Praxis

Poetry, Religion, and Empowerment in Nigerian Lesbian Self-Writing

Unoma Azuah[1]

[1]SHORT BIO
Unoma Azuah is a college professor from Nigeria, teaching at Wiregrass Georgia Technical College, Valdosta, GA, USA. She is also a LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activist and a creative writer. Her research focus is on LGBT rights with a specific focus on Nigerian LGBT lives and rights.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
Wiregrass Georgia Technical;
unomaazuah@gmail.com

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3078-0197

ABSTRACT
The Nigerian LGBT community is nearly invisible and mostly functions underground or through pseudonyms, in spite of the emerging visibility of queer writing in recent times. As a Nigerian lesbian woman and writer, in this article I seek to analyse some of my queer poems through an auto-ethnographic lens. While providing a brief history of contemporary Nigerian queer writings, their beginnings, their struggles, and their growth, even in the midst of their attacks, I will focus on and draw upon specific experiences as narrated in some of my poems, to explore how the religious constructions of my life and the lives of LGBT Nigerians can both limit and empower us. Through my experiences and the sharing of these involvements, I hope to be a part of the process that dismantles the religious block of homophobia that crushes us, and to reclaim religious language and imagery as a site of empowerment. Through my poetic testimonies, I liberate myself and, hopefully, my queer community.

KEYWORDS
queer; autoethnography; Nigerian LGBT; Christianity; African Religion

Introduction

Can the Nigerian LGBT community, which is largely invisible, be written into visibility? Can writing be an empowering tool to fight oppression? In my experience, being a Nigerian lesbian-identifying writer, writing is liberating. Writing is empowering, especially when used as a healing process for surviving pain and oppression. Several other writers have also testified to this. For instance, Lawrence Yeo states that "[w]hen we experience sadness, we use it [writing] as a form of therapy to provide light in the darkness that envelopes us."[1] Thus, the power of writing is in its ability to affect and change lives, to begin with our own lives. Dawn Lemirand-Poepping states that she believes in the ability of writing and creativity "to empower us to overcome adversity in our lives."[2]

One form of writing is the literary form, and interestingly, queer literary writing has recently emerged as a new genre in Nigeria and indeed across the continent. Various queer-themed novels, collections of sto-

1 Lawrence Yeo, "Three Ways to Turn Systemic Oppression into Creative Inspiration," *ExtraNewsFeed.com*, 10 February 2017.

2 Dawn Lemirand-Poepping, "This I Believe: Writing as a Tool for Learning and Empowerment," *Greater Madison Writing Project (GMW), Medium.com*, 4 October 2017.

ries, and/or poetry have been published. Originating in Nigeria is a collection of poems by Unoma Azuah and Michelle Omas, called *Mounting the Moon: Queer Nigeria Poetry*, as well as Nnanna Ikpo's novel, *Fimí Sílẹ̀ Forever: Heaven Gave it to Me*, and Chinelo Okparanta's novel, *Under the Udala Trees*. Autobiographies are another form of writing, with various collections of LGBT and queer life stories having recently been published across the continent. Among these texts are those of Chike F. Edozien, *Lives of Great Men: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man*; John MacAllister (ed.), *Dipolelo Tsa Rona*; a collection of stories by Azeenah Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan, and Rafeeat Aliyu, *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak*; Kevin Mwachiro, *Invisible: Stories from Kenya's Queer Community*; and Makhosazana Xaba and Crystal Biruk (eds.), *Proudly Malawian: Life Stories from Lesbian and Gender-Nonconforming Individuals*.

Both forms of queer writing make visible what hitherto was largely invisible to the public eye: the reality, complexity, and plurality of African queer experiences. African queer writing therefore serves crucial political and intellectual purposes, as it contributes to the building of what Keguro Macharia has called "queer African archives."[3] In this article, I combine the queer literary form and the autobiographical form, engaging these two forms of African queer writing in a unique way: I present an auto-ethnographic reflection on my work as a Nigerian queer literary writer and I use some of my own autobiographical poems to explore the significance and potential of literary and autobiographical production for the understanding of Nigerian – and broader African – queer experiences and lives.

Methodology

In the design of this article, an auto-ethnographic, qualitative methodology is used. Qualitative research that is based on autoethnography offers readers and writers the opportunity to share in the experiences and certainties that developed through the relationship between a writer and his or her background. As Denzin and Lincoln put it: "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people

[3] Keguro Macharia, "Archive and Method in Queer African Studies," *Agenda* 29, no.1 (2015): 140-6.

bring to them."[4] Though there are reservations about the subjective nature of qualitative methods of research, it is still a trusted and viable technique for researching and arriving at progressive results. For instance, Creswell and Merriam attest to the viability of the qualitative method as being human based just as the auto-ethnographic writing utilises the involvements of the author as a partaker of that practice.[5] Mariza Méndez further captures the value of this approach when he echoes Marshall and Rossman by stating that "[i]t is because of this particular approach to inquiry that personal narratives, experiences and opinions are valuable data which provide researchers with tools to find those tentative answers they are looking for.[6] By using the theoretical perspective of qualitative autoethnography as an approach to this research, I recount and analyse experiences through my poetry as a way to interpret cultural and environmental conditioning that constrained me to first accept and internalise homophobia; understand the process better; recognise the damages homophobia causes; and then fight it with the tool of writing and rewriting the wound.

I cannot presume, and therefore do not claim, that my own experiences as a Nigerian, lesbian-identifying woman are representative of Nigerian, let alone African, queer experiences in general. However, it is my experience as an activist-writer, that in the process of sharing my self-writing, and helping others to write their life experiences, identification and recognition occur. Other members of the LGBT community become aware, identify with my experiences, and recognise the same patterns in their own journeys as members of a queer group. It is my hope and also my experience that, by engaging my work, they would feel encouraged in knowing that they are not alone and can "right" their existence into visibility and into being. They can thereby perpetuate the trend because, as Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner state, "auto-

---

4 Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: Sage, 2000), 3.

5 John W. Cresswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed-methods Approaches* (London: Sage, 2009); Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

6 Mariza Méndez, "Autoethnography as a Research Method: Advantages, Limitations and Criticisms," *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 15, no.2 (2013): 279-87. Cf. also Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative* Research (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).

ethnography is both process and product;"[7] or in the words of Shari Stone-Mediatore, storytelling and life-writing can generate "knowledges of resistance."[8]

In the discussion of some of my selected poems below, I will pay specific attention to the religious language and imagery that I creatively use. I believe that this is vital, because religion is so often used as a source of homophobia in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa,[9] but needs to be reclaimed as a site of self-empowerment by LGBT people. As much as organised religion is a factor in the politics against LGBT rights and lives, many Nigerian LGBT people, myself included, are deeply religious, and religious self-writing therefore is of critical importance in the building of queer African archives.

Why Do I Write?

My name is Unoma Azuah, a college professor and a LGBT activist. My research focus is on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights with a specific focus on Nigerian LGBT lives and rights. There were little to no existent LGBT narratives in Nigeria in the 1980s and 90s when I was growing up in that country. Our lives and narratives are under the threat of being erased by the predominantly homophobic Nigerian society. However, in resistance and insistence come presence and acceptance. Therefore I will, through my writing, be part of the process that dismantles the institution of homophobic oppression. Through my poetic testimonies as well, I liberate myself and remain optimistic about the liberation of my queer Nigerian family.

Why do I write? Perhaps I am clinging onto the hope that some kind of change may begin with me. Perhaps, David M. Halperin feeds my hope when he says that "Harriet Beecher Stowe channeled her anguish and her ambition into a socially acceptable anger on behalf of others, transforming her private experience into powerful narratives that moved

---

7 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12 no.1 (2010), Art. 10.

8 Shari Stone-Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

9 Cf. eg. Adriaan van Klinken and Ezra Chitando (eds.), *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

a nation."[10] This faith may be mind-boggling when my country, Nigeria, criminalises homosexuality. This belief may be idealistic when Nigeria has inscribed as its law a 14-years jail sentence for homosexuals found guilty of practising a sexual orientation they did not choose. This conviction could be futile, especially when I was excited to catch up with a college friend whom I had not seen in more than 20 years. After our exchange of pleasantries, he inquired about my husband and children and I told him that I have neither children nor a husband. He became concerned enough to ask me why. I told him I am a lesbian. His demeanour changed. He told me that my life is an abomination and proceeded to quote the Bible, specifically Romans 1:24, 26 and 27:

> [24]Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves:
> [26]For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:
> [27]And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.

I was upset by his judgement, but my anger became a repeat of an emotional stress often triggered by a society that wants to police my body. The attack of my sexuality which he represented, became a "conscious attempt to place sexuality at the point at which various systems that regulate the social…are openly displayed.[11] I tried to initiate a dialogue, but he shot me out by concluding with this statement: "The word of God is divine and final." His verdict was not unfamiliar – it remained the one judgement that caged my life. The decree that my sexuality and my sexual practice is and has always been evil, a thing of horror, and a crime particularly through my friend's biblical eyes, has been a constant marker in my life. It follows me around like a shadow and that perception has also been the prevalent belief that fuelled my self-hate and low self-esteem as a lesbian who grew up in a rather homophobic society: Nigeria. My gaze has always been fixated on biblical interpretations of my sexual orientation. As a result, I lived in the closet and expressed myself enthusiastically in many other issues except for who I am, because it is easier and safer to talk about any

[10] David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 110.
[11] Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 130.

other thing but the abomination I have been branded with; that is, "it is easier to theorize and to talk about what we would like to be than to talk about what we are," as Judy Greenway puts it.[12]

In the blind acceptance of my judgement as an abomination, I forgot to insist on speaking up and to question the context of the Bible verses my schoolmate cited. For instance, I failed to ask why verse 25 was omitted in his quotation. This verse says: "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen."

This verse, from all indications, focuses on idolatry. Consequently, the context goes beyond homosexuality to mention rites that perhaps happened during idol worship involving vulgar activities as part of the worship. This idea is far from standing side by side with a loving same-sex relationship. As a result, Troy Perry's position on the subject reveals an affirmation when he states that "[t]he homosexual practices cited in Romans 1:24-27 were believed to result from idolatry and are associated with some very serious offenses as noted in Romans 1. Taken in this larger context, it should be obvious that such acts are significantly different than loving, responsible lesbian and gay relationships seen today."[13]

However, there are also biblical verses that speak to the likes of my disparaging schoolmate, like Romans 2:1: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself."

Thus, I have learned to battle the persecution that comes with homophobia. For many of us, our sexual orientation continues to be an aspect of our subjugation that we fail to scrutinise. So, my body is a site of oppression. To manage the pain, I have navigated the terrain of self-hate through biblically justified assaults and abuses. The same hate and biblically justified attacks seem to have driven not just the Nigerian LGBT lives underground, but also their narratives. Queer writing in Nigeria remained invisible for years. Even in one of the early mentions of

[12] Judy Greenway, "Questioning Our Desires," 2019, judygreenway.org.uk.
[13] Troy Perry, *Don't be Afraid Anymore* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990), 342.

homosexuality, for instance in Soyinka's *The Man Died*,[14] the theme surrounding such lives or issues remain one of "foreign" or "alien." In recent times, when queer topics are broached in Nigerian popular culture or even in Nigeria's literary scene, they are usually treated as pariah or taboo. Hence, queer characters, where they exist, are typically treated the way queer lives are treated: abused and criminalised. These tendencies remain faithful to the view that homosexuality is from the West and is alien to Africa. Thus, the point that sexuality is neither a racial nor a cultural but a human phenomenon, is blatantly ignored.

Pioneering Nigerian Queer Writing

In the 1990s, as a pioneer of LGBT writing in Nigeria, I began researching and writing queer topics and literature, particularly with the publication of my essay, *Emerging Lesbian Voice in the Nigerian Feminist Literature*,[15] which was instantly condemned with a pandemonium that suggested that my life and ideas are treacherous to the stable fabric of an African society like Nigeria.[16] Nonetheless, my emerging voice was not killed and instead, in recent years I have received great company with many other African queer writers emerging.

In 2005, Jude Dibia released *Walking with Shadows*, a novel about a gay man married to a woman who ends up struggling to conceal his sexuality. However, in 2014 the then President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, signed the anti-same-sex marriage bill into law. Resistance to the absurd law came from multiple channels, which gave birth to a steady and bold flow of queer Nigerian literature. In the year the anti-same-sex marriage act law was passed, Kola Tobosun edited an online e-zine, *The Gay Edition*, as a response to the despotic law. Then there was Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Tree* which was published in 2015 and features a lesbian protagonist. Next came a flurry of queer literature and queer writing with the publication of books like *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of LGBT Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender*, a collection of the real-life experiences of queer people

[14] Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Bookcraft, 2014).

[15] Unoma Azuah, "Emerging Lesbian Voice in the Nigerian Feminist Literature," eds. Dirk Naguschewskin and Flora Veit-Wild, *Body Sexuality and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literature* 1 (New York: Matatu Press, 2005), 129.

[16] Uduma Kalu, "The Lesbian Voice in Current Nigerian Literature," *Sunday Vanguard* February 1997, 17.

that I edited in 2016.[17] In the same year came Joe Okonkwo's *Jazz Moon*,[18] which made the finalist list of LAMBDA Literary Award for Gay Fiction. Also in 2016, an essay that garnered great attention was *Africa's Future Has No Space for Stupid Black Men*[19] by Pwaangulongii Dauod. In the same year, a South African based Gerald Kraak Prize which gives visibility to queer literature, celebrated four Nigerian Queer narratives. They include Otosirieze's *You sing of a Longing*; Olakunle Ologunro's *The Conversation*; Amatesiro Silas A. Dore's *For Men Who Care*; and Ayo Sogunro's *One More Nation Bound in Freedom*.[20]

In expanding the reach of LGBTQ writing, in 2017, Nigeria's first LGBT literary collective used the pun "14" as their title being a play on word for the 14 years jail term that awaits any Nigerian LGBT person. Other writers of courage came along. In 2017, for instance, Romeo Oriogun won the Brunel International African Poetry Prize for his bravery in treating issues of desire in the aftermath of Jonathan's criminalisation of LGBT lives.[21] Chibuihe Obi's bold Brittle Paper essay, *We're Queer, We're Here*,[22] received a wide applause and then Arinze Ifeakandu's *God's Children Are Little Broken Things*, a queer themed story, was shortlisted for the Caine Prize of African Literature.[23] However, between 2016 and 2017, with the energy that LGBT writing brought with it, came violent and homophobic attacks. For instance, in 2016, the writer, Chibuihe Obi, was constantly threatened because of his outspokenness about his sexuality. He was consequently kidnapped and assaulted. Another writer had to vacate his home for a safe space, after constant

17 Unoma Azuah, *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People* (Jackson, TN: CookingPot Publishing, 2016).

18 Joe Okonkwo, *Jazz Moon* (New York: Kensington Books, 2016).

19 Dauod Pwaangulongii, "Africa's Future Has No Space for Stupid Black Men," *Granta* 136: Legacies of Love, https://granta.com/africas-future-has-no-space/.

20 Sisonke Msimang, Sylvia Tamale, and Mark Gervisser (eds.), *The Gerald Kraak Anthology, African Perspectives on Gender, Social Justice and Sexuality: Pride and Prejudice* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2018).

21 Sarah Cox, "Brunel International African Poetry Prize Awarded to Nigeria's Romeo Oriogun," 2017, https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/Brunel-International-African-Poetry-Prize-Awarded-to-Nigeria's-Romeo-Oriogun.

22 Chibuihe Obi, "We're Queer, We're Here," *Brittlepaper.com*, 2017, https://brittlepaper.com/2017/05/queer-chibuihe-obi-essay/#comments.

23 Sabo Kpade, "Caine Prize Preview 2017: 'God's Children Are Little Broken Things'," by Arinze Ifeakandu, *Okayafrica.com*, 2017, https://www.okayafrica.com/arinze-ifeakandus-god-children-little-things/.

harassment and threats to his life.[24] A third was stripped of his money, beaten, and extorted. Despite these setbacks and threats, Nigerian queer literature is picking up pace and gathering momentum. Just recently, for example, Chike F. Edozien's memoir, *Lives of Great Men*, the first memoir by a gay Nigerian, won the LAMBDA Award for Gay Memoir; then Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Speak No Evil* was published. This was followed by the book, *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria's Queer Women Speak* – a Nigerian anthology of queer female experiences by Azeenah Mohammed, Chitra Nagarajan, and Rafeeat Aliyu. 14 released its second anthology called *The Inward Gaze*.

In that tradition of creating presence and pushing visibility for queer writing, I ask: Why do I choose to look through the autoethnography lens to excavate and sieve through my life? I choose this lens to fight what Chimamanda Adichie calls "the single story,"[25] in the sense that I would not let somebody else obscure or reframe my story through their own limited scope, as Chinua Achebe puts it, "the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."[26] In line with this, homophobia becomes the hunter glorifying his/her own story. However, I must be a witness to testify to the true story of the hunt. Further, Viv Ellis and Sue High give me the answer for my need to write my own story, in their words:

> The truths of auto ethnography exist between a story teller and a story reader…because we want you to engage with our struggles with adversity, to empathize with the too often heartbreaking feelings of stigma and marginalization, to identify with difficulties we experience in finding words to express pain and disruption meaningfully and want to do something…to assist fellow sufferers.[27]

This is necessary because hate and homophobia, under a religious umbrella, have broken down oppression into different blocks of

---

[24] Obi-Young Otosirieze, "Un-silencing Queer Nigeria: The Language of Emotional Truth," *Brittlepaper.com*, August 2017, https://m.facebook.com/brittlepaper/posts/1253152881477910.

[25] Chimamanda N. Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story." *National Geographic Learning*, 2016, https://ngl.cengage.com/21centuryreading/resources/sites/default/files/B3_TG_AT7_0.pdf.

[26] Cf. Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story."

[27] Viv Ellis and Sue High, "Something more to tell you: gay, lesbian or bisexual young people's experience of secondary schooling," *British Educational Research Journal* 30 no.2 (2004), 347.

combating the so-called deviant and obscene lifestyle. Mark Vicars expands upon this issue when he states that through his reflective analytical explanation he tries to pull together his fragmented experiences that question how power is formed and used to categorise "otherness" into blocks of subjugation.[28] These are found in social and religious spaces of my growth. However, I have evolved through drawing upon specific experiences in my poems to illustrate how particularly the religious constructions of my life and the lives of LGBT Nigerians bind us. However, through my experiences – the sharing of these involvements – I engage both in subtle and active ways in the process that dismantles the religious block of homophobia that crushes me and the likes of me. Nevertheless, through my poetic testimonies, I come to points of avowal.

Growing up in a Christian home meant that I adhered to most, if not all biblical principles at the top of which my sexuality became the most daunting. I constantly, through self-hate, tried to "obliterate" myself because I was not becoming what I was supposed to be. Ellis and High amplify this position when they show that "heteronormative practices… operate to punitively inscribe difference and discipline those subjects who lack the presence of embodied heterosexuality."[29] In line with that, I stuck to espousing heterosexual ideals and relegated homosexuality to disparaging spaces where it belonged: infestations, trash, and blot. In that self-loathing I birthed the poem *Forbidden*:

> My hair is a palm tree
> Where birds build their nests
> Hatch their eggs and fly
> I droop, heavy with their excreta
>
> My head is a mortar
> Where you pound pain
> And gaze into my hollow
>
> My face is a landscape
> Festered with uprooted trees
> Where owls hoot their dirge

[28] Mark Vicars, "Who are You Calling Queer? Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones but Names Will Always Hurt Me," *British Educational Research Journal* 32, no.3 (2006): 347-61.

[29] Ellis and High, "Something More to Tell You," 213-25.

My body is a bin
Where you dump your crumbs
To cast my ashes to the wind

Because my being was reduced to worthlessness as good as a piece of trash that is tossed out, the images of trash bin, chaos in uprooted trees, pain, and *excreta* remain consistent features of the poem.

Added to this, my grandmother introduced me to the basic concepts of her indigenous Igbo religious motifs and resources as a child, and these were centred on Onishe, the river goddess of the Niger, who is considered the guiding mother of the Asaba people in Delta State, Nigeria. Yet, as a teenage Christian in a Catholic high school, I was conflicted about my Catholic faith and my indigenous religious background. Then I found ways of reconciling my indigenous beliefs with my Christianity, by drawing a connection between Onishe, the river goddess and the spiritual mother of the Asaba people, and Mary, the mother of Christ – their roles as guardian mothers intersect. I did not always identify with Mary, specifically because my grandmother told me the story of how Onishe fought the institution of the Catholic Church at Asaba. However, because I found myself in a Catholic boarding school, I was constrained to make a connection between them. While the sense of sexual purity is attached to Mary, the same was not the case with Onishe. Her purity is not seen through a sexual perspective. Instead, the nature of her untainted being is seen through her territorial and invincible nature. For instance, Rev. Father Patrick Isichei confirms Onishe's sectional and possessive nature when he also shares the story of how Onishe resisted the emergence of the Catholic Church at Asaba. According to Isichei, Catholic missionaries took stones from Onishe's shrine at the Niger River for constructing their church, but each time the stones were compiled, Onishe took them back, and she did not relent till the Catholic Church was forced to gather their building stones from another region away from the river.[30]

I did, however, find more affirmation in the indigenous religious motifs my grandmother nurtured me with, because I found acceptance and a meaning to my variance. For instance, my grandmother emphasised that Onishe was supernatural and though seen as a woman, her power and

[30] Wale Akinola and Austin Oyibode, "Reverend Patrick Isichei: How rivergoddess disrupted early attempts to build church in Asaba," *Legit.ng* 2018, www.legit.ng.

spirit is not fixed to a specific gender, because she is said to be androgynous in essence. In other words, some of these motifs give spaces for my queerness because she characterised my being different as a sign of being special and of having a distinct link with the goddess who was also seen as unusual, as her core is not gender limited. Nevertheless, I still battled with the clash within my Christian upbringing that homosexuality is wrong. So, in consigning homosexuality to its monstrous spot, came death wishes and the willingness to offer myself as a sacrifice for dehumanised lives. Consequently, I came to present myself as an object of ransom, a sacrificial object to the goddess of my maternal Niger River. I evoked the goddess in the poem titled *Onishe*, pleading with her to take me:

> Let me be the egg bearing the
> stench of stillbirth
> Let me be the blood bleeding before
> the oracle
>
> I may be the white yam ringed with cowries
> I may be the lone voice piercing the
> path of fear
>
> Let me be the calabash
> bearing totems at the cross-road
> of death.

When no recourse came in the throes of death wishes and self-hate, I battled with whether or not to pass as straight. It would have eased the pain. It would have made life much easier. Vicars once more gives voice to my feelings because, like him, I lived a divided self which was made possible through my participation in the discursive rules of my society and my family. This

> meant that sexuality proved to be an increasingly problematic terrain…the division I felt I had to maintain between public and private truth produced a growing psychic conflict. I consciously tried to enforce separation between a private dangerous knowledge of a homosexual self and the public heterosexual role that would have enabled me to pass through the…day unscathed.[31]

[31] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?"

I could not tow the two lines. So often I fumbled with playing straight which made me look even more conspicuous and guilty through my strategising about ways to be less gay. I had to find less conspicuous ways to hide myself, as Michel De Certeau puts it, "to avoid scrutiny from the strategic, panoptic and inscribing gaze of normativity."[32] These thoughts of camouflaging myself preoccupied my mind when I lived in the convent and I fraternised with nuns while considering whether or not to become a nun. I still felt out of place. My experience at this time was recorded in the poem *Escape*:

> The panic attacks began at Nsukka and
> I was a wind blowing southward.
> I love women, but others love men.
> Moments paused in doubts, fears and taboos.
>
> The ache attacks started at Saint Peters chapel near hilltop
> I was an aspiring nun in tight jeans and a t-shirt
> when others prayed, I cursed.

In high school as a teenager who was already aware of my sexuality and where my attraction to women was seen as an anomaly, I lived next to a convent and observed their lives as I considered becoming a nun as a way to escape expectation that I should be married to a man, though I was also drawn to faith and found a spiritual life alluring. The nuns seemed to live a life of their own, even though in prayer and service. They did not have to get married to men, so it was quite an attractive alternative as opposed to facing homophobia in a society where I could not live what is/was considered a "normal" life. However, I worried about living as a lesbian nun. So, while I contemplated being a nun by spending time in convents, the haunting voices of judgement trailed me in what I believed was my curse as a lesbian. After graduating from College, I applied to become a nun and lived in a convent for some time.

While there, I retreated further in my mind and sought refuge in monasteries where every ritual tormented me because I felt unworthy. I could not find a home or even a sanctuary in a place of supposed peace and calm. Instead, the quest for acceptance and home brought me closer in scrutinising my steps towards a religious life in the poem *Home Is Where the Heart Hurts*:

[32] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 348.

In the monastery of my mind
light and silence share a bend
and at both stations, I have knelt
bruised and bleeding, pruning wild petals
even as my cassock gather stones and dust.

My life is of gazes at metal crosses
the thorns and blood that was Christ's lot
I live to partake of the one thorn ripping through
a clear flesh
in the communion that is a flash
in a pan of bread and wine.
The tolling bell calls
to sleep, waking, baking, prayers in
beads of blunted edges
it calls to vows, reunions, knots and strings of
dangling hopes.
First, there is silence, then a flood of light
my gown shuffles across cold floors –
to summons at the tower of grace. This is a familiar temple…
but it hurts.

In search of a spiritual fulfilment in my existentialist dilemma as a lesbian surrounded by judgement, I often visited monasteries at Enugu in Enugu State and Umuoji and Ozubulu in Anambra State, Nigeria, to reflect and withdraw into the shell of my soul. While these monasteries gave me solace in the healing power of silence and meditation, it created a hollow in my heart because I could not find answers. So I lived a life of isolation in the context of carrying the serene nature of the monastery inside of me. In other words, where I had left a physical monastery, I have borne one inside of me. This gave me a better understanding of how Christ must have felt during his last days before he was betrayed and persecuted. I came to identify my own feelings of isolation, marginalisation, and despair with the experiences of the suffering Christ, humiliated and dehumanised on the cross.

Since the monastery could not be my permanent home, I felt the emptiness that came with the realisation that I am on my own in a world that was not accommodating. In these rituals of spiritual quest, there were still the sting of despair and hopelessness. All I heard was the empty fluff of the religious garb I tried to cover and cleanse myself with. Yet, the shallowness of that performance hobble along as I drag my essence along these paths of void. My queer love is overwhelming even

as I am troubled by the looming consequence of sin and death. Thus, the poem continues:

> In the monastery of my mind
> my lover and I cannot lock lips in the wind
> there is no name for the frames of our love
>
> but we smile into the faces of strangers
> hoping they ignore the weight of what we share –
> it's heavy, so heavy – it tilts the globe.
>
> After a long trek in the desert of life
> My lover is a festival of meals
> We have devoured love and made lust
> the aroma that hangs in our kitchen.
> I bore my lover like news delivered
> to a keen receiver.

So even as my lover and I find our queer love liberating, our society renders it non-existent and disempowers it by not naming it. In naming is power. Instead, we are condemned to irrelevance, as fruitless, as sterile as shown in these lines from *Home is Where the Heart Hurts*:

> My lover and I
> are eunuchs on the corridors of echoes
> the sterility of crosses, silence, prayers and mortality
> are the landmarks of our barren landscape.

Since I could not find a way out, I contemplated resistance. I did show forms of resistance within the confines of struggle and self-hate. That sense of fight is what I explored in the last stanza of the poem *Forbidden*:

> Burn me in your gathered fire
> I will not become a liar
>
> Grind me on your largest slab
> I remain, a taboo
>
> I will defy the rage of the rain
> And erode no more.

I had to fight back in some way by at least trying to love myself, trying to find love. So, in a mutual quest to find Christ in the pursuit of a religious life, I found my first love, Nelo. But our love confused us. We were on holy grounds but defiled the grounds with our unholy love. The second movement of the poem *Nsukka* shows this:

> The convent calls were soothing
> I laid in love and lust
> Straddled sin and sainthood
> My mother's absence
> re-incarnated in Nelo's presence
> she unbound me
> and pulled the strands of lightening
> away from the ball of fire
> that was my head
> she nailed me to healing walls.

We did not stop our forbidden love. We could not stop because even in prayers and novenas in serene monasteries in retreats to reach the farthest parts of our forbidden selves, Nelo's face became God. She shone through the holes of my dilapidated body and each thought of her rescued me. These I chronicled in the poem *Aevum*:

> I am facing walls
>
> in this spiritual slab
> In the recesses of my seclusion
> You're still my companion
>
> I bear you like a birth mark
> In the alcove of my caves
> My nerves threaten to burst
> and focusing in this holy altar is a squeeze
> the stones, the light, the white
> sleeping air, frozen trees
> yet, the bulging, the pounding,
> the heaving of this single heart
>
> My legs refuse to lift to this retreat
> For you are one with God
> The layers of separation blur where I meet the trinity – the son
> the Father, and
> the spirit

> Your face is etched on every stretch of silence
> In every incantation your voice floats
>
> You become the fever that subdue me in my quest for power
> and the herb that heals me in my drift into weakness
> My altar of worship…

Even in retreat, in my attempt to be close to God, my lover's presence dominates, and I do not feel any antagonism in merging her soothing presence of love with the same love Christ gives me. My lover is an embodiment of God. God reaches me through her because our love is my glimpse into what heaven looks like: beautiful. Hence, my lover's face is etched on every stretch of silence in God.

In being healed by love and not consumed by hate at the initial stage in life, I began to open up to love to believe in its holiness. I started questioning. I started realising that there was no truth in a society that spewed hate and bombarded me with a plethora of reasons why I should not live. I began to unthaw. The scales began to fall off my eyes. Judy Greenway helped me interpret my situation when she says that

> those feelings which we take as "given," as spontaneous responses to people and situations, are in fact created in us by family structure and our particular experiences in it, by the dissociation in our society between work and home, public and private, emotion and intellect. It is not just that our desires are repressed and manipulated by society; the desires themselves, with all their contradictions, are formed by our specific conditioning.[33]

I had to get rid of the conditioning and retell my story even as I un-learn and re-learn myself. I had to claim myself and my sexuality, and in that process challenge the *status quo* by embracing that all I was told was evil, because "[i]f practice is productive of power then practice is also the means of challenging power," as Avtar Brah states.[34] Additionally, Vicars echoes Butler, affirming that, "by choosing to challenge prejudice in the initiatory performative utterances…in countering explicit homophobia [we] disrupt the normative processes by which they and I are being formed as subjects within [a] discourse."[35]

---

[33] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?", 349.
[34] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 1996), 125.
[35] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?", 352.

Hence, I started celebrating myself and my sexual orientation. I started to make love to my lovers, women, as a way to own myself and dare homophobic institutions that banished me. If resistance is not built to challenge heteronormative insistence to render us invisible, then they thrive because, as Speer and Porter have pointed out: "Heterosexism normalizes heterosexuality and buttresses a rigidly demarcated two gender system. Heterosexist talk relies on and invokes normative notions of gender and sexuality, policing their boundaries, consequently telling us much about the construction of both."[36] Therefore, I love and lift the homosexual love – the woman-to-woman love – by subverting biblical allusions and dismantling fixed biblical images, particularly biblical verses that are misconstrued and used as tools of animosity instead of love, as Christ preached. So I subvert skewed scriptural interpretations rooted in hate by reinstalling my own monument to lesbian love, such as in the poem *Woman to woman*:

I eat your sacred scriptures
Tonguing through each page
A devout supplicant
Feeding on your divine
Fuel
Devouring this body of worship
Your neck
To
Your toes
Each flicker, each lick, each suck
Hangs at the tip of my tongue
Lithe
Nipples
As supple as mango juice

Bulging at your every breath
Down your legs
Where your calves shudder
I gather your toes in a squeeze
Before we merge in multiple moans.
Your belly is the landscape that elevates me
And lowers me
Down to your confluence
Where babbling brooks sooth our quiet cries

[36] Susan A. Speer and Jonathan Potter, "From Performance to Practices: Judith Butler, Discursive Psychology and the Management of Heterosexist Talk," ed. Paul McIlvenny, *Talking Gender and Sexuality* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 174.

> But we explode:
> A hurricane in paradise.
> And in the midst of this waterfall
> Woman
> I speak in strange tongues
> Testifying to your splendor
> I will spread your gospel
> To the ends of the earth.

In these songs of love, I hear the echo of the biblical book, *Song of Songs*, for my moans of love merge with the erotic imagery of this book: the "queen" has brought me into her chambers. The above poem is also inspired by imagery from the Pentecost narrative, from the biblical *Book of Acts*. When the spirit of God descended on the apostles, they spoke in multiple languages as a way to reach all peoples with the gospel of Christ. The overwhelming presence of God's spirit transformed them into acquiring powers that were not ordinary. In the same vein, when my lover and I make love, the overpowering presence of love leads us to utter the intensity of our love expression in words we cannot explain, but it is a language our merged bodies understand and express as a way to celebrate our essence. Therefore, just as the apostles processed the love of Christ by spreading the gospel of the good news, I profess my love for my lover and spread the wonder of this love to the ends of the earth, just as the good news is dispersed all over the world. As a Christian who feeds on the word of God to grow and be nurtured, I feed on my lover's quintessence as a believer in love. Consequently, I eat her sacred scriptures, tonguing through each page, as a devout supplicant, feeding on my lover's divine fuel, devouring her body, a body I worship as in the image of God.

In my poetry, therefore, the language and imagery of sexuality, desire, and embodiment fluently merge with the language and imagery of God and the sacred. Indeed, this follows a trend in queer religious writing, in which the embodied and erotic experiences are closely connected to the experience of the divine.[37] Crossing the boundaries between what is often seen as separate spheres of human experience is a queer thing to do. In some of the poems discussed above, I also cross the boundaries between the spheres of Christian and biblical language, and of the language and symbols of African indigenous religions. That, indeed,

[37] Cf. eg. Marvin Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (eds.), *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

might well be an African queer thing to do, as it is a pattern emerging from other African queer writings too.[38] In my poems and other writing I seek to creatively engage with religion as a source of meaning and value to write my body, identity, and sexuality into being. This is particularly crucial because religion is so often used as a source of homophobia in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, but is too rich to be left in the hands of the homophobes and therefore needs to be reclaimed as a site of self-empowerment.

Conclusion

I will keep testifying to the power of queer love to the ends of the earth. There are little homosexual boys who need to believe in themselves and not buy into the hate. There are little lesbian girls who are growing and do not need to be stifled as I was. Instead, they can identify with the queer body of knowledge to affirm their sexual orientation. Grace and Hill attest to the truth that "queer knowledge can proffer a location where identities grow. They enable learners to challenge hetersexualizing discourse and heteronormative ways…In doing so they situate queer performance as an alternative pedagogy that often forms new directions for personal development."[39] So you can ask me again: Why do I write? Why do I write my pain? I write, we write, because we need to create modes of interventions to face and fight homophobia in every shape they take to silence us and make us invisible. There is a need to counter the notion that our lives are evil and should remain criminalised. The impact of hate is eroding our lives as the Nigerian LGBT community of writers and artists, but we cannot sit back and watch in deafening silence. Voicing our truths through our actions and through our words will gradually dismantle barricades of hate, especially because Vicars once again sums it up so succinctly when he declares that "a sense of self can become constituted through the authorizing performative utterances of wounding words."[40]

---

[38] Cf. eg. Adriaan van Klinken and Kwame E. Otu, "Ancestors, Embodiment and Sexual Desire: Wild Religion and the Body in the Story of a South African Lesbian Sangoma," *Body and Religion* 1, no.1: 70-87.

[39] André P. Grace and Robert J. Hill, "Using Queer Knowledges to Build Inclusionary Pedagogy in Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings* 2001, 4. https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=2301&context=aerc.

[40] Vicars, "Who are you calling queer?"

References

Adichie, Chimamanda N. “The Danger of a Single Story.” *National Geographic Learning*, 2016. https://ngl.cengage.com/21centuryreading/resources/sites/default/files/B3_TG_AT7_0.pdf (Accessed 16 July 2018).

Akinola, Wale and Austin Oyibode. “Reverend Patrick Isichei: How river goddess disrupted early attempts to build church in Asaba.” *Legit.ng*, 2018, www.legit.ng (Accessed 16 July 2018).

Amatesiro, Silas A. “For Men Who Care.” In *Pride and Prejudice: The Gerald Kraak Anthology*, edited by Sisonke Msimang. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. 2016.

Azuah, Unoma. “Forbidden.” In *25 New Nigerian Poets*, edited By Toyin Adewale, 42. University of Michigan Press. Ann Arbor, 2000.

Azuah, Unoma. “Aevum.” *Sentinel Poetry Movement*. 2002. www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/magonline0305/page15.html.

Azuah, Unoma. “Escape.” *Poetas Siglo XX1 Poetassigloveintiuno.blogspot.com*. 2004. https://poetassigloveintiuno.blogspot.com/2014/04/unoma-azuah-11425.html.

Azuah, Unoma. “Emerging Lesbian Voice in the Nigerian Feminist Literature.” In *Body Sexuality and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literature* 1, edited by Dirk Naguschewskin and Flora Veit-Wild,129. New York: Matatu Press, 2005.

Azuah, Unoma. “Home is where the Heart Hurts.” *Sentinel Poetry Movement*. 2005. www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/magonline0305/page15.html.

Azuah, Unoma. *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People.* Jackson, TN: CookingPot Publishing, 2016.

Azuah, Unoma. “Woman to woman.” *Mounting the Moon: Queer Nigerian Poems*. Jackson, TN: CookingPot Publishing, 2018.

Azuah, Unoma and Michelle Omas (eds.). *Mounting the Moon: Queer Nigeria Poetry.* Jackson, TN: Cookingpot Publishing, 2018.

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of diaspora*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Cox, Sarah. "Brunel International African Poetry Prize Awarded to Nigeria's Romeo Oriogun." 2017. https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/Brunel-International-African-Poetry-Prize-Awarded-to-Nigeria's-Romeo-Oriogun (Accessed 16 July 2018).

Cresswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed-methods Approaches*. London: Sage, 2009.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 1-20. London: Sage, 2000.

Edozien, Chike F. *Lives of Great Men: Living and Loving as an African Gay Man*. London: Team Angelica Publishing, 2017.

Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12 no.1 (2010), Art. 10.

Ellis, Viv and Sue High. "Something More to Tell You: Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual Young People's Experience of Secondary Schooling." *British Educational Research Journal* 30 no.2 (2004), 213-25.

Ellison, Marvin and Kelly Brown Douglas (eds.) *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

Grace, André P. and Robert J. Hill. "Using Queer Knowledges to Build Inclusionary Pedagogy in Adult Education." *Adult Education*

Research Conference Proceedings, 2001. http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2001/2001grace.htm (Accessed 16 July 2018).

Greenway, Judy. "Questioning Our Desires." *judygreenway.org.uk*, 2009, http://www.judygreenway.org.uk/wp/questioning-our-desires/ (Accessed 16 July 2018).

Halperin, David. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Ikpo, Nnanna. *Fimí Sílẹ̀ Forever: Heaven Gave it to Me*. London: Team Angelica Publishing, 2017.

Iwuala, Uzodimma. *Speak No Evil*. New York: Harper. 2018.

Kalu, Uduma. "The Lesbian Voice in Current Nigerian Literature." *Sunday Vanguard*, February 1997: 17.

Kambili, Rapum. "The Inward Gaze," *14: An Anthology of Queer Art* no.2. *Brittlepaper.com*, August 2017. www.brittlepaper.com (Accessed 23 May 2019).

Kpade, Sabo. "Caine Prize Preview 2017: 'God's Children Are Little Broken Things'," by Arinze Ifeakandu. *Okayafrica.com*, 2017. https://www.okayafrica.com/arinze-ifeakandus-god-children-little-things/ (Accessed 16 July 2018).

Lemirand-Poepping, Dawn. "This I Believe: Writing as a Tool for Learning and Empowerment." Greater Madison Writing Project, *Medium.com*, 4 October 2017. https://medium.com/gmwp/this-i-believe-writing-as-a-tool-for-learning-and-empowerment-116a3313c478 (Accessed 24 May 2019).

MacAllister, John (ed.). *Dipolelo Tsa Rona*. Gabarone: Setso Publishing, 2016.

Marshall, Catherine and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative* Research, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999.

Méndez, Mariza. “Autoethnography as a Research Method: Advantages, Limitations and Criticisms.” *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 15 no.2 (2013): 279-87.

Merriam, Sharan B. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Mohammed, Azeenah, Chitra Nagarajan, and Rafeeat Aliyu (eds.). *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria’s Queer Women Speak*. Abuja: Cassava Republic Press, 2018.

Msimang, Sisonke, Sylvia Tamale, and Mark Gervisser (eds.). *The Gerald Kraak Anthology, African Perspectives on Gender, Social Justice and Sexuality: Pride and Prejudice*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2018.

Mwachiro, Kevin. *Invisible: Stories from Kenya’s Queer Community*. Nairobi: Goethe Institute Kenya, 2014.

Obi-Young, Otosirieze. “You Sing of a Longing.” In *Pride and Prejudice: The Gerald Kraak Anthology*, edited by Sisonke Msimang. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. 2016.

Obi-Young, Otosirieze. “Un-silencing Queer Nigeria: The Language of Emotional Truth.” *Brittlepaper.com*, August 2017. www.brittlepaper.com (Accessed 23 May 2019).

Obi, Chibuihe. “We’re Queer, We’re Here.” *Brittlepaper.com* 2017. www.brittlepaper.com (Accessed 23 May 2019).

Okonkwo, Joe. *Jazz Moon*. New York: Kensington Books, 2016.

Okparanta, Chinelo. *Under the Udala Trees*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

Ologunro, Olakunle. “The Conversation.” In *Pride and Prejudice: The Gerald Kraak Anthology*, edited by Sisonke Msimang. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. 2016.

Perry, Troy. *Don’t be Afraid Anymore*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1990.

Probyn, Elspeth. *Outside Belongings*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Pwaangulongii, Dauod. "Africa's Future Has No Space for Stupid Black Men." *Granta 136: Legacies of Love*, 2016. https://granta.com/africas-future-has-no-space/ (Accessed 24 May 2019).

Sogunro, Ayodele. "One More Nation Bound in Freedom." In *Pride and Prejudice: The Gerald Kraak Anthology*, edited by Sisonke Msimang. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. 2016.

Soyinka, Wole. *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Bookcraft, 2014.

Speer, Susan A. and Jonathan Potter. "From Performance to Practices: Judith Butler, Discursive Psychology and the Management of Heterosexist Talk." In *Talking Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Paul McIlvenny, 151-81. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002.

Stone-Mediatore, Shari. *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Tobosun, Kola. The Gay Edition. *NigeriansTalk.org*, 2014. www.nigerianstalk.org (Accessed 24 May 2019).

Van Klinken, Adriaan and Ezra Chitando (eds.). *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.

Van Klinken, Adriaan and Kwame E. Out. "Ancestors, Embodiment and Sexual Desire: Wild Religion and the Body in the Story of a South African Lesbian Sangoma." *Body and Religion* 1 no.1 (2017), 70-87.

Vicars, Mark. "Who are you calling queer? Sticks and stones can break my bones but names will always hurt me." *British Educational Research Journal* 32, no.3 (2006), 347-61.

Xaba, Makhosazana and Crystal Biruk (eds.). *Proudly Malawian: Life Stories from Lesbian and Gender-Nonconforming Individuals*. Johannesburg: Gala, 2016.

Yeo, Lawrence. “Three Ways to Turn Systemic Oppression into Creative Inspiration.” *ExtraNewsFeed.com*, 10 February 2017. https://extranewsfeed.com/three-ways-to-turn-systemic-oppression-into-creative-inspiration-f416ac062493 (Accessed 24 May 2019).