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FOLIE (Sandra), « The White Continent of Night. Re-Imagining Europe in Women's Neocolonial Enslavement Narratives: *On Black Sisters' Street and Joy* », *CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society*, n° 6, 2023 – 2, *Sketches of Black Europe in African and African Diasporic Narratives / Esquisses de l'Europe noire dans les récits d'Afrique et des diasporas africaines*, p. 91-115

DOI : [10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-16076-2.p.0091](https://doi.org/10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-16076-2.p.0091)

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RÉSUMÉ – L'article compare le roman *On Black Sisters' Street* de Chika Unigwe et le film *Joy* de Sudabeh Mortezaei, qui traitent du trafic sexuel des femmes nigérianes vers la Belgique et l'Autriche. Ils partagent une généalogie de genre avec le récit d'esclavage, mais se focalisent sur le (néo-)colonialisme européen. S'appuyant sur la théorie postcoloniale et intersectionnelle ainsi que sur l'imagologie, l'article analyse la ré-imagination féminine noire et l'exotisation stratégique de l'Europe dans les deux œuvres.

MOTS-CLÉS – trafic sexuel, récit d'esclave, néocolonialisme, imagologie, Europe

FOLIE (Sandra), « Le continent blanc de la nuit. Ré-imaginer l'Europe dans les récits féminins de l'esclavage néocolonial : *On Black Sisters' Street* et *Joy* »

ABSTRACT – This article compares Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* and Sudabeh Mortezaei's film *Joy*, both about Nigerian women trafficked for sex work to Belgium and Austria respectively. They share a genre genealogy with slave narratives but are primarily concerned with European (neo-)colonialism. Drawing on postcolonial and intersectional theory as well as imagology, this article analyses the Black female re-imagination and strategic exoticisation of Europe in the two narratives.

KEYWORDS – sex trafficking, slave narratives, neocolonialism, imagology, Europe

THE WHITE CONTINENT OF NIGHT

Re-Imagining Europe in Women's Neocolonial Enslavement Narratives: *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Joy*¹

INTRODUCTION

In his analysis of European *ethnotypes* (ethnic stereotypes), Joep Leerssen writes that “‘Europe’ can be framed, from case to case, as the continent of mixed feelings, civil society and social order”.² These *eurotypes*, as he proposes to call them, represent a relatively recent object of research in imagology – a field within comparative literature traditionally devoted to the analysis of national characters. So far, when imagologists have dealt with larger units of analysis, e.g. transnational regions and continents, it has usually been white Europeans looking at non-European “others” such as Native North and South Americans, Central Asians, or Africans who came to represent “the brute or brutalizing forces of nature”.³ Opposing images of a white, civilised, and progressive Europe vs. a Black, primitive, and backward Africa can be found in (anti-)colonial as well as postcolonial literatures, for instance in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Tayeb Salih’s *Season of*

- 1 The feedback I received from participants at the Blankensee-Colloquium “Sketches of Black Europe” (March 2022, ZfL Berlin) and the Andrew W. Mellon Workshop “Im/Mobilities” (June 2022, American Academy in Berlin) on early versions of this article was enormously helpful. In particular, I would like to thank Elisabeth Bekers and Michelle Murray for sharing their expertise with me, and Patrick Crowley for pointing me to Lynn Festa’s wonderful article “Humanity without Feathers”.
- 2 Joep Leerssen. “The Camp and the Home. Europe as Myth and Metaphor”. In: *National Stereotyping, Identity Politics, European Crises*, edited by Jürgen Barkhoff and Leerssen, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021, pp. 125-141 (126).
- 3 Joep Leerssen. “Eurotypes after Eurocentrism: Mixed Feelings in an Uncomfortable World”. In: *The Idea of Europe – The Clash of Projections*, edited by Vladimir Biti et al., Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021, pp. 85-98 (86).

Migration to the North (1966). In *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009[2007])⁴ and *Joy* (2018), Chika Unigwe and Sudabeh Mortezaei, respectively, offer a similar juxtaposition of the enlightened vs. the dark continent. However, as they both represent female African European perspectives in “the era of global neocolonialism”,⁵ they complicate that binary in new and meaningful ways.

Chika Unigwe is a Nigerian-born author who, by the time she wrote her second novel *OBSS*, had been living in Belgium for over ten years. Like herself, her novel's protagonists and narrators, Ama, Efe, Joyce, and Sisi, come from Africa, mostly Nigeria,⁶ and migrated to Belgium. Unlike the author, they are not legally in the country and thus have to engage in sex work to pay back the debts incurred for their journey. *OBSS* is a work of fiction, albeit one inspired by real stories and experiences. In her acknowledgements, Unigwe thanks “the nameless sex workers who allowed [her] into their lives, answering [her] questions and laughing at [her] ignorance”.⁷ About a decade later, Sudabeh Mortezaei's feature film *Joy* was released, offering a glimpse into the lives of Joy and Precious, two Nigerian sex workers living in Vienna. Mortezaei, whose parents are from Iran and who grew up in Vienna and Tehran, was inspired by Corinna Milborn and Mary Kreutzer's report *Ware Frau* (“Commodity Woman”) on the modern enslavement trade from Africa to Europe. For the report, they interviewed eight women from Benin City who were trafficked to different European countries.⁸ However, Mortezaei also did her own research in both Austria and Nigeria. She mostly worked without a script and almost exclusively with amateur actors from the Nigerian community in Vienna such as Joy Alphonsus and Mariam

4 The Dutch translation appeared two years before the English original: Chika Unigwe. *Fata Morgana*. Transl. by Hans van Riemsdijk. Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2007. In this article, I will work with the original English text, first published by Jonathan Cape in 2009, in the following edition: Chika Unigwe. *On Black Sisters' Street*. London: Vintage, 2010. Henceforth, I will abbreviate the title as *OBSS*.

5 Peter Švik. “Global Neo-Colonialism (or on the Cold War and What Came After)”. *LSE International History Blog*, 31 May 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2019/05/31/global-neo-colonialism-or-on-the-cold-war-and-what-came-after/> [accessed 8th April 2023].

6 One of the four women, Joyce, is from South Sudan but is living with her boyfriend in Lagos at the time she meets her prospective trafficker, Dele.

7 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

8 See Corinna Milborn and Mary Kreutzer. *Ware Frau. Auf den Spuren moderner Sklaverei von Afrika nach Europa*. Salzburg: Ecowin, 2008.

Precious Sansui. While this allowed the actors to bring in their own stories and experiences, it is not their life story that is being told and not their person that is at stake.⁹

Although narrated in different media, Unigwe's novel and Mortezaï's film share a common genre genealogy that goes back to the slave narrative. These autobiographical accounts by formerly enslaved people such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs circulated widely from the late eighteenth century to the end of the American Civil War. The genre experienced several resurgences, which received significant scholarly attention: both in the so-called neo-slave narratives from the 1960s onwards – mostly including novels set in the U.S. at the time of the transatlantic enslavement trade, for instance, Alex Haley's *Roots* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* –;¹⁰ and in the factual modern or new slave narratives, which began to flourish in the late twentieth century. Popular examples of the latter variant include Zana Muhsen's *Sold* and Francis Bok's *Escape from Slavery* about the sale of a Birmingham-born girl into a forced child marriage in Yemen and slavery under wealthy Muslim farmers in Southern Sudan, respectively. As Laura Murphy specifies in her study *The New Slave Narrative*:

Those who are enslaved today – people who are forced to work against their will for the benefit of another without the ability to walk away – are not typically subjects of the kind of institutionalized legal slavery that prevailed in the nineteenth-century United States but are often held captive in forms of slavery that are less readily recognized or remedied because their exploitation is illegal and therefore remains hidden by employers.¹¹

To date, book-length examples of autobiographical narratives by formerly enslaved people are found primarily in the U.S., the U.K., and

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- 9 Mortezaï very consciously decided against making a documentary, not least for ethical reasons. Most women would not want to reveal such private and traumatic experiences to the camera. See Patrick Wellinski. "Sudabeh Mortezaï über ihr Flüchtlingsdrama 'Joy': Opfer, die zu Täterinnen werden". *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 8 Sept. 2018. However, there are documentaries on the subject, such as *Meine Hölle Europa. Vom Geschäft mit Afrikas Frauen (Sisters of No Mercy)*. Directed by Lukas Roegler, 2007. Produced by WDR, DVD.
- 10 See Valerie Smith. "Neo-Slave Narratives". In: *The African American Slave Narrative*, edited by Audrey Fisch, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 168-185.
- 11 Laura Murphy. "Introduction. The Reemergence of the Slave Narrative in the Twenty-First Century". In: *The New Slave Narrative. The Battle Over Representations of Contemporary Slavery*. New York: Columbia UP, 2019, pp. 1-28 (3).

France.¹² Within these countries and beyond, the stories about victims of trafficking who initially embarked on their journeys “voluntarily” and “knowingly” usually remain unpublished. This is true for many African migrants whose willingness to engage in sex work in Europe is often based on a profound lack of prospects in their home countries. Moreover, they generally “have little understanding of the conditions under which they will work and of the size of the debt they will incur”.¹³ Stories of such “voluntary” migrant sex workers who could not or did not want to escape, who deliberately avoided the public eye, or who had neither the ambition nor the financial and structural support to write, rarely achieve to reach public awareness through reports or books. This would also have been the case with the short, oral, and sometimes fragmentary narratives of the Nigerian sex workers in Antwerp and Vienna if they had not anonymously found their way into *OBSS* and *Joy*. Both fictional narratives were created by ethnicised women who have themselves experienced marginalisation in Europe. However, Unigwe and Mortezaei are not victims of human trafficking like their characters. Drawing on the life stories of Black African migrant sex workers that were shared in conversations with them, their literary production “ambivalently combines the fictionally-mediated personal testimonies of highly individualized women with the feeling of a socially representative document that speaks to [an] ‘African’ female migrant experience in the diaspora”.¹⁴

In this article, I will read *OBSS* and *Joy* as women-authored/-centred examples of neocolonial enslavement narratives. I propose this term for fiction that centres on different types of human trafficking and modern slavery from the late twentieth century onward, and thus addresses Europe’s continuing exploitation and oppression of its former colonies. In a comparative text and film analysis, informed by postcolonial and intersectional theory as well as imagology, I will focus on a salient strength of this relatively new genre variant that has “remain[ed] a marginal

12 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

13 Moreover, as Jørgen Carling writes, the women’s knowledge “does not excuse or legitimate subsequent abuse”. Jørgen Carling. “Trafficking in Women from Nigeria to Europe”. *Migration Information Source*, 1 July 2005, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trafficking-women-nigeria-europe> [accessed 8th April 2023].

14 Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo. “Unsettled Subjects: Sex Work in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*”. *English Studies in Africa*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2019, pp. 112-123 (114).

subcategory of migration literature”.¹⁵ its appropriation of “the powerful narrative of Europe as a colorblind continent, largely untouched by the devastating ideology it exported all over the world”.¹⁶ I will argue that Unigwe and Mortezeai’s decentring of the white European gaze makes their texts valuable sources for a Black female re-imagination of Europe.

BOTCHED DREAMS OF EUROPE OR THE FORTRESSES WITHIN

OBSS and *Joy* show Belgium and Austria each as destination countries for sex trafficking and indentured sex work migration. However, they also draw attention to the fact that the network of traffickers, which grew out of friendship and family relations in 1980s Nigeria, is organised throughout Europe. The first market for this modern form of slavery was Italy, but other countries gradually followed.¹⁷ In Unigwe’s novel, this transnational reach becomes particularly clear when the Lagos-based trafficker Dele proudly proclaims that he “send[s] gals to Europe. Antwerp. Milan. Madrid”¹⁸ every month. At the beginning of *Joy*, a *juju*¹⁹ priest takes a young woman’s oath never to betray her traffickers. If she sticks to it, no one will harm her in Europe, not even the police, whether “in Germany, Italy, France, or Spain”.²⁰ The continent is also the frame of reference for the *madam*, Joy and Precious’ pimp in Vienna, who reminds “her girls” of their plans and the duties that come along with them: “You wanted to come [to] Europe, now you are in Europe” and

15 Elisabeth Bekers. “The Mirage of Europe in Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* and Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*”. In: *Postcolonial Gateways and Walls. Under Construction*, edited by Daria Tunca and Janet Wilson, Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 255-277 (257/fn. 8).

16 Fatima El-Tayeb. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, Kindle, pos. 82-83.

17 See Milborn and Kreuzter, *Ware Frau*, *op. cit.*, p. 39; *Meine Hölle Europa*, *op. cit.*, 0:00-0:33; Milena Rizzotti. “Chasing Geographical and Social Mobility: The Motivations of Nigerian Madams to Enter Indentured Relationships”. *Anti-Trafficking Review*, vol. 18, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222184> [accessed 4th October 2023].

18 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

19 *Juju* is a West African spiritual belief system that involves magical power.

20 *Joy*. Directed by Sudabeh Mortezeai, 2018. Produced by FreibeuterFilm and ORF, DVD, 05:02-05:05 (English subtitles).

“[t]his is how the job is in Europe”.²¹ Nancy Nenno notes in her review that audiences would only realise the film was set in Vienna from a few passing references to the city. She finds it a particular strength of *Joy* that the story could similarly happen anywhere in Europe, “as it targets all Western European nations as potential destinations for sex traffickers”.²²

It is also noteworthy that the protagonists of *OBSS* hardly distinguish between different European countries and cities. Their primary distinction is between London – a city familiar to everyone in Nigeria – and the rest of Europe. The location of the lesser-known Belgium is repeatedly explained as “next door to London”. Dele “made it sound as if you could walk from one to the other. From one door to the next”.²³ This downsizing of Europe is accompanied by an additional distinction between Western/Central and Eastern Europe. Some minor characters in the novel belong to Europe, the continent, but not so much to “the West” as to “the rest”, an example of which can be seen in the Eastern European women with small children who beg in the shopping streets of Antwerp. Sisi sometimes gives them money, at other times she simply hurries past them. On the one hand, it could be argued that *OBSS* perpetuates stereotypical notions of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. On the other, Sisi explicitly mentions the nationality of the Albanian sex worker who has her booth right next to her in the city’s red-light district. Thus, the novel deviates from an image of Eastern Europe as a nameless, borderless, and dark space.²⁴ Far from looking down on her Eastern European colleagues who came to Antwerp before the Nigerians in the early 1990s,²⁵ Sisi shows solidarity in her behaviour towards them, just like they show solidarity towards her.

However, this solidarity between immigrant Black African and white Eastern European sex workers should not obscure the “colour line” that runs through *OBSS*’ Europe. The novel does not equate female

21 *Ibid.*, 19:09-19:10 and 58:33-58:34.

22 Nancy P. Nenno. “Nenno on Mortezaei, ‘Joy’”. *H-Black-Europe*, Feb. 2020, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/113394/reviews/5806335/nenno-mortezaei-joy> [accessed 8th April 2023].

23 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

24 See *ibid.*, pp. 255 and 237 respectively. For more detailed information on stereotypical images of Eastern Europe/ans, see Vedrana Veličković. *Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Literature and Culture. Imagining New Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

25 Ronald Weitzer. *Legalizing Prostitution. From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business*. New York: New York UP, 2011, p. 109.

transnational and interracial solidarity with community and sisterhood, which only seems to exist between Ama, Efe, Joyce, and Sisi. The title of the novel links them with their address in *Zwartzusterstraat*, which resembles an actual street in Antwerp and can literally be translated as “Black Sisters’ Street”.²⁶ Like the names of the protagonists, *Zwartzusterstraat* serves as a chapter heading and indicates the narrative perspective of the respective chapters (see figure 1). The street’s prominent position – it narrates nine of 27 chapters and thus is the second most frequent narrator after the main character, Sisi – is reminiscent of African American classics such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Ann Petry’s *The Street*, and James Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Unigwe seems to transfer the disillusionment with the cultural myth of the American Dream to Europe: from 124 Bluestone Road in postbellum Cincinnati (Morrison), 116th Street in postwar Harlem (Petry), and Beale Street, which stands for “the black neighborhood of some [and every] American city”,²⁷ to the *Zwartzusterstraat* of today. Fittingly, *OBSS* begins on 12 May 2006 (see figure 1) – one day after Belgian skinhead Hans Van Themsche murdered Oulemata Niangadou and Luna Drowart, a Malian nanny and her European charge, on *Zwartzusterstraat*. Van Themsche also wounded Songül Koç, a woman of Turkish origin wearing a headscarf. In a letter to his parents, he wrote that “he was going to kill some foreigners”,²⁸ by which he meant people he perceived as non-European, that is, non-white or non-Christian. Following a nationwide series of racist crimes (which Unigwe briefly addresses in the novel²⁹), Van Themsche “was the

26 For more detailed information on the street name and Unigwe’s usage, see Bekers, “The Mirage of Europe”, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

27 *If Beale Street Could Talk* is largely set in 1970s Harlem and Greenwich Village, where there is no Beale Street. However, the film adaptation of the novel opens with the following quote from Baldwin: “Beale Street is a street in New Orleans, where my father, where Louis Armstrong and the jazz were born. Every black person born in America was born on Beale Street, born in the black neighborhood of some American city, whether in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Harlem, New York. Beale Street is our legacy. This novel deals with the impossibility and the possibility, the absolute necessity, to give expression to this legacy.” *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Directed by Barry Jenkins, 2018. Produced by Annapurna Pictures, Plan B Entertainment, and PASTEL.

28 John Ward Anderson. “Belgians Seek Roots of Racist Crimes String of Attacks on Foreigners Feeds Fears About Political Appeal of Intolerance”. *Washington Post*, 20 May 2006.

29 In addition to Hans Van Themsche’s murders, a boy who was previously “killed at the Central Station for his MP3 player” is mentioned. Sisi’s death is also being investigated “as a possible racist attack”. Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

first person in Belgium to be convicted on the new charge of racially motivated murder”³⁰ – a charge that breaks with the framing of Europe “as a space free of ‘race’ (and by implication, racism)”.³¹

Chapter headings (point of view)	Chapters (frequency of occurrence)
12 May 2006 (third person omniscient)	1 (1)
Zwartzusterstraat (third person omniscient)	2, 4, 6, 10, 12, 16, 22, 24, 26 (9)
Sisi (third person limited)	3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27 (13)
Efe (third person limited)	8 (1)
Ama (third person limited)	14 (1)
Alek-Joyce (third person limited)	18 [as Alek], 20 [as Joyce] (2)

FIG. 1 – Chapters and narrators in *OBSS*.

While the novel reproduces an intra-European hierarchisation of (white) Europeans along the categories of Western vs. Eastern and centre vs. periphery, all of them can be said to share white privilege,³² which demarcates them from people of colour within and beyond continental and national boundaries. This supposedly white Europe nowadays extends into Russia in the east and as far as the Mediterranean in the south. In the west, however, it reaches all the way across the Atlantic. This is highlighted in the novel when North America and Europe merge in the perception of some of the protagonists who, still in Africa, are pondering possible overseas destinations. While Ama names London, Las Vegas, and Monaco as her preferences, Joyce can imaginatively choose between London or America, which blend in her vision: “London. America. Londonamerica. Said with ease.

30 “Belgian Man Sentenced to Life in Prison for Racially Motivated Attack”. *New York Times*, 11 Oct. 2007.

31 El-Tayeb, *European Others*, *op. cit.*, pos. 83-84.

32 The American activist and scholar Peggy McIntosh famously described white privilege as an “invisible knapsack” of privilege that every white person is born with. See Peggy McIntosh. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”. *Peace and Freedom*, July/August 1989, pp. 10-12. Since in Europe race is primarily associated with people of colour, who are positioned as always outside, as foreigners, and *European Others* (El-Tayeb), whiteness reigns as the invisible norm.

Londonamerica. Americalondon. Interchangeable”.³³ Mama Eko, Ama’s aunt, speaks of “*obodo oyibo*”,³⁴ which translates as “white man’s country” and is used in Igbo for Europe and North America. While the former is portrayed realistically in the novel, the latter appears primarily as an idealised fantasy – “the promised land that many heard of but only the chosen few got to see”³⁵ – or as a future horror scenario of Europe. For example, Sisi predicts that “Antwerp is becoming America, with all these shootings”.³⁶ The transatlantic enslavement trade is occasionally alluded to, for instance in the description of the women as “cargo” who face a “passage” and will be sold at “auction”.³⁷ However, such allusions to chattel slavery, which run the risk of “conjur[ing] up race and, hence, mystify[ing] the economic rationalities that motivate trafficking”,³⁸ do not serve as the story’s primary frame of reference. Rather, they point to continuities that include but also go beyond the Middle Passage and emphasise the lasting legacies of European colonialism, i.e., neo-colonialism. The idea of neocolonialism, conceptually developed from Karl Marx’s “influential critique of capitalism as a stage in the socio-economic development of human society”, can nowadays “be described as the subtle propagation of socio-economic and political activity by former colonial rulers aimed at reinforcing capitalism, neo-liberal globalization, and cultural subjugation of their former colonies”.³⁹ By only subtly referring to the transatlantic enslavement trade and circum-Caribbean slave societies, for example through the use of certain vocabulary, Unigwe avoids substituting a simplistic and ahistorical as well as US- and race-centric perspective for the real and more complex reasons behind modern forms of slavery – thus emphatically pointing to “the predatory labor circuits that global capitalism needs in order to thrive”.⁴⁰

33 See Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, pp. 134 and 225 respectively.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 247 and 278 respectively.

38 N. Michelle Murray. “Coerced Migration and Sex Trafficking: Transoceanic Circuits of Enslavement”. In: *Transatlantic Studies. Latin America, Iberia, and Africa*, edited by Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel et al., Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2019, pp. 348-360 (355).

39 Oseni Taiwo Afisi. “Neocolonialism”. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (IEP), <https://iep.utm.edu/neocolon/#H2> [accessed 8th April 2023].

40 Murray, “Coerced Migration”, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

Accordingly, the protagonists' images of Europe are initially not guided by the bloody history of slavery and colonialism but by capitalism's promises of prosperity. Before coming to Belgium, Efe "imagined castles and clean streets and snow as white as salt. But now when she thinks of it, when she talks of where she lives in Antwerp, she describes it as a botched dream".⁴¹ Back in Lagos, Sisi imagined her life in Europe "in a technicolour glow of the most amazing beauty", "full of colours and promise". When her plane landed at night, "she saw nothing of Belgium but lights (working street lights at the sides of the roads!)". Then she was brought to "a house on a narrow gloomy street", whose gloom "[s]he had at first attributed [...] to the darkness but in the morning she found out how wrong she was. [...] No amount of light could lift it from the bleak neglect into which it had settled, a desolation which would only deepen with time".⁴² Sisi realises that the only glow that would ever fall on her is the one from the "[b]lue and red lights, like Christmas lights, decorating [the] window" where she is on display, "waiting for buyers to admire and buy" her services.⁴³

In the film *Joy*, it is Precious who has just arrived in Austria from Nigeria. She came by boat and later tells her family on the phone that the journey was "very, very, very hard",⁴⁴ because the boat capsized and – unable to swim – she was afraid for her life. Her experience is different from that of the women in *OBSS*, who "fly directly from Lagos to Brussels on scheduled flights and enter Europe smoothly on forged passports". In this way, as Elisabeth Bekers observes, Unigwe "eschews the stereotypical images of refugees secretly smuggled into Europe in cramped conditions".⁴⁵ Meanwhile, however, these stereotypical images have become more real for trafficked women from Nigeria, as crossing into Europe is by now even more difficult than a few years ago. While a study published in 2010 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime states that Nigerian trafficking victims "mainly travel to Europe by plane from Lagos or other international airports from West Africa",⁴⁶

41 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 98, and 99 respectively.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

44 *Joy*, *op. cit.*, 12:59-13:00.

45 Bekers, "The Mirage of Europe", *op. cit.*, p. 266.

46 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *The Globalization of Crime. A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*. Vienna, 2010, p. 46.

subsequent reports by the European Asylum Support Office indicate that most of them use the central Mediterranean route through Niger and Libya, from where they continue to Italy by boat.⁴⁷

After recounting her traumatic crossing to her family, Precious emphasises how “very, very beautiful” it is in Austria: “Everywhere is beautiful. Light is always here 24 hours, like non-stop. They never take the light. Just imagine how cool it would be”.⁴⁸ The last sentence already makes it clear that, under different circumstances, she would enjoy living in Vienna – or at least enjoy the comfort it stands for (such as electric light) back home in Nigeria. Precious’ conditional enthusiasm is further depressed by her family’s repeated demands for more money and therefore more sex work. The same is true for Joy, whose family demands a large sum from her because her father allegedly needs a kidney transplant. After borrowing the money from her madam and sending it to her family, Joy learns that her brother has bought “a brand new [...] [f]lashy car”. In response to her astonishment and shock at this information, the madam shrugs her shoulders and smiles wryly: “They have a rich daughter in Europe”.⁴⁹

Europe may be the continent of cleanliness, order, and light. However, this inextinguishable light refers – in Mortezaï’s Austria as well as in Unigwe’s Belgium – not only to comfort, progress and prosperity, but also to “the oldest trade in the world” and, more concretely, to the red-light districts in Vienna and Antwerp. In the vocabulary of imagology, this means that the texts draw hetero-images of Austria and Belgium as transit and destination countries of sex trafficking from Africa to Europe. The main reasons for the flourishing business are twofold: firstly, the “[i]ncreasing demand for sex and cheap labour” in Western and Central Europe; and secondly, “[p]overty and associated issues” in African countries such as Nigeria, and “limited options for safe and legal migration” for the citizens of these countries.⁵⁰

While Belgium and Austria share an “ambiguous status as both central and peripheral” in Europe,⁵¹ as being part of the affluent West

47 European Asylum Support Office (EASO). *Nigeria Trafficking in Human Beings. Country of Origin Information Report*, April 2021, p. 37.

48 Joy, *op. cit.*, 13:48-13:58.

49 *Ibid.*, 60:07-60:15.

50 EASO, *Nigeria Trafficking in Human Beings, op. cit.*, p. 18.

51 Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez and Elisabeth Bekers. “Writing an(Other) Europe: Challenging Peripheries in Chika Unigwe’s Fiction on Belgium”. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2021, pp. 386-400 (389).

but not quite as central as the UK, France, and Germany, there also seems to be a hierarchical divide between them. This may be partly due to the geographical location of Belgium in Northwestern Europe and Austria in the southern part of Central Europe. The latter's capital, Vienna, which is located in the very east of the country (and thus more easterly than Prague or Zagreb), is also known as the "gateway to the East".⁵² However, since both countries are similarly wealthy, it seems more likely that their different approaches to sex work explain the better housing and working conditions of the protagonists in Unigwe's novel. Although both countries have long legalised sex work (Austria in 1974 and Belgium in 1995), Vienna's strategy was to outsource visible spaces of sex work to the outskirts,⁵³ while Antwerp confined a significant portion of these to a specific red-light zone in Skippers' quarter about a 20-minute walk from the central town square. As part of an urban planning initiative in the early 2000s, the police presence there was increased, a freely accessible health clinic was installed, and the accommodation for sex workers was renovated.⁵⁴ Although the house on Black Sisters' Street is described as gloomy and the furnishings as tasteless and cliché, each woman there has her own room with clean white bedding. Their primary place of work is a booth in Skippers' quarter. Joy and Precious, on the other hand, are housed in a shabby basement apartment in Vienna with bare concrete walls, sparse furnishings, and little light. They sleep in an iron bunk bed in a room that houses several other women. Moreover, they work on the streets in an outer district of Vienna, which is one of the most precarious and dangerous types of sex work. This becomes clear when Joy gets into a car with a white man who drives her far away, refuses to let her out,

52 Paul Hofmann. "Vienna, Gateway to the East". *New York Times*, 18 March 1990, p. 12. See also the final report (July 2016) of the project "Vienna's Role as Metropolis in Central and Eastern Europe: Status and Future Perspectives" by the 2015/16 Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) Master Class of the Vienna University of Economics and Business.

53 In September 2013, when the new University for Economics opened in the Prater, a large, centrally located public park in Vienna, the red-light district there was banned. Consequently, the sex workers who used to work in this area were pushed to the outskirts of the city. According to experts, this "outsourcing" has made their situation worse and more unsafe. See Chris Köver. "Austria May Build 'Drive-In Brothels' for Street Prostitutes". *Vice*, 11 Sept. 2014, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xjjdz/austria-may-build-drive-in-brothels-for-street-prostitutes> [accessed 8th April 2023].

54 Weitzer, *Legalizing Prostitution*, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-115.

and rapes her with a group of men who could be skinheads, judging by their appearance.⁵⁵ However, in *Joy* it is also pointed out that things can get even worse than they have been in Vienna. When Precious is to be sold to Italy, some of the women she lives with advise her to “learn to keep quiet” and not to “talk too much” over there.⁵⁶ More than ever, it becomes important for her to be seen but not heard.⁵⁷ This shows that the European West-East and Centre-Periphery divide is complemented by a North-South divide within Western and Central Europe.

While small, compact Western/Central Europe was initially imagined in positive terms – everything is believed to be close to London, easily accessible, clean, bright, and prosperous –, the novel and the film increasingly depict it as fractured and claustrophobic. At first, the women thought they had overcome “Fortress Europe” but, instead, its walls have moved closer and now surround their respective countries or cities of residence. After the madam takes away Sisi’s passport and her asylum application is rejected, she, like her “sisters”, becomes a *persona non grata*. Despite the freedom to travel without passport control in the Schengen area, people of colour are often “the focus of discriminatory checks on trains, buses and on the street”.⁵⁸ In *Joy*, Precious’ mandatory journey to Italy is abruptly interrupted due to an ID check on the train.

55 See *Joy*, *op. cit.*, 54:31-56:18.

56 *Ibid.*, 61:07-61:08 and 62:18 respectively.

57 “Silence and total obedience” are also the rules of the house in *OBSS* (*op. cit.*, p. 120). Both the dreaded sale of Precious to the South and the English proverb that children should be seen and not heard, which the madam appropriates for her “girls”, are strongly reminiscent of nineteenth-century slave narratives. As Unigwe said in an interview (asked about her historical novel on formerly enslaved abolitionist and author Olaudah Equiano): “Slaves were to be seen, not heard”. See Elisabeth Bekers. “Writing Africa in Belgium, Europe: A Conversation with Chika Unigwe”. *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 46, no. 4, Winter 2015, pp. 26-35 (32).

58 Fiona McGaughey. *Singled Out: Exploratory Study on Ethnic Profiling in Ireland and Its Impact on Migrant Workers and Their Families*. Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, 2011, https://emn.ie/files/p_201212180946582011_Singled_Out_MRCI.pdf [accessed 8th April 2023]. While this study focuses on Ireland, there are numerous similar testimonials from Black people and people of colour in other European countries. Recounting her experiences of being interrogated and strip-searched by white officials in Italy and France, bell hooks described how, for many Black people, “to travel is to encounter the terrorizing force of white supremacy”. See bell hooks. “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination”. In: *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg et al., New York: Routledge, 1992, pp. 338-346 (344). In *Travelling While Black*, Nanjala Nyabola reports similar discriminatory checks, “like taking the train from Vienna to Bern and being the only people in our full carriage who get their identity documents checked”. See Nanjala Nyabola. *Travelling*

When they see the police officers, Joy and Precious immediately leave the train at the next stop. If their passports had been checked, both women would have been at risk of deportation. The women's freedom of movement is even restricted within the cities they live in – for the most part, they only move between their place of work and their place of residence. In *OBSS*, Sisi is the only one who takes long walks around Antwerp during the day and plans to move in with her boyfriend in a suburb – a plan she eventually pays for with her life. Joy's relative mobility – encouraged by her client-turned-lover, she goes to an NGO and considers testifying against her madam – may also have contributed to her being reported and subsequently deported.

STRATEGICALLY EXOTICISING EUROPE OR EXPOSING (NEO)COLONIAL AMNESIA

Joep Leerssen writes that if “an imagologist were to approach the vexed question of what constitutes a European ‘identity’ [...], his/her first reflex would be to unpack the implied contrast-frame: a ‘European identity’ as opposed to what, precisely?”⁵⁹ Beyond the contrasting images within Europe (west vs. east, centre vs. periphery, north vs. south), *Joy* establishes Africa as Europe's stereotypical Other. Against Africa's imagined “brute force of nature”, Europe's “self-imposed social order” is supposed to shine particularly brightly.⁶⁰ In the opening sequence, the audience observes a *juju* ritual in a wooden hut where a shrine is set up with different objects such as bowls, jugs, plastic bottles, animal bones, shells, and fabrics. The priest, a tall and corpulent Black man, kills, plucks, and disembowels a chicken while reciting an incantation in the African language Edo (also called Bini) – parts of which form the oath that a young woman must repeat before she leaves for Europe. The *juju* ritual is meant to protect trafficked women abroad, especially from

While Black. Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move. London: Hurst, 2020, p. 36. See also Lindokuhle Shabane's review of Nyabola's book in this issue, pp. 219–223.

⁵⁹ Leerssen, “The Camp and the Home”, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

the police. However, if the women break their oath by not paying back their debts (on time) or betraying their madam and traffickers, they and their families back home face serious consequences: from violence and financial hardship to sudden illness and death. The protection provided by *juju* can turn into a curse. In her review, Nancy Nenno questions “whether the explicit visual depiction of the ritual is truly necessary to the film or whether it instead fuels a kind of voyeuristic exoticism that actually detracts from the film’s aim of encouraging the spectator to identify with the trafficked women”.⁶¹ While showing the ritual is certainly helpful, perhaps even necessary, to understand why Joy is so afraid to break her oath and testify against her madam, the film’s less than subtle opening could also be interpreted as a kind of “strategic exoticism” that works “from within exoticist codes of representation”.⁶² It would probably be an exaggeration to credit the opening sequence with managing “to subvert those codes”.⁶³ There is, however, a kind of mirror scene in the last third of the film that “reverse-casts the Austrians as exotic and primitive”⁶⁴ and thus contains subversive potential. An analysis of this second scene will show how it redeploys exoticist codes “for the purpose of uncovering differential relations of power”.⁶⁵

On their way to Tyrol, where Joy, as already mentioned, is to hand Precious over to the Italian traffickers, the two women leave the train early to avoid an ID check. Since they are very cold at the station, they decide to wait in a restaurant, where the exclusively white guests eye them conspicuously. They sit down at one of the free tables, keep silent, and drink tea. Suddenly, there is a loud ringing of bells and a roaring sound. A “Passe” or “Krampus group” enters, consisting of Saint Nicholas, a basket carrier, an angel, and several “Krampusen” – “young, unmarried men dressed up in horned wooden masks, fur suits and cow bells in an attempt to impersonate the devil”.⁶⁶ This performance is part of an Alpine Christian pre-Christmas tradition. In some regions

61 Nenno, “Nenno on Mortezaei”, *op. cit.*

62 Graham Huggan. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London [et al.]: Routledge, 2001, p. 32.

63 *Ibid.*

64 Nenno, “Nenno on Mortezaei”, *op. cit.*

65 Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

66 Matthäus Rest and Gertraud Seiser. “The Krampus in Austria. A Case of Booming Identity Politics”. *Ethnoscripts*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 35-57 (36).

in Austria, such “Passen” walk from house to house on Krampus Day (December 5) or St. Nicholas Day (December 6) to reward good children and punish naughty ones. They give out gifts (mostly fruits, nuts, and sweets) but also frighten children. These performances often take place in public spaces and thus become gaudy events – so-called “*Krampusläufe*” (“Krampus runs”) – that also attract adults. In this form, they are commonly associated with “sexualized violence, alcoholism, atavism, rural backwardness, low levels of education and right-wing nationalism”.⁶⁷

After some jumping around and making a lot of noise, the Krampuses in *Joy* kneel down, and the man dressed as Saint Nicholas begins to speak in an Austrian dialect. He thanks his audience for the welcoming reception and continues: “*Wir bringn nur des Liacht und boltn fest dagegn, gegn oll die dunkl’n G’stoltn, so bes, dass selbst die Eigenen in Kett’n boltn.*” (“We only bring the light and stand firm against all the dark figures who are so evil that they even keep their own in chains.”)⁶⁸ This line is not without a certain ambivalence. After all, the (electric) light represents both Precious’ highly positive first impression of Austria as well as her forced sex work in the red-light milieu. Moreover, the “dark figures” may primarily refer to the Krampuses and the deadly sins they embody, but they also recall the situation of the dark-skinned Joy and Precious, who were virtually sold by their families and figuratively put in chains by their fellow countrymen and women. Unlike *OBSS*, the film does not show how the women were recruited as sex workers. However, Joy and Precious’ madam repeatedly emphasises that they knew what kind of job they were coming to Europe for.⁶⁹ Their families also seem to be in the know because it is their mothers who tell them to take on more clients and send more money home.⁷⁰ Although the women most likely came to Europe voluntarily and with the knowledge that they would be

67 *Ibid.*, p. 38. In his novel *Das Grab von Ivan Lendl*, Paul Ferstl also uses this custom to create a critical auto-image of a primitive, rural Austria: “*Nachdem Pich aus einer Gegend kam, in der sich Männer Felle umbängten und den Winter begrüßten, indem sie wablllos Passanten verprügelten, war er in Bezug auf ausländische Sitten durchaus tolerant.*” (“Having come from a region where men put on furs and welcomed winter by randomly beating up passers-by, Pich [the young, male protagonist] was quite tolerant of foreign customs.”). Paul Ferstl. *Das Grab von Ivan Lendl*. Wien: Milena, 2022, p. 120; my translation.

68 *Joy*, *op. cit.*, 69:54-70:07; my translation.

69 *Ibid.*, 19:03-19:17; 58:24-58:35.

70 *Ibid.*, 13:21-13:28; 46:15-47:08.

sex workers, they were left in ignorance of the exact conditions and the risks involved. After her first week as a sex worker in Vienna, Precious begs her madam to let her do any other work. The fact that much later, on her way to Italy, she pleads with Joy to let her escape, indicates that she is at no point a voluntary sex worker.⁷¹

On a more general level, the Krampus scene can also be read as a display of neocolonial amnesia. Nigeria – and especially its urban centres located near the shore, such as Benin City – were important trans-shipment points during the time of the transatlantic enslavement trade. Due to the typical triangular route of the ships, there was also a connection to Europe at that time. Human trafficking in the twenty-first century has revived the importance of West African coastal cities, although the means of transportation and the destination countries have changed. This shift in destination countries between historical and contemporary slavery particularly affects Austria. Despite never owning colonies, its capital Vienna has become a hub for trafficked women from Nigeria since the early 2000s.⁷² The fact that the white guests in the restaurant follow Saint Nicholas' speech with the first verse of the German Advent song "*Lasst uns froh und munter sein*" ("Let us be happy and cheerful") may thus be read as a performance of neocolonial amnesia.⁷³ After all, they appeal to each other to be "happy and cheerful" while two women forced into sex work by dire economic circumstances sit among them – trafficked persons, who are literally in the process of reselling (Joy for the madam) or being resold (Precious). This trade does not happen out of malice, as suggested by Saint Nicholas, the representative of white Christianity, but out of a lack of options in the age of neocolonialism.

Although *Joy* begins with an African *juju* ritual, overall *OBSS* gives more insight into the lives of its protagonists in Africa than the film. Ama, Efe, and Joyce begin to talk about their past after the mysterious murder of Sisi. As Efe says: "They are all the family that she has in Europe. And families that know so little of each other are bound to be

71 *Ibid.*, 18:51-19:02 and 66:04-66:10 respectively.

72 See Milbourn and Kreutzer, *Ware Frau*, *op. cit.*, p. 132. In more recent discussions on colonialism, increased attention is being paid to a "colonialism without colonies". For the Austrian context, see: Clemens Ruthner. *Habsburgs 'Dark Continent'.* *Postkoloniale Lektüren zur österreichischen Literatur und Kultur im langen 19. Jahrhundert.* Tübingen: Francke, 2018.

73 *Joy*, *op. cit.*, 71:20-71:40.

dysfunctional”.⁷⁴ Only by sharing their history do they create a genuine sisterhood and a community, which also corresponds to the concept of diaspora. Their individual stories and reasons for coming to Europe are diverse and defy an “essentialist vision of the exotic African woman”⁷⁵ or “an ‘archetype’ of the African prostitute”.⁷⁶ While Chisom (who calls herself Sisi in Europe) was unable to find a job after her studies and wanted to escape poverty and the lack of prospects in Lagos, Alek’s entire family was murdered in the Second Sudanese Civil War. She was raped by a group of soldiers and finally sent to Europe by her Nigerian boyfriend, supposedly as a nanny. Alek’s trafficker Dele gave her the new name “Joyce”, as from then on “[she] is conceived of as a thing that will give joy to men in Europe”.⁷⁷ This split between the person Alek and the depersonalised Joyce is also emphasised on a formal level by having one chapter (18) narrated by Alek and one (20) by Joyce (see fig. 1). Even though Alek/Joyce’s story is akin to the kind of “sob stories”⁷⁸ that, according to their madam, white people are so fond of, the novel rejects any sentimentality. Except for Alek/Joyce, all the women knew what kind of work they would be doing in Europe, although they did not know the exact terms of that work.

Africa – specifically Nigeria and Southern Sudan – are portrayed as corrupt, violent, and socially unjust. However, the stereotypical hetero-image of the backward and primitive dark continent is not necessarily dominant. *Juju*, for example, is not at all featured as an instrument for oppressing the protagonists. On the contrary, there is an urban legend circulating in Antwerp that a former Ghanaian sex worker used “*touch and follow* [...], the sort of juju that good medicine men made”,⁷⁹ to successfully secure a rich white man. Thus, the

74 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

75 Sarah De Mul. “Becoming Black in Belgium: The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe’s Authorial Self-Representation and *On Black Sisters’ Street*”. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2014, pp. 11-27 (23).

76 Daria Tunca. “Redressing the ‘Narrative Balance’: Subjection and Subjectivity in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*”. *Afroeuropa*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2009.

77 Chielozona Eze. “Feminism with a Big ‘F’: Ethics and the Rebirth of African Feminism in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*”. *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2014, pp. 89-103 (94).

78 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 121; full quote: “White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear about us killing each other, about us hacking each other’s hands off in senseless ethnic conflicts. The more macabre the story the better.”

79 *Ibid.*, p. 253. Emphasis in original.

supposedly primitive, male tool of oppression from Africa becomes a means of liberation for an African sex worker in Europe. This story of a female appropriation of *juju* provides hope and an empowering sense of Black female community. As such, it aligns well with the protagonists' "ambiguous agency"⁸⁰ and "powerful resilience"⁸¹ throughout the novel: they are not conveyed as victims but as "agents in a transnational world making [...] strategic choices that are restricted by circumstance".⁸² In this way, the novel maintains the "push-pull between the critique of exploitative systems and the affirmation of individual women's resourceful capabilities".⁸³ The latter is particularly evident in a "reverse objectification of the clients",⁸⁴ whom Ama considers as "tools she needed to achieve her dream".⁸⁵ The novel also draws a clear parallel between the venal services of sex workers and the venality of white "dirty" cops who ask the madams "for free girls" and "[a] thousand euros"⁸⁶ to look the other way.

With regard to a decentring or complexification of the "white gaze", the most interesting scenes are those in which Sisi goes on solitary walks through the city of Antwerp – an experience that, according to Michel de Certeau, implies "a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian".⁸⁷ On her daytime walks, Sisi "wander[s] into central areas in Antwerp and appropriate[s] the spaces that are assigned to tourists and middle-class consumers".⁸⁸ After passing run-down neighbourhoods, beggars, and dirty streets, she arrives at magnificent shopping miles and historical sights. In the city centre, she buys souvenirs – especially chocolates, some of which are in the shape of penises and breasts. Once, she pretends to be an American

80 Dina Ligaga. "Ambiguous Agency in the Vulnerable Trafficked Body: Reading Sanusi's *Eyo* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*". *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2019, pp. 74-88 (75).

81 Okolo, "Unsettled Subjects", *op. cit.*, p. 120.

82 De Mul, "Becoming Black in Belgium", *op. cit.*, p. 20.

83 Okolo, "Unsettled Subjects", *op. cit.*, p. 120.

84 *Ibid.*

85 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 169. In a similar way, Joy instructs Precious: "We don't look at the faces. We only think where we are going, because you have a goal. Don't look at the faces, look at the money. You target your goal." *Joy*, *op. cit.*, 25:48-25:55.

86 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

87 Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 97-98. Emphasis in original.

88 Bastida-Rodríguez and Bekers, "Writing an(Other) Europe", *op. cit.*, p. 394.

tourist “doing Europe” and says to the saleswoman who is wrapping her chocolates: “You Europeans are so smart. Your English is so good, darling. I wish I spoke another language! Anything. As long as it’s foreign”.⁸⁹ This mock compliment reverses the ignorant surprise of many Europeans about the fact that formerly-colonised people speak former colonial languages – now very often the official languages of their respective countries – proficiently. Sisi’s compliment, however, can also be read as a sneer at the lazy “fragile tongues” of white people that lead Africans to change their names to make them more easily pronounceable: “Nothing longer than two syllables and nothing with odd combinations of consonants”.⁹⁰

The next stop on Sisi’s walk is in front of her favourite statue, “the giant throwing a hand in the middle of the central square”.⁹¹ A passer-by – a “through-and-through Antwerpenaar” – whom she asks to take a picture of her, tells her the story of the statue:

About five hundred years ago or so an unruly giant terrorized the inhabitants of the area, severing the hand of every boatman who could not pay the exorbitant taxes he levied on them for passing by his castle. Then a brave young man [Brabo] came from who knows where and killed the giant and threw his hand into the River Schelde which runs through the city. The overjoyed inhabitants watched him throw the hand away and named the city ‘Handwerpen’, to throw a hand away.⁹²

The statue is located on the Brabo Fountain, which was completed in 1887 and installed in front of the Town Hall. By this time, Antwerp had re-established itself as a European trading centre through the expansion of its port and the exploitative and brutal colonial policies of Leopold II. Notably, the removal of hands (and feet) was used as a form of punishment against the colonised Congolese. Brabo’s resurgent importance as a national hero in the nineteenth century thus collides with the brutal realities of European colonialism. Another direct consequence of colonial policy was the opening of Belgium’s first chocolate factories, which made Antwerp a “chocolate city”. To this day, visitors can purchase the giant’s severed hand in the form of chocolates and thus “ingest”

89 Unigwe, *OBSS, op. cit.*, p. 256.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 278.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 256.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

local history.⁹³ Attentive readers, however, will not have missed that, in Sisi's version, it is the giant and not the hero who throws the hand.⁹⁴ Furthermore, instead of the giant's severed hand, she buys chocolate penises, thus symbolically castrating the Belgians rather than embracing their bloody history.

Sisi continues this playful appropriation of European cultural heritage during a visit to the Cathedral of Our Lady:

She would go inside and aim her camera at paintings she found uninteresting and vulgar – really, all those huge breasts spilling out of clothes was in extremely poor taste – and pretend to take pictures. She traded conspiratorial smiles with tourists who thronged the cathedral, solemn and wide-eyed, and whispered, “Isn't it beautiful? Rubens was a genius!”⁹⁵

James Baldwin noted in his essay *Stranger in the Village* (1953) that “[t]he most illiterate among” the inhabitants of a Swiss mountain village were “related, in a way that [he was] not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres [said] something to them which it [could not] say to [him]”⁹⁶ Sisi, in contrast, questions the status of the white male canonised artist and his works of high art. Under her gaze, the female figures of the catholic, baroque, and exuberant Rubens are transformed into uninteresting and vulgar works, mere expressions of bad taste and an objectifying male gaze – similar to the chocolate breasts and penises she buys on her walks through Antwerp and the cheap pornographic pictures hanging on the walls of her room in Black Sisters' Street. At the same time, Sisi enjoys her neocolonial pseudo-mimicry: “Doing Europe, you see.”⁹⁷

93 See Ivo Raband. “Der ‘Brabobrunnen’ in Antwerpen (1887). Geworfene Hände als ‘Sites of Mediation’”. In: *Materialized Histories. Eine Festschrift 2.0*, edited by Tina Asmussen et al., 19 May 2021, <https://mhistories.hypotheses.org/792> [accessed 8th April 2023].

94 Whether this reversal was intentional or not, I cannot say. However, in one of her short stories, Unigwe explicitly refers to “King Leopold in the Congo who had his men chop off the limbs of workers who underperformed”. Chika Unigwe. “How to Survive a Heat Wave”. In: *Better Never Than Late. Stories about the Tragedy of Arrival and the Yearning for Home*. Abuja/London: Cassava Republic Press, 2019, pp. 106-114 (109).

95 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

96 James Baldwin. “Stranger in the Village”. In: *Notes of a Native Son*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012, pp. 163-179 (169). For a detailed discussion of Baldwin's essay and that passage, see Gianna Zocco's article in this issue, p. 135.

97 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This article has shown that it can be fruitful to look at representations of Europe in neocolonial enslavement narratives written or directed by women. For one thing, there is an organised, trans-European trafficking network behind Black female migrant sex work in Belgium and Austria, which is highlighted in the novel as well as in the film. These women usually want to go to Europe, or rather to an idealised *eurotype*, but where exactly they end up seems to be somewhat arbitrary. In any case, they would not have chosen Belgium and Austria – both affluent, but from their perspective also peripheral western destinations. Perhaps it is precisely the peripheral-central location of Antwerp and Vienna that enhances the European focus in *OBSS* and *Joy*. This does not mean, however, that the actual destination countries and cities are negligible. Both the novel and the film specifically address Belgian and Austrian, partly Antwerp and Viennese, sights and traditions. While for many Belgians a severed hand may represent justice, strength, national pride, or simply the victory of good over evil, just as Saint Nicholas and the Krampus do for many Austrians, these cultural elements are called into question when viewed by those who clearly feel the past history and present reality of European colonialism.

Both the novel and the film have a circular narrative structure. They end where they began: one with an account of Sisi's death and her soul flying back to Lagos; the other with Joy initiating her passage to Europe, which can be read as a flashback or as the beginning of another illegal journey after her deportation to Nigeria. This circularity, which runs counter to the plot of many factual historical as well as new slave narratives, constitutes a special potential of the texts' fictionality. While autobiographical "sob stories" suggest that escape and the attainment of freedom are happy endings – in other words, that the abolition of slavery or human trafficking is the main solution to the problem – *OBSS* and *Joy* do not aim for readers to achieve catharsis. They do not cater to the "Western white readership[s]' eager[ness] for third-world victim stories",⁹⁸ whose sentimental tropes "allow the suffering of masses to be condensed

98 Sabrina Brancato. "Afro-European Literature(s): A New Discursive Category?" *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2008, pp. 1-13 (3).

into a single unthreatening figure”.⁹⁹ Instead, they encourage readers to see the underlying neocolonial structures, which are often less nation-specific than transnational or even continental.

When, in *OBSS*, Efe recites the beginning of Charles Dickens’ novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, she also appropriates its ambivalent imagery to narrate *a tale of two continents* and of humanity divided into North and South, Black and white:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so.¹⁰⁰

Dickens’ novel is set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. While not unreservedly favourable to the revolutionaries, it clearly positions itself against an aristocracy that thinks “[r]epression is the only lasting philosophy” – in the words of their representative, the Marquis St. Evrémonde: “The dark deference of fear and slavery [...] will keep the dogs obedient to the whip”.¹⁰¹ Dickens’ use of the word “slavery” here and elsewhere in the novel refers primarily to the oppression of those predominantly white people who stormed the Bastille on 14th July 1789. However, as C.L.R. James convincingly demonstrated: “[t]he slave-trade and slavery were the economic basis of the French Revolution” and “the history of liberty in France and of slave emancipation in San Domingo is one and indivisible”.¹⁰² For readers familiar with Black history, a trafficked Nigerian woman’s recitation of the iconic beginning of one of the most famous novels about the French Revolution inevitably carries associations with its Haitian counterpart. Where Efe puts a full stop and thus ends the quotation early, Dickens continues as follows: “the period was so far like the present period”.¹⁰³ Efe’s omission of this

99 Lynn Festa. “Humanity without Feathers”. *Humanity*, vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 2010, pp. 3-27 (6).

100 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

101 Charles Dickens. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: Penguin, 2012 [1859], p. 143.

102 C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. 2nd revised ed. New York: Vintage, 1989, pp. 47 and 60-61 respectively.

103 In Dickens’ original, the last sentence continues: “[...] the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for

propositional continuity and circularity of history, which presumably is an all-too-hard truth for her at this moment, is only recognisable to the reader through a comparison with the original passage in Dicken's novel. This hidden aposiopesis charges the omitted part with all the more meaning. Efe's subsequent comment in Pidgin that she likes "the way *incredulity* and *epoch* dey drip commot from the mouth",¹⁰⁴ while not claiming that nothing has changed since the eighteenth century, can thus also be read as a reminder of the incredulous fact that there are still enslaved people today, even if they sometimes fall outside a narrow definition of modern slavery or human trafficking. Overall, Unigwe's and Mortezaï's representation of the two continents no longer corresponds to the contrastive, stereotypical imagery of a white, civilised, and progressive Europe vs. a Black, primitive, and backward Africa. However, it is also not a simple reversal but an ambivalent re-imagination, which is expressed in both works through the repeated subversion of the binary stereotypical imagery. Thus, Europe is depicted as the continent of light and the continent of darkness or, taking into account the current power relations and the perspective of the authors, narrators, and protagonists: the white continent of night.

By focusing on African women, Unigwe and Mortezaï are also countering "the typical 'male-gendering of black Atlantic [and, I would add, Afropean] narratives",¹⁰⁵ including works by W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Caryl Phillips, Paul Beatty, and Johny Pitts. Moreover, they engage in the "inscription of a specific group within the African diasporic community, which has often been neglected in literary accounts of immigration not only in Belgium [and Austria], but in the whole of Europe"¹⁰⁶: Black African women trafficked for sex work to Europe. When formerly enslaved people and authors of historical slave narratives like Harriet Jacobs claimed that slavery was "far more terrible for women",¹⁰⁷ this is nowadays still true in some ways. Not only are

good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only." Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

104 Unigwe, *OBSS*, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

105 Bekers, "The Mirage of Europe", *op. cit.*, p. 266.

106 Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez. "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: European Cities and the African Sex Worker in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2014, pp. 203-214 (204).

107 Harriet A. Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, edited by L. Maria Child; edited and with an introduction by Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, MA/London:

women and girls much more likely to be (sex) trafficked (they constitute the overwhelming majority – 92% between 2017 and 2018 – of trafficking victims in the EU¹⁰⁸), but the physical and mental effects of this type of trafficking on them are considerable. The most striking patriarchal tactic in both the book and the film is that women are made accomplices and competitors. Former sex workers like Efe become madams themselves, who then play their girls off against each other by putting one in charge of the other. If the new girl does not pay, the experienced colleague has to work twice as hard and pay for her. As Joy says: “In this game it’s the survival of the fittest”.¹⁰⁹ Her statement exposes Darwin’s theory of evolution – which was used as a major pseudo-argument to justify colonialism and slavery – for what it became very early on: a capitalist and patriarchal instrument of oppression.

Unigwe and Mortezaei are particularly successful in critically illuminating the intersection of (neo)colonialism and patriarchy, both of which employ the strategy of *divide et impera*. *OBSS* and *Joy* ultimately also imagine “[c]artographies of new African diasporas” that can “contribute to a reconfiguration of gendered and racialized situated politics of belonging in Fortress Europe and beyond”.¹¹⁰ Following Baldwin, such new politics of belonging could echo the statement, demand, and/or threat (depending on the reader’s positionality) that Europe is no longer white and male, and will never be white and male again.¹¹¹

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Harvard UP, p. 77.

108 EASO, *Nigeria Trafficking in Human Beings*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

109 *Joy*, *op. cit.*, 26:38-26:39.

110 Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe. “‘Black Folk Here and There’: Repositioning Other(ed) African Diaspora(s) in/and ‘Europe’”. In: *The African Diaspora and the Disciplines*, edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and James H. Sweet, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010, pp. 313-337 (321).

111 See Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”, *op. cit.*, p. 179.