Queer Kinship

Masculinity, Age and the Closet in the Windrush Generation in Bernardine Evaristo's *Mr Loverman* (2013)

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1. Introduction

Since Anglo-Nigerian author Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other* won the Booker Prize, jointly with Margaret Atwood, in 2019, the author and her work have received much critical and popular attention. While this novel takes the representation of diverse black woman characters as its subject matter, its direct predecessor *Mr Loverman* (2013a), Evaristo's seventh novel, focusses on the story of an old gay man and the themes of masculinity, homophobia and self-realisation. Evaristo wrote the novel as part of her doctorate in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. In the theoretical part of her thesis, which discusses the representation of black men in British fiction, she states, "I had never encountered this mix of age, race and homosexuality in British fiction" that characterises her protagonist (Evaristo 2013b, 352). In fact, it is easier to find black British texts on older queer *women* than on men, if only slightly, and only when using a broad definition of the term 'older."[1] Thus,

1 In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the queer women Bummi and Amma are at least middle-aged. In the queer black British anthology *Sista!* (2018), edited by Phyll Opoku Gyimah et al., there are a few non-fiction pieces by and about old(er) queer black women (Mason-John; Rose; Cole-Wilson; Ekine; and Beadle and Beadle-

the novel's representation of this intersectional and marginalised set of identities – one that is influenced by masculinity and age – is a trailblazing one.

The novel follows seventy-four-year-old Antiguan immigrant Barrington "Barry" Walker who has been married to a woman, Carmel Walker née Miller, for fifty years. He is the father of two adult children, Donna and Maxine, and grandfather to Daniel. He is, however, leading a double life since he has been having a much longer, secret relationship with a man, Morris de la Roux, for sixty years. The plot is centred on Barrington's slowly coming to terms with openly expressing his queer identity, and then coming out to his community. The inner conflict around these themes is closely connected to the normative expectations that his social environment associates with masculinity and age. The narrator-protagonist has internalised these expectations to such a degree that they negatively impact his potential of developing meaningful kinship ties. Barrington discloses his non-conformity in the climax of what can be called a coming-out plot,[2] thereby rejecting the unattainable standards for his performance of masculinity. In the novel's second half, he and Morris look forward to a happier rest of their lives where they can openly acknowledge each other as family and are part of a larger (black) queer community. The relationships to biological and legal

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Blair, all 2018). Its equivalent anthology on black gay men, *Black and Gay in the UK* (Gordon and Beadle-Blair 2014), however – whose explicit intention is to fill a gap of representation in the British literary landscape – does not include any representation of old men, and barely any of middle age (if the 46-year-old protagonist of "Retrograde" by Donovan E F J Morris [2014] is to count as such). Caroline Koegler (2020, 5) points out how its dedication to "boys, girls, and girlboys" unnecessarily constricts the collection to young age.

2 The novel plays with this conventional plotline of queer stories by giving it to an old black man instead of a white teenager. A recent, very popular example of the latter trend is Becky Albertalli's young adult novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) with its accompanying blockbuster movie, *Love Simon* (Berlanti 2018), which falls neatly into this formula. By tapping into this tradition and subverting it, the particular set of marginalised identities of *Mr Loverman*'s protagonist is highlighted.

family[3] are re-negotiated and the chosen, alternative kinship ties that get a chance to develop through Barrington's character growth receive a higher standing. Thus, *Mr Loverman* contributes to a positive exploration of the possible kin relations of old gay black British men. Meanwhile, the novel simultaneously perpetuates normative ideas around these identity positions. The protagonist's high sex drive challenges the desexualisation of old age, while promoting both gay hypersexuality and the normative pressures around 'successful aging'. Further, since the coming out functions as such a turning point in his outlook on life – and his position within kin networks – it frames his closeted life as tragic, worthless and lost. Throughout this chapter, I will investigate how Barrington's kinship formations are entangled with these discourses.

2. Masculinity in Intersection with Age, Queerness and Migration

2.1 The Windrush generation

Having migrated to Great Britain in the early 1960s, the main characters Morris, Barrington and Carmel are clearly positioned as part of what is now called the 'Windrush generation,' the first large-scale wave of (mostly) Caribbean immigrants to arrive in Great Britain as labourers from 1948 to the early 1970s. This background is laid out in the novel in Barrington's clothing style, the Caribbean community around his wife's church friends, and the history of discrimination in the job and housing markets.[4] As Caroline Koegler (2020) and Lucinda Newns (2020) have both pointed out recently, placing a gay character within this specific history is groundbreaking. It redefines the established images of "hypermasculine heterosexuality" (Newns 2020, 142) that have been

3 These include spouses and their family members (legal kin), as well as one's own children, parents and siblings (biological kin).

4 See, for instance, the collection of accounts from members of this generation in Grant (2019), who attest to such circumstances.

attached to male immigrants of this generation, not least due to such portrayals in novels like Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which is now considered a black British classic.

The Caribbean is furthermore notorious for its homophobic attitudes, ones that have been recognised by several scholars to be a relic of colonial anti-sodomy laws (see e.g. Gaskins 2013, 430). This cultural climate at large, not just the Windrush generation, produces distinctly hegemonic expectations for a masculine gender expression. The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' was introduced by Raewyn Connell in 1995, who suggests that masculinities exist in the plural, rather than as one monolithic expression, and that some realisations of masculinity – by young, white, heterosexual men – are privileged over others. Those men who do not occupy these spaces are stigmatised as deviant and effeminate (Connell 2005 [1995]). The Caribbean context, then, produces a very rigid image of an ideal masculinity that queer men cannot live up to.

2.2 Failure to meet society's normative expectations of masculinity

This context leads to Barrington's difficult relationship with these expectations. The main character constructs himself as highly masculine by explicitly referring to traditional (one might say old-fashioned) masculine ideals, and actively modifying his behaviour to meet them. He is the patriarch in his home who rejects doing any domestic work, hates feeling and expressing emotions, always dresses in a three-piece suit, and thinks gender nonconforming people are ridiculous. Yet, due to his queerness, there are parts of his gender expression that are considered feminine or flamboyant: His partner Morris jokingly describes him as "So bloody-minded, so individualistic, so clothes-conscious and what some might call a 'colourful personality', at least when they being [sic][5]

5 The narration and dialogue are occasionally rendered in Caribbean dialect. Due to its frequency, I will not continue to mark such deviations from Standard English.

polite" (Evaristo 2013a, 101). His clothes-consciousness and individualism point to a feminine inscription of his gender, and the "colourful personality" directly denotes flamboyance. The final phrase of this quote indicates that Barrington's gender expression is non-normative enough for others to point it out and judge him for it since the 'impolite' phrases one might find are most likely femmephobic slurs.[6] Although Morris's specific utterance here falls under teasing and banter, it gives clear hints at Barrington's gender expression that does not comply with the intensely masculine ideals he and his surroundings hold for him. His autodiegetic and unreliable narration does not pick up on his deviance, however. This signifies the protagonist's dissociation and denial of the difference between his gendered reality and his idealised view of himself.

The negotiation between his queerness and the normative expectations for masculine gender expression that he has grown up with dominates much of the novel's discourse and the protagonist's outlook on life. At one point, Barrington connects the perpetrators of a violent homophobic attack he endured in London in the 1970s with the attitudes that were common in Antigua: "They was the same kind of boys who bullied any boy back home who wasn't manly enough, who wore too-bright shirts, who was a bit soft in his manner, who needed straightening out" (Evaristo 2013a, 122). The cultural contexts of Antigua and Great Britain thus both police gender expression, as men and boys who do not successfully perform a very specific – and, arguably, toxically confined – branch of masculinity are outcast and punished. It is repeatedly made plain to Barrington that gay men cannot meet the heterosexual norms of hegemonic masculinity, which makes him even more determined to try, and it forces him to hide a significant part of his life and personality for over seventy years.

Whenever Barrington falls short of the masculine norm, chiefly through his queerness, he experiences self-hate, a feeling that has

6 Femmephobia, sissyphobia and similar terms describe the latent stigmatisation of feminine gender expression in (cisgender) men, even within gay circles (see Brightwell 2018, 15–16).

been described as internalised homophobia (cf. Allen and Olleson 1999, 33–34). As teenagers and young men, he and Morris had hoped they could 'cure' themselves of their orientation, which they are forced into experiencing as pathology through their homophobic surroundings. In the narrative present, the protagonist fearfully imagines a day when he is shunned as a "HOMO" or "*Buggerer of men*" (Evaristo 2013a, 132, 134) in the streets of London if he ever admits his relationship and orientation to others. The usage of slurs, especially the latter variant that is specific to Caribbean dialect, shows the impact of homophobia from both of his life contexts. Barrington struggles strongly with society's unattainable expectations of masculinity, and his internalisation of them, which leads to conflict and inner turmoil. As I will show below, this fear and self-hate negatively influence his kinship ties.

2.3 Non-normative male ageing

Another aspect that influences Barrington's experience of his masculinity is his age. From the very beginning, the characters' old age is part of their self-image and the narrator's cynical banter. Most often, allusions to old age underline the story's comic tone:

> So there we was in the dancehall amid all of those sweaty, horny youngsters (relatively speaking) swivelling their hips effortlessly. And there was I trying to move my hips in a similar hula-hoop fashion, except these days it feels more like opening a rusty tin of soup with an old-fashioned tin opener. (Evaristo 2013a, 2)

The two men are noticeably older and their lives, for which they sometimes express nostalgia, have changed because of it. However, they do not excessively mourn that fact or succumb to lethargy as a result. They rather continue with adapted versions of their former activities. As Stephan Karschay and Joanna Rostek have pointed out, instead of treating old age "as a problem-ridden and negatively connoted stage of life", as novels frequently do, *Mr Loverman* adopts a "positive stance […] on the issue of (male) aging" (2016, 132).

Their qualification in parentheses is apt, since the novel's positivity towards ageing does not extend to Barrington's forty-year-old daughter, Maxine. She receives the most age-related comic treatment, where she sometimes becomes a stereotyped character. Maxine is childish, uses exaggerated youth slang such as "*whatevs*" or "*Totes* amazeballs" (Evaristo 2013a, 91, 100), dresses like a teenager, and her profession in the fashion industry has her pretend she is "twenty-nine for eleven years already" (Evaristo 2013a, 96). It thus seems like there are few positive or optimistic aspects to this character's advancing age. This diverging portrayal corresponds to what Susan Sontag (1972) has termed the 'double standard of aging'. In the essay, she identifies "childish, immature, weak" behaviour as being "cherished as typically 'feminine'" (Sontag 1972, 38), which represents Maxine's character and stigmatises female ageing. The male characters' ageing process is either negligible, positive, or leads to the final, liberatory coming out, while this female figure stagnates in trying to remain forever young.[7]

The connection between the portrayal of the male characters' old age and their masculinity is especially visible in Barrington's sex life. He and Morris have always barely been able to keep their hands off each other, and Barrington reports having had many casual, anonymous sexual encounters in London's back-alleys over the years. This characterisation corresponds to hegemonically masculine ideals of virility and sexual prowess, while simultaneously perpetuating the stereotype of promiscuous gay men. It even connects these revolutionary queer characters to the mentality of Selvon's (1956) womanising protagonists (), the mere difference being the gender at which they direct their overt sexual advances.[8] Yet, the stigmatised expectation for *men in old age* is that they become desexualised and celibate, and thus lose part of their

7 Barrington's wife Carmel negates some of the stereotypes and stigmas that Sontag (1972, 31) criticises around female ageing, most notably by entering a relationship with another man as soon as she is separated from Barrington (Evaristo 2013a, 279), which challenges the idea of older women being "sexually ineligible much earlier than men" (Sontag 1972, 31).

8 Evaristo (2013b, 362) herself admits to this connection in her doctoral thesis.

perceived masculinity. For these septuagenarians, however, sex retains a central role in their relationship, for example since they prefer giving sexual services to the other over actually communicating about their conflicts (Evaristo 2013a, 242). This characterisation is further entangled in the pressures around 'successful aging': "the idea that a person *needs* to be sexy and have sex in order to attain optimal health, vitality, and a 'successful' ageing process" (Przybylo 2021, 181) is as problematic as the automatic desexualisation of old age. The novel thus treads a thin line between creating farcically hypermasculine (and thus hypersexual) characters, and revolutionary representations of old, gay, black British life.

The narrative also diegetically addresses the normative assumption towards old men with regard to sexuality. Before the protagonist's formative coming-out moment that initiates his changed outlook on gender norms, he largely only imagines young men's bodies as possessing 'manly', and thus desirable, attributes. He describes his memory of a young Morris as "a perfect specimen of manhood", and admires how much his young grandson's "masculine" physique resembles what he used to look like himself (Evaristo 2013a, 115, 171). After his coming out, he suddenly asserts how attractive Morris's older body is to him: "Don't care how buff you is, I still want you" (Evaristo 2013a, 244). He can now express his emotions more openly and lets go of some of those expectations of what can be considered 'manly.' These altered attitudes towards others' attractiveness translate to a gradually changing view on his self-worth.

If we think of age in terms of generation and upbringing, rather than only the number of years or the biological components of an ageing body, then a further impact on the internalised expectations of masculinity, and by extension the closet and social isolation, can be observed. For most of their lives, the characters have lacked any positive role models that could have given them hope that being openly queer may not exclusively lead to problems, isolation and violence (see de Vries 2010, 152). There are brief mentions of Quentin Crisp, the queer trailblazing dandy-like figure of the 1930s, whom Morris is inspired by, but Barrington rejects identifying with him due to the flamboyance and femininity he ex-

presses (Evaristo 2013a, 137–138). The cultural and historical settings, as well as the identity positions of the queer characters, impact their attachment to masculinity and the life strategy of secrecy.

3. Queer and old age kinship

3.1 The kin concept of chosen families

In a society that desexualises old men, i.e. assumes that they are both undesirable and have no desire themselves (see Przybylo 2021, 184), Barrington and Morris are able to navigate being closeted more easily now than as young men who were seemingly (and inexplicably, to a normative society) uninterested in sex. Thus, Morris argues that they do not need to hide in their old age as carefully as they did before. When Barrington shows reluctance to moving in together and consequently outing themselves as being romantically involved, Morris says:

> As for discretion, [...] there'll be no gossip, Barry. You think folk be whispering, *Oh, look at those two horny studs goin' at it behind closed doors*? No, man. They be saying, *Oh, look at those two sweet* OAP [old age pensioner] *gentlemen keeping each other company and changing each other's bedpans.* (Evaristo 2013a, 44)

The two lovers, who are almost as sexually active now as they have always been, would never be suspected as such due to the expectations of desexualisation, and the kinship and caregiving roles that older adults often take up in each other's lives.

This directly leads to the status of fictive kin or chosen families for the protagonist. The former gerontological concept is equivalent in its usage and real-life functions to the queer studies' terms 'chosen family' or 'family of choice,' which were first articulated by Kath Weston (1997 [1991]). As many recent empirical studies from the emerging field of Queer Gerontology have shown (see Ramirez-Valles 2017), such kinship bonds, which very frequently include caregiving roles, are especially relevant to the

intersectional experience of LGBTQ+ elders.[9] Factors such as rejection from biological families, possible lack of children, or discrimination in care facilities lead to an accelerated reliance upon non-biologically related caregivers and alternative kinship ties for this social group. Their precariousness means that other people who are not related to them, by law or birth, and who would not be part of traditional or biological kinship ties, provide much needed support, comfort, familial connections and companionship (see Smith and Muraco 2019, 162).

3.2 Alternative kinship in *Mr Loverman*

Although the caregiving aspect is not explicitly mentioned again in the novel, the concept of chosen family at large gains increasing significance. Next to his self-image and confidence that would be negatively affected by being openly queer, Barrington mostly fears that isolation and the loss of kinship ties would result from such a step: "I don't like being an outsider" (Evaristo 2013a, 159). All the community groups that offer themselves to Barrington over the first half of the novel are negatively impacted by homophobia, internalised or otherwise, and by his caution around being outed as queer. Ironically, exactly his fear of losing kinship ties prevents him from developing them in the first place. He was never romantically interested in his wife, Carmel, and even learns to strongly dislike her over the course of their insincere marriage, so this traditionally legal kin does not provide support and companionship. Yet, he does not ask her for a divorce since her role as what has been colloquially termed his 'beard'[10] helps to keep him safe and his orientation undetected. This also means, though, that they are trapped in what both

9 Studies that specifically focus on the caregiving aspect include, for instance, Heaphy et al. (2004), Muraco and Frederiksen-Goldsen (2011), Croghan et al. (2014), or Knauer (2016). Most of such studies only focus on US-American and white participants.

10 A gay person (usually a man) is described as having a 'beard' when they enter a relationship with someone from the 'opposite' gender, purely in order to appear heterosexual to others. This is frequently done without the knowledge of the partner, who believes that they are a genuine couple.

metaphorically describe as a 'prison' of a marriage (Evaristo 2013a, 106, 140, 236).

Moreover, the looming threat of his family members' anticipated reactions to his queerness negatively impacts all contact between them. Barrington dreads the upheaval and alienation that his coming out must lead to:

> I realize I might never sit down to a meal with my wife and daughters ever again. Our fragile nuclear family is about to explode. What parental price will I have to pay? I have no doubt that from wifey and Donna's point of view, I will go from head of the family to dead in the family. (Evaristo 2013a, 90)

He is invested in his biological and legal kinship ties and is afraid that being open about his queerness will eradicate them. His fear furthermore leads to a lack of deeper friendships, as he cuts ties with his hippie friend Peaceman as soon as he hints to Barrington that it would be safe to come out to him. The reproduction of homophobic discourse by Carmel's close Antiguan friends, which goes back to the presence of Caribbean homophobia, means that he also does not get on with them. Before his coming out, the only truly sincere and affirmative relationship he has is with Morris, his significant other and best friend.

Barrington and Morris are strongly committed to each other, know their partner better than anybody else, and want to spend the rest of their lives together. Yet, they must still learn throughout the novel to be the family that the other needs. His fear of isolation and estrangement from his biological family means that Barrington has disappointed and hurt Morris when he backed out from divorcing Carmel in the 1980s. Since his own divorce at that time, Morris has been living alone, and he admits to his partner how lonely and cut-off he has felt ever since. Morris's character represents the gay elder who is isolated from most kinship ties and is on track to spending the rest of his life secluded, largely unsupported and alone. When Barrington finally does want them to move in together in 2010, Morris rejects him at first due to his own fears of upheaval and change after thirty years of living as a bachelor. This is one in-

stance where the rhetorical effects of old age are not humoristic, as Morris asserts that it is useless to start their shared life now, when there is so little of it left. He says, "[W]e [are] nearer to death than to life" and claims he has given up on finding happiness and fulfilment (Evaristo 2013a, 44). At many other points, Barrington also looks back on his life and mournfully regrets how much of it he has spent hiding his true self.

The representation of their old age functions here to emotionally underline the tragedy of their lives in the metaphorical closet. This negative framing of queerness in old age, and especially of coming out at a mature point in life, is a common one, as seen for instance in the photography series *Not Another Second* by The Watermark in New York City. Each of the exhibits, which have been published in a coffee table book (Newby 2021), lists how many years the senior LGBTQ+ person has 'lost' due to having lived a closeted double life. Barrington is similarly portrayed as having lost those sixty years. Both queer characters in the novel have poor mental health and a bleak outlook on life due to their lifelong secret, which Jill Wilkens has also identified as a common occurrence for old LGBTQ+ people (2015, 91). The longer queer people remain isolated in the closet, the harder it gets for them to identify with their lives. Moreover, this can inhibit their formation and maintenance of sincere, supportive kinship ties. However, this fatalistic view in *Mr Loverman* and the photography series remains the dominant parameter in the identity construction of queer elders. It is doing them a disservice if the majority of their lives is written off as useless, tragic and 'lost,' only because they had to prioritise their immediate safety. Doubtlessly, the act of coming out and being able to show one's authentic self can be life-changing and affirmative, and being forced to do the opposite is often detrimental, yet its centrality and necessity in queer narratives should be questioned.

This discourse can be analysed in two directions. For one, it echoes what age studies scholars have discussed using concepts like the 'life review' and other processes of identity formation through narrative strategies such as reminiscence.[11] Coined by psychiatrist Robert N. But-

11 See the literature review by Gerben J. Westerhof, Nicole Alea, and Susan Bluck (2020).

ler (1963), the life review describes the psychological process of recalling one's life in old age and working through past conflicts to arrive at a coherent view of the personal past. For Barrington, this look back on his life is rather reflected in depression and despair, in accordance with what Butler (1963, 68) calls the "severe form" of the life review. Barrington's narrative of his life is judged as nearly completely negative due to his time in the metaphorical closet. Secondly, it prioritises sexual orientation, especially of the openly announced kind, over all other identities and life events. Barrington's relationship with his queerness structures the plot, his kinship ties, and his life narrative. This privileging of sexual identity echoes some form of identity politics that must not remain unquestioned.

Nevertheless, for Barrington's story, coming out functions as a watershed moment that not only changes his outlook, but also lastingly influences his kinship ties. After the climactic turning point of coming out to his family (Evaristo 2013a, 196–197), he reconnects with Morris and they take up their former physical and emotional intimacy again. The conflicts and tensions that have arisen over the years due to their anxiety about being unmasked as a couple can be left behind and the two men now assume the public role of each other's life partner. This is symbolised most succinctly through Morris's move into Barrington's family home.[12] His grandson, Daniel, has stopped visiting after the coming out, Barrington's daughters moved out long ago, and Carmel moves back to Antigua after divorcing her husband. Morris now physically and symbolically fills the empty space that the protagonist's legal and biological kin have left. This conclusion to the novel's overarching conflicts lends itself to a reading of Morris as not merely his romantic partner, but specifically as Barrington's chosen family, in favour of his socially accepted, heteronormative legal kin. They break through old rooms and literally re-assemble the make-up of Barrington's family home to suit their tastes and needs. Joseph Ronan (2021, 637–638) has analysed that "[traditional] family and queerness are opposed" in the novel, and in the end, they

12 See Koegler's essay (2020) on the significance of homemaking and the family home for Barrington's life as a queer immigrant.

form a "reshaped family" instead. The constant reiteration of the rejection of same-sex relationships by (most of) their surroundings, and the fact that such legal advancements as marriage equality did not happen until a year after the novel's publication, let alone its setting, make their kinship bond a clearly non-traditional and revolutionary one.

Many of Barrington's other relationships can also become more sincere once he is less invested in obsessively performing heteronormative masculinity. His younger daughter, Maxine, is the first person with whom he has a positive coming-out experience (Evaristo 2013a, 218–221) and she becomes a reliant supporter of his new life, which he is grateful for (Evaristo 2013a, 271). Brian Heaphy and others (2004) define chosen family as a construction that can include and *redefine* the relationship with selected biological family members. Barrington's connection to Maxine becomes even more sincere and life-affirming once he can display his whole self to his favourite daughter. His 'choice' of close family does not include Donna, his eldest daughter whom he never got along with well and who sides with her mother over Barrington in her parents' conflict. Daniel is only included in his family construction a year after the coming out, when the young man apologises for his discriminatory initial reaction. It is significant that they never come out to Morris's homophobic sons and even free up a separate space in the house to present as his 'bachelor pad' if need be (Evaristo 2013a, 295). This fraught familial relationship lingeringly inhibits the two men's full self-realisation and the restructuring of their gender identities and social connections. It leaves a bittersweet aftertaste to readers, while also counteracting the otherwise utopian 'happily ever after' of their second chance at life. This qualifies the so-far unquestioned privileging of 'being out' criticised above since they are better off, and have a happier life, because they *do not* come out to those young men. For old queer people, it is necessary to *choose* how one's family is constituted and to redefine what the connection must mean for them, and not all bio-legal kin can be included to the same extent. The construction of 'kin' does not require a blood connection, and conversely, purely biological relations do not suffice for being, or remaining, someone's kin. The dynamic concept offers space for rejecting another set of rigid social norms, next to those

of masculinity, and for finding the right form of companionship, family and support. *Mr Loverman* contributes to positive (re)imaginings of how gay members of the Windrush generation can forge connections with others in their old age.

The last community or kinship group in the novel, next to the non-normative, familial partnership with Morris, and the re-negotiation of biological kin, is that of other queer people, which proves to be one of the biggest, and to the protagonist most unexpected, positive influences. The concept of a 'queer community' and designated spaces such as gay clubs or pride parades are well-researched, and studies in Queer Gerontology name it as one of the biggest alternative kinship groups for old queer people.[13] In the novel, the earliest example happens in the 1970s, long before his official coming out, with Merle, a teenaged friend of Donna's who has been disowned by her Montserratian parents due to her queerness. Barrington is inspired by her resilience and feels ashamed that he is not as brave as she is in living her queerness openly and enduring the backlash from her community. He ends up providing her with housing and other resources to fill her lack of kinship ties. Furthermore, they have a silent understanding about Barrington's relationship with Morris, whereby he appreciates that he does not need to be on his guard and can be himself around her, and he thinks of her using the fond pet name "Little Merley" (Evaristo 2013a, 132–133) way into her own adulthood when she is a parent herself. She can fall back on Barrington's care and support (financial as well as ideological) over the years and he takes up a father position in her life. Merle fills the understanding and supportive daughter role long before his biological daughters are trusted to react to, and asked to accept, their father's true self. In her character, the necessity of having chosen, instead of solely bio-legal kin becomes tangible through the established familial role she fulfils for Barry (and he for her), instead of either of their traditional

13 The most salient example of the impact of this family dynamic is the era of the AIDS crisis with its peak in the 1980s, where ill, socially ostracised people heavily relied on support from the LGBTQ+ community. See, for instance, Brian de Vries (2010, 153) or Brian Heaphy (2007, 204).

'folks.' She further embodies an alternative to the imagined 'fix-all' quality of coming out: her understanding and offer of kinship exist before and in opposition to the imagined necessity of a grand announcement.

After Barrington's coming out, Maxine introduces Morris and her father to her friend group of young gay men, the most typical queer community in the novel. At first, the couple find themselves overwhelmed by the queer subcultural space in Soho (nicknamed 'Gay-ho'). Barrington does not initially thrive as much in this environment as the more open-minded Morris does. This is due to his confrontational character, which he ascribes to his age ("I really do feel like a grumpy ole man today", Evaristo 2013a, 259), and implicitly to his self-consciousness around bold gender non-conformity. A further influence is the marginalised position they occupy in this traditionally youth-centred space – it takes visiting a bar explicitly conceived for "the older gay clientele" for them not to feel completely out of place. Therein, they are still the only *black* older queer men (Evaristo 2013a, 248) – even within queer spaces, and hence the queer community, they are on the margins. This self-consciously points to how unusual the representation of this set of intersecting identities is, and what challenges the group of old black queer people faces regarding the forging of community ties.

Despite his initial resistance, Barrington goes from being in awe at holding his lover's hand in public for the first time, which he feels emboldened to do in the company of other queer people (Evaristo 2013a, 247), to eagerly consuming (black) queer literature provided by Lola, a black PhD-student researching pre-colonial African homosexuality.[14] The couple becomes entrenched in queer life and culture, and they open themselves up to the queer community. This contact is what Barrington credits as the main factor in "com[ing] to terms with what I been fearing and hiding all my life" (Evaristo 2013a, 274), i.e. opening himself up to society's scrutiny of his gender through exhibiting his queerness, and leads to the novel's happy end. He receives the resources and support he needs to connect with his identity and overcome his now unfounded

14 See Newns (2020, 153–154) on the significance of Lola's presence for decolonising this queer space and opening it up to the protagonists' belonging.

fear of social isolation. Instead of making Barrington an outsider, as he feared for sixty years, his openness and his rejection of hegemonic masculinity allow him to become a social 'insider' for the first time in his life. Realising that there is a community of accepting people waiting, he can now conceive of living authentically in the world.

4. Conclusion

The protagonist's overemphasis on and eventual negotiation of masculinity, the threat of homophobia, and the realisation that he has been living an unhappy double life for too long trigger a radical reshaping of his outlook on life, his home space, and consequently his family ties. Letting go of his masculine and heteronormative expectations for himself and others, which he developed out of his cultural and historical contexts, enables Barrington to admit to his sexuality and live life more openly. By having him adopt a larger kin network and redefine the relationship with his traditional, biological family, *Mr Loverman* envisions the possibility of a positive old black gay life in contemporary Britain that is entrenched in black and/or queer community. The novel follows the assumption that (family) relationships are essential to one's well-being, especially in old age. Opening up the Windrush generation's queer population to the possibility of fulfilling community widens the narrow confines for this group. Nevertheless, the fatalist view of the 'lost years' of a long life in the closet prevails. While the novel creates a fictional environment that reveals the structural nature of the characters' problems, its suggestion that coming out is the all-round solution needs to be challenged.

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