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'It was a departure of sorts': glocal homes in recent short fiction by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Efemia Chela, Chibundu Onuzo and Lesley Nneka Arimah

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ABSTRACT

This article takes off from two of the angles of contention found in critical responses to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and subsequent Atlanticist studies: asymmetries and exclusions along gender lines, and insufficient attention to the dynamics of contemporary global capital. It examines what gets articulated when recent African short fiction is approached via a frame centered on the location of home, gendered labour, sexual and reproductive economies, and the interrelation of the domestic and capitalism. In particular, it is informed by Alexis Pauline Gumbs's counter-heuristic to Gilroy, the Black Feminine Domestic. Gumbs's attempt to make visible such a subject position and forms of labour prompts my focus on domestic workers and analogous figures, often migrant and low paid and sometimes found only at the edges of texts. I discuss Efemia Chela's 'Chicken' (2014), Chibundu Onuzo's 'Sunita' (2015), Lesley Nneka Arimah's 'Skinned' (2019), and, from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), the stories 'Imitation,' 'The Thing Around Your Neck' and 'On Monday of Last Week.' Here the tropes of circulation and regimes of rationality identified by Gilroy find counterparts in the structuring of workforces, the reach of body and biopolitics, and discourses of national borders and migration. The lens of 'women's work' permits an intersectional shift in and beyond Black Atlantic frames and the heteropatriarchal imagination, but the selected material and preoccupations here also seek to offer another opening on debates about, and genres of, 'African' writing.

KEYWORDS Short fiction; African literature; domestic; Black Atlantic; migrant; capitalism

Introduction

The opening of Efemia Chela's (2014) short story 'Chicken' features the lines

The entire dusty front yard was swept. Forthright, our maid, swept it once from the middle to the left and once from the middle to the right ensuring even

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distribution [...] she lovingly gave the earth a centre parting, like she was doing the hair of the daughter she seldom saw. Deftly, she made concentric circles with the rake, making certain not to be backed into a corner as she was in life.

This description within a broader scene of preparations for a party at the protagonist narrator Kaba's family home, offers a brief, revealing glimpse of the duties and life of domestic help Forthright, but also a departure point that sharpens the preoccupations of this article: the labour and routes of migrant and low paid working women, hierarchical domestic spheres, and the biopolitics in operation within family relations, reproductive imperatives, and bodily care, here found in the mention of hair work. 'Backed into a corner' of the narrative, attention to such maids and analogous figures opens up an enquiry seeking to exceed the frames of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and, along the way, contribute to debates on African short fiction and its contexts.

My approach arises from two of the angles of contention found in critical responses to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) and subsequent Atlanticist studies: asymmetries and exclusions along gender lines, and insufficient attention to the dynamics of contemporary global capital. Critics such as Michael Rothberg, Joan Dayan and Neil Lazarus have pointed to the disconnection of Gilroy's model from what Lucy Evans calls 'the socio-economic workings of an increasingly transnational climate of global capitalism' (2009, p. 265). Robert Reid-Pharr, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, among others, flag gender issues and gendered asymmetries, including identifying Gilroy's privileging of a set of experiences historically less accessible to women in his examples of artists and writers in exile and in his emphasis on practices such as seafaring. Paul Williams extrapolates that 'the 'home' (as the place of forced and unforced reproduction, and the paid and unpaid labour of black women) has to be added to *The Black Atlantic's* repertoire of symbolic spaces' (2012, p. 132). Back-dropped by such responses to Gilroy, specifically I would like to examine what emerges when we look at a selection of contemporary African fiction, in this case, short stories by women, through a framework that is alert to home, gendered labour, and sexual and reproductive economies. Further, not only does this recent writing often feature an interrelation between the global and the local, but, as reflected in the terms of my title, it also enables an exploration of the interlinks between the domestic and global capital. Analysis will take in Efemia Chela's 'Chicken' (2014), Chibundu Onuzo's 'Sunita' (2015), Lesley Nneka Arimah's 'Skinned' (2019), and, from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), the stories 'Imitation,' 'The Thing Around Your Neck' and 'On Monday of Last Week.'

This scope also shifts focus from what Michelle Wright (2013, 2015) has identified as the Middle Passage Epistemology underpinning Gilroy's influential model, and from an Atlantic imaginary oriented towards Europe and the Americas. As many critics have pointed out, the exclusion of Africa as a site of

detailed investigation in *The Black Atlantic* potentially, if unintentionally, contributes to a fixing of Africa as outside of 'the modern,' as bounded, static and timeless, anterior to modernity.¹ As early as a 1996 Special Issue on Africa and diaspora, after an account of Gilroy's case for black experience and expression as constitutive of modernity, Simon Gikandi flags the need for 'some concrete intellectual encounter with Africa itself' (p. 5). In addition, thinking about movements not accounted for within the Middle Passage frame allows greater attention to the experiences and cultures of the post 1940s African – not black – diaspora, here understood as operating *within* as well as outside of the continent.² Another way in which Wright (2015) invites the questioning of universalizing notions of blackness is by denaturalizing the common focus on the heterosexual black male. Thus, this article asks what happens when not only is an Africanist emphasis brought to bear, but more plural, less heteropatriarchal understandings and representations of black identity are foregrounded?

A focus on recent short fiction by women writers speaks to current African literary cultures and contexts, including those of publishing and reception. Spanning from the 2009 work of well-established figure Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to stories by three newer writers shortlisted for or awarded the Caine Prize in the period 2014–2019, my selection of primary material both reflects and helps constitute a field underlined by debates that can be inadequately shorthanded as novel vs. short story; contemporary relations to or rejection of an earlier generation of the 'fathers' of modern African literature; writers in the diaspora vs. writers living and working in African nations; marketing at and recognition from domestic vs. international readerships, and so on. The impact of online channels for sharing and publishing work today should also be noted (see Adenekan and Cousins 2013) alongside questions of 'prize culture.' Discussing the Caine Prize for African writing, Ben Okri reflects in 2019 'The choice of the short story was inspired. While the novel is the more expansive form, the short story is the more accessible [...] It lets you in. It lets you begin' (p. 9). Certainly, the selected short fictions by Chibundu Onuzo and Efemia Chela were written in response to Arts initiatives (Onuzo's 'Sunita' for BBC Radio 3's Young Artist Day and Chela's 'Chicken' for submission to Short Story Day Africa), although Onuzo had already published a novel previously in 2012. Whereas Roger Berger's earlier 1998 analysis of African short stories positioned work in this form in a vanguard for not being addressed to a 'foreign reader' attracted to a 'sense of the exotic [...] and an overt manifestation of the great anticolonial theme' (p. 78), since then the politics both of literary awards like the Caine Prize (which aims to 'encourage and highlight the richness and diversity of African writing by bringing it to a wider audience internationally') and of a category and any characterization of 'African literature' have come into heightened relief (see Krishnan 2018). While the effects of the Caine Prize

itself remain open to debate,³ I identify in the chosen stories a thread of pre-occupation with migrant and low-paid working women and domestic arenas that not only embeds together the local and global and prompts an intersectional shift in Gilroy's frames but also offers another opening on the range of what might constitute 'African' writing.

Catalyzing to the approach here is Alexis Pauline Gumbs's turn to a subject position that she calls the Black Feminine Domestic. Gumbs's intervention is found in a 2009 Special Issue of *Symbiosis* titled '(Un)Gendering the Transatlantic,' which Colleen Glenney Boggs introduces via such feminists as Susan Stanford Friedman, Laura Briggs and Amy Kaplan, whose work sets out how 'the domestic (including the family, the household, and the nation) is not the opposite of the transnational, but must instead be rethought as one of its loci' (Glenney Boggs, p. 95). Gumbs's contribution, 'The Black Feminine Domestic: A Counter-Heuristic Exercise in Falling Apart,' offers a provisional critical approach, rather than a term or 'organizing logic' to replace the Black Atlantic; she writes, 'Moving along shadow circuits of capital [...] I use the black feminine domestic as a counter-heuristic' (p. 106, 102). Unlike Gilroy, her focus is on the 'lives and bodies of black working class women' (p. 101), with Caribbean migrants who went to the UK, Canada and the US for work from the 1940s onward particularly in mind. The Black Feminine Domestic is a 'poetic intervention,' exploring an excluded subject position and invisibilized forms of labour, in the latter stages illustrating this via the poetry of Dionne Brand (p. 102). Gumbs's critique targets both 'a masculinist valorization of mobility and an undertheorization of reproduction,' and the concomitant 'elision of the [feminized] labor of gendered black subjects' (p. 101).

While Gumbs begins from a Caribbean diaspora context, her wish to reanimate 'the gendered subjectivity of those [...] whose labor can be obtained without pay, without papers, without regulation, and without recognition and whose bodies can be inscribed with the language of nation-making (both as fantasy home and horrifying excess),' is generative in approaching domestic and other precarious workers, and their 'glocal' position, in the African short fictions under examination here (p. 103).⁴ Notably, Susan Andrade's study *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958–1988* (2011) focuses on the domestic in fiction by African women. While Andrade explores the interconnection between the private and public spheres, her terms of reference are the family and the nation, and not the transnational. Looking at novels from an earlier period, she argues against such writing being deemed apolitical, occluded from a tradition of national and anticolonial narratives, and, pursuing a different line to this article, for political engagement via domestic allegory. Bearing in mind twenty-first-century literary responses, the lines from Gumbs above indicate other relevant aspects left at the edges of Gilroy's transnational model: visas,

green cards, national border policing, lack of rights for undocumented migrants, vulnerability to abuse, and flows such as migrant remittances. I propose that attention to homes/the domestic allows patterns of women's experiences and work to come to the fore and, informed by Gumbs's 'counter' to Gilroy, also other forms of exchange beyond his account of 'the circulation of ideas and activists [...] the movement of key cultural and political artefacts' (1993, p. 4); exchanges in particular within sexual economies involving marriage and sexual exploitation, and in reproductive and other forms of biopolitics at work in a transactional order shaped by uneven capitalist globalization.⁵

Women's work/spaces

Following Gumbs's spotlighting of the invisibilized domestic, the stories under consideration often feature househelps and the unpaid work of wives and daughter figures within the home, whether foregrounded in, or at the margins of, the narrative. Rather than a situated form of belonging, this gendered labour in, and orientation from, the house is repeatedly linked to a sense of displacement and economic bonds. My framework also enables a magnified view of parallels between the movements and lack of choice of women protagonists who are not domestic workers and figures who perform services for them. For the most part without erasing class difference, these narratives thus offer a sense of women in a patriarchal and global economic system which fixes all of them, whether maid or migrant bride or aspiring but sidelined professional.

After winning 'the American visa lottery' but breaking away from her familial sponsor, desperate Akunna in Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck' secures a restaurant job by proposing she 'would work for two dollars less than the other waitresses' (p. 115, 117). The manager's response that he will pay 'a dollar less, but under the table; he didn't like all the taxes' (p. 117) indicates hidden economies as well as the forfeiting of worker rights. Nonetheless, Akunna sends cash back to Nigeria regularly (mailing 'half your month's earnings to your parents at the address of the parastatal where your mother was a cleaner' (p. 118)), living in isolation and forgoing her education to just about cover the 'rent for the tiny room with the stained carpet' (p. 117). Meanwhile in 'On Monday of Last Week' Kamara, who has recently moved to join her husband in the US, does informal child-care while she waits for her paperwork to come through. With her recurring focus on female African diasporans in the US, there are frequent references to migrant precarity, green cards and an unregistered workforce in Adichie's stories and, as well as invoking a world of economic disparity, borders and exclusory images of nation, this is often also tied to dependency on or indebtedness to a spouse or another male sponsor. Such relations echo through the

inhabitation of inhospitable home spaces that are symbolic of alienation and sometimes a position offset from domestic ideals. Written in the second person, the narrative of 'The Thing Around Your Neck' conveys Akunna's dislocation in this life in the margins: 'Sometimes you felt invisible and tried to walk through your room wall into the hallway, and when you bumped into the wall, it left bruises on your arms' (p. 119). This anticipates a feeling, found more widely, of living in someone else's house, whether your husband's or an employer's. Thus a correlation is unfolded between the attempt to find a legitimized place in a new country as a migrant and struggles in domestic settings and gendered roles that for women characters allow little at-homeness. In addition, forms of debt, remittances, and 'under the table' migrant pay remind of the interrelation of these experiences and globalized capital, corresponding to 'the systematic transfer of caring work from poor countries to rich' (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003, p. 13).

Adichie's 'Imitation,' however, centres on a more privileged protagonist, for Nkem's husband belongs to 'the Rich Nigerian Men Who Owned Houses in America league' (p. 26). Yet, as the story develops, both Nkem's acceptance of her husband's decisions and class distinctions between herself and housegirl Amaechi get disrupted. Again, looking at domestic space and feminized work is revealing. Neither Nkem's present unchosen home in America nor the house back in Nigeria, where her husband spends most of his time, feels like home:

She walks out into the hallway, up the wide stairs, then back downstairs and into the kitchen. She used to walk like this throughout the house in Lagos, every day of the three weeks she and the children spent at Christmas [...] Her mind wanders to the bedroom [...] that still feels like a hotel room. (p. 27)

This unsettledness is linked to confirmation of her husband's infidelity but also a broader sense of dissatisfaction and unbelonging within a life that has been shaped for her by another.

While the narrative of 'Imitation' is focalized entirely through Nkem's perspective, the evidence of househelp Amaechi's labour insists on her presence not erasure. Indeed, Adichie builds up a cumulative picture of the daily acts that maintain the home, incorporating descriptions of the work of Amaechi's 'efficient hands,' washing the floors, smoothing the bedsheets, cleaning the bathrooms, cooking the meals (p. 29). The suggestion of an alignment between the gendered positions of economically dependent wife and imported domestic worker within a broader system of patriarchal capitalism is driven home from a different angle when their shared background as 'Bush Girl[s]' is disclosed (p. 31). At one point Nkem reflects, 'The madam / housegirl line has blurred in the years she has had Amaechi. It is what America does to you [...] You have nobody to talk to, really, except for your toddlers, so you turn to your housegirl,' revealing both isolation in the US and domestic

intimacy between women across class difference (p. 29). Yet, while Nkem has become a big man's wife and Madam to Amaechi, both grew up in homes where 'you snatched the food up, whatever it was, and ate it' and both have been socially elevated and brought to America by Obiora (p. 24). Adichie's short fictions thus bring together explorations of gender structures, migrant precarity and a not-at-homeness that enacts the entanglement of the domestic and transnational. In 'Imitation,' suggestively conveyed to the reader, although unspoken to each other, are the shared conditions of Nkem's and Amaechi's girlhoods and, at least until the end of the story, a mutual adult position without 'a say' (p. 23).

This kind of pairing of female figures from different social strata is more heavily foregrounded in Onuzo's 'Sunita.' Indeed, the story's premise binds together aspiring banker Dolapo in the UK and Sunita, a girl in rural India who sells her hair. I will return to the international trade in hair later and here examine other representations of working women. Belonging to a well-off family and about to graduate in History, Dolapo pursues a job in London's financial centre. Her mentor Adaeze, known as Daisy, not only advises a change in name but also renouncing her afro for a weave: 'fine if you want to work in advertising or publishing, or media, or fashion [...] but certainly not banking' (p. 787). Exposing the tandem workings of gender expectation and racism, Onuzo has Daisy declare 'elegant, chic, glamorous; these are the adjectives we use for women in banking,' simultaneously identifying untreated black hair as 'unprofessional, unkempt and unserious' (p. 787). As the gatekeeper to a highly paid career in a male-dominated sector, Daisy perpetuates the particularly narrow presentation of self needed for black women to succeed. Further, Onuzo punctures 'brownwashing' and tokenism in this twenty-first-century corporate world: 'She had been paired with Daisy by Diversity Unlimited, a recruitment firm that helped companies fill up their ethnic minority quota. Daisy had worked for seven years in an investment bank [...] Daisy's hair cost a thousand pounds' (p. 788). While Dolapo in the end navigates her own way through Daisy's advice, this strand of the story – elaborating an economically advantaged subject position – establishes conformity and acceptability of image, based on enduring racism and sexism, as still determining women's career prospects.

In contrast, those who work as black hairdressers are represented as low paid and belonging to a precarious migrant workforce in these fictions. In 'Sunita,' Dolapo orders the hair for her first weave and then takes it to a salon for it to be attached: 'they [...] stitched the human hair to hers, tight-running stitches that made her eyes water' (p. 788). Yet, focused on drawing out the relationship between the women who sell their hair and the women who buy it, 'Sunita' leaves the extractive labour of those who care for this hair overlooked. This omission is sharpened by brief comparison with the salon-based frame narrative of Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013).

Here, preparing for her intended return to Nigeria by having her hair braided, protagonist Ifemelu encounters Aisha, an undocumented migrant from Senegal. Working long hours at the rundown Mariama African Hair Braiding Salon, separated from family, and legally and economically vulnerable, Aisha quizzes the now secure, semi-Americanized Ifemelu, 'How you get your papers?' (p. 363), this question reminding Ifemelu of her own earlier struggles in America and reinforcing the theme of migrant marginality even as the easily invisibilized, feminized hair work goes on.⁶ Fictions centred on more affluent protagonists such as Nkem and Dolapo (and Ifemelu in *Americanah*) use backstories and pairings with less privileged figures to complicate naturalizing accounts of the position of women, whether at home or at work, within both patriarchy and a globalized economy.

If Dolapo is left acting on her own terms as she enters a job interview at the end of 'Sunita,' the short story 'Chicken' by Chela charts a contrasting trajectory for another aspiring professional. Chela's protagonist narrator has a privileged family background, the party scene at the beginning not only marking her 'departure of sorts' from home but also establishing material comfort. Kaba's move to Cape Town and search for employment results only in hardship and marginality in this urban setting though. Her living space reflects her efforts to economize and diminishing prospects: 'the window edges taped shut to keep out the cold. The suitcase instead of a dresser. My crusty two-hotplate stove that I made nshima and beans on every day.' Having ignored her parents' wish that she study law, on graduation Kaba finds herself slowly cut off from their support and facing a bleak job market that Chela connects to the context of global finance and, in particular, the crash of 2007–2008: 'times were tough [...] In the year that the markets crashed, I was assured that the crisis would have sorted itself out by the time I entered the job market. It was nothing like that.' Her social descent is shown to be related to both attempted independence and the shattered promise of multinational businesses for the best position she can find neither supports her nor is likely to offer progression: 'I was one of 100 unpaid interns at the bottom of a global firm [...] My days went down the drain as I alphabetised contact lists and took coffee orders. I filed things. Then retrieved them.' Despite the allure of a 'global firm' in the advertising industry, being stuck at the bottom, performing repetitive and pointless tasks, Kaba is revealed as economically precarious and increasingly desperate.

Although Kaba's background, education and ambitions – and migration within Africa – mark her out as different from the housewives and low-paid workers discussed above, the exploration of her entrapment echoes the position of such women in Adichie's fiction. 'Chicken' conveys, in the first person, Kaba's estrangement and curtailed sense of the future:

I envied people who talked in certainties [...] In plans and futures [...] I used the internet at work to find more jobs, but I was already stretched thin on that front [...] I lied my way into focus groups and market surveys for products I couldn't afford. My heels wore down. My gait changed. I saw myself in the blacked-out windows of a skyscraper en route to somewhere. At first I didn't realise who the hurried girl with the hunched back was [...] She looked hunted.

Not recognizing herself in a hunted, hunched reflection, trying to scrape together an income, Kaba's difficulties are enmeshed within patterns of alienation and a bigger, globalized yet uneven system of exploitation of interns, all hoping for a corporate job. Her choices and gendered contingencies in a stratified city and recession, to which I will return, contrast Dolapo's movement towards confident self-determination. Not only is Kaba shown to lack 'certainties' and 'plans' but her role in a 'global firm' echoes the labour of migrant househelps, hairdressers, waitresses and housewives within an extractive neo-colonial model.

The interplay between the narrowed options of maid Forthright, introduced sweeping the yard, and the path of Kaba in 'Chicken,' or between the lives of housegirl Amaechi and wife Nkem in 'Imitation,' is taken further in the exploration of 'passing' between strictly upheld social categories in 'Skinned' by Arimah. Preoccupied with a rigid patriarchal division of women into clothed (either in 'father cloth' as a child or later cloth from a husband) and unclothed, 'Skinned' represents the struggles of Ejem as she ages yet remains unmarried. Ejem has to contend with not only increasing ostracization and public embarrassment but also the dismantling of her career and a shrinking income due to prejudice. Arimah, however, as well charts Ejem's growing interest in women of the *osu* serving caste, and I suggest the segregated, hidden lives of these domestic workers present a significant corollary of Ejem's position and that of women here more widely.

Ejem had worked 'at the corporate headquarters of an architecture firm' yet once over thirty she faces escalating discrimination for being an unmarried woman, with Human Resources declaring 'Until you are [covered], we can no longer put you in front of clients' (p. 305). In Arimah's amplified narrative world, both custom and law dictate Ejem must continue to go naked yet she is then blamed for her 'availability' causing workplace distraction and shamed by the public visibility of her status. Pushed out of this well-paid job, Ejem takes on 'home-based work selling makeup' but a loss of clients and 'raised rent put everything in jeopardy' (p. 305). The story unfolds her slide from financial independence and relative security into constraint, overshadowed by the spectre of women who remain single being forced to become garment makers, working in 'giant factories, where they would weave cloth for women more fortunate than they' (p. 306). Their position is socially and government enforced: 'indentured [...] burdened to earn the care of the state' (p. 316). To stave off this future, Ejem takes lower paid,

feminized work giving massages at a spa 'where her nudity would be less of an issue' (p. 306). In this social structure, pushed to extremes, the definition of woman only in relation to man is seen vividly, with those who fail to conform being dehumanized and punished: 'Ejem recalled a documentary she'd seen in school that showed the dismal dorms to which unclaimed women were relegated, the rationed food, the abuse from guards [...] It had been meant to instil fear [...] and it had worked' (p. 314). Although, protected by her great wealth, businesswoman Odinaka provides an exception (she is 'unclaimed, but covered herself anyway'), her example is undercut by her treatment of inferiors and the hypocrisy that her family 'owned almost half the cloth factories across the globe' (p. 308). Within her caste, despite coming from a poor village, Ejem is able to attain professional success but this and her independence are then eroded – shown to be temporary – due to the paramount requirement that she become a wife and mother.

Attention to the domestic workers in 'Skinned' allows a refocused understanding of the story's enquiry, however. An early scene of Ejem's self-consciousness on public transport also features her reactions to an osu woman who breaks taboo by boarding the bus. This recalls histories of racial segregation based on white supremacy, linking them to the osu caste, who are marked from birth to make them identifiable on sight. Ejem initially averts her eyes like other passengers, but then 'soften[s]'. She was so close to becoming an unseen woman herself, unanchored from the life and the people she knew, rendered invisible' (pp. 302–303). Here Ejem connects her own gendered exclusion for not marrying with the osu position. Indeed, Arimah uses the osu to further probe the dynamics of invisible labour, also identified by Gumbs. Ejem observes, 'Other pedestrians avoided them as though they were poles or mailboxes' while, at the same time, their employment spares Ejem's married friends from 'serious housework' (p. 307, 300).

Once sheltered by Odinaka's patronage, the apartment block to which Ejem moves offers a spatialized image of such a social structure; 'the rooms themselves held an indefinable feeling of having only just been vacated' (p. 311) for the osu women clean and bring groceries unseen, instructed only via an intercom system. Unable to fully inhabit a new existence passing as 'clothed,' terrified of her future unclothed, Ejem speculates about a 'freedom born of irrelevance' as a member of the lowest caste and wonders that 'Her people lived side by side with the osu and they knew nothing of each other' (p. 306, 312). This separation and proximity is not evenly distributed though; not only the labour but also the lack of knowledge is one sided as Ejem suspects a fellow resident is hiding her scar and passing as non-osu, an act possible only due to previous learning while serving others. 'Skinned' concludes with Ejem banging on a wall panel in her apartment, 'seeking a welcome' among the osu having finally seen one disappear into a hidden passage and their world beyond (p. 316).

The social orders in 'Skinned,' and Ejem's turn towards invisibility and potential belonging among the unclothed osu, concretize the imposition of heteropatriarchal categories, gendered forms of labour, and alignments or pairings of women across economic difference found in other fictions. Looking at the location of the home but also those who move away from home for work has revealed recurring images and experiences of estrangement, stuckness, dependency and marginality. From wives, to househelps, to aspiring or excluded professionals, women workers are shown to contend with, variously, racialized pressures to conform or assimilate, exploitation, precarity and invisibilization. Arimah's osu caste both illustrates and invites a re-centring towards those subjects doing feminized work, sometimes found only at the fringes of a narrative but which, I propose, allow greater understanding of the whole. Hidden economies involving those without papers or choice or redress, as well as the more apparent reaches of global firms, intimate the related workings of contemporary capitalism. Gumbs writes of how, in some of its moves, *The Black Atlantic* 'reproduces the colonial circuits of capital that [Gilroy] is usually careful to critique' and 'depends on a [...] relation in which American colonies continue to provide raw and exoticized resources for an older European world' (2009, p. 101). In this investigation, we can extend Gumbs's pattern to Africa and literary exploration of neo-colonial extraction of resources in the form of gendered labour.

Sexual and reproductive economies

The selected short stories additionally shape compelling approaches to politics of the body, sexual relations and reproduction, encompassing mechanisms of power, forms of labour and economic exchanges not looked at so far. As pointed to earlier, drawing on Glenney Boggs's summation, in *The Black Atlantic* 'the subjectivity and counter-culture that emerged was implicitly masculine,' with case studies operating 'to the neglect not only of women but of gender and sexuality as categories of analysis' (2009, p. 94). Further, Gumbs argues, 'the messy implications of sexual and reproductive labor mark the limits of Gilroy's heuristic' (p. 108). Gumbs's own intervention highlights aspects of the Black Feminine Domestic wherein the invisibilized and economically precarious have heightened vulnerability to sexual violence (p. 107). I move next to how my chosen fictions both expose these dynamics, particularly affecting black women, and disrupt them, demystifying heteropatriarchal systems, contemporary biopolitics, and their imbrication with capital.

In almost every story women and girls circulate in a sexual economy as well as a labour economy, with attention being directed to gender structures within which women are passed between men. Arimah's 'Skinned' pushes a

patriarchal as well as a caste system to stark clarity as women are exclusively defined by relation to male family members; specifically, while under their fathers' authority, girls must go unclothed from the point of adolescence until assuming a clothed status when claimed by a husband. Indeed, this form of heteropatriarchy is government mandated as when Ejem is reluctant to surrender her father's cloth we learn that 'He knew what happened to the families of girls who stayed covered [...] the town council would levy a tax [...] his girl would be disrobed in public, and her family shamed' (p. 304). There is also an indication that not just single Ejem, but also married women perceive their status and exchange as oppressive; encountering Ejem passing as clothed, her friend Chidinma berates 'You don't get to be covered without giving something up' (p. 315), revealing a pattern of lost independence and resentment. In 'Chicken,' by Chela, Kaba's great grandmother exclaims of a 30-year-old relative, 'Bridget is off the shelf! [...] Now I can say all my girls are settled [...] Someone else is responsible for them now.' With marriage framed as settled respectability, Kaba's independent city life 'at the bum end of town' brings her close to the other side of this gendered binary; from her window, she sees 'Gaudy prostitutes' retreat at dawn. While sex workers disambiguate the exchange of bodies for money, elsewhere more subtle angles are introduced such as when in Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck' Akunna does not want her rich white boyfriend to pay for them to visit her home country: 'You did not want him [...] to add [Nigeria] to the list of countries where he went to gawk at the lives of poor people who could never gawk back at *his* life' (pp. 124–125). Already perturbed by his expensive gifts, Akunna scrutinizes the relationship for a transactional aspect and the ticket offer as tied into a neo-colonial dynamic that operates culturally and economically.

In Adichie's 'Imitation' meanwhile, marriage is shown as a union involving an imbalance of power and based predominantly on economic and patriarchal imperatives. Knowledge of her husband's infidelity prompts Nkem's recollection that 'She dated married men before Obiora [...] Ikenna, a businessman, had paid her father's hospital bills [...] Tunji, a retired army general, had fixed the roof of her parents' home' (p. 31). This reinforces a picture of women's roles as mistresses, wives, mothers, daughters, in men's lives and, simultaneously, highlights the transactional element in Nkem's sexual relationships. From the start, her marriage has been shaped by a class disparity as well as conventional gender expectations. In the narrative present, Nkem's function is partly that of status symbol, vehicle of conspicuous consumption, in that her husband can afford to keep his wife and children abroad 'with big houses and cars' (p. 28). 'Imitation' also develops interplay between Obiora's collecting of precious pieces of African art (something else befitting a rich Nigerian man) and the assumptions around women being for men, and being acquired by men, that underpin most relationships.

Nkem 'look[s] forward to the art pieces [...] imagining the lives behind them,' yet these expensive replica Benin masks and pieces of Nok terra-cotta summon up not only histories of British colonial plunder, but also Nkem's existence behind a mask, living an imitation life in America (pp. 25–26). Having 'never imagined this life' (p. 27), she speaks up for a return to Nigeria at the story's close, puncturing her husband's complacent if beneficent sense of compliance and ownership. Across this material, marriage then emerges as centred on masculine prerogatives, evaluations and 'responsibility,' with women defined by men, and more broadly located within reproductive and sexual economies.

At times more explicitly forced and exploitative encounters are represented. Recalling Gumbs on domestic workers' particular vulnerability to sexual and other forms of violence, 'Skinned' mentions that Chidinma's husband 'wasn't the sort to harass an osu woman in his employ' (p. 300). In 'The Thing Around Your Neck' Akunna has to flee when her uncle 'came into the cramped basement where you slept [...] and pulled you forcefully to him' (p. 116). Living in his family home with him to thank for her visa, she is forced to make her own way in the US after this predatory sexual experience that is, again, framed as transactional: 'If you let him, he would do many things for you' (p. 117). Not only does Akunna's uncle's attempt at coercion reflect patriarchal hierarchies but it too gestures towards migrant precarity in a skewed global economic system as he also teaches that 'America was give-and-take' (p. 116).

In addition to shaping a critique of gender structures and how these relate to exchange and extraction, several of the stories address the exclusions and silencings performed by heteronormativity. In 'Chicken' Kaba, without apology or anxiety, declares 'I liked the symmetry of being with a woman. Breast to breast.' In Adichie's 'On Monday of Last Week,' the Monday of the title refers to a ground-shifting encounter when Kamara finally meets her charge Josh's African American mother. Her attraction to Tracy and the sudden sense of possibility that this initiates is described as the 'flowering of extravagant hope' (p. 80). Kamara anticipates hostile judgements, 'A fellow woman who has the same thing that you have' but, regardless, is 'now propelled' (p. 80) by an overwhelming, energizing desire. However, the important, frank inclusion of these same sex relations and attractions does not mean they are idealized. Interacting with Tracy, perhaps ominously, makes Kamara feel 'like a bride' and the artist's seductive request 'Would you take your clothes off for me?' (p. 87, 89) in order to paint her, hints at an exploitative aspect. Indeed, although the glimpse of another life with Tracy is transformative, Kamara's hopes are dashed as it becomes clear that she is not the only female employee Tracy has propositioned and readers suspect her exoticization of Kamara as African. Similarly, in 'Chicken,' when Kaba has a passionate one night stand with another woman, the liaison is

soured in the morning by 'pity.' Her more affluent lover is not embarrassed by their queer desire and uninhibited sex but by 'the window edges taped shut to keep out the cold [...] 'You might need this more than I do,' she said, leaving R100.' The interaction thus becomes 'a charity event' and humiliating for Kaba, faced with 'what she thought I was worth.'

If stories by Chela and Adichie include erotics and hopes that disrupt the assumptions of a heteropatriarchal imagination, while at the same time not romanticizing sexual relations between women as surpassing other differences, 'Skinned' by Arimah takes a less overt but still suggestive line. When Ejem had been offered marriage cloth she had 'seen a weight that would smother her' (p. 303). This rejection, in a context where marriage is all, is elaborated when she imagines trying to explain her feelings: 'what could she say anyway? I'm not sure I ever want to be claimed? Chidinma would think her mad' (p. 301). Ejem's risky stance threatens the status quo by not simply accepting it and her ambiguous attempt to join the *osu* at the end could be interpreted as a queer turn to a community of women who, due to their low status, can live unmarried and unjudged regardless of age.

My final focus brings together reproductive imperatives and commodification of the body. It speaks to the undertheorization of reproductive labour identified by Gumbs and unites concerns with norms of family, gender and sexuality, women's experience, biopolitics, and exploitation within globalized capitalism.

Kamara in 'On Monday of Last Week' experiences a heavy weight of cultural, communal and familial assumptions that marriage will and should result in children. During a six-year separation while her husband works towards his green card in the US, Kamara 'attends the Christenings of friends' children' (p. 83), this being a succinct capturing of the gender expectations resting on her. Once Kamara and Tobechei are together again, her mother declares 'we will hear the patter of little feet soon' (p. 86). Kamara shares this desire, although it appears unsatisfied, and she becomes aggrieved at entitled discourses of family in her new home; watching television 'used to amuse Kamara [...] Now that her periods insisted on coming month after month, she resented those manicured women with their effortlessly conceived babies and their breezy expressions like "healthy parenting"' (p. 82). Here, along with her hurt at not occupying the designated, wished for role as a mother and her satirical observation of dominant American parenting tropes, comes an adumbration of the impact of migration and border policies on family and fertility, with Tobechei and Kamara kept apart for years and childless on reunion.

Just as Kamara struggles to reconcile with her failure within the heteronormative imperative to reproduce and mother, Kaba in 'Chicken' encounters the idealized images of children and family traded on in the fertility industry. Increasingly desperate for money, Kaba follows up on a business card she finds: 'Karama Adjaye Benin, Chief Recruiter, FutureChild Inc. The ovum bank you can trust.' Rather than an account of donation as altruistic, Kaba's

first-person narrative makes a direct link between considering sex work and selling her eggs: 'The concept [prostitution] didn't seem so far-fetched any more. In a way, the business card was my chance.' This emphasizes a position of economic necessity while Chela also highlights the corporate part in the process via the naming of FutureChild Inc, 'The [...] bank you can trust.' That fertility treatment is a business is pressed home by the 'waiting room goopy with pink branding about ethnically diverse angels, mama birds [...] rosy assumptions of family life.' Yet when Kaba reassures herself 'I was a veritable mine of genetic material,' the metaphor calls up an extractive model and perhaps also a wider picture of surrogacy, organ trade and exploitative health practices sourced from, or outsourced to, the global South.

'Chicken' features extended bird and egg imagery (the task of killing the chickens falls to Kaba at the opening; her one night stand has a distinctive 'inner lip tattoo [...] A single egg') and, in a way, with her donation Kaba becomes the titular chicken that lays the egg. However, Chela's story ends ambiguously with Kaba having found a new sense of resolve but also troubled by a future child she will never know: 'I would always be beating paths for it to follow.' This elegiac conclusion takes us back to Forthright, the tender of the yard with whom we and Chela began. For the image of her careful sweeping also invokes her distant child, 'like she was doing the hair of the daughter she seldom saw,' and a family life from which her much needed employment as a maid keeps her away.⁷ This resonates once more with the migrant domestic workers made visible in Gumbs's heuristic as well as with Kaba's contingent, haunted decision to sell her eggs.

Although linked to workplace, gender expectations and racialized beauty ideals rather than reproduction or health, the trade in hair in 'Sunita,' by Onuzo, furthers enquiry into the commodification of body parts. After her weave Dolapo contemplates the strangeness of the fact that 'Real, human, hair from someone else's scalp now framed her face' (p. 786). Later we learn she has started having dreams of hot fields, carts pulled by bullocks, school uniforms, the experiences of someone else, in 'not her [own] body' (p. 788). Onuzo thus uses the device of Dolapo's apparent connection to Sunita, the source of her new hair, to explore a line from daughterhood and poverty in rural India to the re-styling of an aspiring banker in London. Daisy explains, 'it's mostly from India. The women sell it to make money for their families' (p. 789), this economic angle along with the unsettling dreams leading Dolapo to reclaim her afro by the end. The fact the hair arrived in deluxe packaging and 'lay lustrous [...] folded into itself like a small, sleek creature, a sable or a mink' (p. 788), marking similarity to animals bred for their pelts, extends the concern with biopolitics and bodies as a resource within a critique of the global inequalities that underpin both the selling and buying here.

From exchanges within sexual economies involving marriage and exploitation of the vulnerable, to exposure and unsettling of heteropatriarchal and

heteronormative structures, to reproductive and body politics within neo-colonial capitalist dynamics, this part of my discussion has attempted to further unpack the distinctive explorations found in contemporary African short fiction by women. Looking especially at family and gender expectations, sexual interactions and commodified bodies, the focus has remained what Gumbs calls an 'invisibilized labor force that still symbolically re-presents masculinity as the ownership of other people' (2009, p. 102), although widening the constituents of that force. While many of the figures examined are, like Akunna in 'The Thing Around Your Neck,' 'used to accepting what life gave, writing down what life dictated,' several are shown to move toward self-determination or seeing through given structures (p. 121). Short stories though are not necessarily organized around charting 'development' and the selection here is equally as concerned with situations, glimpses, images and parallels that strikingly reveal intersectional and 'glocal' mechanisms and orders. 'On Monday of Last Week' ends with a continuation of the status quo, a foreclosing of a brief vision of change, but the other fictions all finish with more hopeful if not conclusive moments of purpose, transformation and departure. These moments reflect political questions of the body, of sexual relationships and of reproduction, dissecting how women circulate as a resource beyond as a straightforwardly conceived source of labour.

Conclusion

From Gumbs's starting point that Black Atlantic frames 'operate through and reproduce gendered terms of engagement in their elisions' (2009, p. 105), this enquiry has turned to recent writing that, in various ways, addresses such terms and elisions. Indeed, just as Gumbs finds 'black women writers have used fiction as a strategy to represent the missing subject position that inspires [her] articulation of the Black Feminine Domestic' (p. 108), I suggest the short fictions here pluralize African and African diaspora subject positions, understanding of which is aided by a framework centred on homes, gendered labour, and sexual and reproductive economies. Importantly, the 'domestic' – often in estranged forms – becomes a key site and vehicle for exploring the hidden workings of localized and globalized orders: patriarchal, economic, neo-colonial, and so on. This both encapsulates the urgency of 'mak[ing] the labor of black transnationalism visible' (p. 102) and extends the scope of Gumbs's exercise. In parallel, attention to low-paid and migrant working women, whether marginal or foregrounded in the narrative, has opened up revealing perspectives on such naturalized hierarchies and the operation of advantage/disadvantage on the intersecting axes of gender, race, sexuality, nationality, class and caste.

The first line of 'Chicken' reads 'It was a departure of sorts [...] Or maybe not at all.' Kaba here references that there is no clear marker of, or date for,

leaving her family home, yet, borrowing this line, it proves apt for capturing a staying with the domestic in this investigation, a counterpoint to models of mobility that rest on leaving it long behind. While preoccupied with those rendered invisible and hidden circuits of capital, what Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild name ‘the female underside of globalization’ (2003, p. 3), the fiction I have examined also refuses a sense of ‘disembodied exchanges’ in an abstract transnational (Gumbs 2009, p. 116). Instead, we find an insistence on subject positions, types of labour, forms of precarity and bodily transactions that have been bound within heteropatriarchy and globalized capitalism even as those systems are questioned by their exposure. What remains less certain is if these representations mark a sustained de-centring, a ‘departure,’ in understandings of black and African literature.

Notes

1. For example, Gikandi (1996, 2014) and Goyal (2014).
2. See Goyal (2017) on twenty-first-century diasporas and literatures. She outlines, ‘the writers chronicling contemporary African migrations [...] resist received notions of what constitutes African literature [...] expanding previous geographies and weaving together race and class with location [...] the literature of the new diaspora [...] demands more complex scales of comparison and analysis sufficient to navigate local, regional, and global formations’ (pp. 641–642).
3. See Pucherová (2012), Attree (2013) and Edwin (2016). Suhr-Sytsma writes, ‘Due partly to its ties to the London publishing scene and partly to the ‘dynamic canonization’ afforded by an annual prize, the Caine Prize has a catalytic effect on African writers’ reputations and careers outside their countries of origin. As a result, it exerts an outsized influence on discussions about an emerging canon of twenty-first-century African literature’ (2018, p. 1094). Edwin however notes, ‘The short story has enjoyed the patronage of well-known African writers regularly producing short fiction. But reception in the form of analyses, literary essays and thematic discussions in literary criticism remains relatively poor in relation to the same attention the novel enjoys’ (2016, p. 360). This is a partial echo of Emenyonu’s 2013 call for more critical attention to the short story.
4. Chang’s (2000) study looking at immigrant women workers in the global economy, helpfully situates feminized labour in relation to economic interventions from First World countries, and bodies such as the World Bank, ‘to facilitate their continued extraction of Third World resources, including and especially people’ (p. 3).
5. For formative work on these topics in the Social Sciences see Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003), Momsen (1999) and Dickey and Adams (2000). Also Sassen – examining the work of maids, nannies, nurses, sex workers and contract brides – crystallizes how ‘The dominant narrative of globalization concerns itself with the upper circuits of global capital, not the lower ones’; this ‘privileges global transmission over the material infrastructure that makes it possible [...] and the new transnational corporate culture over the other jobs upon which it rests’ (2003, p. 254).
6. For scholarship attentive to this dynamic in the frame narrative see Terry (2020) and, in particular on extractive models, Okoth (2020).

7. Chang (2000) and Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003), looking at patterns in which women move for low-paid, caring and live-in jobs, highlight this aspect of the impact on the families and children left behind.

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