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JOURNAL OF POSTCOLONIAL WRITING
https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1757202

INTERVIEW

On writing transnational migration in *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and *Better Never Than Late* (2019): An interview with Chika Unigwe

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ABSTRACT

This interview with Nigerian writer Chika Unigwe, conducted by email over the course of three months in early 2020, addresses the ethics and aesthetics of representing sex trafficking and transnational migration in her award-winning novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and her latest short story collection *Better Never Than Late*, which appeared in the US in 2020. The author discusses the discourse on migration and trafficking in both works, bringing much-needed nuance to the conversation. She pays particular attention to issues of "agency" and "vulnerability", as well as authenticity, stereotyping, the "white gaze", the publishing industry, and the recent controversy on Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* (2020). Drawing from her own personal story, Unigwe also talks in depth about the stylistic choices she made in depicting the immigrant experience in the global north and the difficulty of representing rape and trauma in fiction.

KEYWORDS

Chika Unigwe; *Better Never Than Late*; *On Black Sisters' Street*; transnational migration; sex trafficking; representation of immigration; trauma and rape

Chika Unigwe personifies the transnational writer par excellence: born and raised in Enugu, Nigeria, educated in her home country and Belgium, and currently working in US universities (Brown, Emory, Georgia College), the author has earned her place as a compelling third-generation female Nigerian voice writing from the diaspora. Her artistic production ranges from award-winning stories and novels published in English and Dutch (her third language) on topics as diverse as the postcolonial "unhomeliness" facing immigrants in the global north, sex trafficking from Africa into Europe, and patriarchy and gender oppression in Nigeria. She is currently working on the life of Olaudah Equiano's daughter Joanna Vassa.

Given the primacy of immigration debates, fuelled by the rise of nationalism, nativism, and xenophobia, especially in Europe and the US, the focus of this interview, conducted by email over the course of three months in early 2020, was her award-winning novel *On Black Sisters' Street* (Unigwe 2009) and her latest short story collection *Better Never Than*

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Late (Unigwe 2020), both centring on different facets of transnational migration.[1] *On Black Sisters' Street* (which in 2012 won Africa's most valuable literary prize, the Nigeria Prize for Literature) brings to life the circumstances of four African women trafficked into Belgium for sex work. *Better Never Than Late* broadens the subject to include the experiences of several Nigerian migrants who also dreamed of a better future overseas after their own country failed to provide the jobs and stability they needed to succeed. Aesthetically ambitious and thematically important, these works offer a nuanced glimpse into the myriad situations that prompt individuals to migrate, the realities of immigrant life abroad, and the anxieties of living in exile. Yet none of these are conventional media-type representations of "the (illegal) immigrant", a conflation of clichés merged into a static figure arousing pity in some and fear in others. Instead, Unigwe's intimate perspective animates the daily, often mundane experiences of those navigating a foreign society that does not always openly welcome them, but still needs and exploits their labour. Ten years after the publication of *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe returned with an even sharper eye and gripping creative gift to tell the stories of immigrants in Europe. Her characters are realistic, relatable, flawed, and sympathetic – in short, profoundly human.

Laura Barberán Reinares (LBR): In order to write *On Black Sisters' Street*, you thoroughly researched the situation of women sex-trafficked from Nigeria into Belgium. I would like to start with a question on the theme of that novel, sex trafficking, which you have addressed in several interviews. My question to you is: how do you feel as a writer when audiences reach out to you as an expert on sex trafficking (rather than as a writer who interprets this issue in her fiction)? How did the "expertise" part play out in *Better Never Than Late*?

Chika Unigwe (CU): It is a coincidence that I am responding to this just as I am about to leave for the 25th Nigerian Physicians in America Convention to speak on women's health (but with particular reference to Nigerian sex workers in the diaspora) as an "expert" on sex trafficking. I think that all the spaces which *On Black Sisters' Street* has given me access to (speaking to law enforcement agencies, health workers, etc. as an "expert" – recently, a Nigerian magazine referred to me as a "relationship expert") demonstrate to me just how interconnected fiction is with life, and how our works are much bigger than ourselves. I am grateful for all the opportunities; it means the work is being read and appreciated, but I'm also slightly amused at my designation as an "expert" on a life I've never lived. It also says something about power dynamics. Who is allowed to speak for whom? Whose voice is allowed to be amplified? Whose storytelling is given validity? For example, the cops who invite me to share my research and give talks and share knowledge have access to these sex workers, but somehow, incredibly, my voice is considered more "authentic" than theirs. I feel complicit in something I cannot control. With the stories in *Better Never Than Late*, that anxiety is a lot less, perhaps, because some of the experiences my characters – particularly my female characters – have are experiences I share. For instance, having to learn Dutch, the loss of confidence that comes from being in a space where nothing one knows matters. And some of the stories are based on experiences people close to me have been through. For instance, the little girl in "Clearing for Take Off" believes that to be a teacher, she first has to be white. Or Prosperous, with her university degree, unable to get any job commensurate with her

qualifications. I feel very strongly about telling these stories – the sort of stories that Prosperous and Agu and their fellow immigrants are privy to (as witnesses and as victims), but which their host community is mostly ignorant of.

LBR: It is striking that the characters in both works are complex and layered, unlike the usual mainstream representation of illegal or sex-trafficked immigrants. Sex trafficking in particular is a very difficult topic to represent from a purely aesthetic point of view. While writing *On Black Sisters' Street,* were you mindful of the way in which the audience might receive your descriptions of the women's sex work, for example? How did you avoid exposing these women to a voyeuristic gaze?

CU: I really, more than anything else, wanted to create characters that could have been anyone, forced to make a choice. How far would we go to fulfil our dreams, given the options available? The only audience I worried about was my family (and by that I mean my parents). I had to pretend they'd never read it or I would never have written some scenes. I always treated my characters, especially my protagonists, with respect. They were to me, first and foremost, regular women trying to carve a better life for themselves and their families. If I were writing a character who happened to be a teacher, I would not have spent every page writing them in the classroom, for instance. I wanted the characters' stories to be propelled along by the normal things they did, and their desires – not by the type of work they found themselves in. I was also very conscious of not sensationalizing their work because it would have distracted from the story I was trying to tell. Before doing research for this novel, it had never occurred to me that all the things I took for granted – education, a middle-class life, holidays – were things for which others were willing to sell sex. Privilege can be incredibly blinding. It's easy to imagine that everyone lives like you if you're surrounded by people like you. I believe that if I had concentrated on the sex-work aspect of the novel, it would have turned out no different from the documentaries on sex trafficking which completely ignore the lives the women had before becoming sex workers, or the lives they lead outside of the brothel. The fact that there are many moments in their lives when anyone seeing them could not guess what they did; that they could be standing next to you in church; sitting beside you on the train; that they are more than the work they do. This was also a novel I didn't want to tell from the point of view of one character. Four seemed like a sensible, even number (I cannot stand odd numbers); any more would have been too many to explore. I wanted the four protagonists' stories to carry more or less equal weight. The only way I could do that was by granting them more or less equal narrative space. I also wanted to give Sisi a chance to say something from beyond the grave. I didn't want her agency to die with her senseless murder. I didn't want that power taken from her. I didn't think it was fair for her to lose everything. I also didn't like the idea of Dele and Madam and Segun going scot-free. I find it consoling to think that her spirit is able to avenge her death, to comfort her parents, to roam the earth punishing people like Dele and Segun and Madam. I hope she does not harm Dele's daughters (they are innocent, after all) but she has to punish Dele in a way that it would be close to impossible for him to recover from.

The characters in *Better Never Than Late*, again, like the women of *On Black Sisters' Street*, are trying to carve out space for themselves in this new country. However, the stories of immigrants tend to either romanticize their homeland or be grateful for the

"freedom" of the new place and also make them stereotypes whose entire narratives are polarized: good and/or bad. I wanted characters who felt like the people I know, complex, flawed humans making choices and sacrifices one doesn't necessarily approve of. However, I was careful not to let my opinions, one way or the other, affect the integrity of how I wrote the characters.

LBR: *On Black Sisters' Street* depicts women who (all but Joyce/Alek) choose to be trafficked for sex work. In this respect, *On Black Sisters' Street* captures the complexity of the current debates on sex trafficking (to this day there is no clear consensus within feminist positions on sex trafficking, sex work, prostitution, and sexual slavery). Were you trying to adopt one particular feminist view on this issue? In other words, did you envision these women as (to use a currently popular term) "economic migrants", like your characters in *Better Never Than Late*, or as victims of a trafficker? Or both?

CU: The characters in *Better Never Than Late* fall into two categories: economic migrants (mostly the men) and their wives who come along for the ride, not always willingly. In that way, the women differ from the women of *On Black Sisters' Street* who had more agency in choosing to leave. Prosperous actually says at one point that she moved for Agu. Her job in Nigeria wasn't at stake; she had her parents on whom they could depend while they started afresh in Enugu, but Agu was determined to leave a country that had broken him. It seems to me that Prosperous was more intuitive and more realistic about the difficulties of migrating to a country where they had to learn a new language in order to survive. Godwin was very naive and that made adapting, for want of a better word, almost impossible, and that frustrated him.

Regarding *On Black Sisters' Street*, I think that one of the things I might have wanted to do with the characters was to bring in some nuance into the conversation. I don't know that it was a decision I took consciously (the only choice I made consciously was to tell as authentic a story as possible, to drop all of my biases while writing out of respect for my characters), but I realized early on that the mainstream narrative was more polarized, so much less nuanced than the reality. The popular narrative had the women as completely lacking in agency, completely naive, and somehow completely removed from other types of labour migrant. My characters, just like many of the women I spoke to, were willingly trafficked. That is not to say that the choice was not made under duress, but what put them under duress was economic. They might have made other choices had the options been there. So, yes, they are economic migrants, bound to horrific illegal contracts in many cases and sometimes the results are fatal. The freedom they enjoy in the host country is bound to their ability to make good on the contracts they have with their traffickers. This is a condition they accept before they arrive, sometimes swearing to it before a juju priest, but of course, one never knows how much one can take until one begins to live the experience.

LBR: You raise an important point about the women in *On Black Sisters' Street* potentially making other choices had the options been there for them. This speaks as well to the type of (typically western) humanitarianism Teju Cole (2012) criticizes as the "white-saviour industrial complex", so prevalent in mainstream sex-trafficking discourse. Your novel in fact points to the structural context that leads the women to

make those risky decisions and addresses (gender) inequality, corruption, nepotism, unemployment, poverty – the enduring effects of colonialism and economic neocolonialism in Nigeria. Do you see current anti-trafficking efforts such as rescue work, for example, as helpful to people involved in trafficking situations? How did you navigate the political aspect of the stories in your narrative?

CU: Let me start with the last part of your question. Every form of writing is political. I just wanted to tell a story, but in telling it, in adding flesh to its bones, I had to also explore the conditions that make it possible for women like my characters to leave Nigeria. In telling their personal stories – and I do believe that as people living on Earth, navigating our way through life (and I'm going to somewhat quote the brilliant Claudia Rankine [2016] here) "there's no private world that doesn't include the dynamics of (our) political and social world" (n.p.) – the politics of the novel is even more pronounced. The problem with many of the present-day anti-trafficking efforts is that they are built on the assumption that one box fits all: all cops are good; trafficked women have no agency and need nothing more than to be "free". The trafficked women from Benin City, Nigeria, more often than not know that they are being brought in to service the sex industry. Once they are "rescued", unless they are provided with training or a means to earn the money which sent them out in the first place, they offer themselves up for trafficking again. One woman I spoke to who reported her aunt, who was her madam, to the German authorities, did so in the hope that she'd be given asylum. However, that's not how it works. Women do not want to be rescued and sent back to Nigeria to start again from scratch. Some cops also exploit the women, knowing that they are vulnerable. They capitalize on their vulnerability.

LBR: Going deeper into "choice" and "agency" – readers can see that, unlike other postcolonial novels addressing sex trafficking, such as Chris Abani's (2006) *Becoming Abigail* or Abidemi Sanusi's (2009) *Eyo*, your trafficked characters display relative freedom in the host country (Abani's Abigail, for example, is deceived and ends up chained to a dog kennel in London). Why did you think it was important to represent women making a conscious choice, as opposed to being kidnapped or deceived?

CU: I was just writing the truth of the women I met and spoke to. They go to church and throw parties and go shopping and laugh and cry, but they are aware of the limits of their freedom. Madam, for example, would not let them take days off sick. They are controlled in other ways, and they know it. They know how little their lives matter, not just to Madam, but to the wider community. They allude to this when they speak of the Malian nanny who was murdered by a racist young man, and even when they speak of Sisi's death. They are aware that they are free, but not quite, and would not be free until their debts were cleared – otherwise Sisi would not be worrying about what would happen to those "sisters" she's left behind. Also, the women's main priority is to make money for themselves too (that is why they migrate, after all). That's their motivation. It is the reason why the traffickers find eager victims, complicit in their own exploitation. Narratives like Abani's are also true and valid (and they were, for a while, the single story of sex trafficking and we know the danger of "the single story" [Adichie 2009]), but they are not the truth of modern-day sex trafficking from Nigeria. For anti-human trafficking non-governmental organizations and law and enforcement officers, it is

pertinent that they recognize this form of trafficking too, so that they can better help women like Sisi who wish to escape it.

LBR: Turning to *Better Never Than Late* more specifically, as an immigrant myself, many of the aspects you developed in the stories deeply resonated with me. And yet, after years away from "home" (whatever that is), one becomes oblivious to things that were initially puzzling. You have left Nigeria and lived in Belgium and the US for a while now. Has this story collection been gestating for a long time? What was the creative process for this latest book?

CU: The oldest story in that collection is over ten years old. I worked and reworked the stories over many years; many of them followed me from Belgium to the US. There are some stories that made it into the initial draft which I had to drop by the time we reached the final version, for different reasons. I had explored a version of one of the stories as a novel many years ago, but I always wanted to get back to it. I think it works better as a short story; the focus is sharper.

LBR: I am sure you made the right decision, as *Better Never Than Late* flows beautifully. About your female characters: many can be read as strong, anti-patriarchal women who seek fulfilment on their own and find the tools/coping mechanisms to succeed (or, like Prosperous, are in the process of self-awareness and action). Did you intend to write a feminist collection?

CU: I agree that the collection is feminist. I am very interested in writing women with agency, especially in situations where, in the dominant narrative, their agency is erased. I couldn't have written a Prosperous who just folded her hands and let life mop the floor with her. I wanted a woman who confronted her regrets (if any) and moved on. For Prosperous, moving back to Nigeria was out of the question, so how best to deal with the situation? Learn Dutch, train for other opportunities, recalibrate her life. If she was going to stop cleaning homes, she couldn't keep regretting her past or dwelling on it, she'd have to adjust to the present circumstances. It is something that seems, for some reason, difficult for Agu to do. He hates working in the bread factory but he never entertains the notion of learning the language, for example, and trying for something less soul-crushing for himself.

LBR: You also address women's complicity with patriarchy in the stories that show more affluent, professional women in Nigeria exploiting and beating their young maids, presumably because they are female and poor (the narrative voice is clearly critical of those abuses). Interestingly, once in Europe, husbands of those formerly independent women expect their wives to revert to traditionally patriarchal roles (cook, clean, serve, rear children), sometimes even reinforcing this through beatings. Can you comment on how the dynamics of gender, class, and race play differently/similarly in Nigeria as opposed to Belgium?

CU: Nigeria is highly patriarchal and patriarchy has always had its foot soldiers: women who benefit from the sort of hierarchy that patriarchy fosters. These professional, affluent women are right beneath the men and uphold the status quo by ensuring that those beneath *them* remain there. In Europe, these men whose wives' independence did not threaten them (because there were the househelps and the drivers and the gardeners to

take the burden of being a “traditional” wife off of the wives) suddenly realize that they are expected to chip in. Of course, these women, never having had to do all the work themselves, expect the men who love them to step into the gap left by the domestic help. These men, however, have never been trained to do so or to expect it. They want to maintain their position as the “pampered head” in the way they had in Nigeria, but it is impossible, and conflicts arise. Agu resorts to violence as an outlet for his frustration. It is arguable that had they stayed in Nigeria, with all the comforts of a middle-class life, the idea of raising his hand against Prosperous would have been preposterous to him. They import a middle-class Nigerian lifestyle, where they are privileged, into Europe, where they become the bottom feeders and of course, there is going to be trouble. I also think that this is the reason why Prosperous and her friends adapt better to life as immigrants in Belgium. Their fall from grace – even if they don’t realize it – isn’t as low as it is for the men. There are stories of independent Nigerian women, who, when they have in-laws visit from Nigeria, suddenly perform gender-specific roles. Even if their husbands shared housekeeping and cooking with them, for the duration of the stay of these in-laws, the husbands stay away from the vacuum cleaner and the kitchen. I remember a friend telling me a long time ago of an uncle visiting her sister and her sister’s husband in the US, and this husband’s uncle being so scandalized by the sight of his nephew cooking that he refused to eat anything cooked by the man. My friend’s sister, who also had a job outside the house, had to cook, and serve the uncle. It’s easy to say that she shouldn’t have, that she and her husband should have let the uncle starve, or that they should have sat him down and told him where to go. However, people make compromises and sacrifices every day for relationships that matter to them. In a patriarchy, it is often the woman who is called upon to make the sacrifice. And when men move from that system into one where those privileges they have consciously and unconsciously benefitted from are no longer available, it’s a hard pill to swallow.

LBR: To piggyback on the previous question, *Better Never Than Late* seems to reverse the pattern of racial exploitation depicted in *On Black Sisters’ Street*, as the ones “used” in some of the stories are the white women African men marry to obtain European citizenship. This topic has been explored by other African writers such as the Ghanaian Amma Darko (1998) in *Beyond the Horizon*, yet the subject is complicated because it could also lead to the stereotype of African men preying on white women. You crafted several male characters that counter the stereotype; in addition, Prosperous is clearly sympathetic to Hilde’s situation, and the story reveals an unexpected twist, but were you mindful of the way those representations could be decontextualized within the current anti-immigration discourse? I am aware of the unfairness of this question, since white writers can often get away with writing about any sort of stereotype without being assumed to represent “whiteness”, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2019) reminds us, but I am curious about how you as a writer navigate potentially stereotypical situations.

CU: I think that the reality is that for the men in *Better Never Than Late*, survival – theirs – is uppermost in their minds. When that is the case, it often eclipses everything. Rapu’s husband, Godwin, clearly loves his German wife, but it takes him some time to realize it, because when one’s path to living and working in a country is predicated on marriage, then that becomes more important than love. I do not endorse it; I think that

human beings shouldn't be treated as means to an end, but for these men, it is what it is. And being what it is, even though he clearly loves Hilde, Godwin chooses duty over love. In a way, you can say that love is secondary to survival and to duty. In their circle, it has become normalized. This collection, however, focuses on stories of survival and immigration and so the choice of stories that made it in had to fit the thematic thread. I do believe that readers know that the stories do not represent the experiences of every Nigerian immigrant or of every interracial relationship (no one book could do that) and they judge the collection on the merits of its own world. I certainly do not feel, or burden myself with, the anxiety of making sure that my stories showcase perfect Nigeria and Nigerians. They are not tourist brochures or propaganda material from the Ministry of Culture. I want to be as free to write flawed Nigerian characters – villains even – the way American and European writers depict character, without feeling that I am somehow betraying Nigeria. And because I am not trying to fit a particular narrative, I am free to write well-rounded characters (and to this end, I hope I have succeeded).

LBR: You surely did. The stories do a wonderful job at individually capturing how much these characters endure for a new life abroad that, ironically, as in Prospero's and Agu's case, seems to stifle them intellectually and ruin their marriage: what moves these characters to sacrifice so much?

CU: For Agu, it is a mixture of desperation, helplessness, and pride. He's lost everything in the riots and has hit rock bottom. The country that has promised him solidity has turned to quicksand under his feet and he has to leave to keep from sinking. However, he's too proud (arguably conditioned by patriarchy) to accept help from his wife's family, or he doesn't want to humiliate himself by accepting Prosperous's help because of issues in his childhood. He has no option but to start again far away from the reminders of his loss. For Prosperous, it is love for Agu. In my opinion, she makes the bigger sacrifice because she was always aware that she could have easily got another job. Agu's inability to adapt to this new life and Prosperous's awareness of the extent of her sacrifice affect their relationship, and this is normal, I believe.

LBR: One of the most heart-wrenching stories in *Better Never Than Late* reveals, with little wasted emotion, the trauma Oge experiences after the sudden loss of her child. Readers are plunged into the alienation she feels within the new culture and her lack of a support system beyond a Belgian husband whom she rejects after the tragedy. I am extrapolating here, but did you write this story before or after the political context in the US where migrant children have been separated from their parents, some of them even dying in custody? I was wondering how much the daily news on immigration inspired your stories.

CU: This is the oldest story in the book, but also one of the ones I revised several times and most recently. So the seed was planted a long time ago but the revisions occurred against the backdrop of this [US] government and its really terrible immigration policies. I have also always wondered (and that was the inspiration for the seed) what it would be like to grieve in a different tongue. Soon after my wedding to my husband, his grandmother died and that funeral was my first experience of a Belgian funeral. My parents and siblings who had flown into Belgium for our wedding also stayed for the funeral and what a culture shock it was. My mother-in-law, whose mother she [the deceased] was, and her

family crying into handkerchiefs, barely making any sound; a relatively short Mass and then coffee and pastries, and not a single person crying. My parents and siblings and I couldn't stop talking about it amongst ourselves for a very long time. That story was my way of exploring the shock. How do you cope with a joint loss if the cultural systems in place for your partner to deal with it are so different from yours? How do you fold yourself into that place? Or break out of it? When I got married, our cultural differences were the furthest thing from my mind.

LBR: Both works also tackle a very difficult subject to represent in writing: Alek/ Joyce's gang-rape in *On Black Sisters' Street* and Añuli's sexual assault in *Better Never Than Late*. You placed those episodes almost at the end, as if reaching a crescendo in the narrative. I am interested in the way you "wrote" sexual violence. What are the challenges of representing rape in fictional language from an aesthetic and ethical point of view?

CU: Rape is one of the most violent acts a body can be subjected to. I was almost raped in my first year of college, and I still recall the fear of that day. There are details that I no longer recall (was I wearing a skirt or a pair of pants?) but the horror is fresh. The male student who attempted to rape me slapped me and threatened to beat me with his belt and to bring out his gun (apparently, he belonged to a cult, and cultists had guns on campus). I do not even remember feeling the pain of the slap because I was so scared, that the fear numbed me to the pain. Luckily, he didn't get his way, I ran back to my hostel barefoot, but for years, I saw danger everywhere. Each time I was in a man's car alone, I had my hand on the inside door handle, all the better to escape should he deviate from the route. The trauma reduces but it never completely goes away. For Añuli, it is an unspeakable violation. She does not have the words for it, and so every time she starts to describe it, she talks about something else. I don't think it's because she doesn't trust her friends, but that this is her way of getting to a place where she is finally able to. I hope she gets to that place. For that scene with Alek, I wanted to concentrate on her horror, rather than describe the rape in detail (which would have sensationalized the act and cheapened the horror of the victim). The challenge is in balancing the violation itself – the unspeakable act which must be spoken so that the reader knows what's happening – and the victim's terror and helplessness and sense of violation; the trauma that never goes away. Alek sees dust everywhere. That's her way of experiencing the trauma anew, every day, but it is also a level of trauma that doesn't incapacitate her because she's not helpless in the face of it. She has her rag. Every time she dusts off a surface, she's erasing the power the men who raped her have over her. That is her strategy for surviving, whether she realizes it or not. In giving her dust to wipe away, I am also inscribing on her the hope that with each day that passes, the amount of dust she sees (or imagines she does) reduces until it is nothing more than a speck. It was very, very important to me that she should have the tools at hand to deal with her trauma and stop it from sinking her. Even if that tool is her duster or rag.

LBR: Indeed. I noted that,however traumatic that, however traumatic the subject addressed, and without ever sugar-coating or trivializing difficult experiences, you imbue the stories with some life-affirming element (a hint of reconciliation, self-awareness, repentance, the support of true friendships, etc.). The characters arrive at

Joycean epiphanies, so to speak, but they don't end up feeling betrayed or isolated. Was this a conscious move on your part? If so, why?

CU: I think on some level, it was a conscious decision to lift the stories into light, so to speak. I get very invested in the stories that I write, and I need to find or invent ways that keep me from being swallowed whole by the small and large tragedies in the lives of my characters. It might also have to do with the fact that I am a natural optimist. And having been born and raised a Catholic, I believe in grace and reformation/transformation. I didn't want the characters stuck in a place where they were beyond redemption. The advantage of fiction, after all, is that even when it mirrors reality, the writer has the chance to imagine other possibilities. With all this power – to create a world, populate it with people, good and bad – also comes the power of choosing what to do with it. I choose to be magnanimous with it.

LBR: Let's talk some more about technique. Both *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Better Never Than Late* move back and forth between Belgium and Nigeria and thematically centre on one or a few characters acting as a connective thread within the whole narrative. The stories in *Better Never Than Late* could easily stand alone. Why did you arrange them in the way you did? What advantage does a short story collection afford you, as opposed to the novel form?

CU: One of the reasons I wanted the stories in *Better Never Than Late* to flit between Nigeria and Belgium is that I wanted the reader to get not just the moments in time the particular short stories offer but a much deeper insight into the lives and motivations of the characters. The stories in Nigeria and the ones set in Belgium are in conversation with each other, even when they have different characters. For example, the story of the "exorcism" in the church (where the girl is blamed for Agu's childlessness, amongst other things) sheds light on the sort of cultural background that makes having a child important to Agu, and expands Prosperous's refusal to have one into a rebelliousness that is more than just personal. The effect is that even though this is a short story collection, the gaze is much more like a novel's, the time it covers much wider than a short story could manage well. Why a short story collection and not a novel? The format gave me room to tell many different stories, and give each story equal weight. Also, even with the stories being interlinked, I could jump time, move from Agu just meeting Prosperous to seeing them in Belgium many, many years later.

LBR: On a related note, you have written essays and opinion pieces on sex trafficking, Boko Haram, and the perilous economic situation facing many people in Nigeria, among other subjects, but I wonder if you could comment on the difference you see between fiction and non-fiction's ability to address the themes depicted in *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Better Never Than Late*. In other words, what do you think is gained or lost in representing these topics in fiction versus non-fiction?

CU: Fiction gives one more room to empathize, because you cannot write good fiction without empathy. Fiction also gives a more rounded, more nuanced narrative. In non-fiction, we are called to present facts (and opinions), and always with an audience and purpose in mind. Non-fiction doesn't really do nuance well.

LBR: Staying on the topic of fiction, other African female writers have stated that they feel constrained by what Toni Morrison referred to as the "white gaze" and that they are expected to cater to a western desire for a stereotypical story confirming certain views of Africa – what Sefi Atta (Azuah, Atta, and Unigwe 2008) called representing "some sort of victim". (And on a somewhat related topic, perhaps you can comment on the recent controversy on cultural appropriation and immigrant clichés depicted in the hugely hyped novel by Jeanine Cummins [2020], ***American Dirt*****?) Your works do not seem preoccupied with the "white gaze" (you don't translate native language terms, for instance, and your characters are anything but helpless), yet I was wondering how you feel about these concerns as a so-called "third-generation" Nigerian writer.**

CU: I have never felt I needed to pander to the white gaze. *On Black Sisters' Street* was published by big presses in the west, and *Better Never Than Late* is out in the UK and will soon be out in the US, yet they explain nothing, and don't cater to anybody's stereotypes of "Africa". Perhaps that freedom comes from having Achebe, Tutuola, Nwapa, Ngugi, Soyinka, and all those other African writers who came before my generation of writers write narratives that centred on Africans and did not make the white gaze the dominant one in their works. Maybe it was an organic evolution for me, from writing stories which imitated the Enid Blyton stories I read as a child, to writing stories that did not copy white writers and did not explain my Africa to an assumed (western) audience. I have never felt the need to adjust my writing for a western audience, even though I hope that people of every race will read (and enjoy) my writing, the same way as I have read and enjoyed books by writers from all over the world. My job is to write. I write, my agent tries to sell, and sometimes we succeed and sometimes we don't. Besides, these days, there are a few African presses that are going global as well (Cassava Republic, for example, whose books I've found in bookstores in Atlanta), and perhaps soon, there'd be enough with the clout to compete with the big presses in the west so as to remove the pressure (that some feel) of writing to suit a particular audience. However, I understand the very real need for gatekeepers of fiction (agents and publishers) to be representative of the writers of fiction. What's happened with *American Dirt* happens when the gatekeepers are people who cannot identify harmful stereotypes or who do not care because they are not harmed by it. It also raises the question of privilege and power. A Latinx writer, for example, would not get away with writing an inaccurate book about white Americans because the publishing industry is full of people who are able to and who will call out the inaccuracies. Edna O'Brien's (2019) novel *Girl* fictionalizes the abduction of Nigerian schoolgirls by the terrorist group Boko Haram. O'Brien, who is Irish, stayed in Nigeria "for months" (presumably to learn about the country) and published this book to critical acclaim in the west. O'Brien's freedom and capacity to "learn" about a country by visiting it for a few months would be impossible for a Nigerian author, based in Nigeria, for example, to do in Ireland. Who is going to publish that? Say Tricia Nwaubani, who is a brilliant writer, gets a visa to Ireland, stays there for three months or however long, goes back to Nigeria and writes a book set in Ireland with Irish characters, and sends it to her agent (in the UK) to sell to Faber? She would be factchecked in a way that a European or American writer writing about "the other" would not. And she would be told – and rightly so – that three months isn't nearly enough to learn enough about a country. Western writers are enabled – for reasons already stated – to appropriate other cultures. But that power, like

every other privilege, should come with an awareness of it and with a sense of responsibility. If you feel that you're the best person to write a person's story, because you can, it is only respectful that you represent that other person as responsibly, as authentically as possible.

LBR: On a personal level, what has been the most fulfilling book (or books) you have written and why?

CU: Every new project brings new challenges and opens new insights. *Better Never Than Late* forced me to confront the stories that have lived in my head for years, but they were very challenging to write. I had to strike a balance between telling stories of men and women involved in marriages/relationships of convenience and the very true love that lurks there as well. Having said that, I think that *On Black Sisters' Street* has been the most transformative (it made me more empathetic), as it took me completely out of my comfort/familiar zone and forced the shoes of women I never thought I had anything in common with onto my feet.

LBR: I have found *On Black Sisters' Street* one of the most nuanced and accomplished novels dealing with sex trafficking to date, and I am sure audiences will be eager to read and enjoy *Better Never Than Late*. Thank you!

CU: Thank you! I hope so too.

Note

1. *On Black Sisters' Street* was first published in Dutch by Manteau Press as *Fata Morgana* in 2007 and released in English in 2009. *Better Never Than Late* was first published by Cassava Republic in September 2019 in Nigeria and the UK and released in the US in April 2020.

Acknowledgments

Laura Barberán Reinares would like to express her deepest appreciation to Chika Unigwe for her time, generosity, and unwavering sense of humour. Also, her gratitude to Renée Schatteman for facilitating this interview and to the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*'s reviewers for their most helpful feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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