



Becoming Black in Belgium: The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe’s Authorial Self-Representation and On Black Sister’s Street.

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Abstract:	<p>In the satirical column entitled “Zwart worden in zeven lessen” (Becoming Black in Seven Lessons), The Nigerian-Belgian writer Chika Unigwe considers black identity as a social construction and coming to Europe as an entry to a social imaginary, a discursive space where subjects are already imagined, constructed and treated as “black” by hegemonic discourses. Using <i>Becoming Black in Seven Lessons</i> as a starting point, in this essay I explore the social construction of black identity in relation to, on the one hand, Unigwe’s authorial self-representation as an ethnic minority writer in Flanders (the Dutch language region of Belgium) and, on the other hand, the identity negotiations of the African immigrant women in the Flemish city of Antwerp in Unigwe’s second novel <i>On Black Sisters’ Street</i>.</p> <p>Central to this inquiry will be the question of how the author Unigwe on the one hand and the African sex workers in <i>On Black Sisters’ Street</i> become black in Belgium and how they negotiate a sense of self vis-à-vis the already pronounced social order. I argue more specifically that their self-representations reveal the mediation of dominant historical images and Western symbolic meanings and their attempts to wrest control of the construction of their bodies away from the distorted visions of dominant culture. Without conflating Unigwe’s situation as a black middle class author in the Flemish literary field with the position of the four Nigerian women working in the sex industry described in the book, parallels can be drawn between them, as I wish to contend, in the ways in which their agency is established in the performance of cultural configurations of black identity which have seized hegemonic hold.</p>

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3 **Becoming Black in Belgium.**
4 **The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe's Authorial Self-Representation**
5 **and *On Black Sister's Street*.**
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8 **1. Introduction**

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10 The Nigerian-Belgian writer Chika Unigwe (2010) wrote the satirical column entitled
11 "Zwart worden in zeven lessen" (*Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*), inspired by the Kenyan
12 author Binyavanga Wainaina's piece "How to Write about Africa" (2005), and which is also
13 digitally available as "How to be an African," albeit in revised form.¹ In this column, Unigwe
14 writes that before coming to Europe she had no clear idea of what it meant to be black,
15 suggesting that she did not experience race to be the defining social identity in Nigeria. She
16 goes on to describe with great irony what she has learned about blackness since living in
17 Europe. "I now learn that being black means that I am perceived as a charity project. That I
18 must be grateful for the opportunity granted to me to be in Europe."² These lessons further
19 include dressing in an authentically African way, always to be prepared for police control or
20 to be able to dance. Stating that blackness has no connotation on its own, but is assigned
21 meaning from the outside, Unigwe's *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons* reminds us of the
22 social construction of blackness.
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31 In this essay, I explore the social construction of black identity in relation to, on the
32 one hand, Unigwe's position and authorial self-representation as an ethnic minority writer in
33 Belgium/Flanders and, on the other hand, the identity negotiations of the African immigrant
34 women in the Flemish city of Antwerp in Unigwe's second novel *On Black Sisters' Street*.
35 Central to this inquiry will be the question of how the author Unigwe on the one hand and the
36 African sex workers in *On Black Sisters' Street* become black in Belgium and how they
37 negotiate a sense of self vis-à-vis the already pronounced social order. Deploying *Becoming*
38 *Black in Seven Lessons* as my interpretative lens, I argue more specifically that their self-
39 representations reveal the mediation of dominant historical images and Western symbolic
40 meanings and their attempts to wrest control of the construction of their bodies away from the
41 distorted visions of dominant culture. Although Unigwe's situation as a black middle class
42 author in the Flemish literary field can of course not be conflated with the position of the four
43 Nigerian women working in the sex industry described in the book, parallels can be drawn
44 between them, as I wish to contend, in the ways in which their agency is established in the
45 performance of certain cultural configurations which have seized hegemonic hold.
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56 Since it is fundamental to this concept of blackness that it acquires its meaning and
57 connotation for a large part by the social context, it is important to outline how Unigwe as a
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3 self-represented “Flemish author of African origin” is socially constituted in the given context
4 of multicultural Flanders. Therefore, I will outline some of the dominant discourses, policies
5 and practices surrounding ethnic minority authors in Flanders and relate Unigwe’s self-
6 representation to the notion of ‘strategic exoticism’ (Huggan 2001; Brouillette 2007). My
7 primary concern in this section is the tension between Unigwe’s acute awareness of the social
8 construction of blackness on the one hand, and her ostensible acceptance of the position as
9 ethnic minority author in the Flemish literary field, while at the same time participating as an
10 African diasporic author in a transnational literary field, which arguably makes her one of the
11 most successful Flemish-language authors abroad. In a similar vein, my analysis of *On Black*
12 *Sisers’ Street* builds on recent studies in postcolonial autobiography and explores how cultural
13 discourses that hypereroticise the black female body determine the way in which the four
14 African sex workers in the red-light district of the Belgian city of Antwerp become African
15 sex workers, while the book formally and thematically resists these popular cultural
16 perceptions in favour of rendering more diverse, subtle representations of the women.
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28 **2. Becoming a Black Writer in Flanders**

29 In *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*, Unigwe contends that one is not black or ‘African’, one
30 becomes black or ‘African’ in Europe. Unigwe writes: “[...] get rid of any hang-ups you
31 might have about Africa being a continent. It is a country, and so when people ask if you
32 speak African, or eat African, do not get all worked up trying to explain how a homogenous
33 Africa only exists in a lazy imagination.”³ Coming to Europe means entering a social
34 imaginary, Unigwe implies, a discursive space where subjects are already imagined,
35 constructed and treated as “African” by hegemonic discourses. The act of being recognised as
36 such becomes an act of identity formation. Being perceived as black African animates one
37 into existence, constitutes one within a possible circuit of recognition, within the terms of
38 language and only there one’s social existence becomes possible. *Becoming Black in Seven*
39 *Lessons*, then, sees black identity as a form of discipline, as a set of norms, narratives, and
40 everyday performative roles and acts. It is what you *do* at particular times, rather than who
41 you *are*.
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51 Unigwe’s ideas about blackness as a social construction resonate forcefully with a
52 postcolonial and critical race theoretical tradition in which scholars have not only in various
53 ways uncovered the colonial roots of postcolonial perceptions of black Africa as Europe’s
54 ultimate ‘other’ but also sought for multiple ways to resist these. When Fanon entered the
55 white world of Europe and discovers himself as a black man with an inferiority complex, his
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3 socio-psychoanalytical analysis concludes that one is black to the degree to which one is
4 being perceived as “wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual. Everything that is opposite to
5 these Negro modes of behaviour is white” (Fanon 1967; 192). *Becoming Black in Seven*
6 *Lessons* transposes Fanon’s insights to the 21st century predicament of blackness in the heart
7 of Europe and in so doing suggests that these are still actual.
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11 At the same time, however, Unigwe’s contemporary focus also involves a translation
12 to a new context, more specifically Flanders, the Dutch speaking region in Belgium. In so
13 doing, she brings into mind Stuart Hall’s contention that if blackness is “something
14 constructed, told, spoken, not simply be found”, it could be “pluck[ed] out of its articulation
15 and [be] rearticulate[d] in a new way” Hall [1987] 1996; 116), through which new processes
16 of identification could occur. Following Hall, we need to consider the particular socio-cultural
17 context in which constructions of blackness are narrated by means of which these stories
18 could subsequently be told anew. To bring Unigwe’s imagination of blackness more closely
19 into purview, then, it is worthwhile to reflect on how hegemonic discourses of race and ethnic
20 identity operate in the literary field in Flanders and how they inform Unigwe’s authorial
21 position.
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25 Unigwe, who speaks Igbo and English, has Dutch as her third language. Before
26 making her appearance on the Flemish literary scene in 2005, Chika Unigwe had already
27 successfully debuted with English language publications in Nigeria and Britain. Her poetry
28 was published in Nigeria (1993; 1995), her short stories won the 2003 BBC Short Story
29 Competition and a Commonwealth Short Story Award and were published in *Wasafiri* and a
30 number of anthologies of contemporary African writing and she wrote the two children's
31 books *Rainbow for Dinner* (2003) and *Ije At Boarding School* (2003). After her debut in
32 Flanders, Unigwe has continued to publish Dutch as well as English short stories, essays and
33 translations and editions of her writings.⁴
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37 Published in 2005, Unigwe’s first novel, *De Feniks*, was announced as “the first book
38 of fiction written by a Flemish author of African origin.”⁵ *De Feniks* is set in the Belgian city
39 of Turnhout and explores themes such as grief, illness and loneliness and through the central
40 character’s eyes; it exposes shortcomings of Belgian society, such as its pervasive
41 unwelcoming atmosphere and the superficiality of many of its inhabitants. The novel was
42 received as a hopeful trendsetter for ethnic minority writing in Flanders, but was also met
43 with criticism.⁶ Reviewers commented on the fact that the novel was originally written in
44 English and only afterwards translated into Dutch, a remark indicating the monolingualism, or
45 at least the significance of Dutch as a primary language in nation-based paradigms of
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3 literature dominant in Flanders, even if the author is of African origin.⁷ Additionally, in his
4 review of *De Fenix*, Flemish literary critic Marc Cloostermans (2005) complains that the
5 Nigerian protagonist Oge did not have “a particularly interesting view on our country.”
6 Unigwe’s general portrayal of Belgium in the novel does not satisfy the reviewer’s
7 expectations of a Nigerian-born writer: “To draw our attention to this kind of banalities, we
8 really did not need a Nigerian writer.” According to this argument, Unigwe, as a Nigerian-
9 born author is to present the Flemish audience with an interesting, new, ‘Nigerian’ perspective
10 on Belgium and if she by mouth of her characters fails to deliver this, one of the main reasons
11 to read her work becomes obsolete. As described above, the reception of *De Fenix* indicates
12 not only that Chika Unigwe was eagerly awaited as a Flemish author of African origin, but
13 also that clearly a range of ideas were already circulating among reviewers about such a
14 writer.
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23 Unigwe’s debut as well as reviewers’ responses to it should be seen against the
24 background of a literary field which had already for years been involved in extensive
25 discussions about the absence of immigrant and ethnic minority writers in Flanders, whose
26 work is conventionally though not unproblematically categorised under the umbrella term
27 *allochtone literatuur* (‘allochthonous literature’).⁸ Many critics observed that in Flanders
28 ethnic minority writing had been absent, a phenomenon that they negatively compared to
29 neighbouring countries such as France, the Netherlands, or Germany where during the last
30 decades a growing number of texts written by authors from ethnic minority backgrounds had
31 been published. To put it more specifically, that Flanders did not ‘have’ ethnic minority
32 writers was (and up to today still is) perceived as a problematic lack, an absence in need of
33 clarification, a problem that requires solving. In framing the absence of ethnic minority
34 authors as problem, in various ways interlocutors projected onto the desired category of ethnic
35 minority writers their own ideas about the nature of Flemish society and about what Flemish
36 literature should be. By token, clarifications for the absence of ethnic minority writers were
37 sought in a perceived failure of multiculturalism in Flemish society. Or, following the
38 assumption that in the 21st century global world most modern national literatures in Europe
39 have developed into culturally diverse bodies of literature, if Flanders wanted to be entitled to
40 possess a modern national literature in its own right (which the region up to today only
41 arguably enjoys) it was urgently in need of ethnic minority writers. When Unigwe debuted as
42 the “first Flemish author of African origin”, then, she certainly had expectations to fulfil.
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56 The perceived non-existence, rather than emergence, of ethnic minority writing in
57 Flanders prompted government intervention and subsidy policies aimed at the publication and
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3 promotion of texts written by writers of ethnic minority and immigrant descent. In 2000, then
4 Flemish Minister of Culture Bert Anciaux announced that diversity and intercultural relations
5 would be among the main issues addressed by his cultural policy programme and this
6 remained so during the two successive terms of his tenure. Anciaux formulated his rationale
7 for doing so as follows:
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11 New inhabitants of Flanders should have opportunities for emancipation. They should be able to
12 participate in the diversity of the cultural scene, where they should take up a self-evident position. Then
13 new cultural expression forms will emerge in an equally self-evident fashion, which will fundamentally
14 enrich Flemish society. (Anciaux, *Cultuurnota 1999-2004*:30).⁹
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18 The fragment above reminds of “a politics of recognition” in Charles Taylor’s sense of the
19 term, referring to the question of whether the institutions of liberal democratic government
20 make room - or should make room- for recognizing the worth of distinctive cultural traditions
21 (Taylor e.a., 1994). According to this logic, efforts should be made to support ethnic
22 minorities to enter the cultural scene in Flanders from which they are by and large absent so
23 that their presence could become self-evident. The latter social objective - emancipating
24 ethnic minorities - is subsequently connected to a cultural advantage for Flemish society; It is
25 hoped that the participation of ethnic minorities in the cultural domain will stimulate cultural
26 innovation and “enrich” Flemish society. The verb *verrijken* - “to enrich” or “to make rich”
27 metaphorically denotes “to supplement,” while it may possibly also invoke an economic
28 register of benefit.
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32 Anciaux’s policy programme was translated into practice by The Flemish Literature
33 Fund (*Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren*), an autonomous governmental institution that
34 promotes Dutch-language literature in Belgium and abroad, particularly the literary
35 production by Flemish authors. The Flemish Literature Fund stipulated a so-called
36 ‘intercultural literature programme’ (*intercultureel letterenbeleid*), aiming to improve contacts
37 between the Flemish literary world and authors living in Flanders who do not principally have
38 Dutch as their mother tongue and to facilitate access to the literary field for debuting authors
39 belonging to ethnic minority communities. One of the most acclaimed and successful
40 initiatives that was launched to achieve the latter purpose is the literary writing contest
41 ‘Colour the Arts’ (*Kleur de kunst*) organised by the Flemish Community and non-profit
42 organisation *KifKif*.¹⁰ Literary masterclasses, workshops and info-sessions were organised and
43 aspiring debuting ethnic minorities were invited to attend introductory sessions to the literary
44 publishing world and to apply for creative writing courses.¹¹ The effects of these workshops
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3 on authors of ethnic minority descent making their debut are difficult to estimate, as debuting
4 always depends on a range of factors, but in any case it is known that Mustafa Kör, who
5 debuted with his novel *De lammeren* in 2007 and Rachida Lamrabet, who debuted with
6 *Vrouwland* in the same year participated in such workshops. The former works are just two
7 recent examples of a steady, though so far still rather submerged trend of debuting authors
8 with an ethnic minority background in Flanders since approximately the last decade, while the
9 still relatively absent category of ‘allochthonous literature’ in Flanders continues to be an issue
10 that keeps intriguing the public debate.¹²

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16 Chika Unigwe’s appearance on the Flemish literary scene cannot be seen as a direct
17 consequence of the intercultural literature programme, and neither did she participate in one
18 of the above mentioned initiatives and workshops organised for ethnic minority writers.
19 However, it is worthwhile to explore more in-depth the ethno-cultural paradigm which is at
20 the core of the intercultural literature programme, as it inescapably informs the institutional
21 and ideological framework in which Unigwe as an ethnic minority author positions herself
22 and in which her writings circulate.

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28 First, one of the pivotal elements in the Flemish Literature Fund’s ‘intercultural
29 literature programme’ as well as the various initiatives and efforts launched in this context is
30 that most efforts are focused on aspiring authors of ethnic minority descent or foreign
31 language. The overt focus on the creative writing practices by ethnic minority individuals
32 reconfirms white Flemishness as the norm and serves to reproduce a problematic cultural
33 division between ‘allochthons’ (*allochtonen*) and ‘autochthons’ (*autochtonen*) among aspiring
34 writers. It is worthwhile noting that in public debates on multiculturalism similarly, an ethno-
35 cultural paradigm characterised by a cultural binary between autochthony/allochthony and
36 Flemish versus non-Flemish has been prevalent, even though academics and public
37 intellectuals have repeatedly and in various ways disapproved of the binary for excluding
38 ethnic minorities from imaginations of Flanders (e.g. Blommaert & Verschueren 1998, Abou
39 Jahjah 2003; Fraihi 2004; Maly 2009; Arnaut e.a. 2009).¹³ For example, in *Debating*
40 *Diversity*, Jan Blommaert and Jef Verschueren examine the "tolerant" rhetoric which has
41 found its way into public discourse and argue that it disturbingly resonates with the discourse
42 of radical racist and nationalist groups, in that their discourses similarly draw on a binary
43 between autochthons and allochthons and share an ideology of ‘homogenism’, a view of
44 society in which differences are seen as dangerous and centrifugal and in which the ‘best’
45 society is suggested to be one without intergroup “differences” (1998: 194).

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3 A second feature of the intercultural literature programme is that it establishes a
4 connection between writing and ethno-cultural identity, which in effect culturalises the
5 writings of ethnic minority authors. In the newspaper column entitled “Wij spreken pas als
6 jullie luisteren” (*We only speak when you listen*) (2004), Moroccan-Flemish writer Jamila
7 Amadou argues that ethnic minority writers have been absent from the literary field since they
8 reject the only position in the Flemish literary field available for allochtonous writers, namely
9 to be a spokesperson for his or her ethno-cultural community. In a similar vein literary critic
10 Tom Van Imschoot observes that “the text of an allochtonous writer, [...] even if he [sic]
11 writes about the autochthonous majority, stands for the minority perspective and as such may
12 or may not enrich Flemish literature [...]”¹⁴ The point is indeed that at stake is a ethno-
13 cultural understanding of what an allochtonous literary voice precisely must sound like, which
14 is limiting.
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23 Thirdly, since the access to the literary field of the individuals who are targeted in
24 these policies is indeed made to depend on their cultural and linguistic background, the
25 “burden” of multicultural literature in Flanders rests on the shoulders of the underrepresented
26 target group. Debuting authors, in other words, receive a task. Whether or not they achieve, is
27 made to depend not on anything or anyone except for themselves, their individual talent, and
28 eventually their degree of success in gaining access to the literary field. At the same time,
29 policy makers – a group by and large composed of white males actors– are situated in the
30 institutional positions from which they specify the ways in which the underrepresented group
31 should render Flemish literature multicultural, while at the same time they are alleviated from
32 all responsibility, for example, to implement structural changes in the literary field so as to
33 make it more inclusive in terms of gender, race, or class.
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41 These specific features characterising hegemonic discourses on multiculturalism and
42 ethnic minority writers in Flanders as sketched out above, raise the question of why Chika
43 Unigwe would represent herself as the writer of “the first book of fiction written by a Flemish
44 author of African origin”, a self-representation which, given its explicit emphasis on
45 Unigwe’s foreign origin, hardly facilitates her access to the mainstream Flemish literary
46 canon. Recently, in the wake of the publication of Unigwe’s recent Dutch novel *Night*
47 *Dancer*, journalist Kathy Matthys asks Unigwe in an interview with the Flemish newspaper
48 *De Standaard* culturalist questions such as whether children growing up without a father are
49 nowadays still stigmatised in Nigeria or whether Unigwe is amazed about the ways ‘the
50 Belgians’ mourn, given that Nigerian funeral scenes described in her novel are completely
51 different. In the course of the interview, Unigwe interconnects her writing with the Igbo
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3 language. "I have always been conscious to create an Igbo-atmosphere in my stories. My
4 three novels have the rhythm of the Igbo language."¹⁵ In rather unexpected ways, Unigwe's
5 response resonates with *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*, where Unigwe ironically writes:
6 "If you are a writer, never forget to acknowledge the fact that your writing style derives from
7 the great story-telling traditions of your people." In instances like this interview Unigwe does
8 not overtly criticise and at times even complies with culturalist readings of her work, which
9 may seem surprising in light of her satirical piece *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*. While
10 *Becoming black in Seven Lessons* suggests Unigwe's acute awareness of commonplace ideas
11 of blackness affecting her life and (as we may also assume) her writing in a European society
12 like Flanders, to a certain extent her modes of self-representation in meta-literary texts - such
13 as interviews and book blurbs - do not counter nor overtly question these ideas. It
14 distinguishes her from other ethnic minority writers in Flanders, such as the Moroccan-born
15 Rachida Lamrabet, who vehemently refute ethnic or cultural labels or references to
16 'allochthony' that could serve to distinguish them and possible exclude them from
17 imaginations of what 'home-grown' Flemish literature is and should be in the future.

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19 For an understanding of Unigwe's authorial self-representation, it seems useful to
20 build on the notion of 'strategic exoticism' as put forward in the studies by Graham Huggan
21 (2001) and Sarah Brouillette (2007) on the intersections between postcolonialism and the
22 global literary market place.¹⁶ In *The Postcolonial Exotic* Graham Huggan defines a 'global
23 alterity industry' in which cultural difference is processed through exoticism, 'a mode of
24 aesthetic perception [that] effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender its
25 immanent mystery' (13). For Huggan, the most noticeably feature of writing by authors such
26 as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy is the way in which they balance their ostensibly anti-
27 colonial politics against their commercial viability as globally successful postcolonial
28 novelists and their work 'is designed as much as to challenge as to profit from consumer
29 needs.' Sarah Brouillette critiques Huggan's notion of strategic exoticism as it implicitly
30 distinguishes between those consumers "who seeks mythic access to exotic experience" and
31 those "who actually have access to the reality that the other consumer can only ever wish to
32 possess" (19). Instead Brouillette convincingly finds it 'more fruitful to understand strategic
33 exoticism, and likewise general postcolonial authorial self-consciousness, as comprised of a
34 set of literary strategies that operate through assumptions shared between the author and the
35 reader, as both producer and consumer work to negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of,
36 postcoloniality's touristic guilt' (Brouillette, 2007: 7).

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3 Similarly, one may also assume that while being confronted with expectations and
4 limitations of the position of ethnic minority writer in Flanders available to her, Unigwe
5 strategically acts out the exoticism to which she and her work are relegated. At the same time,
6 this position allows her to launch her work and partake successfully in a transnational literary
7 system that transcends far beyond the localised Flemish literary field. The African suffix to
8 her self-label as a Flemish author may not make Unigwe's entry to the canon of Flemish
9 literature easier, but there is also no reason to believe that this is something what Unigwe
10 aspires to, since her English writings and translations transcend the localised book market in
11 Flanders and the Netherlands and circulate in a transnational field of African diasporic
12 writing. In so doing, Unigwe's fiction illustrates Rebecca Walkowitz' assumption that
13 literature of migration 'reflects a shift from nation-based paradigms to new ways of
14 understanding community and belonging and to transnational models emphasizing a global
15 space of ongoing travel and interconnection.' (2006:533).

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18 After her breakthrough as a novelist in Belgium in 2005, Unigwe Unigwe has so far
19 written two more novels which were initially published in Dutch by Meulenhoff-Manteau,
20 Unigwe's publisher based in Antwerp, and only afterwards published in English, despite the
21 fact that she has continued to publish short stories in English language journals and
22 anthologies that are not available in Dutch translation.¹⁷ Unigwe's rather impressive list of
23 international accolades, including the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in 2012, suggests that
24 her work resonates not only locally but also internationally, as is also suggested in Elisabeth
25 Bekers' entry on Unigwe in the *Dictionary of African Biography* (2011: 101-103). Unigwe's
26 oeuvre is indeed shelved under black, African, Nigerian (diasporic) writing and considered to
27 be part of a wider stream of prose written by a new generation of Nigerian (diasporic) writing
28 that also embraces authors such as the anglophone Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Helen
29 Oyeyemi.¹⁸ Unigwe, then, participates as an ethnic minority writer in the Flemish literary
30 circuit but is also able to transcend this small and localised literary market perhaps more
31 easily than any other Flemish writer, and use this position as a spring board to participate in
32 an Anglophone African diasporic literary field which enjoys a much broader, not to say
33 global, readership.

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53 **3. Becoming Black in the Red-Light District of Antwerp. Chika Unigwe's *On Black***
54 ***Sister's Street***
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3 In what follows, I explore how Unigwe's second novel *On Black Sisters' Street* destabilizes
4 homogenous definitions of African diasporic womanhood. More specifically, playing with
5 conventions of postcolonial autobiography and the short story cycle, *On Black Sisters' Street*
6 renders an account of how four African sex workers in the city of Antwerp strategically relate
7 to exoticist definitions of African womanhood that are central to the sex industry, while it is
8 simultaneously conveyed that their personal histories surmount these.
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13 *On Black Sisters' Street* recounts how four African women desperately seek to escape
14 their miserable living conditions and respond to the lure of a better life in Europe. Sisi is an
15 ambitious university student unable to find suitable work. Efe is a teenage single mother
16 struggling to raise her son without support from his father. Ama has escaped an abusive
17 childhood only to find her dream of escaping Nigeria crushed by a dead-end job. Joyce,
18 without family, home or money, is abandoned by her boyfriend. In a house on
19 'Zwartzusterstraat' in the city of Antwerp, the women share their lives under the watchful
20 eyes of their madam and her menacing assistant Segun. However, as illegal workers in
21 Belgium, the women hide their true names and family histories from each other. It is only
22 when Sisi tries to escape the prostitution world and is murdered, Ama, Efe and Joyce work
23 through her death by gradually revealing their painful histories to each other and to the reader.
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32 Composed of fictional autobiographies of the four women, *On Black Sisters' Street*
33 invites us to consider the continued relevance of autobiography as a central explanatory
34 category in understanding postcolonialism and its relation to subjectivity. The latter exercise
35 has precisely been the focus of a series of recent studies that examine autobiography's
36 philosophical resistance to universal concepts and theories and explore its intersections with
37 the postcolonial enterprise to rethink norms of experience and knowledge (Hornung and Ruhe
38 1998; Gillian Whitlock 2007; David Huddart 2007; Innes 2007; Moore-Gilbert 2009).
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44 *On Black Sisters' Street* firmly situates the life narratives of four African women
45 within today's geopolitical power relations. The women's narratives include tragic episodes
46 of poverty, war experience, sexual abuse and families torn apart in their home countries,
47 which made them vulnerable to the call to enter the global woman's traffic network run by
48 Oka Dele. On arrival in Belgium, they soon find out, however, that they have escaped their
49 circumstances for a mirage – or 'fata morgana' to use the Dutch title of the novel – of a better
50 and wealthier life in Europe, and soon see their dreams shattered. That *On Black Sisters'*
51 *Street* draws on life writing to portray the experiences and memories of the four protagonist
52 may not seem entirely unexpected. In their reinterpretation of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask*
53 as an autobiographical narrative, Innes and Gilbert-Moore suggest that, to Fanon the
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3 autobiographical mode to a certain extent emanates from colonial oppression. In the face of
4 colonial oppression colonised subjects are driven ‘to ask the question constantly “Who am
5 I?”’(Innes 2007: 58; Gilbert-Moore 2009) From this perspective, it is not surprising that *On*
6 *Black Sisters’ Street* also deploys the (fictional) autobiographical mode so as to recount the
7 four women’s deprived circumstances.
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11 Voicing the memories and experiences of four African women in Flanders, the novel
12 offers a dreary portrayal of the submerged world of illegal prostitution in the red light district
13 of Antwerp city. It suggests the descent into disorientation and denial of worth that they face,
14 a recurring theme in many autobiographical works by postcolonial women (Innes, 2007: 58).
15 Working as sex workers, the women must pay back in monthly instalments the fee of 30,000
16 euros to Dele, the costs of their exportation to Belgium. With their fake passports withheld by
17 Madam and living under her close surveillance, the four women are almost literally
18 imprisoned in the house in the red-light district but also objectified in the position of black sex
19 workers satisfying white men’s sexual desires. “As for liking black women, Oga Dele had
20 told her [Efe] that they were in great demand by white men, tired of their women and wanting
21 a bit of colour and spice.” (84) Primarily, the women are indeed socially constructed through
22 exotic, sexualised codes of black womanhood.
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31 *On Black Sisters’ Street* centres on the experiences and voices of the women, who are
32 usually observed from the outside, as sexual spectacles sitting under red spot lights behind the
33 windows of the Schipperskwartier of Antwerp. On first sight, the novel offers the reader a
34 voyeuristic glance into these women’s lives, and seems to draw from the kind of tragic
35 sensationalism with which recent accounts on victimised Muslim women allow Western
36 readers a peek behind the veil (Whitlock 2005). Although lengthy scenes describe how the
37 women are confronted by all sorts of deprivations, violence and abuses both in Nigeria as well
38 as in Belgium, the novel’s aim is not to deplore the miserable fate of black sex workers who
39 are victims in Dele’s women’s trafficking network as well as in the male-dominated Western
40 sex industry. Rendering her account of the journey to Belgium, Ama says: “I made this
41 choice, at least, I was given a choice. I came here with my eyes wide open.” (114) The four
42 women are indeed not victims, as the novel conveys, but agents in a transnational world
43 making choices, strategic choices that are restricted by circumstance.
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53 If they want to be successful as sex workers, the women are to abide to gendered and
54 racialised norms and codes of behaviour. *On Black Sister’s Street* is indeed not so much an
55 account of four African sex workers than an exploration of how they become black sex
56 workers. “Blue bra sprinkled with glitter and a matching G-string, boots up to her thighs, she
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3 stood behind the glass, and prayed that no one would notice her.” (134) The novel clearly
4 suggests the constructed nature of black sexualised womanhood by describing how the four
5 women dress up and act upon the role behind the window that is expected from them. If it is
6 true, in the terms of Eva Pendelton, that “sex work is drag in that it is a mimetic performance
7 of highly charged feminine gender codes” (Pendelton, 1997: 183), to which we may also add
8 racial codes, than the novel portrays the four protagonists in the process of performing these
9 highly charged exoticist codes of black femininity.
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14 It is worthwhile considering at this point whether Brouillete’s notion of ‘strategic
15 exoticism’ is not only illuminating for Unigwe’s authorial position in the Flemish field but
16 also for how her novel relates the four African diasporic sex workers’ position in the Antwerp
17 sex industry. The four protagonists cannot generally be seen to change or subvert the
18 normative scripts they must follow; until Sisi’s failed attempt to escape at the end of the
19 novel, the women almost conscientiously do, say and behave according to what Madam and
20 others tell them. The disruptive potential, however, resides not in the women’s rewriting of
21 the codes of black sex workers, but in the narration of how they act out these codes. Unigwe
22 juxtaposes scenes of the women’s performance as black sex workers to self-reflexive
23 fragments that explicate their doubts, uncertainty, embarrassment or feelings of freedom,
24 while being disguised and text portions in which the women are seen to take an emotional
25 distance or critically comment on their behaviour. Unigwe describes what goes on in the
26 heads of the women, while they try to the best of their capabilities to please the men that
27 approach them. In so doing, their work is revealed to the reader as a strategic lie. Joyce
28 piously scrubs the make-up off her face on request of a regular customer who calls her
29 “Etienne’s Nubian princess.” She is ready to change the script and to change costume, as it
30 were, whenever this is desired. Her ultimate goal is not, however, to please white men’s
31 desire. The latter is but a means to achieve economic purposes and upward social mobility. Or
32 in the terms of Ama: “[...] the men she slept with were [...] just tools she needed to achieve
33 her dream. And her dream was expansive enough to accommodate all of them” (169).
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48 The constructed, performative dimensions of black female sex workers’ identity may
49 suggest an illusion of a ‘behind’ where the women act out their real and true core selves.
50 However, we are soon made aware that also in their daily lives, the women’s identities consist
51 of a series of provisional narratives. In this sense, Unigwe’s concept of identity overlaps with
52 the specific form of decentered models of personhood, which Bart Gilmore generally
53 identifies in postcolonial autobiographies (Moore-Gilbert 2009: xxi). More specifically, *On*
54 *Black Sisters’ Street* inherently connects the issue of storytelling to constructions of black
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3 womanhood. Narrating their histories to each other – life writing being a formal way to
4 underscore the narrative dimension of identity – the women change the story about
5 themselves alongside the rapidly changing circumstances that have occurred to them. Sisi and
6 Joyce have changed their names and are originally called respectively Chrisom and Alek, the
7 latter, as she reveals, is Sudanese, not Nigerian like she made everyone in the house believe.
8 Alek refers to the UN refugee camp she lived in for a while as “a collection of sad stories”
9 (194). On arrival to Belgium, Sisi is determined to “shed her skin like a snake and emerge
10 completely new” (98). Madam invents the story of an escape from Liberia that Sisi must tell
11 about herself in the Immigration office. Reiterating one of Unigwe’s points in *Becoming black*
12 *in Seven Lessons*, Madam further adds: “White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear us
13 killing each other, about us hacking each other’s heads off in senseless ethnic conflicts. The
14 more macabre the story the better.” (121) Sisi agrees to be Liberian, “in the next months she
15 would be other things. Other people. A constant yearning to escape herself would take over
16 her life” (121). While the performance of sexualised definitions of black womanhood is
17 central to the four women’s lives as sex workers, their family histories emphasise their
18 identities as a series of narratives invented strategically to suit the circumstances.

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On Black Sisters’ Street complicates and refutes unilateral definitions of black womanhood, which in the terms of the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, are vulnerable to “the danger of a single story,” suggesting that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. In so doing, Unigwe’s concept of identity also embraces “contingency, indeterminacy and conflict” (Linda Anderson 2001:108 quoting Paul Gilroy 2000: 128). It deploys a range of narrative techniques refuting the static and single-sided ideas about female blackness with which the four women are confronted during their work in the red-light district. *On Black Sisters’ Street* draws on various genres in its depiction of the life stories of the Nigerian women. In the women’s stories, elements of the coming-of-age novel and the bildung roman are evident. Aspects of the detective novel are incorporated in the “whodunit” search for an explanation for Sisi’s death, features of travel writing in Sisi’s jaunts about Antwerp disguised as a tourist, and magical realism in Sisi’s flight from her body to visit her parents and curse Dele’s family after her death. *On Black Sisters’ Street* integrates and interweaves these generic traditions in a composite form.

On Black Sisters’ Street is indeed not a novel prioritising a single authorial voice nor does it present a teleological journey of one protagonist. As suggested above, it could be seen as a fictional autobiography, or rather as a series of fictional autobiographies, as it focuses on

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3 not one but the interspersed life narratives of four women. Its form could also be described as
4 a particular type of short story cycle, a “narrative of community” in Sandra A. Zagarell’s
5 sense of the term (1988; Harde 2007). Zagarell advances a theory of a women’s genre that
6 denotes a text’s ethos and subject matter, a privileging of community over self and a concern
7 with process rather than linear narrative’s conflict or progress. Though Zagarell’s focus is on
8 nineteenth century women’s short story cycles, her insights are fruitful to twentieth-century
9 narratives of community [which] “may be inspired most strongly by writers’ own racial,
10 ethnic, class, and or cultural traditions, and the changing roles of gender” (Zagarell, 1988:
11 527). Zagarell’s view of the short story cycle reverberates in unexpected ways with the
12 “relationality of subjectivity” that Moore-Gilbert identifies as one of postcolonial
13 autobiography’s central features (Moore-Gilbert, 2009: xx).

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21 Reading *On Black Sister’s Street* as a narrative of community reveals how *On Black*
22 *Sisters’ Street* structurally resonates with ongoing mobility and circular movements of
23 migration, rather than with linear-chronological notions of progress and plot development.
24 The chapters entitled “Zwartzusterstraat” render an account of events that occur in the
25 present, and are geographically situated in the city of Antwerp – more precisely in the house
26 in Zwartzusterstraat (*Black Sisters’ Street*). These chapters are interwoven with chapters
27 focusing on the individual life stories of the women and bring into view their separate,
28 idiosyncratic pasts and futures. Eventually, Ama and Joyce return to Nigeria, Efe stays in
29 Belgian prostitution but moves up on the social scale as she now employs African women.
30 Sisi’s ghost leaves her body and travels back to Nigeria too. Their individual stories follow
31 the ongoing movement back and forth between Nigeria and Belgium. Similarly, the basic
32 story line prioritises circularity and ends where it begins, with an account of Sisi’s death.

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41 Additionally, Innes argues that postcolonial autobiographical writing often plays a
42 significant role in establishing the subject’s sense of location and belonging (innes 2007: 64).
43 In the case of *On Black Sisters’ Street*, it is through the short story cycle structure that a
44 community of women is instantiated, one which is composed through the focus on individual
45 autobiographical experiences. The fragmented life stories of the four women are narrated in
46 the first person, which are interspersed by the third person narration of Sisi’s migration to
47 Europe and the events leading up to her death. The movement between individual stories, set
48 in divergent geographies and dissimilar timeliness creates a weaving effect that rejects
49 essentialist notions of black female identity, while simultaneously insisting on a commonality
50 of experience. “Their different thoughts sometimes converge and meet in the present, causing
51 them to share the same fear. But when they think about their past, they have different
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3 memories.” (40) *On Black Sisters’ Street* is indeed a polyphonic collage of individual stories
4 creating a mosaic portrayal that defies the essentialist vision of the exotic African woman. Its
5 mode of narration reflects the multidimensional mobility of African migrant women.
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8 Furthermore, the women living together in the African microcosm in their house on
9 Zwarte Zusterstraat are supposed to share Nigeria as their place of origin, but they are not
10 bound by anything except for their situation in the present. As we come to know their
11 individual life stories, it is gradually conveyed that these women have had very different lives
12 and would not be in contact in normal circumstances. The women share no sense of belonging
13 or commonality based on their national or cultural background. When at a party a South-
14 African man addresses her as his sister, Ama vehemently replies that she is not his sister, and
15 turns his back on him. The rejection of family ties is suggestive, also for the mutual
16 relationships among the four protagonists. Though they share the same house, their
17 conceptions of home and family are not defined in national or cultural terms. The house, a
18 spatial metaphor for the four black women’s community in Europe, is a place of conflict that
19 offers no true sense of belonging, it is a cold place without a heart(h) – the conventional
20 symbol of the beating heart of the home, the fireplace, is fake (32).
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29 The women know little about each other and feelings of hostility and suspicion
30 prevent them from developing intimate relations. “They were strangers without words
31 between them.” (115) The women shroud their histories in ambiguity or keep them covered. It
32 is “silence which has, again, become the community they share” (39). In the course of
33 narrating their histories to each other, however, they develop a sense of belonging in each
34 other’s company. Through the intimacies of storytelling, the women discover their communal
35 bond and shared predicament, which gradually ignites a sense of home. It is indeed the act of
36 story telling that constitutes the women’s community in the house, which in the penultimate
37 section, is described:
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44 “[...] like a family home. The communal kitchen and the shared living room bound the women. They
45 met there when they yearned for company but could always retire to their rooms for some privacy. It
46 was where they could escape the glare of the Schipperskwartier, live a life that did not include strange
47 men with sometimes stranger requests.” (273)
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50 It is Efe who initiates camaraderie among the women through story telling in lieu of Sisi’s
51 death, because in grief “she feels an affinity with these women in a way she has never done
52 before” (41). Her history involves painful memories of a pregnancy at the age of sixteen,
53 when she was laughed at by the neighbouring women in Lagos who exclude her from the
54 community. The status of outcast, combined with her mother’s premature death and her
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3 father's aloofness towards family intimacy, had ruptured the sense of safety and belonging
4 that are conventionally associated with notions of home. In a similar vein, Joyce, whose
5 family is brutally murdered and whose lover severs their relationship to appease his family,
6 recognizes that "the women in the house on Zwartzusterstraat were the only family she had"
7 (235). In the face of the already pronounced social role of the exotic, sexualised black woman
8 that constitutes their becoming in Belgium, the protagonists of *On Black Sisters' Street* do not
9 only negotiate a diverse, narrative sense of selfhood, but also a black women's community
10 which does not depend on ethnic origins, cultural descent, gender, geographical or national
11 affiliations but rather on empathy and understanding which develop through listening to each
12 other's distinctive histories and personal memories.
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20 21 **4. Conclusion** 22 23

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25 In this essay, I have explored how social constructions of blackness affect and inform
26 the authorial self-representations of the Nigerian-Belgian writer Chika Unigwe as an ethnic
27 minority writer in the Flemish literary field. It has been shown how ethno-cultural ideas of
28 authorship are institutionally endorsed, which shape notions of Unigwe's black authorship
29 and affect the ways in which Unigwe's oeuvre is read. Unigwe is sharply sensitive to the
30 social construction of blackness, as illustrated by *Seven Lessons in Becoming Black*, but
31 nevertheless seems to act out the ethno-culturalist authorial role which is assigned to her in
32 Flanders.
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38 It may be argued that taking up the role of black author in Belgium is a form of
39 "strategic exoticism", a role which does not entirely define nor confine Unigwe, considering
40 she deploys it to launch her work and participate in a global literary system of African
41 diaspora writing, while transcending the exoticised position as an ethnic minority in the
42 Flemish literary field that is available to her. The writings by Chika Unigwe, are indeed
43 written, printed, translated and read not only in Flanders but in multiple places, indicating the
44 growing need to adopt a more transnational perspective if we are to accommodate the several
45 communities in which cultural products like Unigwe's writings, are nowadays produced and
46 received and in which also various authorial positions can be asserted.
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53 In light of this latter point, *On Black sisters' Street* is not only a tale of choices and
54 displacement set against the backdrop of the Antwerp prostitution scene but it also reveals
55 itself to be a book that theorizes its own cultural mobility. While, like Unigwe, on their arrival
56 to Belgium the four protagonists of the book enter a social imaginary in which they perform
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3 the already pronounced role of the exotic black woman which is available to them, *On Black*
4 *Sisters' Street* underscores on the one hand how the women perform this role and on the other
5 hand situates their performance in the larger context of their individual biographies,
6 suggesting it is but one out of many strategic narratives they choose to narrate about
7 themselves. Chika Unigwe's writing - its production, circulation and reception – transcends
8 far beyond the exotic category of Flemish fiction of African origin, while circulating in
9 multiple transnational contexts. Similarly, *On Black Sisters' Street* exposes how black
10 womanhood is not merely about taking up the role of the exotic sexualised black woman in
11 the popular European perception, but also, and perhaps more importantly so, about how
12 women across the limits of cultures and social forces of power and domination, improvise and
13 find spaces to re-describe themselves, while creating their transnational worlds anew.
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ENDNOTES

¹ Unigwe, Chika. 'How to be an African.' <http://www.african-writing.com/nine/chikaunigwe.htm> African Online issue 9.

² "Ik leer nu dat zwart zijn betekent dat ik wordt aanzien als een liefdadigheidsproject. Dat ik dankbaar zou moeten zijn voor de kans die ik heb gekregen om in Europa te mogen zijn." Chika Unigwe. 'Zwart worden in zeven lessen' In: Mo* magazine, 11 February 2010. <http://www.mo.be/opinie/zwart-worden-zeven-lessen> This and all further translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

³ Unigwe, Chika. 'How to be an African.' <http://www.african-writing.com/nine/chikaunigwe.htm> African Online issue 9.

⁴ The inherently bilingualism, not to say multilingualism, that characterises Unigwe's oeuvre distinguishes her from most contemporary writers in Flanders. The latter more often than not write principally in Dutch – Dutch being their mother tongue - and participate primarily in the Flemish-Dutch literary field, and only see their work afterwards translated to other languages. In her review of *On Black Sisters' Street*, Fernanda Eberstadt describes Unigwe's language as "a rich mix of schoolmarm British and pidgin English, spiked with smatterings of Igbo and Yoruba" 'Tales from the Global Sex Trade' In: *The New York Times*, 29 April 2011.

⁵ This description also appears on the back cover of *On Black Sisters' Street*.

⁶ For a more extensive outline on the generally shared desire for allochtonous writings in Flanders, see Sarah De Mul (2013) "The Netherlands is doing well. Allochtonous writing talent is blossoming there." Defining Flemish Literature, Desiring allochtonous writings.' In: Wolfgang Beschnitt, Sarah De Mul & Liesbeth Minaard (eds.) *Literature, language, and multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

⁷ For a more detailed outline of Chika Unigwe's writings and other African writing in Belgium, see Bekers, Elisabeth. 'Chronicling Beyond Abyssinia. African Writing in Flanders, Belgium.' In: *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe*, ed. Elisabeth Bekers, Sissy Helff & Daniela Merolla (Matatu 36; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2009. 57-69.

⁸ Stemming from the Greek roots *allos/other*, *autos/same* and *chthon/soil*, the term 'allochtoon' has nowadays replaced the term 'migrant' to refer to the generations of citizens with non-native cultural backgrounds living in Flanders and the Netherlands. According to the Dutch governmental CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek/Central Office for Statistics), an "allochtoon" is a person of whom at least one parent was born abroad. The CBS distinguishes between first-generation allochtoons who themselves were born abroad and second-generation allochtoons who were born in the Netherlands. Besides, the CBS makes a distinction between western and non-western allochtoons. See L. Minnaard, 'Multiculturalism in the Dutch literary field' In: W. Beschnitt, S. De Mul & L. Minnaard (eds) *Literature, language, and multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2013). For critical analysis of the related terms 'migrant'/'allochton' and autochthony, see J. Blommaert & Jef Verscheuren. *Het Belgische migrantendebat: de pragmatiek van de abnormalisering* (Antwerpen: ipra, 1992); Bambi Ceuppens, 'Allochthons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium' In: *African Studies Review* 49, Number 2, September 2006, 147-186; Peter Geschiere. *The Perils of Belonging. Autochthony, citizenship, and exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University Press, 2009).

⁹ "Nieuwe inwoners van Vlaanderen moeten kansen op emancipatie krijgen. Zij moeten kunnen deel hebben aan de diversiteit van het cultuurgebeuren, zij moeten er een vanzelfsprekende plaats in opnemen. Dan komen er even evident nieuwe culturele uitingsvormen tot stand, die een wezenlijke verrijking vormen voor de Vlaamse samenleving."

¹⁰ For various authors and artists – Kenan Serbest, Jamal Boukriss, Sadie Choua or Rachida Lamrabet – the literature contest proved to be one of the principal entry points in the Flemish literary and cultural field, though it should also be noted that many of these individuals were, in addition to their participation in the contest, also occupied in other activities that may have contributed to their relatively successful breakthrough. Sadie Choua, for instance, won the literary contest in 2004, but she also released a widely acclaimed and awarded documentary *Mijn zus Zahra* (My sister Zahra) in 2006.

¹¹ For instance, in the workshop *Vreemd in het schrijven* ("foreign in/to writing"), organised by *Passa Porta*, an international literary centre in Brussels, debuting young talents were guided towards publication under the auspice of distinguished Flemish authors - Kristien Hemmerechts, Stefan Hertmans and Peter Verhelst. *Vreemd in het schrijven* is nowadays discontinued, though other cultural organisations – vzw Kifkif - are nowadays offering similar creative writing courses and projects specifically (though not always exclusively) aimed at an audience of aspiring writers from ethnic minority descent.

¹² To mention just a few recent occasions of public discussions that took as their starting point the difficult emergence of allochtonous writers in Flanders, Literair salon – Allochtone auteurs organised by Gynaika Zuiderpershuis, 17 september 2009, MO* debat Allochtone lezers en schrijvers, Boekenbeurs 9 November 2010.

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¹³ Recently the newspaper De Morgen announced to discontinue using the term ‘allochtoon’ because of its stigmatising, reductive and exclusive effect. Wouter Verschelden, ‘Waarom wij, De Morgen, “allochtoon” niet meer gebruiken.’ *De Morgen*, 19 September 2012.

¹⁴ “als de tekst van een allochtoon, die zelfs wanneer hij over de autochtone meerderheid schrijft voor de blik van een minderheid staat, én die als dusdanig de Vlaamse literatuur al dan niet verrijkt, afhankelijk van het kritische oordeel.”

¹⁵ ‘[ik] heb er altijd bewust voor gekozen om een Igbo-sfeer te creëren in mijn verhalen. Mijn drie romans hebben het ritme van de Igbo-taal.’

¹⁶ Huggan’s notion of strategic exoticism has been further refined by Chris Bongie, who points out that Huggan has no easy answer to the question of the political value of the awareness and ‘resistance’ exemplified by strategic exoticism since postcolonialism’s always-already insertedness into global marketplace. Chris, Bongie *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature*. Liverpool UP 2009. 311. On strategic exoticism in New African Writing such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated*, see Akin Adesokan. ‘New African Writing and the Question of Audience.’ *Research in African Literatures* Volume 43, Number 3, Fall 2012.

¹⁷ Published in 2007, *Fata Morgana* appeared in English as *On Black Sisters’ Street* with Jonathan Cape (2009) Vintage (2010) and Random House (2011). The book confirmed Unigwe’s entry to the international literary field as a Nigerian writer in English – in 2012 Unigwe was nominated for the Wole Soyinka Prize and won the NLNG Prize for Literature. Unigwe’s third novel *Nachtdanser* was published in January 2011; its English language edition *Night Dancer* followed one year later (Jonathan Cape 2012). Specifically Unigwe’s second novel *On Black Sisters’ Street* received positive acclaim in the Anglophone global literature market, with reviewers of major UK and US-based newspapers *The Independent* (Evaristo, 2009) or *The New York Times* (Eberstadt, 2011) praising the book’s literary merits and a nomination for the 2011 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. In 2012, also Unigwe’s third novel *Night Dancer* has been praised internationally (Evaristo, 2012) and she was nominated for the prestigious Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature with *On Black Sisters’ Street*.

¹⁸ See Obi Nwakanma. ‘Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel.’ *Research in African Literatures*. Volume 39, Number 2, Summer 2008, 1-14; Zoe Norridge. ‘Sex as Synecdoche: Intimate Languages of Violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love*.’ *Research in African Literatures* Volume 43, Number 2, Summer 2012.18-39.

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3 **Becoming Black in Belgium.**
4 **The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe's Authorial Self-Representation**
5 **and *On Black Sister's Street*.**
6

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13 **Keywords:**

14 **African diasporic writing, Flanders, Europe, multiculturalism, strategic exoticism**
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16 **Abstract:**

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19 In the satirical column entitled "Zwart worden in zeven lessen" (*Becoming Black in*
20 *Seven Lessons*), The Nigerian-Belgian writer Chika Unigwe considers black identity as a
21 social construction and coming to Europe as an entry to a social imaginary, a discursive space
22 where subjects are already imagined, constructed and treated as "black" by hegemonic
23 discourses. Using *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons* as a starting point, in this essay I explore
24 the social construction of black identity in relation to, on the one hand, Unigwe's authorial
25 self-representation as an ethnic minority writer in Flanders (the Dutch language region of
26 Belgium) and, on the other hand, the identity negotiations of the African immigrant women in
27 the Flemish city of Antwerp in Unigwe's second novel *On Black Sisters' Street*.
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29 Central to this inquiry will be the question of how the author Unigwe on the one hand
30 and the African sex workers in *On Black Sisters' Street* become black in Belgium and how
31 they negotiate a sense of self vis-à-vis the already pronounced social order. I argue more
32 specifically that their self-representations reveal the mediation of dominant historical images
33 and Western symbolic meanings and their attempts to wrest control of the construction of
34 their bodies away from the distorted visions of dominant culture. Without conflating
35 Unigwe's situation as a black middle class author in the Flemish literary field with the
36 position of the four Nigerian women working in the sex industry described in the book,
37 parallels can be drawn between them, as I wish to contend, in the ways in which their agency
38 is established in the performance of cultural configurations of black identity which have
39 seized hegemonic hold.
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47 interests are situated in the field of comparative postcolonial studies with a particular focus on Neerlandophone
48 and Anglophone literatures. Her books include *Colonial Memory. Contemporary Women's Travel Writing in*
49 *Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam UP, 2011), a Dutch-language monograph on multiculturalism in
50 Belgium (*Als een leeuw in een kooi*. Meulenhoff-Manteau, 2009), *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural*
51 *Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, co-edited with S. van Wichelen and B. O. Firat) and *The*
52 *Postcolonial Low Countries* (Lexington Books 2012) edited together with Elleke Boehmer. Her current research
53 project focuses on literary configurations of Flemishness and Flemish identity in the context of colonialism and
54 multiculturalism.
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3 **Becoming Black in Belgium.**
4 **The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe's Authorial Self-Representation**
5 **and *On Black Sister's Street*.**
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8 **1. Introduction**

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10 The Nigerian-Belgian writer Chika Unigwe (2010) wrote the satirical column entitled
11 "Zwart worden in zeven lessen" (*Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*), inspired by the Kenyan
12 author Binyavanga Wainaina's piece "How to Write about Africa" (2005), and which is also
13 digitally available as "How to be an African," albeit in revised form. In this column, Unigwe
14 writes that before coming to Europe she had no clear idea of what it meant to be black,
15 suggesting that she did not experience race to be the defining social identity in Nigeria. She
16 goes on to describe with great irony what she has learned about blackness since living in
17 Europe. "I now learn that being black means that I am perceived as a charity project. That I
18 must be grateful for the opportunity granted to me to be in Europe" (Unigwe, 2010: My
19 transl.). These lessons further include dressing in an authentically African way, always to be
20 prepared for police control or to be able to dance. Stating that blackness has no connotation on
21 its own, but is assigned meaning from the outside, Unigwe's *Becoming Black in Seven*
22 *Lessons* reminds us of the social construction of blackness.
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31 In this essay, I explore the social construction of black identity in relation to, on the
32 one hand, Unigwe's position and authorial self-representation as an ethnic minority writer in
33 Belgium/Flanders and, on the other hand, the identity negotiations of the African immigrant
34 women in the Flemish city of Antwerp in Unigwe's second novel *On Black Sisters' Street*
35 (2009). Central to this inquiry will be the question of how the author Unigwe on the one hand
36 and the African sex workers in *On Black Sisters' Street* become black in Belgium and how
37 they negotiate a sense of self vis-à-vis the already pronounced social order. Deploying
38 *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons* as my interpretative lens, I argue more specifically that
39 their self-representations reveal the mediation of dominant historical images and Western
40 symbolic meanings and their attempts to wrest control of the construction of their bodies
41 away from the distorted visions of dominant culture. Although Unigwe's situation as a black
42 middle class author in the Flemish literary field can of course not be conflated with the
43 position of the four Nigerian women working in the sex industry described in the book,
44 parallels can be drawn between them, as I wish to contend, in the ways in which their agency
45 is established in the performance of certain cultural configurations which have seized
46 hegemonic hold.
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3 Since it is fundamental to this concept of blackness that it acquires its meaning and
4 connotation for a large part by the social context, it is important to outline how Unigwe as a
5 self-represented “Flemish author of African origin” is socially constituted in the given context
6 of multicultural Flanders. Therefore, I will outline some of the dominant discourses, policies
7 and practices surrounding ethnic minority authors in Flanders and relate Unigwe’s self-
8 representation to the notion of ‘strategic exoticism’ (Huggan 2001; Brouillette 2007). My
9 primary concern in this section is the tension between Unigwe’s acute awareness of the social
10 construction of blackness on the one hand, and her ostensible acceptance of the position as
11 ethnic minority author in the Flemish literary field, while at the same time participating as an
12 African diasporic author in a transnational literary field, which arguably makes her one of the
13 most successful Flemish-language authors abroad. In a similar vein, my analysis of *On Black*
14 *Sisers’ Street* builds on recent studies in postcolonial autobiography and explores how cultural
15 discourses that hypereroticise the black female body determine the way in which the four
16 African sex workers in the red-light district of the Belgian city of Antwerp become African
17 sex workers, while the book formally and thematically resists these popular cultural
18 perceptions in favour of rendering more diverse, subtle representations of the women.
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31 **2. Becoming a Black Writer in Flanders**

32 In *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*, Unigwe contends that one is not black or ‘African’, one
33 becomes black or ‘African’ in Europe. Unigwe writes: “[...] get rid of any hang-ups you
34 might have about Africa being a continent. It is a country, and so when people ask if you
35 speak African, or eat African, do not get all worked up trying to explain how a homogenous
36 Africa only exists in a lazy imagination.”¹ Coming to Europe means entering a social
37 imaginary, Unigwe implies, a discursive space where subjects are already imagined,
38 constructed and treated as “African” by hegemonic discourses. The act of being recognised as
39 such becomes an act of identity formation. Being perceived as black African animates one
40 into existence, constitutes one within a possible circuit of recognition, within the terms of
41 language and only there one’s social existence becomes possible. *Becoming Black in Seven*
42 *Lessons*, then, sees black identity as a form of discipline, as a set of norms, narratives, and
43 everyday performative roles and acts. It is what you *do* at particular times, rather than who
44 you *are*.
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55 Unigwe’s ideas about blackness as a social construction resonate forcefully with a
56 postcolonial and critical race theoretical tradition in which scholars have not only in various
57 ways uncovered the colonial roots of postcolonial perceptions of black Africa as Europe’s
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3 ultimate 'other' but also sought for multiple ways to resist these. When Fanon entered the
4 white world of Europe and discovers himself as a black man with an inferiority complex, his
5 socio-psychoanalytical analysis concludes that one is black to the degree to which one is
6 being perceived as "wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual. Everything that is opposite to
7 these Negro modes of behaviour is white" (Fanon 1967; 192). *Becoming Black in Seven*
8 *Lessons* transposes Fanon's insights to the 21st century predicament of blackness in the heart
9 of Europe and in so doing suggests that these are still actual.
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14 At the same time, however, Unigwe's contemporary focus also involves a translation
15 to a new context, more specifically Flanders, the Dutch speaking region in Belgium. In so
16 doing, she brings into mind Stuart Hall's contention that if blackness is "something
17 constructed, told, spoken, not simply be found", it could be "pluck[ed] out of its articulation
18 and [be] rearticulate[d] in a new way" Hall [1987] 1996; 116), through which new processes
19 of identification could occur. Following Hall, we need to consider the particular socio-cultural
20 context in which constructions of blackness are narrated by means of which these stories
21 could subsequently be told anew. To bring Unigwe's imagination of blackness more closely
22 into purview, then, it is worthwhile to reflect on how hegemonic discourses of race and ethnic
23 identity operate in the literary field in Flanders and how they inform Unigwe's authorial
24 position.
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33 Unigwe, who speaks Igbo and English, has Dutch as her third language. Before
34 making her appearance on the Flemish literary scene in 2005, Chika Unigwe had already
35 successfully debuted with English language publications in Nigeria and Britain. Her poetry
36 was published in Nigeria (1993; 1995), her short stories won the 2003 BBC Short Story
37 Competition and a Commonwealth Short Story Award and were published in *Wasafiri* and a
38 number of anthologies of contemporary African writing and she wrote the two children's
39 books *Rainbow for Dinner* (2003) and *Ije At Boarding School* (2003). After her debut in
40 Flanders, Unigwe has continued to publish Dutch as well as English short stories, essays and
41 translations and editions of her writings.²
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Published in 2005, Unigwe's first novel, *De Feniks*, was announced as "the first book
of fiction written by a Flemish author of African origin."³ *De Feniks* is set in the Belgian city
of Turnhout and explores themes such as grief, illness and loneliness and through the central
character's eyes; it exposes shortcomings of Belgian society, such as its pervasive
unwelcoming atmosphere and the superficiality of many of its inhabitants. The novel was
received as a hopeful trendsetter for ethnic minority writing in Flanders, but was also met
with criticism.⁴ Reviewers commented on the fact that the novel was originally written in

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3 English and only afterwards translated into Dutch, a remark indicating the monolingualism, or
4 at least the significance of Dutch as a primary language in nation-based paradigms of
5 literature dominant in Flanders, even if the author is of African origin.⁵ Additionally, in his
6 review of *De Fenix*, Flemish literary critic Marc Cloostermans (2005) complains that the
7 Nigerian protagonist Oge did not have “a particularly interesting view on our country.”
8 Unigwe’s general portrayal of Belgium in the novel does not satisfy the reviewer’s
9 expectations of a Nigerian-born writer: “To draw our attention to this kind of banalities, we
10 really did not need a Nigerian writer.” According to this argument, Unigwe, as a Nigerian-
11 born author is to present the Flemish audience with an interesting, new, ‘Nigerian’ perspective
12 on Belgium and if she by mouth of her characters fails to deliver this, one of the main reasons
13 to read her work becomes obsolete. As described above, the reception of *De Fenix* indicates
14 not only that Chika Unigwe was eagerly awaited as a Flemish author of African origin, but
15 also that clearly a range of ideas were already circulating among reviewers about such a
16 writer.
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26 Unigwe’s debut as well as reviewers’ responses to it should be seen against the
27 background of a literary field which had already for years been involved in extensive
28 discussions about the absence of immigrant and ethnic minority writers in Flanders, whose
29 work is conventionally though not unproblematically categorised under the umbrella term
30 *allochtone literatuur* (‘allochthonous literature’).⁶ Many critics observed that in Flanders
31 ethnic minority writing had been absent, a phenomenon that they negatively compared to
32 neighbouring countries such as France, the Netherlands, or Germany where during the last
33 decades a growing number of texts written by authors from ethnic minority backgrounds had
34 been published. To put it more specifically, that Flanders did not ‘have’ ethnic minority
35 writers was (and up to today still is) perceived as a problematic lack, an absence in need of
36 clarification, a problem that requires solving. In framing the absence of ethnic minority
37 authors as problem, in various ways interlocutors projected onto the desired category of ethnic
38 minority writers their own ideas about the nature of Flemish society and about what Flemish
39 literature should be. By token, clarifications for the absence of ethnic minority writers were
40 sought in a perceived failure of multiculturalism in Flemish society. Or, following the
41 assumption that in the 21st century global world most modern national literatures in Europe
42 have developed into culturally diverse bodies of literature, if Flanders wanted to be entitled to
43 possess a modern national literature in its own right (which the region up to today only
44 arguably enjoys) it was urgently in need of ethnic minority writers. When Unigwe debuted as
45 the “first Flemish author of African origin”, then, she certainly had expectations to fulfil.
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3 The perceived non-existence, rather than emergence, of ethnic minority writing in
4 Flanders prompted government intervention and subsidy policies aimed at the publication and
5 promotion of texts written by writers of ethnic minority and immigrant descent. In 2000, then
6 Flemish Minister of Culture Bert Anciaux announced that diversity and intercultural relations
7 would be among the main issues addressed by his cultural policy programme and this
8 remained so during the two successive terms of his tenure. Anciaux formulated his rationale
9 for doing so as follows:
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16 New inhabitants of Flanders should have opportunities for emancipation. They should be able to
17 participate in the diversity of the cultural scene, where they should take up a self-evident position. Then
18 new cultural expression forms will emerge in an equally self-evident fashion, which will fundamentally
19 enrich Flemish society. (Anciaux, *Cultuurnota* 1999-2004:30, my translation).
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23 The fragment above reminds of “a politics of recognition” in Charles Taylor’s sense of the
24 term, referring to the question of whether the institutions of liberal democratic government
25 make room - or should make room- for recognizing the worth of distinctive cultural traditions
26 (Taylor e.a., 1994). According to this logic, efforts should be made to support ethnic
27 minorities to enter the cultural scene in Flanders from which they are by and large absent so
28 that their presence could become self-evident. The latter social objective - emancipating
29 ethnic minorities - is subsequently connected to a cultural advantage for Flemish society; It is
30 hoped that the participation of ethnic minorities in the cultural domain will stimulate cultural
31 innovation and “enrich” Flemish society. The verb *verrijken* - “to enrich” or “to make rich”
32 metaphorically denotes “to supplement,” while it may possibly also invoke an economic
33 register of benefit.
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42 Anciaux’s policy programme was translated into practice by The Flemish Literature
43 Fund (*Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren*), an autonomous governmental institution that
44 promotes Dutch-language literature in Belgium and abroad, particularly the literary
45 production by Flemish authors. The Flemish Literature Fund stipulated a so-called
46 ‘intercultural literature programme’ (*intercultureel letterenbeleid*), aiming to improve contacts
47 between the Flemish literary world and authors living in Flanders who do not principally have
48 Dutch as their mother tongue and to facilitate access to the literary field for debuting authors
49 belonging to ethnic minority communities. One of the most acclaimed and successful
50 initiatives that was launched to achieve the latter purpose is the literary writing contest
51 ‘Colour the Arts’ (*Kleur de kunst*) organised by the Flemish Community and non-profit
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3 organisation *KifKif*. Literary masterclasses, workshops and info-sessions were organised and
4 aspiring debuting ethnic minorities were invited to attend introductory sessions to the literary
5 publishing world and to apply for creative writing courses.⁷ The effects of these workshops on
6 authors of ethnic minority descent making their debut are difficult to estimate, as debuting
7 always depends on a range of factors, but in any case it is known that Mustafa Kör, who
8 debuted with his novel *De lammeren* in 2007 and Rachida Lamrabet, who debuted with
9 *Vrouwland* in the same year participated in such workshops. The former works are just two
10 recent examples of a steady, though so far still rather submerged trend of debuting authors
11 with an ethnic minority background in Flanders since approximately the last decade, while the
12 still relatively absent category of ‘allochthonous literature’ in Flanders continues to be an issue
13 that keeps intriguing the public debate.⁸

21 Chika Unigwe’s appearance on the Flemish literary scene cannot be seen as a direct
22 consequence of the intercultural literature programme, and neither did she participate in one
23 of the above mentioned initiatives and workshops organised for ethnic minority writers.
24 However, it is worthwhile to explore more in-depth the ethno-cultural paradigm which is at
25 the core of the intercultural literature programme, as it inescapably informs the institutional
26 and ideological framework in which Unigwe as an ethnic minority author positions herself
27 and in which her writings circulate.

33 First, one of the pivotal elements in the Flemish Literature Fund’s ‘intercultural
34 literature programme’ as well as the various initiatives and efforts launched in this context is
35 that most efforts are focused on aspiring authors of ethnic minority descent or foreign
36 language. The overt focus on the creative writing practices by ethnic minority individuals
37 reconfirms white Flemishness as the norm and serves to reproduce a problematic cultural
38 division between ‘allochthons’ (*allochtonen*) and ‘autochthons’ (*autochtonen*) among aspiring
39 writers. It is worthwhile noting that in public debates on multiculturalism similarly, an ethno-
40 cultural paradigm characterised by a cultural binary between autochthony/allochthony and
41 Flemish versus non-Flemish has been prevalent, even though academics and public
42 intellectuals have repeatedly and in various ways criticized the binary for excluding ethnic
43 minorities from imaginations of Flanders (e.g. Blommaert & Verschueren 1998, Abou Jahjah
44 2003; Fraihi 2004; Maly 2009; Arnaut e.a. 2009). For example, in *Debating Diversity*, Jan
45 Blommaert and Jef Verschueren examine the “tolerant” rhetoric which has found its way into
46 public discourse and argue that it disturbingly resonates with the discourse of radical racist
47 and nationalist groups, in that their discourses similarly draw on a binary between
48 autochthons and allochthons and share an ideology of ‘homogenism’, a view of society in
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3 which differences are seen as dangerous and centrifugal and in which the ‘best’ society is
4 suggested to be one without intergroup “differences” (1998: 194).

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6 A second feature of the intercultural literature programme is that it establishes a
7 connection between writing and ethno-cultural identity, which in effect culturalises the
8 writings of ethnic minority authors. In the newspaper column entitled “Wij spreken pas als
9 jullie luisteren” (*We only speak when you listen*) (2004), Moroccan-Flemish writer Jamila
10 Amadou argues that ethnic minority writers have been absent from the literary field since they
11 reject the only position in the Flemish literary field available for allochtonous writers, namely
12 to be a spokesperson for his or her ethno-cultural community. In a similar vein literary critic
13 Tom Van Imschoot (2009, my transl.) observes that “the text of an allochtonous writer, [...] even if he [sic] writes about the autochthonous majority, stands for the minority perspective and as such may or may not enrich Flemish literature [...]” The point is indeed that at stake is a ethno-cultural understanding of what an allochtonous literary voice precisely must sound like, which is limiting.

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26 Thirdly, since the access to the literary field of the individuals who are targeted in
27 these policies is indeed made to depend on their cultural and linguistic background, the
28 “burden” of multicultural literature in Flanders rests on the shoulders of the underrepresented
29 target group. Debuting authors, in other words, receive a task. Whether or not they achieve, is
30 made to depend not on anything or anyone except for themselves, their individual talent, and
31 eventually their degree of success in gaining access to the literary field. At the same time,
32 policy makers – a group by and large composed of white males actors– are situated in the
33 institutional positions from which they specify the ways in which the underrepresented group
34 should render Flemish literature multicultural, while at the same time they are alleviated from
35 all responsibility, for example, to implement structural changes in the literary field so as to
36 make it more inclusive in terms of gender, race, or class.

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45 These specific features characterising hegemonic discourses on multiculturalism and
46 ethnic minority writers in Flanders as sketched out above, raise the question of why Chika
47 Unigwe would represent herself as the writer of “the first book of fiction written by a Flemish
48 author of African origin”, a self-representation which, given its explicit emphasis on
49 Unigwe’s foreign origin, hardly facilitates her access to the mainstream Flemish literary
50 canon. Recently, in the wake of the publication of Unigwe’s recent Dutch novel *Night
51 Dancer*, journalist Kathy Matthys (2011) asks Unigwe in an interview with the Flemish
52 newspaper *De Standaard* culturalist questions such as whether children growing up without a
53 father are nowadays still stigmatised in Nigeria or whether Unigwe is amazed about the ways
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3 'the Belgians' mourn, given that Nigerian funeral scenes described in her novel are
4 completely different. In the course of the interview, Unigwe interconnects her writing with the
5 Igbo language. "I have always been conscious to create an Igbo-atmosphere in my stories. My
6 three novels have the rhythm of the Igbo language" (my transl). In rather unexpected ways,
7 Unigwe's response resonates with *Becoming Black in Seven Lessons*, where Unigwe
8 ironically writes: "If you are a writer, never forget to acknowledge the fact that your writing
9 style derives from the great story-telling traditions of your people." In instances like this
10 interview Unigwe does not overtly criticise and at times even complies with culturalist
11 readings of her work, which may seem surprising in light of her satirical piece *Becoming*
12 *Black in Seven Lessons*. While *Becoming black in Seven Lessons* (2010) suggests Unigwe's
13 acute awareness of commonplace ideas of blackness affecting her life and (as we may also
14 assume) her writing in a European society like Flanders, to a certain extent her modes of self-
15 representation in meta-literary texts - such as interviews and book blurbs - do not counter nor
16 overtly question these ideas. It distinguishes her from other ethnic minority writers in
17 Flanders, such as the Moroccan-born Rachida Lamrabet, who vehemently refute ethnic or
18 cultural labels or references to 'allochthony' that could serve to distinguish them and possible
19 exclude them from imaginations of what 'home-grown' Flemish literature is and should be in
20 the future.

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22 For an understanding of Unigwe's authorial self-representation, it seems useful to
23 build on the notion of 'strategic exoticism' as put forward in the studies by Graham Huggan
24 (2001) and Sarah Brouillette (2007) on the intersections between postcolonialism and the
25 global literary market place.⁹ In *The Postcolonial Exotic* Graham Huggan defines a 'global
26 alterity industry' in which cultural difference is processed through exoticism, 'a mode of
27 aesthetic perception [that] effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender its
28 immanent mystery' (13). For Huggan, the most noticeably feature of writing by authors such
29 as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy is the way in which they balance their ostensibly anti-
30 colonial politics against their commercial viability as globally successful postcolonial
31 novelists and their work 'is designed as much as to challenge as to profit from consumer
32 needs.' Sarah Brouillette critiques Huggan's notion of strategic exoticism as it implicitly
33 distinguishes between those consumers "who seek mythic access to exotic experience" and
34 those "who actually have access to the reality that the other consumer can only ever wish to
35 possess" (19). Instead Brouillette convincingly finds it 'more fruitful to understand strategic
36 exoticism, and likewise general postcolonial authorial self-consciousness, as comprised of a
37 set of literary strategies that operate through assumptions shared between the author and the
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3 reader, as both producer and consumer work to negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of,
4 postcoloniality's touristic guilt' (Brouillette, 2007: 7).

6 Similarly, one may also assume that while being confronted with expectations and
7 limitations of the position of ethnic minority writer in Flanders available to her, Unigwe
8 strategically acts out the exoticism to which she and her work are relegated. At the same time,
9 this position allows her to launch her work and partake successfully in a transnational literary
10 system that transcends far beyond the localised Flemish literary field. The African suffix to
11 her self-label as a Flemish author may not make Unigwe's entry to the canon of Flemish
12 literature easier, but there is also no reason to believe that this is something what Unigwe
13 aspires to, since her English language writings and translations transcend the localised book
14 market in Flanders and the Netherlands and circulate in a transnational field of African
15 diasporic writing. In so doing, Unigwe's fiction illustrates Rebecca Walkowitz' assumption
16 that literature of migration 'reflects a shift from nation-based paradigms to new ways of
17 understanding community and belonging and to transnational models emphasizing a global
18 space of ongoing travel and interconnection.' (2006:533).

20 After her breakthrough as a novelist in Belgium in 2005, Unigwe has so far written
21 three more novels which were initially published in Dutch by Meulenhoff-Manteau, Unigwe's
22 publisher based in Antwerp, and only afterwards published in English, despite the fact that
23 she has continued to publish short stories in English language journals and anthologies that
24 are not available in Dutch translation.¹⁰ Unigwe's rather impressive list of international
25 accolades, including the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in 2012, suggests that her work
26 resonates not only locally but also internationally, as is also suggested in Elisabeth Bekers'
27 entry on Unigwe in the *Dictionary of African Biography* (2011: 101-103). Unigwe's oeuvre is
28 indeed shelved under black, African, Nigerian (diasporic) writing and considered to be part of
29 a wider stream of prose written by a new generation of Nigerian (diasporic) writing that also
30 embraces authors such as the anglophone Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Helen Oyeyemi
31 (Obi Nwakanma, 2008; Norridge, 2012). Unigwe, then, participates as an ethnic minority
32 writer in the Flemish literary circuit but is also able to transcend this small and localised
33 literary market perhaps more easily than any other Flemish writer, and use this position as a
34 spring board to participate in an Anglophone African diasporic literary field which enjoys a
35 much broader, not to say global, readership.

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3. Becoming Black in Antwerp's Red-Light District. Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street*

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In what follows, I explore how Unigwe's second novel *On Black Sisters' Street* destabilizes homogenous definitions of African diasporic womanhood. More specifically, playing with conventions of postcolonial autobiography and the short story cycle, *On Black Sisters' Street* renders an account of how four African sex workers in the city of Antwerp strategically relate to exoticist definitions of African womanhood that are central to the sex industry, while it is simultaneously conveyed that their personal histories surmount these.

On Black Sisters' Street recounts how four African women desperately seek to escape their miserable living conditions and respond to the lure of a better life in Europe. Sisi is an ambitious university student unable to find suitable work. Efe is a teenage single mother struggling to raise her son without support from his father. Ama has escaped an abusive childhood only to find her dream of escaping Nigeria crushed by a dead-end job. Joyce, without family, home or money, is abandoned by her boyfriend. In a house on 'Zwartzusterstraat' in the city of Antwerp, the women share their lives under the watchful eyes of their madam and her menacing assistant Segun. However, as illegal workers in Belgium, the women hide their true names and family histories from each other. It is only when Sisi tries to escape the prostitution world and is murdered, Ama, Efe and Joyce work through her death by gradually revealing their painful histories to each other and to the reader.

Composed of fictional autobiographies of the four women, *On Black Sisters' Street* invites us to consider the continued relevance of autobiography as a central explanatory category in understanding postcolonialism and its relation to subjectivity. The latter exercise has precisely been the focus of a series of recent studies that examine autobiography's philosophical resistance to universal concepts and theories and explore its intersections with the postcolonial enterprise to rethink norms of experience and knowledge (Hornung and Ruhe 1998; Gillian Whitlock 2007; David Huddart 2007; Innes 2007; Moore-Gilbert 2009).

On Black Sisters' Street firmly situates the life narratives of four African women within today's geopolitical power relations. The women's narratives include tragic episodes of poverty, war experience, sexual abuse and families torn apart in their home countries, which made them vulnerable to the call to enter the global woman's traffic network run by Oka Dele. On arrival in Belgium, they soon find out, however, that they have escaped their circumstances for a mirage – or 'fata morgana' to use the Dutch title of the novel – of a better and wealthier life in Europe, and soon see their dreams shattered. That *On Black Sisters' Street* draws on life writing to portray the experiences and memories of the four protagonist may not seem entirely unexpected. In their reinterpretation of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask*

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3 as an autobiographical narrative, Innes and Gilbert-Moore suggest that, to Fanon the
4 autobiographical mode to a certain extent emanates from colonial oppression. In the face of
5 colonial oppression colonised subjects are driven ‘to ask the question constantly “Who am
6 I?”’ (Innes 2007: 58; Gilbert-Moore 2009) From this perspective, it is not surprising that *On*
7 *Black Sisters’ Street* also deploys the (fictional) autobiographical mode so as to recount the
8 four women’s deprived circumstances.
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13 Voicing the memories and experiences of four African women in Flanders, the novel
14 offers a dreary portrayal of the submerged world of illegal prostitution in the red light district
15 of Antwerp city. It suggests the descent into disorientation and denial of worth that they face,
16 a recurring theme in many autobiographical works by postcolonial women (Innes, 2007: 58).
17 Working as sex workers, the women must pay back in monthly instalments the fee of 30,000
18 euros to Dele, the costs of their exportation to Belgium. With their fake passports withheld by
19 Madam and living under her close surveillance, the four women are almost literally
20 imprisoned in the house in the red-light district but also objectified in the position of black sex
21 workers satisfying white men’s sexual desires. “As for liking black women, Oga Dele had
22 told her [Efe] that they were in great demand by white men, tired of their women and wanting
23 a bit of colour and spice.” (84) Primarily, the women are indeed socially constructed through
24 exotic, sexualised codes of black womanhood.
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33 *On Black Sisters’ Street* centres on the experiences and voices of the women, who are
34 usually observed from the outside, as sexual spectacles sitting under red spot lights behind the
35 windows of the Schipperskwartier of Antwerp. On first sight, the novel offers the reader a
36 voyeuristic glance into these women’s lives, and seems to draw from the kind of tragic
37 sensationalism with which recent accounts on victimised Muslim women allow Western
38 readers a peek behind the veil (Whitlock 2005). Although lengthy scenes describe how the
39 women are confronted by all sorts of deprivations, violence and abuses both in Nigeria as well
40 as in Belgium, the novel’s aim is not to deplore the miserable fate of black sex workers who
41 are victims in Dele’s women’s trafficking network as well as in the male-dominated Western
42 sex industry. Rendering her account of the journey to Belgium, Ama says: “I made this
43 choice, at least, I was given a choice. I came here with my eyes wide open.” (114) The four
44 women are indeed not victims, as the novel conveys, but agents in a transnational world
45 making choices, strategic choices that are restricted by circumstance.
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54 If they want to be successful as sex workers, the women are to abide to gendered and
55 racialised norms and codes of behaviour. *On Black Sister’s Street* is indeed not so much an
56 account of four African sex workers than an exploration of how they become black sex
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3 workers. “Blue bra sprinkled with glitter and a matching G-string, boots up to her thighs, she
4 stood behind the glass, and prayed that no one would notice her.” (134) The novel clearly
5 suggests the constructed nature of black sexualised womanhood by describing how the four
6 women dress up and act upon the role behind the window that is expected from them. If it is
7 true, in the terms of Eva Pendelton, that “sex work is drag in that it is a mimetic performance
8 of highly charged feminine gender codes” (Pendelton, 1997: 183), to which we may also add
9 racial codes, than the novel portrays the four protagonists in the process of performing these
10 highly charged exoticist codes of black femininity.

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16 It is worthwhile considering at this point whether Brouillete’s notion of ‘strategic
17 exoticism’ is not only illuminating for Unigwe’s authorial position in the Flemish field but
18 also for how her novel relates the four African diasporic sex workers’ position in the Antwerp
19 sex industry. The four protagonists cannot generally be seen to change or subvert the
20 normative scripts they must follow; until Sisi’s failed attempt to escape at the end of the
21 novel, the women almost conscientiously do, say and behave according to what Madam and
22 others tell them. The disruptive potential, however, resides not in the women’s rewriting of
23 the codes of black sex workers, but in the narration of how they act out these codes. Unigwe
24 juxtaposes scenes of the women’s performance as black sex workers to self-reflexive
25 fragments that explicate their doubts, uncertainty, embarrassment or feelings of freedom,
26 while being disguised and text portions in which the women are seen to take an emotional
27 distance or critically comment on their behaviour. Unigwe describes what goes on in the
28 heads of the women, while they try to the best of their capabilities to please the men that
29 approach them. In so doing, their work is revealed to the reader as a strategic lie. Joyce
30 piously scrubs the make-up off her face on request of a regular customer who calls her
31 “Etienne’s Nubian princess.” She is ready to change the script and to change costume, as it
32 were, whenever this is desired. Her ultimate goal is not, however, to please white men’s
33 desire. The latter is but a means to achieve economic purposes and upward social mobility. Or
34 in the terms of Ama: “[...] the men she slept with were [...] just tools she needed to achieve
35 her dream. And her dream was expansive enough to accommodate all of them” (169).

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The constructed, performative dimensions of black female sex workers’ identity may
suggest an illusion of a ‘behind’ where the women act out their real and true core selves.
However, we are soon made aware that also in their daily lives, the women’s identities consist
of a series of provisional narratives. In this sense, Unigwe’s concept of identity overlaps with
the specific form of decentered models of personhood, which Bart Gilmore generally
identifies in postcolonial autobiographies (Moore-Gilbert 2009: xxi). More specifically, *On*

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3 *Black Sisters' Street* inherently connects the issue of storytelling to constructions of black
4 womanhood. Narrating their histories to each other – life writing being a formal way to
5 underscore the narrative dimension of identity – the women change the story about
6 themselves alongside the rapidly changing circumstances that have occurred to them. Sisi and
7 Joyce have changed their names and are originally called respectively Chrisom and Alek, the
8 latter, as she reveals, is Sudanese, not Nigerian like she made everyone in the house believe.
9 Alek refers to the UN refugee camp she lived in for a while as “a collection of sad stories”
10 (194). On arrival to Belgium, Sisi is determined to “shed her skin like a snake and emerge
11 completely new” (98). Madam invents the story of an escape from Liberia that Sisi must tell
12 about herself in the Immigration office. Reiterating one of Unigwe’s points in *Becoming black*
13 *in Seven Lessons*, Madam further adds: “White people enjoy sob stories. They love to hear us
14 killing each other, about us hacking each other’s heads off in senseless ethnic conflicts. The
15 more macabre the story the better.” (121) Sisi agrees to be Liberian, “in the next months she
16 would be other things. Other people. A constant yearning to escape herself would take over
17 her life” (121). While the performance of sexualised definitions of black womanhood is
18 central to the four women’s lives as sex workers, their family histories emphasise their
19 identities as a series of narratives invented strategically to suit the circumstances.

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31 *On Black Sisters' Street* complicates and refutes unilateral definitions of black
32 womanhood, which in the terms of the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, are
33 vulnerable to “the danger of a single story,” suggesting that if we hear only a single story
34 about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. In so doing, Unigwe’s
35 concept of identity also embraces “contingency, indeterminacy and conflict” (Linda Anderson
36 2001:108 quoting Paul Gilroy 2000: 128). It deploys a range of narrative techniques refuting
37 the static and single-sided ideas about female blackness with which the four women are
38 confronted during their work in the red-light district. *On Black Sisters' Street* draws on
39 various genres in its depiction of the life stories of the Nigerian women. In the women’s
40 stories, elements of the coming-of-age novel and the bildung roman are evident. Aspects of
41 the detective novel are incorporated in the “whodunit” search for an explanation for Sisi’s
42 death, features of travel writing in Sisi’s jaunts about Antwerp disguised as a tourist, and
43 magical realism in Sisi’s flight from her body to visit her parents and curse Dele’s family after
44 her death. *On Black Sisters' Street* integrates and interweaves these generic traditions in a
45 composite form.

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56 *On Black Sisters' Street* is indeed not a novel prioritising a single authorial voice nor
57 does it present a teleological journey of one protagonist. As suggested above, it could be seen
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3 as a fictional autobiography, or rather as a series of fictional autobiographies, as it focuses on
4 not one but the interspersed life narratives of four women. Its form could also be described as
5 a particular type of short story cycle, a “narrative of community” in Sandra A. Zagarell’s
6 sense of the term (1988; Harde 2007). Zagarell advances a theory of a women’s genre that
7 denotes a text’s ethos and subject matter, a privileging of community over self and a concern
8 with process rather than linear narrative’s conflict or progress. Though Zagarell’s focus is on
9 nineteenth century women’s short story cycles, her insights are fruitful to twentieth-century
10 narratives of community [which] “may be inspired most strongly by writers’ own racial,
11 ethnic, class, and or cultural traditions, and the changing roles of gender” (Zagarell, 1988:
12 527). Zagarell’s view of the short story cycle reverberates in unexpected ways with the
13 “relationality of subjectivity” that Moore-Gilbert identifies as one of postcolonial
14 autobiography’s central features (Moore-Gilbert, 2009: xx).

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16 Reading *On Black Sister’s Street* as a narrative of community reveals how *On Black*
17 *Sisters’ Street* structurally resonates with ongoing mobility and circular movements of
18 migration, rather than with linear-chronological notions of progress and plot development.
19 The chapters entitled “Zwartzusterstraat” render an account of events that occur in the
20 present, and are geographically situated in the city of Antwerp – more precisely in the house
21 in Zwartzusterstraat (*Black Sisters’ Street*). These chapters are interwoven with chapters
22 focusing on the individual life stories of the women and bring into view their separate,
23 idiosyncratic pasts and futures. Eventually, Ama and Joyce return to Nigeria, Efe stays in
24 Belgian prostitution but moves up on the social scale as she now employs African women.
25 Sisi’s ghost leaves her body and travels back to Nigeria too. Their individual stories follow
26 the ongoing movement back and forth between Nigeria and Belgium. Similarly, the basic
27 story line prioritises circularity and ends where it begins, with an account of Sisi’s death.

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29 Additionally, Innes argues that postcolonial autobiographical writing often plays a
30 significant role in establishing the subject’s sense of location and belonging (Innes 2007: 64).
31 In the case of *On Black Sisters’ Street*, it is through the short story cycle structure that a
32 community of women is instantiated, one which is composed through the focus on individual
33 autobiographical experiences. The fragmented life stories of the four women are narrated in
34 the first person, which are interspersed by the third person narration of Sisi’s migration to
35 Europe and the events leading up to her death. The movement between individual stories, set
36 in divergent geographies and dissimilar timeliness creates a weaving effect that rejects
37 essentialist notions of black female identity, while simultaneously insisting on a commonality
38 of experience. “Their different thoughts sometimes converge and meet in the present, causing
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3 them to share the same fear. But when they think about their past, they have different
4 memories.” (40) *On Black Sisters' Street* is indeed a polyphonic collage of individual stories
5 creating a mosaic portrayal that defies the essentialist vision of the exotic African woman. Its
6 mode of narration reflects the multidimensional mobility of African migrant women.
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10 Furthermore, the women living together in the African microcosm in their house on
11 Zwarte Zusterstraat are supposed to share Nigeria as their place of origin, but they are not
12 bound by anything except for their situation in the present. As we come to know their
13 individual life stories, it is gradually conveyed that these women have had very different lives
14 and would not be in contact in normal circumstances. The women share no sense of belonging
15 or commonality based on their national or cultural background. When at a party a South-
16 African man addresses her as his sister, Ama vehemently replies that she is not his sister, and
17 turns his back on him. The rejection of family ties is suggestive, also for the mutual
18 relationships among the four protagonists. Though they share the same house, their
19 conceptions of home and family are not defined in national or cultural terms. The house, a
20 spatial metaphor for the four black women's community in Europe, is a place of conflict that
21 offers no true sense of belonging, it is a cold place without a heart(h) – the conventional
22 symbol of the beating heart of the home, the fireplace, is fake (32).
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31 The women know little about each other and feelings of hostility and suspicion
32 prevent them from developing intimate relations. “They were strangers without words
33 between them.” (115) The women shroud their histories in ambiguity or keep them covered. It
34 is “silence which has, again, become the community they share” (39). In the course of
35 narrating their histories to each other, however, they develop a sense of belonging in each
36 other's company. Through the intimacies of storytelling, the women discover their communal
37 bond and shared predicament, which gradually ignites a sense of home. It is indeed the act of
38 story telling that constitutes the women's community in the house, which in the penultimate
39 section, is described:
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46 “[...] like a family home. The communal kitchen and the shared living room bound the women. They
47 met there when they yearned for company but could always retire to their rooms for some privacy. It
48 was where they could escape the glare of the Schipperskwartier, live a life that did not include strange
49 men with sometimes stranger requests.” (273)
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52 It is Efe who initiates camaraderie among the women through story telling in lieu of Sisi's
53 death, because in grief “she feels an affinity with these women in a way she has never done
54 before” (41). Her history involves painful memories of a pregnancy at the age of sixteen,
55 when she was laughed at by the neighbouring women in Lagos who exclude her from the
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3 community. The status of outcast, combined with her mother's premature death and her
4 father's aloofness towards family intimacy, had ruptured the sense of safety and belonging
5 that are conventionally associated with notions of home. In a similar vein, Joyce, whose
6 family is brutally murdered and whose lover severs their relationship to appease his family,
7 recognizes that "the women in the house on Zwarte Zusterstraat were the only family she had"
8 (235). In the face of the already pronounced social role of the exotic, sexualised black woman
9 that constitutes their becoming in Belgium, the protagonists of *On Black Sisters' Street* do not
10 only negotiate a diverse, narrative sense of selfhood, but also a black women's community
11 which does not depend on ethnic origins, cultural descent, gender, geographical or national
12 affiliations but rather on empathy and understanding which develop through listening to each
13 other's distinctive histories and personal memories.
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23 4. Conclusion

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26 In this essay, I have explored how social constructions of blackness affect and inform
27 the authorial self-representations of the Nigerian-Belgian writer Chika Unigwe as an ethnic
28 minority writer in the Flemish literary field. It has been shown how ethno-cultural ideas of
29 authorship are institutionally endorsed, which shape notions of Unigwe's black authorship
30 and affect the ways in which Unigwe's oeuvre is read. Unigwe is sharply sensitive to the
31 social construction of blackness, as illustrated by *Seven Lessons in Becoming Black*, but
32 nevertheless seems to act out the ethno-culturalist authorial role which is assigned to her in
33 Flanders.
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40 It may be argued that taking up the role of black author in Belgium is a form of
41 "strategic exoticism", a role which does not entirely define nor confine Unigwe, considering
42 she deploys it to launch her work and participate in a global literary system of African
43 diaspora writing, while transcending the exoticised position as an ethnic minority in the
44 Flemish literary field that is available to her. The writings by Chika Unigwe, are indeed
45 written, printed, translated and read not only in Flanders but in multiple places, indicating the
46 growing need to adopt a more transnational perspective if we are to accommodate the several
47 communities in which cultural products like Unigwe's writings, are nowadays produced and
48 received and in which also various authorial positions can be asserted.
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55 In light of this latter point, *On Black sisters' Street* is not only a tale of choices and
56 displacement set against the backdrop of the Antwerp prostitution scene but it also reveals
57 itself to be a book that theorizes its own cultural mobility. While, like Unigwe, on their arrival
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3 to Belgium the four protagonists of the book enter a social imaginary in which they perform
4 the already pronounced role of the exotic black woman which is available to them, *On Black*
5 *Sisters' Street* underscores on the one hand how the women perform this role and on the other
6 hand situates their performance in the larger context of their individual biographies,
7 suggesting it is but one out of many strategic narratives they choose to narrate about
8 themselves. Chika Unigwe's writing - its production, circulation and reception – transcends
9 far beyond the exotic category of Flemish fiction of African origin, while circulating in
10 multiple transnational contexts. Similarly, *On Black Sisters' Street* exposes how black
11 womanhood is not merely about taking up the role of the exotic sexualised black woman in
12 the popular European perception, but also, and perhaps more importantly so, about how
13 women across the limits of cultures and social forces of power and domination, improvise and
14 find spaces to re-describe themselves, while creating their transnational worlds anew.
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ENDNOTES

¹ Unigwe, Chika. 'How to be an African.' <http://www.african-writing.com/nine/chikaunigwe.htm> African Online issue 9.

² The inherently bilingualism, not to say multilingualism, that characterises Unigwe's oeuvre distinguishes her from most contemporary writers in Flanders. The latter more often than not write principally in Dutch – Dutch being their mother tongue - and participate primarily in the Flemish-Dutch literary field, and only see their work afterwards translated to other languages. In her review of *On Black Sisters' Street*, Fernanda Eberstadt describes Unigwe's language as "a rich mix of schoolmarm British and pidgin English, spiked with smatterings of Igbo and Yoruba" 'Tales from the Global Sex Trade' In: *The New York Times*, 29 April 2011.

³ This description also appears on the back cover of *On Black Sisters' Street*.

⁴ For a more extensive outline on the generally shared desire for allochtonous writings in Flanders, see Sarah De Mul (2013) "The Netherlands is doing well. Allochtonous writing talent is blossoming there." Defining Flemish Literature, Desiring allochtonous writings.' In: Wolfgang Beschnitt, Sarah De Mul & Liesbeth Minaard (eds.) *Literature, language, and multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 123-148.

⁵ For a more detailed outline of Chika Unigwe's writings and other African writing in Belgium, see Bekers, Elisabeth. 'Chronicling Beyond Abyssinia. African Writing in Flanders, Belgium.' In: *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe*, ed. Elisabeth Bekers, Sissy Helff & Daniela Merolla (Matatu 36; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2009. 57-69.

⁶ Stemming from the Greek roots allos/other, authos/same and chtoon/soil, the term 'allochtoon' has nowadays replaced the term 'migrant' to refer to the generations of citizens with non-native cultural backgrounds living in Flanders and the Netherlands. According to the Dutch governmental CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek/Central Office for Statistics), an "allochtoon" is a person of whom at least one parent was born abroad. The CBS distinguishes between first-generation allochtoons who themselves were born abroad and second-generation allochtoons who were born in the Netherlands. Besides, the CBS makes a distinction between western and non-western allochtoons. See L. Minnaard, 'Multiculturalism in the Dutch literary field' In: W. Beschnitt, S. De Mul & L. Minnaard (eds) *Literature, language, and multiculturalism in Scandinavia and the Low Countries* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2013). For critical analysis of the related terms 'migrant'/'allochtoon' and autochthony, see J. Blommaert & Jef Verscheuren. *Het Belgische migrantendebat: de pragmatiek van de abnormalisering* (Antwerpen: ipra, 1992); Bambi Ceuppens, 'Allochthons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium' In: *African Studies Review* 49, Number 2, September 2006, 147-186; Peter Geschiere. *The Perils of Belonging. Autochthony, citizenship, and exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University Press, 2009).

⁷ For instance, in the workshop *Vreemd in het schrijven* ("foreign in/to writing"), organised by *Passa Porta*, an international literary centre in Brussels, debuting young talents were guided towards publication under the auspice of distinguished Flemish authors - Kristien Hemmerchts, Stefan Hertmans and Peter Verhelst. *Vreemd in het schrijven* is nowadays discontinued, though other cultural organisations – vzw Kifkif - are nowadays offering similar creative writing courses and projects specifically (though not always exclusively) aimed at an audience of aspiring writers from ethnic minority descent.

⁸ To mention just a few recent occasions of public discussions that took as their starting point the difficult emergence of allochtonous writers in Flanders, Literair salon – Allochtone auteurs organised by Gynaika Zuiderpershuis, 17 september 2009, MO* debat Allochtone lezers en schrijvers, Boekenbeurs 9 November 2010.

⁹ Huggan's notion of strategic exoticism has been further refined by Chris Bongie, who points out that Huggan has no easy answer to the question of the political value of the awareness and 'resistance' exemplified by strategic exoticism since postcolonialism's always-already insertedness into global marketplace. Chris, Bongie *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature*. Liverpool UP 2009. 311. On strategic exoticism in New African Writing such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, see Akin Adesokan. 'New African Writing and the Question of Audience.' *Research in African Literatures* Volume 43, Number 3, Fall 2012.

¹⁰ Published in 2007, *Fata Morgana* appeared in English as *On Black Sisters' Street* with Jonathan Cape (2009) Vintage (2010) and Random House (2011). The book confirmed Unigwe's entry to the international literary field as a Nigerian writer in English – in 2012 Unigwe was nominated for the Wole Soyinka Prize and won the NLNG Prize for Literature. Unigwe's third novel *Nachtdanser* was published in January 2011; its English language edition *Night Dancer* followed one year later (Jonathan Cape 2012). Specifically Unigwe's second novel *On Black Sisters' Street* received positive acclaim in the Anglophone global literature market, with reviewers of major UK and US-based newspapers *The Independent* (Evaristo, 2009) or *The New York Times* (Eberstadt, 2011) praising the book's literary merits and a nomination for the 2011 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

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4 In 2012, also Unigwe's third novel *Night Dancer* has been praised internationally (Evaristo, 2012) and she was
5 nominated for the prestigious Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature with *On Black Sisters' Street*.
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