Counterbalancing Single Stories on Migration: The Subversion of Stereotypical þÿ R e p r e s e n t a t i o n s i n C h i k a U n i g w e s B e t t e r N e v e r T h a n H

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Counterbalancing Single Stories on Migration:

The Subversion of Stereotypical Representations in Chika Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late*

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General Introduction

In a 2016 interview co-published by German tabloid *Bild* and American news website *Insider*, Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban asserted, "If somebody takes masses of non-registered immigrants from the Middle East into a country, this also means importing terrorism, criminalism[,] anti-Semitism and homophobia". These words, which are not an isolated example (see European Network Against Racism 10–15), are a telling illustration of how inflammatory discussions around immigration have been in Europe, particularly since the beginning of the so-called "migration crisis" around 2015. Moreover, Orban's claim also highlights how European discourses about non-European immigrants are often constructed on stereotypes and oversimplifications.

Amid such polarized discourses, the reading of *Better Never Than Late*, by Nigerian-born author Chika Unigwe, came to me as a real breath of fresh air. Indeed, the 2019 short story collection allowed me to become more familiar with perspectives that are not sufficiently heard in European mainstream discourses. The collection, which features ten interconnected short stories, depicts for the main part the lives and struggles of a community of Nigerian migrants residing in the Flemish town of Turnhout (north-eastern Belgium). These stories address themes such as family issues, survival, loss, and broken dreams. Many of the collection's characters are linked with one another and revolve around each other in some way, which creates an organic mosaic of relationships, feelings, and experiences. This plurality of experiences can be seen as a central feature of *Better Never Than Late* (hereafter *Better Never*) because it allows the book to provide its reader with many different angles, which all come together to nuance and complexify mainstream narratives about migrant experiences. Sarah Banday argues in this regard that "[t]hrough this collection Unigwe firmly moves away from the notion of the single migrant story".

As suggested by Banday, *Better Never* can indeed be connected to what Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the single story". In her famous 2009 TED Talk, Adichie explains that single stories are representations of people, places, and ideas that are based on a unilateral perspective and therefore lack completeness and nuance. These representations essentialize people and cultures; they transform complex narratives into deceptively oversimplified discourses—hence their danger. Throughout her talk, Adichie advocates the circulation of more diverse and complete stories to challenge such oversimplified narratives. To this end, she directly refers to Chinua Achebe, an extremely influential Nigerian author who

inspired both Adichie and Unigwe, and his desire to create "a balance of stories" (14:21–14:25)—i.e., a state of affairs in which all people are able to tell their own story without being dispossessed by narratives imposed by external powers (Achebe, *Home and Exile* 79).

As discussed in Banday's review and as illustrated by Orban's earlier claim, representations of migrants in Europe are undoubtedly subject to the danger of a single story. As it will be argued throughout this dissertation, discourses on migration in the West are rife with received ideas and oversimplifications, and these play an important role in Unigwe's *Better Never*. Indeed, the collection features many elements that, at surface level, can be regarded as stereotypical: migrant conmen, fake marriages, scenes of domestic violence, depressing backstories, depictions of Africa as lawless and of Europe as a safe haven. The list goes on. As a result, the short stories can be unsettling at first glance, since one could argue that they help perpetuate common single stories. However, the collection does not stop there. Indeed, by using elements such as character development, plot twists, or narratorial comments, *Better Never* always manages to give new depth to these initial stereotypical representations: the opportunistic migrant ends up falling in love with the woman whom he tried to con, the oppressed migrant woman is shown to fight back for her dignity, and Belgium is revealed to be a second-rate, almost undesirable host country. By maintaining this tension between displaying and challenging oversimplified representations, the collection concurs with Adichie's claim according to which stereotypes are not outright untrue, but rather incomplete (13:06–13:13). In other words, Unigwe does not entirely reject stereotypes in *Better Never*. Instead, she deceptively plays into them so that she can complete them, create a new picture out of them. This ensures that the single story of migrants in Belgium can be rejected in favour of a set of multilateral and multidimensional perspectives.

To understand how *Better Never* challenges single stories on migration, it is also necessary to delve into the ways in which the book makes use of its literary features. In a 2020 interview, Unigwe states that fiction "gives a more rounded, more nuanced narrative [than non-fiction]" ("On Writing" 420). Starting from this claim, the present analysis will discuss how precisely *Better Never* is able to use its own fictionality to nuance common stereotypes. For this purpose, various aspects pertaining to fiction will be extensively discussed as part of the analysis. These aspects, which are commonly called *elements of fiction*, include characterization, plot, narration, setting, themes, and style (Russel). Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which said elements contribute—alone or in combination—to the nuancing of single stories throughout the collection.

To sum up, this dissertation aims to explore how Chika Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late* counterbalances various single stories on migration that are circulated by Western discourses. More precisely, the present analysis will discuss how *Better Never* uses (elements of) fiction to subvert and shed new light on common stereotypical representations, which ultimately allows the collection to build a more nuanced and multilateral story about migration in Belgium. For this purpose, I will use single stories as focal points of my interpretative framework. Indeed, by isolating the various single stories on migration that are addressed in the book, I will be able to point out how Unigwe makes use of elements of fiction such as plot, narration, or characterization to add new perspectives to these oversimplified representations.

To this end, the present dissertation will be divided into five main sections. The first will focus on Chika Unigwe's life and career. The second will consist of a brief summary of the collection's short stories. The third section will centre on the concept of the single story. It will discuss Adichie's TED Talk in more detail and explore how her position can be compared to that of her source of inspiration, Achebe. A discussion on the ways in which Unigwe herself relates to the concept will follow. The fourth section will be dedicated to this dissertation's method. It will first explain how the single story can be used as a basis for the interpretative process. It will then discuss the importance of elements of fiction, which will be used as tools for the literary analysis. The terminology surrounding migration and the various terms that can be used to refer to people in displacement will also be expounded on. Finally, the fifth section, the heart of this dissertation, will consist of a textual analysis and close reading of the collection. In this section, various single stories that appear in *Better Never* will be isolated and extensively discussed. The aim of this textual analysis is to study how the collection interacts with stereotypical representations pertaining to migration and how these interactions can lead to the rise of new, more complex perspectives on the matter.

1. Chika Unigwe: Life and Work

Since this dissertation aims to extensively discuss the short story collection *Better Never Than Late*, it is first necessary to have a few words about its author, Chika Unigwe. This section will cover relevant information about Unigwe such as her life story, her work, her career, her reception, and her world views.[1]

1.1. Biography

Amarachika "Chika" Unigwe was born on 12 June 1974 in Enugu, south-eastern Nigeria. The sixth out of seven children, she grew up in a middle-class, conservative Catholic Igbo family (Unigwe, "The Danger"). She frequented the Federal Government Girls' College in Abuja and subsequently obtained, in 1995, a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The same year, she married a Belgian civil engineer, whom she had met during her university years, and moved with him to Turnhout, in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The first years of her stay there were marked by strong feelings of loneliness and isolation, mainly due to cultural differences as well as her initial inability to express herself in Flemish/Dutch (Unigwe, "An Interview" 54).

Unigwe nonetheless quickly found her way in Flanders' academic landscape, as she obtained her Master of Arts degree in English at the Catholic University of Leuven in 1996. After a two-year stay in Seattle (2000–2002), she settled back in Belgium and, in 2004, obtained her PhD at the University of Leiden (The Netherlands) with a thesis entitled "In the Shadow of Ala: Igbo Women Writing as an Act of Righting". From 2007 to 2010 she served as city councillor in Turnhout under the banner of the Christian Democratic and Flemish party (*CD&V*). In 2013, she left Belgium and returned to the United States, moving to the Atlanta area, where she still resides today.

Since moving to the U.S.A., Unigwe has been involved in various important literary enterprises and institutions, confirming her status as a rising figure in the field of international English literature. A few of these undertakings include her role as a judge for the Man Booker International Prize in 2016; her appointment as a Bonderman Professor of Creative Writing at

[1] This section relies on biographical information found in Bekers; *Schrijversgewijs*; Tunca, "About Chika Unigwe"; Tunca, "Biography"; Tunca, "Primary Sources"; Unigwe, "An Interview"; and Unigwe, "Writing Africa".

Brown University (Providence, RI) from 2016 to 2017; her setting up of the Awele Creative Trust in Nigeria to support young writers (of which she is today the Creative Director); and her appointment as core faculty member at Georgia College and State University in 2020.

1.2. Literary Works

Chika Unigwe started to write during her university years in Nsukka. The year 1993 marked her debut as a poetry writer with the collection *Tear Drops*, followed in 1995 by a second collection, *Born in Nigeria*. Up until 2003, she wrote poems that were published in periodicals or on websites. A few years after settling in Turnhout, she also started to publish short stories. In this regard, the writing of short stories has been a constant in Chika Unigwe's literary career, with an almost uninterrupted streak from 2003 until today. Most of these stories were written in English, some were written in Dutch, and many were awarded local or international prizes (see below). Besides poetry and short stories, she also wrote two educational books—*Itje at School* (2003) and *A Rainbow for Dinner* (2003).

While many of her works were published as short, standalone pieces, the author also wrote several books of fiction, including four novels. Although originally written in English, her first novel, *The Phoenix*, was initially published in Dutch translation in 2005 (under the title *De Fenix*) and would only be published in English two years later. On a related note, the initial release in Dutch of a work originally written in English is a pattern that has characterized all her novels thus far. *The Phoenix* follows the life of Oge, a woman of Nigerian origin who has moved to Turnhout with her Belgian husband. The novel focuses on issues such as loneliness, estrangement, and grief. Her second novel, *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009—Dutch version: *Fata Morgana*, 2007), revolves around the lives and experiences of three Nigerian women and one Sudanese woman working in the *Schipperskwartier*, Antwerp's red-light district. Thanks to its compelling characters, its engaging story, and its vivid discussion of issues such as prostitution, survival, and women's agency, *On Black Sisters' Street* is often considered to be Unigwe's most famous and successful work (Tunca, "About Chika Unigwe"). With her third novel, *Night Dancer* (2012—Dutch version: *Nachtdanser*, 2011), Unigwe shifted the focus entirely back to Nigeria. Here, the story follows the quest of Mma, a young Nigerian woman looking for answers about the life of Ezi, her estranged deceased mother. The novel is centred on the difficult choices that women have to make in an (Igbo-)Nigerian society still strongly governed by patriarchal norms. Unigwe wrote *The Black Messiah*, her fourth novel, in 2012. However, as of today the book is still only published in Dutch translation (*De zwarte messias*,

2013). This fourth novel is marked by another change of focus, this time going all the way back to the eighteenth century by narrating the life story of Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who became an important figure of the British abolitionist movement. A new novel titled *Leaving Meshach* is scheduled to be released in late 2022. In an interview with the Nigerian newspaper *Punch*, the author revealed that the novel "is set in Enugu (and partly in Atlanta, GA) in the 2000s and tells the story of Nani, a vulnerable teenager who is lured in by a much older man, Meshach, a self-proclaimed Man of God" ("Award-winning author").

Unlike its four predecessors, Unigwe's fifth fiction book, *Better Never Than Late* (2019), is not a novel but a collection of ten interconnected short stories. As mentioned in the general introduction, the collection primarily focuses on a community of Nigerian migrants living in Belgium. Although the book also features important non-migrant characters, all these are linked with said community in one way or another. While some of the stories are original, others such as "Finding Faith", "Becoming Prosperous", and "Love of a Fat Woman" are rewritings of Unigwe's earlier productions. In a 2019 interview, the author describes the writing process behind *Better Never* as follows: "I worked and reworked the stories over many years; many of them followed me from Belgium to the US" ("On Writing" 416). The collection can therefore be seen as the culmination of a continuous refining process, which took place over several years. In addition, *Better Never* is also noteworthy because it is the first long fiction work by Unigwe that was initially published in English.

Besides creative writing, Unigwe has also been active in academia. Indeed, she has published numerous essays about literary, political, and/or social issues. Journalism has become an important part of her life too, as she began to write articles for Nigerian newspapers such as *Daily Times* and *Daily Trust* and international ones such as *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*.

Unigwe's work has generally been positively received, and the author has been awarded many prizes and distinctions for her novels and short stories throughout her career. In Flanders, she notably won a 2003 contest organized by the *Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding* ("Flemish Department of Employment and Professional Training") for the short story "De smaak van sneeuw" ("The Taste of Snow"). Moreover, Unigwe quickly gained international recognition well beyond the borders of Flanders. Without being exhaustive, she won the 2003 BBC Short Story Competition with her story "Borrowed Smile" (2003), she was a finalist of the 2004 Caine Prize for African writing thanks to her short story "The Secret" (2004), and she received the 2012 Nigeria Prize for Literature for her novel *On Black Sisters' Street*. She also received numerous fellowships, including one awarded by the UNESCO-

Aschberg programme for artists and cultural professionals. Today, Unigwe is regarded as a successful author of growing international renown, on par with other famous Nigerian(-born) figures. Indeed, as stated by Elisabeth Bekers, "Chika Unigwe has been hailed as a 'third-generation' Nigerian writer alongside other notable young writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chris Abani" (Unigwe, "Writing Africa" 26).

1.3. A Committed Writer

As the above intimates, Chika Unigwe is a politically committed writer in many respects. This is evident not only from the themes of her literary works, but also from her interviews and non-fiction pieces. Indeed, her works often address issues such as racism, migration, or women's agency. While the situation and hardships of black people living in Western countries often stand at the heart of her writings, she never hesitates to condemn aspects of her home country that she deems problematic too, as shown by her numerous critical articles posted in Nigerian newspapers such as *Daily Trust*. Many of these issues are directly tied to patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, political inefficiency, and the fact that, according to her, "[t]radition is great but not all of it is good" ("Our People"). Most importantly, Unigwe is a strong advocate for female empowerment and an even stronger opponent of attacks on women's agency, dignity, and bodily autonomy (see, for instance, Unigwe, "Aluta Continua"). Knowing all this, it comes as no surprise that themes such as patriarchy, migration, and racism pervade many of Unigwe's fiction works, including *Better Never Than Late*.

2. *Better Never Than Late*: Synopsis of the Short Stories

As mentioned in the general introduction and in subsection 1.2., *Better Never Than Late* is a short story collection that primarily focuses on a community of Nigerian migrants residing in Belgium. Although each story can be read as a standalone piece, the collection stands out by its interconnectedness, and the way in which its narratives can all be seen as part of a broader network. The following pages will provide a summary for each short story so that the collection's contents can be outlined before this dissertation starts to analyse the book in more detail.

The collection's first short story, "The Transfiguration of Rapu", revolves around the triangular relationship between Gwachi, a Nigerian migrant, Hilde, his German "paper-wife" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 2), and Rapu, Gwachi's Nigerian wife, whom he brought over to Belgium. Most of the story takes place at Prosperous and Agu's apartment, a common meeting place for the Nigerian community in Turnhout. Throughout the pages, Gwachi is revealed to love both his wives equally and is unable to commit to either one of them. When both Hilde and Rapu become pregnant almost at the same time, he is forced to make a choice and plans to leave Hilde a few months after the birth of her child. However, as the story unfolds, Rapu confesses to Prosperous that she is pregnant from another man, for whom she has decided to leave Gwachi. Moments later, Agu comes back to the apartment, announcing that Gwachi has asked Hilde for a divorce.

"Finding Faith", a rewriting of *The Phoenix*, tells the story of Oge, a woman of Nigerian origin who learns to come to terms with the accidental death of Jordi–Okwukwe, her five-year-old son. After the incident, her marriage with Gunter, her Flemish husband, falls apart, as both spouses see things differently as far as grief is concerned (the coldness of Belgian funerals, in particular, is excruciating for the Nigerian-born woman). However, thanks to a cathartic stay at her parents' house in Nigeria, Oge eventually regains faith in her relationship, and, when she comes back to her apartment a few days later, her husband is waiting for her, also ready to move forward.

Although Prosperous appears and is mentioned in many of the collection's short stories, "Becoming Prosperous" can be regarded as the only one that truly focuses on the character's experiences and struggles. As she is cooking for her now-authoritarian husband and his friends,

Prosperous is led to remember how emancipated her life was back in Nigeria. Through numerous flashbacks, the story shows how religious riots prompted Agu to leave his home country, asking his wife to follow him in the process. Driven by the recent achievements of her university friend Ifeatu (who is running for governor in Nigeria), Prosperous resolves to start chasing her dreams too. "Becoming Prosperous" ends with the title character confronting her husband, who has been ordering her around throughout the story.

"Everyone Deserves Grace" starts where "Becoming Prosperous" left off. Coming back from work, Agu reflects on his recent actions. Indeed, the story reveals that, hurt in his pride, he threw boiling water at Prosperous. As Agu is getting closer to his apartment, he starts to remember how his childhood, lived in poverty, made him insecure and how this insecurity was exacerbated after arriving in Belgium. At the end of the story, Agu vows to let go of his pride, ask Prosperous for forgiveness, and become a better man.

Set in Nigeria, "Better Never Than Late"[2] tells the story of Kambi, a young middle-class woman who becomes convinced that her maid Ijeoma is a witch. Because of her cousin Ada's influence, Kambi is led to believe that her unsuccessful romantic life is the result of Ijeoma's curses. After violently forcing her young maid to confess, Kambi and Ada bring the girl to a church, where she is subjected to a horrifying exorcism ceremony. As the story unfolds, Kambi starts to deeply regret her actions, as she feels more and more sorry for Ijeoma.

"Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am" also centres on a Nigerian man using marriage as a means to obtain legal papers. The story focuses on Godwin and Tine, his Flemish wife. Their relationship is shown to be relatively unhealthy, with Godwin making fun of his overweight wife as well as being an overall untrustworthy partner. Nevertheless, in a twist of events, Tine is revealed to be as cunning as her husband. Towards the end of the story, she indeed confesses to Prosperous that she has been using Godwin all along for her own satisfaction.

The collection's seventh story, "Cleared for Takeoff", centres on the character Gbolahan, an ex-footballer raising his young daughter Bola alone. Horrified to hear his daughter ask him if she needs to be white to become a teacher, he comes to understand why Ego, his estranged wife, decided to leave Belgium to pursue her dream career in the United Kingdom.

[2] With regard to the title of the collection and the title of some of its stories (i.e., "Better Never Than Late"; "Heart Is Where The Home Is"), I choose to follow Unigwe's own capitalization, even if it appears to be unconventional at times.

To protect Bola and help her chase her dreams, Gbolahan decides to swallow his pride, reconnect with Ego, and ask her to take care of their daughter in London.

Like "Everyone Deserves Grace", "Love of a Fat Woman" can be seen as another "direct sequel". The story is set in Nigeria, during a visit that Godwin and Tine pay to the former's family. This stay at Godwin's house is far from being a pleasant one. Indeed, his mother and sisters do not approve of his marriage with Tine, and they constantly remind him of that fact. When Godwin learns that his grandmother is coming from her village to see his wife, he dreads their encounter. However, Tine and Godwin's grandmother are instantly able to connect with one another. When observing their joyful interactions, the Nigerian man realizes that he might be in love with Tine after all.

"How to Survive a Heat Wave" tells the story of Añuli, a woman of Nigerian origin who was raped on a train by Belgian students. As she stands in her kitchen with her friends Prosperous and Oge, she tries to talk about her ordeal, but "the unholy trifecta of fear, humiliation and shame" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 110) prevents her from doing so, leading her to talk about unrelated topics instead. As the story progresses, Añuli remembers her schoolmate Nwadiuto, who was raped in a hostel, blamed for it, and committed suicide shortly after. Remembering Nwadiuto has a triggering effect on Añuli, who is ultimately able to tell her friends about what she went through.

Finally, "Home Is Where The Heart Is" focuses on a young migrant woman who asks her Nigerian mother to come live with her in Belgium. After they become reunited, the protagonist notices that her mother is not happy in Turnhout, mainly because of how lonely life is in Belgium. One day, as she comes back home, the main character sees her mother "sobbing and rolling on the floor" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 123). Without a second thought, she decides to buy her a flight ticket so that she can return home.

The summary of all these short stories makes it possible to highlight how narrowly interconnected *Better Never* is as a collection. This is shown by various "overarching" elements such as recurring characters (Agu, Prosperous, Oge, Godwin, Tine), recurring settings (Prosperous and Agu's flat), recurring patterns (dysfunctional relationships, late-story catharses), and direct continuity between some stories.

3. Theoretical Background: The Single Story

This third section will focus on the concept of the single story. First, it will further discuss the importance of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story". It will then analyse how Adichie's ideas can be related to Chinua Achebe's concept of the balance of stories—a connection that Adichie herself makes in her TED Talk. Finally, this section will discuss Chika Unigwe's own approach to the idea of the single story.

3.1. Adichie and the Danger of a Single Story

3.1.1. The Single Story: Definition and Problematization

The single story is a concept that was coined in a famous 2009 TED Talk by Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977–). In the talk, titled "The Danger of a Single Story" (hereafter "The Danger"), Adichie explains "how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story" (01:36–01:43). The main thesis of her talk is that some people, places, or situations are too often portrayed through what she calls "single stories"—i.e., representations that are based on one perspective and are therefore oversimplified and unnuanced. She adds, "[T]o create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" (09:18–09:28). The power of repetition thus allows the single story to essentialize people and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Throughout her talk, Adichie proceeds to give many examples of the single stories that have impacted her life and the lives of those around her. She describes, inter alia, how her early perception of literature was heavily influenced by British and American standards (00:26–01:28); how Africa is perpetually described as a land of beautiful landscapes and unimaginable violence (05:56–06:20); how she caught herself thinking that her house boy's poor family could not produce anything of value (03:07–04:04); and how, after spending some time in the United States, she started to perceive Mexicans as undesirable migrants (08:19–09:17).

According to the Nigerian-American author, single stories are not harmless. Indeed, she argues, "The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (13:03–13:16). In other words, Adichie does not systematically reject the elements on which single stories are constructed. What she does find problematic is the fact that single stories are

restrictive, unnuanced, and essentializing. They lead to oversimplified representations, and these can have dangerous consequences. As she further explains, the single story "robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (13:50–14:00). Single stories erase the many complex stories that can be told about a person, a place, or a concept and replace these with homogenized representations, which can lead to division, and dehumanization.

In her talk, Adichie also underlines the fact that single stories are not created in a vacuum. Quite the opposite, she argues:

> It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali". It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another". Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali. How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. (09:30–10:03)

Single stories are not only based on complex power dynamics, but they also help perpetuate specific power relations. One instance of this, which is mentioned in the TED Talk, is the way in which representations of Africa as wild and uncivilized can be traced back to Western literature in the context of European expansionism and colonialism (06:27–07:23). Single stories are therefore marked by various social parameters such as who created and perpetuates them, who can be seen as their victims, what benefits a single story brings to its "teller" and, conversely, what kind of harm it causes to its "target".

As advocated throughout the TED Talk, single stories need to be challenged because of their harmful consequences. In "The Danger", two potential courses of action are suggested in this regard. The first one consists in better understanding the whys and wherefores of a single story, in other words, unravelling the way in it has been established and perpetuated. Indeed, as Adichie reminds her audience, it is necessary to keep in mind that single stories should never be seen as the starting point of a people's (or a place's) narrative:

> The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, "secondly". Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have and entirely different story. Start the story

> with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story. (10:11–10:43)

Single stories may appear to be self-evident, but there are always prior events, anterior reasons that can explain how and why they came to be—even though these reasons tend to be concealed. As mentioned above, various social parameters can lie behind the origin of a single story. Therefore, to weaken the danger of such narratives, one also needs to understand who created them, who perpetuates them, and who has suffered from them.

The second measure that one can take to challenge the single story of a place or a person consists in, as Adichie phrases it, "engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person" (13:43–13:46). Numerous other stories need to be circulated and valued in order to complete the oversimplified picture created by the single story. "The Danger" itself can be seen as an example to follow, as it balances every single story that it describes with alternative perspectives. For instance, Adichie may partly fulfil the stereotype according to which writers are supposed to have tragic life stories (her grandfathers died in refugee camps, she lost loved ones because of inadequate infrastructure, she grew up under a military regime), but she also maintains that her childhood was a really happy one (11:48–13:03); emigration may be an issue in Mexico, but this does not mean that the country is miserable and unpleasant to live in altogether (08:19–09:17); Africa may be a continent of disastrous news, but it is also overflowing with uplifting success stories (13:30–17:28).

3.1.2. Single Stories and Stereotypes

The present subsection aims to further discuss how the concept of the single story and that of stereotype relate to each other, but also differ from one another. As a reminder, a single story is an oversimplified portrayal of a group of people, a place, or an idea, which is based on one dominant perspective. On the other hand, a stereotype is a "preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc." (*Oxford English Dictionary*, hereafter *OED*). The idea that a stereotype is a preconceived idea is particularly noteworthy because it implies that one can hold a certain type of belief about a person or a situation before (or without ever) coming into contact with said person or situation. A stereotype can thus be conceptualized as a specific expectation that a person can hold towards someone or something.

In "The Danger", a cause-effect relationship can be established between both concepts. Indeed, Adichie states that "[t]he single story *creates* stereotypes" (13:03–13:06; emphasis added). One can therefore infer from this statement the idea that single stories are the cause of

stereotypes. This can be illustrated by Adichie's own examples. Because the single story of Africans depicts them as uncivilized and bestial people (05:56–06:56), the author's American roommate came to hold the stereotypical expectation that a Nigerian would not be able to speak English nor to use household appliances (04:05–04:41). Similarly, because of the way in which mainstream narratives portray Mexicans as profiteers who try to invade the United States, Adichie caught herself being surprised when she visited Guadalajara, as she did not expect the city to be so pleasant and peaceful (08:08–09:18).

This being said, Adichie also argues in her talk that "[t]hey [stereotypes] *make* one story become the only story" (13:13–13:16; emphasis added). This statement could be considered counterintuitive at first glance, since it means that the single story is both the cause and the result of stereotypes. However, Adichie's words are by no means contradictory if one considers that single stories and stereotypes are interdependent. Indeed, it can be argued that both concepts interact with one another in a cyclical way: the single story creates stereotypes, and stereotypes in turn consolidate the single story. In other words, both concepts are two almost undistinguishable faces of a same coin; they cannot be detached from one another, and it is impossible to discuss one idea without also tackling the other.

3.2. Achebe and the Balance of Stories

Towards the end of "The Danger", Adichie directly refers to fellow Nigerian author Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) and presents his idea of "a balance of stories" (more details on this concept below) as a goal to strive for:

> So what if before my Mexican trip I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. and the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world? What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories". (14:00–14:25)

Many of the ideas expressed in "The Danger" are indeed inspired by Achebe, an extremely influential figure whom Adichie herself calls "Nigeria's most important storyteller" (qtd. in Tunca, "The Past, Present, and Future" 119). More precisely, Adichie refers in her talk to Achebe's *Home and Exile* (2000), an essay collection compiling three lectures that the author gave in 1998 at Harvard University. In *Home and Exile*, Achebe also bases his reasoning on the premise that "[m]an is a story-making animal" (59). The author's main line of argument is that,

for more than 400 years, Western powers have used stories against colonized peoples to harm, to oppress, and to dispossess. With regard to the colonization of Africa, the aims of such stories were, according to Achebe, "to create the tradition of an Africa inhabited by barely recognizable humanity" (47), "to validate the transfer of African lands to white settlers" (68), and to "habituate Europeans to the spectacle of Africans 'as men in chains'" (28). In other words, stories were established and used to dehumanize Africans and therefore naturalize and legitimize the hegemony of the European man over his colonized subjects. This led to a state of imbalance, in which the stories of Africa were monopolised by dominant European discourses.

Throughout the collection, Achebe presents the 1950s as a turning point because of this decade's emerging calls "to end Europe's imposition of a derogatory narrative upon Africa" (45). The Nigerian writer sees this phenomenon as "The Empire Fight[ing] Back" (37) to reclaim its stories and challenge the Metropole's dominant narrative of Africa. Achebe's perspective on the power of stories is therefore strongly marked by the idea of reaction—one could even say confrontation. Stories are needed to heal, but also to counterattack, to rectify the wrongs caused by centuries of colonial discourses, and to redress a narrative balance that has been for too long tilted towards European ideologies. Indeed, Achebe's ultimate ideal is what he calls "the balance of stories" (79), which is the concept that Adichie directly quotes in her TED Talk (14:21–14:26). Although the concept is extensively discussed in *Home and Exile*'s third essay/conference (titled "Today, the Balance of Stories"), it may be best explained by briefly quoting a 2000 interview published in *The Atlantic*. In the interview, Achebe states:

> And this is really what I personally wish this century to see—a balance of stories where every people will be able to contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people's accounts. This is not to say that nobody should write about anybody else—I think they should, but those that have been written about should also participate in the making of these stories. ("An African Voice")

To regain balance, not only is it important to encourage the emergence of a multitude of different perspectives, but dispossessed people also need to be able to tell their own stories so as to reclaim their dignity and break free from narratives imposed by external powers.

It is therefore not difficult to understand how Achebe's stances inspired Adichie's idea of the single story (and the dangers thereof). Admittedly, the ways in which both authors choose

to tackle the issue are quite different. Indeed, while Achebe mainly focuses on (de-)colonization and studies the power of stories through the lens of action-reaction power dynamics, Adichie's ideas can be seen as more flexible and more universally applicable; they still importantly pertain to the representations of Africa and Africans, but the need to reject single stories also transcends the borders of the continent. In a way, this comes down to the fact that, as argued by Daria Tunca, "Adichie's position as an African writer in the twenty-first century differs from Achebe's in the second part of the twentieth" ("The Past, Present, and Future" 111). Be that as it may, it is indisputable that both authors ultimately pursue similar objectives, namely the undermining of hegemonic discourses, a rise in multi-perspectivity, and the right for people to have a say in the telling of their own stories.

3.3. Unigwe's Approach to the Idea of the Single Story

Although Chika Unigwe is undoubtably familiar with Adichie's theory (see, for instance, Unigwe, "On Writing" 415), the former did not wait until 2009 to address issues similar to that of the single story in her fiction. Indeed, the undermining of received ideas and unilateral representations has always been at the heart of her writing. In a 2008 round table discussion with fellow Nigerian authors Unoma Azuah and Sefi Atta, Unigwe argues in this regard, "[I]t is also important to me that I tell our [African women's] story, and not be intimidated into telling stories that 'people' want to hear" (Azuah et al. 110). With this statement, Unigwe makes it clear that she refuses to cater for mainstream expectations in her writing. This refusal to conform to normative expectations can be linked in some respects to the (partly) negative reception that *The Phoenix* / *De Fenix* had in Flanders, as Unigwe herself suggests in the same article:

> With my novel, a reviewer seemed disappointed that I had written about someone who lived in Europe, not in Africa. I got the impression that he would have been happier if I had had animals, jungles, tam tams, and characters who sang and danced regardless of their circumstances. That was what he expected from an African writer! (109)

Even though Unigwe's tone is rather sarcastic here, she points out a crucial issue—i.e., the fact that, as a black African author in Belgium, she was expected to write in a certain, predetermined way. Indeed, Sarah De Mul points out that a number of readers and reviewers expected *The Phoenix* "to present the Flemish audience with an interesting, new, 'Nigerian' perspective on

Belgium" (14), which in turns indicated that "Unigwe was eagerly awaited as a Flemish author of African origin, but also that, clearly, a range of ideas was already circulating among reviewers about such a writer" (14). It can therefore be argued that, as a Nigerian-born and black author, Unigwe herself was subjected to the power of the single story, more specifically the single story of the African author writing in a European country. This status came with its share of received ideas and normative expectations about the way in which she was supposed to write. Nevertheless, as highlighted above, Unigwe has always stood her ground and never complied with these expectations.

In the round table conversation mentioned above, Unigwe also states, "I find it easier writing from experience (especially others')" (Azuah et al. 111). Indeed, to challenge mainstream discourses and dominant representations, the author regularly takes inspiration from real-life experiences. For instance, in the process of writing *On Black Sister' Street*, Unigwe went herself to Antwerp's red-light district to speak with (mostly Nigerian) sex workers and hear their many stories—an experience which, she argues, made it "a lot easier to write balanced stories" ("An Interview" 55). Creating stories and characters inspired by the experiences of real-life people is a strategy that Unigwe has used throughout her career. In a 2020 interview focusing on *On Black Sisters' Street* and *Better Never*, she explains that this strategy allows her to challenge polarizing, stereotypical representations, especially those concerning Nigerian migrants in Europe:

> However, the stories of immigrants tend to either romanticize their homeland or be grateful for the "freedom" of the new place and also make them stereotypes whose entire narratives are polarized: good and/or bad. I wanted characters who felt like the people I know, complex, flawed humans making choices and sacrifices one doesn't necessarily approve of. ("On Writing" 413–14)

In other words, Unigwe's writing (and her characterization in particular) is marked by a desire for authenticity. This entails depicting people in all their complexity and nuance as well as telling the stories of characters who do not fall into premade, essentializing categories.

In a 2017 opinion piece titled "The Danger of Reading the Single Book: A Plea for Cross-Cultural Reading", Unigwe gives more details about how she relates to the idea of the single story in the context of literature and what changes she advocates in this regard. In this article, the idea of "Reading the Single Book" refers to the influence that dominant texts have on people, especially young children. Indeed, since the narratives circulated by these texts are

often left unchallenged, they lead their readers to adopt a limited and distorted vision of the world. Unigwe mentions, for instance, how, like Adichie, her early perception of literature was mainly influenced by European books. She also recalls how her Catholic education based on the Bible led her to believe that whiteness was an ideal, while being black was "a curse". She then discusses the fact that, at school, she was taught the history of Nigeria as if nothing had happened before the arrival of European settlers. Towards the end of her article, Unigwe argues that challenging the power of the single story cannot be accomplished if the power of the single book is not tackled at the same time:

> Challenging the notion of the Single Story is not enough. In fact, it becomes almost a useless project if those [non-mainstream] stories are not published and read and therefore do not contribute to the transformation agenda, hence, my plea for a cross cultural publication and reading. Young readers, especially, believe in the integrity of the written word. They believe that the written cannot lie.

To counterbalance the power of the single story and to rectify the imbalance of narratives, literature needs to be rethought and diversified so that the complexity of the world and its people can be shown to children from a young age. In this opinion piece, Unigwe also mentions Achebe as a direct source of inspiration. Indeed, she explains how his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) inspired her to become a writer:[3]

> When I moved to Belgium and began to write, I wanted to, like Achebe, be a historian as well, telling the stories of my Africa because I had been confronted by people who spoke of Africa as if it were a country.

As soon as Unigwe arrived in Europe, she quickly noticed that stories were unbalanced—especially to the detriment of Africans. Like her model, she thus vowed to write in order to restore a certain balance of stories.

Another aspect that must be mentioned regarding Unigwe's approach to the concept of the single story is the way in which the author playfully interacts with stereotypes and received ideas. Indeed, Unigwe frequently makes use of stereotypical representations in her fiction works for various effects and purposes. One of these effects can, once again, be linked to the negative

[3] It is worth noting that *Things Fall Apart* also had an important impact on Adichie (Tunca, "The Past, Present, and Future" 114).

reception that *The Phoenix* / *De Fenix* had in Flanders. Not only was the novel criticized because of its "uninteresting" depiction of Belgium, Unigwe's portrayal of Flemish people was also perceived by reviewers as exaggerated because of how prejudiced some Flemish characters appear to be in the novel (Tunca, "Voices to Heed" 4). When discussing this phenomenon Tunca points out that this depiction of Belgians as prejudiced people (which could be seen as a stereotype in itself) is perfectly deliberate, as it allows Unigwe to establish a picture of Belgium that is disturbing, unfamiliar, and unsettling for its inhabitants:

> it is a disturbing experience for anyone to be made to look into a mirror and dislike the reflection one is presented with. The encounter with this other, ugly, unrecognizable self becomes even more distressing when one realises that someone has deliberately provoked the unsettling confrontation by placing the mirror at a strategic spot in the room. ("Voices to Heed" 4)

Tunca further argues that, although Unigwe's depiction of Belgium may be regarded as somewhat extreme at times (4), this defamiliarizing portrayal "merely highlights a fact which some Europeans are yet to take in: Western standards are not universal" (4). Next to this unsettling effect, Tunca identifies another purpose with regard to Chika Unigwe's use of stereotypes—i.e., the author's tendency to depict "African protagonists whose prejudices are equally unfounded" (5). In other words, European characters have no monopoly on stereotypes and oversimplifications in Unigwe's fiction works such as *The Phoenix* (Tunca, "Voices to Heed" 5) or *On Black Sisters' Street* (Tunca, "Redressing"). To sum up, Unigwe's use of stereotypes can be argued to have at least two functions: portraying Belgium in an unsettling and defamiliarizing way, and depicting African characters who also tend to resort to received ideas and oversimplifications.

Next to these two functions, this dissertation will argue that there is another way in which Unigwe uses stereotypes, which is particularly salient in *Better Never*. Indeed, the collection will be argued to use stereotypical representations as foundations for stories and characters that eventually turn out to be much more complex than they initially appear. In other words, the collection fights fire with fire; it plays into stereotypes and single stories so as to complexify them. Take for instance the single story of the manipulative interracial marriage, according to which migrants (ab-)use marriage to obtain legal papers in their host country (a single story that will be extensively discussed in subsection 5.1.). Instead of outright avoiding such representations, Unigwe depicts relationships based on these very premisses. By doing

this, she can then add details, provide conflicting perspectives, paint a more intricate picture, and eventually move away from the initial oversimplified representation. As a result, the single stories that appear in *Better Never* become complexified, nuanced, and, therefore, weakened. This tension between the depiction and the subversion of stereotypes and single stories in the collection will be the focal point of section 5.

4. Method and Methodological Comments

This section aims to clarify the method and the interpretative framework that will be used in the textual analysis in section 5. A first subsection will discuss how single stories can serve as starting points for the interpretative process. I will then discuss the importance that elements of fiction will have in the upcoming analysis. Finally, I will delve into the terminology surrounding migration and the different designations that can be used to refer to people in displacement.

4.1. An Interpretative Framework Based on the Single Story

As a reminder, this dissertation aims to show how Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late* deceptively plays into single stories on migration to complete them, complexify them, and ultimately challenge their potency. As already mentioned above, *Better Never* is characterized by a carefully crafted tension between the depiction and the subversion of stereotypes. In order to better understand this tension and, more generally, the ways in which the collection addresses single stories, the following analysis will place said single stories at the centre of the interpretative process. Indeed, instead of discussing the book short story by short story or character by character, the textual analysis in section 5 will use single stories as focal and starting points.

More precisely, the following analysis will isolate various single stories pertaining to migration and extensively discuss them in dedicated subsections. These subsections will all start with an introduction in which the single story in question will be briefly explained. In these introductions, various noteworthy elements will be taken into account so that the single story can be better understood before studying how it is addressed in *Better Never*. After the introduction, the heart of the analysis will consist in studying how the collection interacts with each single story. The focus will be placed on how the book plays with these representations: how it sometimes seems to conform to these, but also—and especially—how it deviates from these and how it nuances them. To this end, various literary elements will be scrutinized (see subsection 4.2.). Finally, at the end of each subsection, there will be a short partial conclusion that will aim to summarize how the single story is complexified and ultimately modified in the collection.

Before proceeding further, it must be noted that the single stories that will be analysed in section 5 will mainly be related to representations that are vehiculated by Western and European discourses. At the same time, this dissertation acknowledges the fact that the collection is also filled with Nigerian/African myths about Europe and Europeans, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> "That's what they hear back home," Prosperous said. "Oyibo [white] women want black men. I remember years ago, our neighbours' son came back from America with tales of how he had to fight off white women. He said that every time he went out, he had to fend off the legion of oyibo women wanting a piece of his black ass. We all believed him." She laughed at the memory, Agu laughing along. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 75–76)

In a way, one could argue that, in Nigeria, there exists a single story of white women, according to which these are easily seduced by black men, and this example is not an isolated one (see, for instance, *Better Never* 8, 56, 81). Although some of these African myths and stereotypes about Europe will still be mentioned when relevant, I choose not to include them as focal points in my analysis. The reasons for this decision are multiple. First, studying single stories that are predominantly driven by Western discourses will allow this analysis to remain focused and cohesive. This choice also comes with the substantial advantage that stereotypes in Western and European discourses are usually well-documented and are commonly addressed in various sociological or communication studies. This will allow the present dissertation to analyse representations that have already been scientifically observed beforehand, instead of relying on personal hunches. Finally, given the international cultural power of the West, I argue that the potency of these African single stories about Europe and white people is fairly limited globally speaking. In other words, there are already plenty of alternative stories that can complexify, nuance, and counter these Nigerian stereotypes. It is therefore difficult to talk about an imbalance of stories as far as these representations are concerned—unlike Western single stories on migration, which tilt the balance against specific groups of people and are insufficiently challenged.[4]

[4] For more detailed analyses of the ways in which African stereotypes about Europe and Belgium are addressed in Unigwe's fiction, I point my readers to Tunca, "Voices to Heed"; Tunca, "Redressing" (although these articles do not cover *Better Never Than Late*, the findings that they contain are still highly relevant in relation to the collection); and Bastida-Rodríguez and Bekers.

4.2. The Use of Elements of Fiction to Challenge Single Stories

As mentioned in the general introduction, Unigwe considers that fiction allows her to create more nuanced narratives ("On Writing" 420). Therefore, this paper will discuss how precisely fiction allows the author to write with more nuance, which in turns allows her to erode the potency of the single story. For this purpose, particular attention will be paid to specific literary features that are commonly called *elements of fiction*. These elements usually include aspects such as plot, characterization, setting, narration, themes, and style (Russel).

Among these aspects, the study of characterization in the collection will be of particular importance for the upcoming analysis. Indeed, since analysing characterization consists in scrutinizing how people are portrayed in a work of fiction, it will be insightful to study how representations in *Better Never* are similar to or differ from those induced by single stories. The literary opposition between flat and round characters will be relatively important in this respect. This distinction, conceptualized by E. M. Forster in 1927, opposes flat characters, who are "constructed around a single idea or quality" (Forster 48), and round characters, who possess more specifying traits. Forster further explains, "[W]hen there is more than one factor in them [characters], we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" (48). This idea of "curve" suggests that the distinction between flat and round characters can be regarded as a spectrum rather than a strict binary opposition. In addition, the concept of character change, and especially that of dynamic characters, who can be described as "any character who changes as a result of the story's conflicts and plot" (Glach), will also be used to describe how some of the collection's characters are led to evolve in the span of the short stories. These concepts (along with other elements such as backstories, motivations, and relationships) will make it possible to highlight how complex the collection's characterization is and how this contributes to addressing the danger of the single story in the context of migration.

Particular attention will also be accorded to the collection's plot and plot structure. Indeed, it will be argued that, in various occasions, features such as plot twists—i.e., "unexpected turn[s] of events in a work of fiction" (*OED*)—allow *Better Never* to bring common tropes in a new light and offer new, more complex perspectives. The ways in which the stories interact with one another will also be of particular interest. Unigwe states in this regard, "Why a short story collection and not a novel? The format gave me room to tell many different stories . . . and give each story equal weight" ("On Writing" 420). Admittedly, each short story in *Better Never* can be read as a powerful standalone piece, and no story is more

important than another. However, the short stories can also be regarded as part of a broader network of experiences, which creates an important sense of continuity. In other words, not only does this wide range of stories allow *Better Never* to depict many different experiences (an aspect that can already undermine the power of the single story on its own), the interconnectedness of these stories also makes it possible for the collection to build a complex network of causes and consequences, of origins and destinations, of justifications and actions.

Aspects pertaining to narration and focalization will also be insightful because they can be linked with the idea of perspective. In the collection, eight out of the ten short stories are written with a third-person narration, while the remaining two ("Cleared for Takeoff" and "Heart is Where The Home Is") have a first-person narrator. That being said, all ten stories have in common the fact that their focalization is internal. This means that each of the book's stories is told based on the point of view of a different character—except for "The Transfiguration of Rapu"; "Becoming Prosperous"; and "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am", which are all told through Prosperous's perspective. This plurality of points of view also contributes to *Better Never*'s complex and nuanced picture of migration. In addition, other aspects pertaining to narration will be discussed, namely how the stories' internal focalization allows for various kinds of narratorial comments, or how this internal focalization makes it possible for the reader to gain access to the characters' thoughts and memories.

Although the other three elements—setting, themes, and style—will not be put under as much scrutiny as the ones discussed above, they will still be brought up in the analysis when relevant. It is also worth noting that all these elements of fiction are interdependent: characters make the plot move forward; the plot makes characters (re-)act, feel, and behave in specific ways; narration and focalization influence the ways in which the events of the plot are perceived and the ways in which specific characters are described. These combinations are almost limitless. Therefore, the following analysis will discuss these elements of fiction individually and combined.

4.3. Terms Referring to People in Displacement

Numerous designations are used to refer to people who settle down in a different country from the one in which they were born. Since many characters in *Better Never* are in this situation, and, since migration is going to play an important role in the upcoming analysis, it is necessary to clarify this terminology before proceeding further.

One of the most important documents in this regard is the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), also known as the Geneva Convention. According to the international agreement, a refugee is a person who,

> owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (art. 1)

The convention thus establishes the notion of "wellfounded" danger as an essential criterion for a person to be recognized as a refugee, generally and legally speaking. This criterion has an important impact on the ways in which people in displacement are perceived in their host country. As pointed out by sociologist Bridget Anderson and political scientist Scott Blinder, media coverage and mainstream discourses often contrast refugees with economic migrants, whose reasons for leaving their home country are supposed to be based on a "search of employment or economic opportunity" (*OED*) rather than immediate danger. Furthermore, the Convention also has repercussions on the ways in which people in displacement are legally labelled in their host country. Indeed, the idea that, to be recognized as a refugee, a person needs to have faced "wellfounded" persecution has been largely implemented in the asylum procedures of the states that signed the Convention (Woolley 377), including Belgium. In this regard, Agnes Woolley points out that, through the process, one "must bear credible witness to the events that have led to their claim for protection" (377). Consequently, asylum procedures create a distinction between legally recognized refugees and applicants whose asylum claim is rejected and whose stay in their host country is therefore considered illegal (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers). The term *asylum seeker*, which describes a person currently in the process of "seeking refuge, esp. political asylum, in a nation other than his or her own" (*OED*) is also important in this respect.

There exist yet other designations to refer to people in displacement. The word *migrant*, is one of the first that comes to mind in this regard. *Migrant* is often presented as a neutral umbrella term "to refer to anyone living outside the country of their birth" (Hamlin), but this neutral quality of the word has been questioned in the recent years (see Anderson and Blinder;

Hamlin; Nash). The terms *legal* and *illegal migrants* (or *documented* and *undocumented migrants*) are also commonly used to indicate whether a person's stay in a country is allowed by law, but referring to individuals as *legal* or *illegal* is far from being unproblematic (see Hamlin). The use of the word *expatriate*—or *expat*—is contentious too because, while it also refers to a person leaving their country to reside in another, the term tends to be reserved to "educated, rich professionals working abroad" (Nash). Ultimately, migration is not a uniform phenomenon. Indeed, migrant experiences are numerous, varied, and complex. As a result, discussions on the matter are often characterized by a high degree of confusion, approximation, and a tendency to use the abovementioned terms interchangeably (Anderson and Blinder).

In *Better Never*, the majority of characters are Nigerians—more precisely Igbo people, i.e., people from one of Nigeria's largest ethnic groups—who, at some point, left their home country and settled in Belgium. However, their exact status and the circumstances under which they reside in their host country vary from one character to another. For instance, it is clear that Godwin, one of the main characters in both "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am" and "Love of a Fat Woman", is in an illegal situation, which prompts him to use marriage as a means to obtain legal papers. Conversely, Gbolahan and Ego ("Cleared for Takeoff") were able to apply for Belgian citizenship thanks to Gbolahan's former employer. The ways in which each character experiences migration are therefore fundamentally different. Another noteworthy aspect in this regard is the fact that Unigwe herself uses the term *economic migrant* to refer to some of the collection's characters. According to her, "The characters in *Better Never Than Late* fall into two categories: economic migrants (mostly the men) and their wives who come along for the ride, not always willingly" ("On Writing" 414). This claim is important in that it implies that the men in the collection make the choice of leaving their country to search for new opportunities, whereas the women do not necessarily migrate for these reasons, but rather out of devotion (maybe even constraint, see subsection 5.4.2.). In addition, it will be argued below that some characters, Prosperous and Agu in particular, blur the distinction between refugees and economic migrants due to their life circumstances (see subsection 5.4.2.). As a result of this disparity of situations, I choose to use the word *migrant* as a cover term to refer to the various characters in *Better Never* who left Nigeria to live in Belgium. Although it has been argued that the term can be ideologically loaded (see Anderson and Blinder), this dissertation will spare no effort to use the word as neutrally as possible and to acknowledge that, behind this common denomination, there exist a multitude of different stories and experiences.

5. Textual Analysis: Depiction and Subversion of Single Stories in *Better Never Than Late*

This section will consist of a textual analysis of *Better Never* using the concept of the single story as basis for the interpretative framework. As a reminder, the present analysis will isolate various single stories that are depicted in the collection and study how these are wittily played upon but also counterbalanced thanks to Chika Unigwe's use of various elements of fiction. Four single stories pertaining to migration will be discussed in the following pages: the single story of the manipulative interracial marriage, the single story of the abusive migrant relationship, the single story of the migrant career path, and the single story of the dreadful home country.

5.1. Opportunism, Naivety, and Betrayal: The Single Story of the Manipulative Interracial Marriage

"When he met Tine, he held onto her. She was his passport."

(Unigwe, *Better Never* 100)

5.1.1. Introduction

The depiction of marriages in which a migrant man takes advantage of a European woman to obtain Belgian citizenship is an aspect of *Better Never* that certainly caught its reviewers' attention (see Banday; Olisakwe). These marriages can indeed be regarded as one of the book's most striking elements, illustrating Ukamaka Olisakwe's claim according to which, "The Nigerians in these stories will do anything to earn a living, feeling no mercy for the naïve who fall prey to their desperation". The idea that marriage between a migrant and a European is manipulative in nature and cannot be built on genuine love and mutual appreciation is quite common in Western discourses. Sociologist Beate Collet points out in this regard that the stereotype of the "so-called 'grey marriage' claims that the national spouse was misled by the foreign spouse" (384). She adds that many European discourses, measures, and policies "make it clear that mixed marriage is socially and legally constructed as dubious and therefore needs to be controlled" (384). It should be noted that what Collet calls "grey marriage" is different

from the idea of a marriage of convenience, in which both parties are aware that the union is "contracted from motives of convenience, mutual advantage, or expediency (as opposed to love or sexual attraction)" (*OED*). Quite the opposite, the single story of the grey marriage entails that the European spouse is always deceived into thinking that the union is built on genuine love.

This idea that migrants systematically manipulate their oblivious European spouse for their own gains or, as worded by Laura Barberán Reinares, "the stereotype of African men preying on white women" (Unigwe, "On Writing" 417) results from a more general vision according to which "immigrants are a danger: the hungry ones, coming from the land of famine, looking to take" (Ponizovskiy). Indeed, migrants are regularly portrayed as invaders in European anti-migration speeches. As pointed out by media and communication expert Baldwin Van Gorp, Belgian media themselves can play a part in perpetuating this framing of migrants as intruders (497–98), "as a threat to one's own cultural and economic achievements" (489). The single story of the transnational union, according to which marriage can be used as a backdoor to citizenship, therefore perfectly fits into this context.

The following pages will study how interracial marriages are portrayed throughout the collection and how their depiction can be connected to the single story of the grey marriage. Particular attention will be accorded to the ways in which these relationships partly conform to the stereotypes mentioned above, but also to the ways in which the collection ultimately deviates from these in order to present new perspectives on the matter.

5.1.2. The Danger of Playing Both Sides: Gwachi and Hilde

"The Transfiguration of Rapu" (hereafter "The Transfiguration") can be seen in many regards as a strong start to the collection. Indeed, the book's first story makes it clear from the beginning that *Better Never* will not shy away from portraying problematic situations, even if these can be linked to sensitive stereotypes. The relationship between Gwachi and Hilde, his German wife, is a perfect illustration of this, as it can be connected in many ways to the single story of the manipulative interracial marriage. Throughout the short story, Hilde is presented as a temporary substitute, as a means to an end to facilitate Gwachi's integration into Europe, allowing him to achieve his ultimate objective: being reunited with Rapu, his Nigerian wife. As the latter explains, the plan is for Gwachi to divorce Hilde once she overstays her usefulness: "First Gwa-Gwachi was in Lebanon. Then Ho... Ho... Holland. Then Germany. Now he says hee-hee-hee-he's settled. Once he divorces Hee... Hilde, and I divorce Shylock, we'll be too...

too... together again" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 6).[5] Even though it turns out that Rapu's situation is not much more enviable than Hilde's (see subsection 5.2.4.), both women's positions are different in terms of (perceived) legitimacy. Indeed, the Nigerian community revolving around Agu and Prosperous continually hierarchizes Gwachi's marriages; his union with Rapu is the only one that is acknowledged as genuine, while his current marriage to Hilde is regarded as a mere pragmatical pretence. During an argument with his wife Prosperous, the character Agu perfectly summarizes this dual perception:

> Rapu is his wife, is she not? She's the one who's recognised back home. She's the one we recognise, the one who has his child already. He'll do right by Hilde. But his marriage to Rapu, that's the one he needs to fix. (9–10)

Through this hierarchizing process, Hilde herself is dehumanized. She is seen as the "paper-wife" (2), a mere tool, whereas Rapu is repeatedly presented as the real wife (3, 5, 12). When Hilde becomes pregnant with Gwachi's child, Prosperous deplores how even the baby is regarded by the community as "some impostor they ha[ve] to pretend to care for" (12). This dehumanization and tool-like aspect of Hilde is mirrored in the story by her flatness as a character. Indeed, unlike Rapu, who becomes a complex, fleshed out round character throughout the story, Hilde is not characterized by much more than her pleasant nature and her unconditional love for Gwachi. This lack of character traits makes Hilde appear as a one-dimensional, almost transparent figure, which corresponds to the uninterested way in which she is perceived by the Nigerian community.

All the main components of the single story are here: a migrant man marrying his way into Belgian citizenship; a naïve European woman, totally oblivious to her husband's deception; a Nigerian woman who follows her husband to Europe, waiting to reunite with him; and a meticulous plan to orchestrate it all. However, it would be hasty (and erroneous) to conclude that "The Transfiguration" merely helps perpetuate the stereotypical view of the manipulative interracial marriage. If the short story seems to play into these stereotypes at times, it also brings many twists to the archetypal formula. One of these twists can be found in the way in which the short story gradually reveals that Gwachi's love for Hilde is not solely based on pretence. Indeed, mutual affection permeates the couple's interactions to such an extent that Prosperous prefers to hide the truth when Rapu questions her about Hilde:

[5] Unless otherwise specified, the quotations in these close-reading subsections will always be from Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late*.

> What good would it do . . . to tell her that Hilde and Gwachi held hands like children when they visited, that they touched each other when they spoke, finished each other's sentences? It was much kinder to lie. (5)

In addition, when Hilde becomes pregnant, Prosperous notices how enthusiastic Gwachi is about the idea of having a child with his European wife: "Gwachi stood beside her [Hilde], his eyes shining as if he had been shown some wonder. Prosperous recognized the look of pride" (10). While seemingly uplifting, this revealed love for Hilde is also what makes Gwachi such a complex and conflicted character. Indeed, throughout the story, the Nigerian man is predominantly characterized by his indecision and his inability to commit to either one of his love interests. While Gwachi is initially able to play both sides with relative ease, his situation becomes more dire when both his wives become pregnant almost at the same time. From this moment on, he is forced to face the uncomfortable reality that he cannot keep buying time indefinitely, yet he remains plagued by his inability to choose:

> "Gwachi doesn't know how he's going to deal with it," Agu told Prosperous later that night. "Two babies coming in the same year. He thinks it'd be very cruel to leave Hilde now she's almost due. He loves Rapu but he also loves Hilde." (11)

As Gwachi's problems catch up with him, his inner turmoil becomes more apparent. Prosperous notices that his laughter holds "something else, something weightier, something less carefree" (12). The Nigerian man is torn between Hilde and Rapu, between gratitude and betrayal, between guilt and necessity, between love and duty. Ultimately, while Gwachi's love and his guilt towards Hilde do not negate the manipulative aspect of their marriage, it shows nonetheless that the two characters' relationship cannot be strictly reduced to lies and deception; these are only part of their story.

Another reason why "The Transfiguration" deviates from the stereotype of the cunning migrant using marriage for his own gain is the way in which Gwachi's plan to divorce Hilde and marry Rapu dramatically backfires at the end of the story. In a twist of events, Rapu is indeed revealed to be in love with another man, whose baby she is carrying and for whom she plans to leave Gwachi. This revelation comes moments before another important plot turning point—i.e., Gwachi's decision to divorce Hilde:

> "I've got news," Agu shouted jubilantly, coming in almost as soon as Rapu left. If he were a dog, Prosperous thought, his tail would be wagging. Her own news could wait. "Gwachi has asked Hilde for a divorce. Today! He's on his way now, as we speak, to give Rapu the good news!" (14)

The story ends with these words, and, like Prosperous, the reader is left to ponder what comes next for all these characters. Whether or not Gwachi is able to reconcile with Rapu or Hilde, the fact remains that his relationship with both women is permanently damaged because of his decisions. The character's ultimate downfall thus highlights how marrying someone to gain citizenship can be a double-edged sword, maybe even a desperate man's gamble. Interestingly, Gwachi's fate is partly foreshadowed at the beginning of "The Transfiguration", with the story of the Ogwashi man,[6] a cautionary tale about "the covetous nature of human beings" (4), which circulates among the Nigerian community in Turnhout:

> The Ogwashi man had been paid a huge amount to marry a certain Ogwashi woman whose husband was already in the country but who could not bring her in because he was legally married to a Belgian woman. The man—*very much like Gwachi*—missed his "real" wife so much he did not want to wait until he had got his papers and divorced his white wife to bring her in himself. But the Ogwashi man not only took the money, he also took the wife—even going back to Ogwashi to pay her dowry once the husband in Belgium had had his dowry returned. (3; emphasis added)

As suggested in the excerpt, the Nigerian migrant in the tale can be linked in many respects to Gwachi: both initially migrate to Europe without their Nigerian wives, both marry European women to (attempt to) obtain legal papers, both have their Nigerian wives become engaged in a marriage of convenience, and both eventually lose their European wife *and* their Nigerian wife. Although, some details differ between these two stories (for instance, Rapu does not remain in Nigeria, nor is she "stolen away" by her "fake" husband Shylock), the tale of the Ogwashi man could almost be seen as a *mise en abyme* within "The Transfiguration". In a metafictional perspective, this could mean that, like the story of the Ogwashi man, the short story itself can be read as a cautionary tale, a tale that highlights the risks that one takes when using people and playing on multiple sides. This emphasis on the risks of marrying into

[6] Ogwashi Ukwu is a town located in Delta State, southern Nigeria.

citizenship creates an interesting contrast to the usual vision of marriage as an easy backdoor and free-for-all card making it possible for myriads of people to magically become European citizens.

In addition to these aspects, it is also important to highlight how the events of the short story are narrated through Prosperous's subjective perspective. Indeed, throughout the story, Prosperous acts like a third-party observer of the triangular relationship between Rapu, Gwachi, and Hilde. This status allows her to notice specific details, to acquire specific knowledge, to which the reader often has direct access. See, for instance, how she directly sees through Gwachi's façade when he exaggerates the downsides of his holiday with Hilde in Turkey:

> He played with Rapu's braids, ran a palm over her back. "I missed my wife. Hilde wanted to see museums. To shop. To walk. Every morning, she dragged me out to walk." Gwachi's voice, however, remained soft, a feather, a voice wholly lacking in conviction. Prosperous wondered if she was the only one who caught it. (8)

As mentioned above, Prosperous's observations play an important role in making the reader aware that Gwachi genuinely loves Hilde and that their relationship is not entirely defined by manipulation. Given that "The Transfiguration" is *Better Never*'s first story, Prosperous's status as an observer here also announces how important the idea of limited perspective is going to be throughout the collection. Indeed, in the short story, many characters are led to make erroneous assumptions about Gwachi's marriages because their perspective on the matter is incomplete: Hilde is unable to see that she is not the only woman in Gwachi's life; Agu assumes that the situation will be back to normal when Gwachi eventually leaves Hilde; everyone is led to believe that Gwachi is the father of Rapu's baby; upon hearing the truth, Prosperous briefly assumes that it might be Shylock instead; Rapu convinces herself that Gwachi does not intend to leave his German wife; and, most importantly, Gwachi wrongly assumes that Rapu is going to wait for him indefinitely. In a way, "The Transfiguration" can be seen as a storytelling patchwork attempting to showcase and link together various perspectives on the same story. As an observer, Prosperous attempts to take several of these perspectives into consideration and confront them, as suggested in the following excerpt:

> Prosperous thought of Hilde fighting her parents for the man she loved. She thought of Rapu and her growing stomach. She thought of Nkonye in Nigeria,

> waiting to join his parents. She did not know whom to feel sorry for, whom to root for: Hilde or Rapu? (11)

As a result, her empathy for both women and her inability to decide on whose side she stands highlight just how complex these characters' overall story is. Her hesitation also emphasizes the idea that Gwachi, Hilde, and Rapu's story can be regarded through many different and conflicting angles.

5.1.3. Mutual Exploitation and Blossoming Love: Godwin and Tine

At surface level, Godwin and Tine's relationship, which is depicted in "Cunny Man Die, Cunny Man Bury Am" (hereafter "Cunny Man") and "Love of a Fat Woman" (hereafter "Love"), is relatively similar to that of Gwachi and Hilde. Indeed, in both cases, a Nigerian man uses his marriage to a European woman to gain easier access to European citizenship. Reflecting on Godwin's intentions, Prosperous—acting, once again, as an observing party in "Cunny Man"—notes, "[S]omewhere a guide for beating the system exist[s] for people like Godwin" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 83). Like Hilde, Tine is used by a migrant man as a tool, an "investment" (79), a step towards a goal, a "means to an end" (78). Moreover, being an overweight woman, Tine is constantly mocked and belittled throughout the two short stories in which she appears: "Godwin snorted and said in Igbo, 'Nwoke ma-ife o na-eme.' A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" (76). The objectification and belittlement of Tine can thus be seen as combined signs that her relationship with Godwin is built on nothing more than lies and manipulation. Once again, the stereotype of the exploitive "grey marriage" creeps in, as it becomes expected that Godwin and Tine's relationship is nothing but an exploitive façade.

However, the idea that Tine is an oblivious victim of Godwin's manipulation is precisely what "Cunny Man" aims to disprove. Indeed, another one of *Better Never*'s memorable plot twists is the revelation that Tine is perfectly aware of her husband's intentions. Not only that, but she also admits to Prosperous that she herself has been using Godwin as retribution for his lack of care and affection:

> Tine continued, "Arm candy to parade around, a man too afraid to displease me!" She let out a chuckle. "You see," she put her hand back in the water and continued to wash the beans, "I said to myself, if he can't love you back, don't let him get away with it, get a big party out of it. . . ." (87)

Unlike Hilde, who remains oblivious until it is too late, Tine is armed with the knowledge that Godwin's intentions are not genuine, and she decides to act accordingly. The stereotypical idea according to which interracial marriages are a source of unilateral manipulation is therefore counterbalanced here, as the power dynamics of the couple are entirely redefined. This turn of events is foreshadowed by the title of the short story itself:[7] Godwin may think that he is the "Cunny Man" (75) here, but he has been conned all along by someone even more scheming. Furthermore, the characterization of Tine as a whole can be considered to counter the stereotype of the naïve European woman. Indeed, up until the last pages of the story, Prosperous continually perceives the young Belgian woman as a hesitant person, "too eager to please, too eager to belong" (77). As a result, Prosperous automatically (and mistakenly) assumes that Tine is vulnerable and totally oblivious to the power that she holds over Godwin: "How could Tine have missed it all? The laughter that was too loud, the waist holding that was too tight? She had control. She, not he" (78). Tine's flatness as a character therefore reflects how dull, how inoffensive she is perceived to be by the other characters who interact with her. In other words, this (perceived) flatness perfectly conveys how she initially fits the stereotype of the naive European woman who allows others to use her. However, when she drops her façade in front of Prosperous, she becomes a fully round character, as her hidden complexity is finally revealed. This change is so powerful that it scares Prosperous: "That voice was a stranger's voice and Prosperous had no idea what it meant. She had always been afraid of the unknown. She moved one step away from Tine so that their arms no longer touched" (86). When Tine reveals herself to be a ruthless, scheming opportunist, Prosperous sees this change as a metamorphosis, as if the Belgian woman were shapeshifting into someone or something else, into an almost supernatural entity. It is worth noting that the seeds of this transformation are planted earlier in the story, when Prosperous notices that Tine shines more and more "with a brightness that only the truly happy could have" (83). The words "truly happy" should be interpreted with caution here, since Tine herself later confesses that her relationship still hurts despite the benefits that she receives from it ("He… uses me. It hurts but, you see, I loved him" (87)). Nevertheless, this new, increasing brightness can be associated with internal changes and life-affirming resolutions such as Tine's acceptance that Godwin does not genuinely love her or her growing resolve to make the best out of her marriage despite her husband's lack of care.

[7] *Cunny man die, cunny man bury am* is a proverb in Nigerian Pidgin English that can be translated as "A cunning man dies, a cunning man buries him", meaning "If you think you are wise, there are other people who are wiser than you are" (Kadiri et al. 7).

Once again, Prosperous's role as a third-party observer helps provide nuance to a situation that could otherwise be seen as an illustration of a common single story. Indeed, her narratorial comments can be regarded as a valuable source of information for the reader. As in "The Transfiguration", Prosperous is conflicted about her guests' marriage. She wants to tell Tine the truth, but she cannot bring herself to do it:

> Prosperous wished—as she always did—that she could tell her the truth. But she could not bear to break the heart of this woman who glowed in her marriage. She liked her too much and sometimes imagined that Tine was her own younger sister. What could she say? Godwin is taking you for a ride. He doesn't really love you. He's using you. He's just with you for his papers. And then it would be her word against his. Any idiot could see how besotted Tine was with Godwin. (84)

The internal focalization on Prosperous highlights how the character oscillates between emotions such as tenderness, empathy, guilt, and self-justification. Prosperous does not delude herself: she is aware that she is playing "a part in Godwin's game" (78), yet she also feels that she is in no position to act alone, because her isolated efforts would be in vain anyway. This conflicted attitude towards Tine's predicament is strikingly different from the way in which Prosperous's husband perceives the whole situation. Indeed, even though "Cunny Man" does not focus nor focalize on Agu, he remains an important character in the story due to the way in which his opinions are contrasted with those of Prosperous, as highlighted by their numerous arguments:

> Prosperous hated this Agu for whom everything, even relationships, was transactional. In all the ways this place had changed him, this was the worst, she thought. Later that night, when they got home, she asked him, "Must everything boil down to money? It's disgusting."
>
> "Not to money. To survival. But money is part of survival too, isn't it?" She said nothing and turned her back to him. (80)

Unlike his wife, Agu's approach to Godwin's marriage is a much more pragmatic one. Agu does not condemn Godwin, nor does he object to his relationship. He knows that his fellow Nigerian has been "struggling" (75) and that his marriage can give him the security and stability that he desperately needs. In a 2020 interview, Unigwe acknowledges that there exists a mindset

according to which, "when one's path to living and working in a country is predicated on marriage, then that becomes more important than love" ("On Writing" 417–18)—although she states in the same interview that she "do[es] not endorse it" (418). Agu has internalized this perspective according to which survival comes first no matter the circumstances, which places him at odds with Prosperous. As a result, the interactions between the couple can be seen as clashes of perspectives, and these clashes are quite efficient at weakening the one-sidedness of the single story of the manipulative interracial marriage. On the one hand, Prosperous's internal conflict highlights how Godwin's choices can be frowned upon even by people with a migratory background; on the other, Agu's perspective emphasizes how important the ideas of survival and necessity are when discussing such issues and how these aspects often prompt people like Gwachi and Godwin to make difficult and questionable decisions.[8]

In addition, Godwin himself deviates from the archetypical depictions of the manipulative migrant. Although the way in which he is characterized changes significantly from "Cunny Man" to "Love"—partly because the narration focalizes on Prosperous in "Cunny Man", whereas the story is told through Godwin's point of view in "Love"—both stories successfully establish that Godwin is much more than a being of pure wickedness. In "Cunny Man", he is described right away as a man who radiates overconfidence:

> He had the recognisable tired look in his eyes, the high-pitched tone when he spoke, as if he wanted to convince everyone of his optimism, his certainty that he would achieve whatever it was he had come to Europe for. (75)

Godwin's cocky attitude can be seen as a form of overcompensation for his fears and insecurities—especially when it comes to Tine and the volatility of their relationship: "It was as if he were afraid of her slipping away" (76). While "Cunny Man" already announces the complexity of Godwin's character, one must keep in mind that the story is told from the point of view of Prosperous, whose knowledge of Godwin's feelings remains mostly indirect. This is why "Love" is so insightful. Indeed, having two short stories featuring Godwin and Tine not only allows *Better Never* to show the evolution of the couple over time, but it also provides the reader with two different perspectives concerning the nature of the characters' relationship. Since the narration of "Love" focalizes on Godwin, the short story unsurprisingly fleshes him

[8] This idea that Prosperous and Agu embody two different perspectives on the issue—i.e., morality versus survival/duty—can also be applied to "The Transfiguration", albeit in a less prominent way.

out as a round character, revealing his full complexity. In this regard, the following excerpt is quite illustrative of the way in which the character feels about his marriage:

> Sometimes, not often, he felt a twinge of guilt but what was he doing wrong, really? It wasn't like she was not getting anything out of it. He was giving her a huge ego boost. She liked to show him off to her friends. Really, it was a fair deal. (101)

Although Godwin mostly sees himself as guilt-free and justified in his actions, these lines give the underlying impression that he is on the defensive, as if he were trying to convince someone in an argument, potentially himself. This emphasizes the idea that the character's mind is not exactly at peace when he contemplates the nature of his relationship. Moreover, this complexity of character is further highlighted by the revelation that, deep down, Tine does not leave Godwin totally indifferent:

> And if he were honest with himself, there was a lot to like about Tine. There were times he thought that, had he met her under different circumstances, had he not been focused on making sure that he had the right papers to stay on in Belgium, he could have loved her. Granted, she was bigger than the type of women he fell for, but there were times when he put his head between her breasts and never wanted to stir. There was also a confidence about her, when she was not complaining to him about her weight, that he found sexy. (102)

Admittedly, the feelings of tenderness that Godwin has towards Tine may not be as manifest as those of Gwachi towards Hilde. Nonetheless, the former is still implied to be emotionally attached to his wife—at least to some degree. Once again, while this attachment does not hide away the manipulative aspect of Godwin's marriage, this hidden side of the character is proof that treachery is far from being his only defining trait. Furthermore, this feeling of tenderness is given the chance to fully blossom at the end of the story, when Godwin's grandma, a flat character radiating kindness and benevolence, warmly welcomes Tine as "her new granddaughter" (105). Observing their interactions, the Nigerian man begins to feel "a stirring, something tender that he th[inks] might be the beginning of love" (105). The fact that the short story ends with these words is important because it suggests that there is still hope for the couple. Their future remains open, and the grim fate entailed by the single story of the manipulative interracial marriage is not a fatality anymore.

5.1.4. Overcoming Mutual Alienation: Gunter and Oge

The marriage between Oge and Gunter in "Finding Faith" offers an interesting contrast to the two aforementioned relationships. Indeed, the short story shows another facet of the migrant-European couple, a facet exempt from manipulation and the use of people as a means to an end. Nevertheless, this depiction of the interracial marriage is also a troubled one. Indeed, "Finding Faith" can be read as a story of estrangement, a story of a relationship falling apart, partly because of cultural differences. The internal focalization on Oge allows the reader to access the main character's memories and observe how the death of her son has affected her and her marriage. The story shows that losing their five-year-old puts a great strain on Oge and Gunter's relationship, as they gradually drift apart due to their diverging ways of processing grief. The way in which Oge is revulsed by the cold and dignified aspect of Belgian funerals is a telling illustration of this dissension:

> Oge could not bear it any more: these people, friends and family who had gathered to mourn with them, eating and talking with terrible normalcy. And Gunter! Gunter, who ought to hurt as much as she did, was at that moment bringing a sandwich to his mouth in the same relaxed way he did at the breakfast table. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 24)

As Unigwe herself explains in a 2013 interview, "In Nigeria, when somebody dies, there has to be an outward show of grief; you can't simply sniff silently into your handkerchief" ("An Interview" 55). The perceived nonchalance of Belgian funerals is therefore too much to bear for the Nigerian-born woman, who starts to feel alienated from people to whom she is usually close. To some extent, it can be argued that both Gunter and Oge are entrapped in conflicting single stories about the nature of grief: the Belgian single story dictates that grief is supposed to be inward, whereas the Nigerian one is more about outward displays of sadness. These opposing views are a cause of increasing discord. After the funeral, Oge begins to hate "the ease with which he [Gunter] ha[s] thrown himself back into life" (25). She wants "to spend the rest of her life in bed" (25) and thus feels frustrated when her husband begs her to get out of the house and see a therapist. These disagreements eventually culminate into an intense argument, during which Oge asks her husband to leave. This gut-wrenching unravelling of these two characters' relationship highlights how fast a combination of grief, cultural differences, and divergent opinions can make a marriage fall apart. At first glance, this unfortunate situation seems to reinforce the impression that interracial marriages are doomed to fail in *Better Never*.

Indeed, Oge and Gunter's relationship may not be manipulative, but it still faces important issues. Their inability to connect with one another in such hard times could be seen as a sign that both characters are inherently incompatible.

However, "Finding Faith" is also a story of reconciliation, a story of people learning to acknowledge their divergences to move forward together. Thanks to a cathartic stay in Nigeria, during which Oge cries for the first time since the death of her son, she realizes, with the help of her parents, that she needs to reconcile with Gunter:

> *You and Gunter should be doing this together. You both lost a son. Whatever it is he's done, forgive him.* Her mother's parting words at the airport. But what was there to forgive? She was no longer appalled by the fact that Jordi was cremated. *So what if Igbo people do not cremate?* her father had asked. Jordi was hers and Gunter's alone. Her grief was hers and not that of the entire Igbo people. *Do you still love him?* She did. (27)

In Nigeria, Oge changes as a character, and this dynamism allows her to come to the realization that cultural differences should not have veiled the fact that grief is a personal matter above all. Her renewed faith in her marriage, combined with the story's hopeful resolution ("She thought of all the ways in which she loved him" (28)), shows once again that a troubled relationship is not defined by its negatives only. "Finding Faith" can therefore be read as an important alternative story of the interracial marriage, a nuanced, complex story in which a loving couple is depicted in all its happiness, in all its pain, and in all its imperfection.

5.1.5. Partial Conclusion

In *Better Never*, the single story of the manipulative interracial marriage may be partially illustrated on several occasions, but it is also constantly completed by new twists, new perspectives. Indeed, the collection can be argued to change the single story in several ways.

First, Gwachi and Hilde's relationship shows that a migrant man can use a woman to facilitate his integration in Europe yet still deeply love her at the same time. Gwachi's eventual demise also highlights how volatile and dangerous using people as means to an end can be, which goes against the stereotypical idea that marriage is an easy way into Europe for migrants.

On the other hand, Godwin and Tine's relationship illustrates the idea that manipulation and exploitation are not always unilateral in interracial marriages; the European spouse is also capable of deceiving their partner. Nevertheless, "Cunny Man" and "Love" also show that, even under many layers of deception, there is still room for love to blossom.

In addition to this, Prosperous's keen observing eye is a valuable source of knowledge and nuance in both "The Transfiguration" and "Cunny Man". In "The Transfiguration", she reminds the reader that a story can always be regarded through different perspectives. "In Cunny Man", her interactions with Agu are also particularly insightful because the two characters represent different sides of a same debate: while Prosperous sees her guests' deception with a disapproving eye, Agu puts more emphasis on Gwachi's and Godwin's circumstances and the reasons that prompt them to make these choices.

Lastly, "Finding Faith" tells the story of an interracial couple that may be troubled, but the issues that it faces are by no means related to deception or manipulation. By offering an interesting contrast to the aforementioned manipulative relationships, Oge and Gunter contribute to maintaining a balance of stories in the collection as far as interracial marriages are concerned.

5.2. Inequality, Violence, and Patriarchy: The Single Story of the Abusive Migrant Relationship

"That love that had brought her here, where was it now?"

(Unigwe, *Better Never* 43)

5.2.1. Introduction

As illustrated by Viktor Orban's claim in the general introduction, the idea that migrants import various vices into Europe such as "terrorism, criminalism[,] anti-Semitism and homophobia" is a relatively common one in discourses on migration. Patriarchal oppression and sexism can be added to this list. Indeed, sociologists Lavinia Gianettoni and Patricia Roux argue that, in European countries, "the sexism of immigrants . . . is seen to be an intrinsic characteristic of the immigrants' culture" (374). They add, "foreigners are suspected of acting to upset the norm of gender equality for which the West is seen as the guarantor" (377). Like the single story of the manipulative interracial marriage, this portrayal of migrants as importers of sexism fits into the general vision of the migrant as a threat to Europe and a corruptor of its identity, values, and institutions. In this second single story, migrant relationships themselves are perceived to be inherently unequal; migrant men are often seen as "oppressor[s] of family members" (Charsley and Wray 403), whereas migrant women are seen as their victims. As Gianettoni and Roux further argue, these representations also tend to conveniently obscure the West's own problems with gender inequality: "In a Western context, denouncing the sexism of the Other is

a way to make invisible the hierarchical gender relations in which everybody is embedded" (377). Before going further, it is necessary to address the important caveat that questioning the single story described above is not the same as claiming that gender issues do not exist in migrant relationships. What is going to be problematized in this dissertation is the fact that the single story of the migrant couple establishes gender issues as an essential defining trait for these relationships; it makes oppression become their only story.

Like interracial relationships, marriages between migrants in *Better Never* are often depicted as flawed and dysfunctional, and issues such as patriarchal norms and gender inequality play an important role in this regard. However, once again, the collection always manages to go beyond the single story that it tackles. Indeed, the depicted relationships between migrants are always complex and nuanced. They sometimes partly conform to stereotypical representations, but their multidimensionality always makes them ultimately diverge from these common portrayals.

5.2.2. Post-Migration Gender Inequality: Agu and Prosperous

Prosperous and Agu are more than third-party characters who welcome guests in their flat and observe other people's struggles. Their own relationship is also extensively explored in both "Becoming Prosperous" and "Everyone Deserves Grace". Like all the relationships discussed so far, theirs is a troubled one. Indeed, in "Becoming Prosperous", the title character is not satisfied with the direction that her life has taken, and the story's internal focalization makes it very clear. Like "Finding Faith" and "Love of a Fat Woman", "Becoming Prosperous" can be seen as an internal journey, an introspection that allows the main character to travel back and forth through time and reflect on her life story and choices. The reason why Prosperous is so regretful is because she has been forced into performing a patriarchal gender role. The following excerpt is a telling illustration of how she feels that her life is slipping away from her because of this:

> She puts the food on a tray and carefully carries it out to the sitting room where the men are now playing a game of Whot. The men hardly look up from their game. When she returns with plates and spoons, all four drop their cards as if on cue and Emmanuel says, "At last. Smells delicious, nwunye anyi." *Nwunye anyi*, our wife. That is what she has become. "Wife" to whichever guest her husband invites home: cooking, cleaning. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 43)

Prosperous is the only one in the couple who is responsible for the household chores. On the other hand, Agu sees himself as "the breadwinner", constantly bringing in visitors but always "too tired to help" (31), notwithstanding that Prosperous too works hard at her cleaning job. Because of patriarchal gender expectations, Prosperous and Agu's relationship is falling apart to the point that violence becomes part of their daily life:

> The words they do not say fill the distance they keep from each other, except when there is fault to be found in this new world where roles are demarcated. When the food is not ready on time. When the flat is not tidy enough. Or her voice is not "wifely" enough. Then Agu unleashes his frustrations on her. His hand connects to thump sense into her. And her hands find their way to thump him back. In this way too, they have changed. Afterwards he cries and says he is sorry but when a man works all night in a bread factory it changes him. (44)

Not only does Agu impose a specific gender role on Prosperous, he is also prompt to anger and becomes violent when he deems that his wife does not perform said role well enough. In this regard, he conforms quite closely to the archetype of the violent migrant patriarch. Nevertheless, once again, the collection does much more than just showing this negative picture. Indeed, there are many ways in which Agu and Prosperous's marriage can be said to deviate from the single story of the oppressive migrant relationship.

One important recontextualizing element in this respect is the idea that their marriage was not always like this. In Nigeria, the couple used to stand on a much more equal footing. In "Becoming Prosperous", the title character is led to reflect on her old life through many flashbacks set in her home country. She contemplates, "It was a different life. She and Agu were equals. Here, surrounded by the odour of their losses, he feels the need to assert himself as a 'man'" (39). Despite Nigeria, and Igboland in particular, being highly patriarchal (Unigwe, "Our People"; Unigwe, "On Writing" 416), both characters are successful in an unrestrained way in their home country; they are both free to pursue their goals as they please. It is only when the couple migrates to Belgium that Agu becomes self-conscious about tasks such as cleaning or cooking. In Nigeria, "[h]e would not have thought it insulting to be asked to do 'a woman's job'" (35). Unigwe herself is familiar with this phenomenon of Nigerian men reverting to patriarchal values after migrating. She explains in an interview:

> In Europe, these men whose wives' independence did not threaten them (because there were the househelps and the drivers and the gardeners to take the burden

> of being a "traditional" wife off of the wives) suddenly realize that they are expected to chip in. Of course, these women, never having had to do all the work themselves, expect the men who love them to step into the gap left by the domestic help. These men, however, have never been trained to do so or to expect it. They want to maintain their position as the "pampered head" in the way they had in Nigeria, but it is impossible, and conflicts arise. ("On Writing" 416–17)

According to the author, this issue can be linked to class and economic status. Indeed, when leaving Nigeria, Agu and Prosperous have to abandon their middle-to-higher-class lifestyle and replace it with a lower-class one. This becomes a source of conflict, as Agu refuses to take part in household tasks and delegates everything to his wife. On the other hand, having to play the role of housekeeper makes Prosperous resentful towards her husband, for whom she sacrificed her life and career in Nigeria: "The Agu for whom she moved to Belgium, where was he now?" (43). The idea that Agu and Prosperous's relationship is not initially governed by patriarchal rules is important regarding the present analysis. Indeed, it highlights the fact that inequality and abuse are not inherent to the couple. Instead, it is presented as the result of adversity and concessions.

Another reason why *Better Never* deviates from the single story of the oppressive migrant relationship is the fact that, on several occasions, Prosperous is shown to fight back. The first instance of this that comes to mind is her telling Agu to "[f]uck off" (47) at the end of her cathartic introspection. Indeed, "Becoming Prosperous" makes it clear that its protagonist wants to turn her life around, that "she feels an impatience to begin another journey" (45), and her snapping at her husband is a telling sign that this new journey is about to begin. That being said, the end of the short story is not the only instance in which Prosperous is seen to fight back. For example, during their arguments, when Agu hits her, she hits back, and, right after, when he apologizes, she does not: "She never says anything. She never says she is sorry for hitting back. She never absolves him" (44). In addition to this, Prosperous is also revealed to use contraception against her husband's wishes:

> "Are you on the pill?" he asks. Each time she says no. The only response he wants to hear. The room is not big enough, the space is too limited, for any other answer. This place has not only shrunk her but has made her a convincing liar. In that way she has changed, too. (40)

Prosperous's subtle acts of resistance, such as refusing to forgive her husband or refusing him the children that he desperately wants ("he prayed for children" (53)) can be seen as a way for her to regain a certain form of control within the constraints of her marriage. These acts of resistance can be affiliated to a specific concept called *negofeminism*, a term coined by Obioma Nnaemeka. According to Unigwe, who called herself a negofeminist in a 2013 interview, negofemism is a form of feminism "which stays within the boundaries of social and cultural norms, but which also manipulates that space" ("An Interview" 56). In the same interview, she adds that negofeminism "is not confrontational, it recognises the strength of culture and the limitations of what you, as one person or as a woman, can do within that culture" (57). This statement is perfectly applicable to Prosperous's own situation. Indeed, up until the very end of "Becoming Prosperous", the title character does not overtly oppose her patriarchal constraints. Instead, she subtly navigates within the limitations of her relationship to regain power where she can. This is not to say that this way of fighting back is not as good as overtly challenging her husband's abusive nature, which Prosperous ultimately does at the end of the story. Quite the opposite, as Unigwe reminds her audience, negofemism is not better or worse than other, more confrontational declinations of feminism, but it is important in that it gives some women "a chance to evolve without burning bras, because they can't afford to do that" ("An Interview 57). In other words, negofeminism allows some women to fight for their dignity in situations where being overtly confrontational would actively endanger them. Prosperous's character arc explores this duality between openly challenging patriarchy and doing it in a more negotiating way. Her ultimate act of defiance particularly illustrates this tension, as it may be seen as a new beginning for the character, but it also ends up putting her at risk, considering what the reader learns in "Everyone Deserves Grace"—i.e., the fact that Agu threw boiling water at his wife for talking back to him in front of his friends.

In this regard, "Everyone Deserves Grace" is of crucial importance, not only because it provides continuity to Prosperous and Agu's relationship, but also because the short story fleshes out Agu as a character and depicts him as more than just a violent patriarch. Admittedly, Agu is already portrayed as more than an archetype in "Becoming Prosperous", thanks to traits such as his humorous personality, his complex past, and the fact that he is a "broken man" (43). However, it is mainly in "Everyone Deserves Grace" that the collection establishes him as a truly complex and conflicted round character. Like "Becoming Prosperous", this short story can be seen as an internal journey, this time narrated through Agu's perspective. Like Prosperous's introspection, this internal journey oscillates between Nigeria and Belgium, between past and present. Agu is led to reflect on how he has changed since leaving his home

country and how this has affected his relationship with Prosperous. At the beginning of the short story, his tone is pessimistic, fatalistic. He feels deeply sorry for hurting Prosperous and admits that his "uncontrolled temper" (52) is a problem, yet he still refuses to reconsider the idea that only his wife should take care of the housework:

> If she worked nights like he did, standing on his feet, . . . pushing pallets of bread, she would know that expecting him to help, that asking him to help was unreasonable. Besides, she had the other women. (55)

In this short story, Agu seems to experience some sort of cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, he is aware that there is a "gap" (49) between him and his wife; on the other, he refuses to acknowledge that he could bridge this gap by listening to Prosperous's concerns. However, like many other stories in *Better Never*, "Everyone Deserves Grace" ends with a climactic experience in which the main character is led to understand something important, something that allows him to change. Indeed, at the end of a particularly colourful stream-of-consciousness passage, Agu is able to pinpoint the main reason why his marriage has been falling apart:

> It was pride. The same pride that made him want to keep up the lifestyle he had in Jos even though Prosperous had to bear the brunt of it. The very same pride that made him . . . raise a hand against Prosperous, pour hot water on her for shaming him. For telling him to 'fuck off' in front of the other men. He was that stick figure on the floor, felled by his arrogance. But would he get grace from Prosperous? If he could not forgive himself, would she be able to? He hoped so, oh he so desperately hoped so. He let himself in, ready to become a new man, deserving of grace. (57)

Like many stories in the collection, "Everyone Deserves Grace" does not end well per se, but it ends on a hopeful note. Ultimately, it is unclear whether Agu concretely changes after his realization,[9] but the fact remains that, even if for a short moment, he is shown to be more than

[9] In "Cunny Man", which is presumed to take place after "Becoming Prosperous" and "Everyone Deserves Grace" (as hinted by Prosperous becoming more proficient in Dutch (78)), the pair still appears to go through important issues: "She was starting to accept that there was nothing left of their marriage to salvage. Yet she could not leave" (82). However, since the short story does not primarily focus on Agu and Prosperous as a couple, it remains unclear whether the dynamics of their relationship have changed and/or whether they are currently trying to work out their problems.

a violent patriarch, as he appears to be willing to redeem himself. For this reason, the fate of Agu and Prosperous's marriage is not completely sealed.

5.2.3. Resenting Female Emancipation: Gbolahan and Ego

The relationship between Ego and Gbolahan, from "Cleared for Takeoff", can be seen as a stark contrast to the common representations conveyed by the single story of the abusive migrant relationship. Indeed, the short story focuses on two complex round characters who both greatly deviate from stereotypical representations. On the one hand, Gbolahan is portrayed as a single father whose main purpose in life is to take care of his daughter in the absence of his wife (which he deeply resents): "In Turnhout, I loved Bola for the two of us. I spoiled her like no child should be spoiled. I gave in and ordered her pizza as often as she wanted it. . . . She was a happy kid" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 94). He therefore differs from the archetype of the migrant patriarch who refuses to be involved in the housework and child care. On the other hand, Ego is depicted as a fierce and ambitious person, who leaves her family behind to pursue her dreams in London. One of her main character traits is her refusal to see (so-called) family duties as inherently more important than her own pursuit of happiness. Ego's decision to leave Turnhout alienates her from her husband and her daughter: "When she came back after the interviews, I could see we were already losing her" (92). When going through "Cleared for Takeoff" for the first time, the reader may be inclined to sympathize with Gbolahan. Indeed, there is something gut-wrenching about seeing this man and his daughter feel "out of place" (93) when they visit Ego, like "puzzle pieces which no longer fit" (93). Feelings of abandonment and resentment permeate many lines in the short story, and one could infer from this the idea that, because of her selfishness, Ego is the one to blame for her husband and her child's unhappiness.

However, it is necessary to keep in mind that "Cleared for Takeoff" is told through Gbolahan's biased perspective. Unlike most stories in the collection, this one is narrated in the first person, emphasizing the idea that the narrator is not exactly reliable. In this regard, his feelings of disappointment and resentment towards his wife directly arise from his constant expectation that only Ego should be the one to make sacrifices for her family, an expectation which can be argued to result from patriarchal values. Because of said values, Gbolahan deeply resents Ego for her decision to live in London, which he regards as a "betrayal" (93). Like Prosperous in her respective stories, Ego is expected to put her ambitions to rest so that she can take care of her family—a parallel that Gbolahan himself draws in support of his argument: "But she was not the only educated one being forced to sacrifice, I said. Prosperous and Agu, did she think they didn't have degrees? Prosperous cleaned homes, and she hadn't left her

husband yet" (92). To these words, Ego answers, "I'm not Prosperous" (92). Indeed, unlike her fellow countrywoman (prior to her development in "Becoming Prosperous"), who abandons her dreams to take on the role of the homemaker, Ego chooses to reject this asymmetrical system of expectations according to which a woman should always prioritize her family above all else, but a man can refuse to make compromises to maintain his own "level of comfort" (92). In Banday's words, the character "defies the notion that a man should be the one to succeed and the woman must give herself up to allow that to happen". Furthermore, when Gbolahan resorts to emotional blackmail to attempt to make Ego come back, she does not give in; she does not compromise her autonomy, even when threatened:

> "I don't want her going to see Mama in one country and Papa in another one. The best thing would be for you to come home or else…"
>
> "Or else…"
>
> From anybody else, it would have been a question, an invitation for me to complete my sentence, to issue my threat. But I knew Ego well enough to know that it was not a question, it was a challenge, inviting me to do my worst. Warning me that she would not budge. (94)

Patriarchal coercion may not be as manifest in "Cleared for Takeoff" as it is in "Becoming Prosperous", but it is still present in Gbolahan's actions. Needless to say, this does not mean that the short story fully conforms to the single story of the oppressive migrant relationship. Indeed, like Prosperous, Ego and her refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations (even under threat, *especially* under threat) offers a clear contrast to stereotypical ideas according to which migrant women are submissive.

Ego is not the only character in "Cleared for Takeoff" whose portrayal deviates from stereotypical representations. Gbolahan is also important in this regard, not only because he is depicted as a single father (as discussed above), but also because, at the end of the story, he begins to recognize the abusive nature of his actions and vows to change for the better:

> *And maybe*, that inner voice that constantly kept me company said slyly, curling up the tip of my cigarette into my ear, *maybe both of you will even have another chance*. I did think of that. *You never stopped loving her, did you?* It's probably too late for me. *Ja, you're right. You fucked up big time*. I know. (96)

Like many characters in the collection, such as Prosperous, Agu, or Godwin, Gbolahan is a dynamic character who learns a lesson and decides to change at the end of his story. Indeed, "Cleared for Takeoff" can be seen as another internal journey, at the end of which the ex-football player accepts that he has made mistakes and does not delude himself from the possibility that these mistakes may have alienated him from Ego for good. As is the case for many stories in the collection, the ending of "Cleared for Takeoff" is more bittersweet than outright happy; it leaves room for hope but does not give complete closure to the main character's predicament. Another reason why the ending is important is because, through his introspection, Gbolahan learns to compromise and to make sacrifices, which contrasts with his earlier stubbornness:

> I knew before I took out my phone that I was going to call Ego. I knew before I said the words that I would tell her that I was sorry, that I wanted her to have Bola, to guard her wings, grow them out, to keep her safe in a way that I could not here. (96)

In a relatively sudden turn of events, Gbolahan decides to send Bola to London to ensure that she does not become invisible in Turnhout ("Of course you have to be white, Papa. Have you ever seen a black teacher?" (89)). By doing this, Gbolahan not only decides to swallow his pride and ask Ego for forgiveness, he also willingly accepts the prospect that he will not be seeing his daughter as much in the future. In that sense, he truly learns what it means to make sacrifices for his family.

5.2.4. The Dread of Uncertainty: Gwachi and Rapu

Subsection 5.1.2. discussed the ambivalence of Gwachi and Hilde's relationship in "The Transfiguration of Rapu". It also mentioned the idea that Rapu's situation is relatively unenviable. Indeed, throughout the story, the Nigerian woman is completely dependent on Gwachi (and to a lesser extent her fake husband Shylock). When discussing Rapu's situation and the marriage of convenience that she has contracted with Shylock, Gwachi himself objectifies his wife as if she were mere cargo stored in a warehouse:

> Gwachi complained that Shylock was charging him too much. "Twenty thousand euros! And we are from the same village, the man is my kporakpo [village-man]! He loves money too much, when am I going to pay all that off?"

> "You make it sound like you're paying off a car," Prosperous said, irritated. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 3)

As Prosperous is quick to notice, Rapu's presence in Belgium is reduced to a commercial agreement; the process in which she is brought to Europe strips her of her humanity. What makes Rapu's situation even more distressing is the constant uncertainty that the woman has to face: "'How long still?' Rapu asked every night when he dropped her off at Shylock's. 'Not long now', came the standard reply" (4). As highlighted in subsection 5.1.2., Gwachi is a man characterized by indecision, and this inability to commit deeply affects Rapu, for whom a future in Belgium with her husband becomes something more and more intangible, to the point that she regrets following him in Europe: "I don't know. Maybe I should ha… ha… have remained in Nigeria" (9). Due to the way in which Rapu is dehumanized and deprived of agency, it can be argued that her marriage with Gwachi partly fits the single story of the oppressive migrant relationship. That being said, their relationship is a complex one, much more complex than a single story of plain abuse and oppression. Indeed, Gwachi is not shown to be violent, nor is he perceived to be authoritarian (although one must keep in mind the fact that the story is told through Prosperous's incomplete perspective); it is the uncertainty to which he subjects Rapu, combined with the expectation that she is supposed to wait for him indefinitely, that makes their relationship problematic.

In addition, "The Transfiguration" portrays Rapu as much more than a submissive and insecure woman. Indeed, like many characters in the collection, she goes through a significant change as her story progresses. At first, she is depicted as a relatively flat character, with her shyness and insecurity being her main and only character traits: "She sat down on the edge of the sofa, as if she were ready to flee at the slightest sound" (1). However, Rapu is progressively shown to transform into a more confident, more rounded character, who starts to prioritize her own happiness and whose life does not appear to solely depend on Gwachi anymore—hence her "Transfiguration":

> Her eyes had lost their startled look and acquired a certain calm. When she spoke, she no longer wrung her hands or cracked her knuckles. She settled into Prosperous's sofa as if she owned the place. She asked for music so she could dance. She no longer mentioned Hilde or her pregnancy.
>
> "Her eyes are opening," Prosperous said to Agu. She liked this woman. (10)

Rapu's character arc is centred on her rejecting the uncertainty and the inhumanity of her situation. Towards the end of the story, she "sound[s] like she no longer care[s]" (13) about Gwachi's intentions, and, ultimately, she decides to leave her husband for someone else whom she loves. By doing this, Rapu gains a sense of agency, of which she was deprived for a long time. She rejects the patriarchal expectation that she has to be readily available for her husband, while being unsure whether she has a future with him at all. Ultimately, Rapu rejecting the rules to which she is supposed to conform undermines the stereotype of the submissive migrant woman, as the short story portrays a woman breaking away from a situation that she deems demeaning.

5.2.5. Partial Conclusion

As is the case with interracial marriages, *Better Never* is in no short supply of troubled migrant relationships. However, the collection quickly shakes off assumptions by telling complex and nuanced stories, in which abuse, oppression, and submission are far from being the only defining features of said relationships.

"Becoming Prosperous" and "Everyone Deserves Grace" show that gender inequality is not necessarily imported; in Prosperous and Agu's case, it results from a sudden change in socioeconomic circumstances. "Becoming Prosperous" is also important in that it portrays the struggles of a migrant woman who is shown to fight back within and eventually outside the constraints of her marriage—a portrayal that moves away from the stereotypical vision of the migrant woman as passive and submissive. Finally, Agu also deviates from mainstream representations of migrant men as authoritarian patriarchs because his character arc centres on his repentance and his resolution to let go of his pride for the sake of his marriage.

"Cleared for Takeoff", on the other hand, depicts the lives of a single father and an ambitious woman who leaves her family behind to chase her dreams, two characters who drastically differ from the stereotypical representations of migrant families as deeply patriarchal structures. Even though the relationship between Gbolahan and Ego is not entirely devoid of issues pertaining to gender inequality, both characters are shown to challenge patriarchal values in their own way. Indeed, Ego is portrayed as a woman who rejects the hypocritical expectation that only she has to make sacrifices for her family, whereas Gbolahan gradually learns the error of his ways, as he decides to swallow his pride and seek forgiveness for the sake of his daughter.

Finally, "The Transfiguration of Rapu" shows that a relationship can be harmful for a woman without being overtly abusive or oppressive. Nevertheless, Rapu is also shown to fight

back against her predicament. By rejecting her husband and her community's expectations, she challenges the stereotypical idea that migrant women are submissive and lack agency.

5.3. Laziness, No Education, and Lack of Ambition: The Single Story of the Migrant Career Path

"I thought they'd take one look at our degrees and offer us jobs on the spot."

(Unigwe, *Better Never* 32)

5.3.1. Introduction

This single story pertains to the ways in which the professional background of migrants is depicted in various European discourses. In a list of common stereotypes compiled by the French Red Cross, the idea that most immigrants are uneducated comes first (Bachelet). This belief that migrants have a low level of education often comes together with other stereotypes, such as the idea that migrants predominantly come from a lower-class background or the idea that they choose to migrate to take advantage of the welfare systems of European countries (Bachelet). Combined together, these beliefs create what this dissertation will call *the single story of the migrant career path*, a single story according to which migrants are uneducated, lazy, and/or lacking ambition, their sole purpose being to receive state handouts and exploit the presupposed generosity of their host country. Once again, this single story can be related to the portrayal of migrants as unwelcome intruders.

The educational and professional background of migrants has been analysed in depth in several empirical studies. *Settling in 2018: Indicators of Immigrant Integration*, a report co-written by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (hereafter *OECD*) and the European Commission, is an important work in this regard. Indeed, in its third chapter (titled "Immigrant skills and labour market integration"), the report presents several interesting findings, which importantly complexify the single story discussed above. Such findings include the fact that "[a]lmost every labour market in the OECD discounts foreign degrees" (64), the fact that "immigrants are more likely than the native-born to be involuntarily inactive" (65), or the observation that, "[o]f the foreign-born, 37% are highly educated, a larger share than among the native-born" (64). These observations could undoubtedly be used to debunk the single story of the migrant career path. That being said, this dissertation primarily aims to discuss literature, not social statistics. Therefore, while acknowledging the importance of the findings mentioned

above, the following pages will predominantly study the different ways in which *Better Never* addresses and interacts with the single story of the migrant career path.

5.3.2. Disillusions and Broken Dreams: Prosperous and Agu

Prosperous and Agu, who can be argued to be the collection's main characters, are both trapped in menial jobs—Prosperous being a cleaner and Agu working night shifts in a bread factory. Right away, they seem to conform to the stereotype that migrants are always uneducated and unskilled workers. Nevertheless, their employment situation also entails that the pair is anything but lazy. Indeed, Prosperous and Agu are both depicted as hard workers and frugal people, who, despite their efforts, seem only to be able to afford the bare minimum for a living:

> The thought of either of them suggesting a dinner date was almost laughable. Every penny had to be counted and preserved. Back home in Nigeria, they had gone out a few times a month to a fancy Chinese place. . . . But here, going out was a frivolity they could not afford. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 82)

Numerous flashbacks and introspective moments make it clear that the characters' socioeconomic and employment situation is relatively bleak. It can even be argued that both characters work to survive rather than to live. Agu's get-togethers become his only source of comfort: "Continuing the tradition in Turnhout rooted him to a past he hoped to return to someday. It made his loss bearable" (55). As for Prosperous, she does not even get to enjoy "these mini parties" (55), as she calls them, since she constantly has to take care of the cooking and the cleaning (see subsection 5.2.2.). What makes the characters' situation even more disheartening is the revelation that both are university educated and both had highly successful careers back in Nigeria. Indeed, Prosperous is depicted as a woman with "a degree in banking and finance from one of Nigeria's finest universities and five years of experience working in a bank in Jos, going to work in power suits and climbing steadily up the corporate ladder" (36), whereas Agu has a degree in accounting and is portrayed as a man with "business acumen" (41), whose "supermarket stood out above the rest" (41). However, as Prosperous bitterly remembers, once the couple reaches Belgium, they learn that their degrees mean nothing, something to which they react with absolute disbelief:

> At one of the job centres, the young man they saw asked them, *Do you speak any Nederlands? Nee? Frans? Nee?* They could not hope to get the kind of jobs they were after, working in a bank or teaching, if they spoke neither Dutch nor

> French. Ideally, he said, they would need both. Some German and some English would be useful too.
>
> Whenever she retells the story, Prosperous always ends with the same line: "Haba! All those languages and a teaching degree to be able to teach mathematics to a bunch of kids!" (32)

Admittedly, the language barrier can be particularly complex in Belgium. Nevertheless, Agu and Prosperous's predicament is also a telling example of how Western countries do "not value foreign degrees as highly as native ones" (OECD and European Commission 14), which entails that migrants "who do have a job are more likely to be overqualified" (OECD and European Commission 14). This gap between the two characters' initial expectations and the reality of their new life in Belgium has devastating effects on their morale as well as their relationship. However, interestingly, the two react to this "fall from grace" (Unigwe, "On Writing" 417) in radically different ways.

Agu's reaction and his general behaviour after settling in Turnhout is tainted by fatalism. He starts to regard his first days in Belgium and his job applications as something taboo, something that must not be mentioned ever again: "Agu never talks of those days. It is as if the weight of remembering is too much for him to bear" (32). His disillusion is insufferable; it makes him become a bitter man and, as discussed in subsection 5.2.2, an abusive husband. His voice, which was "[m]eant for serenading" (35), becomes "gravelly and rough . . . like sandpaper rubbing against her [Prosperous's] ears" (35). Moreover, the internal focalization in "Everyone Deserves Grace" allows the story to further explore Agu's past, his "old insecurities" (50), and the reason why the weight of his broken dreams crushes him so much. Indeed, the numerous flashbacks in the short story point to the fact that Agu grew up poor, and this strongly defines him as a character:

> Having lived through the war and having been poor for so long, his father was very cautious around wealth, he [Agu] told Prosperous. With Agu, having tasted poverty had the reverse effect on him. He was determined to douse himself in his wealth so that none of the stench of poverty remained. And he needed not just the physical things that money could buy but also witnesses to his wealth. (54)

This allows the reader to better understand why Agu becomes so resentful after migrating to Belgium. Indeed, the Nigerian man sees the poverty of his childhood as a shameful situation,

as a “stench” that he needs to scrub off and never smell again. In other words, once Agu starts to be successful with his supermarket, he vows never to be poor again. This is why losing his source of income in Nigeria and being unable to find a job in Belgium that corresponds to his degree and work experience shatters him. Returning to the lower class locks him in a downward spiral of loss, bitterness, and insecurity:

> Belgium had seemed like a good idea, somewhere he could recuperate from his losses and start afresh, but no one had warned him of how low they would have to go. No one had warned him of how it could transform a man. Of how it would steal the fire from Prosperous’s eyes. Often, he felt guilty but something (embarrassment?) stopped him from admitting to Prosperous that he wished they had never moved here. (53)

Ultimately, Agu’s disillusion shows how the rigid Belgian job market can break a person and make them change. Although it is not this dissertation’s task to determine whether Agu’s circumstances can absolve him for his actions, the fact remains that these details about his professional background and his broken dreams make the character more compelling and multidimensional. Moreover, his experience greatly moves away from the stereotypical idea that migrants are lazy, unambitious, and/or uneducated.

Another aspect pertaining to Agu’s experience that is worth mentioning is the working conditions of the bread factory that employs him. The following excerpt is of particular interest in this regard:

> If she [Prosperous] worked nights like he did, standing on his feet, watching out for old, dented bread tins that might clog the oven exit because the factory owners were too cheap to replace the tins, reaching under the still moving conveyor belts to pick up bread that might have fallen (they had been warned never to hit the emergency stop button because doing so kept the loaves in the oven longer and they browned too much to be sold and the factory lost money “and if you lose us money, you won’t be paid,”) . . . she would know that expecting him to help, that asking him to help was unreasonable. (55)

Although these lines have already been discussed to analyse how Agu uses his demanding job as justification to avoid helping with the housework, the excerpt is also insightful in that it shows the factory’s complete disregard for safety rules as well as the way in which its

management uses pay withholding as a threat to keep their workers in check. These working conditions reinforce the precarious aspect of Agu's situation: not only is he overqualified, he is also exploited by his workplace, which takes advantage of his vulnerability as a migrant worker to further disempower him.

The way in which Prosperous processes her own feelings of disillusion contrasts strikingly with her husband's attitude. Indeed, while she feels that "[s]he has suffered as much as he has" (35), she still "doesn't want to forget" (32) the disappointment of the early days, because "[r]emembering keeps her on her toes" (32). In other words, while Agu's character is centred on bitterness and fatality, Prosperous refuses to consider herself defeated. Her entire character arc is based on her rejecting the inevitability of her position, not only regarding her marriage, but also her professional situation—two aspects of her life that are linked with one another. As she washes vegetables in the kitchen, she ponders:

> *I should have taken language lessons, gone for that teaching degree, refused to settle for this. . . . Instead, we let ourselves be defeated by the thought of going back to school, sitting through lessons to learn not one but at least two new languages. Which is perfectly understandable. No. It's not. In fact, why can't I do it now?* (33)

This internal dialogue perfectly highlights how conflicted Prosperous feels since arriving in Belgium. She constantly oscillates between acceptance and discontent, and this hesitation could have been much longer, were it not for hearing of her university friend's success: "If Ifeatu could chase her dreams, why can she not? They were both ambitious as undergraduates" (46). The contrast that "Becoming Prosperous" establishes between the two women is particularly important in that matter. Indeed, it is stated in the flashback sequences that both were ambitious and had promising careers ahead of them, yet one is running for governor in Nigeria, while the other is cleaning houses in Belgium. This discrepancy not only serves as a trigger to prompt Prosperous to turn her life around, but it also presents Belgium as a "dream killer", as a country that spurns the aspirations of its foreign-born newcomers, no matter how hard they work or how ambitious they are. This depiction of Belgium as a non-ideal place to live, which might trigger some discomfort for Belgian readers, is a perfect example of how, according to Tunca, "showing Belgium its own flaws . . . is the daunting task that Chika Unigwe has taken upon herself" ("Voices to Heed 4). That being said, at the end of her internal journey, Prosperous ultimately decides to fight against these overwhelming odds, realizing that "[t]he possibilities

are endless" (47). She does not allow unfavourable circumstances to crush her ambitions, as she decides to "rise to the challenge" (33) and pursue her dreams.

5.3.3. Comfort of Habit and (Un-)Clipped Wings: Gbolahan and Ego

As previously discussed, ambition and the pursuit of happiness are elements that set Gbolahan and Ego apart from each other. As discussed in subsection 5.2.3., Ego's refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations goes hand in hand with her desire to chase her dreams without being held back. In Belgium, she is withering away because of her inability (or refusal) to adapt to a repetitive job for which she is massively overqualified: "She had worked too hard for her degree to ever feel satisfied not being able to work without it. 'It's like having wings and not being able to fly. I tried, Gbolahan. I tried'" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 93). Like Prosperous and Agu, Ego leaves behind a promising career back in Nigeria and ends up experiencing the disillusion of working a menial job in Belgium, her degree in chemical engineering unused, wasted. As a result, she decides to move to London after a friend lets her know that her career might be more fulfilling there, a freeing decision which has been extensively discussed in subsection 5.2.3.

On the other hand, Gbolahan is characterized by a certain immutability, a desire for his (professional) situation to remain unchanged as long as it is predictable and comfortable. For this reason, he is perfectly content with working a manual and repetitive job and is adamantly opposed to the idea of changing his way of life, as the narration makes it apparent in the following excerpt:

> "How am I supposed to give up the job I have here to go to London and start again? What's there for me in London beside rain and fog?" Doing the same thing over and over again for over 11 years gave me a level of comfort Ego did not understand. And I liked the city. Turnhout was quiet, the sort of city one could raise a child in without worrying about crime or the cost of housing. Healthcare was free (almost), education was free and childcare was affordable. (91–92)

It could therefore be argued that Gbolahan partly fits the single story of the uneducated migrant who lacks ambition: he has no degree, he works a job that was handed to him by his ex-employer, and his motivations for staying in Belgium are linked to the benefits of the country's welfare system. However, one must also keep in mind the obvious fact that Gbolahan was initially an international football player, a position which cannot be attained without a

substantial amount of ambition and dedication. Gbolahan may be unambitious at the time of the story, but it still took him a serious knee injury to let go of his dream and settle into a more modest job. Moreover, while he is perfectly satisfied with his own employment situation, he is also shown to worry about his daughter's future: "I wanted my daughter to dream. To fly. I did not want her wings clipped before they'd even had a chance to grow" (95–96). Unlike himself post-injury, the ex-footballer wants his daughter to be ambitious, to dream bigger than he does.

What Gbolahan and Ego have in common is the fact that they both eventually come to realize that Belgium (Turnhout in particular) is not an ideal place in terms of equal opportunities. Indeed, on several occasions, the story emphasizes how black people are completely absent from certain sectors in Turnhout, which can have far-reaching consequences on their self-image, especially for young children. This is why Ego decides to leave, and why Gbolahan is eventually determined to send his daughter to London:

> And I thought of Bola thinking she had to be white to be a teacher. Too young to make the connection between what her mother did and what she wanted to do. But not young enough to notice that people like her, like her Papa, were not visible in certain spaces. (95)

Once again, the collection portrays Belgium as a "dream killer", a place of "cheerlessness" (Olisakwe) that may be advantageous in terms of infrastructure, but that also lacks prospects for the emancipation of migrants and black people.

5.3.4. Various Career Success Stories

While the professional situation of migrants is an element that is mainly addressed in "Becoming Prosperous", "Everyone Deserves Grace", and "Cleared for Takeoff", the collection also features several career success stories (in addition to Ego's), which contrast with the stories of disillusion mentioned above. For instance, Oge, from "Finding Faith", is fluent in Dutch and works for an insurance company; Añuli and her husband, from "How to Survive a Heat Wave" have saved enough to (almost) be able to go back to Nigeria; and the main character in "Heart Is Where The Home Is" is implied to have a relatively successful (albeit busy and demanding) career. These professional success stories may not be fully developed in the collection, but they are still worth mentioning here because they all move away from the stereotypical vision of migrants as immobile and passive figures, who lack ambition and are unable to integrate into Western labour markets because of this.

5.3.5. Partial Conclusion

The professional background and career path of *Better Never*'s characters is often complex and much more nuanced than the single story according to which migrants are lazy, uneducated and/or unambitious. In addition, the collection repeatedly highlights important issues regarding the integration of migrants into Belgium's labour market.

In this regard, Prosperous and Agu's experience emphasizes how little value foreign degrees have in Belgium, and how devastating this asymmetry can be for migrants who had promising careers back in their home country. While Agu's character arc showcases how this "fall from grace" (Unigwe, "On Writing" 417) can break a person, Prosperous refuses to admit defeat and chooses to persevere against all odds in order to pursue her dreams. The collection also points out how Belgium's reluctance to recognize the value of foreign degrees is a blessing for unscrupulous companies that take advantage of migrants because of their vulnerability.

Gbolahan's and Ego's employment situations also deviate from stereotypical representations. Indeed, Ego is portrayed as a fierce and ambitious woman who eventually chooses to leave Belgium because the country does not give her the chance to practice a profession for which she is qualified. Gbolahan, on the other hand, may be more accepting of his modest situation, but it should be noted that it is ambition that led him to emigrate from Nigeria in the first place. Furthermore, the character is also aware of Belgium's flaws, especially its lack of opportunities for black people, no matter how hardworking or ambitious they are. For this reason, he decides to send his daughter away to London so that Ego can take care of her and help her nurture her dreams.

On a related note, the collection also features several success stories in which migrants rise to the challenge and defy the odds that are against them to pursue their dream career. Although the focus is not always directly placed on these success stories, these depictions still allow the collection to offer alternative perspectives in which migrants are ambitious, resourceful, and determined.

5.4. Lawlessness, Victimhood, and Trauma: The Single Story of the Dreadful Home Country

"'I don't care if they speak cat. I need to get out of here,'
he said, eager to seek a new beginning."

(Unigwe, *Better Never* 42)

5.4.1. Introduction

This last single story pertaining to migration is different from the three single stories that have been analysed thus far. Indeed, while these could be related to portrayals of migrants as intruders and threats, the single story that will be analysed in the following pages bears upon another vision of migrants, this time as (helpless) victims. According to social psychologist Vladimir Ponizovskiy, "there is a story in which immigrants are something like distant poor relatives, targets for exercises in impersonal kindness". In this single story, migrants are perceived as tragic figures, who are assumed to flee from the horrors of a lawless home country. In this regard, Unigwe herself argues that some stories about immigrants tend to suggest that these should "be grateful for the 'freedom' of the new place" ("On Writing" 414), implying that their home country lacks such freedom. In this perspective, even so-called "economic migrants" could be seen as victims of their homeland, as desperate people fleeing from a hopeless place in which economic and professional opportunities are inexistent.

This single story oscillates between pathos and condescension. As Ponizovskiy further argues, this representation of migrants as victims "is popular not because of its appeal to the listener, but because of its appeal to the story-tellers". Indeed, these discourses can be linked to a form of Western saviour complex, in which migrants have to be rescued from the dreadfulness of their home country, and it becomes the West's duty to offer them the opportunities that were refused in their birthplace. Unigwe illustrates this idea particularly well in a satirical article titled "Zwart worden in zeven lessen" ("Becoming Black in Seven Lessons"; De Mul 11). In this article, the author ironically states:

> 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

> I now learn that being black means that I am perceived as a charity project. That I must be grateful for the opportunity granted to me to be in Europe. (De Mul 12)

By contrasting the "charity" of Europe with the presupposed hopelessness of foreign countries, this single story places migrants in a debt position, in which they are supposed to be eternally and unconditionally thankful to their host country.

With regard to (Sub-Saharan) African migrants, these representations of their home countries as lawless and hopeless can also be argued to have roots in depictions of the continent "as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness" (Adichie 07:12–07:15). These negative depictions of Africa can in turn be linked to the kind of saviour complex that was discussed above—something that Binyavanga Wainaina denounces in his satirical piece "How to Write about Africa":

> Remember, any work you submit in which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as the "real Africa", and you want that on your dust jacket. Do not feel queasy about this: you are trying to help them to get aid from the West. (94)

What Wainaina criticizes here is a long tradition according to which Africa is only defined by misery, which always justifies some form of Western intervention.

The following pages will therefore analyse how *Better Never* addresses the stereotypical idea that Nigeria, the origin country of the collection's migrant characters, is supposed to be a miserable place. This dissertation will also scrutinize how representations of Belgium as a saviour country are undermined throughout the book. Particular attention will be accorded to the ways in which the collection plays with the backstories of its characters, sometimes imbuing them with tragic elements, but always in a complex and nuanced fashion.

5.4.2. The Ambivalence of Choice: Prosperous and Agu

Once again, the discussion of single stories brings this dissertation back to Prosperous and Agu. Indeed, their backstory can be seen as a relatively tragic one. Although they both survived deadly religious riots, Prosperous's memories highlight the fact that these events have left a permanent mark on her and Agu:

> She does not want to think of the charred corpses she saw the day after the riot. She does not want to think of the way human bodies sizzled like pork when they burned. She does not want to think of the trouble it took to get them here. Or of

> the lies they had to tell, the new identities they had to wear. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 42)

These scenes of pure horror may contribute to depicting Nigeria as a place of dread, and lawlessness. However, *Better Never* also continually makes it clear that violence is not the only thing that defines the country. Indeed, in the case of Agu and Prosperous, the terror that they experienced in Jos[10] is counterbalanced with the implication that there was a possibility for them to remain in Nigeria: "She [Prosperous] would have liked to stay back, to try to find a job in another bank in the east—she had experience after all" (43). Throughout "Becoming Prosperous", it is implied that the characters could have rebuilt their lives in their home country, being safe in the East with the support of Prosperous's parents. Their decision to leave could therefore be argued to result from a choice, rather necessity. That being said, it is also shown that the riots leave Agu a deeply traumatized man, who sees no future for himself in Nigeria: "The supermarket was razed and he lost everything in one night. His investment. His will to live" (41). Because of this, the ideas of choice and free will are complexified in *Better Never*. Agu stands in a sort of grey area: he could safely remain in Nigeria, yet he has lost all hope of ever being able to live normally in his home country. In that way, the character can be argued to blur the distinction between refugee and economic migrant; he may have decided to move to Belgium in search of new opportunities, but he also left Nigeria because of the horrors that he witnessed there, which destroyed his source of income and made him hollow. By playing with this ambivalence between free will and necessity, Unigwe is able to complexify Agu's relation to his home country, which is shown to be more than a dangerous place that needs to be escaped at all costs.

Another layer of complexity can be added to this ambivalence of free will when one considers Prosperous's situation. Indeed, "Becoming Prosperous" often suggests that the title character regrets following her husband to Belgium, as illustrated by the following words: "If anyone asked her now if that sacrifice had been worth it, she would say no" (43). Being a successful banker, Prosperous could have rebuilt her life in Nigeria (see previous paragraph); it is therefore interesting to see how her decision to follow Agu oscillates between choice and compulsion, as emphasized by the story's internal focalization. See, for instance, how

[10] Jos is a multicultural city located in Central Nigeria. It is often the scene of religious tensions, and it has known several ethnical conflicts in the past decades (Dahiru). The collection does not confirm when the scenes of violence that Prosperous and Agu witnessed took place. The riots depicted in "Becoming Prosperous" could therefore be the 2008 or the 2010 Jos riots. The event could also be purely fictional and/or purposely left ambiguous.

Prosperous thinks that she "agreed to the move" (43), yet she also reflects, "There was no question of his [Agu's] wife continuing her job at the bank. She was marked too" (41–42). This excerpt can be interpreted in two ways: the first meaning is that, like Agu, Prosperous is marked as a Christian and, as a result, has to leave Jos out of fear for her life; however, these words can also mean that, as Agu's wife, Prosperous has no choice but to share her husband's downfall, even if she gets opportunities to rebuild her life in the East. This complexifies the nature of her decision to leave Nigeria—a decision that can be linked back to Unigwe's claim according to which the Nigerian wives in the collection "come along for the ride, not always willingly" ("On Writing" 414). In this regard, it is not the first time that the idea of choice is addressed in Unigwe's fiction, especially with regard to female characters. Indeed, in *On Black Sisters' Street*, the concept of free will is also thematized throughout the novel, as the circumstances that prompt the main characters to become sex workers make it difficult to determine whether their decision results from choice or necessity. In a 2013 interview, Unigwe states, "When I was writing the book, I had to redefine for myself what the parameters of choice were. Perhaps Alek was indeed forced into prostitution, but the other girls were also forced into it by circumstances" ("An Interview" 55). Such considerations about the nature of choice are undoubtedly present in *Better Never* too, especially regarding characters such as Prosperous, Rapu, or Ego, whose presence in Belgium results from a complex network of causes and circumstances. Ultimately, the idea that Prosperous could have been much more successful had she remained in Nigeria and the ambivalence of her decision to move to Belgium emphasize how her home country is more than a source of misery as far as she is concerned.

Another method that the collection uses to deviate from depictions of Nigeria as an absolute hellscape consists in having the characters regularly present the country as a place of positives. For instance, in "The Transfiguration", many of Prosperous and Agu's acquaintances are said to "shar[e] their nostalgia for a country they swore they could not wait to live in again" (1–2). Nostalgia is assuredly an important theme in the collection, and fond memories of Nigeria, usually conveyed through flashbacks, are numerous throughout the short stories. A telling illustration of this is the way in which an important part of "Everyone Deserves Grace" is dedicated to showing Agu's happy memories of the early days of his relationship with Prosperous ("The remembrance made him smile" (49)). These memories show another facet of Nigeria, a facet of joy and serenity. In this regard, the following excerpt in "The Transfiguration", in which Gwachi asks his friends to vilify their homeland, is also deeply significant:

> They magnified Nigeria' flaws, transforming it with their words into a nation with none of the redeeming features they spoke warmly of over plates of eba and soup (*Food tastes so much better in Nigeria! In Nigeria people might not have much but they are always willing to help! Nigerians are so much happier than these oyibo people! Our people are resilient! Resourceful! Brilliant! The best ever!*). . . . They spoke to Hilde, instead, of kidnappings at gunpoint; of policemen who sold their uniforms and rifles to armed robbers; of constant power outages and air so thick with the exhaust fumes of rickety old cars that it was impossible to breathe. (7–8)

The reason why Gwachi and his friends indulge in the single story of their home country as a miserable place is unclear. Hypothetically, it could be to dissuade Hilde to travel to Nigeria and therefore keep her in the dark about Gwachi's hidden family; it could also be because Hilde's presence makes these characters feel as if they need to cater for the white gaze to make her comfortable. In any case, these (single) stories infuriate Prosperous, who knows that these men are usually more than inclined to praise Nigeria and its qualities. As a result, this passage highlights the important tension between the single stories that circulate in Europe about Nigeria on the one hand and the characters' much more positive perception of their home country on the other.

Finally, another aspect of the short stories—especially those featuring Prosperous and Agu—that counterbalances the stereotypical vilification of Nigeria is the way in which Belgium, the supposedly "better" setting, is depicted as a non-ideal place to live in. Indeed, in "Becoming Prosperous", Agu reminds his wife that "Belgium had been foisted on them" (33). This portrayal of the small European country as a second-rate place to migrate to can be linked to what Patricia Bastida-Rodríguez and Elisabeth Bekers call "[t]he motif of Belgium as an accidental destination" (389), according to which, they explain, "Belgium's location outside the anglophone world, and the language issues this entails, . . . renders it less attractive to Unigwe's protagonists" (389).[11] These excerpts from "Becoming Prosperous", in which the title character remembers how undesirable Belgium is perceived (and turns out to be) as a country of destination, echo an earlier moment in "The Transfiguration", during which Agu explains to Prosperous why Gwachi and Hilde decided to move to Belgium after living in Germany: "He

[11] Still according to Bastida-Rodríguez and Bekers, this "motif of Belgium as an accidental destination" can be found in many of Unigwe's fiction works (388–89).

[Gwachi] said Germany is very hard for black men. *Harder than Belgium. Can you imagine*?" (2, emphasis added). These words, which are by no means flattering, once again highlight how the collection does not shy away from unsettling the Western reader by making European countries appear in a problematic way. Nigeria may be plagued by important issues, but Belgium is also an imperfect place too, far from being the pristine safe haven that it sometimes pretends to be.

5.4.3. Traumatic Parallels: Añuli and Nwadiuto

"How To Survive a Heatwave" (hereafter "How to Survive") can be seen as yet another internal journey, this time taking place in the span of a few minutes. This does not prevent the story from being as rich and intense as the other ones in the collection, quite the opposite. Indeed, "How to Survive" is a story that focuses on Añuli, a woman of Nigerian origin who repeatedly finds herself unable to tell her friends that she has been raped by students on a train. Her mind instead wanders from one thought to the next, which prompts her to talk about unrelated topics: "This is not really what she wants to say. She wants to say something else but it is easier, at the moment, to speak of being bombarded with options in Europe" (Unigwe, *Better Never* 106). As in all the other stories, the narration allows the reader to gain access to Añuli's thoughts and to better understand the mental process through which she is going. The most important "stop" of this internal journey is the main character's reminiscence of what happened to Nwadiuto, a young Nigerian woman who was raped and subsequently committed suicide:

> The memory of Nwadiuto that she has buried so deep inside her, so deep that in all the years since her suicide, she never thought of the girl once, excavates itself and she can remember the girl in startling detail. The remembrance brings her pain. (114)

The details surrounding Nwadiuto's death are particularly distressing. Indeed, after being assaulted, she was heavily victim-blamed ("*She should have known better! Everyone knows this, never meet a guy in his room alone unless you're asking for wahala* [trouble]*!*" (114)), which most probably played a role regarding her suicide. Even her parents are said to be "ashamed of how their daughter died" (114)—although one must keep in mind that Añuli's perspective on the matter is not entirely reliable, since she was among the people who, at the time, blamed Nwadiuto for the ordeal through which she went ("she remembers asking, like so many others, why the girl had gone to the male hostel" (113)). The tragic story of Nwadiuto—and especially the reactions that it triggered among her peers—allows the collection to point

out various issues concerning gender and sexual violence in Nigeria. However, arguing that "How to Survive" perfectly fits the single story of Africa as a lawless continent because of this would be missing the point. Indeed, the story does more than just highlighting the problem of sexual violence in Nigeria, it also addresses how this issue can be related to what happened to Añuli in Belgium.

It is important to keep in mind that the story draws a clear parallel between Nwadiuto and Añuli; both are raped by students, at night, in a place where there is no witness to the crime. Moreover, the fact that Añuli is reminded of Nwadiuto just after remembering the violence of her own ordeal is further proof that the stories of both women are connected to one another. This parallel unravels the stereotypical dichotomy that is set between Europe and Africa, with the former being a place of positives and the latter a continent of negatives. Indeed, as it turns out, both Nigeria and Belgium have issues regarding gender and sexual violence. Throughout the short story, the safety and bodily integrity of women are violated in both countries. Furthermore, the way in which issues of sexual violence are addressed in Belgium is also problematized through the interactions that Añuli has with her Flemish friend Lies:

> She recollects Lies telling her that in Belgium, rape is not considered a violent crime but a moral one. Yet each time those men on the train touched her, it felt as if they were lacerating her. What happened to her on the train was violent. (113)

The excerpt leaves it unclear whether Lies herself holds this view or whether this is her opinion on how sexual violence is addressed by the Belgian state. In any case, this idea that rape is not considered to be a violent crime echoes the reactions that the assault of Nwadiuto provoked in Nigeria. Indeed, the short story points out that, in both countries, the extreme violence of rape is downplayed, be it because the victim is blamed instead of the aggressor or because the sheer brutality of the act is simply not recognized. Ultimately, this parallel between Añuli and Nwadiuto emphasizes the idea that no country is intrinsically better than the other when it comes to sexual violence. As long as the safety of their female population is compromised, both countries are equally open to criticism.

5.4.4. Crippling Isolation and the Irresistible Pull of Home: "Heart Is Where The Home Is"

The backstory of the protagonist and first-person narrator in "Heart Is Where The Home Is" (hereafter "Heart") contains a number of tragic elements that can be linked to the Igbo culture.

Indeed, through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that the main character lost almost all her family possessions as well as her home after the death of her father:

> Not even those bowls had survived my uncles' greedy hands. The car was the first to go. . . . Uncle Justus, my father's older brother, laid claim to that. As he did the sofas, the TV and finally the house.
>
> My tenth birthday was spent helping my mother set up what was left of our belongings in a one-room flat, smaller than the bedroom she and my father had shared only two years before. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 120)

These scenes of utter loss and dispossession highlight the problematic aspect of traditional Igbo succession laws, according to which "women are by and large excluded from inheritance" (*Library of Congress*).[12] In other words, this patriarchal set of rules, which forbids wives and female children from inheriting, is the reason why the protagonist and her mother are dispossessed by their uncles, who, by this process, plunge the two women into the lower class. The widowed woman, in particular, is shown to have a difficult life, becoming a street vendor and having to work hard to make ends meet: "I promised her a rest from days of sitting in the sun selling peppers and tomatoes to customers determined to pay the lowest price possible" (117). This is why the main character wants her mother to come and live in Belgium, so that she can finally have a rest and enjoy a more relaxing way of life. A certain duality seems therefore to be established between Nigeria and Belgium, with the former being portrayed as a place of tragedy and poverty, and the latter as a place of happiness and relief.

However, this duality is deceptive and gradually subverted. Indeed, the main character's expectation that life will be overall better for her mother once she arrives in Belgium is quickly thwarted, as the older woman grows increasingly unhappy in Turnhout. Unlike the narrator, who sees Belgium as her "home" (115), her mother is unable to become accustomed to the country. The main reason behind this inability to settle is the crippling loneliness that is associated with Turnhout. Only a week after arriving in Belgium, the mother character notes that her daughter's "house is too quiet" (119) and complains that they never have any visitors. As the story progresses, the woman's initial elation gradually fades away, and isolation transforms her into a sad and quiet figure:

[12] It must be noted, however, that institutional progress has been made in Nigeria and Igboland in the recent years. For more details on the matter, see *Library of Congress*; and Okoli et al.

> And then, just as it had showered upon my house, the laughter dried up. As did her voice. She hardly spoke to me. No longer asked if I had no friends. . . . She sat with me as I listened to the news in Dutch and muttered, "I could never learn this language!" One day, she held her throat dramatically and said, "This is what it must feel like to be dumb. To hear and not understand. To speak and not be understood." (123)

Admittedly, the loneliness of the apartment can be largely attributed to the main character's own "reclusive nature" (124) as well as her unwillingness "to be inundated with people for whom [she] would have to be responsible" (124). However, the fact remains that "Heart" mainly associates loneliness with Belgium, while Nigeria is marked by friendliness and social connection, a contrast that is emphasized in the following excerpt: "She had never been without friends. I had not managed to make a single friend here" (124). Ultimately, despite the injustice and the hardship that the protagonist's mother faces in Nigeria, she still yearns to go back "home" (124). This makes the short story a relatively balanced one in terms of settings. Indeed, the characters' troubled past prevents Nigeria from being depicted through a rose-tinted perspective, yet, at the same time, the mother's and the daughter's feelings of loneliness emphasize the idea that Belgium is not automatically a better place to live in.

5.4.5. Stories in Conversation: "Better Never Than Late"

Last but not least, "Better Never Than Late" (hereafter "Better Never") is interestingly peculiar in the context of the collection. Set in Nigeria, it is the only story that does not seem to be directly connected to migration—although Prosperous and Agu (who turns out to be Kambi's cousin) make a brief appearance in it. Nonetheless, the story's themes and the events that it narrates are of crucial interest for this dissertation's discussion. "Better Never" can be read in many regards as social criticism concerning the ways in which power relations are established and maintained in (Christian) Nigeria, especially with the help of tradition and religion. Indeed, the story shows how easily vulnerable people (women, children, maids) can be made into scapegoats for various problems, of which they are generally totally unaware—a situation that legitimizes the use of violence against said vulnerable people:

> Now, they knew the source of his [Agu's] childlessness. "What a wicked child," Kambi said. "What do we do now?"
>
> "We will beat out a confession from her and get the pastor to bind her on Sunday. We will fight her spirits!"

> The beating was necessary, Ada explained, because it meant that once Ijeoma confessed she would be powerless to harm Kambi for a while. (Unigwe, *Better Never* 62)

Kambi and Ada's belief that Ijeoma is to blame for her employer's lack of romantic success (and Agu's childlessness) makes the beating "necessary", it transforms unprovoked violence into an act of legitimate defence. In addition, the brutality to which Ijeoma is subjected during the exorcism is also suggested to be of sexual nature, as shown in the following excerpt, in which the pastor starts to touch the young girl's body against her will: "He touched her chest and ran his palm down her front. Each time he touched her, Ijeoma jerked and tried to free her hands from the men holding her, but she was powerless against their strength" (71). Not only does religion legitimize the use of violence against a vulnerable girl, but it also makes it possible for a man to violate the sanctity of a teenager's body without repercussions. At the end of the ceremony, the dehumanization of Ijeoma and her lower social status are made directly visible, with the young girl becoming "a heap of laundry at the pastor's feet, the white cloth bunched up to expose her thighs" (73). The strong martyrdom imagery in this excerpt emphasizes how religion brutally ritualizes and cements status differences; through the exorcism, Ijeoma's inferiority is burnt into her body and her mind. It could be argued that this vivid depiction of extreme (yet legitimized) violence contributes to portraying Nigeria as a place of cruelty and sufferance. However, one must also keep in mind that "Better Never" is but one story of the country, a story that is counterbalanced by countless other experiences and narratives throughout the collection.

Indeed, "Better Never" is a telling example of how, in Unigwe's words, "[t]he stories in Nigeria and the ones set in Belgium are in conversation with each other" ("On Writing" 420). The main example that she uses to illustrate her claim is the way in which the short story contextualizes the tensions within Agu and Prosperous's relationship:

> For example, the story of the "exorcism" in the church (where the girl is blamed for Agu's childlessness, amongst other things) sheds light on the sort of cultural background that makes having a child important to Agu, and expands Prosperous's refusal to have one into a rebelliousness that is more than just personal. ("On Writing" 420)

At the beginning of "Better Never", the narrator (focalizing on Kambi) indeed comments on the strong Igbo social expectations according to which starting a family and having children is a necessary prerequisite to a successful and fulfilling life:

> She just wanted those aunts (and uncles) and her mother to stop asking her, "Kambi, when are we meeting the one?" whenever she turned up to family gatherings alone, asking in tones that insinuated that it was a shortcoming of hers that prevented her from getting married. (61)

As Unigwe explains, "Better Never" sheds a new light on other stories because it addresses social norms—namely, the ideal of the traditional nuclear family—that play an important, overarching role throughout the collection. The opposite, i.e., the idea that the reading of "Better Never" is influenced by details revealed in other stories, is also accurate. For instance, the knowledge gained from "Becoming Prosperous" makes the suspicion that falls on Ijeoma dramatically ironic, since the reader knows that Prosperous's childlessness is the result of her using contraceptives. In summary, even though "Better Never" does not seem to directly address the theme of migration, it can nonetheless be seen as a central story due to how connected it is to other parts of the collection—a centrality that is highlighted by the story's middle (i.e., fifth) position within the book and its shared title with the collection as a whole. This idea that "Better Never" is in conversation with the other stories entails that its depiction of Nigeria also converses with other portrayals throughout the book, such as nostalgic memories (see, for instance, 48–49); mundane, everyday-life scenes (103–04); or displays of intense chaos and brutality (41–42). Combined, all these representations form a global multi-perspective story of Nigeria that is complex and nuanced.

Finally, another reason why "Better Never" is not to be regarded as a unilateral portrayal of Nigeria as a doomed country is the fact that its protagonist comes to regret her actions and reject the foundations on which they are based. Indeed, Kambi is yet again a dynamic character who starts off as relatively flat and changes throughout the story to become rounder, more complex. In spite of her education, she appears at first to be quite impressionable as far as spiritual matters are concerned ("She had two degrees, but enough self-knowledge to know that she was out of her depth here" (60)). As a result, she often lets Ada influence her and make decisions in her stead, which leads to the setting up of the exorcism ceremony. As the story progresses, the main character starts to question the legitimacy of what she, her cousin, and the pastor are inflicting to Ijeoma:

> What if there had been a mistake? The girl looked harmless. She turned to Ada and before she had even said a word, Ada said, "See how her wild eyes are. Ask the blood of Jesus to cover you from her evil." Ijeoma's eyes were indeed wild, Kambi saw now. (68)

However, once again, Ada is able to overwhelm her with her confidence; and Kambi's perception of her maid immediately goes from "harmless" to "wild", as her mind is twisted by her cousin's words. Nevertheless, towards the end of "Better Never", self-delusion and Ada's influence are not enough to suppress Kambi's intense feelings of guilt. After witnessing her maid's suffering and humiliation, the main character does not feel an ounce of satisfaction; she is no longer able to play a part in the ceremony, nor can she bring herself to sing and pray with the crowd anymore:

> Deep in her heart, where relief should have been a river flowing, Kambi discovered instead that a heartburn had lodged itself, holding her around her neck, so that when she opened her mouth to sing, she could only whisper, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" (74)

Although it occurs when the damage is already done, Kambi's character change is quite significant because it shows that, in the face of someone else's suffering, empathy can resurface even after being buried under superstition for such a long time. As in "Everyone Deserves Grace", the ending of "Better Never" is far from being a happy one, but it still offers a glimmer of hope, a chance for the main character to change for the better after realizing something that is important to her. As a result, Kambi's character arc emphasizes the idea that, even though religious fundamentalism is a key issue in Nigeria and its harming effects should not be downplayed, it is not an inescapable fatality looming over the country, as it can be questioned, even rejected.

5.4.6. Partial Conclusion

Stereotypical representations of Nigeria as a place of disaster are constantly challenged throughout *Better Never*. Indeed, the collection's strong multi-perspectivity makes it possible to present the country in a multitude of different ways, adding much-needed complexity and nuance to Western mainstream discourses portraying the place as an unredeemable hellscape.

With the traumatic backstory of Prosperous and Agu, the book does not shy away from highlighting the rampant violence that sometimes characterizes Nigeria. However, by playing

with the concept of choice, the collection also weakens the idea that both characters are helpless escapees, who were forced to leave the horrors of their home country. This is particularly relevant for Prosperous, whose decision to accompany Agu can be seen as an ambivalent mixture of (circumstantial) coercion and free will. In addition, the stories featuring Agu and Prosperous provide the reader with several alternative depictions of Nigeria, in which the country is seen through a nostalgic and joyful lens. These short stories also undermine representations of Belgium as a perfect safe haven, since their characters tend to portray the European country as a less-than-ideal destination for migrants.

As for Anuli's and Nwadiuto's story, "How to Survive a Heatwave" is able to weaken the dichotomy of Nigeria as dangerous and Belgium as safe by establishing a parallel between two women who were both let down by their country's inability to properly tackle the issue of sexual violence.

In "Heart Is Where The Home Is", this duality is also undermined. Indeed, despite losing everything in Nigeria, the main character's mother is unable to live away from her homeland and therefore withers in Belgium. The isolation that is associated with Turnhout also plays a role in weakening Belgium's self-image as a welcoming country where life is nothing but pleasant—although this association with loneliness is also nuanced by the main character's own personality and choices.

Last but not least, "Better Never Than Late" may depict a bleak side of Nigerian society, marked by class inequality and harming beliefs, but the collection is also careful to ensure that Ijeoma's ordeal does not become the only story of the country. Indeed, thanks to its interconnectedness with the other short stories, "Better Never" is balanced by a multitude of perspectives and portrayals that appear throughout the collection. Furthermore, Kambi's guilt at the end of the short story can be seen as a hopeful sign that people can change and question self-evident truths, even in the face of religious dogmatism.

Conclusion

Chika Unigwe's *Better Never Than Late* may be a short book, but it is an abundant read, overflowing with interesting themes, compelling characters, and engaging storylines. The ways in which the collection addresses the ideas of perspective and portrayal is undoubtedly one of its most important features. In this dissertation I have aimed to show how *Better Never* interacts with stereotypical representations and the concept that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the single story". Indeed, throughout my analysis, I illustrated how the collection uses its own fictionality to undermine the one-sidedness of Western stereotypes about migration. Ultimately, it can be concluded that the ten short stories do not avoid stereotypes, nor do they blindly reject them. Quite the opposite, many characters and situations are constructed based on elements pertaining to single stories. However—and most importantly—the collection always adds twists to the archetypal formulas of which it makes use. The end result is that *Better Never* does not challenge stereotypes and single stories by dismissing these, but rather by acknowledging their existence (one could even say by embracing them) so that it becomes possible for the collection to subvert the potency and unilaterality of these representations. Single stories appear profusely throughout the book, but they always end up being nuanced, complexified, modified, and confronted; as a result, they never remain single stories as such, because they always ramify and become multidimensional.

Borrowing Adichie's concept and using it as starting and focal point of my textual analysis, I discussed four main examples that showcase how this tension between illustrating and challenging stereotypical representations works in *Better Never*. The single story of the abusive interracial marriage was analysed first. Even though the collection features no less than two such manipulative relationships, it was pointed out that Unigwe highly complexifies these in several aspects. Such aspects include the fact that these relationships are far from being devoid of love, the gradual erosion of the dichotomy between the cunning migrant and the naïve European, frequent reminders of the importance of survival in the context of migration, and the contrasting portrayal of a third interracial relationship, which is not afflicted by issues pertaining to deception, manipulation, and dehumanization. In other words, while the book is not afraid to problematize the use of marriage as a means to an end, it is also careful to show other facets of these relationships so that their depiction can move away from the single story on which they are based.

This observation is also applicable to the second single story that was analysed in the present dissertation—i.e., that of the abusive migrant relationship. Similarly, *Better Never* does not shy away from portraying migrant couples that are characterized by abuse and inequality, but it also ensures that the stories go beyond these negatives. By depicting characters that move away from stereotypical representations (for instance, migrant women fighting back against patriarchal constraints or migrant men vowing to swallow their pride for the sake of their relationship) and by challenging the idea that gender inequality is imported, the collection paints alternative pictures and weakens the oversimplified idea that migrant relationships are solely based on oppression.

The third single story that is challenged throughout the collection is that of the single migrant career path, according to which migrants are supposed to be lazy, uneducated and/or lacking ambition. Once again, the collection partly plays into these stereotypes by depicting migrants who are working menial jobs and/or migrants being satisfied with modest careers. That being said, the stories counterbalance these representations by featuring many characters who decide to pursue their dreams and follow their ambition. Furthermore, *Better Never* also problematizes the lack of value that foreign degrees have in the West, a situation that leads to distressing disillusions.

Finally, the fourth single story, according to which the home country of migrants (in this dissertation's case, Nigeria) is predominantly defined by misery, is challenged in the same manner throughout the collection. Indeed, even though the book does not refrain from highlighting problematic aspects regarding Nigeria and the Igbo culture, these more negative depictions are continually contrasted with other, more positive representations. Moreover, the short stories also frequently weaken the duality between Nigeria as a dangerous place and Belgium as a safe haven by pointing out the fact that Belgium is a country with important issues too. Ultimately, each single story discussed in this dissertation can be argued to go through a similar complexifying process in *Better Never*, which allows the collection to provide its reader with a rich, multilateral, and multi-perspective story of migration in Belgium.

In addition, this dissertation also discussed how Unigwe uses elements of fiction to shed a new light on the stereotypical representations that *Better Never* addresses. Various recurring patterns were observed and highlighted in this regard. Indeed, several characters can be argued to become rounder as their story progresses (Agu, Godwin, Kambi, Tine, Rapu). These changes in character depth often reveal hidden dimensions regarding these people, who are initially perceived as archetypes but turn out to be much more nuanced. Next to this, plot twists and sudden turns of events are frequent in *Better Never* (Rapu leaving Gwachi, Prosperous telling

off Agu, Gbolahan deciding to send his daughter to London, Tine confessing her true intentions), and they often serve as a source of additional complexity for their respective stories. Internal journeys are also commonplace in the collection—see, for instance, Prosperous's introspection in "Becoming Prosperous", Agu's in "Everyone Deserves Grace", Gbolahan's in "Cleared for Takeoff", or Kambi's in "Better Never Than Late". These internal journeys, which are established through narration and often involve mental forms of time travel, almost always lead to cathartic episodes in which characters come to realize something that is important to them, something that makes them change. They are therefore another source of complexity for the stories, as they often allow the collection to entirely redefine some characters and situations. On a related note, *Better Never*'s narration also regularly emphasizes how important the idea of (limited) perspective is with regard to storytelling. Finally, in terms of setting, the constant jumps back and forth between Belgium and Nigeria allow the collection to portray both countries in multiple and different manners, often emphasizing the idea that both places are imperfect in their own way.

This dissertation thus showed that *Better Never* can be connected in many respects to Adichie's concept of the single story and Achebe's idea of a balance of stories. Indeed, by providing multiple perspectives and nuanced stories about migrants of Nigerian origin living in Belgium, the collection counters many oversimplified representations that circulate in Western discourses on migration. As discussed in the paragraphs above, *Better Never* also achieves this result by directly interacting with and complexifying stereotypical representation throughout the short stories. The collection also contributes to restoring a balance of stories with regard to migration, not only because it is a work about Nigerian migrants that is written by a Nigerian author (in a communicative context that is dominated by Western discourses), but also because the collection often balances itself and avoids giving more weight to some representations compared to others. However, this dissertation highlighted that Unigwe does not merely implement her colleagues' theory in her fiction works. Quite the opposite, it was pointed out that the author's aspiration to challenge mainstream representations arises from a desire to reflect the authenticity of situations that she directly or indirectly witnessed. Moreover—and most importantly—the present analysis also underlined how Unigwe playfully makes use of stereotypes to produce various effects, a tendency that can undeniably be observed in *Better Never Than Late.*

I would like to conclude this dissertation with a quotation from Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964). In the novel, the central character Ezeulu tells his son, "The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place" (78). Perceiving and trying to

understand the universe that surrounds us is like looking through the narrow holes of a mask: it is possible to make general sense of the view, but the overall picture remains limited, incomplete. The lack of a large view angle creates haziness, blind spots, and stereotypes thrive on these deformations. Indeed, single stories are not mirages or illusions that need to be dismissed without a second thought. Instead, they can be seen as misrepresentations of forms and figures that, because of the mask, appear to be much simpler than what they really are. To see the world, and to see it well, one must learn to walk to different places and observe people and situations from other angles. This is no small feat, as no one can truly get the opportunity to travel the whole globe and experience everything that it has to offer. This is where literature (and fiction in particular) comes into play. By unsettling us, showing us alternative perspectives, and offering us glimpses into unfamiliar situations, stories open cracks in the mask, and they help redress the incompleteness of our perception of the world.

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