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REPRESENTATION OF QUEER IDENTITIES IN COMING-OF-AGE, NIGERIAN-SET NARRATIVES

Representación de identidades queer en novelas de aprendizaje ambientadas en Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore how queer identities are represented in coming-of-age narratives set in Nigeria and written in English by a new wave of contemporary female authors in the diaspora. Identified throughout the analysis under the acronym QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Colour), the queer protagonists of Olumide Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017) and Buki Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder* (2021) expose how their subjectivities are formed through the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race. Underpinning the analysis of the selected fiction is the need to critically reflect on how political otherness continues to affect queer communities in the Nigerian context. While examining biased attitudes remains a central feature of this analysis, this paper highlights the potential of horizontal bonds and solidarity relations for empowering the queer protagonists. Popoola and Papillon's interest in portraying the development of a resistance consciousness confirms that this contemporary trope of female authors uses literature as a pedagogical tool to counter queerphobia and advocate for queer rights in Nigeria and beyond.

Key words: queer identities, Nigeria, horizontal bonds, queerphobia, coming-of-age.

Resumen: Este artículo explora la representación de identidades queer en novelas de aprendizaje ambientadas en Nigeria y escritas en inglés por una nueva ola de autoras contemporáneas en la diáspora. Identificados a lo largo del análisis bajo el acrónimo QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Colour), los personajes principales de *When We Speak of Nothing* (2017), de Olumide Popoola, y *An Ordinary Wonder* (2021), de Buki Papillon, exponen cómo sus subjetividades surgen a través de las intersecciones de género, sexualidad y raza. La base para esta investigación radica en la necesidad de reflexionar críticamente sobre cómo las políticas de exclusión continúan afectando a las comunidades queer en el contexto Nigeriano. Si bien la representación de actitudes sesgadas sigue siendo una característica central de las novelas seleccionadas, este trabajo destaca el potencial de los vínculos horizontales y las relaciones de solidaridad para consolidar a las voces queer. El interés de Popoola y Papillon por reflejar el desarrollo de una sensibilidad empoderada confirma que esta generación de autoras emplea la literatura como una herramienta pedagógica para contrarrestar la queerfobia y defender los derechos queer en Nigeria y más allá.

Palabras claves: identidades queer, Nigeria, vínculos horizontales, queerfobia, novelas de aprendizaje.

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1. Introduction. Queer Identities in English Literature Written by Nigerian Female Authors

The discussion of how queerness is represented in the Nigerian literary context begins with Wole Soyinka's first novel *The Interpreters* (1965). The Nigerian author, who is part of the nationalist generation (1952-1970) as identified by Nwakanma in her periodisation of Nigerian literature written in English, portrayed homosexuality in the African country through the character of Joe Golder. Golder, who was characterised as a gay, biracial, and American teacher, appeared during a time marked "by silence and opacity rather than any clear-cut homophobia" (Green-Simms, 2016, p. 140). While Soyinka's character is considered by many to be a milestone in the evolution of LGBTQ+ rights, Golder is also criticised for his limitations. In line with this idea, Green-Simms suggests in her examination of the emergent queer voice that *The Interpreters* does not bring queerness into discourse and, unfortunately, contributes to "an outburst that has, for the most part, loudly and forcefully neglected to tell the stories about the love, joy, and heartbreak of African men who love men and women who love women" (p. 141).

A closer look into the periodisation of Nigerian literature in English reveals a shift in focus. Unlike nationalist authors, modernists (1970s-1980s) and the third generation (1990s-2000s) place LGBTQ+ voices and themes at the centre of the political discussion. A relevant aspect is that male voices are dominant during the modernist phase, with the exception of Flora Nwapa, Adaora Lily Ulasi, Mabel Segun, Buchi Emecheta, and Ifeoma Okoye. Male authors' prevalence became diluted in the aforementioned third period, and women writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Unoma Azuah, Akachi Ezeigbo, Helen Oyeyemi and Chika Unigwe played a significant role in reshaping the literary scene. Described by Ogunyemi as "privileged and responsible Nigerian daughters, [who] participate in the discourses, like men, while remaining true to their womanhood" (1996, pp. 3-4), these authors contributed by providing insights into Nigerian society and history from a non-masculine perspective. A feature that distinguishes this trope is that colonialism, cosmopolitan awareness, and the nation's examples of maladministration per se are no longer the central themes in their writing, where they discuss "the meaning of the nation and national belonging", and address "the contradictions inherent in contemporary Nigerian society" (Murphy, 2012, p. 111). Moreover, themes such as femininity, feminism, patriarchy, power-dynamics, in-betweenness, assimilation and mobility take prominence in the work of this generation.

Complementing the discussion of the Nigerian literary scene and Nigerian feminist literature in English, the third phase is characterised by the emergence of the Nigerian lesbian voice, represented by prominent writers such as Titiola Shonenyin, Promise Okekwe, Temilola Abioye, and Azuah. According to Azuah, the authors' focus on sexuality and empowerment is reflected in their portrayal of characters experiencing intense internal conflict, a desire to seek alternatives to suppression, and their exploration of bisexuality (2005, p. 138). The author adds that the lesbian voice in this new wave is innovative because it introduces sexuality as a fundamental aspect of the nation's narrative and challenges the dominant viewpoints held among the State and many Nigerians (p. 130). These portrayals of an alternative Nigeria demonstrate that the LGBTQ+ exists in the African country, often hidden in the lives of individuals who fear expressing their gender identity and sexuality.

Representing a new generation that stands as a prolongation of Nwakanma's phases are Akwaeke Emezi, Buki Papillon, Chike Frankie Edozien, Chinelo Okparanta, Eloghosa Osunde, Nnanna Ikpo, and Olumide Popoola. Among other achievements, this trope of authors is gaining recognition for promoting queer visibility and inclusion in African literature. Osinubi celebrates the distinguished shift and states that queer voices, "[i]ncarnated as lesbian, gay, intersexed, transgendered, or interminate", have become more prominent in African political

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discourse, contributing to the circulation of information about Africa, and challenging the legal and social predicaments faced by sexual minorities on the continent (2016, p. vii). While the celebration of queer representation in the literary world is evident, the portrayal of queer characters in specific novels, namely Popoola's *When We Speak of Nothing* and Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder*, deserves further critical analysis. Examining these stories is essential to understand how a new wave of female authors address issues such as queerphobia, marginalisation, belonging, and the potential for queer emancipation.

Unlike the nationalists and the modernists, who considered feminism as ultimately Eurocentric and thus rooted their work in the womanist movement[1], Popoola and Papillon reinscribe the personal experiences of the LGBTQ+ youth within a feminist perspective. Published in 2017, *When We Speak of Nothing* delves into the challenges faced by Black and queer individuals in contemporary Britain and Nigeria through the eyes of Karl. The story unfolds through 38 chapters, offering a realistic portrayal of life in both countries and shedding light on the hardships experienced by minority groups. Similarly, Papillon's debut novel, *An Ordinary Wonder,* is a coming-of-age story about Oto, a Nigerian intersex child who is forced to live as a boy despite identifying as a woman. The novel, set in the 1980s and 1990s, is divided into 49 chapters and explores intersex experiences along with Nigerian folklore, customs, mythology, songs, and literature, providing insight into the behaviour of the youth in specific cultural contexts.

Central to the analysis of Popoola and Papillon's work are the questions: what does queer mean and how does a generation led by female voices address this matter in their literary debuts? Critics such as Chris Berry, Annamarie Jagose, David Halperin and Lisa Duggan argue that queer must be seen as a unifying umbrella. However, Sullivan and Anzaldua challenge this view, asserting that it fails to deconstruct the subject, erases individual differences, and homogenises the LGBTQ+ community. Davis also raises similar concerns in his exploration of the politics of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in LGBTQ+ movements and Black and brown communities. Conscious of the marginalisation and neglect faced by these networks and their corresponding individuals throughout time, the critic echoes activists' decision to employ the self-defining label QTPOC. Standing for Queer and Trans People of Colour, this acronym infers that queers are "Intersex, Bisexual, Transgenders, Lesbian, Gay, Queer, Gender-Queer, Gender-Variant or non-conforming, Undefined, Questioning, and Exploring persons" (p. 3). This essay acknowledges the concerns raised by Sullivan and Anzaldua regarding the homogenising potential of the term queer and argues that the nomenclature QTPOC is the most appropriate for examining the representation of queer identities in coming-of-age, Nigerian-set narratives. This approach to what queer is serves two purposes: reflecting the experiences of trauma and unbelonging faced by minority groups, especially trans and intersex youth, and inscribing the queer experience in Nigeria's history and narratives. Ultimately, this methodology allows for exploring how the youth's subjectivities are formed through the intersections of gender and sexuality, as well as proves the benefits of non-familiar kinship communities in forging a resistance consciousness.

2. QUEERPHOBIA AND DISCRIMINATION: CONFRONTING THE POLITICS OF OTHERNESS

Targets of biased attitudes, Karl and Oto (the protagonists of *When We Speak of Nothing* and *An Ordinary Wonder*, respectively) face challenges fitting into society due to the biased attitudes an apparent majority holds. Unlike Oto, whose experience of discrimination takes

[1] According to Ogunyemi, the main differences between African womanists and white feminists is the former's race, as well as their past and present experience of subjugation by Western culture (1996, p. 64).

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place exclusively in the context of Nigeria, Karl's gender identity is shaped by negative interactions with family members and bullies in the United Kingdom. While heterosexist domination in the UK stands as a pivotal part of Popoola's analysis of gender discrimination and patriarchal domination, this section is concerned with illustrating encounters of transphobia in Nigeria. A comparative examination of the depictions of heterosexist hegemony and patriarchal abuse by Popoola and Papillon corroborates Myslik's analysis regarding adolescents who assert their power through violence against marginalized communities. Although transphobic aggressions are not the primary focus of the critic, it is plausible to draw a connection between the narrow-minded individuals who perpetrate attacks on queer individuals. This relationship underscores the reality that members of seemingly privileged groups "are socialized to be dominant and aggressive, to conform strongly to established sex roles, and to ridicule or punish those who deviate from those roles" (1996, p. 159). Consequently, the representation of heterosexist domination and patriarchal abuse illuminates the role of familial and societal institutions in perpetuating queerphobia and transphobia.

In Karl's case, he encounters gender norms for the first time outside the UK when he arrives at Port Harcourt's airport. The attention he draws at border control is not unfamiliar but makes him feel uncomfortable. Hoping that the police officers are not what he describes as "gender police in the making" (p. 58), Karl is required to act passively to disapproving looks and comments such as "Ah ah, they no know how to dress themselves" or "Dis one, no be woman" (p. 59). Luckily for Karl, there is one member of staff who, unlike his colleagues, finally welcomes Karl to Nigeria. Nonetheless, this encounter leaves the protagonist embarrassed and emotionally distressed. As he internally reflects, it is "a bit too much. The attention. The waiting. The not saying much" (p. 61). Karl's feeling of unease does not go away as he goes through border control but intensifies when he finds out that his father, Adebanjo, with whom he had only exchanged a few words on the phone, is not waiting for him at the airport as arranged. Disappointed, Karl feels "like turning back, running back through security, telling them not to worry, he would not upset dress codes any longer" (p. 62).

After some days of wondering about his father's whereabouts, Karl finally meets him. An encounter Karl is initially excited about, it turns out to be a disaster because of the coldness that prevails. With no greeting whatsoever, the father's first verbal exchange is, "I believe we have some catching up to do", followed by him stepping away from the entrance and leaving the door open. Inside the house, Karl feels observed and scrutinised and, most importantly, is misnamed as Carla instead of Karl (p. 131). After having a conversation with Karl about unrelated topics, Adebanjo confesses that he was at the airport when the teenager arrived, but a call from Karl's key worker, Godfrey, made him leave. The information Adebanjo received regarding his son's transitions, added to the assumption that Karl was a girl, shocked the protagonist's father to the extent that he "wasn't in the position to come back" (p. 133).

Communication between father and son is not fluid, and the discomfort both experience makes Karl aware that "the inevitable" is about to happen; the need to strip so that a stranger can decide whether you are enough for them or not. Courageous to speak out about himself, Karl tells his father that he has been a trans boy for as long as he can remember. In his words, "When I was eleven, I just said I wouldn't pretend to be a girl no more. She understood. I had never been one" (p. 134). Unable to process this information and shocked, Adebanjo demands his son to explain, "Who told you to dress as a boy? What is this?". Not expecting this attitude, Karl describes his father's body as if shouting "all the things that he wouldn't say. Almost like the skin was foaming, all the unsaid things underneath bubbling away" (p. 135). The hostility that marks this first encounter is accentuated when Adebanjo, stressing to Karl that trans people do not fit in the nation's narrative and history, formulates the question, "What do you think of our country so far?". This interrogation upsets Karl deeply and forces him to question the extent to which he was "included in the 'our'" (p. 132). Adebanjo's use of 'our' has an alienating and

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estranging impact on Karl. Proof of this interpretation emerges when, following the encounter with his father, the teenager informs Godfrey on the phone that "there isn't any place here for someone like me", quoting Karl (p. 142).

Unlike Adebanjo, who does not know about Karl's gender identity because he has been absent from his son's life, Oto's family is depicted as one that compels him to classify as a man despite identifying as female. As if she is a secret to be kept hidden, Oto is forced to live a childhood marked by neglect, physical and mental abuse, and a constant sense of threat. Similarly to Adebanjo in Popoola's novel, Oto's father is described as someone who is "as remote as Mars and twice as hostile", as well as "a cruel, selfish person" who had "never been anything but a painful absence" (pp. 13, 89, 91). The adult's main priority is safeguarding his reputation by hiding Oto "in plain sight" as he perceives the protagonist's physiology as abnormal. According to the father's views, if Oto's "condition was ever traced back to us, the Akinro family name would be tainted with abnormality for generations" (p. 46). Sharing the father's opinion on the need to keep out of sight the baby's genitalia, Oto's mother never lets the kid stay over at friends' houses. This decision not only impacts the young girl's well-being but also interferes with the reputation she develops among the children at school as "a sickly child" (p. 11). The fear of what others may think of her family if Oto's condition is discovered also relates to the much-needed medical diagnosis that the protagonist does not receive until she is almost a teenager, as the mother never lets the kid alone in a hospital room.

Oto, whose dream was to live in "a sweet home where words and silence didn't cut like a double-edged razor" (p. 90), feels emotionally rejected by her father and is forced to believe that she and her actions are the reasons for her unstable family setting. The situation is illustrated when Oto and her twin-sister, Wura, are young, and the father asks what present they want from his trip. In Wura's case, she tells him she wants "ribbons and a fairy-tale castle with a real princess inside". Uncertain of the father's reaction, Oto expresses that she wants the same, but her father, disgusted, looks at the protagonist "like a person stares at the sole of his shoe after stepping in vomit". Such is the revulsion the male adult feels towards Oto that he leaves the family house, afraid to sire "another monster" (p. 13).

Oto not only feels rejected by her father, whose discrimination is subtle and painful, but also by her mother and her maternal family. Oto's mother, who is never emotionally available, disapproves of her kid's body condition and blames her for her husband's abandonment. The accusation is one that deeply contributes to the protagonist's feeling of isolation during her childhood. An example that illustrates the abuse the protagonist is exposed to happens when, at the age of 5, she grows the desire to wear her grandmother's wig after seeing her setting it aside. Not knowing that what she wishes to do is something that would carry mental and physical consequences alike, Oto decides to follow her instinct. It is after she has arranged the wig on her head that she looks at herself in the mirror, discovering what she truly is: a girl and not a boy. The character's happiness and eagerness to inform the others about her discovery is met with her mother's apathy, who contradicts the young girl by saying, "You're not a girl, Otolorin, you're a boy!". Additionally, the mother threatens the kid, telling her that if something like this happens again, if she ever repeats those words or if she ever lets anyone see her privates, she will lock her outside at night (p. 7).

The role that clothes or compliments play in one's expression of identity is also evident before the twins' celebration of their 12th birthday. Even though Oto does not hate to wear trousers, she expresses her longing to wear, like her sister, a dress (p. 6). Conscious that her parents would never support her dressing choices, the protagonist asks to try on the dress that Wura is going to wear for their celebration. Wura's denial of her request does not surprise Oto due to their mother's threat that Jehova God would punish the family if Wura encouraged her twin's "sinful habits" (p. 7). In the end, after putting on "the big, sad eyes Wura could never

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refuse", Oto ends up trying on the dress and, to the misfortune of both, their mother witnesses the protagonist in Wura's birthday outfit. Adopting an aggressive attitude and assaulting Oto by calling her "wicked child", the twin's mother pushed Oto "out of the room. Down the hallway. To the edge of the longing" (pp. 8, 9). Reflecting on these situations, Oto realises that no matter how hard she tries to please her mother, the "reasoning for [her] condition was a nightmare [she] couldn't seem to wake up from" (p. 59). The teenager's affirmation is verified when her mother says, "I would have been satisfied with one child. Better dead baby than a living horror" (p. 149).

Abuse is not only experienced by the protagonist in the private space of the household but also at the various educational institutions she attends. Despite her numerous attempts to fit in with the rest of the students, Oto feels as if there are unwritten giant rules that everyone seems to understand except for her. The struggle to conform to the dominant gender and societal norms and the rest's naturalisation of certain practices as feminine or masculine leaves Oto in a space of in-betweenness. As the character recalls, "I sidled uncertainly from one group to the other, just waiting to play. With anyone". Additionally, Oto notices students' perception of her as not fitting the established 'norm' when "they'd all suddenly move elsewhere or talk and play around me as if I wasn't there. If I tried to butt in anyway, I'd get a swollen ankle from being silly kicked or an 'accidental' elbow would hit my face" (p. 59). On one occasion, a bully ridicules Oto, calling her a "sissy boy", making her feel ashamed and forcing her to assimilate that there is something about her that disturbs the others despite her "best efforts to act 'normal'" (p. 43).

A major issue in Oto's delayed process of self-discovery is, too, the lack of representation she encounters in her day-to-day life. The only time the teenager sees someone with whom she could identify is on TV, where the Nigerian singer and performer Fela Kuti appeared with his queer queens. Fascinated, Oto expresses that she admires Kuti for daring to be exactly who he wants to be. But, apart from that, the protagonist lacks examples of queer individuals like Kuti. This lack of representation is perceived, for example, when Oto's biology teacher shows a diagram of the human reproductive system and confidently states that "babies' organs separate into male or female in the womb". Aware that the teacher has failed to acknowledge her reality, Oto wishes her teacher had spoken out about existences like hers and had demanded to know why her situation was not being represented in the diagram and the lesson per se (p. 82). Something alike happens when, desperate, Oto urges to the library in need to find a book where her condition gets addressed. It is in one of the books where she finds the words 'pseudo' and 'hermaphrodite', but she struggles with the definitions provided, feeling that they do not represent who she is, claiming she is "much more than. Sham, fake person with both male and female parts" (p. 83).

The interactions Karl and Oto have with Nigerian civilians and some members of their family show that part of Nigerian society is governed by gender norms and follows them according to heteronormativity standards. The way the protagonists relate with others confirms that their queerness determines their feelings of unsafety and alienation in the African country. Constructed as individuals who uphold heterosexism, reject queerness, and punish those who deviate from the norm, the police officers, the bullies, Karl and Oto's selected members of their families deny the protagonists' existence. In essence, these narrow-minded individuals represent a part of the population who believe that identity cannot be fluid, and view transitioning as unnatural and inappropriate.

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3. HORIZONTAL BONDS. THE BUILDING OF A SUPPORT SYSTEM AND THE GROWTH OF A RESISTANCE CONSCIOUSNESS

While power relationships and vertical bonds negatively impact Karl and Oto's well-being, Popoola and Papillon also pay attention to how the protagonists encounter people who have a positive impact on the development of their resistance consciousness. The analysis of these interactions dismantles prevailing discourses about Nigeria and its population being predominantly against queer identities and rights. Additionally, Davis' affirmation that "[f]or queer and trans people of colour there is a yearning to find community that can hold and embrace all their intersectional multiplicity and richness" is validated by the emotional ties Karl and Oto develop in the African country (p. 49). In Karl's case, the bonds he forms with John, Nakale, and Janoma help him embrace his identity as a man. Likewise, Oto's acceptance of her identity as a woman partly happens due to the support network she establishes with Mr Dickson and Derin.

As Popoola's novel progresses and Adebanjo's absences become the norm, Karl develops a strong bond with John. A working-class man working for Adebanjo and a cousin of his uncle's wife, John makes his home a welcoming space for the teenager. This small apartment, where John lives with his wife, Uzo, and their newborn, Rose, is compared to Karl's home in Britain for its modesty, and provides a comfortable and warm environment for Karl, "for being in, not for showing to someone" (p. 93). Like John's role in Karl's journey of empowerment is Oto's teacher at the boarding school, Mr Dickson. Aware of the bad relationship between the teenager and her family, the adult welcomes Oto into his "small, unpretentious white bungalow" with "a showstopping rainbow riot of flowers" in the front yard until she recovers from her suicidal attempt (p. 223). The teacher, who condemns the protagonist' parents' abusive behaviour, guides Oto in her journey of self-acceptance as an intersex person. The guidance is appreciated when he leaves a book for the teenager to flick through, titled *Treasures of the Louvre*, where she finds a picture of a reclining marble figure made in the second century BC, called the *Borghese Hermaphroditus*. To come across this picture is positive for Oto because, although she looks different to her down below, the figure provides evidence that bodies like hers have existed for centuries (p. 231). After Oto tells Mr Dickson about this finding, the teacher adds that there are African sculptures that resemble her. Called the *nommo*, these are "ancestral spirits of the Dogon people of Mali. They appear with a human torso and a fish-like tail", like Lori (p. 232).

Mr Dickson not only provides Oto with examples that empower her consciousness but also seeks the medical and legal advice that the protagonist has always been denied. The idea of consulting a urologist who "can offer some clarity and perhaps a diagnosis" brings a blush of fresh air and hope to Oto (p. 234). As the teenager notes, professionals in this field can answer the questions that she has longed for so badly, such as "Am I male? Female? Somewhere in between? Will the bumps on my chest get bigger? Will I menstruate? Grow a beard? Can I have babies?" (p. 235). After the visit to the urologist, Oto is provided with scientific answers to her case and learns through some diagrams that reproductive organs are raged from zero to six and, bearing in mind her identification as female, she would be staged at two, meaning that Oto "should ideally have had a female sex of rearing". The exchanged information makes the teenager realise that her parents' approach to raising her has been inadequate, as she should have been raised female, like Wura. To quote Oto,

> Mother was dead wrong. I'm not a changeling. Or any sort of demon. Or curses. I'm Lori. I've always been. An *expert*, a medical researcher, just said no. It matters. Despite everything, it matters very much right now to hear this. I want to climb on her table and shout, *I am Lori! I am Lori Akinro*! (p. 237)

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While the familiar bond Karl and Oto establish with John and Mr Dickson is crucial to the characters' journey of self-acceptance, attention must be drawn to the relationships the teenagers have with people of their same age. In Popoola's novel, this bond is seen with Janoma and Nakale, and, in Papillon's, with Derin. Despite the differences between the three characters, they all have in common that they never invade Karl and Oto's personal space or pressure them to talk about their identity. Instead, Janoma, Nakale, and Derin accompany the protagonists until they feel comfortable sharing their experiences and feelings. These horizontal bonds are important because they unveil the presence of a community in Nigeria that understands and accepts queer identities.

In her research on *When We Speak of Nothing*, Alimi signals that the emotional bond between Karl and Janoma is a pivotal moment of transfiguration for the protagonist. This relationship represents the protagonist's shift from seeing himself as a freak to recognising himself, firstly, as a man, and, secondly, as a human being (2017, p. 23). The foundation of their relationship lies in the trust that Karl deposits in Janoma as time goes by, particularly as she informs the teenager about the queer scene in Nigeria. Learning about the musician Area Scatter, who gained fame as a cross-dresser embracing non-heteronormative behaviour in mainstream media, makes Karl feel safe, welcome, and represented. Apart from recounting how Scatter disappeared from the public eye but later re-emerged as a woman, facing opposition yet significantly contributing to queer rights in Nigeria (p. 168), Janoma speaks of Charly Boy. Described as "the Area Scatter of our time", the Nigerian singer drew public attention for kissing "a male musician on the mouth during a photo shoot" (p. 167). While many found this act scandalous, Janoma normalises it. Nigerian's acceptance is reflected, too, when Karl opens up about his feelings and attraction and tells Janoma that, although he disagrees with that information, some people say he was born a girl (p. 172). After this exchange, Janoma tells Karl she likes him just the way he is, expressing relief and reciprocating his feelings (p. 181).

As is the case with Janoma, Nakale helps Karl develop a gender consciousness and contributes to the deconstruction of male relationships, interpreting these as tender and gentle. From the day they first meet, the Nigerian teenager makes the protagonist feel connected to his daily life and they meet regularly. The close bond between both is seen, especially, when Karl feels the need to tell his new friend that his passport shows a name other than Karl. Nakale's reaction to this information is not hostile, but relaxed. As the narrator informs, right after he was told about Karl's gender identity, Nakale "rolled on to his back and folded his arms behind his head" (p. 193). Having known for a long time about his friend's gender identity, Nakale tells Karl that all he has done since they have been friends is following Mena's advice, which is: "[T]o be a friend is to be there and wait for the time. For the time to talk. And then listen" (p. 194).

In *An Ordinary Wonder*, Derin's role is similar to Janoma and Nakale's, acting as both a friend and a partner to Oto. Since they first meet, Oto and Derin bond over their shared experiences of discrimination. Unlike Oto, Derin embraces his differences and uniqueness, and encourages Oto to do the same: "[I]f you act like your uniqueness is a great thing and you couldn't care less about their opinion, they eventually give up. And that feels so good and you do it again and again until you truly believe it" (p. 54). To validate the idea that there is no right or wrong way of being, Derin discusses with Oto his admiration for individuals with non-normative bodies, such as his uncle, who "was born with six toes and fingers on each foot and hand" (p. 94). Despite being ridiculed and labelled as a wizard, Derin's uncle proudly "wears rings on his smallest fingers just to drive [people] crazy", to defy what society expects from him. While some people cringe when they interact with him, Derin finds this situation utterly funny and a demonstration that difference is not a load but something to be proud of. Derin also shares his admiration for the drummer Chick Webb, who, because of suffering tuberculosis of spine, had a short stature and a hump in his back. What the character regards the most is that a talented Webb was successful in an industry that condemns non-conformities like his (p. 95).

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Through these examples, Derin encourages Oto to embrace her uniqueness, demonstrating that differences should be celebrated rather than conceived as burdens.

Derin's respect for Oto must also be highlighted for it stands as the foundation of the teenager's relationships. Mindful of Oto's personal space, Derin never questions the protagonist's decisions, such as when she dresses and undresses under her robe with her back turned, or why she locks the room they share, sometimes leaving the key inside. As Oto informs, Derin "just knocks and waits" (p. 175). The problem is that the female teenager does not always reciprocate Derin's trust and keeps vital information from him. This breach of trust affects Derin, who feels betrayed and heartbroken, and is forced to move to America, where his mother lives. Eventually, Derin reaches out to Oto, seeking her forgiveness because as her best friend, he should have stood by her side unconditionally (p. 247). As it happens to Karl with Janoma, Derin's apology and continued support help Oto to confide in him about her true self. To the protagonist's surprise, Derin already knew about it but did not want to make assumptions about her private concerns. After telling Oto he had been waiting for her to "eventually tell [him] what was up", Derin expresses his acceptance and affection for her, regardless of who she is (pp. 249-250).

4. From Powerless to Empowerment. The building of a Resistance Consciousness

The network of care, love, and support Karl and Oto establish in Nigeria is key for the protagonists' transformation into empowered individuals. In Karl's case, his development of a resistance consciousness and embodiment of his identity as a trans man is evident when he accepts meeting his father for a second time despite a horrible first encounter. Self-determined and portrayed as someone with agency, Karl refers to this event as "some half-arsed attempt at bonding", indicating his lack of interest. As the teenager is due to come back to London soon, Karl expresses a preference for having the "last meal at the buka, with everyone", rather than being with Adebanjo. Not only does Karl's attitude change but his father's as well. Adebanjo, following his wife's advice, tells his son that he has spent time researching about trans people and would like for them both to have a second chance. However, Karl continues to perceive a discriminatory tone as his father refers to trans individuals as "[p]eople like you", confirming Karl's belief that the adult's views on the community he represents are negative. As the teenager reflects,

> [t]he *like you* address was never a start to anything good. Followed usually by a version of: *you people, you are not normal, but I am going to decide to tolerate you while I'll keep making it obvious that I'm the one who is generous here. Because you are not normal.* It wasn't quite the same as friendship. Like Nakale. It wasn't quite like *I'm not leaving you. I dey stay for here.* (p. 197)

Comparing his father to a door you cannot open for it "has two polished blocks instead of handles", Karl decides to avoid sharing more information about himself or his plans with Adebanjo or spending more time with him, which reflects his changed attitude since arriving in Nigeria (pp. 197, 199). Instead of the tormented boy of weeks before, what is now in front of Adebanjo is an unstoppable teenager with a renewed sense of stubbornness that, as the narrator describes it, "was troubling" (p. 201). The representation of Karl's journey of self-discovery in Nigeria allows Popoola to depict the motif of the journey as having a positive outcome. After returning to London, Karl exhibits his agency with his relatives and close friends, expressing that the father is no longer a priority (p. 220). Amazed by his self-assertive tone, Karl shares that "he loved the sound of his own voice. Loved the way the authority dropped in it, heavy,

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like it just laid down the earth itself. He seemed like a guy who told, not asked" (p. 234). This assertiveness is also reflected when Karl tells his mother he no longer wants to run away from problems and "no longer left things behind to shut them out. He stayed now" (p. 230). In essence, Karl's negative and positive experiences in Nigeria mark the beginning of his transformation into someone with agency who fully embraces himself. Upon arrival in the British capital, the teenager challenges traditional ideas of masculinity and confronts those who reinforce his feeling of alienation.

In Oto's case, the strong bond she establishes with Mr Dickson and her heartfelt conversation with Derin, where they both open up about their feelings, are crucial, as she is finally able to feel a sense of belonging that she has craved for her whole life. Without dismissing the relevance of both relationships, it seems that what truly changed the protagonist's attitude are the words the urologist shares with her. The meeting with this professional leads Oto to embrace her new identity as Lori Akinro, accept herself, and act according to how she feels and not what the norm establishes. This newfound confidence allows Oto to enter a shop with dresses hanging around, experiment with make-up, and fully embrace her true self. Relieved and liberated, Oto looks at herself in the mirror and, no longer scared, "I wave, blow myself a kiss, then giggle, feeling silly. I know I want to see her every day. I want to be her for the rest of my life", Oto shares (p. 240). Ultimately, the protagonist's renewed acceptance leads her to inform Mr Dickson that she will no longer be Lori, but instead go by the name Lazarus because "I truly feel like I am back from the dead" (p. 244).

In a way that resembles Karl's opposition to Adebanjo, Oto's determination is evidenced when she faces her mother by not allowing her to complain about her dressing choices and tells her it is time to treat her and Wura as sisters, "whether you accept it or not" (p. 260). A similar resistance happens when Oto threatens to build a bad reputation for her father's name if he does not meet her demands. Comfortable with who she is, Oto also takes off her shirt, then her trousers, leaves her thumbs hooked into the elastic band of her briefs, and tells her father, "I have no problem with myself, but imagine what all those narrow-minded people like you would say!". Moreover, the teenager threatens her father as she discusses the consequences of people learning about her intersex condition. If that happens, Oto suggests, her brothers from her father's side "will forever have to prove their lineage is not […] low pedigree" (p. 298). In the father's eyes, Oto is blackmailing him; however, the protagonist sees it as her right to demand a passport with the name Otolorin Akinro, specifying she is a woman. The act of confronting her father brings Oto a sense of empowerment and satisfaction. As she shares, "It feels amazingly good to have the tables turned, even as I pity his lack of a heart" (p. 301).

5. Conclusion. Literature and the Plight for Inclusive Changes

The literary scene in recent decades has shown a commitment to representing the queer community as voiced, determined, and an integral part of Nigeria's narrative of belonging. Contemporary portrayals of queer identities differ from how previous generations approached LGBTQ+ themes in their writing. One possible reason for the passive portrayal of queer characters in the work of nationalists, modernists, and third-generation authors could be the failure to acknowledge sexuality and gender as forms of oppression and an interpretation of these indicators as Western concepts. These portrayals are being challenged by a new generation of female authors who, through their work, advocate for the stories of marginalised voices. In doing so, they not only speak out about the deteriorating state of queer rights in Nigeria but also advocate for inclusive and non-discriminatory change.

The commitment to achieving equality in the African country is recognised in the work of Popoola and Papillon, who published their debut novels while living in the diaspora. The comparative analysis of *When We Speak of Nothing* and *An Ordinary Wonder* reflects that although

marginalisation and heteronormative standards continue to influence the formation of queer identities, horizontal bonds are formed within communities. Prioritising the depiction of kinship relationships is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it validates the idea that these bonds are crucial in the development of a resistance consciousness in queer individuals. Secondly, it deconstructs prevailing interpretations of African society, particularly Nigerian society, as being queerphobic. In other words, Karl and Oto's representation as fractional but empowered individuals contributes to an understanding of literature as a means to condemn biased attitudes against minority groups, delegitimise heteronormative structures and institutions, and embrace the multiplicity of the queer community in Nigeria.

I propose that Popoola and Papillon's aim with their debut novels is to promote solidarity, respect, and kindness for the other and among each other as the foundation for equality. The investigation of a literary tradition that challenges the invisibility of queer stories and explores the disputes and opportunities deriving from representing queerness invites debates on the benefits of establishing horizontal bonds and promoting transcultural dialogues in Nigeria and abroad. However, further research is needed to determine the extent to which diaspora writers benefit from representing queer identities while not living in the African country. Additionally, it would be relevant to investigate and compare if other authors of Popoola and Papillon's generation demonstrate a similar commitment to queer rights. This analysis will help determine if the authors' dedication to including queer voices is generational or specific to their time.

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