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WALKING THROUGH A WOUNDERLAND

**Wilderness, wellbeing and where to belong in *I Belong Here: a
Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* and other works**



Author Anita Sethi walking the Pennine Way. © Image copyright Anita Sethi.

By Anita Sethi

WALKING THROUGH A WOUNDERLAND

Wilderness, wellbeing and where to belong in *I Belong Here: a*

***Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* and other works**

By Anita Sethi

Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

(PhD by Published Work)

York St John University

School of Humanities

July 2024

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Sethi, Anita, *I Belong Here: a Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* and other works

ABSTRACT

This PhD comprises a critical review and original creative writing consisting primarily of my book *I Belong Here: a Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* (2021) and interrelated essays and stories, all themed around place and exploring the central theme of the thesis. *I Belong Here* found a home on bookshop shelves in the categories Nature, Travel and Memoir & Biography, straddling these interdisciplinary genres within ‘place writing’ and entailing extensive research including topics such as reclaiming and restoring landscape and language, place and postcolonialism, and walking, wildlife, woundedness and wellbeing. The critical component contextualises my work and shows its influences and impact, elucidating how it has made a significant, independent and original contribution to knowledge.

I trace the literary history of writers finding succour in nature back to Romantic poets and whilst sharing some commonalities with the English pastoral tradition of finding wonder and awe in nature, I problematise, challenge, and add a new dimension, forging a new literary pathway. Wainwright’s account of finding solace walking in nature in *A Pennine Journey* (1986) inspired but also repelled me in its misogynistic language. The genre has long been dominated by the “lone enraptured male” (Jamie, 2008) and although nature writing has grown in popularity with bestselling books by female authors, it is still characterised by problematic homogeneity. I apply the intersectional thinking developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks to nature writing, contributing knowledge about the interrelatedness of place, race, gender, class and regionality.

Crucially, I show the effects of systemic inequality on mental health and on access to nature. The etymology of trauma is ‘wound’ and in my original writing I walk through the ‘wounderland’ of the scarred landscape of the North, along the way exploring psychological wounds and causal structural injustice. I draw on but develop in new directions literary trauma theorists such as Caruth (1996) to show the interrelation of place, the political and personhood, and the effects of intergenerational and postcolonial trauma. I explore how language and landscape can help us bear the seemingly unbearable – transforming wounds into words, in turn enabling a writing back to toxic colonialist narratives, ‘bearing witness’ to a post-pastoral, postcolonial experience. *I Belong Here* traces a journey in which walking through the wild does wonders for the wellbeing but as I grapple with notions of ‘nature cure’, I show why – at this time of ecological crisis - we must care better for nature and put forward the phrase ‘nature care’.

At the heart of my work is where and how we lose and gain a sense of belonging - I posit the book in itself as a place, showing how books can help us belong. I demonstrate how – through its original contribution to literature - my book has engendered new forms of belonging.

PART A) CRITICAL REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The genesis of *I Belong Here* was a traumatic experience, an emotional wounding - being racially abused while on a TransPennine train journey by a man who also threatened to set me on fire. Suffering from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and claustrophobia in the wake of the attack and grieving the sudden death of a friend, one day I was looking at a map of the route and saw the Pennine range of mountains rising up - zooming in closer I saw a place called Hope. Powered by hope, I decided to make a journey of reclamation walking through the Pennines including the Pennine Way, as a way of saying: I won't let having been racially abused stop me travelling freely and without fear in a country where I belong. My geographical journey along the 'backbone' of England is intertwined with a journey through Britain's history and my own, excavating the causes and consequences of racism and inequality, including the effects upon the mental health. A journey through place, prose and personhood, along the way I explore the roots and routes of landscape and language, and indeed the language of landscape. Language had been used to attack me by the racist abuser and I here show how it can be reclaimed and employed as a tool of healing.

My work asks: how can walking in the wild both reveal and help heal trauma? As I walk through limestone scars, I walk through what I term a 'wonderland' discussing my experience of childhood trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder, systemic causes of wounding, postcolonial and intergenerational trauma, and why walking does wonders for the wellbeing – along the way showing the need to change causal systemic inequalities. I take an interdisciplinary approach in the field of environmental humanities by uniting literature with science, speaking to experts in 'green care' and 'blue care' about the benefits of nature and walking to both physical and mental health.

As this critical component demonstrates, my published work has made a significant, independent and original contribution and had a major impact within its discipline. *I Belong Here* won or was nominated for several awards: it won a Books Are My Bag Award (an award unique in being voted for by booksellers and readers) and was nominated for the Wainwright

Prize for Nature Writing, Portico Prize, Great Outdoors Award and Royal Society of Literature's Ondaatje Prize for writing evoking "a strong sense of place." It was selected as Best Travel Book by *Wanderlust*, the *Telegraph* and *Independent* and Book of the Month at Stanfords Travel. My book's impact is apparent as it has helped to decolonise the canon, cited in numerous academic papers¹ and becoming part of several university syllabuses, for example chosen as The Big Read at Sheffield Hallam University² - as part of the initiative, *I Belong Here* was distributed to thousands of students and staff with the Vice Chancellor describing how the book "gives us all an opportunity to consider and question our own perspectives and role."

The quality of my published work and its impact and contribution to the discipline is clear through reviews. The book garnered strong endorsements from leading writers and received excellent reviews in publications including the *Sunday Times*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Telegraph*, *Independent*, *New Statesman*, *Spectator*, *Wanderlust*, *Country Walking*, *BBC Countryfile Magazine* and *The Bookseller* where it was selected as Book of the Month with reviewer Caroline Sanderson describing it as "a beautifully written, hate-defying book" and "a magnificent and redemptive achievement."³ *The Sunday Times* review commented: "While punchier and more political than most nature writing, this book is a thing of beauty," and also described the book as "an education."⁴ I will throughout elucidate some of the ways that my work has offered "an education."

The landscape the book was published into was overwhelmingly monocultural: in the year *I Belong Here* was nominated, I was the only writer of colour on the Wainwright Prize longlist. I am a writer from a marginalised, underrepresented background who has shown that I can break barriers of race and regionality in the literary and publishing worlds to become an award-winning, critically acclaimed author – but not without challenges along the way. In the

¹ A selection of scholarly papers and books in which *I Belong Here* has been cited is included in the Bibliography.

² Husbands, Chris, Professor Sir, *The Big Read 2022-23, An Introduction from the Vice Chancellor*. <https://libguides.shu.ac.uk/bigread22-23/vcintro>.

³ Sanderson, Caroline. Book of the Month: "Sethi's Pennine climb scales dazzling heights", *The Bookseller*, 8 January 2021, and *The Bookseller* Spring Buyer's Guide, "Highlights of the Season", Issue February-July 2021.

⁴ Das, Shanti, "I Belong Here by Anita Sethi, review – on the trail of identity in the Pennines." *The Sunday Times*, 18th April 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-belong-here-by-anita-sethi-review-xl006jth>.

book itself – and this critical component – I explore some of the obstacles experienced on my journey.

It is important to here acknowledge the roots of racism. Racist Enlightenment science and natural history heralded itself as fact and was entwined with colonial missions – key 18th-century British naturalists Hans Sloane and Joseph Banks influenced pseudoscientific racism and endorsed slavery and colonisation. Captain James Cook looted huge quantities of botanical and zoological specimens from countries he ‘explored’. Darwin, sailing aboard HMS Beagle in 1831, joined in expeditions to better map territories for British control. The influential British journal *Nature* acknowledged their own complicity in having published the “scientifically inaccurate”⁵ work of Francis Galton – his notions became viewed and taught as factual knowledge, as indisputable truth rather than propaganda and pseudoscience and “had a huge, damaging influence that the world is still grappling with. The idea that some groups — people of colour or poor people, for example — were inferior has fuelled irreparable discrimination and racism.” The journal grew as did Britain’s colonial power: “In their contributions, many scientists editing and writing for *Nature* endorsed the views of white, European superiority that drove this empire building.” The journal included harmful contributions “from the fields of ecology, anthropology and ethnography, which were inextricably linked with colonial expansion.” It “spread and legitimized” Galton’s “scientifically erroneous and immoral”⁶ eugenics theory which came to influence policies that led to the murder of millions of people and subjugation of countless others. The journal also acknowledged that more recent articles have perpetuated harm.

Literary education – as well as the media, magazine and book publishing - perpetuated such racism. Education (more accurately, miseducation) functioned as brainwashing of colonial subjects into internalising the message from their masters that they were inferior. Such miseducation aimed to effect, in Gramsci’s terms, a ‘domination by consent.’⁷ Colonialism’s

⁵ Editorial, “How *Nature* contributed to science’s discriminatory legacy.” *Nature.com*, 28th September 2022, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03035-6>.

⁶ National Human Genome Research Institute. “Eugenics and Scientific Racism.” Last updated 18th May 2022, <https://www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/Eugenics-and-Scientific-Racism>.

⁷ Ashcroft, B., Griffiths G, Tiffin, H. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Routledge, 1995, reprinted 2001, pp425-6.

claims to the superiority of white people became “embodied/encoded through the ‘fetish’ of the English book” (Viswanathan, 1995). Education was a tool of “colonial subjectification” establishing “the locally English or British as normative through critical claims to ‘universality’ of the values embodied in English literary texts” and “represents the colonised to themselves as inherently inferior beings – ‘wild’, ‘barbarous’, uncivilised’.” Throughout the Empire, the reciting of racist literary texts as part of the curriculum became embedded. C. E. Trevelyan, a colonial administrator and member of the Council on Education declared that it was “superiority which has enabled us to conquer India, and to keep it.” Viswanathan writes that “the strategy of locating authority in these texts all but effaced the sordid history of colonialist expropriation, material exploitation, and class and race oppression behind European world dominance.”⁸

Toxic notions about who and what is ‘natural’ and belongs in this world still persist including in the interrelated institutions of academia, publishing and the media. My own life, as a descendant of immigrants and indentured labourers from former colonies is deeply affected by on-going systemic discrimination. In this thesis, I explore an intersection of related questions encompassing race and place, inequality, access to nature, and the trauma caused by unbelonging – these interconnected topics reveal how experiences of place are shaped by imbalances of power. I show how intersectional thinking developed by cultural critics bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw can be insightfully applied to British place and nature writing.

In my creative-critical output I shed new insight into core issues of how place affects people and how people affect place, how it feels to be an outsider and how we can belong as I examine intersections summarised through the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between place and race? Within place, I include both urban and rural landscapes with a focus on nature. I explore how race interrelates with aspects of marginalisation including class, gender and geography and how the climate crisis disproportionately affects marginalised communities.

⁸ Viswanathan, Gauri. ‘English Literary Study in British India’, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, p436.

2. How does identity impact form and style? That is, how does our sense of personhood, shaped by place, affect prose? How does landscape influence language and vice versa?
3. How does marginalisation affect our experience of moving through the world and what is its impact on the mental health? Specifically, what is it like being a person of colour descended from the Empire's indentured labour system reckoning with the traumatic legacy of colonialism on landscape and on the terrains of the mind and body?
4. How does walking through the natural world and a deeper understanding of biodiversity improve our physical and mental health, the sense of our place in the planet and lead to greater unity, empathy, and positive engagement?
5. What role do writing and literature play in creating belonging?

I bring to this thesis a rigorous wealth of research experience and excellent track-record of public and professional engagement. My creative writing encompasses *I Belong Here: a Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* and contributions to over ten anthologies including *Women on Nature*, *Common People*, *We Mark Your Memory*, and *Seaside Special*. I have also worked as a literary and cultural critic and essayist for leading publications including *The Guardian*, *Observer*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *New Statesman*, *Telegraph*, *Sunday Times*, BBC Radio 4's cultural review programme, *Front Row* and BBC Radio 3's *The Essay* and *The Verb*. I have been a Judge of the Women's Prize, British Book Awards, Place Writing Awards of the Arts Foundation, Costa Book Awards and Society of Authors Awards and was elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society where I gave a guest lecture. I have devised and taught writing masterclasses and workshops for many institutions and, acutely aware of barriers to access, forged partnerships with The Woodland Trust and others to help creative writing – and nature - be accessible to all backgrounds.

The impact of my published work and professional engagement includes deepening understanding of the relationship between place and personhood and that those from all walks of life and backgrounds belong in nature – and in the pages of books about nature – whilst also showing the systemic and structural obstacles that cause unbelonging.

SECTION ONE

THE PATHS TAKEN AND UNTAKEN

1.1 (i) Review of extant literature – ‘on place, travel and nature writing’

Where does *I Belong Here* belong in the world of books, in the literary ecosystem? *I Belong Here* found a home on the bookshop shelves in the following categories: Travel Writing, Nature Writing and Biography/Memoir and has won or been nominated for prizes in the field of: Non-Fiction (winner of the Books Are My Bag Award - Non- Fiction), Nature Writing (shortlisted for the Wainwright Prize for UK Nature Writing), Travel, adventure and outdoors literature (shortlisted for the Great Outdoors Award), and for books evoking a ‘strong sense of place’ (nominated for the Royal Society of Literature’s Ondaatje Prize). It was chosen as a Travel Book of the Year by several national publications.

In this section, by way of contextualisation, I review the extant literature in these fields and genres to which my book belongs. Statistics reveal a link between genre and gender: how fewer women than men have been published in non-fiction and its subsections: research carried out by The Women’s Prize Trust found that only 26.5% of non-fiction reviews in national newspapers were allocated to books by female writers, while 35% of books awarded a non-fiction prize over the past 10 years were written by a female writer, across seven UK non-fiction prizes.⁹ Such statistics fuelled the Women’s Prize to launch a new prize for non-fiction in 2024 to sit alongside its long-established sister prize for fiction. New research by the Trust also analysed data from Nielsen BookData’s consumer research and revealed that a gender bias still exists in men’s reading habits, with more men likely to read books by men whilst the reading habits of women were more evenly split.¹⁰

There are genres in which gender disbalance is particularly glaring including travel, adventure and nature writing. This genre has also been characterised by the colonial trope of the white man adventuring to, discovering, ‘conquering’ and ‘civilising’ supposedly savage and inferior

⁹ Shaffi, Sarah. “Women’s prize to launch annual award for women’s non-fiction writing.” *The Guardian*, 8 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/feb/08/womens-prize-to-launch-annual-award-for-womens-non-fiction-writing>.

¹⁰ *Women’s Prize Trust*, Accessed 31st May 2024, <https://womensprize.com/gender-bias-in-mens-reading-habits-still-exists/>.

societies. Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' (1899)¹¹ exhibits racist imperialist views – portraying Empire as a moral endeavour to civilize savages. Cloaking brutal ideas in lyricism to endow them with seeming benignity was key to the colonial endeavour. In 'A Song of the White Men' (1899)¹² Kipling wrote:

“Now, this is the road that the White Men tread
When they go to clean a land –”

This sinister “clean a land” reference bears colonialist tropes and calls to mind the Empire's violent removal of indigenous people. The poem continues: “Oh, well for the world when the White Men tread.” Kipling's verse here is incantatory, indoctrinating – spreading a message that it is the White Men that bring wellness – it goes on to condone war in the pursuit of dominion. Professor Edward Said defined Orientalism as “the system of European or Western knowledge about the Orient” which is “synonymous with European dominance.” Empire gave white men “superior ontological status.” Key to colonialism was the “imperial scribe” to spread and ingrain the message.¹³ Such scribes produced works ranging from *The Lost World* (1912) by Arthur Conan Doyle to more contemporary books influenced by Empire and imperialist thought which are littered with both gendered and racialised stereotypes. The “colonial vision” of texts including Paul Theroux's *The Old Patagonian Express* (1979) has been criticised by Professor Debbie Lisle who also describes geographer Doreen Massey's argument that Theroux's “sweeping judgments” serve to “reinforce a hierarchical relationship.”¹⁴ Moreover, in Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958), locals are described as ‘evil-looking’ (pp56, 131), ‘savage-looking’ (p170) and ‘wild-looking’ (pp111, 125, 260) - ‘wildness’ is often pitted as counter to ‘civilisation’, and although the concept of wildness has more recently been embraced in writing about the rewilding movement for example, colonialist tropes created a kind of tameness even in nature and travel writing. I further explore this topic in ‘Decolonising travel, place and nature writing’ (2.4).

The “lone enraptured male” of the genre is a term coined by writer Kathleen Jamie in a now classic *London Review of Books* essay in which she reviewed *The Wild Places* by Robert

¹¹ Available at: https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems_burden.htm.

¹² Available at: https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems_whitemensong.htm.

¹³ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1978, Vintage Books Edition 1979, pp197-226.

¹⁴ Lisle, Debbie. *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p7.

Macfarlane.¹⁵ In it she asks: “if we read about ‘nature’ or wild places, it pays to wonder, who’s telling me this, who’s manipulating my responses, who’s doing the mediating” – often, in the genre, it will be a male writer. “What’s coming over the hill? A white, middle-class Englishman! A Lone Enraptured Male!”, she writes. “Here to boldly go, ‘discovering’, then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with civilized lyrical words.” Within books themselves we find shocking gender disparity: of *The Wild Places*, the academic Tim Hannigan in an essay for *The Handbook of British Travel Writing* noted that “more than 80 individual writers are cited or mentioned by name during the course of the book, from W. H. Auden to William Wordsworth. Of these, however, just six are women.”¹⁶

The Travel Writing section of bookshops still shows the persisting gender disparity in the genre, as I detailed in an article for the *i*.¹⁷ Here – as well as in *I Belong Here* – I share how I always longed for adventure, to travel to far-flung places and nearby wonders and capture my journey through the world in words. I yearned to climb mountains, to swim in the sea and walk the world’s great pathways. I devoured adventure stories in my local library - but in most of the great travel stories, it was the boys having adventures – the notion that travel and adventure are male pursuits is deeply implanted from the earliest days of childhood. The most prominent girl having an adventure in the children’s books I read was Alice – who got to fall down a rabbit hole.

Travel writing is still dominated by male voices chronicling real life adventures. In a bookshop, amidst hundreds of books in the Travel Writing section, female authors can be counted on a single pair of hands. Inside the largest bookshop in the North, Waterstones Deansgate in Manchester, where as a teenager I would browse the shelves and dream of one day being an author, I see *I Belong Here* at the centre of a table with a sign reading “Best of British Travel Writing” with a subtitle, ‘From wild swimming to rambles in the countryside, pick up everything you need to start your local adventure’ - the reverse of the sign reads “Best of Blighty: A

¹⁵ Jamie, Kathleen. “A Lone Enraptured Male.” *London Review of Books*, Vol.30 No.5, 6 March 2008, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n05/kathleen-jamie/a-lone-enraptured-male>.

¹⁶ Hannigan, Tim. “Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*.” *Handbook of British Travel Writing*, edited by Barbara Schaff. De Gruyter, 2020, pp575-595 (583).

¹⁷ Sethi, Anita, “Travel writing is still dominated by male voices.” *i News*, 16 September 2022, <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/travel/travel-writing-dominated-male-voices-alice-adventure-1841363>.

selection of great writing in and around the United Kingdom.” Being there in book form is the culmination of a long, tough journey in convincing a monocultural industry to believe that a northern woman of colour belongs here in this genre. On this particular display, of 34 books only three are by women. The selection is a snapshot showing the canon of classic travel writing including adventure, walking, nature and mountaineering literature – here present are books from those including Bill Bryson (*Notes from a Small Island*), Robert Macfarlane (*Landmarks* and *Holloway* with Stanley Donwood and Dan Richards), Robert Twigger, Simon Armitage, Stuart Maconie, Patrick Barkham, Billy Connolly. Aside from myself there is only one other living female author in the selection – *I Am An Island* by Tamsin Calidas. The other female author, Nan Shepherd, whose book *The Living Mountain* is here, died in 1893.

I walk further and see an extensive Travel Writing section and again there are only a few books by women. But *I Belong Here* is there amid the backlists of Dervla Murphy, Jan Morris and Freya Stark. There is *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, who made an epic journey walking the Pacific Crest Trail, *Wanderlust* by Rebecca Solnit, and *Among Flowers* by Jamaica Kincaid. Anthologies include *The Virago Book of Women Travellers* – although the women of colour writers collected are glaringly absent. *I Belong Here* has also risen across regional divides and in Waterstones Gower Street, London is to be found in the Travel Writing section on a display with a banner reading:

“Britain Coast to Coast: From the highlands of Scotland, to the peak of Snowdonia and the shores of Cornwall, this selection of travel writing is hand selected by booksellers to show the best of what the UK has to offer.”

The road to getting published was arduous. I was told ‘someone like me’ could not be a travel or nature writer. Even when published I faced obstacles. There were some resentful grumbles from white peers about writers of colour taking up too much space – a sense of intruding on a territory staked out and border-guarded only for a certain kind of person to belong in. When we travel through the world we face risks, such as racism, violence and street harassment. When we write about travel, we can face another set of risks and hostility. Back to those bookshop shelves: “If there’s a book you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it”, advised Toni Morrison – so I kept putting one foot forward, one more word on the page.

(ii) What's so new about 'The New Nature Writing'?

Over the past decade and a half the growth of interest in place writing has included the emergence of what Jason Cowley labelled 'The New Nature Writing' in *Granta* (2008) which I reviewed in the *Independent*.¹⁸ In his introduction Cowley writes: "The best new nature writing is also an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue." He goes on to say:

"The writers collected here are all on some kind of journey of discovery, as the best travel writers were, but at a time when so many of us are concerned about the size of our carbon footprint, they have no need to travel to the other side of the world to understand more about themselves and their relation to the world they inhabit."

He writes that "many of the stories in this issue are studies in the local or the parochial" and that many "can also be read as elegies: we know how our world is changing and what is being lost and yet we are powerless to prevent the change."¹⁹

In some ways this so-called 'new' nature writing was far from new – as author Jos Smith noted in his book a decade later: *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (2018) in which he situates New Nature Writing beginning earlier, from 1973 with the publication of Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* and Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside*. Cowley defines the 'old nature writing' as the "lyric pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer" and argues that the new writers approach their subject in "heterodox and experimental ways" yet he "also wanted the contributions to be voice-driven, narratives told in the first person." That voice-driven first person is also a hallmark of the Romantic tradition. Cowley's essay has gone on to be seminal, and provoked much debate and discussion.

Out of 18 writers collected in the *Granta* anthology there are only two female writers (Kathleen Jamie and Lydia Peelle) and a glaring absence of writers of colour. The genre is still characterised by problematic homogeneity - a severe omission since identity impacts our

¹⁸ Sethi, Anita. "Granta 102: The New Nature Writing, ed Jason Cowley." *Independent on Sunday*, 24th August 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/granta-102-the-new-nature-writing-ed-jason-cowley-904863.html>

¹⁹ Cowley, Jason. "The New Nature Writing." *Granta: 102*, July 2008, Introduction, paragraph 7.

experience of place and given the billions of people of colour on the planet, a significant amount of whom have been impacted by British imperialism.

As I explore in *I Belong Here*, I am no less British than a white British person – a fact too often overlooked in a deeply engrained ‘othering’ of ethnic minorities leading to a sense that brown and black people don’t belong in places regarded as quintessentially English or British such as in nature and the countryside – or in genres about such places. *I Belong Here* is a book with a local focus – the north of England – but shows how the supposedly local is in fact made of global histories, geographies and geologies. Local does not have to mean ‘parochial’.

Igniting something of a renaissance in nature writing was *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald (2015), a moving story of the author’s turning to nature following the death of her father, blending nature with memoir – there followed *The Outrun* by Amy Liptrot (2016) who turned to nature during recovery from alcoholism, *The Grassling* by Elizabeth Jane Burnett (2019) who deepens her connection with Devon’s landscape during her father’s declining health, and several more nature memoirs of this ilk showcasing the healing powers of nature – yet the contemporary precedent came a decade earlier in Richard Mabey’s *Nature Cure* (2005), his memoir of how reconnecting with the wild helped his debilitating depression (I discuss notions of ‘nature cure’ further in ‘3. The Wounderland’). Earlier still, Rachel Carson recognised the ameliorative power of nature, writing in *Silent Spring* (1962): “Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature.” Carson was concerned not only with nature’s impact on us, but with our impact on nature and her work succeeded in bringing environmental issues into the political agenda, leading to the creation of the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Indeed, several narratives challenge the notion that we are “powerless to prevent the change” - in my own work I write of how even planting a single bulb in an urban garden is, in some small way, contributing to change. If everyone were to plant a bulb, our world could flourish for the better.

1.2 (i) Walking (beyond) narratives

I was interested in moving beyond existing books by blending nature and travel writing with a long-distance walking narrative and it is instructive to consider the literary history of walking narratives which informed my research. As I write in *I Belong Here*, the literary long-distance journey is age-old as the pilgrimages embedded in such medieval works/walks as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Of course, people were undertaking long-distance walks before they came to be captured in English literary texts but in such texts "a tradition developed which has persisted ever since and remains largely uninterrogated: the association of literature, remoteness, wildness and spiritually uplifted men" (Jamie, 2008). It was Chaucer's tale of journeying and pilgrimage that inspired the long walk I made along the southernmost English coast chronicled in *I Belong Here*, in which I walked with The Refugee Tales, an initiative named after *The Canterbury Tales*. "Like Chaucer's characters, millions of people of many faiths and backgrounds have undertaken pilgrimages throughout the ages, forging 'pilgrim ways'" (*I Belong Here*, p57). That walk was a precursor to my Pennine Way walk but both were walks subverting literary traditions of who could walk where and find it 'spiritually uplifting.'

The literary tradition of walking developed in notions of the 'flâneur' in nineteenth-century Paris as explored in the writings of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin and, in London, Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840) – the flâneur was synonymous with an affluent man walking through cityscapes. Walking was also key to American Transcendentalist writing and canonical texts including Henry David Thoreau's *Walking* (1862).²⁰ "I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in" (p661) he writes and: "Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest." (p665). Thoreau saw writers across the pond in England as being tame by comparison and derides them thus:

"English literature, from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets, — Chaucer and Spenser and Milton, and even Shakspeare, included, — breathes no quite fresh and, in this sense, wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature,

²⁰ Thoreau, Henry David, "Walking." *The Atlantic Monthly*. Vol.IX – June 1862, pp657-674.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/>

reflecting Greece and Rome. Her wilderness is a green-wood, — her wild man a Robin Hood. There is plenty of genial love of Nature, but not so much of Nature herself.”

When I began reading this essay, I was almost with Thoreau, delighting in the wild walk, but my skin prickled as I read on, and he propagates an odd theory: “It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were.” He is, chillingly, pitting what we now call the ‘global north’ against the ‘global south’ or white people against brown and black people in a battle of who is more ‘natural’. He celebrates how “the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural.” Getting close to the wilderness entailed violent appropriation and Thoreau observes in a stomach-churning sentence: “The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories are “rusted with the blood of many a meadow” (pp665-8). It is easy to see why I wanted to walk beyond such narratives, to reclaim wildness.

(ii) Misogyny within the tradition, Alfred Wainwright’s *A Pennine Journey*

I here discuss in more depth one of my key influences, *A Pennine Journey: The Story of A Long Walk in 1938* by Alfred Wainwright which I first learned about while on my own journey, seeing a plaque mentioning it whilst I was at Settle train station, North Yorkshire. It was from Settle that Wainwright set off on his circular, 11-day journey longing to escape from the stresses of life and find solace in the hills. His route partially influenced the course of my subsequent journey which formed the heart of *I Belong Here*, with his end-point also being Hadrian’s Wall. Although he undertook the walk in 1938, Wainwright’s book was not published until 1986, almost fifty years after it was written and after the creation of the Pennine Way for which Wainwright wrote a guidebook and by which time he was acclaimed for his Lake District writing. I was drawn to his lesser-known work and its account of seeking solace in the hills and escaping an atmosphere of pervasive fear and gloom. However, I was appalled by the book’s misogyny and this fuelled my wish to write against such a toxic narrative, to forge my own way. For example, Wainwright writes:

“...let me commit to print a query I have often pondered. I wrote above of enthusiasm, of man recapturing the wild joys of boyhood. I’ve wondered many a

time: have the ladies the same capacity for enthusiasm? Not for climbing or pot holing necessarily. For anything. Have they, too, somewhere within them a slumbering spark which can on occasion burst into a burning, brilliant flame and retain its intensity and heat against the cold waters of judgement and reason? (...) The enthusiast tingles with life and, while he yet lives, dwells with the gods.” (pp7-8).

He continues his rant thus, stating that women “are not creatures of imagination”, and furthermore:

“I have not yet witnessed genuine enthusiasm in one of them; often I have seen a pretence of it, but the divine spark was missing. Conventions deny them the liberty to indulge in the higher flights. Maybe their imaginations do soar sometimes, but are kept in leash and hidden. Yet I doubt it, for there are no secret enthusiasms. The man burns; the woman throws the cold water over him. Let’s leave it at that, and kindly ascribe mixed metaphors also to enthusiasm.”

“Let’s leave it at that”, Wainwright blithely writes, after dismissing women as inferior. I read these words and felt myself – not for the first time in my journey – burn with rage; although I, as a woman, in Wainwright’s view, was not capable of burning with anything. I felt myself burn with enthusiasm too - my unwillingness to “leave it at that” fuelled on my walking and writing journey and subsequently this exegesis, born of ‘genuine enthusiasm’ for both geographical and intellectual adventure and enquiry.

Wainwright declares that a woman has “no secret enthusiasms”; the arrogance of assuming knowledge of the inner workings of a woman’s mind inspired me to share my own narrative. The interior lives – as well as externality – of the marginalised have long been appropriated by those with the power to write and publish; their ‘I’ subsumes all other ‘I’s (further discussed in 2.3). Therefore, to write a non-fiction walking narrative sharing my own interiority was an act of literary reclamation. So no, Alfred Wainwright, let’s not leave it at that.

(iii) **The wild joys of girlhood**

Wainwright writes of “the wild joys of boyhood” – and of course girls have not traditionally been associated with wild outdoor adventures. As I discuss in *I Belong Here*, it has been the boys who got to have most adventures in classic storybooks and in many there is also a clear link with boys’ adventuring, imperialism and the British Empire – in the works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Kipling, G.A. Henty and Boys Own Adventures for example - which adds another dimension to what I am walking and writing against.²¹

I smash stereotypes by writing of what I will here call the wild joys of girlhood - for my love of nature first flourished in childhood. The geography of where my love of the wild was born also disrupts literary traditions. For it was not in the countryside I first discovered wild joy but in the inner-city. In *I Belong Here* I discuss how I first experienced ‘the wild’ while growing up in a multicultural urban landscape in Old Trafford, Manchester: “I see how the wild first grew within me, as a small child learning to spot sudden startling growths of nature in the city...” (p225). I also explore the topic in my contribution to the anthology *Women on Nature* edited by Katharine Norbury, “Perspectives on Urban Nature” (2021), which shares enchantment with ladybirds and migratory birds in Manchester. In *Winter: An Anthology for the Changing Seasons* (2016), I focus on the great benefits to wellbeing brought by cultivating an urban garden. In my story in the anthology *Seaside Special: Postcards from the Edge* (2018) edited by Jenn Ashworth, I share a childhood experience of the sea on a trip to Blackpool, Lancashire, one of the most deprived towns in the country yet still capable of eliciting in me as a small child looking out at the sea a greater understanding of the power of the wild.

Throughout my work I offer a clarion call for why urban areas need more and better cared for green spaces, rather than romanticising the situation, and why children of all genders and backgrounds deserve to experience the wildness of the countryside too. Reports show demographical inequality in experiencing the countryside - Natural England, for example, estimated that only one percent of visitors to national parks are from black, Asian and minority

²¹ Bristow, Joseph. *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man’s World*. Routledge, 1991.

ethnic backgrounds despite comprising 14% of the general population.²² My advocacy for the wild joys of girlhood and for children of all racial and cultural backgrounds to access nature offers a fresh contribution to literature. Reviewers picked up on this aspect with author Emma Jane Unsworth for example writing in an endorsement: “Sethi redefines the nature genre with this brave, brilliant and defiant book. A rousing and beautiful ode to hope and wildness. I loved it.”²³

My book was published just 35 years after Wainwright’s, a relatively short span of time if taking a long view of English Literature. It is shocking that as relatively recently as this such a deeply prejudiced, misogynistic book managed to be published at all. In *I Belong Here* I write about how misogynistic as well as racist and classist stereotypes permeating even children’s books such as *The Water-Babies* led to a damaging sense of unbelonging.

Wainwright asks “have the ladies the same capacity for enthusiasm?” and argues no. Capacity – the deeming of women as incapable and inferior is there in black and white in this book, written by a writer deemed to be a classic figure of nature writing and after whom an entire prize is named, the Wainwright Prize for Nature Writing – in its history only two women have won the prize and no person of colour. Being the only writer of colour on the prize-list the year I was nominated elucidates statistically the minority of stories from non-white cultures to have met with mainstream accolades in this genre. There is still an insidious notion which I have encountered of certain people not being ‘capable’ – a notion I have endeavoured to smash.

*

Moving beyond “the road that the White Men tread,” to quote that memorable Kipling phrase, women writers to have written about walking who have influenced my thinking include Virginia Woolf whose *Street Haunting: A London Adventure* (1930) is a powerful example of a female flâneur traversing a cityscape, an intriguing comparison to Charles Dickens traversing an urban landscape in *Night Walks* (1860) – though both focused on

²² Booth, Robert. “England’s national parks out of reach for poorer people – study.” *The Guardian*, 4th February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/04/england-national-parks-out-of-reach-for-poorer-people-study>.

²³ Early reader endorsements available at: <https://i-belong-here.com/book/>

perambulations in London and I was keen to include the cityscape of Manchester and surrounding countryside in my walks and explore contemporary contexts along the way. Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (1999) offers a cultural history of walking encompassing ideas including pilgrimage, the 'flâneur', and the Romantics. In my book I discuss more contemporary narratives of walking which partly inspired my own journey including *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed (2012), which was made into a film and in which the author walks the Pacific Crest Trail following her divorce and her mother's death. It also manages to mix welcome humour with heartache, a breath of fresh air. Despite the gravity of my topics, I was keen for my work to also be, in parts, humorous – for it was humour that helped me to survive a tough journey. Other writers and books chronicling long-distance adventures which sparked my imagination include Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980), about the author's solo trek through the Australian outback with four camels and a dog for company and *The Salt Path* by Raynor Winn (2018) about the author walking the South West Coast Path after being made homeless.

Yet I was acutely aware that the skin we are in affects our way of being in and walking through the world and following the racist attack I suffered knew I had to convey this experience – an awareness of increased vulnerability due to visibly non-white skin, of how race affects our experience of place. I still had not found my experience reflected in literature as a British woman of colour walking – and set out to capture it between book covers.

How much progress had there actually been in the three and a half decades since Wainwright's misogynistic book saw the light of day? Despite the few more women published, I felt acutely that there was still a long way to go, that what was needed in the genre was intersectional feminism. The writer Kathleen Jamie, in a 2019 *Guardian* interview with Patrick Barkham, observed the gender disparity but also factors including class and race:

“Only 15 years ago...nature writing was barely there. It seems very strange that this thing that barely existed can suddenly ignite. I hate to say it, but it has been colonised – by middle-class white men. I'm interested in how that's happened. And if you understand how that's happened, you understand the whole godforsaken political state of this

country.’ (...) She’s keenly observant not just of the male character of much nature writing but also of its middle and upper-class provenance. “Poetry has got much greater diversity, by a long shot ... So why is that? Is it related to land and ownership? Abso-bloody-lutely.’ (...) More women have been published recently, with big sellers by Helen Macdonald, Amy Liptrot and Isabella Tree. But Jamie still bemoans the lack of young, poor and non-white nature writers. She believes that they don’t often visit the countryside, but there is still nature in cities. ‘People are just too put upon, downtrodden, frightened, worried [to write],’ she says. ‘So if you eliminate a whole class, you’re going to eliminate what goes with them – working-class music, acting, literature – a citizen’s wage would enable a cultural flourishing, a human flourishing’.”²⁴

As acknowledged in the above citation, although there are more women published we need an intersectional approach to considering elements of marginalisation including race, class and regionality. Moreover, colonisers were not only white males – it was a woman who for a significant time presided over the global Empire - Queen Victoria, the so-called ‘Empress of India’, a term granted to her by Parliament.

“A writer needs a strong passion to change things”, asserted Roger Deakin in his contribution to that *Granta* collection²⁵ – ironically that passion to change things is what fuelled me on in my own writing and walking. Throughout this exegesis I share my literary influences and the footsteps that have come before - but also why and how, as a creative practitioner, I forged a fresh pathway forward through literature where none existed.

²⁴ Barkham, Patrick. “Kathleen Jamie: ‘Nature writing has been colonised by white men.’” *The Guardian*, 17th October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/17/kathleen-jamie-surfacing-interview-nature-writing-colonised-by-white-men>.

²⁵ This quote is also printed below the author biography in Deakin’s *Wildwood* (2007).

(iv) **‘My feets is tired but my soul is rested’**

A fresh angle I have contributed to the literary walking narrative is showcasing walking as a form of protest in contemporary times whilst also tracing this through history to the Civil Rights protests in which walking was as powerful as talking – it declared the need for equal rights and desegregation during the Bus Boycott 1955-6 after the racist treatment of those including Rosa Parks. Martin Luther King shares in his writings that when he suggested to one such walker, a church elder named Mother Pollard, that she rest and take the bus she declared: ‘my feets is tired but my soul is rested.’²⁶(*I Belong Here*, pp61/2, 133).

I track such walking through history to modern times and more contemporary walking protests of the 2017 Women’s Marches, Black Lives Matter marches of 2020 and Climate movement marches of recent years. I show how walking protests for equality have encompassed calls for racial, class, gender and environmental justice. I share how I was inspired by the Manchester Ramblers who walked for equal access to the countryside during their 1932 Kinder Scout protest which led to the opening of the first national park, the Peak District National Park in 1951 and the opening of the Pennine Way in 1965, the first National Trail – as I write in *I Belong Here*, the Manchester Ramblers showed how “walking could be a radical and political act and lead to change; that walking could be a way of saying: I belong here.”²⁷ I share why I needed to walk beyond them, too, to forge a new pathway through literature where none had existed before. “As I walk through the moorland I feel more than ever that pioneering spirit from Manchester, and how walking is still a radical and political act.” (p14).

My public engagement and impact sharing such pathways of thought includes an appearance on BBC Radio 4’s *Ramblings*, a programme in which “Clare Balding joins notable and interesting people for a walk through the countryside”. During the programme²⁸ I was interviewed by the presenter while taking her on a walk through the Hope Valley in the Peak

²⁶ King, Martin Luther, *Strength to Love*. Walker and Co, 1963, 1984 edition, pp218/9.

²⁷ All quotes from *I Belong Here* are cited from page numbers in its hardback edition.

²⁸ *BBC Radio 4, Ramblings*. “Hope Valley With Anita Sethi.” 28th October 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001rq4p>.

District. Moreover, Britain's bestselling walking magazine, *Country Walking*, recognised *I Belong Here's* original contribution to the field, writing:

"A profound read, weaving a sequence of immense concepts into a beautiful, unique and uplifting story about a walk. It's also a superb study of the wildlife and wildness of the Pennines, and the words that northerners have found to name and describe them. Walkers may recognise many sights within Anita's journey. But rarely has a writer brought so many strands of social and cultural history into the concept of walking." (Hallisey, 2021).²⁹

²⁹ Hallisey, Nick. "Where do I belong?" *Country Walking*, May 2021.

SECTION TWO

2.1 FINDING THE FORM – ROUTE MAPPING AND ROOT MAPPING

2.1 (i) Hybridity of self and form

Here I elucidate how the form, as well as content, of my work is original, and the approach I took to finding the form – a hybrid of travel, memoir and nature writing underpinned by research into the ‘backbone of Britain.’ *I Belong Here* is also a hybrid of tenses: I chose to write the geographical journey in the present-tense, better elucidating how walking through nature helps us feel more present, and chose the past tense for the sections dipping into memory as well as those of essayistic exploration. Throughout, I deepen the sense of how a hybrid identity impacts style, on how content influences form.

Reviewers picked up on the hybrid, multi-layered and interdisciplinary nature of the work, for example Caroline Sanderson in *The Bookseller* describing the book as “a powerful blend of memoir, current affairs, travel and nature writing” which succeeds in being “a magnificent and redemptive achievement”. Sanderson selected *I Belong Here* as Book of the Month in *The Bookseller*, featured it in a Spring preview guide as well as conducting an author interview which made the front cover of the magazine.

The form I chose to tell my story includes a blend of the narrative movement of a geographical journey interwoven with memories (‘memoir’ of course derived from the word for ‘memory’), as well interweaving research into history, nature, political and environmental context, and mental health, resulting in a fresh form which helps to justify the originality of the project. The form – as well as content of *I Belong Here* – is crossover and intersectional and has garnered an interdisciplinary appeal. I wrote an ‘I’ that is hybrid through using a hybrid form, in the process breaking down barriers of genres and carving new pathways through literature. I interrogated the terms of non-fiction by showing how and why a writer such as I can and does belong in a genre that has hitherto been exclusionary.

The concept of ‘hybridity’ in literature and literary and cultural theory was pioneered and popularised by postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha who, in his influential text *The Location of Culture* (1994), describes hybridity’s potential to break down fixed binaries and instead recognise the importance of “cultural interstices.” Hybridity is an ontology which acknowledges the liminal and in-between spaces. Bhabha writes of “the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence” (p9). He writes of ‘The Third Space’ theory (“by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity”, p39). Bhabha pays homage to thinkers and writers who influenced his theory including “the pioneering *oeuvre* of Edward Said” (ix), Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Toni Morrison, and Frantz Fanon.

More recently, literary criticism on hybrid creative nonfiction includes Brenda Miller's *A Braided Heart: Essays on Writing and Form* (2021) which explores craft elements involved in emerging forms of creative non-fiction including the ‘braided form’. *Writing Otherwise: Experiments in Cultural Criticism* (Stacey and Wolff, 2016) is a series of essays about combining academic writing with another form such as the poetic or personal. In *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction* (2023), editors Margot Singer and Nicole Walker argue that “creative non-fiction does not simply borrow elements from fiction and poetry but bends and recombines them to make a hybrid that perpetually troubles and transcends generic bounds.” They further argue that in literature “hybridization infuses wild energy into familiar forms” (p4).

Having been adopted by literary and cultural studies and the social sciences, the term hybridity is actually biological in origin – biology, for example botany, being fertile in hybridizations which serve to improve quality and growth.³⁰³¹ I draw on hybrid traditions but deepen and offer a fresh take – as noted in reviews – that is, showing what it is like to exist within an environment rather than a vacuum, interweaving the political with the personal and with place in a story on publication unique to this genre. Indeed, the *Sunday Times* review described *I*

³⁰ Tolia-Kelly, D.P. “Hybridity” *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*, 2009, pp 258-63.

³¹ Canclini, N.G. “Hybridity” *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences (Second Edition)*, 2015, pp448-452.

Belong Here thus: “punchier and more political than most nature writing.” The review also described the book as “a thing of beauty”, showing that I achieved my aim of creating an aesthetically pleasing work of art which did not ignore but saw as integral to it the political and environmental context in which it was created. Many traditional travel and nature writers have steered clear of the political as if it would somehow sully literary craft. However, this form crucially allowed me to show how the political is inextricable from the personal. I show how political decisions affect deeply personal aspects of our lives and how we move through our lives. This form enabled me to show how external place – which is affected and shaped too by the political – impacts our internal worlds. It allowed me to show how we are shaped by the environment we inhabit and how we in turn shape our environment.

(ii) Intersectionality: Walking as a woman of colour

This hybrid form proved a good stylistic vehicle for my intersectional writing, and for interrogation and re-construction of the "I" and "eye" – our way of being in the world, and our way of seeing the world. Here I develop my argument for an intersectional – and inter-genre – approach to place, personhood and prose.

As I make my journey walking the pathways of Britain, I consider intellectual pathways: key critical sources I here explore are Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks. Such thinkers considered how elements of identity overlapped such as race and gender. For too long, for example, race or gender have been viewed in a vacuum but exploring the experience of being a woman of colour – that is, the interrelated experience of race and gender - is instructive in understanding the power dynamics affecting identity. I further this and offer a fresh perspective by examining the intersections not only of race and gender but also class and regionality and how they affect my experience of walking through the world – and of having a book published about walking.

The criss-crossing of pathways inherent in intersectional thinking allows for multiplicity of being, for complexity and joining of the dots, recognising the need to understand the multiple nature of identities, the diversity of ‘diversity’, and the power structures within which we function.

In *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (1991)³² Crenshaw writes: “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences.” Moreover:

“Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicise experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as ‘woman’ or ‘person of colour’ as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of colour to a location that resists telling.” (p1242).

She goes on to write: “Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* people of colour within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, the interests and experiences of women of colour are frequently marginalised within both.” (1244).

I unite race and gender in *I Belong Here* which has contributed original insight into intersecting experience in the context of place, nature and landscape writing. I write about being a visible minority ethnic (VME):

“I wonder too how the way I am perceived by other people as I walk through this non-multicultural village and out into the countryside will be affected by the fact that I am with a man who looks white and whether I will be more accepted than if I had been walking alone as a brown woman. My companion tells me that although he is mixed-race, because he looks white he is not a ‘visible minority’ and not regarded so, which complicated his sense of identity further.” (p68)

My book helps to tackle this marginalisation, bringing it to the heart and centre. A section is entitled ‘Walking as a Woman of Colour’ in which I detail an incident of abuse I experienced earlier that Summer walking through Nottingham:

“The fact that it had been two white women who racially abused me that day, and a white woman who gaslit me, also shows the limits of white feminism and why we

³² Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039?seq=2>

need a more intersectional approach to exploring the experience of being in the world, place and belonging.” (p74).

Author Katharine Norbury, editor of *Women on Nature*, recognised my contribution in this field, writing in an early reader endorsement: “Anita Sethi invites her reader to walk, not just at her side, but in her shoes, and to feel for themselves both the exhilaration and the chagrin of travelling the backbone of her home country as a woman of colour. By turns joyous and humbling, *I Belong Here* is an urgent and necessary addition to the canon of contemporary writing about place in Britain.”³³

(iii) The class ceiling

My book contributes originality and helps to further knowledge in its chosen field through considering intersectionalities of class and regionality and how they impact our way of moving through the world. Class is addressed by bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), in which she challenges Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which “ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women.” In so doing “she deflected attention away from her classism, her racism, her sexist attitudes towards the masses of American women” (p2). hooks argues:

“Friedan was a principal shaper of contemporary feminist thought. Significantly, the one-dimensional perspective on women’s reality presented in her book became a marked feature of the contemporary feminist movement. Like Friedan before them, white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases, although there has been greater awareness of biases in recent years. Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. Past feminist refusal to

³³ Pre-publication endorsements for *I Belong Here* appear variously on the hardback edition and at: <https://i-belong-here.com/book/>.

draw attention to and attack racial hierarchies suppressed the link between race and class.” (p3).

Crucially she comments: “Class struggle is inextricably bound to the struggle to end racism” – for too long class has been seen as separate to race, and the issue of ‘the white working class’ hijacked by right-wing groups to stoke hatred to immigrants – hatred which fuels racism such as that I chronicle in *I Belong Here*. Yet my book smashes this myth by showing the existence and experience of ethnic minority working-classes, those for whom class and race inextricably intersect. This theme is explored throughout my body of work. What actually defines class? “Parental occupation is the most accurate measure to assess socio-economic background” (Social Mobility Commission, 2020)³⁴ – I write scenes rarely seen in nature writing; about growing up the daughter of a nurse in a single-parent family (*Common People*, pp212); glimpsing birds out of the window of my grandmother’s corner shop in Stretford, Manchester (*Women on Nature*, pp357-364); and about the precarity of millennial adult life as part of ‘generation rent.’ (*I Belong Here*, pp158-60).

Nature writing has been overwhelmingly absent of working-class voices, as has the broader publishing industry. My creative non-fiction essay, ‘On Class and the Countryside,’ exploring my first trip to the Lake District was published in an impactful anthology *Common People: An Anthology of Working Class Writers*, helping to broaden discussion on this theme, which I discussed too in an essay for BBC Wildlife³⁵. I explore how important it is to break down barriers of place. “It’s vital that children of all classes and cultural backgrounds have ready access to nature and the countryside” (p216/7). This cause has since been advanced by initiatives such as Class Festival founded by Natasha Carthew, at which I have been a speaker. In an academic essay entitled ‘A Common Countryside: Rewriting the English Rural in *Common People*’ published in *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism* (Issue 21), Katherine Greenwood situated me as part of “a new wave” of writers who are “rewriting the English rural” and “articulating an urban and leisurely experience of the countryside from a working-class,

³⁴ Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-commission>.

³⁵ Sethi, Anita. “Is the countryside the reserve of the privileged?” *BBC Wildlife*, Oct 2019. <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/people/reserve-of-the-privileged>.

racialised, and feminist perspective” and whose works act to “redress silences and absences in contemporary literature of the countryside.” Greenwood describes the contribution to knowledge my work has made, contextualising with a discussion of Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City*: “the work of Sethi counsels an extension of Williams’s analysis”, she writes, “which entwines the politics of place, race, gender and class”. She adds: “Making the case for the working-class writer – and writers from other disadvantaged groups in society – Sethi shows that the outsider can access original and distinctive forms of creativity.”

(iv) Regionality: Rewriting the North

A crucial intersection I consider is that of regionality, not only the North-South divide but also within the North. The concerns of ‘the North’ have at times been hijacked to fuel racism and nationalism, with a failure to see their interrelation with other aspects of marginalization such as race and class – in my work I ‘braid’ such concerns together in an intersectional interweaving. Indeed, my racist attacker was from the North, living in Marske-by-the-Sea Redcar, Cleveland, North Yorkshire – an area of disenfranchised voters targeted during Boris Johnson’s election campaign and by Brexit campaigners, misusing regional alienation to stoke racism and winning over core ‘Red Wall’ voters in former Labour heartlands.

I consider my experience as a writer from and writing about the North in a section of *I Belong Here* entitled ‘Northern Nature’ which also explores political impact on place (pp213-33). My public engagement on this topic includes being part of a panel entitled Rewriting the North, one of a series of events organised by Manchester Metropolitan University as well as being part of the New Writing North conference in Newcastle to where I was, ironically, heading when I was racially abused. In *I Belong Here* I further share the obstacles I encountered in my journey to publication as a writer from a minority background, including prejudices from those who believed I did not belong here:

“Writing about anything beyond the M25 is still not respected enough in the industry, not seen as ‘universal’ but Northerners are just as human and intelligent as Southerners and care as much about nature; what’s more, we are capable of reading too.” (p215)

I write candidly about a member of the publishing industry who advised me to remove the word ‘Pennines’ at proposal stage – stating that as it is in the North the book would not sell as ‘no-one cares about the North’. Instead, I kept in, even strengthening, the geographical location, and went on to win mainstream awards including one voted for by booksellers and readers around the country. The book also met with healthy sales, earning out its advance and was made a Book of the Year by Waterstones bookseller and Stanfords Travel Bookshop proving that a particular place can be written about in a way which gains universal resonance.

The book’s impact in this area was elucidated by author Andrew McMillan in *The Observer* (2024) on “the new authors covering fresh ground” in writing about the North in which he wrote:

“there isn’t one way to talk about the north; it’s not one thing, it’s prismatic. Just think about the different angles we’ve been given in the last decade. The way Okechukwu Nzelu uses Manchester to explore ideas of race, class and sexuality with humour and tenderness in his debut novel, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, is different from Kim Moore’s *Barrow*, which is different from Malika Booker’s *Leeds*, with its hidden histories, on which she turns the poet’s magnifying glass. Helen Palmer’s *Blackpool*, which is reinvented in Joycean, carnivalesque ways in *Pleasure Beach*, is different from Zaffar Kunial’s northern landscapes, where poems are carved from specific place, and from Gareth Gavin’s haunting queering of the north, as its post-industrial landscapes are turned into dreamscapes in his Goldsmiths-shortlisted novel *Never Was*. Then there’s Jessica Andrew’s vivid debut *Saltwater* where, in Washington, “Boys at school knew the factory was looming over their future, waiting for them to grow into the overalls.” Sunjeev Sahota’s *Sheffield*, seen in the novels *Ours Are the Streets* and *The Year of the Runaways*, is different from Anita Sethi’s journey of reclamation through the Pennines in her moving memoir *I Belong Here*.”³⁶

³⁶ McMillan, Andrew. “Beyond cliché and condescension: We need new stories about ‘The North’.” *The Observer*, 27th January 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/jan/27/beyond-cliche-and-condescension-we-need-new-stories-about-the-north/>.

In *I Belong Here* I also show that the North is a far from homogenous landscape - there is vast inequality within the North including in access to the natural world. Cities are often dubbed ‘metropolitan’ which has become synonymous with ‘metropolitan elite’ ignoring gross disparity of wealth and prosperity within cities themselves. I make a clarion call for urban areas to be redesigned as greener, cleaner spaces, for closeness to nature – abundance of trees on streets, plentiful parks – to be improved for all so that we don’t just have to exist in the countryside to breathe clean air, and for greater access to the countryside and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty too, and a sense that all backgrounds belong there. I share how the gulf between socially deprived areas and the countryside was highlighted in a report from the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE, 2019)³⁷ revealing that almost half of the country’s most socially deprived areas are more than 25 kilometres by road from ten national parks and forty-six Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The CPRE launched detailed maps that show 36 per cent of England’s population live too far from the current network of National Parks and AONBs for these areas to be classified as easily accessible, and it has called for better, more sustainable public transport.

I argue that the North-South divide endemic in the literary world and publishing industry is symptomatic of the political and economic North-South divide and chart the beginnings of change to address this inequality – but how far there is to go. This imbalance also impacts views about nature. The term “superior southern wildness” used by Kathleen Jamie in her now classic essay ‘A Lone Enraptured Male’ is here resonant. Jamie writes:

“Not only wildness, but superior southern wildness: lying in a sunny Dorset field Macfarlane visited his new, post-gryke understanding and ‘again I felt a sense of wildness as process . . . This was a wildness quite different from the sterile winter asperities of Ben Hope, and perhaps, I thought for the first time, more powerful too.’
Ach weel.”

It has most famously been Northern countryside areas such as the Lake District, from Wordsworth to James Rebanks which has featured in literature about nature. As I explore in my body of work, powerful wildness is to be found not only in Northern countryside areas but in

³⁷ CPRE. *The Countryside Charity*. “Helping people enjoy the benefits of England’s special landscapes.” 11th February 2019, <https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/helping-people-enjoy-the-benefits-of-englands-special-landscapes/>

urban areas. I explore areas of my hometown of Manchester such as Old Trafford and Stretford where I grew up, “more known for its football than its flowers” as I write (‘Before the First Frost’, *Winter*, p196), and moments of joy to be found here too, cultivating a small inner-city garden, glimpsing the growth of wildflowers, spotting migratory birds “making a beautiful symmetrical pattern with their flight” (*Women on Nature*, p361). Nature and the wild exists here too – seeing wildness in the everyday, seemingly quotidian, and in places not usually associated with the wild is a notion argued for by Jamie which I here endorse though further by writing about the wild of a cityscape as well as looking into the emotional wildness of, for example, depression and how experiences of nature can be ameliorative to some extent, as explored in 3. Wounderland. Throughout my work, I emphasise how ecological crisis is impacting both rural and urban areas.

Other aspects I consider which are too often overlooked in how they shape our place in the world and sense of belonging are the ontological impact of violence, abuse and bullying in childhood, as well as unconventional family dynamics such as growing up in a single-parent family. Underpinning these discussions of intersectionality and marginalisation is the issue of power – who has it and wields it and who it adversely excludes. As Crenshaw writes in *Mapping the Margins*:

“a large and continuing project for subordinated people – and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful – is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others.” (p12)

I apply this notion to the power of the printed page, the power of literature and the canon to exclude and include, to decide who belongs here. I have put on the page those who have been excluded from it – thus showing how we belong here, in the world, and in the world of literature. In my work I consider and celebrate the diversity of diversity as it were – I explore not only racial diversity but also regional, gender, class and linguistic diversity, and at the book’s heart is biodiversity. I overturn the racist notion that if written by a ‘minority’ writer, a story can only appeal to the racial/gender demographic of its author – and prove that stories from the so-called margins can have a wide appeal. This aspect of my published work also makes it fresh, original and impactful.

(v) Speaking out

Speaking out about systemic inequality and its impact is problematic, at times detrimental and damaging to the person who speaks out, as has been noted by writers throughout the ages, including bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

“In 1981, I enrolled in a graduate class on feminist theory where we were given a course reading list that had writings by white women and men, one black man, but no material by or about black, Native American, Hispanic, or Asian women. When I criticised this oversight, white women directed an anger and hostility at me that was so intense I found it difficult to attend the class. When I suggested that the purpose of this collective anger was to create an atmosphere in which it would be psychologically unbearable for me to speak in class discussions or even attend class, I was told that they were not angry. *I was the one who was angry.*”

She continues: “Often in situations where white feminists aggressively attacked individual black women, they saw themselves as the ones who were under attack, who were the victims.” The author goes on to explore how “racist stereotypes” deepen “the role white women play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization.” (pp12/13).

In *I Belong Here* I have a chapter called ‘Speaking Up’: “I know there is a price for speaking out, being called ‘outspoken’, putting one’s head above the parapet, rocking the boat.

Literature, folktale and mythology bear witness to a long history of silenced women: in Greek mythology, after Philomela was raped, she had her tongue cut out so she could not speak of her traumatic experience; she later turned into a nightingale. As women we have historically been conditioned to please and placate, to be meek and docile, not to speak out.” (p30). I discuss how in our contemporary age, women commentators, writers and public figures are susceptible to being trolled, harassed, gaslit and ‘victim blamed.’ Moreover, success as an ethnic minority writer can be a double-edged sword: after being nominated for the Wainwright Prize, for example, a fake account appeared on social media trolling me with resentful racist comments. Thus, I shed insight into the challenges of walking through – and writing about - this world as a woman of colour.

2.2. Decolonising travel, place and nature writing

What is it like being a person from a marginalised background moving through place? What is it like being a person of colour descended from the empire's indentured labour system reckoning with the traumatic legacy of colonialism on nature - and on the mind and body? How can writing and walking bring a greater sense of belonging to place and landscape – regardless of background? Such are the essential questions resonating through my research.

Although I have been an avid reader since childhood, many books were littered with disturbing stereotypes of marginalised people; 'dark people' were often demonised in the pages of books, making me feel excluded from them – this fuelled my motivation to tell my own story and decolonise the canon. Here I examine further the ways in which my work helps to decolonise the genre, curriculum and canon. I apply intersectional thinking to my discussion, showing interrelated power structures. After all, colonisation was about usurping power - and race, place, class and gender were all factors in that usurpation. Critical Race Theory (CRT) emphasises the interrelation of gender with race – furthered in theories of intersectionality – indeed, scholar Crenshaw is an exponent of both CRT and intersectionality.

Travel writing has existed for centuries – that is, writers have written about their travels and chronicled their journeys since the beginnings of the book-form. However, what has been largely absent from the narrative is a recognition that journeys were at the heart of British colonialism and its aftermath, “journeys forced and journeys chosen, journeys of slavery, indenture and freedom”, as I write in my contribution to the landmark anthology *We Mark Your Memory: Writing from the Descendants of Indenture* (School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2018), p43. This essay and anthology had significant impact and public engagement – I read from it at venues including the Migration Museum and at the Commonwealth People's Forum part of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, the summit of leaders of 53 countries representing more than 2 billion people, on a day whose itinerary was entitled Politics of Hope: Taking on Injustice in the Commonwealth. As I write in my essay: “The hidden horrors and heartaches of history must be remembered” (p49).

I was on a journey when I was racially abused by a man who asked me if I had a British passport, told me to go ‘get back on the banana boat,’ go back to where I’m from (I was born in Manchester, UK), and threatened to set me on fire – it was this attack which starts my book *I Belong Here*. Misogyny also fuelled the attack; the abuser called me a “paki c*nt” – a phrase riddled with both racism and sexism. The summer after being subjected to a race hate crime, as I suffered from anxiety and depression and was grieving the sudden death of a friend, I decided to make a journey of reclamation walking through the Pennines. Along the way I also make other kinds of journeys, into the psyche of the nation, excavating the root causes of racism and how the whitewashing of history we are taught, of the curriculum and canon, has perpetuated such alarming ignorance. As a brown British school girl, I learnt more about Henry VIII’s wives and spent more time colouring in their costumes than I did about why I ended up being born in the UK at all. I learnt nothing about the journeys of colonialism, empire, indentured labour and immigration – journeys I shed light on, and which of course involved extensive travel. Traditionally, ‘travel writing’ and its subset nature writing in English literature have been the preserve of the leisure classes with the time and money to make journeys, but I make the point that far from the notion of travelling for pure enjoyment, leisure or pleasure, much travel throughout the world has been enforced or been a necessity – such as the journeys in my own immigrant and indentured background. This is also a way in which I overturn and challenge conventional notions of the genre.

Another stereotype I smash is around the temporary, notional belonging of people of colour: in fact, the belonging of black and brown people in Britain is much deeper and more ancient than popular knowledge gives credit for and has been proven by the remnants discovered through archaeological excavations at Hadrian’s Wall (the end point of my journey) and in ancient cities such as York: “There are parts of Roman York that were more multicultural than contemporary York.” (*I Belong Here*, p285). Failures in education have omitted such histories and my work contributes to a re-education.

Racism is not limited to a stranger on a train but permeates our institutions, media, academia, publishing and literary worlds – and books themselves. As discussed, there has long been a strain of racism and fascism in travel, adventure, nature and place writing – epitomised by the

colonial trope of the white man adventuring to, ‘discovering’, ‘conquering’ and ‘civilising’ savage and inferior societies. Belonging is crucial here – toxic notions of who does and does not belong.

The ‘father’ of the US national parks, John Muir, long considered a figurehead of nature writing and the environmental movement, made derogatory comments about Indigenous people and American Indians as ‘dirty savages’ and Black people as lazy ‘Sambos’. The Stanford professor Richard White said Muir’s views of the wilderness had a racial basis: “The way we created the wilderness areas we now rightly prize was racist.”³⁸ Muir believed that American Indians “seemed to have no right place in the landscape” despite having lived there for thousands of years – he believed they did not belong there and sought their eradication. ‘Fortress conservation’ policy forcibly removed indigenous people from their land and homes as the National Parks were created including at Yosemite where the Miwok tribe had thrived for almost 4000 years. In a 2015 *New Yorker* article entitled ‘Environmentalism’s Racist History’, professor Jedediah Purdy discusses *Our National Parks*, a 1901 essay collection by Muir written to promote tourism to the national parks, in which he writes: “As to Indians, most of them are dead or civilized into useless innocence” – Purdy notes that “in the same paragraph Muir was more concerned with human perfidy towards bears.”³⁹ John Muir was also a member of the influential Sierra Club whose members and leaders including Joseph LeConte and David Starr Jordan advocated for white supremacy and eugenics. In 2020, The Sierra Club’s executive director acknowledged this harmful history and how the Club also once excluded people of colour in favour of middle and upper-class whites and that they are committed to improving diversity.

However, such racist white supremacy still affects wilderness and notions of wilderness with fortress conservation practices still on-going. In the US Wilderness Act 1964 the word ‘wilderness’ is described as an area where the earth is ‘untrammelled by man, and where man himself is a visitor who does not remain’ – this negates the fact that indigenous communities

³⁸ Associated Press, “Sierra Club apologises for racist views of ‘father of national parks’ John Muir.” 23rd July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/23/john-muir-sierra-club-apologizes-for-racist-views>.

³⁹ Purdy, Jedediah. “Environmentalism’s Racist History.” *New Yorker*, 13th August 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/environmentalisms-racist-history>.

have been a part of the wilderness since ancient times. Dictionary definitions – often seen as fact – are part of the linguistic and wider literary misconceptions of wilderness and nature, propagated in colonial times and still persistent. Interestingly, the recently launched We Are Nature campaign seeks to change the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of Nature and bring it in line with the fact that humans are part of Nature, not separate from it⁴⁰.

Fascist notions of place still permeate the UK: a white supremacist group unfurled a giant White Lives Matter banner on Mam Tor in the Peak District in Summer 2020 (*I Belong Here*, p86). In the past few years, outdoors groups have been founded encouraging diversity in the countryside such as Black Girls Hike and Muslim Hikers – however, the vicious racist trolling they have been subjected to shows that false notions of who nature belongs to need over-turning. Writers of colour are also vulnerable to such trolling, in territorialised spaces. I show why British – and global - place writing needs to move beyond dangerous associations with fascism and acknowledge that people of colour are not inferior, deserve to be treated equally, and that we also belong here.

Colonialism and nature writing – and the decolonisation of nature

Nature was at the core of the colonial endeavour – as I explore in *I Belong Here* and in my contribution to *We Mark Your Memory*. My maternal ancestors were shipped from what was then British India to British Guiana to toil as indentured labourers on sugar plantations, and it was in Guiana now called Guyana that my mother was born. The rapacious plundering of the earth's natural resources for profit fuelled the Empire. Indeed the derogatory term 'banana boat' that was hurled at me derives from the British Empire's banana plantations.

The places from where my parents and ancestors hailed were rich in nature, in wilderness, yet people of colour in Britain are more often associated with urban areas - it was to urban areas that my parents, like many immigrants, came as that is where more jobs were. Here race, class and regionality are inextricable – the motivation for movement across the world was surviving and hopefully thriving. My mother emigrated to the UK from Guyana aged 21 to train as a nurse. My father moved from Kenya to the UK following decolonisation from

⁴⁰ We Are Nature campaign website: <https://wearenature.org/our-story/>.

Britain. I thus show how the movement of people across the globe to industrial cities such as Manchester has been shaped by Empire; how Empire has shaped place and the ethnic and cultural composition of places.

Despite the countries of their origin being so rich in nature – from the Amazon rainforest to the Maasai Mara savannah wilderness to the Ganges river and the Himalayas in the case of my parents and grandparents – somehow, the damaging and misplaced stereotype persists that immigrants and people of colour don't belong or want to belong in nature – or the genre of nature writing. A government-commissioned report into the future of Britain's protected landscapes (*DEFRA Landscapes Review*, Glover, 2019) criticized national parks for not doing enough to make people from diverse sections of society feel welcome.⁴¹ “We are all paying for national landscapes through our taxes, and yet sometimes on our visits it has felt as if National Parks are an exclusive, mainly white, mainly middle-class club”. The Review proposed systemic reform of National Park and AONB governing boards stating that only a “tiny fraction” of board members are from black, Asian or minority ethnicities.⁴² I argue that those with protected characteristics need to feel welcome in the UK's protected landscapes and in writing about such landscapes.

I welcome the writers and artists challenging the misplaced notion that people of colour don't love or belong in nature. In a photographic series, the artist and photographer Ingrid Pollard, born in Georgetown, Guyana and living in the UK from an early age, challenged the notion that black British people only belong in urban settings. There is also an abundance of nature imagery in the writing of Guyanese poet Grace Nichols, although when I interviewed her she mentioned how such topics along with her stylistics merits can be overlooked as she and so many writers of colour are pigeonholed as writing solely about race. (*I Belong Here*, p177).

I reclaim and decolonise the genre and overturn stereotypes, showing how nature is no less natural a terrain for a writer like myself to love and write about, to belong in. As Greenwood

⁴¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. “Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBS.” Last updated 25th September 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review>.

⁴² I explored this further in an article for *British Vogue* (Sethi, Anita. “Nature Should Be For Everyone – Not Just the Privileged Few” 4th July, 2020).

wrote of *I Belong Here*: “The book is a call to action and reclamation of the land and the literature that has been largely denied to marginalised groups in society. Sethi reshapes our understanding of the countryside by rehearsing and recasting the tropes of the ‘middle-class rural convention’ that is also a largely white and masculine tradition.”⁴³ (*Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, Issue 21).

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In *I Belong Here* I also decolonise the canon by discussing narratives from indigenous perspectives including author Robin Wall Kimmerer’s explorations in *Gathering Moss* (2003) *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) which provide a vital perspective on humans’ relationship with nature. She advocates reciprocity with nature: “As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us” (*Braiding Sweetgrass*, p328). I move from the anthropocentric view of the superiority of humans over nature which is so prevalent in Western nature writing to exploring indigenous perspectives about nature; for example, Kimmerer uses the term ‘more-than-human’ when writing of nature. In *I Belong Here* I posit myself and humans as part of nature not above it, thus as a creative practitioner decolonising notions about nature and ‘nature writing.’

The influence of indigenous views of nature can be seen in the following passage of *I Belong Here* when I walk beside the River Ribble:

“I am the river, and the river is me – the Maori saying runs through my mind. The sound and sight of the river fills my head, swelling and rushing and flowing, and there is nothing else my attention is focused on but its waters...

I am the river, and the river is me. I feel myself falling away, the shell between the self and world dissolving as I walk...” (pp170/171).

The Romantic and ‘pastoral tradition’ found awe in nature and whilst sharing aspects of this – such as the capacity to find awe and wonder - I also problematize, challenge, and add a new dimension. Keats criticised the ‘egotistical sublime’ in this tradition including in Wordsworth’s

poetry – the superiority of the self whilst viewing nature. He coined the term ‘negative capability’ to differentiate from this and whilst my work shares more in common with Keatsian negative capability, I find it more useful to consider notions of nature from indigenous cultures.⁴⁴ As the passage above describes, the experience of nature causes a loss of ego – a merging of self and nature (‘I feel myself falling away’...). This is a trajectory throughout my narrative culminating in the message that we are a part of not apart from nature. I also explore indigenous views of walking – for example the ‘songlines’ (also called ‘dreaming tracks’), paths across the land and sometimes sky which some Indigenous Australians believe were travelled during the Dreamtime. Ancestors walked the world and sang the world into being. (*I Belong Here*, p51).

The pastoral tradition is known for its simplistic idealisation of rural subjects and nature. However, as a post-pastoral and post-colonial writer, I de-romanticise nature writing in various ways, for example by exploring the challenges of being a person of colour in the countryside, as well as by looking unflinchingly into the heartache of the ecological and climate crisis which is threatening the vulnerable natural world and depleting biodiversity and ecosystems in both rural and urban areas. I show how the climate crisis disproportionately affects people of colour living in polluted urban areas as well as in developing countries. I deromanticize the canon by turning a steady gaze on both the beauty and brutality to be found in places not, for example, editing out the litter floating upon a canal, or the depletion and pollution of our rivers and seas. Air pollution, besieging all major cities, is endemic and studies reveal just how toxic it is: a Public Health England report stated that “air pollution is the biggest environmental threat to health in the UK, with between 28,000 and 36,000 deaths a year attributed to long-term exposure.”⁴⁵ (*I Belong Here*, p233). More people of colour live in polluted cities, revealed as a comorbidity with coronavirus. Class and race and regionality literally affect the air we breathe – our environment - and our life chances within such an environment.

⁴⁴ The phrase ‘egotistical sublime’ was used by Keats in an 1818 letter to Richard Woodhouse. Available at: <http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/271018.htm>.

⁴⁵ Public Health England. “Public Health England publishes air pollution evidence review.” 11th March 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/public-health-england-publishes-air-pollution-evidence-review>.

2.3 Construction of the ‘I’

How did I construct an “I” in such a monocultural landscape? I share the practice-based approach I took to finding and writing the “I”. The extant literary landscape – and societal structures – had all but erased the capacity to say “I”. Saying “I” therefore – constructing the self in words and narrative – is a radical act of creation. Two chapters of *I Belong Here*, ‘Speaking Up’ and ‘Bearing Witness’, recount the racist abuse I suffered and the process of reporting it to the police including giving a statement which resulted in my racist attacker being convicted. I explore how the “I” came to be destabilised and the process of stabilisation – as well as the ‘here’ in which every ‘I’ must exist – the here of both place and time. I share this extract from the chapter ‘Bearing Witness’ in which a police officer has asked me to phonetically spell my name:

“It is such a primal feeling – spelling out your identity, letter by letter, in a police station, after being victim of a hate crime, after having the core of the identity attacked and in such brutal language. I began again shaping sound into sense, hearing my name resound. This is who I am.” (p42).

I am asked my current job occupation and share how I was going to Newcastle to speak at the launch of a new book I am in (*Common People*) at Waterstones at 6.30pm, and how heartbreaking it is that we can’t move around the country freely without suffering from racial assaults.

“This is my name, this is what I do for a living, this is where I live, this is what happened as I was travelling through the world. I felt language return to me, and each word I uttered felt palpable, each word felt powerful, each word was bearing what had happened.

I felt words in my brain, then on my tongue, behind my teeth, then enter the room. The room was so small it was as if I could feel my voice vibrating in the air, shaping sound into sense. It seemed as if every cell and every muscle in the body was engaged in getting the words out into the world, as if all the oxygen flowing through my lungs was intent on getting into language. *I*... a letter so strong and

sturdy, upright. Today someone tried to bruise that self, to dent it, and not for the first time. It was an attack not only on me but on every one of my skin colour. I felt the vowel in my voice. And how for so much of my life it had been a struggle to fully say it, to be it, all the forces that had tried to flatten it, extinguish it. I. I exist. I have a heart that beats. I have a right to exist and move around in the world safely, to belong. I shaped each word with care, feeling how important it was to convey what happened, for the truth to be known, and justice to prevail – and that by giving this testimony I might stop someone else having to suffer what I did. For being able to fully say ‘I’ enables connection with ‘you’ and ‘we’ and ‘us’.

This is why we learn to talk at all.” (pp42/3).

At that moment inside that police station, I realised how for so much of my life it had been a struggle to say ‘I’, the toxic forces that had tried to flatten it, extinguish it – I explore the destabilisation of the ‘I’ as well as the process of learning to establish a self, to feel and hear the vowel in my voice, to say “I exist”, which constitutes some healing. We are all creatures of place and the “I” is constructed within a “here”, within a place and a time. But both the “I” and the “here” had been attacked – the racist man had suggested I had no right to be here, that I did not belong here. He threatened to set me on fire, to eradicate my existence. My journey of sharing my story, of constructing an “I” is thus inextricably linked with place.

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The self in society

“Being able to fully say ‘I’ enables connection with ‘you’ and ‘we’ and ‘us’,” I write in *I Belong Here* (p43). I explore the self in society, and the profound sense of being unsettled in both, in place and in time. Indeed, when I walk in a place called Settle in the Yorkshire Dales I focus on this theme and explore what it might take to move from a state of profound unsettledness to feeling settled in the self. I also show how unsettledness is itself a powerful state for a writer, bringing insight and potential new ways of being. What does it mean to be settled and unsettled? “Here in the wild, I feel settled”, I write (p171) – I find new forms of settledness not in bricks and mortar but in nature – also tracing this to ancient times when the

first homosapiens were nomadic. I posit that losing that connection with nature has, among other factors, led to a sense of unsettlement.

Such unsettlement also raises the questions: when we leave a place, how does it remain in our mind and heart? What traces do places leave within us? How does our hometown shape our selfhood? Such questions are paramount in an era of heightened displacement in which more people are forced to leave their homes than ever before, and in which environmental crisis has threatened the planet, our communal home. Thus, I consider place and placelessness, location and dislocation, and what it means to feel at home in the self and world in an age of ecological and political crisis, of profound unsettlement, an age of trauma.

SECTION THREE

THE WOUNDERLAND

“I am walking through wounds, wandering a wounded landscape, what I call a ‘wounderland’ of sorts” (I Belong Here, p203)

Systemic discrimination, violence, bullying and abuse as explored in earlier chapters of this exegesis – and the creative component - wounds the mental health, causing trauma which manifests in conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the root of which is a sense of exclusion, being made to feel as if you do not belong.

I coined the term ‘wounderland’ to describe the geographic and psychogeographic space of trauma – I walk through the wounded landscape of the North, full of ‘scars’ (the word for a steep cliff or rocky outpost, fascinating formations), and consider the woundedness of the earth and its inhabitants. My central research question is into the causes and effects of woundedness and how walking – and writing – can help heal and create a sense of belonging. This section further excavates the woundedness – and healing – at the heart of my work.

3.1 Tracking Trauma – from railway spine to neural pathways

Literary trauma studies is a developing field exploring how literature deals with both personal and collective trauma and in my research I have both investigated and built upon extant studies in this area – identifying gaps.

It is fascinating to consider “the origins of the discourse of trauma” (Kennedy, 2020)⁴⁶, tracked back to the phenomenon of ‘railway spine’ - a nineteenth century diagnosis which was variously physical and also termed then as a ‘nervous disorder’. With the burgeoning growth of the industrial revolution came the rapid expansion of the railways in the early nineteenth century and, with it, accidents and trauma involving symptoms but no evidence of injury. In 1866 the surgeon Sir John Eric Erichsen traced such symptoms to concussion of the spine “with potential

⁴⁶ Kennedy, Rosanne, “Trauma and Cultural Memory Studies.” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Routledge, 2020, 1st Edition.

psychological overlay” – laying the way for compensation for injuries (Gasquoine, 2020).⁴⁷ Trauma theory intersected with medical and legal concerns as those affected sought legal compensation for both physical and psychological injuries. Contemporary notions of ‘posttraumatic stress disorder’ (PTSD) – a term which first appeared in 1980 in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders⁴⁸ – can usefully be traced back to debates around ‘railway spine’.

‘Railway spine’ is a resonant phrase for my journey along the backbone of Britain which began with abuse on a railway and led to my abuser being charged with a racially aggravated public order offence. As I explore in *I Belong Here*, legal and medical concerns also intersect here with trauma. I have explored pre-existing research into trauma but also develop and deepen the field in various ways, considering relatively new topics: for example, the Equality Act was legislated in 2010 and defined the protected characteristics including age; gender reassignment; disability; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation. My abuser attacked my protected characteristic of race also making gender-based slurs. I make clear that such an attack is illegal and also share the mental trauma inflicted by being attacked in such a way (chapters ‘Protected Characteristics’, p115 and ‘On Strength, Courage and Trauma’, p141). I share what Victim Support counselling I received and make a clarion call that psychological support for trauma should be more readily available – not everyone has evidence of their abuse or is able to achieve a conviction and will not have access to psychological help. Moreover, trauma can manifest long after the traumatic event itself.

The beginnings of literary trauma theory drew from psychoanalysis with Freud and Lacan as leading influences. Professor Cathy Caruth has been a key figure in this psychoanalytically informed approach to literary trauma theory, as explored in her book *Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) which draws on Freud’s theory of trauma outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) and characterised by repetitive reenactments of a painful event that one cannot leave behind yet does not fully

⁴⁷ Gasquoine, Gerard Philip, “Railway spine: The advent of compensation for concussive symptoms,” *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences*, Volume 29, 2020, Issue 2.

⁴⁸ Crocq, Marc-Antoine. “From shell shock and war neurosis to posttraumatic stress disorder: a history of psychotraumatology.” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 2000 Mar; 2(1): 47-55.

understand. Freud uses literature to describe traumatic experiences including a story told by Tasso in his romantic epic of the hero Tancred unwittingly wounding his beloved Clorinda. Freudian notions of traumatic experience are characterised by belated return of the trauma, unknowability and “the unassimilated residue of an event” (Forter, 2007).

Caruth writes: “What seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred’s first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.” (p4). Caruth writes of “a literary dimension” that “stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound.” (p5).

Literary trauma theory has developed in interesting directions from such early psychoanalytic theories to embrace a more interdisciplinary approach. In *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014), editor Michelle Balaev discusses the “pluralistic model of trauma” which allows for “plurality of theories and approaches.” Crucially this “moves away from the focus on trauma as unrepresentable and toward a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience” (p3). Trauma was imagined as “inherently indecipherable” (p10), but pluralistic thinkers have begun to decipher it with the tools of political, social, cultural and historical contexts. Acknowledging the causes and historical forces that traumatise enables a positive change rather than endless repetition of trauma and opens up “a space for acting on the systems that traumatize.” (Forter, 2007, p282).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Forter, Greg. “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form.” *Narrative*, Vol.15, No.3, Oct.,2007, pp259-285.

I situate my work as part of a “literature of witness”, a term used by Margaret Atwood⁵⁰ – but which speaks to a long history of “testimonial forms of storytelling” (Jensen, 2020⁵¹) which are part of the literary narrative of traumatic experiences. Despite the ‘unspeakable’ qualities of trauma, there is a paradoxical impulse to testify and bear witness to the unbearable, to speak of the unspeakable, to write of what almost defies articulation. What has been too absent from such testimonies are a plurality of experiences, those which have traditionally been excluded, silenced, erased. I bear witness to such suffering, bearing witness to the trauma of moving through the world in a marginalised body, to the brutal and violent legacies of Empire, and to historical and cultural erasures.

3.2 Colonialism as a wounding and intergenerational trauma

We are all woundable and wounds have the capacity to heal - to some extent – but I argue that it is crucial to understand and deal with the causes to avoid on-going traumatisation. I explore specifically how wounds can be caused by systemic injustice and inequality, marginalization, and racism and how that affects mental health. The effect of marginalisation on the mental health has been too absent from literary trauma studies as well as from broader public discourses, a legacy of the colonisation of the curriculum including academic texts and the lack of diversity in the literary, academic, publishing and media industries. I argue that institutional failures to deal with the legacy of British colonialism such as the whitewashing of the curriculum have fuelled racism, ignorance and perpetuated postcolonial and intergenerational trauma. Critical Race Theory elucidates institutional racism and it is instructive to consider this with regards to contemporary institutions such as those which influence our experience of place and personhood. My journey along the ‘backbone of Britain’ as my book is subtitled is a geographical journey but also a journey through Britain’s history including the parts of it which have been whitewashed and how that has affected and wounded mental health as well as wounding and damaging relationships between people. The shocking silence in the school classroom around the brutalities of Empire and colonialism

⁵⁰ Atwood, Margaret. “Margaret Atwood on What ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Means in the Age of Trump.” *New York Times*, 10th March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/books/review/margaret-atwood-handmaids-tale-age-of-trump.html>.

⁵¹ Jensen, Meg, “Testimony.” *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Routledge, 2020.

was traumatic to me as a brown British school girl descended from indentured labour and immigrant parents from former British colonies – the silence was purposeful and not unchangeable; it is possible and in fact necessary to break this silence.

Systemic discrimination has been deeply embedded into books themselves, from the earliest days of childhood reading. Demeaning depictions riddling the pages of literature were wounding to read. I spent a childhood and adulthood reading such stereotypes, as did others, and such stereotypes enforce toxic notions that marginalised groups don't belong. Much of learning thus needs to be an unlearning and re-education; for example unlearning that women are inferior and have no enthusiasm for adventure as Wainwright propagated, and re-learning that it is natural for those of all backgrounds to love nature and have the intellectual capacity to convey that love of nature, to undertake adventures and share the stories we gather along the way. As I write in *I Belong Here*:

“I read *The Water-Babies* in childhood and did so without being warned about what we might find beyond the wonder of the water-baby, for it is a book teeming with racial prejudices – and that is just one example. As I read more of *A Pennine Journey* I was alarmed by its misogyny. Of course these writers were ‘of their time’ but prejudices can be internalised from reading books uncritically, and I wonder how much has been by people over the years. Discussion about this has been alarmingly absent, but in the wake of recent protests for racial equality there has been some re-evaluating: for example, *Gone With the Wind* was removed from HBO Max due to its ‘racist depictions’ and reintroduced with a disclaimer discussing historical context.” (p177).

Woundedness can be caused by unbelonging and perpetuated and ingrained by the racist demeaning of ethnic minorities prevalent throughout culture – a legacy of colonialism. Indeed, a ‘content warning and position statement’ on the Rees-Williams collection of 3000 children’s books in York St John’s University states: “Within the 150 years of children’s writing which is represented in the collection, there is a widespread occurrence of colonialist narratives which centre white supremacy, and racist and orientalist methods of both fictional and historical storytelling.” It

adds that “their ability to cause damage endures” but their preservation provides “evidence of the racist marginalisation and stereotyping of peoples.”⁵²

Therefore, a decolonisation of the canon – which does not mean erasing but contextualising historic literature and canonising and creating new diverse literature - can contribute to understanding, humanization of dehumanized minorities, and to healing.

We also need a more invigorated decolonisation of literary trauma theory – after all, as Professor Janet Sayers points out: “Freud was racist. He described colonized people as savage and primitive, and he likened them to infants and young children” (Sayers, 2020)⁵³. Can we really continue to revere and regard as central to literary trauma theory a thinker who propagated such shocking racist views – in themselves traumatising to read? Interesting contemporary literary critics and scholars to explore trauma in postcolonial literary studies include Greg Forter, Sam Durrant, Irene Visser, Vijay Mishra, and Leela Gandhi who have variously examined work by those including J.M.Coetzee, Wilson Harris, Toni Morrison, VS Naipaul, Arundhati Roy and Frantz Fanon. Sam Durrant for example, in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (2003), explores Frantz Fanon’s seminal *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Durrant makes the point, argues Forter, “that the potential for traumatization is a constitutive feature of colonial (race) relations, inasmuch as these are always and everywhere relations of domination.”⁵⁴ (Forter, 2014; Durrant, 2003).

I fill in gaps in literary trauma studies which has failed to focus enough on the reckoning of the traumatic legacy within Britain itself, the colonising country to where many formerly colonised people travelled and settled after Independence, and where they began families, new generations such as myself who bear the intergenerational scars of trauma. This is at the heart of my work as I track trauma to these geographic and psychical places.

⁵² York St John University. “Rees-Williams Collection.” <https://www.yorks.ac.uk/library/welcome-to-the-library/special-collections/rees-williams-collection/>

⁵³ Sayers, Janet. *Sigmund Freud, The Basics*. Routledge, 2020, 1st Edition, p161

⁵⁴ *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma*, p70.

I deepen explorations of postcolonial and intergenerational trauma, and the trauma of unbelonging caused by the legacies of colonial violence, shaming and uprooting. I put forward that colonialism was a form of collective bullying, viewing the target as inferior, which when internalised – such internalisation carried through generations - causes symptoms of depression and low self-esteem and other mental health struggles. In *I Belong Here* I unite literature with science by considering the biological effects of bullying: for example, I cite research by the University of Montreal which suggests that bullying can change the structure surrounding a gene involved in regulating mood, making victims more vulnerable to mental health problems as they age (Ouellet-Morin, 2012).⁵⁵

The landscape of trauma studies is ever growing and of interest is its relationship with neuroscience and neurobiology and its place in the growing interdisciplinary field of ‘medical humanities’: As I write in *I Belong Here*: “Knowledge about trauma is still evolving, including relatively recent studies about the inheritance of trauma, how it is passed down through generations through ‘epigenetics’”.⁵⁶ A selection of interesting studies regarding epigenetics and trauma are collated at the UK Trauma Council’s resources portal⁵⁷. Counter to the somewhat fatalistic Freudian narrative that we are doomed to repetition, I consider how such biological changes are far from permanent and how walking and engagement with nature can have such a profound effect on the whole being – on body and mind – as to forge new neural pathways, new ways of being in the world – and carve a new direction away from toxic cycles of trauma. I also emphasise the need to tackle the causes of wounding, for the systemic discrimination still existing in institutions to end, and only when we have a truly equal society will no further wounds be inflicted.

⁵⁵ full citation in Bibliography.

⁵⁶ Henriques, Martha. “Can the legacy of trauma be passed down the generations?” *BBC Future*, 26th March 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190326-what-is-epigenetics>.

⁵⁷ UK Trauma Council. “Epigenetics and mental health”, March 2021, https://uktraumacouncil.org/research_practice/epigenetics-and-mental-health-a-brief-guide-to-the-research.

3.3 The body and belonging – including a ‘body of work’

I have earlier considered constructing an “I”. How does one construct the “here”? Here is a time as well as a place and the recognition of that informed my work as a creative practitioner. All my life I felt ‘not really here’ on account of the effects of trauma, which causes ‘derealisation’ and ‘depersonalisation’ as described by trauma theorists including Bessel Van Der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) who explains that traumatised people can “feel separated from their bodies” and that: “Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies” (pp99/100). I was stranded psychologically in the place and time of traumatic events. My journey towards saying “I” is also one of being here, now – of being able to fully inhabit both place – including my own body, once a site of trauma - and time, the present moment.

My interest in how the body is hurt – and how it may be healed – is apparent early on in my ‘body of work’. For example, my story in the *Winter* anthology sows the seeds of this interest in its exploration of how helping my mother to cultivate an urban garden brought a greater sense of peace: my childhood self notices the brown and black colours of the body, which I had been bullied about, in the tree barks and branches and soil: “they too are a natural part of the world”. (p197). I am often asked about being a brown body out in nature and whether that brings discomfort but it can actually bring a oneness with nature – moreover, a bird or a butterfly or a bee or a tree is not going to ask us where we are from, we can simply be. Indeed, we can learn from nature: “Does the purple thistle tease the grass about its greenness?” (*I Belong Here*, p76). Meanwhile in ‘Escape from Eldorado’ (*We Mark Your Memory*), bodily pain has something to teach me as root canal treatment caused by my sweet tooth leads to a journey to the sugar plantations of my mother’s birthplace, Guyana, unearthing the links between nature and Empire, a system which caused so much bodily and mental suffering. Walking by waterways both in Manchester and Guyana, from the Ship Canal to the Demarara River, brings greater sense of the immensity of nature in our history and present-day, some healing and understanding, some distilling of words from wounds.

A through-line in my body of work are the benefits of nature to both physical and mental wellbeing, unifying body and mind: I depict my mother's depression and how gardening was to some extent ameliorative, how it seemed she was, for a time at least, "passing her sadness away into the soil." (*Winter*, pp197/8). In my contribution to *Women on Nature*, a ladybird becomes a source of sustenance helping survival in a life ridden with domestic violence. I write of how the experience of violence shatters a sense of self but of the awe and wonder to be found observing even creatures so tiny: "I liked looking at the ladybirds, their intricacies. It helped, in this great blur of a crowded city into which I had been born, to focus" (p357). Nature lives on in the imagination, too: when I am no longer with the ladybird, I conjure it back to life through painting it – giving it embodiment in art. I also share awareness not only of humans' woundability but nature's, conjuring the "strange wounded noises" of an injured bird and how my grandmother helped tend and care for it until it could again fly free. When I can no longer see the beloved bird I imagine being it which brings creaturely perspective: "that night as I lay in bed I became a bird (...) Looking down upon my life in this way, I felt all the bad emotions drain away. I felt a peace flood through me."

Choosing *I Belong Here* as a 'Cultural Highlight' in the 'On My Radar' section of *The Observer* newspaper in 2023, the writer Chris Bush commented:

"I'm loving this book by Anita Sethi about walking the Pennine Way. It starts with a description of a racist verbal assault she experiences on a train, and it's an extraordinary personal piece of travel writing about her relationship with the environment. It has a profound topography of the body: the chapters are broken into 'mouth', 'spine', 'skin' – terms that have meanings both within a landscape and in our bodies. It also looks at the historical context: British colonial rule, the Kinder Scout trespass, public rights of way. It's about who the land is for and who it belongs to."⁵⁸

I chose to structure *I Belong Here* around the body; each section is named after a part of the body – Mouth, Skin, Backbone, Lifeblood, Feet – and each part of the body parallels a part of the landscape: skin is paralleled with grass (the skin of the earth), backbone with the

⁵⁸ Bromwich, Kathryn. "On my radar: Chris Bush's cultural highlights." *The Observer*, 25th November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/nov/25/on-my-radar-chris-bush-cultural-highlights>.

limestone cliffs, and lifeblood with the rivers flowing through our country, and the rivers along which I plotted the route of my journey. The narrative trajectory is to show how the skin we are in affects our experience of the world but then to get beneath the skin to show the lifeblood and oxygen of which we are all made (oxygen created by trees, plants, algae and photosynthesizing plankton) conveying the universal message that we are all a part of nature.

My journey through the landscape is one of embodiment, beginning from a state in which I was ‘derealised’ with trauma, not fully inhabiting myself or the here and now, and moving towards a state of belonging in my body, in the here and in the now – I show how the experience of walking in the wild was intrinsic to that embodiment. The structural trajectory of the narrative is to get beneath the skin to show the lifeblood of which we are all made, the oxygen which flows through all of our lungs, needed for the existence of each and every one of us, offering an equalising message. Influential to my thinking was an interview I conducted with the Booker Prize winning author Margaret Atwood in the UK’s oldest nature reserve where we went birdwatching as a setting for the interview. A life-long environmentalist and conservationist she made the point that nature is a part of us: “Nature is inside you. You just breathed some of it in.” For Atwood, loving one’s neighbour means loving the air in their lungs: “You have to love their oxygen, therefore you have to love what makes their oxygen. The natural world isn’t apart from us.”⁵⁹ This universalising message of equality is one I put forward against the divisive forces of hatred and racism.

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My tracking of trauma in the body, mind and landscape deepened with explorations of scars in the eponymous chapter of *I Belong Here* (Scars, pp184-213) – scar, a site of the body which finds a profound parallel in the landscape. The word ‘scar’ is the word for marks left on the body after being wounded, markings left on the mind - psychological scarring, and is also the name for a limestone cliff or outcrop. The North is a scarred landscape, full of such outcrops. I literally walk up through scars including Horton Scar near Pen-y-Ghent, one of

⁵⁹ Sethi, Anita. “Birdwatching with Margaret Atwood.” *FT Magazine*, 26th October 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/9e1e1506-9b04-11e6-b8c6-568a43813464>.

the Three Peaks. I walk through, into and beyond what I call a ‘wonderland’ – which becomes a metaphor for my emotional journey.

Literary critic Caroline Sanderson, in a profile in *The Bookseller*, observed the link between landscape and language thus:

“[An] imbued sense of ‘northern-ness’ is one of the most striking qualities of “I Belong Here.” Sethi riffs beautifully on north country vernacular with place names, and the names of geological features providing the starting-point from which to discuss a broad range of issues. For example, the chapter called “Scars” in which she writes about climbing Pen-y-Ghent via the high cliff known as Horton Scar is also a reflection on loss and PTSD and on healing. Arriving in the North Yorkshire town of Settle prompts her to ask questions about what it means to have a home, to belong, and what it is to lack or be displaced from these things. In fact the entire book is structured in an allegorical way as an activist journey around the human body, from Mouth (“Speaking Up” and Bearing Witness”) to Feet (“Walking and Witnessing”). And the fact that the Pennine Hills are popularly known as the backbone of Britain inspires a meditation on what it means to have backbone in a metaphorical sense – what we mean by strength, what people need in the way of social support structures.”⁶⁰

Sanderson found parallels between the geographical landscape and the structural landscape of the book, writing: “just like the limestone strata of the Pennine sedimentary landscapes she so evocatively describes, “I Belong Here” is a work of many layers, with Sethi excavating the mental health crisis, systemic racism, isolation, and what it means to have a voice, the protected characteristics of the 2010 Equality Act. At a time when so many have someone to grieve for, “I Belong Here” is a book about bearing loss too. The book also beautifully expresses her love of the natural world, and her joy at the renewed sense of embodiment that comes from putting one foot in front of the other.”

As for the ‘wonder’ to be found in the ‘wonderland’, I write: “If you look into the wound and turn it into words, there is wonder to be found” (*I Belong Here*, p206). Throughout, I

⁶⁰ Sanderson, Caroline. “Author Interview: Anita Sethi”, cover story, *The Bookseller*, 22nd January 2021.

consider the wonder and related concept of awe to be found gazing into the scarred landscape of body, mind and earth – from gazing down the astonishing ‘Hull Pot’, a collapsed cavern in Pen y Ghent to the waterfall flowing therein, to considering our more emotional and psychological wounds and the healing that understanding can bring.

3.4 **The Walking/Nature Cure: From tradition to contemporary science**

There is a literary tradition of seeking solace from turmoil by walking in nature as discussed - I have considered what I do have in common with this tradition and also how I challenge, disrupt and add a new dimension, a new pathway. I frame my research within critical debates but also add fresh, original writing to the field. Whilst studying English at university my knowledge of the field deepened as I studied literature from medieval to contemporary times and also American and postcolonial literatures including ideas of nature such as the Wordsworthian sublime and Transcendentalists. Thereafter I consolidated my research skills and knowledge working as a literary critic including reviewing books about nature such as *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. However, such research activities made me acutely aware of how a canon is created, what falls through the canon – and the interesting work of literary excavation and restoration. For example, in a BBC Radio 3 *Essay*⁶¹ I explore the neglected Anne Brontë, who found succour by the Scarborough sea whilst suffering from tuberculous and where she died and is buried. Her reputation is – like her gravestone – only more recently being restored. “By the sea she so loved, it is easy to see and feel how the landscape of the north so powerfully shaped the literature and lives of the Brontës.” In my *Essay*, I ask: “What does it feel like to be a woman walking alone through the world, through the wild?” – a question resonant to both of our work.

The contemporary notion of the ‘nature cure’ in literature was popularised in the catchily titled book *Nature Cure* by Richard Mabey (2005) about his struggles with depression and quest to reconnect with the wilderness. In *I Belong Here* I also mention narratives which partly inspired my own journey including *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed - this journey through grief was resonant as I was that summer suffering from a bereavement – the sudden death of a friend aged just 28 years old. Grief is a wounding. I set off on a journey through the

⁶¹ Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00182c5>.

‘wonderland’ of loss and grief caused by bereavement as well as from the racial abuse I suffered and a reopening of earlier wounds. Other writers who walk through trauma include Raynor Winn in *The Salt Path*. A now classic memoir which explores grief and bereavement through the prism of nature is *H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald which brought a fresh energy to nature writing, although does not feature a walking narrative. Whilst I was writing from and into a generation of women writers to some extent, my own story had not been represented in the pages of literature. In the words of a Brontë sister: “I’ll walk where my own nature would be leading. / It vexes me to choose another guide.”⁶²

As argued by pluralist literary trauma theorists, it is the specificity of a story that adds value to understanding, not simply a reaching after a supposed universality and not ignoring the systemic causes of trauma. In telling my story I have challenged who gets to write their story and have it read, who gets to bear witness to suffering and trauma. Indeed, there persists a toxic and racist notion that ‘mental health’ and mental ill-health is something white people have whilst the behaviour of brown and black people stems from being simply mad, bad or evil – inferior, rather than impacted by traumatic occurrences which effect the mental health and subsequent behaviours, suffering that is prolonged by inequality in access to mental health care. By sharing my story, I have offered a humanising and equalising narrative. Breaking down the duality between mind and body, I argue for better mental health care including destigmatisation of mental illness, writing: “If the body became wounded we’d have no shame about seeking help, and it should be the same with the mind, yet stigma still remains, and treatment needs to be more inexpensively and abundantly available.” (*I Belong Here*, p204).

I contribute to understanding by taking an interdisciplinary approach to environmental humanities, uniting literature with science and the medical humanities, speaking to experts in ‘green care’ about the benefits of nature and walking to both physical and mental health. I conducted copious research in the field of walking and wellbeing – and how it is scientifically proven that walking does wonders for our wellbeing and improves both the physical and mental health. The term ‘wellbeing’ has taken on various connotations and in recent times

⁶² Various attributed to Charlotte and Emily.

been commodified with companies selling ideas of wellness - throughout my work I challenge notions of what might bring us wellbeing and show the structural and systemic barriers that impede some from achieving wellbeing (such as unequal access to nature, as discussed earlier, or unequal pay which may prohibit us making those journeys into nature at all).

Crucially, my hybrid approach continues to break down the ‘mind’ and ‘body’ binary by instead uniting them – showing how biologically and scientifically the mind and body are inextricably interrelated and how the way we move our body affects our mind. Neuroscientist Shane O’Mara in his book *In Praise of Walking: The New Science of How We Walk and Why It’s Good for us* (2019) shares how walking is good for both body and mind. I was interested particularly in how walking in wild places does wonders for us and set out to research this. I interviewed experts including Professor Dacher Keltner and Dr Alan Kellas about ‘green care’, the ‘green prescription’ and about both the science, neurobiology and literary tradition of finding ‘awe’ in nature as well as the science and biology of walking and its effect on wellbeing. The external environment impacts our internal environment, our wellbeing, and being immersed in a natural environment is proven to increase wellbeing. I researched the emotions I felt during my journey, the ways and extent to which nature and walking can be ameliorative, and evolving notions of a so-called ‘nature cure’. Professor Dacher Keltner co-authored the paper ‘Emotions in the Wilds of Nature’ showing declines in PTSD symptoms among poor teenagers and veterans when they went white-water rafting. I asked him why nature is so healing to symptoms of PTSD. “There are multiple things that happen when you have suffered a hate crime as you did, and I’m really sorry about that, or a child who’s been bullied or you’ve been sexually assaulted or you’re coming out of war, or you’ve been in poverty,” he told me. He explained that the sounds, the scents, the colours of nature directly calm down our stress response. “Our bodies are like antennae that pick up these natural cues”. Being connected to the “wonders of nature” and experiencing awe also shows that there is more to life than what can be imprisoning trauma, “there is more to the story.” He explained: “Those three pathways of how we sense nature, how it calms our minds, and that powerful awe really are good ways to heal...Parts of our body evolve to experience awe-inspiring nature.”

I researched in depth physiological reactions: one of my symptoms of PTSD is anxiety, essentially a very intense fear. Can nature heal the deep-rooted fear that we've kept in our bodies and mind since childhood? "I believe it will through these pathways, or what are called mechanisms, and that is the radical thesis," he said. "Which is why I think it's so important to write what you're writing and show how nature can be healing." He mentioned countries such as South Korea and Japan which have the concept of 'forest bathing' ['shinrin yoku'] and elaborated on the "trauma stress profile" and its bodily symptoms – shallow breathing, facial pressure - and how studies such as his own show that being in nature calms all that; we breathe more deeply, the heart rate slows, cortisol levels drop, the immune system functions better. The body senses the environment, he explained. "The radical part of these possibilities is that you take a child who's been bullied and maybe if we get them out walking in the woods they'll handle the trauma better, and I think that would be a good thesis to get people thinking about and it has a lot of physiological support."

I recall that dictionary definition of the word scar, 'a lasting effect of grief, fear or other emotion...'. It was welcome that his study focused on emotion, for when experiencing PTSD, one might not be thinking about the traumatic incidents themselves, but the fear and anxiety seem to become embedded in mind and body. We can feel trapped by past experiences, whereas walking in nature can bring us back to the present moment. Awe can be a "powerful antidote" that helps free us from the imprisoning "mindset of trauma."

What happens to us when we experience the awe of nature has been pondered for hundreds of years, evolving throughout the centuries. "This begins with Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Wordsworth. The sublime, which triggers awe, is vast and mysterious, and so your present knowledge can't immediately categorise and make sense of it. So you begin with vastness and mystery and then the next theme comes in, which is that when you've been traumatised you often feel like your self has been injured."

"The 'core self' as well", I pointed out. "Hate crime is an attack on protected characteristics, which is the core of a person. In bullying too you feel like the core of yourself has been damaged, injured or wounded."

“Yes”, he agreed. “What awe does is that momentarily all of the processes involved in that core self being hurt are quieted and your mind opens up to other possibilities. The next thing – which is critical for awe, which is why we get the goosebumps and chills – is that you feel connected to something larger... If you’ve been wounded by one person or a set of bullies, you start to think they’re just one part of the story, there’s so much more. Finally, there’s wonder, where your mind is opened and you’re curious – awe is literally a wonderful emotion. There’s a lot of awe: in walks in the woods, in great music. Your story will inspire others, and they will feel awe.”

The problem with establishing a network after trauma, from my experience, is that your trust can close down. Fear and PTSD can stop you trusting people enough to form a relationship and therefore to have that network with others. “Yes, and identity-based trauma and PTSD can make you isolated. If you’re a person of colour and are a victim of hate crime, you can feel alone and often are, so that compounds the problem.” Walking in nature seems to lessen that fear of trusting others, making the walker more open to new experiences and to both remember and let go of the past. I shared with Professor Keltner my walk through the vast Pennine range and my craving for wilderness. “I think we have a biological need for natural awe,” he commented. “There’s a hunger in people for awe.”

I interviewed more experts in the field, interrogating notions of a ‘nature cure’ – and posit my theory that it is more ‘nature care’, since symptoms of anxiety and depression can recur, and conditions such as PTSD can be chronic, which is why it is so important to be able to integrate regular contact with nature into the fabric of life. This also leads to resisting a straightforward recovery arc narrative which is propagated in much nature writing: I instead move from simple linearity into a more rhizomatic, nuanced narrative trajectory.

Lynne Frederick of the No Panic charity explained that walking is excellent because it helps the body to burn off stress hormones, calms the body down: “With anxiety your brain can get tired, and your body is preparing for flight or fight. It’s going back to basics of how the body works and how the body and thoughts are connected because there is not enough awareness around that.”

I also interviewed Alan Kellas, a nature-based psychiatrist who is Green Care lead at the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP). Green Care is an emerging approach supported by the RCP, an umbrella for different projects that explore and promote nature connections in mental healthcare. He also points out wildlife organisations such as The Wildlife Trusts, Forestry England, the Woodland Organisations, the Canals and Rivers Trust, city farms and community allotments, and the NHS forest scheme, which do work that is also essential for people's health. "There are ways in which mental health provision could be delivered outside of buildings, and in the natural world," he commented. I asked what actually happens to us physically and mentally when we are out in nature. "We've evolved over thousands of years as biological as well as social creatures," he replied. Our attention begins to change, becomes more focused and less peripheral. We notice differently and nature engages all of our senses – visual, auditory, aesthetic. "It often brings us back into the present, stops ruminations and helps us achieve what mindfulness practice does, which is coming into the moment. We start to breathe in a more relaxed way, which may mediate the change in our emotional regulation."

Kellas pointed out that theories of how we develop as people, how our emotion and identity develop, are often based on our relationships with parents and family backgrounds, but he does not think there is enough attention on how a child relates to the natural world. Every cultural tradition has a story of relationship to the land and to place, which will be an influence. He commented: "I think that what happens when in nature is that we access core biological memories that have evolved over centuries and generations. In that sense it helps reconnect us to a core self." Trauma happens at a very visceral level "that goes much beyond words", he explained, about experiences such as my own. Experiences can get "burned into our physiology," so are not only at a cognitive level but also at a physiological level and psychotherapies are only relatively recently moving towards more of a sense of integration of mind and body.

I told him about my walking journey through the Pennines, and he asks if water featured at all. "Absolutely. I've been following the course of rivers. I was in a state of anxiety but, as soon as I heard the water, it was like the stress drained away." He explained how being near

water can make a difference physiologically. “Think of the phrases we have such as ‘water under the bridge’, ‘flow states’, and so on. There’s growing research on blue care as well as green care.”

He continued: ‘From a state of being frozen or trapped – the simple act of going for a walk to begin with, it’s taking a degree of control or agency. Simple walking and movement itself can be transformative. We think about things differently when we move rather than sitting. Then what you describe powerfully is the idea of a journey as both internal and external. That’s implicit in pilgrimages of all sorts. Landscape has been sacred in many cultures and the idea of walking through that landscape. Making a walking journey can be a creative as well as a spiritual act.’ He says that at times of existential conflict, we’re trying to connect with core features of ourselves, which can prompt a quest-like journey, leaving the familiar, crossing a threshold and becoming immersed in the natural environment, and then returning and telling your story. “What I love about the idea of such journeys,” he says, “is that people might start out needing to do something for themselves but what they find is a gift both for themselves and for others – it’s a social as well as individual process. You’re bringing a gift back to other people.”

I told him that some people advised me after my attack not to travel alone again but that is partly why I made this journey: I was not going to let this affect me so negatively or make me inert. Quite the opposite: I wanted to expand my world. He explained: “A trauma can set off triggering reactions and then what happens is avoidance. It’s the holy grail of therapeutic work, how you find the little flame inside a person when they move from freezing, stuckness and avoidance to thinking, ‘I could do that again’. We begin to choose how we react to a situation.” At the heart of sustainability questions and the climate and environmental crisis is our own relationship with the natural world, argued Kellas. We need better understanding of how people and place connect: “There are evolutionary, biological and cultural ways of looking at the history of human and place connections” and there can be traumas around our dispossession from the land. He went on to make a powerful point: “Where people have basic relationship problems, I think it should be the next step to ask: well, what about your relationship with water, or trees, or a dog or a bird? Our psyches aren’t entirely defined by the

human world alone and mostly, in unbearable mental states, where people can also turn to is the natural world.”

In *I Belong Here* I consider not only how we are shaped by trauma but how and the extent to which we can walk through and beyond it: “Scar. We can be shaped by those ‘lasting effects of grief, fear, or other emotion left on a person’s character’ but we are resilient too and can be reformed; it is possible to move beyond traumatic emotions, to survive and thrive after them. Even walking this way through astonishing formations has re-formed my mind to some extent, so profound can be our relationship with place, deep as the earth, an experience reaching to the very core of the self”.

*

Throughout this exegesis – and accompanying creative work – I have explored and shown how marginalisation affects our experience of moving through the world and what its impact is on our body, mind and mental health. I have examined how and why walking through place - particularly wild places - is a way of making an emotional and intellectual as well as physical journey. I have shown how place profoundly affects the body, heart and mind for example how geographical inequalities can lead to mental illness and physical ill-health including alienation, anger, depression, PTSD and a crushing sense of exclusion and inertia. In my writing I have shown the shifts in emotion brought by engagement with place and nature, such as the transformation of a sense of exclusion into empowerment, of pain into prose. As I walked upon geographical pathways, I have considered emotional, intellectual and linguistic pathways, making a significant, vital contribution into understanding the relationship between place and pain, and pain and prose. I have examined how we move through places and how places move through us - and move us – and the possibilities of capturing such movements of the heart, mind and body in language.

My ‘body of work’ thus represents a route-mapping and root-mapping of the landscape, the body and the mind – of how they become wounded and of their capacity to heal.

CONCLUSION

I WRITE TO BELONG – THE BOOK AS BELONGING

I have with my work created new forms of belonging. I have throughout this thesis elucidated the hostile elements which create a sense of unbelonging and how I sought refuge in creating a home in words. I posit that my thesis is itself the production of a powerful new place.

“A profound read, weaving a sequence of immense concepts into a beautiful, unique and uplifting story about a walk,” wrote Britain’s bestselling walking magazine *Country Walking* (Hallisey, 2021) about *I Belong Here*, showing the book’s appeal to both a specialist and general reader. I have explored how the challenges of existing and moving through the world with a hybrid identity have impacted literary form and illuminated both the relationship between place and personhood, and between place and prose. My work celebrates hybridity in both content and form - after all, there is much within nature itself such as the plane tree which thrives and flourishes in its hybridity. *I Belong Here* develops the creative non-fiction form of nature and travel writing, making it more pluralistic and deepening understanding of how identity impacts writing, and how content influences form.

Crucially, I have interrogated notions of ‘nature cure’ and coined the phrase ‘nature care’ as an alternative, recognizing that whilst seeking cures, we cannot ignore the causes. Nature cannot simply be a sticking-plaster to wounds inflicted by structural, societal and racial inequalities. Ironically, the publishing industry itself is complicit in such racial inequality – the Publishing Paid Me campaign, for example, highlighted how writers of colour are earning lower advances than their white peers. This unequal treatment is unacceptable and shows that, since the times of indentured labour practices which exploited the labour of people of colour and inflicted harm, we are still treated as inferior which impacts our lives, livelihoods, and wellbeing.

I have shown how structural inequalities affect access to nature itself, as well as causing damage to nature. I offer a clarion call that, at this time of ecological crisis, we must care better for nature and each other – if we are to in turn receive the care that nature offers; for we

are a part of not apart from nature and how we treat it is inextricably linked with our own biology, our ability to breathe at all.

Throughout my ‘body of work’ I have challenged racist, classist, and misogynistic stereotypes which have caused the dehumanisation and destruction of millions of people. I posit the fact that colonial history is not just relevant to ‘ethnic minority’ people but that this is all of our history, the history of white, brown and black people the world over – thus moving it from the margins and making it mainstream and offering an original, fresh perspective on place.

I have explored how I am not a traditional author to be writing in this field of literature and my journey to publication was far from smooth; indeed, I encountered obstacles along the way - as I write about wryly in the book, I was told by some in the publishing industry that I don't belong here. As shown, there are statistically few women and even fewer women of colour in this arena of nonfiction. Writers from minority backgrounds risk being pigeon-holed and having their writing marked as inferior and less than universal. I have been pigeon-holed by some but smashed through those boxes to show how a story from the so-called margins should and can become mainstream. I have managed to overturn such demeaning notions and ensure that stories from the so-called margins belong where they should – at the centre.

The mainstream success of the book demonstrates how a particular story can reach through to the universal. I also show literature’s important role in honouring the particular and respecting and showcasing difference. While I explore elements of the ‘universal’ and what we share in common as humans, such as being a part of nature, I also celebrate difference and uniqueness. I advance a theory that literature’s value is not just in reflecting the reader, but in elucidating empathy – that is, an understanding of someone unlike ourselves, a sense of what it would be like to walk in someone else’s shoes. For far too long – for the whole history of literature – readers have been taught to empathise with white characters, whilst brown and black characters have been absent or subjugated. Literature has been a vessel for white readers to find themselves reflected and for people of colour to see themselves depicted as inferior. I overturn this by bearing witness to the legacies of erasure and by offering my own

story, helping to humanise and thus adding value to the discipline of the ‘Humanities’ – also deepening the definition of what it means to be human at all by showing us as part of nature. I also offer a clarion call for us to empathise with nature: “This is what it feels like, to think yourself into the natural world, to empathise with it. I want to empathise with the river, to get beneath its skin and surface, to imagine what it would be like to be the river.” (*I Belong Here*, pp170/1).

Dehumanisation seeks to deny certain people existence of a mind – I aimed to overturn this by showing inner as well as outer landscapes and their interrelation, and this was picked up on by reviewers. The writer Patrick Barkham author of books including *Wild Child* wrote in an endorsement: “Anita Sethi opens our eyes to the beauty of our countryside and hurt and healing found therein. It is rare to find writing that evokes landscape so finely but also conveys our inner world with such power, emotion, vulnerability and truth.”⁶³

To summarise my work’s impact, it has received prestigious prizes, critical acclaim, and I have made numerous appearances at festivals and events around the UK from the Scottish Highlands (where I appeared alongside Kathleen Jamie) to Cornwall (where I appeared alongside Raynor Winn), as well as Cheltenham Literature Festival, Charleston Literary Festival, Wealden, Manchester Literature Festival and many more. I have also connected with readers who would not be reached by such festivals, readers feeling alienated by such events, by hosting writing workshops and readings for those on low incomes and from BIPOC backgrounds – such spaces can be viewed as examples of ‘a third place’ (Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 1989), offering opportunities to discover new forms of belonging.

To be able to bear witness is to be closer to belonging – as is to have one’s testimony heard: in *I Belong Here* I write of reaching readers being the culmination of a journey. I propose that the book itself is a form and place of belonging. Indeed, the copious personal correspondence I have had from readers includes hundreds of letters and emails variously sharing how the book helped them to find a sense of belonging and believe that they too

⁶³ Pre-publication endorsement on hardback and at: <https://i-belong-here.com/book/>.

belong here, or to realise how people they had regarded as ‘other’ also belong here. As a woman of colour I have throughout my career received hate mail and trolling, but I have been overwhelmed too by the positive messages of empathy and connection from people of all backgrounds and ages, from a ninety year-old man to young people of colour – and even from some who shared how they had previously been racist but how my writing had made them rehabilitate such views.

“An incredibly powerful, moving and beautifully told story of what it means to belong, of trauma and healing, slavery and freedom. Full of wild magic,” wrote acclaimed author and nature writer Lucy Jones in a pre-publication endorsement. “This book will make the world a better place. We are so lucky that Sethi invites us to walk alongside her, seeing the majesty of the natural world.”⁶⁴

As well as being extracted in major outlets including *The Observer* and reviewed extensively including in *The Guardian*, *Sunday Times* and *New Statesman*, I have also had broadcast appearances on BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 3 and ITV News among others. The impact of my work has also been proven not only in prizes or book sales, but also in how it has been incorporated into the curriculum at several universities, across disciplines, from English Literature and Creative Writing to Geography and Environmental studies.

I Belong Here has also been excerpted in anthologies including *Awe and Wonder: An EMC Anthology of Nature Writing*⁶⁵ (2023) which author John Lewis-Stempel, in his introduction, described as a “brilliant – and important – collection of nature writing”, and which was collated to help young people connect with nature in conjunction with the English and Media Centre and Bloom Education which aims to help schools bring nature into the curriculum. It was also extracted in *Way Makers: An Anthology of Women’s Writing About Walking* (2023) which extracted a section from the chapter ‘Walking as a Woman of Colour’ and where sits alongside classic writers including Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia

⁶⁴ Pre-publication endorsement on hardback and at: <https://i-belong-here.com/book/>

⁶⁵ Available at: <https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/publications-magazines/20758/emc-free-awe-and-wonder-accompanying-resources-download/>

Woolf, Nan Shepherd and Kathleen Jamie. In an anthology covering centuries, there are few writers of colour showing that there is still a long way to go for the genre to be truly diverse but that my work has helped in this journey. Before I had written or published my first book, being published in anthologies helped me to establish a platform for my voice, so to see *I Belong Here* itself extracted in anthologies about walking and nature feels like a vindication of its existence. Anthologies can also be influential in deciding and creating a ‘canon’ – as a student of English Literature it was anthologies to which I turned to gain an overview of a particular period or genre. To now have my book extracted in one shows that it has become part of the ‘canon’, and finally is deemed to belong there, in a place where so many thought it could never be.

“Thank you for writing this book”, wrote one reader in a hand-written letter. “I was in a bad place when I read it, but *I Belong Here* has given me hope.” Here – in this journey from my mind to the mind of another - has been some healing, the most valuable kind.

PART B). Original writing

Sethi, Anita, *I Belong Here: a Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* and other works

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