

Home away from Home: Imageability and Wayfinding in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing around Your Neck*

Hogar lejos del hogar: Imaginabilidad y orientación en *The Thing around Your Neck* de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Received: 10/04/2022. Accepted: 06/03/2023.

How to cite this article: Stefanova, Svetlana. "Home away from Home: Imageability and Wayfinding in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing around Your Neck*." *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 44, 2023, pp. 11–34.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.44.2023.11-34>

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Abstract: This essay explores the process of orientation in migratory space in three of the twelve stories that make up Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's collection *The Thing around Your Neck*—"Imitation," "On Monday of Last Week," and "The Thing around Your Neck"—from the perspective of Kevin Lynch's theory of *wayfinding*, developed in his work on urban spaces *The Image of the City*. The analysis of how gender and class affect the female protagonists' conceptualization of home is based on Lynch's notion of *imageability*. The metaphorical extension of the concepts of *imageability* and *wayfinding* aims to grasp migrants' psychological and emotional experiences of orientation. Taking as a point of reference three highly imageable objects—masks, mirrors, and letters—the study of the protagonists' wayfinding in America reveals the tension between reality and imagination in the creation of mental images of home. In her recognition of the potential of female agency, Adichie draws a parallel between the protagonists' reorientation in the exilic space and their reorientation in their intimate relationships.

Keywords: *The Thing around Your Neck*; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; home; migration; imageability; wayfinding.

Summary: Introduction. "Imitation": The Wife's Masks. "On Monday of Last Week": The Babysitter's Mirror. "The Thing around Your Neck": The Daughter's Letter. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo explora el proceso de orientación en el espacio exílico en tres de las doce historias que componen la colección de cuentos cortos *The Thing around Your Neck* de

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—“Imitation,” “On Monday of Last Week” y “The Thing around Your Neck”—desde la perspectiva de la teoría de la orientación de Kevin Lynch, desarrollada en su trabajo sobre los espacios urbanos *The Image of the City*. El análisis de cómo las dimensiones de género y clase afectan la conceptualización del hogar de las protagonistas se basa en la noción de *imaginabilidad* de Lynch. La extensión metafórica de los conceptos de *imaginabilidad* y *orientación* tiene como objetivo captar las experiencias psicológicas y emocionales de orientación de los migrantes. Tomando como punto de referencia tres objetos que se caracterizan por su *imaginabilidad*—máscaras, espejos y cartas—el estudio de la orientación de las protagonistas en América revela la tensión entre la realidad y la imaginación en la creación de imágenes mentales del hogar. En su reconocimiento del potencial de la agencia femenina, Adichie muestra el paralelismo entre la reorientación de las protagonistas en el espacio del exilio y su reorientación en sus relaciones íntimas.

Palabras clave: *The Thing around Your Neck*; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; hogar; migración; imaginabilidad; orientación.

Sumario: Introducción. “Imitation”: Las máscaras de la esposa. “On Monday of Last Week”: El espejo de la niñera. “The Thing around Your Neck”: La carta de la hija. Conclusiones.

Home is a place riddled with vexing questions.
—Caryl Phillips¹

INTRODUCTION

There is no spatial figure more critical to the formation of a diasporic identity than that of home, which is always ambiguous and “never as fixed and permanent as the ideal perception” of a physical location (Georgiou 23). Although contemporary diaspora fiction resonates with stories of a new generation of cosmopolitan émigrés, still, the multiple barriers African migrants face in the West produce “a sense of cultural alienation,” which is why they often “end up disenchanting in their new found ‘home’” (Fongang 2). For them, the concept of home is not so much ambiguous as impossible, a kind of “symbolic fiction that makes one’s actual place of habitation bearable” (Bronfen 73). While it is widely agreed that migrants’ identities “incorporate multiple sites of affiliation,” situatedness is still of crucial significance, that is why they often experience a heightened sense of dislocation (Hall and Datta 70). Iris Levin believes that so far, the notion of migrant home has focused mostly on emotions and that the “physicality and tangible aspects” of the migrant house have not been adequately explored (3). Hence, I would like to suggest that “physicality” may be

¹ Phillips’s oeuvre deserves special attention in diaspora literature for his exploration of the migrant’s feeling of not belonging, loneliness, and loss.

helpful in revealing how home is conceptualized and represented in the recognition of issues posed by migrants' orientation in the new environment. In her work *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel*, Sara Upstone moves away from the opposition between space and place and argues that "without space, any negotiation of place is incomplete" (3). This means that for migrants, who often experience the terrifying feeling of being lost, a spatial marker "provides the point of reference from which [they] can both imagine and navigate space" (Tally 2). Markers can be imaginary or, as Sara Ahmed observes, they can also be "objects we recognize, such that when we face them, we know which way we are facing" ("Orientations" 543). She discusses Kant's example of "walking blindfolded into an unfamiliar room" and argues that "orientation is not so much about the relation between objects that extend into space (say, the relation between the chair and the table); rather, orientation depends on the bodily inhabitation of that space" (*Queer Phenomenology* 6). Despite its importance in the migrant experience, the notion of orientation and related spatial matters remain underexplored within the context of postcolonial studies.

My analysis of Adichie's stories departs from a reading of Kevin Lynch's work on urban spaces *The Image of the City*, in which he develops the concept of *imageability* as a core element of his theory of *wayfinding*. *Wayfinding* takes place in a wide variety of scenarios, among them "finding and settling in a new home environment," and involves making decisions based on a combination of newly acquired environmental knowledge and "recorded representations of environments," such as maps (Golledge 25). It can be broadly defined as "the ability to determine a route, learn it, and retrace or reverse it from memory" (Golledge 25). Focusing on theories of wayfinding in interior environments, Jamshidi and Pati establish four categories, which are theories of perception, theories of spatial knowledge development, theories of mental representation of spatial knowledge, and theories of spatial cognition (299). Lynch's work is discussed within the third category. Following this train of thought, to analyse how the ability to interpret spatial information correctly influences the process of wayfinding, Golledge brings out Lynch's study of legibility of urban environments. According to Lynch, just as we can grasp coherent patterns of recognizable symbols on a printed page, "a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an overall pattern" (3). In the process of wayfinding, a good environmental image provides a sense of emotional

security and helps to avoid the anxiety that comes with disorientation. Lynch's idea that mental images of space are produced by the interaction between immediate sensations and memories of the past is particularly significant to understand how wayfinding works for Adichie's characters. To build an image, the observer "selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what he sees" (Lynch 6). The objects involved in the creation of this image should have some practical and emotional meaning for the observer and the cues can be visual, such as colour and shape, but they can also appeal to other senses. This leads to Lynch's idea of *imageability*, which he defines as "that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer" (9). This quality, which can also be called *legibility* or *visibility*, facilitates the creation of mental images of the environment and impacts the process of wayfinding.² With this in mind, Lynch notes that the sense of home is "stronger when home is not only familiar but distinctive as well" (5). In this essay, Lynch's terms are meant to go beyond his original idea of how individuals interpret spatial information in urban environments. The concepts of *imageability* and *wayfinding* are extended and remodelled to grasp the symbolic navigation of gendered cultural and social complexities in terms of migrants' psychological and emotional experiences of orientation.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's main concerns include colonization, migration, race and identity, as well as dominant societal conceptions of gender roles. Her commitment to women's empowerment, straightforwardly presented in her non-fictional works, established her as one of the celebrity feminists in contemporary popular culture, especially after being famously quoted by Beyoncé in her hit album *Lemonade*. Adichie has published three highly acclaimed novels: *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) about the Biafran war, and *Americanah* (2013), and a short story collection, *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009). Most of the critical works that address the concept of home as part of the migrants' feeling of (not)belonging in Adichie's fiction focus

² Lynch developed the concept of *imageability* as a theoretical tool for studying spatial behaviour in urban environments. Its applicability in the research of individuals' sense of place and related feelings of anxiety or wellbeing has generated a wide range of interdisciplinary studies in human's navigation in real and virtual environments, including recent interest in navigating in information space.

on *Americanah*.³ Although the collection of short stories *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009) anticipated themes such as displacement, disorientation, and the yearning for home, it has yet to receive the kind of critical attention it deserves.

My intention, in what follows, is to explore the process of wayfinding as an exilic experience in three of the twelve stories that make up the collection: “Imitation,” “On Monday of Last Week,” and “The Thing around Your Neck.” Bringing the three stories under spotlight reveals a discernible pattern that makes a fertile ground upon which to discuss how gender influences the idea of home in migrants’ orientation in new urban and domestic environments determines. In an attempt to avoid one generic story about Nigerians in America, Adichie engages with class and how it “often determines the kind of immigrant that one is” (“A Conversation with James Mustich”). The stories are also noteworthy for the way they explore the category of class and offer more nuanced representation of migrant experience. The protagonists are young Nigerian women, who move to the United States and after the initial discomfort of indeterminacy, gradually begin to distinguish real from fictive home. These three strong-willed women share a determination to not accept the place assigned to them in America. Through the analysis of the process of wayfinding in the selected stories, I argue that in her rejection of predominant gender-role expectations and recognition of the potential of female agency in modern Nigerian diaspora, Adichie draws a parallel between the protagonists’ reorientation in the exilic space and their reorientation in their intimate relationships. Home is depicted not as a fixed location, but as a transitional space, an unstable assemblage of mental images of desired and remembered experiences. The three objects that have practical and emotional meaning for the protagonists and illustrate *imageability* as defined by Lynch—masks, mirrors, and letters—mark the reference point in their exilic wayfinding.

1. “IMITATION”: THE WIFE’S MASKS

“Imitation” is the story of a young woman called Nkem, married “into the coveted league, [of] the Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies” there (*The Thing* 26). At first, her husband,

³ See Amonyze, “Writing a New Reputation”; Berning, “Narrative Ethics and Alterity”; Feldner, *Narrating the New African Diaspora*; Taylor, “Language, Race, and Identity.”

Obiora, one of the fifty most influential Nigerian businessmen, visits his family almost every month, but after an important government contract he decides to travel to Philadelphia only for the summer. Adichie explicitly seeks to situate home-space within the realm of imitation. In the opening lines of the story “Nkem is staring at the bulging, slanted eyes of the Benin mask on the living room mantel as she learns about her husband’s girlfriend” (*The Thing* 22). The image alerts the reader to the object toward which the protagonist is oriented—a Benin mask. The mask is simultaneously the point from which the narrative unfolds and the spatial reference that allows Nkem to gradually understand and redefine her position in the home-space. Following Lynch’s model, the mask, which appears as the material representation of imageability, is endowed with numerous symbolic meanings. Placing it on the living room mantel stresses its central position in relation to the other objects in the house. Time and time again, the mask challenges Nkem to decipher its mystery. In spatial terms, the mask is looking at her no less than she is looking at it, reciprocity that brings forth ambiguity and disquiet. The image is a tangible metaphor for the unreal, in the sense of unauthentic, an imitation, as suggested by the title of the story. Masks are often used for ceremonial purposes as part of a ritual or performance, where they acquire multiple meanings. Their role “is not only to conceal the identity of the wearer. The mask actually creates a new identity” (Finley 13). The masks in Nkem’s living room are a disturbing reminder of the ritual nature of her relationship with Obiora, conceived as a performance of two masked actors. They function as the other of the self, a façade that Nkem projects out to her husband, but also to her American neighbours and Nigerian friends. However, she is not the only one hiding behind a mask; her neighbours, her housemaid, and even her friend Ijemamaka seem to be wearing masks. Masks, which are supposed to orient the observer in space, in fact complicate and destabilize Nkem’s wayfinding.

Staring at the Benin mask with its abstract features, Nkem is intrigued but uncertain about the nature of the reality behind its appearance. Her neighbours’ comments are not of much help; they consider the Benin mask “noble,” which ironically hints at the myth of the noble savage, a term used by abolitionists, whose “portrayals of Africans as perhaps noble but also innocent or ‘simple’ savages were patronizing and unintentionally derogatory” (Brantlinger 170). Reading home as mask and mask as home suggests that it can be quite frustrating for the migrant to cope with the contrast between reality and the desire to call a particular space “home.”

In the absence of clear indicators that mark the route in an unfamiliar diasporic context, imagination becomes crucial in wayfinding. Nkem imagines the Benin people who carved the original masks and those who were chosen to be their custodians and then projects upon her home an assemblage of these fictional fragments.

Lynch reminds us that in the process of wayfinding the mental image can be strengthened by providing the viewer with “a symbolic diagram,” such as a map or written instructions (11). It is important to note that Nkem conceives images herself only in the absence of indications by her husband. It is no surprise that when Nkem tries to read the mask, it remains lifeless, but “when Obiora talks about it—and all the rest—he makes them seem breathing, warm” (*The Thing* 25). In Lynch’s terms, he provides “a symbolic diagram,” a set of instructions to guide his wife in her understanding of home. In other words, her husband seems to be the only source of meaning-making for the masks. Significantly, Obiora always ends his stories about the masks by saying that they should appreciate what they have, a comment which is not so much a tribute to the treasures in the National Museum in Lagos as a reminder that Nkem should be grateful for her social position.

It becomes apparent that imitation has always been around in her marriage, but it is when she learns that another woman has moved into her Lagos house, that Nkem decides to stand up for herself. Driven by a mixture of self-doubt about her own reaction to her husband’s infidelity, she talks to her housemaid Amaechi, who suspects that Nkem has always been aware that her husband has girlfriends, but has deliberately refused to raise the issue. Does this mean that she is not so much afraid of losing Obiora’s love, as of losing control over her domestic territory, the only space she relates to? It might not be an authentic home, but their Lagos house is still *her* house. Considering home both literally and metaphorically, we can say that she defends “both the private spaces of intimate social relations and domestic security” (Silverstone 442). Nkem’s defence of domestic security should not surprise us, given the fact that before Obiora, she dated married men to help her pay her father’s hospital bill or buy furniture for her parents’ home. She even considered being the fourth wife of a Muslim man, “so that he would help her with her younger siblings’ education,” (*The Thing* 31) although eventually he did not propose. When asked about polygamy, Adichie admits that “in some ways [it] is quite accepted,” but explains that the story is “less about the other woman” and more “about a woman who finds the possibility of a voice,

who hasn't had a voice for so long, for whom it hasn't occurred that it's possible to speak" ("Interview with Ramona Koval"). Hearing about her husband's affair gives Nkem "an opportunity to speak, to find that she could in fact have a voice and have a say" ("Interview with Ramona Koval"). Adichie, known as a boldly outspoken feminist, asserts that "many people believe that a woman's feminist response to a husband's infidelity should be to leave. But [she] think[s] staying can also be a feminist choice, depending on the context" ("Dear Ijeawele"). Nkem's decision to not leave her husband can be viewed as a feminist response, not because it fits into a feminist position about confronting infidelity, but because it foregrounds one of the central themes in feminist theories, that of reclaiming female agency. Doubtless to say, context is essential for the understanding of her choice.

Nkem's house is in a lovely suburb near Philadelphia and her white, pale-haired neighbours appear likeable, although somewhat "plastic," as her husband calls them. It is often assumed that when African immigrants come into contact with the white civilization, their self-esteem collapses and they end up emulating white people in an attempt to be accepted on equal terms. Emmanuel Ngwira's reading of "Imitation" and "The Thing around Your Neck" aligns with such argument. Ngwira starts from the premise that "migrants always strive to gather 'signs of approval and acceptance' so as to be allowed access to mainstream cultures," which "often result[s] in the fetishisation of host cultures" (292). He goes on to claim that "Nkem's reverence of the images of the Liberty Bell and Benjamin Franklin" reveals "her othered status and particularly her desire to escape such a status through mimicry of American life" (Ngwira 292). However, we should not forget to take into account the parameter of class in Nigerian diaspora. In this sense, I believe that Nkem does not seek signs of approval and acceptance from her white neighbours; she likes them and feels she belongs in America. She sends pictures of Liberty Bell to her friends in Lagos not because she wants to escape her othered status through mimicry of American life, but because she tries to fit into the league of rich Nigerian men's wives and so acts as such. Her behaviour denotes her unconditional obedience to Nigerian patriarchal customs, rather than to American gleam culture, as suggested by the moment when she deems unnecessary for Obiora to ask her to marry him, "she would have been happy simply to be told" (*The Thing* 32). Following the same line of thought, Heather Hewett rightly points out that the story "directly examine[s] the position of women in formal patriarchal relationships such

as marriage” (81). It is important to notice the interdependence between migration experience and marital/romantic relationship for Adichie’s female characters. Actually, the three selected stories present a similar pattern in that migrant experience channelled through wayfinding in the new home-space causes the renegotiation of the female protagonists’ relationships with their partners (husband in “Imitation” and “On Monday of Last Week,” and boyfriend in “The Thing around Your Neck”).

Nkem’s use of the word *home* to refer to both their house in Lagos and their house in Philadelphia reveals an understanding of home as simultaneously two places and neither of them:

And it hardly feels right, referring to the house in Lagos, in the Victoria Garden City neighborhood where mansions skulk behind high gates, as home. *This* is home, this brown house in suburban Philadelphia with sprinkles that make perfect water acts in the summer. (*The Thing* 34)

She sometimes misses Lagos, but her feeling unhomely in Philadelphia and her decision to return to Nigeria are not caused by estrangement from the local community or by being othered by her American neighbours; she is being refused legitimacy and, in a way, “othered” by her own husband. Obiora lives with his girlfriend in their Lagos house and his wife receives an African mask as a gift when he visits instead. Initially, gender relations within the home-space in the new country of residence are a natural extension of the normative structure of social life in the country of origin. While her husband Obiora moves freely between Nigeria and America and feels comfortable in both places, Nkem is trapped in her home in Philadelphia. Her movement is limited to the domestic space. She is described wandering in and out the living room, which together with the kitchen, the bedroom, and the bathroom functions as a spatial zone heavily loaded with signs of suppressed female agency. In this apparent domestic microcosm, a certain ritual takes place in each room. The bathroom appears as a space of containment and disciplining, where Nkem is expected to perform two rituals staging her submissiveness to the dominant models of behaviour, i.e., smoothing her hair and soaping Obiora’s back in the shower. Women’s body norms and beauty ideals have long been regarded as a means of subjection, so a cultural fixation on certain standards has become “an obsession about female obedience” (Wolf 187). In an act of disobedience, transgression and liberation from the constraints of having to wear a mask, Nkem decides to cut her hair

close to the scalp and move back to Lagos.⁴ Gaining visibility constitutes an important strategy towards empowerment. By cutting her hair, she creates a representation of herself resistant to monolithic categorizations. Nkem frees herself of the role of being a passive model of a rich man's wife and embraces the active role of identifying her own path and choosing an alternative route in the process of wayfinding.

2. "ON MONDAY OF LAST WEEK": THE BABYSITTER'S MIRROR

Like "Imitation," "On Monday of Last Week" is set in America and mostly within the limits of the domestic space and, like in "Imitation," home, where gender, migration, and class intersect, appears as fictional and fictive. A young Nigerian woman called Kamara travels to Philadelphia to reunite with her husband Tobechei. They had met in their final years at university, but had lived apart from each other for some years—Kamara teaching in a secondary school and doing a master's degree and Tobechei working as a taxi-driver and a manager at a Burger King. In Philadelphia, Kamara babysits for a young family—wife Tracy, an African-American and her husband Neil—white Jewish. The opening scene shows Kamara standing in front of the bathroom mirror in Neil and Tracy's house, imagining Tracy caressing her body with her paint-stained fingers (*The Thing* 74). The highly imageable point of departure in Kamara's wayfinding story is the mirror, signifying both self and "other" and producing a mental image of home out of an assemblage of complex symmetries. The mirror often stands for the motif of the double, bringing forward the opposites authentic/unauthentic and real/fictional. The author forges a mode of representation of Kamara's experience through the mirror as a way of interrogating the boundary between real and idealized home in gender terms.

In Lynch's theory, an environmental image can be analysed in three components: identity, structure and meaning (8). The mirror is clearly identified in the narrative and, as it comes, has emotional meaning for the protagonist. It is also visible at a structural level, albeit through a more sophisticated three-axis model. Adichie constructs the idea of home at the intersection of three spaces: Kamara's home in Nigeria, her home in

⁴ Heba Sharobeem interprets Nkem's act differently. She does not see it as a revolutionary act and holds that it actually "shows that how the female body has to somehow pay a price" (30).

Philadelphia, and Tracy's home, where Kamara works as a babysitter. Kamara's mirror is invested with the tension produced by constantly negotiating the notion of home as a borderscape between desire and reality, self-perception and the world of reference. Tracy's house presents a model of the desired space, a mirror image of Kamara's idea of ideal home. The kitchen is comfortable and cosy and its description—overwhelmingly positive. It is the place where Neil first interviews Kamara with what strikes her as an excess of positive thinking and political correctness when he insists on her using the word “biracial” instead of “half-caste” to refer to his son reveals his anxieties and fragility. She is surprised to learn that while in Nigeria “half-caste” means “cool, light-skinned good looks,” in America it is “a bad word” (*The Thing* 76). Mirroring here reverses the meaning of the word “half-caste” and urges the reader to consider the pressure of dislocation in both space and language. The story shows how, as Daria Tunca notes, the “sense of (un)belonging” in African-American experiences relates to migrants' lack of first-hand knowledge of America (293). If the mental image of “we” is based on what is common, then misleading readings and generalizations can lead to perpetuating barriers of ethnicity, place of birth, or gender.

Following Adichie's attention to the class dimension in migration, I would say that it actually affects the protagonists' self-perception and their mode of wayfinding. Although it is difficult to categorize the female protagonists of the selected stories as belonging to a clear-cut social class, Nkem, Kamara, and Akunna (from the story “The Thing around Your Neck”) come across as being rich, middle class, and poor, respectively. Kamara's position would fit into the findings of recent studies which show that “it is not unusual to find middle-class, college-educated women working in other nations as private domestic workers,” particularly women coming from countries which colonialism made poorer (Hondagneu-Sotelo 19). At first sight, social inequality appears to be of no account as Kamara does not feel uneasy with her job as a babysitter. What annoys her is Neil's “assumption that English [is] somehow his personal property” and although Tobechei had warned her against mentioning her education, she tells Neil about her master's degree (*The Thing* 76). It is interesting to note that the remark that annoys Kamara most in the interview is the same remark that Adichie was shocked to hear when she went to university in the United States and her roommate asked her where she had learned to speak English so well (“The Danger of a Single Story”). Adichie exemplifies her idea of “a single story of Africa” with her roommate's

patronizing attitude. In this single story, there is “no possibility of a connection as human equals” (“Single Story” 13:22). Kamara’s reaction to Neil’s question is a reaction to this single story. By pointing out that she has a master’s degree, Kamara attempts to speak to Neil on equal terms; meanwhile, what really intrigues her is Neil’s wife.

At the end of the interview Kamara asks Neil about Josh’s mother and it turns out that she is only “partially” absent from home. The absence of the child’s mother leaves a trace in the real and imaginary domestic space and functions as a contextual clue to Kamara’s wayfinding in the home-space. Tracy is an artist and spends most of the time working on an important project in the basement of the house. A place or space can be gendered in different ways and “we can observe patterns of spatial behavior associated with gender significance, perhaps conveying adherence to conventional gender norms, or perhaps transgressing these norms” (Richardson 9). In *Space, Place, and Gender*, Doreen Massey writes that the “place called home is frequently personified by, and partakes of the same characteristics as those assigned to, Woman/Mother/lover” (10). This interpretation is tied to those cultural expectations of mothers that require them to demonstrate self-sacrifice, placing their child’s and husband’s well-being before their own needs. Such representation of space draws our attention to Tracy’s absence, which clearly transgresses the norms that assume the mother’s physical and emotional availability at any time as the main care-giver in the household.

Adichie draws a complex map of the home-space imageability, employing the mirror motif to distinguish the two levels in Tracy’s house: above ground and below ground. The above-ground level is open, legible, and ordered; it is a peaceful place of family life run day-to-day by a caring father. The basement is exclusively Tracy’s space. After three months of babysitting Josh and listening to Neil’s worries, Kamara is curious if and when Tracy leaves the basement. Sometimes she hears sounds coming from the basement, “a door slamming shut or faint strains of classical music” (*The Thing* 79) and when she asks Josh about his mother, the boy only repeats that they should not bother her. We might be tempted to interpret a mysterious woman confined to a space inaccessible to the family and the babysitter in the light of a long tradition of keeping women locked up, concealing their presence in the house, in its extreme form represented in literature by Rochester’s first wife Bertha Mason, the “invisible woman.” If we assume that Tracy’s house mirrors Kamara’s ideal home, then how can the basement space be interpreted and how does

its existence affect the home-space? Lynch argues that in wayfinding the mental image should be “open-ended, adaptable to change, allowing the individual to continue to investigate and organize reality: there should be blank spaces where he can extend the drawing for himself” (9). The basement is this blank space where Kamara extends the drawing for herself.

For months Tracy’s existence is like “a background reality” (*The Thing* 79) until one Monday afternoon a strange thing happens that causes an unexpected twist in the story. Adichie’s argument that we would be much happier and “much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations” (*We Should All Be Feminists* 34) is particularly apposite here. On that Monday “Tracy appear[s], curvy in leggings and a tight sweater, smiling, squinting, pushing away the dreadlocks from her face with paint-stained fingers” (*The Thing* 80) and the basement space suddenly acquires a new dimension. The narrative challenges gender expectations and the basement emerges as a space of independence, a space where Tracy can maintain her privacy and forge a professional career as an artist, in Virginia Woolf’s words, “a room of her own” (6). Kamara is wrong to assume that Tracy would not be familiar with the kitchen. In fact, she is, which subverts the belief that women cannot be successful in both their career and child care. Such awareness demonstrates how migratory experiences trouble stable identities, “redefining woman’s role as wife, daughter, or mother” as well as her sense of home (Ryan 1231). Kamara shows interest in Tracy’s work, but in fact she is more curious about the basement and the strange objects it might hide—the coach, the cluttered tables, and coffee-stained mugs (*The Thing* 88). Tracy’s basement acts as a magnet in Kamara’s wayfinding. However, the process is undermined by incomprehensible signs, considering that Kamara traces her path in accordance with the logic of preconceived notions of gender. Not sure how to interpret these signs, including Tracy’s unexpected offer to paint her nude, Kamara feels disoriented. She literally begins “to bump into things too often” (*The Thing* 80) since the day Tracy unveils the riddle of the basement. Thus, the basement as a physical space is perceived by Kamara as a mode of corporeal awareness of her disorientation and the need for an active interpretation of all imageable details. It also makes her aware of the different gender roles she and Tracy are expected to perform in their intimate relationships.

Mysterious Tracy reflects the idea of desired or fictional home. It is this mirror reality or “background reality,” as Kamara calls it, that makes the domestic space she shares with Tobechei bearable. Recognizing the mirror as a significant marker also helps the reader navigate the text and create mental images of how the characters transform and are transformed by space and place. In the context of almost complete absence of the female figure from the perfect family-space, Kamara’s perception of herself as a child caregiver blends with expectations about life in America and memories about her home town. The inhospitable flat she shares with her husband seems to be produced by inverting the positive image of Tracy’s house. Parenting, which is most natural to Neil, is something Tobechei decides to avoid. Kamara’s marriage and her home in America are juxtaposed with her vision of ideal family-home and her happy memories of their first encounter at university. She finds Tobechei, with his false American accent, theatrical and somehow vulgar against pleasant memories of hope, of how “they took bucket baths together in the bathroom with slimy walls” and “cooked on his little stove outside,” or how “they had eaten the soggy grilled meat with raw onions that made their eyes water” in the storm (*The Thing* 83–85). In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks admits that when she was living away from home, she used her “early life experience in Kentucky as the standard against which [she] judged the substantive quality of [her] life” and adds that it is “easier to look back at the places we left and view them in a more positive light when we were far away” (60). Undeniably, Kamara’s happy memories shape her expectations about her married life in America in crucial ways, but a shared past is not enough for her to abandon her dreams and accept the role of a grateful wife. The transformation of home as a place of hope in Nigeria into a place of failure in America may be seen as a result of Kamara’s personal growth and reorientation. In the process of wayfinding, she has gained control over the space she inhabits and the path she follows. Sara Ahmed argues that for the migrant subject, “home becomes the impossibility and necessity” of their future, “rather than the past that binds the subject to a given place,” (*Strange Encounters* 78). The house Kamara shares with Tobechei in America lacks this orientation towards the future. In their different ways, Nkem and Kamara perceived home image mirrors the reshaping of their intimate relationships. In this sense, migration experiences become a medium, a magnifying glass through which the two women observe, interpret, and reimagine home.

3. “THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK”: THE DAUGHTER’S LETTER

“The Thing around Your Neck” revolves around the story of a young woman, Akunna, who moves to America after winning the American visa lottery. Akunna belongs to the group of immigrants coming from a poor and extremely vulnerable background. Central to Adichie’s engagement with gendered orientation in the migratory space in the selected stories is the class dimension. Hence, the analysis of “The Thing around Your Neck” prompts us to consider in what way, due to her vulnerability, Akunna’s exilic wayfinding differs from the spatial situatedness of the other two protagonists. The narrative starts with a generic “you” that relates the protagonist to a sense of shared migrant identity of false expectations and broken dreams: “You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house.” (*The Thing* 115). The use of the second-person “you” throughout the story has profound ethical implications. In terms of Adichie’s linguistic choice, the stylistic effect of an anonymous narrator addressing Akunna involves the reader, as the actual addressee of the narrative, more closely in the protagonist’s experiences. “You” involves “me” as a reader in the young woman’s experience. The role of the invisible interlocuter can be interpreted in a number of ways; it can be the author orienting the character in the migratory space, or Akunna’s mother, who is not given a voice until the end of the story, when she answers her daughter’s letter, or Akunna’s own consciousness, reflecting upon her perception of reality from a privileged vantage point. The strategy of obscuring the deictic coordinates enables the author to create an intense dialogue with the protagonist and the reader to perform their own wayfinding in the narrative space.

Adichie addresses the complexity of what Lynch identifies as “the fear that comes with disorientation” (5) in the description of Akunna’s mixed feelings about writing home. Every month she puts half of her earnings in a brown envelope and sends it to her parents, but never writes a letter, for she feels that there is “nothing to write about” (*The Thing* 118). After living for some time in America, she is eventually in the mood to write to her family and friends. Adichie builds a paragraph in which every sentence starts with the words “you wanted to write about/that,” (*The Thing* 118) which emphasizes both the necessity to tell the story about a Nigerian immigrant in America from her own perspective and Akunna’s own

uncertainty as to what and how she should write about her experience, afraid that her story might be misinterpreted under the magnifying glass of her family's painful story of hardship and hope. Within the shifting parameters of her story of home-space, what appears unstable is the position from which Akunna views stories on both sides of the Atlantic, i.e., the place from which she is writing. The letter, real or imagined, an object evoking immediate sensations and memories, serves as "broad frame of reference" (Lynch 4) in terms of imageability in the course of Akunna's wayfinding in America. At a structural level, the letter marks the stages of the wayfinding process. At first, Akunna stays for a while with her relatives in a small town in Main, but is forced to flee and after taking the Greyhound bus to the last stop, ends up in Connecticut, completely lost and alone. In the initial stage of disorientation, she is afraid to write a letter to her parents. In the second stage, a romantic relationship with a young American man from a well-off family helps her in her reading of the material signs that connect her to the outside world. This newly acquired sense of safety empowers her to write home, only to receive a letter from her mother announcing her father's death. The letter she receives marks the last stage, which in the three stories is that of reorientation. Unable to hold to her certainties and reconcile the ghosts of home with her reality in America, Akunna chooses to return to Nigeria. Despite the wide variations in the background story and the motivation behind the decision to move back to Nigeria, the motif of the return in "Imitation" and "The Thing around Your Neck" connect the two stories to another return story, that of *Americanah*'s protagonist, Ifemelu. Ifemelu, who navigates through cityscapes, offering a unique mixture of a love story and the discovery of her black identity on the background of America's tribalism, at the end returns to Nigeria.⁵ Golledge argues that one of the processes involved in successful wayfinding is "path integration" or "homing." Homing is a "procedure whereby the traveler constantly updates position with respect to a home base" so that they can "be able to turn and point in the direction of home base and to estimate the straight-line distance that must be traveled to get there" (Golledge 28). Although homing is common among migrants and essential for their orientation, the process is highly underexplored in postcolonial literature. The letter with its imageability is of particular significance in Akunna's performance of homing.

⁵ Other notable works about return migration to Africa include Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007) or Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2012).

To understand how spatial updating works in relation to home, it is necessary to trace Akunna's pathway analyzing the landmarks. The story opens with the juxtaposition of three home-spaces experienced as: fiction, memory, and disillusionment, in the first, second, and third paragraph, respectively. They form a series of images involved in the protagonist's orientation in her understanding of home. The first paragraph ends with a migrant's stereotyped expectations of a "big house" in America, as a symbol of success, a dream Nkem's husband is proud to have achieved and Kamara's husband is eager to achieve. The second paragraph contains a description of Akunna's home in Lagos, where she lived with her parents and her three siblings in a room with unpainted walls and not enough chairs for the visitors. The third paragraph sketches the spatial coordinates to her uncle's faked hospitality in America. He lives in "a thirty-year-old house by a lake" in a small town in Maine (*The Thing* 115). His hospitality looks too idyllic and it is hardly surprising that soon she has to deal with his sexually aggressive behaviour in the basement of his house.

The sequence of spatial images suggests an underlying tension between illusion and reality, placing the class parameter in the immigrant's experience at the focal point of the notion of home. It is interesting to note that some critics have examined Adichie's works from Afropolitan perspective,⁶ among them Patrycja Koziel, who claims that stories such as "Imitation" and "The Thing around Your Neck" "portray the problems faced by first-generation Nigerian migrants, who soon come to be called Afropolitans" (27). However, Akunna does not really fit into the definition of Afropolitan, a term coined by Taiye Selasi in her article "Bye Bye Babar," unless we understand the term as Miriam Pahl sees it. For Pahl, Afropolitanism "expresses a certain disposition *towards* the world" of authors like Adichie, whose critical perspective "does not merely praise the possibilities of globalization but more importantly examines persisting power differentials and injustices" (74, italics in original).⁷ Adichie's interest in how class influences the experience of migration means that understanding of migrant wayfinding in "The Thing around Your Neck" has more in common with Pahl's interpretation of Afropolitanism as an ethical attitude than with Selasi's original definition of the concept.

⁶ The term Afropolitan itself is not unproblematic and has been contested by a number of writers and scholars. See, for instance, Emma Dabiri's "Why I Am Not an Afropolitan."

⁷ Tope Folarin offers a different view of Adichie's immigrant stories. He reads them as an example of "accessible contemporary African fiction," accessible meaning expected. See Tope Folarin, "Against Accessibility."

Living in her uncle's house feels like home at the beginning, home understood as "a familiar, if not comfortable space," (Mallett 63) because the language her relatives speak and the food they eat make the place seem familiar. However, everyday familiarity of the space proves insufficient. Unlike the basement in Tracy's house, which functions as a private space of freedom, the basement in Akunna's story is articulated as a space of vulnerability, confinement, and humiliation. The house "was like home. Until [her] uncle came into the cramped basement where [she] slept with all boxes and cartons and pulled [her] forcefully to him, squeezing [her] buttocks, moaning" (*The Thing* 116). Akunna escapes from her uncle and ends up in a little town in Connecticut, where she meets a young man and they become close. Memories of family and friends in Nigeria blend with surprising discoveries about the openness of people in America. For Elena Rodríguez, in *The Thing around Your Neck*, "the reader can appreciate a tension between the global and the local" (99). It might be true for Kamara, but not for Akunna, whose relationship with a white man only accentuates her constant, often failed attempts to negotiate her Nigerian reality with Americans' "single story" about Africa. Adichie shows how the "single story" works both ways: Akunna's Nigerian relatives and friends' perception of America and Americans' perception of Africa. While strangers' comments on Africa and African immigrants perfectly fit into the "single story," her boyfriend's knowledge of African culture is most mystifying and his parents' warm reception "almost" make Akunna think all is normal. Symbolically, her relationship with her boyfriend maps the disruptive nature of her experience in the United States. From her initial surprise when at mentioning Nigeria, she expected him to say "he had donated money to fight AIDS in Botswana" (*The Thing* 119), but he asked her if she was Yoruba or Igbo instead, to calling him "self-righteous" for considering "real Indians" only the poor Indians in Bombay, her undoing of the "single story" threatens to destabilize her own sense of self. Akunna's categorization of Americans as rich/thin and poor/fat (*The Thing* 119) and her attempt to connect the reference poor/rich to real/unreal is another external sign of the class dimension in her mental imagery of the migratory space. Her reaction to the ambiguous stimuli she receives is a disturbing reminder of the troubled relationship between home-space and host-spaces and the fragile link between the protagonist and the migratory space she inhabits.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the three selected stories reveals the significance of physicality in the migrants' conceptualization of home. It brings to light a notable feature of Adichie's narrative strategy, which is the use of spatial references impregnated with symbolic meanings to mediate between her protagonists and the unfamiliar urban environments they have to navigate in America. By reading the stories from a perspective informed by Lynch's notion of imageability we can better understand the complexity of both literal and symbolic orientation in narratives of migration. Here, I join Sara Ahmed, who notes that for the migrant who struggles to draw "the contours of a space of belonging," there appear to be "too many homes to allow place to secure the roots or routes of one's destination" (*Strange Encounters* 77). Similarly, in the process of wayfinding, Nkem, Kamara, and Akunna's immediate sensations interact with memories and hopes, creating multiple mental images of home. To explain how these images are formed and influenced by gender and class, I have explored the imageability of three anchor points—masks, mirrors, and letters—and their role in distinguishing real from imagined home and defining one's route in the migratory space. In comparing the stories, we can locate some differences in terms of class, which clearly condition the self-awareness and situatedness of the protagonists. Just the same, the thematic similarities between the texts facilitate the identification of a common denominator in that Nkem, Kamara, and Akunna's unsatisfactory and somewhat theatrical relationships with their partners affect and are affected by their wayfinding in America. As a consequence, they undergo a three-stage transformation—disorientation, orientation, and reorientation—and gain agency and control over their domestic space and decision-making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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