

Ambiguous agency in the vulnerable trafficked body: reading Sanusi's *Eyo* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

Dina Ligaga

Dina Ligaga is Associate Professor at the Department of Media Studies, University of the Witwatersrand. Her latest project is a co-edited special issue for *Agenda* titled, "Gender and Popular Imaginaries in Africa" (2018).

Email: dina.ligaga@wits.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1264-4298>

DOI 10.17159/2309-9070/tv1.v.56i1.6274

Ambiguous agency in the vulnerable trafficked body: reading Sanusi's *Eyo* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

The narrativization of the trafficked body in the novels of Abidemi Sanusi and Chika Unigwe allows for a contemplation of Europe in African migrant imaginaries as both promise and failure. Sanusi's *Eyo* is a narrative of a ten-year-old girl who is trafficked to the United Kingdom as a human sex slave. The novel draws attention to the tensions that define her being/unbeing in Europe and beyond, even after a brave escape from her traffickers. This precarious existence is enhanced in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, whose main characters exist in Europe selling their bodies while existing in states of continuous vulnerability. In reading these two novels side by side, this article explores the discursive meanings of trafficked bodies and how traumatic existence allows for an engagement with Europe as illusory in the imaginaries of African women who cross borders into Europe. The article argues that while the female characters are vulnerable, they retain an ambiguous agency contained within their ability to survive and remain resilient in the face of atrocities for borders crossers. The narrative form of the novel allows for an exploration of what this agency looks like in the face of extreme vulnerability. **Keywords:** trauma, trafficked body, border crossing, vulnerability, narrativity.

The trafficked body as vulnerable?

The tendency in scholarship on human trafficking is to explore trafficked subjects within a victim-perpetrator dyad (Hodge and Lietz 163). In doing so, something is lost in the way of narrating the circumstances, memories, and experiences of those who are trafficked. The broader scholarship becomes encased in the macro-politics of rights and international law. While relevant, such scholarship overlooks the significance of narration, memory, and history pertaining to individuals affected by the trafficking enterprise. In engaging with two novels, Abidemi Sanusi's *Eyo* (2009) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), I explore the ambiguous agency encased within the discourse of vulnerability of the trafficked body. I delve into the narratives of the lives of five women and their entanglements with violent pasts that persist into the present. Within contexts of precarity, I consider what an 'escape' to Europe offers or promises to those who supposedly leave their problems behind. These include escape from poverty, joblessness, and violence and the pos-

sible embrace of wealth, social standing, and general wellbeing. However, the things that these women desire remain elusive because of vulnerability to violent pasts and presents. I therefore ask questions around how these women navigate the spaces they exist in, what I call ambiguous agency. I use a feminist epistemology that demands the recognition of suffering and resilience as a way of navigating extreme violence.

The vulnerability referenced above is signaled in existing scholarship on the trafficked body which, in turn, exists within broader scholarship on 'human trafficking,' a "term commonly used to describe the present-day slave trade" (Hodge and Lietz 163). Trafficking involves an element of coercion, whether economic or social (Bernhart 490). As Melynda Bernhart (490) indicates, trafficking often involves the "smuggling of migrants" in which one person pays fees to another in "order to bring him or her safely across an international border." The trafficked person in this case is traded for purposes of exploitation of their labor, often against their will (Bernhart 490-1). Human trafficking is, in essence, about supply and demand, an essential aspect of what was termed "the white slave trade" in the late nineteenth and twentieth century (Monzini 3). In the two novels that I consider in this article, I read trafficking as moving beyond mere smuggling (aiding a person across an international border for a fee) to include the sustained exploitative relationship that ensues once the person trafficked crosses the border. That relationship is one of power, with the trafficked person becoming dependent on the trafficker for their wellbeing and livelihood. The exploitative relationship is also often one in which the trafficked person has no clear means of escape or ability to return home (place of origin). Among several tactics, the trafficker often holds the trafficked person hostage, requiring a form of payment, usually a large sum of money. The trafficker will also often hold on to the trafficked person's documentation, such as a passport, to prevent the trafficked person from leaving. Given that the trafficked person is a source of income for those who benefit from their labor, a desire by the trafficked person to leave might elicit some form of response from the trafficker, including punishment and, sometimes, even murder. This form of control renders the trafficked body vulnerable in many ways.

I explore this vulnerability against a broader background of memory and narration of violence. In doing this, I trouble the meaning of vulnerability and create possibilities for engaging with the lives of those who are trafficked in ways that render them present and visible. I also engage ideas of survival and resistance within these extreme conditions. I take vulnerability to mean exposure to danger, hurt, pain, and violence. Yet, I read vulnerability as a form of action for survival and protest. Vulnerability would here suggest a discomfort, a troubling, a form of knowing, a facing of fears, and a form of protest. Judith Butler (32–62), in her chapter on "survivability, vulnerability and affect," urges us to think of vulnerability as an opportunity to resist the precarity of life. Exposing the body to vulnerability makes it possible to expose oneself to pain and other affects. A form of questioning is born out of taking risks

and being unsettled in the face of violence. If being vulnerable allows one to gather the will to live, survive, and endure, then reading the trafficked body as a marker of survival is a way of unthinking a narrative of victimhood in which the trafficked body is invariably caught.

My reading does not in any way negate the violence that happens upon the trafficked body in the novels. The presence of violence in fact signals what Saidiya Hartman (4) terms “the terror of the mundane” in which subjection penetrates the essence of being human. As Hartman has argued, the focus on the shocking spectacle of violence is not particularly helpful as it simply reiterates and makes familiar a violation of human rights. What is perhaps necessary is a refocus on the ordinary to investigate what that terror looks like and how those involved respond to that terror. Hartman is concerned with the idea of subjection and critically engages with how even the very ideas of pleasure and will reiterate dominant ideologies. Hartman is useful in thinking about the ambiguity of agency in this case as it appears impossible to think of trafficked bodies as having any form of agency. Yet, they survive. It is therefore useful to think about a methodological shift that acknowledges the place of affective modes of encounter and experiences as guiding principles into reading both novels. I try to resist falling into the trap of reading Eyo, Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce as objects for mapping the terrain of vulnerability. I recognize their located/spatial experiences as modes of reading the violence around them. On this, I echo Danai Mupotsa’s (“If I could write this in fire/ African feminist ethics for research in Africa”) call for a feminist epistemology in order to avoid essentialist and oversimplified analyses of black women’s identity. Rather, as she suggests, a theoretical standpoint that does the work of centralizing a marginal figure inevitably encourages a reading against dominant perceptions.

Theoretically, I recognize Butler’s argument of vulnerability as an opportunity to rethink politics of victimhood, recognizing the body’s ability to exist within an already warped system. She argues, for instance, that as a precariat, one is already exposed to neoliberal systems that violate one’s right to live a comfortable, violence-free life. She, however, adds that the layer of symbolic systems that guide and discipline identity add to layers of violence, and that before one can resist these, one has to be vulnerable to their existence. In many ways, Butler rethinks vulnerability not necessarily as a weakness, or a position of permanent victimization, but also through the lens of effort and solidarity, as a place of resistance. It is not a place of passivity, but a place from which resistance can be launched. It is a refusal to remain continuously vulnerable to harm. In addition, it is useful to think of vulnerability not as something to overcome, but as a space for mobilizing (political) action. For the embodied subject, this action can come in the form of exercising speech, but also having knowledge (knowing/seeing as a form of resistance); it can come through mere refusals to remain in positions of continuous victimhood and helplessness. It is a refusal to succumb to the horrors of trauma suffered.

Butler's position as recounted above, however, is optimistic. In cases where social, economic, and political conditions make it impossible to resist, such a position makes it cruel to hope for change. It is important to recognize this moment as embedded in the idea of agency. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant eloquently reminds us that it is important to configure our optimism for change and a better future through imagination and fantasy, something that can help to recalibrate our hopes and desires. For Berlant (122), while it is possible to tell narratives of violence as something that happens to "us," "stories we tell about how subjectivity takes shape must also represent our involvement with the pain and error, the bad memory and mental lag, that also shape our desire's perverse, twisted [...] indirect routes to pleasure and survival." She suggests taking note of the dreams, the concerns, the pain, the pleasure, and other ordinary attachments that make it possible to navigate the present.

I hope to tease out some of the thoughts outlined above through a reading of *Eyo* and *On Black Sisters' Street* in order to engage with the complexities of African women who travel to Europe with and through their bodies. These are women who, willingly or unwillingly, become trapped in the horrors of human trafficking. *Eyo*, for instance, is sent to the UK to serve as a nanny by her father with the aid of his friend. Unfortunately, the violent context in which she exists comes undone, and she ends up becoming a sex slave. Throughout her travels, *Eyo* is never in control of her body. As a child, she remains vulnerable to all forms of violence because of this lack of autonomy. A man called Dele, who promises them a life of plenty, lures the women in Unigwe's novel, *Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce*, to Europe. While three of them (except *Joyce*) go to Europe willingly, they are hopeful for a dream that will take them away from the squalor and indignity of their respective present existence. In each case, the violence of poverty and sexual attacks, as well as the sheer dominance of patriarchal power, define the past contexts from which they come. Traveling to Europe, rather than alleviate the violence, brings it into sharp focus. From the isolated existence that these foreign bodies are thrown into, to physical harm, to the quiet threat of *Madam, Dele, and Segun* who want their cut in the trafficking trade, these women seem to be unable to imagine alternative presents and possibilities for other lives. Indeed, when *Dele* orders the murder of *Sisi*, it is to make his mark as the puppet master and to remind those who work for him to never cross him. In this extreme context, what does survival and resilience look like?

Escaping precarious pasts

Literature on violence against women and children suggests that it occurs principally because of the subordinated positions of the victims (Watts and Zimmerman 1232). Violence renders bodies vulnerable and open to abuse. The sheer ability to survive and continue to live, in full recognition of what the trauma means on one's body, is extremely important. Feminist scholarship encourages a culture of nam-

ing and exploring the pain and violence as a form of public therapy. The work of black feminists such as bell hooks (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) and *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (1994)); Patricia Hill Collins (*Black Feminist Thought* (1990)); and Pumla Gqola (*Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015) and *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist* (2017)), to name a few, give us vocabulary for thinking about alternative epistemologies which encourages new formulations for thinking about knowledge. Using Black feminist phenomenology, I engage with the context in which violence shapes the lives of the characters in the novels that I review.

Though told in the third person, *Eyo* centers around a ten-year-old girl, whose multiple experiences of violence form the core of the novel's narrative. It is clear from the onset that the writer needs to latch the reader onto excessive emotion of pain and violence and to evoke these as the framework for reading the novel. The exercise of writing *Eyo*, for Sanusi, is seemingly an exercise of exploring deep feelings about an issue of great concern to her. One senses the urgency and emotional investment with which Sanusi as a writer embeds the novel. The writing and the novel become a "corporeal activity," to follow Elspeth Probyn's (76) argument, in which the author emphasizes questions of ethical responsibility in readers who engage with the text. This is reiterated in Sanusi's (n. p.) opening excerpt at the beginning of the novel, aptly titled, "A word from the author," in which she declares that *Eyo* is her way of drawing attention "to the twin issues of child trafficking and sex slavery in the United Kingdom." In the same excerpt, she pleads with the reader to "do something. Keep an eye out" for the "thousands of Eyos in Europe" (n. p). This is a book unapologetically laden with emotion. Wanting to go beyond a mere recounting of statistical fact, the author chooses narrative, through which she explores and exploits the emotional milieu, in order to obtain the most possible reaction from her readers.

To draw the reader in, Sanusi begins by mapping out the violent context of *Eyo*'s background. This importantly provokes the shape that Europe takes later on in the novel. Rather than presenting it as a clear-cut safe haven away from the violence, the author builds up a narrative that prepares the reader for the harrowing reality that *Eyo* finds herself in when she travels from Africa to the UK. Right from the beginning, *Eyo* is presented as a young girl child in perpetual risk of male-inflicted violence. Her body is always already open to forms of violence, through physical touch, lewd looks, and verbal abuses. However, because of her precarious existence in a poverty-stricken location in Nigeria, it is difficult to isolate male violence as the only form of violence that happens to her. Her mother and other women also exist within what both poverty and patriarchal power can do to a woman's body and, in essence, their own participation in *Eyo*'s violence and violations cannot be taken lightly or dismissed.

The hyper-patriarchal setup of *Eyo*'s violent background is a way for the reader to consume her story. The reader first encounters the protagonist in the context of

child labor, for instance. Not only is she out of school, she is selling ice water placed on a tray on her head on a hot dusty day in the middle of a busy city center. She is also caring for her eight-year-old brother, Lanre. The contrast between the two children is sharp, and even though they are two years apart in age, Eyo has the responsibilities of an adult. Lanre is the absentminded little boy who, despite helping his sister to sell ice water, is constantly thinking of ways to escape from her, in search of a good game to play. He is airy and childlike whereas, we are told, she is reed thin but strong with the “tenacity of a warrior queen from days past” (3). Already, from the beginning, Eyo is presented as a once-child, a warrior, strong, beyond her body.

The novel significantly signals the co-existence of violence and tenacity as a way of embracing the desire for survival in Eyo. It also introduces us to Eyo’s versions of justice and hope in a terrain that is so deeply embedded in violence it is impossible to apply rational thinking to it. Her first violent encounter in the novel is with a man who wants to steal the money she has made selling ice. While Lanre’s instinct is to run (typical behavior for a child who is scared), Eyo’s reaction is surprising: “You will kill me first!” (5), she says to the man, pushing him. For her, “the thought of going home empty handed and facing her father gave her the strength of Samson” (5). Immediately after, she screams, and a crowd quickly forms, subjecting the man to a horrible form of mob justice. As the man is being burnt to death, Eyo continues selling her ice water, untouched by the screams coming from the man. This is a form of justice for her. Here, it is evident that Eyo is so familiar with violence (even death) that she can push it aside and continue with her chores. This could be a moment in which the novelist demonstrates an over-exposure to trauma, but it could also suggest a way in which Eyo has learned to navigate life’s precariousness, taking justice in whichever form it comes. I also want to suggest that this is a moment in which Eyo turns into herself for strength. It is her way of looking at life more broadly and of refusing to accept the finality of violence, in many ways feeding into a broader discourse of refusal in which “rational” thinking is circumvented and denied finality (Magano; Mupotsa, “Being/Becoming an Undutiful Daughter: Thinking as a Practice of Freedom”).

Whether speaking on the subject of the undutiful daughter or the queer body in African literature, the work of Mupotsa and Thato Magano suggest a politics of refusal of what circulates as complete and rational in African literature and cultures. It is to be willful, as Sara Ahmed argues in *Willful Subjects* (2014). Eyo refuses to deal with the obvious trauma of a man being killed in front of her. In fact, we are made aware that she does not process the trauma at all. While trauma studies suggest that problematic social behavior can be traced back to moments of trauma, in this case we see Eyo navigating the traumatic space by refusing to engage with it, thereby allowing herself to continue to exist in her own world. She refuses to take on the excess violence of the moment. Importantly, the author does not return to this moment as

having any discernible effect on Eyo. Nevertheless, I also want to maintain that this violent moment presents as a part of the context of violence in which the protagonist must exist and that she has merely developed tools for surviving it.

This opening moment is crucial in thinking about how Eyo controls her vulnerability, namely, in ways that enable her survival. When she gets home, the first person she encounters is the landlord, lying down on a bench outside, looking at her and her brother, "through hooded eyes" (Sanusi 9). The novel suggests that the landlord is potentially hazardous to the children. Eyo has learned to avoid the landlord. We also learn that at one moment when she is alone in the house, the landlord sees it as an opportunity to attack her. However, a neighbor sees him and raises alarm. In many ways, the protagonist is able to navigate the violence around her through her own tactics of survival, but also through the help of female neighbors who are aware of her vulnerable body. Indeed, the men in the novel constantly prey on her. In one scene, for instance, we learn that her father routinely rapes her. She has learned to avoid him by sometimes pretending to be asleep. Her father, figuring out the tactic, threatens to rape her little sister instead. This prompts Eyo to 'agree' to being raped. She finds that she has to negotiate her vulnerability, and she sometimes tries to control it.

Unigwe's characters in *On Black Sisters' Street* are older and their vulnerability presents differently to Eyo's. All the women in the novel, except Joyce, travel to Europe willingly. The women all go through a man called Dede, who is in charge of trafficking women, hoping for a better life, to Europe. Unigwe deals with commonly circulated themes of the Nigerian novel: poverty, collapsed state, aspirations, and the desire for a better life. Her novel is about selling dreams and fantasies. However, unlike Berlant's idea of fantasy as something owned and personalized, the fantasy that the character Dele sells in the novel is one generated by a greedy system that has little to no care for the lives of those involved (Berlant 1). This is perhaps why Sisi feels like a prisoner in Europe and takes to creating her own fantasies of what an alternative life looks like for her. It is why Joyce, Efe, and Ama choose to pointedly detach their lives in Europe from their lives in Nigeria. Dede's fantasy is an elusive promise, a "cruel optimism" to quote Berlant, as it presents something that is unachievable yet presents as a possible promise. In Europe, the women realize that they are being held captive by a trade that prevents them from feeling human, making the fantasy of the good life seem feeble and unrealistic.

Sisi is a university graduate with a business degree whose dreams of becoming rich and helping her parents out of poverty are thwarted by political corruption in Nigeria. According to her, Nigeria is not a place from which to dream. She has the responsibility of looking after her parents, who make it clear that she is their last hope to live a decent life. Her lover, Peter, a clerk in a government office, is burdened with taking care of all his siblings, as well as his parents. The weight of it all is too

much for Sisi and, as she puts it, "Peter's life was a cul-de-sac" (Sanusi 27). Leaving Lagos is, for her, a form of escape from being stuck. When Sisi meets a young woman at a salon, she is excited to find out that she can leave for Europe and earn a living there. Dele, the man in charge of the young woman, immediately offers Sisi an opportunity. Though suspicious, she sees this as her only opportunity out of feeling stuck in Lagos. Europe becomes her future.

Like Sisi, Efe sees Europe as a haven for multiple freedoms. Having fallen pregnant at the age of sixteen, Efe imagines Europe as offering her a second chance at life. Efe's mother dies and her father spirals into alcoholism, leaving her to act as parent to her siblings. She soon develops a relationship with a rich older man, Titus, to help supplement the little money she gets from her father. She falls pregnant and Titus abandons her and the child. Efe drops out of school to tend to her family and to take care of her son, all the while being shunned by her neighbors. She meets Dele when he offers her a cleaning job at his firm. Not long after, he asks her to travel to Belgium, "Next door to London" (Unigwe 81), and she agrees. As Monzini has shown, women who sometimes find themselves in conditions of slavery are lured into it because of extreme poverty. Once again, Nigeria is painted as a hopeless place, where only people with money have control. Belgium is where she would earn "easy money" (84).

While Sisi's and Efe's contexts offer an opportunity to think about questions of poverty, dignity, and a refusal to settle for a life of hopelessness, Ama and Joyce have much more violent pasts. Ama is a rape survivor, having been raped by her father from the ages of eight to thirteen. Her father is a respected pastor whose rigid religious routines stand in contrast with his violent behavior towards a little child. He only stops the rape when she begins having her period, in a way erasing the possibility of detecting his violence. As a child, Ama wills her mother to see her pain and confusion, but her mother refuses. Much like Eyo's mother, there is a possibility that her mother is aware of the abuse but chooses not to confront her husband for fear of losing her livelihood. Unigwe presents this scenario as both violent and ordinary. Ama's life is tainted because of something that should not have happened. Yet, her mother's reaction is a reminder of how much this remains a part of everyday reality. Indeed, she blames her daughter for stirring trouble and is quick to help find an alternative home for her in the city. Ama's life is in essence one that she wishes she could escape. She desires a new future, and given her background, Europe presents an opportunity.

Joyce, like Ama, is also a victim of atrocious violence. At the age of fifteen, Joyce and her family are caught in a civil war in which *Janjaweed* militia murders them in front of her. She is gang raped and left unconscious. However, she makes her way to a refugee camp where she meets and falls in love with a Nigerian soldier, Polycarp. Being Sudanese, Joyce is aware of her foreignness, but hangs on to the love she has

for Polycarp as a way of healing herself from her past. Polycarp's family is, however, extremely xenophobic and unwelcoming. As a solution, Polycarp introduces Joyce to Dele, promising her a new start in Europe as a well-paid nanny. Joyce leaves for Belgium and feels completely betrayed by Polycarp when she finds out what she is meant to actually do in Belgium. Later in the novel, she reflects on this betrayal as possibly the worst in her life. Considering everything else she has been through, this sense of betrayal seems acute.

Poverty and violence, therefore, form the basis from which all five women find themselves in Europe. The women travel because of the hopelessness of their current contexts. Without a doubt, all five women hope for a better life. However, none of them are in control of their own bodies, exposing them to all forms of injustice.

Europe: a fragile, claustrophobic reality

Europe presents as a claustrophobic reality through the eyes of the characters in the two novels under review. The claustrophobic sensation is born out of how these women experience Europe from small rooms, airports, and embassies. Eyo's airport experience on her way to England is one of curious wonder laced with fear. Despite the violence of her context, her home is familiar to her, while Europe presents as an unknown future. Her attitude towards Europe is therefore tentative. On the one hand, she is distressed by the fact that her parents have forced her to leave home, but on the other, she feels that Europe will give her what she has never had—a good education, money, and a good life. In other words, she feels as though she will be a child again and that she will have a chance to grow up in a relatively stable environment in Europe. This space of hope is important, especially because her reality is anything but hopeful. The protagonist learns quickly that her life in England will be a continuation of the life she led in Nigeria. Sam, the man who picks her up from the airport, places a knowing hand on Eyo's thigh even before she arrives in her new home, giving her a clear sense that he sees her as a sex object. Beyond sexual violence, she encounters the wrath of Lola, Sam's wife, who puts her to work the minute she arrives in her house. Soon, Eyo is routinely beaten for unintentional errors and misunderstandings and, at times, locked up in small rooms as punishment for "disobedience."

Eyo sees Europe as an illusion through the lives of Sam and Lola's children. Tolu is her agemate while Joshua is Lanre's agemate. She sees what her life could be. However, the adults are blind to the same. Sam sees a potential sex slave, while Lola sees her as a source of cheap labor. In order to maximize Eyo's value, both Sam and Lola begin to outsource her services. Lola starts running a day care center from her home, urging her friends to bring their children so that Eyo can look after them for a fee. Naturally, she does not receive any payments. Sam rapes the girl multiple times, subsequently pimping her to his friends in return for some money. In this way, Eyo

gets pregnant and miscarries. At that moment, we learn that Lola knew what was going on and said nothing. Her rage is directed at Eyo, whose physical body suffers from beatings from both Sam and Lola. During the day, the girl continues to work as a nanny and housemaid. This theme of the vulnerable, unprotected child shapes the novel. In the second part of the book titled, "African Lolita," sensing that their nosy neighbor might draw attention to the sex slave in their home, Sam 'donates' Eyo to the Big Madame, a human smuggler who makes money pimping the bodies of women from Africa. Because of Eyo's age, Big Madame does not feel compelled to care for her in any way beyond making sure she is fed and clothed for her customers.

I want to argue that Eyo's treatment, while harsh, is not out of script with the manner in which trafficked bodies are already pre-conceived. Paola Monzini engages extensively with the formula used by traffickers to create human slaves. Because the human body inherently rejects the possibility of being forced into action, it has to be broken. In the case of Sanusi's protagonist, this is done through physical and emotional abuse. While the adults recognize the fragility of Eyo's body, they see it as a possibility to break her into conformity.

For the women in Unigwe's novel, the reality is equally disappointing. Sisi, for instance, panicking about paying Dele back, forces herself to deal with the pain of having sex with strangers. Indeed, her first client rapes her, a harrowing experience. Sisi resolves to never allow herself to feel the pain again and prepares herself mentally to withstand the experiences.

The reassurance of narrativity: unpacking subjectivity?

In her analysis of *On Black Sisters' Street*, Daria Tunca (n. p.) categorizes the narrative's characters as both subjected to their condition, but also agentic. She discusses the task of balancing the narrative between the two positions and comments on how the author, using narrative fragmentation, achieves a nuanced engagement with human trafficking. Narrative, as Tunca (n. p.) argues, enables exploration of humanity and its many complexities. It is from this location that one can rethink vulnerability as a trope in the two novels. Feminist theorists identify vulnerability as a feminized concept associated with weakness and dependency (Gilson 71). Vulnerability can, however, be used to "think about alternative ways of theorizing the harms of rape" (Gilson 71). As Gilson shows, to recognize vulnerability necessitates more responsibility and responsiveness towards those who are harmed. It also exposes systems of dominance, such as those pointed out by Butler and Hagelin. Moreover, I like the idea of shared vulnerabilities that Gilson gestures towards, in which she argues that this becomes a basis for ethical responsiveness but also a reckoning of one's own vulnerabilities. According to her, human beings seek justice because we are affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, and empathy (Gilson72). Social justice is born out of that moment. The vulnerable subject is not merely a tool for research, but a call to action.

Here, I cite the work of feminists who argue for a re-theorization of violence of vulnerable bodies outside of a discourse of the familiar. In her book on rape, Gqola speaks about the location of rape in discourse in which focus on the victim has rendered the act of rape meaningless. She examines the ways rape exists within “cycles of complicity,” which make it difficult to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions (Gqola, *Rape* 7). Through direct engagement with rape as it circulates in public, feminists can begin the work of dismantling power structures that sustain the act. In a similar vein, I find the work of Hartman useful in this regard. Hartman argues that the focus on the violence of slavery as spectacular is not helpful. I find, in both works, a need to name and engage with the violence, not as spectacular but as part of the systemic violence that shapes it. I suggest in this paper that exploring incidences of narrative rupture occurs when we catch glimpses of characters’ thoughts, fantasies, wishes, feelings, and other affects.

Eyo’s encounters with violence can be defamiliarized if the focus of analysis is placed on her as a subject rather than a victim. Her responses to violence are useful ways of working through this. It is important for the reader to recognize moments of pain rather than merely the action itself. The novelist, for instance, invites the reader to envision the moment of pain of a miscarriage after one of Eyo’s encounters with Sam’s friend. The doctor who attends to her makes explicit the horror of the situation, but she remains quiet and trapped in her broken body. Such moments offer space for reflection on what such violent acts mean and help to name what the violent act is in its brutality. When Ama is raped by her father, her innocence as a child is juxtaposed against the violence enacted on her. The reader is presented with the violent moment through Ama’s responses to the pain. She takes to speaking to an imaginary friend and to finding a way to protect herself from the horrors of the experience. Merely eight years old, she does not fully comprehend what has happened to her. She, however, is clear on the rules. She does not tell. However, through narrative, we are privy to this moment of intense pain, and her response to that pain allows us insight into the impossibility of that moment. Here, we are placed in close quarters with the perpetrator of the violence and are able to engage with what that violence means to the child. In Joyce’s case, her response to her family being murdered is to lash out. However, this is short-lived as the men jeeringly rape her as a way of showing her her place. She turns into herself at that moment, refusing to engage with those around her, learning new ways of being human in these extreme conditions. Polycarp becomes one avenue through which she rediscovers herself; an avenue that she discovers is unstable. Pain becomes an avenue through which the characters can re-think their existence. Indeed, it is from a place of pain that Sisi develops an ability to dream. In Belgium, for instance, she goes on long walks, pretending to be a rich tourist from elsewhere and imagining a life that continues to elude her. These trips reassure her of her humanity and give her a chance

to recoup her lost dignity. When she discovers that Segun, the house handyman, had overheard her pretend to be a tourist on one occasion, she is so embarrassed that she cannot speak of the incident with the other women. These dreams of hers are also a source of hope for a better life.

Within the context I have painted above, what does it take to refuse to remain scared? In her chapter, "Unmaking vulnerability," Sarah Hagelin remarks that patriarchal culture teaches women and children's bodies to remain scared in order to avoid injury. Interestingly, the human body suffers pain, regardless of what body it is: male or female. What is it that gives men the courage to experience pain but not women? To be vulnerable means to remain compliant to a system that purports to protect. However, what if that system is the one that causes the pain in the first place? Hagelin considers what happens when pain does not rob a woman of her subjectivity. If vulnerability is "a system of beliefs, images and narratives that imply a capacity to be harmed" (Hagelin 3), how can we think around it to find and understand ways in which the female body continues to survive? For her, to live (continue to breathe) becomes an act of refusal.

The authors' ability to evoke feelings of helplessness, disgust, confusion, terror, horror, and pain is precisely the key to understanding the forms of social action they intend to provoke. In a section on women and dignity, Chielozona Eze argues that the characters in Unigwe's novel make political and moral demands on readers. For Eze, it is important to pay attention to the manner in which the characters attempt to recoup their dignity. Through Sisi, this is achieved through the way in which the narrative centers around her pain, while at the same time, weaving in her hopes and dreams. For Eze (97), Sisi embodies a "yearning for a world in which people treat one another in dignity."

In *Eyo*, moments of reprieve are extremely rare. However, the final chapters of the novel are worth pondering. After the protagonist returns home from Europe, she realizes her father no longer lives at home. It dawns on her that her mother has finally taken action after her father started the rape ritual on Eyo's little sister, Sade. This is a tense moment for Eyo. With utter shock and horror, she asks her mother, "[W]hy didn't you say something when you knew he was doing it to me?" (Sanusi 333). The sense of betrayal is evident in her voice, but she is also grateful that her father is no longer a part of her new reality. Sanusi uses such moments of helplessness to heighten awareness of the child's female body in a world of violent men. However, the helplessness is often followed by action.

Other glimpses of hope exist in *Eyo*. A character called Bola, a woman whose husband in Nigeria convinces her to leave her children to travel to Europe to become a sex worker so they can earn money to feed the family, takes pity on Eyo and strives to make the latter's existence marginally better. While Bola is 'saved' from a harsh life by Big Madame who helps her travel to Europe, she sees the injustice that Eyo

and Nkem, two young girls, endure in the Big Madame's brothel. She tries to fight it, attempting to reason with the Madame about the unethical situation. She takes Eyo under her wing and teaches her to read. She teaches her to smile again and to imagine a different life. Indeed, leaving the house after marrying a white man (one of her customers), she returns for Eyo to save her from that life, only to find out that Big Madame has given the girl away for free to a street pimp named Johnny. Apart from Bola, Father Stephen, a catholic priest who works with street-based sex workers, notices Eyo and tries to save her. At 14, Eyo does not trust strangers. Besides, Johnny watches her like a hawk and does not allow her to chat with anyone. Eventually, she manages to escape and run to the church for refuge.

The narratives, though offering glimpses of hope, also show the hopelessness of the lives of sex slaves in Europe. Eyo returns home only for her family to send her back to Europe because of poverty. Sisi is murdered when she tries to escape to lead an easier life. Efe, Ama, and Joyce remain under Dele's employ until their bills are paid. The three women find ways of living their dreams later, but these lives are marked with deep pain and violence.

Conclusion

I explore the idea of vulnerability not merely as a way of engaging with victimhood, but as a narrative device through which subjectivity and agency can be understood. This agency is tentative and ambiguous as it exists within continued subjection. Reading this agency through the migratory body, I signal the inability of these bodies to settle, at home or in Europe. They are in constant motion, as a way of navigating the violence. Movement to and from Europe shows a search for stability that is never there. We see this starkly in the concluding chapters of the two novels. Eyo returns home, only to realize she no longer has space there, and makes the decision to return to Europe, willingly this time, as a sex slave. Sisi is murdered because of her refusal to continue working as a sex slave. Her search for stability leads to her murder. We are told that the other women, Ama, Joyce, and Efe, eventually return to Nigeria, but remain caught up in the industry in many ways. Even Ama, who opens up restaurants and schools for girls, is still marred by her past. To represent the trafficked body means to contend with the constant process of being a migrant, of never quite belonging. It is to be content with finding agency in unfamiliar places and catching glimpses of hope.

Looking at the lives of five female characters, I consider the meaning of present-day slavery and the ways in which this is navigated by those who seem to have no hope. Narrative, I argue, provides a space for reflection through which memory of the violence that shapes the past is allowed into the present. These memories shape resilience and allow for the characters to live through the indignities of their respective trafficked contexts. I use a predominantly black feminist epistemology to consider

the intersections of poverty, gender, and sexuality and how these inform an understanding of women's pain. The authors, Unigwe and Sanusi, use narrative to provoke moral and political action. While Sanusi's work is overtly ethically driven, Unigwe asks for a more nuanced understanding of the conditions in which the women exist. Such a nuanced reading, she seems to suggest, offers an opportunity for deep reflection on the complexity of human lives in conditions of precarious existence.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Urban Connections in African Popular Imaginaries at Rhodes University, as well as the National Research Foundation (NRF).

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Willful Subjects*. Duke U P, 2014.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke U P, 2011.
- Bernhart, Melynda. "Trafficking." *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*. Ed. Melissa Ditmore. Greenwood, 2006.
- Butler, Judith. "Survivability, Vulnerability and Affect." *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2010, pp. 32–62.
- Collins, Patricia H. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2009.
- Eze, Chielozona. "Feminism with a Big 'F': Ethics and the rebirth of African Feminism in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*." *Research in African Literatures* vol. 45, no. 4, 2014, pp. 89–103. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritlite.45.4.89>.
- Gilson, Erinn C. "Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 42, no. 1, 2016, pp. 71–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/686753>.
- Gqola, Pumla D. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Jacana, 2015.
- _____. *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist*. MFBooks Joburg, 2017.
- Hagelin, Sarah. *Reel Vulnerability: Power, Gain and Gender in Contemporary American Film and Television*. Rutgers U P, 2013.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford U P, 1997.
- Hodge, David R. & Cynthia A. Lietz. "The International Sexual Trafficking of Women and Children: A review of the literature." *Affilia* vol. 22, no. 2, 2007, pp. 163–74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109907299055>.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Pluto, 2000.
- _____. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge, 1994.
- Kaze, Douglas E. 2009. "Environment as Script of Poverty in the Third Generation Nigerian Novel: A Reading of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Abidemi Sanusi's *Eyo*." *Research Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 13–21.
- Magano, Thato. *Of Patriarchy, Madness, Mythology and the Queer in Nation Making: A Critique on Tropes of Sexualities in Post-Colonial African Literatures*. Unpublished MA Thesis. U of the Witwatersrand, 2018.
- Monzini, Paola. *Sex Traffic*. Zed, 2005.
- Mupotsa, Danai. "Being/Becoming an Undutiful Daughter: Thinking as a Practice of Freedom." *Transforming Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Eds. Ruksana Osman & David Hornsby. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- _____. "If I could write this in fire/African feminist ethics for research in Africa." *postamble* vol. 6, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–18.
- Probyn, Elspeth. "Writing shame." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Eds. Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth. Duke U P, 2010, pp. 71–90.

Sanusi, Abidemi. *Eyo*. WordAlive, 2009.

Tunca, Daria. "Redressing the 'Narrative Balance': Subjection and subjectivity in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*." *Afroeuropa: Journal of AfroEuropean Studies* vol. 3, no. 1, 2009.

Unigwe, Chika. 2009. *On Black Sisters' Street*. Jonathan Cape, 2009.

Watts, Charlotte & Cathy Zimmerman. "Violence Against Women: Global scope and magnitude." *The Lancet* vol. 359, no. 9313, 2002, pp. 1232–37. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(02\)08221-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(02)08221-1).