



(Un)Exceptional: Representations of the Marginalisation of Black Female Queer Desire in Chinelo Okparanta’s “Under the Udala Trees” and Leona Beasley’s “Something Better Than Home”

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This thesis aims to assess the representations of Black same-sex desiring women, specifically in the contexts of the United States of America and Nigeria. The primary aim of this study is to explore and critique the notion of U.S. sexual exceptionalism and homonormativity as theorised by Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*. In doing so, I aim to show that while the United States of America positions itself as more progressive than countries that continue to criminalise and persecute same-sex desiring people, queer people in both contexts continue to be marginalised and face similar challenges that are a result or cause of this marginalisation. This comparative thesis of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Leona Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* examines the ways in which religion; notions of secrecy and censorship; as well as compulsory heterosexuality and homophobic violence contribute to the marginalisation of Black queer women in both the United States of America and Nigeria.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Published in 2015 and 2017 respectively, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Leona Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* are both compelling debut novels that address notions of womanhood, sexuality and culture. These novels are centred around the theme of same-sex desire—an emergent theme in the landscape of the African and Black feminist novel globally in the past few decades. In addition to demonstrating the principles of Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1991 theory of intersectionality—which speaks to the marginalisation of identities subject to additive models of oppression with a specific focus on the notions of race and gender—the novels at the centre of this study transcend the limitations of the aforementioned aspects of personal realities by further exploring the additional complexities of culture, same-sex desire and corrective violence against queer subjects in Black conservative societies. This thesis explores the intersecting oppressions associated with race, gender and sexuality in representations of same sex relationships (with a particular focus on Black queer women) in the comparative contexts of Africa and the United States of America following significant political movements centred around notions of identity and belonging. I focus specifically on the years following the Nigerian Civil War of the late 1960s and the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In my examination of whether the notion of Western progressiveness as expressed through diversity and inclusivity reigns true when compared to supposedly backward African nations, I explore the treatment of additively marginalised groups i.e. Black queer women as represented in the aforementioned novels.

The legal attitudes towards homosexual desire and activity in the United States of America and Nigeria are in complete contrast. While countries in the West, such as the U.S., have begun to address homophobia on the legislative and constitutional front, many countries in Africa

(including Nigeria) continue to persecute individuals who engage in same-sex relations (Msibi 57). In her examination of homophobic laws in African countries, Barbara Boswell asserts that “[w]here homophobic laws exist in former British colonies, such laws are either remnants of colonial law that have not been repealed from postcolonial nations’ legislative books, while others are re-codified or amended colonial law” (50). The latter was verified in Nigeria when in January 2014, President Goodluck Jonathan signed the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act which “mandated 14-year prison terms for anyone in a same-sex union and 10 years’ imprisonment for allies ‘promoting’ homosexuality” (Boswell 47; Nwazuo and Igwe 181). Despite the fact that the present constitutional criminalisation of same-sex relations was built on the remnants of colonial laws, it is bolstered by the cultural notion of homosexuality being perceived as not only un-African (which is refuted by precolonial historical studies), but also as a Western import from which Africa needs to be freed (Msibi 62).

Conversely, in June 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision to implement the nation-wide recognition of marriage rights for same-sex couples (Murray 1207). Despite a history of state prohibitions (which effectively resulted in the exclusion and non-protection of people who participate in same-sex sexual acts from criminalisation) similar to the colonial anti-sodomy laws in many African countries, the public response to the decision was overwhelmingly positive (Sunstein 1165-1166). Despite this, the exceptionalist claims of the tolerance and acceptance of queer people as well as the global endorsement of the rights of queer people on the part of the United States is often coupled with the condemnation of supposedly “backward” countries (mainly located in Africa) such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Senegal for the homophobic mistreatment and criminalisation of their queer citizens as demonstrated by numerous statements made by the former president of the United States, Barack Obama following the 2015 Obergefell decision which recognised and

constitutionalised same-sex marriage in the United States (Smith). With the constant debates and subsequent condemnation surrounding the criminalisation of homosexuality in African countries, particularly from the USA, I ask whether or not these seemingly polarised contexts truly differ in their institutional attitudes towards intersecting models of oppression particularly pertaining to the arena of Black women's sexuality.

The post-colonial novel is often dominated by nationalist narratives (Osinubi 677; Munro 189). As a result, stories about the communities that are shunned or do not fit the imagined community of the new nation (such as those that openly depict or represent same-sex desire, particularly amongst women) are relegated either to minor roles and/or parts in the novel or to the domain of the short story (Munro 189). Because the short story can avoid the conventional temporalities and the production of endings that provide closure in ways that are not traditional to the novel, it could be asserted the short story reflects the realities of Black queer lives which (due to their marginalisation) hang in the balance (Munro 189). I have chosen to forefront the novel in this study because it not only defies the expulsion of queer lives and experiences from the traditional novel, but it also defies the fleeting temporalities of the short story via the Bildungsroman style which, due to its temporal continuity, effectively proves the historicity of Black queer lives. The novel also provides fertile ground for the exploration of the actual (albeit imagined) realities of Black queer lives in Nigeria and the United States of America beyond the recorded accuracies of legislation and historical socio-political attitudes.

Set during and after the Nigerian Civil War, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* is a Bildungsroman styled novel that follows the journey of a young Igbo girl named Ijeoma initially situated in Ojoto. Overcome by grief after the death of her husband in an air raid, Ijeoma's mother, Adaora, sends her to live with a grammar school teacher in Nnewi. There she

meets Amina, a young Hausa girl who not only begins working alongside Ijeoma as the grammar school teacher's house-girl, but with whom she also falls in love. The pair's love, however, is disrupted when it is discovered by the grammar school teacher. In response, Ijeoma is sent back to her mother (now located in Aba) who, after hearing of her daughter's indiscretion, takes it upon herself to attempt to exorcise the supposed demon of her daughter's non-heterosexual sexuality through extreme devotion to Christianity and bible study. Thereafter, Ijeoma is sent to a boarding school where she is reunited with Amina, who after a nightmare rejects Ijeoma and begins to engage in heterosexual relationships. After completing secondary school, Ijeoma returns to Aba where she meets Ndidi, a teacher who introduces her to the underground LGBT+ community. After witnessing the violence that the same-sex desiring community in Nigeria is exposed to, Ijeoma enters a heterosexual relationship with her childhood friend, Chibundu, whom she subsequently marries and has a child with. Unable to ignore her sexuality and exposed to violence within her marriage, Ijeoma returns to her mother's house where she is finally accepted and is reunited with Ndidi.

Unlike Okparanta's novel, Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* takes place in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States of America. Set in the 1970s, the decade succeeding the Civil Rights Movement, this coming-of-age novel follows the journey of Onnie Armstrong. Adopted by an older Southern working-class couple, Onnie soon finds herself exploring her sexuality with one of the children (Karla) that attend her mother's at-home day care. Despite being punished by her father after the discovery of this indiscretion, Onnie continues to battle with notions of propriety and heteronormative womanhood in the following years. In her middle school years, Onnie and Karla are both sexually assaulted after being found together once again, which presents a new line of self-reflection and questions regarding her sexuality and how it is received by the society in which she lives. Later, Onnie and her mother visit her uncle

in San Francisco, where she, like Ijeoma discovers LGBTQ+ clubs and communities. Upon her return to Atlanta, Onnie's relationship with Karla dissipates as Karla (similar to Okparanta's Amina) conforms to notions of compulsory heterosexuality. Onnie's desire for Karla is suspended by her introduction to Max, who due to her status as the mayor's daughter must also hide her queer desire. Unable to cope with the familial and societal pressures of compulsory heterosexuality, Onnie makes the decision to move back to San Francisco to attend University. Similar to Okparanta's ending, this novel's epilogue informs us that not only is Onnie finally in an accepting albeit discretionary environment, she also reignites her relationship with Karla.

In spite of being set in different continents, both novels confront the intrapersonal realities of institutional marginalisation due to the intersecting oppressions of race, gender and sexuality. In addition to notions of gender and race (the latter prominently being the case in Beasley's novel) these texts demonstrate the ways in which different aspects of society such as culture and religion reinforce the binaries between heteronormative and non-heteronormative desire. By conducting a queer reading of these texts, this thesis aims to dispel the notion of Western exceptionalism and imperialism performed predominantly by the USA with regards to queer existence and queer rights as compared to supposedly "backward" countries that continue to enact explicit anti-homosexuality laws. This comparative reading aims to show that despite notions of Western exceptionalism as expressed by the American condemnation of countries that explicitly persecute queer people, such as Nigeria, queer people in both countries continue to be marginalised in profoundly similar ways.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is divided into five chapters, each exploring a different theoretical element of the marginalisation of the queer protagonists of Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Leona Beasley's *Something Better Than Home*.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter explores the theoretical frameworks that inform identity politics in reference to Black queer women in Africa and America. Additionally, this chapter contextualises the conditions that shape the construction and subsequent marginalisation of the identities of the protagonists in *Under the Udala Trees* and *Something Better Than Home*.

Chapter Three: Religion and Culture

This chapter explores and compares the tensions between religion and same-sex desire present in both the novels central to this study. This chapter specifically examines the colonial history of Christianity and its propensity towards heteronormativity, the demonisation of queer desire, its representation and its consequences for the protagonists in Okparanta's and Beasley's novels.

Chapter Four: Secrecy and Safe Havens

The theme of communal spaces, specifically LGBTQ+ clubs is central to both texts. While Okparanta's Ijeoma discovers one in Aba through Ndidi, Beasley's Onnie is fascinated by the queer clubs and book shops she discovers on her trip to San Francisco. In addition to exploring the historical background of such communities and clubs, this chapter will perform a queer analysis of these clubs from the perspectives of these text's protagonists in order to establish

what effect these places have in the exploration of their sexualities. Additionally, this chapter examines the vulnerability of these spaces and the communities within them in both the USA and Nigeria as represented by the notion of secrecy with regards to non-heteronormative sexuality despite claims of Western exceptionalism and inclusion.

Chapter Five: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Homophobic Violence

This chapter explores the mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality that both protagonists in Okparanta's and Beasley's novels encounter from the state, religion, and the nuclear family. Additionally, this chapter examines instances of homophobic violence in the texts that reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and ensure the marginalisation of queer citizens in the USA and Nigeria.

The Conclusion of this dissertation examines the marginalising aspects of religion, the need for secrecy and safe spaces, as well as those of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobic violence in an effort to encourage the critique of the notions of exceptionalism and superiority amongst nations—specifically those that polarise the Global North and the Global South.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The theme of same-sex desire among women is one that seems to be emerging and gaining increased recognition in the world of African and African American literature in the past few decades. Alongside race and gender, Chinelo Okparanta's 2015 novel *Under the Udala Trees* and Leona Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* (2017) present the additional components of ethnicity and sexuality to the additive model of oppression which complicates conceptions of how identity is expressed and received as elucidated by Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. This literature review firstly aims to define blackness in the differing contexts of Africa and America. Similarly, I discuss terminology in the sphere of sexuality. In doing so, I not only highlight the debates pertaining to terminology in these spheres of identity politics, I also clarify which terms will be used throughout the duration of this essay. Using Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality as a starting point, I aim to show how notions of race, gender and sexuality come together to ensure the institutional marginalisation of Black women in Africa as well as America.

U.S. Exceptionalism and Homonationalism

According to Jasbir K. Puar, exceptionalism is not exclusively indicative of distinction, it also carries implications of excellence and superiority (3). The notion of exceptionalism with regard to nation states and global influence can be traced back to the colonial era in which colonist nations strove to civilise what they concluded to be the savagery of their colonies (Morgensen 106). In the realm of sexuality, colonists not only disapproved of the diverse sexuality and gender practices amongst Native societies, they also sought to regulate them (mainly through sexual violence) by producing the "biopolitics of modern sexuality" which centred Western white national heteronormativity (Morgensen 106; 108). The contrast created by the attribution

of pervasiveness, savagery, and deviance of the diverse nature of Native gender and sexuality practices and the strict heteronormativity of the West in colonial discourse resulted in the orientalisation and racialisation of non-conforming and often queered bodies (Dhawan 53). As a Western construction, it can be argued that settler colonialism laid the foundations for the formation and institutionalisation of settler sexuality in the U.S. which is foregrounded on binary gender systems, heteronormativity and the disavowal of bodies that fall outside of such constraints (Morgensen 108).

By the mid 20th century however, Western feminist and queer movements began to yield constitutional transformations and “sociocultural recognition for non-normative bodies, desires and practices” (Dhawan 53). Within the past fifty years, the West has seen not only the rescission of the colonial discourse that labelled the diverse sexual practices of Natives as primitive; it has gone on to embrace queer subjects (through constitutional decriminalisation and the introduction of same-sex marriage) and use this welcoming of queer bodies into the normative societal fold as “a marker of Euro-American sexual enlightenment and tolerance” (Dhawan 53). Conversely, the Western and often national recognition of queer subjectivity is usually “contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imagery” (Puar 2). These exclusionary inclusions are brought to light by the conception of homonormativity and homonationalism. According to Lisa Duggan, homonormativity conceptualises the emergence of a non-heterosexual mainstream subject (often male, white, North-American, and a part of the affluent middle class) who is concerned with or privy to the rights, privileges and respectability afforded to subjects that adhere to heteronormative societal standards (Kehl 19). On the other hand, homonationalism, as defined by Puar, is the ascription of the protections of citizenship by the nation-state to (some) homosexual bodies (337). While both homonormativity and homonationalism invoke a sense

of inclusion of queer bodies, these concepts simultaneously exclude non-acceptable queer bodies, which are often racialised (Puar 2). The exclusivity implied by homonormativity and homonationalism thus connotes a form of sexual exceptionalism (Puar 2).

U.S. sexual exceptionalism in particular, uses homonormativity and homonationalism as key components in its claim of “the successful management of life” (Puar 2). In its supposed societal and constitutional inclusion of non-heteronormative people, the U.S. asserts itself as an “arbiter of appropriate ethics, human rights and democratic behaviour” as well as “the site of authoritative condemnation of human rights abuses” that take place around the world (Puar 8; 5). The construction of the state of exception attributed to the U.S., also sees to and relies on the production of the “other”—a label often prescribed to presumably backward countries that continue to deny certain citizens universal human rights through their continued persecution of sexual minorities (Puar 4). This state of exceptionalism may be called to question however, by the fact that while the U.S. condemns human rights violations elsewhere, it continues to ignore violations, abuses and inequity within its own borders (Puar 8). Although the U.S. nation state putatively dismantled hegemonic heteronormativity for the sake of recognising most homosexual subjects, it continued to exclude others (Puar 3).

It can be argued that the notion of U.S. exceptionalism is invalid. The legal acknowledgement of queer bodies through decriminalisation and the recognition of same-sex marriage has become a significant indicator of modern civility and a distancing mechanism from the supposed barbarism of the backward nature of villainised non-Western countries (Kehl 20). In spite of its claim to exceptionalism, the U.S. has historically straggled behind most European countries as well some that are classified as part of the Global South (i.e. Brazil, Colombia, South Africa, etc) in regards to the legal recognition of homosexual subjects (Puar 10). Even

though “global mappings of homophobia have resulted in the West being marked as a site of secular modernity”, tolerance and enlightenment, the West seemingly displays historical amnesia concerning their assignment of deviance, savagery and criminality to the diverse gender and sexual practices of Natives during the colonial era (Dhawan 53; 54). We must therefore look at the concept of U.S. exceptionalism and empire critically in order to acknowledge the fact that queerness is not bound to the narrow dimensions of sexual acts and sexual identity, it is also affected by race, gender, nationality, religion etc. in intersecting ways (Puar 9-10).

Although the U.S. legally recognises queer bodies, this inclusion is often contingent upon the demarcation and disqualification of sexualised and racialised others. While the “extension of human rights to LGBTQ people grants certain entitlements and protections”, it also contributes to the construction of “exclusionary normative standards” (Kehl 23). Even so, the most acceptable queer subject’s inclusion is constrained, provisional and unstable (Kehl 23). And so, queer subjects who encounter additional forms of marginalisation on the basis of race, gender, immigration status, and religion amongst others are affected by this exclusionary inclusion (both within and outside of the LGBTQIA community) to a more severe degree (Kehl 24). This results in the doubled exposure to violence and policing from racist queer bodies as well as heteronormative homophobic subjects (Kehl 25). It can thus be argued that the exclusionary and somewhat violent nature of the inclusion displayed by U.S. sexual exceptionalism can be compared to that faced by queer bodies in “backward” countries that continue to mistreat, criminalise, and persecute them.

Blackness: African vs African American vs Black

As a result of both forced migration due to factors such as colonialism and the Transatlantic slave trade and more recently, voluntary migration stemming from the possibility of socio-economic prosperity in the Global North, the emergence of diasporic populations around the world has ensured the heterogeneity of the global population of African descendants. As exemplified by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her 2013 novel, *Americanah*, blackness is not simply a uniform identity based on supposedly shared cultural conditions (Phiri 125). Rather, it is an identity category that is “internally divided in many ways” and as a result is privy and prone to a multitude of complex representations within small communities and across the world (Phiri 125). These divisions can clearly be seen in the ethnic divisions and representations central to the Nigerian Civil War (a war between the ethnic groups— the Igbo and the Hausa) as portrayed in Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*. In recognising the tendency to use the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, it is important to note that while race refers to “biological homogeneity as defined by phenotypical features”, ethnicity is a more complex yet malleable category that encompasses notions of shared origin, culture, tradition, or language (Agyemang, Bhopal and Bruijnzeels 1014). Unlike Beasley’s *Something Better Than Home*, which is racialised by virtue of the American institutional structures being constructed by white society to the detriment of people of colour, Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Tree* is more concerned with ethnicity as seen by the constant categorisation of characters as either Igbo and Christian or Hausa and Muslim that was central to the conflict in Nigeria during the late 1960s. While recognising that both protagonists may be of the same race, I also acknowledge that the meaning of this identity category (Black) differs in their respective contexts. In doing so, in instances of direct comparison, I will be differentiating between these characters and their contexts by referring to characters in Okparanta’s novel as “African” and those in Beasley’s text as “African American”. According to Agyemang, Bhopal

and Bruijnzeels, “the term African... usually refers to a person with African ancestral origins who self-identifies or is identified by others as African” (1016). I also recognise that there are white people who self-identify and are identified as African. However, the use of the word “African” in this thesis will refer to Black Africans. On the other hand, African American most often refers to a descendant of Africans “brought to America as slaves between the 17th and 19th century” who “self identify or is identified by others as African American” (Agyemang, Bhopal and Bruijnzeels 1016). There will be instances in which I will group both protagonists together; in such cases, I will refer to them as “Black” which is a term that “generally refers to a person with African ancestral origins” (Agyemang, Bhopal and Bruijnzeels 1016). As pointed out by Agyemang, Bhopal and Bruijnzeels, in using this term, I also acknowledge that the latter term invisibilises the cultural and ethnic diversity of Black people around the world (1016).

Furthermore, throughout this thesis, I will capitalise the “B” in “Black”. The time-honoured linguistic convention of the English language demands the capitalisation of proper pronouns and proper names referring to particular things, places or individuals (Appiah). Different language conventions, particularly those of capitalisation, can assign and convey value and in doing so can vindicate social structures such as those of race (Mack and Palfrey). The use of a lowercase “b” in reference to Black people often reduces this identity category to a mere descriptor therefore implicitly denying not only the personhood, histories and cultures of Black people, but also the institutional hierarches that persist as a result of the social construction of race (Mack and Palfrey). By capitalising the “B” in “Black” when referring to characters in the texts central to this study, I recognise that race is a social category, not a natural one that would situate blackness as an adjective as opposed to a collective identity category whose history and culture is central to the issues I will discuss in this thesis.

Identity Politics and Intersectional Oppression

By virtue of being women, Okparanta's Ijeoma and Beasley's Onnie are both subject to hegemonic and institutionalised patriarchal societal structures that ensure their oppression. In the case of Beasley's Onnie, her placement in the American post-civil rights era makes her subject to additional oppression on the basis of her race. The construction of identity categories such as race and gender serve as a framework in which dominant social power not only determines who is different, but actively works to exclude those who are marginalised because of their difference (Crenshaw 1242). According to Crenshaw, the main issue of identity politics is that it often "conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (1242). Intersectionality aims to recognise, explore and unify the multiplicity of overlapping forms of oppression in order to form an extensive analysis of the human experience of an individual at a micro-systemic level so as to understand the problematic and oppressive nature of over-arching social structures and institutions (Chan and Howard 355). Intersectionality looks at identity categories such as race, sex, gender identity, and social class amongst others in order to examine the multiple dimensions that overlap and result in the oppression of those that are marginalised due to their difference (Chan and Howard 355). In her theory of intersectionality, Crenshaw asserts that rather than using an additive model—that not only flattens identity categories, but also reiterates social inequity by reverberating socially institutionalised domination amongst those categories' hierarchical ordering—identity categories must be viewed as "mutually constitutive elements" that continue to intersect and shift within an individual's existence (Chan and Howard 355).

Queer Subjectivities in the Theory of Intersectionality

While Crenshaw focuses on the identity categories of gender identity and race in her 1991 canonical article, Christian D. Chan and Lionel C. Howard explore the ways in which sexuality

factors into intersectionality theory through the examination of queer theory. With a focus on “sexuality, affection and gender identity”, queer theory investigates the experiences within LGBTQIA communities (Chan and Howard 351). In shaping queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler “critically analyse the compartmentalisation of gender identity and sexuality” respectively (Chan and Howard 351). While Sedgwick elucidated the problematic propensity to deem sexuality and gender identity as mutually exclusive, both parties explain how this inclination fails to bridge the overlapping factors of individual experience across disciplines and social identities (Chan and Howard 351). Therefore, similar to intersectionality theory, queer theory calls for interdisciplinarity in order to aptly explore the complexities of identity. While queer theory focuses on the experiences of the queer community, both queer theory and intersectionality work to identify members of a community that are invisibilised, silenced and disenfranchised by a multiplicity of overlapping forms of oppression (Chan and Howard 346). In doing so, they aim to dismantle the socially dominant and institutionalised models of power that produce and reproduce dichotomous binaries, such as those found in heteronormative and cis-normative thought (Chan and Howard 347).

Attitudes towards queer individuals and queer communities in Africa have become a significant part of the political and social discourse on the continent and in the world. Due to the stigmatisation, denigration, degradation and even denial of these communities, several countries on the continent continue to criminalise identities and acts that do not align with heteronormativity (Etoke 173). While these attitudes towards queer communities are elevated by African leaders that continue to condemn homosexuality as unnatural, un-African and un-Biblical, they are echoed in Black communities around the world (Tamale 157). The dominant and historical notion of positioning Black people as sexually deviant by white society is an area that the larger diasporic population continue to attempt to resolve (Richardson 4). However,

this resolution has proven to perpetuate the erasure of Black queer bodies. Because they serve as a reminder of the allegation of sexual deviance, Black queer people and communities continue to be perceived as a threat to the established political and cultural narratives of racial upliftment, respectability and civility that are of great importance to Black people around the world (Richardson 4). While the archive is established to reconstruct the past, pay respect to and grieve the unjust losses of those that came before, Black queerness seems to remain unremembered and so, the archive is rendered incomplete (Richardson 4).

In identifying queer theory as an important tool in the exploration of identity politics and the related oppressions alongside intersectional theory, it would be remiss not to critique the ways in which queer theory, itself, may contribute to that oppression predominantly on the basis of gender. Although queer theory has been understood as a theoretical “perspective from which to challenge the normative”, there appears to be tendency in the academic arena to not only use this term reductively as shorthand for gay and lesbian studies, but to also specifically substitute the term “queer” for gay—referring to male same-sex desire (Giffney 74; 73). Additionally, it can be asserted that queer theory itself has been directed towards analysing white same-sex desiring subjects (Muñoz 10). The Queer of Color Critique in particular, as elucidated by Roderick A. Ferguson confronts the “founding limitation of queer studies [...] that had to do with the initial ambivalence about the connections that sexuality had to other modes of difference” (2). Although the principles of Crenshaw’s intersectionality aim for equality on the foundations of gender, race and class, liberal pluralism often looks to include race and gendered subjects into existing institutional structures which are quite often heteronormative (Ferguson 3). According to Sheila Jeffrys, this ironically narrow umbrella term contributes to the silencing often prescribed to and associated with “lesbian” or female same-sex desiring women (459). This is evidenced by Richardson’s assertion that the little documentation and discussions

surrounding the history of Black homosexuality has exclusively represented Black gay men and as a result, Black lesbians and trans people continue to go unnoticed (6). Therefore, the need for specificity and inclusion in the realm of queer theory must stem from the understanding that the interests of same-sex desiring men and same-sex desiring women differ on the basis of the latter belonging to the “political class of women” (Jeffreys 459). Similar to the application of intersectionality in exploring the role of Black women in heteronormative societies, the concept of intersectional theory is also essential to the disruption of the historical representations of queer identities that encourage hegemony in the LGBTQIA community through hierarchical privilege (Chan and Howard 347). I would like to note that this thesis will use the terms “queer” and “same-sex desire/desiring” to describe the romantic relations of the characters in *Under the Udala Trees* and *Something Better Than Home*. I will be refraining from using the word “lesbian” due to the fact that there are very few instances in which either protagonist explicitly self-identifies in this way. Additionally, for similar reasons, while I acknowledge the dangers of using the term “queer” without specificity, I will be using this term to refer to both protagonists to express the supposedly non-normative and marginalised nature of their desires.

Black, Woman and Queer: Africa vs. America

Historically, the Black female body has been considered as the antithesis to white womanhood (Richardson 7). Having been deemed as sexual deviants and anomalies and rendered trapped in the dictatorial categories of “Africanness” and “femaleness”, Black women have been and continue to be victimised through forced marriages and pregnancies, forced sex work, and rape among other practices designed to discipline their bodies in an attempt to control their sexuality (Pucherova 107). Black women’s bodies have been restrained by notions of compulsory heteronormativity, emphasised feminine attributes, motherhood and the “denial of

individualism in favour of ‘collective consciousness’” (Pucherova 108). Furthermore, the aforementioned notions of restriction associated with the Black female body and sexuality are accentuated by the history of their violation (Matebeni 405).

The concept of silence and denial in relation to desire, especially of same-sex desire is prevalent among Black women. The earliest written records concerning African sexualities authored by white male explorers associated Black sexualities with immorality and incivility (Tamale 14). Despite anthropological and historical studies of sexualities through the use of folklore in Africa proving the existence of same-sex sexual practices in Africa before, during and after colonialism, many African feminist theorists and literary scholars agreed that lesbianism was not only non-existent on the continent, but also that if it did exist, it was an abnormality imported from the West (Pucherova 105). The continued intolerance and silencing of supposedly non-normative sexualities in post-colonial Africa can be seen in the exclusion of same-sex desiring African women from Black feminism which does not traditionally acknowledge or discuss the existence of same-sex love simply because their sexuality does not conform to heteronormative standards (Etoke 175; Phiri 156). In its contradiction of the womanist concern of generating awareness about the maltreatment, humiliation and dehumanisation of Black people, it can be argued that in this respect, Black feminism contributes to the incomplete nature of the archive of Black womanhood (Ogunyemi 68). In its failure to acknowledge same-sex desiring women, Norma Alacron asserts that both white feminism and Black feminism’s theories of change and ethical development are essentially derived from the very patriarchal societal foundations they claim to so loudly condemn (Ferguson 3-4).

The post-colonial narrative of Black womanhood has also been instrumental to the additive model of oppression faced by Black women especially in Africa. Due to a history of violation, the perception of the Black female body has not only been veiled for the sake of (white) patriarchal control and authority, it has been desexualised (Matebeni 405). This has primarily been executed through the elimination of the possibility of erotic desire, pleasure and beauty which inevitably strips the Black female body of its agency within the private and public domains of everyday existence (Matebeni 405). According to Vasu Reddy, sexuality, especially in the context of Africa, has been central to “social control, legal restrictions, cultural proscription” and sexual violence which has resulted in the surveillance of Black women’s sexuality via criminalisation and public denigration (Macharia 143; Reddy et al 2). This is supported by Alerdo Zanghellini, who asserts that we often see antagonistic attitudes towards (or the outright denial of) homosexuality in African contexts to reinforce political authority (Osinubi 676).

In recent decades, and in spite of being accused of betraying their traditional values and roles, Black same-sex desiring women have heeded the call to re-remember the past through re-narration (Pucherova 106; Richardson 6). This re-narration “explores the tensions between Black desires for normativity that are enacted through politics of respectability and civility, and the realities of queer experiences that are central to Black cultural life” (Richardson 6-7). Considering the notion that Blackness is equated to queerness, in the definitive sense of the word, one cannot deny the importance of the reckoning with sexual and gender diversity within Black communities in Africa as well as the diaspora, as presented by Black queer literature (Richardson 9). In exploring this diversity, Black women authors who write about same-sex desire further demonstrate the inherent non-normativity of Black culture (Richardson 8). Although there have been instances of same-sex desire amongst women in African literature,

the language used to represent such sexualities is often ambiguous (Phiri 156). In the instances in which female same-sex desire amongst Black women was discussed or expressed explicitly, it was pathologized as madness, depravity and corruption—which is quite contrary to the relative openness with which same-sex desire and practice among Black women is discussed and presented in the 21st century (Pucherova 108; 110). Besides critically conversing with prejudices about same-sex desire and love, recent Black queer fiction contributes to the reformation of African women's subjectivity in its quest for self-determination outside of the traditional identities prescribed to Black women (Pucherova 118).

Crenshaw's work has been a necessary foundation to the perception and understanding of Black women's social realities. However, it does not further capture the intricacies of the experiences of African women in particular. Similar to African American women, African women have been established as a minority whose access is limited in the arena of academia (Goredema 33). In addition to facing many forms of oppression simultaneously, African women are also subject to the additional notions of culture and tradition as well as the socio-economic and socio-political issues that are a consequence of the legacy of imperialism during both the colonial and post-colonial historical eras (Goredema 35; Kolawole 12). In saying that, it is important to note that African feminism does not strictly restrict itself to concerns of the rights of women from Africa, but also of those of African women living in the diaspora (Goredema 34).

While the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s saw extraordinary openness with regards to sexuality in the United States of America, the exploration of non-normative desires and sexualities amongst Black people was an arena often exclusively explored by men (Nelson, 23). As the late 1920s gave way to the early Civil Rights Movement in the USA, the LGBTQ+

community came under fire by the leaders of the aforementioned movement (Russell 103). Due to the prioritisation of the security of equal rights for Black citizens led mostly by Christian ministers (the Civil Rights Movement) and Muslim clerics (the Black Power movement) that followed and burgeoned in the 1960s, the resultant notions of respectability politics pushed for “heterosexist value systems” (Nelson 24). Simultaneously, the 1960s also saw the emergence of the movement for the rights of gay and lesbian citizens (Nelson 24). However, similar to the way in which the Civil Rights movement disregarded Black women for the sake of racial equality, this movement disregarded Black queer women by prioritizing gender and sexuality over race (Nelson 24). Akin to the Civil Rights movement’s minimal attention to the ways in which Black women experience oppression differently by virtue of their gender, the American Gay Rights movement of the 1960s ignored the ways in which people that were marginalised on account of their gender and sexuality were also liable to experience additional oppression by virtue of their race.

Black, Woman, Queer: According to Chinelo Okparanta and Leona Beasley

Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* is a powerful novel that celebrates same-sex desire. By using the Biafran Civil War as the primary setting for this story, Okparanta showcases the fraught relationship between “sexuality and literary and political authority” (Osinubi 676). The legacy of the war and the resultant trans-generational trauma has prompted the investigation of the modes of marginalisation and antagonism caused by the permeation of political authority into the privacy of the individual experience (Osinubi 678). Similarly, Beasley’s *Onnie* is surrounded by the heterosexist conservatism that was central to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The historical setting of these novels forms a parallel between the violent and unstable political “pluralisms” and the criminalisation of the emergence of homosexuality in the public and private domain (Osinubi 679). This suppression and the refusal

to acknowledge same-sex desire and sexual minorities has been integral to the construction and reinforcement of political authority across many different cultures (Osinubi 676). Unlike her African feminist predecessors, Okparanta uses the conventions of the “Anglo-Igbo novel” to scrutinise the construction of the post-colonial nation and its resultant idea of individual identity through the presentation of sexual minorities in the form of queer Nigerian women (Osinubi 678). Using the ethical imperative of a novel set in a civil war, Okparanta questions notions of national belonging regarding sexual minorities, even in the post-war period (Osinubi 678). Okparanta’s graphic representation of same-sex desire is a stark contrast to previous African women writers (such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta) who while reflecting on women’s sexual pleasures, do so within the bounds of heterosexuality and heteronormativity (Osinubi 677; 680). Female same-sex love is emphasised in the novel by the contrasts drawn between the dynamics of homosexual and heterosexual relationships. The disparities between the heterosexual relationships— plagued by jealousy and violence— and the homosexual relationships presented— as sites of fulfilment, selflessness and authenticity— can be seen even in scenes as intimate as those addressing sexual intercourse (Pucherova 117). Therefore, novels like Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley’s *Something Better Than Home* show the need for the strengthening of discourse that analyses the increasing visibility of non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative sexual identities (Etoke 174).

In addition to centring the experiences of marginalised groups on the basis of their womanhood, their non-heteronormative sexuality, their race as well as their ethnicity, Okparanta’s and Beasley’s novels challenge the notion of belonging, especially to a specific (often nationalistic) home which according to Anne-Marie Fortier, is a “recurring theme” in queer narratives (407). This can be seen not only in Okparanta’s protagonist’s continual forced migration around Nigeria as well as Beasley’s choice of title. It could be argued that the notion of American

exceptionalism as discussed above is refuted by the simple title, in which Beasley, by using the word “Better”, implies that there is a more desirable notion of home for the queer community outside of America. The conjuring of a more desirable place to call home infers the unwelcoming nature of the home, as presented by the state, the society as well as the nuclear family experienced by Beasley’s protagonist in an American city. The anonymity ascribed to the city in which Beasley’s novel is set may be a tool of protection used to demonstrate the fear and dangers of the discrimination and intolerance faced by the queer community in the United States of America. However, it may also speak to the notion of the continual “fantasisation of home” that is common in the queer narrative, in which home is a space that “is always in construction” in reality and not only in the queer imagination (Fortier 419).

When looking at the complexities intrinsic to identity politics, the historical, social and geographical contexts cannot be ignored. The notion of the intersecting oppressions that haunt Black women’s sexuality is made even more poignant by the historical and geographic contextualisation of the history of the sexuality of African women, the attitudes towards queerness in Africa, and the criminalisation of same-sex relationships right into the present day; as well as the history of African women during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the societal implications of the Civil Rights Movement and its exclusion of Black same-sex desiring women. The complexity of these experiences as determined by identity politics have proven significant to the critical analysis of the realities of these individuals before, during and after the colonialist creation of the Global North and Global South. By looking into the aforementioned factors of identity through an intersectional lens, I hope to gain some insight into whether or not the realities of Black queer women in the socio-economically polarised contexts of Nigeria and America truly differ, or if they are essentially the same despite the morally superior positioning of the latter.

Methodology

The marginalisation of the protagonists of Okparanta's and Beasley's novels respectively are primarily based on their gender and sexuality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality problematises the conflation and disregard of intragroup differences that contribute to the oppression (1242). While Crenshaw extensively examines notions of race, gender and class, her theory of intersectionality does not explore issues that are also central to women in Africa such as culture, religion and the intricacies of the legacy of colonialism or to the fraught existence of Black queer women in the West. Using an intersectional lens which refutes the notion of additive models of identity and oppression, I aim to explore the ways in which the marginalised identities of Black queer women are constructed in different ways according to the historical, social and geographic contexts of the Global North and the Global South. However, in doing so, I intend to centre the notion of sexuality in the conversation alongside race and gender by conducting a queer close reading of the texts to examine the ways in which sexuality is portrayed as a main component in the construction of supposedly differing realities in the disparate contexts of The United States and Nigeria.

Chapter Three: Religion and Culture

The relation between Christianity—particularly among the African diaspora—and the notion of queer sexualities, both historically and in the present day, has been fraught with tension. The introduction of Christianity to the African continent as a result of colonialism, and its continued influence on the Black diasporic population incited by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade has impacted multiple generations globally and remains a significant structural element of society today. Despite the acceptance of non-heteronormative sexual practices and homoerotic relationships in pre-colonial societies, the introduction of Western Christianity resulted in the implementation of “a more rigid gender binary and a strict prohibition of same-sex practices” in colonies including the United States (van Klinken 489). The tensions between religion and sexuality are particularly evident in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley’s *Something Better Than Home*, as demonstrated through the demonisation of homosexuality, as well as through the hostility directed towards the two protagonists by the religious influence displayed by the church and authoritative parental figures. By briefly exploring the colonial history of religion, its modern reflections and ramifications for same-sex desiring people as well as the ways in which tensions between religion and non-heteronormative sexualities are portrayed in the novels central to this study, this chapter aims to argue against the notion of U.S. exceptionalism by examining the commonalities of the marginalisation of Black same-sex desiring women in Nigeria and the United States of America.

The History of Christianity in Africa

In Nigeria, the colonial introduction of the Christian religion not only inaugurated a gender binary that went against pre-colonial societal norms, it also implemented a moral rejection of traditionally accepted same-sex marriages (particularly those between women) (van Klinken

489). Despite the notion that the Igbo society was supposedly patrilineal, the normative societal gender system was quite flexible prior to the initial establishment of Christianity in Nigeria in 1841 (Amadiume 27). While indigenous customs encouraged the industriousness of women, British colonial authorities viewed the rebellious and militant attitudes of Igbo women as masculine much to the contradiction of Western gender norms (Amadiume 16). With regards to sexuality, the notion of same-sex desire, same-sex marriage and the societal tolerance towards such relations predates colonisation and the subsequent imposition of Christianity and Christian morals (Arimoro 223). According to Arimoro, “a specific form of same-sex marriage, commonly referred to as woman-to-woman marriage was recognised and widely practiced” amongst the Igbos of Southern Nigeria prior to colonial rule (224). While these marriages were mainly for the sake of retaining the right to claim children, and not solely inclined toward the fulfilment of same-sex desire, they were not only legally recognised, they were also deemed as socially acceptable as well (Arimoro 224). However, the proliferation of Christian morality and colonial Western ideals misunderstood such indigenous customary laws and ultimately rejected them.

Similarly, some indigenous communities in North America recognised and accepted non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices prior to their colonisation by the British in the 17th century (Griffin 92). The colonisation of North America and the subsequent introduction of European Christianity instituted by missionaries rejected this acceptance (Griffin 92). And so, while U.S. exceptionalism aligns itself with the notion that African countries are backward in their convictions, one could argue that the colonial foundations of heteronormativity in modern Nigeria and the USA are quite similar in that they share a history of rejecting precolonial customs that not only tolerated but accepted same-sex desiring people and same-sex marriage in favour of the imposition of heteronormative European ideologies.

Against U. S. Exceptionalism

Despite claims of progressive and inclusive ideologies from North America, the majority of modern Christian attitudes towards non-normative sexualities and sexual practices globally are largely reflective of those established by British colonial missionaries. The notion of sexual exceptionalism from the U.S. in comparison to the negative and often hostile sentiments toward queer people in African countries such as Nigeria can be seen primarily in the condemnation of the latter by the former (Puar 5). According to Michael Ignatieff, following the end of the Second World War and the consequent establishment of the United Nations, the United States of America—being one of the five permanent and arguably most influential members of the international body—“has displayed exceptional leadership in promoting international human rights” (1). As such, the 1960s American Gay Rights movement prompted concerns over the socio-religious persecution of same-sex desiring individuals around the world from Western countries (Griffin 88). As a testament to U.S. exceptionalism, we often see the tendency to deem human rights as “synonymous with American values” (Ignatieff 1). This tendency is exemplified by the centring of Americans by the U.S. government and U.S. led global NGOs in campaigns against the marginalisation and persecution of certain members of society, i.e., the fight for women’s rights and the notion of “gay rights as human rights” (Ignatieff 1; Kaoma 238). The advocacy for human rights for marginalised people has been supported by the condemnation issued by Western countries—and the U.S. in particular—to countries that do not recognise the oppression of certain groups of people. These acts of condemnation not only establish a hierarchy which paternalises Western countries and infantilises African countries; it bolsters the “stereotypical image of a homophobic Africa” (van Klinken 487).

Religion and Legislation in the Present Day

The introduction of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in Nigeria in 2014 simultaneously elicited condemnation from a number of Western governments—including the United States—and support from Nigerian religious leaders such as Catholic Bishops and Pentecostal leaders who viewed homoerotic desire and homosexuality as not only a transgression of the “holy commandment”, but more importantly, as “evil” (Arimoro 227; 230). In their denunciation of non-heteronormative sexualities, Nigerian religious leaders often appeal to the notion of “African culture as being antithetical to homosexuality” and of homosexuality as not only “unchristian”, but also as an “un-African” affliction of the Western world brought by colonisation (Ukah 29). Interestingly, despite assertions of progression and inclusion in the country, right-wing American Christian churches and American conservatives share many of the same sentiments as the majority of African Christian churches in regard to the opprobrium of same-sex desire and continue to contribute to the proliferation of these attitudes in African countries through monetary sponsorships and physical donations (Kaoma 239). While Nigeria saw the support of the criminalisation of same-sex marriage from religious leaders, America witnessed the same vigour from religious conservatives in opposition to the 2015 Obergefell decision (Ledet 787). In fact, the 2014 addition to the Nigerian constitution was greatly supported by U.S. conservatives and Evangelists who not only lobbied for “African nations and religious leaders to further criminalise same-sex gender relations”, but additionally sent materials such as books through Bible schools and universities to encourage the repudiation of homosexuality on the continent (Kaoma 236).

Women in Religion

While the female body is presented as a site of spiritual temptation and sensual terror, especially when engaging in same-sex desire, it is also given the responsibility of correcting

such behaviour; both of which are prescribed by a male-led religion. Upon the introduction of religion in colonies, precolonial societies saw the further relegation of women from formally communal society via their exclusion from discussions about the newly imported doctrines, which mainly consisted of men (Amadiume 198). The gender hierarchy which officially placed men above women in society was reinforced by the hierarchy established within the church, which was synonymous with Western education in which male figures were given roles of leadership (i.e. the notion of clergymen, as well as boy children being prepared for governmental, industrial and educational services that would eventually strengthen Western ideals), whilst women were consigned to forming church congregations and girls were prepared for more domestic roles such as household work and childrearing (Amadiume 220; Tamale 159). This process resulted in the marginalisation of (specifically Black) women in the formation and leadership of modern societies.

In the same vein, the marginalisation of Black women resulted in the further marginalisation of the same-sex desiring female body due to the fact that members of the church, the majority of which are women, are given the responsibility of policing and disciplining other female bodies that did not conform to the heteronormative ideals of western Christianity (Ukah 26). This can be seen by the assignation of blame to the religious maternal figures in both novels for their daughters' sexualities. Following the discovery of Ijeoma's same-sex romantic relationship with Amina by the grammar school teacher, and pressured by the notion that the Bible study lessons she implemented as a corrective measure for her daughter's same-sex desire had failed, Ijeoma's mother, Adaora blames herself for her daughter's sexuality—"It's my fault" (Okparanta 88). This is echoed in Beasley's novel when Onnie's father blames her mother for Onnie's homoerotic behaviour. Upon finding a young Onnie kissing Karla in the backyard during the time in which Karla frequented Onnie's house due to being a member of

Onnie's mother's day-care, Onnie's father blames Onnie's mother for this same-sex act by saying, "...If she turns up ruin, ittah be yo' fault..." (Beasley 22). The word "ruin" suggests destruction and devastation. The conditional use of the word "if" suggests the possibility of queer desire and may thus be indicative of the hope that Onnie's sexuality will conform to heteronormativity. The conditional assignation of blame not only suggests that homosexuality would be the cause of such ruin, but also that it would be due to the inadequacy of her mother's childrearing. This is supported by the comparison that could be drawn to architectural ruins, which are mainly caused by a lack of maintenance and care. The notion of architectural ruins may also evoke images of the structure of familial home and of the church, which would, according to this assessment, be devastated by any inkling of the existence or acceptance of a queer member. The phrase "fault" in conjunction with its allocation through the use of "my" and "yo'" in reference to the mothers in both novels implies failure specifically on the parts of the maternal figures, who due to the doctrines of the church and heteronormative Western ideals have been solely charged with the responsibilities of childrearing. Both authors' use of "fault" suggests inadequacy; the notion of which is resultantly extended to the subjects of such failure, who are the children that have specifically displayed homoerotic behaviours.

The threat of non-heteronormative desire for Christians ensures that the notion of failure not only contributes to the familial and societal ostracisation of the children at hand because of the homoerotic behaviours they have demonstrated, but also of their parents for their failure to ensure the conformation of their children to socially and religiously acceptable ways of being (Ukah 29; Martin 192). Thus, in addition to the marginalisation of Black queer people within the private arena of the nuclear home, we see the echoed exclusion of queer people due to the heteronormativity indoctrinated by the Christian church which has played a central role in the moral structuring of the African diasporic community around the world. The compiling model

of exclusion at play here as demonstrated by the homophobia rife within African and Afro-diasporic communities—both in the United States of America and Nigeria—speaks to the intersectional challenges faced by Black same-sex desiring women due to their “membership in multiple stigmatised groups” (Walsh 1236).

Cleansing the Sin of Queer Sexuality

In both Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley’s *Something Better Than Home*, Christianity has furthered the marginalisation of Black same-sex desiring women in particular, through perceptions of same-sex desire as an abnormal affliction as well as through the notions of purification following such assumptions. While Christian doctrines viewed sex and sexuality as a major area of concern spiritually, the sexuality of women in particular was a cause for more acute anxieties, as according to van Klinken the “female flesh” was seen as a “sign of spiritual terror and a site of framing reborn qualities and spiritual attributes” (Ukah 26). The notion of the female body as a site of necessary religious discipline (Tamale 153) is clearly demonstrated in the lives of the protagonists at hand.

According to Martin Riesebrodt, despite some of the minor changes incurred over the passage of time, “the promises of salvation and deliverance” at the centre of religious doctrine continue to persist (Ukah 21). The notion of salvation, however, is dependent on penitence and purification, the latter of which is a theme applicable to both the American and Nigerian context as demonstrated by Okparanta’s and Beasley’s work. In Okparanta’s novel, the notion of purification is evident when in one of their Bible study lessons, Ijeoma’s mother asserts, “There’s nothing more important now than for us to begin working on cleansing your soul” (Okparanta 65). Because the purpose of “cleansing” is to remove dirt or contamination, the implication is that due to her indiscretions and her sin of not only having same-sex desires, but

also of acting on them, Ijeoma is now contaminated and in need of purification. The particular addressing of Ijeoma's "soul" refers to the spiritual part of her being, which is regarded by religion as the immortal entity of an individual that will be judged by God. By this virtue, in the context of religion, the soul is viewed as the most important part of one's being as it, in tandem with the penitence one displays, determines whether one will be condemned to damnation in Hell, or if they will be permitted entry into Heaven. The notion of the afterlife here, through the invocation of the soul, is once again reminiscent of the good versus evil binary central to religious doctrine. We also see the prioritisation of such cleansing by Ijeoma's mother through the phrase "There's nothing more important", which is also ominous and hostile in tone as it suggests that all else, including the psychological well-being and any attempt of understanding her child will be ignored for the sake of religious redemption. The prioritisation of the correction of same-sex desire implied here demonstrates the magnitude of the threat non-heteronormative sexuality and desire pose for the Christian community, "whose destiny is to uphold the will of God as enshrined in the Bible" (Ukah 30). Once again, we see the assignation of a child's success and salvation to the religious maternal figure.

The notion of purification can also be seen in the American context in Beasley's novel during Onnie's baptism. Baptism is a Christian rite consisting of the immersion of an individual into water as a symbol of purification. Similar to Ijeoma's cleansing, Onnie's baptism and its symbolic implications signal contamination and a need for salvation, which may be applicable to her sexuality as like Ijeoma, it takes place after she is discovered participating in what is deemed as a same-sex practice with Karla, as discussed above. Like Ijeoma, Onnie's experience is riddled with hostile undertones as demonstrated by the phrase "One by one we were dunked in the water as if we were caged victims in a glass box" (Beasley 54). Due to the strong consonants at the beginning, middle, and end of the word (only separated by one vowel

in each instance), the word “dunked” in particular is cacophonous in tone, which may suggest the abrasiveness of the action. This word is also synonymous with the word “dip” which is usually used in reference to the immersion of particularly small objects into a liquid. Due to the fact that this event occurred during Onnie’s childhood, the aforesaid connotation of this word emphasises the violence of the action of the handling and immersion of a small child into a body of water by an adult. The hostility and violence of the actions central to the baptism are also bolstered by the comparison of the people being baptised to “caged victims in a glass box”. The comparison to “victims” alludes to the notion of being exposed to harm through violence; a notion made more ominous by the implication of entrapment and confinement in a body of water suggested by the word “caged”. The “glass box”, by virtue of being transparent implies the potential violence of this rite to certain (queer) bodies. The notion of transparency spectacularises this rite of cleansing and purification which effectively involves other congregants in the violence perpetrated. The issue of the criminalisation of same-sex desiring and practicing individuals discussed previously in the context of Nigeria is alluded to in Beasley’s text during Onnie’s experience following the Reverend’s proclamation of baptism— “It was as if he were reading me my rights before I was tried, convicted and sentenced to my watery prison” (54). This allusion illustrates the ways in which the legal debates, across contexts, surrounding queer desire are inextricably linked to religious ideology and rhetoric (Ukah 21). In a similar manner to the persecution of queer people in Nigeria following (and preceding), the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, this phrase not only reflects the loss of (civil) liberties that same-sex desiring and practicing individuals experience, but also to institutional persecution they are subject to in multiple arenas of their lives.

The condemnation and labelling of homosexuality as an affliction, through demonisation and pathologizing is strongly connected to religion in both novels. The perception of the female

body as a site of “spiritual terror” as mentioned above as well as that of homosexuality as an affliction can be seen in the convictions of demonic possession by Ijeoma’s mother; the first of which is made clear in the novel following Ijeoma’s retrieval from the grammar school teacher’s home by her mother after being discovered in a sexually compromising position with Amina—“... Mama, the one who believed so much that there was a demon in me” (Okparanta 59). In addition to being defined as the acceptance of something without sufficient evidence, the word “believe” also has strong religious connotations. In the context of religion, belief is the basis of worship in Christian (and any other) faith. The invocation of belief central to religion relies on the acceptance of unproven supernatural elements and beings, which carries connotations of unquestionable trust and knowledge, and is fortified by the exaggerative phrase, “so much”.

The introduction of the figure of a “demon” in the context of Christianity is suggestive of a malicious spiritual entity that is adversarial to God and what is right. The adversarial nature of such an entity to what has been deemed as a righteous God creates a binary within the doctrines of the religion between right/good (as represented by God, Saints and angels) and wrong/evil (as represented by the Devil and demons) (van Klinken 495). The fact that Ijeoma’s mother believes that there is a demon “in” Ijeoma implies connotations of demonic possession, which would suggest that Ijeoma is not in control of her own body and its desires because they are homosexual in nature. This not only frames homosexuality as evil, but also as something out of one’s control. Interestingly, the removal of agency by demonic possession however is in direct contrast to the argument against the acquisition of civil rights for homosexual individuals often put forth by religious groups in which they assert that homosexuality is a chosen practice (Ledet 791). In addition to representing evil, demons are also associated with causing physical and mental anguish and illness. According to Msibi, the 19th century Western invention of “the

‘homosexual role’ developed [...] to denote a kind of sickness for those attracted to the same sex” (56). Here, we see the deeming of homosexual desire as a disease or ailment in need of treatment. This is demonstrated in Okparanta’s text as Ijeoma’s mother brands her daughter’s desires as “sick” which through the implication of physical and/or mental illness pathologizes same sex desire in language attuned to medical discourse (86). This allusion to illness would normally require scientific treatment, however, religion is once again invoked as a saviour, which is demonstrated by the subsequent assertion, “You will be cured by the glory and power of God” (Okparanta 89). The word “cure” carries connotations of healing and rehabilitation, thus bolstering the presentation of homosexuality and homosexual desire as a detrimental affliction.

According to van Klinken, “theology presents a re-enchantment of the world in a dualist scheme of good versus evil, and God versus the Devil eschatological undertones” (495). The construction of the binary between good/salvation and evil in religion is illustrated by the modification of conduct enacted by the love interests (Amina and Karla) in both novels. Homosexuality is not simply perceived as a transgression of the holy commandment; it is regarded as evil in the global doctrine of Christianity (Arimoro 228; 230). This binary is clearly demonstrated by Karla, who in the aftermath of Onnie’s trip to California, asserts that,

“she’d found Jesus [...] Karla Louise Lyons proclaimed herself an official good girl—
a nice girl, a church girl, an anything-but-a-queer-girl”

(Beasley 97).

Aligning with the good/evil binary that is central to the church, we see that Karla’s goodness is grounded in her being “an anything-but-queer-girl”. In this instance, the phrase “anything

but” can be defined as ‘not being’ which would imply that Karla’s goodness is conditional on the basis of her conformation to heterosexuality. However, this phrase is ambiguous and has the potential of inciting confusion. While this phrase is defined as ‘not being’, the word “but” may be defined as ‘except for’ which effectively makes room for the acceptance of other sins by placing same-sex desire at the extreme end of sin. In addition to being “anything-but-a-queer”, one of the characteristics of being “an official good girl” is being “a church girl”. The linking of these characteristics makes them contingent upon one another, meaning that to be a good girl, one must adhere to the rules and regulations set by the church, one of which would be the denial of same-sex desire.

On the other end of the good versus evil binary central to religion, we have the declaration of homosexuality as a sin by Okparanta’s Amina in the aftermath of a nightmare, while she shares a bed with Ijeoma— “Maybe we were the fallen children, the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness.” (Okparanta 155). Because she is in conversation with Ijeoma, the address “we” refers to their personal relationship which is romantic in nature. The word “fallen” to describe them in the context of religiosity carries connotations not only of sin, but of immorality and depravity. The implication of depravity in particular is indicative of deviance and perversion, which are often characteristics used to define and label individuals who do not conform to the religiously motivated societal conventions of heteronormativity. This is emphasised by the phrase, “the sinful ones without the strength to continue in the path of righteousness”. The suffix “ful” in the word “sinful” implies that the fallen are characterised by extreme or excessive sin. Because this utterance takes place after a romantic encounter between the two girls, one may assume that this romantic relationship is the sin to which Amina is referring. The inference to an overabundance of sin leaves little room for salvation, which contributes to the either/or construction of the binary at hand. The phrase “without the strength”

suggests not only that the achievement of righteousness requires strength, it also insinuates that because the two are sinful, they are weak— thus positing queer sexuality and desire as an inherent weakness which is seen as an additional characteristic on the evil end of the religious binary.

Othering Within the Church

Similar to the condemnation discussed, the novels at the centre of this study also illustrate the othering of homosexuality in the context of religion through censorship. In settings of religion in both novels, female same-sex desire is rarely explicitly named which is illustrated by the debate surrounding the causes of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that occurs during one of the Ijeoma and her mother's lessons;

“It couldn't have been because they were selfish and inhospitable and violent?” I asked.
“It has to be that other thing?”
“Yes,” Mama said. “It had to be that other thing. It couldn't have been anything other than that other thing”

(Okparanta 74).

The introduction and comparison of the sins of being “selfish and inhospitable and violent” to the supposed sin of homosexual desire posits non-heteronormative desire as something that will intentionally and inevitably cause harm to those surrounding the supposed perpetrator. However, what is more intriguing is the use of the phrase “that other thing” to refer to same-sex desire or what we assume to be homosexual desire. The use of the word “other” not only denotes difference from what is considered as ‘normal’ (which in this case is heterosexuality), it may also refer to the perception and treatment of certain groups as different. This concept of

difference places certain groups that do not conform to the conventions set by the hegemonic societal groups on the margins of community, thus making them prone to the violence and harm that they are often accused of causing.

The notion of difference can also be seen in relation to Beasley's protagonist when she describes herself as "something different than what Reverend Glover said young girls should be" (55). Here, we see explicit reference to difference, which would connote something that falls outside of the bounds or (hetero)normativity. Akin to Okparanta's novel, the notion of ambiguity as illustrated by the word "something" despite the negative connotations of this phrase as evident in its tone. This lack of specificity gives the reader the responsibility of guessing what this wrongdoing is on the basis of context. The ambiguity experienced by the reader (due to the lack of specificity) surrounding this supposed difference may be mimetic of the ambiguity and consequent confusion faced by both protagonists in regard to their sexuality and exactly why their desires have been deemed as "wrong". Once again, we see the linking of this difference to religion through the moralistic centring of a religious leader, Reverend Glover through the expression "than what Reverend Glover said". In addition to implying the introduction of a comparison, the word "than" conveys contrast. The contrast here would be to "what Reverend Glover said", which establishes the words of the Reverend as somewhat of an anchor of normalcy and righteousness according to the societal conventions and beliefs of the church. The use of "something" and "thing" refutes the specification of the difference or of the supposed sin which may be viewed as an attempt to reduce the weight of the sin by erasing it through the censorship created by a lack of definitude. According to Foucault, linguistic censorship as demonstrated by the use of the aforementioned expressions contributes to the subjugation of (homo)sexuality through silencing in an effort to "extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present" (17).

It could be argued then, as demonstrated by Foucault, that the censorship presented by the lack of naming same-sex desire in both novels may be for the sake of propriety or tact, especially between “parents and children [...] or teachers and pupils” (which are both apt descriptors for the relationships presented in this instance in regard to both novels) (18). This is especially fitting in the case of Okparanta’s Ijeoma during her lessons with her mother. By not explicitly mentioning her supposed sin, Ijeoma may be protecting not only herself by lessening the impact of her purported sin, but she may also be protecting her mother from the devastation of that sin. Nonetheless, the very virtue of censorship is counter-intuitive in that by euphemising same-sex desires, censorship further catastrophises them by presenting them as negative to the point of being unspeakable, which effectively gives them more power by inflating the notions of negativity associated with these desires, ultimately making them seem graver.

Queer Ambiguity

Although female sexuality is excessively policed, it is rarely explicitly addressed by the Christian church, the Bible or by religious leaders. This can be seen in the Bible verse, “man must not lie with man” in which the word “man” may refer to all of humankind (Okparanta 74). This meaning of the word would then suggest that humans are prohibited from lying with other humans, which would effectively make this command absurd. In its exclusion of women, the specific reference to men in this commandment rejects female sexuality and desire, ultimately silencing it in the context of religion and the teachings of the church (Tamale 153). This emphasises the silencing of women as not just a part of religion, but also as a result of the censorship bestowed upon society by religion. The ambiguity associated with censorship is emphasised by the use of the word “lie” as a euphemism to replace “sex”. While the word “lie” is defined as a fabrication or falsification of information, it also may refer to a reclining position

of relaxation. The replacing of supposedly unacceptable words such as “sex” with words that are essentially innocent may cause confusion. Although Ijeoma knows what her mother and the Bible are referring to due to being discovered in a sexually compromising position with Amina, this attempt to cushion the impact of sex, sexuality and desire may cause more confusion than possibly anticipated by teachers of religious doctrine.

The notion of potential confusion is echoed in Beasley’s novel when during one of Karla’s visits to Onnie’s house, in which they must hide their same-sex desire from Onnie’s mother, Onnie muses, “I had broken a few of the Reverend’s rules. Here I lay with a girl, we weren’t married” (55). The notion of ambiguity can be seen in the similarities of the words “lay” and “lie” in Okparanta’s novel. In this instance, the word “lay” is used by Onnie to describe kissing and fondling at most between her and Karla. Therefore, the lack of clarity surrounding sex and what exactly constitutes sex—specifically non-heteronormative sex— highlights the potential technical inconsistencies of the euphemistic and often parabolised language used in the Bible. Despite this, there is an air of rigidity and authority in the aforementioned quotations in both novels as illustrated by the utilisation of “must” and “rules” respectively. In addition to causing confusion, the conflicting rigidity and ambiguity of these religious commandments and their exclusion of women through lack of address complicates the marginalisation of female same-sex desiring individuals in the church by completely erasing them and the possibility of their existence in the context of religion.

In addition to claiming superiority in the arena of freedom pertaining to all, American exceptionalism differentiates the U.S. from third world countries in particular, through the international promotion of human rights and the condemnation of countries that do not adhere to American standards. However, in doing so, the United States of America often refuses “to

accept criticism of its own domestic right performance” (Ignatieff 7). Through discussing the consistencies of the notions of purification, demonisation, censorship and the binary that dictates behavioural propriety central to the global doctrine of Christianity in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley’s *Something Better Than Home*, this chapter has sought to reveal the ways in which the marginalisation (in the arena of Christian religion) of Black same-sex desiring women in the novels’ representations of the USA and Nigeria share qualities of discrimination, hostility and shame— thereby critiquing the notion of U.S. (sexual) exceptionalism.

Chapter Four: Secrecy and Safe Havens

The institutionalisation of sexuality to the arena of the matrimonial home and to the sole function of reproduction relied heavily on the constant policing of sexuality and sexual practices as well as the implementation of repression and censorship in reference to sexual discourse (Foucault 3). The introduction of censorship resulted in the silencing and marginalisation of sexualities, sexual practices and sexual desires that did not conform to the acceptable and intertwined categories of heterosexuality, marriage, and reproduction. The global expansion of these societal standards through colonisation saw to the proliferation of homonormativity, as well as the resultant marginalisation and silencing of othered sexualities and desires. By conducting a close analysis of the representations of the silencing and secrecy as well as the necessary establishment of safe spaces central to the experiences of groups marginalised on the basis of their sexualities as demonstrated by instances in the novels central to this study, this chapter examines the shared challenges of censorship and self-management faced by queer communities in both Nigeria and the USA, despite the American exceptionalist claim that its queer citizens are free to express themselves openly as opposed to the criminalisation of non-heteronormative desire in “third world” countries, such as Nigeria.

Despite a history of othering Native populations’ non-heteronormative gender and sexuality practices during the colonial period (in both Africa and North America), the West has seen sociocultural transformations within the last fifty years that have supposedly embraced queer subjects (Dhawan 53). The acceptance of queer people into normative society has not only been deemed as a “marker of Euro-American sexual enlightenment and tolerance”, but it has also become a marker of progressiveness and global exceptionalism, in contrast to the purportedly backward countries of the third world that continue to criminalise non-

homonormative sexualities and sexual practices (Dhawan 53). However, U.S. sexual exceptionalism can be critiqued by the hegemonic structures (such as racism, sexism and classism) that continue to prevail despite the national recognition and inclusion of queer citizens into mainstream society through social discourse and legislation (Puar 2; 337). The intersectional socio-economic and political hierarchies implied and implemented by these hegemonic structures simultaneously construct an acceptable queer subject (often male, white, and part of the affluent middle class) as well as an excluded and non-acceptable queer subject (who is often discriminated against on the intersecting basis of gender, class and race) (Kehl 19; Puar 2). Despite the inequalities of homonormativity established above, the United States of America continues to condemn the unequal treatment of queer people in countries such as Nigeria.

Secrecy and “Safe Spaces”

According to Michel Foucault, the encroachment on the private and sexual life of the individual by the state creates the categorisation of sexuality into ‘good’ (usually understood to be heterosexuality) and ‘bad’ (which refers to sexualities that fall outside of the confines of heterosexuality), in which sexualities deemed as ‘bad’ are condemned to silence and censorship (de Orio 373). The heteronormative societal norms that are often reflected in legislature have historically prohibited homosexuality, resulting in the marginalisation and social sanctioning of queer individuals thus necessitating secrecy among those who do not conform to heterosexuality (Ponse 314). The shared bond of difference and secrecy within queer communities often lead to the creation of “a secret society” which is often enacted in order to avoid unwanted exposure and potential (life-threatening) danger within the disapproving contexts of heterosexist societies (Ponse 314; Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 13).

As demonstrated by Okparanta's and Beasley, the themes of secrecy and censorship are extended to safe spaces created in queer communities that allow for safe self-expression among other queer people. Due to the censorship enforced by heteronormativity and heterosexism, queer people are "pushed further into the private sphere" where their sexuality can only be "turned on within the shelter of the private sphere" (Munoz 73). Therefore, we see the use of informal networks in the creation of "public and private sites" that are "quasi-underground" in nature and often "imperceptible to outside observers" (Podmore 595). Additionally, according to Eddi Ombagi, these spaces established for the gathering of queer people for "leisure and pleasure" are often "imagined, read and decoded as invisible: as being outside the public imaginary" (108-109). As such, the "physicality and functionality [of these spaces] implies that they transgress the function they were intended for" (109). The "inversion of their intended authorised legal use is a subversive act" (Ombagi 109). These spaces often subvert the "negative assumptions of queer lives and practices" created by hegemonic heteronormative and heterosexist discourse by creating environments that present queerness in "more positive and affirmative tones of community, friendship and celebrations of love" (Ombagi 108).

Spaces that promote the freedom of expression of queer people without the fear of heterosexist disapproval and persecution continue to be enshrouded by secrecy and censorship. This can be seen in both novels central to this study as characters in both texts encourage others against speaking of such spaces in public or to heterosexual members of their families. Beasley's characters—Onnie and her step cousin, Elsee in particular resort to omission and giving their parents false information about their whereabouts while in San Francisco. This is mostly demonstrated by Elsee, who during Onnie and her mother's visit to San Francisco, takes Onnie to spaces in which queer people are accepted, such as the Annapurna 1969, a tobacco shop that also stocks "lesbian books" as well as Ollie's, a seemingly discreet queer club under the

pretence of taking her to places that her parents deem as more acceptable tourist locations (Beasley 108; 123).

The theme of secrecy with regards to queer spaces is also demonstrated in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* when Ndidi, Ijeoma's love interest, considers taking her to a queer underground club. In her contemplation, Ndidi swears Ijeoma to secrecy— "It's not the kind of place you want to go around talking about. In fact, you have to promise me that you won't go talking to anyone about it.", which is followed by, "I can't take you to it if you don't promise" (Okparanta 190). The phrase "go around" implies that it is not a place to be mentioned around just anyone, especially in a society that is not only so outwardly homophobic, but one that will punish and potentially harm queer people. The invocation of a promise is indicative of the gravity and importance of Ijeoma's silence and secrecy regarding this space. The fact that Ndidi makes this promise the sole condition of Ijeoma's entrance into this queer space shows not only the importance of secrecy with regard to queer spaces in heteronormative and heterosexist societies, but also the trust among queer communities to keep these spaces safe.

Censorship in queer space is emphasised by Ombagi's assertion of the queer subversion of ordinary space through the inversion of authorised functionality (109). The inversion of seemingly mundane spaces through their conversion into queer spaces is demonstrated in both Beasley and Okparanta's work. In Beasley's novel, we see the inversion of the function of the doghouses in Onnie's backyard that were built by her father, as a means of supplementing his income as a plumber (Beasley 34). However, the function of these doghouses is transformed to playhouses which Onnie and Karla use to "play Doctor and Nurse", which eventually leads to them kissing and fondling one another (Beasley 36). The colloquial connotations of "the doghouse" describe a situation in which one may find themselves if someone is angry at them.

In addition to rendering these spaces as punitive in nature and for the housing of animals, the negative colloquial connotations implied by this structure simultaneously others Onnie and Karla because of their desires while being an inviting yet exclusive space, whose intrinsic meaning is collapsed, thus making it a space of abjection (Kristeva 2). The punitive insinuations of this space, in tandem with Onnie and Karla's use of it to enact their desire implies that their same-sex desire is wrong or unacceptable. This is supported by the secrecy bound to the activities that take place in this space as demonstrated by Karla warning her sister Needa, who usually accompanies the girls to the doghouses, against telling their mother about her and Onnie kissing as discussed above.

The inversion of the functionality of spaces can also be seen in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* through the placement of the club that the queer women in the community use, which is revealed to be a church—“The place was a dimly lit church like structure” (Okparanta 190). As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, the church and Christian religion, especially in Okparanta's novel, is a site of the condemnation of homoerotic desire and trauma for Ijeoma whose mother denounced her because of her queer desire and seeks to correct her behaviour through relentless bible study lessons targeted at showing her how “evil” her non-heterosexual desires are. In turning a space in which queer desire and queer people are condemned into a place in which queer people can safely gather as a community and freely express themselves, Okparanta illustrates the inversion of the “authorised legal use” of this space, even if it is just temporary (Ombagi 109; 114). This transformation allows queerness to “impose its presence, thereby revealing the fallacy and futility of restriction, confines and boundaries of the city-spaces” and ultimately shifting the ways in which the church is perceived, especially with regard to queer people. This shift can also be seen in Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* when Onnie's mother speaks of her own experience of queer desire;

“When I was young there was a girl at church I really loved [...] We were best friends up until we were sixteen and we both ended up married. But ours wasn’t a real love, like between a man and woman. We was infatuated”

(120- 121).

Similar to the club in Okparanta’s novel, in spite of its heteronormative teachings and its condemnation of same-sex desire, the church is constructed as a place in which queer love blossoms for Onnie’s mother. Despite this, we see the dismissal of the validity of homoerotic feeling by Onnie’s mother as she refers to their relationship as “infatuation” and asserting that it “wasn’t real love”. The notion of infatuation implies a childlike obsessive admiration for someone, thereby diminishing its validity in adulthood, which is supported by the assertion that queer love is not “real”, thus not only questioning its validity, but also its existence. This questioning posits same-sex desire as imaginary, thus undermining its reality in favour of heterosexuality, which is bolstered by the comparison to the subsequent phrase “like between a man and woman” which endorses heterosexuality, as not only acceptable, but more importantly sustainable in the realm of reality and adulthood.

In addition to subverting the authorised functionality of certain spaces, safe spaces for queer people such as the clubs encountered in both novels are places of comfort and support that offer marginalised people secure places in which they can freely express themselves without fear of judgement, interrogation, punishment, or persecution (Adams 227). In addition to “providing safe retreats from rampant homophobic and heterosexist contexts”, these spaces “provide a momentary separate space to meet other” queer people and to “drop all straight facades”

(Adams 227). The temporary escape from homophobia and the ability to express queer desire freely is evidenced in Okparanta's novel;

“Ndididi held me tighter, pressed her body into mine, and there was a reassurance in it. Never before had I danced this way with a woman, never before so freely. I banished all thoughts of Amina, and of Mama's Bible studies [...] I felt a sense of liberation that I had not until then known”

(Okparanta 192- 193).

Ijeoma's banishing of intrusive thoughts linked to her potential punishment and persecution as a result of her queer desire shows the power of safe spaces for marginalised communities to invert the negative assumptions of queer desire and transform them into positive affirmations of “community, friendship and celebrations of love”, thus creating liberatory (albeit temporary) spaces of self-expression (Ombagi 108). Her ability to dance freely with Ndididi shows that these spaces allow and encourage freedom of queer expression. The salience of this moment and this space is emphasised by the fact that Ijeoma had “Never before” experienced the freedom of expression encouraged by the construction of a community of similar people that will not judge nor condemn queer desire. This sense of liberation and self-expression is echoed in Beasley's novel, when Onnie, in speaking of California— where she encountered multiple queer spaces— states that “All I knew was when I was in California, I was different. I felt vibrant, I felt like myself” (228). The freedom that both protagonists feel in this space echoes Ombagi's assertion that these spaces provide “an escape from the self but invariably back to the self” (118).

The Dangers of “Safe Spaces”

The safety of safe spaces for queer people is seemingly always questioned and in need of reinforcement. In addition to existing as mechanisms of escape from homophobia, these spaces are often sites of vulnerability and anxiety as well as constant fear. This anxiety is portrayed in both novels through the character’s unease at the prospect of occupying such spaces. In Okparanta’s novel, Ijeoma’s anxieties are exhibited by;

“...I could not help the anxiety that was building in me, frantic and questioning thoughts. Just what are you doing in a place like this? What business does a respectable young woman have in an underground place like this?”

(Okparanta 192).

While we see Ijeoma releasing these inhibitions soon after this, the anxiety mentioned here is reflective of the effects of homophobia on queer individuals. This shows that even within a space occupied by other queer individuals in an effort to connect with one another and form a sense of community, this gathering remains illicit in the eyes of heteronormative society, especially considering that they are in a church. This notion of illicitness is emphasised by Ijeoma’s questioning of her “respectability” while occupying this space which shows that while these spaces are constructed to encourage freedom and safety, the heterosexist conditioning of queer individuals through homophobia has the ability to invade these spaces, thus shattering the feeling of safety by encouraging the worry of inadvertent exposure. This is paralleled by Onnie’s discomfort when she is in Ollie’s, the queer club in San Francisco with her cousin Elsee as well her running away from Reuben, a character she encountered along the street on multiple occasions on her trip to California, who she did not know was queer. Having no knowledge of Reuben’s queerness, Onnie’s fear of Reuben and men and boys in general (due

to her being sexually assaulted earlier in the novel by a boy in the neighbourhood named Earlee after being found kissing Karla) continues to haunt her on her trip, “Now every boy that stood or walked on Alcatraz reminded me of Earlee” (Beasley 103). The psychological effects of this homophobic attack not only follow Onnie across the country, but they are reignited by Reuben’s presence in Ollie’s trip, which prompts Onnie’s anxiety in what is supposed to be a safe space for her.

The theme of secrecy and the assurance of safety in safe spaces is also conveyed by the measures taken to safeguard them. According to Tony E. Adams, these spaces “might exist in decrepit areas of the city” and “may even use non-descript public signage” (228). These assertions are evidenced by the underground club in Okparanta’s novel as the reader is told that the church that was the site of this gathering was “at the end of a dirt road” which may suggest that its location may discourage human traffic given its distance from other buildings and roads (190). In addition to the non-descript nature of the facades of these spaces, Adams asserts that “there may be barriers to entry as well, including door greeters and security guards, physical barriers such as ‘partitions’ and ‘second doors’, or even a ‘members-only’ policy” in these spaces (228). While the underground club in Okparanta’s novel only has a “carved wooden door” as a (potentially ineffective) barrier, the exclusive nature of the informal network that forms the community that frequent this space mimics the notion of a “members-only policy” that may be used as a mechanism of safeguarding the space (190). In Beasley’s novel, we see the use of people as security guards in two instances. The first is in reference to the doghouses in Onnie’s backyard where we see Needa, Karla’s sister using “her back to block the door”, thus acting as both a physical barrier as well as a security guard of the doghouse— a space in which Karla and Onnie explore their attraction to one another (Beasley 35). Similarly, we see the use of a “velvet rope”, the introduction of Brown Elvis (a security guard at the queer club,

Ollie's in San Francisco, who simultaneously functions as a door-greeter) as well as the payment of an "entry fee" in the form of marijuana, an illicit drug which is hard to obtain (thus making the process of entry even more difficult) in addition to the actual doors of the club (Beasley 125).

Secrecy and Hiding

The end of the 17th century saw the careful confinement of sexuality to the marital home and to the utilitarian purpose of reproduction (Foucault 3). As a result of this confinement and the resultant exclusion of other sexualities, societies also saw the "beginning of the age of repression", censorship and silence (Foucault 17). Central to the notions of repression and censorship imposed by strict heteronormativity and heterosexism, societal "patterns of secrecy and sexual self-management" emerged among queer marginalised communities in order to avoid unwanted exposure (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 9; 13). As demonstrated by the protagonists in the novels central to this study, the notion of secrecy and censorship is illustrated by the act of hiding same-sex desires and practices, due to hostile societal attitudes and homophobic violence enacted towards queer individuals by the state, their communities and their families. The secrecy implemented by queer individuals regarding their desires and sexualities often stems from the fear of ostracisation, alienation, abuse, harassment and the threat of death from friends, family as well as from the communities in which they live (Anderson and Holliday 27). Okparanta's *Ijeoma* illustrates the fear of ostracisation from family (from her mother, specifically) clearly in her assertion;

“I looked into her eyes, knowing better than to tell the truth, but I could not get myself to speak the lie. I shook my head. I forced myself to shake it with authority, making sure not to blink. It was the first time that I had lied to Mama”

(Okparanta 92).

Said in the aftermath of the corrective religious lessons Ijeoma is subjected to by her mother and in response to being asked whether she still thinks of Amina (the object of her same-sex desire) in a romantic and/or sexual manner, secrecy and censorship are enacted through lying, omission and self-management. The use of the phrase “knowing better than to tell her the truth” in immediate response to her mother’s question forebodes the lie that Ijeoma is about to tell. In addition to diminishing the option of honesty that previously resulted in Ijeoma not only disappointing and angering her mother, but also in her being punished through forced prayer and the religious threat of damnation, the phrase “knowing better than to” implies that this secrecy and dishonesty is learned behaviour based on the reactions to her non-normative desires. Additionally, Ijeoma’s experience of her corrective religious lessons (which have been discussed in the previous chapter) may encourage this lie due to her desire to not only appease her mother by respecting her beliefs, but also to avoid further condemnation and disruption to her mother’s life (Anderson and Holliday 28). The act of self-management for the sake of concealment can be seen in Ijeoma’s physical actions. While she cannot bring herself to verbalise the lie, Ijeoma uses physical cues such as those of “looking into her [mother’s] eyes”, of shaking her head “with authority” and “making sure not to blink” in order to ensure that her lie is convincing and that her secret remains hidden. The “forced” nature of these actions brings forth the notions of physical self-management and restriction central to the censorship and secrecy that structure the lives of queer individuals avoiding exposure in heteronormative contexts and societies (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 9).

The notion of sexual self-management is not restricted to physical actions, it is also applicable to appearance as well, which is demonstrated by the character of Brown Elvis in Beasley's novel. Brown Elvis is a security guard at Ollie's, a queer club, which Onnie encounters courtesy of her step-cousin Elsee when Onnie and her mother visit Elsee and her family in San Francisco. While the secrecy of this club is not made explicit by Beasley, unlike that mentioned in *Under the Udala Trees*, Onnie and Elsee hide this visit from their parents under the pretence of visiting a more tourist-ridden space. In her initial encounter with Brown Elvis, Onnie assumes that Brown Elvis is a man — “I couldn't believe she told this strange man our names” (Beasley 125). However, this assumption is disrupted by the observation, “Brown Elvis waved us inside and I noticed he'd polished his nails Pepto-Bismol pink” (Beasley 125). While the assumption that Brown Elvis is a man is founded on the character's non-feminine appearance and voice, it is quickly disrupted by the supposedly feminine aesthetic choice of painted nails, and further emphasised by the painting of nails in a colour that has traditionally been associated with femininity. This character's physical expression clearly does not conform to the societally imposed binaries of gender and gender presentation that Onnie is accustomed to, as demonstrated by her stuttered confusion in addressing Brown Elvis— “Yes sir... I mean ma'am or sir, yes...yes.” (Beasley 126). This non-conformation to socially instituted gender binaries queers this character due to their refusal of heteronormative conventions of gender expression via the stylised performativity of appearance and clothing.

However, the notion of secrecy and self-management ascribed to queer people is conveyed when Brown Elvis volunteers to accompany the girls home— “Brown Elvis returned with street clothes on. She'd discarded her club persona...” (Beasley 132). The phrase “street clothes” implies social acceptability and by extension, safety. The implementation of this

phrase suggests that the Brown Elvis's apparel beforehand was not considered socially acceptable due to its non-conformity to the stylised constructions of one specific gender as determined by the hegemonic gender binary (Butler, 520). Contrary to Onnie's previous confusion with regard to Brown Elvis's gender, we see her referring to Brown Elvis as "she" and "her" following this change in appearance, indicating that this character is feminine presenting in her "street clothes" (Beasley 132). While Onnie assumes Brown Elvis's gender, Beasley does not confirm nor deny Onnie's assertion, which results in the reader not knowing how Brown Elvis identifies. This change in clothing may be seen as this character's attempt at passing (which is defined by Barbara Ponse as the "successful accomplishment in social interaction of a usual, unremarkable social identity by an individual who would, if discovered, be deemed unusual or different in some crucial way") by meeting the binary standards of gender and gender presentation in a heteronormative society through her choice of dress (Ponse 316). However, Brown Elvis's change of clothes may signal an expression of gender fluidity, which would also contradict the societal regulations of gender expression as prescribed by the hegemonic gender binary that requires one to conform to the gender assigned at birth. If the former is the case, we see the suppression of self-expression and the enactment of self-management of queer individuals in heteronormative contexts. Thus, it can be argued that considering the fact that characters in both Okparanta's and Beasley's novels encounter situations that require self-management, secrecy and the repression of the true queer self in favour of adhering to heteronormative societal conventions, the notion of U.S. exceptionalism (which centres the tolerance and acceptance of queer citizens) can be questioned and critiqued.

The fear of consequence, especially from a maternal figure, is reflected in Beasley's *Something Better Than Home*. In warning her sister, Needa to not tell their mother about kissing Onnie, Karla (Onnie's love interest) says "Don't tell Mommy we kissed Onnie, she wouldn't like it.

She might give you a spanking for being with us” (Beasley 36). Similar to Okparanta’s Ijeoma, the annexation and sanctioning of queer admission is seen in the refraining from verbalising same-sex desire through the use of the phrase “Don’t tell”. This repression of verbalising same-sex experiences not only implies silence within the sphere of the immediate family, it also alludes to the erasure and exclusion of queer bodies in the grander scheme of the national imaginary as demonstrated by the implementation of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy previously implemented by the U.S. military, that specifically targeted queer men and women of colour; which is particularly interesting as both protagonists in the texts central to this study are Black women (Puar 1). Similar to Ijeoma, Karla anticipates her mother’s negative reaction to queer desire as seen in the phrase “she wouldn’t like it” and fears the repercussions of such admissions— “She might give you a spanking”. The secrecy central to the lives of same-sex desiring people extends to those who know about their desires. This can be seen in Karla bringing Needa into the fold of her queer relationship with Onnie through the grouping of the same-sex practice as seen by the pluralisation of “we” and “us”, as well as the emphasis of individual punishment by the word “you” in reference to the spanking.

The Precariousness of Secrecy

The notion of secrecy, however, is a precarious state that the characters in both texts must navigate in tandem with their fears of being discovered. This is especially the case in the context of the familial home in which the queer subject must be in close quarters with heterosexist family members. According to Barbara Ponse, the “proximity and intimacy” of the familial home makes the “management of secrecy difficult” as the queer subject is always at risk of being unwittingly discovered (Ponse 324). Thus, the queer individual seems to always teeter on the edge of unwanted exposure. In Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees*, this balancing act is illustrated in both the familial home, which Ijeoma occupies with her mother as well as

the matrimonial home, which she occupies with her husband Chibundu and her daughter, Chidinma. Comparable to the surveillance and policing implied by the notion of secrecy, as well as state-sanctioned policy (i.e. the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy of the United States military as well as the Same-Sex Prohibition law of Nigeria) as discussed above, self-censorship and self-management with regards to queer desire can also be seen in the confinement of same-sex desire to "furtive" encounters with same-sex partners within close proximity (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 10). As a result, the notion of secrecy is applicable not only in reference to heterosexist familial or societal counterparts, but also to communication between members of the queer community themselves. This can be seen in Okparanta's novel when Ijeoma must censor her letters to Ndidi (her love interest), while living with Chibundu;

"When night came, I sat in bed and wrote to Ndidi [...] I could have waxed poetic, said something about my love for her being as large as a whole country[...] But it would have been risky to do so — to let out all of my emotion in a letter. What if someone got ahold of the letter and exposed our relationship?"

(Okparanta 254).

Here, the phrase "I could have" connotes the possibility and option of romantic expression between Ijeoma and Ndidi, as well as conveying an inclination to express true emotion and queer desire on Ijeoma's part. However, the probability of doing so is quickly thwarted by the possibility of unwanted exposure, as illustrated by the poignant question posed at the end of that paragraph. The word "risky" implies danger, which is indicative of the common implementation of secrecy and self-censorship for the sake of safety (Anderson and Holliday 27). In assessing the risks of her actions, Ijeoma displays vigilance by concealing her true

feelings in an effort to avoid unwanted exposure (Anderson and Holliday 27). Her ability to perceive potential danger and censor herself for the sake of safety may also be another instance of learned behaviour after having witnessed the death of a queer acquaintance on the basis of her sexuality being exposed to the public earlier in the novel. The risk in this instance is magnified by the close proximity shared by Ijeoma and Chibundu— “Chibundu, by my side, was snoring slightly” (Okparanta 254). In contrast to the home shared with her mother, in which she had her own room and a resultant sense of privacy, the increased intimacy and even closer proximity of the matrimonial home in which she is expected to share a bed with her husband renders Ijeoma’s ability to keep her secret more difficult. While this closeness may be another reason for the censorship displayed in the letter itself and despite Ijeoma taking precautions to hide the letters carefully— “I made sure to put the letter at the bottom, beneath the pens and pencils, even beneath the journal, where I was certain Chibundu could not see it”, this living situation also creates a sense of tension that exposes the precariousness of the secrecy associated with undisclosed sexuality and desire, especially within close quarters that do not allow for much privacy (Okparanta 254).

Like Okparanta’s Ijeoma, Beasley’s Onnie must also navigate the tension of keeping her sexuality a secret within the closeness of the familial home. Similar to Ijeoma’s living situation with her mother, Onnie lives with both her mother and father— characters both established as disapproving of homosexuality. While Ijeoma is limited to keeping her same-sex desire a secret (due to her never bringing a love interest into the close quarters of a home), Onnie is forced to hide the sexual practices that she engages in within the familial space in addition to her desires. This can be seen in an encounter she has when Karla, her love interest, visits her home;

“... quickly, we felt each other up and kissed, all while remaining upright. I put my hand under her shirt to fondle her breast [...] We got good and heated when we heard Mama coming from the kitchen. I was never so grateful for hardwood floors and a small house that carried sound— Mama’s prosthetic leg made a clump sound when it hit the wood floor”

(Beasley 64- 65).

The close proximity of the familial space proves to be a simultaneous hindrance and aid to the hiding of same-sex desire and practices from disapproving family members. Onnie’s mother insists that the girls keep Onnie’s bedroom door open, which in addition to breaking the barriers of privacy to prevent sexual practices between the girls due to past actions thus making secret-keeping more difficult for these queer characters, also prompts the enactment of self-management as both girls are forced to refrain from verbalising their true emotions for one another and instead use physical cues such as motioning to communicate their desires. While the open-door policy prompts the silencing of true emotions from the girls, their commitment to keeping their secret seems to enhance their other senses as they are more aware of the sounds within the house that may signal the possibility of discovery by Onnie’s mother. And so, we see that while the risk of the close proximity of the familial space hinders Ijeoma and causes her to be even more cautious about her actions in order to keep her secret, the closeness of the household in this case allows for the queer characters in Beasley’s novel to freely express themselves until they are made aware of Onnie’s mother’s impending presence due to the “hardwood floors and a small house that carried sound”. Despite this, the self-management, heightened awareness and hurried nature of the sexual practices enacted here create a similar tension associated with secret-keeping as that created in Okparanta’s novel. While U.S. exceptionalism claims the acceptance of and encourages the freedom of queer people within in

its borders and condemns the lack of freedom afforded to queer people in countries such as Nigeria, the representation of queer unfreedom as reflected by the necessity of secret keeping with regard to sexuality in both Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* critiques the notion of American exceptionalism by showing that the protagonists in both contexts face similar challenges surrounding the censorship and forced non-disclosure of their sexuality.

U.S. sexual exceptionalism is contingent upon the nation's progressive attitudes that promote the recognition of and acceptance of queer people into the folds of normative society. This sense of exceptionalism has led to the condemnation of third world countries in particular, including Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Senegal for not only failing to recognise the rights of its queer citizens, but also for persecuting individuals on the basis of their sexuality. Despite this, this chapter has demonstrated that based on the necessity to hide, censor themselves, and seek safe spaces in which to exist and express themselves freely, queer people in both contexts continue to face similar challenges because of their marginalisation on the basis of sexuality. In analysing these challenges in both contexts as represented in the texts central to this study, I have critiqued the notion of exceptionalism in an effort to show that despite U.S. exceptionalism, queer people continue to be marginalised (as seen by the notions of self-censorship, forced non-disclosure and the need for safe spaces—the safety of which remains precarious in heteronormative and heterosexist contexts) in both the first world and the third world.

Chapter Five: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Homophobic Violence

Following the enactment of the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in Nigeria in 2014 and the subsequent U.S. Supreme Court decision to recognise marriage rights for same-sex couples in all North American states in 2015, countries that criminalised and persecuted people on the basis of their sexual orientation such as Nigeria were not only met with condemnation from nations around the world, but were additionally met with “threats and inducements” that pushed for the political support of the rights of queer people on the continent (Amusan, Saka and Muinat 47). A particular proponent of this condemnation was the United States of America which has used its tolerance as demonstrated by its constitutional acceptance of queer people as a marker of Western progressiveness and exceptionalism (Puar 8; 5). However, it is important to note that although the United States of America recognises the rights of its queer citizens, this act of acceptance is often subject to the “exclusionary normative standards” of race, gender and class (Khel 23). Thus, considering the fact that the U.S. continues to condemn human rights violations elsewhere—such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Senegal, particularly in the arena of gay rights and the criminalisation of homosexuality—while ignoring those that take place within its own borders, the state of sexual exceptionalism and progressiveness claimed by North America in contrast to its African counterparts (as mentioned above) must not escape critique (Puar 8). Despite the claim of U.S. sexual exceptionalism, capitalist and social systems that perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality and exclude non-heteronormative sexualities remain in place. This chapter will explore compulsory sexuality, how it is constructed and demonstrated in the experiences of the protagonists in the novels examined as well as the notion of homophobia and how it is presented as a tool of compulsory heterosexuality in the representations of the experiences of queer people in Okparanta’s *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley’s *Something Better Than Home*.

Compulsory Heterosexuality and Intersectional Marginalisation

First conceptualised by the poet Adrienne Cecil Rich in her essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience”, the notion of compulsory heterosexuality is ultimately based on the foundations of the construction of gender, which in its cultural construction is based on the appearance of biological sex (Butler 10). According to Judith Butler, there is a “distinction between sex, as a biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity” (522). In establishing this distinction, Butler asserts the performativity of gender by stating that it is “an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts” (519). The cultural construction of gender is constituted by similarly socially formed constructions of a gender binary which enforces divisions and hierarchies based on the biological facticity upon which the cultural construction of gender performance is based, thus forming an interdependent societal system of identification (Butler 524; Seidman 18). The cultural construction of gender and the enforcement of a gender binary through the instatement of a “sexual-gender hierarchical order” is engrained into structural institutions of society and maintained through classification schemes, laws and policies, social organisations, cultural representations “as well as daily practices of harassment, intimidation and violence” (Seidman 19; 20). To ensure the reproduction of the aforementioned societal representations of identity, further systems and constraints are put in place through the additional institution of heterosexual monogamous marriage—the sole purpose of which is sexual reproduction and the subsequent socialisations that ensures the continuity of the cultural constructions of sex, gender and sexuality (Butler 524).

The 17th century exclusive restriction of sexuality to the marital home for the utilitarian purpose of reproduction was supported by the canonical institutions of religious and civil law that not only governed sexual practices but confined them to the realm of heterosexual marriage

(Foucault 3; 37). Despite the historical confinement of sexuality to heterosexual marriage and the disavowal of non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices through othering in the form of social exclusion through dehumanisation and pathologizing, the term and concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” was only coined and developed by gay liberationists and lesbian feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and France amongst other Western nations (Foucault 43; Seidman 18). In her influential 1980 article “Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience”, Adrienne Cecile Rich asserts that heterosexuality, its naturalisation and the compulsory state assigned to it, is paradoxically a man-made political institution (635). Based on gender binarism and the resultant hierarchies, heterosexuality especially with regard to women, has not only been naturalised through the assumption of it being the default sexuality of all, it has also been used to bind women to men and position them as the subordinate party in this coupling (Seidman 18). As a result of the institutionalisation of heterosexuality and to maintain its compulsory state, the social production of homosexuality posited it as the “concrete” and abnormal other (Seidman 23). The simultaneous positioning of women as the subordinate gender within the sexual-gender hierarchy and of same-sex desiring people as the abnormal other contribute to the creation of the intersectional marginalisation of same-sex desiring women (Seidman 21).

Despite its influence in the critical social theory of sexuality and queer studies, Rich’s essay failed to include the further complexities of “historical, geographical and social contextualisation”, race, ableism and the intricacies of language with regards to the queer community in the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 10). While Black feminism addresses the impact of racism in the oppression of women on the basis of gender unlike white feminism, they both fail to acknowledge same-sex desiring women conforming to the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality by participating in the othering of non-heterosexual

sexualities (Ferguson 3-4; Carroll 3). In an effort to refute the notions of “savagery, pathology and deviance” allocated to Black people during colonialism and the subsequent emergence of the Transatlantic slave trade, the tradition of representing Black people in the U.S.A as moral and respectable has resulted in the erasure of “othered” sexualities and “gendered being in favour of a static heterosexual narrative” that promotes the socially instituted norms of marriage, reproduction and the subordination of women (Richardson 64). Similarly, compulsory heterosexuality is maintained on the African continent by assertions of homosexuality as “unnatural” and “un-African” (Richardson 4). While Black same-sex desiring women face the marginalising factor of racism (in predominantly white spaces and countries), their marginalisation is particularly compounded and complicated by the intersectional factors of the sexism implicit in the construction of gender binarism as well as the heterosexism implicit in the institutionalisation of compulsory heterosexuality in multiple historical and geographical contexts (Richardson 63). In addition to being marginalised in the queer community on the basis of their race and gender due to homonormativity (which is central to U.S. sexual exceptionalism), Black queer women continue to risk being ostracised by their own ethnic and racial communities due to their sexuality (Walsh 1240).

The Construction of Compulsory Heterosexuality

Similar to Butler’s assertions concerning the cultural construction of gender, the normativity ascribed to heterosexuality is comprised of the mundane and seemingly nonchalant repetition of the ways in which heterosexuality is positioned in privilege through naturalisation and moralisation in comparison to homosexuality which is often portrayed in cultural discourse as not only abnormal, but deviant in nature (Martin 191; Foucault 43). Furthermore, in accordance with the generational transmission of the cultural construction of compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity is often established during childhood through the manner in which parents

construct gender for their children in compliance with cultural representation (Martin 192). Karin A. Martin asserts that the parental construction of gender with regard to their children is intrinsically linked to construction of the child's sexuality (192). Mothers in particular are the parental figures that are held responsible for the reproduction of heteronormativity in their children and have historically been assigned blame for their children's non-compliance to compulsory heterosexuality (Martin 193). This can be seen in both Okparanta's and Beasley's texts, which give great attention and focus to the relationships between their queer protagonists and their mothers. Both novels portray the protagonists' mothers' journeys to correct their daughters' queerness.

In Okparanta's novel, these efforts are led and influenced by religion, as explored in a previous chapter of this thesis, while Beasley's maternal character's efforts are constructed within the confines of the home and the nuclear familial structure. The assigning of the responsibility of enforcing compulsory heterosexuality to the maternal parental figure is illustrated in both novels through the assignment of blame when both protagonists begin to show signs of queerness. In a moment of realisation that Ijeoma continues to harbour homoerotic desires in spite of her Bible study efforts, Ijeoma's mother declares in a devastated tone, "It's my fault" (Okparanta 88). Here, the word "fault" echoes the notion of responsibility and the failure to fulfil that responsibility. As discussed in the Religion and Culture Chapter of this thesis, this is paralleled in Beasley's novel by Onnie's father's declaration, in speaking to his wife after discovering that Onnie and her friend Karla have been kissing that if Onnie continues to display homoerotic desire/sexuality, "ittah be yo' fault" (22). Like the use of the word "my" in Okparanta's novel, the use of "yo'" here signifies the assignation of responsibility and blame to the mothers. The supposed failures of the maternal figures in both novels simultaneously

demonstrate the deviance associated with same-sex desire as well as highlighting the figures responsible for the reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality.

The Validation of Compulsory Heterosexuality

The automatic assumption of heterosexuality is key to the validation and naturalisation of compulsory heterosexuality. According to Rich, “heterosexuality is presumed as a ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most women’” (632). As a result of this assumption, we see the privileging of the coupling of men and women through the validation of heterosexual relationships and marriage in particular (Rich 635). According to Richardson, in order to counter the colonial narratives that portrayed Black people as savages and sexually abnormal and deviant figures, the desire for heterosexual coupling and marriage “to the exclusion of all other arrangements” amongst Black communities in both North America and Nigeria is “an attempt to demonstrate Black normalcy” (66). Once again, we see the co-dependent attribution of normalcy to heterosexuality and the othering of all other sexualities. The emphasis placed on the coupling of men and women is clearly demonstrated in Okparanta’s and Beasley’s novels through the recurring emphasis of heterosexual marriage, as well as through both protagonists’ love interests’ compliance to compulsory heterosexuality by entering heterosexual relationships.

The construction of compulsory heterosexuality is founded on and maintained by the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural or default sexual preference of every individual (Rich 632). The use of the words “compulsory”, “assumption”, and “natural” in association with heterosexuality throughout theoretical texts on this topic in itself is compelling as they posit heterosexuality as a factor of life that despite being fundamentally linked to identity, continues to go unquestioned. This lack of critical questioning ultimately results in the continued acceptance of heterosexuality as the preference of all, but also in the continued attack

of all other sexualities with a lack of critical reasoning behind it. In Okparanta's novel, this is shown in the instance of Amina's wedding announcement at her and Ijeoma's "senior send-off party" (Okparanta 170). After this announcement, the grammar school teacher's wife pulls Ijeoma aside and while sympathetic to Ijeoma's romantic desire for Amina, defends Amina's engagement by saying that "It's just the way things are done" (Okparanta 171). While very ambiguous through the lack of specificity shown by "It's" and "things", this declaration's (which we can assume is about Amina's impending heterosexual marriage) short length implies finality and, in this way, discourages questioning from either party in the conversation despite the tonal implications of the desire to do so. This is echoed in Beasley's novel when speaking about Charleston's (a former childhood friend of Onnie's) disdain for Vtray (Onnie's new male queer friend) because of his sexuality— "But something about breaking rules mixed up with his newly formed muscles made Charleston a puritanical freak" (155). The non-specificity of the "rules" produces a comparable ambiguity to that of the grammar school teacher's wife's statement above. The combination of the specificity and finality of the language used in association with heterosexuality despite its ambiguity as well as the readers' presumed knowledge of what is being addressed, not only illustrates the naturalisation of heterosexuality, but also its institutionalisation into the way in which we reason and assume romantic partnerships.

As discussed above, the nuclear household is the primary arena in which compulsory heterosexuality is constructed. This can be seen in the assignation of responsibility to the maternal figure to ensure their children's compliance to the cultural construction of compulsory heterosexuality (Martin 192). One of the ways in which mothers embed notions of compulsory heterosexuality into their children is through the promotion of coupling of men and women through monogamous, reproductive marriage, usually presenting their own heterosexual

marriages as prime examples of normalcy (Martin 200). The portrayal of the sole validity of heterosexual marriage and the exclusion of any other possibilities of coupling support Seidman's assertion that "heterosexuality binds women to men and defines women as incomplete without men, prescribing their desires, wants, and roles in a way that make women's self-fulfilment dependent on their relationship with men" (20). This can be seen in the constant references to marriage by both maternal figures in the novels central to this study. Seidman's statement is clearly depicted in Ijeoma's mother's bicycle analogy. In pressuring her daughter to find a husband following the announcement of the commencement of Amina's traditional (heterosexual) marriage rituals, Adaora compares marriage to a bicycle, claiming that in the construction of this structure;

"The man is one wheel, [...] the woman the other. One wheel must come before the other and the wheel has no choice but to follow. What is certain though, is that neither wheel is able to function fully without the other"

(Okparanta 182).

By metaphorically limiting the construction of marriage to men and women, we see the enforcement of heterosexual coupling. The constraints of this metaphor to "one" woman and "one" man simultaneously promote the notion of monogamy that is central to compulsory heterosexuality while delegitimising marriage or romantic coupling between people of the same sex. This analogy also speaks to the notion of patriarchy central to compulsory heterosexuality by way of the sex-gender hierarchy mentioned previously as illustrated by the strategic ordering of the sentence which positions the man as "one wheel" and the woman as "the other". The word "other" positions women as secondary participants in the structure of marriage, thus portraying them as subordinate to the needs and desires of their male

counterparts as emphasised by the proclamation that “one wheel must come before the other”. This subordination of women is further evidenced by the notion of having “no choice but to follow”. By using this analogy, Adaora reinforces the key elements that both contribute to and are the result of the construction of compulsory heterosexuality— the sex-gender divide, the hierarchy of such a divide, and the fact that this hierarchy is patriarchally inclined.

Compulsory heterosexuality as manifested in monogamous heterosexual marriage is also seen in Beasley’s novel. While on their trip to visit family in San Francisco, Onnie’s discovery of queer literature and queer clubs encourages her to concretise her sexual identity and as a result she contemplates coming out to her mother. During that conversation, Onnie’s mother tells her own story of potential queer desire but dismisses it by deeming only heterosexual marriage as “real” and acceptable— “But ours wasn’t real love, like between a man and a woman” (Beasley 120). The phrase “ours wasn’t real love” in reference to the potentially queer love interest Onnie’s mother once had adheres to the erasure of possibility of non-normative sexualities that is central to the naturalisation of compulsory heterosexuality. By deeming it as not “real”, we see the undermining of the legitimacy of queer love and queer relationships as well as a demonstration of the restrictions put on female relationships that limit them to friendship (Rich 635). Conversely, we see the legitimisation of heterosexual romance through the phrase “like between a man and a woman”. In accordance with compulsory heterosexuality, this suggests that romantic love is only valid and acceptable in the monogamous coupling of men and women, which further reinforces the gender binary of man/woman by disavowing identities that fall between these two categories, or identities such as trans or non-binary. Similar to Ijeoma’s experience, we see the enforcement of heterosexuality onto a relatively young person, Onnie (both of whom are teenagers when they receive this information), by her mother. By excluding the possibility of queer love, the maternal figures in both novels reproduce

heteronormativity, thus making heterosexuality compulsory for their children. Despite the claim that the United States is more tolerant and accepting of queer people and queer romance as seen through the recognition of same-sex marriage, we see that the notion of compulsory heterosexuality is just as strongly enforced within the nuclear home (which could be considered as reflective of the state) in the U.S. as it is in the supposedly more backward, intolerant, and condemned Nigeria.

Invalidating Queer Identities and Romance

A key component to the construction of compulsory heterosexuality is the delegitimisation and othering of non-heteronormative desire. According to Seidman, the “compulsory status of heterosexuality is maintained in part by representations of the homosexual as the polluted other compared to the pure heterosexual” (23). The notion of the polluted other is echoed by Rich, who argues while heterosexuality is naturalised in society, same-sex desire is pathologized and demonised, thus concretising the status of otherness allocated to queer desire (639). As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, parental figures within the nuclear household can be agents that ensure the generational reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality. One of the ways in which this is done is by “preventing homosexuality” by teaching their children that “it is wrong often by relying on religious understanding” (Martin 204). According to Seidman, the additional use of “the state, laws, [and] social institutions” in the cultural construction and social institutionalisation of heterosexuality is what makes it ultimately compulsory (20). One of the social institutions that play a significant role in the construction and enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality is that of religion— and specific to this study, the Christian Church. The use of Christian doctrine in the promotion and enforcement of heterosexuality is seen in the constant validation of heterosexual relationships in religious discourse in both novels.

As discussed in the Religion and Culture chapter of this thesis, Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* implements religion as an influential aspect of enforcing and maintaining compulsory heterosexuality. This can be seen in the Bible verses that supposedly condemn same-sex desire and are scattered throughout the novel. These verses are also the basis of the Bible studies lessons that Ijeoma is subjected to by her mother after she is caught participating in same-sex practices by her guardian. One of the Bible verses her mother emphasises during her lessons is "Man must not lie with man, and if man does, man will be destroyed" (Okparanta 74). The word "must" implies necessity and/or obligation expressed through a command. The instructional tone of this verse leaves no room for one to express themselves differently, thus contributing to the compulsory nature of such a command, which is heterosexual in nature as it not only discourages same-sex desire, but also deems it as wrong or immoral. Additionally, we see the introduction of punitive and often homophobic and violent measures to ensure the adherence to heterosexuality and to discourage queerness— "if man does, man will be destroyed" which maintains the compulsory state of heterosexuality. The introduction of the punishment, often through violence, of non-heteronormative desire uses the instillation of fear as a mechanism of control by not only ensuring that the queer other is shunned and shamed, but also implying that they may be harmed.

Similarly, the notion of religious moralisation and how it discourages, and sanctions queerness is shown in Beasley's novel through Karla's adherence to compulsory heterosexuality. In declaring her heterosexual relationship to Hiawatha, Karla says that because she had "found Jesus", she "proclaimed herself an official good girl— a nice girl, a church girl, and anything-but-a-queer girl" (Beasley 151). As discussed in the Religion and Culture chapter, we see the association of heterosexuality with goodness pitted against the presentation of non-

heterosexual desire as immoral. By assigning immorality to queer desire, we see the othering of non-heterosexual desire, once again contributing to the compulsory nature of heterosexuality as presented by religion.

It is interesting to note that in both the novels, despite attempts to prevent queer desire, the heterosexual relationships that the protagonists' love interests engage in seem to contradict their true desires, which are queer as seen by their previous engagement in same-sex romantic relationships. When announcing her engagement to Ijeoma and her mother at the girls' senior send-off party, it is said that;

“Amina cleared her throat. She looked at me as she spoke. It was a simple declaration:
‘There is a Hausa boy who wants to marry me’”

(Okparanta 170).

While the clearing of Amina's throat may signify a significant announcement, it may also suggest hesitancy regarding the declaration she is about to make and the potential hesitancy she may have to the heterosexual marriage itself. Despite this hesitancy, Amina goes on to make the declaration, which may carry tonal connotations of coercion implying that the marriage is not something she truly wants. This is supported by the shifting of the desire to marry to the “Hausa boy” through the phrase “who wants to marry me”. By shifting this desire for heterosexuality to the other party, Amina's agency in the matter is effectively removed, thus stressing the compulsory status of heterosexuality. By phrasing it this way, we (as the readers) and Ijeoma are forced into a space of ambiguity as we do not know what it is that Amina truly wants. Additionally, this phrase speaks to the patriarchal nature and hierarchical binarism of compulsory heterosexuality in establishing a dynamic in which the woman is

deemed as a subordinate to the dominance of the man. Here we see the simultaneous invalidation of queer desire as well as the compliance to compulsory heterosexuality. Similar to the ambiguity experienced by the reader and Ijeoma in regard to Amina's true desire, the meaning of the look Amina gives Ijeoma during her announcement is not clarified. We do not know if it is one of wanting and longing or if it is one of determination. Similarly, Beasley's Karla (Onnie's) love interest, is also said to have "looked at [Onnie] directly" when with her new boyfriend Hunter following her declaration of having "found Jesus" after Onnie's return from San Francisco (165). Like the look exchanged between Okparanta's Amina and Ijeoma, the reader and Onnie are left guessing whether this look is one that expresses continued desire or if it is to reinforce the validity of this adherence to heterosexuality. Once again, despite the possibilities of resistance, both love interests' continued participation in heterosexual relationships bolsters the notion of the compulsory status of heterosexuality.

The invalidation of non-normative desire in favour of the validation of heteronormativity is seen in the religious moralisation discussed above and in the assumption of the transiency of same-sex desire. Seidman asserts that "if, as is increasingly the case in the U.S. and across Europe, homosexuals are understood as having intimate relationships, these will be represented as unstable and transitory in contrast to heterosexual love, whose normal condition will be described as stable and solid because it is assumed to be founded in deep affectional and social commitments" (24). This is clearly evidenced in a conversation Onnie has with her mother in San Francisco. In the same conversation mentioned above in which Onnie's mother speaks of the potential for same-sex desire in her experience, she states that "We was infatuated—girlhood love. It's just a phase, you'll grow out of it" (Beasley 120-121). The use of "infatuated" is indicative of fleeting admiration that should not be taken too seriously. The implication of impermanency and the subsequent allaying of this attachment to the realm of

childhood via the word “girlhood” invalidates the stability of queer love and relationships. The dismissive phrase “you’ll grow out of it” may suggest the lack of development in thought associated with same-sex desire thereby insinuating the potential for maturity and invalidating Onnie’s same-sex desire by deeming it as a sign of immaturity. The implication of the instability of queerness by referring to it as a phase effectively portrays heterosexuality as the more stable, accepted and expected alternative.

In contrast to the criminalisation of homosexuality in countries such as Nigeria (in which Okparanta’s protagonist is located), that continue to be condemned by the USA, U.S. exceptionalism claims the inclusion of queer people into the fold of the national imaginary (Puar 2). The aforementioned analysis draws similarities between the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is constructed, validated, institutionalised and transmitted generationally as well as the ways in which same-sex desire is invalidated in both the USA and Nigeria as represented in the novels despite claims of tolerance from the former. While the USA continues to promote gay rights and condemn the criminalisation of homosexuality in other countries, it is important to acknowledge that the systems that contribute to this criminalisation elsewhere continue to thrive within the borders of the United States of America, thus bringing the very concept and validity of U.S. sexual exceptionalism into question.

Homophobia and Violence

Being deemed as having the potential for deviance, sexual desire has become an arena of identity that requires regulation through fear, discipline and punishment. The regulation of sexual desire is often enacted through homophobic “harassment, intimidation and violence” often performed by physical torture and imprisonment, amongst others (Seidman 20; Rich 648). These mechanisms of discipline are often used to compel queer people to conform to the

notion of compulsory heterosexuality. Desiree Lewis maintains that in addition to ensuring the adherence to heterosexuality, homophobia and homophobic violence are used as mechanisms of power associated with patriarchy, which is a primary aspect of compulsory heterosexuality (105). As a result of gender binarism and hierarchy, the institutionalisation of patriarchy associate dominance, entitlement and often violence with masculinity and subordination with women which is often performed through homophobic rhetoric and rape (Lewis 105). Homophobic violence includes the specific targeting of queer women who do not comply with the regulations set by compulsory heterosexuality and is used to ‘punish’ and ‘cure’ women of their (non-heteronormative) sexual orientation (Morrissey 74). Despite the U.S. condemnation of the homophobic persecution of queer citizens in Nigeria, the use of homophobic violence as a punitive and corrective mechanism of compulsory heterosexuality in both aforementioned geographical contexts is demonstrated in Okparanta’s and Beasley’s novels.

The notion of punitive homophobia is manifested in (fear of the potential of) homophobic attacks portrayed in both Okparanta’s and Beasley’s novels. In Beasley’s *Something Better Than Home*, while exploring San Francisco with her cousin, who goes onto meet with her boyfriend, Onnie recognises the disparity of acceptability in society with regards to the public actions of heterosexual and queer couples. Having seen her cousin Elsee freely engaging in public displays of affection with her boyfriend, Onnie realises that “If Karla and I tried kissing on the streets of Eleven Lights City, I guess we’d be arrested, beat up, or sent to juvenile detention” (Beasley 124). The mention of the potential for imprisonment coincides with the notion of homosexuality as immoral, and as something that is punishable even by the law, similar to the criminalisation of homosexuality in Nigeria in 2014. The portrayal of the potential for persecution in the context of the U.S.A in Beasley’s novel effectively turns the concept of the American condemnation of countries that have criminalised homosexuality on

its head, thus critiquing U.S. exceptionalism. This continued fear of persecution and homophobic violence is particularly interesting when considering that like Okparanta's novel, Beasley's novel was published in 2015, the year which simultaneously saw the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the United States, and the resultant comparison and condemnation of countries that criminalised queerness such as Nigeria.

In addition to the fear of imprisonment, we see the fear of physical homophobic violence. The use of societal punishment through physical violence is demonstrated by the killings of queer people in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. This is particularly evidenced by the violent murder of Adanna, who was found "burning and burning and turning to ashes" by the women who attended the gathering held at the queer underground club after it was discovered and attacked by members of the community (Okparanta 209). The grotesque violence of this murder— of being burnt alive, is not only justified by the social institutions that uphold compulsory heterosexuality, such as religion (Foucault 37) as seen by the "thundering voice" heard "reciting a prayer" during the attack but it also works to instil trauma and immense fear in other same-sex desiring people which is then used to maintain the compulsory status of heterosexuality (Okparanta 208). The public display of Adanna's body may be seen as an additional act of homophobic violence due to the trauma other queer members of the community must endure to ensure proper burials. Therefore, in addition to the violence of non-acceptance, from family, friends, and community as well as the violence perpetuated by the threat of physical harm and potential death, the violence of witnessing homophobic violence not only compounds the trauma and exclusion of non-heteronormativity, but it also often forces queer people into heterosexual relationships for the sake of safety; thereby confirming the compulsory state of heterosexuality (Griffin 99).

According to Foucault, one of the key “mechanisms of knowledge and power centring on sex” is the hysterization and the subsequent disciplining of the female body (103). This process consisted of determining the female body as one saturated with sexuality and resultantly assigned and confined to the realms of reproduction (both biological and social), “the family space” and the “life of children” (104). Having been newly charged with “conjugal and parental obligations” in the 17th century, women’s bodies became targets of disciplinary power to ensure social control (King 30). These modes of discipline and control can be seen in the use of sexual violence as a regulatory or punitive measure to maintain compulsory heterosexuality (Lewis 105). These notions are present in both novels as we see male figures using the bodily discipline of same-sex desiring women not only to punish these women’s queerness, but to also demonstrate patriarchal male dominance and entitlement.

This can be seen in the sexual assault of Onnie by Earlee, which takes place when she, Karla and Lorraine (her best friend) visit Lorraine’s love interest Hiawatha. Earlee, a friend of Hiawatha’s older brother immediately asserts his male dominance towards Onnie through sexual harassment upon entering the apartment by having “one hand on his crotch and the other pressed against [Onnie’s] shoulder. ‘Chill— unless you want some of this’, he whispered” (Beasley 82). By grabbing his genitals— an anatomical representation of male sex, Earlee performs masculinity in an intimidating and violent way which speaks to the technology of power at play with regard to the sex-gender binary and sexuality. By asserting his masculinity in this threatening manner, Earlee asserts his power over Onnie who is portrayed as weak and powerless as she follows his instructions to avoid him carrying out his threat. The threat however is later carried out as Earlee proceeds to sexually assault her. Before doing so, he says “I told you I’d come see ‘bout you” (Beasley 91). The phrase “see ‘bout you” implies dealing with something or setting it right. This speaks to the notion of the homophobic rape of same-

sex desiring women considering that this assault happens directly after Earlee walks in on Karla and Onnie kissing. While the motive behind the assault is not made completely clear, it could be argued that it may have been both a reaction to seeing Onnie and Karla engaging in a queer sexual act as well as a bid to assert his male dominance based on his aggressive actions prior to the incident, which are both components essential to the construction and maintenance of compulsory heterosexuality.

The notion of male dominance and homophobic rape is also represented in Okparanta's novel through the actions of Chibundu, Ijeoma's husband. Upon finding Ijeoma's romantic letters to Ndidi, Chibundu begins to exhibit signs of violence towards Ijeoma. Similar to Earlee's assault of Onnie, Chibundu's assault of Ijeoma not only illustrates homophobia, it is also used as a disciplinary mechanism for the female body, which is not only inferior to the male body, but is also "unknowable" and "enigmatic" (King 33). As asserted by Foucault, knowledge and power go hand in hand, and so without the knowledge and understanding of the female protagonists' sexualities, it could be argued that the power of these male characters is somewhat diminished. Therefore, in what could be said to be an effort to regain power and control, we see the disciplining of the "unknowable" queer female body through homophobic violence and rape. This is evidenced by the fact that similar to Earlee's assault of Onnie after finding her in a sexual act with Karla, Chibundu's sexual violence follows the discovery of the letters between Ijeoma and Ndidi. This violence is demonstrated when Chibundu says "I shouldn't have to force myself on you night after night" (Okparanta 285). The use of the word "force" insinuates a lack of agency and consent from Ijeoma, which suggests sexual violence. The phrase "it shouldn't have to be this way" (Okparanta 284) on the condition of their being husband and wife implies that while sexual violence should not take place in the heterosexual marital home, it does. According to Adrienne Rich, "enforced submission and the use of

cruelty, if played out in a heterosexual pairing is sexually ‘normal’” (639). This sense of normalcy is evidenced by the passive and calm tone Chibundu possesses in acknowledging his aggression. While supposedly due to Ijeoma’s conjugal and familial duty to reproduce and according to Chibundu, give him a son—which in itself is a mechanism in the hysterization and disciplining of the female body—it could also be argued that these instances of violence are also homophobic motivated, due to the fact that they only began following Chibundu’s discovery of Ijeoma’s letters to Ndidi. In addition to the desire for a son, the homophobic potential of this violence may also be a disciplinary mechanism to force Ijeoma’s commitment to their heterosexual relationship, thus reinforcing the compulsory nature of heterosexuality.

Similar to Onnie’s mother’s assertion of queerness as something that is transitory and can be controlled, Chibundu believes that Ijeoma’s same-sex desire is something that she can work towards forgetting for the sake of their heterosexual relationship. This can be seen in the phrase, “You haven’t tried enough. If you put your mind to it, I know you can love me the way a woman is supposed to love her husband.” (Okparanta 285). The positing of Ijeoma’s queerness as a state of mind, which can easily be changed once again posits queer love as unstable, unreliable, and transient in comparison to “real” heterosexual love which is stable and reflects long term commitment as is seen by their marriage. The forceful tone adopted by Chibundu is apparent in the phrase, “You will try harder [...] If all else fails, you will at least give me my boy” (Okparanta 285). Similar to the instructional tone associated with religion, we see Chibundu instructing Ijeoma to comply with heterosexuality. This asserts Chibundu’s patriarchal dominance that is key to the construction of compulsory heterosexuality, in which the female partner is presented as the more submissive party in the heterosexual relationship whose sole function is confined to the arenas of reproduction. This notion is further asserted by the dominance Chibundu claims over Ijeoma’s body by his demand that she give him a male

heir—which is something she has little control over. This dominance suggests male entitlement over the female body and female sexuality, willing it to do what the male partner wants despite the wants of the woman in a heterosexual coupling. This transference of agency is incredibly violent. The determined tone of this command also suggests that Chibundu is willing to be relentless in his pursuit of a male heir, with or without Ijeoma's consent, thus exposing her to the possibility and overall probability of continued sexual violence and assault from her husband.

In conclusion, this chapter has addressed the construction of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality as represented in Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley's *Something Better Than Home*. By showing the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is continuously validated by social institutions, such as the church and religion as well as by authoritative figures, such as parents, I illustrate the ways in which the institutionalisation of compulsory heterosexuality invalidates queer desire. While U.S. sexual exceptionalism prides itself on the notion of tolerance and the inclusion of its queer citizens into its national imaginary, it shares similar systems and mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality with countries it condemns for the criminalisation of homosexuality. The notion of acceptance should imply safety; however, through Beasley's novel, we see disturbing instances of homophobic violence—an essential mechanism of control in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Senegal where homosexuality is criminalised. The use of similar systems (of compulsory heterosexuality) and disciplinary mechanisms (of homophobic violence) in both the contexts of Nigeria and the United States of America as represented in the novels central to this study ultimately call the notion of U.S. sexual exceptionalism and its promises of the tolerance and acceptance of queer people into question.

Conclusion

In conducting a queer close reading of Chinelo Okparanta's 2015 novel *Under the Udala Trees* and Leona Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* (also published in 2015), this thesis has aimed to critique the notion of U.S. exceptionalism. In this study, I have used Okparanta's and Beasley's novels, set in Nigeria and the United States respectively, to compare the representations of the intrapersonal realities of the protagonists' experiences that are marked by marginalisation on the basis of the intersections of their race, gender and non-heteronormative sexuality in an effort to show that despite the claim of U.S. exceptionalism, queer people face similar challenges and experiences in the represented contexts of the United States and Nigeria. To do so, I have mainly focused on the experience of the queer protagonists with regards to notions of religion and culture; the notions of censorship and the establishment of safe spaces; the way in which compulsory heterosexuality is constructed and enacted in both represented societies as well as the ways in which homophobic violence are used not only as discriminatory devices, but also as tools to reinforce the notion of compulsory heterosexuality.

The notion of exceptionalism regarding nation states began during the colonial era which saw colonist nations not only endeavour to conquer other nations, but to control and regulate them and their citizens (Morgensen 106). Having deemed the sexual and gender practices of indigenous societies as perverse and uncivilised as part of the project of economic and ideological domination, colonists sought to regulate them according to Western white national heteronormativity (Morgensen 108). The introduction of Western white national heteronormativity resulted in the intersectional marginalisation of orientalised, racialised, queer bodies (Dhawan 53). According to Jasbir Puar, while the West, and the United States specifically, has gone on to recognise and embrace queer people in the latter half of the 20th

century as well as the 21st century, this recognition's exclusionary nature is founded on its contingency upon the disqualification of racialised and sexual others (2). This is supported by the emergence of homonormativity, which centres the validation and acceptance of mainly white, North American, affluent, non-heterosexual men while continuing to marginalise queer men and women of colour (Kheh 19; Puar 337). The continued marginalisation of queer people that do not conform to the homonormative ideal call the validity of U.S. exceptionalism as compared to countries which continue to be openly homophobic by criminalising homosexuality into question. We see the continued marginalisation of queer people through social institutions such as the church, the notion of forced censorship of non-heteronormative sexualities, as well as the social institutionalisation of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia; all of which I have explored in this thesis.

I began my queer close reading of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* by examining these novels' representations of the role of the Christian church in the marginalisation of queer people. Having established the history of the colonial construction of Christianity on the African continent, I have shown the ways in which religion contributes to the social reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality. In comparing the lives of the protagonists in these texts and establishing similarities in their experiences of demonisation, cleansing as well as the good/evil binary that dictates their behavioural propriety, I have examined the marginalisation of Black queer women in the arena of the Christian religion. In showing how the United States and Nigeria as represented by these novels share similar characteristics of the marginalisation of queer people within the social institution of religion, I have called the notion of U.S. exceptionalism into question. By demonstrating the shared experiences of discrimination, shame, and hostility in these contexts, I have shown that

the experiences of queer people in the representations of both countries are significantly similar.

The concept of censorship and self-management is central to the Foucauldian concept of sexual repression. In the second content chapter of this thesis, I analyse the representations of censorship in the novels central to this study by looking specifically at the secrecy that is necessitated by the societal discrimination against queer people as well as the similar necessitation of the safe spaces which queer people establish for the purposes of safety, community, and freedom of expression. Once again, despite the U.S.A's claims of exceptionalism, the dangers faced by queer people in both representations of the U.S.A and Nigeria in these novels are quite similar. While the safe spaces discussed in this chapter exist in both novels, they rely on censorship, secrecy, and self-management in heterosexist societies. In demonstrating the need for secrecy in the lives of queer individuals, both novels explore the precariousness of this secrecy and how queer people are forced to mitigate such circumstances. In examining the shared need for queer people in the United States and Nigeria to hide and censor themselves as well as to create spaces in which they feel safe from the constant threat of homophobic violence, this chapter critiques the notion of U.S. exceptionalism.

The final chapter of this thesis examines the notion of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobic violence. Using Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience", I have examined the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is constructed and reproduced in the societies represented in Okparanta's and Beasley's novels. By analysing the ways in which gender binarism and patriarchy influence the construction and reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality, I explore the ways in which heterosexuality is maintained by different social institutions. I have also examined homophobic violence and rape

as a mechanism of compulsory heterosexuality. Despite the strong condemnation of countries such as Nigeria for their homophobic persecution of queer people, this chapter aims to show the ways in which homophobic violence is present in both the contexts of the United States as well as Nigeria.

My analysis of Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* and Beasley's *Something Better Than Home* is mainly concerned with critiquing the notion of U.S. exceptionalism. The assertion of superiority central to exceptionalism has led to the American condemnation of predominantly African countries that have criminalised homosexuality. However, in analysing the novels chosen for this thesis, it is clear to see that queer people in both the U.S. and Nigeria face similar challenges due to their continued marginalisation. In drawing this comparison, I hope to have shown that despite geographical location, queer people continue to be marginalised and have their rights violated. In doing so, I hope to encourage the questioning of notions of exceptionalism and superiority amongst nations.

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