

The Notion of No-Longer-Victim Diaspora in Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late*

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Abstract

*Much of mobility scholarship sees diasporic communities as mere victims, displaced, marginalized and vulnerable. Yet today the experiences of diasporas are becoming enriching and creative, and the diasporic subjects are so prosperous that it is legitimate to designate some as no-longer-victim diasporas. This idea is brought to the reader quite expressively by Nigerian-born writer Chika Unigwe. Her major works depict the life of the African community in Flanders, Belgium. Her fictional characters are struck by adversities in their exile, but they remain determined to go on. Drawing on Cohen's notion of "transcending the victim tradition", I elucidate in this article how what I call 'the idea of no-longer-victim diasporas' is thematized by Unigwe's short story collection *Better Never Than Late* (2019). The act of transcending of diaspora – overcoming the victim stage – is, to a large degree, hinted at through the notion of 'longing for homeland', a strategy migrant subjects embrace to find meaning to their current state, which eventually helps them remain resilient in the face of adversities, adapt to the host culture, shape up and start anew.*

Key words: No-longer-victim diaspora, Longing for homeland, African Literature, Immigration

1. Introduction

The African diaspora in Europe has to endure a double sense of alienation. Unlike other migrant subjects, Africans are double-alienated, firstly typically because they are foreigners, and secondly because of their colour (Bryce-Laporte, 1972). This double susceptibility is a thorn in their flesh, and the socioeconomic uncertainty surrounding them becomes characteristic of their daily life, and it is ever fuelled by ideas of 'perhaps', 'what if,' 'it is likely' – the typical existential questions/concerns that have overworked philosophers, let alone vulnerable people. But the irony remains that the burden of this pain cannot be countered by a return to their home countries – usually ones that are socioeconomically insecure and politically unsettled. Alternatives to this unhappy, and often unwanted, return involve strategies that migrant subjects embrace for the purpose of surviving in exile and adapting to the culture of the host country. In this process, many African migrants become preoccupied with questions about two distinct identities, that of the past homeland and that of the new home. Uncertain of their current life – and sometimes frustrated by the difficulties to fit in the new culture, migrants develop a kind of longing for their homeland, which becomes a crying question, an attempt to bring in an imagined life in order to create an ideal place first in search of the self and second in the process of home making. Once they are beleaguered by estrangement and alienation, migrants' reactions collapse into images of an abstract, idealized place of origin – or what Avtar Brah (1996) describes as "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (p. 192). In many instances, the migrant subjects evoke a privileged space of belonging (naturally the country of origin), where they feel psychologically safe, emotionally comfortable and subjectively reassured by living in the past, the identification of its events and the real or hypothetical

intimacy with its people, which initially alienates them from the host culture and throws them into a state of seclusion. The state of the conflict of belonging and not belonging at a time (being here and there, being present and absent) and the insecurity surrounding life in the exile lead to what Edward Said (1994) calls a "marginal" state (p. 46), giving way to another layer of uncertainty, of ambivalence. Finding themselves forsaken in the margin of the host culture, migrant subjects embrace a position that Arnold van Gennep (1960) terms the "liminal" stage (p. 21) – a middle way state between two geographical or socio-cultural milieus. This stage, coupled with migrants' efforts to make sense of their current life, results in either their acceptance of the host country, in which case they try as much as they can to integrate themselves in the host community, or their dissociation from that community, in which case they inhabit their memories of the past, relinquished and estranged from the present.

In any case, however, the movement through memory does not necessarily mean that people have the desire to break with their current place; rather it is the in-between world, the transitional stage or the "realm of the beyond", to use Homi Bhabha's words (1994, p. 1). It is as though the migrants are "in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). On the one hand, those who insist on affixing their identities to their places of origin – those who fail to get over this stage of liminality – continue to experience "a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal day-to-day cultural and social states and processes" (Turner, 1979, p. 465); that is to say, between their past experience in their country of origin and the new spaces in the host culture. On the other hand, for those who succeed in elbowing their way in exile and do not "succumb to a morose despair" (Weaver, 2003, p. 448) – no matter whether they maintain their connections with the past or break with it, the experience is more likely to elicit a mental space that could nurture creativity and prosperity. Engendered by memories, the creation of such spaces oftentimes starts in the form of longing for the homeland, which might later develop into, or rather transcend, a stage of "new beginnings" (Lauzon, 2017, p. 70), where diaspora subjects thrive and integrate into the host countries (Cohen, 1996), and thus progressing from passivity into positivity (Sheffer, 2002), from inaction into action, from victimhood to creativity.

The foregoing discussion is a stark departure from what we know from traditional diasporic approaches, which have often looked at diaspora communities as victims (see, e.g., Cohen, 1996), with suffering characterizing their experience and the desire for returning to their home of origin being one of the basic criteria for defining them (Safran, 1991). For African diaspora subjects, this meant clinging tightly to African identity- with the efforts by some individuals toward emancipation often taken to mean a compromise of such an identity. Today however – because the experiences of diasporas are becoming "enriching and creative" (Cohen, 1996, p. 513), and they are relatively prosperous and successful – it is quite possible to have these two notions (African identity and emancipation) dwelling together in the same pot. In some postcolonial accounts, therefore, the phenomenon of diaspora is no longer seen as an "expression of victimization and deprivation, but rather as a form of emancipation and empowerment" (Lan, 2011, p. 57). Drawing on Cohen's notion of "transcending the victim tradition" (1996, p. 513), I elucidate in this article how what I call 'the idea of no-longer-victim diasporas' is brought to the reader quite expressively by Nigerian-born Igbo writer Chika Unigwe in her short story collection *Better Never Than Late* (2019).

Although the notion of diaspora traditionally suggests estrangement and dormancy, an examination of *Better Never Than Late* can reveal some developments in the energies of

subjects toward emancipation, deliverance and assimilation. One premise in this article is that diaspora subjects should "better be seen as depending not so much on displacement but on connectivity" (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p. 52), whereby they connect and identify with the host community. This identification (overcoming the victim stage and coming out of age) is, to a large degree, hinted at through the notion of 'longing for homeland' in *Better Never Than Late*. The present discussion will engage issues of the extent to which Unigwe's collection goes beyond the notion of 'victim diaspora'. It is an account of the ways by which the narrative presents migrants' longing for homeland as a strategy for finding meaning to their current state and how this eventually helps migrants remain resilient in the face of adversities, shape up and start anew. Knowing that their stay is not a temporary experience – where taking pain is justified by hope of return to the homeland – Unigwe's characters have to accept the fact that their life in exile might take far longer than they had planned – as their migratory process is one of linearity (Chambers, 1994), in which case they need to devise strategies for surviving. The emancipative longing, this article argues, turns what starts as an internal conflict into a strategy for deliverance and new beginnings.

2. The Notion of Home and Longing in *Better Never Than Late*

Longing and its nexus to human spaces is a recurring theme in exilic literature, since, as Paul White (1995) points out, "literature contains some of the most effective explorations of identity issues" (p. 2), thus becoming a seedbed that defines and redefines the notions of identity and home, as well as the perception of the self. The premise is that migrant writers have acquired an agency that allows them to look at the world around with a bird's-eye critical view, raising questions of migrants' integration into the host society, but also taking into account the heavy brunt of the colonial legacy, which still expresses itself socially, politically and culturally on the subjects (Spivak, 2010). In his description of the inner state of writers in the exile, Edward Said (1994) points out that such authors often experience "a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old" (p. 49). What permeates a migrant's writing, according to Said, is a sense of ambivalence, one that is beleaguered "with half-involvements and half detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another" (ibid). It follows that the resulting works often engage questions pertaining to reconstruction of mental spaces that are hybrid in nature – with the spatial element taking on the guise of being here (the exile) and there (the homeland).

It is this form of tentative liminality, or in-betweenness, that Chika Unigwe's characters are stuck in. Unigwe was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1974, making her one of what some critics call 'The Third Generation of Nigerian Writers'. At the age of 21, after earning a college degree in business from the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, she moved to Belgium in 1995 to join her husband in the Flemish town of Turnhout, Antwerp. Writing from her own experience, and also from the stories she personally heard – and imagining stories yet to be told, Unigwe depicts the life of the African communities in the land of Flanders, the newcomers as well as the old hacks. She tells stories of fictional characters who are struck hard by adversities in their exile and going through several trials, but they remain determined to go on.

Unigwe's texts are an examination of the notion of home and its implications for exiles. Reflecting on her first months in Belgium, Unigwe wrote, "When I left Nigeria for Belgium, I made my husband's home my own. But homesickness lodged like a stone inside... It was like a huge stone weighing me down. I had nightmares of this stone pulverising me" (Unigwe, 2013). Her short story collection *Better Never Than Late* is an observation of the changes of the life of Nigerian migrants in Belgium, their destinies, their disappointments, their life

concerns and their aborted hopes; it is an artistic adventure that involves immersion in the human soul and addresses life issues such as love, hate, pain, death, sex, the vicissitudes of days and the burden of existence. Yet it is also a literary representation of African diasporic characters and how they perceive of the notion of the homeland. A close reading of her text suggests different questions, but there is one that insists throughout the volume: To what extent should a person be willing to relinquish an identity, sustained by nostalgia and on occasion wistful or idealized recollections, of a lost homeland, for the sake of integration and the creation of a new hybrid identity? Put differently: Should people leave their country of origin and seek another life in exile?

An ostensibly outright answer is provided in the title of the collection – a rephrased proverb – which suggests that staying in the homeland is much better than leaving it. Yet, it is not that simple – as telling an African national who is experiencing poverty, misfortunes, destitution and political oppression that Europe is but a day dream or a "mirage" – as Elisabeth Bekers (2016, p. 256) puts it, is just like telling a drowning man that clutching at a straw will do him no good. After all, it is the "push" factors (such as wars, poverty, unrest in countries of origin) rather than the "pull" forces (such as more security, better jobs, safer life in destination countries) that stand behind the mobility of Unigwe's protagonists (Bastida-Rodríguez and Bekers 2021, p. 388). As the discussion will show, the warning presented in the title of the collection seems like a message Unigwe is addressing to Nigerians, and other Africans at large, who are in their homeland, rather than to migrants who have already started the exilic experience. For the latter category, thus, the message is not a call to relinquish exile and return to homeland; rather it is an invitation to adapt and assimilate in the host culture.

With this being the case, another set of questions emerges. How can migrants play the game right from the moment they set out for Europe? How can migrants identify with the host country? These are questions of migrants' adaptation, for, as many of the stories in *Never Better Than Late* reveal, there is inner conflict that speaks to questions of coping and assimilation. Unigwe uses memory to address these questions. Often, she casts migrant characters whose search for an identity takes them back to their home countries, and in their delusion, they create perfect, unreal homelands, the kind hinted at by Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1992). In constructing their homeland in exile, the characters "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 10), with the vision of the characters becoming "fragmentary" (p. 10) and the mirrors "broken" (p. 11). Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late* bursts this notion of deceitful imagination, and paradoxically, it does this through the act of longing for the homeland. Although such longing appears frequently in the conversations of the characters in the collection as well as in their internal thoughts, Unigwe makes their longing one of instrumentality, a functional faculty and a driving force for change and adaptation. In this sense, longing is summoned when all means are exhausted, as memory remains the only strategy for dealing with a fragmented reality, and healing the rift of a soul burdened with loss and estranged from its present milieu.

3. Discussion

In analyzing the role of a character in a fictional text, James Phelan (1996) suggests zooming on three dimensions of a fictional narrative. First, there is the "mimetic" aspect, in which the character is read as a life-like person. Second, there is the "thematic" aspect, in which a character "functions in one way or another to advance the narrative's thematic concerns" (p. 216). Third, a critic may choose to focus on the "synthetic" component, thereby bringing to the

analysis specifically a character who "plays a specific role in the construction of narrative as made object" (p. 216).

The depiction of migrants' day-to-day life by Unigwe allows an understanding of a character across Phelan's three components. This is especially relevant through Unigwe's telling of the story of Prosperous. This character changes internally in the course of the narrative from passivity to vigor, from despondency to determination, from despair to peace of mind. Synthetically, the collection follows the life experience of Prosperous, an Igbo Nigerian migrant in Belgium, who used to lead a successful life in Nigeria, and now she lives in the margin of the Belgian culture, deserted, deprived and literally impaired. Prosperous lives in the past, and is consumed by nostalgia. She plays a pivotal role in the construction of the text, as she appears in eight short stories of the ten-story collection, with more than 180 references in such a short collection (around 150 pages), a presence that makes the reader conclude with some certainty that Prosperous is the one the author casts as the protagonist. It is at her house that migrants gather from time to time to socialize and tell their stories. She is the one whom the author keeps visiting, even in the stories that ostensibly have no relation to her and also stories set in places that are thousands of miles away from Turnhout, her place of residence. She is the one with an entire story, "Becoming Prosperous", devoted exclusively to her and bears her name. Finally, at the mimetic level, the way Prosperous develops in the narrative is crucial for the themes in the collection. If the assumption that the collection is a call for integration is true, then the name Prosperous is quite indicative, as it suggests accomplishment and success.

Prosperous is uprooted from her original social milieu. She lives in Belgium but she is estranged, living in the margins of Belgian culture. She sacrificed her comfortable life in Nigeria for love (for her husband); yet in exile, with the husband devastated by a poor job—leaving him too disaffected to show love to her – she seems to have lost this asset, too, so "if anyone asked her now if that sacrifice had been worth it, she would say no" (Unigwe, 2019, p. 42). Undoubtedly, Prosperous' experience is harrowing – one that has knocked her severely down. She always recalls the misfortunes she and her husband had to encounter when they first arrived in Belgium: "We should never have left. We should have been better off in Nigeria" (ibid, p. 33). Rocked by alienation and helplessness, she almost apologetically compares her past— when "nothing seemed impossible" (ibid, p. 31), when she would have people "waiting on her hand and foot" (ibid, p. 37), to the present, now working during the day "as a cleaner" (ibid, p. 33) in Belgian houses and then spending the rest of the day in preparing food and drinks to her husband, Agu, and his friends.

Prosperous believes that the significant part of her real life is the one in which she had lived happily with her parents, where she obtained her college degree, had a full-time job in Nigeria, where she also got married to and lived with Agu, the man she loved. Beyond that, she believes her life is not quite real, or at least it is meaningless, in the beyond (Bhabha, 1994), in which nothing is certain (Lash & Urry, 1994). Her thought is one arising of a liminality stage, a place outside her normal, real life. Such constructions are sparked by an internal conflict resulting from the rejection of, or failure to engage in, the present life, a feeling of alienation and unreality, a strong indication of the tension between the self and its existing state.

This gives way to longing for homeland, which is not always a state she experiences because of her physical rupture with the past; it might rather signal a crisis of identity that can be resolved only by returning to the past to define the present and find the safe space (seen as

home) the self identifies with. Yet this is somehow related to the dynamics of integration- how easy or how difficult the process is. Belonging to a certain place thus becomes an issue that is "intrinsically linked with the way in which the processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It relates to the complex political and personal struggles over the social regulation of belonging (Brah, 1996, p. 194), which, if successful, produce sites of hope and new beginnings. This is very significant for the state-of-the-art discussion, since migrant subjects, as Tsagarousianou (2004) reasons, should not look back to recover the identity of their homeland, but rather look ahead to find an answer to questions of what essentially makes a home.

In the process of home-making, and with efforts to understand the different landscapes, Prosperous's longing for home at times becomes her comfort, and her yearning cannot help but draw contrasts and allow the past to intrude upon the present. For her, thus, Nigeria of the past becomes a cognitive representation, "a mental construction built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past" (McLeod, 2000, p. 211). The idea of home being a cognitive space entails that home is not only the physical space, but also, and more importantly, the mental construct, and as Collins (2009) would put it, home as a cognitive space "becomes a site of exploration of self, and of the relationship between self and others" (p. 143). The conflict between Prosperous and her husband compels her to evoke memories from her past days in Nigeria to reason about her misfortunes in Belgium. As she negotiates her current experience of estrangement, much of what she experiences is a sense of not being in the present place. She dismisses her husband's contentment with his pitiful, low rewarding, "menial job" (Unigwe, 2019, p. 42). Oftentimes, she visits their past – she, an employee at a bank, and he, a thriving businessman. This evoking of the past opens up for a space that is chosen by the memory as a perfect one, while in reality it is only ephemeral. Her inability to connect with that fantasized homeland, and her belief that the past life is much better than her present life, makes her thought collapses into alienation. Her propensity to idealise leaves her increasingly alienated not only from time and the passage of time but also from reality, creating this unsettling dialectic between imagination and reality.

However, this sense of alienation would prove to be only internal, triggered by her own inadequacy. She is estranged because her capabilities are regarded as inferior. When she tries to integrate into the society of the majority, she is held back by her inadequate energies, and she does nothing to prove that she is worth of assimilation. This disaffection continues to plague her until she reminisces over her past, which grants her some guidance and a sense of the place to which she belongs – her homeland. Rapport and Dawson (1998) remind us of a paradox that results from a situation where displacement and alienation lead to a sense of belonging. In the face of distress and helplessness, Prosperous employs her own strategy of longing for her homeland, a meaning-making one. Recollecting memory would mitigate her internal conflict, as conjuring up the past allows her to move about freely in places that were once hers. She appropriates the past to confront present contingencies, the lost stability. This internal deliberation of in-between spaces collapses into a "Third Space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37), in which the concept of identity involves questions of what was and what is. As it turns out in the narrative, harping on about the past and holding on to the memories of beautiful, comfortable old days only restrict people's ability to move forward. One should be careful in dealing with the problems the memory raises, because human memory tends to be "selective" (Markovit, 2001, p. 513). It may evoke an event and exaggerate its graces and totally deny another painful event. Prosperous makes herself believe that the

memories she has of Nigeria are not fantasies. However, her imaginative, mental constructions of an ideal homeland are inflated later in the narrative.

Taking the reader back to Nigeria in the short story "Better never than late" (which is also the title of the collection), Unigwe does not seem to be in full agreement with those who are drifted away by their ideal conceptualization of their homeland. Migrants' act of fantasizing the homeland is neutralized through the story of Ijeoma, a poor young maid based in Nigeria. Ijeoma has to go through an episode of physical torture on grounds constructed on superstitions. Convicted of sorcery— of tying up "Kambi's luck" (Unigwe, 2019, p. 56), the maid is violently punished, not only by Kambi, the mistress, and her cousin, Ada (representing the secular traditions of the community), but also by the pastor (representing the religious tradition in that area of the world), who violently flogs the poor girl, mercilessly inflicting terrible physical pain on her.

This ghastly image, to which Unigwe takes the readers, could be read as a warning of romanticizing the homeland, and simultaneously considering the opportunities that present themselves for migrants. Against this violence and disorder, Unigwe brings to the forefront of the narrative a scene of Prosperous' mundane life in the kitchen, which is very symbolic. Prosperous does not like the ingredients she is using to prepare the moin-moin dish, believing that the powdered yam- the Belgian version of the whole yam she used to have back in Nigeria- is but "a combination of chemicals not fit for human consumption" (Unigwe, 2019, p. 35) that she does not want to have. Yet, looking again at the meal she prepared, she finally gathers her "courage to taste the soup she oversalted", and she finds it "not bad" (ibid, p. 36). The nuance created by symbolism relates artfully the idea that migrants need only to take the first step of coping with and adapting to the new life in the exile, which will be a "not bad" experience when they are psychologically prepared to adapt. It is only after this episode of revelation that Prosperous starts pushing her thoughts of Nigeria away and decides to go on. From that moment on, her homeland breaks into indistinct recollections that are dwindling as time wears on. Now, "she cannot even recall with certainty, for instance, the exact color of her office desk" back home (ibid, p. 36), and things need to run their course, and now her "new life has superimposed itself on the old so that any clear memory of the former is impossible" (ibid, p. 35). She has traded in idealized recollections and the utopian imaginary –imagination impervious to loss, transformation, and desecration, so Nigeria is now a static image existing outside of time.

As Prosperous starts suppressing her memories of the homeland, she simultaneously starts conceiving of home as a cognitive state, as would Rapport and Dawson (1998) put it, that is not tied to a particular physical place, but rather as a state in which people can know themselves better, or have a clearer picture of the self. To return home does not necessarily mean that people find themselves once again in the place that they have for long left behind. With many people choosing mobilities for different purposes, identity formation can derive from and is bound by new places of residence (Chambers, 1994; Strathern, 1981). What Prosperous is experiencing prompts the question why a new form of identification has been developed in her. Given the socioeconomic uncertainties surrounding her life, and the constricted attachment to her place of origin, as well as her negotiation with the self of potential new opportunities, she feels good about herself. Prosperous's mental tension between the two spaces is itself an act of identity formation. The old home in Nigeria is brought metaphorically by memory to connect with the present home so as to provide grounds for possibilities of adopting a new identity. It is in recognizing the differences between the past and the present that Prosperous came to see

her future identity as Belgian. Her memories have become functional, and her recollection of Nigeria's successful Prosperous is but a catalyst for change to the better. As she contemplates her scepticism about her ability to learn Dutch (a prerequisite for finding a decent job and leading a successful life in the provincial town of Turnhout), and the resulting indecisiveness, she rebuffs herself, reckoning that "[t]he Prosperous of Nigeria would be ashamed of her. That other Prosperous would have mastered the language, made something of herself" (Unigwe, 2019, p. 38). This apotheosis serves as a driver for action: "It's decided. Tomorrow, she will register for Dutch lessons" (Unigwe, 2019, p. 44), which will open to her a wide range of jobs. She has taken the decision to shed her old skin and begin a new life, and become prosperous.

4. Conclusion

What is particularly interesting in Unigwe's narrative is transparency in depicting both the real and the illusive images of the homeland. In an interview with Elisabeth Bekers (2015), Unigwe said: "Distance helps you see better. In my case, distance has certainly made me less sentimental about home even as I miss it. Home is not ideal. I can see its flaws. I have become an objective observer" (p. 30). This realistic view is a denial of the idealization of homeland, or creating an "imaginary homeland", to use Salman Rushdie's phrase.

Migrants' longing for the homeland is a sense of captivation, bringing with it sentimentalities of a warm house, a crowded street, a noisy balcony, a room in which all the members of the family gather to tell stories, the caring grandmother's hand, the pleasant tales of the grandfather, the salutation of a good neighbour, the smell of coffee in a quiet evening gathering, the taste of delicious fruit – a life full of blessing. These are some images migrants recollect from the past in order to understand their present life. The migrants' mind realizes – even from behind the walls of its unconsciousness – that it is temporally and spatially displaced, and that perhaps the only way to understand self lies in a phantom window that the mind is trying to open into the past.

The way out of the internal conflict of being here and there at a time is to fashion methods to adapt in the host country. One way of doing this is through remembrance. Recalling memories of the past and yearning for the homeland are presented by Unigwe's short story collection *Better Never Than Late* as approaches that the migrant community espouses to find meanings, delineate individual identity and reconcile with the self, which results in identification with the host country and with the people around, as well as reconstruction of life and liberation from delusions and self-deception. This instrumental longing – in the sense that it has a purpose rather than an expression of helplessness – is captured most notably in Unigwe's casting of the character of Prosperous. The manner in which this character develops in the narrative suggests that Unigwe is encouraging migrants to adapt and make the most of it. In the end, Prosperous does not remain stuck in the past, and through memory, she transposes her past and turns her nostalgia into a sentience of two separate worlds. The first is the one she cannot return to empty-handed, for "[w]hat would be the point of going back to Nigeria with nothing but the clothes on your back?" (Unigwe, 2019, p. 33). This is but an experience that will put returnees under constant pressure, and mocking, from their native community. The second is the real one, in which the migrants have to challenge hardship and come alive. That is the case of Prosperous's coming-out-of age. As time passes, Prosperous's images of an ideal homeland become delusive, escapist, which grants her a sense of the place she now inhabits. So, while visiting her past is a kind of longing for the homeland, it is also a harbinger of a new beginning.

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