

REDRESSING THE “NARRATIVE BALANCE”: SUBJECTION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN CHIKA UNIGWE’S *ON BLACK SISTERS’ STREET*

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1. Introduction

I

In the past few years, critics have started to acknowledge the invaluable contributions made by writers of African origin to the literary traditions of various European nations.¹ Well-known African authors have resided in France and Great Britain for several decades but, of late, growing numbers of talents have also begun to gain recognition in countries such as The Netherlands, Spain and Italy.² Indisputably, the new “Afro-European” movement is on its way to becoming an established discursive category (Brancato, “Afro-European Literature(s)”) and, even though the amount of broadly distributed works by Afro-European authors may not be overwhelming on the continental scale as yet, specific territories, as for example The Netherlands, act as literary bases to widely acclaimed writers who have roots in different parts of Africa.

The Netherlands’ southern neighbour, Belgium, is a self-proclaimed “multicultural society” at the “heart of Europe”;³ yet, Elisabeth Bekers has demonstrated that, until recently, it was hardly possible to find any fiction by Afro-European writers in this country.⁴ Significantly, Belgium’s only Africa-related “literary” work that has made international headlines in recent years is Hergé’s 1931 *Tintin in the Congo* —a comic strip banned from children’s sections in British bookshops amid controversy surrounding its representation of Africans. And indeed, Hergé’s view of the then Belgian Congo can at best be considered a dubious caricature or, as more outspoken commentators have put it, it can even be described as “racist claptrap” (“Bid to Ban ‘Racist’ Tintin Book”).⁵

Tintin's colonial(ist) adventures, which still enjoy iconic status in Belgium, may be seen as a fitting symbol for the quasi-absence of Afro-Belgian writers recounting their own experiences in the country. The collective denial of the racist undertones of Hergé's book at the Belgian level even seems to fit the nation's refusal to heed the few African—and, more generally, non-white—voices in its midst. A similar impression concerning the kingdom's figurative deafness seems to be shared by Bekers, who reports that

As recently as October 2004, the Moroccan-born columnist Jamila Amadou complained in *De Standaard*, one of Flanders' quality newspapers, that no migrant voices have been heard in Flemish literature, for the simple reason that no one has been prepared to "really listen." (63)

In a revealing footnote, Bekers adds that "Amadou's remarks stirred little reaction," a silence that "only confirms the point she made in her column" (63). Whatever the possible explanations for the scarcity of African and immigrant writers in the country, the bottom line is that "non-white writers in Belgium have no visible role in society," as British-Caribbean author Caryl Phillips eloquently put it in an essay on racism and prostitution in Antwerp in 2004.

The year following Amadou's and Phillips's statements saw the publication of *De Feniks*, the first novel by Chika Unigwe, a Nigerian-born Belgian author.⁶ The broad commercial release of this book focusing on a Nigerian woman living in Flanders meant that the factuality of Amadou's and Phillips's claims needed to be somewhat qualified, but their perceptive analyses remained highly relevant. Indeed, many Flemish journalists' reactions to Unigwe's narrative were largely negative, as they felt that the novel presented a cliché-ridden picture of Flanders.⁷ My own impression was different; I argued at the time that these hostile reviews mainly reflected Belgium's unwillingness to be represented as "other' and unfamiliar" by a black African writer (Tunca).

I still believe that the relatively lukewarm reception met by *De Feniks* in Flanders can more plausibly be attributed to the novel's controversial nature in the Belgian context than to any potential aesthetic flaws—a conviction supported by the combined facts that the English version of the narrative, issued in Nigeria in 2007, received several highly positive reviews (Dickinson, Umez), and that an extract from the book, published in short

story form under the title “The Secret,” was nominated for the prestigious Caine Prize in 2004. Regardless of what one’s views on Unigwe’s debut novel might be, one cannot deny that the author took the first step towards a much-needed “narrative balance” in Belgian society, a move advocated by Phillips in his aforementioned piece. Since the publication of *De Feniks*, the situation has gradually started to change, as other immigrant writers — especially women of North African origin— have followed in the Nigerian-Belgian author’s footsteps (Bekers; Unigwe, “Interview”).

In her second novel, Unigwe decided to approach the sensitive topic of immigration through another angle, namely that of prostitution. Her urge to write about the lives of African sex workers in Antwerp arose from two different experiences. Her initial interest in the topic was sparked by the “cultural shock” she felt in Belgium when seeing young women on display in windows —a highly unfamiliar sight in Nigeria (see Unigwe, “Interview”). Then, she was struck by the words of Caryl Phillips, who, at the end of his essay on the Nigerian women working in Antwerp’s red-light district, concluded: “this is not my story to tell. Others in Belgium will have to tell it.” This statement, Unigwe confides, “haunted [her] for a long time” and, once she felt ready to “take that step” (“Interview”), she rose to the challenge of exploring these women’s lives through fiction. The result was a narrative first published in Dutch as *Fata Morgana* (2006), and later released in its original English version under the title *On Black Sisters’ Street* (2009).

2. *On Black Sisters’ Street*: overview and preliminary remarks

On Black Sisters’ Street follows four female characters —Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce. The first three women all left Nigeria of their own accord to come and work in Antwerp as prostitutes, in the hope of creating better lives for themselves after earning enough money to start afresh. Crucially, the protagonists’ stories diverge beyond these broad common features: Sisi, whose real name is Chisom, is a university graduate who has been unable to find a job in Nigeria because she does not have the right “connections” (22); Efe has to support a son whose father, a married man, refuses to acknowledge the child; and Ama, who was abused by her devoutly Christian stepfather in Enugu and, upon denouncing him, sent off to her mother’s cousin in Lagos, finds no satisfaction in her “predictab[le]” and

“circular” job (159) at her relative’s small restaurant. Of the four main characters, only one, Joyce, was tricked into coming to Belgium under false pretences. The young woman, whose real name is Alek, was originally from the Sudan, where her family were massacred by a *janjaweed* militia. Following the tragedy —during which she was also raped— she spent several months in a refugee camp, where she fell in love with a Nigerian soldier, Polycarp. The couple soon settled in Lagos but the man, pressured by his family into marrying a girl from his own Igbo ethnic group, arranged for Alek to be sent to Belgium —allegedly to work as a nanny.

The women’s different experiences arguably serve to refute any conception of an “archetype” of the African prostitute (see also Unigwe, “Interview”). The sense of plurality conveyed by the protagonists’ distinct trajectories is strongly reinforced by the fragmented structure of the book. Indeed, it is revealed early in the narrative that Sisi has been murdered; then, the novel proceeds to recount her story up to her last days in Belgium, while alternatively paying attention to her grief-stricken friends in their shared flat in the *Zwartzusterstraat*.⁸ Efe, Ama and Alek/Joyce take turns in telling the others how they became prostitutes, thereby introducing another series of flash-backs. Significantly, the moments when the three characters announce (in direct discourse) that they will share their personal stories are in each instance separated from the actual flashbacks (a narration in the third person) by a chapter devoted to Sisi.⁹ This technique allows the writer to move one step further away from the conventional linear reading which had already been disrupted by the recounting of the protagonists’ past.

The narrative fragmentation introduces a complexity echoed in the portrayal of the characters. Indeed, while the women have been negatively affected by various financial, political and cultural circumstances, the novel by no means plays up to the “Western white readership[’s] eager[ness] for third-world victim stories” (Brancato, “Afro-European Literature(s)” 3). The fact that three out of the four women deliberately chose to enter prostitution precludes any possibility of conveniently categorising them as innocent, passive females crushed by the combined evils of African men and European mores. Instead, Unigwe’s depiction of her characters and of both their native and host societies is marked by a sense of nuance that deserves to be discussed in some detail. More precisely, I wish to argue that the protagonists’ trajectories constantly oscillate between

two forces: on the one hand, the pressures of society and the demands of its more powerful members—which lead to the women’s entrapment and their loss of individuality, and can hence broadly be encompassed under the concept of subjection—; and on the other, their wish to exert agency and eventually satisfy their own aspirations, which relates to the expression of their subjectivity. I would like to suggest that the characters’ back-and-forth movements between these two poles, subjection and subjectivity, are illustrated in the novel in at least four guises. First of all, my intention is to show that a number of passages involving cultural stereotypes do not exclusively cast the African characters in the expected roles of victims, but also present these protagonists as indirectly contributing to the reproduction of (neo)colonial clichés about Africa. Secondly, by focusing more specifically on Alek/Joyce and Chisom/Sisi, I shall attempt to demonstrate how the novel develops the themes of renaming, slavery and objectification to point to the protagonists’ exploitation. Thirdly, I shall underline the potential role of storytelling in the restoration of the prostitutes’ identity, and finally emphasise that their very quest for subjectivity in some instances inadvertently induces their subjection.

3. Stereotypes in *On Black Sisters’ Street*

Just as the presence of four main characters prevents any social typecasting of prostitutes, so the novel’s utilisation of culturally-related elements exposes the illegitimacy of all forms of pigeonholing based on racial or ethnic criteria. Remarkably, the deconstruction of such widely held prejudices is achieved precisely through the use of cultural stereotypes. Already in her first novel, *The Phoenix*, Unigwe showed how some Europeans held unfounded or largely exaggerated beliefs about Africa; importantly, however, some of her African characters made similar generalisations about Europe—which demonstrated that Africans and Europeans both displayed the same human weakness, namely that of having preconceptions about the “Other” (Tunca).

On Black Sisters’ Street adopts a somewhat similar approach towards clichés, but it takes the strategy one step further.¹⁰ In a manner reminiscent of *The Phoenix*, the later novel contains, for instance, white Flemish characters who ask Sisi if she is fluent in Lingala—a language widely spoken in Central, but not Western, Africa—and includes a

passage where Sisi “sw[ears] never to eat anything she c[annot] easily identify” (281) after finding out that her Belgian boyfriend eats horse meat. Such uninformed assumptions or extreme reactions undeniably imply that ignorance and bias exist on both sides of the so-called cultural divide. Yet, in *On Black Sisters’ Street*, the gap between civilisations does not only separate one continent from the next —as is often the case in fiction by African immigrants in Europe— but it is also defined along intra-continental lines. In an apparently anecdotal, yet meaningful, passage, two of the Nigerian women, Ama and Sisi, are attending a party in Antwerp and feel superior to the Ghanaians present:

Ama spied two Ghanaian guests going back for a third helping of rice and smirked to Sisi that surely, surely, Nigerians cooked better, made tastier fried rice than Ghanaians. (People who threw whole tomatoes in sauces could not really cook, could they?) And both women agreed that Ghanaians were just wannabe Nigerians (10-11)

This extract serves at least two major purposes. First of all, it demonstrates at an early stage in the novel that African communities —even in the diaspora— are not unified wholes.¹¹ The above passage achieves this in a playful manner, but other sections of the narrative make analogous statements regarding more tragic situations. A case in point is the feeling of isolation experienced by Alek in the refugee camp: the young woman finds herself unable to “make friends with the other refugees” (196), even though they are victims of the same war. Despite the passages’ radically different tones, both events illustrate that the shared plight of individuals does not necessarily inspire an unconditional community spirit.

Secondly, Ama and Sisi’s mocking remarks about the Ghanaians also introduce the reader to the characters’ assertiveness and judgemental behaviour. Less obviously perhaps, their dismissive description of Ghanaian cooking and their smugness towards the guests also seem to be reminiscent of the European “colonial gaze.” Indeed, the two Nigerian protagonists indulge in the perpetuation of stereotypes about the “Other” and conclude to the latter’s inferiority —a behaviour that indicates that Africans too can be biased. This idea finds echoes in another passage:

At the door, a tall dark man stood guard. He wore a plain black cap and stonewashed jeans. Sisi wondered where he was from. His darkness did not look Nigerian ... Senegalese, perhaps. Or Gambian. He might even be from one of those Rwanda and Burundi places. She could not decide. (204)

This excerpt subtly reinforces the abovementioned point about some Nigerians' attitudes towards other African citizens. Sisi's reference to "one of those Rwanda and Burundi places" is tinted with a sense of mild condescension (reinforced by her use of the demonstrative "those") that one might more readily associate with colonialist views of the continent.¹² Significantly, the amalgamation of Rwanda and Burundi resurfaces later in the novel, in a passage describing benevolent white women who talk to Sisi at the bus stop:

Old women would tell [her] of when they lived in the Congo many decades ago, talk fondly of Albertville which had now been renamed something they could never remember, something African. Ask you if you spoke Lingala. What you thought of Kabila. Talk of their niece who could not have a baby and adopted a beautiful little son from Rwanda. Or Burundi: "Beautiful baby, only problem is his hair. Quite difficult to comb, the *krulletjes*. I told them to try the clothes softener I use. Smells nice and the best softener I've ever used. If it works on clothes no reason it should not work on hair. Don't you think?" (280)

The interchangeability of Rwanda and Burundi in this passage may evoke different versions of a typical scenario at the bus stop, but it may also, in keeping with the white women's ignorance about Africa, reflect their confusion of the countries. In any case, their questioning of Sisi on Congolese matters, combined with the Nigerian character's own lumping together of Rwanda and Burundi, suggests that both the European *and* African characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* unwittingly amalgamate "foreign" African cultures in a manner strongly reminiscent of reductive colonial attitudes.

But the longer quotation above is also significant in another respect. Reading the monologue in direct speech (apparently a specific example of the comments routinely made by old Belgian women), one can hardly resist smiling at the suggestion of using "clothes softener" to untangle the frizzy hair of a child. Yet, the idea of using a product usually applied to *objects* on a human being may conceal more serious undertones, considering the novel's focus on the sexual exploitation—and thus objectification—of

African women in Belgium. The prostitutes' loss of dignity indeed seems to be linked to the removal of their agency, and even to the repression of their humanity by external forces. The most obvious point of departure to demonstrate the mechanics of this process is the story of Alek/Joyce, the only character who did not enter prostitution voluntarily.

4. From subjectivity to subjection

Alek, the sole protagonist coerced into prostitution, is also the only one who unwillingly undergoes a change of name. When she is introduced by her boyfriend Polycarp to Dele, the pimp who arranges for the four women to come to Antwerp, the Yoruba man deems her name unsuitable:

The fat man nodded at Alek and said, "the name has to go. Alek. Sound too much like Alex. Man's name. We no wan' men. *Oti oo*. Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her ... Make I see... Cecilia? Nicole? Joyce? ... Joyce. Yes. Joyce. Dat one sound like name wey dey always jolly. Joooooyce!" (230)

The name chosen by Dele for Alek, "Joyce," is of course heavily ironic —her immigration to Belgium and her job as a prostitute render her anything but "jolly." Dele's renaming of Alek also symbolises the erasure of the woman's identity on at least two levels. Firstly, the procurer deems her real name to sound too much like a "man's," and proceeds to eliminate this unwelcome trace of masculinity. By attempting to reduce Alek's entire personality to her biological status, it could be argued that Dele metaphorically re-enacts the rape suffered by the "tomboy[ish]" Alek (185) at the hands of ruthless soldiers in the Sudan. Secondly, since the young heroine was called after her grandmother (185), Dele's obliteration of the name also amounts to the blotting out of her family history.

The erasure of Alek's identity goes hand in hand with her objectification: on the long flight to Brussels, she is said to "f[eel] like cargo with a tag" (233). While the word "cargo" obviously refers to her new condition as an "item" for sale, the term is also an unmistakable reference to transatlantic slavery. This allusion is not an isolated occurrence and, if the narrator still conveys Alek's humanity by referring to her "feelings" in this case, other extracts unequivocally present the prostitution of Nigerian women in Europe as a

twenty-first-century version of the enslavement of Africans in the “New World.” Consider this description of an “auction” (278) held in Brussels:

The women would be called into the room one at a time for the buyers to see and admire. They would all have numbers, for names were not important. Their names would be chosen by whoever bought them. Names that would be easy for white clients to pronounce. Easy enough to slide off their tongues. Nothing longer than two syllables and nothing with the odd combinations of consonants that make African names difficult for fragile tongues. “Number three, ladies and gentlemen. Number three is the type of woman white men like. Thin lips. Pointed nose. Sweet *ikebe*.” He slapped her bare buttocks. Number three smiled. (278-79)

The selling and parading of the girls, as well as their renaming by their new “owners,” doubtlessly evoke the slave markets of the past. Events not only repeat themselves on a historical scale, but also at the “micro-level” of the narrative, since one of the characters, Efe, eventually becomes a “Madam” herself —paradoxically, Efe’s move from exploitee to exploiter perpetuates the subjection of African women in the West. Even the narrator seems to acknowledge the inevitability of this cycle: not without a tinge of irony, the omnipresent discourse of objectification is borrowed in this scene to refer to the smiling girl as “Number three.”

The comparison between prostitution and slavery is one of the novel’s most powerful statements. Nevertheless, the narrative also makes clear that the two institutions differ on the basis of the fact that, as mentioned above, all the women except Alek are to some extent complicit in their own fate: in contrast to Alek, Sisi, for example, “could have chosen not to come” (270), despite her desperate financial situation. Unlike Alek still, Sisi has not been deprived of her real name, Chisom, by her pimp, but as a result of her own decision:

She ... decided to change her name, to adopt a name that she would wear in her new life. Sisi. Sister in Shona. ... She would re-name herself Sisi: a stranger yet familiar. Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence, at least for a while. And once she hit it big she would reincarnate again as Chisom. (44)

Chisom deliberately creates an alter-ego for herself, whose supposed familiarity is suggested in the very meaning of her adopted name. Yet, while she is initially confident that she will be able to “shed her skin like a snake and emerge completely new” (98), her first experience with a Belgian client is not the effortless re-birth she had expected. She tries to get through this degrading moment by convincing herself that her body is in reality not hers:

This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me. This is somebody else. ... [The man's] penis searched for a gap between her legs. Finding warmth, he sighed, spluttered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus, inaugurating Sisi into her new profession. And she baptised herself into it with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth, feeling intense pain... (212-13)

Even more strikingly than Sisi's tears, the man's semen evidences the humiliating “baptis[m]” of the young woman's new persona. The sexual exploitation of her body, and her mind's simultaneous efforts at convincing herself that “[t]his is not [her],” fittingly illustrate the growing conflict between her physical situation and her mental state. Counter to her initial assumption, she can't prevent her “strang[e] yet familiar” incarnation (44) from metamorphosing into “a different person,” “somebody else” (261). To the eyes of the men in the red light district, Sisi even loses all humanity and becomes mere merchandise:

She learned to twirl to help [the potential customers] make up their minds, a swirling mass of chocolate flesh, mesmerising them, making them gasp and yearn for a release from the ache between their legs; a coffee-coloured dream luring them in with the promise of heaven. ... And in between customers she talked with the woman from Albania who rented the booth beside hers. ... They talked about their childhoods. Sisi made hers up. And she was sure the Albanian woman did too. They were people without any past, people with forgotten pasts, so whatever was said would have to be made up of air. But that did not matter. The act of talking meant a lot more than what was talked about. (237)

Sisi's status as a “commodity” on display (182) is reinforced by her association with chocolate and coffee (incidentally, foodstuffs whose fabrication relies in many cases on raw material from Africa). Her past “forgotten” (237), she tries to salvage her subjectivity by

engaging in the “act of talking” with her neighbour – a crucial occupation, since “[i]t mean[s] someone still [sees her] as more than a toy” (237). The fact that the women use words as means of subverting their objectified condition points to the decisive role played by storytelling in the characters’ attempt to regain subjectivity, both at the fictional and the metafictional levels.

5. From subjection to subjectivity

Efe’s, Ama’s and Joyce’s mutual sharing of their past undoubtedly allows them to establish a closer rapport with each other. Before Sisi’s murder, the flat in the *Zwartzusterstraat* was admittedly “like a family home” (273), but the women had no more than “a relationship which skimmed the surface like milk” (239). Upon hearing about Sisi’s death, Efe, Ama and Joyce start to tell each other their life stories, and it is only after this process of communal discovery that Ama declares that “Now [they] are sisters” (290). Importantly, the women’s confessions allow them to reject their condition of “people without any past” (237), and their revelations parallel the reclaiming of their identities: to Alek, the mention of the name she was robbed of “sounds like a homecoming” (180). After the recounting of her story, it seems that the young woman has retrieved her individuality, for the reader is told that “Alek smiles through Joyce’s tears” (239). At that moment, “Joyce” is presented as a mask through which “Alek” has eventually managed to surface. This instance also marks the first time that the name “Alek” is used to identify the character in a narrative passage that is not a flashback —it is almost as if the telling of her life story had sealed Alek’s rebirth.

Sisi, on the other hand, never completes her plan to “reincarnate again as Chisom” (44), and she never reveals her identity to her friends. After her death, the women realise that they do not even “kno[w] Sisi’s real name” (36), and neither do they “know her people” (38). As a consequence, they are unable to send her body to her family in Nigeria. Sisi’s anonymous death strongly brings to mind the fate of the “unknown soldier,” an association which was initially to be reinforced by the title of the book, since both *Where Poppies Blow* and *Between the Crosses* were considered at some point.¹³ While the war symbolism may

be a veiled tribute to the Nigerian prostitutes' battle against adversity, the allusion above all leaves the reader wondering about the purpose of the women's sacrifice.

Because Sisi's life and death remain a mystery to her colleagues, the meta-narrative function of her story is even clearer than in the cases of the other protagonists. Since Sisi is no longer able to share the events of her life with her friends, the narrator's recounting of her destiny to the *reader* salvages the character from anonymity. In a way, the novel restores her individuality, and even her dignity, by retracing her life and her quest for subjectivity.

6. Subjection through subjectivity

For Sisi herself, this quest for subjectivity takes the form of walks around the city of Antwerp, during which she poses as a wealthy foreign tourist, entering shops and trying on gold and diamond rings that she never buys (257-58). It could be argued that Sisi fools herself into believing that she can fight her objectified condition by pretending to exert power over objects, be they the expensive items of jewellery she feigns to purchase, or the mounts of cheap souvenirs she acquires (248). Sisi's constant roaming, a habit she already developed in Lagos, also seems to testify to her wish to escape her own existence, and even to symbolise the paths she has taken in her journey through life. Significantly, as her sense of despair becomes deeper and she realises that her life has been "[a] series of mistakes. Always *steps* in the wrong direction" (247, my emphasis), her walks around Antwerp "increas[e] in both frequency and length" (248). Eventually, Sisi becomes a prisoner of her own misguided choices —her subjectivity, in other words, contributes to her own subjection. When she decides to leave prostitution and "get rid of Sisi, let a fire consume Sisi, char her and scatter her ashes" (276), she fails to realise that the murder of her Doppelgänger amounts to her own death. In the end, Chisom cannot simply "reclaim her life" (276) and disengage herself from Sisi —the two seem to have become inextricably linked.

While *On Black Sisters' Street* acknowledges the impact of the characters' decisions on their fates, it does not lay the blame solely at their door. Efe, Ama and Sisi, especially, are presented as both innocent victims of, and willing participants in, societies

which promote the idea that happiness can be acquired only through material wealth. Efe, for example, sleeps with Titus, a rich married businessman, because his money allows her to buy trendy clothes for herself and gifts for her siblings —in other words, it is her precarious financial situation that encourages her to engage in a form of prostitution even before going to Belgium. Later, she decides to swap her two cleaning jobs in Lagos for the one in Antwerp because her most important goal is to provide “a better life” for her son (78). However, she does not realise that her belief in the absolute power of money will lead to her estrangement from her child, whom she leaves behind in Nigeria.

Similarly, Sisi thinks that happiness can only be reached through affluence and social status. Despite her university degree, she is unable to find a job in Lagos, and her frustrating experiences lead her to believe that “everything is for sale” in Nigeria (173). Therefore, she decides to leave for Belgium in the hope that the money she makes there will enable her to buy her father “some respect” in the form of “a chieftaincy title in their village” (173). Later, she internalises the association between wealth and respect to such a degree that, when she goes on a shopping spree in Antwerp, she cannot resist holding the bag of the expensive boutique where she has just bought clothes “in such a way that its name showed” (285). Sisi seems to be misguided in systematically equating social status with happiness, yet her desire for money never leads her to indulge in the moral depravity of the likes of her pimp Dele. On the contrary, Sisi initially decides to enter prostitution because it is in her mind the only way that she can “make ... money honestly” (211). Tragically, her plight and eventual death stem at once from society’s brutal realities, from her somewhat naïve interpretation of these harsh rules and, paradoxically, from her sense of self-respect.

7. Conclusion

An apparently anecdotal incident occurring towards the beginning of the novel perfectly summarises the issues that I have tried to raise in this essay. At a party, a black South African man tries to grab Efe’s hand and calls her “sister” (12), to which the young woman emphatically replies: “I’m not your sister” (12). Efe’s aggressive reaction first of all fittingly illustrates the narrative’s rejection of the idea of a unified Africa. The point is most

saliently evoked in relation to the black diasporic communities in Antwerp, but it is also reinforced by some of the distressing events that unfold on the African continent itself — the armed conflict that kills Alek’s family, and the cultural pressures that lead her boyfriend to send her away, are but two examples of this. The novel further suggests that the fragmentation of Africa can be traced back to the intolerance of some of its inhabitants, whether this prejudice takes the form of benign banter about Ghanaian cooking or that of ethnic hatred with devastating consequences.

In Unigwe’s book, even the African characters tend to indulge in the exaltation of subjectivity typically associated with the white European looking down on Africa. At the same time, the Nigerian women of the story are all victims of sexual exploitation in their host country, which testifies to the complex interplay between their sense of agency and the objectification to which they fall prey. The ambiguous relationship between subjectivity and subjection is also eloquently demonstrated by the fact that, while most of the protagonists have come to Antwerp deliberately, their choice was often forced on them by the lack of viable options in their society of origin.

Efe’s striking rejoinder —“I’m not your sister”— also evokes sisterhood, an idea whose centrality is suggested in the very title of the book. This article has attempted to show that different guises of the notion inform the relationship between the characters. Initially, the women are “sisters” only on a superficial level, in a manner reminiscent of the South African’s use of the term. The man indeed calls out to Efe using a word that evokes family ties, but then “grumbl[es] *bloody Africans*” (12) after she has rejected him, thereby discarding the artificial proximity he had tried to establish when the connection is no longer convenient. In this instance as in the women’s case, common diasporic experiences are revealed not to constitute sufficient conditions for the creation of close personal bonds. Rather than shared circumstances, it is the spontaneous *sharing* of the characters’ diverse destinies through language that eventually leads to the establishment of a true sense of sisterhood. The protagonists’ heartfelt revelations starkly contrast with organised “exercise[s]” in confession such as the “sessions” imposed on Alek while at the refugee camp (196).

Genuine storytelling, then, emerges as an essential ingredient to the development of Efe, Ama and Alek’s relationship, and to the reclaiming of their respective subjectivity.

On the metafictional level too, the device performs a fundamental role, since the restoration of Sisi's dignity is eventually achieved through the recounting of her life – and not, as the character herself had anticipated, through her acquisition of material wealth.

While exposing the systematic equation between money and happiness as illusory, the novel does not indulge in any form of preaching against its characters, and neither does it indicate that the contemporary world is all doom and gloom. For instance, the relatively pessimistic outlook suggested by Sisi's death and Efe's eventual career choice is counterbalanced by the story of Ama, who ends up opening a boutique in Nigeria, and even more so by that of Alek, who uses the money she has earned in Antwerp to set up a school in Yaba. This suggests that, despite Sisi's unfortunate experience, the author is still hopeful about the role that education may play in the future of Nigerian society.

Ultimately, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* can be said to redress the "narrative balance" in at least two different ways. First of all, the novel gives voices to the "silenced minority" mentioned in the title of Caryl Phillips's essay and, secondly, it presents a sensitive and nuanced picture of its heroines' personalities and fates. The author manages to arouse the reader's empathy through the act of writing, which effectively shows that, as Alek realises herself, "[i]t is not the blood that binds us in the end" (288).

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¹ In addition to the present journal, at least one recent academic publication focuses on contemporary Afro-European narratives: *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe* (ed. Bekers, Helff and Merolla). Another scholarly book that partly focuses on “African Europe” is *African Presence in Europe and Beyond / Présence africaine en Europe et au-delà* (ed. Gyssels and Ledent).

² See respectively Merolla, Brancato (“Voices Lost in a Non-Place”) and Pedroni for overviews of these countries’ developing Afro-European literatures.

³ These descriptions can be found on Belgium’s official website for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (see “Multicultural society”; “Belgium at the Heart of Europe”).

⁴ Bekers’s analysis focuses exclusively on Flanders, the northern, Flemish-speaking part of Belgium. However, I would argue that the situation in Wallonia, the southern francophone part of the country, is hardly better than that of the northern region —if anything, it is even worse. This claim seems to run counter to the opinion voiced by Bekers, who provides a short list of African authors living in Wallonia (but whose works are, she readily concedes, hardly available in print).

⁵ Shortly after the UK incident, a debate was also sparked off in Belgium when a Congolese student denounced the book for similar reasons. He filed a legal claim which was, however, rejected.

⁶ The novel was originally written in English under the title *The Phoenix*, but it was first published in Dutch translation by a well-known Belgian-Dutch publishing house.

⁷ For short analyses of *De Feniks* and its reception, see Tunca; Bekers 65.

⁸ “Zwartzusterstraat” means “Black Sister’s Street” (in the singular) in Dutch. The “Zwartzusterstraat” (without the “e”) is an actual street in the Antwerp red light district, but the author adapted this name for the purpose of her novel (Unigwe, personal communication).

⁹ Moreover, the flashback recounting Alek/Joyce’s life is once more interrupted by Sisi’s story. The first chapter devoted to the former character is entitled “Alek,” while the second is called “Joyce.” The importance of Alek’s change of name is analysed in section four of this article.

¹⁰ Unigwe has said that this strategy is in fact not a deliberate one —her use of clichés seems to be motivated by her concern with convincing characterisation rather than be a conscious attempt at using stereotypes as a device to make political statements (see “Interview”). Nevertheless, the technique does not lose any of its significance for, whether intended or not, the recurring presence of clichés forms an unmistakable motif in the novel.

¹¹ The same applies to black communities at large —according to Ama, Caribbean men are “not even proper black[s]” (260).

¹² That Sisi reproduces colonial clichés was much clearer in the novel’s manuscript, in which another sentence was appended to the paragraph I have just cited: “They do look alike, don’t they, people from those countries?” The question was removed in the later stages of editing and does not appear in the published version of the book.

¹³ Chika Unigwe, personal communication. These words are extracts from the poem “In Flanders Fields” by Canadian John McCrae. The piece lends voices to the soldiers who died on the Flemish battlefields during the First World War.