

# THE PEDAGOGIES OF SEX TRAFFICKING POSTCOLONIAL FICTION: CONSENT, AGENCY, AND NEOLIBERALISM IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*\*

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Amnesty International's 2015-16 push for the decriminalization of sex work sparked yet another international debate on sex trafficking, with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), together with a long list of celebrities and iconic feminists such as Gloria Steinem, claiming that such measure will only worsen sex trafficking, among other problems, and myriad pro-sex work feminists vouching exactly the opposite.<sup>1</sup> This dispute is by no means new—as of 2018, it remains at an impasse—but, interestingly, while sociologists and women's studies scholars have been discussing sex trafficking issues for decades now, and despite its intimate relation to postcolonialism and globalization, the topic has gained prominence in postcolonial studies fairly recently. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, for example, only in its third edition of 2013 includes for the first time a definition of “trafficking” and provides a few examples of postcolonial fiction dealing with the topic: one of them Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), the novel this article explores in detail.<sup>2</sup>

By 2013, not much had been written on the subject of sex trafficking from a literary studies perspective.<sup>3</sup> Sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and especially legal/law enforcement discourses dominated the conversation, but the challenges of representing sex trafficking aesthetically and the critical responses to such literature—which, arguably, can powerfully shape public perception of the issue—meant that literary treatments of sex trafficking were falling behind in comparison.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, some

nanced postcolonial literary analyses have come to light, but, enabled by the ambiguities regarding “consent” in the 2000 UN Trafficking Protocol and its subsequent ratifications, the conflicting feminist debates on sex work—erroneously conflated with sex trafficking or sexual slavery—still dominate the conversation and often establish the parameters of the analysis according to their diametrically opposed views on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Yet when analyzing sex trafficking narratives through either pro-sex work or anti-prostitution rhetoric, critics may find themselves between Scylla and Charybdis, at times reduced to unresolvable debates on individuals’ consent to be trafficked and their degree of agency.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, an interesting trend has been observed: where mass media largely relies on victimizing and disempowering tropes echoing abolitionist imagery (see Baker; Barnett; Doezema), postcolonial literary analyses tend to showcase and privilege moments of agency akin to pro-sex work rhetoric (see Bickford; Dawson; McCallum).<sup>7</sup>

This article seeks to intervene precisely here by pointing to the inadequacy of traditionally invoked concepts such as “consent” and, tightly associated to it, “agency” as primary foci of analysis when explaining contexts that can allow for extreme exploitation such as transnational sex trafficking. Despite recent human rights-oriented studies supportive of sex work published by *The Lancet* and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), the anti-prostitution/abolitionist model has become emblematic of the mainstream fight against sex trafficking in the US and, predictably, is the one receiving most attention and funding.<sup>8</sup> In response, postcolonial scholars who are apprehensive about abolitionist policies that generally construct trafficked individuals as unable to act or speak in their best interest have tended to embrace the opposing camp’s rhetoric. Prabha Kotiswaran, a sex worker rights advocate herself, duly stresses the need to expand “the narrow focus of current anti-trafficking efforts away from the top of the pyramid of anti-trafficking law, targeting scenarios involving strong coercion and strong exploitation, and instead pushing downwards towards the range of other trafficking scenarios” (405). Kotiswaran further notes that “[m]any postcolonial scholars have powerfully countered this abolitionist discourse by forefronting the *agency* of third world actors, especially sex workers” (355; emphasis mine). As will be suggested in the body of this work, the latter position is not unproblematic either and needs to be examined, as it maintains the binary by only inverting hierarchies: where one stresses victimhood, the other highlights agency, sometimes at the expense of overlooking appallingly oppressive contexts.<sup>9</sup>

Although many voluntarily trafficked people do enjoy high degrees of independence in foreign countries, one should bear in mind that this apparent autonomy rests on a very fragile power balance, as the dynamics of the job are necessarily complicated by the illegality, criminality, and therefore heightened vulnerability of the trafficked person and thus the need for other critical lenses beyond primarily celebrating, in fairly typical postcolonial fashion, moments of (often undisputed) individual resistance. In her award-winning novel *On Black Sisters’ Street*, the Nigerian-born

writer Chika Unigwe clearly shows the pitfalls of transferring the analytical model that currently dominates the pro-sex work/anti-prostitution debates into, to borrow Homi Bhabha's famous phrase, a similar *but not quite* framework. Even though the pervasive "victimhood" paradigm espoused by abolitionists is flawed, analyses of transnational sex trafficking fiction that predominantly attempt to highlight "consent" and "agency" run the risk of replicating pro-sex work rhetoric in the wrong context. Based on Judith Butler's observations on the limits of the legal discourse on sexual consent and Saba Mahmood's nuanced exploration of agency, this analysis intends to carve a dialectical third space of inquiry outside this limiting binary that currently pervades the sex trafficking discourse in order to redirect the discussion to the structural causes that enable sex trafficking. My objective, then, is not to take one side or the other, but to refocus the conversation to more productive pedagogical grounds, and move beyond the usual location of trafficked "agents" in postcolonial sex trafficking fiction—which in most cases can be found—to addressing the responsibility of the current neoliberal economic context that leads rational, but often poor, people to "consent" to be trafficked into exploitative jobs in the first place.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, I also question our investment in the ideas of agency, choice and consent, perhaps liberal feminists' mantras when it comes to analyzing sex trafficking fiction, and challenge the neoliberal assumptions implicit in this glorification of individual agency and consent in contexts that can enable hyper-exploitation.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in fetishizing agency regardless of the circumstances, one runs the risk of naturalizing the oppression and foreclosing a more urgent discussion about the responsibility of globalized macroeconomic context—in which all of us participate, if only ideologically—in perpetuating the exploitation.<sup>12</sup> I suggest that a pedagogy that examines sex trafficking fictional narratives within frameworks that interrogate how systemic gender inequality, xenophobia, racism, destruction of third world environments, forced migration, war and displacement, and patterns of unsustainable consumption—issues that Unigwe develops in her novel—directly correlate with sex trafficking has the potential to generate more impactful collective political action than locating abject victims or postcolonial heroines.<sup>13</sup>

One of the many lures of Unigwe's narrative in fact lies in its ability to resist easy categorization as it complicates straightforward views of subaltern sex-trafficked women in terms of victimhood or agency. Rather than passing judgement on them because of their choices, Unigwe crafts four trafficked characters endowed with depth and subjectivity who, regardless of their circumstances, speak for themselves and act upon their desires. For different reasons, they "consent" to be trafficked to the Europe in hopes of a better future, three of them fully cognizant that they will be doing sex work. In chasing their dreams, three will succeed and one will be killed.<sup>14</sup> Without ever resorting to melodrama, Unigwe offers a wide array of realistic sex trafficking scenarios that push readers beyond the limits of pro-sex work/anti-prostitution rhetoric and forces them instead to acknowledge the context and consequences of these characters' (free) choices.

## BETWEEN EMPOWERMENT AND VICTIMHOOD IN *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*

As if compelled by Caryl Phillips's 2004 essay on racism and prostitution in Antwerp and his pronouncement that "this is not [his] story to tell; [others] in Belgium will have to tell it," Belgian resident Chika Unigwe took it upon herself to thoroughly research the topic and place the spotlight on those women to whom Phillips referred as "the silenced minority."<sup>15</sup> In her highly acclaimed *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe heeds Phillips's advice as she brings to life the experiences of African women trafficked into Belgium for sex work.<sup>16</sup> While her previous novel *De Feniks* (2005) received mixed reviews in Belgium, where she lived until 2013, *On Black* swiftly catapulted Unigwe to international recognition, earning her the 2012 Nigeria Prize for Literature, the most important literary accolade in her home country, and cementing her status as a compelling third-generation Nigerian voice writing from the diaspora.<sup>17</sup> For a novel dealing so successfully with such a complex topic from an artistic point of view and such a contentious issue from an ideological perspective, the prize was undoubtedly well deserved.

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In *On Black*, Unigwe uses a fragmented, non-linear narrative and offers a polyphony of female voices, in different registers denoting diverse levels of education, social class, and cultural backgrounds, whose stories merge once they meet in Belgium. This aesthetic choice allows Unigwe first to highlight a multiplicity of sex trafficking scenarios, and second to resist the usual commodification of African literature and the anthropological cultural explanations often projected by Western "branding" of African fiction—the "the danger of a single story," as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would say. Unigwe convincingly draws several characters who are sympathetic and flawed but, above all, deeply human and relatable in their predicaments. Within a genre that often objectifies or even exploits characters into conventional types, Unigwe puts a name and a story together to create a narrative that is both aesthetically ambitious and thematically powerful, while she opens the spectrum of academic inquiry by creating a fluid space in which agents may become victims and victims may become agents. The common denominator remains the precarious situation that prompted the women's migration out of Africa, and the vulnerable position in which they find themselves as illegal immigrants in the global North.

The plot of her novel is clever: four African women converge at an apartment in Antwerp, Belgium, after agreeing to be trafficked by Dele, a well-off Nigerian trafficker to whom they each owe 30,000 euros plus the cost of their living expenses. Once in Europe, their passports are confiscated so, for all purposes, they become invisible—in Judith Butler's terms—at that moment, even if alive, their "lives are already considered not lives, or only partially living, or already dead and gone, prior to any explicit destruction or abandonment" ("Can One Lead a Good Life?" 10). A few pages into the novel, readers learn that Sisi (born Chisom), whose split story runs

as a connective thread throughout the narrative, has been murdered, an incident that acts as a catalyst for the three remaining women, Efe, Ama, and Alek, who never learn why Sisi was killed, to start sharing their own stories for the first time.<sup>18</sup> Unigwe thus weaves each of the characters' pasts in Africa with their present in Belgium, leading audiences to empathize with the situation of these young women who, all except for Alek, have freely chosen to be trafficked for sex work in the hope of making enough money to support their families back home or earn the means to enjoy an affluent life of material privileges for themselves in Europe.

Unigwe deftly dismantles the binary consent/agency debates that often dominate critical discussions of novels dealing with sex trafficking and align them accordingly with either pro-sex work or anti-prostitution discourse. To begin with, by having the women consent to be trafficked for sex work, Unigwe generates a rich space of ambiguity that would be difficult to accomplish had her characters been forced into sexual slavery, a trope explored by other African authors such as Amma Darko in *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Chris Abani in *Becoming Abigail* (2006), or Abidemi Sanuzi in *Eyo* (2009).<sup>19</sup> These novels, each with its own merits, embody a necessary but different, if less contentious, category as they represent obvious instances of coerced sex trafficking, where the main female characters initially consent to leave their African countries, but do not know they will be forced to engage in prostitution once in Europe.<sup>20</sup> In Unigwe's case, three of her characters recognize and expect to do sex work—and in fact, most of them become very successful in the process—while, crucially, one of them is violently murdered for not complying with her trafficker's rules.<sup>21</sup>

Another effective strategy that distinguishes *On Black* from some of the other postcolonial sex trafficking novels mentioned above is that, unlike Abani's *Abigail* and Sanuzi's *Eyo*, Unigwe depicts her characters as adults, or borderline eighteen, at the time of consent to be trafficked.<sup>22</sup> This authorial decision solves a major representational problem as it prevents audiences from immediately placing the protagonists in the category of "victims." Abani's and Sanuzi's narratives go to great lengths to decentre readers' perspectives on their characters' victimhood by depicting the trafficked girls as multidimensional, strong, and intelligent, at times in control of their sexuality. For example, *Abigail* starts an affair with an older social worker assigned to her case, and *Eyo* voluntarily becomes her pimp's lover. But the fact that these novels cover the lifespan of girls transitioning from childhood into adolescence—*Abigail* roughly from ten to fourteen and *Eyo* from ten to almost sixteen—complicates the discussion in terms of the characters' sexual consent and level of agency. Age of consent debates are particularly subjective, and Butler reminds one that "age of consent laws serve all kinds of social purposes [at times beyond the best interest of the young person]" ("Sexual Consent" 418). Yet from a psychoanalytical perspective, these aforementioned depictions of consensual sexual acts are not without trouble, as Butler points out that sexual desire is never transparent or unproblematic, more so when it comes to minors (419).<sup>23</sup> One should also consider that Abani and Sanuzi

depict young characters who have been sexually abused by close relatives as children, which thwarts straightforward readings of their sexual desire and freedom.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, in both novels, the gruesome descriptions of violence the trafficked characters endure at such young ages once in Europe—Abigail chained naked to a dog house and sodomized daily by her trafficker, for instance, or Eyo drugged by her pimp, brutally gang raped, and filmed having sex with a dog—make it difficult for audiences to see them as empowered young subjects rather than as sex slaves. Even if one leaves the age issue aside, the degree of sexual violence and explicit coercive methods depicted are so shockingly extreme that to address these postcolonial sex trafficking novels primarily through pro-sex work rhetoric with its privileging of individual choice and agency seems farfetched.

One of the major aesthetic difficulties of representing sex-trafficked characters concerns, in Susan Sontag's words, "the ethics of seeing" (3)—in this case, how to avoid deploying exploitative images of sexual violence that further objectify the person and turn her/his experience into an erotic performance for readers to watch from a safe distance. As in mainstream media, fictional representations of sex trafficking tend to rely on disempowering, voyeuristic, often (porno)graphic images of trafficked victims. A novel like Sanuzi's *Eyo*, for instance, resorts to realism to represent of Eyo's numerous rape scenes often from a (problematic) third-person point of view, to the effect of showcasing brutal sexual violence or borderline pornographic passages, as in the following example: "Sam [Eyo's host father in London] looked at the ripening buds of [Eyo's] breasts, her sprinkling of pubic hair and desire rose within him[.] Eyo opened her mouth wide open and bent over, her tears splashing his penis. When he came, his sperm sloshed inside her mouth, threatening to poison her" (90). The fact that the victim of sexual violence here is a child whose breasts have not yet developed, together with the mimetic quality of the description, complicate the ethics of the representation as it further commodifies/eroticizes the young protagonist while supposedly trying to inspire audiences to fight sex trafficking of minors. In contrast, Unigwe skillfully subverts audiences' usual exposure to voyeuristic glimpses inside brothels or exploitative scenes by focusing on the women's lives *outside* their booths, while for the most part avoiding the use of explicit sexual imagery. If anything, readers see that most of the worst violence occurred before the women's trafficking into Europe and that, once in Belgium, while working for "Madam," they seem to enjoy relative freedom and happiness.

The narrative begins on a high note, with Sisi, walking blissfully and shopping in Antwerp, pondering on her newfound economic freedom and genuine love for a man (Luc). The next chapter shows the other three women getting ready for work, rushing and bantering, but certainly none of their comments hints at anything remotely like slavery: no women chained to radiators, no drugs, no bruises, or any of the typical abolitionist imagery. The following chapter still refuses to indulge in stereotypical images of victimization as Unigwe devotes several pages to describing the festive atmosphere at a celebration Efe organized to honor the memory of

a deceased Nigerian woman she calls her grandmother. At the party, the women dance, drink, and meet several fellow Africans, while Unigwe takes the opportunity to disrupt conventional views of Africa(ns) as a monolithic ethnic/cultural group and instead turns her protagonists into “orientalists”: the four women reveal their particular idiosyncrasies and “other” fellow Africans with comments about “Kenyaans who ate samosas and had no traditional clothes” or Ghanaians who are “just wannabe Nigerians” but, as if reaffirming the legitimacy of their decision, they all agree that “Antwerp, for all its faults, is the best city in the world” (10-11). Indeed, against widespread assumptions, readers do not find in this novel African women begging to be rescued by (Western) saviours.

Nor do audiences encounter what Mawli Adjei, in his criticism of Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*, deems the men as “enemy” archetypal trope (48). Of course, one should bear in mind that Darko’s novel offers a very different spin on the topic, as she addresses coerced sex trafficking. Within such a context, Darko herself explains, it becomes difficult to cast likable male characters (Bouillion). Similarly, Abani’s *Becoming Abigail*, which depicts an unambiguous case of sexual slavery, portrays, for the most part, predatory men (Abigail’s father hints incestuous desire towards his daughter; male cousins sexually abuse her; Peter, the trafficker, brutalizes and rapes her while in captivity). Even the older male social worker with whom the fourteen-year-old starts a passionate affair could be read as another exploiter, as he holds throughout an unequal position of power and benefits from the girl’s emotional instability.<sup>25</sup> Unigwe, for her part, crafts an array of men who range from the clearly abusive (Dele, the trafficker who orders Sisi’s murder; Titus, the older man who seduces and abandons Efe after her pregnancy; Brother Cyril, the pedophile who rapes Ama), to more ambiguous ones (Polycarp, Alek’s boyfriend, who initially shows love but eventually betrays her), to genuinely decent ones (Peter, Sisi’s hardworking, sympathetic boyfriend in Nigeria; and Luc, the white “good man” with whom she falls in love in Belgium) (3). Through such broad-ranging representations, Unigwe challenges the binary mentality typically reflected by mainstream sex trafficking discourse of evil traffickers and innocent victims, and blurs the lines with morally ambivalent characters on both sides. Significantly, in *On Black*, it is the women who look for traffickers and not the other way around.

Unigwe even puzzles audiences reluctant to consider sex work a legitimate “choice” by crafting a (female) procurer whose form of punishment consists in actually *not* letting the women do sex work. Because of the aforementioned party, Efe shows up late for work, so “Madam’s anger manifested itself in a laughter that was dry like a cough and a sneering ‘Ah, so you’ve earned enough money to waltz in to work whenever you want?’ For a week she refused to let Efe use her booth. One week of not earning money was enough to put anyone off getting into Madam’s bad books” (9). While this scene obviously shows an unequal power relation with instances of clear coercion and subordination, it is striking that the method of punishment does not reflect the typical anti-prostitution rhetoric of women beaten, tortured, or forced into sex, but

rather the opposite, the temporary prohibition of sex work, enough to upset Efe and move her into compliance the next time. All in all, in comparison with the habitual (porno)graphic images of rape and sadism inside brothels that popular sex trafficking discourse projects, Unigwe, for the most part, depicts a rather pleasant environment once the women arrive in Belgium. In fact, except for Sisi's initiation into sex work and her later murder, the most disturbing moments come from the past sections in the narrative when, in attempt to make sense of Sisi's (to use Butler's term) "ungrievable" death and the possibility that any of them could meet the same fate, the women start sharing their previous lives in Africa and the perilous economic conditions that prompted them to migrate.<sup>26</sup>

Keeping a restrained and objective tone, Unigwe deftly arranges their stories in an escalating order of abuse and violence, while stressing throughout the unequal power relations these women have faced and attempted to cope with in their home countries. One by one, the three living characters begin to unburden their pasts. Efe, whose speech denotes a clearly working-class background, was forced to leave school after her mother died in order to take care of her siblings. An unsympathetic older man named Titus chases and seduces her with car rides and Coca-Cola, luxuries for the deprived Efe, so she becomes his lover in exchange for a little money to buy rather insignificant things such as jeans, nail polish, or candy, Unigwe's way of highlighting Efe's utter poverty and teenage aspirations. As with the rest of her characters, Unigwe avoids showcasing exploitative images and, for the most part, represents sex from Efe's point of view, rather than offering Titus's potentially objectifying third-person heterosexual male gaze: "His stomach pressed on hers, and she wished she could push it out of the way. *De man stomach dey like water pot.* There was nothing at all in this whole exercise that made her want to repeat the performance" (47). Efe becomes pregnant, and is predictably discarded, by Titus, so she finds herself humiliated and alone, forced to provide for her child and her three siblings in an environment in which no one would marry or support her after getting pregnant out of wedlock. Her only options are a few exhausting cleaning jobs that keep her away from her child for most of the day. Underpaid and overworked, she realizes that her prospects of earning a decent wage in Nigeria are next to none, so she ends up contacting Dele, the trafficker, who helps her move to Belgium to do sex work.

Unlike Efe, Ama comes from a more comfortable middle-class situation, but she gradually reveals how her ultra-religious stepfather, whom she initially believes to be her real father, sexually abused her from age eight until puberty. These incidents ruin her former stellar performance at school and deeply change her, as she becomes withdrawn and depressed. After graduating from high school with low grades and no university education prospects, Ama finally gathers the courage to unmask her stepfather in front of her mother but, in a devastating scene, the girl is kicked out of the house for her presumed lies, although it is strongly implied that her mother actually believes the abuse existed but chooses to stay with the pastor for economic reasons: "Just shut up. Shut up, Ama, before I am thrown out of my husband's house because

of you. *Mechie onu kita* [...] Just pack your things. Pack your things” (128). Penniless and disgusted by her stepfather’s hypocrisy and her mother’s betrayal, Ama moves to the city with a female relative, Mama Eko, who offers her a low-paying job waitressing at a restaurant. Here she meets Dele, who promises a better life in Europe, so she later voluntarily arranges her own trafficking and ends up in Antwerp with the rest.

Alek, whom Dele renames “Joyce,” is the last one to unravel her traumatic past. Unlike the other two, she is a Sudanese refugee who survived the ethnic cleansing wars in South Sudan, a massacre notoriously ignored by the West. Alek endured unspeakable brutality, gang raped by a Janjaweed militia that also raped her mother and killed her whole family. Interestingly, this, one of the most violent passages in the novel, is not explicitly represented as Alek is hiding inside a closet, unable to “see” what goes on as she purposely shuts her eyes (therefore readers’ eyes too) and only witnesses the aftermath of her parents’ ordeals and her brother’s murder. During Alek’s gang rape, Unigwe again averts a potentially voyeuristic gaze by describing the scene from Alek’s point of view through tropes of physical torture and mental detachment: “This is not happening. This is not happening.’ A mantra to keep away the layer upon layer of pain that seared through her as he went in and out of her, groaning like a dying man” (163). In a refugee camp, Alek encounters foreign aid for the first time and tells her story to a United Nations worker, who appears numb after hearing myriad similar accounts: “*The woman did not blink as she listened to my story. [...] The woman did not blink!*” (166). Instead, the humanitarian worker “handed Alek a ration card, told her it was for food. Gave her a plastic sheet for her tent,” and called a loud “NEXT!” (166)—Unigwe’s unmistakable commentary on the insufficiency of such palliative help and the devastating results of the war. At the refugee camp, Alek meets and falls in love with a seemingly kind Nigerian man, Polycarp, who brings her to Nigeria for a future life together, but ends up abandoning her because his clan would not accept her. Noticeably, Alek is the only character in the novel who does not seek Dele on her own, as it is Polycarp who arranges with Dele her trafficking to Europe, supposedly as a nanny. At his office, Dele inspects Alek’s body and changes her name into a more feminine and marketable one, Joyce, which makes Alek suspicious of the whole arrangement. However, the broken-hearted Alek/Joyce ignores the red flags and agrees to leave. As for Polycarp, he needs to get rid of her in order to start an “appropriate” relationship with a woman of his tribe—and who does not bear the stigma of rape, readers presume—yet his guilt compels him to pay for her debt, which places Joyce in a more favorable position at the brothel in Antwerp.

Arguably, all these women’s backgrounds carry fairly “common” motivations for their choices to be trafficked: utter poverty and teen pregnancy; sexual abuse and abandonment; gang rape, murder, and betrayal. Abolitionist advocates who regard prostitution as inherently harmful and a result of abuse can rationalize that these women’s psyches have been damaged somehow by acute trauma. Sisi, on the other hand, presents a more interesting scenario because she exhibits none of that: she has a graduate degree from a respected university, a boyfriend who loves her and

wants to marry her, a family who supports her, and lots of dreams. If anyone, she is expected to “make it.” But Unigwe does not spare the opportunity to show that, even though postcolonial Nigeria may have delivered on the promises of education, it has blatantly failed to provide the jobs graduates will need afterwards.<sup>27</sup> Only those with the right connections or willing to pay bribes, as Achebe has mordantly shown in his *No Longer at Ease* or Adichie in her more recent *Americanah*, can access coveted employment. Unigwe also makes sure that readers understand Sisi’s family’s expectations and pressures by pointing out the non-existent social mobility they have suffered for years. Despite her father working for the Ministry of Works as a civil servant with middle class aspirations such as buying a car and owning a home, parents and daughter have lived all their lives crammed in a one-bedroom apartment with a communal kitchen and a shared toilet, at times without water, stinking of waste and infested with maggots. Sisi’s parents managed to send her to school believing her education would be a ticket to success, as “there were only two certainties in their lives: death and [Sisi’s] good job” (20). But after she graduates in business, for two years Sisi tries her best to find employment in any of the old colonial and later neocolonial banks to no avail. When her job never materializes because of the bureaucracy, corruption, and nepotism ingrained in neoliberal Obasanjo’s Nigeria, Sisi begins to lose hope and considers paths never thought of before. After much frustration, she chooses—of her own accord—to be trafficked for sex work into Belgium.

By offering such distinct scenarios, Unigwe rejects the polarized discourse that either fetishizes choice and agency or espouses clichéd images of uber-victimization in sex trafficking contexts. And while the main character Sisi is killed for failing to repay her debt, the other three women eventually pay them off and succeed: Efe stays in Belgium and becomes a prosperous brothel owner herself, thus repeating the cycle of exploitation; Alek goes back to Nigeria “with enough capital to set up a school in Yaba”; and Ama opens her own boutique and makes her old friend Mama Eko its manager (240). Unigwe does go to great lengths to resist the disempowering tropes many anti-trafficking advocates repeat ad nauseam, to represent instead most of her trafficked characters as in control of their destinies. Even Sisi, after being brutally murdered, assumes a position of strength since the novel ends with her spirit claiming revenge on Dele by cursing his young daughters. Sisi’s words powerfully close the narrative and restore her as an agent even after death: “May your lives be bad. May you never enjoy love. May your father suffer as much as mine will when he hears I am gone. May you ruin him” (254). Yet, however stylistically forceful, that strategy is of course a rhetorical device Unigwe uses to empower her character, as what causes Sisi’s death is her attempt to exercise her autonomy and leave the life of sex work to which she had voluntarily consented but could not leave.

## MOVING BEYOND “AGENCY” AND “CONSENT” IN POSTCOLONIAL SEX TRAFFICKING DISCOURSE

Here it is pertinent to revisit the issues of agency and consent. In this context, Butler’s analysis of sexual consent becomes relevant as she highlights the ambivalence and unpredictability inherent in situations that rely on sexual consent, where individuals may not know at the time of consent “precisely to what they have consented in advance” (405). Butler elaborates on consent as follows:

Although consent is often conceived as a discrete act that an individual performs and so draws upon the presumption of a stable individual, what happens to this framework if we maintain the view that the “I” who consents does not necessarily stay the same in the course of the consent? In other words, does the “I” give itself over to a certain transformation, not fully knowable in advance through its act of consent? (“Sexual Consent” 406)

66 Sisi’s murder occurs because, as Butler would say, in the course of her consent she changes her mind and wants to quit. But that option is non-existent for her as an illegal sex-trafficked individual, which raises an obvious question: how much agency does she have as an illegal immigrant dependent on exploiters? Would it be appropriate to see this character as a sexual slave, however apparently strong and free she has acted before?

As a pedagogical exercise, to focus primarily on Sisi’s initial consent and high degree of agency would certainly counter abolitionist gender-stereotypical representations of trafficked women as weak or helpless. But this stance is not uncomplicated because, for once, it assumes transparent views of such concepts. Like Slavoj Žižek in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Butler problematizes the idea of a coherent, rational choosing subject and the assumption that people act logically in their best interest. Butler wonders whether

consent carries with it a dimension of fantasy, by which I do not mean that it is an error or falsehood. On the contrary, I am wondering whether the legal language of consent encodes a fantasy of the liberal subject, the perspicacious and choosing “I.” I presume you do not think that I dispute the possibility of clarity or of choosing, even if sometimes, if not often, choosing in a clear-minded way. But even if we do sometimes, or even often, choose in a clear-minded way, that does not mean that we are fundamentally fully choosing and self-knowing subjects. (“Sexual Consent” 425)

In agreement with Butler, the feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod notes that “consent might not be simply a core liberal value, but part of a strong fantasy of autonomy,” which, she argues, explains “our intense attachment to the idea” (217). Butler herself further complicates legal definitions of consent by referring to Gramsci, who reminds one that consent can actually be “manufactured” under conditions of hegemony (Butler, “Sexual Consent” 410).<sup>28</sup> Regarding agency, in her insightful *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood already noted that “Butler [like herself] resists the impetus to tether the meaning of agency to a predefined teleology of emancipatory politics” (20).

Mahmood provocatively destabilizes the concept and invites scholars to consider “alternative ways of thinking about agency,” bearing in mind that views of “agency” are not transparent or equally transposable to every context and that the insistence on identifying emancipatory forms of resistance—in itself, “a fairly unproblematic enterprise”—may reflect more Western liberal desires and projections of what agency is or should be, rather than a universal, stable notion (7, 9). In Mahmood’s own words:

I question the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist [and postcolonial] feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating [...] modes of power[.] In doing so, this scholarship elides dimensions of human action whose ethical and political status does not map onto the logic of repression and resistance. (14)

While both Butler and Mahmood’s critiques address different (if related) contexts, their analyses of consent and agency become helpful to postcolonial explorations of sex trafficking discourse as they subvert concepts that have become naturalized (i.e. unquestioned) when, in fact, as these critics persuasively show, they are culturally and historically mediated.<sup>29</sup>

I have argued throughout that postcolonial literary analyses that endeavour to primarily showcase the choice and agency of trafficked characters under extreme exploitation may be missing the point as, even if one leaves aside how unstable these ideas are in themselves, such analyses seem to be echoing pro-sex work rhetoric in the wrong context. Understandably, these literary analyses are well intentioned as they attempt to counter the abolitionist depiction of trafficked women and children as ever-passive gendered victims in need of paternalistic state intervention and more repressive criminal justice solutions; yet, in so doing, they stay trapped between the agency/submission binary. If one’s purpose is to intervene ethically in order to better the situation of populations affected, how relevant, for example, would it be for trafficked people who find themselves in oppressive or even life-threatening situations to focalize our (students’) gaze on feel-good instances of individual resistance at the expense of addressing the structural contexts that enable and perpetuate their exploitation? In other words, if one can agree that these criteria offer a limited focus of analysis, how can feminist and postcolonial literary critics address the ethics and aesthetics of transnational sex trafficking more fruitfully?

It is true that postcolonial studies, as Robert C. Young, among others, has noted, show a proclivity to trace instances of subaltern agency and resistance in the face of oppression—and this is often a good thing.<sup>30</sup> I am certainly not implying that all analyses of subaltern trafficked populations’ “agency” are futile or that one should stop trying to locate those moments of resistance in novels addressing transnational sex trafficking; nor do I intend to deny the commendable work some feminists have advanced on the subject. Instead, I ask whether other foci of inquiry may render more productive explorations and interventions. In this respect, I share the apprehension scholars such as Mahmood and Abu-Lughod have expressed, albeit in different contexts, about the desire to locate and explain, in the words of Abu-

Lughod, moments of “resistance” and “resisters” (qtd. in Mahmood 8) at the expense of critically examining the workings of power. Like them, I argue for “a critical vigilance against the elisions” (Mahmood 16) such analyses may (unintentionally) carry. When dealing with a complex issue such as transnational trafficking, one must recognize that consent and agency are shifting, unstable, and intimately dependent on the specific material circumstances a person may be experiencing, and that a model that may serve as a productive political strategy for furthering essential sex workers’ rights may become counterproductive for some sex-trafficked people, and vice versa.<sup>31</sup> Even in the context of apparent autonomy, one cannot always determine the blurry lines between empowerment and exploitation in the face of the systemic vulnerability transnational sex trafficking can entail, and thus the need to move beyond the seductive feminist/postcolonial mantras of agency and consent. As stated before, these ideas may reflect more a neoliberal credo rooted in what Abu-Lughod calls a “fantasy of autonomy” (217) than a useful political strategy to actually change the structural conditions of exploited trafficked populations: for instance, xenophobia, discrimination, racism, and lack of substantial access to welfare support, housing, employment, health, or education. More worryingly, this insistence on individual consent and agency can deflect attention from problems that should be collectively and politically addressed in lieu of celebrating (*à la* Nicholas Kristof) entrepreneurial choice, personal responsibility, or astounding resilience in the face of adversity.<sup>32</sup>

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A more productive pedagogical approach would focus on the structural contexts that generate the characters’ exploitation. Here, a concept such as Kimberlé W. Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality comes to mind, as trafficked individuals navigate a combination of social identities that put them at a clear disadvantage because of their citizenship status above all, together with the race, class, and gender discrimination that poor (often non-white) minorities engaged in sex work suffer in predominantly white countries that stigmatize and prosecute their very existence.<sup>33</sup> Chandra Mohanty, for her part, finds “feminist solidarity” as “the most useful and productive pedagogical strategy for feminist cross-cultural work,” a model that rejects seeing women in their stereotypical-Other roles and assumes instead that, in our globalized world, “the lives of women are connected and interdependent, albeit not the same” (61).<sup>34</sup> “What is emphasized,” Mohanty stresses, “are relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist solidarity” (62) with especial attention to “the directionality of power” (62) and the “often devastating effects of global restructuring on women” (64). Like Mohanty, Abu-Lughod invites us to consider “our own larger responsibilities to address the forms of global injustice that are powerful shapers of the world” in which trafficked people, whether by choice or not, “find themselves” (783). Unigwe’s novel thus prompts a more nuanced examination of frequently invoked concepts such as “agency” and “consent,” and in turn reminds critics to be vigilant about their (unintended) complicity in maintaining oppressive power structures in the name of “empowering” the very people those structures will continue to exclude unless changed. Shifting the focus

from locating individual “agency” to addressing the inescapable relation between neoliberal economic measures benefitting women and men in the global North—including unrestrained militaristic ventures, xenophobic anti-immigration laws, damaging environmental policies and consequent planetary destruction and migration, concentrated corporate power, and patterns of unsustainable consumption—places transnational solidarity and responsibility at the center of the pedagogical exercise. At the same time, this pedagogy provides a fluid border that recognizes subaltern trafficked people as capable “agents” with the ability to consent to act in their perceived best interest, but who can later become “victims” not because of the clichéd third-world-passivity or helplessness represented in mainstream sex trafficking discourse, but because of the dynamics their choice itself entails.

Bebe Loff and Jyoti Sanghera point out that “[t]rafficking is the result, in part, of actions by ‘victims’ who sensibly seek a better life [and therefore become agents] for themselves and their families in another country. It is also a response to needs in the labour market in countries of destination” (566). From this perspective, “[d]iscussions about trafficking should be considered against a backdrop of global inequality in which people make rational decisions to act in ways that might be illegal, socially unacceptable, or self harming” (566). As Chieloza Eze explains, the women Unigwe represents “are lured to Europe not only by the promises of the continent that colonized theirs, but more especially because of the political, social, and economic dysfunction that have brought different forms of tragedy to their homelands: war, rape, poverty, and political corruption” (90). A novel like *On Black* thus forces readers to take a broader look and acknowledge the present-day “corruption and incoherence of the Nigerian nation-state” (Quayson 368) and how globalized economies profit from the exclusion of subaltern populations. The different sex trafficking scenarios Unigwe skillfully weaves acknowledge this reality, as she addresses these women’s vulnerability primarily in terms of their socioeconomic circumstances, their dependence on patriarchal structures, and their ethnicity (class, gender, and race).

Rather than creating clear-cut situations, Unigwe’s characters inhabit a liminal space between victimhood, determined by circumstances outside their control as illegal immigrants working the shadow economy, and empowerment, thanks to their own conspicuous resourcefulness and capacity to persevere. In stark contrast to mainstream representations, Unigwe refuses to infantilize women or assume them as powerless, unintelligent, or unable to take responsibility for their own lives; nor does she represent them in permanent need of patriarchal (Western) rescue. Instead, her narrative underscores that the women’s initial consent and high degree of agency may not always trump the limitations imposed by their circumstances as illegal immigrants in the global north. That is the brilliance of Unigwe’s narrative: it showcases an ample spectrum of sex trafficking scenarios without patronizing or morally judging her characters. In Unigwe’s world, trafficked women do not become abject victims, but the fact that one ends up murdered after deciding to leave sex work compels one to question how much agency a trafficked woman can expect to have

within a legal system that forces her to abide by the rule of exploiters. In this way, Unigwe brings attention to the myriad realities facing sex-trafficked populations and to our shared responsibility in challenging the neoliberal system of inequality that generates such oppression, which models that predominantly endeavour to highlight victimhood or empowerment would, perhaps unintentionally, silence.

## NOTES

\*Support for this project was provided by a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by The Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York.

1. See “Explaining Our Draft Policy on Sex Work,” Amnesty International; “Keeping Sex Workers Safe,” *The Lancet*; and Breiner, “These Three Graphs Could Change Your Mind about Legalizing Sex Work.” As of January 2018, this debate between sex worker rights advocates and anti-trafficking activists remains at an impasse.
- 70 2. Even though most human trafficking occurs in trades other than sex work (such as agriculture, fishing, construction, mining, or domestic work), sex trafficking has received disproportionate attention. Ashcroft’s *Key Concepts* provides examples of only three novels dealing with sex trafficking under the “Trafficking” entry, for example, when other postcolonial authors, such as Mahasweta Devi’s “The Fairytale of Rajbhasha,” Chris Abani’s *Graceland*, and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, to name a few, have dealt with different forms of trafficking. At the risk of continuing this trend, this article brings attention to the pitfalls of the current sex trafficking discourse in postcolonial studies in order to address more productive pedagogical strategies of intervention. For a comprehensive analysis of human trafficking in its various forms, see Quayson and Arhin.
3. I refer to 2013 as this is the year when Ashcroft et al. first incorporated “trafficking” into their compendium of key postcolonial terms.
4. See Bickford; also see Dawson.
5. The problem with these two positions, which Unigwe’s thoroughly researched novel visibly captures, is that, unsurprisingly, neither one can effectively address every case when it comes to sex trafficking, as issues of consent, coercion, choice, and agency are far more fluid than the binary model of pro or against implies. In “Human Trafficking and Sexual Slavery,” Ronald Weitzer notes that “[t]rafficking and slavery are used in-terchangeably in the [US] State Department’s 2012 and 2013 annual reports” (227). Regarding “consent,” Prabha Kotiswaran explains that the “issue of consent was central to the negotiation of the U.N. Protocol, and was extraordinarily influenced by the sex work debates” (364). For an analysis of the nuances surrounding the terms sex trafficking, sex work, and sex slavery, see Kempadoo.
6. For a compelling analysis of “agency,” see “The Subject of Freedom,” Chapter One, in Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety*. Regarding “consent,” I should clarify that my focus differs from second wave anti-prostitution feminists such as Kathleen Barry, who would argue, along other abolitionists, that prostitution could never be a real consensual choice in the face of economic coercion or child sexual abuse, for example, scenarios that Unigwe actually addresses in her novel as triggers of perceived empowering choices her female characters consciously make. I echo instead the philosophical analysis Judith Butler illuminates in her essay “Sexual Consent: Some Thoughts on Psychoanalysis and Law.”
7. Some seminal postcolonial analyses of these novels, in keeping with the field’s traditional methodology, acknowledge the hyper-exploitative contexts the sex-trafficked characters inhabit and yet have endeavoured to locate moments of “agency” in the trafficked characters represented. Some critics highlight these young characters’ voluntary sexual choices (see note 23) or refrain from calling the underage characters “children,” for example. In his analysis of Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail*,

Ashley Dawson locates “agency” in the fourteen-year-old trafficked character’s sexual affair with an older social worker assigned to her case, a relation that Dawson reads as “egalitarian” despite their age and power difference and Abigail’s clearly traumatized mental state (188). Donna Bickford, for her part, seems to agree with Dawson’s interpretation of agency in general, although she specifies that she does not want to be read as “sanitizing the violation of human rights that is trafficking” (132) and brings attention to the role of males consuming/demanding sex work instead. Pamela McCallum seems uncomfortable with Dawson’s reading of agency in the sexual affair between Abigail and the older social worker, but still locates “agency” in the character’s “engagement with cultural texts in the form of maps and literature” (38).

8. A 2018 study by the GAATW calls to recognize sex workers organizations’ efforts to combat sex workers’ exploitation; a 2014 study published in *The Lancet* offers evidence to substantiate the decriminalization of sex work, especially as it reduces the prevalence of HIV.
9. I am emphatically not suggesting that Kotiswaran’s research ignores root causes generating human traffic; on the contrary, I am only highlighting that her commendable and necessary work to further sex workers’ rights has spilled over to postcolonial literary analyses of cases depicting clear coercion and exploitation—even sexual slavery—and that postcolonial critics, possibly to distance themselves from reductionist abolitionist discourses, have often embraced the “agency” mantra in cases that do not meaningfully warrant it; and, of course, “agency” can almost always be creatively found even in the most horrific cases. I should also clarify that my point on acknowledging “victimhood” is not directed at social workers who remind one that labels such as “victim” only delay or limit a person’s capacity to overcome trauma and heal.
10. I want to acknowledge the disproportionate amount of attention certain populations receive. While sex trafficking statistics show that women are predominantly affected, men and transgender individuals are also trafficked, but the emphasis on showcasing “ideal” victims deserving of moral outrage and pity silences that reality; for a relevant analysis, see Blume, and Meyers. I address only women here because they are the focus of Unigwe’s novel.
11. I acknowledge the vagueness of the term “exploitation.” I am only referring to extreme cases here, such as the murder of one of the trafficked characters Unigwe depicts or the enslavement and rapes of the main characters in Abani’s *Becoming Abigail* and Sanuzi’s *Eyo* (see Kotiswaran 395-96).
12. See Barberán Reinares (12-13).
13. In particular, I address literary, cultural, and gender studies scholars who play such an influential role in the way sex trafficking narratives are unpacked in academic contexts because they can help reshape the current sex trafficking discourse centering on the (usually Orientalized) victims/agents and perpetrators that have captured the public’s imaginary to foregrounding the structural conditions that generate such exploitation and our shared responsibility in changing them. Another relevant aspect to consider is the market’s favoring of stories addressing a (subaltern) individual overcoming insurmountable hardship, as Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have noted in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, which prompts critics to be cautious about unintentionally reinscribing this trend and the elisions enabled by privileging liberal discourses of autonomy within clearly oppressive contexts.
14. I do not suggest that all individuals who choose to migrate and be trafficked for sex work will become abject victims. Some, as Unigwe describes, manage to live successful lives. My point is to acknowledge that some do find themselves in appalling situations of exploitation because of the systemic vulnerabilities trafficking entails (such as illegality) and that a discourse that centers primarily on individual agency and consent might downplay root causes of the exploitation in lieu of celebrating (very marketable) individual “empowerment.”
15. See Phillips.
16. First published in Dutch as *Fata Morgana* in 2007 and later released in English in 2009.
17. According to Daria Tunca, the tepid reception of *De Feniks* had less to do with aesthetic problems

than with Belgium's reluctance to accept an African writer 'othering' it.

18. To avoid confusion, I will refer to Chisom as Sisi, the name she adopts once she arrives in Belgium.
19. For further analyses of these novels, see Barberán Reinares, Bickford, Dawson, McCallum, Nadaswaran, and Schultheis Moore and Swanson Goldberg.
20. These three characters are deceived into abandoning their home countries: Mara believes that she will be living with her husband in Germany; Abigail is promised an education in London; Eyo expects to become a nanny in London, which she initially does, but her host father ends up raping and prostituting her.
21. I will further elaborate the significance of this point later in the article.
22. In Unigwe's novel, Efe's age is not clearly specified, but textual clues such as the duration of her pregnancy hint that she must be about eighteen by the time she leaves for Belgium. For a detailed analysis of minors' age of consent and trafficking, see Pearce.
23. Butler criticizes "the libertarian presumption that the child has a reserve of sexual freedom available at all times" because it ignores
 

72 the vexed consequences for children of the social formation of desire, the psychic repercussions of ambivalence, shame, and unknowingness, and the particular tensions that can and do emerge when one wants what one does not choose, or one chooses what one comes not to want very much, or when sexuality is animated without knowing precisely what or how one wants. Only within a strictly libertarian point of view is every act of desire an implicit act of choice [which] might complicate the direct link between sexual and consensual acts. ("Sexual Consent" 416)
24. Unigwe also represents one of her characters, Ama, as a victim of child sexual abuse, but unlike Abani's and Sanuzi's novels, which describe coerced sex trafficking, Ama decides to be trafficked for sex work and ends up becoming successful because of that choice; once Ama's debt is repaid, she comes back to Nigeria with enough money to open a school.
25. Abani presents this relationship from Abigail's point of view, so it becomes difficult to see it as exploitative since the teenager seems to be in love, or infatuated, with the social worker and in control of her decision; the character claims it is her choice.
26. In "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?" Butler explains that for some people (in this case, sex-trafficked individuals deprived of documents and a legal status), "life is already not considered to be a life[; life] is treated as a form of death [...] especially when one has become nameless or when one's name has been replaced by a number, or when one is not addressed at all" (11-12).
27. In his non-fictional account of the sex-trafficked Chibok girls in Nigeria, Helon Habila explains that "[e]ducation from primary to university level was free for all Nigerians, and this was the case until the late 1990s. Every graduate was assured a job[.] Kleptocracy hadn't yet take root as a principle of governance[.] A once vibrant middle class of civil servants, entrepreneurs, [etc.] would be gradually decimated and sent into exile" (69).
28. For a psychoanalytical exploration of the illusion/fantasy of "choice," see Žižek.
29. In *Politics of Piety*, the feminist anthropologist Saba Mahmood analyzes agency within a religious framework involving Muslim women in Egypt. While the context of this analysis is different, the stereotypes projected onto Muslim and Arab women (voiceless, oppressed) allows one to make a fruitful comparison/extrapolation, as mainstream discourse represents sex-trafficked women through very similar tropes (voiceless, oppressed).
30. For a nuanced analysis of resistance in postcolonial contexts, see Young, "Postcolonial Remains" and "The Right to Exist."
31. A model that regards all prostitution as trafficking clearly imperils the legitimate claims for rights of sex workers.

32. See Kristof.
33. See Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall. By referring to their work, I am not discounting the perilous situation of white women especially from post-socialist countries, who constitute a large portion of the trafficked population especially in Europe. See Shelley, Chapter 6.
34. Mohanty further explains that difference should be embraced contextually “with all of its contradictions”:
- It is this particular model [feminist solidarity] that provides a way to theorize a complex relational understanding of experience, location, and history such that feminist cross-cultural work moves through the specific context to construct a real notion of universal and of democratization rather than colonization. It is through this model that we can put into practice the idea of “common differences” as the basis for deeper solidarity across differences and unequal power relations. (62)

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