

From Africa to America: Precarious Belongings in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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This article analyzes NoViolet Bulawayo's critically acclaimed debut novel *We Need New Names* (2013), bringing to the fore the legacies of colonialism and the subsequent diaspora to the West. Like the work of other contemporary Afrodiasporic writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi and Imbolo Mbue, Bulawayo's narrative recreates the problematic space of dislocated, transnational migrants who are attached to a postcolonial and a metropolitan "home," and denied fundamental rights in both. Unstable belongings are part of the new subjectivities forged in postcolonial contexts, where invisibility is also a social, political and economic sign of precarity. In Bulawayo's novel, social conflicts, abusive governments, linguistic imposition, displacement and migration are revealed through a group of African children, first in a Zimbabwean shantytown and then in the United States. This study contextualizes the diasporic dilemmas of belonging and identity formation, while at the same time exploring the possibilities of political agency within contemporary Afrodiasporic literature.

Keywords: precarious belongings; NoViolet Bulawayo; Afrodiasporic literature; postcoloniality; invisibility

De África a América: filiaciones precarias en *We Need New Names*, de NoViolet Bulawayo

Este artículo analiza la aclamada primera novela de NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* (2013), subrayando los legados de la colonización y la diáspora hacia países occidentales. De igual forma que otras escritoras afrodiaspóricas contemporáneas, tales como Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi y Imbolo Mbue, la novela de Bulawayo reconstruye el complejo

espacio que habitan las personas migrantes y transnacionales, vinculadas a un hogar poscolonial y a otro metropolitano, en los que se les niegan derechos fundamentales. Las subjetividades que emergen en contextos poscoloniales se caracterizan por sus filiaciones inestables, además de la frecuente invisibilidad social, política y económica. En la obra de Bulawayo, las peripecias de un grupo de niños y niñas africanas revelan los conflictos sociales, el abuso gubernamental, la imposición lingüística, el desplazamiento y la migración, primero en un barrio marginal de Zimbabue y después en Estados Unidos. El presente estudio contextualiza los dilemas de identidad y pertenencia en la diáspora, además de explorar las posibilidades de agencia política en la literatura afrodiaspórica.

Palabras clave: filiaciones precarias; NoViolet Bulawayo; literatura afrodiaspórica; poscolonialismo; invisibilidad

Paul Gilroy aptly contends that the idea of diaspora offers an alternative to the fixed “primordial kinship of belonging” and the “metaphysics of ‘race,’ nation and bounded culture coded into the body” (2000, 123).¹ He further argues that diaspora is a concept that “problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging” (123). Even though diaspora studies provide a rich theoretical basis from which to tackle the provisional status of cultural identity, and to question essential notions of belonging, Jayne Ifekwunigwe warns us that the concept of diaspora has also become a buzzword, like globalization, with certain connotations that might be associated with a “marketable millennial cultural currency [...] which re-casts our recurrent homelessness as an asset rather than a deficit” (2003, 58). In light of this assertion, I propose to explore the social, political and economic precarity and invisibility that may accompany dislocated bodies in contemporary diasporas, particularly the three million diasporic subjects that left Zimbabwe after its independence from the United Kingdom in 1980, paradoxically called the “born free generation” (Austin 2011, 43). In so doing, I draw on studies of the African diaspora and postcoloniality that underscore the dialectics of precarity and the diasporic dilemmas of belonging within the political and socioeconomic legacies of the original systems that produced the African Atlantic diaspora: the Atlantic slave trade, slavery, colonialism and imperialism—see Gilroy (2000), Chariandi (2005), Rice (2012) and Valkeakari (2017).² This paper focuses specifically on the new (postcolonial) diaspora and its representation.

Thinking beyond borders of nation-states is also relevant for the construction of what Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley call a “diasporan consciousness” (2000, 14). Echoing Safran (1991) and Boyce-Davies (1996; 2002), they consider that the constituent elements of such a consciousness include: (1) dispersal from a homeland, often by violent forces; (2) the making of memory and a vision of that homeland; (3) marginalization in the new location; (4) a commitment to the maintenance/restoration of the homeland; (5) desire for return; and (6) a continuing relationship and identity with the homeland that shapes the consciousness and solidarity of the group. Even though such consciousness might be part of the shared experience of dislocation, I will avoid monolithic approaches and highlight instead the instability of identity formation in NoViolet Bulawayo’s debut novel *We Need New Names* (2013), looking at the postcolonial and capitalist forces that lead to precarity and leave little space for political, ethnic or class belongings, either before or after dispersal. “Africa” and “America,” referenced in the title of this paper, activate certain narratives that are also deconstructed in the novel as unstable fictions.

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² Robin Cohen ([1997] 2008, 1-20) argues that diaspora studies have gone through four stages: (1) The Classical Stage (1960s-1970s), mainly confined to the study of the Jewish diaspora; (2) the 1980s, in which diaspora was deployed as a “metaphoric designation” (Safran 1991, 83) for various categories of people: expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities; (3) the mid 1990s, where diaspora was reordered and re-evaluated in response to the complexities of a postmodern world; and (4) the turn of the twenty-first century: the current phase of consolidation.

Visibility or the lack thereof is also relevant in diasporic studies because the lives of migrants frequently take shape on the margins of society as “shadow lives” (Král 2014, 46). Françoise Král underlines the fact that invisibility seems to have emerged as a common characteristic of our times, a paradoxical feature in a world where public exposure and media attention are narrowly focused on certain geographical areas and individuals, and for a limited span of time. Additionally, Král identifies three types of invisibility: social, political and economic. Thus, she goes beyond categories of race and ethnicity, accentuating social precariousness and the lack of recognition of civic and political status. Invisibility, according to Todd Lieber (1972), suggests the situation of a group of people stripped of their native culture and forced to adhere to alien standards and values while their own cultural qualities are ignored; socially, it reflects the conditions of a group whose basic plight has been long overlooked or pushed into the shadows. Perhaps most significantly, invisibility embodies the complex psychological dilemmas of men and women without a sense of essential group identity, whose individual human identity is often denied by the dominant society.³ Bulawayo recalls that one of the inspirations for her novel was a haunting photograph of a child sitting in the rubble after her home had been bulldozed during the Zimbabwean government’s Operation Murambatsvina, a campaign of forced relocation in 2005: “I became obsessed with where the people would go, what their stories were, and how those stories would develop—and more importantly, what would happen to the kid in the first picture I saw” (Griffiths 2015, n.p.).

Bulawayo grew up in Zimbabwe and describes herself as being from the “born free generation” of the 1980s (Smith 2013, n.p.). She moved to the United States shortly after high school and studied creative writing at Cornell University with a Truman Capote Fellowship. In 2011, she won the Caine Prize, Africa’s highest literary honor, for her short story “Hitting Budapest,” which would later be included as the opening chapter of *We Need New Names*. Bulawayo was the first African woman to be shortlisted, in 2013, for the British Man Booker Prize, and has been awarded a number of literary distinctions in the United States. Although writers of the new African diaspora such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi, Imbolo Mbue as well as Bulawayo herself have been criticized for their privileged situations and literary success outside the continent (Fasselt 2015), their texts bear witness to postcolonial situations and diasporic identities that may as yet be unnamed. In this regard, Aretha Phiri (2016) refers to contemporary Afrodiasporic writing as a multifaceted locus that presents inclusive and ambiguous visions of Africa and African diaspora as a response to ever-shifting contexts and realities. Despite Phiri’s suggestion that Afrodiasporic fiction is not explicitly politicized (2017, 145), this is a generalization that does not apply to Bulawayo, who consciously engages in

³ Lieber’s pioneering article (1972) on the metaphor of invisibility referred specifically to its representation in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952).

creating a new discourse from the problematic but hybridized space of the displaced, transnational subject who is tethered to a postcolonial and a metropolitan “home,” although he or she is denied basic rights in both.

As Bulawayo explains, she is “trying to say that we need new identities, new ways of seeing things, new ways of being,” especially in the wake of the “lost decade” in Zimbabwe’s recent history which, as a result of Robert Mugabe’s authoritarian politics, was filled with strife, cronyism, fraud and corruption (Vaye Watkins 2013, n.p.). Although Bulawayo does not mention the name of the city or country where the novel is located, there are several markers that link it to Zimbabwe. *We Need New Names* can be divided into two distinct sections; the first vividly portrays a group of children living in a shantytown, ironically called Paradise:

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 color of dirty puddles after the rains. 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. (Bulawayo 2013, 34)

This precarious and temporal “Paradise” was constructed after the war of independence from the United Kingdom (1964-1979), which was soon followed by thirty years of Mugabe’s autocratic government (1987-2017), and described through the unsentimental, poetic and skeptical voice of one of the children, ten-year-old Darling. The names of the streets in the shantytown invoke important personalities in the history of Zimbabwe, like Chimurenga Street and Mzilikazi Road. The first is a word in the Shona language used to describe the insurrection against the British South Africa Company in the 1890s (First Chimurenga); the latter refers to the founding king of the Ndebele nation (c. 1790-1868), an ethnic group that was severely repressed both during colonization and after independence. According to Belinda Moji, “these names can be read as signifiers that inscribe the novel as a certain history of the Zimbabwean nation, given the post-independence dominance of the Shona majority and the political marginalization of the Ndebele ethnic group” (2015, 182). However, the Shona and the Ndebele fought together in the First Chimurenga, joining forces against the exploitation of resources in the continent led by the South Africa Company.

Both the Ndebele and the Shona were referred to as natives in Rhodesia, although the Ndebele state was only formed four decades before the arrival of the colonialists. Nor are the majority Shona the original occupiers of the land, which is said to have been inhabited by the Khoi San before the former’s existence. Khanyisela Moyo argues that the Shona and Ndebele are historically attached to the artificial space created after independence, referred to as Zimbabwe, and feel it to be their “homeland” (2011, 171). Today, the Shona and Ndebele largely view ethnic groups from neighboring countries as immigrants and foreigners; for example, laborers from Mozambique who were brought in under colonialism. In fact, after independence, “the ‘foreigner’ label was extended

to the Ndebele and minority white population by some sectors of the Shona people; yet these groups largely see themselves as homeland minorities” (Moyo 2011, 172). Hence, the tag of “foreign” also applies to the shantytown inhabited by the Ndebele in Bulawayo’s novel, a configuration that makes their existence and subjectivities even more precarious.

To pass the time and kill their hunger, the kids go to Budapest, an affluent neighborhood mostly populated by whites right across from Paradise: “there are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I’d rather die for guavas. We didn’t eat this morning and my stomach feels like somebody just took a shovel and dug everything out” (Bulawayo 2013, 1). Their precarious economic situation is portrayed in a humorous tone and, borrowing Jens Elze’s designation, the narrative renders a “postcolonial picaresque” that uncovers relations of inequality and depicts them naturalistically, insisting on their “disenabling precarity” (2017, 40). The perversity of their poverty is a shameful reminder of the rampant economic inequality in Zimbabwe and is highlighted when the kids visit Shanghai, a construction site supervised by Chinese contractors. When asked if they are building a school, hospital or apartments, one of the Chinese supervisors boasts: “We build you big mall. All nice shops inside, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Versace and so on” (Bulawayo 2013, 46). These remarks also underscore China’s expanding role on the continent, where the country’s various investments in infrastructure in exchange for open access to mineral exploitation are considered by some as a new form of colonialism. Adam Tiffen (2014) adds that Chinese government-backed construction and engineering companies are doing exceptionally well in Africa; rather than infusing local African economies with cash, stimulating growth, and increasing local production, the main benefit has been to Chinese enterprises.

Asymmetrical relations with the West are also acutely exposed in the novel. A visit from well-meaning white NGO workers affords the reader the opportunity to witness the dehumanizing impact of charity:

The man starts taking pictures with his big camera [...] 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 the pictures anyway, take and take. We don’t complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts. (Bulawayo 2013, 52)

The excerpt criticizes Western superiority towards postcolonial subjects and, according to James Arnett, the taking of pictures points to how “postcolonial suffering is commodified and traded [...] in a materialist affective economy that is grounded in the production and dissemination of telegenic images of suffering” (2016, 152). This “habitus of individual aid” is a symptom of neoliberal late capitalism, which displaces the impulse to provide aid, assistance and charity to private subjects, reifying Western assumptions of privilege, and reiterating the necessity of the “performance of suffering” (153).

The passage goes on to describe the kind of gifts that the children receive: “each 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” (Bulawayo 2013, 52). Each item symbolizes a surplus of Western capitalist society: the toy gun stands for the welfare of weapons and the commercialization of wars; the sweets identify the addictive trade of sugar; the tight red dress pinpoints the fast-growing waste of clothing and the word “Google” at the front of the T-shirt relates to the ever-present and meticulous surveillance of social habits. As for the adults, they “get small packets of beans and sugar and mealie-meal but you can see from their faces that they are not satisfied. They look at the tiny packages like they don’t want them, like they are embarrassed and disappointed by them, but in the end they turn and head back to the shacks with the things” (55). Deprived of the ability to provide for themselves through pre-colonial structural means, such as a national infrastructure of manufacturing or a consolidated and efficacious agricultural industry, Zimbabweans are “structurally subjugated” (Arnett 2016, 54). Their invisibility is randomly portrayed in the novel by a group of cameramen, wearing T-Shirts from CNN and the BBC, who compare the precarious settlement with the aftermath of a natural disaster: “it’s like a tsunami tore through this place, Jesus, it’s like a fucking tsunami tore this up” (Bulawayo 2013, 67).

Naming is an empowering practice that both contests and evinces invisibility in the novel. Darling’s friends play the “Country-Game” drawing imaginary maps on the ground, a game that sarcastically names the unfair distinctions of the piece of land where one is born. The playful geopolitical dynamics establish that first, the kids have to fight over the names, because each of them wants to be “certain countries, like everybody wants to be the USA, and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece. These are the country-countries” (49). A second stage in the game determines that, depending on who loses the fight, “you just have to settle for counties like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania. These are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here” (49). Ultimately, “[n]obody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this we live in—who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?” (49). The intertextual reference to Chinua Achebe’s canonical novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), through Darling’s rhetorical question, discloses the political disillusionment with national and foreign meaningful action for the population.

The names of the characters are also evocative and significant: Messenger, Destiny, Godknows, Bastard, Bornfree, Mother of Bones, Forgiveness and Darling. However, the narrator acknowledges that when Zimbabweans started fleeing from their country and settled down somewhere else, like in the United States, “a country-country”: “We did not know that they would think of us, what they would do about us. We did not want their wrath, we did not want their curiosity, we did not want any attention. We did not meet stares and we avoided gazes. We hid our real names, gave false ones” (242). This

excerpt from the chapter entitled “How They Lived” (237-250), succinctly describes the diaspora of three million Zimbabweans who left their country in the 1980s and how they tried to make themselves invisible in order to be accepted, even rejecting their real names and taking others that would make them belong, like “Aaron, Josh, Dana, Corey, Jack, Kathleen” (247). Interestingly enough, NoViolet Bulawayo was born Elisabeth Tshele and changed her name to NoViolet Bulawayo when she relocated to the United States; NoViolet means “with Violet” in her native Ndebele, recalling her deceased mother, and Bulawayo refers to the second largest city in Zimbabwe, where the writer spent part of her childhood. Even though she adopted an Africanized name, NoViolet causes semantic uncertainty in English, due to the use of the prefix “No.” This linguistic resource underscores the necessity for the colonial English to draw on the African language for the accurate meaning (Moji 2015, 183).

Even though the names are loaded with meaning, their referentiality is arbitrary and culturally constructed. This is apparent in the chapter entitled “We Need New Names” (78-88), where the group of children try to perform an abortion on Chipo, impersonating the characters in the popular US TV series, *ER*. Sbho announces, referring to herself, the patient and Darling: “In order to do this right, we need new names. I am Dr. Bullet, she is beautiful, and you are Dr. Roz” (82). Since Darling has no point of reference for *ER* and is unaware of what her new name means in terms of role, she stays silent and does nothing. Her inaction, due to the absence of information, suggests the necessity of dialogue between cultures. The scene also reveals the porosity of local space they occupy to international influence, while at the same time mocking the TV show through caricature and the rudimentary procedure that the children employ; they intend to use a clothes hanger to perform the abortion, which is ultimately prevented by one of the adults.

Humor pervades the novel, revealing how political action is nullified and becomes devoid of actual meaning after colonial segregation. In the chapter “Blak Power” (104-130), Bulawayo deliberately misspells the name of the 1960s US political slogan, “Black Power,” to describe how a gang of Zimbabweans break into several houses owned by white people in Budapest, the prosperous suburb, yelling “Africa for Africans!” (114). This event not only evinces unresolved racial and class tensions but it also reveals the lack of accessible schooling and, therefore, literacy: “we don’t go to school anymore. The teachers left,” they shout (109). The gang’s senseless violence and their misinterpretation of political action is parodied with the final inscription that they leave, “*Blak Power*” written in feces, on the toilet mirror in one of the mansions (130; emphasis in the original). In such an abject and grotesque scenario, the possibilities for real solidarity and belonging, beyond blind nationalism, seem scarce. Bulawayo is equally critical of the stifled opportunities for change and activism under Mugabe’s government. In “For Real” (131-146), the children imagine and mimic the real-life assassination of Bornfree, a young activist in the slum who promoted a campaign to make people aware of the importance of voting for political transformation. This time,

imagination is not a means to generate “a sovereign political community”—to borrow Benedict Anderson’s well-known phrase for the subjective processes of nation-building ([1983] 2006, 7)—but to recreate the disarticulation of communities.

Social precarity is presented through the community’s obsession with migration within and outside Africa, despite the evidence that migrant labor may lead to illness or family breakdown. Darling’s immigrant father returns from Johannesburg with AIDS, while her cousin Makhosi gets lung disease from digging for diamonds in the South African Madante mines. The local healer, Vodloza, even advertises his services to help with “BAD LUCK GETTING VISAS ESPECIALLY TO USA AND BRITAIN” (Bulawayo 2013, 27; emphasis in the original). The announcement is one of the few times that the United States is named as such because Darling always refers to it as “America” or “My America.” This designation leads her to fantasize about her future prosperity outside of Zimbabwe, activating the mythic narrative of the American Dream (wealth, status, assimilation into the dominant culture): “When I go to live with aunt Fostalina, that’s the kind of car I’ll drive [...] I just know, because of this feeling in my bones, that the car is waiting for me in America, so I yell, My Lamborgini, Lamborgini, Lamborgini Reventón!” (111). The United States is Darling’s destination in the second part of the novel, which begins with a chapter named “Destroyedmichygen” (147-184), sarcastically imitating the pronunciation of the city and the state altogether.

“My America” becomes the country where an adolescent Darling works in underpaid jobs, and where undocumented African migrants are invisible, as narrated in chapter seventeen (251-273), entitled “My America.” The designation “My America” brings to mind the eponymous collection composed of fictional diaries of children living through significant moments in the history of the United States (1609-1903). Immigration at the turn of the twentieth century is the motif of the last three diaries (“Sofia’s Immigrant Diary Series”) and they represent an immigrant child’s arrival in the Promised Land. However, in Bulawayo’s novel, the “America” formerly imagined becomes the locus of precarity and frustration: “When I’m not working at the store, I have to come here, even though I don’t like the idea of cleaning somebody’s house, of picking up after someone else, because in my head this is not what I came to America for” (Bulawayo 2013, 263). Precarity is most intensely depicted in “How They Lived” (237-250), a chapter that recounts the perils of undocumented migration and the Othering of a non-inclusive American Dream: “When they debated what to do with illegals, we stopped breathing, stopped laughing, stopped everything, and listened. We heard: exporting America, broken borders, war on the middle class, invasion, deportation, illegals, illegals, illegals” (242). Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) and Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) also explore the inaccessibility of the Dream for African migrants, whose dreams are “deferred” (Hughes [1954] 1990) or wholly cancelled. Selasi’s novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013) addresses the tensions of how a family of Ghanaian and Nigerian descent cope with the consequences of achieving the Dream; they realize that it was not created with black people in mind, and that it is gender biased.

Othering and the feeling of not belonging are more acute when an imagined “America” dissolves and a distant Africa is fictionalized. To US Americans, Africa becomes the overarching signifier of violence and poverty, thus erasing the locality of place and experience. One of the sources of this blurred fiction is the mass media. One such reference is inserted when Darling attends the interracial wedding of a family friend, Dumi, in South Bend (Indiana) and one of the white guests assumes that Darling is “African,” like the groom, who is actually Zimbabwean:

Jesus, the rapes, and all those killings! [...] I can't even process it. All those poor women and children. I was watching CNN last night and there was this little girl who was just—just too cute, she says. Her eyes began to mist and she looks down. I glance at the box of Kleenex at the edge of the counter and wonder if I should pick it up and hold it out to her. (Bulawayo 2013, 175-176)

The remarks pigeonhole two issues: the general reference to violence with no specific location or (postcolonial) context and the “commodification of suffering” in collective anonymity (Arnett 2016, 164). The over-simplified comments continue, even when Darling tells her (not the reader) the country where she comes from: “Africa is beautiful [...] But isn't it terrible what's happening in Congo? Just awful? Now she is looking at me with this wounded face. I don't know what to do or say” (Bulawayo 2013, 175). Later, the woman mentions that her niece is going to Rwanda to help in the Peace Corps: “you know, they are doing great things for Africa, just great [...] I nod, even though I don't really know what the woman is talking about. But her face is looking much, much better, like the pain from earlier is going away” (176).

Lasse Heerten notes that in the age of audiovisual mass media, the internationalization of “remote Third World countries” has become increasingly dependent on images of suffering (2017, 9). He specifically refers to how images of human suffering represented the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) as a depoliticized humanitarian crisis, which also signified a social relationship: “they denote the relationship between the global North and the global South in a postcolonial world” (9). Biafra visually encapsulated “the misery of the Third World” and the evocations of “global society children of sorrow also give a role to Western societies: that of savior” (10). Under the Western gaze, postcolonial conflicts turn into “spectacles of a suffering that the observers wish to alleviate” (10), as the block quote above reveals. The so-called “spectacle of the Other” was also theorized by Stuart Hall (1997), who paved the way for the study of representational practices and racial and ethnic difference stereotypes in visual popular culture.

Mass media further contributes to the alienation of immigrants living in the US. In chapter fourteen, Darling and her eighth grade school friends watch RedTube, a free on-line amateur pornographic site, for entertainment after class. She clarifies to the reader that Nigerian Marina and US born Kristal are her friends because they

live on the same street and go to the same school, pointing to the transitional state of their friendship (Bulawayo 2013, 199): “I click on Mute because when the real action starts we always like to be the soundtrack of the flicks. We have learnt to do the noises, so when the boy starts working the woman, we moan and we moan and we groan” (201-202). The description of this “underground” entertainment (they watch the clips in the basement of Aunt Fostalina’s house) illustrates the loss of innocence of the three girls and the commodification of sex. Each time they mute the clips and impersonate the porn characters, they take on different roles, stripping off their own identities. The girls’ voyeuristic gaze is focused on each film in turn, alphabetically; Darling even produces an inventory of those that they have watched (200). On one occasion the film dubbing game distracts Darling from a phone call that she receives from her mother and friends in Zimbabwe and, when she finally decides to answer, she explains that she does not identify with them anymore: “It’s hard to explain, this feeling; it’s like there’s two of me. One part is yearning for my friends [in Zimbabwe], the other doesn’t know how to connect with them anymore, as if they’re people I’ve never met” (210). She refers to that same feeling of agony and loss several times, while not being able to name it: “I don’t know whether to call it pain or anger or sadness, or whether it has a name” (197).

The other distraction the girls indulge in is driving to the mall and strolling through the stores, a spectacle of consumerism and opulence. Darling has not only learned to fake an American accent but also the trademarks of material accumulation. The same yearning that she cherished in Zimbabwe comes back in the mall parking lot: “right there, next to a black van, I see my car. I don’t even hesitate, I run to it, yelling, My Lamborgini, Lamborgini, Lamborgini Reventón!” (224). When her friends point out the exorbitant price of the car, Darling complains: “I’ll never own it, and if I can’t own it, does it mean I’m poor, and if so, what is America for, then?” (225). America, as a functional signifier of capitalism, teases her and all those who will never achieve the Dream. On the way to the shopping center, Darling has a daydream and sees herself back in Zimbabwe, at Queen Elizabeth Primary School, wearing a uniform with a picture of a rising sun, and the words “*Knowledge is Power*” written below it in red italics (220; emphasis in the original). The irony is evident: knowledge takes on imperialistic connotations in a postcolonial setting. The fusion of reality, imagination and dream imbues the passage with a dazzling patina, and music further contributes to the effect. The girls are listening to Rihanna on their expedition to the mall, although Darling listens to a different soundtrack in her head: “I hear myself singing this song we used to sing at school back home when we were little: Who discovered the way to India? / *Vasco da Gama! Vasco da Gama!*” (219). This time, a metaphorical parallelism is established between the narrative of discovery, constructed at British funded schools in Zimbabwe—overlapping the actual imperial colonization of America—and the girls’ incursion into the shopping center, which makes them complicit with the narrative of consumerism.

The closing chapter, set in Darling's present in Kalamazoo (Michigan), a year before she begins attending community college, reignites the feelings of loss and "in-betweenness" (Bhabha [1994] 2004, 2). A call from Chipo takes her back to memories of Zimbabwe and to confronting her friend, who accuses her of having "run off to America," leaving her country and people behind, and never going back. Guilt is part of Darling's new hybrid identity, although it is left unnamed in the novel. However, Chipo calls her by her full African name, for the first time: "Darling Nonkululeko Nkala" (Bulawayo 2013, 286). Ironically, the latest information which Darling has of Zimbabwe comes from the BBC and it is of suffering: "You think watching BBC means that you know what is going on? [...] 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" (285). Chipo's scornful tone slaps Darling in the face, leaving her without any feelings of national belonging: "It's your country, Darling? Really, it's your country, are you sure?" (286). Hence, Darling holds on to her vivid memories of place. The last one is sparked by the news of Bin Laden's death, a broadcast that Darling watches in Kalamazoo, and leads her to recall the time when she and her friends made spears out of branches in Paradise and playfully pretended to hunt for Bin Laden in order to collect the reward that "America" had offered (288). It is a symbolical fantasy of supremacy, interrupted by a sudden accident in which a truck full of Lobel's bread runs over a stray dog, named Bin Laden by the kids, killing it. This turn of events connects both "homes" with the thread of international political conflict and disarray, softened by the memory of fresh African bread. This final recollection metaphorically encapsulates the failed promise of a new beginning after killing Bin Laden, a shared enemy.

Dispossession permeates the new identity of a displaced Darling, who has no words to describe how she feels. Such nascent transnational identities need new inclusive names that tear down physical and imaginary walls. This might be the reason why Bulawayo named the last chapter "Writing on the Wall" (274-290). The wall stands for the physical separations of her room, where she writes with a red marker that "looks like blood" the words "*iBio iyirabisbi*" ["Biology is rubbish"], a protest in Ndebele against her Aunt Fostalina's insistence on her studying a science career "that counts" (275). This minor gesture of rebellion illustrates her longing for change and the desire to distance herself from an already defined (but not by her) path. This direction coincides with Selasi's revolt against pre-determined African identities outlined in her influential essay "Bye-Bye, Babar (or: What is an Afropolitan?)" (2009), in which she delineates the features of emerging "Afropolitan" identities of middle-class young African descendants in post-independence Africa and abroad.

However, Bulawayo distances herself from the depiction of a cosmopolitan, privileged experience. She creates instead a bleak fictional space that conjures up a postcolonial picaresque, where precarity and vulnerability are the connecting threads capable of weaving together diasporic identities. It is a diaspora consciousness nurtured

by the colonial dispossession of the Ndebele minority, who would later be considered a “foreign” group in their own territory. Banished to shantytowns like Paradise, they are already marginalized at home, so their invisibility and precarity starts in their homeland. Ifekwunigwe (2003) asks us to reconsider the status of diasporic identities separate from ahistorical and unifying tendencies. In this study, I have prioritized an analysis of social, economic and political vulnerability in the country of birth and in a Western destination, thus configuring postcolonial “precarious passages” (Valkeakari 2017) and belongings.

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