

Useful Reflections: Writing to Heal in a Hostile Environment

Submitted for the degree of PhD in Creative Writing: By Publication

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Abstract

This PhD by publication includes my second novel, *Here Again Now*, and the reflective and critical exegesis, in which I examine the circumstances surrounding the writing of my novel, and my response to it.

The first chapter is a short introduction to the exegesis. Part Two explores what I refer to as the ‘hostile environment’ of the racist UK publishing industry and the lack of clear models for a novel about two Black gay British men who love one another in a romantic, sexual sense, and explains the writing of my second novel partly as a response to these circumstances. Part Three introduces the ways in which I think of my novel as research and explores the limitations of our conventional thinking regarding the concept of family (including a discussion of the Book of Ruth, of which *Here Again Now* began as a retelling) and where queerness sits within or alongside that. Part Four examines the possibility that my novel might offer some kind of healing, both to its readers and to the literary context of the book itself which is just as wounded by patriarchy as the characters in my novel. Finally, the conclusion attempts to find some measure by which the book’s success as an act of healing can be judged.

1. Introduction

Second novels are infamously tricky: you have your whole life to write the first one, and for the second you have a deadline. However, I was keenly aware that I had resources for writing my second book which I didn't have for the first. I had a readership, however modest, an editor and some life experience. I had a greater understanding of the processes of editing, marketing and all the other mechanics of publishing. I had a contract, in which *Here Again Now* formed the second part of a two-book deal. I had won and been nominated for a few prizes and awards for my first novel¹, and done around 50 interviews and appearances to promote it. So, while I was not immune to the anxiety that commonly accompanies the writing of second novels, the question for me was not, "Can I do this?" but "Given the resources and obstacles I have, what can I do?"

Those obstacles — ways in which the publishing industry treats Black writers, especially Black British and Black queer writers — will form the basis of my first chapter, illustrating how my novel is partly a response to those obstacles. (Perhaps some PhD theses will not spend as much time, if any, discussing the professional context into which their authors write their fiction; to this I ascribe the reason that many PhD candidates are not from marginalised backgrounds and identities, and scrutiny of their professional context need not so greatly affect their creative process. This was not the case for me: the workings of the publishing industry influenced my writing in important ways, as I will outline.) From there, I will articulate my response to the environment in which I was working and the ways in which I have been informed and nurtured by texts, films, experiences and conversations, before seeking to measure my work against my stated aims, most importantly writing as healing: healing literary traditions, healing history, healing readers.

¹ My debut novel, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* won a Betty Trask Award from the Society of Authors, was shortlisted for the Polari Prize and the Desmond Elliott Prize, and longlisted for the Portico Prize.

2. The “F--- You” Novel

As I wrote *Here Again Now*, I realised that my intention was, in part, to challenge received wisdom around masculinity and queerness, and to be able to do so in a way that offered healing for people who had been hurt by patriarchal, heteronormative and racist power structures. For most of the time that I was writing *Here Again Now*, I was working in an all-boys school and saw close-up what masculinity looks like for many young men, as well as some of the grown men I have met. There are rules to being a man: don't talk about your feelings, don't publicly show affection for other men, don't show “weakness”, don't seem “girly”. A study conducted by Ipsos Mori and commissioned by the charity Movember shows that, for example, although “most men [77%] believe that talking can help”,

Over a fifth (22%) of men say they are unlikely to speak with someone if they were having problems they were finding it hard to cope with. 41% of men say they have regretted opening up to someone about their problems and over half of these men (53%) say that this experience would prevent them from opening up again. (Ipsos MORI, 2019, p. 3)

Importantly, although I was certain that I wanted to write about Black men specifically, I was wary of pathologizing Black men by suggesting that toxic masculinity is exemplified by a demographic which, as bell hooks explains, endures “the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity”, and which is “[s]een as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers” (hooks, 2003, p. x). Instead, I wanted to explore how men suffer particularly grievously when we fall foul of standards of masculinity (as queer men often do not and must). More importantly, I wanted to celebrate the possibilities opened up when men who have “endured the worst” experience new ways of loving one another and themselves. In other words, the Blackness of my characters is most important not because Black men are uniquely demonstrative of toxic masculinity, but because we are uniquely oppressed by it.

However, I also realised that such a novel would have a lack of clear models in terms of its Black British gay male love story, and in terms of its handling of themes of fatherhood and family. There are other novels which feature Black British gay characters as protagonists, of course, but their approaches and focuses are very different from my own. *Mr Loverman*, by the Booker Prize-winning Black British author, Bernardine Evaristo (Evaristo, 2013), is the closest available model, being a novel by a Black British writer about a Black British man who is in a romantic relationship with another Black British man. However, its focus is significantly different from that of *Here Again Now*, as its protagonist spends almost the entire novel married to a woman and conducting his love affair in

secret. Ultimately, *Mr Loverman* is primarily the story of a gay man trying to live authentically, not the story of love between Black men.

Jamaican-British writer Paul Mendez's *Rainbow Milk* (Mendez, 2020) is different again: it is the story of a Black British gay man who is primarily searching for stability, acceptance and a room of his own, and only experiences a romantic relationship towards the end of the novel, and that with a White man. The same is largely true of Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*, which largely concerns the protagonist, John, *questioning* his sexuality and ultimately moving in with a White man (Salkey, 2009). Then of course there are novels like *The Swimming Pool Library* (Hollinghurst, 1989) and *The Line of Beauty* (Hollinghurst, 2005) in which Sita Bolani notes, "the author's eye [rests] at length on the bodies of black and working-class men" (Bolani, 2019) but whose narratives do not focus on love between Black men. Even my own debut, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* (Nzolu, 2019), only sees a Black gay man one of three main characters (the other two being female) and his story does not involve any relationships with other Black men.

There are other novels which have other things in common with *Here Again Now*, such as queer experiences of family, such as *Tales of the City* (Maupin, 1989), or Black fathers, such as *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (Baldwin, 2001) and *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga, 2021). There are other novels which use the Bible as a foundational text, such as *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (Winterson, 2014). There are other novels which deal with Black queer love in a non-British context, such as *The Prophets* (Jnr, 2022) and *Under the Udala Trees* (Okparanta, 2017), and plenty more outside the Black British gay male community, from *Call Me By Your Name* (Aciman, 2017) to *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (Collins, 2019) to *Disobedience* (Alderman, 2006) to *Girl, Woman, Other* (Evaristo, 2019) and beyond. There are many novels which deal with queerness but focus on the coming-out experience, such as *The Lost Language of Cranes* (Leavitt, 2005). All of these informed my thinking in some way, but all of them are distinct from my own. *Here Again Now* is unlike any of them: it foregrounds both the love between Black British men and a story of queerness, masculinity and fatherhood that leaves both parties healed.

There are reasons for the lack of a clear model of course, some of which are nothing to do with the publishing industry. For example, Thomas Glave explains that *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* was written "in an era when the word "homosexuality" was barely mentionable, and the homosexuality of a Caribbean person literally unthinkable" (Glave, 2009, p. 9). And who knows how many Black gay British writers are like I was in 2018, not ready to write protagonists whose identities are so close to my own, nor to subsequently spend months talking publicly about Black male experiences of gender and sexuality, as part of a promotional tour?

However, the UK publishing industry has a role to play. For example, it often appears that the publishing industry has a narrow view of what Black writing can and should do. A 2020 Arts Council England report reads:

The core audience for publishers is white and middle-class. The whole industry is essentially set up to cater for this one audience. This affects how writers of colour and their books are treated, which are either whitewashed or exoticised in order to appeal to this segment. [...] The major booksellers and supermarkets have a clear sense of their audience, which like the industry as a whole caters for the white, middle-class audiences. (Saha & van Lente, 2020, pp. 4, 36)

The report also says:

Thus we find that writers of colour are stuck between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand there is an expectation of what stories such authors are able to write about (usually relating to the author's racial or ethnic identity in some way), but also a fear that such stories might appear too niche. (Saha & van Lente, 2020, p. 15)

In the prologue to their 2022 anti-memoir, *None of the Above*, Black non-binary writer and performer Travis Alabanza writes:

Something is seen as more successful the more it is made comprehensible to the masses (read: the white and not queer and not trans). Anti-racism books fly off the shelves if they are presented in ways that help people learn comfortably. Feminist-packaged theory is deemed revolutionary if sold in a white, skinny, and highly colourful package. (Alabanza, 2022, pp. 6-7)

Alabanza articulates perfectly the need for writers from marginalised backgrounds to write on their own terms if their work is to have any real meaning, and how this need exists in conflict with the expectations of the publishing industry. The commercial imperative is a burden for every writer of course, since publishing is a business. But this burden is much lighter for some writers than others, and the parameters within which Black writers are permitted to publish are demonstrably narrow and arbitrary, and the commercial value ascribed even to writing which falls within those parameters is not consistently reflected in the form of advances.

This is evidenced by the #PublishingPaidMe discussion on Twitter in 2020, in which it became apparent that while Black writers were consistently paid smaller advances despite having seemingly

proven their commercial viability, while their White (particularly White male) counterparts enjoyed much larger advances despite seemingly disappointing sales. Malorie Blackman, a former Children's Laureate, said her advances are "NOWHERE near what some white authors are getting for their nth book where n is a single digit. I make a living but I've had to learn to cut my cloth to fit my income" (Flood, 2020).

Bestselling Black British author Dorothy Koomson quote tweeted her, saying:

This. A billion times. My books were rejected because they weren't about 'the black experience'; my books were ignored cos I wasn't writing how they thought black people are like; I was told to put clues in about my characters' colour; I was asked to make characters racist. (Koomson, 2020)

What emerges is a real reluctance to publish and recognise Black writers on their own terms. I believe it is rooted in a belief that Black writers are not writers first (or even, in some cases, at all), but as Black first – with all the attendant preconceptions of that label. The Ghanaian bestselling novelist Yaa Gyasi writes:

Years ago, I was at a festival with a friend, another black author, and we were trading stories. She said that the first time she did a panel with a white male author she was shocked to hear the questions he was asked. Craft questions. Character questions. Research questions. Questions about the novel itself, about the quality and the content of the pages themselves. I knew exactly what she meant. (Gyasi, 2021)

It seems Black writers are expected to exercise a narrow range of skills, write about a narrow range of topics, and that we risk financial exploitation even when we work within those ranges. We are denied artistic freedom, seemingly in exchange for commercial success, only to find that the benefits of this success are routinely withheld, at least in part. Reading about this, I felt something between courage and pique that led me to feel quite dismissive towards any imperatives or expectations that did not align with my own.

The wider publishing eco-system (including journalists, for example) adds difficulty to the problem. In July 2020, the *Times* asked, 'Where are all the new male hotshot novelists?' (Marriott, 2020). The *Times* followed this with a similar article in October 2021 (Strout, 2021), to which *Dazed* responded with an article entitled 'Where have all the young male novelists gone?' the following month (Pierce, 2021).

While these articles were not incorrect to point out the fact that young male novelists in the UK do not currently appear to enjoy the kind of marketing and publicity spend enjoyed by their most feted female counterparts (one thinks, here, of the third novel by a best-selling White author whose publication was supported by a merchandising campaign that included t-shirts, bucket hats and umbrellas), they overlooked the role played by the media – by those journalists themselves and their colleagues. These articles ignored altogether the contributions of Black male novelists – despite there being a recent rise in publications by writers from this demographic, including Derek Owusu, Paul Mendez, Ashley Hickson-Lovence, Nels Abbey and me, all publishing debut novels in 2019 and 2020. Moreover, 2020 was the year in which the Desmond Elliott Prize, referred to by the *Telegraph* as ‘the most prestigious prize for debut novelists in the UK’ (Rigden, 2013), shortlisted only Black writers for its £10,000 prize (Derek Owusu, Abi Dare and me), two of whom were male, including the winner. To go from this to an article which claimed to be discussing ‘young male novelists’ but did not even mention our names, was a reminder of the real problems I faced as a Black writer in the UK publishing industry, and led me to ask myself real questions about what impact my second novel might hope to have.

Moreover, it seems odd to talk about male novelists being disadvantaged or overlooked, without making the specific point that Black male writers (particularly those who, unlike me, come from a working-class background) experience this more so than their White counterparts, and indeed have been experiencing this for some time before the articles were published. Alex Wheatle, a Black British working-class writer, made the switch from writing adult fiction to Young Adult (or YA) books. In 2016, he explained this move in an interview in the *Guardian* that seems to highlight the very problems that Strout, Pierce and Marriott discussed, years before they discussed it, and from the perspective of a Black male writer who is surely more overlooked than his White counterparts:

Though he was awarded an MBE for services to literature in 2008, he points out that he was only invited to one literary festival in 14 years. In preparation for meeting him, I could only find one previous newspaper interview. While his YA experience has been very different – “the industry seems to have received me with open arms” – he thinks it is part of a wider problem affecting black and working-class authors.

“I felt like I was this token black writer who writes about ghetto stuff,” Wheatle says. He believes working-class characters are increasingly thin on the ground, while the handful of black writers who are feted often explore sweeping tales of immigrant experience, rather than domestic tales rooted firmly in one place and time. “My books are seen as only for a black demographic, whereas Zadie Smith or Andrea Levy’s were propelled higher than that, so I felt cheated, in a way.” (Kaleeli, 2016)

Moreover, when Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* topped the official paperback non-fiction bestseller chart – making her the first Black British female author to do so, she expressed mixed feelings about her achievement, calling it a “horrible indictment of the publishing industry” (BBC News, 2020). Eddo-Lodge alluded not only to the fact that no Black British woman had achieved this position before – not since the chart’s inception over 20 years earlier in 1998 – but to the fact that it took the very public murder of George Floyd for this to happen for her book. Thus, her book’s place in the charts is not only a reflection of her writing (which is excellent) but of the racism of UK publishing and reading. More recently, the most recent edition of *Granta* magazine’s influential ‘Best of Young British Novelists’, came out in Spring 2023. Published once every ten years, it is credited with predicting and fostering the enduring literary fame of writers like Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie and David Mitchell. The latest edition was greeted by an article in *The Times* entitled ‘2023 Granta list — is the novel’s future white and female?’ (Thomas-Corr, 2023)

This is a problem of morale, of course, and I had this in mind when I was writing *Here Again Now*. I was deeply unsure if anyone would care about a book about three Black British men, or if anyone would read it if they did, or if it would be judged fairly if they did.

But the problem goes beyond morale, and it certainly goes beyond three articles. Following this thread leads us to conclude that the publishing industry – and the satellite industries surrounding it, such as the newspaper industry – are hostile environments for Black writers, particularly Black British writers. By failing to properly recognise both the contributions of and problems experienced by Black writers, Elizabeth Strout, Barry Pierce and James Marriott seem to suggest (deliberately or not) that ‘male novelists’ is shorthand for ‘White male novelists’ and that Black British writing does not always seem to ‘count’. The crisis they have in mind is not, therefore, one of unfairness in the publishing industry, but a crisis concerning the primacy of Whiteness – a primacy which has clearly not been shaken as much as some people might claim.

Strout, Pierce and Marriott are not alone in alluding to this crisis. In an interview, the novelist Martin Amis was asked for his views on the Booker Prize and whether he cared about never having won it: he replied that “it had no authority and has less authority now” (McElvoy, 2020). He was then asked specifically about recent winners. He explained, “I haven’t read any of these books for the reasons I gave you. You don’t feel a literary push behind it. It’s politics, it’s sociopolitical considerations rather than literary like the Nobel.”

This statement expresses, in part, Amis’s personal feelings regarding the way literary prizes are awarded and administered, and he would not be the first person to suggest that the prize is not

awarded purely on the basis of merit. But it is difficult to speak about the way a prize is awarded without speaking, however tacitly, about its recipients. At the time of Amis's interview, Bernardine Evaristo was one of the most recent winners of the Booker Prize (and the first Black British woman to win it), and although Amis does not name her, his interviewer does, suggesting that she "might be fine with the sociopolitical description via her writing, because she intends to reflect on a changing society." It is difficult to conclude that Amis sees the value of this.

What is clear is that Amis was trying to describe a wider cultural phenomenon that goes well beyond any one winner. Amis's sentiments are echoed, and perhaps clarified, by 2005 Booker Prize-winner John Banville:

In response, Mr Banville – winner of the Booker Prize in 2005 - said, he would not like to be starting out in the industry now, that "it's very difficult" and went on to say:

"I despise this 'woke' movement. Why were they asleep for so long? The same injustices were going on. It's become a religious cult. (O'Loughlin, 2020)

Banville seems to equate writing which explicitly espouses interest in political matters ('woke' writing) with activism – and he appears to be dismissive of both. Moreover, his allusion to some sort of prejudice against heterosexual White men implies that writers outside of this demographic who experience success have done so largely or purely because of factors which have nothing to with literary merit. What these remarks by Amis and Banville make clear is that even when Black writers win the most prestigious literary prize in the UK, our work is still routinely and publicly dismissed, its merit denied, and the anti-Black prejudice that is historic to this nation quite overlooked. Despite the nation's response to the increased visibility of BLM over the summer of 2020, the UK has proven multiple times that it is neither ready for, nor interested in, serious and systemic change regarding anti-Black racism in publishing.

Although certain ceilings were ostensibly broken here (many Black writers entered or re-entered the bestseller charts during the aftermath of George Floyd's murder), this does not mean that racism was solved, or even that the anti-racism behind these changes (if anti-racism is what it was) was enlightened, or even at all impactful. The Ghanaian-American novelist Yaa Gyasi, author of the historical fiction novel *Homegoing*, wrote about her experience of this. Gyasi expresses pleasure, of course, at the commercial success of her book, but she is less certain about what this success means for race relations in the long term:

When an interviewer asks me what it's like to see *Homegoing* on the bestseller list again, I say something short and vacuous like "it's bittersweet", because the idea of elaborating exhausts and offends me. What I should say is: why are we back here? Why am I being asked questions that James Baldwin answered in the 1960s, that Toni Morrison answered in the 80s? (Gyasi, 2021)

Indeed, it appears that the increased popularity of work by and featuring Black people was, ironically, somewhat indiscriminate: in summer 2020, around the same time that Reni Eddo-Lodge's book became a bestseller, *The Help* was the most popular film on Netflix (Aquilina, 2020). The film's most prominent Black actor, Academy-Award-winning Viola Davis, has openly expressed regret about taking the role, because the film centres the experiences of its White characters, despite ostensibly being a film about anti-Black racism (Murphy, 2018). This is what writer and academic Priyamvada Gopal has called 'race illiteracy' (Batty, 2019): the deep and sometimes wilful ignorance regarding the nature of racism in the UK (and clearly in the USA), and even regarding its presence.

This was the ecosystem into which I had entered with my debut novel in 2019, and in which I wrote, with my eyes wide open, my second novel between 2018 and 2021, and this ecosystem was (I found, to my chagrin) much more difficult for me to work through than simply the problem of having written one novel and then being asked to write another. What all these articles and statistics tell us is that, for the most part, Black people are only permitted to thrive – indeed, to function – in the publishing industry so long as we are seen to serve the exigencies, interests and whims of the White people in whose hands our careers lay, and according to the presumed dietary preferences of the White people to whom our books are marketed. We are directed to (or assumed to) use our own traumas to explain racism and anti-racism again and again *ad infinitum*, to an audience which may or may not be listening.

In a 2013 interview with the Huffington Post, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie described *Americanah* as her "fuck-you" novel (Adichie, 2014), referring, in part, to a sense of freedom from certain conventions of fiction writing which she had followed in her first two novels (she gives the examples of "show, don't tell" and "don't editorialise") but which no longer served her. Although by any measure Adichie is infinitely more successful than I have been, *Here Again Now* was my "fuck-you" novel in that I knew I was writing a novel – indeed, I felt compelled to write a novel – which tacitly said these words to an industry that confines and constrains Black writers just as traditional modes of masculinity confine and constrain men. I felt that my novel about Black queer love was necessary and at the same time knew that the necessary nature of the work would not guarantee a positive reception or indeed a fair one. With this in mind, I decided not to write a relatively straightforward love story that was (only) about two men in a romantic relationship, instead queering the idea even of a queer

love story by writing about a cisgendered heterosexual man being pulled into the orbit of another person's queerness by the love they shared for one another and for the man they both loved and mourned.

I also realised, part-way through writing the novel, that there were no White female characters, despite the fact that this is the “perceived target reader” in publishing (Saha & van Lente, 2020, p. 4)². I knew that this might affect how well the novel might be received commercially or even critically, but I saw no artistic reason to change it. The story worked best as it was, and I would have to let the chips fall where they might. Had I been working within a less hostile publishing industry, *Here Again Now* might have looked radically different; I might have written a novel which was less hungry for change. I will never know.

Toni Morrison once famously said:

The very serious function of racism [...] is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. (Morrison, 1975)

I did not want to be caught up in this any more than I had to. I absolutely believe in anti-racist work – in writing against racism, in protesting against it, in educating against it but I do not believe my sole responsibility as a novelist is to educate the same White readers whom other, better novelists have seemingly been educating for decades. That way ‘distraction’ lies. So I had to decide who the novel was *for*: if not White middle-class women, then whom?

This question was crystallised when writing the book's dedication. A dedication, for me, is more than simply a designation, although it takes on this role as well. It is an *envoi*, of the kind that Chaucer

² The perceived appetite for literature (and characters) that appeals to White readers is well documented: *Rethinking Diversity in Publishing* records accounts by non-White writers of having their books, about non-White characters, given covers with White (or lighter-skinned) figures, because their publishers deemed this more commercially viable (Saha & van Lente, 2020, p. 26). But this does not mean, of course, that any White female characters always have to be exemplary or aspirational. In fact one of the most successful Black novels of this century, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie, 2017), featured an explicitly racist White character, Susan Grenville-Pitts. Another, very successful novel, Sara Collins' *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (Collins, 2019) features a similarly problematic wealthy white woman, Madame Marguerite Benham. This appetite for White female characters, then, is not simply a need for characters with whom one can identify, so much as for characters whom one can *recognise*, even if that recognition is accompanied by a rather comfortable feeling that *they are much worse people than we are*.

wrote in *Troilus and Criseyde*: “Go, litel bok, go litel myn tragedye,/ There God thi makere yet, er that he dye,/ So sende might make in some comedye!” (Chaucer, 1988, p. 584). A dedication points not just to *who*, but to *what* the book is for; the role it might play in the world.

I had been reading Carmen Maria Machado’s genre-blending book *In the Dream House*, which also deals with abuse and difficult experiences of relationships, and which also arguably uses narrative to offer some kind of restoration even to the writer-survivor as well as to the readers. Its dedication simply reads: “If you need this book, it is for you” (Machado, 2019). I thought this was perfect: it makes space for the heterogenous nature of her reader’s needs, while making clear that the book’s purpose is at least partly restorative.

Then, I saw Shon Faye launch *The Transgender Issue* in Manchester, where Faye explained that her book was not intended to convert hard-boiled transphobes, but was for people who “instinctively want to love their transgender friends and family” but lacked the critical apparatus to support this instinct in the face of transphobia from powerful public figures and the mainstream media (Faye, 2021). In other words, people who were on the edge of the right side of history.

So, with this in mind, I dedicated *Here Again Now* to “anyone who’s ever stood on the edge of something” (Nzelu, 2022). Clearly, this means Black queer people like Ekene and Achike who have been partially excluded from their families or societies, but it also means people like Chibuike who instinctively loves his child, but shied away from expressing this love in a full and positive way. And, beyond that, it refers to anybody who has ever felt excluded, or felt they lacked the courage or wherewithal to make lasting positive change. There was, too, a tacit nod to any readers who might have been driven, perhaps by their experiences of exclusion, to thoughts of suicide.

The next question was: what did I hope the book would do for its intended readers? The fact that I wanted it to do anything for them meant that I saw my writing as political – whatever that means. Orwell rightly observed that ‘no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude’ (Orwell, 1968, p. 4), alluding to the fact that all art either challenges, upholds or develops the political attitudes of the time and culture into which it is created. The Orwell Prizes for political writing (whose very existence suggests that political writing is in some sense endangered) list among their criteria ‘Political Purpose’, taking as a quotation from Orwell’s ‘Why I Write’ the definition of ‘political purpose’ as a ‘[d]esire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.’ Perhaps it is with this in mind that the critic Terry Eagleton defines the political as ‘the way we organise our social life together, and the power relations which this involves’ (Eagleton, 2006, p. 169). In this light, the question is not, ‘What is political writing?’ but rather ‘What *isn’t*?’ and my

position as a Black British writer only added to this. I saw that anything I wrote in the context of the publishing industry which I have outlined above would be all the more political for its mere presence. To write as a Black British person (particularly when writing about Black people without specifically having a White audience in mind), is to write politically because to write as a Black British person is to write *into* the context of race relations in the United Kingdom, even if one is not deliberately writing *back* to it, even if one does not explicitly address the topic. (Thinking of Amis's distaste for books which are all 'politics', one might observe that not all writers have the option *not* to appear political in their writing.) The decision I had to make was not whether or not my writing would be political, but in what *way*.

Some make the distinction between explicitly political writing and implicitly political writing, although the line between the two is less clear than it might appear. Dorian Lynskey organises novels along a spectrum of subtlety, noting that some political novels have a 'theme rather than an agenda' (Lynskey, 2019). Lynskey quotes the White British novelist Jonathan Coe: 'I think it's a peculiarly English thing, this recoiling from a novel whose political message seems too overt. [...] in England that seems to be considered rather vulgar.' Terry Eagleton observes a similar phenomenon, remarking on a 'typically Anglo-Saxon uneasiness with ideas as such – a feeling that arid abstractions are out of place when it comes to art' (Eagleton, 2006, p. 207).

The distinction between explicitly and implicitly political writing is up for debate, but it reflects a common way of thinking about political writing that determines how books are marketed, reviewed and read. The distinction itself (and the fact that the word 'agenda' carries undertones of disdain or even fear) foregrounds its own subjective, arbitrary nature – and thus the cultural and political forces which brought that distinction into being and uphold it. These were forces which I was keen to try to transcend, not so much because of how I saw *Here Again Now*, but because of my aforementioned dismissive attitude to the cultural biases in the UK. I came to believe that the 'explicitly/implicitly political' binary distinction was almost as irrelevant and constraining to my writing as the 'political/apolitical' binary itself. Who decides what is a 'campaigning novel' (Lynskey, 2019)? Who decides how such novels are read and reviewed, or in what quantities they will be bought and sold? Whatever the answer to these questions might be, we can be sure it is not, to any significant extent, 'Black British people', and as such it seemed something of a waste of time for me to place any great weight on such distinctions.

Another problem with this distinction is that it acknowledges the intention of the novel (to bring about some kind of political change) and, in its taxonomy, seems to look down upon the energy of that very intentionality. When a novel which tries to change the world is labelled a 'campaigning novel', the distance between the denotation of that word 'campaigning' and the quieter ways in which such

novels usually work engenders a rather unkind irony. Ambition is recast as bravado or arrogance; that idealism is seen as naive, even uppity, as though there is a universal and unassailable consensus that this is *just not what novels do*.

Such a view is deeply raced and gendered. It is also deeply frustrating: if writing is to bring about political change of any kind, on any scale, its readership must be willing and able to meet its ideas halfway, rather than hold every single text up to the yardstick of any 'peculiarly English thing'. This is why, for example, I made Chibuiké's plight clear in Chapter 3: 'If there were a name for Ekene's place with him, could he be the first to say it? How could he speak a world into being? How could he invent a language for love?' (p. 63) I knew that this might be read by someone with fairly Anglo-Saxon tastes as too explicit, not subtle enough, or over-explaining. I was not writing towards that readership.

Apparently, Black writers are not expected to make this choice. Eddo-Lodge comments on the fate of Black British writing which, like her own, *is* deemed explicitly political:

I also feel that an industry or wider public that feels that any writing about black life is there to educate the white public... the entitlement! The arrogance of it! I'm sick of it. Not everything's for you. (Kale, 2020)

Eddo-Lodge makes the valid but alarming point that writing like hers and like mine is judged as to how well it educates a White readership, irrespective of whether this is what the writer aimed to do, and of what other things the book actually does. But Eddo-Lodge also distinguishes between texts which are written for the writer's own self-expression, and texts which are written for the improvement of the imagined readership. This is a fundamentally different way of looking at political writing from Lynskey's and a more helpful one: if writing is inspired by strong political feeling, it seems odd not to take that feeling into account when categorising the writing.

In *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, it is clear that Eddo-Lodge may well have been expressing frustration and grief at past and present injustices, excitement at the possibility of change, or any number of things. In *Here Again Now*, I am trying to express hope, as much for other people as for myself. I wrote *Here Again Now* primarily as a story of the love between a cis-gendered, heterosexual older Nigerian man, and a queer, younger Black British man because I wanted to communicate that this kind of love can and must exist, just as much as I wanted to show that this kind of *novel* (Black, British, Nigerian, male, queer, healing) can exist.

The need for healing in this context is urgent. At the most extreme end of the harms done to queer people in the UK, sits conversion therapy, defined as ‘techniques intended to change someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity. These techniques can take many forms and commonly range from pseudo-psychological treatments to spiritual counselling. In extreme cases, they may also include surgical and hormonal interventions, or so-called ‘corrective’ rape.’ (UK Government Equalities Office, 2018, p. 83) Cisgender men are slightly more likely (8%) to undergo it than cisgender women (6%), and that Black/African/Caribbean/Black British respondents (13%) are nearly twice as likely to undergo conversion therapy than their White counterparts (7%) (p. 84).

Unfortunately, it is often a religiously-oriented process, as people with no religious belief are the least likely to have been offered conversion therapy: 6% of respondents to the UK Government survey reported having no religion, compared to 10% of respondents who identify as Christian (p. 88). And here I must confront the fact that although the Bible formed part of the inspiration for both my novels, I have long been troubled by the fact that the Bible is very often posed as a rationale for persecuting and disenfranchising queer people (in Black communities and others). Robert Jones Jnr says of his novel *The Prophets* that ‘that there was no way I could write about anti-Blackness, anti-queerness, and antebellum slavery without confronting Christianity’s significant role in all three’ (Jones Jnr, 2020). Although my subject matter was markedly different from Jones Jnr’s – my book has less of a focus on the harms done to Black people by White people and more of a focus on the ways in which Black people can heal the harms done to us by ourselves and by others – I felt I had to address the failings of Christianity here, if only to contextualise the kind of healing I envisioned.

Conversion therapy is still a widespread practice in Nigeria, my parents’ homeland, and the country from which I draw large parts of my own heritage. As the journalist Vincent Desmond writes:

Many queer people in Nigeria who are outed to their parents are subject to [...] varying forms of conversion therapy from religious institutions who believe their queerness is caused by demonic possession. (Desmond, 2020b)

This so-called therapy can be quite shockingly cruel, as one young person testifies:

“They were slapping me and calling it prayer. They were going around me in a circle, singing and jumping and hitting me. Then they asked for a broom which they used to hit me for a long ass time. By the time we were done, my body felt sore,” Tobi said. “Then, my mom refused to let me go home. Apparently, the [religious leader] had said I should stay there for two weeks. I didn’t have a choice, my family drove off.” (Desmond, 2020b)

I was fortunate never to be subjected to such abuse, but I was always aware of the possibility, and at least one member of my family has experienced it in Nigeria, where the safety of queer people has been under attack in recent years. In 2012, President Goodluck Johnson introduced the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA), outlawing any homosexual activity and anything that could be seen as supporting it. Chike Frankie Edozien describes how ‘sexual minorities in Nigeria are such an easy target’ even in the broader political sense of scapegoating. He describes an incident in which a high-ranking fifty-four-year old Nigerian official made homophobic remarks in order to distract from his marrying an eighteen-year-old woman (Edozien, 2017, pp. 120-121). Before the SSMPA, life for queer people in Nigeria (people like Amos) was less actively policed, but was perilous and secretive; some witnesses describe a kind of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach to homosexuality. For example, one gay man recalls, ‘It was not necessarily uncommon to cohabit, it was like getting married [...] cohabiting was a more hassle-free way to “get married”, sort of’ (Desmond, 2020a). Edozien’s memoir recounts a relationship with a man he met in Lagos ‘in the 1980s’ (Edozien, 2017, p. 2) and encounters with other men throughout his teenage years and young adulthood. Edafe Okporo (who has now successfully claimed asylum in the USA), talks about the ‘underground’ scene in Lagos before 2012:

Everything was underground, kiss and don’t tell, bring your clothes over in your bag when you get to the party, throw out your wig and put on your heels. After the party is over rearrange yourself like it never happened. (Desmond, 2020a)

This is another context into which I was writing, and one of the most important: the looming threat of conversion therapy for queer people of Nigerian descent and religious families (even those living in supposedly safe Western countries) means that for Amos to conduct even a clandestine relationship, and for both Achike and Ekene to come out to Chibuiké, either tacitly or explicitly, represents tremendous courage.

Moreover, throughout my novel, I hoped to produce not just writing as writing, but writing as *healing*, and to do so by celebrating the capacity of the human spirit to heal. I will look at healing from more than one angle, because healing is more than one thing, depending on the context, and the hurt. In some contexts, healing means simply the restoration of what was lost, the soothing and reparation of what has been broken: the cut which no longer bleeds, the wound over which new skin has grown. But I will discuss healing as alchemy later on, and this is because healing can mean more than simply a return to a prior state of being. After all, in my novel and in many real-life cases, the *status quo* is not necessarily a desirable point to which to return, and it is possible that our societal desire for ‘healing’ can sometimes be a desire that the wounded, as well as the wound, disappear from our direct line of sight.

When I think about healing, I think, of all things, about the resurrected Christ, such as in Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's early 17th-century painting, 'Incredulità di San Tommaso' ('The Incredulity of Saint Thomas'). In the painting, Christ's wounds are still there – indeed, Saint Thomas pokes his finger into Christ's pierced side, pulling away the skin to test the veracity of the wound. But the wound is no longer solely a source of pain or loss, nor indeed of concern. The wound has not 'healed' in the sense of disappearing, but nor is the pain portrayed as eerily undying. In fact, the pain is no longer the *point*. The point is what Christ can do and be, having been hurt. This wounded figure seems to offer *us* something – salvation, mercy, love – despite the hurt he has suffered. Despite the pierced side, the crucified body, we know that Christ is healed because he has been made or allowed to transcend pain, in order that he can fully experience – and impart – love, power and peace, perhaps even joy. However partial, however collaborative with other writers and artists, this is the healing I want my writing to offer to my readers, to the history of queer Blackness and to the literary traditions in which I take a small part.

This meant healing the history of queer Nigerians by giving them their place in time through the character of Amos. It also meant, with regard to my three protagonists, celebrating the possibility not just that victims can transcend victimhood (although this is important), but that perpetrators of violence can transcend hatred, ignorance and fear.

Aristotle introduces the idea that 'the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity' (Aristotle, 1996, p. 16). Lorraine Hansberry goes a little further:

the artist who is creating realistic work imposes on it not only what *is* but what is *possible*... because that is part of reality too. So that you get a much larger potential of what man can do. And it requires much greater selectivity – you don't just put everything that seems – you put what you believe *is*... (Hansberry, 2011, p. 236).

Writers, perhaps especially those working within the realist genre (Hansberry was making a distinction between this and naturalism, 'which tends to take the world as what it is'), have a power to demonstrate what can be done to make a better world, or indeed what a better world might look like. James Baldwin offers similar wisdom when he writes that 'It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims' (Baldwin, 1984, p. 15).

However, again the hope I wished to offer was not – or not directly, primarily or exclusively – intended for a White audience. It is true that Baldwin powerfully argues for the benefit of fighting to liberate White people from the illusions of racist thought:

And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. (Baldwin, 1963, p. 21)

And I have written with this in mind before: in my first novel, I was writing to demonstrate, partly but directly to White heterosexual readers, that Black heterosexual and queer people are capable of deep feeling in all directions. But I doubt Baldwin would seriously argue that Black fiction writing must orient itself towards White people in any wholesale way. Moreover, in the publishing context in which I was writing, I was reluctant to dedicate my creativity to a White readership through a book with three Black protagonists. In no sense was I interested in writing to ‘educate a white public.’ Indeed, I saw this type of thing as a distraction.

Here, three quotations from Toni Morrison help to clarify my intentions. In a 1993 interview with PBS anchor Charlie Rose, Morrison famously said of racism:

If you can only be tall because somebody’s on their knees, then you have a serious problem. And my feeling is white people have a very, very serious problem. And *they* should start thinking about what *they* can do about it. Take me out of it! (Morrison, 1993)

The following year, Morrison explained the difficulty of Black writers considering their approach to their work, and looked for a way out of the conundrum:

If I have to live in a racial house, it was important at the least to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced, a thick-walled, impenetrable container from which no sound could be heard, but rather an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors. Or at the most, it became imperative for me to transform this house completely. (Morrison, 2020b, p. 132)

Finally, a 1998 interview in which at one point, Morrison’s words seem to prefigure Eddo-Lodge’s and Adichie’s sentiments when she is asked about having ‘marginalised’ White people in her books: ‘I wanted to feel free not to have the white gaze in this place’ (Morrison, 1998). Most importantly for my argument, however, there is a moment when Morrison and Wendt consider what it means for Morrison, a Black writer, to be ‘mainstream’ in a White and racist country:

I can't tell you how satisfying it is to have earned a readership that is [...] as large as it is. I stood at the border, stood at the edge, and claimed it as central. Claimed it as central. And let the rest of the world move over to where I was.

Like those of Adichie, like Gyasi, Evaristo and Eddo-Lodge, Morrison's literary achievements tower over my own. I quote her words only to explain my ambitions: that a story about Black British men, in an industry and a country which both constitute a hostile environment, could be, in some way, 'central'; that it need not cater specifically to the expectations of an industry or readership which can often seem, as Gopal put it, 'illiterate' and that I could find a way to live, if not comfortably in a racist house, then at least productively.

With this in mind, I wrote the novel I most enthusiastically wanted to write: the novel I pitched to my publisher in 2018 along with *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*; a novel which is built from my passions, curiosities and deeply held beliefs. If it educated my readers, I wanted this education to be profound. To demonstrate that my characters and their lives and their communities exist would not be enough. I decided also to celebrate them. This meant ignoring any imperative to portray Blackness as something that is organisable in terms of what does or does not constitute a sympathetic, familiar or otherwise acceptable victim of trauma, or of racism or anything else. My task was, in a sense, to get the best of both worlds, in that to be human is to have the potential for experiencing the best and worst of action and of emotion: I had to create flawed characters who were weighed down by trauma and by actions which had inflicted trauma, but who had the potential for considerable growth.

3. Family and Queer Love

Linda Candy advises:

If a creative artefact is the *basis* of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based. If the research *leads* primarily to new understandings about practice, it is practice-led.’ (Candy, 2006, p. 3).

This is further clarified by R. Lyle Skains, who tells us that

Put simply, in practise-based research [...] the creative act is an experiment (whether or not the work itself is deemed ‘experimental’) designed to answer a direct research question about art and the practice of it which could not otherwise be explored by other methods. (Skains, 2018)

When I started writing *Here Again Now*, I was not writing in an academic context: at the time, I would not have described the novel as ‘research’ of any kind. Nevertheless, I had certain direct research questions in mind while writing, most particularly: how can a novel which is written and published in a hostile environment offer healing, particularly in a queer Black British context, and perhaps even suggest social change? In answering this question, I felt I had to address certain problematic, complex things within the novel’s purview, and one of these things was family, specifically the heteronormative ideal of the two-parent, nuclear family, prioritised above all other social structures or relationships.

Marxist theory provides what is perhaps our best lens for the critique of the heteronormative family. Engels theorised in 1884 that the nuclear family, with two parents at the head and both (or at least the husband) remaining monogamous, was both a child and nurse of capitalism. He suggests that this family structure, as it first emerged in Ancient Greece,

was not in any way the fruit of individual sex love [...] It was the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions – on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property. The Greeks themselves put the matter quite frankly: the sole exclusive aims of monogamous marriage were to make the man supreme in the family and to propagate, as the future heirs to his wealth, children indisputably his own. Otherwise, marriage was a burden, a duty which had to be performed whether one liked it or not to gods, state, and one’s ancestors. (Engels, 2010, pp. 95-96)

Engels tells us that our contemporary ideas of family are not eternal and unchanging but dynamic and responsive to the cultures in which they exist – moreover they emerged in order to serve a purpose of which we should all be suspicious. Our thinking around these topics has evolved since the nineteenth century (*The Origin of Family* lists among its flaws a tendency towards eugenics³), and his ideas have been critiqued and developed. For example, Delphy and Leonard argue that

Even if the family and women's oppression are now necessary for capitalism, it cannot be argued that the family and women's subordination are due to capitalism. Rather capitalism developed in a society based on the family (household and line). *Prima facie*, capitalism is familistic and gendered rather than gender and the family capitalistic. (Delphy & Leonard, 1992, p. 32)

Even if, as Delphy and Leonard argue, capitalism developed within societies which rely on, and place great cultural emphasis on notions of family (which Delphy and Leonard define as ‘its characteristic relations of men and women and between generations’ (p. 33)), rather than the reverse, what remains clear is that certain conventional notions which dog our practice of ‘the family’ are subject to change and thus can and should be subject to critique and evolution.

As Sasha Roseneil explains, there is evidence that these ideals have been undergoing partial transformation, even erosion over recent years, and she cites

the dramatic rise in divorce rates, the increase of births outside marriage (and to a lesser extent outside any lasting heterosexual relationship), the rise in lone parenthood, the decline in the popularity of marriage, the expansion of cohabitation and solo living, and the climbing proportion of women who are not having children [and an] approach currently dominant in Anglo-American family sociology [which] emphasises the diversity of family forms and experiences’ (Roseneil, 2009, pp. 398-399).

As I will show with my discussion of the most direct inspiration for *Here Again Now*, such transformation has been around for a very long time, if not explicitly, formally or knowingly. One cannot help but infer that this means that traditional, heteronormative ideas of family have been failing people for at least as long.

This is why one of the things I wanted my novel to offer an examination of some of the ways in which more conventional notions of family can fail its component members while seeming to serve at least

³ Engels discusses the ‘superior development’ of ‘two races’ owing to their diet, pp.29-30

some of them, by upholding unhealthy or problematic ideals, or by sustaining and protecting destructive behaviours. I moved from this to a celebration of the fact that something much more beneficial might lie outside of heteronormative ideals of what family should mean.

The phrase ‘chosen family’ refer to a support network that isn’t governed by parentage or familial relation, but organised primarily according to love. Armistead Maupin coined the phrase ‘logical family’, which is a helpful way of thinking about this. In fact, he used it to name his memoir, and in the prologue, he explains:

Some children [...] grow up another species entirely, lone gazelles lost among the buffalo herd of our closest kin. Sooner or later though, no matter where in the world we live, we must join the diaspora, venturing beyond our biological family to find our logical one, the one that actually makes sense for us. We have to, if we are to live without squandering our lives. (Maupin, 2017, p. 2)

Maupin rightly foregrounds the element of urgency behind the idea of the logical family. Those of us who find ourselves in *biological* families (or families of origin) which are not the logical place for us to be – either because we are fundamentally different from the people to whom we are related, or because, as for Achike and Ekene in different ways, we experience rejection at the hands of those relatives – must find our logical family, a family which suits us and the logic of our lives, no matter how illogical it may seem to a more conservative onlooker. Both Maupin’s narratives and my own make plenty of room for experiences of love which ‘make sense’ only to the characters involved (if that) but which are nevertheless partly positive: the love story between Ekene and Achike, for example, is characterised by failures on both sides: watching Achike eat, Ekene thinks to himself, ‘How sad, to be able to offer up only an approximation of love, to bark consternation at Achike when he only wanted to take a napkin and clean his skin’ (Nzelu, 2022, p. 20). However, in both Maupin’s narratives and mine, the best loves make sense because the extent to which love makes sense, or is ‘logical’, is the extent to which it serves the needs of the people involved.

Thus, we must find our logical families because a life spent with a biological family (or family of origin) that makes no sense to us – that does not seek to understand us, that does not protect us and nurture us – is not merely an unpleasant life, but ultimately a wasted one. Maupin therefore conceives of the logical family as one that does not merely facilitate a life that gives pleasure or satisfaction (although those qualities are of course important here), but one which is lived as it *ought* to be lived and indeed one which is the only alternative to tragedy. Thus, I would suggest that it is our fate as ‘other species’ to find our logical family – and it is our task to be ready for them when we do.

There is an urgency to both the search and the readiness, and both form important parts of my novel. Traditionally, the search, with its connotations of the hero's journey, is coded as masculine; the readiness, the preparation, perhaps even waiting, are coded as feminine: one thinks of the archetypal knight errant, searching for the damsel in distress who is merely waiting to be rescued. I sought to combine these two elements, the masculine-coded journeying towards a goal and the feminine-coded waiting. In doing so I was writing in response to the novels of one of my favourite writers, Jane Austen. In particular I was building on my reading of *Emma*, which is characterised by 'the struggle towards a fixed and permanent truth external to the individual' (Butler, 1975, p. 260) – in other words, by a journey *towards* readiness for romantic love. In *Emma*, what is sought is a kind of honesty with the self, born of humility and maturity, and until she finds this, she is ultimately unready to love and be loved by Mr Knightley. In *Here Again Now*, I wrote about the struggle towards celebration of the primacy of the heart over societal norms or legislation. Still, the basic shape of the journey remains the same: a character must find their way towards truth, and they must be ready to make significant changes when there is some conflict or barrier between the self and what has been found.

However, the most direct model I chose for *Here Again Now* was much older. In the Book of Ruth, a Jewish man called Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, leave their native Judah and move to Moab, fleeing a famine. Their two sons marry Moabite women, named Ruth and Orpah. Then, a famine claims the life of Ruth's husband, along with that of her husband's brother, and their father. Naomi prepares to return to Judah, and asks Ruth and Orpah to go back to their parents' homes:

And Naomi said unto her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother's house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me. The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept. And they said unto her, Surely we will return with thee unto thy people. [...] And they lifted up their voice, and wept again: and Orpah kissed her mother in law; but Ruth clave unto her. And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. (The Holy Bible: Ruth, 2011, 1:9-10 and 14-17)

I wrote *Here Again Now* essentially as a loose rewriting of this narrative. I was fascinated by this story of logical family that existed long before Maupin coined the term. I wanted to explore the forces behind this experience of logical family: Ruth's deliberate, purposeful choice to stay with Naomi, their joint choice to fulfil their needs through a new kind of relationship, and their readiness for that

unique relationship when it became possible. I wanted to celebrate these things in my novel and, finally, to explore what such an experience might look like within a Black male context, with sorely imperfect characters who needed love but also needed to be ready when the love that arrived demanded much of them.

Thus there are a number of ways in which my story departs from the Biblical one: aside from my novel being primarily about Black men, the Biblical story ends with both Ruth and Naomi marrying men, while *Here Again Now* is explicitly concerned with relationships for which we have no language and for which there is no formal or legal recognition; it's also notable that Ruth's story concerns the experience and validity of Judaism-by-choice ('thy God my God') while my novel primarily concerns itself with Odinani, the traditional Igbo belief system according to which people are reincarnated multiple times (I am of Igbo heritage myself and heard this belief spoken of around the home as a child; I was sometimes spoken about as the reincarnation of a deceased relative), and especially with the place of this belief system in the lives of Igbo people in diaspora, living in majority-White contexts.

These differences reflect the fact that there are a number of ways of approaching the Book of Ruth, a number of possible 'centres of gravity' within the story. A re-writing of the Book of Ruth, or a novel taking the Book as inspiration could just as easily have been about religious conversion, or marriage, or charity, or community, or any number of things. Importantly, although my source material was religious scripture and although I write about Odinani, I was not writing a religious story; I merely took one as my point of departure for a new work. Jeanette King makes the point that, for example, questions about the gender of a monotheistic deity throughout history and the impact of this on human societies have 'increasingly been asked not only by feminist theologians, but by feminist historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, for whom the history of religion in relation to women is a central concern' (King, 2000, p. 1).

King notes that it is possible to '[turn] away from Christianity without necessarily abandoning a sense of the divine' (p. 4), as Jeanette Winterson and Michèle Roberts have, and that feminist rewritings of Biblical stories 'deconstruct and reconstruct those myths not only to expose the patriarchal beliefs which under-pin them, but to provide alternative myths which can offer women a more constructive view of their own gender.' In other words, contemporary writers can and do draw out authentic elements from the stories which testify to the rewriter's purposes, even if those new purposes have nothing to do with the old. This is what I am doing in *Here Again Now*. The story of Ruth was most interesting to me for its celebration of the fact that humans need not limit their experiences of love, intimacy, trust and support to relationships which are ordained and recognised by law or by religious sacrament. While it is true that Naomi encourages Ruth to find a husband, and they both marry men

by the end of the Book, the two women spend most of the story outside of these marital relationships – indeed, the story begins when they both find themselves unmarried, and ends when they marry again. The story is primarily concerned with their relationship to one another, a relationship for which there is no established term.

Something interesting happens in the King James Version: when Naomi first addresses Ruth and Orpah, twice she calls them ‘my daughters’ (The Holy Bible: Ruth. 1:11 and 12); she does this again after Orpah leaves (2:2). However, when the narrative voice describes Naomi, it is as Ruth’s ‘mother-in-law’ (1:8 and 2:18). These shifts reflect the difference between Naomi’s tender and affectionate address and the more impersonal narrative voice, but I would argue that the variation in language also reflects how difficult it is to precisely nail down the nature of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship once the formal link between them – Ruth’s husband, Naomi’s son – has gone. There is something inexact about the use of both ‘daughter’ and ‘mother-in-law’ because most Jewish and Christians tradition maintain that death does indeed part husband and wife (as evidenced by Naomi’s encouraging Ruth to remarry later on in the Book), suggesting that death would also mark the end of any formal connection between their families. In fact, the primary language which defines their relationship is the language in which Ruth’s *need* for the relationship is expressed. Between the marriages that bookend their story, their relationship is based on need, rather than birth or marriage. In other words, if they are a ‘logical family’, the logic that governs their relationship is that of the heart, not the law, or the church. In this brief moment, then, the heart *transcends* the law and the church, and this was my starting point as a novelist. Chibuikwe and Ekene both struggle with the fact that there is no language for their relationship: I wanted to take the uncertainty from the narrative voice of Ruth and move it into my characters’ heads.

And yet, despite us having no exact language for the relationship, it is vital to both women – they both benefit from the relationship in important ways. We are told that Ruth ‘gleans’ in the fields owned by Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi’s late husband (‘Let me now go to the field, and glean ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace’ (2:2)). ‘Gleaning’ here is the practice of taking crops from a field after the harvest has finished, or where a farmer may choose not to harvest, for example if he chooses to reserve crops specifically for gleaning. Gleaning is a practice reserved for vulnerable members of society, like Ruth and Naomi who have no close male relatives on whom they can depend. Importantly, when Ruth returns to Naomi after a day of gleaning, she shares with Naomi what she has obtained:

And she took it up, and went into the city: and her mother in law saw what she had gleaned: and she brought forth, and gave to her that she had reserved after she was sufficed. (2:18)

In fact, this extract tells us that Ruth ‘reserved’ some of what she had specifically for Naomi, suggesting that even when she was finding food for herself (and even when she was speaking to the wealthy and eligible Boaz, whom she went on to marry), she had Naomi in mind. Thus, a picture emerges of a relationship which is mutually thoughtful and caring, and which literally provides sustenance.

There is another kind of benefit to the relationship. Naomi guides Ruth towards marrying Boaz, and although my novel is not concerned with celebrating marital relationships, the motivation behind Naomi’s action is central to both her story and mine: ‘My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee, that it may be well with thee?’ (3:1) Naomi’s language is the language of tenderness and care. She is no longer formally related to Ruth, and is no longer Ruth’s mother-in-law and is not her mother, but her role in finding a husband for Ruth is remarkably maternal. If the Book of Ruth is about Judaism-by-choice, it is also about motherhood-by-choice in quite a radical way, and this is why I wrote a novel about fatherhood-by-choice. Chibuike has a deep, unfathomed need to be a father, a need which is connected to, but outlives his son: ‘He loved Ekene because his child, his only child would never come back to him now, and still he had love inside him, and it must out’ (Nzolu, 2022, p. 155)

There is, then, a distinction between Maupin’s definition of ‘logical family’ and the way Ruth and Naomi live as one: for Maupin, the concept is ultimately about fulfilment, while for Ruth and Naomi, it is about survival. In *Here Again Now*, I decided to marry the two concepts together, asking what it might look like if fulfilment, the need to be recognised and loved for who we truly are, were an utterly vital part of human life (as I believe it is) – and asking what joys might be possible if that need for security and emotional nourishment, in queer Black people, were finally met. (This is, after all, the motivation both for Ekene’s coming out to Chibuike, and for Chibuike explaining his childhood and traumas to Ekene (pp. 143, 186).)

I wrote Ekene and Chibuike’s relationship as one formed because the alternative would be unthinkable because I was building on my reading of the Book of Ruth. Had Ruth and Naomi clung to more conventional notions of family and familial obligation – had Ruth gone back to her parents’ home – their stories would have been radically different, perhaps worse. This is why I expressed the nature of the bond between Chibuike and Ekene as two seemingly polar opposites which are nevertheless true at the same time. On the one hand, I described the love they feel as inexorable: in the moments before drawing the blanket over the sleeping Chibuike in what is a deeply symbolic act and what becomes the catalyst for the formation of a new relationship between them, Ekene feels his ‘heart is not his own’ (Nzolu, 2022, p. 152), that he cannot help expressing love for Chibuike in this way, despite any other impulse he might have, or despite what common sense might suggest. Similarly, I put Chibuike at the mercy of the love he feels for Ekene. Thus, he is compelled to phone

his family and pass on the news about Achike's death, in order to relieve Ekene of the burden of having to do it for him:

Here was someone's son who could not be failed again. Whatever had made him do his heart's harsh bidding – whatever had made him cry, or confess, or want to clasp his arms around another – he must listen to it. And if there was a love in him that needed somewhere to settle, he must let it. That was all there was. (p. 197)

At the same time however, I described their love for one another, and indeed for Achike, as being without precedent, both in the feeling of it and in its expression – and I used free indirect speech to move this uncertainty into the minds of the characters, as I mentioned earlier. For both men, especially Chibuiké, there is a sense that this earnest, open, affectionate, non-sexual, nurturing relationship between them, as men who have been taught that such relationships are not for them, is entirely new. Early in the novel, Chibuiké considers how he can make Ekene feel welcome, and realises that he does not feel as though such a thing has ever been done before:

How could he find his way to telling the boy that he was safe with him? How could he find his way when there was no path? It felt as though no man had ever said those words before. If there were a name for Ekene's place with him, could he be the first to say it? How could he speak a world into being? How could he invent a language for love? (p. 63)

Similarly, when Achike is born, Chibuiké

cried for long minutes, quietly, happily, the tears petering out and then raining down again like a Manchester afternoon, drizzling just when he'd thought he was safe. The crying had surprised Chibuiké. It had terrified his wife. Nobody had told her that men felt this way about their children. (p. 57)

Ekene, a queer man in his late thirties, is somewhat less surprised by the idea of a non-heteronormative love than Chibuiké, and his journey towards the experience of love is of a different nature. Still, Ekene bears the scars of a dysfunctional childhood and so his growing bond with Chibuiké feels foreign to him:

What was he, if he was someone's? Who was he, if he was Chibuiké's? He could never be the man's son. Chibuiké's son would not come back. So what now? Could he live with the man forever, and be his – what? Nobody else had ever done this. Surely, nobody had ever done

something like this. He thought and thought, and tried to feel clean. There was no way forward. There was no language for what should happen next.

Moreover, there is a sense that his relationship with Achike, so hard to define, is also without precedent. In Chapter 4, Ekene and Achike are standing in the churchyard before Oskar's wedding, talking and joking easily, and Ekene muses that 'Sometimes it was nice to tread a well-worn path' (p. 65) – that it is nice to fall into the familiar roles they each play in their friendship – purely because this is such an unusual experience for him.

Thus, a picture continues to emerge of a love which is urgent but poorly understood; ancient but mystified; natural but feared. Speaking about women, Audre Lorde observes that 'the need and desire to nurture each other is [...] redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world' (Lorde, 1984, p. 111). The fear which Lorde correctly ascribes to a patriarchal world is certainly directed towards women; as the Movember study suggests, it is also directed towards men (and men often direct this fear inwardly at themselves) where they fail to meet expectations of how men should be, men who fail to meet expectations of how men should love and relate to one another.

In *Here Again Now*, I made this evident in men where they most obviously benefit from a patriarchal system, and also in where the men are most clearly victims of that patriarchy. Indeed, their fear of a love which promises to nurture them is one of the best examples of their victimhood, and thus one strong argument among many for the dismantling of the systems that oppress all of us – patriarchy, capitalism, White supremacy.

bell hooks discusses Malcolm X as one of the examples of Black men who have defied these oppressive expectations of Black manhood. Disappointingly, though, Malcolm X's queerness is not discussed, despite the fact that there is evidence for it (Perry, 1991). More to the point, although hooks calls for 'radicalization' (hooks, 2003, p. xiv) as the best weapon against oppressive ideals of Black malehood, she does not discuss queerness, or the possibility that there is something radical which queerness can contribute. For hooks, queerness is not explicitly part of the solution she suggests, perhaps because she often writes about queerness as something to be protected, perhaps because she has written disdainfully about 'strange gossip speculation' and 'seemingly pointless speculation' over Malcolm X's personal life (hooks, 2012, p. 72). For me, in *Here Again Now*, queerness – or rather, *queering*, that much more proactive thing – is precisely the solution.

I see queering as a response to, and a resistance against heteronormative capitalist White supremacist ideals: in this light, queering is revolution and liberation, but also, crucially, shelter from the forces

against which it rebels. Roseneil observes that ‘a number of queer tendencies’ are contributing to ‘a destabilisation of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and a challenging of heteronormativity’ (Roseneil, 2009, pp. 402-403), and I feel this idea of destabilisation offers a helpful definition of queerness itself. bell hooks’ definition refines this somewhat, when she says ‘queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and it has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live’ (Orr, 2022). This broader definition suits my work well. In *Here Again Now*, I wanted to write about the fact that there is something worthy of witness and of celebration which is outside of heteronormative ideals of relationships between men and between women and men, and even outside of some of the more heteronormative views of queerness as being simply about sexual orientations or gender identities. These things are important to me, but ultimately I wanted to write about queerness (that is, the active choice to reject heteronormativity) as something revolutionary that can take all of society with it.

The Book of Ruth ends with Ruth and Naomi finding husbands, and it implies through this narrative structure that heterosexual marriage is the happy ending which is most suitable for crowning the emotional journey undergone by the two women. Instead of this, I wanted the structure of *Here Again Now* to give this crowning primacy to a queering of the nuclear familial structure, a reimagining of what family can look like and of what it can do. This is why I wrote the story’s resolution (after all, the crisis is not that they do not love one another but that, loving one another, they do not know what to do about it) in the form of Chibuike and Ekene’s agreement to live ‘somewhere else. A fresh start. Somewhere new’ (p. 280), somewhere away from the home Achike had paid for with his work in racist White Hollywood: this symbolises a move away from capitalist White supremacist patriarchy and broken ideas of family structure towards a ‘chosen family’, just as much as it symbolises the start of the mourning process which will allow them to move on from Achike’s death.

As such, I was writing not just to queer the original Biblical story, but the novel itself. In her essay, ‘Beyond the Narrative Arc’, the writer and critic Jane Alison examines the ‘irksome sexual aspect’ of the traditional structure of the novel:

Here’s critic Robert Scholes: “The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act ... the fundamental orgasmic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation.”

Well. This is not how I experience sex. Critic Susan Winnett says, “Meanings generated through dynamic relations of beginnings, middles, and ends in traditional narrative and traditional narratology never seem to accrue directly to the account of the woman.” And

anyway, why should sex—this kind of sex!—be the archetype of fiction? Why should an art form as innovative as fiction have a single archetype at all? (Alison, 2019)

Alison notes this structure is inspired by a very ‘masculosexual’ experience of sex – I would go further and argue that the sexual element of it is heterosexual: plenty of queer people, male or otherwise (including me), will testify that sex does not always have to take this form. The writer, critic and teacher Matthew Salesses goes further:

Teleology, it can also be argued (and this argument has been made very persuasively, especially by women writers), is gendered [...] The evaluation of meaning by how things end appeals to a sense of domination, as in the story of colonisation. In some cultures, there are no lasts, only cycles, and firsts are politely refused or mistrusted. (Salesses, 2021, 46%)

Salesses is discussing the American literary and educational landscape, but I think it’s fair to apply America’s obsession with colonisation to the UK context in which I am working – and to consider his remarks about some cultures to the Igbo context from which I am writing, a context in which life is traditionally considered to be a cyclical journey through multiple reincarnations, rather than a linear journey from birth to death or the eternal afterlife. In my novel, I draw on this traditional belief for the structure of the novel, eschewing a heteronormative structure which culminates in marriage, even happy marriage, and encourages the reader to see all prior plot points as preparation for marriage. Instead, I portray the relationships between characters in the novel, as well as their individual lives, as cyclical, and thus Chibuiké and Ekene’s ending as a part of that cycle, albeit a more positive part: Ekene eventually recognises that he is part of an ‘unerring, unbroken line of love and kindness’ which he initially believes has been ‘lost, now, through hatred and ignorance and mischance’ but which he realises he has ‘started [it] again’ (Nzelu, 2022, p. 189). As such, the novel leaves behind narrow, out-dated forms of masculinity not just in its portrayal of character, but in its structure too.

Obviously *Here Again Now* is very much about men, but for me to examine masculinity and gender, I also had to look at what patriarchy does to women, and the nature of that oppression in itself as well as the ways in which patriarchal, heteronormative familial practices hurt women, inevitably also hurts men.

Much of the discourse (feminist, Marxist or otherwise) surrounding the ways in which conventional notions of family oppress women focuses on domestic labour (Delphy and Leonard, for example, state this explicit focus in their argument (p. 29)). However, another element of this oppression is *emotional* labour. The term ‘emotional labour’ was first coined by Arlie Hochschild (Hochschild, 2012, p. 20), and refers to the management of one’s own emotions or those of other people,

particularly according to and in service of the priorities, desires or needs of other people or organisations, such as an employer, patriarch or a fellow student. Hochschild gives the example of a flight attendant who is told to smile to passengers despite feeling tired or less than cheerful.

Unsurprisingly, men are generally not socialised to be proficient in this kind of work (indeed, men are often socialised to think that emotional labour is essentially feminine in nature and thus insignificant, a sign of weakness and not worthy labour, or even labour at all), and so this kind of labour falls disproportionately on women. According to Hochschild, who was originally writing in 1983, ‘roughly one-third of American workers today have jobs that subject them to substantial demands for emotional labor’, while ‘of all *women* working, roughly one-half have jobs that call for emotional labor.’ (p. 22)⁴

Dr Jean Kim, former Unit Chief and treating psychiatrist at an all-female psychiatric unit, describes a similar discrepancy:

Compared to the times I’d occasionally cover the other predominantly male units, and military units which were also mainly male, I noticed some interesting differences. [...] Relationships were the main issue: romantic, parental, child/baby, friendship, co-workers—they were all at the forefront of their stressors. These women were juggling everything beyond themselves, and the constant self-extension was burning them out [...] Their identity almost seemed invested in their self-sacrifice, even self-annihilation. (Kim, 2017)

What Hochschild and Kim describe is every day to be seen in family structures where the expectation is that women, as girlfriends, wives, mothers and sisters, will provide emotional support to the men in their lives, often at their own emotional expense (particularly in that this emotional labour is routinely *given* by women and not routinely received). Moreover Kim, working with women experiencing some of the more extreme impacts of disproportionate, unacknowledged, unreturned emotional labour, names this cost: exhaustion, self-sacrifice, self-annihilation, identity.

Ndidi Okoro experiences just this. Against her inclination, Chibuikwe pressures her into having a child. Importantly, Ndidi is not just under the pressure of one man’s expectations, but under a whole society’s norms and conventions represented through him. For example, Chibuikwe is spellbound by the idea of walking into a pre-defined role as father and husband. He has heard, countless times, the story of how his own parents met while studying, and his father

⁴ One thinks, also, of the extra emotional labour involved in being a marginalised writer in the British publishing landscape: circumventing; persevering; smiling.

asked to borrow her lecture notes, delighted when she consented to sit next to him and show him how to do it for himself, only to realise that his note-taking was as precise and deliberate as everything else about him, including his pick-up line. (p. 71)

This is why I wrote his first encounter with his wife as an echo of his parents' first meeting. When Chibuike first meets Ndidi he 'asked to borrow her lecture notes on thermodynamics; he needs help, he says, with the transfer of heat from one body to another,' (p. 180) and although this may seem harmless or even auspicious, the relationship later sours and implodes because of the very reasons it began: Chibuike is attracted to Ndidi partly because he is under the false impression that her love can make him a better man.

Thus, when Chibuike proposes having a child, Ndidi 'knows what is expected of her as a wife. She knows what marriage is for' (p. 182). And, when that child is born, Chibuike expects his wife to take easily to motherhood because he does not see the role played by patriarchy's hand in shaping his expectations of family: he thinks that women are automatically good at motherhood because he is blind to the emotional labour involved because, as a man, nobody told him that there was any real work to be done. Thus Ndidi, who never wanted a child, 'does not love the baby like he does. She doesn't know how. She can only be strict, and severe' (p. 184).

For Chibuike, this is confusing and a disappointment, but the beginnings of the trouble brewing were always there if he had been able to see them. He loves Ndidi for her ability to perform emotional labour for him in the way that women are expected to do: to manage his addiction, for example, and allow him to appear healthy and happy ('With Ndidi, he steps into the shape of a big man' (p. 180)). But he is unaware that by falling into easy, well-worn gender roles, he leaves himself and his wife vulnerable to harm:

For as long as she can remember, her mother has been the one to manage her father's emotions, working diligently behind the scenes to keep his anger within manageable bounds, constantly monitoring the pressure he applies to their married life, balancing tension and compression. Ndidi does the same for her brother; he is several years older than her but still unmarried. What Chibuike wants from her, men have wanted for years. (p. 181)

Even when Chibuike knows he and his wife must divorce on principle because she wishes to protect her brother, the abuser of her son, Chibuike hesitates because he knows that without Ndidi, there will be nobody to perform the emotional labour he needs: 'What is a man without a mother, even his child's?' (p. 56). I chose this phrasing in order to foreground the parasitic nature of Chibuike's

masculinity, since Chibuike is not only exploiting Ndidi as his wife, but inappropriately dependent on the skilled emotional labour which is primarily intended for his own child. This kind of imbalance of emotional labour is a well-documented phenomenon known to ‘lead to fatigue, burnout, apathy, resentment and even contempt’ in the put-upon partner in a romantic relationship (de la Cretaz, 2020).

The only reason Ndidi is able so easily to manage Chibuike’s addiction, and make him feel better about himself, is because she has been trained by the deeply problematic family in which she grew up. The things Chibuike found attractive in his wife, the forces which Chibuike exploited in order to convince his wife to have a child, may have resembled his parents’ happier marriage in some ways, but they are the same forces which led Ndidi to forsake their son. When she decides to try to help her brother avoid prison, she believes she will be able to look after all her male charges: brother (whose paedophilia she will, somehow, manage privately within the family), husband (with whom she will remain married) and son (who will, theoretically, be protected from his uncle henceforth and who will not have to live in a broken home). In fact, her plan risks the safety of her own child and, importantly, the safety of countless other children who are not hers, for the sake of the protocol of ‘family first’. Through this kind of mirroring and distortion of various familial and marital relationships, I aimed to portray Ndidi and Chibuike as both trapped not merely by their personal relationships with one another and their wider families, but by their blindly following gender and familial roles that do not, in fact, protect or serve them. My aim here was not to excuse their behaviour, or to pathologise it, but to explore its causes and its history as a way out of such problematic patterns.

I wrote Ndidi as a reversal of Naomi: Ndidi is a mother who never wanted to be a mother, and who fails her child largely because her desire *not* to be a mother was ignored and her unsuitability for motherhood was presumed to be a temporary phase rather than representing a decision that ought to be respected. In this I was also reflecting on my reading of *Second-Class Citizen*, in which Adah’s desire to pursue a promising education is overruled by her husband and his family, and by the wider community’s expectations of what a young woman should be doing with her life (Emecheta, 1974). As might be expected, her childcare responsibilities (and her abusive marriage) ultimately make it very difficult for her to fulfil her dreams of becoming a writer, or to maintain steady employment of any kind. Still, Adah feels a deep affection and responsibility for her children when they are born and strives to secure the best life possible for them, under tremendously difficult circumstances. But it struck me that this might not always be the case, and that narratives in which women grow to love their children despite having been pressured into motherhood, are open to potentially dangerous misinterpretation, however true to life (the details of Adah’s life closely follow those of Emecheta’s).

Moreover, I also wrote Ndidi’s character to distance Chibuike (and myself) from the essentialist ideals of masculinity hoped for by some men who wish to ‘represent heterosexual masculine privilege as a

thing of the past even as it continues to structure institutions’ (Harrington, 2021, p. 350). Harrington explains that there are those who would seek to protect the male privilege, including within the family, by appearing to reform problematic elements of traditional masculinity without relinquishing the notion that men have an automatic right to hegemony. I did not want Chibuike to represent a kind of ‘eternal masculine’ (Boise, 2019, p. 147) who has a divine right to rule over women but has merely been corrupted in the *way* he does so. It was important to me that Chibuike’s authority over Nddi was itself the problem, for his wife as well as himself. Had he never pressured Nddi into having a child, Achike might never have been born; also, he might not have been born to a life of abuse, uncertainty and loss, and his parents might never have experienced such emotional turmoil.

Thus, for Chibuike’s story to find resolution, the answer must lie in queerness – again, queerness not just as queer sexual orientation or a queer gender identity, but as an active choice which is available to people of any and all identities. It is a throwing-off of heteronormative traditions and conventions in favour of an approach to love which is radically more humane and more responsive to the needs of the people involved. This is an important distinction not least because resolution for Ekene requires this, too.⁵

bell hooks argues that ‘Black males in the culture of imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy are feared but they are not loved. Of course, part of the brainwashing that takes place in a culture of domination is the confusion of the two’ (hooks, 2003, p. ix)⁶. In *Here Again Now*, I wanted to portray this kind of confusion from two perspectives. I wanted to explore it from the perspective of someone who instils fear in seeking to show love, which is why Chibuike’s father ‘beats Chibuike more [than his other children] because he loves him more.’ (p. 161) I also wanted to explore what it means to be a victim of this kind of confusion, and to experience that victimhood as an inheritance that goes back through generations. Hence Achike, the son of a man who is a ‘failure of a father’ (p. 53) having been raised by a man whose father, in certain important ways, failed him, is ‘confused by the very concept of affection. Threatened by it, as though he could not distinguish between love and trouble.’ (p. 54) Thus, this is not merely a case of individuals in pain and confusion: *Here Again Now* is concerned with a cycle of learned behaviour, passed from one person to the next, *spreading* pain and confusion. Gadsden and Harris argue for ‘decolonized models of [...] identity’ to better serve

⁵ I wish to stress that I am not trying to essentialise queerness, and that I do not see queer identities itself as fundamentally revolutionary: people and practises which we would, here and now, describe as ‘queer’ have always been with us. Rather, queerness as the choices we make in how we live our lives and respond to those around us, which extends far beyond sexual orientations and gender identities which are thought of as queer. Perhaps this distinction is best summed up by the phrase popularised by the ‘Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants Movement’: ‘not gay as in happy but queer as in fuck your borders’.

⁶ hooks is writing about her native USA, but it is more or less beyond argument that England shares the USA’s imperialist, White-supremacist capitalist systems – indeed invented and exported them.

Black men (Gadsden & Harris, 2022, p. 1). Similarly, hooks sheds light on the way Black men are imprisoned by imposed – that is to say, learned and prescribed – ideas of masculinity:

Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out. In patriarchal culture, all males learn a role that restricts and confines. [...] At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling. (hooks, 2003, p. ix)

When I wrote the character of Chibuike, I was writing a man who was living precisely this kind of life: he is imprisoned. This did not mean simply writing a character who was incapable of empathy, or love, or deep feeling: such a character would be not imprisoned but sociopathic, and would experience an entirely different set of problems. It was important to me that Chibuike was capable of deep feeling because, as I mention, he needed to be able to experience the best of the human condition as well as the worst; but also because such representations of Black men, particularly heterosexual, cis-gendered Black men, are rare – a result of the hostile publishing and media environment I described earlier. And, without such representations from which to ‘learn’, the imprisonment of Black men is doomed to continue, as hooks notes.

However, I was equally bound to write about Chibuike as oppressed, to describe his behaviour as brutal, problematic and ultimately isolating, even within a dynamic which he perceives as being as intimate as family. At the end of Chapter 12, when Ekene is deeply distressed and clearly needs a hug, Chibuike hesitates:

There was no way through to such things, no tracks laid down for the wheels to grind. It simply wasn't what you did, or what anyone had done before. Decades had gone by, and not a single hug for the boy. He couldn't find a way. But he ached to do it. What else was he for? How long could he live like this, a father without a son to love? (p. 218)

Here, Chibuike is the perpetrator of harm in that he is isolating Ekene just as he has isolated Achike. But it was important for me to portray him as isolating himself, or as isolated by societal expectations of him as a man, and by a lack of role models who showed him examples of a masculinity that was more cognisant of, expressive of, comfortable with and fluent in his own emotions.

In doing this, I was building on the practices of other Black British writers. hooks refers to the problematic, carceral nature of Black male selfhood which, as she says of her own father, is ‘still committed to patriarchal thought and action even though it keeps him isolated emotionally from loved ones, even though his sexism, and its concomitant violence and abuse, has ruined a marriage of more

than fifty years' (hooks, 2003, p. xiii). In *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*, Johnnie contemplates the particular predicament he is in, as a man whom we would now call Black British, trying to carve out an identity for himself as a middle-class man, nuanced and directed by the wishes of his patriarch and of the heteronormative, White supremacist, patriarchal society from which he comes and in which he lives in London:

One thinks of a father who's a hurricane that never ceased blowing dutifully through one's nightmares, one's thoughts and actions. One thinks of him as something very special. On some other planet. Next to mine. [...] I suppose he had the right life saved up for me. The life of endless respectable pursuits and conventional patterns of behaviour. Not that the old man would have insisted. But 'the others' would have prescribed a girl three to four shades lighter than myself. Respectable people are married people. (Salkey, 2009, pp. 80-81)

More recently, Derek Owusu's *K* is all too conscious of the fact that his gender expression and sexual desires for other men conflict with his upbringing as a Black British man of Ghanaian heritage:

As a child, second hand [sic] word and sermons in Twi put me in my place so the spectrum of sexuality never moved me – a straight walk even if I could decide on a direction [...] (Owusu, 2019, p. 52)

In Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (another retelling of an older story, *Howards End* by E. M. Forster), Kiki looks at her son merely allowing himself to openly enjoy a live performance of classical music, merely allowing himself to be moved emotionally, and feels that she has succeeded as the mother of a Black man:

Yet surely no one among these white people could be more musical than Jerome, who, Kiki now noticed, was crying. She opened her mouth with genuine surprise and then, fearful of breaking some spell, closed it again. The tears were silent and plentiful. Kiki felt moved, and then another feeling interceded: pride. *I don't understand*, she thought, but *he* does. A young black man of intelligence and sensibility, and *I* have raised him. After all, how many other young black men would even come to an event like this [...] Kiki continued her imaginary speech to the imaginary guild of black American mothers: *And there's no big secret, not at all, you just need to have faith, I guess, and you need to counter the dismal self-image that black men receive as their birthright from America — that's essential — and, I don't know... get involved in after-school activities, have books around the house, and sure, have a little money, and a house with outdoor...* (Smith, 2005, pp. 70-71)

Importantly, Kiki's internal monologue suggests some self-awareness regarding the fact that raising a 'young black man of intelligence and sensibility' requires a certain amount of money, although perhaps there is less self-awareness surrounding Kiki's measurement of intelligence and sensibility according to the extent to which her Black son is able to respond visibly to a White European work of art. Still, *On Beauty*, published five years after *All About Love*, joins a conversation about the ways in which Black men are deprived of a full emotional life – and how wonderful it is when this can be healed. As I aim to do and as hooks directs, Kiki and Jerome – and, ultimately, Smith – are throwing off conventions and expectations around what it means to be a Black man. I do so in the knowledge that whatever change I make will be incremental, perhaps not even visible unless voluntarily and explicitly exposed, but also in the knowledge that such change is (as best demonstrated by hooks) urgently needed.

4. The Alchemy of Healing

Black queer people urgently need relationships and representation which offer healing. Importantly, though, as I indicated in Chapter 2, my vision of healing is not identical with *correction*. In *Here Again Now*, Achike confuses the two, thinking that love ‘always had to be [...] essentially corrective. Love must be a red pen’ (p. 18), and this leads him to experience love only in part, despite the purity of his intentions. Achike always seems to want either to efface the parts of Ekene he finds troubling, or to refuse to acknowledge them altogether. Similarly, with his father, he thinks he can eradicate his father’s alcoholism by self-sacrifice alone.

This is not healing; it is, in this context, a refusal to accept the fullness of what it means to be human, albeit a refusal that comes from idealism. This is not what I had in mind for my characters, or for the work the novel might do. Again, as I said in Chapter 2, healing is contextual, meaning different things to different people in different circumstances, so any definition of healing is likely to be quite broad. But for my characters and for my readers, I envisioned not an erasure of past hurts (which, in any case, would make for a rather saccharine ending to the narrative and does not reflect most people’s experiences), but a transmuting of the whole, a journey towards ‘satisfaction’⁷, in which both characters and readers go from object to subject, and this requires an altogether different approach from Achike’s.

When Chibuiké’s transformative relationship with Ekene begins to form, it does so on the basis of the two of them engaging with and understanding one another in a very deep way: they see one another at their most vulnerable, and this forms a catalyst for them sharing deeply personal elements of their lives that help explain them, offering up the whole self for acceptance and for a transmuting love in a way that Achike was never able to do, or even to witness. This is healing in its fullest sense: a recognition of the fact that the pain, the wound, if you like, is now part of a human being’s memory and experience, and a moving forward positively with that in mind.

The healing my characters offer one another is any kind of panacea: the healing they experience is transformative of the whole, but it does not make them wholly perfect or omnipotent. Chibuiké declares that they will have to sell Achike’s flat because he can’t afford the mortgage (p. 280), and Ekene tells Chibuiké ‘I can’t be everything you need. Not at once. I can’t. You’ll need to go to meetings, and you’ll need to give up drinking – all the things you promised’ (p. 279). Rather than

⁷ Note the importance of the word ‘towards’, here: healing is a journey not (or not solely) an arrival at a destination. My hope for my readers, for the literary tradition in which I take a part, and for the history of Black queer lives and representation, is that *Here Again Now* will join people on that journey and be a positive presence; a companion.

having control or approval of every aspect of one another's being, Ekene and Chibuikwe offer the possibility of real change by accepting realistic, pragmatic, positive ways of moving forward for the self and for the other, having fully acknowledged the realities of their needs and those of the other. It was important to me that my vision of healing be just as practical as it was optimistic.

It's worth saying, too, that although Achike does not receive the healing he deserves, he is not irredeemable. I ended his role in the novel on a tragic note, but it was important to me he must not be portrayed as finally and absolutely irredeemable, only to be killed off by a Darwinian narrative that sets apart the worthy from those unworthy of notice. This reflects and testifies to my understanding of healing: while its transformational power is huge, its reach is finite because it depends on the finite capacity of humans to deliver it, and to take advantage of it.

Now, if we are to discuss healing, we must discuss hurt, and the choices I made as a writer in terms of which kind(s) of hurt to portray, and how. Although, as I said earlier, the spectre of conversion therapy looms large for some queer people of colour, I chose not to write about conversion therapy largely because I believe that rather a lot of the visibility of Black people in mainstream media involves Black suffering. The nature of Black pain (and Black joy) will change depending on the context: for some, it means pain that is the result of racialised forces and systems (chattel slavery, for example, or police brutality, or the various harms created by drug abuse), or joy that is experienced in spite of, or even within those forces or systems (Negro spirituals, for example, or educational success).

But the appetite for Black pain in Western media tends to focus on its most extreme forms (slavery, police brutality, drugs) and I remain wary of thoughtlessly feeding this appetite. Any writer must be comfortable with depicting pain, but pain comes in many forms and levels, and these extremes contribute to a skewed understanding of Black life in the present day. I am far from the only creative who feels this way; producer Marsai Martin famously has a 'no Black pain' rule:

I have a couple of rules when you come into my office. When you come into my office, don't give me this — I don't do no Black pain. If it's Black pain I don't go for it because there's so many films and projects about that, so that's not who I am. (Chuba, 2021)

I have referred already to the problematic appetite for Black pain in UK publishing, but I think it is also worth pointing out that this appetite is partly responsible for creating a distinction between Black joy and Black pain which is somewhat misleading. Kleaver Cruz points out that

[j]oy is a way to enter the pain, as much as it is to be in the joy [...] There's a difference between experiencing something and creating it [...] When you consciously create Black joy or conjure it, it becomes something you can wield as opposed to just experience. (Brinkhurst-Cuff & Sotire, 2021, p. 26)

Cruz's thinking is heavily indebted to Audre Lorde who, in a different context, wrote almost 45 years earlier about joy as a powerful instrument for change, as a tool that can help address and prevent pain:

The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (Lorde, 2017, p. 26)

Moreover, because I knew I wanted to write a story of reconciliation aimed at providing a model for conservative or religious parents to love their queer children, I wanted to create a father who had committed terrible injustices, but not so shocking as to be hopelessly far from the possibility of redemption in the reader's eyes.

This decision actually helped me explore homophobia more fully: many other forms of abuse and injustice towards queer people exist, especially from their families, including the kinds of seemingly non-violent rejection that I write about in *Here Again Now*, such as the silent withdrawal of parental love, and the tacit insistence that to be queer is to be inconvenient, inadequate, or irredeemably disappointing. I believe that the extreme, often physical violence and the emotional violence which is less visible are both of the same root, part of the same culture of homophobic violence. I believe they must be considered together and can only be eliminated together; tackling one in isolation will never be successful.

This is the strongest sense, for me, in which fiction writing functions as research: it explores different ways of interpreting received wisdom, challenges what is problematic (often merely by presenting it as such, which can be unprecedented in mainstream publishing), and offers alternatives that can make a difference to the lives of real people. When writing *Here Again Now*, I had in mind some clear missions and among them were the portrayal of the common practice of rejecting queer children as morally wrong, indeed as a tragedy for *everyone* involved; the portrayal of loving one's queer child as not merely ordinary but urgently necessary for both child *and* parent; and the insistence that for queer and non-queer people to know peace, this acceptance must be offered, and that offer must be accepted. This is all difficult work, particularly the offering and the accepting, which require time, love, honesty and patience, and this takes work. Advocating for a set of values underpinned by love, hooks advises us that '[a] love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully

and well' (hooks, 2018, p. 87): in *Here Again Now*, I wrote Chibuiké's, Achike's and Ekene's long, complex journeys towards accepting that they themselves have these rights, despite trauma and abuse.

I was, however, conscious when writing this novel that not every character would be able to achieve realisation, and that not every storyline would find resolution. Ndidí, for example, dies without ever finding her way out of the oppression which drove her to compromise the safety of her own child; Amos exits the stage having lost what little freedom he had. This is, perhaps, an inevitable part of storytelling, because if every character's storyline was equally resolved, the novel might well feel trite. Burroway and Stuckey-French observes that '[t]he more morally complex the story, the less straightforward the idea of winning and losing becomes' (Burroway & Stuckey-French, 2007, p. 265); speaking of film, Robert McKee tells us that a story's resolution needs to allow the audience to 'leave the cinema with dignity' (McKee, 1999, p. 314). If I were to write a narrative in which everyone ends up equally happy, I would fail to honour the moral complexity of their journeys, fail to fairly and adequately portray the evils of patriarchy – and fail to honour the journey on which the reader has hopefully undergone.

All the same, I wanted a narrative in which no one character's storyline finds resolution at the direct expense of another's. Specifically, I did not want Chibuiké's redemption to be achieved or demonstrated at the direct expense of Ekene, who was even more vulnerable than he was. I have seen queer narratives do this to their detriment, where one character (usually a White British man) finds redemption at the expense of another (often a non-White character, or someone otherwise Othered), or evidences this redemption by 'getting the girl' (or whichever gender the Othered character has or doesn't have) – who has been morally superior all along and perhaps might be happier, or even safer, with someone else.

Examples of this in heterosexual love stories abound: famously, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio publicly accuses Hero of having been unfaithful to him despite having only the flimsiest of evidence. He humiliates her, disgraces her, seems to kill her – but, having changed his mind and experienced an Act's worth of guilt, he marries her in front of at least one audience member who is probably wondering whether Hero, rather than marry a man who is dangerous and stupid, would have been better off staying dead (Shakespeare, 2007). It's worth pointing out, however, that Shakespeare arguably comments tacitly on Claudio's unworthiness (and, perhaps, on the unequal nature of many real-life relationships) by writing his marriage as the foil to that of Beatrice and Benedick, which takes place at the same time but follows a great deal more character development on both sides, so that both people are more equally developed in the direction of readiness for marriage and worthiness of one another.

Sadly, some queer narratives feature similar inequalities but without the same self-awareness. For example, in *God's Own Country* (2017), young, lonely, unhappy farmer Johnny Saxby undergoes character development, sacrificing his stubbornness at the altar of his feelings for Gheorghe, the Romanian immigrant worker who has newly joined the farm – and who, largely because of Johnny's moral failures, was on the point of leaving. Johnny finds Gheorghe, they reconcile, the film ends, supposedly happily. But what is apparently supposed to be a satisfying ending lacks full resolution, because while Johnny has (somewhat) changed, Gheorghe is tacitly portrayed merely as the prize claimed by Johnny following his transformation. The story tacitly posits that his love for Johnny overcomes any objections to Johnny's character he might have, but because the reasons for that love are not clear, the story seems to simply use Gheorghe's feelings as a way of skipping over the need to critically examine what is fair or sensible. Such relationships exist in real life, of course: the problem here is not a lack of verisimilitude, because desire is not always 'sensible', romantic relationships are not always built on logical decisions and White men very frequently experience the better end of all sorts of imbalances of power. The problem is that the narrative seems to endorse this relationship, which ought most correctly to be characterised as unequal, unwise, and unlikely to offer real or lasting happiness to Gheorghe, or perhaps even to Johnny. In the film, the character with less structural power is deprived of full characterhood for the sake of a narrative which is, despite its queerness, primarily about the primacy of White male characterhood and White male humanity over anything else.

A similar craft choice is made in *Sex Education* (2020), when Adam, a White bully who torments and terrorises Black fellow-student Eric for years for being openly gay, undergoes redemption by learning about himself and his character flaws while away at boot camp. Adam proves and celebrates this transformation by showing up to the school play and interrupting the performance (for which Eric has been rehearsing for months). Eric, who has been on his own deeply moving journey from victim to survivor, navigating his relationship with his friends, his education, his family and himself, has an important moment undermined for the sake of proving Adam's worth. Adam makes what is ostensibly a romantic proposal, but how can Adam's transformation be complete if the most essentially loving thing he does is deeply selfish? How can he hope to prove (to Eric, to the audience) that he is no longer oppressing Eric, by disregarding Eric's own journey? There is scant resolution to be found here and this is arguably acknowledged by the narrative when Raheem (whom Eric had been seeing) warns Eric that Adam will hurt him again, but no significant further attention is given to this aspect of their relationship in the following season. This narrative choice appears to be an emerging pattern, particularly in film and television, and it is disappointing.

I was determined to make a better choice in my narrative, for my characters and for the sake of my readers, some of whom might be vulnerable young queer people themselves. As Matthew Salesses

writes, ‘If writers really believe that art is important to actual life, then the responsibilities of actual life are the responsibilities of art’ (Salesses, 2021, 37%). This does not mean, of course, that art should always be as gentle and polite as we might expect people to be, but that artists seeking to put their work into the world must consider how that work impact and interacts with the world into which it is placed. In order for the love between Chibuike and Ekene to be complete, some form of what atonement theory refers to as ‘satisfaction’ was necessary. Although I lost my faith years ago, atonement theory⁸ provides a helpful word term here because ‘satisfaction’ points to the need for Ekene to be *satisfied* by Chibuike’s atonement for past wrongs, and also to Chibuike’s need to be made whole or *made enough* (to go back to the roots of the word) in order be able to love Ekene with his whole and best self – for example, Kathryn Pogin explains that

Where our social environments are marred by systems of domination and oppression, and where our epistemic resources developed within that same socio-political order, there is a risk that our very abilities to recognise and will good maybe nearly inescapably compromised [...] Operating in good faith does not preclude inadvertently exercising ideological judgement to the detriment of the moral right. (Pogin, 2021, p. 160)

Hence Chibuike explains that he took in Ekene because he believed that having another (seemingly) heterosexual man under his roof would be good for Achike, whom he knew was gay (p. 143): he thought he was doing a good thing for his child, but his ability to ‘will good’ was deeply compromised here. In order for him to make real progress, the narrative had to simultaneously make room for the ‘satisfaction’ of *both* Chibuike and Ekene.

In fact, when writing the book, I had to carefully consider whether it would be Ekene or Chibuike who would make the first move towards reconciliation⁹. After all, Ekene is the arguably the most emotionally self-aware character, and if the story is about the benefits of queerness for men in general, it makes sense for the queer character to induct the straight character into a queer way of living and loving. But at the same time, Ekene is extremely vulnerable: not only has he lost a dear friend, but he has also endured more than twenty years of a confusing relationship with that friend, a man who is far from perfect. He has also lived nearly forty years without an adequate father or father-figure in his life. I could not have Chibuike ask Ekene to be ‘both patient and physician’ (Morrison, 2020a, p. 200), any more than I would have wanted to take on that double-burden myself in the context of the

⁸ Atonement theory as the branch of Christian theology concerned with the precise role of Christ and the precise role of human beings (and sometimes the relationship between the two roles) in the salvation of humanity.

⁹ Here I distinguish between reconciliation (the eroding, evolving or destruction of barriers to the love between people) and resolution (which makes little-to-no room for those barriers to evolve, and thus tends towards an ending which is less satisfying).

racist publishing industry. And perhaps most importantly, Chibuike and Ekene are not just themselves: respectively, they represent every parent who has failed a child, and every child who has ever been failed. I could not convincingly or in good conscience write a reconciliation between Chibuike and Ekene that did not take into account Ekene's urgent emotional needs. I could not allow this book into a reader's hands without managing their reconciliation with the greatest of care.

Baldwin wrote that African Americans 'know about White Americans what parents – or, anyway, mothers – know about their children' (Baldwin, 1963, pp. 108-109), articulating that experiencing the nasty end of a power imbalance can confer wisdom that hegemony cannot, because 'one watched the lives they led. One could not be fooled about that; one watched the things they did and the excuses that they gave themselves' (p. 109). So, if Ekene, in this instance 'child', is the one who knows more about Chibuike, who has watched the things he did, then Ekene is the one who knows more, and it is Chibuike who has to go on the journey of redemption, and this redemption must be a sincere address of his faults, not meaningless gesture for the sake of preserving some trope of masculinity.

In terms of the plot¹⁰, the first pivotal moment in Chibuike and Ekene's relationship comes after Achike's death, when Ekene comes back to the flat and finds Chibuike asleep in the living room. It is December, the window is open and Ekene sees Chibuike 'with his arms wrapped around himself protectively in sleep, the blanket half falling off his legs' (p. 151) and wonders what to do. In the end, he draws the blanket over Chibuike, and this initiates a conversation between the two of them, which in turn makes way for a satisfaction:

How to wash away the heart's old habits? [Ekene] could not see how. He wanted so much to be free of whatever unfair bond it was that tied him to Achike, or to his own father, or to Achike's father. He wanted so much to be free of whatever had made him to his heart's harsh bidding this evening, and was bidding him even now [...] His heart was not his own. He was Achike's tonight, more than he had ever been; he was his own father's, even if his own father would never claim him. And if there was a love in him that needed somewhere to settle, he must give it a place to be. (p. 152)

This was important because although Ekene is arguably more prepared to show tenderness to another man, my desire that the novel act to heal meant that his vulnerabilities had to be part of the equation of reconciliation, just as much as his strengths. Thus, I arrived at the formulation above: Ekene is in

¹⁰ Here I use John Mullan's definition of plot as 'the causal chain that connects events and characters' (Mullan, 2006, p. 170) rather than simply a chronology of what happens, which would place the first pivotal moment in Chibuike and Ekene's relationship much earlier in their lives, when Chibuike acts *in loco parentis* for the first time in Chapter 6.

fact brought to reconciliation by his human frailty (trauma and its resultant urgent need for love, even when that love might not be returned in the way it ought to be), and by recognising this, the story recognises that his actions have nothing to do with Chibuiké's deservingness and everything to do with Ekene's needs. Ekene's actions here do not fulfil reconciliation; they barely begin it because what he does is not just about Chibuiké (Achike and Ekene's father are also on his mind); it is very much about him and his own needs. It is only the alchemy of Chibuiké's open-hearted response that transmutes Ekene's small act of self-expression into one of reconciliation. Without Chibuiké's reciprocity, it would be only Ekene acting out his grief, as he did with Karl, the man whose youth and naivety he took advantage of before returning to the flat.

Moreover, although the blanket scene is the first such scene *in the novel*, it is not, chronologically, the first time Ekene or Chibuiké show or feel tenderness towards one another. I opened Part II of the novel with an analeptic episode on which a teenaged Ekene is staying at Chibuiké's house, having been kicked out by his mother:

He has learned to live within rules. He has felt boundaries hug him tight. He has never had a bedtime before. He has never had a strict ban on fast food. Nobody has ever limited his screen time, or made him floss between his teeth. Nobody has wanted so much of him until now. (p. 137)

Incidentally, I wrote this element of the novel, Chibuiké's approach to parenting, largely as a result of a conversation I had as part of a panel event at the Africa Writes festival at the British Library on 6 July 2019. The event was part of the publicity for *Safe: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space*, an anthology of twenty essays by Black British male writers from a range of backgrounds, experiences and identities, and this was reflected on the panel: Derek Owusu, a survivor of an abusive foster parent; Alex Wheatle MBE, who had been to prison following the Brixton riots; Yomi Sode, a father himself, and me. Yet one thing we all had in common was that our parents, particularly our fathers, rarely expressed love through explicitly stating their feelings in words. Were they ever to be questioned about whether they loved their children, they would reply with some version of, 'Of course we love you – we put food on the table. What more do you want?' I knew then that I wanted to write my fathers and father-figures in this light.

Finally, the funeral, at which Chibuiké publicly embraces and comforts Ekene during a panic attack, whom neither Chibuiké's family nor Ndidi's really know. Chibuiké is initially too worried about public opinion to help Ekene, but when he recognises the primacy of the heart over the expectations of society, and now that his ability to 'recognise good' is purified, he does the right thing:

He looked around. There were eyes on him, from Ndidi's family and his own, watching to see if he knew this man, and what his place was in Ekene's life [...] Then Chibuiké's arms around [Ekene] recalled [Ekene] to himself [...] Chibuiké's presence was entirely pure of force, wanting only to help him breathe slowly in and out, wanting only to offer some good thing forward to his heart, and to encircle him with the best love he could extend. It was only to bring the best of himself to bear on Ekene. And they sat together on the floor again, Ekene still heavy under the weight of himself. He breathed. (pp. 271-272)

I had to write this embrace as it was – public, healing, loving – because it represents Chibuiké's commitment to loving Ekene, as wholly and as openly as if they were father and son. Through this, healing for Ekene and Chibuiké is facilitated; but also the 'underground' nature of queer love in Nigeria (to which Desmond testifies and which Amos lived) is healed.

Throughout the novel, words and actions repeat and reoccur: Ekene's relationship with Chibuiké is seen multiple times, in multiple timelines, from multiple perspectives, as are many of the relationships within the novel; the novel itself is a 'reincarnation' of the story of Ruth. Through the 'reincarnations' within the narrative, I reveal the relationships to the reader in more depth and nuance, but alongside this is also the grace granted to the characters through second chances. The foundational idea of grace comes, of course, from Christian doctrine, as does the formal work of the novel; I was influenced by my time in the church, when I was exposed to the 'recapitulation theory' of atonement, the idea that Christ 'retraced the steps of Adam, successfully resisting sin and evil in all the ways that Adam failed to, culminating in the ultimate act of obedience: death on a cross' (Pugh, 2014, p. 1).

However, as mentioned earlier, I was also very much informed by the traditional Igbo belief in reincarnation, introduced at the start of the novel through the film in which Achike stars before his death, also called *Here Again Now*. This is part of the healing work which was central to my purpose in writing this novel: healing for the characters in it, of course, but also for the very real people whose experiences mirror those of the characters and, in turn, I hope, to some small degree, for literature itself.

Perhaps the best explanation for the kind of repetition I am performing in *Here Again Now* comes from Charles Baxter. He explains his idea of 'stutter memories, or rhyming action' in which, '[t]he effect is a bit like prophecy, except prophecy run in reverse' (Baxter, 2008, p. 112). This is a phenomenon that occurs

when narratives move in reverse — when they come dramatically or imagistically to a point that is similar to one they had already seemingly passed. We see an image that we half

remember. We hear a voice that we think we have heard before. We watch as someone performs an action that someone else did very much that way years ago. Something about the onward flow of time has been tricked. [...] These are the stories that poets often like to tell, but most stories have some elements of time reversal, of what I would call stutter memories, or rhyming action. (p. 113)

This constitutes what he calls ‘beautiful action’ (p. 113) (as opposed to effective language or effective dramatic structure). Baxter, conscious of not wanting to give bad writing advice, is careful to delineate what is ‘good’ writing from ‘bad’, what constitutes successful from unsuccessful execution of narrative rhyme. However, I feel that Baxter’s view of what constitutes beautiful action is contingent on his specific cultural background, just as all readers’ tastes are. Interestingly though, he acknowledges that some readers will be blinded to the beauty of rhyming action owing to those readers’ particular biases: ‘Americans love singularity. Ah, we say, the unexpected. How beautiful the unexpected is. (No: The unexpected is seldom beautiful.)’ (p. 114). He also acknowledges his own biases when he states that, ‘Rhymes are often most telling when they are barely heard, when they are registered but not exactly noticed.’ (p. 114)

Baxter cites examples from modernist writers Sylvia Townsend Warner and James Joyce, and mentions African writers who are ‘obsessed with patterns and rhyming action’ (p. 115) such as Bessie Head, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. However, we see this phenomenon in one of the novels that I took as one of the most direct inspirations for the formal work of *Here Again Now: Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston.

In this novel, the protagonist, Janie Crawford, endures two unhappy marriages before finding love with a third man. Janie’s journey through romantic relationships represents and corresponds to her journey towards emotional and psychological fulfilment – what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls her ‘journey from object to subject.’ (Gates, 2013, 30%). These two journeys are marked by the recurring image of a pear tree in blossom. At the beginning, the reference to the pear tree in bloom accompanies her sexual awakening and represents the possibilities of love at its truest:

The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flash. Now they emerged and quested about consciousness. [...] She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. (Hurston, 2013)

Later, Janie's grandmother tells her that she wants her to marry Logan Killicks, a man for whom Janie feels nothing, but whose stability and protection her grandmother craves for her. The image returns: '[t]he vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn't know how to tell Nanny that.'

Finally, when Janie meets 'Tea Cake', the final man she will marry, the image returns again:

She couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom — a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God.

The recurrences are openly stated, and the wording is preserved intact, or nearly intact, each time: it is clearly not intended to be 'barely heard'. Perhaps then, when Baxter cites the 'American' taste for singularity, what he really refers to is what Eagleton called the 'typically Anglo-Saxon uneasiness with ideas as such – a feeling that arid abstractions are out of place when it comes to art' (Eagleton, 2006, p. 207).

For Hurston, the image is diegetic, in that Janie is aware of it as a landmark to which she returns, a touchstone for romantic and personal happiness. For the most part, however, this is not the case for my characters. Although both Ekene and Chibuiké cite the same reason ('I wanted you to see me as I am' (pp. 143, 186) for their respective confessions to one another, the rest of the time my 'rhymes' or 'stutters' do not work this way. For example, when Chibuiké asks the teenaged Ekene if he misses his feckless, unfaithful, absentee father, I used free indirect discourse to say that 'Underneath the word "miss" still moves some wild, insubordinate thing that this language cannot hold' (p. 136). I reincarnated the idea when the teenaged Chibuiké realises that his stepfather is a closeted homosexual:

He can't pronounce the word for what he saw. The language of sin arises first in his mind, but its word will not fit; the act will not submit to the word. *Gay*. It corresponds to what he saw, but underneath the word still moves some wild, insubordinate thing that this language can never hold. (p. 169)

Finally, at Achike's funeral, when Ekene is trying to decide how his relationship with Chibuiké will look now that Achike is no longer there with them, I used free indirect speech again to show Ekene's thoughts:

Caretaker. Martyr. Father. None of these described the whole truth. Underneath the word still moved some wild, insubordinate thing that this language could never hold. (pp. 254-255)

The ‘rhymes’ happen in their internal thoughts, meaning that the connections between characters and timelines are visible only to the reader. This means two things: one on hand, only the reader sees the characters’ lostness in its entirety, their inability to understand their connections to one another, that they are ‘part of something infinite and strong’ (p. 9). The reader is Baldwin’s negro, Baldwin’s child; the reader is also, perhaps, Godlike, as the second significance here is that the reader also sees the characters’ potential to be *found*, to be healed and saved – both when that potential is fulfilled, as with Ekene and Chibuiké, and when it is not, as when Achike dies young.

But my characters teeter on the edge of satisfaction; I had to show them in what Lorde called the fear of a ‘real connection’. To do this, I borrowed from ‘Whoso List to Hunt, I Know Where is an Hind’ by Sir Thomas Wyatt, in which the woman, beloved but emotionally unavailable to the poet, is described as ‘wild for to hold, though I seem tame’ (Wyatt, 2005, l.14). I never intended any of my writing to depend on a full appreciation of every reference in order for it to be enjoyed or responded to meaningfully, but all language comes with its own baggage, and this baggage seemed to fit. As wildly different as this sixteenth-century ‘hind’ ostensibly is from my characters, Wyatt’s language offers helpful associations. Like the woman in the sonnet, the redemptive thoughts of my characters are captivating and striking, but feel dangerous, here not only because there is no readily available word that fully expresses their thoughts or feelings, but because their thoughts do not fit any standard, traditional way of thinking about the world, which means they also do not fit. Thus, this rhyming action represents a threat to the characters’ sense of stability and security, just as much as it represents an opportunity for new ways of thinking.

This, then, is the queerness I mentioned earlier, and which bell hooks stops just short of mentioning at all in *All About Love*: it is dangerous in that it introduces real uncertainty and threatens established modes or order, but it is this very uncertainty that is exciting and indeed the beginning of the healing process for all of us, not just for Armistead Maupin’s ‘lone gazelles’ but for the entire ‘buffalo herd’ that has had their species, and therefore their entire lives, laid out for them, to their detriment. Chibuiké, a heterosexual cis-gendered man, is just as lost as the homosexual Ekene: in order to understand and thrive in the world, he needs change just as much as Ekene does, having been let down no less by traditional ideas of masculinity and manhood. He needs the wildness and insubordination of his inner life because it is his passport out of a way of thinking that is restrictive and unliving.

There is an analogue to this in the words of the writer Juno Roche who, according to an interview with *PinkNews*, ‘now goes by they/them pronouns and is embracing just using the word “trans” with no additional qualifier such as “woman” or “femme.”’ (Ashenden, 2019):

‘These days I’m finding that just using the word trans, for me, centres my identity in a new space.’

Reclaiming just the label ‘trans’ is freeing for Roche, who sees it as turning away from the idea that being trans is ‘a place that we should pass through really quickly’, and instead embracing their transness.

‘We were taught that we shouldn’t want to occupy trans,’ they explain.

‘Before we were seen as broken and that the process of transitioning would save us and deliver us to a kind of binary place.

‘For me, I just felt like I was at that stop off point always and that trans was the word that honoured me and honoured my experience.’

For my characters, as for Roche, the solution is to dwell in the moment of being undefined by a system which defines only to constrain. I believe there is something tremendously courageous in this, but also something which is, in a sense, terribly simple. I tried to reflect this towards the end of the novel, when I brought the story of Ekene’s relationship with Chibuike to a close:

Chibuike nodded, still crying, and they moved to hug each other, but hesitated before this first mutual thing, each approaching the other. Neither one moved in brave and lonely service of the other, but now together and whole. Their form was still unprecise, and might only ever be second best to what they’d lost. But wasn’t that still good? Even if it was too late for Achike, even if he would never see it — hadn’t they both come so far?

Yes, it was an impossible thing they might do now.

They did it. (pp. 280-281)

I never defined what it was they did, since part of Ekene and Chibuike’s triumph is that they have forged a relationship not only despite a degree of ineffability, but *within* and *born of* that ineffability. At the beginning of the novel, ineffability is to be feared, a problem to be solved; by the end, it is the destination at which the characters arrive, healed, and ‘together and whole’. This is the impossible thing they have done.

In Hurston's novel, the rhyming action does not always rhyme in the strictest sense: in the middle of her novel, when Janie feels least happy, least understood, least fulfilled, Hurston's use of repetition is, essentially, characterised just as much by discord as accord. It is a kind of half-rhyme which only becomes a full rhyme, transmuting to wholeness when Janie finds real love with Tea Cake. Similarly, in my novel, the characters struggle with the question of how men can love one another in a new and fulfilling way, until they simply don't struggle anymore. As I mentioned earlier, the words 'Yes, it was an impossible thing they might do now. They did it' are preceded by instances of the characters facing the possibility that they would not be able to do whatever 'it' is.

The difference between what Hurston is doing and what I am doing, is that the healing in her novel takes place entirely within Janie: she goes from object to subject as a result of her relationship with Tea Cake. Hurston takes Janie out of a relationship in which she is 'de mule uh de world' (Hurston, 2013), and places her in one in which she can become a fulfilled and happy human being. In *Here Again Now*, what heals is not just Ekene and Chibuike but, in a tiny way, the systems and the world in which they live. In some small way, both love and language are healed by the recognition that there is something wild about the human heart that 'our social environments' which are 'marred by systems of domination and oppression' (Pogin, 2021) cannot hold. The story of Ruth is healed, offered a new direction and new possibilities which openly embrace queerness and an openness to new structures. Readers, I hope, are healed by a narrative that shows that what seems impossible is, at least, demonstrable, available, imaginable.

I chose the word 'alchemy' for the title of this chapter and used the word 'transmuting' throughout because these words offer insight into the kind of healing at which I aimed in my novel. Alchemy, the transmuting of base metals into gold, represents the kind of whole, qualitative and systemic change which my characters need, and which I believe the world needs. It is not enough to tinker at the edges. I could, for example, have written a novel about two gay Black British men falling in love and getting married with the blessing of their parents, and that would have been a completely valid choice. But for my characters and my writing, true satisfaction requires a fundamental kind of change: not merely fitting into an existing system but changing the system itself. Elizabeth Freeman explains that 'any comprehensive theory of kinship must [...] answer to the paradox that lesbians and gays both inhabit and exceed the matrix of couplehood and reproduction' (Freeman, 2007, p. 295). I wanted to go beyond this: to write not only about queer people who, as it were, escape the matrix, but people who by their very choices and non-sexual relationships (not or not only by their sexualities or gender identities) transform their lives into queerness, and find freedom in it. Speaking of practitioners of non-reproductive sex, Freeman correctly identifies the inadequacies of our language surrounding their relationships to one another:

these names are available [...] But the terms for descent tend to draw not only upon the dominant lexicon of kinship but also upon kinship's most conservative meanings and functions. So, for instance, one gay man can officially take another as an adoptee, but only if the adoptee is as young as a genetic offspring would be and the relationship preserves normative generationality; otherwise the two men are interpreted as friends or lovers. (p. 297)

The consequences of this are profound. Freeman continues:

Kinship matters for queer theory in a way that Judith Butler reminds us that "bodies matter": (1) a culture's repetition of particular practices actually *produces* what seem to be the material facts that supposedly *ground* those practices in the first place, and (2) when those repetitions are governed by a norm, other possibilities are literally unthinkable and impossible. (p. 297)

In other words, if I had written a novel about Ekene and Achike getting married (just as Ruth marries Boaz and has a son with him), then however beautiful and valid the novel might have been, it would only have upheld familiar structures which do not fully serve the communities about which I write, or to which I belong. (Indeed, Freeman suggests that 'perhaps any genuinely democratic culture needs to abandon the notion' of kinship because it is 'fundamentally exclusive, depending as it does upon the distinction between those who are kin and those who are not kin' (p. 297).) Again, I emphasise the distinction between Freeman's theory and my own creative practice: Freeman seeks freedoms for practitioners of non-reproductive sex, while I seek healing for everyone who exists or would benefit from existing outside the conservative, traditional notion of family, irrespective of sexual practice or orientation.

I was struck, years ago, by an essay by Zadie Smith, in which she describes the author of *Middlemarch* as the 'wisest of writers, who has time for Fred, time for everybody' (Smith, 2009, p. 33): Smith argues that *Middlemarch* is all the stronger for its ability to take in a range of characters including those like Fred Vincy, whom a young Henry James described disdainfully as a 'common-place young gentleman, with his somewhat meagre tribulations and his rather neutral egotism.' *Here Again Now* had to be a novel in which those characters who miss out on the fullness of redemption (particularly Achike, Ndidi) do so because their redemption (like Ekene's, like Chibuike's) would require the fullness of their own novel, not because they are fundamentally unworthy of any further narrative attention. I cannot claim to leave no character behind, but I can be sure that any character who does not make it 'all the way' is just as much a victim of the limits of the (my) novel's scope as of the complex circumstances which brought about their need for redemption in the first instance.

Redemption requires not just the will to be redeemed, but a support network – a village, even if a village of one. This is the novel’s final concern, but I wrote an explanation of this into Achike’s dialogue in the very first chapter, when he explains that his father is ‘just... lost. He needs something to anchor him. He needs to be around family, and he needs someone to remind him of why he should give up drinking again’ (p. 18). And, although this novel ultimately could not be the story of *Achike’s* healing, he was right.

5. Conclusion: So, did it work, then?

When I chose the word ‘alchemy’ to describe the healing I intended my novel to facilitate, I did so with half an eye on the fact that alchemy is a dream from which the world has long since woken up. Base metals do not become gold. Black queer people are mistreated every day with little hope for immediate justice or solace. My novel could never single-handedly solve that problem entirely. ‘Healing’ as a success criterion is a tough nut to crack, not least because of the implication that everybody who needs healing must experience it in order for it to be valid; if this is the case, transmutation really does only happen in the imagination. As I mentioned earlier, the novel’s dedication addresses itself to a very broad demographic, far too broad for me to accurately measure its reception. So then what does success look like for this book?

Zadie Smith writes about how she has wrestled with the precise meaning of the *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a teenager, the novel’s effect on her then and on subsequent re-readings, and the reasons for this:

At fourteen, I did Zora Neale Hurston a critical disservice. I feared my ‘extraliterary’ feelings for her. I wanted to be an objective aesthete and not a sentimental fool. I disliked the idea of ‘identifying’ with the fiction I read: I wanted to like Hurston because she represented good writing, not because she represented me. (Smith, 2009, p. 7)

It is with some guilt that Smith acknowledges that she found something rather shallow in the idea that a Black woman can feel a special connection to a magnificent work of art by a Black woman even partly because it is by a Black woman: ‘like all readers, I want my limits to be drawn by my own sensibilities, not by my melanin count.’

What Smith is arguing against is the idea that her race controls her responses to literature: ‘as a reader, I want to claim fellowship with good writing without limits; to be able to say that Hurston is my sister and Baldwin is my brother, and so is Kafka my brother, and Nabokov, and Woolf my sister, and Eliot and Ozick.’ I agree with Smith that one’s race need not entirely control one’s response to art, but I also agree with Salesses that one’s cultural background inevitably influences one’s response to art much of the time, as it does every other real-life experience (Salesses, 2021, 12%). Smith’s essay ultimately concludes this:

Fact is, I *am* a black woman, and a slither of this book goes straight into my soul, I suspect, for that reason. And though it is, to me, a mistake to say, ‘Unless you are a black woman, you

will never fully comprehend this novel,' it is also disingenuous to claim that many black women do not respond to this book in a particularly powerful manner that would seem 'extra-literary'.

As Salesses says, 'pure craft is a lie' (Salesses, 2021, 12%), which means that to ignore that Black people might have certain strong connections to works which capture experiences of Blackness, is just as facile as ignoring that Black people exist, or that our experiences of the world are influenced by racism. So if a novel by a Black person, about a Black person, touches Black people in a particular way, then this fact can and ought to be celebrated, and I believe it can and ought to be celebrated without completely excluding non-Black people who might engage positively with the work.¹¹ Hurston herself wrote, 'How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company?' (Hurston, 1928, p. 216). I would go further than Smith, though, and insist that the 'slither' of Hurston's novel that went straight into Smith's soul *is* literary. After all, it was Smith who wrote that now, as a grown woman and educated adult, 'the true reason I read is to feel less alone, to make a connection with a consciousness other than my own' (Smith, 2009, p. 56) – and it seems miserly to deny that there is no craft in giving this connection to a reader, to draw a distinction between the literary and the human.

I may never know exactly how far the impact of this novel meets my hopes. I can demonstrate impact in terms that a university understands ('engagement': BBC radio appearances, literature festivals, conferences, blurb quotations), but more central to my intention was that the novel brings comfort and a sense of companionship to the readers who need it. I think I have achieved this. After an event at the Daunt Books Festival in London in which I was interviewed by Derek Owusu, one audience member approached me afterwards and said, smiling, 'Can an old middle-class White lady say how very much I enjoyed that?'¹² As I say, I wrote the book, essentially, for anyone who needs it, so to know that the themes resonated with anyone feels, to me, like success. But there is also something quite magical about being approached, online or in person, by people whose experiences mirror those of my characters more closely. A couple of weeks before *Here Again Now* was published, I spoke to one sixth-form in Manchester, largely made up of non-white students, about my experience of being a writer; after the event, some of the students came up to me and expressed their gratitude at seeing a fellow Black queer person in the public eye. Some of them then came to the launch of my book at the Manchester central library. Finally, one message from a young Black gay man stayed with me. It

¹¹ Despite this, however, at the time of writing none of the (many) mainstream media reviews for either of my novels – which are both about Black British people – have been written by Black people. This is a frustrating and disappointing affirmation of the problems in publishing which I outlined in the first chapter of this essay, and which are not changing fast enough.

¹² The fact that she did not then buy a copy of the book takes almost nothing away from the joy of hearing her response to our discussion.

spoke of the reader's engagement with the novel and its significance to him, ending with the simple words:

It's sort of impossible not to reflect on my own relationship with my dad [...] They're useful reflections.

This is golden.

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