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Diasporic Consciousness and Narrative Ambiguity in Short Stories by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe

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Abstract

This chapter examines diasporic consciousness (understood here as an individual's worldview shaped by their diasporic experiences) in selected short stories by Nigerian writers Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe. More specifically, the chapter argues that Adichie's "On Monday of Last Week" (2009) and several of the interconnected short stories in Chika Unigwe's collection *Better Never than Late* (2019) exemplify a poetics of ambiguity that is typical of new diasporic African writing, in which literary techniques such as point of view (also known as focalization) are used to produce ambiguous narratives couched in language that often resists interpretative closure. The chapter shows that, in Adichie's story, internal focalization, combined with symbolism linked to space and race, is deployed to comment on the balance of power between the old and new African diasporas in the US. In Unigwe's stories, point of view alternates between characters, producing narrative echoes and leaving blind spots that are central to the deployment of a form of diasporic consciousness in which gender issues feature prominently. Both Adichie's and Unigwe's texts feature ambiguous endings that, ultimately, may be the expression of a diasporic consciousness that is still contending with uncertainty and that, as a consequence, remains in flux.

In their introduction to the volume *African Migration Narratives: Politics, Race, and Space* (2018), Cajetan Iheka and Jack Taylor observe that "[t]he issue of migration is a political and social force that has begun to exert pressure on the form and content of contemporary African aesthetics" (2). When considering the domain of literature at least, this statement appears almost overly cautious for, already a decade earlier, Nigerian writer and scholar Tanure Ojaide pointed out that "migration, globalization, and the related phenomena of exile, transnationality, and multilocality have their bearing on the cultural identity, aesthetics, content, and form of the literary productions of Africans abroad" (43, qtd. in Iheka and Taylor

5). In his article, Ojaide identified some of the thematic and formal features of what was then an emerging tradition – recurring motifs such as coming of age, emigration, return home, and a "multilocal sense of belonging" (45). Since then, the continued growth of new African literatures has led these motifs to acquire the weight of fully-fledged tropes, a development that has been paralleled by an increasing interest in the identities of diaspora subjects as they "grapple with challenges of migration and displacement, and the impact of globalization," and "must renegotiate their existence in an alien western environment," as Rose A. Sackeyfio has noted in relation to African women in particular (102).

The concept of diasporic identity has been studied concurrently with that of diasporic consciousness, which more visibly foregrounds the role of thought and perception in shaping identities. As Lokangaka Losambe explains, "the new African diaspora creative writer . . . casts a critical gaze upon three life-worlds: the African society she originates from, the western world she presently lives in, and the diasporic consciousness she articulates" (367). The latter notion is more precisely defined as "a global, post-hybrid conjunctive consciousness . . . around issues like race, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, politics, nationality, coloniality, and transnational identities" (Losambe 367-368). Thus, when Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states in an interview that she is "particularly interested in how [identity] changes when you leave home . . . you move to a new place and you think, why the heck not [do things you didn't think you could]?" (Adichie, "A Conversation" 83), she is establishing that the articulation between diasporic identity and diasporic consciousness is one of her major concerns. Similarly, when her compatriot Chika Unigwe states that, in her collection of interconnected short stories *Better Never than Late* (2019), the female protagonist's "way of looking at life changes because she is in this [diasporic] space" ("On Chiselling" i4), the author is emphasizing the pivotal role played by the diasporic experience in fashioning not only the character's material reality, but also her entire worldview.

If new African writing is decisively shaped by diasporic consciousness, it also – perhaps as a corollary – often features what might be termed a poetics of ambiguity, a trait that was not so prominent in the works of earlier generations.[1] This ambiguity does not simply refer to the conspicuousness of "ambiguous and disjointed" diaspora identities (Sackeyfio 102) within twenty-first-century African texts. Rather, just like "contemporary writing from Africa and its diasporas complicates teleological visions of migration" (Krishnan 143), so many of these contemporary narratives also feature protagonists who engage in literal or figurative meandering expressed in language that stubbornly resists interpretative closure. In

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what follows, I focus on a selection of short stories, Adichie's "On Monday of Last Week" (2009) and several of the interconnected short stories from Unigwe's collection *Better Never than Late* (2019), as exemplars of this new diasporic poetics. These stories display as many similarities as they do differences; they explore the interweaving of two major themes in new diasporic African literatures, gender and migration, by using a technique that lends itself particularly well to the expression of ambiguity and indeterminacy – namely, internal point of view (also known as internal focalization). Adichie uses this method with a slight distancing effect, subtly showing the focalizer's fantasies to be unreasonable even as the character entertains them, while also introducing possible ironies and ambiguities by lending both the focalizer and the other characters words and gestures whose symbolic weight they appear to be unaware of. Unigwe, by contrast, exploits the technique of internal focalization either to leave blind spots in the narrative or to introduce plot twists that, ultimately, not only emphasize the characters' subjectivity but also point to the reader's inevitably partial grasp of the diasporic protagonists' disrupted lives.

"On Monday of Last Week," first published in the journal *Granta* under the slightly different title "On Monday Last Week" (2007) and later collected in a revised version in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), is arguably one of Adichie's most ambiguous short stories. The narrative follows Kamara, a Nigerian immigrant who has joined her now estranged husband, Tobechi, in Philadelphia after six years of forced separation during which she waited for him to send for her. A university graduate, Kamara does not have a green card and has little choice but to work as a babysitter to seven-year-old Josh, the mixed-race son of Jewish father Neil, who is a lawyer, and African American mother Tracy, who is a painter. Tracy spends her days working in the basement of the house where, as Neil tells Kamara, she is not to be disturbed. When, having looked after Josh for three months, Kamara finally meets Tracy, the former feels an instant sexual attraction towards the latter, encouraged by Tracy's compliments about Kamara's physical appearance and an invitation to pose naked for one of her paintings. Kamara spends much of the story fantasizing about an erotic encounter with Tracy, until she witnesses the painter complimenting Josh's French teacher, Maren, in a way that is strikingly similar to what Tracy did to her. The story ends as Kamara, who decided to go on a diet after meeting Tracy, "[sits] down next to Josh and [takes] a cookie from his plate" (94).

Most analyses of "On Monday of Last Week" have centred around the story's depiction of same-sex desire, with critics putting forward a number of interpretations of

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Kamara's sexuality whose diversity reflects the ambiguity of the text itself.[2] Far less attention has been given to the fact that the story is layered with hidden meanings and symbolism that, this chapter argues, can ultimately be linked to Kamara's intertwined sexual and diasporic disillusions. For example, towards the beginning of the story, the basement that Tracy occupies to work on her art is referred to no less than three times as "down there," a phrase that is also a euphemism for female genitalia. With this reading in mind, Neil's admonition that little "Josh isn't allowed in the basement *for now*" (78, my emphasis) and that Kamara "can't go down there, either" (78) appears tinged with humour; similarly, Neil's mention that Tracy is "pretty self-sufficient down there" (78) jokingly forecasts the dashing of Kamara's hopes of sexual reciprocation by the self-centred Tracy. This symbolism associating the basement with female sexual organs may, on the one hand, suggest psychological repression on Kamara's part, that is, the unconscious exclusion of feelings from the conscious mind (as opposed to a conscious process of suppression designed to conceal her lesbianism, an idea put forward by Ayuk-Etang and Munge 327). On the other hand, the prohibition issued by Neil also positions the basement as a forbidden space akin to the forest in fairy tales or the basement in gothic fiction – genres that incidentally engage in the exploration of the unconscious and the repressed. This veiled allusion to a possible supernatural or gothic motif may not be incidental, as the mention that Tracy "doesn't come up until the evenings" (78), combined with the fact that she somewhat implausibly gets her food delivered to the basement during the day (78), is suggestive of the vampiric figure that Tracy turns out to be.

Whether or not one considers this reading to be valid, critics concur in their appraisal of Tracy as a contentious figure. Andrea Thorpe and Sam Naidu, in their analysis of the literary representation of vulnerable, illegally employed female migrants, go so far as to label Tracy a "predator" (182) on account of her superior position as Kamara's employer and of her status as "a middle-class, American woman" (191). They go on to argue that "On Monday of Last Week," like the other text that they analyse in their article, reveals "the power dynamics between host and migrant" (181). Similarly, Aretha Phiri emphasizes the "power differentials" (161) between the two women, arguing that Kamara and Tracy have an "unequal relationship premised on imperialist, neocolonial imperatives" (161). In this reading, "Kamara's desperate, persistent knocking on her basement door" to see Tracy "recalls and rehearses the binary mechanisms that have historically governed geopolitics, by positioning Kamara as the unbridled, irrational African 'other' and Tracy as the composed, rational Western subject" (161).

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While both of these analyses convincingly emphasize the centrality of power dynamics and the latter's possible political symbolism, neither foregrounds the uncomfortable fact, which is nonetheless essential in a diaspora-centred reading, that Tracy is actually African American, and thus a member of the African diaspora herself. This evasion on the part of critics is not entirely surprising, for Adichie's portrayal of Tracy is provocative to say the least, leading one commentator to declare that "this rather unflattering portrait veers dangerously close to negative stereotype" (Munro 201). Even though Brenna M. Munro makes this statement in relation to the character's potential bisexuality, this assessment may equally be applied to Tracy's African Americanness. This would position the character as an ill-fitting piece in the puzzle of Adichie's oeuvre, which is generally characterized by a thoughtful treatment of African American figures, regardless of whether the latter connect or clash with the African protagonists. Such a negative portrayal of African Americans is even more conspicuous in the initial 2007 version of Adichie's story, in which Tobechi, prior to Kamara's arrival in the US, "managed to find a black American woman to do a green-card marriage but she was giving trouble, asking for more money, threatening to report him to immigration, to not turn up for the green-card interview" (Adichie, "On Monday Last Week" 40).

Rather than focusing on potentially vilifying portrayals of African Americans, I wish to pursue another line of enquiry combining a socio-political understanding of the text with a *symbolic* reading such as that outlined above in relation to the basement. Munro comes closest to such an interpretation when she observes that Kamara and Tracy's "failed pairing lends itself to an allegorical reading, about the difference between dreams of Black transnational solidarity in the US, and the reality" (194). However, the encounter between Kamara and Tracy holds more than just the collapse of this diasporic ideal. This is indicated by faint subtextual allusions in Kamara's first interaction with Tracy:

> "Oh, hello," Kamara said, smiling. "Nice to finally meet you, Tracy."
>
> Kamara held out a hand but Tracy came close and touched her chin. "Did you ever wear braces?"
>
> "Braces?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "No, no."

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> "You have the most beautiful teeth." Tracy's hand was still on her chin, slightly tilting her head up, and Kamara felt, first, like an adored little girl, and then like a bride. She smiled again. (87)

Thorpe and Naidu read this scene as an instance of "sexual manipulation" (192) with only "a subtle hint of predation" (191), which nonetheless develops into full-blown "violation" (190) after Tracy's "soft" interrogative "Would you take your clothes off for me?" (Adichie, "On Monday of Last Week" 89) turns into the imperative "You *will* take off your clothes for me" (92, emphasis in original, Thorpe and Naidu 192-193). However, Tracy's "seductive 'inspection'" of Kamara (Phiri 161) is loaded not only with sexual tension, but also with historical baggage. Indeed, Tracy compliments Kamara on her *teeth*, a body part whose appraisal is emblematic of the dehumanizing inspection of enslaved people on the auction block. Moreover, Tracy's question as to whether Kamara has ever had dental "braces" may carry a faint echo of the iron neck braces used to shackle the enslaved. With this reading in mind, Nigerian Kamara's response that she has never worn them ("No, no") becomes laden with subtextual meaning. Equally significant in this scenario is the fact that African American Tracy, a member of a historically victimized people, is recast into an abuser, and thus assigned symbolic whiteness. In Kamara's mind, Tracy is also – in a clash of incompatible similes – given the power of seniority (as Kamara initially feels "like an adored little girl") and possibly assigned symbolic maleness (Kamara then feels "like a bride").[3]

That the latter fantasy stems more from Kamara's imagination and from her reaction to "the charismatic Tracy" (Munro 194) than from any objectifiable event in the story has led Thorpe and Naidu to develop the idea that the emotionally vulnerable and economically deprived Kamara is complicit in her own oppression, a "causal relationship between vulnerability and complicity" that they term "consequential complicity" (188). This interpretation, however, leaves the authors with a series of unresolvable contradictions: "consequential complicity," they argue, "*paradoxically* points to a form of transgression through desire, which is potentially empowering" (181, my emphasis); "Tracy succeeds in, *paradoxically*, stripping Kamara of her humanity while reminding her of her embodied self – a self who is desired and who desires" (192, my emphasis). Once again, broadening the analytical framework to include more oblique symbolic dimensions of the encounter may be helpful in filling in these interpretative gaps. Thus, my argument in what follows is that the

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characters' diasporic consciousnesses are presented in crisscrossing patterns that, taken together, present diasporas in the US in almost allegorical fashion.

Tracy and Neil's house again constitutes a good point of departure to develop this idea. After Kamara has started her babysitting job, Tobechi asks her for "details she could not possibly know" (82) about the house that her employers inhabit: "Was it a colonial? How old was it? And all the while his eyes were shining with watery dreams. 'We will live in a house like that one day in Ardmore, too, or another place on the Main Line,' he said" (Adichie, "On Monday of Last Week" 82-83). Tobechi expresses a wish for economic ascension that is typical in immigrant narratives – Ardmore and the Main Line host affluent suburbs – but his ambition to live in a "colonial" house contrasts with the dreams usually depicted in African diasporic fiction, which tend to be future-oriented and gravitate around self-made success and reinvention. Rather than evoking an implausible nostalgia for a colonial past (which, in the US, necessarily involves a slavery past), the house can more convincingly be seen to represent the country in its contemporary state, a space in which Tobechi wants to claim a position of prestige akin to colonial privilege. This reading of the house as a microcosm of the US itself is reinforced when juxtaposed with Kamara's earlier thoughts about "these rich white people on the Main Line" who "did not know what to do with their money" (78-79), hinting that what is simultaneously disdained and coveted is not only the financial status that comes with the "colonial" house but also the *whiteness* of its inhabitants.

In such a configuration, it is significant that African American Tracy shares her house with Jewish Neil, a member of another diaspora, and their mixed-race son Josh. Viewed collectively, these characters may be seen to represent some of the diversity of the multicultural US, in which each person plays a clearly defined role. Indeed, when Neil first meets Kamara, he puzzlingly introduces himself as "white, Jewish" (76), a double label that may reflect anything from a claim to assimilated white identity to a sign of insecurity about his Jewishness (based on the fact that, "in America's ladder of races, Jewish is white but also some rungs below white," Adichie, *Americanah* 185). In any case, Neil, an exceedingly anxious and excessively controlling parent to his son Josh, not only regulates the latter's diet based on the latest fads, but also polices who gets admitted into his family: when Josh makes Kamara a "special family Shabbat [card]" (90) at school, Neil tells him that "Kamara is your nanny and your friend, and this was for family" (91). As Thorpe and Naidu assert, Kamara's position as a paid domestic worker performing "intimate labor" means that she "is an integral part of the family while at the same time remaining an outsider" (Thorpe and Naidu 185); yet,

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it is telling that self-identified "white" father Neil sets the boundaries of propriety and acceptance into the symbolic American family, whereas mixed-race son Josh welcomes Kamara, the newly arrived African immigrant who lacks official existence in the country-household, into the fold.

In this sense, young Josh may symbolize a more hopeful future of diasporic togetherness in the US, as his "crayon-colored" card (90) embodies an inclusiveness that contrasts with the "haphazard splashes of bright paint" (88) that his artist mother consigns to the canvas in her solitary basement. As this textual element shows, Josh's depiction in relation to his mother is one of both striking similarity and subtle difference. In the story, Josh visibly bears some of his mother's physical traits, which endear him to Kamara: "the curve of his lips" is "exactly like that of Tracy's" (80), and he has "his mother's thick, unarched eyebrows" (74). However, whereas Josh's eyebrows are described as looking "like straight lines drawn above his eyes" (74), almost giving him the comic appearance of a cartoon character, his mother's eyebrows are said to be "so thick and straight they looked *fake* " (91, my emphasis).[4]

This inconspicuous physical detail may more broadly point to the manufactured nature of Tracy's identity, which may in turn hint at a subtextual commentary on the relationship between the old and new African diasporas in the US, represented in the text by Tracy and Kamara respectively. As Munro remarks, Tracy's statement that "the motherland [i.e., Africa] informs all of my work" (Adichie, "On Monday of Last Week" 89) "seems as superficial an investment as her fleeting interest in Kamara" (Munro 194). In point of fact, Tracy does have *some* knowledge of Africa, which distinguishes her from some of the clueless white characters in Adichie's fiction (e.g., she knows that there are Yoruba people in Nigeria and asks Kamara about the meaning of her name, thus showing awareness of its cultural importance), but there is in Tracy's proclaimed artistic connection with the continent a clearly perceptible sense that she may represent a certain *type* of African American artist, often perceived to claim ownership of the African continent by proxy. With this idea in mind, it is rather striking that Tracy's African Americanness, her artistic interest in Africa, her dreadlocks, her "skin the color of peanut butter" (79), and her Jewish husband lawyer are all features that were once shared by African American writer Alice Walker. This is not to suggest that Adichie is specifically targeting Walker through Tracy; by all accounts, Adichie admires the African American writer, whose work she quotes at the end of her speech "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). Moreover, several of the abovementioned traits are also

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shared by other African American writers such as Lynn Nottage and the late Lorraine Hansberry.[5] More precisely, then, my suggestion is that "On Monday of Last Week," through the character of Tracy, comments on who still holds the power of diasporic representation in the US. In this sense, Tracy's wish to paint the emotionally submissive Kamara naked, but in a way that "wouldn't look much like [her]" (89), becomes symbolic of how the old diaspora defines, and possibly misrepresents, the identity of a new diaspora that willingly submits itself to a process of cultural assimilation as it is still carving out an identity for itself in a society to which it has little historical claim. The new immigrants' diasporic consciousness, then, is revealed to be as brittle as Kamara's emotional state.

This symbolic reading can be extended to the end of the story, which shows just how easily the new African diaspora can be evinced from the prominent position to which it aspires on the American scene when usurpers come along. In a final scene that mirrors Tracy's first encounter with Kamara, the painter asks Josh's white French teacher Maren, as she had Kamara before this (87), if she has "ever been an artist's model" (94). This question comes after Tracy has complimented Maren on her "[v]iolet" eyes (94) – an unusual physical feature that may evoke anything from albinism to Hollywood star Elizabeth Taylor or even a supernatural being; in any case, Kamara's "beautiful teeth" (87) have been supplanted by a more exceptional quality that is now, presumably also temporarily, the focus of flighty Tracy's unwavering "gaze" (94).

The scene also stands out on account of Kamara's ambiguous reaction: "She [sits] down next to Josh and [takes] a cookie from his plate" (94). Munro writes that Kamara "reaches *defeatedly* for a cookie" (194, my emphasis), as the protagonist fails to observe the diet that she started; by contrast, Thorpe and Naidu emphasize the act's potential in terms of agency and empowerment, reading Kamara's gesture as a "final metonymic act [that] is a repudiation of the self that desired to be desired by Tracy," an act that "is defiant enough to suggest that Kamara's newfound transgressive agency is only in its infancy" (193). Both of these ostensibly contradictory readings find support in the text. On the one hand, Kamara clearly experiences a moment of disillusion, and her reaching for comfort food may anticipate a relapse into her binge-eating "spoonfuls of margarine" (85) in front of the television. On the other hand, her reaching for the cookie may indicate that she snaps not only out of her unrealistic sexual fantasies but also out of her undiscerned yearning for a form of diasporic belonging that panders to honorary whiteness.[6] In this reading, it is significant that Kamara,

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before reaching for the cookie, "[sits] down next to Josh" – who, as mentioned above, can be regarded as a symbol of a more wholesome diasporic togetherness.

While it is possible to devise an interpretation that might reconcile these seemingly opposite poles – namely, that Kamara's eventual empowerment must come through the disappointment of her diasporic fantasies – it is my contention that the question cannot, and probably should not, be definitively settled: the ending of the story ultimately resists interpretative closure, and the text's commentary on the notion of diasporic consciousness lies in the ambiguity itself.

Just like "On Monday of Last Week," Chika Unigwe's *Better Never than Late* recounts the hopes and disillusionments experienced by members of the Nigerian diaspora, this time in Belgium. Parallels abound between, on the one hand, Kamara and Tobechi from Adichie's "On Monday of Last Week" and, on the other hand, Prosperous and Agu, the married couple at the centre of several of Unigwe's stories who, according to the author, are also "the people holding the collection together" ("On Chiselling" i8). Early on in their relationship, both couples enjoy a loving and egalitarian bond when living in Nigeria, where they share domestic tasks without the men feeling that these chores threaten their masculinity: while Tobechi is unoffended by being called a "woman wrapper" (83), Agu happily lets Prosperous fix his car when it breaks down and is even "swept off [his] feet" by her unexpected mechanical talents (*Better Never than Late* 48). Both couples then leave the country at the instigation of the male partner, although in Unigwe's book the reason for their departure is not financial deprivation but trauma resulting from ethnic and religious violence in the northern city of Jos. Moreover, in the case of Prosperous and Agu, the Belgian destination is not chosen but "foisted on them" (33).

Once both couples have arrived in their new diasporic home, the men start slipping into stereotypically masculine roles: Tobechi performs "theatrical" lewdness during sex (Adichie, "On Monday of Last Week" 85), while Agu, "surrounded by the odour of [his and Prosperous'] losses, . . . feels the need to assert himself as a 'man'" (Unigwe, *Better Never than Late* 39). In Agu's case, this assertion of "manliness," which is meant to compensate for a loss of social status (Unigwe, "On Writing" 416-417), takes several forms: he refuses to do any cleaning in either professional or domestic settings, as this is supposedly "a woman's job" (*Better Never than Late* 35); he invites his Igbo friends to the couple's flat every weekend but it is Prosperous who must "do all the work," including hours of cooking (38); he regularly beats his wife "[w]hen the food is not ready on time" or "[w]hen the flat is not tidy enough"

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(44). In both Adichie's and Unigwe's stories, the couple's intimate lives also suffer as a result of their emotional estrangement. In a striking mirror effect between the texts, Kamara claims to be taking the contraceptive pill but actually is not, and Prosperous claims that she is not but in fact is. During the sexual act itself, Kamara feels only "the rubbery friction of skin against skin" (Adichie, "On Monday of Last Week" 85), while Prosperous "[lies] unpliable underneath [Agu], immune to his hands" (Unigwe, *Better Never than Late* 49).

That the latter comment reflects Agu's perception of the couple's intercourse points to a fundamental difference between Adichie's and Unigwe's texts, namely that, while "On Monday of Last Week" is solely focalized through Kamara, in Unigwe's sequence of stories, narrative point of view alternates between Prosperous (in the first, third, and sixth stories in the collection, respectively entitled "The Transfiguration of Rapu," "Becoming Prosperous," and "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am") and Agu (in the fourth story, entitled "Everyone Deserves Grace").[7] The stories are chronologically connected. For example, at the end of the third story, "Becoming Prosperous," the female protagonist performs an act of defiance by shouting "Fuck off!" (47) in reply to her husband's and his friends' excessive domestic demands. At the beginning of the fourth story, "Everyone Deserves Grace," the reader learns through Agu's focalized perspective that he threw boiling water at her (52) for speaking back to him in front of the guests (57). Agu's violent reaction is neither excused nor condoned, but the story makes it clear that Agu is a broken man who, whilst he has become a "version of himself he had difficulty recognizing" (52-53), still "want[s] nothing more" than to "love [Prosperous] back into the woman she had been in Jos" (49).

In other words, *Better Never than Late*, in contrast to "On Monday of Last Week," lends the male partner three-dimensionality: "Everyone Deserves Grace" specifically shows how Agu is "focused on fighting for his own survival" (Unigwe, "On Chiselling" i4) and is, therefore, unable to support his wife. Yet the narrative balance remains tilted in Prosperous' favour, as the stories told from her point of view outnumber Agu's. The domination of this female perspective is central to the deployment of a form of diasporic consciousness in which gender issues feature prominently. For example, it is significant that the events that lead Prosperous to tell her husband and his friends to "Fuck off!" are triggered by one of his male friends calling her "Nwunye anyi" (47), an Igbo affiliative term (meaning "our wife") that loses any inclusive and affectionate connotations in the story's diasporic context: "That is what [Prosperous] has become. 'Wife' to whichever guest her husband invites home: cooking, cleaning" (43).

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Such gender-inflected narrative choices decisively impact the entire story arc in *Better Never than Late* – hence, they shape the collection's representation of diasporic consciousness. In what follows, I explore this claim first by outlining the instances of emotional and physical abuse of women by men that pervade the stories. I then discuss Prosperous' empathetic reaction to this abuse, which is nonetheless paired with a reluctant complicity that conceals – and therefore indirectly enables – her male compatriots' behaviour. Subsequently, I turn to "Love of a Fat Woman," a story in the collection that once again gives the narrative floor to a male abuser, and I show how the ending epitomizes the collection's poetics of ambiguity. Finally, I relate this ambiguity to Prosperous' own diasporic consciousness and briefly discuss the tentative sense of hope that the collection may convey.

To be fully understood, this analysis must start with a synopsis of the first story, "The Transfiguration of Rapu," and its slightly convoluted plot. In this text, the eponymous character enters the scene as the shy, shuttering wife of Gwachi, a Nigerian man with whom she shares a son left behind in Nigeria. While Gwachi has married German Hilde, "his paper-wife" (2), to obtain residency in Europe, Rapu is able to come to Belgium after marrying a man nicknamed Shylock, who is ironically praised for his "untarnished reputation for honesty and professionalism" (4) in charging his fellow Nigerians exorbitant fees to help them acquire residency via illegal sham marriages. As Rapu bides her time sleeping on Shylock's couch, waiting for Gwachi to be able to divorce his "paper-wife," Prosperous soon catches on to the fact that Gwachi's voice is "wholly lacking in conviction" (8) when he mocks Hilde's "white people's" habits (8). Indeed, Prosperous suspects that Gwachi is developing romantic feelings for Hilde, who soon falls pregnant, as does Rapu shortly afterwards. After Hilde has given birth to a baby girl and Gwachi starts spending even more time with his new family, Rapu announces to Prosperous that the father of her own baby is not Gwachi but another man with whom she has fallen in love (13). As Rapu leaves Prosperous' flat to announce the news to Gwachi, Agu comes home and informs Prosperous that Gwachi has just asked Hilde for a divorce.

This ostensibly farcical plot twist conceals a far more serious subtext. As this synopsis indicates, a recurring element in the story is women's emotional mistreatment at the hands of Nigerian men, a motif also found in the stories "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am" and "Love of a Fat Woman." Indeed, just as Gwachi marries Hilde in "The Transfiguration of Rapu" to acquire legal status, so Godwin in "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am" marries overweight Tine, another supposedly unsuspecting "paper-wife," to obtain residency.

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However, Tine is a more central character than Hilde is and, in a plot twist reminiscent of the ending of the first story, Tine reveals to Prosperous that she is aware that Godwin is using her. She states that she chooses to stay with him only to fulfil her own emotional needs, and that she is planning to leave him before he acquires residency (88). Tine's revelation comes as a surprise to Prosperous and to all but the most attentive reader.[8] Whether or not the plot twist is entirely unexpected, it prompts a reassessment of some of the assumptions found in "The Transfiguration of Rapu" – most notably, the belief that white Hilde, who married Gwachi against her parents' will (11), is one of those "[o]yibo women" would "give up everything for the person they love" (2). In other words, Prosperous' misjudgement of Tine may in fact reveal a larger blind spot across the narratives: perhaps Hilde too has a hidden history that Prosperous, from her limited point of view, is unable to access.

In all these situations – those involving Rapu, Hilde, and Tine – Prosperous reacts uneasily at the poor treatment of her fellow women, whether Nigerian or European, and is initially shown to believe that empathy involves the denial and concealment of the truth. In "The Transfiguration of Rapu," Prosperous "squashe[s]" her guilty feelings and lies to Rapu, claiming that Hilde is "not beautiful" and that Gwachi acts "almost as if he were ashamed of her" (5): "What good would it do" to tell Rapu "that Hilde was beautiful," she wonders (5)? Rapu answers Prosperous' comments with a knowing "Thank you" (5) that seals the two women's complicity in the self-deluded appearances that they feel compelled to keep up at the time. Similarly, Prosperous feels uncomfortable, but does not speak up, after Hilde's baby girl has been born and Gwachi's friends "acted as if Rapu's baby was the real baby, and Hilde's own some impostor they had to pretend to care for until Rapu's arrived" (12). Prosperous reproduces this pattern once more in "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am," where she similarly refrains from sharing her knowledge of Godwin's intentions with his wife, feeling that "she could not hurt Tine" (80).

Prosperous never acts upon her empathetic feelings to challenge her male compatriots, yet she develops an increasing sense of injustice that ever so slightly evokes the possibility of future empowerment. This can most clearly be demonstrated by examining her reaction to another recurring incident in the stories, namely Igbo men's use of their mother tongue when speaking to each other in front of their European wives who do not understand the language. The men appear to revel in humiliating the women. When Agu and Prosperous visit Hilde and Gwachi after their daughter has been born, Agu hands his friend a cheap plastic rattle and "boast[s] to Gwachi in Igbo" (12) that he will buy an expensive pram when Rapu's baby

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arrives. In "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am," Godwin introduces overweight Tine to Agu and Prosperous and, in Tine's presence, says in Igbo: "Nwoke ma-ife o na-eme. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" (76). Whereas, in the former storyline involving Hilde, Prosperous deplores her fellow woman's humiliation but ultimately witnesses it rather passively, in the latter story, she has acquired some Dutch (a language that neither Agu nor Godwin speaks) and considers using Tine's mother tongue in front of the men to make the young woman aware of the power that she has over the paperless Godwin, as "[t]hey [the men] would not understand her" (78). Prosperous therefore considers intervening in the abusive situation, yet she eventually falls short of acting upon her intention, and instead compliments Tine on her African-looking earrings (78). Thus, despite the indication that the development of Prosperous' diasporic consciousness may involve emancipation from her immigrant community, cultural loyalty still emerges victorious from its confrontation with gender-based ethics.

In a manner analogous to "Everyone Deserves Grace," which is focalized through Agu after the reader has been acquainted with Prosperous' perspective of events, "Love of a Fat Woman" is focalized through Godwin after the reader has witnessed his despicable behaviour in "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am." "Love of a Fat Woman" finds Godwin and Tine on a visit to Enugu, Nigeria, during which Godwin's obnoxious conduct is predictably confirmed: he plans to find another wife as soon as he can (98), and he unsympathetically describes Tine in animalistic terms, referring to her as "a giant pig" (104) who grunts while snoring (97). Yet the story also reveals that Godwin, before reaching Belgium, was himself subjected to inhumane treatment, having been "worked like a horse" in Cyprus (100); moreover, his scheming is also designed to allow his widowed mother to take "an early retirement from her petty trading" (99) and to give his two younger sisters "a good education" and "a comfortable home" (102). As in "Everyone Deserves Grace," a form of narrative balance is restored, and the male character moves from despicable villainy into a more ambiguous space, becoming one of those "complex, flawed humans making choices and sacrifices one doesn't necessarily approve of" (Unigwe, "On Writing" 414).

The ambiguity remains until the end of the story. Initially, the trip to Enugu is unsuccessful: Godwin's mother is less than impressed with her daughter-in-law's looks ("How do I show her off to the other women, eh?" 98), and Tine herself wishes to go back to Belgium because "the vacation was not what she had expected" (104). The mood – and the direction of the narrative – changes with the arrival from the village of Godwin's

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grandmother, who does not know of her grandson's scheming and is impatient to see "the new wife" (104), who soon becomes "our new wife" (105), reinvesting the affiliative term featured in "Becoming Prosperous" with affectionate kindship. Godwin's grandmother warmly hugs Tine and exclaims in Igbo that the latter is "[a] beautiful woman" (105), leading Godwin to notice a beauty that he had never appreciated in his wife. Tine and the grandmother, who do not share a language, spend the rest of the day eating mangoes in the sitting room, with Tine imitating the older woman's gestures to catch the fruit's juice, and both women sharing peals of laughter that spontaneously bridge linguistic, cultural, and generational gaps. The story ends as Tine's laughter "tinkled a bell and at that moment Godwin felt a stirring, something tender that he thought might be the beginning of love" (105).

Just like the final scene in "On Monday of Last Week," this ending lends itself to multiple readings. The first option is to view the story as a tale of retribution: Godwin has once again been caught at his own game. After coming to Europe, hoping to take advantage of the old "myth" that "[o]yibo women want black men" (76), he ends up as "[a]rm candy to parade around" (87) in an ironic self-fulfilling prophecy, only to have his own humanity catch up with him. However, an alternative reading is suggested both by Tine's initial love for Godwin (87) and by the wholesomeness of the young Belgian woman's encounter with the Igbo grandmother. Indeed, this final scene is an emotional homecoming for Tine too: after spending months trying to learn how to cook African food, wearing unconvincingly African-looking earrings, and complaining that her culinary experience in Enugu is not "authentic" enough (104), she finally shares a spontaneous sense of intercultural intimacy over a simple piece of fruit. Thus, the narrative leaves the door open for a cautiously optimistic reading in which Godwin and Tine may enjoy a happy ending after all.

Such moments of timid hope are found throughout the collection, and they are often linked to Prosperous' negotiation of her Belgian diasporic life. Indeed, Prosperous initially "regrets that she did not rise up to the challenge" (33) of learning Dutch, but she realizes that signing up for language classes is "[t]he way out" (33); later in the collection, she is shown to have acquired some Dutch, as mentioned above. Similar hope can be detected in the sisterly relationship (84, 86) that Prosperous develops with Tine, suggesting that diasporic consciousness may also manifest in the forging of cross-cultural female bonds. Prosperous' diasporic condition also leads her to re-evaluate her past, and most specifically the way in which she treated the maids that she had in Nigeria, two teenage girls who were not paid (39) and who, when Agu and Prosperous left Nigeria, were "simply sent . . . back to their families .

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. . without a thought as to how they would continue their education" (39). From her new diasporic surroundings, Prosperous wonders whether the girls, if they have finished their education, are now better off in Nigeria than she is in Belgium (39). Significantly, Prosperous' unease – she feels a "nagging" even as she believes that she treated the maids "kindly" (39) – is a budding form of empathy that is neither fully shaped by the social entitlement that propelled her in Nigeria, nor by Belgian mores according to which having underage maids is culturally foreign. Rather, Prosperous is starting to articulate a "post-hybrid conjunctive consciousness" (Losambe 368) – in other words, a diasporic consciousness fashioned concurrently by her country of birth, by the new space that she inhabits, and by her emotional and cultural negotiation of both.

As this chapter has shown, Adichie's "On Monday of Last Week" and Unigwe's *Better Never than Late* explore the evolving diasporic consciousnesses of Nigerian protagonists in American and European contexts. In Adichie's story, diasporic disillusion precipitates emotional delusion, a combination that, this chapter has argued, is doubled with a symbolism that comments on the balance of power between the old and new African diasporas in the US. Taking a different approach, Unigwe's stories show diasporic disillusion to manifest in a range of gender-based acts of violence, all of which conceal feelings of yearning, discomfort, or despair, yet still faintly suggest the possibility of love and cross-cultural solidarity.

As this chapter has also demonstrated, Adichie's and Unigwe's texts stand out for their blind spots and ambiguities, as both writers opt for endings that leave the fate of their characters unsealed. This technique, which recurs across new African diasporic writing, may be the expression of a diasporic consciousness that is still contending with uncertainty and that, as a consequence, remains in flux.

Notes

[1] Think, for example, of the novels of Buchi Emecheta, whose heroines tend to either "triumph or die" (Unigwe, "Buchi Emecheta").

[2] For example, Aretha Phiri has stated that "Adichie's evocation of 'border-crossing' sexual desire probes the possibility for black women of bisexual subjectivity" (156). By contrast, other critics (Okunhon; Ayuk-Etang and Munge) approach Kamara as a lesbian character, while Brenna M. Munro writes that "[n]either Tracy nor Kamara are, of course, 'lesbians'"

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(194) and that they "are more accurately categorized as sexually fluid than lesbian, straight, or bisexual" (194).

[3] This comment is not intended as a heteronormative statement, but is rather justifiable on the basis of historical fact: same-sex marriage was not legal in Pennsylvania, where the story is set, until 2014. Of course, this reading does not preclude a less literal interpretation whereby Kamara is involved in a same-sex marriage fantasy.

[4] In the original 2007 version of the story, Josh "[has] his mother's round nose" (33) and no mention is made of his or Tracy's eyebrows. The addition of this particular detail may therefore increase its potential significance.

[5] I would like to thank Dr Rebecca Romdhani for pointing out the similarities between the character of Tracy and these three African American writers.

[6] This reading, which regards the entire encounter with Tracy as a pure product of Kamara's delusion, is congruent with the fact that the protagonist's diet was self-imposed in the first place: Kamara *imagined* that Tracy might notice her if she lost weight, but the "curvy" (79) Tracy made no such demands of Kamara.

[7] Two of these titles contain Biblical allusions. These references are beyond the scope of this chapter, but Christianity is so pervasive a theme in the book that it would deserve a separate study.

[8] The reader might indeed have spotted a clue in the short story's title, "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am," a Nigerian Pidgin proverb that translates as "When a con man dies, it is a con man that buries him" (Mensah 92). As Eyo Offiong Mensah elucidates, the saying "projects the wisdom of retributive justice. To put it another way: [t]he measure that one gives is the measure that one receives" (93). As the title predicts, then, the shoe ends up on the other foot for Godwin, much like it did for Gwachi in the first story.

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