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Vassar College

Lost in Transnation

Reconciling Geographical, Linguistic and Cultural Distance

in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Introduction

“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”

--NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*

In her essay “Bye Bye Babar,” self-ascribed “Afropolitan” writer Taiye Selasie describes the plight of the “modern adolescent African,” who “is tasked to forge a sense of self from wildly disparate sources” (“Bye Bye”). Creating identity across culture, physical distance and language is no easy task, but NoViolet Bulawayo manages to embody Selasie’s statement through the most intimate yet public identifier: her name. Born Elizabeth Zandile Tshele, she made the change while attending college in Texas, shortly after she emigrated from Zimbabwe to the US. “No” means “with” in Nbedele, her first language, which comes as a prefix to “Violet,” her mother, who died when she was 18 months old. Her surname, “Bulawayo” is significant because, as she explains, “it is is the city of my people...where I grew up...being away from home and not being able to return for more than a decade created a kind of nostalgia” (“Writing,” Driver). Her name, a fusion of things lost and far away, was born out of distance—between home and the United States, between her family and her new sense of self, between herself and her readers. It also speaks of possibility; as writer Daisy Hernández says, “naming has its own brilliant power” (30).

In her debut novel, the aptly titled *We Need New Names* Bulawayo’s eleven year old narrator Darling crosses borders, renames countries and creates new definitions in order to “forge a sense of self” by melding together her personal and

geographical roots across distance. The novel, which started out as a Caines Prize winning short story called "Hitting Budapest," is split between Zimbabwe during the later years of Mugabe's regime and the American Midwest at the beginning of the millennium. Selasie describes the plight of young "Afropolitans," calling them "lost in transnation" ("Bye Bye"). Writers like Warsan Shire, Teju Cole and Selasie herself have embraced this "in-between" aesthetic, using it to create a sense of melancholic liminality in their work. Bulawayo, however, uses this mentality to create sharp, biting contrasts to emphasize the distinction between multiple worlds and languages, while also letting individual symbols linger in between. In Zimbabwe, Darling's friend Bastard wears a Cornell T-shirt, divorced from the context of the American university. Near the end of the novel Darling sees Kate, her boss's daughter, wearing the same shirt, and remarks, "I felt like I already knew the place, like we had a connection" (269). This moment of cross-cultural *deja-vu* embodies Selasie's sentiment, but the momentary link is lost when Darling "open[s] her mouth to tell Kate about Bastard...but then...there is nothing to say" (269). Much like the Cornell shirt, Darling lives in state of perpetual "transnation," constantly assuming new identities and creating different meanings in order to make sense of distance.

Bulawayo has the added challenge of communicating with disparate readerships, whose national identities Bulawayo never directly. Instead, Darling rewrites her personal history, speaking not of "America" and "Zimbabwe" (the name of her home country is not mentioned once), but rather "Paradise," the township where she grew up and "Destroyedmichagyn," her home in America and a space that she takes ownership over, through renaming. Darling frequently makes the

distinction between “America” and “My America,” reminding the reader that her experience is not generalizable, but singular. Bulawayo breaks from this specific style only three times—in chapters entitled “How They Appeared,” “How They Left” and “How They Lived,” during which Greek Chorus-like third and first person plural narrators give Darling’s child-like lens a wider postcolonial perspective that communicates the political as well as the personal. Near the end of the novel, these voices describe dreaming of their country, stating “we find ourselves surrounded by oceans we cannot cross...always we wake from these dreams groping for mirrors” (252). Bulawayo highlights the anxiety of selfhood that results from living between two physical, linguistic and cultural identities. She contrasts her narrators’ desire to see their reflections with the plurality of their voice. A chorus cannot have a sense of self, cannot see a singular image. Yet Darling also struggles with her own idea of selfhood—how does one create identity across distance? For her, attempting to bridge or at least reconcile the gaps are methods of merging the individual and collective self. The chorus of voices hence becomes a larger, more historical manifestation of this struggle.

Darling’s narration sets up clear divides between geographical location, language and culture. There is a sharp economic and physical gulf between Paradise and Budapest (the wealthy, primarily white neighboring community) and thousands of miles between Paradise and Destroyedmichagyn—both distances seem insurmountable. Similarly, Bulawayo leaves segments of Nbedele untranslated, leaving the reader who only speaks English to reckon with the translational gap. Casual conversation is also rendered fluidly, without quotation marks or indications

of specific speakers, which creates a linguistic gulf between the reader and speaker. Cultural distance is less literal, but permeates the novel through physical objects, such as guavas and Victoria's Secret push-up bras, and interactions as crucial as weddings or as trivial as phone orders.

Darling travels across the world, across two cultures and two languages, attempting to claim agency over objects, people and language. However, despite her attempts to bridge, build and reconcile, she remains trapped in between binaries, "lost in transation." She speaks of her fractured conception of "home," which is split physically between Zimbabwe and her new living situation in America. But even in Paradise, "home" is still subjective and changeable. She speaks of "two homes inside my head: home before Paradise and home in Paradise, home one and home two" (193). Since Darling's family was forcibly relocated to Paradise by the Zimbabwean government, her conception of "home" while in America is complicated. Her father also left their family for South Africa—an internal migration that created another extension of "home." When he comes back, dying of AIDS, Darling rejects him, stating: "*go back and leave us alone*"(93). However his existence, between the binary of two "homes," parallels Darling's plight later in the novel.

For older generations, the idea of "home" becomes not a binary, but a series of layers, since they have "three homes" inside their heads, "home before independence, before I was born...home after independence...and then the home of things falling apart, which made Aunt Fostalina leave and come [to America]" (193). Even in a single word, there are shifting identities, complex histories, a literary allusion and a variety of perspectives at play. Darling observes that generalization is

dangerous, warning, “when someday talks about home, you have to listen carefully, so you know exactly which one the person is referring to” (194). Bulawayo cannot encapsulate all of these definitions, but rather attempts, with a singular and specific narrative, to make sense of the ways in which they interact. Over the course of this non-linear, image-based narrative Darling navigates geographical, linguistic and cultural distance, and in her attempts to bridge these gaps, actively rewrites, renames and redefines her own identity.

A Note on Terminology:

Chandra Mohanty argues “there can...be no apolitical scholarship” (62). Critical writing is undoubtedly shaped by the author’s identity and mine will influence this thesis. As a white, female, American, English-speaking feminist, I hope to avoid, in my discourse, what Obiajunwa Wali calls “a patronage of doubtful intentions,” by being as specific as possible in my analysis of Bulawayo’s text (334). Wali’s comment ties into the complicated and controversial conception of “African Literature,” a term that I’ll reference as it pertains to relevant scholarship. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the “single story of Africa, a single story of catastrophe” that many Americans use to make judgments about all people, including writers, from the continent. This mentality comes in part from certain portrayals of Sub-Saharan Africa in “Western Literature,” as “a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness” (Adichie, “Danger”). Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer from a very different generation and context whom Adichie references in her lecture, sums this up in his famous essay on *Heart of Darkness* when he points out the need “in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe...at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest” (340). Bulawayo actively engages with this mindset by using irony and humor to undermine these assumptions.

The ways in which the text functions as a transnational feminist piece could make up a thesis of its own, but a brief summary is crucial to the understanding of distance. The central nature of the female characters, like Darling, Fostalina, Chipo and Mother of Bones, serves as a response to post-colonial conceptions of

masculinity, which often feminizes language, land and art as “fertile” material to be reclaimed by male protagonists and authors (Achebe, 348). I’ll explore this idea in depth in my section on language, but Bulawayo’s response to Achebe’s masculinist conception of the post-colonial writer comes across clearly in “How They Came,” when she describes the “crumbling” of “solid, Jericho walls of men,” upon their families’ relocation to Paradise:

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 the 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 (79).

Bulawayo’s sly challenge to Achebe, whose work she alludes to throughout the novel, demonstrates her attempt to both highlight and complicate the ideal of “female strength” in the post-colonial Zimbabwean context. Her portrayal of women extends beyond Paradise, and beyond the limits of “third wave feminism” as well. Transnational feminist scholar Leela Fernandes complicates the “wave” metaphor, which she argues is hegemonic. She claims that transnational feminist texts, such as *We Need New Names*, exist in a dangerous, liminal space that allows for more productive conversations, alluding to the “texture, depth and challenge” that these works possess (189). With this “texture” comes the complicated definition of “the transnational self,” one that I want to explore further in this thesis.

Bulawayo’s discussion of language, distance and translation evokes Gloria Anzaldúa, a transnational feminist writer from a drastically different cultural context whom Fernandes argues “exceeds the binary opposition between “second” and “third wave” feminism” (186). Anzaldúa’s discussion of the transnational

feminist “self” reflects the way in which selfhood operates in Bulawayo’s text.

Anzaldúa calls for “a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness,” during which she argues that the more expansive cultural and historical identity must merge with the individual writer or character (95).

Bulawayo has a similar contradiction between individual and collective selfhood, demonstrated by her first person and third person omniscient narration styles.

Darling’s selfhood is tied to location, culture and people, while the “collective” self reflects politics, history and structures of oppression. I plan to explore one facet of Darling’s “selfhood:” her individual self-conception, as it relates to distance, and the ways in which temporality and location allow the collective to bleed into the singular.

Boundaries and Paradoxes: The Distance Between Budapest and Paradise

Within the landscape of Bulawayo's narrative, vast economic divides make short geographical distances seem insurmountable. In the first chapter of *We Need New Names*, she sets up the divide between Budapest and the ironically named Paradise, a township hit hard by the country's hyperinflation and government corruption in the first decade of the millennium. Paradise is certainly far from Eden, and its residents include a pregnant eleven-year old, corrupt church figures, slimy local politicians and Darling's dying father, who has returned from South Africa with AIDS, "unable to move, unable to talk properly, unable to anything" (91). Yet it is situated running distance from Budapest, a rich, white suburb with "big, big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs and neat graveled yards or trimmed lawns, and the tall fences and the Durawalls"(6). The two are close yet disparate, separated by race, socioeconomic status and white fear. Bulawayo uses these two spaces, presented in the first chapter, as a parallel for a much larger geographical distance that comes with Darling's eventual emigration to America.

Paradise's name, which alludes to the Bible, Milton and Toni Morrison, seems to be the only form of control that its residents have over its existence. The township is a result of forced removal, which Bulawayo highlights in her chapter "How They Appeared," written in the omniscient 3rd person plural. "They did not come to Paradise," says the narrator, "coming would mean that they were choosers"(75). The land represents post-independence displacement and the disillusionment caused by Mugabe's Operation Murambatsvina, which means, "get rid of the trash" in Shona and was an attempt to crack down on the rising crime

rates and black market activity in lieu of the financial crisis. The plummeting value of the Zimbabwean dollar, which was valued at 31% of the US dollar in 2005, the year *Murambatsvina* was launched, saw an increase in “petty trading,” black markets and unlicensed businesses. Therefore the operation represented Mugabe’s desire to restore “sanctity and order” to the urban centers and ultimately led to dislocation of those already suffering from hyperinflation (Slaughter 2). The UN estimated that in its first year alone nearly 360,000 people were evicted from their homes in major cities like Harare and Bulawayo and forcibly relocated to townships like Paradise (Slaughter 2). Mugabe, who was Shona, cracked down particularly hard on Ndebele communities like Darling’s, due to deep seated tensions still simmering after the Shona vs. Ndebele conflict during the Second Chimurenga. Therefore Paradise’s name is especially significant as it represents a reversal of its biblical counterpart. Its residents were cast out by a threatening God-like ruler and sent to this false Eden to rebuild with nothing but “a nation’s memories” (78).

The novel sets up a locational foil—Budapest, the last retreat of the “evil white people who came to steal our land,” and the new class of wealthy Black elite, many of whom were complicit in Paradise’s creation (77). Named after a city also fraught with hyperinflation, Budapest represents a parallel universe, a chance to assert one’s place in a country that has, like America, failed its low-income residents. The vision of “opportunity” takes the form of padlocked houses, which are theoretically attainable to everyone in this new, “free” nation. “I’m blazing out of this kaka country myself,” says Bastard, the 11-year old loudmouth of the group, “then I’ll make lots of money and come back and get a house in this very Budapest. Or

even better, many houses: one in Budapest, one in Los Angeles, one in Paris” (15). The dream of leaving for America, achieving wealth and then returning to one’s country with a Green Card and improved social status in the community is wildly appealing to Paradise’s younger generation, the “Born Frees.” Darling and her friends did not fight for liberation, nor were they even alive during the way, but they are left to face a failing economy and a racial chasm—the aftermath of revolution.

The history of this revolution is never directly spoken of in the text, but its influence shapes landscape of Paradise and Budapest. The roots of colonialism in Zimbabwe can be traced back to the founding of Rhodesia, named after the infamous Cecil John Rhodes. Rhodesia, a self-governing British colony, was built upon white supremacy and minority rule. However, “the winds of change” began to sweep through sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s as Black Nationalists began to fight back against colonial governments in Kenya and the Congo and white Rhodesians started to feel the rumblings of revolution. In 1963, right before the start of the Second Chimurenga, or the Zimbabwean War of Liberation, Ian Smith made a Unilateral Declaration of Independence, proclaiming Rhodesia “independent” and garnering outcry and sanctions from the international community (Charlton 157).

While this desperate attempt to maintain white rule gained the attention of the rest of the world, it did little to stop the gathering forces of the Zimbabwean African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the armed wing of the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU), who used guerrilla tactics, landmines, and a strategic alliance with Mozambique to fight back against the Rhodesian government. Over the course of this 15 year bloody conflict, which estimated 20,000 fatal

casualties, a civil war between Shona and Nbedele resistance armies, a mandatory draft of all white Rhodesian men, excessive border conflict with Zambia and Mozambique, massive white emigration and a weak internal settlement that did very little to ease conflict or lift sanctions, the war came to an end in British Parliament (Charlton 155-60). The Lancaster House agreement made Zimbabwe its own country, provided that they elect a leader democratically. Freedom fighter Robert Mugabe won the majority of the vote in 1980 and Zimbabwe was declared an independent nation. However, the racial and ethnic war was not yet over. White settlers were desperate to keep their land and forced to reconcile with their fraught “African” identities. As writer Alexandra Fuller, who grew up during the War in a white Rhodesian family, states, “my soul has no home. I am neither African nor English nor am I of the sea” (36).

This “post-Rhodesian” racial conflict is shown twice on Budapest’s turf, both with trivial and dire consequences. As the children roam Budapest, staring the beautiful houses, they walk to “Chimurenga Street,” where they encounter a clueless, white British tourist who wears a “golden Africa” necklace and somewhat forcibly takes their pictures (7-9). While the children find the woman’s racism to be silly, the location speaks to a much deeper racial chasm, and the legacy of colonial destruction that ties this British tourist to Budapest’s violent history. A more loaded encounter occurs when a mob of angry Paradise residents show up to “reclaim” one of Budapest’s houses from its white owner. Darling and her friends “can tell from his voice that he despises...them all” but also remarks that the white house owner sounds “so full of pain like there is something that is searing him deep in his blood”

(121). The first encounter demonstrates the ignorance that arises from the distance between Paradise and Budapest; the second shows that the destruction of that distance is influenced by the history of violence imbued in the soil. Therefore, these racial conflicts maintain echoes of the brutality and racial hatred that preceded and permeated the revolution.

The dream of opportunity eventually disappoints, when Darling finally leaves Paradise. Bulawayo highlights a particular aspect of Bastard's aforementioned dream that poses a problem to the residents of Paradise—leaving is not nearly as hard as coming back. Darling begins the novel with the statement, “getting out of Paradise is not so hard.”(3). Though she is referencing her illicit trip to Budapest, Bulawayo seems to be alluding to “getting out” in terms of leaving for America. Later, during their excursion, Darling brags to her friends, “I’m going to America to live with my Aunt Fostalina, it won’t be long, you’ll see”(16).

Leaving Paradise to take a trip to Budapest is theoretically easy. Getting out to travel to America is more difficult due to many roadblocks such as visas, lack of funds, lack of relatives and loyalty to the community. But, if this statement applies to leaving for America, there is a sentiment left unspoken: “Getting out of Paradise is not so hard *but...*” Leaving is not nearly as hard as coming back, due to distance, whether it is geographical, cultural, linguistic or a combination of the three. Bastard replies to Darling's claim about leaving: “America is too far, you midget...what if you go there and find it's a kaka place and get stuck and can't come back?”(16).

When the children head back to Paradise after stealing guavas from the rich people's yards, the return seems easy. Darling observes, “we do not run. We just

walk nicely like Budapest is now our country too, like we built it even, eating guavas along the way and spitting the peels all over to make the place dirty” (13). Darling and her friends are not visiting Budapest, nor are they simply taking from it (“Hitting” it, as the chapter title proclaims), but rather actively reshaping its landscape. Darling’s words present unstable irony—she as the narrator cannot conceptualize, at age eleven, that Paradise and Budapest are part of the same country, but Bulawayo uses this uncertainty to comment on the incredible distance that exists, even within the span of a few miles. It also serves as a commentary on the complicated nature of the word “country” in a postcolonial context. Who has claim to Budapest, in this so called “free land?” Though the territory still seems unattainable, by dropping guava peels, Darling and her friends take ownership over Budapest. They are not only trying to reclaim this “foreign” land, created by systematic racism and economic inequality, but also change it by inserting symbols of their small “conquest.” The stealing of the guavas is not merely a game or an attempt to assuage hunger (though it serves both purposes), but rather a tiny act of rebellion against a neocolonial institution. By leaving behind signs of this resistance, they are reshaping the landscape and effectively reclaiming Budapest, a result of both colonial structures and Mugabe’s oppressive regime in the post-war era.

The image of guavas returns when Darling is staying with Aunt Fostalina, having left Paradise for a land even more promising than Budapest: “Destroyedmichigan,” and later Kalamazoo. Guavas are rare in the Midwest and limited to “expensive white people,” like Eliot, Darling’s boss and his daughter Kate. This limited access parallels their function in Budapest—a luxury item, cultivated

and guarded. However, in this new space, Darling feels unsafe and unable to reclaim spaces that have been made financially and physically inaccessible. She thinks back to the guavas when she asks her aunt about visiting home and is greeted with “silence, like [she] didn’t even hear me speak” (187). At that moment, surrounded by “stacks of magazines,” and “drinking a Capri sun from a straw,” Darling is faced with the insurmountable geographical distance between her two homes. Aunt Fostalina seems resigned, but Darling begins to eat a guava and muses: “how can she understand that each time I take a bite, I leave the house, Kalamazoo and Michigan, leave the country altogether and find myself back in Paradise, in Budapest?” (188). Here Bastard’s words return to haunt her—she has gone too far and is unable to return. The trip from Budapest to Paradise becomes a synecdoche for the much larger distance between Paradise and “Destroyedmichygen,” a territory that she recreates for herself, just as she and her friends did with Budapest. Language, however, proves a more powerful tool than dropped guava peels. Darling finds that by giving places “new names” (as the title implies), she can redefine foreign spaces. Hence naming becomes a survival mechanism for straddling these distances.

She makes the distinction between “America” and “My America,” as she attempts to write her friends back home (190). One is cold, harsh and “destroyed,” by inequality, a place where the “bang-bang-bang of gunshots” keeps her inside and “a woman a few houses down from ours drowned her children in a bathtub”(190). Destroyedmichygen is no paradise, literally or metaphorically, but Darling tries to transform this landscape into the glossier image of America that she spoke of in the first chapter. She is forced to confront the vast distance between these two

countries—the one that she created and the one permeated by “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”(150). Her solution? She stops writing altogether. The America that she lives in is not the one that she and her friends discussed while guava stealing in Budapest. But despite her disappointment, she occupies a space of privilege that sets her apart from Bastard, Chipo and Sbho. She cannot seem to surmount this distance, therefore she finds it easier to put down the pen and let Paradise exist in her imagination, just as America exists in theirs. Since she cannot bridge the distance between these two locations, nor live on either side of the binary (she can still taste the guavas, despite the fact that she no longer has access to them), she must rename objects in her new environment and embrace this liminal space between two countries.

Linguistic Distance: English, Reclamation and “Afropolitians”

As well as straddling multiple towns, countries and communities, Bulawayo is also “juggling two languages” (“Zimbabwean”). She does so with skill and control, bending, fracturing and manipulating English, while injecting her prose with snippets of Ndebele, her first language. “I don’t speak English every day,” she said in another interview, “in writing I have to arrive in translation” (“Close,” Rosen). This translation process operates in the context of Achebe, Wali and N’gugi Wa Thiong’o, whose canonized scholarship on English presents opposing views on its use in “African Literature.” This label itself is problematic for reasons outlined in the Introduction—the multiplicity of linguistic identities across the continent, its use in colonial education systems and the Eurocentric nature of the term to name a few. But, the utilization or condemnation of “the language of the oppressor” is an important scholarly argument that implicitly shapes Bulawayo’s work.

Wali blatantly states that the concept of “African Literature” written in English “leads nowhere”(330). He argues that by writing primarily in the language of colonization, African narratives become automatically geared towards the West, rather than feeding back into the communities upon which said narratives are based. Furthermore, writers measure themselves by the standard of glorified white European and American male writers, whom they have grown up reading in colonial school systems (333). As these same writers gain popularity in America and Britain, they engage in another form of the Brain Drain, in which members of the “intellectual elite” write for those outside of their own nation.

He demands that “Western” scholars abandon their paternalistic attitudes about “African Literature” and delve into fields of translation rather than practicing “patronage of doubtful intentions”(334). He emasculates his contemporaries, such as Achebe and Soyinka, stating “until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they are merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration” (333). Bulawayo alludes to the substance that sometimes gets lost in translation in an interview: “Ndebele is my ancient language, the language of intimacy. And as much as I’m fine with communicating in English it doesn’t have that weight for me” (“Zimbabwean”). According to Wali’s argument, there is a creative loss that occurs when one sacrifices the intimacy of one’s first tongue. Bulawayo’s criticism of some Zimbabwean literature reflects fragments of his theory: “most of our literature in English tries to sound English in a sense” (“Writing About Women”). The distinction between writing in English and “sounding” English though, is crucial and one that Achebe makes a case for.

Chinua Achebe, often called the “grandfather” of African Literature (a problematic statement in itself, since it assumes that the continent did not have a literary tradition before American high schoolers started reading *Things Fall Apart*) directly responds to Wali’s argument. Achebe calls English “the world language that history has forced down our throats,” but acknowledges its power nonetheless (346). He encourages writers to harness this influence in a Calibanesque use of “the language of the oppressor,” twisting it to convey the experiences of the oppressed and subtly undermine the complacent native speaker. He defies the colonial

implications of writing in English by claiming ownership: “I have been given this language and I intend to use it” (347). Achebe also responds directly to Wali’s “sterility” jab by citing writers like poet Christopher Okigbo or J.P. Clark, who manipulate a second tongue in beautiful, surprising ways. This liminal space of translation, or “transnation” according to Selasie, allows for writers like Bulawayo to create new meanings. He calls his contemporaries, which Wali condemns, “a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language” (347).

Bulawayo embodies this “new voice” nearly 50 years after Achebe’s treatise on English was published. In a *New York Times* review, author Uzodinma Iweala calls her writing, not postcolonial but fitting into Selasie’s conception of an “Afropolitan” identity (“We Need”). Selasie elaborates on her definition, calling “Afropolitans,” “the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you” who come from a variety of cultures, nations and racial identities and are characterized by their “willingness to complicate Africa – namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them.” (“Bye Bye”). This new generation of writers, which include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, Warsan Shire and Petinah Gappah among others, have complicated Wali and Achebe’s arguments. While decolonizing still remains a goal, distance, individual and collective selfhood and transnational identity become central conflicts (“Bye Bye”).

Another difference between Achebe’s generation and the “Afropolitan” mentality is a heightened awareness of gender dynamics, especially in relation to

language. Wali's accusations of "sterility" and reference to the "Western midwives" of his contemporaries allude to English as a form of emasculation. The systematic attack on "African" manhood played a major role in colonialism, and therefore reclamation of "the mother tongue" could represent a reassertion of this masculinity. Achebe responds directly to this jab: "far from leading to sterility, the work of many new African writers is full of the most exciting possibilities" (347). Bulawayo's transnational feminist perspective moves away from this masculinist language and paints images of resourceful women, like Darling and Fostalina, who see new landscapes as an opportunity for change, whether internal (through Fostalina's weight loss) or external (through Darling's renaming). The male characters however, remain stunted, rooted in "infertile" masculinity. Uncle Kojo takes to aimlessly driving (Darling renames him "Vasco de Gama"), Darling's father withers from AIDS after a failed attempt at emigration and Tshaka Zulu spends the remainder of his days in a mental institution (261). The male characters' inability to change, adapt and create new meanings condemns them to static existences, implying that transnational feminist identity has a greater possibility for growth.

Gloria Nne Onyeoziri, another member of this newer generation, builds on Achebe's claim and addresses the cultural gap between the English-speaking "Afropolitan" writer and the community. She claims, "irony can be a response to an oppressor convinced of his superior wisdom" (1). It becomes a powerful tool of communication for those with "divided allegiance," namely African authors publishing in English, who make up Bulawayo and Selasie's generation of "Afropolitan" transnational writers (25). Onyeoziri digs into duality, or what she

calls “double voiced” prose, which sets up the contradiction crucial to all irony—the distance and blurred identities that come with emigration, scholarship and the use of English (20). Caught in between two languages, two communities and two cultures, irony becomes a defense and a bridge for younger “Afropolitan” authors.

Onyeoziri argues that many such writers use unstable irony, in which the directionality, power dynamics or intention is not always clear due to the discursive communities that they are addressing. Irony and humor become ways to find the “sense of self” that Selasie examines, across geographical, linguistic and cultural borders (“Bye Bye”). Unstable irony therefore serves a double purpose for the postcolonial African writer. In addition to a subtle attack on “patronage of doubtful intentions,” it can also be a tool of healing, used to bridge the messy cultural gap between the intellectual “Afropolitan” elite and their small, often rural, communities (Wali, 334). These writers occupy a liminal space, straddling two drastically different worlds while trying to address both.

Bulawayo uses “unstable” verbal irony in *We Need New Names* to convey linguistic distance. Early in the novel, she twists the words of a Western news reporter from either “CNN” or “BBC,” which Bulawayo purposefully lumps together, perhaps as an ironic jab at America and Britain’s racist overgeneralization of “Africa.” The reporter compares Paradise’s destruction by the Zimbabwean government to “a fucking tsunami”(69). Darling is confused by his simile: “I say to Verona, What is a fucking tsunami? And she says...didn’t you see that time on TV, how it came out of the water and left all those people dead in that other country?”(69-70). Bulawayo first takes the reporter’s words, which set up a familiar

trope, in which the American/British civilian is shocked by the “horror” of “African” violence, and changes the meaning. The word itself has several layers, since its origin is Japanese, but it’s being used by an English-speaking American to describe a Ndele-speaking community, who are at various levels of English proficiency. The children then take this word (“foreign” to the journalist himself, as well as to them) and create their own definition: “A fucking tsunami walks on water, like Jesus, only it’s a devil”(69). They, like Achebe, actively rewrite English. The paradoxical image of a natural disaster looking divine at first, but leaving a destructive, satanic wake is striking, leading to the type of “fertile” poetry that comes from translation, according to Achebe. The ironic resonance of their words sinks in when Verona says: “a fucking tsunami...left all those people dead in that other country”(70). At first glance, the “joke” seems to be at the expense of Verona, who does not see that as she distances herself from “horror” in an unnamed far away place, this reporter will allow the rest of the world to do the same with images of their community, which he takes liberally. However, Bulawayo uses her words to complicate this irony and show the problematic nature of the reporter’s assumptions. To him, their situation looks like a tsunami, to them, that word brings up images of a far away world that is even worse. While he others them, they actively twist his words and create their own vocabulary.

In *Paradise*, Darling speaks English rarely, and only with “foreign” characters, such as when she talks on the phone to the British family of the man whose house was raided in Budapest. She notes her friends’ jealousy as she speaks to these distant, disembodied voices, stating “everybody is looking at me like I’m something”

(131). Here, English becomes a status symbol, which distances Darling from Chipo, Sbho, Godknows and Bastard. When a “new voice” comes onto the line, and starts speaking Nbedele, Darling first laughs (a white person speaking her language is a rarity) but then feels “disappointed because [she] wanted to keep speaking in English”(131). Again, she plays into the mission-education established hierarchy that places English above Nbedele. But, more than accepting the “world language that has been forced down [her throat]” in school, Darling realizes the power that her language ability holds, especially in regards to translation (Achebe 346). The white people on the other line attempt to communicate with *her* across distance—for them, her words are powerful and potentially life changing. When the man on the phone switches to Nbedele, he becomes the translator and gains power over the situation. Therefore, Darling’s disappointment is not merely internalized oppression, but also recognition of translation as a powerful, potentially life or death force.

Darling’s relationship with English intensifies when she moves to Destroyedmichagyn, and her fluency increases. This heightened understanding, which she lacks in the interaction with the reporter, becomes a source of distance between her and her Aunt Fostalina. Three levels of such distance characterize a crucial but seemingly quotidian interaction between Fostalina and a Victoria’s secret employee, as her aunt attempts to “order her push up bra on the phone,” an act that is evocative of white American female beauty standards (195). Bulawayo echoes the linguistic power dynamics of the Budapest phone call, but this time reverses the roles. Fostalina is now in the position of the white British family—she

needs something and linguistic distance is the barrier, heightened by the physical distance of a phone call. In this case, the Victoria's secret salesgirl holds the linguistic power. She is white, English-speaking, American and the key to Fostalina's desired product.

Darling watches this personal yet perfunctory interaction unfold. There is a level of sensory distance, since Darling hears both sides of the conversation (the salesgirl is presumably on speakerphone) but is only able to see one, through reading Aunt Fostalina's body language and facial expressions. Darling observes Fostalina's frustration, anger and humiliation while the salesgirl, a disembodied, "bored" and inhumane voice, is unable to "see" Fostalina, both because of her physical distance on a surface level as well as her implicit racism and xenophobia on a more ingrained level. Without seeing, understanding is impossible. Bulawayo attempts to bridge this distance through highlighting sound and sight from several different perspectives: Darling's, Fostalina's and the salesgirl's.

The central conflict of the scene lies in a linguistic misunderstanding, a more biting version of a Vaudevillian farce. The salesgirl cannot seem to understand Fostalina's accent over the phone. Darling describes her aunt's futile efforts to bridge the gap: "angel, angel, angel, Aunt Fostalina says, raising her voice even louder," despite the fact that the girl on the other line cannot understand (196). Darling finds this distance, in a way, comedic. Like "Who's On First," the Abbott and Costello sketch that hinges on misinterpretation and semantics of pronouns, Aunt Fostalina's "Ah-nghe-l" cannot be understood across the physical distance of the phone line and the linguistic distance between their accents. As an observer, Darling

stands in the middle of this the gap, holding the key: "I silently mouth--*enjel. Enjel*" (197). She controls the missing link between these two parties (her Americanized accent) yet ultimately can do nothing to help the situation without injuring Fostalina's pride, a factor much more important than obtaining the bra.

Aunt Fostalina responds to this distance with anger and frustration, which mask shame, yelling, "what do you mean you don't know what I'm saying? Such a simple word!" (197). The salesgirl, on the other hand, remains disengaged. Darling remarks, "you can tell from her voice that she is getting tired from trying to understand" (197). Boredom and indifference are the result of the girl's privileged position, both as gateway to Fostalina's purchase and possessor of an even more desired object: American English. Darling says of such people (who represent a large portion of her readership), "the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don't know how to listen; they are busy looking at your falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying" (196). Imagery of seeing and hearing comes back in this passage, and Bulawayo suggests that both are crucial to understanding. The salesgirl can only hear Aunt Fostalina, just as "those who speak only English" can solely see the speaker's mistakes. Darling occupies the more compassionate position of listener and viewer, and can therefore understand the situation holistically, hearing Fostalina "dragging out the word like she is raking gravel," as well as seeing her "knotted face" as she talks "with her hands" (197).

Despite this potential for understanding, Darling's "they" extends not just to the salesgirl, but also to the monolingual reader. Fostalina, like Bulawayo, turns to words in order to combat distance, using written English as a tool against the

failures and humiliations of speech. Darling observes, “she has scribbled the word *angel* all over the magazine, and the naked woman with the bra and underwear is all clothed in black ink, the letters like angry insects” (197). Through this violent imagery, Fostalina projects the shame, anger and distrust she feels for the disembodied voice of the salesgirl onto this inanimate photo. Her writing becomes a sea of “angry insects,” swarming this symbol of American female beauty standards, which capitalistic society tells her she can purchase, through hard work and assimilation. Yet, though she has money and speaks English, she is still denied access to this emblem of pulchritude and sex appeal. With her small act of rebellion, she uses the very word she cannot convey to fight back against the girl on the other end of the line, the girl in the photo and the American beauty standards force her to take up less space.

However, she also does not hang up the phone, does not use the medium of English with which she is more comfortable. “I am not. Ordering. Online,” she states firmly, when the salesgirl brings up the possibility, in an attempt to get her off the call (198). Even though Fostalina, like Darling, feels more powerful, more comfortable and more in control behind a pen or keyboard than she does on the receiver, Fostalina pointedly denies this option, still trying desperately to make herself understood. While speaking, “she pokes the Victoria’s Secret woman’s face with the pen as she says each word,” another intersection between sound and sight and a clear indication that her pen has become a literal and metaphorical sword that is more powerful than the salesgirl suspects (198). Fostalina’s small gestures at

barbing English against an oppressor speak to Achebe's larger call to use "the world language that history has forced down our throats" to regain power (Achebe, 346).

Bulawayo uses the distance between Aunt Fostalina and the salesgirl to speak about a broader distance between herself and her readers. Her assertion that writing in English requires her to "arrive in translation" indicates her role as mediator, translator and emissary between disparate audiences, just as Darling acts as a "translator" for the white family calling Budapest and a bridge between Fostalina and the salesgirl ("Close," Rosen). As she observes her aunt, Darling speaks to the difficulty of internalizing a second language: "you 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's messed up" (196).

Through Darling, Bulawayo attempts to communicate, across distance, with her two disparate readerships. By using the second person, she puts readers that fall into the category of "those who speak only English" in the position of one without their privilege, forcing them to empathize rather than fulfill the role of the girl on the phone—sympathetic at best, judgmental at worst. But for the multi-lingual reader, the second person takes on a different tone. It becomes intimate, as she validates and universalizes the experience of being misunderstood.

The third distance that Bulawayo attempts to bridge is the one between Darling and Fostalina, which mirrors the gap between Bulawayo, an educated, potentially "Afropolitan" emigrant who has mastered "the language of the oppressor," and her own community. The scene is characterized by Darling's overwhelming sense of embarrassment, both for Aunt Fostalina and for herself. She

has achieved a level of assimilation, marked by her diverse group of American friends and her initiation into “American” adolescence with shows like “Dora the Explorer” (ironically used to teach English-speakers another language), and “That’s So Raven, Glee and Friends,” which she uses to cultivate her accent. She learns about “American” womanhood, from the Victoria’s Secret catalogues and by watching porn in her classmate’s basement while she and her friends provide “the soundtrack for the flicks” (203). And, most importantly, she collects an arsenal of American phrases, like “*pretty good, pain in the ass, for real*” and “*yikes,*” which she stores “under her tongue like talismans, ready to use” (196). This successful assimilation creates a gap between Fostalina and Darling, which becomes most visible when she says, of her aunt’s “vibrating” accent, “I promise myself I’ll never ever sound like that”(199). Fostalina, after finally spelling out the word for the salesgirl, leaves the room with a seemingly inscrutable expression: “I don’t quite know whether to call it pain or anger or sadness, or whether it has a name” (199). Darling, who reconciles distances through naming, is unable to bridge the gap of assimilation between her and her aunt. This inability to understand her own family is in a way just as painful as the salesgirl’s casual yet violent misunderstanding.

Bulawayo attempts to bridge this gap by switching to the future tense, and having Darling imagine what Fostalina will do next. Darling asserts that she will go downstairs, stare at the mirror and replay the conversation with herself. “I know that in front of that mirror Aunt Fostalina will be articulate that English will come alive on her tongue, and she will spit it like it’s burning her mouth, like it’s poison, like it’s the only language she has ever known”(200). Bulawayo’s sharp,

unapologetic diction highlights the violence of assimilation, masked by Darling's innocent imitation of "Spongebob" and "That's So Raven." The pity, fear and disgust that she feels for her Aunt manifests in Fostalina's fervent attempt to claim English for her own. While the imagery of English as "poison" evokes Wali and the oppressive nature of assimilation, it conveys an Achebian use of English as a tool of liberation. For Darling, Fostalina and Bulawayo, words are walls, but they are also sledgehammers.

Cultural Distance: Absence, Excess and Bodily Discipline

Bulawayo defines the cultural distance between Paradise and Destroyedmichygn (her pocket of America) by absence rather than excess. The sights, sounds and people not present in this new territory characterize Darling's first description of it:

You will not see any men seated under a blooming jacaranda playing draughts. Bastard and Stina and Godknows and Chipo and Sbho will not be calling me off to Budapest. You will not hear a vendor singing her wares, and you will not see anyone playing the country-game or chasing after flying ants. Some things only happen in my country, and this here is not my country (149).

America is typically thought of as the Promised Land, an orgy of luxury cars, plentiful supermarkets and ubiquitous opportunity. However, Darling's first observations are characterized by loss rather than overabundance. She mourns the absence of people—both strangers, like the man under the jacaranda, and loved ones, like her mother (a street vendor) and her group of friends. She also remarks on the loss of the country game, a playful and childish attempt at migration that has become a more brutal reality.

Bulawayo skims over the details of Darling's physical emigration, instead relying on a moment of prose spoken by a third person omniscient narrator, the same tactic used in "How They Appeared." In "How They Left," Bulawayo emphasizes the transgressive nature of borders and the sense of forcible renaming that occurs when emigrants are forced to flee to countries "who names they cannot pronounce"(146). By alluding to loss of speech and agency that come with mandated English, Bulawayo marks the intersection of cultural and linguistic distance. She uses both the third person plural ("they") and the second person

("you") in this section, as an attempt to communicate between disparate audiences and establish a link between the personal and the collective.

The second person also appears in Darling's aforementioned description of her new home. As she surveys Destroyedmichygen's landscape, she invites the readers, regardless of identity or national origin, to put themselves in her shoes by tentatively asking them to "come here where I am standing and look outside the window" (149). By placing her outside the action, behind the glass pane, Bulawayo alludes to the gap between Darling and this new territory, which gives her a sense of safety, enforced by her ability to rename her new home and therefore claim ownership. Unlike the collective emigrant voice in the previous chapter, Darling's renaming becomes a source of power and a means of defining these "unpronounceable" new words and territories. Images of sight and observation from the phone conversation resurface here—there is power in Darling's ability to survey her new "home," but the window highlights her position as a spectator rather than an active participant, a role that exists within a liminal space but also prevents her from actively engaging with "foreign" turf (as she does with the guavas in Budapest). Here in DestroyedMichygan, a space that she has defined through renaming, the distance—linguistic, cultural and physical—is much greater, and therefore the stakes are higher.

Absence also takes on the form of weight loss and bodily discipline as another form of redefinition through assimilation. Aunt Fostalina's disordered eating, dieting and obsession with fitness are an attempt to reconcile two notions of female beauty. Just as the stereotype of America created in Paradise, "the one we'd

seen on TV when we were little” doesn’t fit with Darling’s emigrant reality, fatness and thinness also convey cultural distance across borders (189). Darling states, “in America, the fatness is not the fatness I was used to at home.” She describes women in Paradise as possessing a “fatness you could envy. It was fatness that did not interfere with the body; a neck was still a neck, a stomach a stomach...but this American fatness...the body is turned into something else”(173). Like the idea of excess, opulence and opportunity that the residents of Paradise cling to, this American conception of fatness becomes dehumanizing and empty in reality. Bulawayo implies that large bodies become grotesque in an American context, perhaps because of patriarchal standards of beauty that prevent women from taking up space. Capitalist consumer culture, represented by the “Angel” push-up bra, also commodifies thinness, turning it into a symbol of wealth and prosperity.

In Paradise thinness denotes starvation, lack of resources and the possibility of disease. Darling describes her father as “just length and bones” upon his return from South Africa (92). Here, his thinness is shameful and destructive—a visual symbol of the toll that AIDS takes on one’s body and social standing. Anthropologist Carolyn Martin Shaw interviews women in Harare about beauty standards, observing that they “worry about being too thin,” as thinness could be associated with these same stigmatized issues (Shaw 72). She also notes that thin women are often considered less romantically and sexually desirable, stating, “a ‘strong’ or big body size is a sign of respectability in a married woman and wealth in families.” One of her male interviewees expresses the ultimate blow to sexual self-confidence when he claims that he “felt sorry for [thin women]” (72).

Aunt Fostalina's obsession with the American ideal of thinness therefore becomes a rejection of Zimbabwean culture and an attempt to fit into the deficiency that permeates *Destroyedmichygn*. She begins obsessively exercising, "walking and walking and walking...when she walks she whips her arms front to back like a mjinga and counts at the same time" (150). Thinness and fitness become tools of assimilation, emblems of her "American-ness," which manifests in her constant attempts to compare herself to other emigrant family members and women back home. She pesters Darling: "You think I'm losing weight? Who is fatter, me or Aunt Da? Who is fatter, me or your mother?(157). Thinness and assimilation become competitions in which the stakes are crucial. By losing weight, becoming thinner and taking up less space, she is not only distancing herself from Zimbabwean ideals of female beauty but also pitting herself against other women in a similar position and using shaming as an assimilation tool. Her weight loss regime is not only influenced by consumerism (through objects like her fashion magazines and new juicer) but actually becomes a part of the American capitalist system—competing against others in order to assimilate and obtain a seemingly achievable ideal.

Much like Nyasha in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Fostalina sees this bodily discipline as a form of breaking free from Zimbabwe's patriarchal structure. When she comes home with only fruits and vegetables, Uncle Kojo criticizes her: "Ever since you started this weight thing you never cook...you know, in my country, wives actually cook hot meals every day for their husbands and children" (157). Their son TK responds by muttering "patriarchal motherfucker" as Fostalina lets loose a string of Ndele epithets, which Kojo cannot

understand (158). TK's comment and Fostalina's vitriolic response both emphasize the cultural gap between her and Kojo, who is Ghanaian. She resents him for attempting to control her body and not validating her assimilation attempts. His request is not necessarily tied to Ghanaian femininity (the expectation that wives cook for their husbands is present in America and Zimbabwe as well), but his use of "my country" emphasizes their different backgrounds, and turns that distance against her by implying that she is not being a "good" wife or woman in his eyes. Nyasha also starves herself in order to break free from patriarchal rule and reject Baba's conception of ideal womanhood. But more broadly, she wants to gain control over her body, and "to prevent brutalization at the hands of colonialism and patriarchy" (Patchay, 150). Anorexia therefore becomes a response to the multiple layers of oppression she experiences in pre-revolution Rhodesia, at the hands of Baba, Black male community leaders and ultimately the white-supremacist government

Like Nyasha, Fostalina has rejected one ideal, only to be entrapped by another. Bulawayo highlights the power dynamics surrounding Fostalina's body at the wedding of her Zimbabwean college ex, Dumi, to a white American woman. Before the wedding, Fostalina and Darling spend "hours and hours" trying on dresses at JC Penny and eventually, the former chooses "a long strapless, cream dress that [clings] to her body" (172). Her color choice reveals her worship of the competitive femininity detailed in fashion magazines, which she uses as manuals for dieting, female relationships and assimilation. At the reception, Fostalina revels in her new dress and her thinness, "all smiles looking at the couple." Darling observes

that this happiness is contingent on the fact that the “bride is fat and ugly” (174). This interaction is not only a tool of validation for Fostalina—it is a tool of assimilation. With her “cream” dress and her thin body, she tries to assert that she is, in a way, *more* American, and therefore more appealing than Dumitru’s new spouse who does not fit in with these beauty ideals. Her emigrant experience has been characterized by absence of money, community and care, so she transforms this absence into a form of control that she hopes will allow her to gain access to cultural (and legal) citizenship, just as Dumitru has done through his strategic marriage. Like Nyasha, she wants to challenge “her status as a *good African woman*” and become a “good” American one, informed by the patriarchal and capitalistic beauty standards of fashion magazines (Patchay, 150). But through her consumption of these ideals, she has become entrenched in another system of oppression—one characterized by dearth in the face of excess. Shaw notes the difference between American women’s magazines, which show violent “sodomasochistic” images and thin “heroin chic” women, in contrast to the more domestic imagery presented in many South African and Zimbabwean publications, which focus on cooking, household tips and hairstyles (70-72). As Fostalina analyzes, devours and picks apart these idealized female bodies on the pages, she distances herself from her own cultural standards of womanhood.

Nyasha’s influence appears again with the introduction of the white, affluent, American daughter of Darling’s employer, Kate, who obsessively diets even though her fridge is “bloated with food” (270). While cleaning Eliot’s house, Darling reads Kate’s diary and discovers that she “is starving herself” because “when she looks in

the mirror she sees an ugly fat cow" (268). Darling is at first shocked and amazed by Kate's behavior and wonders "how she lives and deals with the hunger, those long, terrible claws that dig and dig into your stomach," but her shock turns to scorn when she sees "her breakfast arranged on her plate—five raisins, one little round thing and a glass of water" (268-70). Darling "burst[s] out laughing" and, to the reader, addresses Kate, whom she calls "Miss I Want to Be Sexy" directly: "no matter how much you starve yourself, you'll never know real, true hunger...what's more you're here, living in your own country of birth" (270). While Kate and Fostalina hold themselves to the same American, patriarchal beauty standards, they starve themselves for opposite reasons. Kate operates from a place of privilege and excess while Fostalina attempts to mediate absence in order to control her own lack of resources and make herself more American, more like Kate. Starving in the face of plentiful resources is a clear symbol of status and glamour, and in both Fostalina and Darling's eyes, an indication of what it means to be privileged. While Darling mocks Kate and detests the paradoxical nature of her relationship with food, she also acknowledges that Fostalina engages in the same behaviors. In the case of the latter, starvation becomes a tool of bridging cultural distance, rather than an expression of excess.

Conclusion: Reconciling Distance

Bridging distance requires claiming and renaming the liminal space between two countries, two cultures and two languages. It requires allowing both sides a way in, while leaving room for uncertainty. Despite engaging with various levels of distance throughout the novel, Darling is still unable to fit neatly into any of these labels, spaces or communities. Her third and final “phone call” touches once again on the limits of seeing, hearing and understanding across multiple layers of distance. This time, she Skypes with Chipó, now a young woman raising her daughter in Paradise, whose voice the reader hears for the first time in the novel. Back in Paradise, when “her stomach started showing, she stopped talking,” so this Skype conversation marks the first time she is allowed to speak (4). The medium represents a technological intersection of seeing and hearing that allows the two parties imitations of intimacy, while highlighting the vast physical distance between them. It creates a liminal space, a kind of “in-between” contact, which reflects Darling’s “lost in transnation” mindset during their interaction.

Darling’s three phone calls over the course of the novel demonstrate a progression of seeing, hearing and understanding. While talking to the far-away British family in Budapest, she hears but cannot see or fully understand English. While watching Aunt Fostalina talk to the Victoria’s secret salesgirl, Darling can see, hear and understand both sides of the conversation. This scene solidifies her role as emigrant, translator and “in-between” cultural citizen. However, in this final conversation, she is granted full sight (via Skype) and full ability to hear, yet her

understanding is fractured despite the fact that the two women speak in Ndele, Darling's first language.

Darling, feeling the immense physical, emotional and cultural distance between them, attempts to bridge the gap. "I know it's bad," she starts off "...what they have done to our country...last week I saw on BBC—" to which Chipu responds sharply, "You are not the one suffering. You think watching it on BBC means you know what is going on?" (287). Darling has inadvertently become the nameless reporter from "CNN or BBC" whom she mocks and resents at the beginning of the novel. She has internalized the American "single story of catastrophe," which has been used to other her, both in *Destroyedmichagyn* and in *Paradise*. But now, with the detachment of a Skype call, she begins to "feel sorry" for Chipu, an emotion that she despises in white Americans (286). Therefore, the BBC comment is an attempt to bridge this gap and cover pity with anger "at our leaders, for making it all happen, for ruining everything," (287) just as the reporter's comment about the "fucking tsunami" is an attempt to reconcile painful and insurmountable distance with an unproductive outburst of emotion (69).

After Chipu reprimands her, Darling tries to repair the damage by claiming, "it's my country too. It's our country too," a clear attempt to bridge distance with the invocation of community and loyalty (288). Chipu responds with a "crazy womanly laugh" and reprimands Darling:

Really, it's your country, are you sure?...Why did you run off to America, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, huh? ...If it's your country, you have to love it to live in it and not leave it...and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent you were not even born with, that doesn't even suit you, that this is your country? (288).

In this passage, geographical, linguistic and cultural distances intersect, and fracture Darling's sense of "home." First, Chipo, who takes on a polemical voice, highlights the obvious physical distance that Darling has put between herself and Paradise, through her emigration and moreover, her unwillingness to return. Then, she points out the linguistic distance between them, reprimanding her in Nbedele and pointing out Darling's new "accent," a result of her attempts to assimilate and avoid Fostalina's plight in "Angel." Finally, she calls into question Darling's cultural citizenship. Though she is still technically Zimbabwean, Chipo diminishes Darling's claim to "home" by arguing that bridging the cultural distance between her and the residents of Paradise will be much harder and costlier than buying a plane ticket.

Chipo's outburst recalls Bastard's remark in the first chapter: "America is too far, you midget...what if you go there and find it's a kaka place and get stuck and can't come back?"(16). Now that she has left, Darling has become more of an exile than an immigrant—she is financially, emotionally and culturally confined by Destroyedmichagyn, but yet cannot seem to claim her home country as her own. Her solution to this confrontation is, once again, anger. She "throw[s] the computer" sends it "sailing towards the wall," in a definitive attempt to end any form of reconciliation (289). By destroying the technology that allows her to artificially bridge distance, she is forced to fend for herself in the liminal, uncertain space between cultures and languages.

This crucial moment is one of the final images and it fractures the layered conception of home that Darling has attempted to build throughout the novel. Bulawayo defies the typical bildungsroman structure, just as she uses image-based

storytelling rather than a linear narrative to convey the fractured construction of the transnational self. Through her destruction of the computer, Darling expresses her frustration with the transnational “in-between,” but she is also presented with a chance to reimagine her multiple conceptions of “home,” free from outside influence. In this sense, the transnational self must exist in this non-linear, image-based space, separate from but influenced by multiple conceptions of community.

In *We Need New Names* Bulawayo represents the anger and loneliness that comes with distance, especially for young “Afropolitan” emigrants. But she also highlights the fact that art, music and writing can break down these binaries and help forge a new sense of identity, a point also illuminated by Anzaldúa: “living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create” (95). On a personal level, Bulawayo alludes to bridging distance in her own life and following Chipó’s advice. She told *Publisher’s Weekly* that she will, ideally after her Stegner fellowship at Stanford, try to split her time between Zimbabwe and the US (“Close,” Rosen). While renaming, reclaiming and redefining the emigrant narrative can be a form of healing and reconciliation, the reality remains that much of Bulawayo’s readership is not Zimbabwean. Books can occupy the country-less spaces between borders and attempt to bridge distance ways that people cannot. Regardless of the physical space that Bulawayo occupies, her work, which extends beyond the personal, can be seen as a cultural channel and a way for readers in various different contexts to intersect and attempt to recognize and reconcile the distances that permeate their own lives. Like Bastard’s Cornell shirt, the text floats between countries, creating new meanings, new names and new interpretations.

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