

# AFRODIASPORIC FEMALE AUTOMOBILITY AND MOTEL-DWELLING IN LESLEY NNEKA ARIMAH'S "WINDFALLS"

## LA AUTO-MOVILIDAD FEMENINA AFRODIASPÓRICA Y EL MOTEL-VIVIENDA EN "WINDFALLS" DE LESLEY NNEKA ARIMAH

**SANDRA GARCÍA-CORTE**

Universidad de Oviedo  
garciaacsandra@uniovi.es

---

73

### **Abstract**

This article explores Lesley Nneka Arimah's "Windfalls" (2017) from a literary mobility studies perspective, applying notions of mobility studies such as the driving-event, friction, arrhythmia, and stickiness for an in-depth textual analysis. Given that its female migrant protagonists are constantly on the move, tropes of mobility recur throughout the story. Cars, filling stations, parking lots, truckers, motels and the figure of the sojourner play a pivotal role in defining its Afrodiasporic protagonists' postmigratory mobilities in the United States. Arimah's depiction of automobility and motel-dwelling underlines her theme of a flawed mother-daughter relationship and their impossibility of achieving the promised American Dream. A close reading of the fictional travellers' displacements uncovers a critical analysis of automobility and motel-dwelling as forms of subversion of hegemonic mothering. Particular attention is drawn to how the female protagonists' motilities are determined by their racialised gendered bodies. By analysing the literary representation of concrete and tangible mobilities performed by female Nigerian migrants, this study acknowledges the importance of exploring a key characteristic of third-generation Afrodiasporic fiction which has mostly gone unnoticed.

**Keywords:** automobility, driving-event, Lesley Nneka Arimah, mobilities, motels.

## Resumen

Este artículo explora “Windfalls” (2017) de Lesley Nneka Arimah desde la perspectiva de los estudios literarios sobre movilidad, aplicando nociones del campo de la movilidad como el *driving-event*, la fricción, la arritmia y la viscosidad para un análisis textual exhaustivo. Dado que las protagonistas migrantes se desplazan constantemente, los tropos de movilidad se repiten a lo largo de la historia. Coches, gasolineras, aparcamientos, camioneros, moteles y la figura de la viajera desempeñan un papel fundamental en la definición de las movilidades postmigratorias por Estados Unidos de sus protagonistas afrodiaspóricas. La descripción que hace Arimah de la automovilidad y el uso del motel como vivienda temporal subrayan los temas principales de este relato: la imperfecta y compleja relación entre madre e hija y la imposibilidad de las protagonistas de alcanzar el prometido sueño americano. El estudio de los desplazamientos de estas viajeras ficticias y su apropiación de las posibilidades de movimiento real que se les plantean contribuye a un análisis crítico de la automovilidad y la estancia en moteles como formas de subversión de la maternidad hegemónica. Se presta especial atención al modo en que la movilidad de las protagonistas femeninas está determinada por sus cuerpos racializados y marcados por su género femenino. Al analizar la representación literaria de las movilidades concretas y tangibles de estas migrantes nigerianas, este estudio reconoce la importancia de explorar una característica clave de la ficción afrodiaspórica de tercera generación que apenas ha sido analizada.

**Palabras clave:** auto-movilidad, *driving-event*, Lesley Nneka Arimah, movilidades, moteles.

## 1. Introduction

This article studies Lesley Nneka Arimah’s “Windfalls” (2017) from a literary mobility studies perspective, contextualising and explaining the relevance of mobility studies notions of the “driving-event” (Pearce 2017), “friction” (Cresswell 2014), “arrhythmia” (Edensor 2013), and “stickiness” (Costas 2013) for a thorough textual analysis. My main purpose is to analyse the textual representation of mobilities in “Windfalls” to uncover its deconstruction of both hegemonic mothering and the American Dream.

Lesley Nneka Arimah is a diasporic Nigerian writer whose trajectory and writing fit some of the traits described for third-generation African literature. Arimah was born in 1983 in the United Kingdom to Nigerian parents and grew up in different places, enjoying a peripatetic life thanks to the demands of her father’s job as an oil engineer. Third-generation writers’ multilocal affiliation is made evident through

Arimah's statement that both Nigeria and the United States constitute her "home base" ("Interview" 2017); also in tune with third-generation fiction, her writing puts an emphasis on diasporic identity and transnationality. One must bear in mind, however, that the concept of "third-generation African writing" has been criticised for the rigidity of the label (Krishnan 2013) and "its reliance on spatio-temporal constructs that fail to account for the complexity of the texts it classifies" (Dalley 2013: 15).

The "multidimensionality, multifocality and multivocality" (Zeleza 2007: 13) which characterises third-generation writing is indeed apparent in *What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017), the short story collection which includes "Windfalls" and explores parenthood, depicting varied mother-child and father-child relationships. Arimah's writing follows a tendency of contemporary African women's writing to portray patriarchal oppression and structural discrimination in the host countries. In an interview about this collection, the author confesses her interest in "stories of unconventional African Nigerian women because Nigeria, especially, is a very hard place to be unconventional ... in the way that differs from ... the roles that women are supposed to fulfil in Nigerian society" (Strand Book Store 2018). Set in a metropolitan environment in the United States, "Windfalls" depicts the (third-generation) topic of cultural assimilation and estrangement experienced by a first-generation migrant woman and her daughter. The protagonists of this short story are unconventional as a result of their struggle to get by in the United States. Arimah's concern with narrating Nigerian migrant women's stories aligns with Jane Bryce's stance of acknowledging the relevance of a realist representation of the feminine in "a recognizable social world" (2008: 49-50).

What is noteworthy about "Windfalls" for the purpose of my analysis is that mobility is granted a prominent position in the text, following the recent tendency of third-generation African women writers to portray tropes of mobility as part of the vital experience of the modern African subject —see for example Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Noo Saro Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (2013), Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2017).<sup>1</sup> Mobility is a crucial characteristic of third-generation African fiction that should be studied in further detail, for it constitutes a defining element in cosmopolitan visions of the African condition. It has also lately become a significant subject of inquiry in the social sciences. The New Mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Sheller 2014) has been fundamental in drawing attention to this issue. The paradigm offers an alternative interpretation of mobility which includes not only physical and technologically-enhanced human travel, but also the

circulation of materials, images and ideas, as well as the examination of information technologies and the regulation of mobility. Sheller and Urry's contribution, which contemplates mobility as a performance and everyday practice, offers an important analytical tool to examine how contemporary society is organised around mobility systems.

Although there has been extensive work on mobilities in the field of sociology, it has not been much explored in the arts and humanities. In fact, the sharp divide between social sciences and arts and humanities has proved difficult to overcome (Merriman and Pearce 2017). In the field of postcolonial studies, the term "mobility/ies" has been mostly regarded as a synonym of diasporic movement, as critic Anna-Leena Toivanen has accurately observed (2017a). Indeed, mobility as concrete physical movement remains unexplored, except for postcolonial travel writing (Edwards and Graulund 2011) and Toivanen's contributions (2017b; 2021). With regard to the relevance of exploring tangible instances of mobility in contemporary literary works by African and Afrodiasporic writers, Toivanen argues that

contemporary African and Afrodiasporic literatures feature a wide variety of representations of (modern) mobilities. Yet not that much critical attention has been devoted to literary portrayals of concrete, tangible forms of mobility. One reason [...] could be that mobility is such a 'natural' and 'obvious' aspect of the modern postcolonial and globalised life that it easily goes unnoticed in literary texts. (2021: 1)

76

My understanding of mobility/ies aligns with Toivanen's, because human travel is not simple and unproblematic, and "covers a wide variety of mobilities" (2017b: 1) apart from migration.<sup>2</sup> A few recently published articles and monographs have engaged with how a mobility studies approach can be applied to the reading of contemporary literary texts (Toivanen 2017a; 2017b; 2021), thus contributing to "a partial 'recasting' of discussions of movement in the arts and humanities disciplines" (Merriman and Pearce 2017: 494). The purpose of this article is to contribute to the development of an alternative understanding of mobilities from a literary studies perspective which focuses on the analysis of concrete and tangible displacements performed by specific Afrodiasporic migrants in the United States. This alternative understanding involves a close reading of fictional travellers' displacements, while paying critical attention to the means of transport themselves. Focusing on concrete forms of movement automatically places this analysis of "Windfalls" in the post-human turn, which underlines that human life is never just human; connections between people and technological machines are inherent to contemporary life. Means of transport mediate and have different effects on the traveller's experience of the journey. Therefore, this study attempts to contribute to enlarging the body of publications which have already dealt with how a mobility studies approach can be applied to the study of contemporary literary production.

What makes “Windfalls” so interesting in terms of mobility is the friction and stickiness that defines the protagonists’ mobilities as well as how Arimah uses tropes of mobility to destabilise the hegemonic cultural conception of mothering, which has been central in African women’s lives. Jana Costas proposes the Sartrean metaphor of stickiness as a more precise metaphor than those of liquidity, fluidity, flows or nomads to understand and conceptualise mobilities, for stickiness “allows illuminating how mobilities can be contradictory” and ambiguous: “the sticky provides neither a sense of stability nor a sense of freedom” (2013: 1474). Like sticky and difficult-to-grasp substances, people’s mobilities are defined by stickiness, as they are characterised by ambiguity and instability: the circulation is sliding, it never stops but takes place on very asymmetrical and irregular terms. Tim Cresswell’s concept of friction also illuminates the description of these characters’ mobilities, which points to a mobile world riddled with obstacles as a result of a complex entanglement of factors, the most important of which is power. Friction “draws attention to the way in which people, things, and ideas are slowed down or stopped” (Cresswell 2014: 108).

## **2. Flawed Motel-dwelling**

77

“Windfalls” (2017) narrates the story of an unnamed Nigerian migrant woman and her adolescent daughter Amara, who live off feigning falls and injuries. After receiving a large amount of money as compensation for the accident in which her husband died, Amara’s mother has become accustomed to making a living out of legal pay-outs for fraudulent accidents which take place mainly in grocery stores. In fact, “[t]here is a science to it, falling” (Arimah 2017: 79), for they have their own carefully planned scheme: “When the fall begins, think of it as a dance: right leg up [...], left leg buckle [...] land askey, and await the attention of an audience” (79-80). This description of how their staged fall should be performed echoes the stage directions of the performance of a dance, thus highlighting its constructedness. Like the audience of a play, witnesses are key to bringing lawsuits against companies.

In order to be able to live off this conduct and avoid being discovered, mother and daughter are forced to lead a highly mobile lifestyle: “[a]nd so it goes, year after year: the fall, the payoff, the glitz. Always followed by slipping out of apartment windows and rented trailers, clothing stuffed in pillowcases and grocery bags thrown into the trunk of the car [...] and on to the next town” (Arimah 2017: 82). The automobile becomes fundamental for guaranteeing this family’s arguable freedom of movement —arguable because their physical movement is constrained by multiple factors, the most important being their racialised gendered bodies. Not only do they very frequently change their address, but also their identities.

This circumstance forces Amara to write her name “on dusty *cars* across the country and in coffee ground spilled on *motel* breakfast counters” (82, emphasis added) to help her remember her real name, which evinces that the girl suffers from her anonymity. Significantly, she chooses to write it on surfaces of two highly significant places in terms of mobility: a vehicle and a motel. It is precisely these two places that I will focus on throughout my reading of the text.

The mobility trope in this story is determined by its social context. Given her lack of options as a female African in the US, Amara’s mother lives as a fraudster. Despite the fact that she never abandons her daughter, she illustrates the figure of the “unmotherly mother” (Splendore 2002: 185). Not only is the girl depicted as a burden for her mother, but this unnamed emotionally absent mother benefits from her daughter by making her accessible to mature men in exchange for money or other services. When they are about to commit fraud against a new company, Amara is relieved to find a woman in charge behind the desk: “[t]his spared your mother the embarrassing last resort of offering a blow job to convince the lawyer to take your case. (It also relieved you of extending one yourself [...] when your mother excused herself on a false trip to the bathroom)” (Arimah 2017: 83).

78

Apart from introducing the complex mother-daughter relationship in this story, this excerpt shows an important characteristic of “Windfalls” in terms of form: the use of a disruptive uncommon second-person narrator, a formal characteristic that it shares with Taiye Selasi’s “The Sex Lives of African Girls” (2011), which also presents an innocent young adolescent girl as its protagonist. What makes this type of narration special is its combination of “a ‘conative’ [...] level of address and a level of story reference” (Fludernik 1993: 219), which blurs the distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives and complicates “the realms of existence [...] between the narrator and narratee [...] and the protagonists of the fiction” (219). The short story begins with the use of the “you” voice in present tenses in the introduction and then changes to the use of past tenses. Second-person narration is mostly used in the present tense, because it helps the reader empathise with the protagonists more easily, by implying that the actions narrated could happen to any other person. When second-person narration is used in present tenses, the narrator, the narratee or the reader and the protagonist coincide, forming what is known as “completely coincident narration” (DelConte 2003: 211) and establishing a more intimate relationship between them all. The use of past tenses, however, produces the effect of slightly separating the reader from the character, thus gaining a sort of distance which facilitates the reading of tough scenes. Matt DelConte describes this as “partially coincident narration” (2003: 211). Given the harshness of a forced premature sexual initiation, the “you” narrator contributes to victimising the protagonist even further by

highlighting her innocent and limited point of view, while simultaneously demonising the mother, whose lack of a proper name throughout the narration anonymises her. The second-person narration points to a common feature of fictional narratives about the mother-daughter relationship: the representation of the maternal figure from the daughter's point of view, which leads to the erasure of the maternal voice through the dichotomy of idealisation/denigration (Giorgio 2002). Adalgisa Giorgio highlights that formal experimentation facilitates the subversion of well-established cultural notions, such as hegemonic mothering, which refers to striving to be a stable and permanent caretaker who gives the best to her children normally at the expense of her own goals and wishes. The formal experimentation in "Windfalls" does not only include a second-person narrator but also a fragmented story full of omissions which forces readers to be attentive to every detail so as to be able to make inferences.

In order to understand how Amara's adult life is to develop, detailed information about the complex mother-daughter relationship is introduced through the protagonists' temporary motel-dwelling. Significantly, this type of accommodation is intrinsically related to car culture and the journey. Its car-friendly location and its "opening freedom" as well as the fact that "the place can be left on a whim" (Treadwell 2005: 215) prove very convenient for this mobile family of two who evoke the figure of the vagrant: aimlessly moving from one place to another. The motel "mediates between a fixed address and vagrancy, between home and the car" (215). The New Mobilities paradigm classifies motels and hotels as transfer points or interspaces, i.e. places which facilitate the mobility and circulation of peoples by providing travellers with the opportunity to rest. This western-centric classification overlooks the fact that there are people who deliberately choose to live in extended stay hotels, motels and similar indoor accommodations, as the protagonists of "Windfalls" do for a limited amount of time. Perhaps referring to such places as *viscous* interspaces could be a way of making the term more inclusive, acknowledging the different ways that people of varied sociocultural backgrounds may act or interact with such westernised spaces. It is to be expected that the interaction with those spaces by postcolonial racialised "others" is shaped substantially differently to that performed by white travellers. Indeed, how a person moves through these interspaces and how they are perceived are experiences determined by visible markers: race, gender, sexuality, class, colour, ethnicity, nationality, disability, age, etc. The concept of *viscous interspace* accounts for the fluidity of the white travellers' traversing while acknowledging the reduced speed and rhythm of those othered subjects in such apparent spaces of transit.

Indeed, living in a hotel or a motel has become an option to consider not only for well-off clientele, but also for middle-class and lower-class customers, given the

difficulty of signing a leasing contract without a steady job, or finding someone to co-sign it. Lower classes may choose to live in motels or inns because these offer accommodation without requiring credit cards or any personal details. Cash, day-to-day and/or week-to-week payments tend to be accepted, which satisfies the needs generated by underprivileged peoples' low or irregular earnings in western countries. In this way, "[m]otels provide accommodation that is relatively anonymous (a car's driver may be the only person whom a motel owner sees)" (Treadwell 2005: 215).

By choosing to become sojourners in a motel for months, this migrant family unit avoids any form of control over their identities in the United States, thus ensuring privacy. In order to understand the viscosity of these relevant spaces in terms of mobility, it is worth focusing on the use the protagonists make of the place as well as the possibilities and/or restrictions it provides them with. After receiving one of their compensation payments:

You moved into a motel where you had your own bed, a rarity, and your mother gave you a daily allowance to spend at the fairgrounds a quarter mile away. You hobbled to the grounds while your mother occupied herself with shopping and the men who darted in and out of her life like a lizard's tongue. (Arimah 2017: 85)

80

This excerpt not only depicts how this impoverished family manages to live in a motel, but also points to the girl's vulnerability in a hostile environment. The fact that Amara feels blessed for having her own bed proves that the success of the American Dream is unachievable for most racialized migrants.<sup>3</sup> The portrayal of the motel as Amara's mother's place of prostitution confirms Treadwell's idea that motels "collect deviancy" (2005: 215) as well as "accommodat[e] the domestically resistant" (216). This remark is also echoed by Aritha van Herk, who points out that budget hotels and motels represent perfect spots "for behaviours related to cultural taboos: sex, drugs, crime and death" (2014: 145). This fraudster's status as a racialised female migrant conditions her opportunities to find a stable job. Yet, despite the fact that there are certain jobs in the low-paid service sector she could aspire to, she seems to reject leading a conventional migrant life. Taking some form of rebellious attitude is a characteristic of mothers of third-generation Afrodiasporic fiction "that is done at expense [sic] of the relationship with their daughters" (Nadaswaran 2011: 27). Arimah's depiction of Amara's mother's arguable reluctance to live in a fixed place could serve as confirmation of the author's intention to subvert hegemonic mothering. However, given that Amara's mother neglects her daughter's cultural and social education at too many levels, it could be claimed that the author follows that trope of third-generation literature in which mothers neglect their daughters due to lack of empathy or because of the influence of Nigerian customary laws.



The motel is closely linked to the realm of the private, “providing a homeliness that [is] outside or extraneous to the institutional construction of family home” (Treadwell 2005: 216). Certainly, the motel “complicates linear accounts of progress, family, and history” (214). The family’s motel-dwelling affects the girl’s feeling of belonging to a conventional family unit. In spite of the “homeliness” of their motel quarters, Amara feels uneasy because their arrhythmic, mobile way of living does not resemble the lives of other children her age, as depicted in Amara’s trip to the fairgrounds, where she becomes aware of her disadvantaged position. Treadwell adds that “the motel might also be entertained as an imagining of everyday life without routine, without closure: the possibilities of mobility disconnected from linear progress and allied instead to chance and desire” (2005: 214). Even though Amara and her mother have the routine of performing falls or other frauds, their dwelling in the roadside motel represents a certain halt in their lives, for there is no explicit reference to their fraudster activities during their motel stay. At the same time, the motel stay, which is ruled by the mother’s impulsive desires, contributes to emphasise the family’s seemingly eternal state of arrhythmia. Motels, however, have one major limitation when it comes to cohabitation: “the impossibility of separation or personal distance in limited quarters” (Treadwell 2005: 215). Certainly, the physical closeness of bodies implied in sharing a motel bedroom constitutes a significant drawback: in order for this woman to use the motel room, her daughter cannot be present. She needs to be alone to meet those men who “darted in and out of her life like a lizard’s tongue” (Arimah 2017: 85). By inviting her daughter to go to the fairground, Amara’s mother overlooks the vulnerability of the girl when encountering sexual predators:

You insisted on riding the Tunnel of Love by yourself, despite the efforts of Giles, the carnie, to find you a partner [...] and his efforts to join you later at night when he clocked out. The children who waited in line giggled at you for riding alone. While they spent their day at the fair dodging overbearing parents [...] you [...] dodged the hands of eager men. (Arimah 2017: 85-86)

The need to impose some personal distance in this mother and daughter’s life in a motel leads to the girl’s facing undesirable situations while moving alone. Motility, a relevant concept in the field of mobility studies, alludes to “the manner in which an individual or group appropriates the field of possibilities relative to movement and uses them” (Kaufmann and Montulet 2008: 45).<sup>4</sup> Some motility determinants include “physical aptitude, aspirations, accessibility to transportation and communications, space-time constraints, knowledge [and] licenses” (Urry 2007: 38). Human displacements are undoubtedly influenced by racial, gender, class and sexual social markers. The girl’s racialised female body determines her mobility potential. Her traversing of a space which is not typically frequented by young girls

on their own transforms this space supposedly designed for children's fun into one of confusion and danger. As Fran Tonkiss discusses, "[t]he experience of walking [...] will be very different depending on which city you are walking in, why you are walking, and who you are" (2005: 129). A co-constitution of the girl and space operates: she constitutes space by moving through it and at the same time she is constituted by her interactions with the space she traverses. Amara's uneasiness at the fairground is caused both by sexual predators and by other children's giggling at her for being on her own, which leads Amara to contrast her situation with their overprotected lives. As a diasporic and postcolonial individual, "bearer of ethnic or other cultural or somatic differences" (Carrera Suárez 2015: 854) which separate her from the crowd, the adolescent embodies the figure of the postcolonial "pedestrian" (853), given that her body becomes a site of learning and border negotiation. Amara's young, racialised female body becomes the vehicle through which she senses place and movement as hostile and menacing. As a pedestrian, her "observing and traversing of cities is conducted from the perspective of alterity" (857).

The girl's alterity is also motivated by her hobbling. Amara has "a permanent brace in [her] ankle" caused by a suspicious fall from her mother's arms when she was a baby, which "[she] like[s] to believe [...] was real" (Arimah 2017: 81). What she knows about that fall is "[t]hat [her mother] was reaching over to grab the biggest, freshest eggplant off the display but slipped and, oh shit, dropped the baby" (81). As a result, the girl's mobility is not only limited by her age, gender, race and skin colour, but also by her visible physical impairment. The girl's limited motility arguably increases her dependence on her unmotherly mother, whose motility and mobility are obviously superior to her daughter's. Altogether, the fairground scene exemplifies how systems of mobility can also constitute systems of immobility or alienation for Afrodiasporic migrants. External factors to Amara's walk through the fairground—dirty old men and conventional families—act as obstacles which cause a high degree of friction, slowing down and conditioning her physical displacements. The characters' temporary stay in a motel illustrates a flawed mother-daughter relationship, which will be further discussed in the following section through an analysis of the protagonists' driving-events.

### 3. Turbulent Automobility and Mother-Daughter Relationship Crisis

Lesley Nneka Arimah's "Windfalls" constitutes an adaptation of the "road" motif to Afrodiasporic content. The road is one of the most established literary tropes in American fiction "[f]rom early frontier narratives to late postmodern literature. In a sense, to be 'on the road', is concurrent with notions of Manifest Destiny and the

Puritan ‘errand into the wilderness’. The road is resonant within the concept of nation building” (Paes de Barros 2004: 96). This short story deconstructs this aligning of the road motif with the search of the West and nation building, which is present in classic novels such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), by focusing on lower-class Afrodiasporans’ impossibility of achieving the American Dream.

The adaptation of the “road” motif to Afrodiasporic content is not limited to this text. The main events of Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013) are also articulated around moving cars, contributing to the depiction of its first-generation male migrant protagonist’s endless sense of unease, which results from his inability to find his position in American society. The road similarly does not lead Arimah’s protagonists to progress and their automobility is depicted as aimless car driving with no fixed destination, much like Kweku’s aimless driving scene, in Selasi’s novel, after he has been hired because of an unfair racist event. Unlike men’s conventional road narratives, most women’s road narratives usually have no fixed destination. This aimless driving highlights the sense of unease that defines the Afrodiasporic characters’ condition. The emphasis of both Selasi’s novel and Arimah’s short story on cars reinforces what Aretha Phiri defines as a key characteristic of the contemporary Afrodiasporic condition: “an elusive and fragile reality of being fundamentally unhomed” (2017: 148). In addition, “Windfalls” also rethinks women’s travel narratives in which the road normally “functions [...] as a path toward fulfilment, community and attachment between mothers and daughters” (Paes de Barros 2004: 96), for the road is depicted as a site of dispute between this unnamed mother and her adolescent daughter.

The automobile constitutes an indispensable tool in this two-person family’s survival, for it enables them to move between places and to change addresses with relative ease. An illustration of the crucial role the automobile plays in their lives is the fact that once their car has broken down, Amara does not hesitate for a moment to have sex with Randall “the trucker” to get their car towed off the highway, because he “turned out to be the guy a girl had to do to get a ride around here. He’d let you out three days and two thousand miles later” (Arimah 2017: 87). Given that truck drivers are frequently associated with deviant sexual behaviours, this sexual encounter has resonances of truckers’ “amorous exploits with female hitchhikers” (Packer 2008: 176), which was a popular theme of country songs in the 1970s, most of which tended to glorify truckers as American icons or “modern-day cowboys” (175).<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, Amara evokes the figure of the hitchhiker, which evinces racialised young girls’ vulnerability in this environment.

I argue that this family’s mobilities can be conceptualised as sticky: they are slippery and have an ambiguous character providing “neither a sense of stability nor a sense

of freedom” (Costas 2013: 1474). Amara’s gender and age cause friction, placing her in a disadvantaged position while on the road. Her mobility is neither frictionless nor unimpeded. In order to access the road through getting her car repaired, she undergoes an unsettling episode, which might not be so disturbing from her point of view, given that it reflects her mother’s usual behaviour. Sex and her body guarantee the girl’s gate of access to the privilege of the road. This arguably forced sexual encounter constitutes a disruption as well as a door to maintaining the family’s mobile lifestyle. Therefore, Amara’s mobility has an ambiguous nature, for it is “neither liberating nor simply unsettling” (Costas 2013: 1482). Amara’s early sexual debut could also be claimed as the girl’s way of seeking both agency and acknowledgement by her mother.

The 850 dollars Amara obtains from this sexual intercourse are employed in purchasing a second-hand “dark green Camry that had caught [her] mother’s eye” (Arimah 2017: 87). The Toyota Camry is a mid-sized Japanese vehicle which was rated “the fifth-best-selling car in America” in 1989 (James 2005: 64). Its medium size emphasises this family of migrants’ will to achieve the American Dream, for the automobile is intimately connected with Americans’ self-image. The centrality of automobility to American society is undeniable. As Packer points out in his thorough study of car safety in the United States, the obsession with automobility might “be the offspring of Americans’ restlessness and their desire for freedom and wide open spaces, a desire that was conceived during exodus from England and birthed in a boundless continental frontier” (2008: 2). The migrant protagonists of this story have adopted their host society’s materialistic aspirations as part of their forced assimilation within the dominant host society, but the type of vehicles they have access to paradoxically confines them to underprivileged communities for whom the American Dream is not even an option.

The complex mother-daughter relationship is depicted through moments of tension which take place in spaces that are significant in terms of automobility. These include Amara’s discovery of her pregnancy “under the flickering fluorescent of a gas station bathroom” (Arimah 2017: 87) and her confronting her mother in one of their car journeys asking her to stop living in the way that she does. Amara’s pregnancy is presented as an important impediment to their extremely mobile lifestyle. It constitutes a “somatic intrusion” to their mobile rhythm (Edensor 2013: 167). Whereas Amara starts to imagine her future with the baby and “to look for the section that stocked children’s clothing” (90) in any store she visits, enjoying the maternal *jouissance*, her mother does not hide her annoyance and discomfort with the girl’s condition. Both of these moments of tension take place on/by the road. Lynne Pearce argues that the road can be considered a “spatio-temporal continuum of ‘in-between’” (2000: 163). Their being on the road

between different places symbolises this family's state of in-betweenness in the United States as invisible migrants forced to perform fraudulent deeds.

Significantly, a petrol station, a 'non-place' in Marc Augé's view, is the setting for the crucial moment in which Amara finds out that she is pregnant. Augé considers the traveller's space as the archetype of the non-place which "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (1995: 77-78). A key characteristic of non-places, he notices, is that they interact with travellers through texts or signs which facilitate people's transit through them. The messages in these places are addressed simultaneously to each traveller, thus creating a prototype user. In this manner, non-places produce a shared identity which promotes relative and liberating anonymity. Notwithstanding, the concept of "non-places" has been widely contested. According to Peter Merriman, the feelings Augé suggests as being typical of these places —loneliness, dislocation, alienation— can emerge in many other places. In his view, Augé "overlooks the complex habitations, practices of dwelling, embodied relations, material presences, placings and hybrid subjectivities associated with movement through such spaces" (2004: 154), and considers that non-places might evoke as many different feelings and as diverse as the people who traverse them. The story shows that the social interactions that take place in filling stations can be quite complex and the feelings evoked are indeed diverse. Instead of experiencing a liberating anonymity, the girl's interaction with this mobile interspace and her observation of a caring mother adjusting her daughter's ponytail elicits self-awareness of the abnormality of her situation as a young pregnant girl: "It was a simple, effortless act but you realised that you'd never felt your mother's hands in your hair in quite that way" (Arimah 2017: 90).

The New Mobilities paradigm considers filling stations as key "places of intermittent movement" which become pivotal "to make arrangements 'on the move'" (Urry 2007: 37). They offer travellers not only the possibility of refuelling their private automobiles, but they also provide other types of facilities like restrooms and retail space inside the buildings where service tills are located. The filling station becomes central to the plot of the story because it serves to mark a before and after in this family's car journey. This pause in the journey is significant because it motivates a profound change of mental focus for both the driver and the passenger, thus dividing the car journey into three manifestly discrete "driving-events", to borrow Lynne Pearce's terminology (2017: 586). By introducing and theorising the concept of "driving-event", Pearce makes an enlightening contribution to distinguishing the journey from the different driving sequences it might be made up of. In her view, these shorter driving sequences, which she names "driving-events", are the particular units which have some coherence in terms of "a driver's [or passengers'] thought-train[s] and/or mood" (592). She clarifies that "any

journey of reasonable length” can be divided into various driving-events (595). Here it is relevant to consider the context of the longer journey before the stop at a filling station:

You were sitting in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven when your mother handed you a five-dollar bill to purchase tampons, something she'd been doing with soldierly regularity the third week of every month [...] You ended up purchasing a pregnancy test instead... (Arimah 2017: 86-87)

This excerpt evinces the woman's contradictory attitude towards her daughter. Her knowledge of the exact date her daughter should be menstruating shows a certain caring attitude, but the girl's menstruation constitutes a “somatic intrusion” (Edensor 2013: 167) which causes friction and slows down their mobile rhythm. The location where this scene takes place, the parking lot of a 7-Eleven, a chain of convenience stores in America and Asia,<sup>6</sup> serves to reinforce the two women's dependence on the car while underlining their racialised working-class identities. An iconic black and working-class meeting point in the United States, these convenience stores, mainly run by immigrants, have always been closely connected with car culture, as the first TV advertisement of 1949 acknowledges.<sup>7</sup>

86

The car journey can therefore be divided into three distinct driving-events: the drive before the stop at the parking lot of a supermarket, the tense short drive to the gas station and the drive right after “the fetal presence was confirmed” (Arimah 2017: 87). The notion of driving-event is helpful “to denote a unit of (mobilised) time-space that could be contrasted with others [...] and applied to the driver's [and passenger's] consciousness” (Pearce 2017: 594). Indeed, the first driving-event of this journey is characterised by the protagonists' calm state of mind; the second is defined by the characters' uncertainty after the possibility of Amara's pregnancy has arisen; finally, the third driving-event is marked by unease. All in all, this scene at the petrol station can certainly be considered the starting point for the mother-daughter relationship crisis and for their new forced state of arrhythmia, for it is the place where the presence of a more permanent somatic intrusion —Amara's pregnancy— is revealed.

The other delicate moment of the story takes place inside a car. If automobility is considered within the general context of the story, it could be concluded that the mother's obsession with car-driving constitutes a way to cope with her chaotic life. Paradoxically, their restless mobility is also the reason why the protagonists' lives are in turmoil given the subversion of mothering which operates in the story. Mimi Sheller highlights the centrality of the “emotional geographies of automobility” (2004: 223) to western “societies of automobility” (Sheller and Urry 2000: 738; Sheller 2004: 221). With this, she refers to the “flows, circulations, distributions,

intensifications and interferences of emotion” (Sheller 2004: 223) which are elicited by car-driving. Undoubtedly, “emotional responses to cars and feelings about driving are crucial to the personal investments [western middle-class] people have in buying, driving, and dwelling with cars” (224). Nonetheless, this linking of car ownership to developing a self-concept as “competent, powerful, able, and sexually desirable” (225) does not work equally for lower-class female migrants. Still, the automobile becomes an indispensable tool for Amara’s mother to keep her economic and social status. In fact, this car-dwelling which positions Amara’s mother as a car owner contributes to her development of a self-concept as a restless mobile Nigerian migrant woman. In this regard, Sheller observes that “the affective relationship with cars [...] also feeds into our deepest anxieties and frustrations” (224). The mother’s anxiety might be caused by the impossibility of finding a stable job which impedes her assimilation into American society. She seeks pleasure through driving as a way to counteract her impotence in not being able to fulfil the promised American Dream.

The following tense car scene is part of a longer car journey which can also be divided into distinct driving-events. To borrow Pearce’s words, “each and every car journey [constitutes] a unique and non-reproducible event in the lives of the drivers and passengers concerned on account of the variable psychological and situational factors involved” (2017: 585). When Amara is six months along, she decides to confront her mother, because she does not want to follow her steps. In the car, she takes courage to remind her mother that “[v]ery young children require stability as they grow to ensure sound development”, but the woman pretends to ignore her by “watching the road” (Arimah 2017: 88). Amara is demanding a certain sense of what Edensor calls “eurhythmia” (2013: 166). By calling her mother’s attention to children’s need for stability, she refers to following the dominant rhythms, spatiotemporal conventions and routines of their host American society. To cut her off, Amara’s mother takes advantage of what she has at hand and “turn[s] up the radio” (88). The encapsulated space of the vehicle serves as the location to illustrate this ill mother-child relationship. Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin highlights the early mother-daughter relationship as an interaction between two independent subjectivities. Each member is perceived as independent and different from the self but they depend on each other for recognition:

Recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions and actions of the self. It allows the self to realise its agency and authorship in a tangible way. But such recognition can only come from an other whom we, in turn, recognise as a person in his or her own right. (Benjamin 1990: 12)

This breakdown in the mother-daughter relationship illustrates their failure of mutual recognition, which complicates the daughter’s search for self-definition.

Amara's mother does not recognise her daughter as a subject in her own right. Since both mother and daughter are "captives of a moving vehicle" (Arimah 2017: 88), the mother is forced to respond to Amara's demand and she does so by stopping the car brusquely and answering her daughter angrily: "Why, you think I don't know these things? You think I'm a bad mother or something?" (89). This driving-event is characterised by Amara's anxiety and unrest caused by the instability of their unconventional way of life. For her mother, the only way to ignore her daughter's remark is by turning up the radio. The sudden stop marks the end of a driving-event defined by the rising tension between mother and daughter. Moreover, the process known as "parentification" (Hooper 2008: 34) is key to understand their relationship within the larger context of the story. There is a clear role reversal whereby the girl is forced to act as a parent to her own mother by providing the sense of responsibility she thinks her progenitor lacks.<sup>8</sup>

The driving-event that follows lasts thirty minutes approximately, which is the time they need to get to the first grocery store they encounter to buy healthy food for Amara. This drive is defined by hostility on the mother's side. The stop at the grocery store not only marks the end of the journey but also points to the end of the story. Amara's fall caused by her slipping after stepping on a "puddle of melting ice cream" (Arimah 2017: 90) causes her miscarriage and defines the end of Amara's illusions and expectations of imposing a certain sense of eurhythmia in their lives. Considering this scene in general terms, the automobile is presented as a capsule of entrapment in a sense of arrhythmia which, despite enabling them to move, impedes their participating in a sense of generalised eurhythmia. Their everyday mobilities may be determined by the opening and closing hours of grocery stores, but aside from that, there are no conventions which regulate their mobility. Amara's disconformity with their turbulent way of life symbolises a demand for participating in American society's orchestrated and imposed mobile rhythms, which they cannot fully access. On the whole, this fragment serves to illustrate the stickiness of their mobilities as well as the "coercive" freedom of automobility (Sheller and Urry 2000: 749), for the car becomes a paradoxical space of freedom and entrapment for Amara's progenitor.

#### 4. Conclusion

Arimah's portrayal of Afrodiasporic female characters in constant movement underlines their perpetual search for a place or places to belong to. By studying mobilities as tangible everyday displacements in "Windfalls", a sense of unease is revealed as a defining feature of the contemporary Afrodiasporic condition. The anxiety that defines both the characters' motel-dwelling and their automobility is



blatantly illustrative of the complexity of representation of this flawed mother-daughter relationship that helps to classify “Windfalls” as third-generation Afrodiasporic fiction. By making automobility and temporary motel-dwelling central to the plot, Arimah is able to denounce Afrodiasporic migrants’ impossibility of fulfilling the much-wanted American Dream. The depiction of both the vehicle and the motel as paradoxical dwelling spaces ultimately epitomises the impossibility for migrants to belong to American society. All in all, Arimah’s “Windfalls” presents the other side of the narrative about migrants. The migrants’ impossibilities for making progress are materialised at the spatial and temporal level in this narrative given that the analysis of their mobilities unveils their permanent state of arrhythmia. Arimah’s formal experimentation in “Windfalls” contributes to deconstructing the well-established cultural notion of hegemonic mothering. In spite of the short length of the story, the notion of the driving-event proves useful to analyse its structure from a literary mobility studies perspective. Such analyses contradict Merriman and Pearce’s assumption that Pearce’s contribution on the driving-event “will possibly be of more interest to cultural geographers and sociologists than literary scholars” (2017: 501). By engaging with how the New Mobilities paradigm can be applied to the study of contemporary works of fiction, this article confirms the relevance of overcoming the sharp divide between social sciences and arts and humanities.

## **Acknowledgments**

The research underpinning this article has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (FPU15/04245). Further support was provided by the project “Strangers and Cosmopolitans: Alternative Worlds in Contemporary Literatures” (RTI2018-097186-B-100) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, the Spanish Research Agency (AEI) and the European Regional Development Fund, and by the R&D Programme of the Principado de Asturias, through the research group “Intersections” (GRUPIN IDI/2018/000167). I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Isabel Carrera Suárez and Emilia María Durán-Almarza, and to Anna-Leena Toivanen for her constant support, inspiration and help after having introduced me to the wonderful world of mobility studies. Special thanks to the anonymous peer-reviewers who have helped me improve this article.

## Notes

---

1. For recent research on the relevance of the mobility theme on contemporary African and Afrodiasporic writing, see Cobo-Piñero (2020), Green-Simms (2017), and Toivanen (2021).

2. Given that travel is associated with privilege, the figure of the African traveller “seems particularly incompatible with the often coerced mobilities of global south subjects” (Toivanen 2017b: 2).

3. The topic of first-generation migrants’ inability to make it in the United States or to assimilate into the dominant culture is also portrayed in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), and Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2017).

4. Motility does not equate to observable movement: one “may have a high degree of motility without actually moving” (Sheller 2014: 797), whereas other very mobile people may have low motility because of their lack of real choices.

5. For a detailed analysis of the representation of truckers as American icons in country music songs and how the popular vision of the trucker changed after the wildcat truckers’ strike of December 1973 and January 1974, see Packer (2008).

6. The 7-Eleven chain is said to have originated the “convenience store” concept. These convenient quick-stop retail shops open 24/7.

7. In the 1949 advertisement, the impossibility of finding a place to park to go shopping within the city is depicted. In order to avoid these stressful situations, “7-Eleven is the place to stop” as its shop assistants came out to serve their clients, who did not have to get out of their cars.

8. The independence and maturity of daughters has also been identified as a recurrent topic in third-generation fiction (Nadaswaran 2011).

90

## Works Cited

---

“An Interview with Lesley Nneka Arimah: Caine Prize Shortlist”. 2017. *Wasafiri: International Contemporary Writing*. (June 27). <<https://www.wasafiri.org/article/interview-lesley-nneka-arimah-caine-prize-shortlist/>>. Accessed September 15, 2020.

ARIMAH, Lesley Nneka. 2017. “Windfalls”. In *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky*. New York: Riverhead: 78-92.

AUGÉ, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-Modernity*. Trans. A. Howe. London: Verso.

BENJAMIN, Jessica. 1990. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. London: Virago.

BRYCE, Jane. 2008. “‘Half and Half Children’: Third Generation Women Writers and the Nigerian Novel”. *Research in African Literatures* 39 (2): 49-67.

CARRERA SUÁREZ, Isabel. 2015. “The Stranger Flâneuse and the Aesthetics of Pedestrianism: Writing the Post-Diasporic Metropolis”. *Interventions* 17 (6): 853-865.

COBO-PIÑERO, María Rocío. 2020. “‘Part Returnee and Part-Tourist’: The Afropolitan Travelogue in Noo Saro Wiwa’s *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria*”. In Hodapp, James (ed.) *Afropolitan Literature as World Literature*. London and New York: Bloomsbury: 167-184.

- COSTAS, Jana. 2013. "Problematizing Mobility: A Metaphor of Stickiness, Non-Places and the Kinetic Elite". *Organization Studies* 34 (10): 1467-1485.
- CRESSWELL, Tim. 2014. *Place: An Introduction*. West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons.
- DALLEY, Hamish. 2013. "The Idea of 'Third Generation Nigerian Literature': Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel". *Research in African Literatures* 44 (4): 15-34.
- DELCONTE, Matt. 2003. "Why You Can't Speak: Second-Person Narration, Voice, and a New Model for Understanding Narrative". *Style* 37 (2): 204-219.
- EDENSOR, Tim. 2013. "Rhythm and Arrhythmia". In Adey, Peter, David Bissell, Kevin Hannam, Peter Merriman, and Mimi Sheller (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*. New York: Routledge: 163-171.
- EDWARDS, Justin and Rune GRAULUND. (eds.) 2011. *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*. London: Palgrave.
- FLUDERNIK, Monika. 1993. "Second Person Fiction: Narrative 'You' as Addressee and/or Protagonist". *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 18 (2): 217-247.
- GIORGIO, Adalgisa. 2002. *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- GIORGIO, Adalgisa. 2002. "Writing the Mother-Daughter Relationship: Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Literary Criticism". In Giorgio, Adalgisa (ed.): 11-46.
- GREEN-SIMMS, Lindsey B. 2017. *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa*. Minneapolis: Minnesota U.P.
- HOOPER, Lisa M. 2008. "Defining and Understanding Parentification: Implications for All Counselors". *The Alabama Counseling Association Journal* 34: 34-43.
- JAMES, Wanda. 2005. *Driving from Japan: Japanese Cars in America*. Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland.
- KAUFMANN, Vincent and Bertrand MONTULET. 2008. "Between Social and Spatial Mobilities: The Issue of Social Fluidity". In Canzler, Weert, Vincent Kaufmann and Sven Kesselring (eds.) *Tracing Mobilities: Towards a Cosmopolitan Perspective*. Farham and Burlington: Ashgate: 37-56.
- KRISHNAN, Madhu. 2013. "Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature". *ARIEL* 44 (1): 73-97.
- MERRIMAN, Peter. 2004. "Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-Places, and the Geographies of England's M1 Motorway". *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (4-5): 145-167.
- MERRIMAN, Peter and Lynne PEARCE. 2017. "Mobility and the Humanities". *Mobilities* 12 (4): 493-508.
- NADASWARAN, Shalini. 2011. "Rethinking Family Relationships in Third-generation Nigerian Women's Fiction". *RELIEF* 5 (1): 19-32.
- PACKER, Jeremy. 2008. *Mobility Without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship*. Durham and London: Duke U.P.
- PAES DE BARROS, Deborah. 2004. *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women's Road Stories*. New York: Peter Lang.
- PEARCE, Lynne. 2000. "Driving North/Driving South: Reflections upon the Spatial/Temporal Co-ordinates of 'Home'". In Pearce, Lynne (ed.) *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home and Belonging*. Aldershot: Ashgate: 162-178.
- PEARCE, Lynne. 2017. "'Driving-as-Event': Rethinking the Car Journey". *Mobilities* 12 (4): 585-597.
- PHIRI, Aretha. 2017. "Lost in Translation: Re-reading the Contemporary Afrodiasporic Condition in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*". *European Journal of English Studies* 21 (2): 144-158.
- SPLENDRE, Paola. 2002. "Bad Daughters and Unmotherly Mothers: The New Family Plot in the Contemporary English Novel". In Giorgio, Adalgisa (ed.): 185-215.
- SHELLER, Mimi. 2004. "Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car". *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (4-5): 221-242.

- SHELLER, Mimi. 2014. "The New Mobilities Paradigm for a Live Sociology." *Current Sociology Review* 62 (6): 789-811.
- SHELLER, Mimi and John URRY. 2000. "The City and the Car." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24: 737-757.
- SHELLER, Mimi and John URRY. 2006. "The New Mobilities Paradigm." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38 (2): 207-226.
- STRAND BOOK STORE. 2018. "Lesley Nneka Arimah." *YouTube* (April 25). <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqcC1L6DZGw>>. Accessed August 29, 2020.
- TONKISS, Fran. 2005. *Space, the City and Social Theory*. London: Polity.
- TOIVANEN, Anna-Leena. 2017a. "Anxious Mobilities in Accra and Beyond: Making Modern African Subjects in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*." *Matatu* 49: 307-328.
- TOIVANEN, Anna-Leena. 2017b. "Spaces of In-betweenness and Unbelonging: The Hotel in Short Stories by Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." *English Studies in Africa* 60 (1): 1-11.
- TOIVANEN, Anna-Leena. 2021. *Mobilities and Cosmopolitanisms in African and Afrodiasporic Literatures*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- TREADWELL, Sarah. 2005. "The Motel: An Image of Elsewhere." *Space and Culture* 8 (2): 214-224.
- URRY, John. 2007. *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity.
- VAN HERK, Aritha. 2014. "Hotel Hades." In Arapoglou, Eleftheria, Mónika Fodor, and Jopi Nyman (eds.) *Mobile Narratives: Travel, Migration, and Transculturation*. New York and London: Routledge: 139-150.
- ZELEZA, Paul. 2007. "Colonial Fictions: Memory and History in Yvonne Vera's *Imagination*." *Research in African Literatures* 38 (2): 9-21.