

DIASPORIC CHILDHOODS:
REIMAGINING QUEER AFRICA IN 21st CENTURY LITERATURE

by

BERNARD D. LOMBARDI

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Diasporic Childhoods: Reimagining Africa in 21st Century Literature

By BERNARD D. LOMBARDI

Dissertation Director:

Dr. Belinda Edmondson

Diasporic Childhoods examines representations of queer diasporic childhood in twenty-first century transnational African literature—novels, short stories, and memoir—for how they offer ways to reimagine citizenship and belonging for queer Africans that transform historically-accepted interpretations of Africanity in American, African, and African diaspora discourses. It is primarily concerned with how representations of diasporic childhood lead to reimaginings of African continental space in ways that both challenge heteropatriarchal nationalism as it defines postcolonial societies and subvert Western interpretations of Africa as the anti-modern. Their writing reflects a commitment to using the various spaces they occupy and their concurrent migratory experiences to flesh out these reimaginings and to repositioning Africa, diaspora, and queerness in mutual positive relation. A consequence of this transnational framework is that it simultaneously incites new ways of interpreting America and the West within the scope of both domestic and global socio-cultural politics. The writers studied include Uzodinma Iweala, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Chinelo Okparanta, who all work between Nigeria and the United States, as well as Somali-born Diriye Osman, who spent his

childhood in Kenya and now resides in England, and the late Kenyan Binyavanga Wainaina, whose work carries us throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the United States.

In each text analyzed, the presence of queer children, and their varying marginalized experiences, reveals the socio-sexual limits of national identity (and its circulations transnationally) as manifested in the diegetic worlds in which they exist. The extents by which representations of queer childhood disrupt these narratives and/or orient the reader towards possibilities outside a narrative's dominant socio-historical framework, albeit mostly unknown, exemplify an excavation of queer space as an aesthetic methodology in literary studies. By highlighting the imbrications of form, theory, and social practice in literary production and analysis, *Diasporic Childhoods* presents childhood as a marker of queer space and as an aesthetic device that overlaps with cultural and political investments in queer diaspora as a collective consciousness oriented towards the future and beyond racialized and sexualized forms of oppression.

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Introduction

In 2018, the Nigerian-American writer Uzodinma Iweala published his sophomore novel *Speak No Evil*, a queer coming-of-age story about a Harvard-bound high school senior raised in Washington D.C. by his Nigerian parents. The novel is split into two parts: the first narrated by its protagonist Niru and the second by his white friend Meredith, whose feelings for Niru teeter between friendship and romance. Part one, which makes up two-thirds of the book, begins with Niru revealing to Meredith that he is gay after she makes a sexual pass at him. After fumbling through the awkward nature of the experience, Meredith convinces Niru to download the gay dating app Grindr where he meets and begins a romantic relationship with an African American man, named Damien, a few years his senior. When his father discovers Niru is gay, he claims that Niru is just a confused child and takes him to a spiritual cleansing camp in Nigeria to rid him of his “abomination.” Upon return to the United States, Niru becomes more and more emotionally distraught as he struggles to negotiate his competing identities as gay, black, Nigerian, American, son, lover, and friend. This internal instability impacts his relationships, especially with Meredith, Damien, and his father, and his overall sense of belonging nowhere. Part one ends with Niru getting into an argument with his father and running away despite his father’s plea for him to return and talk. Part two shifts the narrative to Meredith’s perspective and revolves around her long-term emotional

response to Niru's death. She tells us a few pages in that she and Niru get into an argument while they are out drinking at a bar; the police arrive as the fight moves outside and escalates into a yelling match, and they shoot and kill Niru because, as Meredith assumes, all they see is a tall disgruntled black man standing over a smaller white woman.

Speak No Evil highlights two critical socio-political issues in twenty-first century African and African diaspora discourses that are at the heart of *Diasporic Childhoods*: the social and legal discrimination of queer persons throughout much of continental Africa and the systemic and historically constituted racial injustices impacting black persons globally.¹ To start, Iweala captures the turbulence many queer Africans face when outed for their sexualities in his depiction of Niru's father's response to discovering Niru's text messages with Damien. Niru states,

He grabs my ear. Daddy, I yelp as he twists and pulls me forward. You want to go and do gay marriage, is that what you want, you want to go and carry man, put your thing for his nyash? Abomination. A BOMI NATION. He pushes my face down into the kitchen table. A salty warmth fills my cheek. My tongue burns. Daddy let me tell you—Tell me what. Tell me how you want to go and collect shame and disgrace for this family. Tell me how you want to go and do all sorts of despicable, filthy, unnatural and unclean things. How can—no. You want to kill me? (31-32)

The father's reaction to Niru is representative of the violence inflicted on queer Africans when outed, which has been closely examined in African cultural representation and critical news coverage throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Though progress has been made towards improving the

¹ Throughout *Diasporic Childhoods*, I use "queer" as a universal term to refer to those Africans who identify as sexually non-normative. I do so with awareness to the ways terms, such as this one, circulate transnationally and allude to semantic manifestations of (neo)imperial power. See Hoad (2007). I have chosen to stick with "queer" in alignment with its use in queer scholarship that has come from the African continent in recent years. See, for example, Macharia (2019) and Musangi (2018).

experiences of sexual minorities in places throughout Africa where homosexual acts are condemnable by law, “the risk inherent in pursuing those rights range from financial costs, to stigma to a negative political reaction and possible exile, injury, or death” (Akanji and Epprecht 35).² The passage also illustrates how those who condemn sexual minorities consider queerness as a threat to the African family, which African philosophy holds to the upmost regard and often presents as a metaphor for the African nation. In her 1995 discussion of “motherism,” for example, the Afrocentric thinker Catherine Acholonu positions what she calls “extremist radical lesbian feminism” as a form of “excessive individualism” that threatens “the intrinsic cohesion of Africa’s cosmology in the family and in the nation” (85;107).³ In the above scene from *Speak No Evil*, Niru’s father deems Niru’s sexuality as a threat to both him (the father) and their family unit as a whole. Because these two—Niru’s father and the family—symbolize Africa and Niru’s African identity in the novel, the father’s reaction establishes queerness as anti-African (his sexuality can kill his father) and Niru as an ontological contradiction (being queer and African). The novel highlights the tense relationship between queerness and Africa within discourse on African sexualities by having the father take Niru to a gay-cleansing camp that is located in Nigeria—such an anti-gay experience characterizes Niru’s only time spent in Nigeria in the novel. Part of my intervention in *Diasporic Childhoods* is to

² Also see page 21 for a discussion of local activist groups in countries like Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Nigeria making small progress to achieving rights for sexual minority groups.

³ See Acholonu (1995), p. 85 (where she critiques lesbianism as a form of Western radical lesbianism) and 107 (where she centers the family and nation as central to her theorization of African feminism/motherism).

illustrate how twenty-first century African writers use their experiences working across African and diaspora cultures to subvert this Africa-queer dichotomy.

The literature I focus on in *Diasporic Childhoods* reimagines citizenship and belonging for queer Africans with representations of black queer childhood that orient us beyond the precarious nature of lived experience in their various socio-historical contexts. With Niru, in *Speak No Evil*, Iweala necessitates a reinvestment in the black queer child by describing the damage that occurs when Niru's experience remains overdetermined by that of his parents, in addition to the racist, sexually intolerant, and geo-national cultures that determine his place in the social world he inhabits. In the passage from the novel above, we see the father silence Niru despite Niru's attempt to explain himself: "Daddy let me tell you..." When Niru and his father discuss the decision to go to Nigeria, his father enforces the ideas that (1) Niru is a child, which assumes a conflation of adolescence with childhood, and, as a result, (2) Niru is not old or mature enough to speak for himself. The father tells Niru, "[Y]ou're still a child and you don't know what you are doing to your life...Look at the shame on us now because you are deciding for yourself" (48). Not only does he claim that Niru's naiveté—a consequence of his age—misguides him, but that his acting on childhood instinct has a negative impact on the family as a whole. Niru's father's negative association of childhood with Niru's queerness and in relation to the family reinforces a dichotomy between queerness and Africa. This conflation of Niru's sexuality with his age also implicitly alludes to what the queer studies scholar Kathryn Bond Stockton calls children's inherent queerness, or their capacities to grow sideways, outside accepted frameworks of knowing. She writes, "As [the gay child] emerges as

an idea, it begins to outline, in shadowy form, the pain, closets, emotional labors, sexual motives, and sideways movements that attend all children, however we deny it. A gay child illuminates the darkness of the child” (3). While *Diasporic Childhoods* focuses mainly on queer childhood as it relates to LGBTQ children who encompass various gender and class identities, I rely on Stockton’s concept of childhood queerness as a discursive framework to explore ways of being African that subvert the exclusionary nature of identities relying on heteropatriarchal nationalism as exemplified by thinkers like Acholunu and characters like Niru’s father.

Niru’s death at the hands of American police officers adds nuance to the representation of his overdetermined childhood experience as it demands an analysis at the intersections of race and sexuality and emphasizes how his subject position, at these intersections, is historically constituted transnationally. Niru’s black body assumes specific meaning as it occupies space in the United States; this meaning is a result of centuries of white supremacist ideology that continues to condition mainstream American minds and stunt black children’s potentiality by assuming their close proximity to death. As the African American studies scholar Christina Sharpe reminds us, in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, “Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments; the ground of terror’s possibility globally” (15). In the moments leading up to Niru’s death, Meredith speculates as to how bystanders are likely processing the circumstances of their argument. She states, “There is a half-moon of bystanders around us now, waiting for something to happen so they can tell each other, remember that time when—he was like six four—dude, he looked like he just

got out of prison—total thug—complete felon—yeah” (160). Through this imagining, which reflects itself onto the reader’s perception of the police officers who shoot and kill Niru, Meredith—a white, female narrator—admits to knowing the stakes of their public argument. This exacerbates Meredith’s whiteness as a marker of power—a subversion of the racialized gender dynamic imagined in the scene—and deems her complicit in his death. Her authority over Niru’s story as narrator throughout the remainder of the novel illustrates a full realization of this power, even if it is self-conscious. However, her openly self-conscious struggle to cope with his death inadvertently appropriates his story to interpret her own experience. Iweala captures the privilege and irony in how Meredith is able to cope in a scene where her therapist tells her, “Sometimes it’s easier to be the victim...Right now at least fifty percent of America thinks you were assaulted. That’s good, I mean important, we can exhale a little...Nobody here is saying he’s a rapist...we’re just not saying anything...” (190). What stands out is the reinforced fact that her life—capacity to exhale—and privilege to remain silent in order to move on work in direct contradistinction to Niru’s breathlessness and the usurpation of his story. *Diasporic Childhoods* is of and about a moment in United States history where white supremacist attitudes towards blackness continue to impact the breadth of black life.⁴ But its overall transnational scope foregrounds my commitment to a queer black diaspora culture centered on the child,

⁴ Christina Sharpe uses the idea of living “in the wake” to capture the connectedness of black experience in the present with that during slavery (“the past not yet past” (13)). She writes, “I use the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery’s violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance” (14).

and that subverts the sexualized and racist legacies of colonialism and slavery while queerly reimagining the spaces presently occupied by heteropatriarchal nations.

Reviews of *Speak No Evil* written around the time of its publication express much displeasure with the narrative shift from Niru to Meredith's perspectives and attribute this to poor writing and organization by Iweala. In his *New York Times* review, for example, Dwight Garner argues that the novel's two parts fuse together awkwardly. Picking apart Iweala's comments in *Speak No Evil*'s acknowledgements section, he writes, "There are signs Iweala knew his long-gestating novel had problems...he thanks his editor for her 'tolerance of tabletops full of index cards instead of pages of text.' You begin to feel you are holding less the product of a natural birth than an emergency cesarean." In her more nuanced review for *The New Yorker*, Laura Miller claims that "[t]he soul of 'Speak No Evil' is the torturous, exquisitely rendered relationship between Niru and his father, a man whose authority his son resents and admires." However, she expresses disappointment in how the novel's transition into Meredith's perspective cuts their narrative short; according to her, it is unable to successfully flesh out the apparent overlap in the two men's stories—Niru's experiences of race and sexuality in the United States and his father's childhood as a refugee in war-torn Nigeria. She claims that "neither [character] gets the ending he deserves." While Miller accurately focuses on the symbolic entanglement between Niru and his father (race/sexuality and civil war), I argue that the switch in narrative serves a grander purpose than she or Garner let on. Though I would agree that it does speak directly to Miller's sentiment concerning the inopportune ending of the father-son narrative.

While *Speak No Evil* explores the consequences of racism and sexual intolerance on Niru's life from two distinct socio-historical and geographic locales—the United States/diaspora and Nigeria/Africa—its overall structure—specifically, its organization into two parts—amplifies the nature of these issues' entanglement within larger histories of cultural imperialism and transnational knowledge production. In order to interpret the larger transnational system of power at work in the novel, we must understand Meredith's narrative as not just a consequence of Niru's death by racial injustice, but for how it, coupled with the fact of Niru's death, disallows the opportunity to further flesh out the stakes of Niru's sexuality for both him and his father/family/Africa. As a result of his death, both literally and metaphorically, reconciliation between him and his father and between queerness and Africa become impossibilities. Iweala hints at this loss in the last sentences of part one before switching to Meredith's perspective in part two. "I clutch the door handle and bounce on my toes," Niru states,

My calves burn. Get in the car now, [his father] shouts. I can feel his anger vibrate against the closed window. What's wrong with you? Our eyes lock through the glass. He checks the rearview mirror again. It will never stop, I say. Carpe diem, I say. My phone buzzes. Niru just get in, get in and let's talk about this... Then I turn and run through the cars to the shoulder lane. My legs are so tired. My chest burns, but I don't stop. Just keep breathing, I tell myself. It gets better. Niru, my father shouts, please come back, talk to me. But there is nothing left to say. (140-41)

Up until this point, Niru's father appears as the novel's primary antagonist, as does Africa to the extent by which Niru's father and his position on homosexuality symbolize its contribution to Niru's identity. What is more, both Meredith and Damien instill in Niru the sense that in order to fully embrace his sexuality, he must turn away from his family. This would also constitute a symbolic distancing from his African identity. When Niru is preparing to leave for Nigeria for his "spiritual cleansing," Meredith tells him to stay with

her; however, he recognizes that he cannot feel at home in her white upper-class world. When he discusses his insecurities with Damien, Damien's response alludes to him needing to leave his family behind. He tells Niru, "You're new at this...don't worry, it gets better...It did for me, once I left home" (115). Niru's argument with and running away from his father, then, symbolizes the idea of leaving for sexual freedom as fully realized in the novel.

Despite the turmoil that leads to this scene, there is a recognizable difference in Niru's father's attitude compared with his initial reaction upon discovering Niru's sexuality that affects how we understand the transnational systems of power undergirding the narrative. Whereas the father cuts Niru off from explaining himself when he calls Niru's sexuality an abomination earlier in the novel, the threat of Niru leaving in the car scene provokes a change in his attitude: we see him begging Niru to come back to talk things out. This change in attitude resonates with what another Nigerian-American writer Chinelo Okparanta says about the importance of family in African cultures:

For Africans, when there is a sort of crisis within the family, we still have to figure out a way to work things out within the family. In my experience of it, there's not that whole mindset where 'I'm going to leave home and not talk to my parents ever again'...Where I see that a lot in the US...I find that with many Africans, and many Nigerians particularly, the family is still the family no matter how annoying we find one another...and we're going to figure out how to make it work. (Lombardi 22)

Though we should acknowledge how Okparanta's reference to "working things out" can materialize as simply ignoring differences within a family unit, I include the quotation to put into perspective Niru's father's willingness to listen to what Niru has to say as an allusion to the potential to transform the family/Africa by incorporating queerness into its socio-cultural landscape. In addition, Okparanta's point to situate her perception of the United States in contrast with her African cultural values resonates with what I see as the

main point of antagonism in Iweala's narrative. In *Speak No Evil*, Iweala illustrates how Niru's American influences—his relationships with Meredith and Damien—exacerbate the opposition felt towards his father and lead to his departure. Because Niru dies shortly after, he and his father never have the opportunity to resolve their issues once his anger subsides. Moreover, the fact that racial violence specific to the United States leads to Niru's death at the hands of police ultimately eliminates the opportunity for his and his father's reconciliation. As such, "America" replaces Niru's father as the novel's antagonist, because it disallows a fully realized exploration of queer African possibility via the child. The negative reviews of *Speak No Evil* discussed above fail to recognize the extent to which its narrative structure functions as an allegory for America/Western cultural imperialism. By highlighting the negative impact of American racism on its exploration of queer possibility for Africans and on American citizens, in general, *Speak No Evil* asks us to consider more closely how Western violence continues to encumber African development and inaccurately position America as the symbol of progress and in contradistinction to the idea of African stasis.

Diasporic Childhoods examines representations of queer diasporic childhood in twenty-first century transnational African literature—novels, short stories, and memoir—for how they offer ways to reimagine citizenship and belonging for queer Africans that transform historically-accepted interpretations of Africanity in American, African, and African diaspora discourses. While my work is committed to those new forms of citizenship and belonging that extend beyond Africa's landscape, I am primarily concerned with how representations of diasporic childhood lead to reimaginings of

African continental space in ways that both challenge heteropatriarchal nationalism as it defines postcolonial societies and subvert Western interpretations of Africa as the anti-modern. The writers at the heart of this dissertation work or worked between Africa and the diaspora. As with Iweala's *Speak No Evil*, their writing reflects a commitment to using the various spaces they occupy and their concurrent migratory experiences to flesh out these reimaginings and to repositioning Africa, diaspora, and queerness in mutual positive relation. These writers include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chinelo Okparanta, who, like Iweala, work between Nigeria and the United States, as well as Somali-born Diriye Osman, who spent his childhood in Kenya and now resides in England, and the late Kenyan Binyavanga Wainaina, whose 2011 memoir *One Day I Will Write About this Place* carries us throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the United States.⁵

Though the specific places these authors write from and about impact our interpretations of childhood and queer experience in each text, the goal of my project is to ultimately examine how representations of queer childhood help us arrive at a consciousness of being and belonging that exceeds hetero-national frameworks. In each text studied, the presence of queer children, and their varying marginalized experiences, reveals the socio-sexual limits of national identity (and its circulations transnationally) as manifested in the diegetic worlds in which they exist. The extents by which representations of queer childhood disrupt these narratives and/or orient the reader towards possibilities outside a narrative's dominant socio-historical framework, albeit mostly unknown, exemplify an excavation of queer space as an aesthetic methodology in

⁵ Aside from Uzodinma Iweala, author of *Speak No Evil*, all writers discussed in this dissertation were born on the African continent and split their time, to one degree or another, between Africa and the diaspora. Iweala was born in Washington D.C. to Nigerian parents but lives between NYC and Lagos. In addition, Chinelo Okparanta, Diriye Osman, and Binyavanga Wainaina all openly identify/identified as LGBTQ.

literary studies. This, according to GerShun Avilez, “makes legible the social work done by literary culture and instantiates the value of non-literary methodologies to literary studies” (139). By highlighting the imbrications of form, theory, and social practice in literary production and analysis, I present childhood as a marker of queer space and as an aesthetic device that overlaps with cultural and political investments in queer diaspora as a collective consciousness oriented towards the future and beyond racialized and sexualized forms of oppression. The diaspora scholar Nadia Ellis defines the basis of such a collective consciousness by “the urgent sensation of a pull from elsewhere, when, not fulfilled, [which] constitutes diaspora culture at its most curious, eccentric, and...paradigmatic” (2). Reinvesting in queer childhood as a token of this pull can lead us to new ways of knowing and being in the world.

While the migratory patterns and diaspora experiences of these authors are representative of globalization’s effects on postcolonial Africa in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries and its influence on literary and other cultural productions, *Diasporic Childhoods* works from the understanding that African and African diaspora cultures and their epistemological structures have developed in mutual relation and with perpetual overlap through time.⁶ The encounters and experiences that migration enables in this body of literature, then, should be read as temporal intensifications of what the queer studies scholar Keguro Macharia calls “the rubbing produced by and as blackness,

⁶ Globalization’s effects on postcolonial Africa and Africans can be categorized by the technological and economic advancements influencing the transnational circulation of peoples and cultures and the increased ease at long-distance connectivity. It can also refer to some postcolonial unrest and failing African nation-states in the past four decades that set in-motion mass migrations of Africans throughout and beyond Africa into the diaspora, whether as refugees or seekers of economic opportunity. Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu refer to these African migrants as the “New African diaspora.” Taiye Selasi and Achille Mbembe refer to Africans who are “of the world,” whether abroad or in African urban centers, as “Afropolitans.” See Nzegwu and Okpewho (2009), Mbembe (2017), and Selasi (2005).

which assembles into one frame multiple histories and geographies” (5). In *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora*, Macharia reminds us that the irritation and affective responses to this rubbing, or frottage, helps us think “about the contested nature of blackness as a shared feature of Africa and Afro-diaspora.” He continues, “For the history of blackness as a shared category is marked by disagreement, disavowal, and ambivalence... Yet the visual logic of blackness, which is modernity’s legacy, does not care for such fine distinctions” (6). Like Macharia, I provide a detour, with this study, from those theoretical analyses of the African diaspora that rely on its ideological separation from Africa to present a hierarchical here-and-there in relation to home, belonging, and modernity.⁷ I emphasize how acknowledging and/or attempting to work through the points of tension/relation rooted in categorical blackness can lead to modes of being and networks of affiliation beyond white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and modern nationalisms. This intervention highlights the ways African and African diaspora theoretical, cultural, and historical discourses that have been traditionally held separate

⁷ Such analyses rely on the terms “Africa” and “African diaspora” to distinguish between two entities relies on a continental framework that impacts how we interpret cultural modernity and belonging. For example, if the term diaspora refers to movement, transformation, and creolization, then the signifier “*African diaspora*” depends on Africa for symbolic stability. As we see in African diaspora discourse of the twentieth century, positioning diaspora against Africa alludes to an obsolete interpretation of Africa, one that ignores Africa’s active participation in social, cultural, and economic modernity. For examples of this discourse, see Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, which presents Africa as backwards and a threat to modern feminism; Molefi Kete Asante’s *Afrocentricity*, which despite his attempt to glorify African history for black Americans, conflates Africa with the past, erasing its participation in the production of modern culture through the present; and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, which in its emphasis of creolization’s significance to the production of black cultures and identities and mapping of black modernity in the Atlantic world, keeps Africa at the margin of his thinking. Since *The Black Atlantic*’s publication, however, scholars working on Africa have attempted to rearticulate Africa’s relationship to the diaspora by interrogating the usefulness of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic paradigm. Two special issues of *Research in African Literatures* have taken on this task: one edited in 1996 by Simon Gikandi and a second in 2014 edited by Yogita Goyal celebrating the book’s twentieth anniversary.

speak to and with each other; the theoretical foundation of this project represents an amalgamation of this work.

The body of literature discussed in my analysis highlights multiple ways representations of migration between the West and Africa, literal and figurative, facilitate a process of reimagining Africa as a space of queer belonging while simultaneously transforming notions of diasporic blackness and the West. This practice of spatial reimagining exemplifies black modernity as a consequence of African cultural production at multiple points of relation, which occur both within and beyond the continent. First and foremost, it situates queer experience as modeling Africa's trans-locality. The diaspora scholar Rinaldo Walcott illustrates how "black queer life...is diasporic and transnational" in his analysis of Toronto's black gay ghetto. He states,

By this I mean that black queer life borrows and shares across national borders to constitute itself locally...[A] black queer diaspora works to unhinge blackness from an assumed and oft-times unquestioned heterosexuality...[I]t remakes the boundaries of the black diaspora, not only making its reach more inclusive of the unruliness that is diasporic blackness, but also raising difficult concerns and questions for the category of blackness. ("Homopoetics" 235)

Similarly, *Diasporic Childhoods* explores extra-national queer engagements, whether literal, imaginative, intercultural or intertextual, to (1) redefine Africanity in relation to queerness, (2) re-center Africa in a larger discussion of black modernity, and (3) transform interpretations of blackness and diaspora from African socio-cultural perspectives.

In addition, as this body of literature negotiates African and diaspora spaces in its explorations of queerness, it works towards challenging interpretations of Africa within American and other Western traditions in ways that concurrently subvert how we understand America and the West in relation to modernity. In this tradition, *Diasporic*

Childhoods presents African and American/Western discourses as imbricated in and of themselves. In my discussion of *Speak No Evil*, for example, I emphasize how the *entanglements* of Niru's race, sexuality, Nigerian culture, and American citizenship inform our interpretations of America and Africa in the novel. Iweala uses the theme of racial violence in the United States to instigate a reconsideration of Africa as a potential space for queer belonging. This reevaluation of space can occur in spite of Niru's father's homophobia, which we are unable to explore fully due to Niru's death and because the novel's switch in narrative perspective. By juxtaposing an American socio-political issue like race violence against questions of homophobia and queer belonging in Africa, *Speak No Evil*, like several of the other works examined in this dissertation, breaks down the historically rendered dichotomy between Western progress and African barbarity that continues to pervade the Western imagination.⁸

⁸ I would argue that the idea that Africa is the antithesis to Western progress inadvertently informs Dwight Garner's *NYT* review of *Speak No Evil*, where he writes, "The trip to Nigeria and a startling moment of racial violence late in the book aside, it is a fairly mild and conventional gay coming-of-age novel, a sarsaparilla instead of a shot." Here, and throughout the rest of the review, Garner conveys a predilection towards more sensational scenes in the novel that highlight the harsher sides of African cultural representation, such as Niru's father's reaction to his sexuality and their trip to Nigeria to cleanse him of his "abomination." This, coupled with the fact that he found the rest of the novel underwhelming and his display of sentimental attachment to the violence of Iweala's debut *Beasts of No Nation*, alludes to an underlying expectation for how literature is meant to portray Africa as the antithesis to Western humanism. In addition, both of the scenes mentioned above conflate Africa—represented by Niru's father and Nigeria—with intolerance towards homosexuality, which adds to, rather than subverts, a fetishization of African violence and barbarity in the American imagination. Because not enough of the novel is like this, Garner deems it a poorly written and conventional gay coming-of-age narrative. His preconceived Western understanding of African cultural representation prevents him from interpreting how *Speak No Evil*'s narrative shift actually alludes to America's ideological obstruction of African queer futures. Because of *The New York Times*' cultural clout, a review like Garner's can have a devastating impact on a book's sales. This further perpetuates the socio-economic inequalities between Africans and the West/United States.

I align the pursuits of *Diasporic Childhoods* with recent scholarship in cultural studies that employs “queer” as a mode for desiring beyond the precarious nature of black life in the present; this period is characterized by heightened institutional violence towards people of color in the United States and towards LGBTQ persons in parts of Africa including Nigeria and Kenya (though sexual discrimination is not absent in the diasporic spaces these authors occupy such as the United States and England). In this body of literature by twenty-first century diasporic African writers, child-characters and coming-of-age narratives provide lenses through which to reimagine queer futures against the ongoing racialized and sexualized violence affecting queer and non-queer people of color throughout Africa and the diaspora. However, a key intervention from this scholarship on utopic forward thinking is disappointment and/or failure. Queerness, then, lies in the affectual nature of desire, albeit a desire unfulfilled, and in its excess. I interrogate child socialization with and against the worlds queer children inhabit in literature to demonstrate how childhood works as a canvas for utopic thinking that is emblematic of both failure and excess. This analysis illustrates how representations of African childhood as embodiments of queer excess overlap with political and cultural investments in queer diaspora as an orientation of consciousness into the future, expanding the potential for black life beyond racialized and sexualized violence in the present. Moreover, the emphasis on childhood is an attempt at challenging the multiple histories of violence that have evolved out of thinking through Africa, blackness, and the child relationally.

This dissertation builds off of the foundations of African diaspora studies and queer-of-color critique to position childhood at the heart of a queer diasporic

consciousness oriented towards the future. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Muñoz argues for an aesthetic that evinces in the present the potential for a queer utopia, despite it being always on the horizon and always not yet here. Nadia Ellis extends Muñoz's paradigm of queer futurity in *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* to provide an aesthetic space to consider black diasporic belonging. She argues that the desire for and aesthetic imagining of a future that would transport black subjects beyond the present signifies a potential collective consciousness, though she argues that diasporic belonging is at its greatest potential when unconsummated—when the negative affect of failure orients consciousness towards the future. Despite utopia's impossibility, Muñoz and Ellis both illustrate the productivity in considering utopian futurity for interpreting the unsatisfactory conditions of the present world. Ellis deems this gap between the here and beyond as the queerness of black global belonging.

Though Muñoz's study is not centered on the child figure, his argument that there is a close relationship between queerness and futurity positions him against others, such as Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, who consider the future the child's terrain, and, thus, no place for queers. While *Diasporic Childhoods* works within Muñoz's camp of queer futurity, my analysis relies on an understanding of futurity as the realm of the child. That being said, I focus on how the child exceeds being conflated with heterosexuality and biological reproduction in ways that bring it closer to queerness and work from the idea that the child who lacks subjectivity and who is vulnerable to external socialization is always already queer in its capacity to exceed its scripted boundaries. Therefore, we can consider a child's becoming the "death" of the

heterosexual parent as it forms new external relations that inform the development of its personhood outside the normative structures of “home.” This disrupts conventional notions of home related to the modern nation state (i.e. United States, England, Nigeria, Kenya, etc.), or even Africa as an imagined homeland in Afrocentric thinking, which, in effect, perpetuates a reliance on imperial continentalism. Instead, diaspora is an alternative space for queered black belonging, an imagining that cannot be mapped according to any accepted geographical framework. This strategy allows us to reimagine queered diasporic belonging in what we call the African continent and beyond.

Another flaw of Edelman’s theory is that it assumes childhood’s universality. Scholars have argued that conflating the child with futurity does not account for the bare life ascribed to racialized subjects. In *In the Wake*, Sharpe illustrates how black children inherit the status of non-being in “the wake” from the mother as they occupy her womb, which she presents as a metaphor for the hold of the slave ship. According to Sharpe, being in the wake in the twenty-first century is a consciousness of black life lived in the continued present of slavery, and, thus, in trauma and near death. Being born in the wake, then, would imply the impossibility of black childhood. As she writes, “[B]ecause Black children are not seen as children and the corral of ‘urban youth’ holds them outside of the category of the child, they are offered more trauma by the state and state actors...and they are certainly not offered the new world or ways toward imagining it that their, that our, circumstances demand” (89). Her intervention calls for wake work or new methods for living in the wake and imagining black life otherwise. My intervention builds on scholarship that makes race central to analyses of queer childhood and debates about futurity. As such, *Diasporic Childhoods* seeks to develop a reading strategy for

interpreting the black African child within and against normative narrative structures.

While I highlight the wake work inherent to some of the narratives analyzed, others require the wake work of the reader to interpret the child's full potential. This nuanced approach is especially important for the historical moment at the center of this project where conflicting interpretations of race and sexuality amongst African and diasporic communities can negatively impact the socialization of black African children who live at the crossroads of various social and cultural forms.

Diasporic Childhoods also pays close attention to how the genders of black queer children impact their socialization and determine how we think of them as orientations into the future. In *Making Modern Girls: A History of Childhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos*, the historian Abosede George explains how salvationist colonial projects evolved in late-nineteenth century Lagos that figured the African child as a vulnerable and imperiled universal subject in need of saving from their racialized and anti-modern parent generation. This motivated the British colonial system's introduction of a Western education system; however, its implementation brought light to its gendered inconsistencies—it incorporated boys and girls differently. George's book examines how elite Western-educated Lagosian women challenged this system by attempting to “modernize” female experience via educational reform, and it traces the evolution of “modern girlhood” at the intersections of competing ideologies. George claims that “examining children and childhood offers a glimpse into how societies view notions of progress, development, modernity, and futurity at particular point in time” (16). By focusing on girlhood, specifically, she proves that such explorations are actually never universal. She also illustrates how gender and class cannot be excluded when interpreting

race in colonial societies. Like George, I pay particular attention, in this dissertation, to gender socialization's impact on how queer authors working in the twenty-first century are able to negotiate racialized and sexual experiences, especially in relation to how one moves and occupies African national and diasporic spaces. While my analysis highlights the gendered violence affecting queer girls and women, it also accounts for the ways queer persons socially conditioned male contribute to and process that violence.

A fascinating asset of the work of scholars such as Sharpe and Ellis, whose approaches to queer theory center on racialized experience, is their capacities to work between the intimate and far-reaching. Sharpe's lens, for one, focuses closely on the circumstances of black embodiment in the wake of slavery in the twenty-first century United States, yet she successfully extends her metaphor of the wake to account for the threat of terror on black bodies globally. Likewise, Ellis interprets black belonging on a world scale. She does so by tracing affective experiences throughout the lives of key figures in African diasporic history, such as C.L.R. James and Andrew Salkey. Specifically, Ellis focuses on the negative experience of failed affinity to describe what she calls the queerness of African diasporic belonging. By centering queerness and failure in her analysis of African diasporic subjectivity in the twentieth century, Ellis offers a reading strategy that dismantles socio-sexual power structures attributed to blackness and belonging.

These global-reaching accounts of individual affect and black embodiment are examples of the work proposed by another diaspora scholar Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. In "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," Tinsley

finds fault with canonical African diasporic scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, who, she argues, allow metaphor to overshadow the material experiences of lived reality. She does not reject metaphor altogether, but instead illustrates how overlooking material reality separates the body from the radical potential of affect and erotic agency. Central to Tinsley's discussion are the metaphors of the slave ship and the Atlantic, which she explains are key to Paul Gilroy's remapping of black modernity in his seminal *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. In "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," Tinsley looks more closely into the hold of the slave ship where she imagines a queer archive of bodily relationships between captives. According to Tinsley, these relationships are queer to the extent to which they resist normative order. Desire's capacity to exceed brutality accentuates the humanity of enslaved Africans at a moment when normative order considered these human-lives nonexistent.

Tinsley's attention to affect and desire is an example of the erotic work proposed by black female thinkers like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi from Africa and the diaspora. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," for example, Lorde asks black women to actively account for their deepest and strongest feelings understood as true knowledge. One's attunement to this erotic power within is the first step towards a shared expression of love with others who also feel and feel for. Lorde presents the erotic as deeply female because its embrace and power subvert masculinist Western rationalism—situated as emotion's antithesis—used to oppress black people, but especially black women. This relationship between love and emotional strength is also at the heart of Walker's definition of womanism as articulated in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. According to Walker, a womanist is

“[a] woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength” (xi).

In *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*, Nfah-Abbenyi highlights material realities specific to African women’s experiences to accentuate the need to discuss black women’s collective agency across differences. What is more, she argues that African female writers of the twentieth century have depicted the ways African women “theorize” feminism through lived work in order to more strongly insert Africa into these global conversations. Her argument emphasizes a need to diversify the lens through which we interpret black women’s agency and recognize inherent cross-cultural similarities in the work black women do diasporically. In *Diasporic Childhoods*, I highlight black feminisms’ influences on contemporary queer literature by indicating the ways the authors and works analyzed prioritize erotic relationality between queer and female subjects in explorations of queer becoming. I focus especially on queer children’s (girls and boys) pull towards both femininity and female power as embodied by mothers and mother-like figures.⁹ Most of the time this pull manifests as a reaction to queer children’s shared sense of marginality within the heteropatriarchal nation-state (varied by gender), or/and as a way to account for the foundational work women do/have done that allows us to consider the queer child as an orientation into the future. I attempt to work fluidly between African and African diaspora epistemologies to shed light onto their shared emphasis of the grounded nature

⁹ Though this dissertation does not focus on trans and non-binary literatures specifically, there is evidence of an overlap between a female erotic foundation and explorations of trans identities in the work of Nigerian author Akwaeke Emezi. See *Freshwater* (2018), *Pet* (2019), and *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020).

of black feminist work and to avoid abstraction when discussing concepts like “imagining” and “futurity.” Working fluidly between various black feminisms also helps us frame interrogations of lived experience and possibility beyond the grounds of nationalism and continentalism.

The anthropologist Lyndon Gill’s *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean* offers a useful framework for applying the erotic as a method for interpreting queer self-hood and community formation beyond the lens of Lorde’s “deeply female plane.” This framework has served useful for reading the erotic in male-authored African queer texts. With a close study of the context in which Lorde delivered her initial conference paper on the erotic in 1978, Gill suggests we interpret her argument as catering to the specific female audience she was attending to. He claims, we cannot “presume that she would reject the proposition that eros as principle be allowed to retain the widest possible applicability—without losing its necessary attention to the ground of lived experience (of women, of men, of trans people, of heterosexuals, of queers, of people of color, etc.)” (7-8). I align *Diasporic Childhoods* with Gill’s understanding of the erotic as a lens through which to interpret the strength of shared desires—“political, sensual, and spiritual”—for insurgent community formations across identities(10-11). I also pay close attention to the ways that queer African writers of all genders continue to use metaphors and literal depictions of female experience to depict the erotic at work in the twenty-first century.

In “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” Tinsley clarifies that though she centers the history of slavery in her queer interrogation of Atlantic modernity, the Atlantic is not the

only place of origin for blackness and queerness. *Diasporic Childhoods* extends this analysis of queer black life beyond the scope of this history by focusing on queer Africans and their impacts on a modern diasporic culture. In order to best interpret their lived experiences, I center the idea of living as queer *and* black, rather than queer *as* black. This shows how queering black experience in toto relies on a stable sense of black being that ignores how black bodily experiences develop out of different histories and have different relationships to queerness.

The work of diaspora scholars like Tinsley provokes those of African literature dealing with the diaspora to seek new ways of theorizing black ontology beyond a Middle Passage epistemology. Although not dealing directly with Africa, Michelle Wright's *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* is one example of scholarship whose main intervention is theorizing blackness through alternative geo-historical vantage points. While my project considers the experiences of queer subjects and employs queer methodologies for interrogating the tensions between African and African diasporic socio-cultural frameworks, other scholars in recent years have begun to think through this tension in different ways, especially by highlighting Africa's influence over Atlantic cultural modernity. Tsitsi Jaji, for example, describes the development of Afromodernity forged out of the circulation of black diasporic sonic culture from the vantage point of Africa in *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*. Similarly, in "Afropolitanism," Achille Mbembe theorizes African modernity through a cultural analysis of Johannesburg as the epicenter of African transnationality. In *Grounds of Engagement: Apartheid-Era African American and South African Writing*, Stéphane Robolin highlights the common grounds of engagement

between African American and South African writers through most of the twentieth century to challenge the idea that cultural influence was unidirectional and African American culture was superior. And in *Frottage*, Macharia examines intra-racial sites of stimulation and frustration between African and African diaspora persons. According to him, this “rubbing” instigates aesthetic and cultural productions and political formations around material experiences of blackness and the shared pursuit of freedom.

Diasporic Childhoods centers the diasporic African child in transnational literature by twenty-first century African writers as a critical site of analysis for interrogating the diverse and intersecting histories that impact African and black modes of being. I examine child-characters as embodied contact zones for African and diasporic cultures and consider the ways their concurrent socialization and/as excess offer new grounds for interpreting blackness and Africanity. This shows how embodying, and thus representing, black being at these new crossroads pushes black life closer to an imagined queer utopia. Thus, the strategies for reading black childhood employed here function with a similar level of care and urgency that Sharpe reminds us is necessary in this moment of intensified violence towards black (and queer) life in the diaspora (and Africa).

Sharpe and Tinsley’s analyses of black life represent a larger trend in black queer theory that emphasizes a relationship between blackness/diaspora and queerness. Both scholars, for example, apply the term queer to account for the perpetual positioning of black life outside the realm of normative life.¹⁰ For them (and Ellis), the overlap between blackness and queerness has a reparative potential for imagining alternative ontologies of

¹⁰ They understand the precariousness of black life as exceeding time. Though they account for the various ways violence articulates itself in particular historical moments).

blackness and belonging. While I support their presupposition that black life is already always queer, I would argue that this seemingly universalist approach to “queer” studies is not as useful for an analysis of the child that positions it with *and* against the black African nation. I would also assert that a concern for black on black violence directed at LGBTQ persons in the diaspora and, especially, Africa requires a more local consideration of queer as it relates to diaspora.¹¹

For these reasons, I find Macharia’s “frottage” a useful theoretical framework for approaching blackness and queerness in twenty-first century African queer literature. In his study, Macharia employs frottage—a relation of intimate proximity—to define the strategies of Africans and members of the diaspora to rethink black being and belonging. He does so to emphasize a horizontal analysis of blackness that focuses on working through intra-racial tensions. Queerness, for him, marks the tense nature of shared blackness, rather than its universality. He also emphasizes how this approach “unsettles the heteronormative tropes through which the black diaspora has been imagined and idealized,” such as family and kinship as they relate to heterosexuality (4). While I am indebted to Macharia for establishing this horizontal framework that imagines blackness and belonging queerly and across traditional African and African diaspora geographies, I remain attentive to the ways African queer writers working in the twenty-first century depict child-mother relationships in ways that reframe motherhood and kinship outside

¹¹ In this sense, this project’s use of queer is indebted to earlier queer-of-color critique scholarship by Muñoz (*Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*), E. Patrick Johnson (“‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother”), and Roderick Ferguson (*Aberrations In Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*), who, themselves, work from the feminist foundation laid down by Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*) and Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*).

strictly heterosexual and biological terms. And so, I seek to complicate this need, as displayed by Macharia, to situate queerness and kinship in opposition.

Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* offers a final framework for theorizing queer diaspora at both local and global levels. She illustrates how interrelated discourses on sexuality, race and colonialism follow contemporary migrants into the diaspora, extending the nation's heteropatriarchy; as such, diaspora loses its radical potential. As a corrective, Gopinath employs queer methods to extrapolate the lived experiences of bodies deemed impossible within the gendered and sexualized space of diaspora. By queering the diaspora, she aligns diaspora's gaze with the future rather than orienting it back at the nation. As such, she situates "home" in the diaspora and as an already existing queer space, albeit erased by the normative order of nationalism and engineered by global capitalism. Much like Muñoz and Ellis' analyses of queer futurity, Gopinath emphasizes how queerness is embedded in the present despite the erasure of and historical violence afflicted on queer bodies. Her excavation of queer subjectivity from within the bounds of diaspora/"home" accentuates possibility and exemplifies the necessity for taking a local approach to analyzing diaspora and the workings of transnationalism.

Diasporic Childhoods is indebted to Gopinath for reorienting diasporic subject formation as it relates to desire and belonging in the diaspora in the present. However, it extends the use of this queer diaspora methodology to account for queer experience on the African continent and the evolution of queer African cultures within this space. This approach blurs the dichotomy between what we traditionally deem separate national and diaspora spaces in African diaspora discourse, and, instead, highlights an inherent

overlap. The explorations of queerness depicted in twenty-first century African literature model a transnational flow of cultures, ideas, and experiences across boundaries that Rinaldo Walcott deems central to black queer life locally and in relation to black queers globally. He writes, “their everyday acts of refusal reposition them inside queer communities and they are therefore implicit to the making and unmaking of these particular cultural geographies” (239). Thus, as African queers in this body of literature redefine the national spaces they inhabit, they imminently participate in a cultural network that extends the terms of their queer, black, and African belongings transnationally.

I begin *Diasporic Childhoods* in chapter one with the Nigerian writer and world-class feminist influencer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Though Adichie does not self-identify as queer, I include her and her 2013 novel *Americanah* to establish a counterpoint from which to analyze queer experience as described by self-identified queer authors Binyavanga Wainaina (chapters two and three), Diriye Osman (chapter two), and Chinelo Okparanta (chapter four), especially in terms of queer non-belonging in the postcolonial African nation. Since the publication of *Americanah* and her famous 2012 TED talk, “We Should All Be Feminists,” scholars, artists, and mainstream readers have regarded Adichie as the leading voice of her generation of African writers and feminist thinkers. The diaspora scholar, Carole Boyce Davies, for example, has coined the 2010s “the Adichie Moment.”¹² As I will discuss in chapter one, the group of writers at the heart of *Diasporic Childhoods* are often characterized as the first generation to be

¹² See Davies (2016).

born into post-independence societies, and for how they work transnationally between Africa and the West. In my reading of *Americanah*, I illustrate how Adichie implicitly accounts for the heteropatriarchy of postcolonial nationhood, and its manifestation transnationally, in her overlapping portrayals of heterosexual romance and return migration, which, together, frame the novel's principal narrative arc and overdetermine the racialized and sexualized experiences of its marginal characters, especially the child-figure who comes-of-age in the diaspora. However, I claim that Adichie's inclusion of diasporic childhood reveals the limits of the dominant hetero-trans-*national* narrative shaping *Americanah*'s diegetic world and alludes to new interpretations of Africa, blackness, and America. This reading serves as a theoretical foundation for my examination of queer diasporic childhood as a horizon of possibility throughout *Diasporic Childhoods*. It also highlights a relationship between heteropatriarchy, nationalism, and transnational migration that defines the socio-political parameters that the writers I focus on in the remaining chapters must work through and against in order to reimagine queer Africa and establish themselves within this ("Adichie") moment.

Binyavanga Wainaina, Diriye Osman, and Chinelo Okparanta each center childhood, coming-of-age, and transnational experience in how they creatively imagine queer possibility in their writing. Each of their bodies of work displays an investment in a queer consciousness that transcends space and that overlaps with black diaspora experience. But they ultimately reveal a commitment to reimagining African geography, traditionally conceived, as a space to be and belong as openly queer. It is this overlap between a queer diaspora consciousness and a commitment to transform African space, especially by engaging with the heteropatriarchal nation, that informs my decision to

include these three writers.¹³ In chapter two, I focus on the socio-politics of space that determine how we understand Africa and the diaspora relationally and in regard to queer experience. It looks specifically at how Wainaina and Osman reimagine their coming-of-age as queer, migratory subjects in *One Day I Will Write About this Place* (2011) and *Fairytales for Lost Children* (2013), respectively, to announce a consciousness for belonging that defies the heteropatriarchal nation without rejecting African geography, or nationhood (in Wainaina's case), as its locus. Through these representations of queer experience, Wainaina and Osman subvert Americanist and African diaspora discourses that conflate sexual freedom for queer Africans with exile.

The final two chapters of *Diasporic Childhoods* zero in on the gendered nuances that impact how we theorize queer childhood as a horizon of possibility in this body of literature. Chapter three resists universalizing queer childhood by exploring how Wainaina's coming-of-age narrative in *One Day I Will Write About this Place* negotiates the precarious nature of being queer but male in patriarchal settings. I suggest that Wainaina's description of his experiences throughout the memoir with and against those of his female counterparts alters how we are able to interpret his subject position within the narrative and his reckoning with queerness as a memoirist. His interactions with these women make evident a "pull" or attraction to an erotic power rooted in female experience that informs my reading of queer possibility in the memoir. What is more, I analyze how Wainaina's critical introspection, as memoirist, and engagement with the possibilities available in female erotic power stand to allegorize the "coming-of-age" of postcolonial

¹³ Though, of course, there are others whose work would add new layers of depth to this analysis, such as the Nigerian born writers Chris Abani and Akwaeke Emezi, who depict biracial and trans identities in their writing, or the South African K. Sello Duiker, whose turn of the century novel *Thirteen Cents* examines the life of a child sex worker.

Kenya. In chapter four, I juxtapose mother-daughter relationships in Okparanta's lesbian novel, *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), set in Nigeria during the Biafran War with those in her stories set in twenty-first century United States from the collection *Happiness, Like Water* (2013). Through this intertextual analysis, I consider transnationalism's role in how Okparanta reimagines possibilities for queer Africans, and how these reimaginings center an erotic of care rooted in women's experiences passed down generationally. Lastly, I illustrate how Okparanta's writing on mother-daughter relationships subverts Americanist discourses that situate African "wilderness," "barbarity," and "femininity" as antithetical "others" to ideas of American freedom, reframing Africa within Western and transnational theories of modernity.

Chapter 1: Hetero-trans-*nationalism* and the Queer Diasporic Child

The theme of return in the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah* exemplifies Adichie's postcolonial-born generation of diasporic African writers' commitment to the African nation-state as a socio-cultural marker of affiliation.¹ The scholar Christopher Ouma attributes this generation of writers' commitment to postcolonial African nationhood to an entanglement with inheritance influenced by child-parent and child-grandparent relations, especially prominent in the stories that are passed down from one generation to another (2009). As such, novels like *Americanah* are often considered representative of what some call "Third" generation literature.² This designation figures Adichie and her generation of writers as an extension of a specific African literary tradition, beginning with writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, and Flora Nwapa, thus emphasizing the relationship of their works to earlier themes of colonialization, imperialism, independence, decolonization, and, most

¹ Adichie is arguably the most internationally acclaimed African writer of her generation, or of any generation living in the twenty-first century, having claimed a space for Africa in popular culture and media on the world stage. In 2017, *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* designated Adichie one of seven "Greats" of that year, earning her a feature on its cover. "She is the rare novelist to become a public intellectual—as well as a defining voice on race and gender for the digital age," novelist Dave Eggers writes in the issue of *T*.

² See Adesanmi and Dunton (2005 and 2008), Krishnan (2013), Ouma (2009), Hron (2008), Waberi (1998).

commonly, African nationhood.³ Out of this inherited entanglement with postcolonial African nationhood has evolved a trans-*national* mode of literary representation that transforms how we understand and interpret contemporary African nationhood, especially the spatial parameters of national affiliation.⁴ Read through the lens of the protagonist Ifemelu's return after thirteen years in the United States, *Americanah* exemplifies how the trans-*national* narrative functions as a reworking of, in this case, Nigerian identity rather than a turn to an alternative mode of consciousness and belonging, such as diaspora.

A consequence of *Americanah*'s entanglement with the African nation of Adichie's literary forbearers is that it reproduces characteristics of the heterosexual romance genre; a series of romantic relationships with men guide the novel's plot and influence Ifemelu's identity formation as a raced, gendered, and national subject. Although Adichie's outspoken condemnation of homophobia in Nigeria, the United States, and elsewhere has positively impacted popular opinions on sexuality, *Americanah*'s reliance on heterosexuality can be considered problematic for how it functions in relation to popular and legal interpretations of national normative social order, framing a criterion for belonging and purporting a rhetoric of reproductive futurity.⁵ Additionally, the theme of heterosexual romance in the novel coincides with its

³ And while I emphasize the significance of reading the works of these two generations of writers relationally, I will herein avoid the labels "First" and "Third" when possible because they erase any notion of African literary representation prior to the mid-twentieth century.

⁴ I insert a hyphen between "trans" and "nation" when I want to emphasize the extent to which a transnational identity manifests a strong relationship to the home nation or when "return" is momentous to transnational experience.

⁵ While I problematize the novel's dependency on heterosexuality, I do so while heeding the work done by scholars like Cathy Cohen who, in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (2005), discusses the limits of a queer politics that homogenizes notions of queer identity

trans-*national* structure in ways that require that we reevaluate the transnational novel's role in the twenty-first century. As trans-*national* identities remain concurrent with the heterosexualism of a home nation, transnationalism, as an epistemology in the novel, diverges from its use in the queer diasporic scholarship of which I align *Diasporic Childhoods* to depict extra-national possibilities for sexual and other non-normative subjects. In "Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory," for example, Rinaldo Walcott discusses the significance of transnationalism as an alternative to ideologies such as Pan-Africanism because it emphasizes cross-national connections "without having to discount local national, linguistic and other different articulations of black lives across the globe" (30). However, Walcott prioritizes diaspora as a conceptual tool for revising what he calls "the new black queer theory" because "diaspora allowed for the questioning of nation and citizenship within a transnational framework of connection" (32).⁶ Moving forward, I will use the terms *hetero-trans-nationalism* and *queer diaspora* to distinguish between those transnational epistemologies that perpetuate a home nation's heteropatriarchy and those that imagine modes of being and belonging beyond it. I will stick to *transnational* when I refer to cross-national migration generally.⁷

against heterosexuals without considering other relations of power that oppress non-normative heterosexual subjects such as race, gender and class. Cohen argues that recognizing intersecting marginal subjectivities is key to a productive queer political coalition. For this reason, it is important to recognize the black feminist work being done with Ifemelu's narrative despite its entanglement with heteronormativity.

⁶ See also Walcott (2009) and Allen (2012) for further discussion of transnationalism's alternative use in queer diasporic studies.

⁷ It is important to note that though this analysis of transnational experiences is a critique of the heteropatriarchal nation, it does not disqualify African geography's promise beyond heteropatriarchy. Rather, queer diaspora becomes an epistemological framework for figuring new modes of belonging at home, abroad, and transnationally. See Lombardi (2018) for a discussion of 21st century diasporic African writing that reimagines African geography as a space of queer belonging. In addition, my aim here is less to critique *Americanah*'s hetero-trans-*national* structure than it is to utilize its existence to offer an alternative

As I suggest in *Diasporic Childhoods*' introduction, I begin with Adichie, and the novel that solidified her position as a literary "Great" on a world scale, to establish what it means to symbolize Nigerian, and African, culture in the twenty-first century. This, then, can serve as a counterpoint from which to read a lesser known body of queer literature that pushes against the terms of African cultural representation as defined by hetero-trans-*nationalism* and the heteropatriarchal lineage Adichie has come to represent, whether or not she has any claim over the terms of representation herself. My intention, however, is not to condemn Adichie for how she is interpolated into mainstream popular media, but to offer a new lens through which to interpret her work that orients us outside the hetero-trans-*national* frame that marks its temporality. In this way, I present *Americanah* as a hinge between a present moment marked by the heteropatriarchal nation, and its inherent racism and homophobia, and the future-oriented cultural work of her queer generational counterparts, such as Wainaina, Osman, and Okparanta, who I spotlight in subsequent chapters.

Though it is not my aim to disqualify the pre-migration national attachments of diasporic subjects per se, I am concerned with how particular generational and class-based attachments to the nation come to define transnational experience and overwrite those of underprivileged and marginalized subjects, such as children and the sexually non-normative. In order to read *Americanah* beyond the hetero-trans-*national* implications of its dominant narrative, this chapter juxtaposes against Ifemelu's experience that of her young cousin Dike, who unlike Ifemelu, comes-of-age in the

reading centered on a specific dialectic of childhood that orients us into the future and beyond a national investment.

United States and struggles to exist within the novel's diegetic world.⁸ Even as Ifemelu moves fluidly throughout the narrative—abstracting notions of gender and race via transnational migration—this freedom relies on a stable sense of self established during childhood, which allows her to *return home* to her childhood sweetheart Obinze at the end of the novel.⁹ Alternatively, Dike lacks this sense of self altogether because his mother, Ifemelu's Aunty Uju, constantly tells him what he is not, rather than giving him a cultural foundation to grasp onto. The most drastic element of Dike's difference from Ifemelu is how this lack of grounding affects his bodily experience as a black child coming-of-age in the United States.

If we read *Americanah*'s diegetic world as determined by Ifemelu's generationally specific trans-*national* experiences and their entanglement with the heteropatriarchy of postcolonial Nigeria, then Dike's struggle to function within it signifies his queer positionality. I define Dike's queerness by how lack and materiality as engendered by his relationship to the novel's overarching hetero-trans-*national* narrative determine his subject formation. The relationship between Dike's non-belonging and his overdetermined black male adolescent body makes him impossible to imagine within the

⁸ My analysis of Dike builds off on existing scholarship that juxtaposes marginal subjectivities in *Americanah* against Ifemelu's experience in order to shed light on the limits of interpreting the novel solely in terms of its generational and/or Afropolitan characteristics. For example, Julie Iromuanya argues in "Are We All Feminists? The Global Black Hair Industry and Marketplace in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" (2018) that even though the braiders at Mariama's salon do not have the same economic advantages as Ifemelu, they maintain a sense of sexual autonomy that Ifemelu does not, because the "emergent African middle class of *Americanah* must contend directly and daily with patriarchy in order to advance socioeconomically" (177). Also see Guarracino (2014) for a discussion of how "Chiefs" in the novel function outside of the novel's Afropolitanism (18-19).

⁹ In an era where many diasporic Africans of Adichie's generation, especially those who call themselves Afropolitan, prioritize cultural hybridity and claim to belong to no single space, my reading of *Americanah* considers the extent to which this privileged sense of being of the world depends on the stability of rootedness, at least to the extent to which one experiences a firm socio-cultural grounding during childhood. In *Americanah*, this grounding clearly correlates with Ifemelu's sense of being Nigerian.

novel's diegetic world read as such.¹⁰ His eventual suicide attempt highlights the tension between his vulnerability and the novel's hetero-trans-*national* narrative, his potential death undercutting, or subverting, the principle of reproductive futurity necessary in driving a narrative of this sort forward.

Read closely, however, the novel also depends on Dike—and, thus, queer childhood—to orient the reader beyond the hetero-trans-*national* limits characteristic of Ifemelu's experience.¹¹ Ifemelu's reaction to Dike's suicide attempt best demonstrates this dependency. In this queer analysis, Dike shifts from impossible subject to what Nadia Ellis calls a (necessary) horizon of possibility beyond the narrative. This reading transcends the diasporic entanglements with the postcolonial African nation that situate *Americanah* as a "Third" generation novel. It illustrates the ways *Americanah* simultaneously pushes back at a nationalism that rests on romance and heterosexuality by situating childhood, though historically constituted, as the embodiment of a queer diasporic consciousness, which provokes a consideration of how future generations will challenge what we know and accept about African subjectivities and affiliative commitments.¹² What is more, while it may be clear that Dike's

¹⁰ The conditions of his attempted suicide point to a trend in earlier national novels of absenting queer subjecthood. Take, for instance, Ezinma and Nwoye in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

¹¹ Framing Dike as a child throughout this essay highlights the tension between his rearing and the unknowability of his racialized and sexualized experiences, and how this tension materializes via his coming-of-age. Examining blackness in the novel through the lens of childhood (as opposed to with Ifemelu's adulthood and the distance it affords) points to the urgency and relevancy of this reckoning given diaspora's impact on the futures of African being.

¹² My consideration of childhood, here, follows that of Madelaine Hron who in "Ora na-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels" (2008) argues, "the child, figured as not yet a (civilized) adult, becomes initiated to relations of power, social discourse and their embodied practices. However, in many ways the child is constantly negotiating, questioning or even resisting these cultural constructions, even by virtue of its own constructedness" (29). That being said, Hron's analysis of childhood assumes an easy relationship to the nation; my consideration of childhood in this essay via Dike alternatively emphasizes his sense of not belonging to either Nigeria or the United States.

experiences in the novel point to the ways he is queered by race, his embodiment of inter-African and African American histories queers accepted interpretations of race as they relate to socio-cultural identities in the United States and Nigeria, particularly what is meant by being *black* in each locale. My analysis of Dike in this chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for my project's larger conceptualization of childhood queerness in literature as a motif that brings to light and challenges accepted norms concerning race and sexuality, and that alludes to alternative ways of being and belonging beyond heteropatriarchal nationhood. Through the optic of queer *diasporic* childhood, I also examine the ways twenty-first century writers, like Adichie, subvert traditional renderings of Africa, diaspora, and America/the West relationally.

This reading of Dike functions as an example of what I see as the overlap between childhood as a discursive space in imaginative fiction, and cultural and political investments in queer diaspora as an orientation of consciousness beyond the here and now, or beyond what has been proven time and again to be the oppressive domain of the modern nation-state for *queer black* subjects. Drawing on Jose Estaban Muñoz's definition of queer as "that thing that lets us feel the world is not enough," Ellis articulates queer diasporic consciousness as "where a persistent sense of the insufficiency of existing modes of belonging is matched by an awareness that new forms remain inspiringly elusive" (3). For Ellis, it is this conscious reorienting when "the world is not enough" that can bring a diasporic culture together. With my analysis of Dike in *Americanah*, I expand Ellis' theorization of queer diasporic consciousness by positioning childhood at the crossroads by which queer and diaspora meet. That is, Dike's story illustrates the insufficiency of accepted modes of belonging for diasporic

Africans. Through his character, Adichie exposes the lack of a socio-cultural foundation to account for the lived experience of coming-of-age as a diasporic African child in the twenty-first century. However, the novel also begs a consideration of what is at stake when we lose sight of the child, when we ignore childhood's queerness, which, according to Kathryn Bond Stockton, is the "unruly contours of growing, . . . something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not [necessarily] reproductive" (13), but with acknowledgment and investment (of precariousness and potentiality) can orient a collective consciousness into the future.

Hetero-trans-nationalism

In *Americanah*, we can track Ifemelu's movements from when she travels to the United States for college and navigates through a series of relationships with a cast of racially diverse characters to when she chooses to return to Nigeria and reunites with her first "true love," Obinze, thirteen years later. By illustrating Ifemelu's capacity to move fluidly through space, *Americanah* subverts traditional diaspora narratives that position movement as a male configuration.¹³ Scholars such as Carole Boyce Davies have spotlighted how *Americanah* popularizes the female migration narrative and the extent to which this novel-as-female migration narrative has influenced new considerations of contemporary national and other African identities. Such a feat Davies deemed challenging for earlier black women writers excluded from a predominantly masculinist

¹³ See Stephens (2005) for a study of how early twentieth-century ideals of transnational blackness were distinctly male in nature.

independence narrative.¹⁴ In recognition of Adichie's successful popularization of women's issues in African literature at such a global scale, Davies coins this period of African writing the "Adichie moment."

The scholar Bimbola Oluwafunola Idowu-Faith astutely distinguishes Ifemelu's capacity to move as relative to her upper-middle class status in Nigeria, "where the need to migrate is not induced by poverty but by the quest to experience choice and something new somewhere else" (2). Though *Americanah* accurately depicts the struggles of being a black immigrant woman in the United States, particularly when Ifemelu faces financial trouble that drives her to pursue sex work early in her stay, it privileges her economic sustainability and capacity to move freely throughout most of the narrative. This freedom to move allows her to maintain a measure of distance when necessary from the material realities affecting minor characters such as Dike, her Senegalese hair-stylist Aisha whose class and citizenship status prevent her from returning to Africa, and the novel's African American characters whose lives are determined by how they inherit the United States' racial history. Ifemelu's access to space also informs her capacity to choose how she identifies and where she calls home.

In ways, Ifemelu is representative of Taiye Selasi's "Afropolitan" as described in the essay "Bye-Bye Babar." The Afropolitan, according to Selasi lives in the diaspora and claims multiple places as her own, and an Afropolitan identity embraces hybridity

¹⁴ Davies writes in "Migration, African Writing and the Post-Colonial/Diasporic Chimamanda Adichie Moment" (2016), "Adichie [is] advancing some of the intellectual and creative positions that female writers of that same earlier generation as Achebe, had advanced without the major international recognition that she is now afforded" (234). And so while Davies applauds *Americanah* for engendering a shift in how African and Western audiences conceive of an African literature, she also reminds us that there were female African writers tackling similar women's issues in their literature earlier and that it is important to read *Americanah* within this tradition of writers and acknowledge their differing political temporalities. See also Davies (1994) for her earlier theorization of a female migratory subjectivity.

and multiculturalism. She writes, “‘Home’ for this lot is many things: where their parents are from; where they go for vacation; where they went to school; where they see old friends; where they live (or live this year). Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many.” Though Ifemelu ultimately claims to belong only to Nigeria, the fact that travel informs her decision exemplifies key characteristics of Selasi’s Afropolitan, specifically the opportunity to move and claim a place as one’s own. In addition, Ifemelu is able to acquire an American passport during her time in the United States, so even after she decides to return, she maintains the possibility of moving back and forth.¹⁵

Ifemelu’s trajectory as a blogger on race and racism illustrates how her particular trans-*national* relationships to Nigeria and the United States enable her freedom to disassociate with American blackness in ways unavailable to Dike.¹⁶ Ifemelu’s boyfriend Blaine, an African American Yale professor, draws attention to her relationship to American blackness when he criticizes her blog. “You know, it’s not just about writing a

¹⁵ Critics such as Emma Dabiri have claimed that representations of modernity in African culture like Selasi’s version of Afropolitanism are limited in scope due to class and the privileged position to market culture. However, scholarship on *Americanah* has championed how an Afropolitan positionality can “address the challenges of contemporary global society” via its privileged relationship to the market economy (Pahl 80). Katherine Hallemeier argues that “Although *Americanah* does not unequivocally denounce the inequities of global capitalism *tout de suite*—saving a critical portrayal of its patriarchal character—it yet denounces the high personal and public costs of a particularly American manifestation of capitalism in which material prosperity offers no freedom from the absolutisms of a racist society” (237). Notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge how this Afropolitan positionality requires a trans-*national* relationship to Africa that is unavailable to diasporic subjects like Dike. Dike does not have the same freedom to move, and his frame of reference is conditioned by the racist absolutism that Ifemelu is able to critique, an effect of his coming-of-age in the United States. For the purpose of this essay, then, I maintain that *Americanah* works within and against an Afropolitan framework to account for the diversity of diasporic African experiences.

¹⁶ It should be recognized that this positionality is meant to situate the female African subject as an authoritative observer, a literary subversion of the colonial anthropologist figure presented at the end of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In this critique, it would be wrong to downplay the feminist work *Americanah* does to situate the African female subject as a global authority or the access it grants her to move transnationally.

blog,” he says, “you have to live like you believe it. That blog is a game that you don’t really take seriously, it’s like choosing an interesting elective evening class to complete your credits.” Adichie continues, “[Ifemelu] recognized, in his tone, a subtle accusation, not merely about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American” (A 428). Although both Blaine and Ifemelu inhabit black bodies, this passage highlights Ifemelu’s outsider status as a Nigerian; this being Nigerian, though ostracizing, allows her to distance herself from the culture and history impacting Blaine and other descendants of enslaved peoples in the United States. After this confrontation with Blaine, Ifemelu changes the name of her blog from *Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America* to *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. Though she refers to herself as a non-American black in the first title, she assumes an affinity towards black Americans based on their shared “blackness.” In her new title, she removes any allusion to an inclusive “blackness” to distinguish her experience in the United States from those of American blacks. This shift in Ifemelu’s identification with blackness is exemplary of how, according to the critic Aretha Phiri, *Americanah* “problematize[s] universalized, even hegemonic, African-American cartographies of blackness,” especially as manifested by Blaine and his social circle (126). However, I would argue that Ifemelu’s decision to return to Nigeria after thirteen years living in the United States is less indicative of the unreality of blackness or her “embodied sense of (un)belonging as a diasporic African” than it is of her freedom to move and distinguish herself as an adult middle-class Nigerian with American citizenship

(137). This becomes more apparent when considered against Dike's experiences in the novel.¹⁷

Though we can read *Americanah* as a transnational novel for how it abstracts notions of gender and race identity based on Ifemelu's experiences as a migrant traveling back and forth across the Atlantic, her decision to return to Nigeria at the end of the novel brings attention to Adichie's generation of diasporic writers' continued entanglement with the nation despite their various diasporic locations. Idowu-Faith reads the relationship between Ifemelu's choice to identify as an "Americanah" (and Adichie's decision to use this term as the book's title) and her return migration as representative of her desire to maintain a Nigerian identity. She writes,

In its very Nigerian context, *Americanah* is identification based on a previous living experience in America, which is self-revealing in the American accent of the individual. Thus, *Americanah* is an affinity without root or deep roots where American is the identity of rootedness in, and belongingness to, America... With Ifemelu's return to Nigeria, she privileges being called an *Americanah* over being referred to as an American... Adichie is literally proposing a return migration for everyone in the diaspora, especially Nigerians.

...long before her decision to return to Nigeria, Ifemelu decides to stop speaking with an American accent in order to hold on to, affirm, and assert her identity as a Nigerian (19-20).

Being "Americanah" in Idowu-Faith's analysis correlates with what I term a trans-*national* identity in the novel. This identity captures Ifemelu's transnational experiences

¹⁷ In "Expanding black subjectivities in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" (2017), Phiri claims that *Americanah* positions home for Ifemelu "not as a final, concrete geographical locale or ideological destination, but as a spatiotemporally experienced subjective space and route characterized by persistent uncertainty and flux. Qualified by 'permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution' (Hall 1990, p. 228), this necessitates a continuous process of becoming and induces a persistent feeling of (un)belonging" (136). Like Phiri, I point to the ways Ifemelu's transnational journey impacts how we interpret home in a constant state of flux. However, I make the claim that home, for Ifemelu, correlates with Nigeria specifically. So, although Ifemelu's experience transforms what it means to be Nigerian and how we conceive of Nigeria spatially, I emphasize how her return signifies the appeal of national belonging. In this reading, I argue that Dike, whose "persistent feeling of (un)belonging," as he exists in contradistinction with Ifemelu's relationship to Nigeria, is the lens through which a transformative African diasporic metaphysic in the novel is best conceived.

by referencing how her time in the United States transforms her sense of self. However, an Americanah is a Nigerian term for a particular Nigerian identity that differentiates a returnee from being “American” (especially when one has obtained American citizenship). And so, an Americanah clutches onto identifying with this national signifier regardless of how its existence inevitably transforms what it means to be Nigerian.

Again, I am not arguing against identifying with a home nation. However, I am interested in how *Americanah* juxtaposes Ifemelu’s capacity to choose and this choice’s relationship to the nation with figures such as Dike whose lack of agency throughout the novel is in part determined by his sense of not belonging in the United States or amongst his Nigerian family members. Even though Dike does visit Nigeria temporarily at the end of the novel, I disagree with Idowu-Faith’s argument that Adichie proposes return migration for everyone in the diaspora. Instead, it is Dike’s queer alterity in the novel that pushes against the hetero-trans-*nationalism* inherent in Ifemelu’s identification as an Americanah. And so, rather than try and attempt to fit Dike into this hetero-trans-*national* framework (as implied by Idowu-Faith’s argument), I explore Dike’s struggle to mesh with this framework as a consequence of its temporality and an allusion to and acknowledgment of a queer diasporic frame of reference for the futures of African subjectivity.¹⁸

In ways, reading Ifemelu’s narrative as trans-*national* speaks to Adichie’s success at centering the African female migrant in conversations on contemporary African nationhood. Davies emphasizes this success in her 2016 discussion of an “Adichie

¹⁸ In chapters two through four, I extend this diasporic frame of reference to reimagine the spaces of continental Africa within its terms.

Moment” where she acknowledges a significant shift in how we read woman’s relationship to the nation from her initial theorization of African women’s writing and migration’s role in how they formulate a consciousness for being and belonging. In her 1994 discussion of a migratory subjectivity, Davies writes, “We may want to...ask, as a number of feminist scholars are beginning to do, if the concept of ‘nation’ has not been a male formulation. This may explain why nationalism thus far seems to exist primarily as a male activity with women distinctly left out or peripheralized in the various national constructs” (“Black Women, Writing and Identity” 12). In this earlier analysis, Davies disentangles identity from place to define black women’s writing as a series of crossings, “and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category” (4). She feminizes diasporic theory by examining how black women’s identities come to represent an alternative form of consciousness that is linked to the traditional diasporic concept of an elsewhere; an elsewhere established by reading black women’s writing relationally.¹⁹ This formulation of black female relationality redefines socio-geography and challenges patriarchal definitions of place offering alternative ways of being and belonging to the world.

On the one hand, reading Ifemelu as an “Americanah” renders the potentialities of Davies’ migratory subjectivity. *Americanah* centralizes female migration in its attempt at challenging and redefining nationhood. Out of this attempt evolves an “Americanah” way of being that transforms the nation’s relationship to space and attempts to figure it as a female formulation. On the other hand, the novel’s continued entanglement with the nation, even read as trans-*national* or as an exemplary shift in Nigerian gender politics,

¹⁹ Which in earlier formulations was also determined male. See note 12

perpetuates a dependency on heteropatriarchy whose demolition was tantamount to Davies 1994 theorization. This heteropatriarchy of the nation is related to the acquirement of wealth and access and works in contradistinction to the diasporic consciousness Davies imagined and that I argue is central to how we are supposed to read Dike as an alternative formulation of African subjectivity beyond the temporal limits of Ifemelu's narrative.²⁰

Despite *Americanah*'s success as a feminist novel, its use of heterosexual romance to move Ifemelu forward exemplifies the limits of tying progress to the contemporary nation and how this impacts a reading of Ifemelu's gendered trans-*national* identity.²¹ First, a series of romantic relationships with men—white and black—informs how Ifemelu understands herself as a black Nigerian migrant woman, how she moves through space in the novel, and her decision to return to Nigeria and identify as an “Americanah.” So, while she can be defined by her capacity to move freely, this privilege is entwined with a heterosexual standard. Ifemelu's narrative illustrates how this standard transcends the space of the nation when figured trans-*nationally*, limiting the possibilities

²⁰ Scholars have pointed out that Ifemelu's wealth is dependent on her relationship to patriarchy. Iromuanya, for example, claims that “While it could be argued that...each woman has the agency to determine how her sexuality will be dispensed in order to thrive monetarily, it is still necessary to scrutinize a system that is premised on the notion that one *must* trade sexual favors and have some form of dependence on a male sponsor in order to advance economically” (178). Moreover, Hallemeier argues that economic advancement in the novel “depends upon one's connections with relatively wealthy and documented men,” though she emphasizes the ways the patriarchal character of capitalism in the United States is particularly sentimental (238). She claims that Ifemelu and Obinze's reunification in Nigeria, though patriarchal in character, “eschews political and personal certainties, such as those forged in the crucible of white supremacy, that center on expectations for a good or better future” (243). While I do not disagree with this reading of Ifemelu's trajectory, I am interested in how this perspective can shift with a focus on Dike. Despite eschewing economic certainties, return solidifies the novel's hetero-trans-*national* character and discounts what is left unknown about Dike; how does his existence, then, blur the United States-Nigeria dichotomy the novel and this reading depend on?

²¹ One could argue that the novel's success as a consumer product is related to the fact of it subscribing to the heterosexual norms of the romance genre.

available to those diasporic subjects who struggle to relate with this hetero-trans-*national* identity. For example, if we read Ifemelu's transnational movement, her disavowal of American blackness, and her relationship to the nation all bound to the novel's heterosexual impulse, then Dike's struggle to belong and understand his black body marks his queer positionality; his queerness in the novel signifies his precariousness, but it also orients our reading of the novel beyond the scope of Ifemelu's experience and how it defines African subjectivity in the novel.

In addition, the pairing of Ifemelu's return with her reuniting with Obinze in the last pages substantiates this hetero-trans-*national* reading of the novel and its relationship to reproductive futurity. As such, we should consider the extent to which a dependency on the (heterosexual) romance genre is a reminder of black women's continued entrapment within the patriarchy of the nation, despite successful attempts at creating space for female voices and the changing times that have led us to be able to coin an "Adichie moment." Therefore, we should acknowledge *Americanah*'s successes as a feminist novel while also situating Adichie as part of an ongoing history of black women's social and political negotiating.²²

Upon returning to Nigeria, Ifemelu sees Obinze several times, even though his marriage to someone else prevents them from picking up where they left off over a decade earlier. However, in the last pages, Obinze shows up at Ifemelu's door to tell her that he had left his wife for her. "I want to act," Obinze says to Ifemelu, "I want this to

²² Abosede A. George's 2014 study of girlhood in mid-twentieth century Nigeria is representative of this history as it discusses the ways activist women in the wake of independence had to concede to the male-dominated nationalist party's patriarchal structure in order to advance certain aspects of their agenda such as gaining access to formal education for young girls and staking a space for women in the public sphere. She writes, "Faced with the choice of being junior status helpmates to the nation-building project versus assuming the position of protected yet structurally disempowered fixtures in the postcolonial nation, the wife or the child, Women's Party members opted for the former" (220-21).

happen. Kosi [Obinze's wife] is a good woman and my marriage was a kind of floating-along contentment, but I should never had married her. I always knew that something was missing...Ifem, I'm chasing you. I'm going to chase you until you give this a chance" (A 588). And then addressing Obinze with the name she used for him in secondary school, Ifemelu says, "Ceiling...come in." Here, in the last words of the novel, Ifemelu invites Obinze in, allowing him to fill a gap that had been open since she left him for the United States as a young adult and which motivated her attempts at understanding her identity via different relationships with white and black men. Likewise, Obinze is finally able to recognize the distinction between contentment and fulfillment, and via Ifemelu act against the dichotomy. This final moment in the novel—this union—consecrates Ifemelu's return; Ifemelu's erotic potential—something that was missing in her relationships with American men, white and black—is revitalized by this double-serving moment: reuniting with Obinze and reuniting with Nigeria. Such a conclusion inevitably alludes to a reproductive future for twenty-first century Nigeria. We could take this one step further and argue that Ifemelu needs Obinze in order to fall back into Nigeria and herself. Taking the word "ceiling" for its literal meaning, Obinze's adolescent nickname becomes an allusion to the upper limits of the novel's feminist potential, which highlights the patriarchal constraints of hetero-trans-*nationalism*. If, as Julie Iromuanya claims, "we have no sense of whether [Ifemelu] is capable of self-reflexivity regarding the precariousness of her position" in this scene, our recognizing this limit provokes a closer consideration of the possibilities available elsewhere in the novel and motivates an analysis of the intersections of childhood and queer diaspora and how they orient an analysis of African subjectivity into the future and beyond Ifemelu's trans-*national*

experiences (181). However, by juxtaposing queer diaspora against hetero-trans-*nationalism*, I am not alluding to homogenous queer and heterosexual identities, nor am I arguing that a queer diasporic paradigm functions at the cost of feminism.²³ What I am suggesting is that we consider the ways spotlighting queer childhood in the novel evolves our reading of *Americanah*'s feminist potential, especially by permitting us to imagine what is available beyond trans-*natio* *nal* epistemologies.

Queer Diaspora

Dike is not queer in the sense that he identifies as homosexual; that is to say, the author does not script Dike as homosexual. However, I read Dike's marginality in the novel as particularly queer for how it alludes to the limits of the dominant hetero-trans-*national* narrative.²⁴ That is, his function at the margin seems less a consequence of his secondary characterization than an intentional orienting, a simultaneous pushing back and beyond the idea of *a* generational experience characterized by Ifemelu's trans-*national* trajectory. So, while Dike's marginality read against the narrative's entanglement with hetero-trans-*nationalism* and its allusion to reproductive futurity signifies the precariousness of his queer relationality, this precariousness demands a re-investment in the potentiality of his queer existence and an epistemological re-orienting that exceeds the trans-*national* experiences that dominate the novel's diegetic world. Read this way,

²³ In fact, chapters three and four of *Diasporic Childhoods* set out to establish African queer literature's indebtedness to black feminist epistemologies in their mappings of queer futures.

²⁴ Dike's marginality is representative of that of a variety of minor characters whose existence complicates how we interpret African subjectivity in the novel. See note 7. However, I emphasize the significance of Dike's capacity to transform the overall epistemological structure of the novel based on his close relationship with Ifemelu, specifically the extent to which his suicide attempt threatens her narrative's inherent hetero-trans-*nationalism*.

Americanah figures not only as an entanglement with the past and the nation, but as a meditation on the temporality of experience and the possibilities available in the child as unknown, the future.

Dike's racialized and sexualized experiences in part determine his queer positionality, provoking his struggle to relate as he comes-of-age in *Americanah*'s diegetic world. This, in effect, requires a more nuanced interpretation of blackness in the novel than what we get by looking at Ifemelu's hetero-trans-*national* narrative alone. In addition, while this analysis of childhood overlaps with cultural and political investments in a queer diasporic consciousness, this specific mode of reading queerness and racialized experience via Dike diverges from other theorizations of queer diaspora, such as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's queer imaginings in the black Atlantic, because a layer of Dike's oppression is that nobody else in the narrative world shares or understands his sense of chaos, and so, unlike Ifemelu, there is no way to resist "by *feeling* and *feeling for*" (192).

There is a relationship between Dike's struggle to relate in the novel and theories on queer childhood, specifically how a parent generation overwrites a child generation with innocence. This scripting with innocence can be based on the parents' desire to protect their children from worldly violence and the naïve assumption that this always works. What is sometimes missed is that this form of protection can cause harm by denying the appropriate foundation to deal with unavoidable social and material violence, like the effects of having a black body in a racist society. "What do children queered by innocence share?" Kathryn Bond Stockton asks, "They all share estrangement from what they approach: the adulthood against which they must be defined" (31). In *Americanah*,

however, we can substitute blackness for the sexuality implied in “what they approach” by Stockton, though as I will show below, these two cannot be disengaged. Half of what estranges Dike in the novel is Aunt Uju’s attempts to ascribe him with innocence, which becomes conflated with non-black. However, she also dissuades him from latching onto his Igbo culture as an alternative; her attempts at protecting him fail because she emphasizes what he is not rather than offering him some kind of cultural foundation to grasp onto.²⁵

After Dike’s suicide attempt, Ifemelu criticizes Aunt Uju for contributing to the imbalance in his life. She asks Aunt Uju, “Do you remember when Dike was telling you something and he said ‘we black folk’ and you told him ‘you are not black’?” Aunt Uju responds, “You know what I meant. I didn’t want him to start behaving like these people and thinking that everything that happens to him is because he’s black.” And Ifemelu follows up, “You told him what he wasn’t but you didn’t tell him what he was” (A 470). This dialogue refers us back to earlier conversations between the two of them regarding which languages to use around Dike. When Ifemelu first moves to the United States, Aunt Uju warns her only to speak to Dike in English in order to help him assimilate better (134). Later in the novel, Ifemelu notices Aunt Uju using Igbo only when Dike is in trouble, and she worries that Igbo “would become for him the language of strife” (211). Oftentimes, Aunt Uju’s own experiences motivate these decisions: she struggles communicating with her accent, so she wants Dike to speak English; in one scene, she

²⁵ Due to my focus on the child, it is necessary to look at the ways a parent generation silences the child and the effects this has on childhood subject formation. However, in an analysis of gender in *Americanah*, one could rightfully illuminate the ways Ifemelu and Aunt Uju’s dominant voices function empoweringly in the novel as representations of a commanding female agency. I am more interested in the ways reading these two generations together engenders a queer feminist analysis oriented in the future through the child.

yells at Dike in Igbo at the same point she becomes fed up with living in a majority-white community. Her own conflicted character impacts Dike's experience by offering no stable foundation to latch onto.²⁶

At times, Aunt Uju's attempts at maintaining an illusion of innocence actually reinforce pejorative notions of black childhood sexuality. Take, for example, the scene where she reveals her decision to leave New York after Dike is caught at daycare with another child looking at each other's private parts. Whereas Ifemelu tells Aunt Uju that she learned at college that an act like this is normal for children who are naturally curious, Aunt Uju thinks otherwise. She tells Ifemelu, "Not at seven years old! Tufiakwa! Where did he learn that from? It is that day care he goes to...All those wild children with no home training, he is learning rubbish from them. I've decided to move to Massachussetts at the end of this term" (A 174). We can draw connections between her reaction to Dike's daycare environment in this passage, her mentioning in the same scene that most of the patients at the hospital are black—alluding to the demographic of her community at large—and her decision to move to what is ultimately a majority white community. Though she does not mention the race of the children at Dike's daycare, whiteness becomes the antithesis to their "wild" behavior owing to the fact that his encounter at daycare provokes her decision to move. As such, it can be inferred that she interprets Dike's sexual curiosity as a consequence of his racialization; specifically, she sees this environment threatening his innocence as a black child rather than interpreting

²⁶ In chapter four, where I focus on mother-daughter relationships in the lesbian fiction of Chinelo Okparanta, I consider how accounting for a mother's conflicted character, especially in relation to her gender experience, can facilitate a child's attunement to her or his own (queer) becoming. In *Americanah*, we never learn how Dike processes his mother's conflict as it affects her, perhaps because of his marginality in the narrative as a whole, so we cannot interpret their relationship beyond how she outwardly affects his sense of non-belonging.

his curiosity as natural to children in general. Her reaction reveals the extent to which her ability to prepare Dike for his future as a black boy in the United States is limited. Her attempt to preserve his innocence by moving him to a middle-class, majority white community further ostracizes his experience and eventually influences his attempt at suicide.

Despite Aunt Uju's decision to move Dike in an attempt at preventing any stereotyped elements of African American culture from having an impression on him, the people at Dike's school assign to him certain characteristics that they assume define blackness, especially because he is one of the only phenotypically black students at school. Due to the racialized stereotypes pervasive at his school, many of his teachers and friends make assumptions about his character and treat him differently. At one point, the principal of his school accuses him of hacking into the school's computer network, though, again, we learn about this only as it is relayed from Aunt Uju to Ifemelu. Shortly after, Ifemelu asks Dike about this, and he tells her that "You have to blame the black kid first" (433). Although this suggests that Dike understands the consequences of having a black body in a majority white community, his eventual decision to attempt suicide alludes to the limited possibilities available in the social worlds he inhabits—at home and at school—to negotiate an identity that accounts for his being black and Nigerian in the United States. This offers an interesting juxtaposition to Ifemelu's part of the narrative where she deals with her struggles with race and identity by moving fluidly through space and between romantic relationships with men. Because of his age, Dike does not have the same freedom to move, and so the consequences of race and relationships have a drastically different effect on his identity formation. In addition, their

age difference limits Dike's capacity to turn to his bond with Ifemelu to understand himself in ways that Ifemelu and Obinze are able to with each other at the end of the novel. If the dominant narrative encapsulates Ifemelu's experience, then Dike's never-fully-realized-self signifies his precariousness.

Dike's relationship with a white girl, Page, during his high school years correlates with Auntie Uju's earlier plan to get him away from the "wild children" and the sexualized racialization of his body in New York, which she inadvertently affirms. However, Page's comment after Dike's suicide attempt points out what seems to be the insufficiency of this relationship for Dike. Adichie writes, "when [Page] was alone with Ifemelu, [she said], 'I just can't believe he didn't reach out to me'" (471). This insufficiency, coupled with his decision to attempt suicide, is representative of his lack of access to any affirmative relationship that would help him negotiate his black sexualized body within the socio-cultural landscape of the United States. Despite Dike's relationship with Page being heterosexual, it exists in contradistinction to the futurity implied in Ifemelu's hetero-trans-*national* trajectory. Ifemelu's romantic relationships, whether failed or not, move her forward in the narrative, contributing to her sense of self and culminating with her reunification with Obinze and Nigeria. As I have argued, this final uniting implicates a reproductive future tied to the heteropatriarchy of the nation-state. The trajectory of Dike's sexuality from childhood to adolescence, alternatively, brings him further from an understanding of himself and closer to death. This is a result of his racialization, his inability to move freely, and his lack of a cultural foundation to grasp onto. Reckoning with the materiality of Dike's experience and its effects on the social world of the novel can transform how we interpret the futurity of the text.

Dike oscillates in the novel between being real and unreal, both materially present and unknowable. This is a consequence of the material reality of his blackness and how it impacts his queer positionality in the novel. Dike is what Christina Sharpe describes as being Trans*, or in excess: the queerness of black life in the wake of slavery, the condition of both being and un-being in relation to the history of the Middle Passage as it pervades the United States in the twenty-first century. Sharpe writes,

That excess is here writ large on Black bodies—as it is with the process of subjection. And it is that point, post the “rupture in the world,” at which, Dionne Brand tells us, *we*, whether *we* made *that* passage or not, are “transform[ed] into being. That one door [the door of no return] transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed” (32).

While Ifemelu’s tie to her Nigerian culture and homeland—her position on the other side of *the door*—allows her to disavow race as defined in the United States, Dike comes-of-age as a black American male amongst his majority white peers. And so, whereas he exists for the novel *in negative* on the one hand—that is, “what he is not”—he is also an overdetermined physical reality in the social space he occupies outside of home, outside the socio-cultural space of *Americanah*, both aspects of this narrative-being and -un-being impacting his coming-of-age. Though, as previously inferred, his coming-of-age functions as an almost coming-into-death via suicide. Dike’s specific racialized experience and his lack of a cultural foundation to inform his becoming deny him the innocence of childhood and force him to work from within his body in ways that Ifemelu could avoid.

However, despite his need to work from within his body, the hetero-trans-*national* narrative world of *Americanah* lacks the socio-cultural know-how to function as a space of black becoming for Dike. This in addition to the fact that his age prevents him from

moving freely through space; while race pushes Ifemelu home, it disrupts Dike's capacity to use his parent's connection to Africa as homeland therapeutically. The only way out for Dike is to remove himself from this world altogether via attempted suicide, the only major choice he makes in the novel. While Dike is already positioned in the margin throughout, this plot device—Dike's suicide attempt—pushes the narrative outside of itself, or, to reference Stockton again, sideways. This queer orientation of moving sideways is engendered by the intertwined nature of Dike's material existence and unknowability. It also highlights his relationship to the novel as a whole. Being both an unattachable element of and a rupture in the narrative's main arch, Dike's trajectory captures the essence of queer childhood as a necessary horizon of possibility. This narration of child-suicide emphasizes how Dike's existence contributes to the epistemological complexity of *Americanah* as a text dealing with the nature and future of African subjectivities.

Reading Dike through Sharpe is a complicated, yet important, undertaking in African literary studies. Living in the wake, for Sharpe, is a trans-generational experience that foregrounds memory—both the trauma in memory and memory's radical impact on action/wake work. In her reading of black motherhood, Sharpe claims, "There is an extensive representational repertoire...of the conflation of blackness and death and multiple 'commonsense' representations of Black maternity—and therefore the impossibility of Black childhood—as condemning one to a life of violence. We trace this history back to chattel slavery and the law of *sequitur ventrem*..., which dictated that the children of a slave woman inherited the mother's non/status" (79). One of the many

powerful aspects of *In the Wake* is how Sharpe extends metaphor to account for black life globally. For example, she applies the hold of the slave ship as a metaphor to account for the bare life ascribed to North African refugees in the twenty-first century who are susceptible to drowning and neglect from the Italian Coast Guard as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean. We can also apply her discussion of black maternity to a discussion of coloniality in Africa. Even though Dike is not a descendant of enslaved persons, his life is precarious in relation to the history of colonialism, passed down, and its effects on contemporary interpretations of African life in discussions of West/non-West, Global north/south, neocolonialism, etc. Moreover, his issue negotiating black and Nigerian identities as impacted by his mother telling him what he is not illustrates how a negative regard towards African Americans—a legacy of slavery—can be adopted as ideology by African immigrants in the United States.

As such, Dike's experience in *Americanah* is a direct result of contemporary Africans' distance from and discomfort with the memory of slavery as it defines black life in the diaspora now. This discomfort is most clearly illustrated via the experiences of Ifemelu and Auntie Uju. And so, I am partially concerned with how those who theorize blackness, like Sharpe, position the "door of no return" at the center of *global* black experience.²⁷ It would be wrong to say that this door functions outside the realm of African history, and it is important to recognize that Sharpe's analysis is concerned with the socio-historical specificity of experiencing the wake, being in the wake of slavery. And she uses that as a metaphorical starting point for considering other precarious situations shaping black life globally. However, Sharpe's work also provokes a closer

²⁷ This was a popular topic of discussion at the 2017 annual African Literature Association convention.

consideration of how some black bodies relate to the door via different histories, and how this affects how people experience and understand blackness in the world beyond a Middle Passage epistemology.²⁸ It is a disconnect between black American and African ontologies, especially in relation to debates on *the door*, that determines Dike's chaos. Reading his subjectivity in the novel, then, requires an understanding of what it means to be queered by race, but it also asks what to make of race's socio-cultural meaning in the United States queered by contemporary African immigrants who bring into conversation multiple and distinct histories, ontological foundations, and cultural metaphors.²⁹

Still, Dike's becoming black necessitates a more serious reckoning with the history of slavery in contemporary discussions of African ontology. This is an effect of globalization and diasporization. Scholars such as Bayo Holsey (2008) and fiction writers like Yaa Gyasi (2016) have begun this process of reckoning. Even if we decide that Dike, being born in Nigeria, belongs on the other side of *the door* with Ifemelu, his journey in the novel illustrates how migratory experience can develop into and necessitate a consciousness and a framework for consciously being independent from national

²⁸ Saidiya Hartman explains the significance of nuance when investigating the history of slavery on each side of the Atlantic in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007). She explains how her experiences in Ghana transformed her understanding of black affiliation. While she traveled in search of the memory of her ancestors and a sense of global Black belonging, she discovered a disconnect in how people in Ghana interpreted the slave trade. Many Ghanaians, for example, either erased this history from their collective memory or viewed its social and economic (including the introduction of Christianity and literacy) benefits as a path to modernity. As such, her engagement with Ghana influenced an alternative way for interpreting black affiliation—through the collective pursuit of freedom—that acknowledges multiple histories and accounts for various black ontologies. This form of affiliation, however, is not available to Dike within the realm of *Americanah*.

²⁹ Sharpe writes, "Black has always been that excess. Indeed, blackness throws into crisis, whether in these places [i.e. in the wake of slavery in the United States], one can ever really think together, Black and (hetero)normative. That is, Black life in and out of the 'New World' is always queered and more" (31-32). While on the one hand, I am emphasizing the fact of black life's queerness in the wake of slavery, on the other, my analysis diverges from Sharpe's in how I queer Dike in relation to other black characters. This requires a reckoning with heteronormativity within black and African communities.

ideologies. As iterated in my discussion of Ifemelu earlier in this chapter, twenty-first century nationhood's—Nigerian or American—entanglement with patriarchy and reproductive futurity inevitably restricts the extent to which such a reactionary consciousness can evolve.

Ifemelu's friend Ranyinudo's interactions with Dike in Nigeria at the end of the novel capture the discord between national hetero-patriarchy and Dike's queer alterity, which discounts return as an option for him. When Dike arrives in Nigeria, Ranyinudo invites him to participate in reproductive futurity by introducing him to her female cousins. She tells him, "Dike, you must marry one of them o... We need fine children in our family" (452). At first, Dike is amused by this idea. However, any sensual or communal feelings that he develops in Nigeria are discouraged by his inability to speak Igbo, a consequence of his lack of a cultural foundation at childhood. Though Ifemelu tells him he can still learn, the narrative continues, "'Yes, I guess so,' [Dike] said, and shrugged, as though to say it was already too late" (523). Ranyinudo's reaction to Dike's suicide attempt exacerbates this dissociation between him and Nigeria and complicates her attempt earlier at bestowing upon him a reproductive future in Nigeria. "I don't understand how a fine boy like Dike would want to kill himself," she says to Ifemelu, "A boy living in America with everything. How can? That is very foreign behavior" (524). This distinguishing Dike a foreigner because of his suicide attempt highlights the extent to which his proximity to death as an effect of his racialized experience in the United States clashes with an interpretation of futurity defined by a hetero-trans-*national* standard.

The absence of a framework for understanding Dike's queer positionality in relation to his Africanness, then, signifies the importance of what Sharpe calls wake work for someone like Dike. As Sharpe writes, "I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme [*being* in the wake of slavery] with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With that analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake of slavery" (18). *Americanah* lacks an experiential framework for inhabiting the wake as it prioritizes Ifemelu's hetero-trans-*national* return narrative. However, Dike's presence in the narrative alludes to the insufficiency of return for those young Africans who come-of-age black in the United States with limited ability to migrate at will and without the cultural foundation to inform a stable sense of self. As such, his blackness distinguishes him as a queer relation to the postcolonial African nation and demands an alternative way of knowing. It also points to the need in African studies to seriously reckon with the history of trans-Atlantic slavery and its centrality to racialized experience in the world.

Although Dike's attempt at suicide is his only real act of agency in the novel, we only learn about it through a conversation between Ifemelu and Aunt Uju, which I quoted in part above. Even as the narrative refers to Dike's agency, he remains voiceless. The only way to begin to grasp Dike's experience, then, is to examine how he reorients the narrative as queer excess. In the end, Dike lives, and so we must think about excess in relation to what is beyond the here and now. While we must reckon with Dike's precariousness and acknowledge the violent nature of suicide as a function in the novel—albeit necessary—we should pay equal attention to how Dike's queer positionality

instigates a more critical analysis of African diasporic subjectivity in relation to childhood.

At several crucial points in the narrative when Ifemelu is forced to reflect on her experiences as a black African in the United States, she wonders how Dike would respond based on his own experiences. That being said, she never asks him, and the reader is left unknowing. Despite our never being exposed to any significant self-reflexive version of Dike, the narrative, itself, seems to be self-aware of being an incomplete interpretation of African diasporic subjectivity. When Dike attempts to finally remove himself from the narrative altogether by attempting suicide, Ifemelu's reaction reveals the potential consequence his absence would have on her life and emphasizes Dike's significance as a queer relation to the narrative as a whole. Adichie writes, "endless, elliptical thoughts of what could have happened churned [Ifemelu's] head. [Dike's] bed, this room, would have been empty forever. *Somewhere inside her, a gash would have ruptured that would never seal itself back*" (A 470; emphasis mine). Even though Ifemelu and Dike are representative of two distinct diasporic experiences, Ifemelu's reference to how Dike's absence would impact her own being emphasizes the significance of their relationality for how we interpret African diasporic subjectivity within and beyond the temporality of *Americanah*'s social world. This passage ruptures the novel's seeming insistence on romance as defining Ifemelu and exposes diaspora's reliance on the child as an undefined subject to interpolate knowledge beyond the known and now.

In addition, if we read the relationship between heterosexuality and trans-*nationalism* as representative of the narrative's normative order, then Dike's capacity to

disrupt the narrative, as described in the previous quotation about Ifemelu, challenges a notion of futurity—in relation to the child—dependent on heterosexual reproduction. Instead, the narrative depends on the child, not as a blank slate to script desire, but for the tension (s)he offers us as both known and unknown. We can think of the child's becoming as the “death” of the heterosexual parent to the extent to which (s)he forms new external relations that inform the development of her/his personhood outside the normative structures of the nation and their trans-*national* manifestations. In this sense, the child is queer in her/his capacity to exceed her/his scripted boundaries, especially as they are determined by nationhood and heteropatriarchy. Moreover, imagining the black African child as queer excess oriented towards the future involves breaking down the normative structures of violence that deem black childhood impossible. Instead, this reading of *Americanah* advocates an interpretation of black childhood as central to how we understand diasporic consciousness as a means to action. As excess, the child orients a collective consciousness beyond the here and now—that is, outside trans-*national* manifestations of national ideology, beyond heterosexuality, and into futurity. The child, as represented by Dike, embodies what Nadia Ellis calls a horizon of possibility, or, as she writes, “the urgent sensation of a pull from elsewhere, when not fulfilled, constitutes diaspora culture at its most curious, eccentric, and...paradigmatic” (2). Although we cannot overlook the extent to which race affects, and in many cases, limits the black African child's movement into the future, a reinvestment in this child, especially her/his capacity to transition us beyond what we know of diasporic culture can be transformative for the life of diaspora consciousness in the future.

Chapter 2: Childhood and the Spaces of African Queerness

This chapter shifts the focus of *Diasporic Childhoods* to representations of childhood in African queer literature, or literature by African-born queer writers.¹ Specifically, I examine the relationships between childhood, sexuality, and space in works by Binyavanga Wainaina of Kenya and Somali-British (by way of Kenya) Diriye Osman. I distinguish this body of African queer literature from more canonical texts such as Adichie's *Americanah* by emphasizing the ways it subverts a hetero-national impulse (though to varying degrees) and reimagines citizenship and belonging for queer Africans.² As the term "African queer literature" implies, this undertaking requires a reckoning with the sexual politics of place. I am thinking specifically about queer non-belonging, an effect of the social and legal discriminations targeting queer persons throughout much of Africa and informing modern definitions of citizenship.³ In countries

¹ In this instance, I use the term "queer" loosely to refer to those who in one way or another self-identify as non-heterosexual. Wainaina (2014) identified as homosexual and Osman (2016) identifies as gay.

² This form of queer subversion is much more overt in the writing of Osman than it is in the work of Wainaina, especially his memoir, *One Day I Will Write About this Place*. However, I read his memoir intertextually with his later writing to expose its queer potentialities.

³ Neville Hoad, in *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*, explains that contemporary homophobias and the idea that queer sexualities are "un-African" are rooted in African nationalisms "as displaced resistance" to colonial legacies of sexualized racialization and "to perceived and real encroachments on neocolonial national sovereignty by economic and cultural globalization" (xii-xiii). Hoad outlines a series of statements against homosexuality in the 1990s by national leaders Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Daniel arap Moi (Kenya), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), and Samuel Nujoma (Namibia), all of which emphasize the idea that homosexuality does not align with African traditions and is a threat to African societies. He quotes Moi stating, "It is not right that a man should go with another man or a woman with another woman. It is against African tradition and Biblical teachings. I will not shy away from

like Kenya, for example, where most of Wainaina's memoir and several of Osman's stories take place, an overwhelming majority of the population have conservative views of homosexuality, and sodomy remains a felony. As such, most queer persons keep their sexualities to themselves, and open displays of affection are few and far between. Otherwise, members of Kenya's queer community run the risk of jail time, social ostracization, physical abuse, and death.⁴

All of the African queer writers discussed in *Diasporic Childhoods* explore, one way or another, the theme of exile for how it can provide openly queer persons a level of freedom that is seemingly not available in their home communities where they remain subject to violence and social ostracization. More often than not, those queer persons who have the social and economic resources to leave end up in countries (predominantly Western) where being openly queer is socially and legally acceptable, such as the United States, Canada, much of Europe, and South Africa. According to the Jamaican writer Marlon James, for example, whose home community's stance on LGBTQ issues aligns with those of the African communities examined here, living in the United States allowed him to be his most authentic self. He recounts for the *New York Times* how when his best friend visited him from Jamaica, she was impressed by his eccentric clothing and open

warning Kenyans against the dangers of the scourge" (xii). In addition, Hoad uses President Thabo Mbeki's hesitance with responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa (early 2000s) to illustrate how the sexual ideology of racism, stemming from Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, affects Africans' discussions of black sexuality.

⁴ Despite the fact of these realities, activists like Wainaina, have influenced society's understanding of queer sexualities and have motivated queer Kenyans to take an active approach to achieving equal rights. In 2015, Kenya's high court ruled that the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission was a lawful organization, even though they underscored their moral disagreement with homosexuality in general. In addition, there is a growing gay nightlife scene in Kenya's capital Nairobi, where it is not abnormal to see queer and heterosexual couples coexisting. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/jun/29/homophobia-in-kenya-nairobi-prejudice-acceptance>

display of queer interests. She points out how comfortable he seemed with himself in this setting, telling him, “This is so *you*, dude. I’ve never seen you as *you* before” (2015).

This statement reinforced for James the sense of freedom he felt being openly gay in the United States. In addition to physical, geographic exile, Osman and Wainaina, as well as Iweala and Okparanta, who I discuss in other sections of this dissertation, consider the effects of filial and psychological—the latter via imagining—forms of exile on being queer and African in their writing.

While acknowledging exile’s function for queer becoming as displayed by Wainaina and Osman, this chapter spotlights how migratory experience—sometimes a direct effect of exile—impacts how they reimagine queer futures that are not dependent on displacement.⁵ This investment in queer African futures emphasizes the temporality of a moment characterized by aggressive heteronormativity and reframes African cultures outside these parameters. Doing so challenges those cultural analyses that emphasize unidirectional narratives of sexual exile, and that, in effect, perpetuate a patriarchal relationship between the West and the formerly colonized, painting the United States, Canada, and European countries as “savior” nations.⁶ Overemphasizing the West’s role in providing safety for sexual exiles distracts us from a more nuanced analysis of African sexual politics in all of its complexities, especially its rootedness in and response to

⁵ My analysis is not meant to underestimate those instances where exile is the only route to physical safety, or to overshadow the life experiences of people like Marlon James discussed in the previous paragraph.

⁶ While in reality, Western human rights initiatives in Africa often lack the cultural know-how to address socio-political issues in ways relative to the experiences of Africans. For example, Akanji and Epprecht discuss, in “Human Rights Challenge in Africa: Sexual Minority Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights,” how campaigns that stress individual rights overlook the importance of group rights in African countries where preserving a sense of homogenous identity amongst a very diverse community is important. In many instances, emphasizing individual rights also shadows the history of colonialism that introduced the idea in terms of citizenship, which was denied Africans under its system (22).

Africa's colonial history.⁷ It also masks the extent to which sexual logics function through global capitalism to insure and maintain neo-imperial order.⁸ I must also state that the predicted safety offered by exile does not always materialize or may be limited by access and time. That is, when discussing exile as a solution, we cannot overlook the ways people's capacities to move are limited by race, gender, class and citizenship, or the ways these social constructions affect people's experiences as refugees in new lands.

Thinking beyond displacement and exile does not invalidate migration's centrality to the process of queer becoming in contemporary African literature. This, especially as African queer writers work simultaneously from within and against systems of governance that deem them "other." My analysis of queer subjectivity in contemporary African literature distinguishes between exile and migration as epistemological frameworks because of how each situates the individual in relation to space and the differing outcomes they each make available for African queer identities. Queer exile, on the one hand, refers to the expulsion of a person whose sexual identity as defined by the state contradicts a sovereign's heteronormative impulse to homogenize a group of people within its spatial parameters. David Sibley, in *Geographies of Exclusion*, describes how the nation adopts a set of characteristics to describe its ideal citizen in order to establish a sense of purity or homogeneity within its demarcated space (100). The establishment of a homogenous national identity extends into the home and determines domestic behavior as well (90). A function of establishing this sense of place—in the home and nation—is that

⁷ See the last sentence of footnote 3.

⁸ As M. Jacqui Alexander argues in her discussion of international gay tourism, specifically white American tourists in the Caribbean, "I foreground the imperial, not only because the unequal dichotomies between consumer/producer and producer/audience adhere to a First World/ Third World hierarchy, but also because implied within this nexus of sexual transaction is the production of a 'queer fetishized native' who is made to remain silent within his local economy in order to be appropriately consumed" (70).

it always determines an “other” whose own characteristics, or stereotypes, do not align, locating them elsewhere. This process of coining an “other” helps establish the nation’s homogeneity; the “other’s” presence within the space of the nation becomes a transgression (108). That being said, Rinaldo Walcott, in “Homopoetics: Queer Space and the Black Queer Diaspora,” suggests that the presence of “undesirable” bodies within a given space contributes to the evolution of the acceptable archetype.⁹ In this sense, an undesirable presence would be a “threat” that reinforces the “worth” of a homogenizing national identity. This contradiction characterizes the process and rationale for discriminating against African queers in social and legal rhetoric because it establishes queerness as a Western influence and, thus, “un-African,” while naming a reason for the West’s neocolonial presence within the space of the nation. Therefore, the African queer becomes emblematic of this antithetical “other” and its threatening, yet binding, presence within the space of the African nation. The body of African queer literature discussed here and throughout *Diasporic Childhoods* explores multiple forms of exile—physical, filial, and imaginative/mental—to account for queerness’ many “presences” within and against heteronormative Africa and to ultimately upend homophobia’s synthetic national manifestations.

Although migration is not wholly inseparable from the theme of exile, I emphasize the ways queer African writers develop a migratory subjectivity in their writing that challenges the homogenizing impulse that bolsters the modern nation-state as a structure of exclusion. In other words, whereas exile implies displacement from a spatially determined nation-state (at least until the social politics of the nation are

⁹ Walcott illustrates how the presence of black persons as “undesirable” bodies in the Toronto queer scene helps establish a white gay middle-class male archetype (238).

drastically altered or the nation fails as an entity altogether), migration emphasizes the active movement across borders and this movement's significance to the act of becoming. This, to such a degree that a resultant subjectivity can come into being whose very existence complicates the nation-state's function as a major marker of affiliation.¹⁰ In addition, representations of migratory subjectivity in twenty-first century African queer literature incite new ways for being and belonging on African soil.¹¹ Walcott reinforces the centrality of transnational movement of peoples, cultures, and ideas for the evolution of black queer communities both globally and locally when he states, "[B]lack queer life borrows and shares across national borders to constitute itself locally. Black queer life thus refuses national designation as its originary site of identification and instead casts its lot with black queers transnationally" (235). In the process, black/African queers remake the very spaces that marginalizes them.¹² Conceiving queer African futurity, then, manifested by fluidity in movement rather than exile negates a hierarchical here and there

¹⁰ See Davies (1994), Ellis (2015), Gilroy (1993), and Walcott (2007) for examples of scholarships that examines how migratory experience transforms how we interpret being and belonging with and against nation-space. I differentiate between the migratory subjectivities of queer Africans that challenge national heteropatriarchy with that of Ifemelu in Adichie's *Americanah*. As a heterosexual romance novel, *Americanah* reinforces the sexual norms of contemporary Nigeria, even as it attempts to rewrite the nation female via Ifemelu's return migration. As I argue in chapter one, this reliance on heterosexual romance impacts the potentiality of the novel's feminism read through Ifemelu's experience alone.

¹¹ Sibley goes as far as to argue that xenophobia based on a purified national identity does not work in an age of global capitalism. In reference to United States-Mexican relations, for example, he states, "Cheap labour from the periphery has played a vital role in the creation of wealth in the core countries. The South has for a long time had a presence in the North. In practice, however, the contradiction between a racist nationalism and the imperatives of capitalist economies is denied" (109). Likewise, the migration of African queers, their cultures, and their ideas across borders as enabled by and a product of the nation's participation in global capitalism negates the effect of its homogenizing impulse.

¹² According to Walcott, black gay men in Toronto use their marginality (extended transnationally) to remake the broader queer space that marginalizes them. "[I]n doing so," he writes, "they actually occupy more than a margin—center/margin language is just not an adequate descriptor for the negotiation and articulation of race, space, difference, and queerness in this particular context" (234). This is also an example of how, according to GerShun Avilez, "queer space describes a strategy that rubs against and unhinges hermeneutical frameworks that seek to define and delimit" (132).

between Africa and the West. However, its commitment to African geography reinforces the significance of a dynamic local culture.¹³

In *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, Carole Boyce Davies positions migratory subjectivity as a form of diasporic consciousness that emphasizes an “elsewhere” other than the “here” of a single geography scripted as nation. Her theorization emphasizes the challenges black women, specifically, face when trying to speak from a single geography as long as space remains fixed to the heteropatriarchy of the modern nation-state.¹⁴ As such, she claims that black women’s experiences and subjectivities evolve out of multiple border-crossings and cultural convergences. An effect of this process of envisaging an “elsewhere,” according to her, is the simultaneous transformation of the nation. Davies writes, “The kind of critical work I envisage moves to redefine our geography, to re-create and remove the lines of impossibility in which we exist” (23). Extending Davies’ study of black women’s identities, this chapter considers a dialectical here and there—the nation and “elsewhere”—central to articulations of queer African futurity in the works of Wainaina and Osman across genders. It also epitomizes my theorization of diasporic consciousness as key to understanding the process of becoming in twenty-first century African queer literature. It is a diasporic consciousness, in this case: the effects of movement on the act of imagining, that helps these writers rework and redefine cultural identities and the spaces in which they flow, asserting a queer framework for being and belonging in Africa.

¹³ See Jaji (2013) and Robolin (2015) for examples of recent scholarship that explores transnational African engagements as a way to highlight Africa’s dynamic culture and active contribution to black modernity.

¹⁴ However, Black women writers such as Adichie have been more successful at their attempts to speak from and for the nation. As I discuss in chapter two, Adichie’s *Americanah* points to the challenges Black women continue to face while also signifying an evolution in women’s relationship to the nation, especially their agency within it, since Davies’s writing in the early to mid 1990s.

“Elsewhere” takes on multiple forms in the writing of Wainaina and Osman and is not always concurrent with the migratory paths of each author and his characters. However, I argue that these forms evolve out of an inadequacy of time and place experienced at home that disrupts the process of queer becoming. What is for certain is that “elsewhere” privileges an African cultural framework that is radically queer in its acceptance of non-normative sexual, and other, minorities. In this chapter, I highlight the extent to which each author relies on the trope of childhood to carry their narratives “elsewhere.” My main intent is to track how representations of childhood enable reimagining Africa’s potential as a space of belonging for sexual minorities. My analysis builds upon that of Madelaine Hron, who, in her discussion of Third-generation Nigerian literature, argues that childhood is “a particularly resistant space, of complex, on-going negotiation of difference that is perhaps not as readily accessible in the stable, socially structured world of adults” (30).¹⁵ This conceptualization of childhood as a space of resistance makes it a vehicle for interrogations of a social entity’s present and its orientations towards the future. That being said, Hron’s theorization of childhood assumes an easy relationship to the imagined nation. Wainaina and Osman’s writing, on the other hand, highlights the struggles queer children face when attempting to express the existence of non-normative sexualities within a national narrative, because non-conforming children do not permit postulations of normative futures. And so, queer childhood disrupts social consensus on normative futures, rerouting the formulation of African socio-cultural identities “elsewhere.” Whereas, in the previous chapter, I

¹⁵ “Third-generation” is Hron’s term. As in chapter one, I resist using this generational marker because it assumes that there exists no African literary representation prior to the mid-twentieth century when those referred to as “First generation” like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, and Flora Nwapa began writing.

articulate the terms of narrative violence as an extension of hetero-trans-*nationalism*, and I highlight its impact on the queer child's sense of non-belonging, this chapter focuses on how African queer writers use childhood to actively imagine otherwise.

As such, queer childhood, in both Wainaina and Osman's writing, appears as a radical site of potentiality within each text, shifting thought beyond the here and now when the world is not enough.¹⁶ Sometimes that means leaving home to start anew. Sometimes that means refashioning the past at an attempt at being reborn through an alternative subjectivity. Sometimes it means shutting out the literal world altogether like the reading child in Wainaina's memoir, *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, who thinks through his own subjectivity via escaping into the lives and worlds of the characters he reads about in books. And sometimes it means allowing children, the future generation, to lead us to an alternative consciousness like the mother in the opening story of Osman's collection, *Fairytales for Lost Children*, a story that, despite the trajectory of the book as a whole, suggests: "what if none of what's about to come has to happen?" Ultimately, though, childhood in this body of literature brings us to the "elsewhere" of queer Africa: a queer diasporic consciousness that exceeds the heteropatriarchal limits of the neocolonial nation-state but embraces being African for Africa. This is especially important in a world where although we can celebrate a black cultural modernity, black lives in Africa and the diaspora remain precarious as they exist in the wakes of slavery and colonialism. So, for many, belonging to a global black community is paramount to survival. This work, as represented in *Diasporic Childhoods*, is important because it claims a space for queer Africa in this discourse on black modernity, and because in the

¹⁶ See Ellis (2015) and Muñoz (2009) for theoretical analyses of "queer" and "queer diaspora" that locate radical possibility in the collective desiring of what lies beyond the here and now.

process of claiming space, we are made simultaneously aware of the significance of movement and convergence, gendered and sexual, in the black diasporic world.

Postcolonial Hybridity, Cultural Nationhood, and the Absence of a Queer Consciousness

Binyavanga Wainaina's 2011 memoir *One Day I Will Write About this Place* tracks his coming-of-age alongside the political youth of post-colonial Kenya. Wainaina's narrative follows his childhood in Kenya, his attempt at University in South Africa, a teaching career in upstate New York, with stops in Uganda, Ghana, Togo and Nigeria. It also addresses what Wainaina describes as Kenya's intra-national cultural chaos: the ongoing struggle for political power between competing ethnic groups and the inter-ethnic conflict this provokes.¹⁷ Wainaina's Kenya is also situated at the crux of war and conflict affecting surrounding postcolonial nations (as we will see later, Osman's childhood is spent as a Somali refugee in Kenya).¹⁸ As a result, increased immigration exacerbates the inter-ethnic conflict already pervasive within its borders and provokes the construction of new forms of discrimination. Physical migration, then, takes on a dual role in Wainaina's memoir: it is figured through his own international travels and through the movement of refugees and other migrants in and out of Kenya. These representations of migration situate Kenya as both national and diasporic space.

¹⁷ The severity of these conflicts became widely apparent in the early 1990s after the introduction of multi-party politics, which President Moi introduced, with hesitation, in order to appeal to the democratic tenets of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. In order to secure his presidency in upcoming elections, Moi employed new strategies to manipulate the system. This, in effect, led to increased and reconstructed ethnic conflict that materialized along regionalized political lines. See Ajulu (2002) and Rajula (2020).

¹⁸ Ethiopian Civil War (1974-1991); Somali Civil War (1991 – present); on and off Civil War in Sudan (1955 – 2005); ongoing rebel conflicts and Civil War in Uganda (1971 – present).

One of Wainaina's main aims with the memoir is to reckon with Kenya's diversity, especially the aspects that make no sense to him or push him outside his comfort zone. He coins the term *Kimay* at the very start of the memoir to describe the palimpsest of cultural currents that destabilize his senses or, as he describes, "any language that I cannot speak, but I hear every day in Nakauru... There are so many, I get dizzy. *Ki-may* is the accordion, the fiddle, the bagpipe, the trumpet. All those spongy sounds" (26). Despite his discomfort with Kimay's destabilizing nature, his memoir is an attempt at making sense of how this chaos informs his own subject position within the post-colony of which he is a product—the title of the memoir, itself, alludes to his recognition of the tight relationship between self and place.

Wainaina describes himself, like he does Kenya, as embodying a cultural hybridity, his diverse background affecting his incapacity to grasp onto a solid cultural foundation or to link himself with a single cultural community. His given and sur names, for example, represent this hybridity. While his sur name acknowledges his father's Gikuyu ethnicity, the name Binyavanga, taken from his maternal grandfather and meaning "to mix things up," reveals his mother's status as a non-native. His name alone characterizes the tension he feels throughout the memoir as an outsider from within. Though, as he grows into adulthood, this tension enables an awareness that evolves into a more certain sense of self. It also effects a more nuanced interpretation of Kenya and his relationship to it. He writes, "Being Binyavanga is to me also exotic—an imaginary Ugandan of some kind resides in me, one who lets me withhold myself from claiming, or being admitted into, without hesitation, an unquestioning Gikuyu belonging" (161). This quote is from a point in the memoir where Kenya finds itself falling victim to tribalism, a

negative turn in its dealing with its intra-national diversity. However, it is also a point in the memoir where Wainaina is inching towards a securer sense of self. And so, while he spotlights how his background prevents him from being “unquestionably” Gikuyu (or Kenyan), he describes his exoticism—his ability to claim something other than Gikuyu—like a privilege, distancing himself from Kenya’s tribalism. As we continue to follow the parallels between self and place in the memoir, we can track the ways migration (that of Wainaina’s mother and his own) defines subjectivity and complicates notions of place.

However, even as Wainaina disrupts notions of place, he remains committed to the nation as a structure for modern belonging; he does this by formulating Kimay as an analytic for reworking nationhood. In this sense, we could situate Wainaina with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as representative of a recent generation of African writers whose transnational literature diverges from anticolonial renderings of a homogenous national community to explorations of “shifting, occluding, deferred, and transposed affiliations and disavowals that gives voice to national commitment, creating space for the plurality of difference within the shifting space of the nation” (Krishnan 78).¹⁹ According to Madhu Krishnan, in her discussion of national commitment in Third generation African writing, Wainaina’s understanding of the nation evolves out of “the shifting and often simultaneous deployment of belonging and alienation” he experiences and discusses throughout *One Day I Will Write About this Place* (79). By writing this

¹⁹ Though Adichie writes from a distinctly black female, albeit heterosexual, perspective that impacts how we read her work in relation to the nation, and a male author like Wainaina. As such, it is important to acknowledge that gender impacts how child Wainaina (and the male characters in Osman’s stories) embodies and enacts queerness and the terms of his belonging in relation to heteropatriarchal Kenya. Chapter three of this dissertation revisits *One Day I Will Write About this Place* to more closely examine child Wainaina’s (and author Wainaina’s self-conscious) gendered relationships to Kenya and to the female characters who occupy his narrative. Though I argue that representations of childhood across genders and non-genders can orient us towards queer African futures, chapters three and four consider the nuances in how gender-specific experiences determine *how* they do so.

narrative, Wainaina discovers that to be fully Kenyan in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is to be able to successfully live through and with Kimay. In actuality, it seems as though his interpretation of nationhood depends on Kimay's capacity to disrupt the ethnocentric socio-cultural politics that consume Kenya under the presidency of Daniel arap Moi (1978 – 2002). As a result, Krishnan asserts, "without the contradictory, complementary, and contrarian play of multiple levels of idealization and renunciation that resound across the narrative, the nation would cease to exist" (79). That being said, we must take what we know now about his homosexuality and the fact that he does not overtly address it in the memoir to reconsider the social parameters of nationhood and what the nation grants/denies sexual minorities. Even if Wainaina and Krishnan rightfully exhibit nationhood's pliability—extending its use value—I am interested in other modes of belonging alluded to that enable a sexual consciousness that is otherwise unavailable in the memoir.

In 2014, three years after the publication of his memoir (and one year after Krishnan's critical engagement), Wainaina released an online essay titled "I am a Homosexual, Mum" where he revealed his homosexuality publicly for the first time. Referred to by him as a "lost chapter" to *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, the essay's engagement with his sexual awakening provokes a critical reevaluation of the terms of difference acceptable within the parameters (though shifting) of nationhood that determine the memoir's social world and his place within them. Even as *One Day I Will Write About this Place* attempts to rework a Kenyan identity that relies on difference, change and contradiction vis-à-vis Kimay, the essay brings to light the absence of a defined homosexual subject in the memoir. By presenting the essay as a lost chapter,

Wainaina points out the significance of this missing element to his selfhood and declares a need to revise his memoir even though, as I will demonstrate, the memoir does gesture towards his queerness in its illustration of his childhood fantasies. Moreover, it reflects a larger failure on the part of the Kenyan society that he describes in the memoir and idealizes migration's role for sexual becoming over a reliance on national belonging. The former can incite the collective consciousness necessary for transforming nationhood, which Wainaina remains committed to. My intention, here, is to show how the essay's engagement with the memoir arouses speculation into new modes of queer African collective consciousness beyond the nation without losing site of the fact that Wainaina remains committed to transforming Kenyan nationhood for the remainder of his life.²⁰ Therefore, Wainaina's body of work illustrates the potential of contemporary queer Africans working through overlapping national and diasporic identities.

Migrations of the Mind: Narrating Childhood and Queer Becoming

"I am a Homosexual, Mum" displays Wainaina's self-conscious desire to re-write his story: not just how he *tells* his story, but how he *lived* his story. He begins the essay imagining himself by his mother's death bed sharing the secret of his sexuality, even as he openly acknowledges, "This is not the right version of events" (2014). The truth, he states, is that he never made it to see his mother before she died, and that he had not trusted her enough to share his secret with her.

In "I am a Homosexual, Mum," Wainaina oscillates between childhood and adulthood in the telling of his story to indicate a dependency on coming-of-age narrative

²⁰ For example, see Wainaina (2017).

to describe his socialization into an openly queer subjecthood as an adult. Take, for example, the way he describes his process of queer self-identification as an adult:

It will take me five years after my mother's death to find a man who will give me a massage and some brief, paid-for love. In Earl's Court, London. And I will be freed, and tell my best friend, who will surprise me by understanding, without understanding. I will tell him what I did, but not tell him I am gay. I cannot say the word gay until I am thirty nine, four years after that brief massage encounter. Today, it is 18 January 2013, and I am forty three [and he does not publish the piece until exactly a year later].

Wainaina's articulation of queer socialization to his mother and the remorse in his recapitulation suggest the desire for a reversion to childhood for a second attempt at coming-of-age. The fact that he proclaims to have been five years old when he first realized he was homosexual furthers this idea; as he writes, "I, Binyavanga Wainaina, quite honestly swear I have known I am a homosexual since I was five." What is more, this reference to a childhood knowing in the essay indicates the existence of queerness in the book despite its seeming absence. That is, if we accept the child as a "knowing" figure, then when we re-read *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, we must consider the extent to which childhood functions as, what Hron calls, a radical space that is at once subject to social order and has the capacity to orient us beyond that order's bounds. Representations of queer African childhood, then, provide a means to reimagine the future by reckoning with the social antagonisms and silencing that negatively impact the process of coming-of-age for queer African children.

If we read Wainaina's essay as evocative of his desire to revisit and revise his coming-of-age narrative explicated in the memoir, then we must reconsider the value ascribed to a childhood foundation when sexual and racialized differences affect one's acceptance into an ethnic or cultural community. For instance, although Wainaina

mentions a level of distrust towards his mother in the essay, he also alludes to ways that this distrust could have been an extension of his insecurities with himself instigated by his relationship to place and reflected on his relationship with his mother. “I have never thrown my heart at you mum. You have never asked me to,” he writes in “I am a Homosexual, Mum.” This justification for never throwing his heart at his mother is reminiscent of his childhood desire in the memoir for a foundation to follow and his insecurity, throughout, with carving his own path. And so, we should consider the extent to which Wainaina’s desire for a foundation to grasp onto correlates with his childhood subconscious as an effect of what remains absent and unknown regarding non-normative sexuality.²¹

One example of Wainaina’s childhood insecurity with carving his own space in the world is illustrated in the memoir when his brother Jimmy brings home a God-fearing boy named Julius for a holiday. Despite being what Wainaina describes as “crippled,” Julius uses religion as a form of empowerment to face his adversity. This disturbs young Wainaina who resists his capacity for establishing his own unique patterns, which would require that he reckon with his own subconscious needs. Instead, he oscillates between following Jimmy’s rigid routine and escaping into the world of fiction in order to avoid reality. While Wainaina interprets Jimmy’s confidence as natural (being masculine and hetero-normative), he becomes threatened by Julius’ presence and attempt at progress. For one, it suggests to him that there are alternative ways of being male beyond those

²¹ It is also ironic that Wainaina refers to mistrusting his mother because, towards the end of the memoir, after his mother’s death, he describes them having a level of dreaminess in common. He writes, “She too wanted to make beautiful things and maybe that is why she let him go, when sometimes she could have been sterner with him” (180). I will look more closely at his relationship with his mother in the memoir at the end of chapter three and explore Motherhood as a theme in African queer literature more broadly in chapter four

modeled by Jimmy and the nation, and that human empathy can possibly lead to the acceptance of difference. He writes, “I no longer fear that the cripple will clutter and break. I fear that he will crawl, and kneel, and stand... Those who come from the most painful awkwardness have the most triumphant stand-ups” (69). It is no secret that Wainaina describes himself as an awkward child, making him similar to Julius. As a result, he becomes disturbed by Julius’s presence because it forces an acknowledgment of himself that he is not yet ready to make. “Nonono,” he states, “My deal is simple. Keep loose and float. Follow easy patterns, and schedules. Commit only to a present tense that lets your legs move behind others, and keeps your head in the clouds. Being cool is never stepping beyond your comfortable patterns” (69). For Wainaina, it is easier to allow his body and mind to follow separate patterns: to have his body “move with male resolution as [Jimmy] does” and his mind to “escape to other places [via reading], where people with certainty shoot up elevators” (68). Otherwise, he would have to reckon with his own body in relationship to the space it occupies. As he writes, “Too many things are calling, suddenly asking for heres and nows, for all of me here and now. Sex has started whispering in my ear, demanding a plan of action. What need do I have for these things? For to be what I am, as promised by fictions, by fantasy and the future, is to fly... To succumb is to let them all in, to see the confusion” (69).

Wainaina’s discussion of Julius spotlights the materiality of his body (his being “crippled”). Even if young Wainaina shows irreverence towards Julius’ disability (by calling him crippled), the social world they occupy together—specifically, Wainaina’s home and the church—acknowledges this material reality and offers a foundation for Julius to crawl, then kneel, then stand. Like Julius’ disability, Wainaina’s sex (via his

body) begins to demand attention in the “here” and “now.” And as he states, reckoning with sex would demand that his head come down from the clouds, an erotic union according to Audre Lorde. She writes in “Uses of the Erotic,” “The erotic is a measurement between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (54). However, young Wainaina avoids this sexual reckoning by deflecting his own insecurities onto Julius: “I pray, one day. I watch the cripple scraping the floor with his knees, and I promise God silently that I will get saved. I will, I say. When I am twenty. Let me stay loose, I ask, and the cripple’s legs buckle and he tumbles” (69-70). Here is another reference to the surface that supports Julius, even as young Wainaina hopes he tumbles.

Acknowledging the social support afforded Julius and the envy Wainaina displays towards him is important for interpreting the state of Wainaina’s sexual consciousness during his teen years. As stated above, Wainaina relies on two things to get him through his adolescent life: (1) the foundation laid by his brother—his “male resolution”; and (2) the “elsewhere” of novels. However, there is no basis in his material world for what he imagines via fiction, so the two remain separate and distinct; his absorption into these worlds allows him to avoid disrupting his social reality with his sexual presence. After reading the memoir and essay together we can surmise that he avoids sex in the passage above because he (at that age) does not understand it and would rather avoid the confusion. Unlike Julius, whose world understands his material reality (or, at least, attempts to), Wainaina only has Jimmy’s male resolution to follow. Discussion or mention of non-normative sexuality remains absent throughout the entire book. Taken as

a reflection of the social world Wainaina occupies, this absence represents how the lack of a queer foundation impacts his childhood consciousness and coming-of-age and informs his attempts, however failed, at performing hetero-normative masculinity. Following Jimmy's lead and keeping his head in the clouds is easier than allowing a self-identified erotic agency disrupt his social world, however liberating it may be.

Although it is evident that young Wainaina reads to avoid reality, the memoir begs a more nuanced interpretation of childhood reading granted the possibilities it provides for developing a sexual consciousness. I would like to now illustrate how Wainaina, as a reading child in *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, directs us outside the known and accepted world, an implication towards futures beyond the socio-political realm of Wainaina's Kenya. This is because Wainaina's description of the reading child makes us, as readers, complicit in his secrets by ascribing agency to the act of reading. Even before Wainaina gestures towards a re-reading of the memoir in "I am a Homosexual, Mum," the child in his book invites us to re-read it queerly by provoking our desires as his own body responds to the urgency incited by his own reading, making the narrative world his own. "The whole world of a novel unfolds inside the head fully entangled with the stinging eyes, the tight chest, the galloping belly," he tells us, "It is fully mine, 100 percent private" (248). Though the memoir can be read at times as implicating Wainaina's relentless immersion in books for his struggles with Kimay and functioning in public, it is also apparent that the refuge he finds in the "elsewheres" of

novels permits an erotic becoming—albeit never fully realized in the memoir—that he is unable to reach towards otherwise.²²

The quote above is taken from a passage where Wainaina evaluates the erotics of reading against those of film and real life, which he argues do not allow for individual feeling. For example, he writes, “Films are for everybody, they make you feel what the whole watching world feels” (248). In addition, he states that though he often masturbates when he should be studying for the national primary examination, he is unable to do so to the thoughts of people he knows (246). Reflecting on his childhood sexuality, Wainaina locates a need for individual experience that he struggles to obtain through the direction of others, a consequence of being a witness (being directed by film’s images and the agency of individuals he knows). Such direction disrupts an erotic reaction he experiences when his body and mind coalesce, when his mind acts rather than receives. “People in books do not have an actual voice for your ears,” he writes, “You cannot see them. You, the reader, work with a good author to make them move around your head, toss their hair, hate and love, and need things urgently” (249). While these passages do not allude to homosexuality, per se, I am interested in how they position young Wainaina queerly within the public world of adolescent becoming. Reading allows him to resist, albeit temporarily, the structure he depends on in the real world, and so, a sexual agency evolves out of this act of ostracization. Moreover, he adds to this resistance

²² The reading child, understood as an allusion to Wainaina’s queerness, points to the already existing, and subversive, queer space of the memoir. This exemplifies what Michael Brown calls the power/knowledge/space of the closet in *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*. He writes, “[The argument] calls for a more explicit appreciation of the ways that power/knowledge signified by ‘the closet’ work because they themselves are always *somewhere* (and at some scale), and that whereness enables and constrains social relations. It is to move away from using the closet as an ageographic signifier—where its spatiality only *connotes* power; rather than seeing the spatiality as already part and parcel of power/knowledge” (3).

by masturbating when he should otherwise be studying for a national exam; this fact positions his sexuality in opposition to the homogenizing influence of national participation over children.²³ This analysis of childhood sexuality effects a reinterpretation of the possibilities available through reading and the limits of nationhood for queer childhood becoming.

Arguably the queerest and one of the most imaginative moments in Wainaina's memoir occurs when, as a reading child, he mentally transports himself into the body of a child-character, Alex, in the American novel *The Black Stallion*. This imaginative transportation takes place as Wainaina shifts his use of pronoun from "he" (Alex) to "we" (the reader, in general, or the sexual outcast) to "I" (Wainaina, himself); he writes,

So then Alex is stuck on this island with a giant black stallion—a wild beast that wants to kill him. In his mumbling cowboy way, Alex decides to ride Black Stallion. Alex has decided to want something impossible. And he wants this impossible thing so much he is prepared to lose everything. He will not admit this, so he pretends to make his lust a mechanical problem: he will find fix-it solutions. How to jump on the back of the animal, how to rig devices to keep him on the back of the beast, how to bribe the horse with various tidbits. As he goes about his business in his fatherless and lonely way, rigging devices, we drip with his want. He will not say how much he wants to conquer the horse. We want to conquer the horse. We want that horse more than anything. I want to be thrown, fall on my back and limp for days" (246-47).

While Wainaina imaginatively implants himself into Alex's body as he attempts to conquer the horse, his childhood desire in the passage is not to be Alex, who "pretends to make his lust a mechanical problem," but to account for Alex's shortcomings as they reflect his own: his inability to lose everything to conquer the impossible. The last sentences of the above quoted passage exude a homoeroticism (by intimating passive anal sex) that is both self-destructive and positively transformative as the reading child

²³ And against the idea that children represent heteronormative futurity and/as the antithesis to queer death/non-futurity as described by Lee Edelman (2004).

reevaluates the world as both known and unknown. These sexual implications of Wainaina's language allude to a conquering that is tantamount to acceptance or a letting-in; that is, conquering the black stallion is more about transforming how he understands his sexual self in relation to a social world where one is supposed to kill off the "inner beast." In this sense, conquering the giant black stallion becomes an act that would subvert the horse's (read as queer) relationship to physical and/or social death.

What this illustrates is that the world of reading portends a world of travel, exploration, and queer self-fulfillment that Wainaina, like Alex, cannot imagine in the material world of his childhood. Although Wainaina made attempts to assert himself as a queer Gikuyu man living in Kenya after the publication of his memoir, travel remains an essential motif in memoir and a catalyst to Wainaina, and other queer writers', sexual coming-of-age, especially as homosexuality remains legally criminalized in places like Kenya. At the time he published his memoir, he was living and working in the United States; also, he writes in his essay quoted at the beginning of my discussion of Wainaina that his first sexual encounters with men took place in London.

However, his references to childhood in his essay on queer-becoming implicate a desire to reevaluate the potentialities associated with space as they pertain to the socio-cultural formation of coming-of-age queer. When we read the memoir, we are invited to join the child as he escapes into the "elsewhere" of novels. Though, as we learn from his experience with *The Black Stallion*, "elsewhere," without being a utopia, functions as a space (in this case, imaginative) to critically reckon with the self in order to evolve a consciousness of knowing and possibility that exceeds that which is socio-culturally

available in his physical present.²⁴ It is important to recognize that even though Wainaina escapes into an American novel, he homes in on the restrictive elements affecting its protagonist.²⁵ The affinity he feels towards Alex evolves out of this sense of restriction, and so neither Kenya nor America can be correlated with freedom. The closest thing to freedom is the consciousness that evolves as a result of his moving in and out of worlds. This disallows an attempt at positioning America against Africa as is common in contemporary discourse on the state of sexual refuge for queer Africans. While temporary exile through reading or travel (as we see in his later years) is tantamount to Wainaina's experience of queer becoming, we should also consider the extent by which his attentiveness to childhood experience begs a reevaluation of space, specifically the physical geography the child occupies in his narratives. What does this "return" to childhood mean for the state of African queerness? If we consider the radical potentiality of queer childhood (as I have throughout this dissertation), then Wainaina's return from essay to memoir via the child implicates re-narrativizing African space with the effect of envisaging alternative futures for queer Africans.²⁶

²⁴ Young Wainaina's escape to an imaginative "elsewhere" in the memoir illustrates a function of his desire to make and remake the world he inhabits (and the world of the text). "As opposed to keeping one within the identifiable sites that social rhetoric creates and perpetuates," GerShun Avilez states, "desire founds and destroys formally designated spaces for existence and the logic that underpins them. From this vantage point, desire as a theoretical construct has cartographic implications; it can make one little room an everywhere or a nowhere" (131-32).

²⁵ As I describe at the beginning of this chapter in my discussion of Marlon James, many interpret "America" as a utopia for queer exiles.

²⁶ We can interpret the impact of this narrative return on an African imaginary in line with Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel theorization of the "sexile" in Caribbean literature. She writes in *Coloniality of Diasporas: Rethinking Intra-Colonial Migrations in a Pan-Caribbean Context*, "the idea of returning becomes a diversion from a single, mainstream, linear version of narrative, national identity, and/or subjectivity...narratives of return after sexile are not only possible but also an important part of the imaginaries explored in contemporary Caribbean narratives" (186).

Childhood Lack and Queer Exile

In comparison with the temporary migrations (physical and imaginative) of Wainaina, most of the protagonists in Diriye Osman's short story collection, *Fairytales for Lost Children*, depend on a more permanent exile, and this affects the development of their queer identities. This holds especially true for those protagonists featuring in the collection's later stories, which center on the experiences of young adults coming to terms with their queer sexualities while living in London and developing new forms of kinship. Evidently, this process of claiming queerness relies on distancing from both Africa and blood-relations. Take for instance the reflections of the protagonist, Diriye (the name of the author), in "Your Silence Will Not Protect You":

I had always thought of family as a fixed, all-powerful entity. I was raised in a culture where family was the most important thing. But as a gay man I had to learn that nothing in life is fixed, especially families. And as a gay man I had to learn that I live in a country where I don't have [to] suffer in silence; that there are laws that protect my rights. As a gay man I had to learn in a bittersweet way that I can choose my family, that certain people have come into my life who share a genuine sense of affinity with me. We may not have the power to choose the family we're born into but we can certainly choose the family we decide to make our own. (113)

While Diriye's family and Somali culture ostracize him for being gay, London offers the power to imagine and choose alternative forms of belonging and reduces the importance of biological kinship. Displaying exile as the site of queer self-fulfillment, though necessary in this instance, affects how we can interpret Africa and queerness relationally.

Notwithstanding this trajectory and the pessimism towards imagining queer belonging in Africa that permeates through Osman's later stories, I am interested in how he deploys queer childhood in the collection's first few stories as an optic for interpreting other possibilities. Of significance are the stories' explorations of child-parent

relationships throughout the collection. Though the collection, for the most part, positions chosen networks of affiliation against destructive family ties, my reading homes in on those stories and passages that allude to the power of filial recognition, most often a female guardian's recognition of her queer child. This is not meant to eradicate a reckoning with the violence affecting queer child subjects throughout the collection. As in Wainaina's memoir, such descriptions of queer childhood speak to the historical juncture Osman writes from and about; an interpretation of queer becoming through the analytic of diaspora, at the heart of *Diasporic Childhoods*, does not work without these representations.²⁷ However, spotlighting those moments—real and imagined—that point to the possibility of parents' accepting their non-normative children can negate the spatial ideologies that evolve out of narratives of exile and which define Africa as the antithesis to modernity. These moments allude, alternatively, to the evolution of new African identities and new ways of interpreting Africa in relationship to cultural production and the world; I explore the potential of this parent-child dynamic further in chapters three and four.

Interpreting representations of queer childhood in Osman's collection requires a consideration of how spatial ideologies—specifically the space of the nation's unwillingness to accommodate difference—affect a queer child's socialization.²⁸ This would emphasize the queer child's sense of lack, or the condition of being without a

²⁷ Osman was born twelve years after Wainaina; however, the socio-politics around queerness in Kenya are similar throughout each of their childhoods.

²⁸ See Sibley (1995) for a discussion of what he calls "pure space" (which can materialize as the nation) and its unwillingness to accommodate difference.

socio-cultural foundation that would benefit the lived experience of coming-of-age queer. That is, the nation has no cultural framework to accommodate queer children because it deems queerness as “other.” Rather, I emphasize the extent by which the culture used to define a particular place determines children’s cultural conditioning and influences literary representations of queer exile. However, the individual’s relationship to place figures differently in the writing of Osman from that of Wainaina; while Wainaina comes-of-age in a place he calls home, the young Somali characters in *Fairytales for Lost Children* realize their queerness in Kenya as refugees. As such, it is impossible to analyze childhood queerness in Osman’s stories without considering their characters’ relationships to space as refugees. Here, I emphasize how being a refugee and being queer each position people as outsiders within specific national contexts and the concomitant bare life ascribed to their bodies as they occupy these spaces.²⁹

Moreover, this juxtaposition between Wainaina and Osman’s writing complicates how we understand Kenya spatially, because it operates in both the traditional sense of “home” and as diaspora.³⁰ In effect, it becomes a place of inclusion and exclusion for various African subjects; diaspora, as it pertains to refugees in Kenya, functions in negative as it defines child refugees by what they are not. This definition of diaspora differs from how I use it to positively describe the evolution of a queer consciousness, a consciousness made possible via movement of peoples, ideas, and cultures across national borders. In what comes, I work through these nuances in my continued attempts

²⁹ My analysis of being both queer and a refugee should not be confused with the idea of being a queer refugee, or someone who obtains refugee status somewhere because of sexual persecution in their home country.

³⁰ Walcott claims that because there are radically different ways to inhabit space, “recognizing a space as ‘the same’ or ontologically connective becomes almost impossible” (240).

at unerathing ways of being and belonging for queer Africans. This requires challenging how the postcolonial nation-state determines inclusion based on hetero-normative standards.

Before I highlight moments of queer African potentiality in Osman's collection, I want to examine how both a lack of foundation for being queer and refugee status heighten the precariousness of queer childhood in the stories "Tell the Sun Not to Shine" and "Fairytale for Lost Children." "Tell the Sun Not to Shine," which I read as a second prologue to the collection, begins with its narrator, now in London, recognizing the imam at a local mosque as a man named Libaan who he had had sexual relations with as a fourteen-year-old back in Nairobi.³¹ At that time, the now imam was eighteen. By recounting these early memories, the story, via the narrator, introduces the reader of *Fairytale for Lost Children*, albeit briefly, to an example of what it means to be a child in Nairobi coming to terms with his non-normative sexuality. Moving back and forth in time, it also foreshadows what is at stake when this child lacks the appropriate foundation for interpreting this part of him/herself.

The narrator of "Tell the Sun Not to Shine" describes eighteen-year-old Libaan as someone he had looked up to as a child. Upon recognizing Libaan, he recounts the first memory that comes to mind. He states, "I remember him towering over me. His skin was dark like Oreos. He had two gold teeth. He introduced me to cigarettes. I would choke on the smoke and he would say, 'You'll get there, kid.' Now I smoke twenty a day" (8).

³¹ "Tell the Sun Not to Shine" comes second in the collection after "Watering the Imagination," which I spend the last pages of this chapter discussing. I read these two stories together as a prologue of sorts; each foreshadows the possibility of a different course of events. After reading the entire collection, it becomes evident that while "Watering the Imagination" places an emphasis on possibility and the imagination, "Tell the Sun Not to Shine" yields truer to the trajectory of the stories as they relate to the state of queerness in Africa and the theme of exile.

These reflections point to how the narrator viewed and desired Libaan as a role-model figure. He scales Libaan's size against his own, he credits Libaan for his present smoking habit, and he describes Libaan's body as appetizing, alluding to his desire to consume it. In the remainder of the story, the narrator brings the reader back and forth in time. He describes his eventual sexual encounters with Libaan, and he consistently disrupts these narrations with mentions of Libaan preaching about Allah in real-time, noting the congregation's prostrating responses:

“Libaan called out ‘Allahu Akbar and began reciting Surah Al-Fatiha.

The next day we'd played football with the neighborhood kids. Libaan kept passing me the ball. Every time he did this, he smiled a gold-toothed smile that said, ‘Nothing happened.’ He was trying to dodge a life of complications. But at night he would place his hands, lips, tongue inside my world of complications. We would catch strokes until it was time for morning prayers. And then we would go about our day wondering if the previous night even happened.

As the prayer came to an end Libaan drew his face to the right and said, ‘Asalamu aleykum wa Rahmatullah,’ and then to the left and did the same. We followed suit. (9-10)

Although the narrator describes earlier how he initiated sexual contact between the two by touching Libaan while he slept, this passage illustrates how he allows Libaan to control the terms of their relationship. His references to Libaan's preaching in the present reinforces Libaan's active position against his and the congregation's passivity (“But at night *he would place...inside my...*”; “We followed suit”). The passage also describes their relationship as something that should go undisclosed in public.

Unlike young Wainaina as portrayed in *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, Osman's child character in “Tell the Sun Not to Shine” has a person to relate sexually with. Therefore, queerness exists in his social world, albeit as a complication. Their age gap escalates this complication, because it positions Libaan as a supposed authority over

the narrator; and while Libaan nourishes the narrator's physical desire, he also distinguishes being openly queer as impossible in their social world. Being queer becomes a contradiction for the narrator, and we are left again considering the extent to which cultural foundation affects coming-of-age. Even the narrator as an adult is left looking for guidance.

The story's opening furthers this conundrum because it introduces us to the narrator as he seeks guidance as an adult: "It was Eid and I had no one to celebrate it with. I needed a sign to point me either east or west." And two short paragraphs later, "I went to the taps outside to perform ablution. An Asian kid in a dove-gray khamiis guided me" (7). My point in highlighting these opening moments is to illustrate how the narrator's need for guidance occupies the story, characterizing his memories with Libaan and defining his adult life in the present—this is how we are introduced to him. I am not suggesting that adult characters should be thought of as fully developed, but that the juxtaposition of the narrator's past and present lives emphasizes the effect of social conditioning—as it aligns with hetero-nationalism—for those dealing with queer sexual desires. His need to be guided east or west alludes to his confused/contested sexual "orientation" in this moment.

In addition, the narrator's shift in characterization of adult Libaan (from desirable to pitiful) by the end of the story is symbolic of the negative impact on one's becoming caused by the stigmatization of queerness. He states, "Now [Libaan] turned around and began to give a lecture but I wasn't listening. All I noticed was his belly, which was round like a basketball. All I noticed were his cheeks, which drooped like a bulldog's jowls. He still had two gold teeth but the rest were black. His beard had been hennaed

until it resembled a bush on fire” (10). The narrator’s attention to Libaan’s body, now rendered undesirable, prevents him from listening to Libaan’s preaching. This denotes a shift in attitude altogether. For the first time, he interprets Libaan as flawed, and this overshadows the authority conflated with Libaan’s superior age and role as imam. We can now read the narrator and Libaan as products of the same world. Although Libaan’s adult body shows signs of ageing, a natural process, this dreary portrayal alludes to a larger inability to deal with the complications he refers to as a young adult. We can read Libaan, then, not only as a detriment to the narrator’s queer becoming, but as a victim of circumstance like the narrator himself.

Moreover, it would be an error to assume, now, that London (the setting of the story’s present) can offer an improved life for queer subjects. Although *Fairytales for Lost Children* leads us to a sense of queer selfhood achieved in London/exile, “Tell the Sun Not to Shine” (read as a prologue) asks us to be wary about conflating freedom with a specific place. Even though the narrator’s perspective on Libaan shifts, there is little resolution in the story regarding safety, space, and queer subjectivity.

This cycle of negative becoming does not end with Libaan and the narrator. The narrator’s description of the Asian child at the beginning of the story who leads him to the mosque to hear Libaan/the imam preach alludes to the cycle’s continuation into the future, evoking a sense of urgency that carries through the rest of the collection. The narrator describes his encounter with the child: “I noticed his bottom lip was purple and fat like a plum...I noticed his nose had a cut the colour of pastrami across its bridge” (7). This child, like the narrator and Libaan, is damaged. Given that all we know about him is his attendance at the mosque to hear Libaan preach, we can speculate as to whether his

damage correlates with his acceptance of Libaan's word/preaching. This, because the narrator has called into question Libaan's authority by highlighting his (Libaan's) negative impact on his (the narrator) identity formation. We can also interpret the child's injured body and his presence at the mosque as symbolizing the absence of an erotic potential—a synergy between body and soul—for queer personhood in this story-world. This representation of injury and childhood incites an urgency that permeates throughout the remainder of the stories. On the one hand, the child leads the narrator towards Libaan, steering the plot forward ("An Asian kid in a dove-gray khamiis guided me") and implying possibility by inciting the narrator's self-reckoning; but, on the other, he is already injured. This preexisting injury works against the plot by shifting our attention backwards, forcing a consideration of beginnings, or, as I describe in my analysis of the narrator's memories, childhood social foundations, especially as they align with ideologies of place.

Fairytales for Lost Children: Politics of Exclusion and Childhood Temporalities

In the collection's titular story, "Fairytales for Lost Children," Osman centers the queer African child in a descriptive Nairobi setting that allows the reader to further explore the impact of its socio-cultural politics on childhood and queer becoming. Whereas the narrator in "Tell the Sun Not to Shine" recounts his childhood in Nairobi while positioned in London, "Fairytales for Lost Children" is entirely set in Kenya. That being said, exile affects its child protagonist, Hirsi, as he is defined by his status as a refugee from Somalia. This determines his potential to move through the story-world, and as we will see, the possibilities available to him in his future. I read Hirsi's refugee status

in the story as an exacerbation of his queerness, the two (refugee and queer) codetermining his precariousness and sense of lack in relation to the postcolonial nation-state. Moreover, I look at how the story challenges notions of childhood innocence by elevating the non-normative child to a knowing subject ascribed with angst, a condition of his position as “other.” This permits a consideration of queer childhood as a progression into other forms of African selfhood.

I align my analysis of innocence and queer African childhood in “Fairytale for Lost Children” with Brenna Munro’s 2016 study of queer childhood in contemporary Nigerian child-soldier narratives. Here, she points to those narratives that embrace new queer subject formations that evolve out of experiences of trauma. She makes her argument in contradistinction with attempts in literature and criticism to recuperate the innocence of former child-soldiers after they have been removed from war and notes that this process oftentimes includes a savior figure such as a Western human rights representative. In her analysis of Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*, she writes,

My Luck is reunited with the ghost of his mother at the end of the novel, a bittersweet reunion that recuperates him as a child and yet marks the fact that his life is over. ‘I am having mother once’ is a statement with a similarly queer temporal grammar. ‘I am all of this thing,’ meanwhile, indicates the possibility of an acceptance of the traumatized and culpable self beyond the respectability politics offered by the return to the heteronormative family and the ‘innocent’ status of the child. (“Locating ‘Queer’” 132)

Although “Fairytale for Lost Children” is not a child-soldier narrative, we can interpret Osman doing similar work as Abani (as read by Munro) to resist normalizing queer childhood via innocence. Munro’s analysis begs a consideration of childhood and culpability that would define the child as a knowing subject who understands one’s queer place in the world. If the children in child-soldier narratives are queered by war through

physical and mental abuse, Osman's Hirsi can be queered by his status as refugee or "other." However, Hirsi is also queer in the sense that he knows that he is sexually non-normative. This sense of knowing in the story prevents the reader attempting to recuperate heteronormative innocence as a way of confronting the politics of refuge. What is more, Hirsi comes to understand his status as refugee and his queer sexuality by interpreting his subject position against the story's landscape and others around him. This juxtaposition between child character and setting provokes a reconfiguration of African identities.

As both queer and refugee, Hirsi remains an impossible subject in every space he occupies: his native Somalia, Kenya, and the imaginative world of fairytales. As such, I am concerned less with how his struggle to exist within specific spaces evolves into a diasporic culture characterized by non-belonging than I am with how his existence disrupts an illusion that space is unambiguously determined by a specific socio-political culture.³² As Gayatri Gopinath argues in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, "Queer diasporic cultural forms and practices point to submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence that continue to resonate in the present and that make themselves felt through bodily desire. It is through the queer diasporic body that these histories are brought into the present; it is also through the queer diasporic body that their legacies are imaginatively contested and transformed" (4).

In the first few pages of the story, we learn that Hirsi's parents are having him attend kindergarten to learn the English language, even though he is ten years old. His father tells him, "You have to learn the luuqad... We're in Kenya now. Everyone here

³² See the introduction to Sibley (1995) for a discussion of the illusion that spatial meaning is unambiguous.

speaks English, even the maid” (15). It is important to realize how Hirsi’s father characterizes being in Kenya with learning English. This is representative of Osman’s overall portrayal of Kenya as a global diasporic space, tainted by its (neo)colonial history. Hirsi’s attending kindergarten despite being ten and mentally and physically more mature than his younger classmates speaks to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s historic argument against writing in English as it stunts Africans’ development.³³ Participating in the nation—via English education—requires a reversion in the mental development of students like Hirsi who are required to learn amongst younger peers. What is more, we will see that several of his younger classmates are white and maintain a sense of superiority over Hirsi. Although they are not originally from Kenya, they are not referred to as refugees as he is. And so, “refugee” functions as a racialized marker of exclusion.

Osman further complicates how the reader interprets Kenya as place in his description of Marcus Garvey Road. He writes,

At the top of the road was an office building called Studio House, all slick with sunlight bouncing off its black glass panels. Right next to the building were a group of chokoras around my age. They were rummaging through the mountain of rubbish piled outside it, finding the odd banana or orange peel to gnaw on. Their fakhirinimo reminded me of the folks we had seen in the refugee camp, except these boys had bottles of glue clamped between their teeth. Snot slid down from one of the boys’ noses. He licked it off. (16-17)

The name Marcus Garvey directs our memory to his famous “Back to Africa” movement and the role it played in marking an African diaspora identity; Garvey championed the notion of Africa-as-home for black diasporans, indicating a sense of desired authenticity ascribed to the African continent. Osman’s portrayal of Marcus Garvey Road, however, disrupts this glorified version of a universal Africa by focusing on the class and racialized

³³ See Ngũgĩ (1986).

disparities, an effect of colonialism, that polarize Africans in Africa. Hirsi tells us, “...One of the chokoras saw me staring at him and pointed his middle finger at me. I turned away, afraid. Seven months ago, running around the camp in rags handed to me by UNICEF aid workers, I didn’t look much different from those street boys. I was afraid that our newfound prosperity was a trick played by a capricious God” (17). This point of relation highlights the contradiction because it figures Hirsi with and against the poor street boy. On the one hand, Hirsi and the street boy are divided: Hirsi gazes at the boy from within his car—a marker of class distinction and his privileged position in relation to the filthy dirt road; and the street boy uses profanity against Hirsi, marking his territory and stating his difference. On the other hand, this relation reminds Hirsi of his own experiences at a refugee camp and the precariousness of his temporal safety, an effect of his not being Kenyan. Because he is not Kenyan, Hirsi’s life is precarious like that of the boy. As he later recounts, “Our home smelt of fear...My waalid [parents] may have reinvented themselves but to the booliis [Kenyan police] we were still refugee bastards who sucked on Nanny State’s iron teats until there was nothing left for her legitimate children” (21). And so, Osman complicates diasporic renderings of Africa-as-home by juxtaposing this point of relation for Hirsi against the signifier “Marcus Garvey.” While Hirsi is temporally safe on the street, the street kids remind him of his outsider status and its threat to his well-being. It also emphasizes the extent to which the neocolonial nation-state affects one’s sense of being and belonging, a detriment to the imagined utopia in early African diaspora rhetoric.

Hirsi copes with being a refugee by reminiscing about his native Somalia and attempting to escape into the imaginative world of fairytales. However, these migrations

of the mind do not have the same positive impact on Hirsi as they do on Wainaina in *One Day I Will Write About this Place*. In the first place, his desire to return “home” is hampered by his most recent memories of Somalia. Take, for instance, his gory description of his family’s exile: “I could never forget the corpse of a woman we saw as we drove out of Mogadishu, brains splattered across the roadside. I vomited in the back of the pickup truck because Aabo refused to pull over and let me out” (16). This image captures the essence of bare life and its impact on Hirsi’s own physicality. His body remains in a precarious state wherever he goes: whether as a refugee in Kenya or at home in Somalia. The fact that one can belong to a place one day and be ostracized another exemplifies how malleable standards of belonging and citizenship are and begs a consideration of alternatives to national identification. Moreover, this scene exemplifies how shifting standards of belonging and their impacts on one’s life alter memory, the imagination, and one’s capacity to escape.

As a result, Hirsi attempts refuge in fairytales, a seemingly safe space for a child’s mind to escape the materiality of real life. However, we, as readers, are warned at the story’s outset of the inherent danger associated with getting too deeply lost in fairytales as they are told for a queer, black, African refugee like Hirsi. Hirsi narrates, “In Disney fairytales the bad guy always loses, but in reality he is rarely thwarted. Whenever the bullfrog’s tongue flicked out, it rolled back with its victim. I learnt not to mess with nature from an early age” (15). Here, Hirsi spotlights a specific juxtaposition between reality and myth that polarizes the imagination from the natural world in ways that are dangerous. This, especially because the fairytales he refers to are Disney and, therefore, signify the West and whiteness. The facts of his blackness and being an African subject

in the neocolonial present distance him from the sense of hope displayed in Disney fairytales. The bullfrog eating his victim can stand in for those in control of neocolonial order, Western or African. What is especially interesting is that he is made to believe that violence and victimization are natural. This conflation of the natural with the social is an example of what Achille Mbembe discusses in “Necropolitics” as “the rational objectives to the very act of killing” employed by European governments as part of the process of “civilizing” colonial subjects within their claimed territories in the first half of the twentieth century (23). The hold colonial rational philosophy has over Hirsi’s postcolonial present is underscored by the termination of his Kenyan teacher for telling her students (white and black) African variations to Disney fairytales. These adaptations of Disney fairytales are considered taboo even by Hirsi’s own parents, though it is telling that complaints by the parents of his white classmate are what ultimately get his teacher fired.

Despite this warning against fairytales and how it foreshadows the story’s end, their effect on Hirsi’s queer becoming proves to be more of a contradiction, because they lead Hirsi to an acknowledgement of his sexual attraction to boys. This serves a liberating purpose, but, more importantly, it casts him as a knowing subject. It contributes to how he understands himself as an outsider or impossible subject in the world he occupies. He describes his encounter with Disney texts in the school library:

I ran my hand across the spine of each title, savouring its elegance. To me they were holy texts, each idea and image sacred. These stories were about love, loss, fear, innocence, strength. The real God was Imagination. I was Muslim but fiction was my true religion.

The God of Imagination lived in fairytales. And the best fairytales made you fall in love. It was while flicking through *Sleeping Beauty* that I met my first love. Ivar. He was a six-year-old bello ragazzo with blond hair and eyebrows. He had bomb-blue eyes and his two front teeth were missing.

The road to Happily Ever After, however, was paved with political barbed wire. Three things stood in my way.

1. The object of my affection didn't know he was the object of my affection.
2. The object of my affection preferred Action Man to Princess Aurora.
3. The object of my affection was a boy and I wasn't allowed to love a boy.

But I was allowed to dream. And in my dream Ivar became my prince...He could never be mine. (20)

Like reading in Wainaina's memoir, this passage about fiction demonstrates, while also complicating, how the theme of imaginative exile (via reading) facilitates the process of coming-of-age queer in places where non-normative sexuality is thought of as taboo.

Hirsi considers reading's imaginative impulse akin to God, which, on the one hand, orients a subject towards an ultimate "good." In terms of reading fairytales, this good can be correlated with love and the discovery of Hirsi's affection towards Ivar. Hirsi acknowledges, however, the societal restrictions against this kind of love for another boy; like religion, reading allows love, but requires the exercise of constraint.

One thing Hirsi does not mention, though, is how Ivar's whiteness exacerbates the taboo nature of this love. Although Hirsi displays mental maturity when he lists the reasons why the politics of sexuality prevent him from achieving "Happily Ever After," the fact that he does not list Ivar's whiteness reveals a blind spot in his knowing. We can correlate this misreading as an effect of his engagement with fairytales; according to stories like Sleeping Beauty, an attraction to a white person seems natural. This blind spot also signifies youth, or reversion, as a consequence of his political status as refugee, especially when correlated with his being in kindergarten at ten years old and the fact that his love interest is an even younger child (six). As a result, childhood, as it relates to queerness, functions dialectically as both a horizon of possibility—Hirsi's queer

knowing—and conditioned by the politics of space—queerness’ impossibility, and this fact’s effect on Hirsi’s becoming, here represented by this blind spot.

Like Wainaina’s description of his childhood experience reading *Black Beauty*, Hirsi’s attraction to fairytales is provoked by the absence of a foundation for conditioning queer life, and his refugee status exacerbates his desire to belong/affiliate. This intensifies the fairytale illusion that he can and should love Ivar. As the child epitome of Prince Charming (or Sleeping Beauty), Ivar lures Hirsi in by asking him to be his best friend, and the formation of this bond appears to be Hirsi’s “happily ever after.” While this is an illusion to misguided hope—as we will see, things do not stay happy for long—it captures perfectly the extent to which socio-cultural dynamics are politically and spatially conditioned and alludes to the potentiality of representations of childhood to orient us elsewhere. That is because this friendship between Hirsi and Ivar, albeit romanticized in Hirsi’s mind, is made regardless of race and sexual orientation. Ivar is old enough to realize how the world works. He is aware that rendering Snow White black, for instance, is bad. And he realizes that Hirsi’s pleasure in hearing black renderings of fairytales is wrong and distinguishes him as “other.” His social awareness also provokes his questioning Hirsi: “Are you a refugee?” (25). Ivar is also young enough that he does not feel bound to these politics—also a privilege of his race and class; he eventually apologizes to Hirsi. While this representation of a youthful bond is limited by time and the eventuality of social conditioning, its presence is significant because it points to a temporality—the temporality of childhood—that delegitimizes prejudice and forces a consideration of “otherwise.”

But for Osman, this “otherwise” is not yet a possibility. Hirsi’s investment in fairytales does not end up leading him “happily ever after.” Instead, their lure brings him closer to death—the physical death of Ivar and his own social death. In the last pages of the story, he and Ivar are best friends playing in the yard at school. Ivar decides to climb a tree despite Hirsi’s reluctance. When Ivar is high into the tree, a baboon comes towards him and he becomes frightened. Hirsi tells Ivar to jump and he will catch him. Ivar jumps, but Hirsi does not catch him. Hirsi tells the reader, “The baboon leapt at Ivar, who let go of the branch. I tried to catch him but he hit the ground head-first and I heard bones break. His angles were like a pretzel. His eyes were open and blood oozed from his mouth like drool. He was *Sleeping Beauty* and I was the prince who had to save him. So I pressed my lips against his and kissed him. I kissed him until I tasted his blood” (30). Here, Hirsi confuses reality for myth and transplants himself into the world of *Sleeping Beauty* where one can turn back time with a kiss; this kiss, the culmination of his queerness in the story. However, from behind this queer pretense unravels a perversity that is more in tune with the state of his conditioned presence in this social world as queer and refugee, or “other.” His attempt at queerly “awaking” Ivar with a kiss turns into a kiss of death represented through blood as the sacrifice of Ivar/*Sleeping Beauty*. Taken in other words, the threat of the “other” overshadows the queer bond between these two children. Hirsi quickly becomes disillusioned, realizing this is no longer a fairytale, but real life. He continues, “...But this wasn’t *Sleeping Beauty* with its Happily-Ever-After. It wasn’t even *Kohl Black and the Seven Street Boys* [his teacher’s Africanized re-telling] ... None of the fairytales I had read prepared me for this” (30). At once, he realizes the severity of the situation and relates it to his status as a refugee: “Me get deported?” I

asked, tears streaming down my face...’No,’ [his teacher] said, although her tone suggested otherwise” (30). The story ends where it began, with Hirsi as “other.” Rather than move forward, towards happily ever after, the plot reverts backwards—back to “other” after his short-lived experience as Ivar’s best friend. This presents an alternative narrative of childhood-becoming to the experiences of those who are “supposed to” read and believe in fairytales: white, hetero-, Western, citizen. This is an example of what Christina Sharpe refers to in *In the Wake* as “a reminder that to be Black is to be continually produced by the wait towards death; that the cradle and the grave double as far as Black flesh is concerned” (88). The uncertainty of Hirsi’s teacher’s tone epitomizes Hirsi’s proximity to social death due to the precariousness of being queer, refugee, and African. But his ability to realize this tone serves as another example of his queer sense of knowing that peculiarizes his experience as a child.

The Gay Child and the Politics of Here and Now

The temporality of Hirsi’s knowing requires an alternative analysis of childhood and sexuality from what is typical of white and homonormative renderings. In *The Queer Child*, Stockton references how Western discourse typically acknowledges the gay child in retrospect—after the child becomes a gay adult. She writes, “Certain linguistic markers for its queerness arrive only after it exits its childhood, after it is shown not to be straight. That is to say, in one’s teens or twenties, whenever (parental) plans for one’s straight destination have died, the designation ‘homosexual child,’ or even ‘gay kid,’ may finally, retrospectively, be applied” (6-7). What effect, then, does scripting child characters knowingly non-normative and naming their queer identities have on discussions of queer

childhood and the politics of space, especially in discourses on African subjectivity? We should recall Wainaina admitting to knowing he was homosexual when he was five years old. Even if at five years old, he did not have a name to give to his liking boys, I am concerned with why in retrospect he labels his childhood self with said marker. That is, why represent the queer African child as homosexual rather than just speculate on the nature of his childhood queerness?

Similar representations permeate throughout Osman's short stories. In his story "Shoga" (a derogatory Kiswahili term for gay man), for example, the narrator, a Somalian adolescent living in Kenya with his grandmother, admits to knowing and embracing his sexuality even as he keeps it a secret from his grandmother; he tells the reader, "My grandmother did not know that I was gay. I've always loved being gay. Sure, Kenya was not exactly Queer Nation but my sexuality gave me joy. I was young, not so dumb and full of cum!" (33-34). Even though he claims to have been seventeen during the moment he talks about—and so an adolescent rather than child—he makes it a point to accentuate the relationship between his sexual knowledge and youthfulness that reads in line with other knowing child characters in the collection. He makes it a point in the quotation above to juxtapose his youth against his knowledge ("not so dumb") and sexual nature ("full of cum"). Moreover, this passage leads into what he calls a "back-story" where he discusses earlier sexual encounters with boys and eventually a man, Boniface. It is understood throughout that his encounters with Boniface are those between boy and man.

These representations of the knowingly queer child merge past/present/future in a way that particularizes, with urgency, the precarious state of African queerness now. In

addition, the gay-identified African child demands a queer presence in Africa's discursive landscape. First, the knowing child's nature exhibits an important contradiction in the foundations stabilizing national subjectivities in contemporary Africa by conflating impressionability with understanding. The simultaneity of knowing and not knowing experienced by the child disrupts hetero-patriarchal order while also disavowing historically limiting notions of African innocence. Second, the possibilities inherent in this dialectic and childhood's perpetual orientation forward signify a horizon of possibility that is central to this dissertation. In this way, the discursive space of queer childhood in this body of literature reflects the evolution of a consciousness beyond the here and now, despite its critical evolution out of the present. Lastly, we have to consider the relationship between queer African writers' attention to the child and their own diasporic movements. On the one hand, queer Africans' relationship to the contemporary nation has pushed them elsewhere, and these experiences have unquestionably impacted their queer becoming. We cannot, then, separate migration from our analyses of queer African subject formation in the early twenty-first century. On the other hand, focusing on the knowingly queer child in all his potential transports us back in time and place. The act of rewriting the past by ascribing this function to the queer child renders imaginable new modes of being and belonging in Africa that contest its place-hold as backwards and the antithesis to modernity.

"Shoga" juxtaposes queer possibility against the precariousness of its protagonist's present by confusing the relationship between memory and reality, which, in effect, disrupts the story's sense of temporality. The story begins with the narrator's grandmother braiding his hair as they light-heartedly quarrel about his feminine

tendencies. “[T]his business of me braiding your hair has to stop!” she tells him, “You’re a boy not a lady-boy.” He responds, “You know you love me...Besides, what’s wrong with being a lady-boy? It’s a good look.” The story continues with the narrator telling the reader, “She pulled my hair and said, ‘Waryaa, if you grow up to be gay, walaahi I will do saar’...’Saar’ was a brand of Somali exorcism.” (33) In this passage, his grandmother connects being gay with growing up. This justifies her belief that non-normative sexuality can be avoided, and that gay is something one becomes in adulthood. Shortly after, though, we see him subvert this attempt at disassociating sexuality from childhood by telling the reader that he is and loves being gay (quoted earlier). Another significant element of this passage is how it depicts their relationship: the fact that the narrator can laugh through the conversation could imply that their love transcends his gayness. In addition, this love seems to help him disregard his grandmother’s stigma towards gayness as superstition that is tied to the traditional cultural landscape she occupies. He states, “Such superstition has always been rife in the bush and my gran, a country gal through and through, knew its effectiveness at deterring unacceptable behavior” (34). Here, the narrator emphasizes the relationship between cultural morality (“superstition”), space (“bush”), and time (“has always”) to forgive his grandmother’s beliefs. He also upends them by referring to superstition’s effectiveness in promoting desired behavior. That is, for the narrator, the greater it seems his grandmother is conditioned by time and space, the easier it becomes for him to imagine other possibilities. And so, by figuring the significance of his relationship with his grandmother over cultural politics and their effects on his experience, he maps out a space for queer potentiality in Africa, an

alternative to filial and geographic exile. As we see by the end of the story, however, this possibility exists only in the future and not in the protagonist's present.

After this brief opening scene, the narrator begins what he calls a "back-story" (spelled with a hyphen). This back-story carries the narrative through to the story's end. He says, "But I've missed a beat, my bambinos. A narrative without a back-story is like meat with no bone; there's no juice to it. So let me take two steps back" (34). It is interesting that the end of the "back-story" (which is also the end of the story altogether) does not correlate at all with the narrator's reality in his temporal present at the story's beginning—this goes against the idea that a backstory's conclusion would be consistent with the situational reality from which it is told. And so, we are made to question whether the opening scene was the narrator's reality or just a fantasy. Whereas the beginning of the story situates the narrator's grandmother doing his hair, the back-story concludes with the narrator in London receiving word of his grandmother's death. In the back-story, the two became estranged after the grandmother discovered that he was having sexual relations with her hired help, Boniface. The narrator tells us, "She stopped speaking to me altogether and we became two strangers bound by blood and bad history" (41).

Towards the end of the story, news of his grandmother's death causes the narrator to enter a self-destructive state until he meets a Colombian man named Ignacio who helps carry him out of it. This sort-of "saving" transports him mentally back to Kenya rather than take him elsewhere, such as the London he presently occupies. The narrator concludes,

I took the joint from him, lay down on the bed and opened my legs wide. Ignacio smiled. As he fucked me I closed my eyes and imagined Boniface in his place...I imagined Ayeeyo [grandmother] in her grave in Nairobi...My whole life zigged and zagged in my head. When I came, I cried. Ignacio asked me why.

I didn't tell him about my loss. Instead, I said, 'Insha Allah,' everything will work out.' He looked at me quizzically. But I kept repeating this statement louder and louder until it created an incantatory effect. I repeated this statement until it became something I could hold onto, something I could believe in; until it shifted from mantra to fact. (42-43)

"Shoga's" conclusion differs from those of other stories later in the collection as it orients us backwards instead of forwards; that is, back to his grandmother, the source of his strife, instead of emphasizing new affiliations he has forged in London, which seems to be the aim of stories like "Your Silence Will Not Protect You."

Even though "Shoga" ends with the narrator in sexual exile—geographic and filial—it must be read differently from these other stories for how it confuses the reader's sense of temporality by ascribing multiple meanings to the term "back-story." In its simplest variation, the story that unravels forms the backstory to what we can assume to be the narrator's present, even as he provides two alternative presents that bookend the story, confusing our perception of reality. Describing the majority of the narrative as a "back-story" (rather than a backstory) can also urge a looking back, not just to tell his story, but to reconsider the past for revision—a moving backwards in order to reimagine the future. Here, analyzing childhood is central because the "back-story" highlights child-grandmother and boy-man (Boniface) as our terms of reevaluation. Like Wainaina's attempt at re-writing his memoir via a second coming-of-age, we can speculate as to whether the narrator in "Shoga" is trying to do something similar. After the narrator replaces the physical Ignacio with mental images of Boniface and his grandmother in the quotation above, he forces himself to believe that everything will be okay. The continuous process of revision he summons—his constant desiring things will be okay until it becomes a reality—depends on reimagining his childhood memories and

relationships. And so, “back-story” also functions at the crossroads of past, present, and future; the story he tells about how he came to be in sexual exile becomes a framework for his imagination, or an urging into being via the child in Africa.

Watering the Imagination: Childhood, Diasporic Consciousness, and Queer African Futurity

Although there seems to be no space for queer subjectivity in Africa *now* in Osman’s fiction, there is an evident investment in the queer child that orients our attention to what is possible in the future. Osman announces this investment right away in the collection’s first story, “Watering the Imagination,” which, less than two pages in length, is narrated by the mother of a queer daughter who resides in Somalia. While the majority of the collection’s other stories conclude with the queer child in exile who chooses alternative modes of affiliation, “Watering the Imagination” intimates that what is to come is not the only option. By choosing a mother-narrator who accepts her daughter’s queerness, Osman highlights both the necessity and possibility of filial recognition for queer freedom in Africa.

Not only does this recognition matter to the queer subject, but it possesses great significance for how we interpret Somalia/Africa’s potential as a space to be and belong as queer. Earlier she states, “I tell these stories to remind my children and myself that Somalia is fertile with history and myth. The only seed that needs regular watering is our imagination” (3). Here, the mother refuses a singular definition of Somalian space; for her, Africa-as-place/home is/has been fertile for regenerating diverse lives. However, she recognizes a detachment between what it means to be African in the present and in relation to accepted gender and sexual norms and how it can be imagined or what can be

possible. In addition, by associating fertility and futurity with the imagination of queerness, Osman subverts discourse that defines queerness as antithetical to heterosexual reproduction. “But I do know that by respecting her privacy I am letting her dream in a way that my generation was not capable of,” she continues a little later, “I’m letting her reach for something neither one of us can articulate” (3-4). And the story ends with her proclaiming, “I will honour my promise as her parent and go forth with her. We will not turn back” (4). The mother, here, calls attention to the relationship between discrimination and time; by acknowledging the limits of her generation—which we can think in relation to modern forms of politically instituted social order—she asks us to consider what is possible by following the child. Via these articulations of the mother-narrator, Osman desires into being an alliance that is at once age old and completely new. By vowing to follow her daughter, the mother-narrator in “Watering the Imagination” situates the queer child as what Nadia Ellis calls a (queer) horizon of possibility: “The urgent sensation of a pull from elsewhere, when not fulfilled” (2). “Elsewhere,” here, signifies the future, and should not be confused with exile.³⁴

Reimagining a fertile queer presence in Africa does not necessitate subscribing to nationhood, though for some, like Wainaina, the modern nation-state maintains a level of potentiality. Whether queer Africa invests in the nation or seeks out alternative forms of social contract, there remains a desire for “the invention of new architectures of being

³⁴ Another interesting aspect of this story is the fact that Osman chooses a female daughter to represent queer childhood as a horizon of possibility in/for Africa and to illustrate a link between mother and queer child. In the following chapter, I look more closely, through a continued analysis of Wainaina’s writing, at literary representations of queer boys’ apparent pull towards the feminine, and how male authors interpret their own queer selfhood and theorize queer possibility in relation to femininity.

and the erection of a counterdomestic space in the very heart of the home and nation” (Gopinath 186). Gayatri Gopinath locates this possibility in the queer diasporic subject deemed impossible by hetero-patriarchy, and I read this in African queer literature embodied by the figure of the queer child, also in ways impossible, and her/his capacity to transport us elsewhere and allow us to imagine otherwise. The queer consciousness being fleshed out by African writers in literature through representations of queer childhood inevitably instigates a transformation in how we understand African space. Whether or not nations remain intact, the migratory experiences instigated by sexual exile—temporary and permanent—and explored in this chapter capture the porousness of national borders to the degree that they attempt to maintain specific cultural and collective terms of exclusion.

In “Watering the Imagination,” Osman captures the temporality of spatial definitions by representing cultural flow (especially in regard to sexual being) in and out of space as withstanding the test of time. The mother narrator states,

So we [mother and queer daughter] take our voices and our stories to the sea. Every evening we walk towards the water and we write our hopes and dreams on scraps of paper. We wrap the paper around stones and tie it on with rubber bands. We then fling those stones that carry our hopes and dreams into the ocean. My mother’s mother used to do this. To us it’s a way of expressing some of the things we cannot verbalise. It’s a way of sharing our most intimate secrets without shame or fear. In doing so, we have created our own mythology and history. (4)

Even as the mother-narrator fixes herself in African soil and emphasizes its queer fertility, this strategy of passing secrets through the sea alludes to an alliance that transcends how we know and configure space. This does not just challenge the political and cultural terms of nation-space, but also geographic specificity, in general, as a determinant for how one belongs. Glissant’s theorization of insularity offers a useful lens

through which to interpret the border between land and sea as signifying an overlapping relationship between Africa and diasporic modes of belonging. Insularity, according to Glissant, is “not a ‘mode of isolation’ but [as] constitutive of a world in which ‘each island is an opening...’” (15).³⁵ Even though Somalia is not an island, the passage above permits a re-mapping that figures the sea an insular opening to alternative forms of queer consciousness that are both African and diasporic in nature; these two terms no longer mutually exclusive, but both considerably important in their own regards.³⁶

³⁵ Taken from B. R. Roberts and M. A. Stephen’s Introduction to their 2017 anthology on Archipelagic American Studies

³⁶ We can extend Glissant’s theorization of insularity to think about the porousness, and artificiality, of borders between various demarcated land-spaces, in addition to the coastal borders between non-island land-spaces and sea.

Chapter 3: In Search of the Erotic: Coming-of-Age Queer but Male in the Post-colony

In his 2011 memoir, *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, Binyavanga Wainaina describes his struggle with coming-of-age in a multiethnic postcolonial Kenya. He compares his experience to Kenya's own flawed capacity to negotiate its internal chaos. A year after the memoir was published, he shares that he had known he was homosexual since he was five years old in an essay that he calls the "lost chapter" to his memoir titled "I am a Homosexual, Mum." This revelation transforms how we understand his coming-of-age story in the memoir. As chapter two makes clear, we now know that Wainaina understood that he was sexually non-normative early in his life; therefore, we can reread the memoir with attention to an unquestionable queer presence.

This chapter examines the ways Wainaina accounts for his being queer but male in the postcolonial Kenya that frames his coming-of-age narrative.¹ I look at how his being socially conditioned male, and in relation to the girls and women closest to him, characterizes his coming-of-age and contextualizes his queer counter-narrative to the heteropatriarchal nation-state. In the memoir, he describes his childhood attempts at fitting into the subjective mold of his older brother Jimmy in order to emphasize a

¹ The majority of *One Day I Will Write About this Place* takes place during the 24-year presidency of Daniel arap Moi of Kenya (1978-2002). Wainaina characterizes Moi's presidency for its corruption and instigation of inter-ethnic conflict. According to the *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "For most of his years as president, Moi and the ruling party...had absolute authority over the country's political and judicial systems. Moi [was] a tough, experienced fighter, with 'country boy cunning' and craftiness in exploiting tribal divisions."

socially conditioned impulse towards the masculine. His assumed masculinity, albeit wobbly, enables him to tell his story as an overlapping national narrative—he tracks his own coming-of-age alongside that of postcolonial Kenya.² Interestingly, he also includes a cast of female characters whose interactions with him offer counterpoints to the heteronormativity that conditions his experience and characterizes the memoir’s form. Analyzing Wainaina’s experiences throughout the memoir with and against those of these girls and women alters how we interpret his queer relationality as a subject in the memoir and his queer reckoning as a memoirist. This chapter focuses specifically on Wainaina’s depictions of his nanny, Wambui, and his mother as female counterpoints from which to read the evolution of his queer self-awareness over time. Their characterizations, however, also facilitate his exploration of an erotic power rooted in female experience. The availability of this erotic facilitates his working through his gendered relationship to the nation, and it enables his reimagining of queer African futures. Whereas, in chapter two, I focus on the “elsewhere” of young Wainaina’s imagining in order to highlight his queer non-belonging, I emphasize, here, how he—as memoirist—situates his proximity to the nation—as male—as an optic to reevaluate the terms of African, and national, belonging across genders and sexualities and through its overlap with diaspora cultures. As the memoir suggests, and *Diasporic Childhoods* echoes, transforming the nation, and African identities broadly speaking, requires that he (and queer men, in general) comes to terms with and accounts for his own conditioning as male in spite of his queer

² Wainaina was born on January 18, 1971, almost seven years after Kenya’s independence from the United Kingdom in December 1963 and six years after its declaration as a Republic in December 1964. I identify overlap in the ways Wainaina engages with Kenya’s struggle to form a cohesive national identity amongst its many competing ethnicities post-independence, and how he describes his own struggles with individual identity formation amidst Kenya’s cultural diversity.

positionality, and with the oppression of black women by man and nation, of which he deems himself complicit.

Highlighting how gender conditions Wainaina's coming-of-age experience in the memoir adds a necessary tension to *Diasporic Childhoods*' theorization of queer childhood as a horizon of possibility because it requires accounting for how varied lived experience is under different and intersecting histories of oppression. Scholars have illustrated how in the contexts of some African socio-cultural histories (pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial) interpretations of childhood have changed with societies' shifting attitudes towards gender. For example, the historian Abosede A. George explains how the application of Western gender categories to describe children in Nigeria evolved, ironically, out of an attempt by the colonial Lagosian government to emphasize children's need to be saved. She writes,

[T]he state focused resources on saving children, viewed as members of a universal generational group, from Africans, viewed as members of a particular 'racial' group. Thus at key moments in the history of Lagos, at the late nineteenth-century moment of the imposition and attempted consolidation of colonial power on the island, and later during the mid-twentieth-century crisis of authority that accompanied the Second World War and prompted a reorganization of colonial power, the child was called forth as a vulnerable and imperiled universal subject, whose very existence demanded and legitimized the appearance of a salvationist colonial regime. (6)

George points out that, not surprisingly, state-mandated juvenile reform focused on boys, which ultimately gendered this "universal" category male. Girls, on the other hand, were considered a threat to colonial order as they were left to hawking and other forms of street work. Lagosian women, in response, took it upon themselves to promote domestic work for girl-children (221-223). This cause-and-response produced a gender code for defining children's labor that mirrored the hierarchization of biological men and women

in colonial society and contradicted a different universal, or “third (non-)gender,” category (omodé) used for children in pre-colonial Yoruba societies.³ In addition, it conflated sex and gender in ways that may not have existed in precolonial Yoruba societies.⁴

However, even if omodé as a (non-)gender category indicates a once historical reality universally accepted, we can apply it to a discussion of queer African childhood *now* by emphasizing its semantic resistance to the gender and sexual hierarchies that define the postcolonial nation-state. As such, it can become a metaphor for the overlap between childhood and what Gayatri Gopinath calls a diaspora consciousness. “[A] queer diasporic logic,” Gopinath claims, “displaces heteronormativity from the realm of natural law and instead launches its critique of hegemonic constructions of both nation and diaspora from the vantage point of an ‘impossible’ subject” (186). The “impossibility” of

³ In her Africanist analysis of Western gender discourse, Oyèróké Oyèwùmí tells us that the Yoruba categories for male and female (okùnrin and obinrin) are not normally used to describe children (omodé). She uses this fact as evidence against a direct translation between English/French and Yoruba gender categories. Gender categories in Yoruba, according to Oyèwùmí, are not binarily opposed or hierarchical in nature like in English and French. See Oyèwùmí (1997), p. 32-33.

⁴ It is important to note here that though biological men and women may not have been hierarchized in precolonial society, J. Lorand Matory’s 1994 study of gender politics in Oyo Yoruba religion illustrates ways that male and female as non-biological social markers do, at times, signify opposing power relations. In *Sex and the Empire that is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion*, Matory examines the nuances of gender and sex categories in precolonial Yoruban religious systems and their persistence under indirect colonial rule. “As in the eighteenth century,” he writes, “Oyo royalism in the twentieth asserted its legitimacy by magnifying the ideological structure of ordinary husband-wife relations and by making the monarch’s literal and metaphorical ‘wives’ into the public icons and agents of their ‘husband’s’ authority” (34). While power relations are evidently gendered in this precolonial system—a wife’s purpose is to extend her husband’s power—and used to undermine colonial authority, both biological women and men served as literal and metaphorical wives. The separation of gender and sex distinguished Yoruba metaphysics from Western gender systems. However, it also emphasizes the subservience of female experience across time, place, and sex. This enables a consideration of the subversive possibilities inherent to the female in relation to systems of power and regardless of biological sex. Still, it is important not to disregard how, according to George, the gendering of bodies under the colonial system shifted cultural norms surrounding gender, sex, and childhood. Understanding how gender categories evolve over time and condition boys and girls in the present prevents a propensity to conflate a universal queer childhood with male experience.

omodé, here, would correlate with the fact of its non-gendered peculiarity in a world defined by heteropatriarchy. By symbolizing this diasporic logic, omodé figures childhood as a horizon of possibility that can transcend time and space, as well as allude to alternative ways of being and belonging in various geographic temporalities and to its overall impact on African metaphysics. But, the overlap between omodé as a metaphor for queer childhood and the diasporic logic defined by Gopinath can also help us extrapolate a female erotic (as a black diasporic epistemology of liberation) in the term's queer potentiality. That is, interpreting queer childhood as a horizon of possibility relies on its evolution out of female experience under heteropatriarchy. This would require that we acknowledge not only the colonial history of how gender and sex became conflated in African societies, but the nature of non-sexed gender categories before this period.

Wainaina's explorations of male and female experiences in *One Day I Will Write About this Place* allude to his indebtedness to the feminine, and its subversive nature, regardless of gender identification. His own coming-of-age narrative illustrates how an expressed "pull" to the feminine does not have to assume a desire to be female; rather, it can indicate an expressed dependency on a female erotic for queer becoming. This erotic, as defined by the black diaspora feminist Audre Lorde, "is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling" (51). The anthropologist Lyndon Gill, in *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean*, offers a framework for applying an erotic analysis to a male-authored text like *One Day I Will Write About this Place* that I draw from in this chapter. In his study, Gill makes the compelling argument that the "female" in Lorde's analysis of the erotic is a consequence of her audience, and insists

we broaden its applicability “without losing its necessary attention to the ground of lived experience” (8).⁵ Gill defines the erotic as:

[P]olitical desire, sensual desire, and spiritual desire might provide the interconnected infrastructure that gives substance to a new erotic. Again, areas of experience that may seem disparate lend themselves—across a bridging desire—to the linking work that Lorde reveres in eros. These conceptual linkages provide a mirror for the personal connections (seldom easy, effortless, or safe) that are a vital resource in Lorde’s work. If connection in general proves an important governing principle for Lorde, then connection specifically between human beings—a deep sharing of pursuits (physical, emotional, 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 [1978] 1984, 56). Lorde reassures us that once in touch with the erotic—which can be achieved only through fostering deep connections with others across a range of political sensual, and spiritual desires—one is not only less willing to accept feelings of powerlessness, despair, and depression, but also more inclined to pursue structural changes in society. (10-11)

He locates erotic relationality—particularly how the erotic evolves out of a relationship between what is lacked (socially, politically, etc.) and the sensual—and the pursuit of societal change at the core of Lorde’s theorization. This foundation permits explorations of the erotic, or “pull to the feminine,” in Wainaina’s writing and of its value to imagining queer African futures that transcend sex within the broader scope of *Diasporic Childhoods*’ analytical terrain. However, as Gill points out, the process of extending the erotic, or transcending sex, includes accounting for the erotic’s rootedness in lived experience. And so, we have to consider the possibilities inherent to the erotic across sexes in relation to how these authors account for women’s experiences in contemporary socio-political contexts. As Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley reminds us, there exists a deep-rooted relationship between queer possibility for African descended [and, I would add, African] peoples and a lineage of black feminist epistemologies derived from the lived

⁵ Lorde’s erotic as power was first delivered as a speech to a majority female audience.

experiences of being black and female in the modern era.⁶ Here, and in the following chapter, I showcase the importance of black feminisms and of understanding black women's experiences for imagining queer possibility through and with this body of African queer literature.⁷

My reading of Wainiana's coming-of-age narrative calls attention to his implicit engagement with a black female erotic to advance an interpretation of the inherent relationship between queerness and black feminist epistemologies. By juxtaposing his coming-of-age experience against a history of postcolonial nation building and against his relationships with Wambui and his mother in his memoir, Wainaina negotiates what it means to be queer but male in patriarchal settings. In so doing, he begins a process of reconciliation between this dialectical self and the female erotic he is drawn to, and that is rooted in black women's history. The process of *becoming* queer, then, signifies a kinetic attraction to an erotic harmony that can be universal in essence without oversimplifying individual experience. By centering these possibilities via a reimagining of his coming-of-age, Wainaina presents an image of queer childhood reminiscent of omodé as a subversive diasporic logic rearticulated in our contemporary historical context. As Gopinath argues, "a queer diaspora [logic]...recognizes the past as a site of intense violence as well as pleasure; it acknowledges the spaces of impossibility within the nation and their translation within the diaspora into new logics of affiliation" (186). As in the previous chapter, I continue to think in terms of the overlapping of a diaspora

⁶ See Tinsley (2018).

⁷ In ways, this and the following chapters attempt to account for certain distances between gender and queer analysis in chapters one and two, particularly the ways heterosexuality defines what I read as Adichie's feminism in *Americanah* and how I interpret childhood, universally, as a horizon of possibility in relation to the sexual politics of space in Wainaina and Osman's writings.

epistemology and traditionally African “national” geographies to reimagine the spaces of queered African belonging. And so, through queer childhood/omodé, I explore diaspora’s local relevance to African metaphysics as an inherently female plane of queer possibility.

Female Sensuality, Diaspora Culture, and the Subversion of Male Authority

Wainaina introduces Wambui to the reader as a fifteen-year-old nanny to his eleven-year-old self. He shares what was his younger self’s particular attraction to her confidence and mysteriousness, a contrast to his typical insecurities involving matters of difference such as Kimay. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wainaina introduces the term Kimay to describe the diverse cultural currents in postcolonial Kenya that destabilize his sense of self throughout much of his life. Though Wambui’s difference elicits a sense of fear in young Wainaina, he relates this fear to the love he and Ciru feel for her. “We [he and Ciru] love her,” Wainaina writes, “she can carry all we throw at her, and she is much more than we have known. We are afraid of her...Wambui’s face is so angled and certain, her smile so crooked and mischievous, that she is the first nanny we have had whom we cannot control. It is clear she can go further than any of us, in any direction, good or bad, violent or funny” (38-39). Although Wambui is only four years older than Wainaina, her presence as a parentlike figure accentuates the ways that he describes himself as childlike throughout much of the memoir, including his naïve innocence and his economic and emotional dependence on others. What is more, she is the daughter of potato farmers, and her status as nanny sets her apart from Wainaina along lines of class and gender. In describing these differences, however, Wainaina attributes a sense of freedom to her capacity to elude him, to exceed what he knows and

what he is able to accomplish as an economically and emotionally dependent male-child entering puberty. Wambui, then, functions as a counterpoint to both his lack of queer self-expression and how this relates to his discomfort with Kimay, an extension of his difficult relationship to a Kenyan national identity. His interest in her, as such, begs a consideration of the role of the feminine, as an alternative to heteropatriarchal Kenya, in his queer becoming.

Wainaina presents a dichotomy between female potentiality and heteropatriarchal Kenya by interweaving his description of Wambui with television images of a 1982 independence ceremony at Nakuru Afraha Stadium under president Daniel arap Moi, which depicted a false sense of national unity across ethnic lines.⁸ Throughout the memoir, Wainaina attributes a multi-decade-long plague of ethnocentrism in postcolonial Kenya to Moi's corrupt presidency. Right before he brings this particular ceremony into the narrative, Wainaina tells us that Moi had recently erased his ex-wife's name from that of the primary school he (Wainaina) attends. "Starting today," he writes, "our school is no longer Lena Moi Primary School; it is a newly painted Moi Primary School. All the old rubber stamps and exercise books are collected, all stationery, anything with the word

⁸ Wainaina does not provide the exact date of this ceremony, but we know that he is eleven (1982) when it occurs and that it happens on Independence Day (December 12; also known as Jamhuri Day) at a Nakuru Stadium. On Jamhuri Day 1982, President Moi delivered a speech in defense of a one-party system. The historian B.O Ogot claims, "The speech embodied Moi's vision of a revitalized KANU [Kenya African National Union] as a popular mass party and also his concept of a one-party state which is strong and united, and yet democratic. To his critics, however, the speech represented an amateurish rationalization of political monolithism by the powers that be" (204). Part of the guise of the one-party system was to establish the idea of inter-ethnic Kenyan unity; Ogot quotes Moi stating that "[t]here had to be a party giving people everywhere a sense of belonging and an arena of unity" (203). Despite illusions to unity, Moi's government was not tolerant of dissent. Therefore, KANU's revitalization was short lived. In 1983, Moi established a "traitor affair" that sought to eliminate any resistance to the one-party system and called into motion a "snap general election" (203-04). Wainaina's depiction of the Independence Day ceremony in *One Day I Will Write About this Place* satirizes Moi's illusion to national unity across ethnic lines.

Lena disappears” (39). This story’s placement alongside Wainaina’s description of the independence ceremony and his interest in Wambui as an embodiment of sexual freedom alludes to the centrality of women’s experience to his own narrative; we see young Wainaina working through the heteropatriarchal nature of postcolonial Kenya, the literal erasure of black women at this time, and his non-sexualized pull towards the female via his relationship with Wambui. Wambui’s presence within Moi’s Kenya subverts his version of postcolonial nationalism by alluding to an already existing queer space.⁹ Because Wainaina envisions this space via Wambui, a daughter of potato-farmers, we can read him working through the African Marxist tradition of his fellow Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, attributing possibility to the culture of the people, and taking it a step further by tying class representation to a diasporic feminist counter-politic via the erotic embodied by Wambui.¹⁰ However, *Lena*’s erasure from the name of Wainaina’s primary school, specifically, is also a cautionary tale on how heteropatriarchy, as an extension of national consciousness, permeates childhood—when minds are most vulnerable. Therefore, this scene also foreshadows how reckoning with patriarchy’s impact on him as a male is part and parcel of his coming-of-age narrative.

As young Wainaina watches the independence ceremony on television, he recognizes an attempt by the government to establish order out of Kenya’s diversity. He describes what he sees on the screen: “Different tribes in different nationalizing uniforms

⁹ In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath uses the term “impossibility” “as a way of signaling the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora” (15). Wambui’s presence in both Moi’s Kenya and Wainaina’s memoir directly subverts the heteropatriarchal politics of nation-space. Her “whereness”/spatiality marks her as “already part and parcel of power/knowledge” (Brown 3).

¹⁰ See Ngũgĩ (1986). Also see Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* for a discussion of how Ngũgĩ’s conflation of patriarchy with neo-colonialism in his fiction enables him to deprioritize the gender specific struggles of African women to an essentialized class struggle (160-61).

that we call traditional. The military people are crisp and beautiful—there are no straighter lines in Kenya, no whiter whites” (44). This image of nationalism—which Wainaina correlates with Moi’s erasure of Lena—depicts a mediated attempt at establishing unity and order by the government for its citizen audience at home. Wainaina’s prose implicates the image’s purposefulness; he mocks how the diverse traditional garbs worn by the ceremony participants allude to their role in Moi’s attempt to nationalize—we learn later that the induction of Moi’s presidency actually represents a deterioration of this idea of “unity in diversity” that the image attempts to portray. Moreover, by stating that there are “no straighter lines in Kenya” than the ones on the screen, Wainaina suggests that this image of national unity does not actually exist beyond the television’s frame. He continues with the celebration’s mediated imagery:

There are many whistles. Troops of Scouts called to order by whistles...Traditional bandleaders with feather and skin hats, and fly whisks sing *mprrrrr* every few minutes to push the song forward. Army and police bands are called to order. Impound. Stamp. Impede. Sta-mpede...All around, choirs are practicing. The groups are spread on the grass, arranged in three or four lines, according to height...Rule, Moi, rule...The Women are dressed in *kitenge* print dresses that reach their ankles, with freshly plaited or hot-combed hair. All the choirs sing with a cartoonish expression, and Wambui mimics them, her newly lipsticked mouth adding some exaggeration to the effect: eyebrows up, cheeks sucked in, mouth open as round as the letter O. Mr. Dondo, our choirmaster, tells us that the eyebrows create a feeling of happiness, when the mouth is making an O. When the mouth is released, the choirs bare their teeth, polite hotel slices of breakfast pawpaw, to look extremely happy. Proud. Pretty, Prim, Promising. Eyebrows subside. (44-45)

In this excerpt, Wainaina subverts the image of national formation with a description of Wambui mocking the procession with an exaggerated working-class femininity: her lipstick and facial expression function as a counterpoint to the tailored nature of the women described under Moi’s patriarchal national order. Moreover, Wambui’s disorderly and sexual nature contradicts the mechanics of gendered obedience assumed by the

women on tv and taught by the choirmaster. The description of her crooked, mischievous face and the sexual nature of her exaggerated O-shaped mouth function in direct contradistinction to the mechanical nature and conflated “happiness”-effect of this same expression as dictated by the male choirmaster.

Wainaina’s representation of Wambui as subversive intensifies as the chapter continues. Wainaina narrates,

The president’s convoy arrives...President Moi and his cabinet mount the VIP section. People stand in lines in the field and listen to the national anthem, mouthing loyally, the president’s ivory and gold stick lifted for all to see...There is a group of ministers’ wives expressionless from makeup...Wambui says, ‘Ah, this is boring.’ She turns down the volume, and we watch the parade in silence. She puts on the giant Sanyo radio behind the sofas...Wambui’s favorite radio show is on. DJ Fred Obachi Machoka is the Blackest Man in Black Africa...Salaams come from Francis Kadenge Omwana wa Leah, with greetings from Zambia. Zachariah Demfo of Lake Babati. Robbie Reuben-Robbie from Kitale Salaams Club, who says, ‘Keep on keeping on’...Boney M.’s ‘Rivers of Babylon’ is playing...Wambui starts to dance, arms flying...‘Oh, I rove Boney M.!’ she says. (46-48)

In this passage, images of order and obedience continue to mediate for viewers at home a guideline for citizenship and national participation that glorifies heteropatriarchy. For example, the expressionless faces of the ministers’ wives allude to women’s status as accessories to their husbands, who, themselves, are accessories to Moi’s patriarchy. In addition, props like “ivory and gold sticks” reinforce masculine authority with their phallic resonance. Tired of these images, Wambui detracts from the scene on the television by lowering its volume, turning on the radio, and beginning to dance. While the independence celebration attempts to create order within the realm of the nation, the radio defies national boundaries by bringing music from all over the African diaspora into the space of the living room. Moreover, through Wambui’s dancing female body, diaspora becomes a mediated counterpoint to the image of national celebration aired on

the television and its associated masculinist priority; diaspora's amalgamation within the realm of the nation via the domestic/living room alludes to its fundamental capacity to transform the nature of space and one's relation to it. As such, Wambui's agency and bodily representation in this scene signify the importance of female bodies and diasporic epistemologies for Wainaina's interpolation of queerness into his memoir/national narrative. The potential of this undertaking lies in its capacity to frame a queer future beyond what is, now, the precarious state of queer life in postcolonial African nation-states. Although this small act of defiance on Wambui's part reaches no farther than the confines of Wainaina's childhood home, not having the same reach as the national television network airing the independence ceremony, Wainaina emphasizes its significance by illustrating its impact on him for pages to come.

Wainaina continues,

[Wambui] starts to sing. The letter *r* climbs into her Gikuyu tongue intact, slaps against the roof of her mouth, and is broken into a thousand letter *l*'s. Only one of them can survive. It runs down her tongue, an accent jet plane, and leaps forward into the air, 'By the livers of mBabylon...'...The president stands on the now silent TV screen, behind him a row of provincial commissioners in khaki and pitch helmets; in front of him are rows and columns of human order...I close my eyes. Gikuyu letter *m* breaks free of his place in the stadium and runs around manically, looking for the Gikuyu *b*. They stand together and hug, bonded by fear into a new single letter, a tribe. *Mbi*. Sometimes you try, but your tongue can't wrap right around the rules. *A, mbi, ci*...Policemen circle them; the president pauses. *N* starts to agitate, standing there in straight colonial stadium lines. In National Stadium lines. *D* shakes like an accordion and wriggles across to *n*; they start to do a waltz. Kanu Khartoon Khaki wants them to behave, be what you are supposed to be, stay still and do what Kenya Khaki says. KANU, our one party, is father and mother, says President, and Khaki people salute. *A. mBi. Ci. nDi, E, F, nGi*...Wambui dances across the carpet, mouth open, singing her M'Boney M. song mangled in her Subukia accent...Wambui squeals and jumps, her breasts bouncing, 'Ohhhh. Haiya. Chalonye ni Wasi? I rove this song'. (48-49)

Wambui's singing in this passage recalls Wainaina's theorization of Kimay. Unlike the sense of order mediated via the images of the independence ceremony on television that

categorically groups people together in seemingly neat pairings under the patriarchal leadership of Moi and the Kenyan nation-state, Wambui's singing and the juxtaposition of diasporic sound with national (silenced) imagery represents a nonsensical coming together and constant transformation. Wambui's dancing female body and the sensuality of this experience for her and young Wainaina illustrate a counter-narrative rooted in the erotic.¹¹ Audre Lorde tells us that "[t]he dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings" (56). Wainaina's understanding of Wambui's sensuality and the political nature of her non-conforming language seep into his childhood imagination, impacting how Moi's national message on the television screen enters his consciousness. Even as this mediation intensifies Wainaina's discomfort with Kimay, its disorderly nature draws him closer to Wambui's fluid self-articulation and, consequently, trivializes the mode of national commitment established by Moi and the television program. This leaves Wainaina desiring more than he knows possible.

Wainaina-the-memoirist uses Wambui to figuratively subvert the masculinist politics of Moi's Kenya in his childhood psyche. Her existence as excess in the narrative ruptures the conditioned space of the nation as it takes shape in his imagination. In his short story, "Boonoonoonoos little bit Boonoonoonoos," published four years after the

¹¹ Though I will soon consider the extent to which Wainaina's attention to her body also privileges his male gaze and thus perpetuates the precarious state of her female potential, demanding this gendered analysis of queer subjectivity and its relationship to a queer African futurity.

memoir (2015), Wainaina further centers the female-as-excess trope in a reimagining of queer possibility in Africa. He does so via an implicit lesbian caricature of Wambui named Milka.¹² The semblance between Milka and Wambui reinforces the ways that the impression Wambui made on him as a child have influenced his figurative imaginings of queerness. Reading the memoir and short story intertextually helps us unpack the relationship between female sensuality and childhood as it informs Wainaina's articulation of a queer future beyond the realm of his postcolonial present.

Before beginning a close reading of "Boonoonoonoos..." it is worth highlighting a few obvious correlations between his chapter about Wambui in the memoir and his narrative about Milka in the story in order to support the intertextual claims I make. To start, both pieces are partially set in railroad communities that represent the fringe of society. Second, Wainaina pays particular narrative and aesthetic attention to the dancing female body in each piece. He characterizes each bodily performance in relation to femininity (though the meaning of feminine shifts from the memoir to the story) and in relation to the audience's gaze (Wainaina in the memoir; men, in general, in the story). Third, both Wambui and Milka are caricatures of working-class female adolescents; Wainaina rewrites individual scenes from the memoir into the story to emphasize how each character negotiates her childhood innocence with adult sexuality because of her class and gender. In "Boonoonoonoos" and *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, he depicts these young women attempting to appeal to an older man on the phone by sounding more "mature." In the first, "Boonoonoonoos," he has Milka and her friend

¹² The story is part of a 2015 special issue on *Afrofuturity(s)* in the online literary journal *Jalada Africa*

Eunice, the story's other protagonist, sneak off school grounds to prank call people. He writes,

They would walk all the way to the gate of Eagerton Agricultural College to use the phone booth. Call random numbers and breathe into the phone and start laughing. Once, a man picked up, barking 'Nani,' in a deep, hard, cigarette-and-beer voice...Milka was quiet for a moment, and then she said, 'Mary Wanjiru.'...Eunice tried to grab the phone, but Milka hung on...'What do you like, Mary?' His voice was slurry...'Napenda wewe.'...His laughter growled... 'He babe. Haunijui.'...They kept talking, and talking, and soon, in self-defense, in the small voice of a girl, Milka turned to English. 'No. I am mashure. I am very mashure'.

This scene resembles an instance in the memoir where young Wainaina overhears

Wambui speaking on the phone:

One day, a few months ago," he writes, "I was sitting on the veranda and I overheard Wambui on the phone. She was laughing breathily, and saying, 'Ohhhh. I am mashure. I am not young. Ohhhh. I am very mashure.' Her voice sounded funny and nasal, and she kept laughing hah hah hah hah...laughing fake, like a woman on *Love Boat* or *Hart to Hart*. 'Ohhhh,' her voice high and shrill like a TV and fake, 'I am verry prrretty,' she said, in English. Her feet were drawing maps on the ground and she was looking uncommonly shy. I burst out laughing. (39)

In each passage, Wainaina establishes himself as a relation informant—first, from a child's gaze, and second, by taking this caricature and remapping it onto his own imaginative landscape, which, in effect, alludes to his self-knowing. In the second quotation, Wambui's desire to present herself as sexual and mature beyond her age to the assumed adult male speaker on the other line disrupts young Wainaina's interpretation of her confident and adult-like personality. Wambui's stumbling over her phone conversation alters young Wainaina's earlier view of her as an authority figure (and, thus, an adult in relation to himself) and the respect this position demands. He emphasizes this shift by laughing at her outright. What is more, this moment captures Wambui's precarious relationality as adolescent and working-class black female: subject to young Wainaina's spying male gaze, on one hand, and the angst caused by the adult male she's

speaking to on the phone, on the other. This gendered/class positionality disrupts her proximity to “innocence” as it blurs the dichotomy between child and adult. Despite the fact that young Wainaina is a child under her care, his assuming the right to gaze without her consent symbolizes his evolution into a masculine subjectivity. This impacts our interpretation of his queer imagination in the narrative.

By mirroring Wainaina’s description of Wambui in the memoir with Milka’s story, Wainaina exposes the evolution of his gendered self-knowing by showing that his real-life experiences inform his imagination as a fiction writer. Milka, as characterized in the first passage above, transforms in a similar manner to Wambui; however, whereas Wambui’s sexualization correlates with her becoming more insecure and child-like, Milka shifts from being a playful innocent child to an abject female. Though Wambui is never deemed innocent in the memoir, Milka’s transformation juxtaposed against Wainaina’s coming-of-age highlights the ways that gender and class impact childhood experience. Wainaina disproves the universality of queer childhood in “Boonoonoonoos” by dramatically subverting allusions to Milka’s innocence with descriptions mirroring Wambui’s real life abjection.

“Boonoonoonoos...” is a coming-of-age story about two black female secondary school friends, Eunice and Milka, and their experiences negotiating the gendered and sexual hierarchies of the postcolonial dystopian Kenya in which they exist. The world of the story replicates a gendered power structure where men have social and sexual power over females; the narrative spotlights Milka and Eunice’s struggle to acquire agency as female children within that world. The story begins with Milka saving Eunice from a

ritualized rape in the school dormitory and follows them as they sneak off the school grounds and travel to Milka's home to collect money from her father, which they tell him is for school fees, but is really for make-up and clothing for a date they set up with a military man they met over the phone. Despite their attempt at presenting themselves as mature women, the cosmetic transformation leaves them feeling filthy and cheap. Milka and Euinice then get high and drunk at a party they attend with the military man. When the substances take hold of their bodies, they realize that they may have romantic feelings for each other. The story ends with the two girls running out of the party for home.

Overall, Wainaina center's working-class black female experience as he imaginatively stakes out space for queer belonging in Kenya and Africa. Even though working-class men precede women in the story's diegetic social hierarchy, the postcolonial state and the West supersede them. In fact, Wainaina depicts working-class men and boys in the story as unable to counter class-based social hegemony, because they pursue power by violating female bodies for sexual purposes. Rather than resisting order to benefit their own social mobility, they remain socially stagnant and gain limited temporal pleasure by objectifying women. The story correlates this stunted class mobility with the state's neocolonial order, effectively dividing working-class people along gendered lines. However, the story ultimately challenges this postcolonial dystopia by centering a black female lesbian erotic as an epistemological orientation into the future. The erotic, though female as it takes shape in the story, subverts male authority as it relates to sexual obscenity without further polarizing the sexes, thus challenging the Kenyan society of which they exist.

Dominance over women functions as a rite of passage through which young men come-of-age in “Boonoonoonoos’...” society. Take, for instance, the following passage:

That first day of boarding school, the first day [Eunice and Milka] spoke to each other, a freezing Lamdiak night...the senior boys came into the dorms to visit their ‘wives.’ Eunice lay frozen in her bed, in the dark, as she heard the giggles, the protests, the moans, the springs...And then Eunice felt a hand on her shoulder. A hand lifted her blanket and a wet, hot tongue ran across her fingers. She almost laughed out loud when she heard the boy’s voice, forced down into his belly, ‘Baby, you are my brown girl in the ring...’ Then the hand grabbed at her crotch, and squeezed. She shot up and turned, rubbing the saliva off her fingers with her pillow. The boy’s eyes were frightened, and standing next to him was Milka. She grabbed his ear and twisted, laughing. ‘...Come back when you’ve been circumcised.

It is clear at the beginning of this passage that boys in this society assume ownership over girls. The narrator refers to girls as the boys’ ‘wives’ in order to connect this rite of passage to the eventual marital contract they will sign as adults; such a contract in this dystopian world—a world that is many people’s reality—legalizes men’s assumed ownership of women. As Eunice’s violator approaches her, he poses as a man by deepening his voice. He then claims her as his “brown girl in the ring.” This line refers to a popular song in Jamaica, sung as part of a children’s game. The reference to a popular children’s game in a rape scene illustrates a symbolic corrupting of children’s innocence in this dystopic society; boys and girls, like men and women, fill certain roles: animals and their objects. This portrayal of how gender roles dehumanize both boys and girls emphasizes their oppressed relationship to the neocolonial state. Gender discrimination, then, exists as a byproduct of Kenya’s social hierarchization under neocolonialism, rather than as the single point of conflict in this story. What is more, this scene illustrates how society projects meaning onto children’s bodies. However, Wainaina disrupts this trope by emphasizing the girls’ capacities to reject this gendered and sexual ritual.

Not all male characters in the story abuse women; however, none have the level of agency to oppose the state/social hierarchy that tames them. The one favorable male character in the entire story is Milka's father, but his only potential to make a difference is through the agency ascribed to his daughter. His sons, on the other hand, are useless. The narrator's only reference to Milka's brothers is in a description of her home compound where she and Eunice visit to collect money. The narrator states, "There...[is] a separate cabin for her three circumcised brothers." Both this line and the rape scene I discuss earlier refer to male circumcision. Though circumcision is not synonymous with castration, we could argue that they share a symbolic referent to emasculation, especially in its colonial context. Circumcision has an overall taming effect because it decreases the amount of pleasure felt around the top of the penis. Although proponents of circumcision assume its health benefits, Wainaina depicts it as a mode of taming hypersexualized men—the idea that African men need to be circumcised correlates with colonial discourse on the over-sexed black body and the idea that black people (in the United States and elsewhere) reproduce beyond their means. We can read Milka's brothers' circumcisions, then, as an allusion to their disability as non-productive presences in society. Similarly, when Milka confronts the boy raping Eunice earlier in the story, she suggests he get circumcised before considering these actions. This to some extent neuters the boy. As the state's fostering of his hypersexual masculinity implies a pathologizing of African manhood, this taming via circumcision symbolically prevents him from altering his social and economic standing. Even if we decide that Milka makes this remark to protect herself and Eunice, her dependency on gender/sex divisive rhetoric perpetuates working-class men and women's subordination to the state.

However, circumcision in this text can also allude to a challenge of phallic power and, thus, a disruption of the state and dystopia. Because Wainaina's female protagonist is the one who suggests that the rapist remove his foreskin, we can consider her emasculating statement a rebellion against the male-centered society in which she lives. Milka challenges the boy's phallic power in order to destroy the social dichotomy between men and women. Mutilating the phallus, here, eliminates its social importance and functions as an equalizer. We can also consider the fact that Wainaina, himself, is male. His de-emphasis of the social power of the phallus via circumcision and portrayal of liberation and upward mobility via female protagonists (an alternative to his own male characterization in the memoir) represents a symbolic effort at negating his own maleness in relation to the text, however impossible this may be as author. By applying circumcision as a metaphor, Wainaina—via Milka and Eunice—challenges the gender hierarchy impacting social mobilization. And so, Milka and Eunice's coming-of-age story reads as a counter-hegemonic bildungsroman, an alternative to how Wainaina juxtaposes his own coming-of-age alongside that of postcolonial Kenya in his memoir.¹³

As stated earlier, "Boonoonoonoos..." ends with Milka and Eunice realizing they may have romantic feelings for each other. With this realization, they run away from a party they were at, escaping their assumed destiny: being the sex objects of men. "The night is bright, the moon is fat, and they walk and talk all the twenty kilometers back to Njoro," the story's closing line reads, alluding to both an escape and a return; they escape society's gendered constrictions without exiling themselves from their homeland: they

¹³ *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, though subversive, is an example of how stories about African societies' maturity into contemporary global politics and economics often read as male-centric coming-of-age narratives.

escape for home. For Wainaina, Africa has the potential to transform its existing flaws; in order to do this, exile cannot be the only option.

What is more, this ending ascribes possibility to two females who may be romantically interested in each other. Imagining Africa's future this way disallows conflating futurity with heteronormative reproduction. Wainaina uses a queer female perspective to transform knowledge production around the concept of humanity including people's abilities and potentialities.¹⁴ Moments before the girls leave the party, Milka realizes that she may have romantic feelings for Eunice and enters a trance-like state where she has a psychic reaction to her body. She loses control over her body as her limbs move ahead of her, faster than her own consciousness. Her organs spin out of control; they are in hyper-motion and refusing order. This experience resonates with Mel Chen's writing on the body without organs in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*: "The body without organs is that body that actively refuses its own subjectivity by engaging the dis-ordering of its 'organs'" (151). In this moment, which leads to Milka reevaluating her sexuality, her body undergoes a transformation that counters its subjectivity in the male-dominated heteronormative society she lives in.

¹⁴ My analysis of Wainaina's approach relates to that of Alexander Weheliye in his book *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, where he relies heavily on Jamaican critic Sylvia Wynter to deconstruct the meaning of "human." He writes, "For Wynter, a feminism that does not aspire to create a different code for what it means to be human merely sketches a different map of Man's territorializing assemblages; however, in order to abolish these assemblages, feminism's insurrection must sabotage 'its own prescribed role in the empirical articulation of its representations in effect by coming out of the closet, moving out of our assigned categories'" (23). Weheliye argues that a more accurate universal understanding of humanity would move beyond conceptions of what it means to be man. Instead of measuring subaltern humanities against a white male blueprint, Weheliye, Wynter, and Wainaina all present the need to recognize humanity in a completely alternate form. Wainaina illustrates this by depicting a world that moves forward with a queer female-female relationship—not a world without men, but one beyond universal manhood. This world beyond "man" begins by ending its dependency on heteronormative "natural" reproduction.

However, this transformation does not happen on its own. Milka had smoked a seed-ridden joint, which engendered this reaction. “Inside she is burning silver and rust,” Wainaina writes; Milka’s inhalation of the joint animates metallic substances within her body. Chen argues that the best way to understand human’s final form is by its voluntary and involuntary interactions with non-human and/or non-animal substances. The interactions between such opposed substances call for new ontological understandings of humanity and animacy. The interactions between Milka’s human body and these non-human substances, then, signify new methods of biological and non-biological (re)production, however metaphorical. Although it is a stretch to argue that Wainaina envisions African futures where artificial inseminations and intra-substance linkages replace “natural” reproduction as the premier mode of prolonging life and progress in Africa, the intermingling of substances and gender- and sexuality-based counter-narratives have the potential to broaden how Africans and non-Africans understand humanity and consider Africa’s present and futures in more socially productive and liberating fashions.

By culminating in a female-female relationship explored via dance, the story also highlights the political effectiveness of an erotic of understanding characterized by black female sensuality. Audre Lorde explains in “The Erotic as Power” that “[t]he erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before” (59). Even as dance metaphorically alters the sex categories framing the deeply gendered world of the story by spinning the girls’ organs out of order,

it is the girls' emerging subject position as women that frames how they challenge social order, as well as the history that has defined what womanhood and femininity mean in relation to notions of power and agency. The political alternatives to a queer future intimated in "Boonoonoonoos...", then, draws on an erotic potential informed by the intertwined metaphors of dance/shifting organs and femininity/womanhood. Moreover, reading Milka and Wambui intertextually allows us to explore further the ways femininity represented via lesbianism figure front and center in Wainaina's queer imaginings. In both the memoir and the story, the dancing female body signifies a queer excess that orients us beyond what we know of the contemporary male-centric postcolonial nation. This elsewhere is both beyond the scope of national consciousness, but deeply rooted within its geographic and cultural parameters.

Female Subjection and Male Consent

Understanding Milka as a caricature of Wambui and, thus, as an extension of Wainaina's imagining beyond the memoir/real world draws attention to how his envisaged queer African future relies on female erotic knowledge. His reliance on the erotic centers black female experience while simultaneously locating erotic value outside women's subjectivity. More specifically, reckoning with black female experience through these characterizations of black women allows him to imagine his own queer agency, and queer futurity in general, in relation to, and as a product of, the erotic work of black feminisms. Wainaina's working through and with gender instigates a more nuanced—and necessary—evaluation of queer childhood, and queerness in general, beyond universality,

which I attempt to partake in here and in chapter four of *Diasporic Childhoods* where I focus on lesbian experience in female authored texts.

In order to extend the erotic as an epistemology for considering queerness beyond black female subjectivity, Lyndon Gill writes,

It is in the moment when Lorde is forced to replace ‘the erotic’ with ‘the sensual’ that her reconceptualization of the erotic itself achieves its most potent coherence. If the sensual (‘those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passion of love in its deepest meanings’) provides a bridge between the political and the spiritual, then ‘the erotic’ constitutes the entire structure and ought not to be reduced to an easy symmetry with any of its composite elements. (10)

Gill’s intervention highlights the subversive nature of nonconforming relationships that defy socially implicated gender categories and provide a wider range of possibilities for community action, excavating queerness within the boundaries of the nation. Even as Gill argues for the erotic’s application in twenty-first century analysis to a broader range of subjectivities, he accounts for how Lorde’s articulation was historically constituted within specifically female experiences. Wainaina works through this dialectic in his writing via his pull towards specifically feminine entities. By doing so, he extends erotic analysis to his own male experience, while recognizing the significance of its female foundation. On the one hand, this pull towards the feminine could be an allegorical attempt at challenging the traditional relationships between manhood, power, and the nation. Or it could represent the queer male authors’ attempt at defying gender categories altogether, liberating his queer self from the heteropatriarchal nation in which he resides. On the other hand, the entanglements with female subjectivity in his writing could allude to the complex ways men/boys and women/girls enact their sexual identities within

and/or against socially proscribed gender categories, and the privileges and oppressions associated with them.

Wainaina is drawn to Wambui as a role model figure, especially her subversive nature; however, he is never able to identify with her as much as his sister Ciru can because of his gender.¹⁵ For example, when Wambui brings him and Ciru to visit a railroad community of women, the women's discussion and incorporation of Ciru ostracize him. He writes, "All the women start laughing. The sleeping woman wakes up suddenly and stands slowly, her *lesso* falling off. She reties it, and I see twin strings of beads running around her waist. Wambui told me beads are for making men happy in bed. I am not sure how. Wambui is winking at Ciru. Those two have secrets, and I don't like it. I miss Cleophas" (42). Young Wainaina's inability to understand the function of the beads despite being told by Wambui what they are for illustrates both his limited understanding of heterosexual sex and sexuality, in general, and his inability to grasp women's sexuality, specifically. For young Wainaina, the wink and assumed secrets between Wambui and Ciru symbolize a manifestation of the erotic he seeks, especially given the fact that their female camaraderie revolves around women's issues—negotiating their roles as pleasers of men, as the passage suggests. However, their discussion of these issues impacts Wainaina's assumed exclusion; his gender—as he understands it—distinguishes him from their shared experiences and distances him from the erotic he seeks. That Wainaina had not come to terms with his non-normative sexuality at this point in his life could have exacerbated the confusion associated with his

¹⁵ Here, I want to note that while I emphasize a female-female bond between Wambui and Ciru that Wainaina is never able to achieve, I recognize moments in the text where Ciru too is also unable to identify with Wambui because of class differences.

understanding of sex in the scene and his sense of exclusion. In addition, we have no confirmation that Ciru actually understands what Wambui tells her. Still, the possibility of their erotic alliance makes Wainaina insecure and simultaneously aware of his male positionality. As a result, he falls back on a male heterosexual alternative: he mentions missing his family's recently fired gardener and cook Cleophas, who is one of Wainaina's early models of male (hetero)sexuality. Earlier in this same chapter, young Wainaina is caught spying on Cleophas as he is having sex with a woman. These two references to Cleophas at the point in the memoir where Wainaina feels ostracized by Wambui and Ciru alludes to Wainaina's predetermined relationship to male heterosexuality and its impact on his early sexual consciousness. His relationship to masculinity, as such, interferes with his access to an erotic that would enable his queer self-knowing. As such, Wainaina places his childhood self at the crossroads of male and queer, and the advantages and disadvantages ascribed to each.

Wainaina-the-memoirist's engagement with female aesthetics accounts for the impact of his own gendered conditioning. This nuanced approach to gender representation works within and against a tradition of African creative and political thought established in response to colonialism. In this tradition, a turn to the feminine figured as an aesthetic reclamation of Africa from invasion. Obododimma Oha describes how late-twentieth century debates on women's rights in Africa drew from the ways that the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor, writer and first president of postcolonial Senegal, depicted the African woman's body as a metaphor for the continent. He claims that Senghor's poetry "appears to provide a conceptual basis for the Africanisation of feminists aesthetics...[and] provides a basis for the challenge of male and masculinist

attitudes to issues of female revaluation and/or defen[s]e of women's rights" (16). While Oha urges against simply romanticizing Africa as a female presence, his argument remains temporally limited within a postcolonial framework. By focusing on the anti-colonial politics of Senghor's poetry, he privileges an Africa-West binary that conflates black women's social oppression with Africa's colonial oppression, in general. This way of focusing on women's oppression as part and parcel of Africa's oppression under colonialism is representative of late twentieth century African feminisms that focus on the interdependency and complementarity of the sexes, such as Catherine Acholonu's *Motherism*.¹⁶ Feminist scholars such as Oha and Acholonu situate their arguments against both those Western feminisms that ignore cultural relativism, and against certain male African scholars, artists, and activists who ignore the rights of women and their complementarity to men's social position. Moreover, Acholonu's *Motherism* speaks out against homosexuality for how it deemphasizes the complimentary of the sexes and heterosexual reproduction, which she regards as natural to African cosmology. By depending on an Africa-West binary, these arguments overlook the potential violence that can occur when man works through the female body artistically. Wainaina attempts to remedy this oversight by accounting for his gendered conditioning as he seeks a female erotic.

Oha rightfully argues that the allegorical feminization of Africa, even if initially meant to frame a decolonial politic, offers a point of entry for dealing with women's issues on a gender specific level. However, his reading of Senghor becomes problematic when it privileges man's capacity to work from within the Africa-as-female body

¹⁶ See Acholonu (1995).

framework, metaphorically or not, without accounting for its potential violence. In his analysis of Senghor's *Nocturnes*, he writes,

Senghor's concern with black women's body, not just in terms of the complexion but also in the significs of feminine body movements, allegorises the physicality of Africa—the 'Vulgar' body of the continent exposed, but not in the understanding of the colonialist. This exposure, which is literally possible in the popular African dance sessions, is the poetic exposure that queries misunderstandings that emerge from external male racial peeping into the cultures of Africa. Senghor, as a male African *insider*, is privileged to perceive and narrate the kinetic text of the black woman's body. (13)

In the final sentence of this passage, Oha accepts Senghor's claim to narrate the black woman's body on account of his insider status as African. Here, the black woman's body stands in for the African continent. He describes this feminization, a result of the allegorical rape of Western colonialization, as the peeping male gaze. The African male's privilege is symbolic of his assumed duty to protect. Not only does this symbolism (in reference to both the African male and the colonial male) perpetuate a dichotomy between male subjectivity and female objectivity, but its privileging of colonial struggle between black and white ignores the intra-African violence caused when man dictates the text of woman's body, whether or not femininity and the female body hold any metaphysical power such as an erotic potentiality. As Julie Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi states, "The African woman was thus spoken for; she herself was no speaking subject" (5).¹⁷

In *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, Wainaina exhibits caution when describing Wambui as an embodiment of erotic power and his attraction to it as he gets older. This nuance, in effect, highlights the power he assigns to Wambui's femininity to

¹⁷ In chapter 4, I discuss in detail Nfah-Abbenyi's approach to complicating the "Mother Africa" trope in male-centric African political thought.

subvert heteropatriarchal male authority as epitomized by Moi's independence celebration. It also reminds us that Wainaina's own childhood conditioning is a result of the class and gendered power structure that positions Moi and Wambui in opposition. He accounts for this by illustrating how his subconscious desire to associate with Wambui's feminine erotic evolves into a socially inflicted sexual consciousness that privileges a male gaze, an eventuality that Oha overlooks in his discussion of Senghor's anti-colonial poetry. With this shift, Wambui's body risks becoming the object it has been historically fated to represent. Thus, Wainaina's self-narration—how he describes his own childhood sexuality and coming-of-age story—becomes a meditation on not only the fate of queer subjectivities in postcolonial Kenya, but on how colonial and postcolonial histories inadvertently engender a male-queer universal that can perpetuate gender violence, despite however contradictory this conflation of queer and privilege is in theory.

In the Independence Day celebration scene of the memoir, we witness an evolution in young Wainaina's socially conditioned sexual consciousness and awareness to Wambui's dancing body that obscures her politically subversive impact. "Wambui squeals and jumps," Wainaina writes,

her breasts bouncing, 'Ohhhh. Haiya. Chalonye ni Wasi? I rove this song.'

I lie back on the carpet. I close my eyes, my back prickling, and let her limbs climb into my mind's living room—where the turgid disco ball throws a thousand nipples of light on me and skirts and twirl and glitter with silver. Her full fiction world comes surging like current, and happiness bursts out of me like a trumpet. (49)

Here, Wainaina juxtaposes Wambui's bouncing breasts against Maroon

Commandos' 1977 Taita language song "Charonye ni Wasi," which speaks for the struggles of rural immigrants living in Kenya's urban centers, the poverty they face, and

their desire to remember rural life.¹⁸ Although Wainaina identifies Wambui as working-class, he has her mispronounce the Taita word “Charonye” for “Chalonye,” polarizing her from the working-class struggles addressed in the song. One would expect this common mispronunciation of “r” for a rural Kenyan speaking English, but her mispronunciation of another local language seems to correlate with how she shifts in young Wainaina’s perspective and in relation to his sexual becoming: from authority figure and subject of resistance to sexualized body and someone who stumbles over words. As she becomes closer to the latter in Wainaina’s mind, she also loses her erotic pull; in this scene, he begins to emphasize language barriers and sexualized bodies over her capacity to bring people together across differences—which would align with the fact that she sings this song and her sensual dancing body. On the other hand, Wainaina-the-memoirist is skeptical of his childhood self, and so, he exhibits caution when displaying his young sexual awakening. That is, he includes allusions to flamboyance and artificiality in the descriptions of his sexual response to Wambui: he lets her limbs climb into his mind, the “disco ball” is turgid and throws “nipples of light” on him, happiness “bursts” out of him like a trumpet, and there are twirls of glitter and silver. By mixing components of sexual arousal with non-living objects, he alludes to the artificiality of assumed “natural” behaviors. His “letting” Wambui’s limbs enter his mind suggests that he could have initially resisted. Though, it also emphasizes his consent to what he has been taught is the acceptable nature of being a man and implies that if this “entering” were more natural, he would not have had to make the decision to let it in.

¹⁸ See “Single Review: Charonyi Ni Wasi—Maroon Commandos”.

By illustrating how Wambui shifts in his young mind (from physical reality to fiction) as he enters a “man’s” worldview, Wainaina positions female subjection as a condition of male consent.¹⁹ Fictionality, here, emphasizes the constructed nature of this scene and Wainaina’s childhood-sexual consciousness. Because we, as real-world readers, know Wainaina is queer and claims to know about his queerness at an early age, we can better situate his impressionability in this scene and his evolution into manhood as a condition of the gendered norms informing this becoming. However, this “becoming man” makes him complicit in the societal erasure of Wambui/woman’s erotic potentiality. Her becoming his “fiction” indicates his possession of her and her further subjection. As the sentence following the quotation above reads, “Wambui, my Wambui is a trumpet, a Gikuyu Scottish strumpet, a woman in long skirts from a Barbara Cartland book cover, from Mum’s secret cupboard, *We Danced All Night*” (49). Wambui becomes man’s relation in this sentence: she is young Wainaina’s to bring him happiness (the previous quote correlates trumpet with happiness), she is a prostitute for black and white men, and she is a woman in need of a hero. However, Wainaina addresses the complexity of his young imagination—his “fictionalizing”—and the artificiality of social constructions by remaining committed to the idea of Wambui as a horizon of possibility. He writes, “It could have been different. Blink...My fiction Wambui will upend the fate of her mother; she has no fear of starting new, in a new place” (49). By juxtaposing this sentence with the previous quotation, Wainaina reveals the problematic nature of

¹⁹ This coupling fiction with subjugation differs from how I understand his depiction of womanhood in “Boonoonoonoos.” While his description of Wambui as fiction in the memoir correlates with his exploration of maleness as a social norm, his portrayal of Milka and Eunice (fictional characters) as horizons of possibility exemplifies a self-conscious attempt at working through and challenging the gender norms constricting his earlier self.

claiming a female subject as an embodiment of possibility when the claimer is conditioned male, though he does not delimit the possibility altogether. While the subversive nature of a female erotic seems a necessary condition for transforming the space of the nation or unearthing an already existing queer nature, we must reevaluate the gendered restrictions impacting queer subjectivities and progressive/feminist epistemologies to avoid universalizing queerness with male experience.

Wainaina ends this section of *One Day I Will Write About this Place* with a fictionalized account of young Wambui the day before an independence celebration that demonstrates a constant negotiating between erotic potentiality and male/state power. He writes,

There she is, back on the roof of my head, clear as anything. Wambui, all of thirteen or so, barefoot in a torn red dress, legs chalky and dusty, a ringworm on her head, with a Huckleberry grin, eyes darting from side to side, in a Dundori public *barza*, a day before another Madaraka Day, whispering some snarky comment in Bawdy Gikuyu, or Rude Kiswahili, right in the middle of prayer for the president. A sharp trumpet flares again, the village subchief doubling back after a public meeting, and wagging his finger, in a pith helmet and khaki uniform. The hearts of the villagers clench for a moment in fear, and he growls: 'Who said that?'

The subchief—I shall call him Carey Francis Michuki—is fat and stubby, and pleased to see all eyes staring at the ground; the villagers are suitably obedient, in rows and columns. Yesterday three women who sell illegal liquor spent the day whitewashing the stones that mark his little compound, around the flag. He hurrumps and ghurrumps, an Independence Day cockerel, chest swollen, *Jogoo, mimi ni jogoo*. Imposing. He grabs hold of his lapels, his colonial buttons shine, he is the most ironed man here. Tonight the Kenya Breweries rep and the British American Tobacco rep and the Imperial Biscuit reps will get him and the district commissioner drunk, with their entertainment allowance, so the convoys of biscuits and tobacco will spend the day kneeling outside the tin hut with a Kenyan flag blowing outside. Impudent. Pumbaf. The subchief turns and waddles back to his station, two hungover administration policemen walking unsteadily behind him, whistles in pockets, as Wambui's mother shoots a warning to her with a wagging finger, as I decide that one day I will write books. (53-54)

In the first paragraph of this passage, Wainaina presents a fictionalized account of

Wambui's subversive side, a reflection of how she occupies his imagination. However, in

juxtaposition with her rebelliousness—her grin and snarky comment during a prayer for the president—Wainaina highlights the patriarchal power of the nation, the nation’s collusion with the West, and how this collusion perpetuates gender and class-based hierarchies amongst Kenyan people and in relation to the world. He juxtaposes Wambui’s torn dress, bare feet, and ringworm against the greedy and gluttonous subchief and the villagers’ orderliness in his presence. He also has Wambui’s mother warn her about her behavior and the threat the state poses at the end of the passage. This exchange between mother and daughter highlights not only how Wambui’s class and youth (one can think naiveté or optimism/queer excess here) impact her precarious relationship to the patriarchal state, but how these factors correlate with her gender. Wainaina demonstrates Wambui’s position as a poor female subject whose embodiment of an erotic and potential as horizon of possibility—alluded to by her disregard for state authority—is impacted by the limited social mobility granted to such a subject. Though Wambui’s mother’s warning reminds her of her place in society, it also hints at motherhood’s—and female networks/companionship in general—role in Wainaina’s conception of erotic possibility. It also preludes how he approaches his complex relationship with his own mother. Wainaina ends the chapter with this warning, not to put down the power of a female erotic, but to remind us to think of the erotic in constant struggle with male power (as embodied by the state and how the state conditions his own childhood consciousness, but also as he functions as mediator of Wambui’s story). His account of Wambui is as much a reckoning with the erotic as it is a reckoning with the nature and evolution of his own gendered consciousness from child observer to memoirist.

Wainaina becomes more and more disillusioned with the Kenyan state as the memoir progresses, and he works through this disillusionment in his portrayals of working-class black women. For example, as he comes to better terms with how the state limits working class black women's social mobility, his descriptions of them become pessimistic, alluding to how this reality also challenges his imagining of erotic power and queer possibility. He illustrates his disillusionment in a scene where he encounters a woman posing as a wealthy émigré at a bar before he is about to take off for South Africa to attend university. In the scene, he describes this woman's façade deteriorating over the course of the night and revealing a less ideal version of herself. Upon first meeting her, he writes, "She is older, and glamorous, in a short blue shimmery dress. She sits next to us without asking and flicks her fingers at a waiter, her skin Hollywood yellow and matte, lips shiny pink, eyes lazy and smoky...Her accent has something in it, German maybe, mixed into her Kenyan accent" (89-90). She introduces herself, "'I am on holiday,' she says, in an air stewardess voice. 'My husband is from Austria. We are divorced.'" (90). As they drink and dance throughout the night, this glamorous image deteriorates. "I am very drunk," Wainaina writes, "...Then we are dancing, close, she and I. She whispers things in my ear. She smells of chewing gum and liquor...Michael Jackson is squealing 'Earth Song,' and his softer tones whirl in the spools of her breath...I must hold myself together. I break away and go to freshen up in the bathroom" (92). Though one may characterize their close dancing and the woman's whispering into Wainaina's ear as sensual, several components of these passages suggest otherwise, or at least complicate the terms of this sensuality. First, the scent of chewing gum, though probably fresh, reminds us of earlier in the memoir when President Moi delivers an

overabundance of chewing gum to Wainaina's primary school even though the school banned students from chewing gum. With this scene in mind, the woman's chewing gum breath can symbolize her consumer status and, thus, victim to Moi's corporate partnerships and exploitations. In addition, Michael Jackson's "Earth Song" plays in the background. Though the song is about environmental justice, it can also represent American cultural and economic imperialism—as many forms of Western activism take shape in the developing world. Its lyrics intermix with the scent of chewing gum and liquor, having an intoxicating effect on Wainaina and requiring that he hold himself together. Whereas his younger, less aware self, may have misread this moment of psycho-physical imbalance for sexual arousal—because this is how one “should” respond to a beautiful woman—this older, though not yet-fully self-realized, version of Wainaina becomes aware of the woman's real identity, and this rattles him. The reference to Michael Jackson, then, also highlights Wainaina's grappling with the performative nature of authenticity as it refers to this woman's identity and reflects itself onto his own.²⁰

Wainaina begins to interpret the elasticity of her character as her polished façade deteriorates before his eyes. “She is sitting, her hair askew,” Wainaina writes,

Her legs are open now, and she bends to scratch her thighs, the stockings seamed. Gikuyu *r's* and *l's* tangle and snarl into her English, like a comb on untreated dry hair. Her head still nods to the music, now a little too vigorously. The soft international jungle on her head parts every so often, and we glimpse the roads she used to arrive here, the stitches from the grafted pieces of hair, the patches of bald, the little spurts of darker, kinkier hair pulled brutally into the wave, so brutally that there are little eruptions and scars on her scalp. (92)

²⁰ Although Michael Jackson is black, his presence in this scene (that raises questions about inauthenticity) emphasizes his whitewashing as an extension of the American systems of power from which his music circulates. Therefore, Wainaina's depiction of “diasporic music” here differs from how he portrays it earlier to emphasize the subversive nature of Wambui's dancing female body.

Wainaina directs us to the woman's spread legs not to display his arousal, but to capture her bawdy character. Whereas quotidian working-class women like Wambui figured subversively in his childhood imagination, especially against ideas of nationhood and patriarchal order, here, Wainaina represents woman in a state of perverse decay in a way that echoes his view of the nation. It is not that Wainaina idealizes the Hollywood woman over the daughter of potato farmers. His emphasis of her deteriorating façade alludes to the unreality of permanent change and how feigned attempts at progress disrupt the erotic power as resistance that he associated with Wambui. What adds to the tragedy of this scene is Wainaina's realization that this woman is, figuratively speaking, an adult Wambui. This scene, then, alludes to Wambui's failed future in relation to the state of man/nation. He writes, "Wambui, all those years ago. [The woman at the bar] reminds me of Amigos Disco Wambui dancing on Independence Day, so easy to believe in the person she wanted to be, so impossible for me to accept that person has come to be. The waiter stands behind me, hands me the bill, still grinning; his eyes run down her breasts and to the middle of her now slack legs" (93). Wainaina does not necessarily interpret the state of working-class womanhood as a failed erotic. He attributes failure to man and nation, both unwilling—if not lacking in self-awareness—to recognize how power as it relates to gender disrupts possibility/freedom. Moreover, this scene, as it stands both alone and as Wambui's future, illustrates how the perpetual male gaze impacts women's psyche, making them actors in their own subjection. Wainaina describes the rough and "patchy" route she took to get to the momentary and conditional façade, a façade meant to please man even as the act of pleasing instigates her own reversion. Under this system,

then, she remains man/nation's subject, alluding to a more urgent necessity to destruct that system altogether.

There are also several instances throughout this chapter of the memoir that underscore the influence of working-class politics on Wainaina's perspective. To start, he mentions reading Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* right before he describes his interactions with this woman at the bar: "It is illegal and it was thrilling, and I had vowed to go back to my own language. English is the language of the colonizer" (92).²¹ At this point in the memoir, it is 1990 and post-secondary education had changed from being free to having a financial cost, influencing his decision to enroll at a university in South Africa, and suggesting an overall shift towards capitalism in Kenyan governance.²² He states that if he is going to pay for an education, it might as well be for a degree he wants to pursue; in Kenya, you do not get to choose what kind of degree you pursue even if you have to pay for your education in full. References to his interest in working-class politics permeate his descriptions of the woman at the bar. He writes, "Me, I want to peel it all off: the hair, the skin, the Black Russian hand gestures. I am so angry at her fake attempt to be what she is not. That she fooled me. I want to put a hoe in her hands and tell her to go home to Subukia and grow potatoes" (93). This response comes shortly after he states, "The curtain of face powder has opened, and there they are: three small dark tribal marks on each side of her nose, not from the weather, not from work, or an accident, three deliberate, immovable lines on her face" (93). We see how his perception of the ideal

²¹ Ngũgĩ outspokenly criticized Moi's dictatorial presidency; for this, he was exiled from Kenya until 2002 when Moi retired from office.

²² During the early 1990s, Kenya received pressure from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to employ democratic principles. This influenced Moi's introduction of a multi-party system, which I reference in chapter two. See Ajulu (2002) and Rajula (2020).

Kenya (and his dissatisfaction with its current politics), then, informs his interpretation of female erotic power. That is, his frustration with the state replicates itself onto his dissatisfaction with the woman's façade: both the nation and the idea of female power he held seem to be failing him. If the female body represents Africa, and his Africa is one best represented by black working-class women, then this turn to capitalism, and this woman's entanglement with it, represents his frustration and impacts his decision to leave Kenya. While his idealization of the female body is not dissimilar to Senghor's image of the dancing woman as discussed by Oha, Wainaina attributes the failure of this idealization to its relationship to heteropatriarchy as represented by the nation, the male gaze, and his own desire to articulate freedom. And so, reimagining queerness within African space, and particularly the space of the nation, which Wainaina remains committed to until the end of his life, requires aligning queerness with black women's ongoing struggle against patriarchy.

Wainaina crafts his memoir in a way that both mourns the state of black working-class women and critiques his own gender and class position. By illustrating how his socially conditioned male mind informs his interpretations of women's experiences at various points of his life, he positions himself as a byproduct of the patriarchal world he critiques and highlights how this complicity interferes with the female body and how it is/can be imagined. For example, young Wainaina idealizes the sexual nature of Wambui's femaleness because this is what he knows to be the "right" reaction for a boy to have, especially at such a sexually transformative and impressionable age. In addition, a slightly older and politically conscious Wainaina idealizes the idea of "Mother Africa" as it embraces how the female body has come to represent the continent. These examples

suggest that when applied as a metaphor for the continent by the patriarchy, womanhood risks being commodified, threatening the erotic from materializing between and for queer men and women. As Audre Lorde cautions, “The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment.” (55). By evaluating his own gendered subjectivity and how it informs his relationship to the nation and womanhood, Wainaina attempts to break down—or, at least, begins this process—the barrier between woman as metaphor and its erotic essence in relation to the psychic/emotional in social and historical responses to power. Only through this reckoning will an erotic potential be available to a universal queer subject. Lastly, Wainaina’s leaving for university juxtaposes the privilege to travel against these representations of inert working-class womanhood. And so, even though this chapter alludes to his belief in the potentiality of thinking through a female erotic and working-class culture relationally, he satirizes the gender/class dynamic by exposing himself as a contradiction through his own complicity: “I will take Gikuyu classes, when I am done with diversiddy and advertising, when I am driving a good car. I will go to the village and make plays in Gikuyu, in my good new car. I will make very good decolonized advertisements for Coca-Cola...I will be cool and decolonized. An international guy. Like, like Youssou N’Dour. Even Ngũgĩ is in America” (92).

Erotic Motherhood: A Prelude

In *One Day I Will Write About this Place*, Wainaina recognizes how his own conditioning as male and his upbringing in an upper-middle-class family inform his coming-of-age and his relationship to women in the memoir. However, his exhibited attraction to female *experience* throughout the memoir symbolizes his recognition of an erotic pull rooted in this experience and central to his imagining of a queer African future. If there exists a real relationship between man/power/nation that determines the state of queer life, then there is something powerful—an erotic—inherent to female experience that if acknowledged, Lorde tells us, can be used to subvert patriarchal power. As Gill argues, and as Wainaina makes abundantly clear, the erotic can be discovered and used to empower a collective across sexes. However, Wainaina employs representations of black women to remind us how the erotic has evolved out of experiences specific to race and gender and as determined by heteropatriarchal power. He illustrates his own relationship to the erotic and its epistemological evolution as complex because he is queer but male. With the memoir, he negotiates his identity in relation to the “female” in order to unearth queer possibility via erotic power.

Though Wainaina similarly portrays his relationship with his mother along gendered lines, he alludes to the possibilities inherent to a mother-queer child alliance for imagining queer futures. His portrayal of his relationship with his mother in the memoir and in his essay “I am a Homosexual, Mum” represents a larger trend in twenty-first century African queer literature across lines of sex and gender that seeks a mother’s acknowledgement of one’s queerness in order to successfully accept oneself.²³ However, in order to fully realize this relationship, Wainaina and other authors—including Chinelo

²³ See Osman (2013), Abani (2007), Okparanta (2015), and Emezi (2018).

Okparanra, whose queer engagement with the theme of motherhood I focus on in the next chapter—also attempt to explore women’s labor as passed down from mother to child. As such, the child becomes an extension of her or his mother’s erotic potential, figuring queer childhood as an entanglement of multiple gendered and sexual realizations. Part of what Wainaina explores in the depiction of his relationship with his mother is how accounting for his gendered upbringing is imperative to understanding his mother’s experience in relationship to him and society at large. But this erotic relationship ultimately nourishes a theorization of queer childhood that accounts for and thrives off of a deeply felt and liberated female aesthetic. It also highlights an inherent link between a seemingly new phenomenon—homophobia—and the colonial and postcolonial histories of silence/violence shaping female experience.

In his autobiographical writing, Wainaina associates his struggle to come-of-age as a closeted queer man with an overarching tension between himself and his mother. However, he uses this tension not to blame his mother for his experience but to illustrate how his insecurities surrounding his sexuality actively perpetuate his mother’s gendered silencing. In “I am a Homosexual, Mum,” Wainaina describes himself revealing his sexuality to his mother as she is on her death bed, though he establishes at the outset that this is just an imagining; he notes that “This is Not the Right Version of Events.” We later discover that Wainaina did not make it home to see his mother before she died, and, so, she never knew this side of him. In the imagining, however, Wainaina tells his mother, “I have never thrown my heart at you mum. You never asked me to.” Shortly after he writes, “Nobody, nobody, ever in my life has heard this. Never, mum. I did not trust you, mum.” In these passages, Wainaina conflates his struggle to express himself

with his mother's constraint; he establishes a tension between his desire to tell her about his sexuality, and the fact that he mistrusted her because of her silence. While it is clear that this mistrust affected his coming-of-age experience, the revisionist nature of the essay—the fact that we learn that he did not see his mother before she died because of his own failings—provokes a reconsideration of the causes of this strain on their relationship.

If we return to a chapter in the memoir where Wainaina eulogizes his mother's death, we can see that he imagines his mother's holding back when it came to his rearing was a result of her desire to let him dream and pursue life in ways that she was unable to due to her gender and status as mother. Referring to himself in third person, Wainaina writes, "He has her [his mother] dreaminess, her absentmindedness. Her stubbornness. He does not have her will, her spine, or her refusal to accept uncertainties, to transcend them. He stands and falls into the tangle of his doubts. Always stands and falls and dreams. She too wanted to make beautiful things and maybe that is why she let him go, when sometimes she could have been sterner with him" (180). His mother's constraint, here, signifies her awareness to the potential of his difference and her belief in him to make something of it. Being exposed to Wainaina's self-awareness and capacity for self-criticism in this passage allows us to read his "coming out" narrative in the "lost chapter" as more than just an exploration of his own insecurities. By positioning his mother's silence at its center, he highlights a relationship between his precarious sexual identity and a history of black women's oppression. There is also an underlying implication that societal pressures around masculinity and homophobia influence how he takes out his insecurities on his mother, perpetuating this history of hetero-male violence. And so, it is reckoning with the gendered history of violence and

silence that shaped his mother's experiences and his own involvement as a socially conditioned male that ultimately permits him to overcome the odds that restrict his full becoming as a queer man in postcolonial Kenya. This example suggests that the history of women passed down through the mother is a vital element to be reckoned with in order to fully grasp queer childhood as a horizon of possibility. In the following chapter, I think further about how the queer child embodies this history passed down, and how this can transform how we interpret queerness in relation to woman, Africa, and the future.

Chapter 4: Erotic Motherhood: A Feminist Reimagining of Queer Africa from the Diaspora

“Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them” (241-242). – Alice Walker

The works of twenty-first century African queer literature explored thus far in *Diasporic Childhoods* have in common, one way or another, an appeal to the mother figure. Though African motherhood has been an unsettled/ing trope in the larger African literary context throughout the twenty and twenty-first centuries, queer literature written at this historical juncture shifts the terms of its articulation to shed light onto new queer African feminisms centered around a mother-queer child relationship. My discussions of Osman and Wainaina in chapters two and three each culminate with the implication that representations of queer African childhood as a necessary horizon of possibility have a need for a mother’s recognition.

More often than not, demonstrations of a desire to be recognized by the mother become most vital when a literary work appears to be invested in mapping out new cartographies of belonging on African continental grounds. Of course, then, this raises the question of whether or not the queer child’s desiring the mother as s/he is drawn to African geography resurfaces age-old assumptions on the stasis of African motherhood

and, thus, African womanhood to the degree to which an African imaginary conflates womanhood with motherhood. It is important, then, to continue to consider the ways representations of queer childhood implicitly overlap with notions of universalism that replicate socially conditioned male experience and reinforce patriarchal nationhood. In *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi reminds us that "[t]he phallus is...both...a sexual object and a way of thinking, as that which man has used for centuries to describe and reinforce relative and bifurcated notions of desire and knowledge" (100). On the one hand, boy children's pull towards the mother and other forms of femininity can be considered an attempt at escaping the phallocentric nationhood that deems their queer lives punishable by law in many African countries and provokes reevaluating the ideological parameters of African motherhood in relation to possibility. However, we must also be wary of the ways such an analysis can replicate an assumed dependency between motherhood as an ideological potentiality and patriarchal nationhood as it relies on the mother to bear and nurture sons.¹ This particular desire can risk phallic resonance—even as the son runs from the phallus—if the mother-son relationship reproduces the unidirectional socio-economics where womanhood becomes defined by woman's capacity to produce and serve her sons.² While my main goal in this chapter is to explore the ways contemporary queer writers revitalize an African feminism centered on a mother-child relationship that is liberatory in nature, I reemphasize Grace Musila's analysis of the female body. In her article on Yvonne Vera's fiction as a predilection towards caution, Musila claims,

¹ See Azuah (2005), p. 132; Munro (2017), p. 192; Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), p. 25-29.

² Such a relationship has been critiqued in classic literary texts such as Buchi Emecheta's 1979 *The Joys of Motherhood*.

“although oppressive systems are often constructed and legitimized at the level of ideas and discourse, they are experienced in a corporeal manner and manifest themselves materially through concrete lived experience” (60). And so, reimagining queer childhood through a child’s relation to the mother must account for the lived and material experiences of black and African motherhood, especially how the queer child’s desire to be recognized impacts how we analyze the mother as both body and metaphor.

In chapters two and three, I analyze Wainaina’s coming-of-age male within and alongside a phallogentric social history of postcolonial Kenya as depicted in his memoir *One Day I Will Write About this Place*. I highlight how his astute self-awareness renders a narrative that also pays attention to the nuanced meaning of gender as it impacts his positionality as a male relation to women such as Wambui and his mother. One example of Wainaina’s awareness to how the patriarchal parameters of the nation-state affect others is in the obituary chapter of his memoir written for his mother. This acknowledgment of the limits of his mother’s gendered experience positions his “call to the mother for recognition.” He describes this “call” by acknowledging the sacrifice and constraint she made for him and his becoming, not as a phallogentric repossession of the mother figure, but as a rememory of his mother’s envisaged self. Toni Morrison describes rememory in her discussion of her 1987 novel *Beloved*:

as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past...There is no reliable literary or journalistic or scholarly history available to [her characters, the former enslaved], to help them, because they are living in a society and a system in which the conquerors write the narrative of their lives. They are spoken of and written about—objects of history, not subjects within it. Therefore not only is the major preoccupation of the central characters that of reconstituting and recollecting a usable past...but also the narrative strategy the plot formation turns on the stress of remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process. (324)

While, in this body of literature, a mother's recognition is deemed vital for queer becoming in the literal sense, contemporary queer African authors use this pull to also highlight the inherent link between a seemingly new phenomenon—homophobia—and the colonial and postcolonial histories of silence shaping female experience. What becomes apparent is the potentiality inherent in this mother-queer child dialectic, or what I want to call erotic motherhood. Taking both Walker and Morrison's leads, this chapter centers the re-membering of African/black woman's history through the queer child's engagement with her past and as a process of her/his own queer self-expression. The body of literature suggests that reckoning with this dialectic enables queer childhood's potentiality as a horizon of possibility. We can also think about the queer child as an embodiment of women's history passed down. This would transform how we interpret queerness in relation to woman, Africa, and the future.

In order to do so, I shift the focus of *Diasporic Childhoods* to examine how mother-daughter relationships, specifically, impact our understanding of erotic motherhood and contribute to how we interpret queer childhood as a horizon of possibility. This, even though part of my larger aim is to complicate motherhood (and erotic motherhood) as a gendered, or gender-dependent, category altogether. It is important to understand how erotic motherhood as an epistemology evolves out of (post)colonial histories of female experience. In order to arrive at this understanding, we have to acknowledge the material realities impacting black women over time, how they overlap with experiences of race, class, and sexuality, and how they translate onto queer experience. In the case of theorizing queer childhood, this recognition is part of a larger

process of accounting for the relationship between queer and female subjectivities without appropriating black women's history for a seemingly queer-male universal.

In her theorization of womanism as a black feminist epistemology, Alice Walker explains that although men can be womanists, it is important to recognize the ways its subversive nature is rooted in female experience passed down from mothers to daughters.

In her first definition of "womanist" at the beginning of *In Search of Our Mothers'*

Gardens: Womanist Prose, Walker describes,

From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown.' Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. (xi)

Here, Walker reimagines a mother's lesson on the precarious state of black womanhood as an act of intimacy with her daughter and encapsulating agency and possibility. She subverts those registers of black girlhood that permeate (in her context) American societies, such as sexual vulnerability, which instigates a loss of innocence and a premature ascendancy into womanhood. Instead, she implements active verbs, such as "Wanting to," "Acting," "Being," and "You trying..." to reject assumptions about—and representations of—the passive state of being a black woman and redefine womanhood based on the intimacy shared in this moment between mother and daughter. For Walker, becoming woman translates to being "Responsible. In charge. *Serious*," and "outrageous" becomes "audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior." Thus, this lesson is less a precaution and more of a recognition of the daughter's radical self; recognizing, in itself, is active and not a passive state, a hinge, or a reinterpretation of what Brent Hayes

Edwards calls *décalage*, between these two temporal states of black womanhood.³ It is in this gap that the distinction between mother and daughter blurs, and the erotic state of womanhood seems at its most potent. This chapter explores this erotic potential in the writing of a self-identified queer woman, focusing on representations of queer women who are simultaneously lesbian daughter and lesbian mother. It considers how this lesbian mother/daughter perspective transforms how we understand a queer erotic presence that, in effect, reshapes African cartographies of belonging within and against histories of postcolonial nationalism and African feminisms.

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of erotic motherhood in Chinelo Okparanta's 2015 novel *Under the Udala Trees*. In it, I examine the relevancy of the protagonist Ijeoma's mother's experience as a widow—an effect of the Biafra war, a conflict of intra-Nigerian nationalisms that took place in the late 1960s—to Ijeoma's gendered and sexual becoming.⁴ Of significance is how Ijeoma-as-narrator mediates her mother's story and how her mother's discomfort with her daughter's non-normative sexuality has an impact on this mediation. I track how Ijeoma's becoming a mother, herself, affects how she reckons with her mother's experiences, leading to their reconciliation at the end of the novel. And so, this reading explores the possibilities

³ See Edwards (2003).

⁴ According to the historian Frederick Cooper, regional and ethnic clashes over the control of oil production and export provoked the war between an Igbo minority and the Nigerian government. Igbos populated Eastern Nigeria where the oil came from, and they worried that government control over oil would cause political and economic regional imbalances. In addition, many Northern Nigerians felt that Igbos attempts at governmental reform (they took control of the government from January to July 1966 via military coup) were motivated by power. As a result, northerners killed tens of thousands of Igbos, and many more Igbos became refugees. In response to both the oil dilemma and the genocide in the north, Igbos seceded Eastern Nigeria and named it Biafra; this led to a bloody Civil War, which lasted from 1967 until 1970 when the Nigerian government won and took back control of Eastern Nigeria (172-73).

available in an erotic bond between heterosexual mother and queer daughter, and in the erotic power of Ijeoma's queer embodiment of both identities at the same time. That is, by the end of the novel, Ijeoma is at once queer daughter and queer mother. I consider the extent to which Ijeoma's queer reproductivity transforms our understanding of motherhood and the fertility of African space and moves an African imagination beyond the liminal scope of the fractured nation state as depicted by the novel's historical setting. The setting of this mother/queer daughter reconciliation in Africa is especially subversive given homosexuality's continued criminalization throughout much of the continent at the time the story is written and published.⁵ Therefore, the queer space Okparanta imagines exists in spite of contemporary African nationalisms. This analysis centers erotic motherhood as a queer, feminist epistemology for revising the politics of belonging in contemporary Africa; the queer mother/daughter dialectic orients an African political imagination into the future and beyond the heteropatriarchal nation-state. At the end of this chapter, I offer an intertextual analysis of the novel and Okparanta's 2013 short story collection *Happiness, Like Water* to discern how her diaspora positionality—as she works through American and African experiences—informs her articulation of erotic motherhood and how she imagines sexual freedom and African space in her writing.⁶

This reading aligns with *Diasporic Childhoods*' larger effort to illustrate how diasporic

⁵ On January 7, 2014 (*Under the Udala Trees* is published in 2015 and Okparanta's collection of short stories, *Happiness, Like Water*, in 2013) then President Goodluck Jonathan signed Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act. Under this law, "[I]t is illegal not only to engage in an intimate relationship with a member of the same sex, but to attend or organize a meeting of gays, or patronize or operate any type of gay organization, including private clubs. Any same-sex marriages or partnerships accepted as legal in other countries would be void in Nigeria" (Gladstone). In 2019, a Nigerian Public Relations Officer of an Abuja Police Command, asked all homosexuals to flee the country or be prosecuted. This Officer also called on Nigerian citizens to bring to the police any evidence incriminating homosexuals (See "Leave Nigeria Now or Suffer").

⁶ Munro highlights Okparanta's diasporic positionality

African experience transforms how we read Africa and the United States/the West relationally and in terms of modernity.

Motherhood in Black/African Feminisms

A plethora of scholarship contributes to debates surrounding the trope of motherhood in African literature and the mother figure in African political culture, in general. Part of this chapter's aim is to situate Okparanta and other contemporary queer African writers like Wainaina and Osman as participants in this conversation as their writing revitalizes the trope from within a queer lens. Reading their contributions with and against a history of black and African feminist scholars who engage motherhood from different perspectives accentuates the nuances contemporary queer experiences, and positive filial and affiliative networks, offer to transform African identities and the terms of African belonging. It does so while simultaneously paying homage to the history of black and African women's work, across cultural and political differences, that has inspired and paved the way for contemporary queer artistic and scholarly productions.

Many scholars who initially took issue with the trope of "mother Africa" did so because of how it appeared in anti-colonial and postcolonial national rhetoric throughout the twentieth century, such as in the poetry of Leopold Senghor, who was a poet and the first president of Senegal (1960-80). In his Negritude poetry, for example, Senghor feminizes Africa as a way to repudiate the barbarity ascribed to Africa and Africans during colonialism by the West. As Obododimma Oha claims,

The celebration of femininity in [Senghor's] poetry can be seen, at one level, as following a common Romantic trend in which things imagined as 'beautiful' are worshipped and adored as 'female', and in which the emotion that defines 'beauty' derives from traditional stereotyping of knowledge. Thus to configure Africa

(blackness) as beautiful would require a feminine model for the configuration to be seen as logical and appropriate. In other words, *femininity* is for Senghor a tool for the legitimization of the Negritudean rhetoric. It enables the poet to justify the adoration of blackness and of his race. (12)

Although Senghor uses a conflated beauty/femininity to challenge the pathologizing of blackness, this metaphorizing of black woman's body loses its subversive potential as it remains confined to Western systems of logic. It also romanticizes woman's position in precolonial African societies, figuring her as transcendental and static, and erasing the experiences actual black women were having. Quoting Lloyd Brown, Nfah-Abbenyi reminds us that "Senghor went as far as to state that 'the African woman does not need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years'" (5).⁷ She continues, "This idealization of the African woman that posits her status transcendental symbol found itself duplicated in African literature with a parallel stress on the supremacy of motherhood, of the fertile mother, of fecundity" (5). Many African feminist scholars, including Nfah-Abbenyi, claim that as a product of a rhetoric that has historically worked to institutionalize the male-narrated postcolonial nation, African woman-as-mother functions to support male order rather than an agent in and of herself. Florence Stratton argues that as motherhood stands in for national allegory, the African woman becomes "an emblem of male potency or power, and a sexual/political allegory is produced in which her story is transformed into his story...[T]he female character is pregnant with the writer's meaning" ("Periodic Embodiments" 123).

Some African feminists, though, have remained committed to the trope of motherhood despite its tendency to service patriarchal renderings of postcolonial nationalism. These scholars often highlight the extent to which oppression is historically

⁷ See footnote 20 in Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), p. 154.

specific and seek out a metaphysical way of rendering motherhood culturally significant. Catherine Acholonu's classic text *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, for example, seeks out a culturally relative understanding of African womanhood that challenges Western and diaspora feminisms' approaches to women's issues. "An Afrocentric feminist theory," she writes, "...must be anchored on the matrix of *motherhood* which is central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through ages" (110). Acholonu's interpretation of motherhood, though seeking cultural relativism, depends on its function within the allegorizing of normative family-as-nation. That is, she conceptualizes an ideal womanhood whose main priority is the African people, emphasizing woman's relationship/mutuality with the African man, and her function to bare and serve others for the continuation of the African race. Acholonu continues, "A motherist...loves God, loves nature, loves and strives for purity and perfection, a motherist protects the child, protects the environment, shows understanding and respect for differences in, and weaknesses of others" (112). Her motherism, then, inadvertently situates female experience at the crux of African potentiality. This prescribed role overlooks women's plight as an effect of the patriarchal state she serves. In her attempt at negating Western ideology, Acholonu depends on a cultural essence that perpetuates a level of stasis in describing African women (and that is similar to those issues found in Senghor's romantic renderings of African womanhood).

What is more, Acholonu's motherist argument positions itself against other diasporic black feminisms as a part of her larger attempt at negating the West's influence on subaltern feminisms. This attempt at negation disrupts motherism's potentiality,

especially as it resonates deeply with some of the theoretical standpoints she so ardently refutes. A main target in Acholonu's refutation of Western feminism is Alice Walker, whose womanist theory I discussed above. She takes issue with what she interprets as Walker's individualism and womanism's conflation with lesbianism; she claims that both are threats to the communalism at the heart of African motherism.⁸ However, by conflating womanism with individualism, Acholonu ignores womanism's celebration of emotional relationality and its availability to men.⁹

What seems to be the essential difference between Acholonu and Walker is the former's unwillingness to challenge women's gendered relationship to the postcolonial nation. Acholonu's use of gender pronouns in her discussion of the motherist leader points to her committed subservience to the African man as national leader. She writes,

The motherist leader...does not dominate nature; the ecosystem, his fellow man, rather he observes, seeks to understand, and cooperates. A motherist is courageous, yet humble, powerful yet down to earth, fatherly yet a mother to the core; a motherist is a man or woman with a sense of history and continuity ever poised to question the status quo, ever ready to promote reforms, ever ready to make personal sacrifices for the good of others like any mother would for no matter his/her age or sex the motherist is essentially a mother. (113)

⁸ Acholonu writes, "Walker's womanist is first and foremost a lesbian. Thus Black feminism has become synonymous with lesbianism. This is a negative development, especially for those whom lesbianism is a taboo" (89).

⁹ Acholonu's argument against *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* relies on misreadings. For example, she quotes the following passage from Walker's definition of a womanist: "a woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non sexually" (89). Momentarily putting her issue with lesbianism aside, we should note the similarities between this passage about womanism and the prior two quotations where Acholonu defines motherism. Whereas Acholonu claims that "Walker's definition of womanist is a definition of herself," she ignores the centrality of community as alluded to by Walker's expressions of love and emotional flexibility. In addition, both writers center women's culture: Acholonu's motherism is "central to African metaphysics" and Walker's womanism prefers women's culture. Other components of womanism that Acholonu ignores, and which align with her own conception of motherism, are motherhood and the environment—the titular phrase "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" captures both of these concepts directly.

When Acholonu shifts from discussing a motherist to a motherist leader, she also switches the gender of pronouns from female to male, disregarding the possibility of female leadership. Even as she attempts to defy gender categories by discussing the ways biological men and women alike are inherently able to take on the tenets of a traditionally female socio-cultural positionality, her fixity within a patriarchal political framework disallows a full realization of her sexed constraint.

As a result of her commitment to an African/anti-West essence, Acholonu ignores the ways diasporic black feminisms subvert the patriarchal nature of Western nationalism and the ways Western patriarchalism permeates into African societies and her own feminist imaginings. In her attempt at distinguishing an African essence, she writes, “A viable African feminist theory must take cognizance of the essence of African epistemology, a deeper understanding of African thought and world view, a sensitivity to the reasons why and the ways in which African peoples differ from the rest of the world” (106). Notwithstanding the importance of this attempt to develop a feminism that is unique to the experiences of African women and societies at large, it relies on an epistemological foundation that conflates tradition and essence with modern socio-political formations in a way that works against her intent. It also lacks the appropriate nuance to account for its relationality to black diaspora feminisms at a larger scale. These gaps in Acholonu’s theoretical framing come into sharper focus when one takes a closer look at the ways Okparanta engages black diasporic frameworks in her writing. Okparanta’s diasporic positionality and existing black diasporic feminist networks, I argue, affect the evolution of an African metaphysics in her texts.¹⁰ However, it is not my

¹⁰ Instead of thinking about Africa and diaspora as mutually exclusive discursive entities, this analysis emphasizes their overlap, or a blurring of geographically informed categories. Say something about how

aim to disregard Acholonu's motherism as an African feminism in total. Rather than reject Acholonu's work, I want to think of my engagement with African motherhood as a subversive "queering" or disidentification.¹¹

My conceptualizing erotic motherhood as a queer African potentiality draws on contemporary African feminist discourse to prove an inherent relationality between African and diasporic imaginations. In addition, the interconnectedness of African and diasporic feminisms in this study shines light onto their immanent contentions and effectively expands the grounds for cooperative possibility. In her 1997 study of gender in African women's writing, Nfah-Abbenyi examines the significance of pleasure, as it relates to sexuality, in black feminist discourse and its complicated relationship to African female experience, particularly when Western and diasporic feminisms attempt to account for, rather than with, African women's local experiences. On the one hand, she recognizes how conversations about sexuality between women, such as between mothers and daughters, model an intimacy that relates to Walker's womanism and Audre Lorde's discussion of an erotic power as discussed in previous chapters. "Women do talk among themselves about their bodies," Nfah-Abbenyi writes, "Women teach one another secrets and practice rituals concerning sexuality that they hand down from generation to generation." However, she notes, "They sometimes talk about their sexual pleasure, but it is more often than not in relation to that of men. In most African societies where

people have been migrating throughout Africa from the beginning of time and ss, modernity (cross-cultural) experience is inherent to African experience.

¹¹ This, in itself, is a feminist undertaking considering the male canon we continue to revere despite the abject homophobia that permeates through it (think, for example, of Fanon. See hooks (1996), Macharia (2019), and Rao 2020).).

women's pleasure is most inferred from what they say or do, from how they say or do it, in their day-to-day interactions with men, the theorization of their pleasure as exclusive to women would drive an intolerable wedge between men and women" (25). Nfah-Abbenyi's issue, though, is not as much with the tension these conversations can create between women and men, but with the fact that Western feminism neglects to account for the specific needs of African women to combat their local discriminations.

One example Nfah-Abbenyi offers is how Western feminists respond to female circumcision on the African continent. She claims that while feminism should consider how this issue complicates interpretations of pleasure, "We are told that circumcision takes away [women's] pleasure for life" (26). This outlook, according to her, ignores how "[l]ocal women can...obtain valuable counseling and support from each other that can empower them either to collectively or individually protest against this practice (something that is happening already) and/or enable them to deal with their loss, heal, and live fulfilling sexual lives" (27). While such local forms of collective empowerment around female-female relationships reflect diasporic erotic and womanist approaches, issues arise when African cultural acts like circumcision, whether or not they are locally contested, are translated as barbaric in a global context. This barbarism is often ascribed to Western interpretations of African humanity and sexualities as a whole, despite "progressive" intentions. In her beloved 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, for example, Walker presents Africa as backwards and as a threat to modern feminism; this is most obvious in how the African environment instigates tensions between the characters Nettie and Corrine and in how Walker presents African girls in need of saving from African tradition. Bernice McFadden's 2018 *Praise Song for the Butterfly* is a more recent

example of the American savior narrative as it portrays an African girl rescued and brought to the United States by an African American volunteer. The fact that this book was longlisted for the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction suggests that what Nfah-Abbenyi saw as problematic in 1990s Western feminisms lingers in contemporary "progressive" cultures around the world.

In other ways, Nfah-Abbenyi's discussion of pleasure and women's sexualities is critical of the African female community she writes from, for example, its lack of support towards sexual minorities.¹² Her nuanced approach to discussing African womanhood models a feminism that can work between African and diaspora epistemologies. It would instigate new interpretations of black/African motherhood that account for women who cannot or choose not to be biological mothers and for the intergenerational conflict between mothers and lesbian daughters, all while still embracing motherhood's significance in African culture and for African queers. Unoma Azuah's pioneering work on representations of African lesbians in late twentieth century literature takes the trope of motherhood to task. In her discussion of the Nigerian writer Promise Okekwe's short story, "Rebecca," Azuah describes the protagonist Rebecca's childhood fascination with her mother's breasts, and how those around her process this as an early sign of lesbianism. The story ends with the friend of Rebecca's mother beating her for this assumed lesbianism. By emphasizing corrective punishment as a consequence of

¹² Nfah-Abbenyi considers the extent to which affirming heterosexuality helps African women fight for women's rights in societies where lesbianism is taboo. She argues, however, "Although, strategically, one might choose to risk this stance, I will maintain as well that this choice continues to stigmatize and perpetuate prejudice against what one can conjecture to be a 'silenced' number of lesbian African women, who cannot speak openly about their sexuality and therefore cannot publicly and politically fight for their rights. Heterosexual women find themselves in an 'enviable' bargaining position, but it is won at the expense of these silenced others" (29).

Rebecca's assumed lesbianism, violence in the story illuminates the subversive potential of Rebecca's ambiguous fetishization. First and foremost, this story captures the real-life issue concerning the abandonment of queer children by their parents, a theme that Osman also explores in *Fairytales for Lost Children*, and which I explore in chapter two.

However, the story also alludes to early queer African feminism's intentional reorienting away from a mother-centered conceptual framework for characterizing female African subjectivity. As Azuah writes, "The idea of motherism might be justifiable, especially with the matrifocal nature of Nigeria; however, it alienates not only women who cannot bear children but also women who choose not to be mothers" (130).¹³

These scholars and artists raise legitimate concerns for the problematic nature of a feminism centered on motherhood. Both the biological restrictions of traditional interpretations of motherhood and the intracommunal conflicts between African women, especially between mothers and daughters impacted by homophobia, affect how we interpret motherhood in terms of an erotic potential for queer persons. In order to use motherhood as an erotic framework, we have to first recognize how it is historically determined by heterosexism as an extension of the state. As Patricia McFadden writes, "Male power and control over women is made possible through the control of soci-cultural mechanisms of social definition and through the unequal distribution of social and economic resources...Another mechanism which the nationalists have used to discourage the expression of feminist positions is the heterosexist definition of sexuality" (518). And so, my impulse to interpret erotic motherhood across African and African diasporic frameworks does not rely on the idea that there is an inherent difference in the

¹³ Azuah, p. 130; see also Munro (2017), p. 192; and McFadden (1992), p. 518.

ways African women and their counterparts in the diaspora understand and value women's care. Instead, African diaspora theory and literature, especially from the United States and Europe, can model how black women's emotional and physical care/work has been integral to challenging nationalisms that bind black women and the idea of motherhood to heteropatriarchy.¹⁴ This, in consequence, can help us understand how and why literature by queer African writers of the twenty-first century who write from the diaspora reinvest themselves in the mother figure as a hinge to the queer child's full becoming.

I want to briefly shift the conversation to two contemporary scholars—one American and one Kenyan—whose theoretical interpretations of black motherhood taken together best capture how I understand its permeation through twenty-first century African queer literature. Their foundations will linger in different forms and overlap throughout the remainder of this chapter. Both of these theorists interweave history and tradition with articulations of contemporary becoming. They also center the intersectionality of race and gender in their excavations of queer possibility in the present. In her 2018 essay, “Homing with My Mother / How Women in My Family Married Women,” the scholar-artist Neo Sinxolo Musangi attempts to arrive at contemporary black female queerness via reimagining the relationship between her mother and her. She writes,

¹⁴ I am not suggesting that women and queer women in the diaspora do not come in contact with similar nationalisms. My goal, instead, is to juxtapose African and African diaspora socio-historical temporalities as a way to illustrate how forced removal and racial minority experience informs diasporic feminisms (and their disidentification with male dominated diaspora theory) in a way that can help think through the possibilities inherent in women's care and erotic motherhood and against motherhood's traditional binding to the heteropatriarchal nation.

Some things are worth repeating: This is not an experiment in kinship or a thing called woman-to-woman marriage or even a thing called marriage. This is an exercise in how else I could choose to arrive at blackness and queerness and feminism. By putting the older black women in my family on the agenda, I imagine not only my own freedom and that of others, but I also, quite deliberately, want to take seriously the intellectual contributions of black women who have, over the years, constituted the survival of something I want to call black theory and a logic of care. By inviting my mother into this conversation, I also seek to invite her into my world-making project through memory-work. Between the many unspoken hi/stories between my mother and I, this genealogy-mining over WhatsApp is pleasurable (albeit labor-intensive), but for the few days that we do this, we (my mother and I) become coauthors of a story that constitutes history as present, history as an intricate witnessing of our own experiences of living, then and now. This exercise is to home both my mother and I without the overbearing disingenuousness and obligations of consanguinity, or the anthropological weight of the thing often called kinship or family ties. (403-04).

In this essay, Musangi offers a fresh perspective on (un)archiving LGBTQ histories in Africa. She argues that scholarship's attempts at unearthing female-female marriages in precolonial Africa, though fruitful, speak little to the lived experiences of queer Africans in the present. Instead, she explores the vertical overlap between her mother's history and her own to highlight how the former's strategies for dealing with race and gender condition her queer experience through acts of love and care. Her exploration of the overlap between mother-daughter relationships and an already existing framework for female-female marriage helps us interpret the erotic in relation to women's love and care. In addition, her work "queers" formal definitions of marriage and motherhood to capitalize on an erotic of survival that is central to how she understands and imagines blackness, queerness, and feminism together. The mother-daughter relationship, according to her, centers the intimacy of marriage with the memory work passed down intergenerationally. Her imagining possibility, then, evolves out of history's intermingling with the present for the future. As she notes, this way of articulating feminism accounts for an overlapping historical/vertical "we" that draws on her mother's

experiences as a black woman, but also invites her mother into her own queer world in an attempt at repairing an erotic bond impacted by social-historical homophobia and national heteropatriarchy.

Musangi's queer feminist work draws on the historical interrelation between women's labor and pleasure. By highlighting the existence of this association, Musangi draws attention to the labor involved in working through this mother-daughter alliance, especially as it necessitates a breaking down of socio-historical divisions as described above. The labor involved in remembering black women's work via the mother is necessary for arriving at the pleasure available in care for black and queer people. This affiliation between labor and pleasure aligns with what Christina Sharpe calls wake work or the paradox of being black, but grounds it in queer female experience.¹⁵ Similarly, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, in *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, explores the relationship between queer self-discovery and understanding black women's labor via representations of creative gender performance and homage to Caribbean mother deities. "[W]hile we often talk about gender creativity through language of expression and performance....," Tinsley writes in her discussion of the 2010 film *Of Men and Gods*, "we might also do well to talk about it as labor." She continues,

Ezili Danto is a fierce Iwa, a woman-loving Iwa, and, above all, what you call a working Iwa—one who answers her sevites' calls swiftly and thoroughly. And her masisi daughters in this film are very much working women, too; are women who invent their womanness through their labor, through intertwining remunerative, spiritual, and community work. In return for their mother's gifts and endless love, Danto's masisi children have to work for and *like* their mother: have to become her daughters by learning the work of being black women. (69-70)

¹⁵ See Sharpe (2016).

Like Musangi, Tinsley explores the labor in black gender and sexual expression; this example relates pleasure to labor by imagining the pleasure in queer creative expression as part of a history of black women's labor passed down. That is, part and parcel of being masisi—transfeminine Haitians—is becoming Ezili Danto's daughter via black women's work; the masisi performance Tinsley discusses (not dissimilar to drag performance in the United States) is labor in two ways: the physicality of performance for an audience and the extent to which the work of female performance is rooted in a lineage of women laboring for/towards expression within heteropatriarchal societies (4). And so, being a black queer woman in all of its queer/creative manifestations, according to Tinsley, correlates with becoming the metaphoric daughter of a lineage of black women, of whom the mother deity represents. Ezili Danto can be thought, then, to symbolize not a single entity—unrooting “mother” as biological fact—but erotic motherhood in toto. This female erotic functions as a segue of transcendence beyond heteropatriarchal violence/history.

Tinsley's analysis centers erotic pleasure/labor as a way of working through and with the mother; the daughter becomes part and parcel of her mother's history—the trunk of an erotic stream whose mouth is unknown, whose existence is inseparable from its source, but whose functionality depends on the relationship of all parts. Musangi captures this relationship between all entities, toward the end of her essay, in her discussion of care towards the end of her essay. She writes, “Instead I want to pursue, through these relationships, the idea of care as shared work and as shared affect rather than as an economically or legally binding practicality. The logic of care, seen this way, is not constitutive of volition or will but is embedded in a shared understanding of practical

normativity by those involved in care-sharing” (410). Here, she shifts the terms of care as it relates to labor in ways that align with Tinsley’s mother-daughter metaphor. Rather than think of care as it relates to economic exchange between parent and caregiver for a job, or in terms of the legality of being mother—the latter an effect and consequence of heteropatriarchal nationalism—Musangi articulates care as mutually willed into being by mother and daughter—a “care-sharing” as opposed to care-giving. This, in part, helps her imagine welcoming the mother/women’s history into her queer world as an alternative to simply replicating what is “given” or passed down. As such, she implicitly frames childhood similarly to its theorization here, in *Diasporic Childhoods*, by highlighting its capacity to exceed scripted boundaries, its orientation beyond what is “given.” Moreover, this version of non-contractual care emphasizes a will/desire to labor together, the pleasure in working together to create future possibilities, queer African futures. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider various ways contemporary African queer literature comes to erotic motherhood as a hinge into the future via queer childhood. I also pay particular attention to how this work navigates diasporic and national spaces, African and other, and draws from experiences in multiple spaces to articulate erotic motherhood and imagine queer African futurity. Ultimately, this chapter highlights the imbrications of black feminism and queer analysis in *Diasporic Childhoods*’ theorization of childhood as a horizon of possibility that, in effect, challenges how we interpret African modernity at multiple points of relation, such as the West and the black diaspora, and across genders and sexualities.

Women at War: Reconciling an Inter-generational Black Female Erotic

The theme of African motherhood is central to Nigerian-American Chinelo Okparanta's exploration of queer possibility in her fiction. A self-identified lesbian, Okparanta, is an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights in Africa and the diaspora. Despite her living in the United States since she was ten years old, her fiction and public activism are committed to confronting Nigeria's homophobia and challenging its anti-sodomy legislation. In her essay, "I Put My Lesbian Novel in the Nigerian President's Hands," for example, she shares her experience meeting Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari where she hands him her novel 2015 *Under the Udala Trees*, "want[ing] him to know that this issue of the anti-gay bill was one of the many issues on the minds of Nigerian citizens." Even though Buhari was quoted speaking in favor of the anti-sodomy laws the following day, Okparanta expresses a sense of hope for the future of queer people in Nigeria. In an interview, Okparanta reasserts her optimism by alluding to the wishy-washy nature of homophobic politics in Nigeria and elsewhere. "It's interesting," she states, "because...Goodluck Jonathan, [former Nigerian President] who signed the anti-gay bill in 2014, said something to the effect of 'Maybe we'll change the law...Maybe things will change.' Even he is changing his story a little...Maybe he only signed the bill because he was trying to get votes back then...He probably doesn't even really see homosexuality as a sin" (Lombardi 22). Although her statements sound optimistic in ways that do not seem to be borne out, Okparanta's commitment to confronting homophobia in Nigeria (and Africa) head on translates via her engagement with the theme of African motherhood to position queer childhood as a horizon of possibility in her fiction. While her place in the diaspora grants her a level of legal and social autonomy, she claims that such a positionality offers her the appropriate distance to

more objectively reimagine African space, what she refers to as “home” (Lombardi). In other words, Okparanta’s experiences in the diaspora—specifically, the United States—provides a foundation of critical comparison that influences her assertion of Nigerian cultural belonging and will to think “otherwise” in terms of queer African possibility.¹⁶ This latter claim correlates with her engagement of motherhood in her reimagining queer belonging in Africa. By recentring motherhood, she challenges the idea that queer possibility is only available for those who leave Africa and their filial attachments behind. Moreover, her working between African and diaspora cultures leads to an understanding of their inherent overlap.

Under the Udala Trees takes place during and after the Biafran War in Eastern Nigeria. It tracks the protagonist Ijeoma’s coming-of-age as a lesbian and, eventually, mother, and focuses on the overlap between society’s response to homosexuality and post-war healing, especially through Ijeoma’s contested relationship with her mother. Though the mother in *Under the Udala Trees* appears to be the major antagonist to Ijeoma’s sexual becoming, Okparanta applies narrative strategies to provoke a more sympathetic interpretation of her role. The novel highlights how the sexual parameters of belonging shaped by nationalism and war impact Ijeoma’s mother’s experiences and her engagement with Ijeoma’s sexuality. As we become more aware of how society conditions female experience via the characterization of Ijeoma’s mother, we can better unpack the novel’s allusions to a queer future beyond heteropatriarchy. The scholar

¹⁶ In “States of Emergence: Writing African female same-sex sexuality,” Brenna Munro claims that by centering queer female identity in her debut collection, *Happiness, Like Water*, and addressing this topic in the context of Nigeria, Okparanta inserts herself within this history. “As an author who grew up in the United States, in particular,” Munro writes, “this subject provides Okparanta a way to take part in the Nigerian conversation, and thus, perhaps paradoxically, assert cultural belonging.” (190).

Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi calls attention to how Okparanta's novel subverts the gendered parameters of Nigerian political authority by killing Ijeoma's father at the very beginning, though he emphasizes her mother's complicity. In "The Promise of Lesbians in African Literary History," he writes,

Through his suicide, which recalls Okonkwo's action, the father rejects the failure of the Biafran nation and refuses to live in a Nigeria consolidated with genocidal war—just as Okonkwo rejects colonial rule. That rejection also hints at a difficult subject of Nigerian civil war fiction: the sexual violence perpetrated on women. Such violence is notably absent, and, in its place, readers are confronted with the father's sexualized attachment to the nation and the mother's complicity as the prime antagonist to her daughter's sexuality and primary conduit for social pressure. Rather than examine rape as epitomizing the perversity of militarized political power, Okparanta inverts the scenario to examine the disguised erotic charge latent within quotidian attachments to the idea and authority of the nation. (681)

Throughout the novel, the mother's antagonism towards Ijeoma's non-normative sexuality and gender performance reminds us of her generation's relationship to nationalism, as expressed in her father's suicide, and the gender norms that define one's attachment to the nation. However, with the removal of Ijeoma's father—and his refusal to think beyond his normative political attachment to Nigeria—Okparanta suggests that we consider the mother not just as his remainder in a changing world, but as a character that must negotiate his absence, the changing shape of Nigeria, and how these impact her interpretation of her own gender subjectivity. Moreover, the novel's narrative structure demands attention to how its portrayal of the mother is impacted by Ijeoma's perspective/mediation. The mother's role in the novel appears much more complex as Ijeoma-as-narrator becomes more self-aware. As the novel progresses, we are able to understand the mother beyond her seemingly antagonistic nature; we witness how Ijeoma's understanding of her mother evolves and how their parallel, or overlapping, evolutions orient the world of the novel beyond her father's nationalism. What comes to

fruition is a queer aesthetic that depends on how a mother and daughter grow to know each other and accept each other into their lives.¹⁷

We can interpret Ijeoma's narration, in part, as a process of making sense of her mother's experience and how this reckoning impacts her own becoming. As Ijeoma matures and better understands herself, she becomes aware that her mother's antagonism is rooted in a complex personhood. Even though her mother has an authoritative voice on the subject of morality and gender expectations, for example, Ijeoma realizes that this voice is an effect of her flawed character—a consequence of her mother's social conditioning and the limitations she has experienced in her life. Though Ijeoma does not understand, at first, her mother's need to reevaluate her gendered place in the world after her husband's death, the narration exposes the war's impact on her role as a mother. After Ijeoma's father's death, her mother sends her to live with a schoolteacher and his wife; while they pay for her to go to school, they also use her as a house girl. It is while under their care that Ijeoma meets her childhood love, Amina. Eventually, the schoolteacher discovers their relationship and sends Ijeoma back to her mother, who had been working on establishing a new home for them. Upon arrival, Ijeoma struggles to forgive her mother for deserting her at such a difficult moment in their lives, and for not returning for

¹⁷ In, "I Put My Lesbian Novel in the Nigerian President's Hands," the interviewer notes the ways Ijeoma's experience with Biafra overlaps with the real-life experiences of Okparanta's mother: "Like Ijeoma, for example, Chinelo's mother lived through the war in that part of Nigeria known as Biafra and lost her father in that war. In a sense, she explains, the novel is a tribute to the way her mother and other family members worked hard to make the best of things. 'Even with all the negatives that a war brings, my mother often talks about the positives,' she says. 'About the way certain people shared their food with others and provided shelter for one another. War is cruel, but that doesn't mean that we have to be. There is kindness and love to be found even in all the inhumanity of war.'" While it is easy to correlate Okparanta's sexuality with that of Ijeoma in *Under the Udala Trees*, understanding the ways the novel overlaps with both her *and* her mother's lives—Okparanta's war with her sexuality and her mother's experiences with Biafra—adds another layer to how the erotic of mother-daughter relationships are central to how we can interpret queer possibility. Okparanta's emphasis of the persistence of kindness and love despite war adds to this argument.

her (again, Ijeoma is sent back to her mother; her mother does not initiate their reunion). On the first morning after Ijeoma's return, her mother tells her, "It's not easy getting set up in a place. You really must understand that it took me all this time to get it looking the way it does now" (69). Ijeoma is reluctant to accept her mother's word; she narrates, "I replied that I understood, and I thanked her, though at the time I had not yet understood, and was not yet to the level of gratitude, because I was still smarting from her desertion of me and the memory of all that time at the grammar school teacher's when my mind tortured itself with all the possible reasons for why my own mother had thought it best to abandon me" (69). Ijeoma's response illustrates a rift between mother and daughter instigated by the war. It also alludes to her understanding, as narrator, that she was not equipped to fully grasp her mother's plight at this early point in her life; though, she does recognize a shift in her mother's character.

Ijeoma continues, "There was something desperate and pleading in her face as she spoke. In that moment it was as if she were the child and I were the parent; she was seeking validation, trying to convince me of why I should be proud of her" (69). And a little later, "There was a distance between us that had not existed before... There was a strain. She was my mother, and I should have leaned into her embrace... But things were different now. In this moment, she felt more like another warden than my own mother, more like a husk—more an emblem of motherhood than motherhood herself" (70). In ways, Ijeoma interprets the distance between them as a product of her exposure to the world outside her mother's household; her mother mentions that if she had not left Ijeoma, she could have prevented the encounter with Amina. And, to a degree, her mother does deflect her own internal struggle and how it has impacted her relationship

with her daughter onto this issue of Ijeoma's sexuality. We see, in the passages above, allusions to a shift in how her mother is able to perform gender herself; though she falls into the role of mother by biological default, the war has affected her capacity to perform this gender role as considered fit. Therefore, the war's effect on Ijeoma's mother's ability to fulfil the socially prescribed role of mother compliments, rather than contradicts, Ijeoma's own non-normative gender performance as a girl in love with another girl. Her mother's deflection, though, negatively alters how Ijeoma is able to understand and sympathize with her mother's plight and informs her understanding of gender and society. Whereas Ijeoma recognizes how an inversion of the mother-daughter role could help her mother in the moment described above—an allusion to the possibility of erotic motherhood as an act of care between two generations of women—her mother's reaction to her sexuality disrupts this possibility. Thought of in another way, the Biafran war—a symbol of conflicting nationalisms—has a trickle-down effect on the erotic possibilities by engendering a division between mother and daughter.

As the novel progresses, Ijeoma better recognizes her mother's concern with her queer womanhood as a deflection of her struggle with her own widowhood. At one point in the novel, after Ijeoma and her mother receive news of Amina's marriage to a Hausa man, her mother delves into a discussion of the importance of marriage between man and woman. "Marriage has a shape," her mother says, "Its shape is that of a bicycle. Doesn't matter the size or color of the bicycle. All that matters is that the bicycle is complete, that the bicycle has two wheels." She continues, "The man is one wheel...the woman the other. One wheel must come before the other, and the other wheel has no choice but to follow. What is certain, though, is that neither wheel is able to function fully without the

other. And what use is it to exist in the world as a partially functioning human being?” (182). And then Ijeoma narrates, “Under her [mother’s] breath, she said, ‘A woman without a man is hardly a woman at all.’ There was something self-deprecating about the way she said it” (182). In this scene, Ijeoma realizes a blurring in her mother’s consciousness between what she thinks of Ijeoma’s sexuality and what she thinks of her own. Her mother’s deflection of her issue onto Ijeoma’s personal life makes this a tense moment between the two rather than one of sympathy. However, this moment is important for the text as a whole, because, despite its antagonistic nature, it brings together Ijeoma and her mother—two women from different generations with different experiences—to establish an overlapping commentary on gender and sexuality in Nigerian society. That is, we are meant to understand Ijeoma and her mother as subject to a single social world where each faces constraints due to gender. This highlights an overlapping tension between established norms and the individual impacted by both nature and consequence. If we interpret the existence of war through the lens of Biafra’s competing nationalisms—whether it be literal or metaphoric/internal—then we can correlate these overlapping histories/generations of women’s experience as impacted by heteropatriarchal social order and the gender and sex norms it establishes. Because this creates a divide between Ijeoma and her mother, it becomes representative of how systems of power thrive off of division. However, Ijeoma’s awareness of her mother’s tension, which she alludes to in the passage above, elicits our attention to how this relationship between mother and daughter has evolved as it has, and its overall role in the telling of her story.

Ijeoma's mother influences her (Ijeoma's) decision to marry a male childhood friend, Chibundu, despite the love she has for a woman named Ndidi. Ijeoma recognizes in her mother's influence a desire to live vicariously through her; that is, her mother seems to understand her daughter's marriage to a man as her own reclamation of the womanhood she lost after her husband's death. This is evident in a conversation between the two of them on the day of Ijeoma's wedding. Her mother tells her, "What a wonderful day for all of us...The day we've all been waiting for." And then when her mother notices something is off with her, Ijeoma narrates, "Is something wrong?" Mama asked, but then she quickly brushed away the question, so determined was she that nothing would spoil this day for her." And a few paragraphs later, "'We can't have sweat spoiling this day for us,' she said, her voice very impatient" (222-223). What stands out to Ijeoma in this conversation with her mother is her mother's use of the pronouns "us" when describing who the wedding celebration is for; this, coupled with Ijeoma's own expression of uncertainty, impacts how she views her mother controlling, and claiming, her experience (her mother was "so determined...that nothing would spoil this day for *her*"). Highlighting the fact of Ijeoma's narrative voice is important for understanding her mother's position in the novel. While we can likely agree that her mother does try and control Ijeoma's experience—and this becomes an antagonistic presence in the narrative for Ijeoma—Okparanta invites us, via Ijeoma's self-conscious narration, to sympathize with how the war and her husband's death have affected how the mother understands her own womanhood and translate onto her actions towards Ijeoma. In ways, Ijeoma's mother's actions towards her daughter allude to an unrealized erotic presence, as the mother implicitly interprets her daughter's potential to mend a piece of her (mother's)

gendered self. However, the mother's self-criticism as it reveals itself to Ijeoma overshadows the possibility of challenging the gendered norms that she subscribes to; instead, the daughter resembles a conduit of social order. And so, the mother outwardly ignores the potentiality of Ijeoma's sexual difference, establishing a fracture in the erotic power of their relationship.

The mother's reaction to Ijeoma's reluctance to marry signifies her own continued attachment to social norms. Ijeoma narrates,

She studied me for some minutes, peering at me with hard eyes. Then she softened, shook her head slowly, and studied me some more. Finally she said, "*Nwa m, ke ihe ichoro ka m me?* My child, what do you want me to do? A woman and a woman cannot be. That's not the way it's done. You must let go of any remaining thoughts you have of that.'...Soon I was going through with [the marriage]. Because that's what you do when you find yourself married to a man who both logic and your mother insist is the right man for you. (223)

Her mother conflates heterosexual marriage with the idea of logic, and this influences how Ijeoma understands herself and female-female relationships, in general. That is, Ijeoma's conflicted identity can be characterized by the ideological opposition between her relationships with her mother and with Ndidi; as she notes in the same passage: "I continued to dance, though all the while Ndidi was on my mind" (222).

Because Ijeoma's relationship with her mother focuses on this pressure to marry a man and have children, lesbian desire evolves for Ijeoma as its counterpoint. This ideological split between Ijeoma's lesbian desire and how she processes gender in relation to her mother disorients Ijeoma's bodily experience. In the novel, Ijeoma describes her bodily reaction to the spatial proximity of her mother as she carries out her relationship with Ndidi. "And then there was the matter of Mama," Ijeoma narrates, "To be living so close to her while carrying on an affair with Ndidi was not something I could

quite stomach. There's a way in which distance represses one's sense of obligation, or rather, a way in which closeness intensifies one's sense of duty. Now that I was living with Mama, I felt...a strong obligation to meet her expectations of me" (189). This scene suggests that as the two opposing sources of female relationality begin to overlap—Ijeoma pursues a relationship with Ndidi as she lives with her mother—her body threatens to reject itself—she becomes sick to the stomach. In ways, this becoming ill represents a discord between body and ideology. Her mother's stance on lesbian desire disrupts a female erotic potential characterized by multifarious enactments of care. War, then, as it appears in the novel, takes on a third form. In addition to the Biafran war and each of Ijeoma and her mother's internal wars—impacted by ideology—the division between Ndidi and Mama as it consumes Ijeoma's consciousness represents a battle between competing feminisms as they exist in the novel, and how feminism at war exacerbates the more obvious issues at work in this novel. Even in the following chapter where Ijeoma disregards the proximity of her mother to her body's want of pleasure by self-pleasuring, this is done at the expense of her mother: "Never mind what mama had said about Onan and the wasting of his seed, that the moral of the story was that any sort of self-pleasure was a sin in the eyes of God" (194). In order to divulge in this act of pleasuring to the thought of Ndidi, she must reject her mother's stance on sexuality; the two factors—lesbian desire and mother-daughter love—struggle to coexist. What is more, her divulging takes the form of an individual act, and, though subversive to the extent by which the act displays a taking ownership over one's body, this claiming of the body does not seem to have the revolutionary impact that we would want to associate with it. The

act is followed by a “panicked dream,” which alludes to the idea that there is more to reckon with in order for the novel’s feminism to be fully realized.

A turning point for Ijeoma occurs when, despite her reluctance to get pregnant, she gives birth to a daughter, Chidinma; after much pleading from her husband and mother, she convinces herself that having a child might be her only path to happiness, and she secretly prays for a girl. She states, “If my child were to be a girl, I would pick even more [ixora flowers] and place them like decorations all around her little head” (255). For Ijeoma, the idea of devoting her life and energy to a girl child can compensate for what she lacks in the rest of her life; this possibility can symbolically reimagine an erotic power through queer female reproductivity and provoke a consideration of what it means to be simultaneously queer and reproductive in Africa. In his study of Apartheid-era engagements between African American and South African writers, Stéphane Robolin explains how the garden figures in black women’s writing as a space to flesh out alternative ways of belonging. This can be applied to the scene above where Ijeoma imagines crowning her hypothetical daughter with flowers from her front yard. Robolin writes, “As representational sites wherein authors work out alternative forms of belonging, these figurative gardens fashioned by women who have reason to question the terms of national belonging register an investment in forms of relation that contravene nationalist logic” (105). Rather than situate her pregnant protagonist in exile, Okparanta reimagines queer possibility by allowing her protagonist to fertilize African soil with her queer reproductivity.¹⁸ Ijeoma’s position in the garden is subversive not just because she

¹⁸ If this narrative took place in exile, it would mirror common representatives of both queer Africans fleeing homophobic persecution and pregnant African women flying to Europe and North America to give birth to American, Canadian, and European citizens. Both of these tropes situate possibility in diaspora and

is a woman redefining African space, but because she is a queer woman staking claim to the garden via motherhood. Notwithstanding the fact that several women authors who have theorized the garden within their critiques of nationalism embody varying registers of queerness, Okparanta's queer representation of motherhood—as queer daughter becomes queer mother—challenges an impulse to dichotomize queer being with biological motherhood. However, when she highlights biological motherhood, she is not simply championing heterosexual reproduction; rather, she is symbolically orienting queer possibility intergenerationally via the daughter figure and reconciling old and new ways of being African. Robolin points out how women writers account for similarities and differences among them in their articulations of the garden: “The writers explicitly discuss the terms of their cross-cultural connections—their similarities and differences—and as the authors’ letters and microgeographic tropes of the garden circulate, they make visible certain shared interests and alternative modes of relation. But in doing so, they simultaneously expose the challenges of and impediments to extended long-distance community” (105). Yet, while Ijeoma’s attempt at dreaming through her daughter and inviting her into the garden instills a sense of hope for a queer future, this possibility cannot be fully realized as long as her link to the past via her mother remains fractured. And so, we must consider how the novel attempts to reconcile this historical relation. That is, can Ijeoma be both queer child and queer daughter?

After Chidinma’s birth, Ijeoma falls into postpartum depression exacerbated by her repressed love for Ndidi. Though her depression is impacted by her marriage more than her role as mother, it alters her capacity to care for Chidinma. In the following two

associate Africa as its opposite. While Okparanta is obviously aware of the dangers facing queer and other marginalized Africans in Africa, her novel argues that the possibility of change is real.

passages, Ijeoma recognizes how her depression, a result of her unhappy marriage, affects Chidinma's view of her as a mother. Ijeoma describes her depression:

I spoke in a monotone those days, because by then I had begun to grow numb. As much as I didn't want it to happen, it was happening. Often my only thought was of how much longer I could carry on that way. How much longer could I continue to exist in this marriage with Chibundu? I was convinced that I would only grow deader were I to stay in it. I would only grow more numb. And who would take care of Chidinma if things went that way? Who would take care of her if I became like the living dead? (295)

And she follows with a description of Chidinma's reaction to her state:

Those days there had begun to be a frightened look on [Chidinma's] face—the look of a child who was afraid that she'd soon be let go, that she'd soon be discarded by the people who should have loved her most. Or maybe I only imagined it so. To me, it was the look of a child who somehow knew that she had been placed in the care of a mother as lukewarm as the water in which she sat. (295)

Because Ijeoma is the narrator, we can only truly know Chidinma's reaction via Ijeoma's perception. What stands out, then, is how Ijeoma's reading of Chidinma resembles her narration of her own reaction to her mother leaving after her father's death. As such, this description of her depression's effect on Chidinma implies that her own experience being a mother at war with herself transforms how she understands both her own childhood and her mother's experience as mother. This dynamic presents women's plight as cyclical, working over the course of several generations. Therefore, interpreting individual mother-daughter relationships in the novel includes recognizing women's plight as a socio-historical process and understanding how social circumstances work against these relationships.

During this time, Chibundu wants Ijeoma to become pregnant again, and he purchases a motorized toy car for his future son. At first, he reprimands his daughter, Chidinma, for thinking it was for her. Even though he eventually realizes his wrong, the

experience seems to teach Chidinma about her gendered place in the world. However, Ijeoma interprets Chidinma's reaction as furthering the rift between mother-daughter rather than between father-daughter. She states, "Later that night, [Chidinma] curled herself in a tight ball in bed, as if she wished to disappear. Her eyes remained open, steady on me, deep in contemplation... Time passed, and then, in a muted and dismal way she let out a sigh. I watched as she turned her body away from me" (308). Chidinma's turning away, here, alludes to this need to reckon with how gender experience impacts female-female relationships and how it overlaps vertically through time. Ijeoma's awareness of the cyclical nature of women's plight materializes in a dream she has about an adult Chidinma looking into her eyes while holding a choking child. Ijeoma describes the dream, "In [Chidinma's] arms, the child gasped and gasped, bringing its hands to its neck, its pleading eyes turning up towards Chidinma. Its face appeared to swell. More gasping, more pleading with its eyes. Still, Chidinma only watched. She did not do a thing to help the choking child" (312). This dream serves multiple overlapping purposes. First, it represents the effect of Ijeoma's poor mothering, a result of her inability to deal with her own internal war. Second, it highlights the cyclical nature of social war's impact on women; it instills a sense of urgency that suggests that if something does not change, her daughter's plight (and her daughter's role as mother) will resemble her own. Lastly, it forces Ijeoma to look backwards as well as forwards, because part of her capacity to realize what is at stake for Chidinma is her own experience as child. Part of reckoning with this cycle of women's plight is her need to acknowledge her mother's experience, and to understand it not just as her mother's wrongdoing, but as part of a history of

women's plight passed down. Ijeoma's interpretation of this dream informs her decision to finally leave her marriage and return to her mother.

As Ijeoma realizes how her own internal war affects Chidinma, she recognizes a parallel between her own and her mother's experiences as women and mothers, despite being, in ways, drastically different. Reckoning with her mother's experience, then, becomes paramount to how she understands her own queerness and role as mother. Although *Under the Udala Trees* is a novel about Ijeoma's coming to terms with her sexuality as she comes-of-age during and after the Biafran War, it is also very much about rediscovering an intergenerational ethics of care that had been affected by the violence of war and its heteropatriarchal nature. As the novel, in part, exists to outwardly challenge homophobia in present-day Nigeria, it also preaches forgiveness and understanding as it internalizes a history of women's labor to embody queer freedom. Not only does Ijeoma's mother need to accept Ijeoma's queerness for the plot's resolution to take place, but Ijeoma has to acknowledge her mother's experience in order to understand herself. Towards the end of the novel, Ijeoma notes, "I suppose it's the way we are, humans that we are. Always finding it easier to make ourselves the victim in someone else's tragedy. Though it is true, too, that sometimes it is hard to know to whom the tragedy really belongs" (320). Taken in context, this passage occurs when Ijeoma considers Chibundu's self-pity, a result of her leaving him. However, the passage relates to what Ijeoma has learned through her journey with her mother, the last sentence a reflection of her learned self-awareness. Such a reckoning allows her to understand her journey as more than individual; as she recognizes how her experience as a queer woman impacts Chidinma's experience as her daughter/in relation to her, she is able to

sympathize with her mother's faults. This influences her desire to let her mother into her life—subverting the terms of their relation from a line drawn to a decalage. This is reminiscent of Musangi's argument to “invite her [/mother] into my [/daughter] world-making project through memory-work” (403). This novel's world-making depends on Ijeoma's interpretation as narrator; by exposing the tense point-of-relation between heterosexual mother and queer daughter and the work necessary for establishing intergenerational empathy, Okparanta establishes the importance of memory-work and an ethics of care for redefining the queer self in relation to society.

Though this representation of Ijeoma as queer mother/daughter utilizes a biological approach to exhibit female inter-generational care, we can also consider this dialectic as a metaphor for rethinking queerness' relationship to African historicity. In his analysis of *Under the Udala Trees*, Osinubi argues that Ijeoma's existence as lesbian mother alludes to a queer ancestry, as, from Chidinma's position, we can associate queerness with an African past; as such, queer existence/possibility orients backwards in addition to how it moves forward with Ijeoma as queer daughter. Osinubi writes, “Okparanta creates an anachronistic lesbian mother and, thus, redresses the denied historical possibility of women's same-sex desires in literature. This access to lesbian ancestors reconfigures affective dispositions to the past; same-sex desire is no longer an external invention without local provenance nor is it previously unthinkable in African literature” (684).

Moreover, even as we center Ijeoma's filial relationships with her mother and daughter in this overarching narrative on women's genealogies, their proximity to her relationship with her lover Ndidi at the end of the novel demands recognition. As

discussed earlier, the distance between her filial and romantic relationships contributes to Ijeoma's fractured sense of self. However, Ijeoma's reconciliation with her mother and her own position as a mother is coupled with, and does not happen in spite of, her romantic relationship with Ndidi; the under-arching queer progress narrative is, to some degree, contingent on their proximity, even if this lesbian relationship has to be kept a secret from the larger society. Ijeoma narrates,

Outside of Mama and Chibundu and Chidinma, Ndidi and I have done our best to keep the whole thing a clandestine affair, a little like it used to be. We keep separate quarters, but we do spend many of our nights together. Sometimes I go to her flat, and other times she comes to mine, which is not far from Mama's bungalow, the same one in which, with help from Mama, I wound up raising Chidinma. (320-21)

In this passage, Okparanta emphasizes intimacy through iterations of love between women, establishing an overlap between vertical and horizontal forms of care via their proximity. Moreover, Ijeoma is able to exist as queer lover/mother/daughter simultaneously without having to reject one aspect of this life in the presence of another; her mother is also able to refashion herself within this queer framework as she reclaims her desired sense of womanhood by helping Ijeoma raise her daughter and accepting Ijeoma's relationship with Ndidi. In this role, her mother implicitly enacts queer mothering as her assistance facilitates Ijeoma's expressions of love in multiple directions; she becomes a part of Ijeoma's queer narrative.

In "Homing with My mother," Musangi explains,

I privilege the *how*...of my family life through a generation of women beginning with my grandmothers, by way of my mother. I use the question 'Witawa ata?' or 'How are you called?' as an entry point for an inquiry into the thing now known as woman-to-woman marriage, its relationship to a logic of care, and how this relationship could potentially enable us to rethink community formation beyond kinship and family ties. (403)

I would argue that it is the very proximity of this juxtaposition between different forms of love/family at the end of the novel that establishes care between women as foundational, not just for themselves individually or as an inter-generational group of women, but for working through and reimagining queerness in Africa.¹⁹ This extends female power beyond biology and tradition and allows us to home in on how what Musangi calls care shapes Okparanta's imagining queer African becoming. As a note, we should also acknowledge Okparanta's choice to keep Chibundu within this queer entanglement—he may be culpable of self-pity, but he does respect Ijeoma's secret. As such, Okparanta, like her feminist predecessors, alludes to biological man's capacity to exist within and foster a female-centered queer framework.

In the last few pages of *Under the Udala Trees*, Ijeoma reflects on how her adult life, though parts remain a secret, can be characterized by happiness. She implies that this is possible because of people's capacities to change and relates it to how she has grown to understand religion: "change is a major part of [God's] aesthetic, a major part of His vision of the world...Maybe we have only to open our ears and hearts and minds to hear" (322). This sense of hope can be attributed to Ijeoma's own self-discovery throughout the novel, her understanding that this sense of freedom is in part due to her and her mother's growing to see and accept each other for who they are across both similarities and differences.²⁰ Okparanta applies this same sense of hope to how she imagines queer

¹⁹ And within the context of the novel, their care becomes foundational for national healing after the war.

²⁰ We can also read the hope symbolized by Ijeoma and her mother's reconciliation as overlapping with post-war healing in Nigeria in the early 1970s. Historians of Nigeria commend Yakubu Gowon (Nigerian Head of State 1966-1975) and the rest of the Nigerian government's efforts at reincorporating Biafra and Igbo people back into society. As one historian, Martin Meredith, writes, "The aftermath of the war was notable for its compassion and mercy, and the way in which the memories of Biafra soon faded. Quoting Lincoln, Gowon talked of 'binding up the nation's wounds'. No medals for services in the war were awarded; no reparations were demanded. Biafran rebels were reabsorbed in the federal army; civil servants

possibility within African communities and on African soil. While the fact of Ijeoma's reconciliation with her mother in Africa alludes to this idea, conversations between her and Ndidi at the end of the novel elicit a capacity to imagine these possibilities more directly. Ijeoma states,

Some of those nights when we are together and in bed, Ndidi wraps her arms around me. She molds her body around mine and whispers in my ear about a town where love is allowed to be love, between men and women, and men and men, and women and women, just as between Yoruba and Igbo and Hausa and Fulani. Ndidi describes the town, all its trees and all the colors of its sand. She tells me in great detail about the roads, the directions in which they run, from where and to where they lead.

"What is the name of the town?" I ask.

Sleep threatens to overtake her, and sometimes she forgets that she does not want to say a name. One night, she mumbles that it is Aba. The next night it is Umuahia. With each passing night she names more towns: Ojoto and Nnewi, Onitsha and Nsukka, Port Harcourt and Lagos, Uyo and Oba, Kaduna and Sokoto. She names and names, so that eventually I have to laugh and say, "How is it that this town can be so many places at once?"

Her voice is soft like a hum, and the words come out quiet like a prayer. She is older now. Both of us are. The years have flown by, and there is an aged roughness to her voice. She says, "All of them are here in Nigeria. You see, this place will be all of Nigeria." (321)

Not only does Okparanta situate Africa/Nigeria as a space of potential queer belonging, but she does so via stories imagined by and shared between women in bed. This depiction of female sociality establishes an erotic charge that is at once political and intimate. Together, Ijeoma and Ndidi remap Nigeria with their own queer reimagining as they lie with their limbs entangled.

returned to their posts in the federal government; and property belonging to Igbos in the North and other federal areas was restored to them. In this war, said Gowon, there had been 'no victors and no vanquished'" (205). See also Bohannan and Curtin (1995) and Iliffe (2007). Okparanta situates Ijeoma's mother's acceptance of Ijeoma's sexuality within this historical context to ironize Nigeria's social divisiveness towards African queers at the time of her novel's publication and to allegorize a more tolerant future for queer Africans.

But, Ijeoma does not end her narration with this image; instead, she returns to that moment when she leaves Chibundu and knocks at her mother's door. She recounts how, to her surprise, her mother received her with open arms: "Mama lifted her eyes. She took Chidinma from my arms, carries her with one arm. I did not expect it when her other arm came around my shoulders...And now she began muttering to herself. 'God, who created you, must have known what He did. Enough is enough.'...She cleared her throat, and she finished: "*Ka udo di, ka ndu di.*" Let peace be. Let life be" (322-23). Like the previous image of Ijeoma and Ndidi wrapped around each other in bed, Ijeoma highlights her mother's physical embrace of both her and Chidinma simultaneously. In this image, we can extrapolate the erotic nature of their embrace because it establishes a conscious political act—acceptance—as indistinct from something ordinary, yet intimate, like a mother putting an arm around her daughter. These images of female intimacy—between mother/daughter and mother/lover—are in and of themselves a mirrored remapping of Nigeria/Africa, and of what it means to be queer, female, and mother within such a cartographic framework.

Transnational Experience and the Remapping of Queer Africa: Against the Myth of the American Savior

In this discussion of reimagining queerness in Africa via a text like *Under the Udala Trees*, we may consider how Okparanta's positionality as a Nigerian-born writer living and working in the diaspora—specifically, the United States, where she moved to when she was ten years old—impacts how she interprets and illustrates possibility. I

asked Okparanta how she negotiates Nigeria and American identities in her writing in an interview, and she responded as follows:

What that means for me is that I get to have a little bit more objectivity when I write about home. I sometimes think distance allows me to see better. I go home often enough. I get many opportunities to see what it's like to be at home in Nigeria. But when you see the ways other countries work, and when you get to know other systems, you can make a little bit more of an objective comparison between the countries...I think that going back and forth between different cultures allows one to have a more objective view of what cultures are, what they're doing, and how they function. This certainly applies to my understanding of the United States. I feel that I can see the US sometimes better than an American who has lived in America for his or her entire life. They don't have a certain objectivity. You know, propaganda is very strong. In the same way that some people have been brainwashed into believing that Africa is just a continent of poverty, others have been brainwashed into believing that America is this land of gold and riches, which is also not the case. (Lombardi 17).

Her response, here, suggests that migratory experience allows her to understand the world via a series of relations rather than through a single lens. Being between the United States and Nigeria, Okparanta claims to see beyond idealized notions of freedom relegated to one place or another. Brenna Munro recognizes this perspective as it permeates the stories in Okparanta's collection *Happiness, Like Water*. "Although as the narrator remarks [in the story 'America'], America is a 'utopia' in many Nigerian people's imagination (101)," Munro writes, "in Okparanta's fiction, both sites are dystopian. The worst domestic violence [in the stories of this collection] happens in the United States..." ("States of Emergence" 195).

Earlier in her discussion of *Happiness, Like Water*, Munro claims that although Okparanta spent the majority of her teenage and adult years in the United States, her specific engagement with lesbian themes in her writing correlates with how she works between diasporic and Nigerian identities. Munro writes,

Thus contrary to the idea that lesbianism is un-African, the decision of a contemporary writer such as Okparanta to place queer female identity at the heart of her debut collection *Happiness*[.] *Like Water* indicates that addressing that topic situates her within a specific strand of Nigerian literary tradition that has a history—peripatetic and liable to erasure, but a history nonetheless. As an author who grew up in the United States, in particular, this subject provides Okparanta a way to take part in the Nigerian conversation and thus, perhaps paradoxically, assert cultural belonging. (190)

By referring to the peripatetic nature of lesbianism in African history due to its susceptibility to criticism, discrimination, and erasure, Munro highlights how the black lesbian figure embodies an intrinsic overlap between African and diasporic ways of being. We can, thus, interpret Okparanta's—a self-identified lesbian—claim to being between American and Nigerian cultures and how this informs her proximity to objective-thinking as part of a queer African women's history, rather than as something outside of an African frame of reference.²¹

While Okparanta uses the tropes of sexual and gender migration in *Happiness*, *Like Water*, to highlight the negative effects of Nigeria's sexual politics, she emphasizes how the process of working through this perspective—sexual/gendered migrant—sheds light on how transnational politics of place can condition interpretations of freedom. Her stories reckon with Nigeria's neocolonial history and relationship with the United States in order to situate sexual migration as a product of transnational politics of place and to subvert the West's conflation with freedom.²² The open-ended conclusion of her story

²¹ As Carole Boyce Davies writes in "Migratory Subjectivities," "The re-negotiating of identities is fundamental to migration as it is fundamental to Black women's writing in cross-cultural contexts. It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that renegotiates the terms of Black women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities" (3). What is more, this process of re-negotiating identities cross-culturally works to also redefine the geographies where black women exist, or, as Davies states, "to re-create and remove the lines of impossibility in which we exist" (23).

²² For example, her stories complicate the idea that the United States is a "savior nation," referring to both the United States' overbearing economic presence in Nigeria and how it provides economic opportunities

“America,” for example, correlates with the narrator’s second-guessing the symbolic freedom associated with moving to America to pursue romantic love.

In “America,” the narrator goes through the process of obtaining a green card so that she can follow her girlfriend, Gloria, to the United States only to second-guess her desire to leave. The story ends with the reader unaware of whether or not the narrator ends up going to the United States. As in *Under the Udala Trees*, the narrator of “America” has trouble reconciling lesbian romance with her relationship with her mother, though the mother-daughter relationship in the latter is nowhere near as volatile as in the former. However, rather than perpetuate the idea that the two forms of female-female love cannot coexist, Okparanta positions this tension as an effect of a larger set of socio-political institutions. Take, for instance, this conversation between the narrator and her parents about leaving to be with Gloria in the United States:

It would be good for me to be in America, [papa] said, a place where he imagined I could be free with the sort of love that I had for Gloria.

‘It’s not enough that I won’t have a grandchild in all of this,’ Mama said, after hearing what Papa had to say. ‘Now I must deal with losing my only child, too.’ There were tears in her eyes. And then she asked me to promise that I would not allow myself to get lost in America.

I shook my head and promised her that she’d not be losing me at all.

All the while, the woman I loved was there, worlds away. If I didn’t make it that third time, I thought, there would be a good chance she’d grow weary of waiting for me. (96)

The emphasis on Mama’s concern for losing her child suggests that Nigeria’s sexual politics affect not just the queer subject, but woman/mother, in general, because it threatens to erase her history via separation/terminated bond. Even though the mother may lose her child because of the child’s pursuit of romantic love, this latter pursuit is not

to Nigerian emigrants—oftentimes, its educated elite—draining Nigeria of its human resources and making Nigeria dependent on American economic support.

a response to a fractured relationship; in this scenario, the parents accept their daughter's sexuality even though they worry about how it may impact her social well-being.

Therefore, sexual exile and the mother's losing her child become intertwined effects of heteropatriarchy/homophobia rather than of any inherent incompatibility. And so, recognizing this tension as a point of relation rather than of opposition directs us to the workings of larger political and economic forces.

After her green card interview, the narrator walks home thinking about life in America with Gloria, and these thoughts eventually lead to feelings of guilt as she notices the landscape surrounding her:

I cross over the next street. It is narrow, but there are big houses on each side of it, the kinds with metal gates, and fancy gatemen with uniforms and berets, and small sheds like mini-houses near the gates, sheds in which the gatemen stay.

I imagine the insides of the houses: leather couches and stainless-steel appliances imported from America; flat-screen televisions hanging even in the bathroom, American-style.

But the road just in front of these houses, just outside the nice gates, is filled with potholes, large ones. And in the spaces between the houses, that corridor that forms where one gate ends and the next begins, there are piles of car tyres, planks of deteriorating wood, layered one on top of another. Shattered glass, empty barrels of oil, sweet wrappers, food wrappers, old batteries, crumpled paper, empty soda cans.

...I tell myself to continue walking, to ignore all of this foulness, just like the owners of the big houses have managed to do.

...But for me, it is a reluctant kind of disregard that stems from a feeling of shame: shame that all that trash should even exist there...

...I scratch my arms with the edges of the green-coloured card. I think of the possibilities, of the many ways in which I might profit from the card. I am still scratching and making plans for America when I drift into sleep.

The story should end there, but it doesn't. A person wishes for something so long that when it finally happens, she should be nothing but grateful. What sympathy can we have for someone who, after wanting something so badly for three long years, realizes almost as soon as she's gotten it that perhaps she's been wrong in wanting it all that time? (103-104)

In her analysis of the story, Munro points out that it is unclear whether the narrator's feeling "wrong" about wanting to go to America is because she loves a woman and

cannot provide her mother with grandchildren or because she is leaving Nigeria. She mentions the narrator's concern for Nigeria's environmental crisis and the possible repercussions for the country and its people if its educated population leaves for America and becomes "lost." Munro claims, "Her doubts about leaving, then, seem to be political; she should be staying in Nigeria to help with the environmental crisis, rather than 'run away.'" At the same time, these concerns about political, national betrayals may be a way to acknowledge and yet disavow that the relationship [with Gloria] has already emotionally run its course" (197). Okparanta politicizes the narrator's leaving in relation to its impact on Nigeria's economic and environmental futures rather than emphasize the sexual politics that push the narrator towards Gloria and abroad—something that may have emotionally run its course. By holding the former at higher stakes than the latter, Okparanta implicitly normalizes queer love and dissociates it with national tragedy. Getting "lost" in America, which her mother fears for her, refers less to any moral deterioration conflated with sexuality than to her absence's—in all its queerness—impact on Nigeria.

While the story raises important questions about migration and exile in relation to sexual freedom, the politics of transnationalism—Okparanta's consideration of Nigeria's postcolonial relationship to the West/America—and questions of sexuality actually bring the narrator—and the story as a whole—back to Nigeria. As the narrator walks home from the embassy, she recognizes America as a paradoxical presence in Nigeria—we see illusions to material wealth juxtaposed against the deteriorating state of Nigeria's landscape, thus highlighting the social/economic disparities engendered by global capitalism. Through this transnational lens—recognizing the global in the local—the

dichotomy between ideas of utopic America and dystopic Nigeria blur; this blurring affects how the narrator interprets possibility in relation to place. It also calls for a reconsideration of the imagined dichotomy between lesbian romance and the narrator's mother. Because the narrator's parents accept her sexuality, the chance of her staying in Nigeria does not delimit the possibility of her pursuing queer love. Rather, staying would subvert global capitalism's attempt at rupturing an erotic link between past, present, and future, allowing us to imagine a world in Nigeria where mother, daughter, and lover can coexist over time.

This process of reimagining Nigeria's relationship to the West in Okparanta's stories does not, in effect, glorify Nigeria as a country or political establishment—both America and Nigeria are dystopias in these stories. Instead, it emphasizes the possibilities in reevaluating notions of Africanness/Nigerianness along lines of queerness and erotic power. In her story "Shelter," for example, Okparanta alludes to an erotic power between daughter and mother that can subvert their unbelonging in both Nigeria and America. "Shelter" is narrated by a young girl living in Boston with her parents. Her father is a student at Boston University, and he physically abuses both her and her mother. One day, a social worker approaches her mother at church after noticing her bruises and offers to help her safely leave her husband and start fresh elsewhere. The narrator describes her mother's grateful response,

'Ah, what a country!' What a country it was that had exactly what a person needed, if only the person knew enough to ask. She hadn't even known that she could ask, she said. But somehow God had put it in her mind. And thank Heaven she did. Because things would surely get better from here. It would not be like in Nigeria where everyone had insisted that it was her duty to remain with papa. (116)

Despite the mother's positive association of America with safety [and in contradistinction with Nigeria/physical abuse], they soon discover that the social worker cannot help them because they are in the United States on the father's visa. Okparanta writes,

Then the woman was shaking her head once more, telling Mama how sorry she was. A slip of her mind, she said. It was something she should have done, but that evening by the bus stop, all she had thought was of the swollen lips, of all the bruises she'd seen on us over the past few months. It had somehow not occurred to her to ask what papers we had. It had not occurred to her that day to inquire about the status of our residency... Surely we still had family back in Nigeria. Couldn't we simply return home to them, and leave Papa here to finish his studies on his own? (120)

The story subverts the white savior/American utopia narrative by portraying safety as conditional in the United States—for the narrator and her mother, safety is contingent on an individual's citizenship status and one's relationship to man and nation. In addition, the abuse tied to heteropatriarchal Nigeria extends transnationally. America, in the story, determines the narrator and her mother's value based on their relationship to man and nation (invariably intertwined), thus reproducing, rather than challenging the overlap of their gendered subservience and political powerlessness. Although this story concludes with a sense of hopelessness, Okparanta projects possibility via the daughter's narration; her narrative voice establishes her own agency and extends that of her mother by telling her story. In so doing, the narrator participates in her mother's labor; she subverts abuse by claiming agency for her and her mother, highlighting the intergenerational nature of women's work and its inherent erotic potential, real or metaphorical. Moreover, the story illustrates how an erotic between African/Nigerian/black women can transcend place; the agency in the girl's narration symbolizes a challenge to the local and transnational structures of power and abuse that attempt to keep them marginalized.

The story “America’s” concern with “getting lost in America” figures the idea of sexual freedom as muddled with global histories of social, cultural, and economic imperialisms. Okparanta’s engagement with these global circuits through queer and female transnational experiences destabilizes notions of America/freedom and raises the stakes of getting lost. Such transnational meditations on gender, sexuality, and citizenship in Okparanta’s writing brings attention to the imbrications of Africanist and Americanist discourse. Amy Kaplan, in her introduction to the now canonical anthology *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993), complicates Americanist discourse on transnationalism by calling into question Perry Miller’s—one of American Studies’ “founding fathers”—discovery of himself and the idea of “America” as a national identity in what he called the African wilderness—“where he found himself ‘left alone with America’” (4). Kaplan argues,

Most histories of American studies single out Miller’s preface as a ‘paradigm drama’ in the foundation of the discipline. These readings, however, have ignored the centrality of the African context as the enabling condition that actively shapes that paradigm. Instead they find that the incongruity of the exotic backdrop passively highlights the drama of intellectual self-discovery; Africa thus figures as distance itself, a foil or shadow for the Puritan ‘city on the hill.’ (5)

The transnational story told throughout Okparanta’s oeuvre, in ways, subverts Perry Miller’s “errand into the wilderness” by rewriting the terms of relation between the United States and Africa. That is, the very idea of “getting lost in America” informs a reevaluation of and reinvestment in Africa/Nigeria’s gendered history—read: mother/daughter erotic—and its queer possibilities. However, this transnational queer/feminist work does not simply negate Miller’s theory; Nigeria does not figure as “pure” or “utopic” in Okparanta’s writing despite the possibilities she ascribes to its cultural and physical landscapes. Whereas Kaplan accurately notes in the passage above

the importance of recognizing how the African context actively enabled Miller's conceptualization of America, Okparanta revises the paradigm by illustrating how the African female's penetration (a queer allusion in and of itself) of the American landscape actively redefines both American and African national identities through *her* queer diasporic becoming. As Kaplan notes, "Miller's personal narrative reenacts a frontier tale: the rejuvenation of the lone white male in the wilderness, who submits to the power of a feminized and racialized landscape only to wrest control and separate himself from it, substituting in this case intellectual work for regeneration through violence" (9-10). If, as Kaplan points out, Miller's narrative illustrates how intellectual work can extend the racialized and gendered violence of a nationalizing impulse, then we should deem significant the ways black/female/queer coalesce in Okparanta's work transnationally to situate diaspora as an alternative paradigm for blurring such racialized and gendered imperial dichotomies. By reimagining queer possibilities in Nigeria/Africa via transnational movement across nations, Okparanta reconfigures traditional renderings of African space within a diaspora framework (rather than in opposition with); this overlap blurs dichotomies of past/future, male/female, public/domestic, hetero-/homosexual, etc. Her writing from the United States and engagement with notions of American freedom underline imperialism's various manifestations and roles in how queerness and issues of homophobia arise internationally.

"Tumours and Butterflies," the final story in *Happiness, Like Water*, is about a Nigerian-American woman living in the United States who is called to her parents' home (also in the United States) to help her mother take care of her father who is receiving

treatment for cancer. She arrives with reluctance, having previously been estranged; her father physically and emotionally abused her and her mother throughout most of her life, and she grew tired of her mother never standing up for either of them. While she tries to sympathize with her father's having cancer and does everything she can to help him and her mother, she decides to leave again after she realizes that her father's abuse never ended and her mother continues to enable him; the narrator interprets her mother's actions as a betrayal. Despite this representation of conflict between mother and daughter, none of the characters in this story are queer as in "America" or *Under the Udala Trees*. In addition, whereas the mother and daughter eventually resolve their conflict in *Under the Udala Trees*, "Tumours and Butterflies" ends with the daughter leaving for what seems to be for good, even though she can tell that her mother does not want her to.

In the final scene of the story, the daughter tells her mother why she has decided to leave. She narrates,

"I place the blouse that I am holding in the suitcase. I turn around so that I am facing her, looking straight into her eyes. I say, 'You are an emotionally abusive mother whose greatest function in my life has been to perpetuate your husband's abuse. It has always been and always will be about him. About not making him angry, about taking care of him, about giving him food this way and that. He will always be your number one priority. And so, you see, I have no business being here.'

I surprise myself, because it's not as if I've ever thought of any of this before. I surprise Mama, too. 'Hush,' she says. 'Don't say such foolish things!'

But I insist. 'No, Mama,' I say, 'It's really true. I mean every word of it. Catering to an abusive person is one thing, but forcing others to do the same, whatever your reasons, is its own form of abuse.'

She raises one hand to her face, covers her eyes with it. 'You accuse me of being emotionally abusive?' she asks. Her voice is soft, as if she's pleading, as if she's hoping that I'll change my mind and come up with a different verdict about her.

I look at her, just watch her. I don't say a thing.

'Me?' she begins again, her voice breaking. 'You really think that I have been emotionally abusive to you?'

...She really gets into crying now, her shoulders heaving, her breath catching and releasing, catching and releasing. I look at her, she is pitiful, and something in me wants to enjoy this moment. Something in me wants to smile and say, 'Now you feel

what I feel.’ But then I look at her again. And she looks more pitiful than she has ever looked all the times that Papa hit her or screamed at her. More pitiful than she looked even with her black eye in Boston. It occurs to me that *I* am the one making her feel this way And I realize that it’s not at all something to smile about.

...I walk the rest of the way down the staircase. And I think that one day, God willing, I will have a husband and I won’t always see eye to eye. So, maybe sometimes I’ll find myself yielding to him, because, after all, I’ll love him very much. Still, I’ll love him not quite as much as I’ll love my child. (195-96)

This passage exposes the impact of patriarchal violence on a female erotic as the father with his abuse is the number one factor instigating a split between daughter and mother. It also reveals how such violence limits mother and daughter’s abilities to recognize how they are each its victim. Due to this lack of recognition, they replicate patriarchal violence by abusing each other. There are allusions in this passage to each woman beginning to recognize the other. However, the daughter leaves knowing that it will hurt her mother. Moreover, though the narrator states her intended devotion to her future child, her statement is informed by her split with her mother. This narrative, then, contrasts with that of *Under the Udala Trees*, where recognition of each other’s plight ultimately brings mother and queer daughter together and establishes the power of this erotic union as an orientation into the future.

There are two key factors, however, that I want to highlight in order to boast the importance of an intertextual reading of these two texts: the significance of place in each narrative, and the sexuality of each protagonist. While *Under the Udala Trees* tells the story of a mother finally accepting her daughter’s queerness in Nigeria, the heterosexual daughter in “Tumours and Butterflies” leaves her mother, and this rupture is taking place in America. As such, we can read this juxtaposition as an allusion to the idea that “leaving”/exile from Africa/mother is not queer; that is, queerness is not irreconcilable with Africa and dependent on leaving for freedom. Because there are no queer characters

in “Tumours and Butterflies,” we are left to consider the extent to which “America” is the factor instigating exile/separation from Nigeria/mother. Such speculation begs a serious reckoning with how America/the West’s imperial relationship to Nigeria/Africa informs how we interpret exile and the politics of homosexuality, and how this impacts queer black lives in Africa and the diaspora. And so, Okparanta’s remapping queer belonging through the reconciliation of mother and lesbian daughter in Nigeria, and her revelation of America/the West’s false idealization in relation to freedom, can help us reimagine the queer African future that was cut short in Iweala’s *Speak No Evil*, bringing *Diasporic Childhoods* full circle.

Conclusion

With *Diasporic Childhoods*, I have made it a point to highlight a body of literature that speaks to the precarious state of queer black life in Africa in the second decade of the twenty-first century, but that also envisions futures for queer Africans that transcend racialized and sexualized violence. By focusing on transnational experience, I have exhibited how this generation of postcolonial-born African writers work through the various spaces they occupy as “citizens of the world” to remap queerness onto Africa’s socio-cultural landscape and, in the process, center Africa and African cultural production in discourse on black modernity. In *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie draws our attention to the limits of a transnationalism that extends national heteropatriarchy for interpreting the migratory experiences of marginal and non-conforming Africans; however, she alludes to the ways working through and across African and diasporic spaces can transform how we understand black, African, and American identities in the twenty-first century. Diriye Osman, in *Fairytales for Lost Children*, emphasizes the urgency to which we must confront homophobia in Africa by establishing a dependency on exile for queer Africans, but he also points to the ways racialized and sexualized forms of violence replicate themselves transnationally and within Western societies, challenging the terms by which we understand freedom in relation to culture and space. Binyavanga Wainaina’s genre-bending autobiographical

writing subverts heteropatriarchy in Africa by deconstructing his gendered conditioning and re-narrativizing his queer self in order to locate an erotic “elsewhere” within the space of the nation. And Chinelo Okparanta’s fiction asks us to recognize this erotic as inherently part of Africa’s cultural landscape, or as already always “here.” She does so by situating African queer experience as part of a lineage of black women battling oppression centered around an erotic of inter-personal and cross-generational care; queer Africa’s future, according to Okparanta, is contingent on the life of this care.

Front and center in my analysis of possibility in this literature has been the trope of queer diasporic childhood. I have gestured towards the multiple ways representations of African childhood and coming-of-age narratives foster these authors’ attempts at accounting for the racialized and sexualized violence impacting black queer people now, and frame how they reimagine life beyond oppression. That is because childhood’s queerness (under the guise of “innocence” that precedes social conditioning) can orient us beyond what we believe and accept about the world. The discursive space provided by queer childhood in this body of literature, then, enables a future-orienting consciousness, which I situate in line with a queer diaspora consciousness as articulated by Nadia Ellis in *Territories of the Soul*. According to her, this consciousness evolves out of the shared experience of insufficiency in the present world that motivates “the urgent sensation of a pull from elsewhere,” albeit unfulfilled (2).¹ Black queer childhood can be interpreted, likewise, as a hinge to queer African futures that transcend heteropatriarchal nationhood, however unknowable or unimaginable in the present. But the work done in *Diasporic*

¹ My work on childhood also aligns with other theories of queer diaspora by Gayatri Gopinath, Keguro Macharia, Christina Sharpe, Omise’eke Natsha Tinsley, and Rinaldo Walcott, amongst others.

Childhoods, and through representations of childhood in literature, must align with a reinvestment in black queer children in real time and outside the strictly imaginative. The socio-cultural politics of our current moment in 2020—in the United States, Europe, Africa, and beyond—heighten the already urgent nature of this investment as black and black queer children remain disproportionately susceptible to physical and mental forms of oppression at all levels of sociality and governance. And so, queer futures for Africans in Africa and the diaspora are dependent on real structural and psychological changes across race, gender, sexuality, class, and citizenship that revalue all human life.

With this recognition, I want to conclude by circling back to the socio-cultural work of twenty-first century African queer writers. It is through their progressive visions of humanity and optimistic forward-thinking, coupled with how they negotiate identity cross-culturally, intergenerationally, and transnationally, that they establish Africa as a key contributor to cultural modernity at a global level and throughout time. Of course, there are ways to highlight queer Africa's contributions to modernity beyond the scope of the texts analyzed in *Diasporic Childhoods*. These writers and texts are part of a lineage of African cultural representation that is in constant motion through space and time. In future versions of this project, I'm inclined to incorporate a discussion of the Nigerian-born trans writer Akwaeke Emezi's novels *Freshwater* (2018) and *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020), or their young adult novel *Pet* (2019), in order to think through some of the questions this dissertation leaves unanswered. For example, both *Freshwater* and *The Death of Vivek Oji* portray how motherhood and feminine energy can function within African cosmologies in ways that resist alignment with biological sex and nurture trans and other queer identities. These perspectives can further develop *Diasporic Childhoods'*

emphasis on the importance of mother-queer child relationships for queer becoming beyond the conventional examples of biological motherhood offered in chapters two, three, and four. Through its explorations of biracialism and cross-Atlantic migrations, Emezi's fiction also works to center African cosmology within diaspora experience in ways that account for the inevitability of socio-cultural hybridity and diasporization in the context of twenty-first century globalization. Emezi's explorations of African cosmology in the evolution of diasporic trans identities reach beyond the experiences of cultural non-belonging of children like Dike in *Americanah* or Niru in *Speak No Evil*. They also extend the terms of "imagining queerness in Africa" by remapping the Atlantic and diaspora as inherently African. This offers new ways to approach African modernity beyond my primary concern, here, with locating it continentally. As this brief discussion of Emezi should have made clear, *Diasporic Childhoods* is only a starting point; it is my hope that the examples I offer throughout its chapters will motivate more discussions of queer childhood at the crossroads of Africa and the diaspora, and orient attention to the enormous amount of literature being published in the United States (and beyond) by Africans, diasporic Africans, queer Africans, etc. at this very moment in 2020, a huge difference from when this project began a decade ago.

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