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***New Subaltern Identities: A Thematic  
Analysis of NoViolet Bulawayo's We  
Need New Names***

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## Introduction

*We Need New Names* is the debut novel NoViolet Bulawayo, a young writer born in Zimbabwe and relocated in the USA at the age of 18, defined for this reason a “child of two lands”.<sup>1</sup> The novel itself has born out of the living in-between these two realities and out of the physical distance dividing them. Bulawayo tells that the inspiration for the novel is a photograph of a kid sitting on top of rubbles she came across online, a picture capturing the shattering effects of Mugabe’s dictatorship. The story, indeed, narrates the consequences and the impact that the wrecking political situation of the country have had on the lives of children, though the eyes of a child. The first chapter of this thesis, indeed, after a short introduction on the author, analyses the narrative device of the child-narrator and its influence on some formal features of Bulawayo’s writing.

The proper thematic analysis of the novel, aim of this thesis work, starts with the second chapter, in which the voice of the child-narrator is taken again into consideration, this time, indeed, for its thematic relevance. In this chapter, the narrator and protagonist 10-years-old black female Darling is introduced as a (triple) subaltern subject because of her age, race, class and gender. The concept of subalternity, as developed by Spivak in the essay “Can the subaltern speak?”,<sup>2</sup> is here deployed with an intersectional perspective that takes into account a multiplicity of factor contributing to superimpose on the subject her/his abject condition. Therefore, in the second chapter, the features of childhood and its corollaries will be analysed together with the role of women in a patriarchal society.

Another element that relegates the protagonist to a position of abjection is her social position in a political context in which, those in power have decided to legitimize their supremacy over the skin of the most vulnerable strata of the population. In the third chapter, indeed, Darling’s subjectivity is again defined by an external actor, which this time is her very own state, a state that has failed in providing a dignified life to its children. Hence, lack of food and education are, in the novel, the material imperatives that drive

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/16/books/we-need-new-names-by-noviolet-bulawayo.html>

<sup>2</sup> Spivak, Gayatri, Chakravarty, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in Williams Patrick and Chrisman Laura, *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*, 1994.

the lives of the inhabitants of the shanty town, who don't have the chance to build a worthy life because they are too busy trying to survive. The first part of the chapter briefly introduces the historical frame in which the novel is set, although no historical event is ever explicitly mentioned in the novel itself. The theme analysed are, therefore, the political and social critique towards the dysfunctional state and the way in which Bulawayo raise it through the eyes of the most innocent victims, namely the children. The analysis of the of the political-social context of the novel concepts of post-colonial theory have been employed, such as that of Bakhtin's carnivalesque aesthetic in its various re-interpretations, as well as the concept of postcolony elaborated by Mbembe.

The fourth chapter deals with the way in which the interactions between the local reality of Paradise and the global reality represented by the media and the NGO contribute to shape the image of Africa and in the West and vice versa. The globalization and the presence of the West affects the lives of the inhabitants of Paradise are made very clear in the novel and are displayed as double-sided: on the one hand they exacerbate the material inequities existing between the two poles of the world; on the other hand are responsible for the distorted image of Africa and the Africans that is conveyed to the western audience. Hence, the focus of analysis is the way in which the young girl, once she has moved to America, is hunted by the way in which the representation of her country affects her own identity and the way in which she is perceived in the West, making her again a subaltern because of her race. However, not only Africa, but America as well is mis-represented in the eyes of the Paradise's people, who conceive it as the land of gold and great opportunities.

If the fourth chapter portrays the young girl as a subject made subaltern by the misrepresentation and the association with the African continent, in the following chapter Darling becomes the product of a multiple displacement, one forced by the her own state and one so called "voluntary", but actually induced the drowning situation of her country: Darling is no longer a subject, but a reject of the state, she is no longer a subject but a diasporic subject, a migrant. The first paragraph of the chapter is therefore dedicated to the historical events of state-induced displacement from which the novel itself moves while the second one treats the diasporic journey of the young girl as something more than a "voluntary" displacement. Theoretical notions about migrations and diaspora will be given, in order to fully comprehend and analyse the figure of Darling as migrant and

her experience in what she calls “My America”. One of the main focuses is indeed the way in which Bulawayo unravels the false myth of easy upgrade for a subaltern subject coming from a disadvantaged position. Besides, this chapter deals with the concept of home, a concept complex to define that becomes even more complicated for migrants who leave their homes behind and can’t go back. As a consequence, the concept of cosmopolitanism, and “afropolitanism” as well, are questioned, and who will always struggle to find his/her in a place that very hardly will become home.

Connecting to the idea of home, the last chapter is about language due to the role it plays in the migrants’ lives as part of what shapes one’s identity and one’s relationship with the world.

## **Chapter I**

**NoViolet Bulawayo and *We Need New Names***

## 1.1 Short biography of the author

“I come from a culture where names speak, are carefully thought out, and mean something”.<sup>3</sup> This is exactly the spirit with which the author of *We Need New Names* chose her own name. NoViolet Bulawayo is indeed a pen name and her legal name is Elizabeth Zandile Tshele. As she specifies, her given name has no meaning to her, since she only discovered it when she began first grade, while she was actually called differently at home. Moreover, friends used still different names in the playground, so that the whole concept of name was quite “fluid”<sup>4</sup> to her. As far as concerns her pen name, it literally means “with Violet”: Violet is the name of her mother, who passed away when she was 18 months, and No means “with” in her native language, Ndebele, so that she used her mother’s name to keep her memory close and honour her. Bulawayo is the name of the second biggest city of Zimbabwe, her hometown, which she has chosen for a very similar reason, that is to feel bound to the place she left during her adolescence and she was not able to go back to for 13 years.

Bulawayo belongs to the generations of “born-frees”, who grew up after Zimbabwe gained independence from the U.K. in 1980: she was born on December 10, 1981, in Tsholotsho. At the age of 18, she left her native country and went to Kalamazoo, Michigan, to live with her aunt and attend college. Moving to the US, she was supposed to follow what the generation of her parents considered a meaningful career and become a lawyer, but there she took her first creative art class at 18, giving voice to her the passion for storytelling, which she inherited from her dad and from her whole cultural background. She completed a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Cornell University where she received the Truman Capote Fellowship. She was also a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, where she now teaches.<sup>5</sup> In 2011 Bulawayo was awarded the Caine Prize for African Literature for her story “Hitting Budapest”, published in the November/December 2010 issue of the *Boston Review*, which then became the first chapter of *We Need New Names*. With her debut novel, Bulawayo is the first black Africa

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<sup>3</sup> Belinda, Otas, “NoViolet Bulawayo”, *New African Woman*, October 13, 2014: 89; [online] <http://belindaotas.com/?p>.

<sup>4</sup> “NoViolet Bulawayo on names, the limitation of language, writing from distance”, *Eat, Drink & Be Literary* Mar 19, 2014, [video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjOGa5BH8Ok&t=36s>.

<sup>5</sup> NoViolet Bulawayo Official Website, <http://novioletbulawayo.com/>.



woman and the first Zimbabwean to be shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize. She also won the Etisalat Prize for Literature, the first pan-African award prizing new African writers for their first-published fiction books.

Despite what one might think, *We Need New Names* did not come out of an autobiographical inspiration: Bulawayo was born and lived in a much more liveable Zimbabwe than the one Darling and her friends experience and her position as a migrant “wasn’t as dramatic as Darling’s”.<sup>6</sup> What actually pushed her into writing her novel, was the need to connect to her homeland in a moment in which she could only witness from the outside, through phone calls, blog, and social media, what was happening in her country, so that telling the story of Darling was “a kind of catharsis”<sup>7</sup> and a way of coping with frustration and pain.

## **1.2 Short introduction and overview of the formal features analysed through the use of the child-narrator device**

*We Need New Names* can be considered a coming-of-age novel narrating the experiences of the ten-year-old black girl Darling in her own voice. The novel opens with the protagonist and her friends crossing Mzilikazi Road and Hope Street to reach Budapest in order to steel guava fruits, and then go back to Paradise. As readers, we feel confused in front of this geography, since we cannot place these names in any map we know. Then we realize that the place (ironically) called Paradise is actually a shantytown on an African country, whose name we are never told, but whose dramatic situation resembles the Zimbabwe of Operation Murambatsvina (‘Drive out the rubbish’ or ‘Restore Order’). From the second half of the book on, the setting switches to the US, precisely to ‘DestroyedMichygen’, as the children call it. Here the protagonist has moved to live with her aunt Fostalina in search of a better future. The moving is not narrated, it just happens, almost abruptly both for the protagonist and for the reader, who is thus able to share with the character the bewildering feeling of suddenly being catapulted into a thoroughly new

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<sup>6</sup> Sophy Kohler speaks to the Men Booker Prize Shortlistee NoViolet Bulawayo, [online] <http://aerodrome.co.za/outside-voice/>.

<sup>7</sup> Kohler.

reality; it is though foreshadowed in the chapter “How They Left”, strategically placed just before the setting shift.

“How They Left” is the second of three chapters in which the first-person singular of the intradiegetic narrator is replaced by the third-person plural of the omniscient narrator, which in the last one of the three shifts from ‘they’ to a self-including ‘we’. Hypothetically, the voice could be that of a grown-up and more mature Darling, analysing and re-telling her own experiences through a newly acquired consciousness of universality. The three chapters indeed, describing respectively “How They [people] appeared” in Paradise, “How they left” their native countries and “How they lived” in the arrival countries, are in communication with each other while interposed among the narration of Darling’s life and could be read as a transposition of Darling’s own experiences on a collective level. This universalising aim can be also detected from the choice of never mentioning the name of the country where the events take place in the first half of the novel, as to remind us that “shanties are, and can be all over the world”.<sup>8</sup> Even more basically assertive of this will and need for telling a story that bears a collectively shared experience, is telling it through the voice of a child, for “there is something universal about kids. We all can relate to them”.<sup>9</sup>

The choice of child-narrator is also a narrative device through which we can analyse more than one formal and stylistic element of the novel. First of all, the characteristic underlying the whole book is an episodic plot structure, for which each chapter could somehow stand on its own since the told episode concludes and resolves itself within the chapter and it is unlikely referred to in the following ones. We can argue that this is exactly the way in which children experience the events of their life, conceiving each moment as delimited and defined on its own. This doesn’t mean that memory plays no role in the unfolding of the story; on the contrary, in more than one occasion, the linearity of the narration is suspended by the remembrance of a past event. Memories are often recalled by simple material objects, such as a picture or even a piece of furniture, which trigger an emotional association and enable Darling to tell us a significant moments of her past – including historically significant events, that the readers have to identify by himself, as they are not presented as such and openly named. The narrator also informs

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<sup>8</sup> Otas, 2014, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Judith, Rosen, “Author Profile: Close to home”, *Publisher Weekly*, April 1, 2013: 36.

us about the past by means of the dream, that the reader is actually supposed to interpret as the surfacing of painful memories, too painful and traumatizing to be told while awake. While Darling is growing up, memories come to her mind with higher frequency and even the smallest element of her everyday life can be charged with emotional power. This is surely telling of Darling's interior conflict and emotional split, due to her living in between her past and her present, her homeland and her adoptive country. In the second section, the child becomes an adolescent and the narrative itself is affected by the growth of the protagonist/narrator, with the emerging of a slightly more tangled storyline.

As well as on the broader structure and plot of the novel, the voice of the child-narrator has a considerable impact on the narrative style and the language. Regarding language, it is employed as a very powerful tool of self-definition and self-making, so much so that, in this chapter I will only analyse some stylistic features of the narration, not yet going into the broader issue of vernacular and naming practices.<sup>10</sup>

The tone of the novel comes from a youthful, ingeniously ironic and attentive kid, carefully observing both her own everyday reality and the world outside and trying to make sense of it through her own mental processes and expressive devices. Her voice makes it possible to achieve in many scenes an almost lyrical and poetical pitch, without ever sounding pathetic or emotional. Darling makes extensive use of similes and metaphors, in order to explain what she sees but also what happens around her and understand it, employing things she knows, food most of the time, as terms of comparison. The gaze of the little girl is always objective and analytic, in accounting for what she sees, thinks and feels, to such an extent that she appears almost brutal, often sarcastic but sadly realistic. When the kids are waiting to receive their gifts from the NGO people, Darling describes the scene: "At first we try to line up nicely, as if we are ants going to a wedding, but when they open the back of the lorry we turn into dizzied dung flies".<sup>11</sup> In the passage, she uses a simile in the first part of the sentence and a metaphor in the second one, thus establishing a stronger and direct identification between the two terms (the kids and the flies), to say that the second image is the closest to reality. In doing so, the girl is not afraid of depicting herself and her friends in a self-deprecating light. The conversational

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter 6.

<sup>11</sup> NoViolet, Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, Chatto & Windus London, 2013, p. 53-54. From now on *We Need New Names* will be referred to in the text as WNNN, in brackets and followed by pages number.

style is pushed the furthest when Darling describes how to play country-game speaking to an imaginary interlocutor, explaining that “you divide the outer ring depending on how many people are playing and cut it up in nice pieces like this” (WNNN 49). In saying “like this” it is as if the narrator wants the reader to be directly involved in the scene making the effort of visualizing what she describes, rather than having it simply explained from afar.

The overall style of the prose is fluid and engaging mostly thanks to the spontaneous voice of the narrator but also to the deployment of some fictional devices, which are meant to make the narrative as close as possible to reality. Among the narrative techniques employed, the absence of quotation marks stands out, as it makes narration and dialogues more straightforward and flowing. Furthermore, dialogues are characterised by an almost pressing rhythm, due to the fact that the narrator usually mentions only at the beginning the speakers engaged in the discussion. In this way, the reader needs to be attentive, so that dialogues can flow without interruptions just like in reality. Due to the choice of omitting quotation marks when reporting a speech, in some cases, the narrator has to point out whether her own words have actually been said or just thought: “Wow the woman said. I say wow too, wow wow wow, but I do it inside my head” (WNNN 7). This way, the reader feels a sort of frustration for the protagonist, who can’t or doesn’t want to express her thoughts.

Punctuation as well is used strategically to mimic the speech act of characters and the way the child perceives it. Long sentences with many subordinate clauses and without punctuation marks are, for instance, typically used to report speeches of Mother of Bones, whose words are never interrupted even by commas. The old woman seems to talk by herself most of the time, in an almost frenzied words flow, and the same young narrator observes: “When she speaks, her words always come tumbling out, as if she is afraid the if she pauses, something will whisk away” (WNNN 25). Darling herself when explaining something adults told her, reports their words omitting commas, as to imply that she hasn’t really understood what they meant or that she takes it for good but does not really agree with it. The reader, then, has the impression that Darling is repeating the speech out loud in a single breath, so that she can’t question the contents. When, for instance, Darling tells us how, according to Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro, the spirit of her dead

grandfather would be inside her, her mode of speech reflects a rather sceptical attitude towards what she is accounting.

If dialogues are speeded up by the use of stylistic devices, descriptions are sometimes slowed up by the use of polysyndeton, which is the deliberate repetition of the same conjunction into a sentence. In the text the conjunction “and” is often deployed to coordinate sequences of nouns or adjectives in descriptive sentences. This rhetorical figure is deployed, for instance, when Darling describes the things that one can find in the houses of Budapest: “satellite dishes on the roofs and neat graveled yards or trimmed lawns, and the tall fences and the Durawalls and the flowers and the big trees [...]” (WNNN 4). The purpose is that of slowing down the rhythm in order to give prominence to every single element, on which the reader is therefore compelled to focus. Another example is the list of country names that Darling makes when explaining country-game (WNNN 49); adding “and” after each name, she wants us to carefully discern which countries are in the list of “country-countries”, the ones in which it is worth living, and which are not. In some case, the same conjunction is also used to link coordinate sentences, while in other cases, the sentences are only linked by commas, namely connected by asyndeton. In one episode, in which the kids are watching a young woman eating in her yard in Budapest, both the antonymic rhetorical figures are used: “we shout and we shout and we shout; we want to eat the thing she was eating, we want to hear our voices soar, we want our hunger to go away” (WNNN 10). Clearly asyndeton is used in the second part of the discourse and together with the repetition of “we want” it has the purpose of emphasizing the climax of urge and craving produced by the hunger of the children.

One interesting peculiarity is that Darling never tells us her own name, or better she does, but not with the explicit aim of informing the reader, and we actually come to know it accidentally thanks to a narrative expedient.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, the fact that the author deliberately decides not to let her narrator mention the country and the time in which the events take place could be both interpretable as the will of universalizing the story and as a stylistic feature ascribable to the child-narrator voice. Darling indeed leaves many details unsaid and unexplained – for instance, she never tells us that Mother of Bones is namely her grandmother – in the typical attitude of kids taking information for granted

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<sup>12</sup> Bulawayo, NoViolet, *We Need New Names*, “Because he is Bastard and I am Darling”, p. 15

when telling an event. It is important to keep in mind that, texts written in the voice and point of view of a child actually came out of the pen of adults. In *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo made successful use of narrative features such as the one highlighted above, in order to make her child-narrator's voice look credible.



## Chapter II

### The voice of the triply subaltern

In this chapter, I am going to deal with the concept of subalternity and explain how the protagonist and narrator of *We Need New Names* well fits in this category for more than one reason. Hence, it is useful to position the concept in his theoretical framework. The word subaltern indicates some ‘of inferior rank’ and it was first deployed in the military field. Its meaning was then broadened by Antonio Gramsci, who applied it to all those groups in society which are subject to the hegemonic power exerted by the ruling class. The term is now a basic one in postcolonial studies thanks to the work of the Subaltern Studies group of scholars, who promoted inquiry and debate on the theme. The issue gained an even more significant position in postcolonial theory and was further problematized by the contribution of Gayatri Spivak. In her celebrated essay “Can the subaltern speak?”, Spivak focuses the attention on the figure of women since, “within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected”.<sup>13</sup> She gives an answer to the controversial question and goes on maintaining that “if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”.<sup>14</sup> Spivak faces the issue of the subaltern position of women in society in terms of representation, but in stating that the female subaltern cannot speak, she is far from denying the agency of marginalised subaltern women.<sup>15</sup> It is necessary to point this out, if I want to take Spivak’s work as a reference for the portrayal of Darling as a resilient, active character using her own language for agency and self-definition.

The next pages will illustrate the figure of the little black girl, analysing the aspects that insert her in the category of subalternity, conceiving the latter, in Ranajit Guha’s

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<sup>13</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in Williams Patrick and Chrisman Laura, *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*, 1994, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, pp. 82-83

<sup>15</sup> Morton, Stephen, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 66-67. Morton highlights how Spivak’s words are often taken out of context and misinterpreted to assert that women have no political and social agency, due to the fact of not being represented.



words, “as name for general attribute of subordination in [...] society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any of this way”.<sup>16</sup> In particular, three aspects or sub-categories will come into consideration in order to fully understand Darling’s position as triply subaltern in the society: race and class, age and gender. This intersectional approach has the aim to point to how one’s positioning in relation to him-/herself or the others is often the outcome of co-occurrence of factors, with the consequence that it is far more difficult for the subject to disengage from his/her material or psychological condition. A multiplicity of factors is that causing the *Nervous Conditions* of Tsitsi Dangarembga’s characters. Dangarembga’s feminine protagonists will indeed be one useful reference for the analysis of Bulawayo’s Darling.

## 2.1 The voice of the child-narrator

Children and youth feature very often as protagonists in recent African novels and they are likely to be narrators of their own events. While in the preceding chapter the child-narrator’s voice was analysed as a fictional device, hence in stylistic terms, here I will take it into account for its thematical relevance. Bulawayo’s child protagonist, Darling, was inspired by the photograph of a kid sitting on top of rubbles, knocked down by a bulldozer during Operation Murambatsvina. Initially, though, the narrating voice should have been that of Mother of Bones, but after a moment of creative arrest, the writer found in Darling’s voice the right approach in order to face the “dense material”<sup>17</sup> and the delicate themes the novel deals with: “themes too large for adult fiction”.<sup>18</sup> Thus, on the one hand, the choice of adopting a child protagonist/narrator and a child’s point of view responds to an expressive need of depicting a tough and unpleasant reality, without falling into excessive sentimentalism. The children’s register may sound unsophisticated and scurrile, but it is exactly this straightforward language that allows the author to reach an

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<sup>16</sup> Guha Ranajit, quoted in Aschroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, Tiffin, Helen, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, Second Edition*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2000. Guha Ranajit is a member of the Subaltern Studies group.

<sup>17</sup> Sophy Kohler speaks to the Men Booker Prize Shortlistee NoViolet Bulawayo, [online].

<sup>18</sup> Hron, Madelaine, “Ora na-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels”, *Research in African Literatures* 39, 2008, p. 29

objective representation of the everyday life in a shantytown, raising in the reader a striking rather than moving feeling. With her blunt and frank voice, the child-narrator succeeds in creating an empathic bond with the reader and, although the traumatic and painful events she describes are experienced first-hand, she never runs the risk of reducing the narrative to her own predicament. Having access to what is happening through the eyes and mental processes of a kid, we are able to look at the dreadful portrayed reality, without pre-packaged feelings, thus developing a genuine feeling of empathy and emotional connection. Darling and her group of friends, Chipu, Bastard, Shbo and Godknows are far from being well mannered and educated, they are instead gross and vulgar and perpetrating disgraceful actions. Their naivetes nevertheless allows the reader to penetrate under the surface to catch the deep reasons which stained their childish innocence.

The child-narrator's voice also provides a critical commentary on the precarious and degrading situation of some African countries. The children's perspective and their approach to society are non-theoretical, still unsophisticated when trying to move a critique, never meandering but going straight to the point of an issue, free from "the various justifications and explanations that typically govern adult discourse".<sup>19</sup> Rather than giving access to the situation by means of conceptual and broad consideration, "adopting a child focaliser"<sup>20</sup> Bulawayo lets the reader immerse fully into the children's everyday life through simple, concrete elements such as food: the children's major concern, right from the first page, is how to provide for food and placate their hunger. Focusing on primary instincts and needs, the author raises a very straightforward and eloquent social and political critique, pointing out how political disasters and bad governance deeply affect people's life. Facing these themes by means of a child-narrator's voice, the approach to the political debate is more nuanced and successfully suggests an "alternative interpretations of challenges afflicting [Zimbabwe]".<sup>21</sup>

The Africa disclosed in *We Need New Names*, is a site of poverty, abuse, hunger, struggle and death, a difficult place to comprehend for Western readers, who may better

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<sup>19</sup> Wilkinson, Robyn, "Broaching 'themes too large for adult fiction': the child narrator in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", *English Academy Review*, 2016, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Hron, Madelaine, "Ora na-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels", p. 28

<sup>21</sup> Nabutanyi, Edgar Fred, *Representations of Troubled Childhoods in Selected Post-1990 African Fiction in English*, PhD Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2013, p. 2

identify with a child protagonist in order to deal with the controversial and brutal matter of the novel thanks to her ingenuous but perceptive gaze. In this challenging Africa, “young people constitute the majority of the population”<sup>22</sup> and are of course the most vulnerable and affected members of the society.<sup>23</sup> Deploying the child-narrator’s voice to have witnesses of this troubled children's life is, therefore, a privileged way into their experiences and their sufferings, which wouldn't have the same impact if uttered by an adult.

Albeit the account of children may lack the knowledges needed in order to report with precision and exactness the events, of which they clearly don't have a full understanding, the strength of their voices lies exactly in their weaknesses: still free from social pressure and not yet fully socialised, kids are completely sincere in showing either their own or other people's fragilities. The narrator doesn't restrain herself from describing in detailed and vivid manner private moments, such as being constipated and defecating for having eaten too many guava fruits (WNNN 16). Moreover, the kids are not held back by the fear of looking stupid while expressing their opinions or accounting for their own actions and, therefore, are able to break social taboos. Being engaged in Darling and her gang's adventures through her ironic, sarcastic eyes, the reader never looks at the kids as objects of pity; on the contrary they emerge as subjects capable of acting and reacting, in such a way that their behaviour against abuses and injustices becomes agency and results in political and social critique. Furthermore, some behaviours held by the children, such as vomiting or spitting on the streets, that may appear as not complying with the social norms, are tools of resistance and dissent. By making a child the narrator of her own predicament, and not just the object of someone else's discourse, the author releases him/her from his/her subaltern position, by prioritising rather than subordinating his/her voice to that same narration that makes him/her a subaltern.

Bulawayo exposes her characters to death, AIDS, suicide, and violence and make them live daily in a situation of degradation and abjection, forcibly relegated to the margins of society. For this reason, she “had to find a character who could look at horror

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<sup>22</sup> Honwana, Alcinda and De Boeck, Filip, “Introduction: Children & Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity & Place”, in Honwana, A. and De Boeck, F. *Makers and breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*, Oxford, Trenton and Dakar James Currey, Africa World Press and Codesria, 2005, p. 1

<sup>23</sup> Nabutanyi, in *Representations of Troubled Childhoods in Selected Post-1990 African Fiction in English*, describing children as the most disadvantaged members of any community, considers their situation as indicative of the social conditions of any country (p. 3).

and still stay intact, still try to go on with the business of life”.<sup>24</sup> The little girl’s perspective, both as narrator and character, allows the novel not to remain crushed under the weight of its own treated themes, thanks to the unacknowledged strength of the children in dealing with their predicament, which lies in their innocence and ability to continue to laugh and play while telling you about “things falling apart”.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, to conclude the analysis of the child-narrator and the way and reasons it is deployed in *We Need New Names*, the point of view of the little girl seems to be Bulawayo’s default perspective, since she actually never experienced Zimbabwe except as a child herself.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2 The children’s agency and resilience

The children of *We Need New Names* “find themselves in a tragic triangle of victims of, witnesses to, and/or perpetrators of”<sup>27</sup> of brutal phenomenon, and they “often live on the edge of dreadful things – community violence, state oppression, warfare, family disintegration, and extreme poverty”.<sup>28</sup> In the first pages, Darling talks about the games she plays with her friends, Bastard, Godknows, Stina, Sbho and Chipo and in introducing them, we learn at once that “someone made her [Chipo] pregnant” (WNNN 2). The juxtaposition of the two images, games and pregnancy, has an intentional shocking effect, because of the image in itself and the fact that the child-narrator doesn’t seem to feel the same discomfort about the situation and can’t share the readers’ reaction. Sexual abuse and rape are portrayed as something kids have to deal with in their everyday lives, such as game, hence, something to be talked about in a plain way. At the same time, though, the children appear to lack proper knowledges about the matter and completely are unaware of their own ignorance. From their talks, the inadequacy, the clash and the

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<sup>24</sup> Rosen, Judith, Author Profile: Close to home, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Bulawayo is quoting the renowned novel by Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart*.

<sup>26</sup> Rosen, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Nabutanyi, *Representations of Troubled Childhoods in Selected Post-1990 African Fiction in English*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Reynolds, Pamela, “Forming identities: Conception of pain & Children’ Expressions of it in Southern Africa”, in Honwana, A. and De Boeck, F. *Makers and breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*, p. 83.

disproportion between childhood and the adult issue they are dealing with emerge with disturbing and disarming evidence. As it happens in relation to other things of which they ignore the proper name, the kids make use of approximations referring to the pregnancy with the words ‘stomach’ or ‘bulge’ and show lack of correct information, as we can observe in the debate between Darling and Bastard:

When is she going to have the baby anyway? Bastard says. [...] what’s one day, on Thursday? Tomorrow? Next week?  
Can’t you see her stomach is still small? The baby has to grow.  
A baby grows outside of the stomach, not inside. That’s the whole reason they are born. So they grow into adults.  
Well it’s not time yet. That’s why it’s still in a stomach.  
[...] Then who put it inside her?  
[...] Then if a man put it in there, why doesn’t he take it out?  
Because it’s the women who give birth, you dunderhead. That’s why they have breasts to suckle the baby and everything.

(WNNN 2-4)

Moreover, Darling and her friends seem to be unaware of the real consequences and implications of the dreadfully unfitting pregnancy and more interested in the fact that it constitutes an obstacle to their capacity of playing, since “[they] have to stop once, though, for Chipo to sit down because of her stomach” (WNNN 2). This is one example of irony – of which Bulawayo makes large use in order to strike the reader: the pregnancy constitutes altogether the wreck, the end and the negation of her innocence and her whole childhood, of which the game is an only a sort of metaphor.

As a consequence of the trauma of the sexual violence she endured, Chipo has been turned dumb or better has lost her capacity and will to talk, so that she communicates with her friends only by gestures and she never says who raped her until she sees the women assaulted by the Prophet in church. Seeing the Prophet on top of the pretty woman is a sort of epiphany for the little girl, “like maybe she received the Holy Spirit or something” (WNNN 40): she suddenly regains her voice and tells in a single breath how her grandfather pinned her down closing her mouth with his hand. The muteness of Chipo is surely a psychological defence from the trauma but it also represents the widespread fact that “few sanction girls’ speech about sexual abuse”.<sup>29</sup> The girl clearly lacks the knowledge to understand and utters what really happened to her – she is able to explain the event only comparing it with the scene she has just seen using the words “like that” –

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<sup>29</sup> Reynolds, “Forming identities”, 2005, p. 83

but she also lacks someone who listens to her; only her friends seem to have noticed her pregnancy, while adults seem to be blind at it. Being both a woman victim of a rape and a child, Chipo is doubly incapable of reporting and denouncing the violence she suffered, on the one hand, because of the innocence with which she experienced the trauma and on the other hand because of the lack of psychological support and someone to talk to. Clearly, in this case, the girl lacks the means to speak, but she also “cannot speak”, because nobody has the will to listen to her. Referring to what Spivak means when stating that “the subaltern cannot speak” and that women are in an even more disadvantaged position, from this episode it emerges how childhood is another category of subalternity in the African patriarchal communities within which children are ignored, silenced and therefore rendered inferior.

Chipo’s pregnancy is an example of how Bulawayo depicts her characters as subaltern, at the same time highlighting their resilience in front of traumatic events. When the words finally come out of Chipo’s mouth:

She has this look I have never seen before, this look of pain. I want to laugh that her voice is back, but her face confuses me and I can also see she wants me to say something, something maybe important, so I say, Do you want to go and steal guavas?

(WNNN 41)

From Darling’s thoughts, we can get the difficulties of the kids in recognising and naming emotions, as well as in expressing them. The discourse about pain and the response to it is culturally stipulated in such a way that children learn how to articulate it, in which situation and in front of whom to suppress it.<sup>30</sup> Also interwoven with categories of gender, age, and class, kids are often not used to conceptualise and process pain and the consequent trauma. Darling feels confused and doesn't know how to act in front of her friend's pain since no one ever taught her how to deal with either her own or other people’s emotions. Hence, she wants to be helpful, but lacks the proper means, so that her reaction is that of trying to overcome the pain by leading her friend’s attention toward something so important to them like stealing guavas. Innocence, wit, and bonds of friendship are what enable these children to survive and never lose the strength to look forward hoping for a better future. In this case, though, Chipo’s childhood is ruined and her adolescence

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<sup>30</sup> Reynolds, “Forming identities”, 2005, p. 83.

and future hopelessly marked, influenced by this traumatizing event, not only psychologically, but also materially. Indeed, Chipo will be the only one remaining in the country, taking care of her daughter, while all her friends will be chasing a better future elsewhere. What will happen is foreshadowed by Bastarad's attitude: he doesn't like it when Chipo's condition impede their activities and "he even tried to get [them] not to play with her altogether" (WNNN 2).

Bastard, with his cynical, scornful, though still innocent attitude, represents the voice of realism and social critique, retrievable not only from his words but also from his behaviour: he throws fruits at house's walls, urinate all over and spits guava peels, inducing the others to do the same, "to make the place dirty" (WNNN 12), with the aim to show his disdain and his agency in a sort of political statement perpetrated with violent and vandalistic modes.<sup>31</sup> Bastard, like the others, despises the life he is compelled to live in his country and he always refers to it as "*kaka* place". In the novel, he also plays the role of spoiler, a sort of writer's voice warning the other characters about expectation they have for their future. On more than one occasion Bastard revels to be the voice of the truth, trying to knock down Darling's idea of what she calls 'my America' by saying:

Well, go, go to that America and work in nursing homes. That's what your aunt Fostalina is doing as we speak. Right now, she is busy cleaning kaka off some wrinkled old man who can't do anything for himself, you think we've never heard the stories?

(WNNN 15).

Therefore, Darling too should be, at least in part, aware that not everything is perfect in America, but still, she wants to believe it is.

If sometimes Bastard appears to the reader sadly disenchanted and cynical because of what he says, Bulawayo challenges further the western idea of childhood, highlighting how the poverty and lack of livelihood make the children cynical not only in words but in actions as well. After eating many fruits that have made them constipated, the children see something hanging from a tree, that we immediately learn to be a woman who hanged herself. At first, all the kids are terrified by that image, except Bastard who pulls stones

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<sup>31</sup> Honwana, Alcinda and De Boeck, Filip, "Introduction: Children & Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity & Place", in Honwana, A. and De Boeck, F. *Makers and breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*, p. 14 say that Biaya, T. K., "Hair statements in Urban Africa: The Beauty, the Mystic and the Madam" in *The Art of the African Fashion*, ed. Els van der Plas and Marlous Willmsen, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000, "argues that the violent cultures of the street which develop throughout Africa consecrate the young persona s political actors".

at the woman to make sure that she does not move. Again, he seems to have completely lost his childish innocence and realize that “God does not live here” (WNNN 17), in a place where certain things happen, and children are exposed to this sort of horrors. But Bulawayo goes even further and doesn't limit herself to making the children witnesses of brutal actions exposing them to suicide and death, but also perpetrators. While they have already set out to move away from that creepy scene, Bastard stops his friends and comes up with an idea that shocks the reader:

Wait, who wants some real bread? He says [...]

Where is it? I say.

Look, did you notice that women's shoes were almost new? If we can get them then we can sell them and buy a loaf, or maybe even one and a half.

We all turn around and follow Bastard back into the bush, the dizzying smell of Lobels bread all around us now, and then we are rushing then we are running then we are running and laughing and laughing and laughing.

(WNNN 18)

The memorable repetition of the present continuous tense with the display of this almost frenetic and macabre laugh captures the dreadful situation of many African realities in which children are physically and psychologically damaged by poverty and hunger. Hunger makes children forget the horror they have just felt, turning them into almost sadistic subjects whose agency is anomalous<sup>32</sup> and contradictory, driven by opportunist and materialist impulses.

### **2.2.1 Children and game**

In addition to stealing fruit on the streets of Budapest, which is actually a sort of adult task such as providing for food, the main occupation of the children in Paradise is inventing games. Playing is a pivotal cognitive element for these kids, whose lives “even in conditions of great deprivation [...] are not just about pain and suffering; they are also about play”.<sup>33</sup> Their favourite games are Find-Bin-Laden and Country-Game, both of which are centred on contemporary themes such as the spasmodic search for Bin Laden

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<sup>32</sup> Honwana, and De Boeck, “Introduction”, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Honwana, and De Boeck “Introduction”, p. 13



going on in the West at the time. Country-Game consists of drawing two circles on the ground, dividing the outer one by the number of players, each of whom has to pick a country and write down its name. In the inner circle stands the caller, who has to choose which country to call on so that the play can begin; but the caller has to choose someone slower than him/her in running, not any country, so that it is easier to beat him/her, since “it’s like being in a war; in a war you don’t just start to fight somebody stronger than you” (WNNN 50). In making these considerations, children show that they have knowledge of the dynamics that exist outside of the game and their own reality, i.e. the dynamics that regulate international relations:

Everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them. These are the country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you must have to settle for countries like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania and them. They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in – who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?

(WNNN 49)

In a globalised world, the kids are aware of the hierarchic structures that rule power and the relations among countries; hence they also know their own position in that hierarchical scale, or better the position that the country where they live occupies and how this has an impact on their lives. Moreover, they personify countries, assimilating them to entities that can express their main characteristics: so China, which is exerting a material influence on their country building huge structures in very short time by exploiting native labour, in the game takes the shape of a dragon or an angel with supernatural powers; America is instead “the big baboon of the world” (WNNN 49), to describe the prominent role the US plays in the international landscape. The fact that they have to fight to be developed country in the game, indicates on the one hand “their still naïve understanding of issues of (un)belonging that attend to migration”,<sup>34</sup> while on the other hand, it shows a sad awareness of the unfair truth of being born in a ‘failed state’ and the unequal consequences it entails. The children prove themselves partly wise, thanks to their ability to process the knowledge they learn from the world in a realistic

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<sup>34</sup> Ndlovu, Isaac, “Ambivalence of representation: African crises, migration, and citizenship in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *African Identities*, 2016, 142.

way, but at the same time, they use the game in order to exorcise the ugly truth and naively give vent to their dreams, i.e. Darling's obsessive desire to go to America.

The main characteristic of children is that "they never forget to play, they never forget to have fun; they have opinions about what's happening"<sup>35</sup> and playing is an important tool through which they can elaborate knowledge on issues much larger than themselves, such as geopolitical reality. Games such as Find Bin Laden also inform us about the impact of globalisation on those kids' minds, for they are concerned with something that has actually nothing to do with their everyday life but is instead part of collective imagery of Western societies.

Another moment that is worth mentioning regarding games is when the children stay in the area of the cemetery after the funeral and act out Bornfree's killing. The kids have witnessed the funeral without permission, hiding on a tree. and start wondering about what happens after death and Stina tells the others that people who were killed become ghosts and roam the earth to find their peace. Once again, as it happened for Chipó's pregnancy, the kids try "to understand the events in order to make the world meaningful again",<sup>36</sup> after having witnessed dreadful things, and use the tools in their possession to do this. Suddenly Bastard shouts he's Bornfree and incites his companions to kill him. At first, they do not realise it is a game, but then they start playing a role. The staging of the killing is so realistic that the kids lose their own identities in Darling's narration to take that of Bornfree and his murderers: in this way it is like the reader was not witnessing a staging, but the actual moment of the event and he is constantly pulled between imaginary and reality like the children themselves. The re-enactment is indeed extremely bloody and the naiveté of the children is starkly distressing especially for the kids "are proper drunk with verve" (WNNN 140) and enjoy the violence so much to strengthen the contrast between the kids' innocence in playing the scene and the actual violence of adults in perpetrating those atrocities. After the thorough re-enactment, the kids realize they have been filmed by two BBC cameramen who are shocked by macabre play and ask "What kind of game are you just playing? And Bastard puts his shirt on and says, Can't you see it is for real?" (WNNN 144). This answer highlights the blurred boundaries existing in

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<sup>35</sup> We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo, Hachette Book Group, [VIDEO] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhzTaz9zfyU>

<sup>36</sup> Reynolds, "Forming identities", 2005, p. 88.

children's minds, dividing what is real from what is just a game, thus demonstrating and confirming how they deploy play in order to understand the grotesque, harsh and confusing forms of violence surrounding them. The playground is, therefore, a moment of formation in which the children process events and information no one takes the time to explain to them.

### **2.3 Childhood and Adulthood**

The majority of African countries have a kin-based society where social wealth depends not only on the wealth of things but also on the wealth of members of families and the community. Children and young people constitute a central element in this social structure, but it is important to keep in mind how the concept of childhood is indeed a social, cultural and historical construction that can't be framed in a univocal (quite always Western) definition, neither can be simply biologically determined and fixed under the age of eighteen. In Africa, "very few children and young people enjoy the luxury of being taken care of by their parents or the state".<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, they are often valued as a source of wealth and are supposed to contribute to the livelihood of the entire family. Furthermore, they are conceived as resilient, strong and capable of surviving in the face of challenging or even dreadful situations: these are exactly the characteristics that Bulawayo assigns to the children of her novel, which actually makes it a powerful story. In the eyes of western readers, Darling and her friends clearly do not conform to the parameters in which childhood is framed: the image of immature, vulnerable and innocent human beings in constant need of adult protection and incapable of assuming responsibilities doesn't fit the children of *We Need New Names*. The African narrative of childhood and adulthood fractures the classic dichotomy, creating new dynamics that position children in a sort of in-between space, where they become, in Bhabha's terms, hybridized. Children are not yet civilized adults, but at the same time they are not even fully in possession of their own childhood, which is far from being sheltered from the most drastic implications of adulthood: on the contrary, they are "initiated to relations of

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<sup>37</sup> Honwana, and De Boeck, "Introduction", p. 4

power, social discourse, and their embodied practices”.<sup>38</sup> Catching children in this hybrid space also means that their behaviour results in a sort of mimicry<sup>39</sup> of adulthood. The attempt to emulate an adult’s words and actions is a typical childish prerogative, but what the concept of mimicry entails is, more subtly, that component of mockery that in turn reveals itself “menacing” and “disturbing”.<sup>40</sup> Darling and her group of friends debate often about issues not concerning properly childish themes, but rather complex concepts – death for example –, topics of global interest and adult matters, rendering them comic in the developing of their arguments or downplaying their importance. An example is the fact that the frenzied hunt for Osama Bin Laden going on in the West is turned into a game, and that the political propaganda for “real change” flattens out in a chant that you simply enjoy singing. Their discussions almost always have as a starting point excerpts of information seized by the speeches of the adults, who anyway do not bother to give exhaustive explanations, which sometimes have, not comic, but pernicious consequences.

The decision to practice an abortion on their friend Chipo, is taken on the basis of incomplete information, acquired by listening to the speeches of some women, so that they are convinced that “if [they] let her keep the baby, she will just die” (WNNN 78) as happened to the girl named Nosizi. In the same way, it is established that they use a cloth hanger in order to perform the operation since Forgiveness overheard it from her sister and her friends. In addition, when MotherLove arrives and sees what the little girls were going to do, she is so consumed by her own agitation that her only reaction is to cry, a cry of deep hurt and defeat, that makes her unable her to take the further step and fix things in the proper way. Once again children show themselves the acting subjects of the situation, who try to actively change what someone else has made wrong, even if with no proper tools, while adults are held in their powerlessness, incapable of taking responsibilities not only for their actions but for their omissions and their neglect as well.

The children of Paradise can’t help but reproducing the violent and destructive behaviour to which they are constantly exposed: two examples of this practice are the

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<sup>38</sup> Hron, Madelaine, ““Ora Na-Azu Nwa”: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels *Research in African Literatures*, 2008, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, elaborates the concepts of in-between space, hybridity, and mimicry in *The Location of Culture* in relation to the colonial discourse, as descriptive of the dynamics of power intercurrent between colonisers and colonized. Madelaine Hron applies them in order to explain the ambivalent position occupied by children in the African literature, and more generally in their narration.

<sup>40</sup> Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 85-86

aforementioned moments in which Darling and her friends re-enact Bornfree's killing and when they rob the hanged woman who committed suicide of her shoes with the purpose of selling them to buy food. While the first is an evident attempt to mimic a disturbing episode, they have witnessed in order to process it, in the second case the children perform a behaviour they have already internalised. Their morality and consequently the way of acting of these children have been corrupted by conditions of constant struggle in which they find themselves. In these circumstances, they not only lack guidance, but they are even surrounded by unethical models of behaviour represented by the same adult and authoritative figures they (should be able to) rely on. Religious authorities, for instance, both pagans and Catholics, deceive people deliberately exploiting their sufferings. The healer Vodloza promises to "fix all the problemsome things that you may encounter in your life" (WNNN 27) – from curses to AIDS to getting VISAS – in exchange for payment in forex; Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro promises to heal Darling's father from AIDS in return for two goats and five hundred dollars.

The children, though, remain the principal suppliers of morality, in a world of misery where there seems to be no more room among adults for solidarity and a constructive social critique. The most eloquent example of this lack of critical spirit that turns into a loss of ethical and moral values is certainly the blind indifference shown by the faithful of the church in front of the rape of a woman by the Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro and his Evangelists, performed during the function. While the woman cries out to the men to leave her alone, Darling realizes that there is something wrong with what is happening and, even if she does it quietly, she repeats the words that the woman is screaming, as if to oppose an active resistance along with her. The little girl is evidently torn by the situation, as she would like to be of help to the woman, but does not know how to do it openly, so she "tries to catch her eye, to make her see that [she]'s not joining the activities, that [she] is with her" (WNNN 39). It is no wonder that Darling is unable to express her solidarity, considering the behaviour of the adults around her:

When the Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro tells them to, the women get up and stand behind him and the Evangelists like a wall, singing and dancing and waving Bibles in the air. Some of them pray, this is what they must do in order for the Holy Spirit to come properly [...] The prayers grow louder and louder, some praying properly, some praying in strange languages, some chanting.

(WNNN 39)

None of the adults is able to grasp and denounce the social injustice and the moral impropriety of what happens in front of their eyes, indeed they make themselves supporters and perpetrators not only with their silence but with their own actions and words. In describing the behaviour of adults, Darling brings to light how they are by now incapable of freeing themselves from and look beyond social constrictions to act with human sympathy and solidarity. She also exposes the hypocrisy and falsehood of religion and how it plays a decisive role in the lives of the member of the community, who try to appear as good worshippers of the God they are exposed, actually fail in being good human and social beings. Darling goes on to deconstruct the role played by the religious authority and its followers, comparing the poor woman lying on the ground to “Jesus after they clobbered him and nailed him on the cross” (WNNN 40). It follows that if the woman is assimilated to Jesus, then the Prophet and the Evangelists are “hem”, that is to say, his executioners. Appropriating elements of the religious discourse, Darling is capable to undermine its whole authority. In addition to demonstrating an empathy that distinguishes her from the adults, the child seems also able to sense the shame of the woman and wants to preserve her dignity, so that when the pretty woman has lost her prettiness, Darling prefers not to look at her, as she unconsciously comprehends, beyond her physical damages, her state of humiliation and mental damage, represented by the fading away of the beauty the little girl had admired until that moment.

Besides not being obviously a model of morality, the adults of *We Need New Names* are also almost completely lacking basic parental functions. As already emerges from the first pages, the children are not looked after: while the mothers, busy doing hair and talking, barely see them, men don't even look at them, busy as they are playing draughts. The adults of Paradise are described, in full opposition to their children, as passive subjects, too disillusioned and devoid of agency, spending their days idly under jacaranda trees or in their shacks chatting. Parents fail to be supervisors and providers for their own children, who are forced to steal to quench hunger and are left free to perform any kind of reprehensible and sometimes even immoral action. In addition, indeed, the roles are often reversed and are the children to take care of the parents. Coming home one day after playing Find Bin Laden, Darling discovers that her father is back after a long absence. At first, she doesn't even recognize him, but she only sees someone “just length and bones. He is rough skin. He is crocodile-teeth and egg-white eyes, lying there, drowning on the

bed” (WNNN 90). Darling expresses herself with short utterances highlighting her state of shock and disbelief, an emotional state that her mother handles with a slap. The little girl, reluctantly forced to touch him even if she is frightened and disgusted, is also given the task to take care of her father and hence to cope with his “sickness”, of which no one ever explains her anything. Darling has mixed feelings towards her father: she blames him for abandoning her and her mother, and feels a grudge for him, who has come back in this state, forcing her to give up spending time with friends and to lie to them – as her mother doesn’t want her to tell anyone he is back and sick – and she ends up hating him so much that she wants him to die, “*because this is not fair*” (WNNN 96); but she also feels pity looking at the dreadful effects of HIV on his body:

We just peer into the tired light at the long bundle of bones, at the shrunken head, at the wavy hair, most of it fell off, at the face that is all points and edges from bones jutting out, the pinkish-reddish lips, the ugly sores, the skin sticking to the bone as somebody ironed it, the hands and feet like claws.

(WNNN 101)

Her father has lost almost every human connotation in her eyes and is only a burden impeding her to spend time with her friends, the only ones with whom she really feels herself: thus, this condition is not only depriving her of her childhood but of the possibility to express her own self, her identity. It is significant to note that Darling isn’t able to touch her father voluntarily if not in the presence of his friends, in the same way in which she never reveals her emotions and thoughts, but just say them inside her head. When eventually she understands that he is really going to die, she instinctively calls him “my father”, expressing for the first time daughterly feelings, that till then she was compelled to pretend. The shift on the parent-child dynamics needs no explanations, but Darling’s own words: “He is looking like a child, just lying there, unable to do anything, and then I’m wishing I were big and strong so I could scoop him up and rock him in my arms” (WNNN 102). The use of the present continuous form stresses that this is the present state of things and that in fact, a change happened from a time when he was her father and was able to fulfil his role.

Adults are depicted as even more invalidated in playing their parental role during the episode of the NGO people coming to distribute food, clothes, and gifts, replacing them in the task of providing for the material livelihood of the family. Darling tells us how children are left free of acting in ways they would never be allowed to, if NGO people

were not there, which stresses how in the eyes of children, parents have clearly lost any authority, and are degraded in the hierarchical scale, being themselves infantilized in comparison with western providers. Moreover, the adults of Paradise “complain about how NGO people have forgotten them, how they should visit more often, how NGO this and NGO that, like the NGO are their parents” (WNNN 55). Criticizing the attitude of adults who complain that those who are supposed to take care of them are not doing enough, we can catch a paradoxical and bitter irony, that almost completely characterises the parent-children relationship in the novel.

What emerges exploring the relationship between adults and children is the different ways in which the two generations navigate their predicament: while “in face of the crisis, the old people are held captive by religion and superstition”,<sup>41</sup> children with their skeptic, innocent and desecrating approach to life are capable of breaking the social barriers and challenging the authoritative system they live in, trying to change their own unfortunate present condition. Treating childhood as an heterogenous category, someone defines young people as both “makers and breakers” of the society, on the one hand shaping themselves and their own identities and making society “by acting as political force, as source of resistance and resilience”, on the other hand “by breaking social norms, conventions and rules”.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to these characteristics, the children of *We Need New Names* struggle every day with their explosive and sometimes shattering innocence in order to escape the subaltern position they are assigned within the seniority system of the society.

## **2.4 The patriarchal society and the role of women**

In addition to living in a society based on a seniority system, Darling is subject to a strongly patriarchal mentality, of which she has absorbed the dictates, assigning them the value of truth. Talking about Chipó’s pregnancy, the kids wonder about the sex of the baby and Darling asserts that “the first baby is supposed to be a boy” (WNNN 3). Even

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<sup>41</sup> Chitando, “The Girl Child’s Resilience and Agency in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, 2016, p. 123

<sup>42</sup> Honwana, and De Boeck, “Introduction”, p. 3



when Bastard points out how Darling herself is a first-born, but in fact a girl, she replies very confidently that she “said, it’s *supposed*” (WNNN 3), highlighting how her certainties are (mis)led by a system of values and norms that she is incapable of questioning. This also implies a kind of disappointment for Darling herself being born a girl, which will be suggested again and confirmed later in the novel, when her father calls her “my son”, in the delirium provoked by the Sickness. Darling, Stina, Sbho, and Chipo are born in a society that leads them to conceive as normal the fact of being beaten by their male friends. The narrator tells us that after Bastard made her angry, Stina would like to beat him, but that “really she won’t because Bastard is bigger and stronger, plus he is a boy” (WNNN 12). Hence, we understand that in Paradise sexism is something you can’t challenge or change even if you are bigger and stronger than the boy who beats you because it is something to be uprooted from minds and it needs way more sophisticated tools than physical violence.

Women are psychologically so caged in the patriarchal discourse, that they are also incapable of feeling sympathy for a woman who is beaten, raped and humiliated in front of them by the Prophet and his Evangelists in church, thus making themselves equally guilty for this atrocity. What is made clear in this episode is the role played by religion in perpetrating and maintaining patriarchal social models, under the farce of religious devotion. Guilt, or according to the Catholic religion, sin is something that seems to go hand in hand with being a woman: women are made feel guilty even for things they can’t control, as a baby crying.<sup>43</sup> Further evidence of the subaltern position of women is the fact that when the moment of confession comes and sinners have to stand up, they happen to be all women, as if women only had to conform to certain social and moral norms and they needed constant approval or forgiveness, while men are sinless or better, as if they weren’t supposed to account or apologise for their sins. Even more disturbing, indeed, is to learn that it was Chipo’s own grandfather who raped her and made her pregnant; he sat in church but didn’t stand up to confess any sin.

In a society in which the patriarchal system is supported by religion, women are expected to conform to certain codes of behaviour and, when they fail, the minister of the church is in charge of punishing them. The collusion between patriarchy and religious

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<sup>43</sup> Wilkinson, “Broaching ‘themes too large for adult fiction’: the child narrator in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, p. 128

devotion is pushed so far that a woman who doesn't comply with the rules of conduct, for instance not dressing properly, is marked with evil features. During the church service, the Prophet claims that "God told him the devil is coming": "the devil is a woman in purple dress that's riding up her thighs" (WNNN 38). Darling's description of the pretty woman, focusing on details such as her white knickers with red kisses on them, her purple dress or her prosperous breast, let us grasp that she is being punished for not corresponding to the stereotyped and traditional image of what a woman, should look like, act and be. In addition, in contrast to the other women sitting in the congregation, the woman tries to stand up for herself, screaming and struggling to free herself from the grip of the men who want to subjugate and molest her. The untraditional social values the pretty woman represents, are turned into a demon that must be expelled so that the Prophet pretends to practice an exorcism on her. But she doesn't show herself submissive in accepting her fate and that makes her deserve punishment, that must be of example for all the other women, who are standing there complaint, eager to please.

In *We Need New Names*, the deployment of a child-narrator and point of view emphasizes the different attitudes with which adults and children navigate the moment of crisis they are living, giving prominence to the children's resilience and strength. But through the almost lyrical voice of the omniscient narrator, Bulawayo explains how adult men and women as well react differently to their common predicament. Men in the novel have been "disempowered",<sup>44</sup> as they are no longer capable of providing a livelihood for their families. Even in a patriarchal society, masculinity is undermined by the failure of the state that confined them to a shanty town, where they have no other occupation but playing draughts, living an idle life. They "always tried to appear strong" (WNNN 76), but they despaired when nobody could see them and again:

[...] when they returned to presence of their woman and children and everybody else, they stuck hands deep inside torn pockets until they felt their dry thighs, kicked little stones out of the way and erected themselves like walls again, but the women, who knew all the ways of weeping and all there was to know about falling apart, would not be deceived; they gently rose from their hearths, beat dust off their skirts, and planted themselves like rocks in front of their men and children and shacks, and only then did all appear almost tolerable.

(WNNN 76-77)

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<sup>44</sup> Chitando, "The Girl Child's Resilience and Agency in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", 2016, p. 117.

So, while men are trapped in the same patriarchal mechanism, forced to appear solid, like a tree, but a tree that can in any case bend under the weight of a wretched life, women are in fact rocks, able to keep the pieces of these lives together.

Women are the ones trying to keep families together, to be positive and give hope. This inclination of women is made clear when Darling tells how her father left to go to South Africa, chasing a future worthy of his education. The father's concern is thus about personal gratification, while Darling's mother wants to prevent the family's scattering and worries about the family needs. Besides, the mother is also able to look with a more sceptical eye at the reality of those who left to cross the borders and doesn't want to live a life in a place where she will always be a stranger.

## Chapter III

### The children of the failed state

Although Bulawayo never specifies the time and place in which her novel is set, the reader is able to recognize in the episodes told by the young narrator some historical events taking place in Zimbabwe during the first decade of 2000. Not giving a name to the country where Darling lives, is not meant to indicate the irrelevance of the latter, but rather it is conceived as a strategy aimed at universalising Darling's experience. Her story is far from being disengaged from the country she inhabits and at the same time, it is like that of many other little girls who are children of failed states. Due to the impact that the political vicissitudes have in the protagonist's life, it is useful to briefly recollect the main historical events to which the author refers in *We Need New Names*, in order to thoroughly understand the implications they have.

Zimbabwe was one of the last colonies of the British empire to gain independence, which came in 1980 and Darling and her friends belong to the second generation of the so-called "born-frees". At the election held in the same year, the ZANU party led by Robert Mugabe came out victorious. In 1987 Mugabe erased the office of Prime Minister and turned Zimbabwe into a presidential republic; from that moment, he dominated the political scene until the coup of 2017, revealing more and more his authoritarian tendencies.

During the 1990s poverty increased, health conditions deteriorated leading to a massive spread of HIV and the discontent for Mugabe's government grew, triggering repressive reactions against demonstrations of disapproval. In 2000, a referendum aimed at empowering the president's position failed, and meanwhile, the oppositional movements grew stronger, organising themselves into one party, the MDC, Movement for Democratic Change. The success of the opposition in the constitutional referendum gave Mugabe the opportunity to accuse them of being supported by Britain and to deploy the anti-colonial rhetoric in order to reclaim the lands stolen by the colonial dispossession.

This triggered the acceleration of the process of “radical land revolution”<sup>45</sup> started in the late 1990s, during which commercial farmlands owned by white farmers were occupied and taken-over on a massive scale with acts of brutal violence and the families displaced. This operation went on in the following years, under the excuse of land redistribution, using white farmers and black farm workers as the scapegoat to blame for the drastic downward of the economy, avoiding the government to assume any responsibility for their own failures.

Between the 1990s and 2000s, the increase of poverty went along with the spreading of informal economy and illegal housing in urban areas, which the government decided to erase with a massive campaign of urban cleansing. In mid-2005, President Mugabe announced Operation Murambatsvina aimed at ‘Restoring Order’ in the cities (or ‘Drive out the rubbish’ from them):<sup>46</sup> around 700,000 among the poorest people living in the suburbs of Harare saw their homes demolished by bulldozers and were left homeless. Thus, the campaign also implicated a forced displacement of those people, who according to the government were supposed to go back to rural areas. In the following years, the tension between the government and the political opponents became more and more acute, causing an increase of violent repression, most of all after the controversial 2008 election, won again by Mugabe, presumably not without manipulations of the results.

Political corruption, hyperinflation, crumbling public services are the main features of a highly militarized and authoritarian post-independence regime, in which human rights are dreadfully ignored. The situation of many Zimbabwean citizens is thus tremendously precarious, characterized by unstable and insufficient livelihood, galloping spread of AIDS, lack of food, education and job perspective, which forced people to migrate either in neighbouring countries, such as South Africa, or even overseas towards the USA, where they have to constantly negotiate their own identity with the condition of illegal foreigners. This is the image that Bulawayo tries to portray through the

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<sup>45</sup> Hammar: Amanda “In the name of sovereignty: Displacement and state making in post-independence Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 2008, 424.

<sup>46</sup> Deborah, Potts, “‘Restoring Order’? Operation Murambatsvina and the Urban Crisis in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Jun. 2006, 274, explains in the footnotes how both ‘Drive out the rubbish’ and ‘Restore order’ are the possible translation for Murambatsvina from Shona, but the government preferred to use the second.

experience and voice of a 10-year-old girl, the most innocent victim of a state which failed in providing proper life, worthy future and, we could add, dignity for its citizens.

### 3.1 Food

The kids always have food in their mouth, yet not literally. They spend most of their time trying to procure food, they make it a topic of discussion, and even mention it unconsciously in some cases, for instance as a term of comparison in similes. Thus, a group of people walking very close to each other is “crammed together like hot loaves of bread” (WNNN 26), MotherLove’s voice swings “like rape fruit” (WNNN 68), Godknows has an “egg-like head” (WNNN 69).

That of food is a leitmotif that goes through the entire novel and we can get its importance from the very first page, when the narrator states that she would “rather die for guavas” (WNNN 1): food is a matter of life or death indeed, a matter of survival; it is also the first element that gives us a hint about the living conditions of the people of Paradise. Food scarcity catalyses almost completely the children’s attention, making food search their primary daily goal, to such an extent that, pushed by the primordial instinct of hunger, the kids organize to raid the yards of the wealthy houses of Budapest in order to steal guavas. They are aware of the risks they run and the wrongness, yet Darling explains, “it’s the fruit that gives us the courage, otherwise we wouldn’t dare be here” (WNNN 4). Being thieves is not even the worst kind of transgression instigated by hunger, since, as already examined in the preceding chapter, the kid’s morality has already deviated from a social environment that has taught them to listen to their survival instinct even when it tells them to rob a hanged woman of her shoes to gain money for some bread.

In sharp contrast with Paradise, a cluster of shacks defined “a kaka toilet”, Budapest:

[...] is big, big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs on the roofs and neat graveled yards or trimmed lawns, and the tall fences and the Durawalls and the flowers and the big trees heavy with fruit that's waiting for us since nobody around here seems to know what to do with that. [...] I keep expecting the clean streets to spit and tell us to go back where we came from.

(WNNN 4)

Even if young and ingenuous, Darling and the other children are perfectly aware of the lack of material resources which conditions their everyday reality, and this makes them understand the harsh injustice ruling their country, one in which children, in order to fill their empty stomachs, are compelled to steal what people with accessibility to resources don't take advantage of.

During one of their raids in the street of Budapest, the kids are stopped by an English woman and the first thing they notice is that she is eating something. Darling is very attracted by the thing the woman is eating since she can tell from "the way she smacks her lips that whatever she is eating tastes really good" (WNNN 6). Even if she doesn't know what it is, she describes it in an almost scientific manner, trying to analyse every part of the food graphically lingering on the different colours and consistencies that she can detect by only looking at it:

It's flat, and the outer part is crusty. The top is creamish and looks fluffy and soft, and there are coin-like things on it, a deep pink, the colour of the burnt woods. I also see sprinkles of red and green and yellow, and finally, the brown bumps that look like pimples.

(WNNN 6)

The entire scene, with Chipo who "keeps jabbing at the air in the way that she says *What's that?*", and the other children who keep their "eyes on the woman's mouth" (WNNN 6) from the other side of a gate, is almost cruel as if the children were starved animals kept in a cage yearning food they can't reach. When the woman wants to take a picture and tells the children to say cheese, Darling admits that she doesn't exactly remember what the word cheese means, but at a deeper level these words sadly suggest that she actually doesn't know what food and its taste are anymore, that she has almost lost touch with it. This bitterness reaches the climax when the woman throws in the trash what is left of the food and with a simple statement, the narrator expresses all the disbelief and dismay that the reader is prompted to feel together with the children in front of the scene: "We have never seen anyone throw food away" (WNNN 7). The extreme unfairness is dramatically articulated by the words of the little girl who, when seeing the woman chewing and swallowing, says "I swallow with her, my throat tingling" (WNNN 7).

During the encounter with the English woman, one theme appears that will be developed in a wider manner in the second part of the novel set in the USA, which is the sharp dichotomy splitting up the world in two, based on accessibility to and availability

of food. The woman is very thin indeed, and, as Godknows points out, she looks fifteen. Misinterpreting the actual meaning of Godknows's words, she takes these as a compliment and proudly responds "I just came off the Jesus diet" (WNNN 8). The fact that the woman seems pleased by these words highlights the Western blindness and, to some extent indifference, towards the tragic situation of some African country. The image of the woman purposefully skinny, wasting food before hungry children are drenched with a darkly humorous irony. Almost at the end of the novel, Darling finds herself in front of a similar scene, when she learns that her boss's daughter is anorexic from her private, she wonders: "how she lives, how she deals with hunger, those long, terrible claws that dig and dig in your stomach until you can barely see, barely walk upright, barely think, and you would do anything, anything for even just a crumb" (WNNN 266). It is immediately clear that her words are not actually describing the feeling of the white, privileged girl who self-inflicts hunger, but they are instead bringing up her childhood's experiences. Thus, seeing the meagre breakfast of the girl, Darling can't help herself from bursting into a laugh and says: "You have a fridge bloated with food so no matter how much you starve yourself, you'll never know real, true hunger" (WNNN 268). This time, the childish innocence in relation to the issue of the western attitude toward food turns into straightforward and sharp words of disapproval.

Going to America implicated for aunt Fostalina, as well, a change in her relationship with food. In a country where food insecurity doesn't exist, eating is no more related to being hungry, but it is now perceived as something that affects your physical appearance. Fostalina is on a fruit diet indeed, and she does a lot of physical exercises, but while the aunt is obsessed with the loss of weight, Darling conceives her thinness as unhealthy, comparing it with the effects of AIDS on her father's body; the same thing she does when seeing a white woman coming out of her house in Budapest, she remarks that the woman is "thin like maybe the man eats all her food, like she has the Sickness" (WNNN 114). As well as thinness, fatness is presented in the novel as a culture related concept: in Western society, they appear to be mirroring physical stereotypes respectively to chase or to avoid; instead, in the eyes of someone who has known poverty and hunger, some kind of fatness becomes synonymous of wealth and health. Darling, however, looking from an external point of view, is able to stress how both sides of the coin, are led to their extremes in America: on the one hand, thinness has become anorexia, on the other fatness



has become obesity. The latter is issued in the episode of the wedding of Fostalin's ex-boyfriend, where the overweight bride is expedient for Darling's reflection on American fatness, distinguishing it from that "ordinary fatness you could understand because it meant the person ate well, fatness you could even envy (WNNN 171)". The equivalence among food, fatness, and health is well conveyed by the young girl protagonist of *Nervous Conditions*, who looking at the table of her uncle's house says: "No one who ate from such a table could fail to grow fat and healthy" (*Nervous Conditions*, 69).

In the novel, food acts as a basis for comparison in order to trace, between Africa and America, a dichotomy according to which the first "stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and the circular discourse about, facts of "absence", "lack""<sup>47</sup>, while the second means abundance, but even excess. The need to appease her hunger is indeed the primary factor pushing Darling to migrate and she seizes every opportunity to re-assert "I'll be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, eating real food and doing better things than stealing guavas" (WNNN 10). Budapest then represents in small-scale the flight from Paradise in order to chase better opportunities and better alternatives to hunger, that is stealing guavas. When the children go into the house of the white couple assaulted by the gang of black men, they head towards the fridge and empty it, stuffing themselves with every kind of food: "We eat things have never seen before, things whose name we don't even know"; they also try without success to eat with forks and knives "like proper white people" (WNNN 129), which will remain challenging for Darling even in the USA. In America, this excessive availability of food and its immoderate consumption are represented most of all by Darling's cousin TK, a fat boy who gorges himself with fast food. Bulawayo moves a sharp critique to the unreasonable disproportion in the distribution of resources that rules our world and lets her protagonist say, "All the food TK eats in one day, me and Mother and Mother of Bones would eat in maybe two or three days back home" (WNNN 157). Again, the parallelism with Dangarembga's novel arises spontaneously and it's worth mentioning Tambu's reaction to the amount of food at Babamukuru's table, by which she nearly feels overwhelmed

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<sup>47</sup> Achille, Mbembe, "Introduction: Time on the Move", in *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, p. 4

since she is not able to ingest large quantities of food at once, in addition to the fact that she finds it more difficult than she had thought to eat with fork and knife.

In the section of the novel set in America, food is taken into account not only for the quantity but also in its qualitative dimension, we could say. In fact, food becomes synonymous with home and has an almost curative effect: when, for example, Kojo stops eating because of the depression for the departure of his son to Afghanistan, “Aunt Fostalina went online and got recipes from his country because that's the only food she could get him to eat” (WNNN 261), as if the absence of the only person he has a real bond within America, could be fulfilled with something recalling him the tie with his native country, hence food. Such parallelism between food and home is experienced by Darling as well when she receives a surprise package containing guavas. The smell of the fruit hits her and every bite has the capacity to leave the country altogether and find herself back in Paradise.

### **3.2 Education**

Education in *We Need New Names* is another of the themes which has to be examined in terms of lack. The children appear to have some consciousness of the international issue and are able to speak some English, but it seems unlikely to the reader that they go to school. Stina confirms the information by saying that they “don't go to school anymore” (WNNN 13) and later Darling explains that it is “because all the teachers left to teach over in South Africa and Botswana and Namibia and them, where there's better money” (WNNN 30-31). From these words, we understand that something has changed in the kids' life and that the disastrous economic conditions of the country are responsible for this. A picture starts to outline in which it is clear how the living conditions of the people in Paradise are affected by the widespread collapse of service provisions such as education or health, along with the food insecurity.

What immediately comes to the fore is that, not only is their present condition dependent on the fact that they don't receive any education; the present lacking are most of all a burden for the kids' future: while they fantasize about buying a beautiful house in

Budapest, Stina brings them back to reality, warning them with the words her teacher once told her, “you need an education to make money” (WNNN 13). The perspective of a proper education, which can provide the chance of a better life, is indeed one of the reasons that will push Darling to emigrate to the USA; as uncle Kojo reminds her while they are going to the wedding, many young women would die to have the opportunity to go to America to study. In a different occasion, Kojo encourages Prince, Fostalina’s cousin just arrived from Zimbabwe, to look for a college, with the promise: “you are in America now, and you can actually be anything you want to be, look at Obama” (WNNN 158). This naïve assertion full of optimism, clearly driven by Obama’s victory in the presidential election, is belied in the chapter called “How They Lived”, in which the omniscient narrator reveals how many immigrants are actually forced by the circumstances to give away their aspirations once arrived in the new country with a student visa:

And when we got to America, we took our dreams, looked at them tenderly as if they were newly born children, and put them away; we would not be pursuing them. We would never be the thing we wanted to be: doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers. No school for us, even though our visas were school visas. We knew we didn't have to money for school to begin with, but we had applied for school visas because that was the only way out.

Instead of going to school we worker.

(WNNN 241)

One very clear example of this status of illegal workers is depicted by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Americanah* with the character of Obinze, who goes to London where he is forced to hide his true identity in order to do jobs actually beneath his level of education. Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah* and the same Darling are not so unlucky, but yet they have to work in order to be able to attend college.

Zimbabwe is a country that forces its citizens to leave, not only since it does not provide schooling to its children, but also because it forces them to leave given that it does not provide any chance to make a living out of one’s education. In addition to teachers themselves, who have left to go to countries in which their proficiencies are economically well-rewarded, we learn that Darling’s father as well has left his family and his country to chase better opportunities in South Africa. Looking at a photo, Darling describes her father’s outfit and eventually tells that it was shot on the day of his graduation from University. Later in the novel, the girl remembers the conversation her parents had right before her father left, and the reason for the leaving is made clear in a

series of rhetorical questions: “Is this what I went to university for? Is this what we got independence for? Does it make sense that we are living like this? Tell me! Father said” (WNNN 92). The men’s words are full of frustration and bitterness for living in a country that doesn’t give you the opportunity to achieve self-fulfilment unless you choose between personal aspirations and family. Education gives Darling’s father the tools to be even more aware of the unfair condition in which he is stuck and leads him to evaluate and reconsider the concept and meaning of family in a different way than his wife: family ties lose value when there is no chance to fully realize one’s own life, in such a way that the only concrete prospect for the future lays in the choice between staying or leaving. Having a rather high degree of education causes a rift with the other members of the family and shifts the perspective from which to assign value to life. Family and community are no longer the spaces in which an educated individual can develop his/her personality, fulfil his/her ambitions, and implement the desire for better living conditions.

Darling’s mother doesn’t understand her husband’s thoughts about moving across the border towards another country in which they would be always considered foreigners; furthermore, she doesn’t conceive the idea of forsaking the oldest members of the family who are in need of her care. Although daughter of a country that doesn’t treat her at all as a citizen, neither guarantees her the minimum standard of living, she prefers not to lose this status moving to a foreign land. The family and community ties, together with the role the mother plays in the environment of Paradise, are the only things that give value and meaning to her life and, contrary to her husband, are the only elements contributing to constitute her individuality.

The way in which an advanced level of education can lead to revaluation and often to the deterioration of community and family ties is another issue that also allows to trace a parallelism between Bulawayo’s work and *Nervous Conditions*. At the beginning of Damgarembga’s novel, the young Nahmo, who attends school at the mission, shows a proud and haughty attitude, feeling superior to the other members of the family, a thing that will lead him metaphorically and physically to death. The fact of having received a high education brings the co-protagonist Nyasha to feel more and more distant from its own culture of origin, and the more this bond weakens, the more the young girl sinks into a state of neurosis, due to her inability to recognize herself in neither of the two cultural systems, which are part of her education. The attempts to heal this inner rapture unite the

protagonists of the two novels and will be further analysed in the next chapters of this thesis.

Despite its positive value, the author embeds education in a contradictory system, in which, whether you want to receive proper education or employ it in a worthwhile manner, you have to choose between all this and your family, your roots, your home country.

Moreover, the situation of intrinsic contradiction and crisis in which Zimbabwe is drowning is represented by the fact that, while the children of Paradise no longer receive an education, in the area of the city called Shanghai a Chinese construction company exploiting black workers is building a mall. The kids themselves appear conscious of this dramatic inconsistency ruling their country, and are aware of the “immediate needs of their communities”,<sup>48</sup> summoned in the naïve questions of Stina: “What are you building? A school? Flats? A clinic?” (WNNN 46). Children can only insult the Chinese, yelling to go back home. Once again, the children are destined to remain disappointed, since their only chance left is to leave for another country if they want to overcome the degradation of Paradise, which lacks decent dwellings or schools or hospitals.

### **3.3 Political utopia and failure**

*We Need New Names* is filled with a marked political critique that emerges in particular in the chapter “Real Chang”, in which Bulawayo alludes to the presidential election of 2008 ended with a disputable outcome that showed the ongoing corruption of the system in after-independence Zimbabwe. The promoter of the change in the community of Paradise is the young Bornfree, whose name represents indeed the hope of a re-birth for the country after the expectations of democracy and freedom betrayed by the government that held the power since 1980. Bornfree and the friend Messenger are political activists supporting what can be identified with the Movement for Democratic Change, the party formed and headed by Morgan Tsvangirai in 1999 in order to oppose the many years of

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<sup>48</sup> Ngoshi, Hazel, Tafadzwa, “Carnivalizing Postcolonial Zimbabwe: The Vulgar and Grotesque Logic of Postcolonial Protest in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 2013, 64.

Robert Mugabe's tyranny. The young man tries to instil new hope among the adults, convincing them that the change is possible if each one gives his/her contribute with her/his vote. The change does not happen. The young Bornfree is brutally killed a week after the election and in his death resonates the many murders committed across the country against Mugabe's political opponents who denounced electoral manipulations. Bulawayo stages the violent beating of the young man making the children play the role of the ruling party's affiliates accusing political opponents of being "functionaries of a regime-change agenda funded by the west".<sup>49</sup> The reference to the historical events is made even more unequivocal by the killers' words, a clear manifest of ZANU's ideology:

We scream into his face while we clobber him.  
Who are you working for?  
Sellout!  
Who is paying you? America or Britain?  
Why don't you scream for Africa or Britain to help you now?  
Friend of the colonists!  
Selling the country to whites!  
You think you can just vote for whoever you want?  
Vote right now, we want to see, sellout!  
You want Change, today we'll show you Change!  
Here's your democracy, your human rights, eat it, eat eat eat!

(WNNN 141)

The figure of Bornfree represents one of the ways in which young people in Africa manifest their agency through giving voice to their political aspirations. Even if relegated at the margins of the public and political sphere, youths try more often than adults to "shatter the nationalist projects of the post-independence state".<sup>50</sup> In narrating this episode, Bulawayo gives an example of that "other side" of the history "told by woman [and] seen through the eyes of children or young men".<sup>51</sup>

The young man's political activism and his death constitute the moment of political utopia and consequent disillusionment of the whole community of Paradise. In addition to the children's response to the political issues, indeed, the novel also deals with the adults' reactions to the crisis and to the state's abuse of power.

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<sup>49</sup> Ngoshi, H., T., "Carnivalizing Postcolonial Zimbabwe", 2013, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Honwana and De Boeck, "Introduction: Children & Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity & Place", 2005, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Veit-Wild, Flora, "De-silencing the past – Challenging "Patriotic History": New Books on Zimbabwean Literature", *Researches in African Literatures*, 2006, 197.

Adults are often represented as passively subjects to the influence of religious authority, more than that of politics in this case. The reader, even through the eyes of the narrator, is led to negatively assess the uncritical attitude of the religious congregation in the face of the exaggerated performance of the false prophet that ends with the rape of a young woman. Prophet Bitchington Mborro, the authority of the spiritual leader of the Holy Chariot Church of Christ, is not questionable since in Paradise he is the only remaining form of an authoritarian figure to turn to in case of necessity. The inhabitants of the shantytown are no longer citizens, in fact, they have been rejected by the state as scraps and dislocated from the urbanized centres and their facilities. For this reason, when Darling's father comes back from South Africa suffering from AIDS, the family turns the Prophet in order to get him cured. Health services in the country have collapsed, and families like Darling's are even more distant from the public structures that should guarantee certain kinds of primary aid. Within an extremely dysfunctional state, therefore, various forms of religious authority benefit from the despair of people and take advantage of the absence of true state authority, taking its place in obtaining people's trust. Since they can no longer rely on and depend upon the political institutions from which they are profoundly disillusioned, the "rejects of the failed states"<sup>52</sup> need to put their hopes in something that now can only be transcendent: God, whether He is placed in the hybrid church of the so-called Prophet, or in the shack of the pagan healer Vodloza. The preachers promise solutions to every kind of material problem, more than spiritual, acquiring an overall control over the life of Paradise's inhabitants.

The vulnerability of the people before the various ad-hoc made-up religions, must not be read, as a stereotyped image of "lazy blacks not stirring to help themselves",<sup>53</sup> such as claimed by some critiques. Rather, I believe, it is functional to highlight the undeniable responsibilities the political authorities bear for having failed to create a new, free, and democratic state. While the adults are naïve to the fraudulent help of false religious prophets, in the absence of parental care, children are forced, in turn and equally naively, to rely on their own skills and knowledge in order to solve problems, as when trying, for

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<sup>52</sup> Gikandi, Simon, "Between roots and routes: Cosmopolitanism and the claims of locality", in J. Wilson C. Sandru S. L. Welsh, *Rerouting the postcolonial: New directions for the new Millennium*, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Sibanda, Silindiwe, "Ways of Reading Blackness: exploring stereotyped Construction of Blackness in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", 2018, 80.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter I, p. 1.

instance, to practice an abortion with a clothes hanger. The parallelism between the parental negligence of the adults of Paradise and the ineptitude of the state towards its own population appears quite evident.

Some scholars have criticized Bulawayo's portrayal of Paradise's community maintaining that, while showing "the depraved and corrupt nature of power"<sup>54</sup> of both state and church, the writer depicts a society of people dumbed by poverty, whose agency, and worse, whose judgment ability have been weakened and almost erased.

### **3.4 Political power, resistance, and transgression**

As already pointed out, despite their ages, the children are constantly engaged with politics and their daily lives result deeply affected by the dysfunctional government of the country. In their involvement with political issues, both national and international, they show various degrees of understanding, and their attitude appears disenchanted toward political matters and consequently provocative toward authority. While the generation of young "Bornfrees"<sup>55</sup> tries to move the collective consciousness of adults from the torpor of political disillusionment committing to the "Real Change", the generation of Darling seems to be almost immune to political illusion. Furthermore, they seem to undergo a sort of early disillusionment, inevitably developed because of the environment they inhabit. While the excitement lingers in Paradise, the kids "hear about change, about democracy, about elections and what-what" (WNNN 59). The use of the expression "what-what" is symptomatic of Darling's unawareness of the real facts happening in the country, obviously due to her own age but also to the fact that the kids seem to have more important businesses to think about, namely search for food hence, survival which politics is not able to provide. In another passage, the narrator is even more clear about the kids' lack of concern in the matter and where lays their true interest, specifying that: "We continue

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<sup>54</sup> Sibanda, , "Ways of Reading Blackness: Exploring Stereotyped Construction of Blackness in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", *Journal of Literary Studies*, 2018, 83. The author of this article, like other scholars, such as Ndlovu I. (2016), argues that Bulawayo makes extensive use of stereotypes of blackness in order to please a white and western audience. In this thesis work, Sibanda's and other similar positions will be taken into account and discussed.



putting up posters; the thing is, we don't even care about any change, we are doing this only because Bornfree says he has some Chinese yams for us when we finish the job" (WNNN 60). After completing their task, proud of themselves, the children sing and laugh intoning the national anthem and shouting "Change! Change! Change!" (WNNN 62) as they pretend that the NGO's cameras are capturing them. The national anthem put in the mouths of the kids becomes something to laugh at, mirroring the loss of credibility that now pertains the state in its wholeness; in the same way, the change becomes nothing more than a slogan, a goliardic refrain devoid of any real content and incisiveness.

During one of their raids in Budapest, Darling and the others meet a black security guard who commands them to leave. His attitude towards the gang of kids appears immediately excessive, as he addresses them "shouting like [they] are on the Mount Everest" (WNNN 105), while the language itself sounds particularly unfitting for the occasion, almost out of place considering the target of his warnings:

I command you to immediately turn around and retrace your steps. Extricate yourselves from these premises and retreat to whatever hole you crawled out of. Under no circumstances should I ever lay my eyes on you again, you follow? The guard says, pointing us to the road. He speaks with this tone like he owns things, but we know that even the baton stick in his hands is not his, that if he weren't on this street he'd be nothing. (WNNN 105-106)

His figure as well, with trousers barely reaching the ankles, unpolished boots, black woollen hat and matched gloves despite the heat, undermines his credibility in the eyes of the children, who think that "Everything about him looks like a joke" (WNNN105). The questionable look, alongside the ineffective well-spoken English, results in a ridiculous figure mocked by the children, who provocatively ask him: "Why do you talk like that, did you go to university? My cousin Freddy went too and he can speak high-sounding English as well" (WNNN 106). While the kids continue making fun of the guard, the refined language, specifically the refined English, is the only weapon with which he can oppose them. The more the exchange goes on, the more the actual powerlessness of the man before the actually unharmed children comes to light; indeed, the means he has to exert his authority are called into question by the children: "And why didn't they give you a gun, or a guard dog? What if we were armed and dangerous?", "Do you even have handcuffs?" or again, "But how will you take him to jail? Where is your car? Do you have a driver's licence?" (WNNN 106). For Bastard the uniform has no meaning and as soon as the guard addresses them "We don't know you, Bastard says, and

spits” (WNNN 106). The spit is another of the ways in which children express their disregard and irreverence towards power, by resorting to acts that break social norms. The performance of “filthy functions on the streets” outrages the guard, who is scandalized and incredulous to the point that he rhetorically asks:

Is this what they teach you at school? To behave like animals? Move, depart! He says. Ah, we don’t go to school anymore. The teachers left, don’t you even know what is happening? Godknows says. The guard starts saying something but then he just stands there like all his big words are gone. You can tell he doesn’t really know what to do with us. (WNNN 109-110)

Before the sharp answer of the boy, the guard remains so disoriented and speechless that he takes off. The reasons behind the kids’ socially unacceptable behaviour are in fact identified in the lack of education, and it is as if the guard itself, leaving, admits the responsibilities of the political system, for having raised citizens who know no respect for the authority.

In his feigned superiority attitude towards the unruly, irreverent children, the guard embodies the “tendency to excess and disproportion”<sup>56</sup> distinctive of the postcolony and reveals its intrinsic weakness. The character at issue serves, indeed, the purpose of showing the overbearing power abuse both of the political and religious authority, since he wears a Zion Cristian Church badge on his breast. The security guard, as an authority figure arbitrary exerting his power over inoffensive and harmless subjects, is only one of the dowels of the unjust and discriminatory system perpetrated by Mugabe’s government. Here, Bulawayo critically engages with the issue of power and resistance in the postcolony meant again as a Mbembesque “site in which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, indiscipline”.<sup>57</sup> Making fun of the black guard, the kids are symbolically undermining the political authority that he stands for, that is, the government holding the power in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The political and social chain of command built by the ruling black elite is thus deconstructed and made a self-parody by the subject occupying the lower step of the hierarchy.

The episode is meaningfully collocated within the chapter “Blak Power”, deliberately misspelled title that refers to the “words *Blak Power* written in brown excrement on the large bathroom mirror” (WNNN 130), the children come across in the house of a white couple raided by some hooligans. After the encounter with the guard, the kids find some

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<sup>56</sup> Mbembe, *The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony*, 1992, 2

<sup>57</sup> Mbembe, *The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony*, 1992, 2

guava tree in the yard of a villa and climb it to harvest the fruits, when they hear the loud noise of a horde of Third Chimurenga Fighters invading the street brandishing weapons and screaming:

Kill the Boer, the farmer, the khiwa!  
Strike rear in the heart of the white man!  
White man, you have no place here, go back, go home!  
Africa for Africans, Africa for Africans!  
Kill the Boer, the farmer, the khiwa! (WNNN 111)

The gang attacks the house, smashing a window with an axe and pouncing on the door with a machete, till the white residents come out. After threatening and humiliating them and brutally hitting their dog with a kick, the young men take away the white couple and enter the house razing and marauding it. What the Chimurenga Fighters want is clear: “Somebody please tell this white man here that this is not fucking Rhodesia! [...] Know this, you bloody colonist, from now on the black man is done listening, you hear? This is a black-man country and the black man is in charge now!” (WNNN 118). The band of youth is indeed a clear reference to the ZANU supporters terrorizing white farmers and properties' owners in Zimbabwe under Mugabe's nationalist motivations. They claim revenge for the colonial past and demand their country back, blaming upon the “bloody colonists” the degraded conditions of post-independence Zimbabwe.

Again, Bulawayo gives the reader an overview of the political events shattering the country, foregrounding the racial tensions, the widespread inequalities, and condemning the government's violent and abject policies. The critique to this abject and excessive nationalism comes again through the innocent eyes of the children who, after an initial moment of excitement, feel empathy for the couple and shame in front of the act of brutality they are witnessing. Although Darling can see in the woman's eyes the same contempt for the children that the woman feels for her aggressors, the little girl can't help feeling sorry for the treatment she is receiving. Bastard doesn't understand why Shbo is “crying for the white people”, but the girl's answer is a limpid demonstration of the human empathy that only a child is able to feel: “They are people, you asshole!” (WNNN 120). With this showing of genuine compassion, the children distance themselves from that kind of abject *Blak Power* with which the reflection mirror would lead them to identify themselves. The misspelled word, indeed, resonates as a semantic dissonance,

through which the author suggests the inner incoherence of that black supremacy and elite who doesn't take any responsibility for the failure of the postcolonial state.

Although one can maintain an oversimplification of the actual complexity of the historical vicissitudes<sup>58</sup> of post-independence Zimbabwe, I believe Bulawayo's aim is not that of perpetuating stereotypes of blackness, and neither is it the outcome. As the others already said, is useful to specify that Bulawayo's novel does not claim to be a completely faithful account of the historical complexity. Notwithstanding, the episode just taken into account, serves the purpose of underlying how anticolonial extreme nationalism promising a new future after the colonial era, are actually responsible for the "failures of the postcolonial national project".<sup>59</sup> Rather than reproducing a stereotyped vision of the black subject, the author successfully suggests, through the voice and eyes of the children, the need to overcome any kind of racial differentiation, in order to aspire to values of humanity now corrupted by political reasons and hunger for supremacy.

### 3.4.1 The banality of power

Among the various interpretative approaches to *We Need New Names*, some analyse the work in terms of the "carnival writing", applying the concept of Carnival as elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>60</sup> "Vulgar and grotesque expressions and enactments"<sup>61</sup> of the children protagonists can, therefore, be considered as instruments through which to express dissent and undermine to the authority by making a parody of it. Any kind of

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<sup>58</sup> Silindiwe Sibanda maintains that "Bulawayo perpetuates this myopic exploration of a complex historical moment by presenting a simplistic exposition of a far more nuanced situation." Sibanda further asserts that Bulawayo misrepresents the "what might be a valid act of protest against" as an act of vandalism enacted by a mob of stereotyped black youths. "Ways of Reading Blackness: exploring stereotyped Construction of Blackness in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", 2018, 84.

<sup>59</sup> Toivanen, Anna-Leena, "Not at home in the world: Abject mobilities, in Marie NDiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", *Postcolonial Text*, 2015, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin takes as a starting point to elaborate his notion of carnivalesque aesthetic medieval carnivals typical of many European countries, during which the lives of the wealthy classes were staged by the plebeians and parodied. According to Bakhtin, during Carnival performances, everyone becomes an active participant and the separation between actor and spectator weakens, thus leading to a temporary suspension of hierarchical relationships. The constraints and social norms are broken by an aesthetic of the vulgar and the grotesque that therefore undermines the officiality of the wealthy classes that are mocked.

<sup>61</sup> Ngoshi, "Carnivalizing Postcolonial Zimbabwe: The Vulgar and Grotesque Logic of Postcolonial Protest in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", 2013, 54.

authoritative discourse, whether religious or political, is degraded by the vulgar language and performances, which become a tool for counter-hegemonic protest against the authoritative exploitation of power in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The use of this aesthetic of the vulgar of which the children are a display is criticized by some critics, who argue that, rather than undermining the hegemony of the failed state, the carnivalesque performances undermine instead the humanity of the characters themselves and their agency.<sup>62</sup>

Achille Mbembe in *The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony* employs the Bakhtinian notion of carnival and applies it to the issue of power. He sees Bakhtin's formulation as a model capable of explaining the relations of power in postcolonial African states but goes beyond this, shifting the perspective. Mbembe assess that those elements of the carnival aesthetics, namely the grotesque and the vulgar, are located both in the popular manifestations, that can be addressed as counter-cultures or "non-official cultures",<sup>63</sup> and in the manifestations of the dominant culture, expressed by those who hold the supremacy. This is "the banality of power": the excess and abuse that alone trigger what Mbembe calls "zombification", namely the loss of effectiveness of the official discourse, which therefore is not only due to the undermining effect of the carnivalesque practices enacted by the plebeians, but is instead an intrinsic feature of the postcolonial authoritarian state.

In the novel, those characters who are representatives of authority, both political and religious, embody exactly the power typical of the postcolony. The name itself of Prophet Mborro evokes the Shona word for phallus,<sup>64</sup> so as to immediately suggest the vulgarity and indecency of his religious practices; moreover, his overall figure is described as excessive, bestial and completely unfitting to his role:

If Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro's voice were an animal it would be big and fierce and would knock things down. Once, when we still churched under the mopane, he told us how he used to have a small voice and that he rarely used it because he was quiet, timid man, until the night an angel came to him and said, Speak, and he opened his mouth and thunder came out.

Now Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro is busy thundering about Judas and Golgotha and the cross and the two thieves next to Jesus and things, making like he saw it all. When Prophet Revelations

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<sup>62</sup> Sibanda, "Ways of Reading Blackness: exploring stereotyped Construction of Blackness in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Mbembe, *The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony*, 1992, 2

<sup>64</sup> Ngoshi, "Carnivalizing Postcolonial Zimbabwe: The Vulgar and Grotesque Logic of Postcolonial Protest in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", 2013, 56.

Bitchington Mborro is in form he doesn't stand in one place. He paces up and down like there are hot coals under his feet. (WNNN 35)

The moral judgement expressed by Darling and the consequent mockery that emerges as a consequence is provoked by the grotesque nature of the authority itself, a mechanism that is also implemented in relation to the security guard, whose inappropriate approach toward the children triggers their provocative and insolent reaction. More than the display of an aesthetic of the vulgar that undermines the agency of the protagonist kids, we are facing what Mbembe defines a “mutual zombification”, because of which both the dominant and the dominated lose their impact.

According to one critic,<sup>65</sup> the use of a scatological aesthetic of which the characters make wide use pertains to the aesthetic of the vulgar. Even this expedient, as well as vomiting or urinating or spitting along the streets of Budapest, is a means to express disdain towards one's own country, to which in fact children often refer with the designation 'Kaka country'. Albeit children would like to live in Budapest in the future, they are aware that “Budapest is not a Kaka toilet for anybody to just walk in, it's not like Paradise”; Bastard adds, addressing Shbo: “You'll never live here” (WNNN 12). Saying so, the children self-identify as waste, like garbage, internalizing exactly the image of themselves that their own country has stuck on them; in addition to their actions, they soil Budapest with their only presence.

Another aspect that has been carnivalized is the controversial issue concerning China-Zimbabwe economical relationship. The author employs again the protagonist children to denounce the monolithic narrative of history, in this case, perpetrated by the ZAFU party's rhetoric according to which a mutual benefit would have derived from this successful relationship between the two countries.<sup>66</sup> Though, the reader can't help but notice how black workers are in fact exploited and not safeguarded while doing their job, through Darling's description of the worker's outfit: “The Chinese men are all over the place in orange uniform and yellow helmets; [...] And then there are the black men, who are working in regular clothes – torn T-shirts, vests, shorts, trousers cut at the knees,

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<sup>65</sup> Toivanen, “Not at home in the world: Abject mobilities, in Marie NDiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*”, 2015

<sup>66</sup> Musanga, Terrence, “Perspectives of Zimbabwe-China relations in Wallace Chirumiko's 'Made in China' (2012) and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013)”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, (2017), 82-83.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.newsday.co.zw/2018/11/zimbabwe-not-benefitting-anything-from-china-ties/>

overalls, flip-flops, tennis shoes” (WNNN 42). Moreover, while the mall will welcome stores of major European brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton, symbol of capitalism and Western imperialism, children must be satisfied with all kind of items referred as *Zhing Zhong*, or even shoes, that are “cheap *kaka* and lasted [us] only a few days” (WNNN 46). Through the use of the scatological and carnivalesque aesthetic, the children illustrate exactly the feeling of ordinary Zimbabwean people toward China and yell them to “leave our country and go and build wherever they come from, that we don’t need their *kaka* mall, that they are not even our friends” (WNNN 47). Their attitude toward who represents the authority in the building site is therefore provocative and vulgar: “You want us to come at night and defecate all over? Or steal things?” (WNNN 14). Even in this case, the authority itself embodies, through the physical features, the excessive and ambiguous characters of that economic report supported by the Mugabe government, and he is depicted in all his fatness, “like he have swallowed a country”, so that the kids call him ‘Fat Mangena’. His vulgarity is expressed also by the presence of “two black girls in skinny jeans and weaves and heels” (WNNN 45), who represent in sexualized terms the exploitative tendencies of the Zimbabwe-China ties.

The relationship between the two countries is particularly disturbing since the scene in which the Chinese builders are intent in the construction of a mall is experienced by children whose homes were razed to the ground during ‘Operation Murambatsvina’. The issue is further problematized by the fact that the ‘Operation’ has been lobbed by the Chinese government, which called “the destruction of Zimbabwean homes and forced displacement of low-income Zimbabweans from capital cities ‘necessary’”.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the Chinese interferences in the country were not only exploitative from the economic point of view but also harmful from the point of view of human rights, encouraging autocracy and violence rather than a democratic development of the institutions.

The author’s recourse to the aesthetics of the vulgare and grotesque and to the scatological aesthetics are interpreted as a means of social and political protest, but according to the critic, the actual result is that of flattening the effectiveness of the

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/zimbabwe-not-benefitting-anything-from-china-ties/>

children's agency.<sup>68</sup> The claim of this thesis is precisely that, the non-occurrence of the change is in itself a key element of political protest, whose outcome is not undermining the agency of the characters, but rather highlighting how the action of the weakest is not enough to implement change. The novel is very explicit in suggesting how, those who hold the leadership of the country are, indeed, the ones who should assume the responsibilities for the disastrous economic and social situation. The lack of change and the consequent diaspora of many of the children remains their loudest act of political protest against the tyrannical government in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

### **3.5 The notion of real**

The elements analysed in this chapter, such as the lack of education, food, and political change, are connected to each other and are clearly elements that define the degree of dignity of the life of the characters. In several occasions, Darling addresses the latter as factors making a life "real", that is to say, making it dignified and decent. After arriving in America, Darling thinks about how her life might have been back at home "when the country was still a country". The political situation devastated and as a consequence, downgraded the country, making it something no longer worthy of being regarded as such; it has become something unreal and undefined, which is referred to by a name that is no longer appropriate. Looking at her prior life from afar, Darling grasps with disarming clearness how her country would have annihilated her, depriving her of an education, of the possibility to emancipate from the misery she would otherwise be destined to: "When it was still a country we would be at school doing some serious learning so we would grow up and be somebodies" (WNNN 160). Food as well, such as personal care, are such primary needs that their scarcity draws a demarcation line between what is considerable a dignified life quality and what is not. Comparing their lives with

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<sup>68</sup> Ngoshi, "Carnivalizing Postcolonial Zimbabwe: The Vulgar and Grotesque Logic of Postcolonial Protest in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", 2013, 68: "Notwithstanding the protest mode of the novel, this does not translate into change for the children and their society; rather, some of them escape into the Diaspora later on in the novel. While the image of *kaka* or dirt, in general, is a discursive weapon used by the discontented children, it is also a limitation in that it does not allow Bulawayo to transcend protest".



that of the residents of nearby Budapest, we can deduce that children's lives are nothing more than survival existence; they can't afford the luxury of taking care of their appearance since it would be superfluous if compared with the lack of food or education. When stopped by a woman living in a villa, what Darling immediately notice is the fact that, despite her wealthy conditions, the woman has messy hair, that makes the little girl think: "If I lived in Budapest I would wash my whole body every day and comb my hair nicely to show I was a real person living in a real place" (WNNN 8). Dirt or cleanliness and food or hunger as factors determining your social status and your identity is a trope already explored fully in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. The young girl Tambu, arrived at his uncle's house, gives a description of herself stressing the way in which food, or the lack of it, just like dirt, become your body turning you into an ugly being:

When I stepped into Babamukuru's car I was a peasant. You could see that at a glance in my tight, faded frock that immodestly defined my budding breasts, and in my broad-toed feet that had grown thick-skinned through daily contact with the ground in all weathers. You could see it from the way the keratin had reacted by thickening and, having thickened, had hardened and cracked so that the dirt ground its way in but could not be washed out. It was evident from the corrugated black callouses on my knees, the scales on my skin that were due to lack of oil, the short tufts of malnourished hair. This was the person I was leaving behind. At Babamukuru's I expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have bred, could not have survived, on the homestead.

(*Nervous Conditions*, pp. 58-59)

Once in her new life, thanks to taking care of herself, Tambu experiences a new self that she has to get used, since "It was a shock to see that in fact I was pretty, and also difficult to believe, making it necessary for me to scrutinize me for a long time" (*Nervous Conditions*, p. 91). But in the first moment, the girl just arrived from a poor homestead finds that new world nearly transcendent and unreal and her thought is: "The absence of dirt was the proof of the other-worldly nature of my new home" (*Nervous Conditions*, p. 70).

In a similar way, indeed, the skin of the young woman of Budapest is so smooth and perfect that it makes her look like she is not even alive in the kid's eyes. In some cases what determines a dignified life is so far away and different from the life and the reality surrounding the children as to appear not even real. This shift in what the concept of reality connotes reveals again the profound injustice and inconsistency that dominates the postcolony. Budapest is described as a place so different from Paradise, as to recall the real Hungarian city from which it takes its name:

This place is not like Paradise, it's like being in a different country altogether. A nice country where people who are not like us live. But then you don't see anything to show there are real people living here; even the air itself is empty: no delicious food cooking, no odors, no sounds. Just nothing. (WNNN 4)

But what more than anything else makes life in Paradise look real again is the hope for a real political change. While the adults are preparing to vote, something has changed in their attitude: "They sit up straight, chests jutting out, and hold their heads high. They have their shirts on and have combed their hair and just look like real people again" (WNNN 59). Expectations and fervour in the occasion of the political elections give back to adults something worth fighting for and making sense of their own lives again after their country has abandoned them. They finally have a goal to reach that makes them "remember how to smile", that makes women try to be beautiful again, wear earrings, makeup, and their best dresses; little gestures, such as taking care of their physical appearance make them regain their dignity. The change that happens is not only in the people's physical appearance but also in the people's attitude towards each other. The children look at their mothers and "their beauty makes [them] want to love them" (WNNN 59). Equally, parents regain for a moment the light-heartedness to play with their kids' and hug them again. Especially in the moment of hope, therefore, it is clear that the political failure of the country and the bad governance have influenced the lives of the people of Paradise, making it difficult to maintain a dignified life, in place in which there is no real hope of change to fight for.

The lives of the people of Paradise have lost their value in the eyes of those ruling the country, to the point that people themselves have internalized this vision of themselves. This loss of value is epitomized by the currency of the country, which by now is old and useless money, as Darling tries to explain to Mother of Bones, who doesn't understand how it is possible that "this very money that I have in lumps cannot buy even a grain of salt" (WNNN 24). The new value, both metaphorically and materially, is now the America dollar, that people of Paradise have little chance to get, and around which they have to shape their reality if they want to survive. Mother of Bones is in fact driven crazy by this injustice and her apparent madness is actually a protest mode against the unfair destruction not only of their present but also of all the past sacrifices and work through which people had tried to build themselves a dignified life.

One question, hence, rises once one stops thinking about the present and future life expectations of Paradise dwellers: "what imagined future trajectory can there be when

essentials are suddenly lacking and there is no petrol, no water, no electricity, and when parents are unable to take their sick children to hospital?”<sup>69</sup> The only hope for the rejected of a failed state lies in looking for a future elsewhere, hence abandoning their homes and families.

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<sup>69</sup> J. Guyer, ‘Displacement, Conversions and the Struggle for Value’, Keynote Address, Conference on ‘Political Economies of Displacement in Post-2000 Zimbabwe’, Johannesburg, 9-11 June 2008, quoted by Hammar, Amanda, “In the name of sovereignty: Displacement and state making in post-independence Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 2008, 427.

## Chapter VI

### (Mis)Representation in the global era

#### 4.1 Misrepresentation

*We Need New Names* is the story of an unprivileged black girl child navigating the difficult times in a country whose socio-economic situation is drowning and undertaking a diasporic journey to the West. Little Darling, from her subaltern position, is not only the narrator of her own predicament but of that of her country as well: through a naïve, brave and intuitive voice, she accompanies the reader into a world whose image is often manipulated and misrepresented on the eyes of the West. As well as through Darling's first-hand storytelling, the reader has the chance to access the events through the eyes of some Western media representatives. Their presence in the country is depicted while capturing, by means of a camera, some key and tragic moment of Zimbabwean history, such as the demolitions taking place during 'Operations Murambatsvina': "Then later the people with cameras and T-shirt that say BBC and CNN come to shake their heads and look and take our pictures like we are pretty, and one of them says, It's like a tsunami tore through the place, Jesus, it's like a fucking tsunami tore this up" (WNNN 67). Comparing the destruction caused by the bulldozer to a natural calamity, "cameramen inscribe this local tragedy within a narrative of global disasters"<sup>70</sup> over which people have no real power, just as they have not in front of Mugabe's tyrannical government. Western journalists and photographers are also present at Bornfree's funeral and account for this moment as well as Darling and her friends, who are watching what is going on from a hidden position. Among the restless mourners, "The BBC man clicks and clicks away at his camera like he is possessed" (WNNN 16). After the funeral, when the children are staging Bornfree's murder, the BBC photographer tries to capture their performance but, when he asks what game they are playing, Bastard's replies: "Can't you see this is for

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<sup>70</sup> Polo, Belina Mojo, "New names, translational subjectivities: (Dis)location and (Re) naming in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 2015, 120.

real?” (WNNN 144). The kid’s answer shows how Western reporters have nothing but a dim understanding of the local reality they are documenting.

Throughout the novel, pictures appear as the most deployed means to transmit images of distant Africa to the Western audience. Their predominant characteristic, though, is the inability to depict a situation in its entirety: they can only capture a scene partially, in pieces and fragments, often omitting the surrounding. The factual reality is susceptible to interpretation and thus exposed to the risk of being manipulated and misinterpreted according to different discourses. Pictures, indeed, are not only at the service of journalists’ features or news reports but are also exploited by non-profit charities as NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to leverage the consciences of Westerners for the purpose of getting economical support.

After we sit, the man starts taking pictures with his big camera, they just like taking pictures, there NGO people, like maybe we are their real friends and relatives [...] they don’t care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn’t do it; they just take pictures anyway, take and take. We don’t complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts.

(WNNN 52)

In these images, the children are deliberately portrayed in shabby conditions so that they no longer emerge as subjects but as objects of piety, in fact, fully responding to the charitable needs. As soon as the cameraman sees Chipó’s stomach, after the first moment of shock, the pregnancy becomes the predilect subject of his photo shoot and he starts taking pictures “like she has become Paris Hilton” (WNNN 53). Comparing the eleven years old pregnant child photographed by the journalist to an American VIP followed by paparazzi embraces a bitter irony: the child’s image is appropriated by the Western media while she is an unaware and powerless victim. The NGOs or Western media exploiting African children’s images in order to gain consent in the West is a good example of how “subaltern voices are often immediately recuperated, transformed and inserted into different narratives and agendas set by other interest groups”.<sup>71</sup> The children’s initial reluctance for being photographed in those conditions is a signal of the fact that they refuse to pity themselves, even though in the end they acquiesce to this misrepresentation.

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<sup>71</sup> Honwana, Alcinda and De Boeck, Filip, “Introduction: Children & Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity & Place”, in Honwana, A. and De Boeck, F. *Makers and breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*, 2005, p. 2.

The images of African childhood spread by the medias are accepted by the Western audience as not in accordance with the conception of childhood they have, a conception they have internalized because globally imposed by the same media. Since a discourse on childhood and consequently standards to comply have been produced, the African childhood can only appear as not pleasing those standards. Indeed, “nowadays it seems impossible to analyse childhood [...] without considering the pattern of globalized children diffused through the media, NGOs and international institutions”,<sup>72</sup> a pattern into which African childhood doesn’t fit. When talking about childhood, of course, also the figure of parenting is relevant, and parents as well are supposed to meet certain expectation in relation to their role. In order to have the control over African childhood, institutions and international organizations expropriate the parents of their role, leveraging on their material and more trivial needs. In *We Need New Names*, parents and adults in general are portrayed as infantilized by the NGO people and not capable of complying their parental role, in the way the discourse on childhood globally disseminated, would require.<sup>73</sup> Among adults, complaining about how the NGO people are not visiting often enough, only Mother of Bones refuses to queue to be granted trinkets, rather than more useful gifts. Clearly, what Bulawayo wants to stress is the extent to which African people suffering hardships are made dependent on Western economic aid. Hence, if Africa is the helpless country in need to be saved, the West obviously fulfils the role of the saviour. The kind of aid provided does nothing but perpetrating a dynamic in which, instead of empowering African people providing them the tools to go beyond their own predicament, Western institutions reinforce the patterns of dependency. This way of representing Africa and poverty does nothing but leading to a “dangerous paternalism” that “empowers the wrong person”.<sup>74</sup>

What stands behind his dynamic and its perpetration is, of course, the production of a discourse about Africa arbitrarily constructed by the West. The novel draws the attention to how the discourse is spread through the mass media and how the control over the latter ensure the control over the processes of representation and construction either

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<sup>72</sup> André, Géraldine and Hilgers, Mathieu, “Childhood in Africa between Local Powers and Global Hierarchies” In Alanen, L., Brooker, E., Mayall, B. *Childhood with Bourdieu*, 2015 p. 185

<sup>73</sup> Géraldine, A. and Mathieu, H., “Childhood in Africa between Local Powers and Global Hierarchies”, p. 201.

<sup>74</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/poverty-charity-media\\_b\\_5155627](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/poverty-charity-media_b_5155627)

of the self or the Other. Not only by producing a discourse on Africa, but also by controlling the means of communications, West have the power to produce knowledges with which to construct an image of the Other, in contrast to which it can shape its own identity. The interference of the NGO on the life of the locales, therefore, appears as nothing more than the perpetuation of colonial discourse that, building pieces of knowledge on Africa, becomes a tool to exert power over it.

The aid of the NGO people is not at all spontaneous and genuinely empathic, on the contrary, they look detached and impenetrable for the children, they are “hidden behind a wall of black glass” (WNNN 52). The metaphor used by Darling to address the sunglasses worn by the NGO people is telling of how they want to keep the distances from the children, who explain: “We are careful not to touch the NGO people, though, because we can see that even though they are giving us things, they do not want to touch us or for us to touch them” (WNNN 54). Darling recognises the hypocrisy inherent in certain types of Western humanitarianism, whose intervention measures are often superficial and insufficient. The lack of human warmth is filled with material donations, often superfluous or even harmful: “Each one of us gets a toy gun, some sweets, and something to wear; I get a T-shirt with the word Google at the front, plus a red dress that is tight at the armpits” (WNNN 55). In order to receive material goods, they so eagerly long, the children feel compelled to comply the white people’s expectations, either it is letting them take pictures or repress their excitement and instead wait patiently and quietly. In order to further please them, Darling addresses them in English, showing an attitude that Fanon explains saying that: “The Negro subjectivity adopts a white men’s attitude”.<sup>75</sup> However, despite the final condescension, Bastard shows a spirit of initiative and even though they “are not supposed to laugh or smile” (WNNN 53), when the camera gets to him, he acts like a model striking every kind of pose. Furthermore, he is the only one showing awareness of the implications and the outcomes of those circumstances: “When they see me over there, I want them to see me. Not my buttocks, not my dirty clothes, but me” (WNNN 53). Bastard is aware of his condition of abjection but refuses to accept that his identity will be associated, and therefore determined, by poverty and dirt. The cynical boy finds a way to take his own representation back, trying to question the self-image imposed upon him by the Western narrative of African childhood. That of

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<sup>75</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 1967, p. 146

the NGO representatives is not unselfish and disinterested altruism, but a “way of advertising their own kindness and generosity”.<sup>76</sup>

When Darling arrives in America, it is confirmed that the stereotypical image of Africa conveyed by media and charity organizations has been absorbed by the Western audience. During the wedding that she attends with her Aunt and Uncle, Darling has an encounter with a white woman who engages in a conversation about Africa, after guessing the girl’s provenience from the colour of her skin. When the woman talks about her daughter’s engagement in the Peace Corps and how many beautiful pictures of children she took in Africa, the recall to the NGO people is immediate for Darling, as well as for the reader. Moreover, the woman asserts that she has also personally contributed to humanitarian aid in the country, donating “clothes and pens and medicines and crayons and candy for those poor African children” (WNNN 176). Seeing the young girl dressed up attending a wedding in America, the woman clearly overlooks the fact that Darling might have been, and actually was, one of those children she pities so much. With this sentence, the woman’s initial genuine and kind attitude echoes again that of the NGO people; this time Darling is mature enough to unmask this gloating kind of humanitarian commitment, observing sharply in her head: “Then she puts her heart over her heart and closes her eyes briefly like maybe she is listening to the throb of her kindness” (WNNN 176). The white woman’s words are a manifest demonstration of the way in which an “overdetermined a priori image of Africa [penetrated] in the global imaginary”.<sup>77</sup> The only feelings that Africa seems to inspire in the woman are either pity for the painful things she sees on the CNN or enjoyment for the beautiful landscapes and the beautiful language spoken by Darling.

Darling’s identity in the West is often reduced to assimilation with the African continent. Since the first moment, the woman in the bathroom makes the girl representative of the whole Africa, and most of all with Africa’s abjection, reporting a number of wretched episodes going on in different regions of the continent, such as Congo, where “rapes and all those killings” (WNNN 175) are taking place. This stereotypical association with Africa also happens to Darling while working at the

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<sup>76</sup> Ndlovu Isaac, “Ambivalence of representation: African crises, migration and citizenship in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *African Identities*, 2016, 138

<sup>77</sup> Krishnan, Madhu, “Introduction: Interrogating the Postnational in African Literary Writing: Localities and Globalities”, *Research in African Literatures*, 2018, VIII.



supermarket when, since she is panicking at the sight of a cockroach in an empty bottle, her manager, Jim, says: “You’re just acting up, I know you’ve seen all sorts of crazy shit over there” (WNNN 253). In the Western imaginary, hence, Africa is nothing but a receptacle of pain and unintelligible strangeness of all sorts, a site of abjection of which their inhabitants are the carriers.

Even Ifemelu, the protagonist of Adichie’s *Americanah*, finds herself in situations in which the associations with a country that inspires only pity and suffering, are sources of embarrassment and even shame:

Kimberly’s face had softened, her eyes misted over, and for a moment Ifemelu was sorry to have come from Africa, to be the reason that this beautiful woman, with her bleached teeth and bounteous hair, would have to dig deep to feel such pity, such hopelessness. She smiled brightly, hoping to make Kimberly feel better.<sup>78</sup>

In front of charitable Westerns, for once, the Nigerian girl would rather be part of that other slice of the world, “to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy”.<sup>79</sup>

As a teenager, we see Darling being more aware of the extent to which representations of her country affect her own identity; she also begins to show intolerance toward certain misrepresentation and narrative, such as the way in which her boss at the supermarket, Jim, “always speaks as if Africa is just one country, even though [she has] told him that it is a continent with fifty-some countries” (WNNN 253). The same careless attitude is shown by Eliot, Fostalina’s former boss owner of a hotel, for which Darling does housekeeping. He always addresses Darling’s country with the phrase “*Back there*” (emphasis in the original) saying it as if her country is “a place where sun never rises”. Though he “has travelled all over Africa [...] all he can ever tell you about the countries he has visited are the animals and parks he has seen” (WNNN 269). Illustrating Eliot’s attitude, Darling tells how once she has stolen an ivory slab in the shape of Africa from Eliot’s house. The gesture apparently devoid of any actual motivation, seems to be the way with which the girl claims Africa back from someone who doesn’t know it and despises it.

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<sup>78</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Americanah*, 2013, p. 150.

<sup>79</sup> Adichie, *Americanah*, 2013, p. 171.

## 4.2 Globalization in the locality

The interferences of Western media and international organizations in the life of the characters is a primary example of “the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa”.<sup>80</sup> Through this means, indeed, information, discourses, and representations do not only find their way outwards Africa toward the Western audience but the other way around as well, that is “the global world that enters Paradise”.<sup>81</sup> Africa suffers the influence of Western and global power holders both materially and culturally. In *We Need New Names*, negative effects of globalization on the life of the people of Paradise are particularly clear in episodes such as that of the Mother of Bones grieving over her box of old money, that now have no longer value since they have been replaced by the American dollar. US’s economic hegemony has now set itself to the point of compromising the value of the local currency, impacting so heavily on the lives of ordinary people, to exacerbate their disadvantage in the local and global landscape. The district called Shanghai is the place where globalization emerges more clearly as an extremely detrimental process for those countries that do not have the means to curb its effects. The state-nation itself is identified as “primary mediator of globalization”<sup>82</sup> and therefore, as responsible for the resulting failures. Zimbabwean asymmetrical relationship with China, rather than having positive economic outcomes for the people stroked by the economic crisis, has the effect of increasing the marginalization of the country, making it always more dependent from the Asiatic superpower. In Shanghai, the black people work in precarious and dangerous conditions, puppets of the Chinese capitalist building industry, while Chinese workers in their orange uniforms are described as being “all over the place” (WNNN 44), as to suggest a new colonial invasion. In addition to the physical exploitation of workers, the construction of the mall is a site of global inequities represented by the name of the European luxury firms. The Chinese presence in Zimbabwe is a confirmation of Bhabha’s statement that “success and failure of globalization begin at home”.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Mbembe, Achille. “Afropolitanism.” *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, edited by Simon Njami, Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2005, pp. 26–29.

<sup>81</sup> Frassinelli, Pier Paolo, “Living in translation: Borders, language and community in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2015, 716

<sup>82</sup> Crowley, Dustin, “How Did They Come to This: Afropolitanism, Migration and Displacement”, *Research in Africa Literature*, 2018, 126.

<sup>83</sup> Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. XVIII.

Just as they know the names of the greatest fashion brands or sports cars, i.e. Lamborghini Reveton, the children appear to have knowledge of global matters, such as terrorism (WNNN 14) and of the global political asset, in which they are positioned at the margins. But notwithstanding their knowledge, the West remains an imagined topos, a faraway world “placed beyond the reach of most young people within Africa, but creatively re-invented, captured, and domesticated by them”.<sup>84</sup> The children show a mimetic attitude toward global issues, particularly evident in the games they play, such as Find Bin-Laden, where they stage the search for the well-known terrorist going on in the West. The western cultural elements, though, are not only reproduced, but also in a way appropriated by the African kids. Perceiving the symbols of the Christian religion imposed by the white colonizers as strangers to her own culture, Darling, who cannot remember the names of the apostles because they are too difficult, tells how she has painted Jesus’s blue eyes brown like hers “and everybody’s, to make him normal” (WNNN 23). Despite the physical distance, the children appear schooled in many aspects of Western pop culture, as they know famous people as terms of comparison such as Celine Dion, Paris Hilton or Hulk Hogan, whose names they deploy in the conversations as if they belonged to their own everyday cultural background. All these elements witness the “permeability of the local space to global”<sup>85</sup> and the extent to which “western cultural model of childhood and youth, with its music, tastes and fashions, its politics of style, [...] appear as globalized norm”,<sup>86</sup> while Africa is instead characterized by poverty and lack and has nothing of all this to offer to children and youth.

The children seem to have internalized the Western discourse on loss, that haunts the image of Africa “leaving it an empty and receptive shell for external cultural colonization”.<sup>87</sup> The African “nothingness”<sup>88</sup> instead, seems to be totally alien to the West, as far as the children are concerned and when Darling, answering a call while she is in the US, says that she is actually doing nothing at that moment, Godknows comments: “How can she do nothing in America? That doesn’t even make sense!” (WNNN 206). The kids who stayed in the native country, are hungry for America, and can’t wait for

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<sup>84</sup> De Boeck, F. and Honwana, A., Introduction, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>85</sup> Polo, B. M., “New names, translational subjectivities”, p.

<sup>86</sup> De Boeck, F. and Honwana, A., Introduction, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>87</sup> Seremetakis, 1994 quoted by De Boeck, F. and Honwana, A., Introduction, p. 8

<sup>88</sup> Mbembe, “Afropolitanism.”, 2005

being satiated by the Darling's accounts on American lifestyle and gossip about celebrities, almost as if she knew them in person. Paradise's locality itself has now been globalized, but in a way that locks "African youth [...] into discourses of loss and absence, and into displacement and dislocation of local desires",<sup>89</sup> that cannot be satisfied if not in the West.

While Africa is represented as a dystopia,<sup>90</sup> America and the West are represented as the land of gold, and as already told, the mass media play a major role in stressing the disparity in material resources between the two. It has been argued that "migration movement do not arise spontaneously out of poverty",<sup>91</sup> but that it is feed by images that show and let people desire something other than poverty, something becoming real and attainable only beyond a national boundary. The way in which both sides of the world are fixed in representations whose matrix is located in the West surely plays a major role in defining these trajectories of migration. The exposure to the mass media and the internet has created in Africa a quest for the Western lifestyle, which indicates the complicity of a certain representation of the West as a push factor of migration flows. Immigrants, thus, undergo "an exposure to the cosmopolitan global world, via the media, [already] in the local settings",<sup>92</sup> so that their perspective on migration is shaped not only by economic factors but by the Western popular culture entering their everyday life as well. Moreover, if one investigates the way in which the media construct an image of Africa as "the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with [...] the facts of "absence", "lack", and "non-being", of identity and difference, of negativeness – in short, of nothingness",<sup>93</sup> it is possible to draw a connection between the colonial discourse and people's longing to migrate.<sup>94</sup> The colonial discourse, indeed, is in some way carried on, reshaped and actualized by the contemporary media, the new places in which dynamics of cultural hegemony and power-knowledge take place. Indeed, as Stuart Hall explains: "the ways in which black people, black experiences, [are] positioned and subject-ed in the dominant

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<sup>89</sup> De Boeck, F. and Honwana, A., Introduction, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Adeyanju, Charles T. and Oriola, Temitope B., "Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration: a Phenomenological Approach", *Journal of Black Studies*, 2011, 949

<sup>91</sup> Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant America*, p. 18 quoted by Gordon, Aprile, *The New Diaspora - African Immigration to The United States*, *Journal of the Third World Studies*, 1998, 79.

<sup>92</sup> Adeyanju, and Oriola, "Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration", 2011, 951

<sup>93</sup> Mbembe, "Introduction: Time on the move", in *On the Postcolony*, 2001, p. 4

<sup>94</sup> Adeyanju, Charles T. and Oriola, Temitope B., "Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration", 2011, 952

regimes of representation [are] the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation”.<sup>95</sup>

Once the migration is undertaken, the subjects gain even greater awareness of the perception that Westerners have of them, so that they interiorize such perception of themselves. In turn, migrants tend to reproduce and confirm the gap between Africa and the West to the people at home, the way it is represented by the media. Even in this stage, “through instantaneous communications technologies, the local and the global are interconnected”.<sup>96</sup> This easiness in the exchange of information between the two sides of the ocean, though, does not prevent the truthfulness of what accounted from being manipulated. In this way, representation going in both directions, namely images of Africa entering the West and vice versa, are reproduced and perpetrated by individuals. Dealing with globalization, Mbembe’s formulations about time and temporality in Africa appear relevant and inherent. Africa is what he defines as a “postcolony”, a concept that can be examined from different perspectives, included that of time: “As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversal, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an *entanglement*”.<sup>97</sup> Globalization, indeed, is one of the matrices of this entanglement, bringing in different temporalities, that in turn entangle with the other ones existing.

[...] the time of African existence is neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effects, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point that where a single age exists within society. This time is not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts and futures that retain, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Hall, Stuart, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, 1990, p. 394.

<sup>96</sup> Adeyanju, and Oriola, “Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration”

<sup>97</sup> Mbembe, “Introduction: Time on the Move”, 2001, p. 15

<sup>98</sup> Mbembe, “Introduction: Time on the Move”, 2001, p. 16

## Chapter V

### The doubly displaced

In this chapter, the term ‘displacement’ designates a situation in which a person is moved from its place of origin in a forced or voluntary movement, for economic and political reasons and whatever the status of the displaced person is, namely refugee or migrant. The term will be treated on one hand as a voluntary displacement, thus meaning a diasporic movement, and on the other hand as a forced movement of “internally displaced people” (IDP). This last phrase was developed by European NGOs in order to indicate humanitarian intervention towards groups of people dislocated “without reference to the causes of movement and which lack basis in international law”,<sup>99</sup> while, in fact, the term ‘displacement’ itself is only weakly defined in legal terms. Besides, in both cases, the term will be discussed in its engagement with power and politics, with the consequent claim that no diasporic movement can be considered thoroughly voluntary since the **statecraft** of the native country always bears responsibilities about this. In this analysis fitting the multiple interconnected meanings that Mbembe attaches to the displacement will be particularly: the multiple losses that displacement generates, that are losses in terms of rights, dignity, and home; the precariousness that displacement causes, making it hard to envisage a dignified future; and last, the fact that displacement should, at least, cause a reflection on the theme of human rights and the way these are neglected and, even worse, violated by those powerful subjects who should ensure their implementation and respect.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Hammar, McGregor and Landau, “Introduction. Displacing Zimbabwe: Crisis and Construction in Southern Africa”, *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, 2010, 267.

<sup>100</sup> Mbembe, ‘Borders, Walls and the Right to Move’, Keynote Address, Conference on ‘Political Economies of Displacement in Post-2000 Zimbabwe’, Johannesburg, 9-11 June 2008, quoted by Hammar, McGregor and Landau, “Introduction. Displacing Zimbabwe: Crisis and Construction in Southern Africa”, 2010, 267.

## 5.1 Forced displacement

The forced displacement in *We Need New Names* is to be located at a time prior to the time when the narration takes place. The reader understands that Paradise is not the place where Darling and her family have always lived, but it is not immediately explained what brought them there. The account comes when Darling tells us she does want to sleep because she fears dreaming of what “is not a dream-dream because it is also truth that happened”, that is when “the bulldozers appear boiling” (WNNN 65). Bulawayo, thus, chooses not to mention “Operation Murambatsvina”, but to address it through the image of the huge and frightful bulldozers that haunt the dreams of the little girl:

Then Mother shouts, Darling come into the house now! but then the bulldozers are already near, big and yellow and terrible and metal teeth and spinning dust. The man driving the bulldozers are laughing. I hear the adults saying Why why why, what have we done, what have we done, what have we done? Then the lorries come carrying the police with those guns and baton sticks and we run and hide inside the houses, but it's no use hiding because the bulldozers start bulldozing and bulldozing and we are screaming and screaming.

(WNNN 65)

The narrative modalities highlight the traumatic impact that this event had on the child, who, through the repetition of the words, creates a vivid and emotionally charged image.

“Operation Murambatsvina” was a massive action of state-induced displacement and dispossession, designed to stop illegal activities, informal urban employment and economy and illegal housing in high-density townships. Lacking a proper land allotment policy, many people had “illegally” built anywhere in urban areas: one example is the backyard shacks in the cities of Bulawayo or Harare. Often, the inhabitants themselves of these shacks were forced to destroy their homes, but material perpetrators of the demolitions were, however, for the most part, the governmental armed forces or young militants trained by the ZANU (PF). The program, therefore, envisaged the evacuation of those strata of the population that lowered the urban living standards, prompting them to return to rural areas, without however activating appropriate forms of alternative accommodation. “An estimated 700,000 urban residents were deprived of their homes and livelihoods, and up to 2.4 million people overall were said to be affected by the operation”.<sup>101</sup> The negative consequences of the operation were countless and, in addition

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<sup>101</sup> Tibaijuka, Anna, Kajumulo, “Report of the fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe to assess the scope and impact of Operation Murambatsvina by the United Nations special envoy on human settlement issues in Zimbabwe”, New York: United Nations, 2005, 8.

to that occurred during demolition operations, that killed many children as well, the deaths were caused by the exacerbated problem of HIV, the scarcity of food and medicine, and hence by the poverty rates that increased exponentially.

Abuse of power is already subsumed in the manipulated language deployed in the **statecraft**, considering that ““Operation Murambatsvina” (“operation” already being one of the euphemisms used in the context of such actions) was quickly renamed “operation gerikai – restore order” by government rhetoric”.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, what was the official translation of the operation diffused by the government, which is “Operation Clean-Up”, actually means “Clean out the Filth”, as argues the Zimbabwean civic movement, Sokwanele.<sup>103</sup>

Therefore, displacement is, in this case, not only forced, but even stated-induced, and hence, politically engaged. The reasons for this “cleaning up” should be searched for not only in the light of the government rhetoric of the requalification of urban areas but also in the finer political implications. In the cities, in fact, the discontent with the regime grew along with the supporters of the opposition, so that the “Operation” was also a kind of punishment for political dissent. More generally, it can be argued that the “Operation” has responded to a need to reaffirm the legitimacy of a state that was to respond to the penetrating economic and political crisis of the country, and which has chosen to do so in a violent and punitive manner. The poorest and the weakest were the most affected by the violence of the regime, which matches perfectly with a concept of sovereignty that needs to make its validity visible and does it arbitrarily, deploying its authority through violence. The regime points at the weakest members of the population as the enemy, as the ‘Others’ to criminalize and blame for the situation of acute crisis in which the country was drowning. Therefore, the moral and political programme implied in the “Operation” actually served as a justification the “act of violent displacement by state[s] of [its] own citizens”.<sup>104</sup> In order to protect his right to rule, the regime has arrogated the right to create borders of inclusion and exclusion, cutting out from entitlement of citizenship and national belonging those who were not considered useful to the regime agenda or worthy

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<sup>102</sup> Veit-Wild, “De-silencing the past – Challenging “Patriotic History””: *New Books on Zimbabwean Literature*, 2006, 196.

<sup>103</sup> Polo, Belina Moji, “New names, translational subjectivities: (Dis)location and (Re) naming in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 2015

<sup>104</sup> Hammar, Amanda, “In the name of sovereignty: Displacement and state making in the post-independence Zimbabwe, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 2008, 418.



of being treated as citizens. In broader terms, “sovereignty is characterised in this paradigm as ‘power over life and death’”,<sup>105</sup> a policy that translates into one of “necropolitic”. Mbembe, indeed, says about sovereignty that:

the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitutes the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.<sup>106</sup>

This subtle boundary between life and death on which the inhabitants of Paradise live is metaphorically represented also by the proximity of the shanty town with the cemetery, called Heavenway, to indicate precisely the state of constant struggle for survival and the situation of uncertainty, which traps their lives in a sort of limbo.

But even before the power to have control over the life and death of individuals, those who hold sovereignty have the power to decide who has the right to be treated decently, whose life has a value that must be respected, and who can be dehumanized. The characters are an example not only of the loss of citizenship, which thus entails the exclusion from the protection of the law and the other benefits but also of the loss of human relevance in the eyes of the state; they have been rejected both as citizens and human beings. Bulawayo depicts us characters who find it difficult to emancipate themselves from such an abject representation of their existence, and thus makes the impact of politics again extremely visible informing and influencing the identities of individuals. Neither the adults nor the children are able to escape from recognizing themselves in such imposed identities: the first ones find it difficult to move away from the confinement in which they were exiled; while the seconds, in spite of the yearning of a different and better future, cannot help but reproducing those behaviours which dissociate them completely from the politically acceptable society.

After the reader has learned the story of the destruction of the previous houses by bulldozers, the next chapter illustrates the moment in which the scattered people appeared in Paradise. “How They Appeared” is the first of three chapters in which the voice is no longer the little Darling’s, but that of a mature omniscient narrator, who describes the scene in its dimension of collective trauma:

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<sup>105</sup> Hammar, A., “In the name of sovereignty”, 2008, 420.

<sup>106</sup> Mbembe, Achille, “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture*, 2003, 11.

They did not come to Paradise. Coming would have meant that they were choosers, that they first looked at the Sun, sat down with crossed legs, picked their teeth, and pondered the decision. That they had the time to gaze at their reflections in long mirrors, perhaps pat their hair, tighten their belts, check the watches on their wrists before looking at the red road and finally announcing: Now we are ready for this. They did not come, no. They just appeared.

(WNNN 73)

The lack of choice that rules the lives of these people from now on is a key element of the chapter, such as the lack of material resources with which to start over properly, so that they build their new homes and lives out of waste materials, that seems sadly appropriate to the subjects, treated as waste by their country. The narrator specifies: “They appeared one by one, two by two, three by three. They appeared single file, like ants. In swarms, like flies. In angry waves, like a wretched sea” (WNNN 73). Bulawayo depicts the mass emigration with an ascending climax of similes that culminates in an entire sea of people pouring out in waves; the image is made even stronger and more vivid by the personification of the waves defined ‘angry’ and the ‘wretched sea’.

In this forced displacement people suffered multiple losses: obviously the loss of home, but also of smaller things, such as a stool, which is not a simple piece of furniture, but actually bearer of the whole history of a family. Hence, the material lack becomes pervasive and leaves them with nothing but “of course memory, their own, those passed down by their mother and mother’s of mothers. A nation’s memory” (WNNN 75-76). The more profound loss is, though, that of kinship manifesting in the emigration across the national borders of members of the family or more tragically in the death. The first kind of rapture of kinship is exemplified by the leaving of Darling’s father and in a second moment of Darling herself, which is then amplified in the chapter “How They Left” describing the scattering of the children of the wretched country. Death, instead, can occur as a direct consequence of the demolition as we learn when Darling remembers the little Freedom, who has been crushed under the ruins of his own house. But it can also be an indirect consequence of the abandonment by the state letting people die of AIDS; in fact, it is as if they were already dead in the eye of the state. The loss is also a metaphorical loss, that of word, which means the loss of voice, a voice to express themselves as individuals and subjects capable of acting: “There were some who appeared speechless, without words, and for a long while they walked around in silence, like they returning dead” (WNNN 75). But when people regained their voices, the moral and political issue emerges:

They shouldn't have done this to us, no. They shouldn't have. Salilwelilizwe leli, we fought to liberate this country.

Wasn't it like this before independence? Do you remember how the whites drove us from our land and put us in those wretched reserves? I was there, you were there, wasn't it just like this?

No, those were evil white people who came to steal our land and make us paupers in our country.

What, but aren't you a pauper now? Aren't these black people evil for bulldozing your home and leaving you with nothing?

You are all wrong. Better a white thief do that to you than you that your own black brothers. Better a wretched white thief. (WNNN 75)

The parallelism made by the characters between the colonial dispossessions and those practiced by the post-independence government, suggests a subtle critique of Mugabe's anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Bulawayo invites, in this way, to consider the contradictions of a political discourse claiming "legitimate historical complaints against colonial dispossession"<sup>107</sup> and simultaneously perpetrating the same kind of wretched exile and violence toward its own citizens. This is nothing but a confirmation of the fact that "Operation Murambatsvina" was only a brutal way of legitimating and validate precarious sovereignty, hidden under the empty rhetoric of urban cleanliness.

What emerges from the analysis of the state-induced displacement is that people hit by the regime's selective violence are in such a situation of crisis, grief, and uncertainty, that they have not only been physically dislocated from their homes and lives, but also "existentially dislodged from ideas about the future"<sup>108</sup> in their very home country. It is exactly this kind of estrangement from the country from which they were exiled with the consequent impossibility of thinking about a worthwhile future there, that induce the characters towards a new displacement, this time considered voluntary.

## **5.2 Voluntary displacement**

The second half of the novel narrating Darling's experience of voluntary displacement in the US is only briefly anticipated by an almost lyrical interlude capturing the mass scattering of "the children of the land", in which Bulawayo, in a sort of dirge, repeatedly asks the reader to look "How they left":

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<sup>107</sup> Hammar, A., "In the name of sovereignty", 2008, 424.

<sup>108</sup> Guyer, J., "Displacement. Conversations on the Struggle for Value", Keynote Address, Conference on 'Political Economies of Displacement in Post-2000 Zimbabwe', Johannesburg, 9-11 June 2008, quoted by Hammar, A., "In the name of sovereignty", 2008, 268.

Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with strength are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with hopes are crossing borders. Those with loss are crossing borders. Those in pain are crossing borders. moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing – to all over, to countries near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce. They are leaving in droves.

(WNNN 145)

In this image, Bulawayo encompasses different kinds of voluntary migratory movements, united by a common denominator that is the excruciating urgency to “flee their own wretched land” (WNNN 146) “when things fall apart” (WNNN 145). With this preamble, the author is also assimilating Darling’s departure to that of her own father to South Africa, that she had so harshly criticised. The father, as well as the children’s teachers who left, are examples of educated individuals joining the brain drain from Zimbabwe. The factors contributing to their leaving are multiple and can be identified in particular with “poor remuneration and wage; lack of job satisfaction; lack of further education and career development; poor working conditions”.<sup>109</sup> In general, people with a certain degree of education or professional skills suffer the inevitably widening gap between their own aspirations and the living standards and employment’s possibilities that the country is actually able to provide them, so that “the decision to migrate often reflects the failure of development at home”.<sup>110</sup>

Africans have always been on the move, even migrating from rural to urban settings or to neighbouring countries in a labour migration, as we just saw, but a “growing numbers of Africans are entering the stream of international migration away from the continent, not just from the country of their birth”.<sup>111</sup> Darling’s journey to America can be analysed within what is called “new” or “contemporary” African diaspora, in order to distinguish it from what is considered the “historic diaspora”, that is the one occurred as a result of the slave trade which brought millions of black Africans in the United States. Hence, the term “contemporary diaspora” is used to “refer to diasporas formed since the late nineteenth century” among which we can “distinguish three different waves: the

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<sup>109</sup> Oberoi, Sumit S. and Lin, Vivian, “Brain drain of doctors from southern Africa: brain gain for Australia”, *Australian Health Review*, 2006, 29, quoted in Kaba, Amadu Jacky, “Africa’s Migration Brain Drain: Factors contributing to the mass migration of Africa’s Elite to the West”, in Okpewho I., Nzegwu N., *The new African Diaspora*, 2009, p. 117.

<sup>110</sup> Gordon A., “The New Diaspora – African Immigration to the United States,” *Journal of Third World Studies*, 1998, 80.

<sup>111</sup> Gordon A., “The New Diaspora – African Immigration to the United States,” 1998, 79.

diaspora of colonization, decolonization, and the era of structural adjustment”,<sup>112</sup> which respectively coincide with the colonial conquests, the struggles for independence and the decade of structural adjustment programs, imposed on Africa by international institutions. It is useful to apply within the denomination “new diaspora” the further distinction between “diasporized Africans”, hence people born in Africa who became long-term residents of the United States – such as Fostalina, Kojo and later the same Darling – and their offspring. Kojo’s son TK, indeed, is considered the African diasporas<sup>113</sup> more fully socialized and integrated into the country of their birth. The latter have more in common with the experiences of historic diaspora, and their own engagement with Africa as a motherland is very different from that of “diasporized Africans”.

In order to explain the causes of migration, many theories have been developed, which deploy different combinations of push and pull factors. The so-called push factors, that are the reasons that in fact push people to leave one place, are largely corollaries of the failure of economic development, such as lack of services, lack of safety, poverty and high crime; in turn, economic deficiencies are closely linked to political turmoil and failures. Pull factors, instead, are the reasons that attract migrants in a particular area, as for instance, higher employment, more wealth, better services, political stability.<sup>114</sup> Migration is then a strategy for survival, that “provides an escape from poverty, hunger, and “wretched conditions” at home”.<sup>115</sup> Although abandoning one’s home country is anything but an easy choice, indeed the last resort, the subjects find themselves calculating “rewards” and “costs” of leaving, and often “the costs of migration are low compared to the likely gains”.<sup>116</sup>

For the young Darling living in conditions of nearly total material deprivation in her native country, America wins by far the competition rewards-costs; the naïve little girl doesn’t even consider the possibility of having to pay in exchange for the material prosperity and wellbeing she believes she will get in America. After having yearned it so much, Darling finally moves to Detroit, Michigan to Aunt Fostalina’s house, where she

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<sup>112</sup> Zelaza, Paul Tiyambe, “Diaspora Dialogues: Engagements between Africa and its Diasporas”, in Okpewho I., Nzegwu N., *The new African Diaspora*, 2009, p. 36.

<sup>113</sup> Zelaza, P. T., “Diaspora Dialogues”, 2009, p. 41 operates this distinction with the aim of analysing relationships between different groups of diasporas and in turn, their relationship with the Africa itself.

<sup>114</sup> Ahmed, Arshiya Iftekhar, “Migration: in search of Utopia”, *International Journal of Research*, 2014, 937

<sup>115</sup> Gordon A., “The New Diaspora – African Immigration to the United States,” 1998, 97.

<sup>116</sup> Gordon A., “The New Diaspora – African Immigration to the United States,” 1998, 80.

lives with her husband Kojo, himself migrated from Ghana, and his son TK. Bulawayo chooses not to narrate the voyage overseas, thus making the reader in some way a participant of the traumatic experience of the girl, who is suddenly catapulted into a completely new and different reality. The reader learns about the setting shift through Darling's description of the place, which is actually a sort of inverse description of the one she made of Paradise in the first place, made in terms of what is lacking rather than of what is there:

If you come here and stand where I am standing and look outside the window, you will not see any men seated under a blooming jacaranda playing draughts. Bastard and Stina and Godknows and Chipso and Shbo will not be calling me off to Budapest. You will not even hear a vendor singing her wares, and you will not see anyone playing country-game or chasing after flying ants. Some things happen only in my country, and this is not my country; I don't know whose it is.

(WNNN 147)

Since her arrival, Darling perceives that that is not Her America and that she will not feel any sense of belonging to that place which, as TK told her: "This is America, yo, you won't see none of that African up in this motherfucker" (WNNN 147). Even before she really gets in touch with the daily reality of the new country and establish social relations, Darling finds herself displaced by the landscape difference, but above all by the impact with the Detroit's climate characterized by cold and snow, a "coldness that makes like it wants to kill you, like it's telling you, with its snow, that you should go back to where you came from" (WNNN 148).

In the first place Darling has to relocate herself in an unfamiliar environment, which threatens her bodily self, compelling her to deal with alien weather, but also making her call into question her physical appearance and the most personal expressions of her 'self', once she fully enters the social sphere:

When I first arrived at Washington I just wanted to die. The other kids teased me about my name, my accent, my hair, the way I talked or said things, the way I dressed, the way I laughed. When you are being teased about something, at first you try to fix it so the teasing can stop but then those crazy kids teased me about everything, even things I couldn't change and I just kept going and going so that in the end I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes in my language, in my head, everything.

(WNNN 165)

Everything is foreign to Darling, even the behaviours of whom should share her roots but instead have now assimilated many cultural elements of the hosting country. She doesn't understand, for instance, why her Aunt just walks and walks, wiping her arms and counting in front of the TV or why she is so concerned with her fitness. Shaping her body

is the way in which Fostalina tries to have control over the elements that will make her look more American and less African. Kojo as well, despite very critical of Fostalina's non-African thinness or the fact that she never cooks a real dinner for her husband and children as a true African woman, spends much of his time watching American sports on Television, while his son plays videogames and eats huge quantities of fast food. The family structure, as well as their lifestyle, is American in that is small and each member is quite independent and leads his/her everyday life isolated from the others. In this daily routine that Darling spends with persons whose identities are now blended and no more simply American, African, Ghanaian or Zimbabwean, the only moment in which she feels comfortable is when other immigrants from her country come to visit. Their common roots connect them in a sort of pseudo-family, and even though they are not related by blood Darling calls them aunt and uncle, and being conscious of this mechanism, she explains: "I think the reason why they are my relatives now is they are from my country too – it's like the country has become a real family since we are in America, which is not our country" (WNNN 161). The idea of home, now that it is far away, tends to coincide with the country of origin, and given the impossibility of having her family close, the immigrant can't do anything but becoming attached to those who share the same origins. In so doing, migrants tend to create communities based on the belonging to a certain ethnicity, affirming their identity in contraposition with the Other, who is represented by the white native westerns.

This concept of family not built on blood ties is further broadened in the chapter "How They Lived", in which ties among people transcend even the national borders, and are based instead on shared immigrant conditions.

And when at work they asked for our papers, we scurried like startled hens and flocked to unwanted jobs, where we met the others, many others. Others with names like myths, names like puzzles, names we had never heard before: Virgilio, Balamugunthan, Faheem, Abdulrahman, Aziz, Baako, Dae-Hyun, Ousmane, Kimatsu. When it was hard to say the many strange names, we called them by their countries.

[...]

The others spoke languages we didn't know, worshipped different gods, ate what we would not dare touch. But like us, they had left their homelands behind. They flipped open their wallets to show us faded photographs of mothers whose faces bore the same creases of worry as our very own mothers, siblings bleak-eyed with dreams unfulfilled like those of our own, fathers forlorn and defeated like ours. We had never seen their countries but we knew about everything in those pictures; we were not altogether strangers.

(WNNN 243)

The choral voice of the interposed chapters, at this point, is no longer just that of those who “appeared” in Paradise and then “left” it, but encompasses the experience of whoever suffers displacement from his/her home and ties to belong in a foreign country: the author “uses the first-person plural voice to be inclusive of all migrants”.<sup>117</sup> To unite people, therefore, are no longer language neither religion, but the fact of having left a homeland in which they are not sure that they will ever be able to return and thus the fact of being part of a diaspora. In the host country, then, arises a “migrant community situated outside the boundaries of citizenship and constituted on the basis of difference”.<sup>118</sup>

An example of the interaction between migrants coming from different countries are marriages, such as that between Fostalina and Kojo. Their relationship actually highlights the extent to which these differences of provenience influence the individual as well as the couple; it is also telling of the complexity and multitude of factors contributing to creating the feeling of being at home. Sharing his home with people coming from the same continent, indeed, is not enough for Kojo to feel in a homely environment. On the contrary, most of the time when Fostalina’s friends from Zimbabwe come to visit, he feels out of place and leaves, or he “sits there looking lost, like he just illegally entered a strange country in his own house” (WNNN 161), since he can’t understand their language. On the other hand, when surrounded by his mates from Ghana, such as during Fostalina’s ex-boyfriend’s wedding, he eats, talks and laughs changing completely “like someone cut him open to reveal this other person” (WNNN 179). Feeling at home for a few moments, emerges a part of his identity, which fails to emerge in the normal circumstances of everyday life of an immigrant in a country that does not belong to him.

Not even with his son, Kojo can feel a bond that goes beyond that of blood, because the two are part of different generations of diaspora and do not share the same feelings about their identities and their origins. TK is an American adolescent who doesn’t feel any connection with his African origins, as evidenced by the fact that he doesn’t even speak his father’s mother tongue. He is one of the children born in the diaspora, who never visited their parent’s country, “didn’t beg [his parents] for stories of the country [they] left behind” (WNNN 249). The diaspora children are not interested in their

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<sup>117</sup> Rosen, “Close to home”, 2014, 36.

<sup>118</sup> Frassinelli, Pier Paolo, “Living in Translation: Borders, Language and Community in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2015, 720.



traditions and sometimes feel the impulse to take some distance from what is happening in Africa which they learn through computers and Google. Parents who have left their kin, “have no home anymore” once their old parents are gone, and think their bond with their homeland is gone with them, to the extent that they “convinced [themselves] that [they] now belonged only with [their] children” (WNNN 248). Kojo, in fact, considers his son as his only real family tie and, when TK decides to enlist for the army and go to Afghanistan, he falls into alcoholism and depression from which he finds no way to recover, if not driving around, trying in this way to compensate for the impossibility of returning home to Ghana, for he has still no papers. The children of diasporized African, however, are not completely theirs, since living in America, parents are not even free to give them what they consider the proper education they received themselves. Instead, they have to comply with the western standards about child raising, and they feared to be arrested for bringing up their children as their parents brought them up, “since Americans call whupping child abuse” (WNNN 277).

Diversity of parameters concerning children education, in fact, is only one of the elements that composes the cultural gap, that Darling can learn to fill only through her own, sometimes harsh, experience. During the wedding, the girl is hit by the little bride’s son with a ball on the eye and her sudden reaction is to slap the kid, as if she has forgotten where she is, namely at a wedding in America. Only from the guests’ silences and their fiery looks she can tell that she has “done something that is not done, something taboo”, that she will never do again “no matter how bad [the kid] is” (WNNN 182). In this comparison between different standards about child rearing, Bulawayo sizes the occasion to highlight the inner contradictions of the western society. For this purpose, is particularly functional the chapter “The Film Contains some Disturbing Image”, in which Darling and her friends Marina and Kristal are captured while spending, as usual, their spare time after school unguarded in the basement watching pornographic films. The girls, thus, are left completely free to navigate the cyberspace without any restriction, until they come across a video containing caution warnings that they just ignore so that they end up being shocked by the violent and disturbing images they see. Not only in Paradise, therefore, but even in America, children are often neglected, especially when parents work all day, and run the risk to be exposed to perils and inappropriate violence. Another episode in which the author openly moves a critique toward the incoherencies of

western society is when the three teenagers take Marina's mother's car, either without permission or driving licence, to go to the mall, since the woman works at the Hospital and therefore sleeps during the day. In the same chapter, Darling also briefly hints at the fact that a boy brought a gun at school; the matter is not further discussed, as if suggesting the ordinary nature of the event. Similarly, in another occasion, the girl tells how a schoolmate, bullied by the same guys who used to bully the same Darling, were found "hanging near the lockers, at school, the word *freak!* scrawled in a red marker on the locker behind him" (WNNN 166).

Even in America, therefore, things are far from being perfect, and Darling as well has to face this ugly truth. However, when speaking with her family and friends back home, the girl always omits the less appealing particulars of life in Detroit:

I didn't tell them how in the summer nights there sometimes was the bang-bang-bang of gunshots in the neighbourhood and I had to stay indoors, afraid to go out, and how one time a woman a few houses from ours drowned her children in a bathtub, all four of them, how there were people who lived in the streets, holding up signs to beg for money. I left out these things, and a lot more, because they embarrassed me, because they made America not feel like My America, the one that I had always dreamed of back in Paradise"

(WNNN 188)

Darling is not completely honest about how America is like and tries to keep, in front of her peers in Paradise, the illusionary image they have made up for themselves through media and the internet, of a place where you are plenty of food, clothes to wear and you can meet famous people. Darling is an example of how "African migrants represent themselves to their peers and social groups in ways that make migration desirable".<sup>119</sup> While complying with their demands to know all the interesting particular of her new life, from the beginning the girl is "careful to leave out some things as well": "That the house [they] lived in wasn't even like the ones [they]'d seen on TV [...], how it wasn't made of bricks but planks, a house made of planks in America, and how when it rained those planks got mold and smelled" (WNNN 187). In addition to omissions, Darling begins to develop "strategies of *disconnection* [...] in relation to the social world [she has] left

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<sup>119</sup> Adeyanju, Charles T. and Oriola, Temitope B., "Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration: a Phenomenological Approach", *Journal of Black Studies*, 2018, 945.

behind”.<sup>120</sup> As time goes on, she writes less and fewer at home, until she stops altogether and loses contact with her friends.

The distance relationship between those who have left the country and those who have stayed is then entrusted to new means of communication such as phones or Skype, which often become a burden for the migrant, who receives only calls bringing bad news or demands for money. Thanks to the new technologies, space seems to contract, and distances seem to reduce, although what is conveyed is a constructed and manipulated image of the reality. The kin in the native country receives the description of a situation from which some pieces of information are omitted, such as the economic and physical sacrifices that those who find themselves in the country of apparent wealth are obliged to do in order to fulfil the “duty” of helping the families back at home. Demands for money sometimes are dreaded “so much that [one] doesn't even want to answer the phone anymore” (WNNN 203); demands for money are sometimes too much for the migrant, who yet can't hesitate, as the kin at home would answer: “You are in America where everybody has money, we see it on TV, please don't deny us” (WNNN245). Fostalina has two jobs, so that she can finish paying for the house for Mother and Mother of Bones in Budapest, a house that Darling describes as a beautiful, adding: “The house is even nicer than this one we live in here in America, which I find strange because when I was at home I heard that everything in America was better” (WNNN 189). “The obligation to help those back home is felt [...] acutely by migrants”,<sup>121</sup> who end up not being sincere about their arduous and sometimes dangerous working conditions, “concealing their hardship in the West from their peers and social groups in ancestral or home societies [...] in order to “save face””.<sup>122</sup> The migrants are not fully themselves anymore, but wear instead a mask in order to play the role that won't disappoint the expectations of modernity and wellbeing of the ones at home; they live a sort of double life: the real one concealed in the backstage and the made up one in the front stage, where they “rehearse and stage performances for members of their community”.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Worby, Eric, “Address Unknown: The Temporality of Displacement and Ethics of Disconnection among Zimbabwean Migrants in Johannesburg”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2018, 420.

<sup>121</sup> Worby, “Address Unknown”, 2018, 431.

<sup>122</sup> Adeyanju and Oriola, “Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration”, 2018, 944.

<sup>123</sup> Adeyanju and Oriola, “Colonialism and Contemporary African Migration: a Phenomenological Approach”, 2018, 954.

### 5.3 Home

The term ‘diaspora’ derives from Greek and means “to scatter through”. As reported by Avtar Brah, according to the Webster Dictionary, diaspora refers to a ‘dispersion from’: “Hence the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs”.<sup>124</sup> That of ‘home’ is an emotionally charged concept, that gets more complicated when you have been forcibly dislocated from the place you called home, or you have voluntarily left your home country in a diasporic journey toward a better future and, possibly, a new home. Darling herself is aware of this complexity and recognizes that “When somebody talks about home, you have to listen carefully so you know exactly which one the person is referring to” (WNNN 191). In trying to give a solidity to the concept, now that she is apart from her country of origin, Darling summarises her own experience of home and the one passed on by her family:

There are two homes in my head: home before Paradise, and home in Paradise; home one and home two. Home one was best. A real House. Father and Mother having good jobs. Plenty of food to eat. Clothes to wear. Radios blaring every Saturday and everybody dancing because there was nothing to do but party and be happy. And home two – Paradise, with its tin tin tin.

There are three homes in Mother’s and Aunt’s Fostalina’s heads: home before independence, before I was born, when black people and white people were fighting over the country. Home after independence, when black people won the country. and then the home of thing falling apart, which made Aunt Fostalina leave and come here. Home one, home two and home three. There are four homes inside Mother of Bones’s4bn head: home before the white people came to steal the country, and a king ruled; home when the first white people stole the country and then there was war; home when black people got our stolen country back after independence; and then the home of now. Home one, home two, home three, home four.

(WNNN 191-192)

Through the digression about memories of home, Bulawayo traces a map of Zimbabwe’s history, focusing in the meantime on the repercussions that the history of the country has on the stories of common people.

Meaningfully, Darling doesn’t include in the list her present dwelling in Detroit with Aunt Fostalina and this is telling about the elements that contribute to defining the concept of home. Despite the situation of hardship, the inhabitants of the shanty town consider Paradise a home. The semantic dissonance created by the name ‘Paradise’, which assimilates such a place of poverty to a heaven, has the double effect of asserting the

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<sup>124</sup> Brah, Avtar, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 181.

place as home and, at the same time, that of claiming the need and hope for a better life. Bulawayo wants the readers to identify themselves in persons who have been made homeless by their own state and for whom now, even a place far from being perfect is anyway a safe haven. The children live near to the wealthy Budapest constantly having under their eyes the possibilities of a confrontation, that leads them to consider Paradise a “*kaka toilet*”. From the first page, the escape from Paradise to Budapest in search of guava fruits represents and anticipates the movement from Zimbabwe to America in search of a worthy future; Budapest, indeed, is all that Paradise is not and “it’s like being in a different country altogether” (WNNN 4). Paradise, therefore, with all its faults, metaphorically represents the whole country in crisis: just as the children have to walk away from the shantytown to placate their hunger elsewhere, in the same way for the masses hope lies only in crossing the borders of their native country, such as the same Darling will do in the second part of the novel. In this sense, therefore, the concept of voluntary mobility should be re-thought and considered as such only if in opposition to the forced and state-induced dislocation. By emphasizing, in the first section of the novel, the drowning situation of economic, social and political crisis of the country and the predicament of those who have been affected by the brutality of the state, Bulawayo wants to make clear as, in fact, the choice to leave one’s own native country is not dictated by a cosmopolitan vocation, but rather by the urgent condition of need.

That of home is also a “two-folded idea – the personal and the national”.<sup>125</sup> The home conceived as the domestic dwelling obviously encompasses physical and emotional elements combined together: it means kinship, family, friends but also a house and a safe space; home is the network of people of social relations and the bond with a physical, geographical space. In a broader sense, home also identifies with the home country, and then it manifests in traditions, culture, history and belonging to it. The two meanings of home are often deployed interchangeably in *We Need New Names*, but the second idea reveals the more dominant, that more determining of what home comes to mean when you are elsewhere, incapable of going back. But in a country in full economic collapse, in which citizens are not even human beings anymore, but just a tool to manipulate in order to manifest the state’s own validity, “home can also disappoint, constrict, endanger,

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<sup>125</sup> Roy, Vilasini, “New Homes and New Names: The African Migrant Novel in the Digital Age”, Master’s Thesis, Stockholm University, 2016, 28.

and indeed, kill”.<sup>126</sup> For Zimbabweans, then, home becomes an ambiguous term, both when they stay and once they have left. For many of them, their native country emerges as a suffocating and “challenging physical and emotional space, from which the youth, especially, feel a dire need to escape. It is barren land with equally barren prospects”.<sup>127</sup> Educated people, in particular, develop a sense of disaffection toward their home/homeland that has to do, not only with the material conditions of poverty and lack but also with unfulfilled personal ambitions. Darling’s father, as already noticed, feels such an alienation that his wife is not able to understand and that makes him incapable of putting family ties in the first place. To the internally split subject, belonging to a family or a place is not enough anymore in order to stay, since at home he feels annihilated and repressed.

For those who are not even in this case “chooser”, to “flee their own wretched land” (WNNN 145-146) is the seemingly better solution, but once “their hunger may be pacified in foreign lands” (WNNN 146), they will have to deal with being hungry for their country (WNNN 153). Leaving the home country in search of better living conditions reveals often a search for utopia, namely for a place that actually doesn’t exist. One of Bulawayo’s aim is indeed to unhinge the illusionary idea of a promised land to find oversee that will guarantee to the migrant easy upward mobility. In the first half of the novel Darling builds for herself an illusionary image of “My America”, that will be deconstructed along the section actually set in the USA. The use of the possessive pronoun “My” indicates, on the one hand, a sort of unconscious awareness of the imaginary idea of America that she made up for herself, on the other hand, the fact that she claims America as her future home, while still living in Zimbabwe. The constant invocation of “My America” is one of the ways in which Darling, dreaming a better place, repudiates Zimbabwe as her home: “The journey to Utopia begins with the negation of one’s country as preparation or justification to leave their country”.<sup>128</sup>

Besides, the children, conscious of the unprivileged position their country occupies in the international asset as we learn when they play “Country-Game”, make use of vulgar language, such as the epithet *kaka*, to refer to it while they never lose the occasion to

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<sup>126</sup> Ndlovu, Thabisani, “Where is my home? Rethinking person, family, ethnicity and home under increased transnational migration by Zimbabweans”, *African Identities*, 2010, 119.

<sup>127</sup> Ndlovu, T. “Where is my home”, 2010, 119.

<sup>128</sup> Mavezere, Gift, “The search for utopia in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, 2014, 20

express the desire of leaving. The home country is marked by the abject essence of the postcolonial failure, and “this abjection imprints the national subjects, who are metonymical parts of the nation”.<sup>129</sup> The migrant is haunted and accompanied by the failures of the postcolonial nation-state in his/her mobility and therefore initially tries to cut it off so that it won’t affect his/her identity in the new country. Illustrative of this will to dissociate one’s own subjectivity with the abjection of the home country, is the way in which at the airport, Aunt Fostalina throws away the bone that Darling received by Vodlaza as a “weapon to fight evil with in America”, addressing to it with the expression “What is this crap?” (WNNN 150). Similarly, also the textual strategy of the sharply dividing the two sessions of the novel could be interpreted as a gesture to cut out the past and as well as the wretched homeland.

America is for Darling the land of abundance, where she will be “eating real food and doing better things than stealing” (WNNN 10). Her longing is aimed at material wealth she is certain she will be able to own in America: “When I go live with Aunt Fostalina in America I’ll send you the doll. There are lots of nice things over there” (WNNN 84). In the first section of the novel, the children see in Budapest an Italian car that symbolizes the American opulence:

When I go live with Aunt Fostalina, that’s the kind of car I’ll drive, see how it’s even small like it was made for me? I say. I just know, because of this feeling in my bones, that the car is waiting for me in America, so I yell, My Lamborghini, Lamborghini, Lamborghini, Reventon!

(WNNN 111)

Though, once in America, the Lamborghini turns into an emblem of disappointment for Darling’s betrayed expectations: “I don’t want to say with my own mouth that if the car costs that much then it means I’ll never own it, and if I can’t own it, does that mean I’m poor, and if so, what is America for, then?”; when she turns to look at the car again, “it’s gone, just like a dream” (WNNN 225). The whole idea of America as the land of prosperity and possibilities, where dreams come true and you can be whomever you want, begins to fade.

The false hopes about migration are already revealed and foreshadowed in the first section of the novel, when Darling’s father comes back from South Africa where he contracted AIDS; another warning about the danger of unfulfilled perspectives is the

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<sup>129</sup> Toivanen, Anna-Leena, “Not at Home in the World: Abject Mobilities in Marie NDiaye’s *Trois femmes puissantes* and NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *Postcolonial Text*, 2015, 3.

experience of her cousin Makhosi, who went to Madante to “dig for diamonds, when [...] everybody was flocking there”, but when he came back “his hand were like decaying logs” (WNNN 23). Therefore, traveling along the stages of utopia and idealization of the host country as “My America”, Darling discovers that in the end “this place doesn’t look like my America, doesn’t even look real” (WNNN 148). As soon as she set foot in “DestroyedMichigan”, the girl recalls in her mind her friends and images from her daily life in Paradise and she realizes that “this here is not my country” (WNNN 147): the fact that she will fail to find a home in America is suggested since her arrival.

Back in her country, hunger was one of the factors that made her repudiate it and that pushed her to migrate; now, instead, “There is food to eat here, all types and types of food. There are times, though, that no matter how much food I eat, I find the food does nothing for me, like I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix this” (WNNN 153). Even though her physical need for food has been placated, the availability of food, as well as the material wealth, seems not to be the solution to all her problems as she had thought. Instead, other kinds of needs come to the surface, like that of relocating in a foreign land and that of dealing with feelings for the country she left behind her back with the promise of a better livelihood oversee. As daughter aware of the dysfunctions and crisis of the state, which is not able to guarantee her a decent present, much less a future, the little Darling yearns to call home a place that can offer a better life, and in doing so, takes for granted how complex it is feeling at home. The importance of family ties, of attachment to one’s roots and traditions, passes in the background, compared to the lack of resources and future prospects. Although she abhors her country when she can still tread on its ground, smell it and taste it, “once [she has left] the place of origin and birth, the reader witnesses the intensification of the subject’s feelings of dislocation”.<sup>130</sup>

In addition to the feeling of disappointment due to the betrayal of her expectations about America, Darling has to face nostalgia for the family and friends she left behind, coming up in unexpected moments: “There are always moments like this, where it almost looks like the familiar things from back home will just come out of nowhere, like ghosts” (WNNN164). Toward the end of the novel, Darling’s longing of home is intensified by the awareness of the physical impossibility to go back, to the point that every hint at

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<sup>130</sup> Ndlovu, I., “Ambivalence of representation: African crisis, migration, and citizenship in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, 2016, 134.



home, such as the drawings on a traditional cloth, brings up positive memories: “Looking at the cloth I’m remembering how beautiful it felt to be in a scene like that, everybody just there together, mingling together, living together, before things fell apart” (WNNN 283). Since abroad the pressure of living in conditions of deprivation has been relieved, “the positive associations of home tend to be stressed over the negative”.<sup>131</sup> Darling’s previous naïve understanding of the issue of origins and belonging undergoes a process of re-evaluation for which, while the conceptualization she had made of “My America” is being devaluated, her idea of home in Zimbabwe, such as her memories, are manipulated by nostalgia and distance: “home [...] is imagined as being un-homely but home whose hostility is mitigated by the unexpected dislocating feelings”.<sup>132</sup> The fact that the physical distance gives Darling a different perspective about Paradise is already foreshadowed in the first section of the novel when the girl looks at the shanty town from a hilltop and describes it saying:

Paradise is all tin and stretches out in the sun like a wet sheepskin nailed on the ground to dry; the shacks are the muddy colour of dirty puddles after the rain. The shacks themselves are terrible but from up here, they seem much better, almost beautiful even, it’s like I’m looking at a painting”.

(WNNN 34).

From afar, the negative elements of the landscape melt into something almost beautiful and idyllic, like a work of art. Right after, Darling lifts her eyes up to the sky and sees a plain that let her dream about going to America. From America, then, Darling would like to trace back that route, yet she finds it to be impossible: “In America, roads are like the devil’s hands, like God’s love, reaching all over, just the sad thing is, they won’t really take me home” (WNNN 191).

In her present condition of migrant in a developed country not fulfilling her expectations, the girl’s consciousness is torn apart between what she should have gained, but she did not and what she has left behind and potentially lost. Just arrived in the inhospitable and unfamiliar “DestroyedMichigan”, Darling’s mind immediately goes back to familiar moments spent with her friends; but soon the fear of what will the future be for her, her home and her loved ones now that she has left insinuate through the Stina’s words:

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<sup>131</sup> Ndlovu, T., “Where is my home?”, 2010, 119.

<sup>132</sup> Ndlovu, I., “Ambivalence of representation”, 2016, 145.

[...] leaving your country is like dying, and when you come back you are like a lost ghost returning to earth, roaming around with a missing gaze in your eyes. I don't want to be that when I go back to my country but then I don't really know because will Paradise be there when I return? Will Mother of Bones be there when I return? Will Bastard and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and Chipo and all my friends be there when I return? Will guava trees be there when I return? Will Paradise, will everything, be the same when I return?

(WNNN 160)

In these words, the problem of the postcolonial subject becomes to delineate a subject who experiences the uncertainty of his new identity torn apart between past and present, since “in that displacement, the borders between home and the world become confused”.<sup>133</sup> In wondering about the future of everything and everyone she knows back at home, Darling subconsciously grasps that when she will go back, home will appear different at her eyes because *she* won't be the same person anymore. Once the subject has entered in contact with the world, he/she is not able anymore to self-identify completely with the homeland, to the point that it will be hard for he/she to recognize home the way he/she has left it. In the chapter “How They Left”, the omniscient narrator poses the issue of the identity of diasporic subjects, universalizing Darling's experience:

Leaving their mothers and fathers and children behind, leaving their umbilical cords underneath the soil, leaving the bones of their ancestors in the earth, leaving everything that makes them who and what they are, leaving because it is no longer possible to stay. They will never be the same again because you just cannot be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same.

(WNNN 146)

The second part of the novel is a clear claim of the fact that “there is no identity that does not in some way lead to questions about origins and attachment to them”.<sup>134</sup>

The above passage, like others, elucidate for the reader the connection existing between rituals and belonging to the homeland and their impact on the identity of those who leave and can't go back. For those who will die without a reunification to their earth, there won't be any peace in the death, as there wasn't in life:

When we die, our children will not know how to wail, how to mourn us the right way. They will not go mad with grief, they will not pin black cloth on their arms, they will not spill beer and tobacco on the earth, they will not sing until their voices are hoarse. They will not put our plates and cups on our graves; they will not send us away with mphafa trees. We will leave for the land of the dead naked, without the things we need to enter the castle of the ancestors. Because we will not be proper, the spirit will not come running to meet us, and we will wait and wait and wait – forever waiting in the air like flags of unsung countries.

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<sup>133</sup> Bhabha, Homi, K., *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 13

<sup>134</sup> Mbembe, Achille, “African Modes of Self-Writing”, *Identity, Culture and Politics*, 2001, 26.

Through the omniscient narrator, shifting this time from the “they” to the inclusive pronoun “we”, Bulawayo explains in an almost lyrical and poetic voice, how “funerals and burials are one of the chief ways of ritualizing membership in the civic space represented by *home*”.<sup>135</sup> The men and women of the diaspora won’t be able to reconnect to their ancestors and once they left, they will be evermore closed off from their home, even in the afterlife. The children born in the diaspora are destined to an even worse fate since their parents “did not bury their umbilical cords under the earth to bind them to the land because [they] had no lands to call our” (WNNN 247). Therefore, these children will never be connected to that land of origin, as it won’t guard the emblem of their birth. “Birth and death, two key life stages, do inform us, [...] about how most Zimbabweans understand the concept of home and belonging”,<sup>136</sup> through rituals that bond you to the (home)land and the earth, in a circle that should embrace your life from the beginning till the end.

Through the particular voice of the little Darling and the collective voice of the omniscient narrator, the spokesperson who claims the universality of the diasporic condition, Bulawayo “captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation”.<sup>137</sup> One aim of the author is that of inscribing the story of the young, black girl emigrated from Zimbabwe into the broader history of the transnational community of contemporary diasporas. The last of the three chapters that deviate from the main narrative, telling “How they Lived”, defines what will be the destiny of the young protagonist, whose experience of the illegal migrant in a Western country we will get to know only partially from the novel. Bulawayo confirms with her character Bhabha’s assertion that “unhomely is a paradigmatic [...] post-colonial condition”.<sup>138</sup> Opening a window in the collective experience, the author sheds light on Darling’s likely future

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<sup>135</sup> Mbembe, Achille, “African Modes of Self-Writing”, 2001, 27.

<sup>136</sup> Ndlovu, T., “Where is my home?”, 2010, 118.

<sup>137</sup> Bhabha, Homi, K., *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 13. It is probably useful to specify that, “to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can be the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of the social life into private and public sphere”. With the term “unhomely”, Bhabha refers to the end of that sense of belonging that the subject can feel in relation to what is instead “homely”, hence familiar and “domestic”.

<sup>138</sup> Bhabha, Homi, K., *The Location of Culture*, 1994, p. 13

condition in America, suggesting a painful epilogue in which “her new ‘home’ will always be “unhomely””.<sup>139</sup>

At her young age, Darling has already left home twice and with that, she has left or even lost not only a house but also these emotional, social and cultural elements which are constitutive of a home. Talking about the forced state-induced displacement, the term ‘domicile’ seems “also apposite, since it captur[s] the loss of home, social relations, work, rights, predictability and ontological security”.<sup>140</sup> All these material and emotional elements, essential components of a dignified life, went lost along with Darling’s first home, and now the girl, disappointed by her home country, looks expectantly overseas, seeking what she has lost. However, her expectations will be betrayed again, and besides not reaching that easy social and economic upgrade she hoped, she will also fail in finding a new home, which can guarantee her stability and sense of belonging, enabling her to carve out an intact identity. On the contrary, she will find herself in an inhospitable place, in which her identity will be split and torn by the constant recall of belonging to the homeland on one side, and the lure of a new life detached from her troubled past on the other. In America, Darling will realize not only the impossibility to erase her home from her heart, but also the complexity of being or feeling “at home in the world”.<sup>141</sup>

#### **5.4 The other face of cosmopolitanism**

Assuming that “world *is* ‘home’ only in so far as it allows each of its citizens to find a place that may contain their future”,<sup>142</sup> we can draw the conclusion that even though Zimbabwe does not allow her to have a future, America will never be ‘home’ for the same reason. The young girl from Zimbabwe left home believing to find in America a promised land, of wealth, prosperity, and opportunities, in which she could forge that future that

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<sup>139</sup> Masterson, John, ““DestroyedMichygen”: Rerouting the Postcolonial in Contemporary Diaspirant Fiction”, *Research in African Literatures*, 2018, 5.

<sup>140</sup> Hammar, McGregor and Landau, “Introduction. Displacing Zimbabwe”, 2010, 267, reports the reflection of F. Stepputat, “Studying Displacement: Reflections on States, Sovereignty and Ethnographies of Im/Mobility” during the above cited Conference held in Johannesburg in 2008.

<sup>141</sup> The reference here is to Brennan, Timothy, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism now*, 1997.

<sup>142</sup> Oboe, Annalisa, and Bassi, Shaul, “Introduction: Trying Freedom”, *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*, 2011, p. 9.

the economically, socially and politically wrecked conditions of her home country would have never provided her. Instead, the hard truth that she has to face is that things will never be easy for her in America, and she will always have to deal with the burden of the abjection she has brought along from Africa as well as with the limitations imposed by her social and economic status. Just as her aunt works hard to provide for the livelihood of her family in both America and Zimbabwe, Darling will discover that she has to roll up her sleeves more than others to achieve her goals. Fostalina, indeed, has to do three jobs in order to earn enough money, and in addition to the physical effort, she pays a moral cost, sleeping with her former boss, Eliot, presumably to integrate her incomes. Here we can trace parallelism with Darling's mother, whom we saw in the first section of the novel sleeping with a man for money. Both in Zimbabwe and in America, the things that a woman for economic necessity is forced to do in order to provide for the livelihood of her family are not so different. Once again, is the cynical voice of Bastard that, revealing how "[her aunt Fostalina] is busy cleaning kaka off some wrinkled old man who can't do anything for himself"<sup>143</sup> (WNNN 15), foresees Darling's own future migratory predicament. Growing up, Darling learns that is she wants to have the chance to go to the college and receive that higher education people go to America for, she has to settle for precarious and underpaid low-skilled jobs: "When I am not cleaning the toilets or bagging groceries, I'm bent over a big cart like this, sorting out bottles and cans" (WNNN 251).

Yet, despite the commitment and work effort, the black girl will have to be satisfied with attending a state college and won't certainly be able to afford a prestigious college like Cornell. As a reminder of the limitations set by her social extraction and her economic status, in one episode, while Darling is engaged in one of her works as a cleaner at Eliot's home, his daughter Kate comes in "wearing Bastard's Cornell T-shirt" (WNNN 269). As little naïve kids of Paradise, Darling and her friend just ignored the real meaning of the name stamped on the T-shirt that the NGO's people gave to Bastard; once in America, instead, she knew exactly what Cornell and wanted to apply to it, but she had to face the truth on her situation: "Then later I saw the tuition and almost died; if you are an international student like time it is very hard to get scholarships" (WNNN 267). If placed on the poor boy of an African shanty town, the name Cornell arises a bitter irony

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<sup>143</sup> The allusion is to the "BBC's" (British Buttock Cleaners).

sharpening the contrast between western wealth and African poverty, worn by the privileged white girl, it has the power to suggest that neither in America Darling is able to fill that gap of unfairness.

For the American government, Darling is indeed a visitor, since she has travelled with a tourist visa, which makes her extended permanence illegal. This is the condition of the majority of migrants, to whom Bulawayo finally addresses with the pronoun “we”. In the chapter “How they lived”, the collective voice gives an account of the experience of the experience of abjection of clandestine migrants, who have no choice but live their lives in shame and concealment, to the point that they think of themselves: “we were no longer people; we were now illegals” (WNNN 242). This statement indicates a negation of the self, operated by the migrant subject, that fits well in the definition of abjection as an ambiguous concept that “signals discomfort about something repulsive that is part of the self and that cannot be treated as an object”.<sup>144</sup> The position of law-breakers condemns them to live a life in the shadow, a half-life, in which they “stopped breathing, stopped laughing, stopped everything” (WNNN 242). In addition to the hardships of a life lived in a constant apnoea, the narrator reminds all the sacrifices the families did to send their children off and “how hard it was to get to America – harder than crawling through the anus of a needle” (WNNN 240).

For Darling, as well as for the other migrants like her, America is a sort of ‘golden’ cage, which makes it possible for them to have a minimal livelihood for themselves and most of all for their kin back home but which at the same time traps them: “We stayed, like prisoners, only we chose to be prisoners and we loved our prison” (WNNN 247). Due to her illegal status, indeed, Darling is condemned to physical immobility (as well as social) and she explains: “For now Aunt Fostalina cannot go back, none of us can” (WNNN 290); Kojo as well, “even though he went to college and has been [in America] for thirty-two years and works and his son, TK, was born here and everything [...] still has no papers” (WNNN 258). Without papers for return, the immigrant can’t go back home not even to visit their families, otherwise, they would be probably unable to enter again in the US. So, they choose to stay, or to marry an obese American woman to get

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<sup>144</sup> Toivanev, A., “Not at Home in the World”, 2015, 3. Reformulating Julia Kristeva's notion of Abjection, Toivanev further explains: “Abjection, then, is something revolting and strange to the self, but paradoxically also a part of it, posing thus a threat to the boundaries of the self”, 2.

the papers, just like Dumi, Fostalina's ex-boyfriend did. The circumstance of leaving home without possibilities of going back is warned by Bastard who, notwithstanding his longing to leave the wretched Budapest confesses: "I don't want to go anywhere I have to go by air. What if you get there and find it's a kaka place and get stuck and can't come back? [...] you have to be able to return from wherever you go" (WNNN 14).

"The trauma of trying to get an American visa",<sup>145</sup> as well as that of living under the shadow of illegality, are largely investigated in Adichie's *Americanah*, through the experiences of the two protagonists. While Ifemelu arrives in the US with a student visa and is compelled to get around the law, using someone else's social security number in order to be able to work and earn the money she needs, Obinze struggles to get his visa and once its validity expires, he continues staying and working in Britain illegally, trying to make himself invisible. Both the characters also witness how living under the threat of illegality "is isolating, disruptive, and anxiety-inducing"<sup>146</sup> and the negative consequences this has on social relationships: Obinze leads a solitary life in order to remain undetected; Ifemelu instead, is so mentally and emotionally worn out, that she falls into depression and cuts her social contacts, in particular with Obinze, disrupting their relationship.

Confined at the margins of society, where her "presence is partial, disallowed from full participation in her adopted country",<sup>147</sup> Darling is certainly not what Taiye Selasi has defined an Afropolitan, but rather she is, together with migrants addressed as "they" or "we" in the novel, an example of "underprivileged postcolonial cosmopolitans".<sup>148</sup> Her mobility, indeed, has not been granted with an easy ascendance of the social scale, but it has been haunted by the abjection following the girl from her native country. Unlike Ifemelu and Obinze, Darling is not a well-educated member of the upper-middle class, looking for the culmination of her formative path in the West, instead, she is the child of a family displaced by its own state, compelled to look elsewhere for mere survival; "she is of the very class that critics believe is ignored by the use of the term".<sup>149</sup>

A comparison with the characters of *Ghana Must Go* and *Americanah*, would be useful to shed light on the necessity to remember that, in order to integrate someone in a

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<sup>145</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Americanah*, p. 173.

<sup>146</sup> Crowley, Dustin, "How Did They Come to This: Afropolitanism, Migration and Displacement", *Research in African Literature*, 2018, 139.

<sup>147</sup> Crowley, D. "How did we come to this", 2018, 143.

<sup>148</sup> Toivanev, A., "Not at Home in the World", 2015, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Roy, V., "New Homes and New Names", 2016, 24.

certain category of mobility, “The question is not simply about *who travels* but *when, how, and under what circumstances?* What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys?”<sup>150</sup> The starting conditions of the various characters, therefore, is already very telling about whether or not is it possible to conceive the experience of the same as ‘Afropolitan’. The gap is particularly wide compared to Selasi’s characters: The father Kweku is now an important surgeon who has the means and the possibility to go back to his native country; the mother Fola comes from a privileged family; their children are all born in America and are properly Afropolitans. Each member of the family feels the necessity to reshape an old or new relationship with Africa and the children in particular, are free to build their own identity immune from the limitations of categorizations such as nationality or socio-economic status. Claim of this works is that, this freedom to describe one’s own identity along different dimensions, which are the national, racial and cultural, is typical of the Afropolitan subject<sup>151</sup> but has not been granted to the protagonist of *We Need New Names*. Darling, indeed, has no possibility to question her own identity in racial and therefore political terms, or cultural terms the way Ifemelu can, writing a blog or discussing the issue within a select club of immigrants and returned Nigerians. The Zimbabwean girl has no chance to ask herself certain questions with the clarity and awareness necessary to give herself answers.

Mbembe conceives Afropolitanism as “a term that’s part of a set of reflections” about the positioning of oneself in relation to Africa and of the latter in relation to the world. This approach centres the attention on the critical attitude that is part of the Afropolitan understanding of the world, as well as on the “philosophical inflection of the term”.<sup>152</sup> He talks about a “cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlies the term “Afropolitan””,<sup>153</sup> so that following this interpretation, the Afropolitan identity is applicable to a category of individuals who are able to “think of themselves, not just in relation to those next door, but to those the world over”, thing that includes, for instance,

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<sup>150</sup> Brah, A. *Cartographies of Diaspora* 182.

<sup>151</sup> Selasi, Taiye, *Bye-Bye Babar*, *Callaloo*, 2013, 230.

<sup>152</sup> Balakrishnan, Sarah and Mbembe, Achille, “Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures”, *Transition*, 2016, 29.

<sup>153</sup> Mbembe, Achille, “Afropolitanism”, *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, 2007, 28.



those who are “in centers of creative activities”.<sup>154</sup> Further, Mbembe describes Afropolitanism as:

[...] awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness, and remoteness, the ability to recognise one’s face in that of a foreigner [...].<sup>155</sup>

What lacks to the young Darling is indeed this “awareness”, since she lacks the material conditions that would enable her to engage in such critical reflections. The girl, illegally dwelling in America, compelled to do more than one ungratifying job in order to be able to afford a state college, condemned live with stereotypes of her wretched country and nation imposed on her own identity, is out of that privileged circle of cosmopolitan individuals. *We Need New Names* clearly rejects these aspects of Afropolitanism.

A broader interpretation of the concept of Afropolitanism has been given, that links it to a positive revaluation of the term cosmopolitanism, claiming that the latter has been misunderstood and assimilated to a snobbism typical of privileged people. From this perspective, Afropolitanism becomes “a new ethics of being”,<sup>156</sup> epitomized in the novel by the collective “we” of the migrants, who are able to “recognise one’s face in that of a foreigner”; in the empathy of the little Shbo who cries in front of the beating of a white couple simply because “They are people” (WNNN 122), even though they are glancing at her with hatred. Of course this attitude can be read as a genuine way to relate to the “other”, if compared for instance to that of the white lady in the bathroom during the wedding, who shows a willingness to help the less fortunate, but from position of privilege without actual understanding; or to the black British woman of Budapest, wearing an necklace with the shape of Africa, her “Dad’s country” (WNNN 9) and a “T-shirt that says Save Dafur” (WNNN 11), while throwing away pizza in the face of hungry children. The woman from London could fit the description of an Afropolitan in the more typical interpretation for the term, with a clear critique by Bulawayo. The child’s capability of looking beyond the binary opposition of “us” and “them”, instead, reveals an innocent sympathy toward the sufferings of any human being, more than “a spiritual, moral connection to a worldwide community”.<sup>157</sup> The assimilation of the idea of

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<sup>154</sup> Roy, V. “New Homes and New Names”, 2016, 19.

<sup>155</sup> Mbembe, “Afropolitanism”, *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, 28.

<sup>156</sup> Eze, Chielozona, “We Afropolitans”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 2016, 116.

<sup>157</sup> Roy, V. “New Homes and New Names”, 2016, 25.

Afropolitanism with the empathic attitude of a child or with the migrants' tendency to identify with who is sharing the same sufferings, then, may sound a little forced. The prefix Afro- might be, in this case, not useful or even misleading, since it is not necessary specifying someone's roots when you want to practice a positive ethic of being toward the others and you don't need to be African to be able to feel such empathy.

Moreover, this perspective on the issue tends to overlook the implications that Afropolitanism, as well as cosmopolitanism, have with mobility, or better with the possibility of moving. Mbembe underlines how "many Africans live outside Africa [...], many of them have had the opportunity to experience several worlds and, in fact, have not stopped coming and going, developing an invaluable wealth of perceptions and sensitivity in the course of these movements".<sup>158</sup> Hence, the capacity to be physically mobile among the many sites of belonging available to the subject in movement is an essential component of the freedom to shape identity. Another difference also concerns the modality of movement, in that while "the cosmopolitan is at home everywhere, the abject have been jettisoned, forced out in a life of displacement".<sup>159</sup> It is clear how, as regards the issue of understanding what home means in relation to other spaces to which the subject is connected, the most significant difference between the characters of the two novels just taken into account is the impossibility of movement, in particular, the impossibility of returning home. This inability characterizes the experience of Darling and shapes her relationship with Africa, both as home and as part of her identity; according to Mbembe, indeed, "Identities are forged at the interface between cosmopolitanism and the values of autochthony".<sup>160</sup> Bulawayo depicts a character, whose subalternity and abjection give her no space to confront issues about identity and belonging with a certain degree of awareness and understanding. The question, in fact, comes up in the form of psychosis, rather than as a well-shaped issue to be investigated and solved. What the characters of *We Need New Names* experience is rather what Du Bois calls "double consciousness",<sup>161</sup> namely "a psycho-social splitting of the self in

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<sup>158</sup> Mbembe, "Afropolitanism", 29.

<sup>159</sup> Nyers, Peter. "Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protection in the Anti-deportation Movement." *Third World Quarterly*, 2015, 1073 quoted by Toivanen, A., "Not at Home in the World", 2015, 2.

<sup>160</sup> Mbembe, Achille, "African modes of Self-Writing", *Identity, Culture and Politics*, 2001, 4.

<sup>161</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

multiple as a result of abject subjectivity wherein the self is dislocated and fails to unite”.<sup>162</sup>

The figure that most vividly and tragically embodies the dangers of a prolonged physical disconnection from home is Tshaka Zulu, named after the legendary heroic founder of the Zulu nation, Shaka Zulu, whom he episodically believes to incarnate. Initially, Tshaka is introduced to the reader as a picturesque figure singing traditional songs and wearing traditional dresses during ceremonies of Zimbabweans; only in a second moment we learn that he is actually patient of a mental hospital, since he is “supposedly crazy” (WNNN 233) of an unmentioned illness Darling refers to as “craziness” or “madness”. Tshaka has migrated to America selling his father’s cattle against his will, and he has never had to possibility to go back. He is trapped in an in-between space manifesting in a psychosis, that is the only way for him to go back and be connected with his land again. His own room seems a “remembrance museum” (WNNN 233), with walls covered with posters of famous Africa man such as Nelson Mandela and photos of his family, of which she reconstructs the genealogy. The same Darling recognizes that “he is not himself” when having an episode, but that he undergoes a psychic disconnection that makes him incapable of avoiding the splitting of his identity.

Darling too has a nervous breakdown as a consequence of her ambivalent and conflictual relationship both with the home she left behind and with the country in which she struggles to feel at home. The girl’s consciousness is split between her past and her present, and the two shores of an ocean: “I feel like I’m not [complete] because I’m busy thinking about home and I feel like I can’t breath for missing it” (WNNN 284). In a rush of anger Darling writes the words *iBio iyirabishi*, a “Ndebelefied English phrase”<sup>163</sup> meaning ‘biology is rubbish’ with a red marker in the wall, and when she tries to clean it, the stain that is left recalls memories of home. In the aim to find something to cover the ruined wall, she finds some object from her homeland such as a batik painted with a colourful market scene, a clock in the shape of Africa and a mask “spilt in the center, one half white, the other black” (WNNN 283). The latter is a clear metaphor of Darling’s own hybrid identity: “It’s hard to explain, this felling; it’s like there’s two of me. One part is

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<sup>162</sup> Sibanda, S. “Ways of Reading Blackness Exploring Stereotyped Constructions of Blackness in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, 2018, 86.

<sup>163</sup> Frassinelli, P. P., “Living in translation”, 2015, 718.

yearning for my friends, the other doesn't know how to connect with them anymore, as if they are people I've never met. I feel a little guilty but I brush the feeling away" (WNNN 210). To sharpen the feeling of detachment from the home country, come the words of the friend Chipo when Darling claims to feel pain for the sufferings going on in the native country:

You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering, so it's us who have a right to even say anything about that or anything about anybody.

(WNNN 287)

Moreover, Chipo reproaches Darling brutally for having left and addresses her like she has voluntarily cut herself off Zimbabwe, abandoning it during difficult times. According to the one who has stayed, having left deprives Darling of the right to claim the country as her home:

It's your country, Darling? Really, it's your country, are you sure?" (WNNN 286) "What are you doing not in your country right now? Why did you run off to America, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, huh? Why did you just leave? If it's your country, you have to love it to live in it and not leave it. You have to fight for it no matter what, to make it right. Tell me, do you abandon your house because it's burning or do you find water to put out the fire? [...] You left it, Darling, my dear, you left the house burning and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn't even suit you, that this is your country?"

(WNNN 286)

As a consequence of these harsh words, Darling throws her computer taken by frustration and anger. Showing Darling's emotional breakdown and violent reaction, lead us to take her side and lets us understand the extent to which such pain is difficult to catch if you are not experiencing it, as Chipo in fact is not able to do.

Through Darling, Bulawayo reclaims the possibility to do something and fight for her country even from the distance imposed by migration. Notwithstanding Chipo's reproach, it is clear whom the author blames: "I start feeling disappointed, and then angry at our leaders for making it all happen, for ruin everything" (WNNN 285). The words pronounced by Darling, clearly do not only refer to the current events happening in the country, but also to that devastating situation that was the actual reason for her "voluntary" displacement. Even at the end, therefore, the author reiterates the political criticism that has been the leitmotif of the novel and suggests how, unfortunately, "nation-building of any kind, unlike in *Americanah*, is never seen as a possibility. The only way

of connection, of a return, is virtual, and completely inadequate”.<sup>164</sup> The same Bulawayo, as hinted in the first chapter of this work, is herself part of the Zimbabwean diaspora and unable to go back to her country for 13 years, during which the shameful political actions narrated in the novel were taking place. That of having to deal with an unfillable physical distance when things are going bad at home hence, is a feeling that Bulawayo herself knows well: “Being away from home and having to process everything through the news, through phone calls home, through reading blog and social media, for me was a form of catharsis, a form of coping. You do get crazy watching your homeland bending from that distance”.<sup>165</sup>

Bulawayo refuses a celebration of migration according to an Afropolitan attitude, which doesn't take into account Darling's lack of agency in order to have control over her own position both in a devastated home country and in wealthy America. The merger between the two worlds, from Darling's abject and subaltern position, seems nearly impossible at the end of the novel as Darling still struggles to find her place in each of two realities separated by a country and connected only virtually. She had to learn at her own expense the fact that “There are always give and takes for every situation”.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Roy, V. “New Homes and New Names”, 2016, 36.

<sup>165</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhzTaZ9zfyU>

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjOGa5BH8Ok>

## Chapter IV

### Language, names and identity

The preceding chapter took into account Darling's diasporic condition and the way in which the latter results into the loss of home and kinship. We have seen how the migrants, after having crossed the border, have to struggle with the feeling of loss, the craving for the homeland and, at the same time, with the need to integrate in the new reality and having to cope with the inevitable feeling of disconnection from the home country very often due to the impossibility of going back. The language plays a major role in the migrants' experience on different levels, being part of what shapes one's identity and one's relationship with the world.

Derrida argues that displaced persons, exiles, rootless nomads, all have one thing in common: the memory of the dead and the nostalgia for the language. The very definition of home is intrinsically intertwined with the resting place of the ancestors as well as the mother tongue. The latter does not have the immobility of the homeland for it becomes mobile as soon as the speaker abandons a place. The language carries us from birth to death, and so become a home that never leaves us.<sup>167</sup>

In *We Need New Names*, language means undoubtedly home but not only, because the language it deals with is not only the mother tongue of the protagonist, the never mentioned Ndebele, but also the language that becomes part of her daily life once she arrives in America. The relationship between the two languages, though, is complicated not only from a thematic point of view but also on a formal one; it is interesting to analyse the way in which the two levels of analysis intertwine, resulting in a creative and innovative outcome.

The story, fictionally narrated by the young Darling, comes to the reader in English, although, hypothetically, as a result of a sort of translation from the protagonist's mother tongue. The first part of the novel, in fact, is reported by Darling in English but the characters actually speak in Ndebele and every time someone pronounce something in

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<sup>167</sup> Bayer, Jogamaya, "Going away/Coming home. Searching for a fixed point in postcolonial Indian writing", in Oboe, Annalisa and Bassi Sahul, *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*, 2011, p. 136.

English the narrator points it out. The same Bulawayo affirms in an interview that she arrives to her writing through translation<sup>168</sup> and likely that is the way in which she gave life to a language that a friend of her has defined “English written in Ndebele”.<sup>169</sup> The whole novel, in fact, appears as an “interplay between the “surface language” (English) and the substratum language”,<sup>170</sup> which emerges in a series of linguistic strategies and techniques which have led the critics to define Bulawayo’s language “vibrant”. Bulawayo’s language seems to have the features of that “new English” Chinua Achebe speaks about, “still in full communication with its ancestral home, but altered to suits its new African surroundings”.<sup>171</sup> Through the naïve, spontaneous, blunt and straightforward voice of the young Darling, the author succeeds in achieving a language which is creative and alive, notwithstanding its apparent simplicity.

The terminology and syntax are simple, indeed, accordingly to the age of the narrator, for whom the language is a means to make sense of and appropriate the world surrounding her. As pointed out in the preceding chapters, the kids find themselves in a local reality which is constantly invaded by the global world, a situation which they have to make sense of with their limited means, one of which is language. Through language they try to understand, shape and appropriate what is new and foreign, what doesn’t originally belong to their environment. When they don’t know the name for something, they make extensive use of approximation referring to it with *thing* or variants as *thingy* or *thingies*: “One is busy looking everything through a *thing*, the other is busy taking pictures” (WNNN 136); “I can tell from the cord *thingies* at the side of her neck and the way she smacks her lips that whatever she is eating tastes really good” (WNNN 6) (my italics on the examples). Again, to refer to the Chinese fortune cookies they have never seen before, Darling resorts to what she can see and call them “funny-shaped-thingies” (WNNN 46). What she can see, that is the shape, the look of unknown items, give her the means to describe them, and for example when talking about what the woman is eating, she explains: “the top is *creamish* and looks fluffy and soft, and there are *coin-like things* on it [...]” (WNNN 6).

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<sup>168</sup> Rosen, Judith, *Close to home*, 2014, 36.

<sup>169</sup> “NoViolet Bulawayo on names, the limitation of language, writing from distance”, *Eat, Drink & Be Literary* Mar 19, 2014, [video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjOGa5BH8Ok&t=36s>.

<sup>170</sup> Newbold, David, “What’s in a name? Linguistic attitude and linguistic features in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *Il Tolomeo*, 2015, 135.

<sup>171</sup> Achebe, Chinua, “English and the African writer”, *Transitions*, 1976, 349.

In explaining things and situations to the reader, the young narrator resorts very often to “like” and makes extensive use of similes, in which the comparison term is usually something she retrieves from her daily life such as MotherLove’s eyes “the white part large like it’s been dipped in milk” (WNNN 87). The language has a strong visual component, indeed, that helps the narrator to understand and explain not only objects but also emotions: “His face looks shocked, like he has just seen the buttocks of a snake” (WNNN 32) or “We so badly want to see the adults come back, it’s like we will eat them when we do” (WNNN 69). The word “like” is also used next to verbs in order to form adverbs as in the sentence “She says it playing-like, laughing-like [...]” (WNNN 31). All those uses of “like” add to the conversational directness of Darling’s narration.

When the narrator wants to minimize something, she uses the expression “what-what” to indicate the small importance of or interest in something, where a more standard form would be the use of “whatever”. When talking about a matter that she doesn’t thoroughly understand, or not make much sense to her, Darling says: “We hear about change, about a new country, about democracy, about elections and what-what” (WNNN 59) or “They clap their hands and greet one another in the name of the Lord and what-what” (WNNN 32).

Another very notable feature of Darling’s language are reduplication and straightforward repetition, both having an intensifying function. Reduplication is deployed to assert something reinforcing its meaning, when in a standard English we would find *really*, in sentences such as “She is not mute-mute; it’s just that when the stomach started showing, she stopped talking” (WNNN 2) or “Now that the lorry is gone-gone, we do not scream anymore” (WNNN 57). As the same Bulawayo explains, the use of a double words is a tactic in which the second one has the purpose to fix and clarify the meaning, because words alone not always do that they are supposed to do.<sup>172</sup> As far as it concerns straightforward repetition, the words can be repeated and be separate by a comma which has the aim to slow down the rhythm and to let the reader focus on meaning as in the closing sentence “the delicious, delicious smell of Lobels bread” or connected by a conjunction “and” for instance to stress the reiteration of an action like the “clicking and clicking and clicking” of the NGO’s cameras (WNNN 9). In addition, the repetition

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<sup>172</sup> NoViolet Bulawayo on names, the limitation of language, writing from distance”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjOGa5BH8Ok&t=36s>.



can be straightforward and not signalled by interpunctuations or conjunctions so as to give a faster rhythm and stronger intensity to the image: “We only laugh and keep hitting. Hitting hitting hitting”. (WNNN 141).

Intensifying action is also carried out by some example of non-standard grammar, that might be interpreted simply as childish language but has actually a great expressive potential in amplifying feelings and thoughts of the narrator. One frequent example of non-standard grammar are comparatives such as “I have forgotten it because was a complicated name, but I think is far much better of some kinds I have seen” (WNNN 236); or “We chant and we sing lauder and loudest” (WNNN 143). In the second sentence, describing the behaviour of the kids during the re-enactment of Bornfree’s murder, the superlative “loudest” is used to create a sort of ascending climax and express the intensity of the feelings the action entails.

Another characteristic of Darling’s language is code-switching with the insertion of sentences or words in Ndebele: as pointed out above, we could imagine the first part of the novel as actually happening in the native language of the character and reported in English by the narrator. This technique is especially deployed in the speeches of picturesque character such as the Prophet Revelation Bitchington Mborro or Mother of Bones, who says: “You you futsekani leave her alone you bloody mgodoyis get away boSaran beRoma” (WNNN 21). The choice to leave not translated is not simply stylistic, but instead, it is a way for the author to claim the difficulty and sometimes the impossibility to translate the imaginary, culture and world of the characters into another language. The translational process is not simply a one-to-one translation of words from a language into another, it implies the translation of an entire system of believes, thoughts and ways of conceiving the world which a language can lack the expressive means to formulate. Some of the things belonging to the local language and culture are simply not transferrable into another language and in order to fill this cultural gap, Bulawayo leads the reader into a condition of estrangement in respect to the context, that same estrangement felt those who find themselves in a foreign country.

The language of the young Darling has a strong visual component, as has already been seen thanks to the use of similarities that make use of very concrete terms of comparison and traceable to the images of the daily life of the narrator. The peak of this

visual richness is reached with the description of the dance that takes place at Fostalina's house during a gathering of friends from Zimbabwe:

They dance strange. Limbs jerk and bodies contort. They lean forward like they are planting grain, sink to the floor, rise as whips and lash the air. They huddle like cattle in a kraal, then scatter like broken bones. They gather themselves, look up, and shield their faces from the sun and beckon the rain with their hands. When it doesn't come they shake their heads in disappointment and then get down sinking-sinking-sinking like ships drowning. Then they get up, clutch their stomachs and hearts like women in pain, raise their arms in prayer, crouch low as if they are burying themselves. They rise again abruptly, stand on their toes and stretch their hands like planes headed for faraway lands.

(WNNN 162)

In the description of the dance we can observe some of the formal features that characterize Darling's language, such as repetitions ("sinking-sinking-sinking") or non-standard English forms ("They dance strange") but, above all, we find a visual vividness achieved through personifications or similes that have as term of comparison concrete elements attributable to the daily life of the narrator. The dancers huddle like cattle, move like woman in pain and raise their arms like they are praying: the language carries all the weight of the African experience and is able to depict a local imaginary that brings Darling back home for a moment, reconnecting her with her culture.

## **6.1 What is in a language**

The two languages around which the novel is built, interact not only at a formal level but also at a thematic one, carrying with them deep meaning connected to the origins and the identity of the subjects. In the first half of the novel, the predominant language is the never mentioned "Ndebele" and, although it comes to the reader in translation, English is a strong presence in the local reality. It is the language of the NGO people who carry gifts, is the language of the wealthy white resident of Budapest, the language spoken by the Chinese people who came to build a luxury shopping mall: English is the influence of the global on the local reality. From the beginning, the young protagonist shows awareness of the social implications of the language and of how English is a symbol of distinction so that when dealing with the NGO people, she uses it to please them: "Thank you much, I say to the pretty lady who hands me my thinks to show that I know English.

She doesn't say anything back, like maybe I just barked" (WNNN 55). In the same way, when the kids are in the white couple's house and the phone rings, Darling is the one who replies the call because she is the one who speaks better English and says "Hello, how are you, how can I help you this afternoon?" (WNNN 127). The young girl, though, lacks a thorough awareness of the language usage contexts and simply tries to implement the rules she has been taught in order to speak a proper English: "I also remember that I haven't been using the word *ma'am* like we were taught to at school and I almost want to start the conversation over just so I can do it right" (WNNN 128). Not only children identify English speaking with social prestige, even the security guard in Budapest addresses them in English in order to put himself in a position of superiority over them. The guard uses expressions such as "permission to perform filthy actions" (WNNN 106) or "refrain from utilizing your vocal organs unless and until you are addressed" (WNNN 108), which are unsuitable for the context. In this case, the kids recognize the inappropriateness of the register used by the guard and this dissonance between the context of use and the formality of language has an almost comic outcome, actually opposite to the one the guard himself aimed to achieve.

Already in the local context, English is a lingua franca as can be noticed in Shanghai, where people from different country try to communicate with all the means they have, including "tools often raised in the air to help the language" (WNNN 44). The construction site is a sort of Babel, in which tongues mix: "it's Chinese, it's our language, it's English mixed with things, it's the machine noise" (WNNN 44). English is the language used by some of the Chinese men to communicate with the children, even though very often without success. The language used by both interlocutor as a second language fails the communicative purpose and ends up in a mutual misunderstanding: "the Chinese men laughs, the kind of laugh that tells you he didn't understand a word. Then he and Fat Mangena start some really serious ching-chonging and we know they are now talking about other things" (WNNN 47).

The role of English a lingua franca is mostly relevant in the second half of the book, where the language is deployed as such both in the small family unit of Kojo's and Fostalina's house and in the larger migrant community. Since Fostalina and Kojo come from two different countries, respectively Zimbabwe and Ghana, and Kojo's son TK only speaks English, the latter is the language of communication in the house. In more than

one occasion it becomes clear how usage of a lingua franca often leads to communicative failures and is an insufficient tool to fulfil some communication needs such as for instance giving voice to feelings and expressing one's identity. When Fostalina and Kojo argue, indeed, she suddenly and automatically switches to her native language so that the husband "shakes his head and walks away since he doesn't understand a word of it" (WNNN 156). A double frustration can be detected from the situation, that of Kojo for not being able to productively communicate with the wife and that of Fostalina, who clearly can't avoid but resorting to her mother tongue in order to express a feeling such as anger. When it comes to convey emotions, it is not only the degree of mastery of the language itself that could hold the speaker from using the lingua franca but is the lingua franca itself that for the speaker lacks the expressive potential inherent of the mother tongue. The native language is indeed is that tool that best adapts to the emotional needs of the speakers and is able to let them express their identity because it is connected to origins of the individual. As we have seen at the beginning of the chapter talking about *Mother of Bones*' untranslated expressions, some phrase, words or emotions just can't be translated into another language different from the mother tongue.

Has already suggested, English is also the lingua franca in the community of migrants, an heterolingual environment in which both interlocutors are aware of the possible failure of the communication, because what brings them together is not homogeneity but the fact of being foreigners among foreigners of being considered "others" by those who are native citizens of the country.<sup>173</sup> In this context, "those who are crossing borders" in the middle of the novel have now become a "we" of people who share a new common identity based on a commune experience in the chapter titled "How they lived". In this way, the lingua franca becomes the basis for the new identity, especially for Darling's generation.

In the transition from Zimbabwe to America, the young Darling has to face a linguistic transition that implies having English as her lingua franca; she doesn't have a choice anymore and speaking English is no longer only a matter of showing off her

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<sup>173</sup> Frassinelli, Pier Paolo, "Living in translation: Borders, language and community in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 2015, 719-720. Frassinelli applies the concept of homolingual address opposed to an heterolingual address elaborated by Saka (1997) in order to describe the community of migrant who rebuilt themselves into a "we" based on difference rather than homogeneity.

mastery of the white's people language. Mastering English becomes a matter of being accepted and integrated in the new society, of shaping a new identity that could fit the new reality she is leaving in. When arrived at school she realises that the perception that the other have of her also goes through the innermost aspects of her such as her language and her accent for which the other kids tease her. The girl has to face the fact of being under attack for even the things she can't change and has to deal with an identity crisis that make her just feel wrong in her body, her language, even her head (WNNN 165). Mastering English, therefore, becomes a tool to conform, to shape her identity in such a way to be accepted as a new self in the new reality.

The mastery of the language, though, doesn't come without an effort, and Darling is perfectly aware of the language production process and of the work it entails the translation of thoughts not only in language but in a language, which is not your own. Once that English becomes a daily struggle for integration and a mandatory practice to forge a new identity, the young girl matures a metalinguistic awareness of the mechanism of communication:

The problem with English is this: You usually can't open your mouth and it comes out just like that – first you have to think what you want to say. Then you have to find the words. Then you have to carefully arrange those words in your head, then you have to say the words in your head. Then you have to say the words quietly to yourself, to make sure you got them okay. And finally, the last step, which is to say the words out loud and have them sound just right.

(WNNN 193)

Darling also understands the inherent difficulties of communication dynamics and how “sometimes language fails us especially when we cross borders”,<sup>174</sup> and communication fails so that it makes it difficult to claim your meaningful presence in the space you are living in. Fostalina knows it well because “language is not doing what is supposed to do for her”:<sup>175</sup> is not a tool of communication, on the contrary, it is a barrier that physically hinder the achievement of her goals. In the chapter titled “Angel”, Fostalina is overwhelmed by the frustration when she tries to order a bra on the phone and the girl on the other end on the phone can't understand what she says. While Fostalina struggles with finding the right pronunciation, the girl assesses the woman's communicative failure and invite her to buy the item online. The meaningfulness and the

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<sup>174</sup> NoViolet Bulawayo on names, the limitation of language, writing from distance”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjOGa5BH8Ok&t=36s>

<sup>175</sup>NoViolet Bulawayo on names, the limitation of language, writing from distance”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjOGa5BH8Ok&t=36s>

effectiveness of the new language are questioned together with the existence of the subject in a world in which he/she is unable to communicate. The inability to communicate is an obstacle that prevents others from perceiving the individual beyond the language barrier and make the speaker a passive subject, whose only answer is to rehearse the scene in front of a mirror until “English will come alive on her tongue and she will spit it like it’s burning her mouth, like it’s poison [...]” (WNNN 98).

Darling is also aware of subtler dynamics that affect the perception that the others have of you on the basis of your communicative skills and she explains how, even after you have managed to put translate your thoughts into words in the in the new language, the effort is such that “when you come to the final step, something strange has happened to you and speak the way a drunk walks. And because you are speaking like falling, it’s as if you are an idiot, when the truth is that it’s the language and the whole process that is messed up” (WNNN 193-194). In this passage it is made clear how much language impacts the external perception of the self and how much effort is required in order to translate not only your words but your identity into another language/world. Some critics,<sup>176</sup> indeed, highlight how the concept of translation can be applied to the subject in movement and how this process is more than a layering over a fixed original subjectivity. In the translational process of subjectivities the new identity does not simply overlap the old one but the two are in a constant entanglement that has as an outcome a subject in “perpetual movement”.<sup>177</sup> Darling’s life, in America indeed, is a constant living in translation and a continuous struggle to shape a new version of herself that can fit in the new context. She has decided that the best way to engrave her new American identity is to “sound American” and in order to do so she watches TV shows and carefully listen to the accent so that she can imitate it; she also has a list of American words that she “keeps under the tongue like talismans, ready to use” (WNNN 194). Darling considers the material benefits of learning to speak English with the right pronunciation, which makes your life easier because no one will question your words by asking you to repeat them.

The fear of a language barrier that tarnishes the perception of the identity also strikes the protagonist of *Americanah*, who decides to “practice an American accent”,<sup>178</sup> after a

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<sup>176</sup> Moji, Polo, “New Names, Translational Subjectivities: (Dis)Location and (Re)Naming in NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, *African Cultural Studies*, 2015.

<sup>177</sup> Moji, P., “New Names, Translational Subjectivities”, *African Cultural Studies*, 2015.

<sup>178</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, *Americanah*, 134.

fellow student speak English slowly with her because he is not sure if she understood him. Later on, though, when a man congratulates with her for her American accent, Ifemelu starts to rethink her decision and resolves to stop faking the American accent”.<sup>179</sup> Darling, never achieves that sort of auto-critic and that bring her to reassert her “real voice” in such a self-consciousness. Once again, the actions of the two characters taken into account must be read in light of the starting point, and it is essential to realize how Ifemelu’s choice is produced above all by the fact of having a choice that Darling, instead, doesn’t have. Ifemelu has the privilege to go back to her real voice, once she has already mastered the English accent,<sup>180</sup> once her real voice is already heard through her blog and she can choose to go back to Nigeria. In the same way, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, Darling can’t choose whether to stay in the US or go back home.

The fact of finally mastering English language and accent, though, becomes for Darling a double-edged sword, which does not result in a hybridization, but rather in a split personality who struggles in claiming a belonging to one place. What she gains by “sounding American” in terms of claiming a place in the new reality, she loses in terms of belonging to her roots. The mastery of the new language, indeed, is something that contributes to isolate and detach her from the local community in the home country, something that, on the eyes of the ones who stayed, dispossess her of the claim of belonging. When speaking with her mother on the phone, she makes fun of her daughter who now speaks English with her “trying to sound white” (WNNN 204). The friend Chipso is even harsher and rejects Darling’s claims on her country stressing dissonance the semantic between the content and the language: “you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn’t even suit you, that this is your country?” (WNNN 286). Her family and friends at home are not the only one to rebuke Darling for her American accent and also the Afro-American friend Kristal accuses her because she “tryna sound like white stupid folk” (WNNN 222). For Kristal, the language bears a political meaning and is a means through which renegotiate her own identity and ethnicity. When Darling accuses her of not being able to “write a sentence correctly in English to show that she is indeed American” (WNNN 199), the girl replies

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<sup>179</sup> Adichie, *Americanah*, 175.

<sup>180</sup> Roy, Vilasini, “New Homes and New Names: The Afrikan Migrant Novel in the Digital Age”, Master’s Thesis, Stockholm University, 2016, 40.

that what she speaks is indeed Ebonics, “a language system, but it be our own [...]” (WNNN 222). While Darling makes every effort to use language as an access route for integration into the Western world, her friend makes it a tool of resistance against assimilation in a system that attempts to impose an identity on her. Although for Darling Ebonics is a “negative concept that assume[d] African American youth incapable of mastering Standard English”,<sup>181</sup> is it actually just one manifestation of an African American culture that refuse to be contained by a racialised system and struggles for self-definition and (re)possession of their history.<sup>182</sup>

Language is therefore inextricably linked to the origins, belonging and identity, to the ability of expressing oneself. Speaking another language doesn't just deprive you of contact with your roots, it sometimes prevents you from a meaningful and productive relationship with the members of the new community:

Because we were not in our country, we could not use our own languages, and so when we spoke our voices came out bruised. When we talked, our tongues thrashed madly in our mouths, staggered like drunken men. Because we were not using our languages we said things we did not mean; what we really wanted to say remained folded inside, trapped. In America we did not always have the words. It was only when we were by ourselves that we spoke in our real voices. When we were alone we summoned the horses of our languages and mounted their backs and galloped past skyscrapers.

(WNNN 240)

The native language, thus, is the only safe place that gives you expressive freedom, represented by Bulawayo through the almost poetic image of the horses galloping away.

To release the anger and frustration of not being able to communicate, Fostalina needs to find refuge in her safe harbour, that is, her own language, in which she can finally explain herself and calls a friend to explain what happened because “you have to tell it to someone who knows what you mean, who will understand exactly what you say, and that is not your fault but the other person's, someone who knows English is like a huge iron door and are always losing the keys” (WNNN 197). It is when the characters have the chance to speak their own native language that we see them being truly themselves and feeling surrounded by a really familiar environment. When Fostalina's friend from Zimbabwe gather, Darling call that “a real family” in which she can listen to the sound

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<sup>181</sup> McLaren, Joseph, “African Diaspora Vernacular Traditions and Dilemma of Identity”, *Research in African Literatures*, 2009, 101.

<sup>182</sup> Mazrui, Ali and Mazrui, Alamin, *The power of Babel: Language and Governanxe in the African Experience*, 1998, p. 34, quoted in McLaren, Joseph, “African Diaspora Vernacular Traditions and Dilemma of Identity”, *Research in African Literatures*, 2009, 99.



of her “real language” (WNNN 161) again. In that context, familiar, marry and save for Darling and Fostalina, Kojo feels an outsider, someone “illegally entered a strange country in his own house” (WNNN 161). The mother tongue in a foreign country means more than ever return to the origins, to one’s true identity. Just as Fostalina and Darling, Kojo as well can really express himself only when surrounded by people speaking his own language to such an extent that the girl says “everything about him is different [...] it’s like someone cut him open to reveal this other person I don’t even know” (WNNN 179).

## 6.2 New names and new identities

The leitmotif of re-naming introduced by the title of the novel, as already mentioned at the very beginning of this thesis, is detectable already from the name of the author herself, who renamed herself NoViolet, in honour of her deceased mother. From this choice, we can understand how names, and therefore the practice of self-naming, are charged with meaning in Bulawayo’s culture. However, for a western audience her name is source of semantic uncertainty, since what for the western reader indicates a negation, “No”, in the author’s mother tongue actually means “with”. In the novel there are other examples of names that create semantic dissonance such as “Bastard”, a name that doesn’t sounds complimentary at all to the ear of the Western reader, but which is actually given to infants to protect them from death in Southern African culture.<sup>183</sup> Southern African naming tradition makes wide use of English elements translated into an African morphological structure such as the names Mother of Bones or MotherLove, whose structure resembles the names MaDube or MaBetina, in which the suffix “Ma-” is a translation of the English “Mother of”. The appropriation of English language is not limited to this, and in the novel, we can find clear examples of names whose lexical items are English, but which wouldn’t be used as proper names in an English-speaking environment,<sup>184</sup> names such as Bornfree, Darling, Whiteboy or Forgiveness. In Southern

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<sup>183</sup> Moji, P., “New Names, Translational Subjectivities”, *African Cultural Studies*, 2015.

<sup>184</sup> Makoni, Busi; Makoni, Sinfree and Mashari, Pedzisai, “Naming Practices and Language Planning in Zimbabwe”, *Current Issue in Language Planning*, 2007, 440.

African naming practices, names carry meaning, encode a message, a hope, a prayer and are often tied to a context, especially the context in which the infant is born. A name as Bornfree, for instance, recalls the political and social circumstances of the kid's birth, which is the moment in which the country gained independence from the Great Britain. Naming practice and its peculiar feature do not only apply to people's name but also to places, so that we can find places with English names such as Hope Street and Heavenway or named which recall historical moments such as "Chimurenga street", evoking the national struggle for independence or Mzilikazi road, after the father of Ndebele nation.

Meaningfulness is something that distinguishes African and Western names, and while the first ones can speak, the second ones can almost be considered "mere labels".<sup>185</sup> Bulawayo's name have even a stronger power, that is a connotative one through which name not only are able to denote and identify their referent but also to convey their characteristics. The name Budapest, for example, not only refers to the European city, but also has the power to evoke the wealth that characterises the Zimbabwean neighbourhood in contrast with wretchedness of the ironically named Paradise. In Bulawayo's imaginary, names also have the power to evoke and almost embody their referent through a tight connection between signifier and meaning. In such way, once Darling has left, Chipo names her daughter after her so "there would be another Darling in case something would happen to [her] in America" (WNNN 210).

The power of name is notably manifest in the chapter that gives the title to the novel, which contains the probably most poignant episode in which Darling, Sbho and Forgiveness decide to practice an abortion of the ten-year old pregnant friend Chipo. The plan is "getting rid of Chipo stomach one and for all" (WNNN 78) because it is an obstacle to their games and also because they think the friends will die for giving birth, but "in order to do it right", Sbho says, "we need new names" (WNNN 82). The girls have found the tools they need to practice the abortion, a clothes hanger, rocks, a metal cup and a belt, but in order to fulfil their roles of doctors and help their patient, they need new names. Indeed, Sbho, who knows what to do because she saw it in the American TV show ER, decides that she is going to be Dr. Bullet, Darling is going to be Dr. Roz, because she

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<sup>185</sup> Suzman, S., "Names as pointers: Zulu personal naming practices", *Language in society*, 1994, 253, quoted in Makoni, B., Makoni, S. and Mashari, P. "Naming Practices and Language Planning in Zimbabwe", *Current Issue in Language Planning*, 2007, 452.

is tall and Forgiveness is going to be Dr. Cutter, because of the cutting motion she keeps making across Chipó's stomach. Renaming themselves with that names coming from a land that they associate with knowledges and resources, the girls get the confidence they need, as if they were suddenly transformed and imbued with the skills and the competence required to perform the abortion. The power they place in names combined with their imagination is the only tool the kids have to change something which is actually out of their control, to change the wretched faith of a girl who had no blame other than being young, innocent and female, who had no power against the terrible injustice she has been condemned to. In the same sort of way, Tshaka Zulu, who hasn't been able to go back home for many years and who has never met his grandchildren, has named all of them, "each name carefully thought out and given over the phone" (WNNN 236). Naming is his way to feel connected and participate to their lives through a practice which is meaningful to his culture, but moreover, thanks to the power attributed to names, "every time [the children and grandchildren] are called by name and they answer, I am the invisible hand toughing them and calling them my own", he says (WNNN 236). Names almost have the capability to make people present and, in turn, Tshaka Zulu naming ritual is somehow the only chance her has to participate to the life at home from a distance in a meaningful way.

When the scenario of the novel changes to America, names and re-naming also take on a different function: they become mostly elements that connect the migrants with their ethnicity and their homeland now far away, just as the mother tongue becomes a hold on the one's roots. Therefore, the same way a name connects you to the homeland, a name that doesn't belong to it can set you apart from the ancestral home:

And then our children were born. We held their American birth certificates tight. We did not name our children after our parents, after ourselves; we feared if we did they would not be able to say their own names .... We gave them names that would make them belong in America, names that did not mean anything to us: Aaron, Josh, Dana, Corey, Jack, Kathleen. When our children were borne, we did not bury their umbilical cords under the earth to bind them to the land because we had no land to call ours.

(WNNN 247)

In order to give the children the opportunity they didn't have to be bond to the country that hosts them, parents give their children names that have no meaning, new names that

conform to the new location and, therefore, to the new identities they want for their children, identities that won't have to carry the burden and the stigma of migration. But people don't only give up their children's name, they also hide their own names, renounce to their own identities to live in the shadow of illegality: "We hid our real names, gave false ones when asked" (WNNN 242). In the new community, migrants no longer have their own identities, they no longer have their own names, each becomes one of the "others with names like myths, names like puzzles, names we had never heard before [...]" so that "When it was hard to say the many strange names, we called them by their countries" (WNNN 243).

Even for Darling, somehow, the name "Africa" becomes interchangeable with her own and a burden superimposed on her identity by the white people surrounding her in the new reality beyond the border. In America, Africa, becomes a category of being to impose on the subject, whose identity is automatically identified with quality of wretchedness, underdevelopment, poverty and death associated with the name. Notwithstanding Darling's efforts to shape her identities according to Western standards, Western society still perceives her through the filter of the name she has been imposed on, that of "Africa" and its connotation. If at home with her friends, giving herself a new name was enough to be whoever she wanted to be, even a doctor able to perform an abortion, now from the unprivileged position of migrant in a foreign country the adolescent Darling struggles to shake off herself the burden of a stereotyped and heterogenized African identity.

The leitmotif of the re-naming is therefore a rhetorical tool that aims to claim new identities free from the yoke of subalternity and from the weight of a super-imposed identity. Through the blunt voice of children, their imaginative strength and the power of names that mean something, Bulawayo advocates the need for the individual to shape for him/herself an identity that can be fluid, no longer bound to stereotypical categorizations, and open to multiple sites of affiliation not restricted by artificial boundaries.



## Riassunto

Nella sua cultura, i nomi “parlano e sono scelti con cura”. Ecco perché Elisabeth Zandile Tshele si è data un nuovo nome, un nome d’arte che è per lei carico di significato: NoViolet in Ndebele, lingua natale dell’autrice, significa infatti “con Violet” ed è un omaggio alla memoria della madre venuta a mancare prematuramente e un modo per sentirla vicina a sé; Bulawayo, invece, è la seconda città più grande dello Zimbabwe e sua città natale. Anche quest’ultimo nome è stato scelto come modo per mantenere vivo il legame dell’autrice con un luogo che ha lasciato da adolescente per trasferirsi negli Stati Uniti e nel quale non ha potuto far ritorno per 13 anni. Bulawayo, nata il 10 Dicembre 1981, fa parte della generazione di coloro che sono cresciuti dopo che il paese ha ottenuto l’indipendenza dall’impero britannico, nel 1980 e si è poi trasferita nel Michigan all’età di 18 anni con allo scopo di studiare legge, secondo il volere dei genitori.

*We Need New Names* può essere considerato un romanzo di formazione che narra, attraverso la sua stessa voce, l’esperienza di Darling, bambina di 10 anni che, insieme ai suoi amici Chipu, Bastard, Stina e Sbho, passa le sue giornate a rubare frutti di guava dal ricco quartiere chiamato Budapest, prima di tornare a Paradise, la baraccopoli nella quale abita insieme alla madre e la nonna, chiamata Mother of Bones. Nonostante la l’ambientazione della prima parte del romanzo non sia mai menzionata, appare chiaro che situazione drammatica descritta è quella dello Zimbabwe di Robert Mugabe, fautore dell’operazione “Operation Murambatsvina - Operazione spazza via l’immondizia”, una massiccia manovra governativa di demolizione e sgombero dei sobborghi popolari metropolitani. La seconda metà, invece ambientata a Detroit, Michigan, dove la protagonista si è trasferita per vivere a casa della zia Fostalina in cerca di un futuro migliore.

La narrazione affidata alla giovane Darling è interrotta da tre punti, in cui la parola passa ad un narratore onnisciente, che potrebbe ipoteticamente essere interpretato come la voce di una Darling adulta che ri-racconta la propria storia analizzandola attraverso una nuova e più matura consapevolezza di universalità: i tre capitoli, infatti, sono una sorta di trasposizione dell’esperienza individuale su un piano collettivo. La scelta stessa

del “Child-narrator”, così come il fatto di non menzionare mai l’ambientazione spazio-temporale, hanno un’intenzione di universalizzazione.

Anche alcuni elementi stilistici e formali risentono della scelta del “child-narrator”, come ad esempio la struttura episodica e il tono stesso della narrazione, ingenuamente ironico, diretto e tagliente, ma a tratti quasi lirico e poetico, nonché la prosa fluida e accattivante. Per spiegare e dare un senso a ciò che la circonda, la bambina fa ampio uso di similitudini e metafore con riferimenti a elementi del quotidiano, come il cibo. Se i dialoghi hanno un ritmo incalzante, le descrizioni sono invece minuziose e dettagliate e figure retoriche come l’asindeto e il polisindeto sono utilizzate enfatizzare e focalizzare l’attenzione su alcuni elementi.

La scelta del “child-narrator” ha anche una rilevanza tematica in quanto permette al romanzo di non collassare sotto il peso dei temi affrontati. Bulawayo descrivere così una realtà spiacevole riuscendo a creare, grazie al tono franco e quasi sfrontato dei bambini e alla loro resilienza, un legame con il lettore basato sull’empatia piuttosto che sulla compassione. Inoltre, gli occhi innocenti dei giovani protagonisti danno modo di affrontare con un approccio tutt’altro che teorico la realtà descritta, focalizzandosi su aspetti estremamente concreti e basilari, come il cibo e l’istruzione, che il lettore occidentale tende sottovalutare, ma che non possono essere dati per scontati in una situazione socio-economica devastata come quella dello Zimbabwe raccontato nel romanzo. Rendendoli narratori delle loro stesse vicissitudini, e non oggetto della narrazione altrui, Bulawayo trova il modo di svincolare i bambini dalla loro posizione di subalternità dovuta alla loro età.

Chipso, con la sua gravidanza, è nel romanzo l’esempio più lampante di un soggetto relegato in una posizione di subalternità e, dunque reso massimamente vulnerabile, non soltanto a causa della sua età ma che dal genere. Messa in cinta dal nonno, la giovane perde la parola per lo shock e sembra così confermare la **sfrontata** affermazione di Spivak per la quale il subalterno non può parlare. Ma come afferma Spivak, se il subalterno, o meglio la subalterna non può parlare è perché, se da un lato è sprovvista dei mezzi per farlo, dall’altro non c’è nessuno disposto ad ascoltarla. Sia in quanto bambina e che in quanto donna vittima di uno stupro, Chipso manca del supporto materiale e psicologico di cui necessiterebbe per articolare ed elaborare un trauma che condizionerà per sempre la sua vita. In tale situazione, soltanto le giovani amiche hanno l’impulso, o forse

l'incoscienza di tentare di aiutare l'amica, tentando di praticare un aborto con nessuna nozione in materia e mezzi di fortuna.

I bambini appaiono infatti completamente abbandonati a loro stessi, senza guida e supervisione, intenti a dare un senso ciò che gli accade attorno con i mezzi che conoscono, come il gioco, attraverso il quale processano la realtà che li circonda e anche ciò che accade nel mondo. Giocando a "Country-game", danno sfoggio delle loro consapevolezze delle dinamiche di potere che governano lo scenario internazionale, nonché della loro posizione in esso, una posizione appunto subalterna. Rinsendo invece il brutale assassinio del giovane Bornfree, cercano di esorcizzare e dare un senso alla dura e violenta realtà che li circonda e che nessuno perde loro tempo a spigare. Così come non ricevono nessun supporto emotivo, i ragazzi non ricevono neanche un sufficiente supporto materiale e sono infatti costretti a razzare i dintorni benestanti per saziarsi o a rubare le scarpe ad una donna impiccata ad un albero per rivenderle e comprarsi del pane. Assieme all'episodio del tentato aborto, quest'ultima scena del romanzo descrive con disarmante chiarezza quando l'infanzia e la purezza dei bambini sia stata turbata dalla ingiustizia della realtà in cui vivono e corrotta dai comportamenti immorali di quegli stessi adulti che dovrebbero essere i loro modelli.

Fra gli adulti, infatti, sono proprio le figure autoritarie come quelle religiose rappresentate dai predicatori sia pagani che cattolici, perpetrare azioni corrotte e immorali come sfruttando le debolezze e la disperazione per trarne un profitto economico e stuprare giovani donne che deviano dai quei valori tradizionali imposti da una società patriarcale. Nonostante tutto, i bambini rimangono gli unici ancora capaci di empatia e compassione, mentre adulti sembrano assopiti ormai in un torpore di disillusione, che li porta a non essere più in grado di discendere ciò che è giusto e lottare per questo. Anche di fronte allo stupro, le donne, ormai succubi della mentalità patriarcale che le ha rese subalterne, non sono in grado di parlare e mostrare solidarietà per la sofferenza e l'umiliazione della giovane, la quale non ha nessuna colpa se non essere carina, come la definisce la piccola Darling. I bambini sono anche l'unica fonte di critica sociale, in quanto non ancora corrotti dall'ipocrisia frutto dalle costrizioni sociali, come si può notare dal tono dissacrante e canzonatorio con il quale Darling descrive la figura del profeta cristiano. Nonostante la loro condizione svantaggiata, i ragazzi sono in grado di rompere le norme e le convenzioni sociali e sfidare l'autorità, cercando così di sollevarsi dalla loro posizione



di subalterni e farsi fautori delle proprie fortune. Al contrario, gli adulti, resi vulnerabili dalle condizioni di indigenza materiale, sono descritti come soggetti passivi di fronte alle ipocrisie, che si fanno frodare dalle angherie delle autorità religiose, nonché infantilizzare e privare del loro ruolo genitoriale dai rappresentanti delle NGO occidentali che vengono a portare cibo, giochi e vestiti.

Il rapporto disfunzionale tra figli e genitori a Paradise appare come una metafora del rapporto tra i cittadini e uno stato che non è più in grado di provvedere a questi ultimi. Lo stato infatti è uno stato cosiddetto fallito che, all'indomani dell'indipendenza, non ha saputo mantenere quelle promesse fatte e cerca negli stati più deboli della popolazione un capro espiatorio da angariare per affermare la propria sovranità. Nello Zimbabwe di "Operation Murabatsvina", i cittadini non hanno il privilegio di vivere che si possa definire tale, ma si devono accontentare di sopravvivere. Così i bambini non vanno più a scuola, il che preclude loro un futuro dignitoso, ma passano invece le loro giornate a procacciarsi sostentamento.

Educazione e cibo sono nel romanzo due elementi cardine che tematizzano la condizione di limitatezza, precarietà e indigenza in cui vivono gli abitanti di Paradise e che mettono quest'ultima in contrasto con l'abbondanza che invece caratterizza l'occidente e in particolare gli Stati Uniti, diventando così un parametro di giudizio per la qualità della vita. La concezione del cibo nelle due realtà infatti è diametralmente opposta. A Paradise i bambini impiegano gran parte del loro tempo e delle loro energie a cercare di placare la fame con del cibo che è un sinonimo di sopravvivenza. In una terra in cui la scarsità di cibo non esiste, questo non è più concepito come sostentamento, ma in relazione alla forma fisica e quindi all'eccessiva magrezza o a un abuso che sfocia nell'obesità. La disponibilità di cibo, così come l'accesso ad un'istruzione segnano una dicotomia netta tra le due realtà, mettendo così in risalto le ingiustizie estreme che regolano il mondo odierno. L'istruzione, inoltre, perde in parte la sua connotazione positiva, perché inserita in un sistema contraddittorio, in cui non soltanto chi non ne può ricevere abbandona il paese, ma anche chi ne ha ricevuta, come il padre di Darling, si trova costretto ad allontanarsi dai legami familiari in cerca di opportunità. Ancor più incoerente e disarmante è il fatto che, mentre i bambini non ricevono più un'istruzione e non possono far altro che rubare per saziarsi, nei quartieri limitrofi, una compagnia edile

cinese sta costruendo un centro commerciale di grandi firme e una donna occidentale butta il proprio cibo di fronte agli sguardi sdegnati dei ragazzi.

Nonostante il contesto reale non sia mai menzionato, il romanzo è carico di critica sociale e politica, e di allusioni a eventi storici come le elezioni presidenziali del 2008 nelle quali il regime corrotto del dittatore Mugabe ha di nuovo avuto la meglio sul movimento democratico, incarnato nel romanzo dal personaggio del giovane attivista Bornfree. Quest'ultimo, promotore del "Real Change", diventa il simbolo della lotta e dell'utopia politica, nonché della disillusione e della sconfitta, rappresentata dal suo assassinio. Attraverso la figura del giovane, Bulawayo da voce a dall'altro lato della storia, quella vissuta da quei giovani che per riscattarsi dalla loro posizione di subalternità, hanno cercato di farsi fautori del cambiamento. Dall'altro lato invece, gli adulti sembrano ormai irreparabilmente disillusi, mentre i bambini sono affetti da una sorta di disillusione prematura, che li porta ad osservare la realtà con occhi disincantati e critici. Questo si traduce anche in un disprezzo verso l'autorità, e per estensione verso il paese definito "kaka country", espresso attraverso un linguaggio scurrile e azioni dissacranti come defecare o sputare per strada, che possono essere interpretate nelle cornici dell'estetica volgare e grottesca e del carnevalesco teorizzate da Mbembe e Bakhtin. Il modo in cui i bambini mimano e si prendono gioco dell'autorità, sia politica che religiosa, rivelano appunto quegli elementi di eccessività, incoerenza e violenza ed insieme banalità insiti nell'autorità stessa, che secondo Mbembe definiscono il regime di potere nella postcolonia. Nonostante la consapevolezza e lo sdegno, i bambini stessi, in quanto figli di uno stato fallito e disfunzionale, sono ormai così disillusi da non riuscire ad evitare di auto-identificarsi con quello stato disprezzabile ed interiorizzare l'immagine di reietti che gli è stata affibbiata.

Il degrado politico e sociale, rappresentato nel romanzo dalla mancanza di beni primari come cibo, istruzione e cure mediche, concorrono hanno il compito di sottolineare quanto la vita degli abitanti di Paradise sia non dignitosa e non degna di essere definita vita, ma piuttosto sopravvivenza. Essi infatti, troppo impegnati a sopravvivere o annichiliti dalla disillusione, non possono permettersi il lusso di preoccuparsi del loro aspetto fisico; soltanto quanto animati dalla speranza del cambiamento, gli adulti trovano il tempo di indossare abiti colorati e giocare con i loro figli. La mancanza di ciò che è essenziale rende difficile dare un valore non soltanto al presente ma anche al futuro, per

il quale l'unica possibilità risiede nell'abbandonare casa per cercare speranza altrove. Così come il ricorso all'estetica carnevalesca è un mezzo per denunciare "la banalità del potere", il fallimento del cambiamento politico non devono però essere interpretati come uno sminuire la capacità di azione dei soggetti subalterni, ma è in sé un atto di protesta politica dell'autrice la quale, così facendo, rimette la responsabilità di una situazione socioeconomica disastrosa a chi ne è stato davvero il colpevole, vale a dire lo stato.

Darling racconta la propria storia con la sua stessa voce, ma nel romanzo ci sono momenti in cui il lettore ha accesso agli eventi che attraverso le lenti delle fotocamere di giornalisti e reporter occidentali. Il modo in cui la realtà locale viene rappresentata, ovvero con immagini spesso prive di contesto, non è di certo una realtà a tutto tondo ma una manipolata allo scopo di ottenere certe reazioni dal pubblico occidentale. Oltre ai media, la presenza occidentale nella realtà locale è rappresentata dalle ONG, che portano ai bambini regali in cambio di foto e che e gli adulti chincagliere piuttosto che così utili. I bambini sono solo in parte consapevoli del fatto che le loro immagini verranno manipolate e anche quando lo sono, come Bastard, non possono fare a meno di accondiscendere e compiacere i rappresentanti delle organizzazioni per ricevere i doni tanto desiderati. Con la presenza delle ONG, Bulawayo vuole sottolineare fino a che punto i paesi africani in difficoltà siano resi dipendenti dagli aiuti economici occidentali: ponendo questi paesi in una posizione di subalternità, dipingendoli come vittime bisognose di essere salvate l'occidente può ricoprire il ruolo del salvatore. Il tipo di aiuto paternalistico offerto da queste organizzazioni, infatti, non fa altro che perpetuare il legame di dipendenza e dare potere ai soggetti sbagliati, cioè quelli che già lo detengono.

Chi detiene il potere, detiene anche il controllo dei mezzi di rappresentazione ed è quindi in grado di produrre attraverso questi un discorso e una narrativa sull'Africa, costruendola così come l'Altro, in contrasto al quale poi modellare la propria identità. La presenza delle ONG viene quindi interpretata come una perpetuazione di un discorso coloniale che, costruendo informazioni arbitrarie sull'Africa, riesce a controllarla e ad esercitare potere su di essa.

Quando Darling si trasferisce negli USA, appare chiaro dalla che la giovane ha con una con una donna bianca ad un matrimonio, che l'immagine stereotipata dell'Africa costruita dai media è stata recepita dal pubblico. Ciò che la donna sa menzionare parlando dell'Africa come un unico paese, infatti, sono soltanto la miseria e le guerre o paesaggi

da cartolina. L'identità di Darling, agli occhi dell'occidente, è inevitabilmente ridotta e assimilata al continente da cui proviene e di conseguenza alle immagini di abiezione a cui quest'ultimo è associato.

La presenza dei media è un chiaro esempio di come la presenza di come il locale e il globale siano interconnessi e di come gli effetti della globalizzazione influenzino la piccola realtà di Paradise sia a livello culturale che a livello materiale: la valuta locale non ha più valore ed è stata rimpiazzata dal dollaro; i costruttori cinesi sfruttano gli uomini del posto per costruire un centro commerciale.

I modelli culturali occidentali, che Darling e la sua gang di amici dimostrano di conoscere, diventano la norma anche per i giovani di Paradise, i quali vedono una realtà locale che non hanno loro niente da offrire se non il vuoto e la mancanza che può essere colmata e un desiderio che può essere soddisfatto soltanto in occidente. In questa rappresentazione dicotomica dell'Africa come distopia e dell'America come terra dell'oro, i media giocano ovviamente un ruolo preponderante e il fatto che certe rappresentazioni stereotipiche abbiano la loro matrice in occidente ha sicuramente un impatto nel definire le rotte migratorie. L'esposizione ad internet e ai mass media e il modo in cui hanno rappresentato un ha creato in Africa una ricerca verso stile di vita occidentale, che indica la complicità di una determinata rappresentazione di quest'ultimo fattori che spingono i flussi migratori.

Darling, in quanto figlia reietta di uno stato fallito, deve portarsi addosso anche il peso dell'essere una doppiamente "dislocata": "dislocata" forzatamente dal suo stesso stato e "dislocata" volontariamente, se così si può dire, con la migrazione negli USA. Anche se non viene mai menzionato chiaramente, come il lettore può apprendere dal racconto degli incubi ricorrenti della bambina, Darling, così come la sua famiglia e tutti gli abitanti di Paradise, è una delle vittime di "Operation Murambatsvina". Si può sostenere che la "Operazione" ha risposto alla necessità di riaffermare la legittimità di uno Stato che doveva rispondere alla crisi economica e politica penetrante del paese, e che ha scelto di farlo in modo violento e punitivo. I più poveri e i più deboli sono stati i più colpiti dalla violenza del regime, il che si sposa perfettamente con un concetto di sovranità che deve dovendo legittimare la propria autorità, lo fa arbitrariamente attraverso la violenza. Il regime ha additato i membri più deboli della popolazione facendoli diventare il nemico, l'Altro da criminalizzare e responsabilizzare per la situazione di crisi

acuta in cui il paese stava annegando. Al fine di tutelare il proprio la propria sovranità, il regime si è arrogato il diritto di creare barriere di inclusione ed esclusione, tagliando fuori dai diritti di cittadinanza e appartenenza nazionale coloro che non erano considerati utili all'agenda del regime o degni di essere trattati come cittadini. Gli occhi dello stato, dunque, la vita di Darling e gli altri abitanti di Paradise non ha abbastanza valore da essere rispettata: Bulawayo ci descrive personaggi che hanno difficoltà ad emanciparsi da una rappresentazione così abietta della loro esistenza, che non sono in grado di sfuggire a tali identità loro imposte dall'alto, in questo caso dal fallimento politico del loro paese. Se tradotta in termini più ampi, questo tipo di politica attuata dal regime è facilmente interpretabile come quella "necropolitica" di cui parla Achille Mbembe,<sup>186</sup> e che è caratterizzata dal potere di decidere circa la vita e la morte dei cittadini.

Dopo che il lettore ha appreso la storia dei bulldozer che hanno raso al suolo la casa di Darling e quelle del quartiere in cui abitava, il capitolo successivo illustra il momento in cui le persone sparse sono apparse a Paradise. "How They Appeared" è il primo di tre capitoli in cui la voce non è più quella del piccolo Darling, ma quello di un narratore onnisciente maturo, che descrive la scena nella sua dimensione di trauma collettivo. Elemento chiave del capitolo è quello della perdita: perdita di beni materiali, ma anche perdita di legami familiari, affetti e dignità umana. È infatti a causa di questa situazione disastrosa, abietta e miserabile, che Darling è spinta verso una nuova "dislocazione", non poi così volontaria, alla ricerca di un futuro migliore oltreoceano, così come il padre aveva tentato di fare andando in Sud Africa. La migrazione di Darling verso quella che lei chiama la "sua America", è anticipata da un capitolo che con tono quasi lirico immortalava la massa dei figli che si disperdono lontani dalla loro terra, accumulati dall'urgenza di scappare da una terra miserabile.

Per la giovane Darling che vive in condizioni di quasi totale privazione materiale nel suo paese natale, l'America appare come una terra di prosperità e abbondanza a cui approdare, e la giovane non considera nemmeno la possibilità di dover pagare un prezzo in cambio della prosperità materiale e del benessere che crede di ottenere facilmente in America. Dal primo istante però l'adattamento alla nuova realtà non è semplice e Darling non sente alcun senso di appartenenza a quella che aveva fino a quel momento chiamato

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<sup>186</sup> Mbembe, Achille, "Necropolitics", *Public Culture*, 2003, 11.

la sua America. Tutto le è estraneo, a partire dal clima, e i nuovi parametri sociali le fanno mettere in discussione il proprio essere a partire dall'apparenza fisica all'accento.



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