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# Cruel optimisms and erotic economies: Feminist life-making beyond arrival in *On Black Sisters' Street*

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**Authors:**
Esther Mavengano[1]
Thabisani Ndlovu[1]

**Affiliations:**
[1]Department of Arts, Faculty of Law, Humanities and Social Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**
Esther Mavengano,
emavengano@wsu.ac.za

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For too long, critics of African women's transnational literature have restricted discussions of displacement to a narrow lexicon of loss, a tendency that reduces migration's complexity to tragedy and vulnerability. In this study, we move beyond this reductive grammar by re-interpreting *On Black Sisters' Street* as an affective cartography of endurance, insurgent desire and feminist life-(re)making. Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism, Elizabeth Povinelli's economies of abandonment, Sylvia Tamale's radical re-theorisation of the African female body and Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminist ethics of negotiation provide important prisms through which refreshing insights can be engendered. We deploy these theories to re-interpret Unigwe's erotic economies as embodied sites of political agency within intensely gendered, racialised and extractive circuits of global capitalism. We contend that the novel subverts conventional pathos by re-inscribing the sex worker's body as a locus of epistemic knowing and defiant self-fashioning amid elaborate registers of cruelty and hope.

**Contribution:** *On Black Sisters' Street* destabilises the trope of arrival as narrative closure to reimagine survival as a relentless, relational and gendered process of becoming. This reading repositions endurance as an African feminist ethic of life-making that reformulates female strength as a modern grammar of African transnational existence under neoliberal conditions.

**Keywords:** African feminist theory; cartographies of endurance; cruel optimism; economies of abandonment; erotic economies; feminist life-making; unbelonging.

## Introduction

Contemporary transnational mobility has acquired renewed visibility and theoretical urgency, thereby provoking polemical debates that traverse political, cultural and epistemic terrains. Gagiano (2022:4) comments that 'the topic of migration in African literature is a huge one', underlining both its thematic centrality and its capacity to illuminate the affective and symbolic contours of displacement. Surprisingly, despite this enormous academic attention, the dominant discourse still privileges the teleological imaginary of movement, success and settlement. Commenting on this state of affairs, Tezcan (2018) states that returning migrants have frequently been framed as failures, while scholars celebrate those who achieve long-term residence abroad. Equally, Bilecen (2022:371) points out that much research focuses on supposedly 'successful' trajectories viewed as fulfilling the migrant's promise. It is from this context that we argue that the contemporary African female-authored literary archive offers a critical and corrective epistemic space. This fictional landscape, we contend, allows for what Gagiano (2022:4) calls 'imaginative and empathetic access' to the emotional and relational forces that shape African migrant lives in present-day trans-worlds.

In an era of securitised borders and political exclusion, literature becomes especially urgent. Mavengano (2022:95) aptly perceives that 'the fear of difference' undergirds contested modernities, and Voegele (2019:122) also establishes that the Western public sphere remains saturated with 'politics of fear, hate, and isolation'. Meanwhile, Zeleza (2005:40) laments that the obstinate 'racialisation of Africa' in global imaginaries continues to support the misrepresentation of African subjects. One of the main concerns raised in current analyses of African transnational literature is the enduring coloniser's model of the world (Blaut 1993). Africa continues to be considered a site of deprivation and chaos, juxtaposed against the West, which is perceived as an 'Eldorado' (Covington-Ward 2017; Pastore, Monzini & Sciortino 2006). This binary, as scholars of migration and literature note (e.g. Adichie 2009; De Haas 2008; De Haas, Castles & Miller 2020; Flahaux & De Haas 2016), displaces the multiplicities, negotiations and iterative becomings inherent in African mobility. Motahane (2025:2) pertinently observes

that the Western gaze continues to imagine Africa as defined by 'hunger, poverty, war, disease, and other socio-economic ills'. Sensationalist media and political conversations exacerbate these imaginaries. Fofack and Akendung (2020:102) also denounce the recurring portrayal of 'millions of desperate people' storming Europe, a trope that reinforces a colonial, exclusionary understanding of mobility. As Gilroy (1993), Gikandi (1996) and Mbembe (2001) postulate, such discourses sustain an Atlantic-centred conception of black modernity and restrict African subjectivity to Eurocentric coordinates.

It should also be mentioned that we do not intend to hide the structural violence, gendered precarity or 'existential angst' that define African postcolonial mobilities (Mavengano & Nkamta 2024:51). Rather, we resist the homogenising narrative that confines African mobility to simplistic moral binaries of victimhood, despair and redemption. Building on Unigwe's complex portrayal, we shift critical focus from arrival-centred readings to a re-conceptualisation of migration as ongoing praxis, in which affect, corporeality and negotiation converge. Our approach proposes what we call a 'beyond arrival' framework, which reimagines survival as a relentless, negotiated project of self-making.

## Theoretical terrain of the study

We situate our reading of *On Black Sisters' Street* within a theoretical constellation rooted in African feminist ethics and framed by affective-political analyses. Instead of replicating arrival-centred or teleological models of migration, we engage conceptual lenses attentive to endurance, relational negotiation and life-making. Central to our framework is Nnaemeka's (2004:38) nego-feminism, defined as 'the feminism of negotiation […] "no ego" feminism' grounded in practices of give-and-take. Compromise and relational balance are instrumental in the feminist struggle 'to detonate patriarchal land mines' (Nnaemeka 2004:378). We deploy this theory to interrogate the ways in which Unigwe's sex workers confront patriarchal and racial economies via calculated negotiation. Here, we contend that her main characters neither carelessly submit nor unreflectively rebel.

Tamale's (2014:150) decolonial feminist critique further enriches our framework. In her analysis of how religion, law and culture regulate African sexualities, she postulates that 'institutions […] structure sexual morality in such a way that it congeals into states of domination'. Her emphasis on sexual citizenship and bodily sovereignty enables us to treat Unigwe's women not simply as victims but also as epistemic agents whose erotic service problematises normative regimes of respectability and exclusion.

We also draw on Lauren Berlant's (2011:1) notion of 'cruel optimism', which describes attachments that undermine the very 'flourishing' they promise. We note that for Unigwe's migrant women, desires for stability, belonging or mobility are both sustaining and constraining. Finally, Povinelli's (2011:20) theory of economies of abandonment is quite useful for our examination of borde(r)ing regimes that are deployed by neoliberal states to produce precarity through relegating 'certain populations' to zones of exclusion where endurance is a mode of survival. In combination, these insights allow us to relocate Unigwe's text beyond the trope of arrival.

## Lives in transit: Gendered precarity and migratory desire in *On Black Sisters' Street*

Unigwe's (2009) *On Black Sisters' Street* is a poignant narrative of African women's migration to Europe. Widely acclaimed as a leading voice in African and diasporic fiction, Unigwe deploys her transnational positionality to narrativise African women's border-crossing with affective resonance (Ezeigbo 2012). The plot follows four young women, Sisi (born Chisom), Efe, Ama (from Nigeria), and Joyce (born Alek), whose journeys converge in Antwerp's red-light district. Koffi (2024) expounds that within Belgian society, sex work is both a mechanism of constraint and a contested, ambivalent route to agency. Antwerp, thus, is portrayed as a liminal and suspended space of transit where identities, aspirations and bodies are ceaselessly (re)negotiated, rather than being protected.

Although Unigwe's women appear to migrate 'willingly', to Europe lured by Senghor Dele's promises of prosperity, such voluntarism is troubled under critical scrutiny. We obtain this evidence when Sisi confesses, '[*W*]e did not all come to Belgium by choice; circumstances pushed us here, and now we must find a way to live' (Unigwe 2009:102). This remark unveils a coerced agency emanating from structural precarity rather than autonomous choice. This reading affirms Ligaga's (2019:72) view that the novel expresses the paradoxical agency of trafficked bodies, negotiating uneasily between 'constraint and self-assertion'. She adds that this tension animates the entire narrative. Sex work is staged through ritualised nightly performances behind Antwerp's glass windows, where half-naked women display themselves in 'sexy lingerie, lacy bras, and racy thongs' (Unigwe 2009:110). These scenes render the commodified body a contested site, permeated with contradictions, both as object and as instrument of survival (Mamah 2021).

The novel's epigraph, drawn from Chikwava (2003), conveys this paradox by portraying the African migrant woman as 'armed with a vagina and the will to live' (Unigwe 2009:7). This striking metaphor further positions the black female body as both weapon and battlefield. Otuegbe (2025:61) accurately notes that the women are positioned concurrently as 'beneficiaries of the sex trade […] and survivors of trauma'. This scenario exposes the uneasy overlap between empowerment and exploitation. Belgium is discursively constructed as a geography of safety and 'civilisation' (Obadare 2016; Ojiakor & Obika 2021), a spatial imaginary that aligns with enduring colonial cartographies in which Europe signifies order, legality and protection. Yet, Unigwe

subverts this idealised imaginary by showing the disjuncture between representational promise and lived reality. Her female protagonists, marked as illegal migrants, are not only excluded from the protective apparatus of the Belgian state but also structurally abandoned by it. Their precarious existence is defined by fear of surveillance, arrest and deportation. Therefore, the state is not a guarantor of safety but an omnipresent, spectral force of discipline and threat. Significantly, Unigwe's work does not replicate the familiar narrative arc of migration as a trajectory from hopeful arrival to inevitable disillusionment. Her work unsettles this teleology by presenting a continuum of vulnerability that precedes and surpasses arrival.

## Attachments to hope: Cruel optimisms and the dynamics of escape

Building on our analysis of African women's precarious mobilities, we turn in this section to the affective and ideological formations that animate their departures. Kehinde (2004) contends that African fictional space has long functioned as a critical weapon through which the existential wounds of postcolonial subjects are exposed rather than concealed. Likewise, Mavengano and Nkamta (2024:354) submit that 'Fictional works are sites for languaging and depicting the subaltern's disenchantment with the unfolding realities in the postcolonies'. Unigwe deploys this very capacity of fiction in *On Black Sisters' Street*. She constructs a narrative in which hope is neither romanticised nor rejected, but placed within a troubling and layered terrain of constraint, imagination and desperation. We read this hope not as sheer naivety, but as a survival epistemology. This entails a mode of knowing and enduring worlds that systematically relegate African female life. Alabi's (2024:233) assertion that migration is driven by a visceral 'hunger' for better futures is endorsed when we consider the circumstances that compel these women to leave Nigeria.

The Yoruba term *japa* does not signify only travel. It refers to an escape or urgent flight undertaken especially by ordinary Nigerians because of the unhomeliness of their country. According to Alabi and Olajide (2023), Nigeria's chronic precarity forces citizens to 'flee in droves', a condition that resonates with NoViolet Bulawayo's (2013) articulation of a restless departure in *We need New Names*. In Unigwe's text, Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce represent this urgency. Undeniably, the arresting idiom, *japa*, is a political indictment directed at inept Nigerian and/or African politicians. African women's desires for elsewhere are produced in direct relation to structural and gendered abandonment at home. The crucial question that arises is, can sex work be considered a self-determined way out of misery or poverty? This question cannot be answered in isolation from the restrictive socio-political contexts which shape these women's decisions. Sisi's confident declaration to Rita that within a year in Belgium, she will be rich and 'buy a Mercedes-Benz' (Unigwe 2009:80), summarises the fantasy of Western success as a form of social mobility. This optimism is immediately explained. She is a graduate of the University of Lagos, a reputable institution, who has remained unemployed. 'Two years after leaving school, Chisom [*Sisi*], was still mainly unemployed' (Unigwe 2009:20). The fact that Sisi and other brilliant university graduates like her need to be 'connected' to the powerful black ruling elite in contemporary Nigeria in order to get jobs recalls Kgebetli Moele's (2006:145) prosecution of 'black betrayal' and the unfolding 'sad black story' in his novel, *Room 207*. This reading is further buttressed by Sisi's family in Lagos, living in filthy conditions at a rented and shared compound in which their common toilet is always full of faeces as a result of perpetual water crisis. This is compelling evidence of the manifestation of 'arrested transition' in the postcolonial era (Mavengano 2025:8).

When we consider Sisi's plight, Berlant's (2011:1) concept of cruel optimism becomes particularly instructive. Berlant used this term to explain a condition of being attached to desires that 'sustain life while simultaneously preventing the achievement of flourishing'. Sisi's attachment to Europe, materially symbolised by the Mercedes-Benz, is an affective lifeline. Yet, this very attachment is also a trap that immobilises critical awareness and exposes her to predatory manipulation. It is this vulnerability that Dele, the Nigerian-based man in the sex trafficking industry, exploits to enslave the four women. Sisi's condition in Nigeria and her migration to Belgium typifies what Omuteche (2014:265) describes as an escape from 'marginal economic existence'. Paradoxically, the escape from Africa by Unigwe's protagonists is nothing more than a commodified illusion. Unigwe (2009:24) effectively deploys a metaphor of a 'botched dream' to convey this ambivalence. Bastida-Rodriguez and Baker (2021:386) also elaborate that Europe 'has been positioned as the centre of the world', but reality shows otherwise. This dialectic recurs across contemporary African female narratives of migration, such as Atta's (2012) *A bit of difference*, and Bulawayo's (2013) *We need new names*. In Sisi's imagination, Europe is the ultimate site of becoming and of being fully human. Consequently, when she arrives in Antwerp, she declares that she 'will make it here' (Unigwe 2009:88). Sisi unconsciously re-inscribes the colonial cartography that places African bodies permanently on the margin of modernity. However, as Toivanen (2021) rightly warns:

> Reductive readings of postcolonial mobility in migration and diaspora studies obscure the layered realities of survival constituted through the cartographies of everyday and quotidian acts of crossing social, economic, and cultural borders. (p. 256)

Unigwe's novel lingers not on arrival but on suspended survival. In this way, Antwerp signifies Povinelli's (2011:20) 'zones of exhaustion' generated by late-liberal economies of abandonment, in which certain lives are rendered disposable under the guise of opportunity. It is in this context that Ama also admits her horrifying dispossession. Her body 'belonged to Dele […] to clients, to the night' (Unigwe 2009:172). Still, even within this explicit commodification, African feminist

readings detect a fractured form of counter-agency. Ama later shields herself from severe pain when she sees the men who used her as 'just tools she needed to achieve her dream' (Unigwe 2009:169). This reconfiguration conveys a strategic, if tragic, recalibration of power within constraint. In other words, we see a worrying but necessary survival logic.

Equally, Efe's story shows the entanglement of gendered and economic vulnerability. After her mother's death, she becomes responsible for her siblings and is seduced by Titus, a married man who exploits her vulnerability; '[*T*]he man had promised Efe new clothes. New shoes. Heaven. Earth' (Unigwe 2009:37). When he finally abandons her after she becomes pregnant, Efe reluctantly embraces sex work to support her family, incurring a €30 000 debt to Dele's trafficking syndicate. Her body functions as collateral for familial survival (Ligaga 2019). This is a recurring reality in African feminist discourse surrounding women's labour, care and disposability. While such moments can be read through the circulation of affect briefly resonant with Ahmed (2001), it is Povinelli's framework that effectively explains how Efe's choices arise from systemic abandonment rather than autonomous volition.

Alek or Joyce's backstory extends this logic into the Mbembean terrain of necropolitics and 'absolute otherness' of the Othered bodies (Mbembe 2001:2). The brutal massacre of her family by Janjaweed soldiers in the heat of Sudan's civil war and the unspeakable violence inflicted upon her is captured in the ensuing extract (Unigwe 2009):

> She scurried out from the cupboard. Her parents' bodies were sprawled on the ground […]. All I wanted was to be able to attack these men who had just blown my life away as if it were a handful of dust. (p. 118)

Furthermore, during the gang rape, the Janjaweed soldiers ejaculate on Alek's face and force her to lick the semen. This horror positions her within what Agamben (1998:28) describes as 'the threshold of bare life'. Joyce's existence reflects Mbembe's (2003:40) notion of the 'living dead'. It is important to note that Joyce's survival is radically political. Not only is her persistence biological but it also constitutes a feminist rearticulation of value in a world that incessantly denies her humanity.

The psychic cost of a painful survival is also expressed when Sisi realises she has lost herself. Reflecting on her transformation from a university graduate in Lagos, Nigeria, to a sex worker in Belgium, Sisi sadly admits that the girl she once was is 'dead now, replaced by someone she barely recognised' (Unigwe 2009:248). The writer uses tropes of renaming, Chisom (Sisi), Alek (Joyce), estrangement and fragmentation to express the price of endurance in contexts of ongoing subjection. In Unigwe's text, migration simply extends subjection from the unhomely African postcolony into transnational spaces. Yet, the author undercuts total despair. Her female characters continue dreaming, despite the challenges faced. Accordingly, we reiterate that the hope articulated in Unigwe's work is far from being redemptive, but is profoundly resistant. It is arguably a wounded and gendered African hope of life-making, which defies erasure even as it bears the imprint of violence.

## Bodies in limbo: Abandonment, precarious intimacies and belonging

This section develops what we term bodies in limbo to denote the suspended condition of African women whose corporeality fluctuates between visibility and erasure, care and neglect, and fleeting recognition and commodified disposability. Gatwiri and James (2024:955) remind us that '[*B*]elonging is political'. While it is 'a felt-and-embodied experience, it is also heavily mediated by power'. Unigwe's central characters personify this irony in visceral form. Their bodies both register dispossession and improvise tenuous modes of belonging. For Mupedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo (2017:4), non-belonging among black individuals is 'not a neutral state but one saturated with painful, humiliating, damaging, and detrimental racialised experiences', termed the 'burden of blackness'. This burden structures the emotional and spatial grammar of *On Black Sisters' Street*. African feminist thinkers address this condition. Amadiume (1987, 1997) stresses that women's bodies in patriarchal-colonial modernity are turned into sites of labour, sexuality and exchange. Nnaemeka (2004) underlines women's tactical negotiations within limiting structures instead of romantic notions of female liberation that ignore or underrate the realities of systemic and layered women's oppression. In the same vein, Tamale (ed. 2011, 2014) shows how the regulation of African women's sexuality is central to colonial legacies and present-day neoliberal regimes. These insights enable us to interpret the term 'limbo' differently, shifting from a passive state of stuckness to denote a gendered and racialised technology of governance and survival.

The protagonists of *On Black Sisters' Street* are shadows during the day and become visible only at night, from 20:00 to 06:00, framed behind the red-lit windows of Antwerp's sex district. Such temporal restriction engenders a fractured existence in which daylight is denied, and nightfall is the only authorised mode of being-seen. This liminality is intensified through a legal architecture that positions these women in perpetual legislative suspension, doubly bound by illegal entry and criminalised labour. Povinelli's (2011) economies of abandonment are re-inscribed because the state maintains an appearance of order by keeping black women in managed precarity. It is within such abandoned zones that neglected subjects, as she notes, live in spaces of 'curiosity, risk, potentiality, and exhaustion' (Povinelli 2011:26). These words resonate uncannily with Unigwe's protagonists, whose daily lives oscillate between fragile imagination and grinding depletion. Berlant (2011:126) asserts that migrants' longing for a 'good life' generally rests on a fantasy of 'stupid optimism'.

In Unigwe's fictional world, the imagined homeland is displaced onto Europe, transformed into a geography of

projected fulfilment. However, this fantasy crumbles upon arrival, as the novel illustrates the continuities of hardship and exclusion. As the novel shows, the supposed 'escape' from African postcolonies to Belgium yields neither economic emancipation nor personal freedom. Much evidence contradicts the promise of Europe as highlighted in the ensuing passage: '[*T*]here are so many run-down houses. And so many people. This is a city that is collapsing under the weight of its own congestion […]. Derelict buildings looking like life had been hard on them […] stepping over a mound of brown stool. Antwerp seemed like a huge incinerator.' (Unigwe 2009:173). Unigwe's text conveys the post-arrival intensification of insecurity. Vuolajarvi's (2019:1090) concept of 'precarious intimacies' sheds light on how affect, economy and border regimes conspire to create exploitative survival circuits. The metaphor suggests that Antwerp consumes and destroys human lives. Like an incinerator, the city burns up African women's dreams, bodies and identities for profit. The incinerator imagery also symbolises the destruction of the migrants' imagined Europe. Before migration, Antwerp exists as a dreamscape of prosperity and opportunity. Upon arrival, however, the city turns into a space where hopes are reduced to ashes.

In Antwerp's red-light district, the women trade their bodies for temporary subsistence: 'delivering all works, penetration, blow job, no condom' (Unigwe 2009:223). On busy nights, Sisi serves 'an average of 15 men' (Unigwe 2009:233). Ironically, on quiet nights, anxiety metastasises under Madam's surveillance and Dele's unrelenting financial demands. And yet, despite this brutal economy, the protagonists practise micro-techniques of psychic resistance (Unigwe 2009):

> Sisi threw her legs in the air and counted how much more until she could open her boutique, start her car export business, her internet cafe. All the dreams filling her head. Her dreams expanding to make sure nothing else came in. (p. 238)

In addition, her obsessive calculation, 'Five hundred. Five hundred. Five hundred' (Unigwe 2009:157) serves as a mantra of sufferance at the intersection of gender, capital and duress. Otuegbe's (2025) term bodies of commerce is quite enlightening as the female body functions as a transnational instrument even when its labour is exploited 'to make somebody else rich' (Unigwe 2009:252). This buttresses the idea that abandonment is not accidental but structurally kept (Povinelli 2011). Freedom is promised at the very moment vulnerability is administered. In one of the compelling scenes in the novel, the visual economy of racial asymmetry is encoded in the apartment decor. There are 'two pictures, a white girl lying on her back, naked with legs splayed … [*and*] an enormous pair of brown buttocks jutting out at the camera' (Unigwe 2009:99–100). What is particularly troubling in these images is not only their sexual explicitness but also the way they re-inscribe a racial hierarchy of visibility and affect. The white female body is individuated, whole and recognisable as a subject, while the black female body is fragmented into hypersexualised parts, evacuated of personhood. This visual grammar reactivates Butler's (2004) theorisation of the ungrievable body – those lives whose injury or loss fails to register as a crisis within dominant frames of recognition. In parallel, Mbembe (2003:21) describes blackness as occupying the spectral zone of the 'humanity of the slave', a figure reduced to shadow existence. Read together, these images in the apartment do more than reproduce racial difference because they also organise differential affective economies. The intact white body is positioned as a site capable of eliciting moral concern, even panic, while the dismembered black body is rendered affectively inert as its violation is anticipated, normalised and thus stripped of the capacity to shock. This is what Hook (2013:254–255) elsewhere identifies as the 'visual trope of the black body in states of destruction', sustained by 'a social fantasy' in which black suffering is both expected and consumable. Within this regime, panic is not a universal human response but a racially mediated affect, selectively activated in relation to bodies already coded as worthy of protection. Ndebele (2007:127) sharpens this point by arguing that the 'inviolable' status of the white body is secured through the structural vulnerability of the black one. Thus, the absence of panic in response to black pain does not signal emotional neutrality but rather the successful normalisation of racial violence within a global visual and moral order.

As Yancy (2005:216) suggests through his notion of a 'hermeneutics of the body', black flesh is always already read through a violent semiotic frame that preconditions its violation as intelligible and unsurprising. Extending this argument, Igwedibia and Ezeonu (2023) observe that the black body is globally considered consumable, such that its suffering rarely precipitates collective alarm in European contexts. Crucially, then, the novel portrays how panic functions as a racialised technology of valuation. In other words, it is not that pain fails to exist in black bodies, but that such pain is systematically disqualified from triggering broader social urgency. Panic, in this sense, circulates within a restricted moral community, accruing around whiteness but bypassing blackness, thereby reaffirming the very hierarchies that make black suffering both hypervisible as spectacle and invisible as crisis. It is quite telling that Villa Tinto, 'the queen of all brothels in Antwerp' once functioned as a warehouse before its conversion into a commodified site of sexual display (Unigwe 2009:126). This historical transformation re-inscribes the space with a legacy of extraction, converting women's bodies into merchandise arranged for visual and economic consumption. Within this setting, Massey's (1994) concept of power geometry is materially legible. White middle-class male clients occupy a position of amplified mobility and choice, whereas the black African women remain spatially immobilised and confined behind glass partitions as purchasable objects (Unigwe 2009):

> They [*white male clients*] move from one window to another and, having made up their minds, go in to close a sale […] Young men […] looking for adventure between the thighs of *een Africaanse* […] Old men […] looking for something young […] Vingerlingstraat bears witness to all kinds of men. (p. 110)

We read the glass booths as a polysemic cartography of trauma that encodes histories of racialised, gendered and neo-colonial exploitation. Mulvey's (1999:808) affirmation that women are 'simultaneously looked at and displayed […] connot[*ing*] to-be-looked-at-ness' is literalised here. The booths operate as both cage and stage, which together engender a cruel theatricality in which the women are visible but stripped of humanity. In this spatial arrangement, Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism is vividly spatialised. Notably, the promise of visibility mimics liberation while at the same time, re-securing subjugation as tourists drift in, stare, recoil and retreat: '[*T*]ourists with cameras […] wander off and suddenly come face-to-face with lineup half-naked women […]. They look […] take another look […] and then walk away with embarrassed steps' (Unigwe 2009:109). It is imperative to note the embedded double gaze that unsettles the spectacle. Drawing on bell hooks' theorisation of the oppositional gaze, we interpret the sex workers' act of looking back as a recapture of agency as 'The ability to retain control over one's gaze […] is a way to retain agency regardless of circumstances' (hooks 1992:116). Furthermore, hooks (1992) also contends that the racialised 'other' is seen as 'spice' and 'seasoning', a consumable pleasure designed to animate the dullness of white, mainstream culture. Yet, in the women's returning gaze, the glass window is re-scripted from a site of pure spectacle into a thin but powerful zone of confrontation that exposes the moral contradictions of the European economy maintained by the fetishisation and disposability of black female bodies. Berlant's (2011:5) observation that 'The infrastructures for reproducing life […] are crumbling' is mirrored in Sisi's shift from Chisom to Sisi. 'Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence' (Unigwe 2009:44). Madam engineers a script of African catastrophe for the Belgian authorities that Sisi uses at the migration office: 'Look sad, Cry. Wail […] White people enjoy sob stories […] the more macabre the story [*of Africa*], the better' (Unigwe 2009:121). It is imperative to also read the renaming of Sisi as what Nnaemeka (2004) might call a negotiation for survival under duress rather than a celebration of self-fashioning. In fact, it is both strategy and erasure, as well as propulsion and loss. The illusion of Sisi's self-reinvention finally shatters when Dieter, her first white Belgian client, rapes her in the pub's male toilet. During the rape, Sisi repeatedly says, '[*T*]his is not me. I am not here' (Unigwe 2009:212). The split between body and self unmasks the lie of arrival imbued in her initial optimistic resolve. We also find Povinelli's (2011) theory quite insightful when reading Madam's confiscation of passports, '[*U*]ntil you have paid every single cent […] you will not have your passport back' (Unigwe 2009:183). Abandonment is bureaucratised, and hope is chained to the £ 30 000 debt imposed on these women, a repayment for being trafficked from Nigeria to Belgium by Oga Dele's illegal company.

## Solidarity and ethical self-fashioning under duress

We also treat *On Black Sisters' Street* as a cartography of collective endurance or a mapping of solidarities formed under extreme relational precarity. For hooks (1989:20), marginality is more than deprivation because it is also 'a site of radical possibility'. This insight is useful when examining the affective and ethical world that Unigwe's female characters populate. By reclaiming narrative agency, they reconstitute themselves as subjects who rewrite their histories and contest the misogynistic and racist architectures that have historically rendered African women's bodies disposable and unintelligible. This brings to the fore hooks' (hooks 1989:149) claim that the margin can be a productive 'space of metamorphosis, subversion, and enablement'. In line with Berlant's (2011) theorisation of cruel optimism, the migrant women remain attached to compromised dreams of dignity, safety and selfhood even when these dreams entrap them within affective circuits of harm.

Within Antwerp's racialised geography, the undocumented women dwell in zones of social death, but they cultivate micro-ethical worlds of care, reciprocity and imaginative belonging. What is consoling is that they cultivate ethical worlds of care, interdependence and creative endurance. Belonging is not guaranteed by geography but painstakingly produced through shared suffering, memory and relational struggle. The women's apartment in Antwerp functions as a liminal site imbued with layered tropes of confinement and communion. In quotidian acts of cooking, quarrelling, consoling and remembering, Unigwe (2009) redefines life under duress as an African feminist ethics of persistence. After Sisi's murder in Antwerp, Ama, Efe and Joyce's grief creates a sisterly bond that is fundamental in the female struggle against oppression (Hinz 2024). The spectral return of Sisi's soul to Dele's Lagos home, 'a house where she had never been' (Unigwe 2009:254), signals an affective rupture in the logic of disposability and a reclamation of narrative sovereignty. Otuegbe (2025:62) claims that Sisi's posthumous self 'demonstrates the possibility of trafficked women negotiating their own outcome'. Ojiakor and Obika (2021) read these acts through a black-feminist epistemology of embodied fear and resilience. We understand Sisi's death as a nuanced metaphor that denotes both mourning and possible renewal. When the survivors speak for the first time, their haunting stories become ontological recuperations that reassemble fractured identities. They tell the silenced stories on their own terms, which is an assertion of voice against erasure (Musila 2019). In other words, the women reclaim dismembered selves (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2009). Ama's declaration, 'and now we are sisters' (Unigwe 2009:290), inaugurates a kinship model founded on ethical witnessing and political intimacy. Ogbazi and Awaraka (2023) and Aguoru (2025) assert that the women's solidarity functions as a literary countercheck to trafficking's dehumanisation. Their solidarity, although born out of trauma, establishes what Povinelli (2011:20 terms 'spaces of otherwise', which are zones where the ungrievable writes new moral grammars.

Wandering beyond the red-light district, Sisi briefly regains imaginative autonomy, becoming what we call the black flaneuse, a figure asserting presence in a city that disowns her.

We interpret this as a radical feminist reterritorialisation of space, an inversion of surveillance in which the watched becomes the witnessing subject. However, this fragile empowerment is haunted by ambivalence: 'In daylight, the district looked almost ashamed' (Unigwe 2009:254). The city's shame mirrors the moral decay underwriting the women's exploitation. Sisi's imaginative authorship culminates when 'She could imagine any story she chose' (Unigwe 2009:258). This is an insurgent rebellion against structures of domination that impose an oppressive script of black female selfhood. Iskander and Landau (2022:22) accurately reason that 'Margins are more than transitory spaces on the edges of power; they are sites of contestation, membership claiming, and identity formation'. Unigwe's women, thus, embody agents of re-worlding, challenging fixed binaries of centre and periphery. These margins are productive frontiers where African feminist solidarities and ethical vocabularies are born (Haruna-Banke & Gogo 2022; Iskander & Landau 2022).

## Reimagining migration, endurance and ethics of becoming

The foregoing discussion reinforces our argument that Unigwe (2009) decisively reconfigures the migration narrative beyond the conventional triad of departure, transit and arrival. Her text compels readers to confront what transpires 'after' the supposed success of relocation. Arrival, in this schema, is not a celebratory endpoint but a site of crisis, negotiation and ethical recalibration. Antwerp epitomises the structural continuity of marginalisation and racial containment (Ladele & Omotayo 2017). It symbolises what Mavengano (2025) describes as a cartography of difference in which the migrant body is marked by a layered ambiguity of hypervisibility, invisibility and disposability. Displacement, thus, exposes the African female body not to redemption but to reconfigured forms of vulnerability and estranged belonging. Each protagonist experiences what Berlant (2011:2) theorises as 'the cruel optimism of arrival' – a form of attachment tethered to fantasies of belonging that paradoxically erodes the very possibility of prosperity. The illusion of European opportunity and reinvention epitomises this irony. Musila (2019), in her study, *A death retained: Women, sexuality, and migration in contemporary African literature*, underscores this point. Sisi imagines Antwerp as 'the beginning of a new life' where she 'would be somebody' (Unigwe 2009:35), yet this dream rapidly changes into exhaustion, debt and eventually her death. Her nightly body count of men she sleeps with before she can 'pay off Madam' (Unigwe 2009:87) dramatises Berlant's argument that certain attachments sustain life even as they quietly destroy it. Moreover, movement, as Unigwe (2009) implies, does not guarantee liberation at all; it simply relocates precarity into new transnational terrains. The women in the text therefore symbolise what we conceptualise as the beyond-arrival subjectivity. This is a form of being that survives within unending vulnerability while crafting a micro-ethics of endurance and care. We note that within these affective economies, care arises precisely where institutional support withdraws. As Povinelli (2011) contends, abandonment ironically produces alternative infrastructures of intimacy and survival. The women's unstable solidarities, such as sharing food, stories and silence, constitute provisional architectures of humanisation within a landscape of commodification. By living, working and narrating together, the women produce new grammars of the human that undermine the colonial paradigm and a contemporary matrix of domination. Ama's assertion, 'and now we are sisters' (Unigwe 2009:290), redefines kinship as an affective and ethical technology of belonging, while Joyce's regaining of her birth name, Alek, which 'sounded like a homecoming' (Unigwe 2009:180), suggests an epistemic return to self. These acts enact what Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009) conceives to be the re-membering of the dismembered self. Hron's (2009:9) claim that migrants 'will eventually arrive and succeed by integrating' is sharply problematised in Unigwe's vision, in which success is never guaranteed but performed through perpetual negotiations with neglect. Similarly, the apartment, the street, and the brothel emerge as what Iskander and Landau (2022:99) call 'productive edges' and liminal zones where dispossession is transmuted into moral and relational resourcefulness. In resonance with Mbembe's (2003) theorisation of necropolitics, the women's perseverance assumes the form of a defiant refusal to vanish within spaces designed for slow death. The post-arrival condition is not a destination but an ongoing praxis of being human under conditions of systematic unmaking. Within this beyond-arrival perspective, survival is recast as agency, endurance a moral pedagogy, and precarity appears as the crucible of radically reconstructed African feminist humanity.

## Conclusion: The beyond-arrival paradigm

Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* stands as a powerful and transformative allegory of postcolonial displacement in which cruel optimism, economies of abandonment and African feminist thought are inscribed onto the racialised, gendered migrant body. The titular phrase, "Black Sisters" on a European 'Street' summarises the paradox of seduction and betrayal that structures the migration imaginary. Europe, so often mythicised as a space of reinvention, is a site of intensified racial, sexual and economic precarity. Unigwe (2009) dismantles paradigms that conflate mobility with liberation and arrival with fulfilment. In her narrative universe, arrival is a densely charged moral threshold, inaugurating new struggles over recognition, survival and self-definition.

Berlant's concept of cruel optimism illuminates the women's attachment to dreams that ultimately unravel them, although the dreams sustain motion. Essentially, Unigwe does not reduce her characters to passive victims. Instead, in what Povinelli (2011) believes to be zones of organised abandonment, the women generate improvised forms of intimacy, care and meaning. Their shared rituals of cooking, mourning, remembering and renaming enact the proposed new radical African feminist lexicon that defies all kinds of

harm suffered. This reinstates Amadiume's emphasis on communal personhood and Nnaemeka's vision of negotiation, and life-affirming interdependence. Within this framework, identity is not anchored in nation or legality but appears from an ongoing process of becoming. The protagonists embody beyond-arrival subjectivities, forms of existence that defy Western validation, and instead draw legitimacy from affective bonds. Their endurance transforms pain into knowledge and vulnerability into a site of alternative African feminist transnational humanism. We conclude that Unigwe reorients migration studies from the spectacle of crossing to the slow, unrecorded burden of staying alive under strain. In these afterlives of movement, survival itself is political, endurance is a pedagogy, and humanity is endlessly reconstructed in the most unlikely spaces.

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## CRediT authorship contribution

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