

# Ways of Reading Blackness: Exploring Stereotyped Constructions of Blackness in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

**Silindiwe Sibanda**

## Summary

This article focuses on NoViolet Bulawayo's debut novel *We Need New Names*, and discusses the ways in which she explores the life of the young protagonist and her friends living in a country in the midst of an economic and political crisis. The article argues that Bulawayo's depiction of 10-year old Darling's life and that of her impoverished community makes extensive use of stereotypes of blackness that are consistent with white constructions of the black other. This reinforces Western notions of Africa through the use of a number of tropes that have come to be considered representative of Africa within the Western literary canon. The article further asserts that, because the children continually perform their poverty, there is an underlying equating of poverty with moral laxity, which renders the novel "poverty porn". Instead of illuminating the suffering of this community, it merely serves to deny it humanity as it engages in a Bakhtinian carnivalesque performance in response to vagaries of the postcolony. Finally, the article argues that it is too simplistic to suggest that this mode of representation of blackness is driven merely by a desire to appeal to the implied white western reader, and rather explores ideas relating a double consciousness on the part of the author.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op NoViolet Bulawayo se debuutroman *We Need New Names*, en bespreek die maniere waarop sy die lewe van die jong protagonis en haar vriende wat in 'n land woon midde-in 'n ekonomiese en politieke krisis, bestudeer. Die opstel voer aan dat Bulawayo se uitbeelding van die 10-jarige Darling se lewe, en die lewens van haar behoeftige gemeenskap, in 'n groot mate gebruik maak van stereotypes van swartheid wat strook met wit konstruksies van die swart "ander". Dit versterk Westerse idees van Afrika, deur die gebruik van 'n aantal trope wat nou beskou word as verteenwoordigend van Afrika binne die Westerse literêre kanon. Die artikel voer verder aan dat, omdat die kinders deurlopend hul armoede ervaar, daar 'n onderliggende gelykstelling van armoede aan morele losheid is, wat die roman as "armoede-porno" weergee. Pleks daarvan om lig te werp op die swaarkry van hierdie gemeenskap, is dit bloot 'n ontkenning van hul menslikheid – in die vorm van 'n Bakhtiniaanse, karnivaleske uitvoering in antwoord op postkoloniale giere. Laastens

*JLS/TLW* 34(3), Sep./Sept. 2018

ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387

© *JLS/TLW*

DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2018.11694



voer die artikel aan dat dit te simplisties is om te suggereer dat hierdie vorm van voorstelling van swartheid bloot aangevuur word deur 'n begeerte om by die geïmpliseerde wit Westerse leser aanklank te vind, en eerder idees ondersoek wat met 'n dubbele bewustheid by die outeur verband hou.

There are specific phantasmagorical constructions of the African postcolony that have come to typify representations of the continent and its inhabitants. The failed African state, war, coup d'états, hunger, poverty, AIDS and the fetishised distended bellied child with the ever-present fly companions, are some of the images of the African postcolony that have become the stock in trade on any writing or images about and on Africa. NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* portrays such a dystopic black childhood through her main child protagonist while also exposing a dysfunctional post-colonial African government. The novel reflects the impact of the failed state on its inhabitants through the life traumas experienced by Darling and her friends.

However, it is the argument of this paper that Bulawayo's depiction of the life of the children and the community in which the children are being raised is a pastiche of bygone cynical portrayals of the failings of the postcolony. Whilst Bulawayo's representations of the lives of her characters are informed by the lived realities of many Africans, her portrayal of black suffering is reminiscent of certain white constructs of the black other. Routine figures of the black other inhabit the text, presenting the reader with recycled images of blackness that are drawn from the font of white constructions of the same. The central question that will be explored within this article is the effect of reproducing white stereotyped constructions of blackness in this text. This question is especially relevant to this novel because Bulawayo's writing is clearly a response to, and a reflection on, a specific historic moment in a postcolony which speaks directly to the state of the nation and the its impact on the populace.

The novel is set in a shantytown, ironically called Paradise, and critiques the failed state through the poverty-stricken lives of 10-year-old Darling (the main protagonist) and her group of similarly aged friends (Bastard, God-knows, Sbo, Stina and Chipso) as they experience variously horrifying episodes of life in the squatter camp they call home. The novel is replete with almost unrelenting instances of savagery, grief and revulsion that punctuate these children's existence. The temporal location of the novel is reminiscent of the post-Operation Murambatsvina (remove rubbish) era of 2005 wherein the Zimbabwean government deliberately destroyed thousands of homes in a bid to clear the cities of slums, informal businesses and disease<sup>1</sup>. Some of the

---

1. Although the author does not name the country that the novel is set in she does state, in an interview, that the country is obviously Zimbabwe but she chooses not to name it in order to universalise the suffering of the people.

inhabitants of Paradise in the novel are the families that were thus forcibly removed.

In locating her novel at this historical juncture, Bulawayo is able to depict a Mbembesque (1992: 2) postcolony with its "... chaotic plurality ... [and its simultaneous] internal coherence". The policies of Bulawayo's fictitious country are reminiscent of those of the Zimbabwean government, including its domestic policies around land redistribution, health and education, as well as its foreign policies, and reflect Mbembe's articulation on the postcolony's system of signs. In this, "power is mirrored and imagined self-reflectively" but also reveals the postcolony's "distinctive art of improvisation, by a tendency to excess and disproportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation" (2). In her novel, Bulawayo uses the neglected children and the dysfunctional community these children exist in to illustrate the ways in which the policies of the state are negatively affecting the lives of the citizens. This neglect of the children is synonymous with the state's abandonment of its people and the dysfunction of the adults in their lack of care and attention to the children mirrors the relationship that now pertains between the state and its populace.

Toivanen (2015) also argues that Bulawayo's extensive use of scatological aesthetics throughout the novel, particularly through the children's continual reference to their home, their country and anything on the receipt of their disparagement as *kaka*, is a further critique of the ineptitude of the state, that is so glaring as to be obvious to, and commented on by, mere children. This recognition instils in them a loathing and a disdain for their country, and other similarly situated countries. This is clearly reflected in the "country game" that they play, leading to a simultaneous yearning to escape to alternative realities away from their own home, which Darling describes as "a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart" (49). Ngoshi (2016: 55) further states that the crass language used by the children is "a reflection of the vulgarity of [the] political and religious power as exercised over society". The use of scatology that recurs throughout the novel then not only reinforces the coarseness of the exercise of power by the state, but also speaks to the loss of innocence and hope by the children. All expression of vulgarity and nearly all acts of depravity in the novel are uttered or performed by the children which serves to concretise the suggestion of this loss of innocence and optimism, further reflecting the destruction of the country's future and the potential that will never be realised.

Although Bulawayo is exploring issues of political and social significance in the unnamed country's history, she does so utilising portrayals of blackness that are consistent with white constructs thereof. This creates tortured black subjectivities but fails to problematise these depictions that have become so

---

<<http://www.dw.com/en/zimbabwean-author-noviolet-bulawayo-i-like-to-write-from-the-bone/a-18572543>>.

ubiquitous as to be read as the complete, and arguably, the only representation of the black subject, particularly in Africa. In an attempt to sympathetically render the loss of humanity and dignity that has resulted from the corrupt and failed state, Bulawayo largely succeeds only in further denuding her characters of any vestiges of pride by the display of the shame and humiliation that their impoverished existence has visited upon them, what is commonly referred to as poverty porn.

Roeningk (2014) defines poverty porn as the representation of the poor in such a way as to exploit their condition, depicting “the graphic qualities of a human being to western eyes for the sole purpose of eliciting an emotional response and ultimately, money”. Collin (2009) also points out that in the trope of poverty porn, “the subjects are overwhelmingly children, with the material usually characterized by images or descriptions of suffering, malnourished or otherwise helpless persons”. Although these images mainly serve charitable ends, primarily used to solicit financial contributions and aid from western donors and individuals, both Collin and Roeningk are in concurrence when they point out that the outcome of this approach is devastating as it not only perpetuates pre-existing western stereotypes of Africa, but also extends the notion of one group always in need of being saved and the other as always the saviour. In a satirical essay on how to best write about African people so as to appeal to a western audience, Wainaina (1992) advises that the inclusion of a refugee camp, starving, dirty, uneducated naked children, bare breasts, helpless victims, Chinese or Indian economic villains, benevolent westerners and dead bodies are key elemental aspects of the homogenising of African subjectivity. Bulawayo’s novel is replete with all of the above and more, and centres these recurring performances of poverty in the construction of the protagonist’s racialised subjectivity.

Perhaps the most obvious reflection of poverty porn in the novel is the repeated references to poverty and degradation for the cameras of western observers by the children. The first instance we see this is when a young woman they encounter in Budapest, an affluent neighbourhood close to their home from where they frequently steal guavas, inexplicably asks to take a photograph of them. Subsequent to that, the children again pose for the NGO people who come to their township to distribute gifts and aid. In this instance, the photographer focuses on the holes in Godknows’ shorts and on 11-year-old Chipo’s pregnancy, and Godknows tells the other children that “we are not supposed to laugh or smile. Or any of the silly stuff you are doing” (53). As Wainaina reminds us, the only images of African children that sell are images of poverty, hunger and misery, and the children become props in the production of the white gaze.

During the enactment of their poverty by the children, in which the worst aspects of their privation is photographed, Darling insightfully observes, that:

they just like taking pictures these NGO people, like maybe we are their real friends and relatives and they will look at the pictures later and point us out by name ... they don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't ... [but] we don't complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the gift giving.

(52)

The sense of an awareness of the demeaning nature of this experience is further attested to by Bastard who defiantly laughs and poses for the camera declaring "I can do what I want ... Besides, when they look at my picture over there, I want them to see me. Not my buttocks, not my dirty clothes, but me." (53). Although clearly aware of the problematic nature of this exploitation and exhibition of the children's poverty and humiliation, forcing them to display the worst aspects of their destitution to the western eye in exchange for cheap goods, Bulawayo does not engage with it further. Instead she presents it as fair trade, which undermines her attempt at a critique of the politics of global aid as well as the power dichotomy that exists with the victim/saviour binary that aid culture reinforces.

The children's response to their pictures being taken references the two distinct ways in which poverty is experienced and understood by the observer and the observed, the one being visual and the other being emotional. In her discussion of the nature of poverty porn Roenigk (2014: 2) cites a book by Corbett and Fikkert in which they explore how the helper and the helped define poverty stating that:

Most North American audiences define poverty by physical suffering and a lack of material resources, while the poor define their condition psychologically and emotionally. They use words like shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation and voicelessness.

It is the latter that encapsulates the nature of the poverty that is experienced by the children while posing for the cameras, and yet it is glossed over by the author and not incorporated into a discussion about the politics of aid. The novel also fails to engage with what Higgins (in Dortonne 2015), a famous New York Times photographer, refers to as *theft pictures* – images that are used to advertise a charity or NGO without the consent of the subject – and their photographers and clients as *poverty pimps*. The children have no control over the images and how they will be used and even though they appear to knowingly and actively participate in process of picture taking, their participation is contingent on the receipt of goods thereafter, thus extending Higgins's metaphor of the whoring nature of poverty and its relationship with global aid.

Indeed, the depiction of the engagement between the aid workers and the community is presented as damaging to children's sense of worth because the

“expensive white people” (54) that the children are admonished not to touch in their frenzy to receive gifts, do not want to be touched by the children. Darling explains: “we can see that even though they are giving us things, they do not want to touch us or for us to touch them” (54). With this single utterance by Darling, the author acknowledges her awareness of the dehumanising nature of the experience and engagement. And while this is to Bulawayo’s credit, the novel still fails to challenge the prevailing figure of the black African child as a powerless victim. A sense of sub-humanness is instilled in the children by the NGO workers during their acts of charity in their refusal to make physical contact with the children. By refusing to touch them, the children are made conscious of being repulsive by simple virtue of their poverty and dirt.

The repugnance by the NGO workers for touching other people is re-enacted by Darling in her reluctance to touch her own father who is dying of AIDS; when she does finally touch him it is because her friends are touching him, and she describes the experience thus: “we are touching him, ... all over like he is a beautiful plaything we just rescued from a rubbish bin in Budapest” (103). This conflation of affection with rescue from the rubbish not only undermines the gesture, but reinforces the underlying notion that there are manifestations of humanity that are justifiably repulsive. Within the logic of the novel, for the children it is their poverty and dirt and for the father it is his disease.

From the very outset of the novel, Bulawayo presents us with Darling, her friends and the rest of their destitute community participating in a faux Bakhtinian (1984) carnivalesque spectator/performer iteration as they enact and vocalise their discontent – though, significantly, without the concomitant disruption of authority or the hegemony of the white gaze. This carnivalesque performance, while attempting to reflect a subversive critique of the failing state, largely succeeds only in further denigrating the characters, subsuming them in ever demeaning scenarios that bring to question not just their agency, but their very humanity. The textual examples that will be utilised in the remainder of this article to discuss the various aspects of the text that are problematic will also be illustrations of the above.

Central to the first part of the novel is the sustained state of deprivation that drives the children to the affluent neighbourhood of Budapest where they steal guavas in order to satisfy their hunger. The first chapter, titled *Hitting Budapest* already suggests some form of criminal activity that will be undertaken by the children, but also evokes a playfulness in their actions because the crime turns out to be the stealing of the guavas that would have rotted on the branch had the children not eaten them. This stealing of the fruit is presented as part of the elaborate games they are constantly playing. But from the very outset, Bulawayo juxtaposes this image of hungry children with that of foul mouthed street urchins who do not just steal to sate their hunger, but also go around “spitting the peels all over to make the place dirty”. They

add: “We stop at AU street for Chipo (who is 11 and pregnant) to vomit .... Today her vomit looks like urine, only thicker. We leave it there uncovered” (11). This portrayal of the children, in addition to reflecting their premature jadedness, as is the intention of the writer, is also the start of the erosion of, not only, their innocence, but also their decency and so we are hardly surprised when, on returning home, they steal a pair of shoes from the hanging body of a woman who has committed suicide to buy bread. Reluctant though they are at the initial suggestion by Bastard, we learn from Darling that eventually “[w]e all turn around and follow Bastard back into the bush, the dizzying smell of Lobels bread all around us now, and then we are rushing, then we are running, then we are running and laughing and laughing and laughing” (18). In this scene especially, Bulawayo suggests that the conditions in which the children live, in the poverty of a shantytown in the context of the failure of the state, is an adequate explanation for the children’s callous conduct. Insinuated in the novel is the notion that the children’s poverty in some way makes it acceptable for Bastard to throw stones at the hanging corpse and for them to rob it. In so doing, the author implicitly suggests that decency is the reserves of the affluent and so the absence of it among the poor not only excuses their conduct, but indeed explains it.

This dehumanisation of the children and their community is further suggested by the parents in the community’s abnegation of their parenting responsibilities and their indifference to the children in the community. The trope of parental neglect echoes the abandonment of the citizens by the state. The women of the community appear to do little else but plait their hair while the men sit under a tree playing draughts, or in the case of Darling’s father, have deserted their families altogether. The only time the adults are animated is when they are attending church or when the NGO truck arrives to dispense charity. We are told that the adults “stand in their own line trying to look like they don’t really care ... [but] the truth is that we hear them all the time complain about how the NGO people have forgotten them, how they should visit more often ... like the NGO are their parents” (55). This portrayal of the adults plays into the stereotype of lazy blacks not stirring to help themselves, but instead sit around waiting for a handout from white benefactors who in this instance become parents to infantilised adults in the community. Another stereotype that is deployed in this scene is that of black adults as incapable of looking after their own children without white intervention; parental authority is usurped by the NGO people. In the excitement of the gifts they will receive, the children behave riotously while their parents look on. This conduct, we learn, is only possible because the NGO people are there. Darling tells us:

They [the adults] don’t order us to stop pushing. They don’t look at us with talking eyes. But we know that if the NGO people were not here, they would seize their switches or pounce on us with their bare hands, that if the NGO people were not here we would not even dare to act like we are doing in the

first place. But then the NGO people are here and while they are, our parents do not count.

(54)

This statement confirms the authorial power transfer from the parents to the NGO people by virtue of fact that the NGO people have the material means to sustain the children that their parents do not have. In her engagement with representations of black stereotypes in South African young adult literature, Sibanda (2012) argues that literary depictions of black adults as incapable of looking after their children not only undermines black parental competence, but also serves to explain and justify the unequal power relations that structure societies in the Global South. Her discussion of youth fiction is relevant for my argument about Bulawayo's novel because she argues that:

The stereotyping of blacks as dependent on whites is founded on the perception of blacks as the inferior other, who, without white intervention, are incapable of executing all but the most basic of human functions. Black characters are presented as being unable to negotiate personal or financial terrain necessitating white assumptions of the role of primary provider and in some instances caregiver as well.

(Sibanda 2012: 126)

The scene in the novel where the NGO people arrive and assume the authority and responsibility for the children by providing the community with food and clothing reflects what Césaire refers to as the dependency complex wherein the postcolonial dependency on the ex-colony occurs not only in the realms of politics, culture and the economy, but also on the psychological, sub-conscious levels of (un)knowing. He adds that “these groups are psychologically made for dependence; ... they need dependence ... they ask for it, demand it; ... this is the case with most colonized people” (Césaire 1972: 40). This, he asserts, is the argument used to justify continued western domination in Africa, and this dominance is acceptable to Africans because they cannot “even try to imagine such a situation of abandonment .... He desires neither personal autonomy nor free responsibility” (Octave Mannoni<sup>2</sup> in Césaire: 41). Césaire's observations are echoed by Fanon (1986) in his engagement with Mannoni, elaborating on the fact that this dependency complex is invariably accompanied by an inferiority complex, which can only be resolved when an independent relationship has been successfully established.

Based on both Fanon and Césaire's discussions on dependence, it then becomes possible to trace the point at which the literary portrayals of

---

2. Césaire points out that although M. Mannoni's conclusions were based on his study of the Malagasy these are the same arguments that are applied to most Africans and their relationship with the West. Fanon (1952/1986: 83-108) also looks at the conclusions drawn by Mannoni in this same study entitled *Prospero and Caliban; The Psychology of Colonization* (1964).



black/white relations originate. The disproportionate power relations at the macro level are reflected at the individuals level between the two groups. Therefore, black dependency in the novel can be located at the point of the establishment of colonial relationships which were founded on the assumption that blacks are incapable of looking after themselves and require white intervention to look after them and their children.

In failing to problematise the nature of the relationship of and between the post- and ex-colony as well the politics of aid, the writer simply displays the ignoble condition that the community exists in and demeans them by presenting them in stereotypes devised by whites to depict blacks as dependent and incapable of supporting themselves and their children. The result of this portrayal of the adults in the community is the acceptance by the children that their parents have no capacity to look after them. This is clearly suggested in the same scene where the NGO people arrive in the community. The adults of the community are forced to, like the children, stand in a line of their own and the children look on while “the adults get small packets of beans and sugar and mealie-meal” (55) thus reinforcing the stereotype of failed black parents who are not only incapable of looking after their own children, but whose children are also cognisant of this and therefore look to strangers for the provision of the basic essentials that their parents are unable to provide.

This idea is reinforced when the children go to visit a Chinese construction site and ask the Chinese manager for a hand out of goods which they disdain and disparage as cheap *kaka* (while begging for them just the same). Interestingly, this Chinese manager perpetuates the xenophobic trope that links Asian traders to foreign exploitation (Wainaina 2005: 93). The manager is portrayed as exploiting his shabbily dressed workers, being entertained by sex workers on the site, and being utterly unmoved by the plight of the children. Disgusted though the children are by what they witness, it does not, nevertheless prevent them from begging for handouts from these people they so clearly despise. In a similar fashion, Darling, though displeased by the realisation that her mother has taken a lover in her father’s extended absence, still chastises him in her mind for his failure to bring them things.

The portrayal of the community is confusing and contradictory. In the first instance, in the scene with the NGOs it is clear that the children have been taught appropriate conduct indicating that the adults are continuing to perform their role as parents, despite being undermined by the NGO people. However, this is contrasted by the fact that for the most part, the adults in the community are presented as negligent and failing in their function as parents, as suggested by the children being abandoned and left to roam the streets begging and stealing in order to eat. This is because, according to Darling, “the mothers are busy with their hair and talk, which is the *only thing they ever do* ... the men under the jacaranda tree ... their eyes never lift from draughts” (*emphasis added*) (1-2) and so the children pass unnoticed by their caregivers. These

black adults in the novel are simply unable to escape racist and essentialist constructions of blackness.

However, the passive and depraved state of moral absence that now exists in this solipsistic community is nowhere better illustrated than in their inability to prevent the public sexual assault of a woman in the church by the minister while the congregation looks. We learn from Darling that, during this public sexual violence, there were “women ... stand[ing] behind him and the evangelists like a wall, singing and dancing and waving bibles in the air” (39). We subsequently learn that Pastor Mborro “leaps on the woman like Hulkogen ... pinning her down .... He places his hands on her stomach, on her thighs, then he puts his hand on her thing and starts rubbing and praying hard for it, like there was something wrong with it. His face is alight, glowing. The pretty woman just looks like a rag now, the prettiness gone, her strength gone” (40). The entire congregation, with the exception of the child, is complicit in this act of sexual assault as they observe and indeed encourage it with their prayers, with no one seemingly possessing the agency or moral courage to prevent it.<sup>3</sup> Ngoshi (2016: 56) notes the name of the prophet Mborro without the second “r” would mean a phallus in Shona and his name is therefore “symbolic of the vulgarity of his religious authority. The vulgar nature of the prophet’s practices manifest in his exaggerated behaviour ... and are the signifiers of the aesthetics of the vulgar and even the grotesque”. The extent of pastor Mborro’s absurdity and repulsion is made all the more pronounced by virtue of the fact that Darling, the child, can see right through him.

Whilst Bulawayo is clearly engaging with the depraved and corrupt nature of power, of both state and church, as well as the violence that is perpetrated by the state on its citizenry with their complicity, she simultaneously debases this community in her suggestion that their poverty has rendered them incapable of discerning right from wrong, undermining their agency. Instead, there is the absence of a moral compass. As if to concretise this community’s decrepitude, the entire community has failed to act on Chipo’s earlier rape and subsequent pregnancy and it is during this episode in the church that Chipo finally speaks and reveals that it is her grandfather who raped and impregnated her. This revelation is not met with indignation and outrage from the community; indeed the only people who seem to notice that Chipo is pregnant are the other children. So ethically void is Bulawayo’s community, it is suggested to the reader, that they fail to notice or indeed take any form of

---

3. The actions detailed in this scene echo those of South African self-anointed prophet who is also called pastor Mborro, who, like his namesake in the novel, sexually assaulted women in church in front of the whole congregation without anyone attempting to stop him. for more details see:  
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2011/04/26/reporters-witness-a-christian-pastor-molesting-women-at-demon-banishing-service/>  
<http://nehandaradio.com/2011/04/24/fingers-privates-biscuits-and-ice-cream/>

action with regard to the rape and impregnation of this child. Like the state, the adults in the community, now vacant of compassion, fail to exact any form of justice in response to crimes perpetrated before their very eyes.

Other racial stereotypes of blackness inform the characterisation of other individuals in the novel as well as the representation of significant historical moments that are reflective of abortive policies and the corruption of state power, its impact on the citizens and its contribution to the demise of the country. In a scene wherein an unruly group of youths invade a white household and assault the occupants and their dog,<sup>4</sup> we are presented with a marauding mass of black youths bent on wanton destruction and a white couple that the youths abuse and humiliate before taking them away from their home for no specified purpose or destination. The entire scene is reminiscent of the fabled barbarians having breached the barricades with no express purpose save to destroy the white family's property and humiliate them. Bulawayo's representation of this occurrence is reminiscent of the western press's<sup>5</sup> treatment of the farm invasions that took place in Zimbabwe where white victimhood was often foregrounded at the expense of the grievances of the black masses who, even when killed, were never mentioned by name.<sup>6</sup> The contrast between the violent youths and the couple is amplified by the fact that the children are themselves afraid of the youths and hide up a tree out of fear of them. What is more, Sbu is moved to tears by the plight of the white couple and Darling is "ashamed that she [the white woman] is seeing us up in her tree, ashamed for her that we are seeing her being taken away like that" (122). Bulawayo perpetuates this myopic exploration of a complex historical moment by presenting a simplistic exposition of a far more nuanced situation. Bulawayo advances the stereotype of the violent and aimless black horde by presenting the youth as little more than ignorant thugs because she fails to problematise the colonial history that had led to this moment. So, what might well be a valid act of protest against generations of injustice is instead presented as vicious and ineffectual knavish behaviour perpetrated by a mob

- 
4. The youths in this scene are suggestive of the Zanu youth that terrorised communities in Zimbabwe.
  5. For more on the reporting of the farm invasions and a historical overview of the lead up to the land grabs see Dombo (2018) and for a detailed assessment of the outcome of the redistribution of land programme see Hanlon, Manjengwa, and Smart (2012).
  6. For more on the racialised reporting on the land occupations in Zimbabwe see: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/jun/02/zimbabwe.andrewmell-drum>> <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/667621.stm>>. <<https://www.economist.com/node/14465671>>.

base enough to use their own faeces to deface the house, and not intelligent enough to even spell black correctly, writing instead “*Blak Power*” (130).

One of the main criticisms that has been levelled against Bulawayo and other African writers in the diaspora is that their writings reproduce stereotypes of Africa in order for their work to appeal to western publishers and audiences who are their prime target. The politics of publishing economics are therefore deemed to influence the narratives that are produced by African writers. Ndlovu (2016: 133) argues that Bulawayo’s novel reflects all the African caricatures and tropes that are referred to in Wainaina’s essay in order to get published in the west where “such African stereotypes are eagerly consumed” affirming the assertion that her depictions of poverty and squalor in the ironically named Paradise squatter camp is suggestive of poverty porn. He further argues that “by unrelentingly focusing on the violated rights of the underprivileged, especially children” (133), Bulawayo is able to gain literary capital through western endorsement by providing western audiences with images that confirm their preconceived ideas about Africa.

Speaking specifically about the role of the Caine prize in determining the thematic focus of African writers, Edwin (2016: 360) argues that, far from encouraging original writing, the Caine prize forces writers to conform to a particular aesthetic in the hopes of winning the prize. Edwin suggests that “writers may thematise stereotypical topics such poverty, political strife or starvation just to conform to the expectations of a western audience who sponsors the prize”. These assertions are vociferously refuted by Arnett (2016: 15) who asserts that Bulawayo’s incisive “critique of the developed world’s appetite for images of suffering is a funhouse mirror that shatters stereotypes held by sub-Saharan Africans of ungoverned, unproblematic wealth often associated with American life”. This we see in the portrayal of the dislocated African subject in the second half of the novel when the teenage Darling has moved to America.

Life in America is not what Darling had anticipated and is similarly suggestive of the conservative depiction of blackness. Nothing is as she imagined; she is alienated and mocked for the ways she speaks, and although her hunger is sated, she is starved of the friends and the sense of community she enjoyed in Paradise. This abject positionality of Darling’s, her family and similarly situated immigrants to America imprisons them in a state of restricted physical and economic immobility that is dictated by their illegal status which further isolates and maroons them in a country that relegates them to a similar fringe existence that they were escaping in their home countries. Toivanen (2015: 2), elaborating on Kristeva’s definition of the abject, states that “abjection then is something revolting and strange to the self, but paradoxically also a part of it, posing thus a threat to the boundaries of the self”. These threats to Darling’s boundaries are continually reinforced by the various, simultaneous, but oppositional, desires for her old friends, and gladness for the distance between them, as well as her continued refusal to

accept that her America, the one she yearned for as a child on the streets of Paradise, will remain an unattainable dream.

Ndlovu (2016) and Edwin (2016) both concede that not all aspects of Bulawayo's novel are reflective of a singular desire to appeal to western audiences. They acknowledge that there is an attempt at criticising western modes of engaging with Africa, especially the ways in which Bulawayo depicts the NGOs and the BCC journalists when they come to Paradise. But in particular, they focus on her portrayal of life in America. They maintain that she falls victim to the very modes of African representations that deny her characters' agency and dignity by portraying them in the very stereotyped constructions that westerners use to deploy blackness and that is largely informed by her desire to appeal to a western audience.

It is my argument, however, that such an assertion is far too simplistic to explain the extensive use of negative stereotyping of the black self without providing a more nuanced engagement with the realities of postcolonial subjectivities. Bulawayo's novel harkens back to the style of resistance writing that was predominant in South Africa during the era of apartheid, especially among black authors whose writing was so overtly political as to undermine its aesthetic appeal. Whilst it is not the suggestion of this article that Bulawayo's novel is lacking in aesthetic appeal, I argue that it is the form of writing that propelled Njabulo Ndebele to write *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1986) and for Albie Sachs to present a paper at an ANC conference entitled *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines* (1991). In both instances, they were engaging with the ways in which writing needs to move away from overt politicisation and opt for a subtler aesthetic that is reflective of realities of people's lives without relinquishing the role of the writer in society. But Bulawayo reflects the worst excesses of poverty and "defines [it] as merely the observable suffering resulting from a simple lack of material resources" (Roenigk 2014: 1). The result of this approach is precisely what is termed poverty porn because she fails to reflect in her novel the fact that "[p]overty is a result of both individual and systemic problems, involving not only personal circumstances but the social and justice systems in place that either works to empower the poor or perpetuate their conditions" (Roenigk 2014: 1).

What then, we are obliged to ask, compels a black writer to construct stereotypes of blackness that conform to dehumanising western constructs of the same? There is a strongly suggested internalisation of white constructions of blackness in Bulawayo's novel, and not merely a conscious mercenary pursuit of publication and fame. What Du Bois refers to as a double consciousness, a psycho-social splitting of the self in multiple as a result of abject subjectivity wherein the self is dislocated and fails to unite. This is an idea elaborated upon by Fanon in his exploration of black dependency and inadequacy within an alienating white world that despises and rejects the black other through an interpolative process that causes a divided self-

perception. Gilroy (1993), on the other hand, historicises dislocated black identities in conjunction with externally constructed identities within an oppressive socio-political context and a historical dislodging which results in a complex shift in black identity. Bulawayo's novel is suggestive of a subconscious imbroglio between a colonial and postcolonial subjectivity that is in conflict with itself as it searches for a contemporary African urbanity. However, the novel does open up spaces wherein contrasting readings of blackness are possible by providing a complex representation of black reality.

## References

- Arnett, J.  
2016 Taking Pictures: The Economy of Affect and Postcolonial Performativity in NoViolet Bulawayo's "We Need New Names". *A Review of International English Literature* 47(3):149-173.
- Bakhtin, M.  
1984 *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- BBC News  
2000 *Zimbabwe Farm Occupations Increase*. Online: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/667621.stm>>. 15 February 2018.
- Blair, D.  
2001 *Gang Kills Mother of Murdered Zimbabwe Farmer*. Online: <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/1325124/Gang-kills-mother-of-murdered-Zimbabwe-farmer.html>>. 15 February 2018.
- Césaire, A.  
1972 *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by J. Pinkham. New York: Monthly Weekly Press.
- Collin, M.  
2009 *What is Poverty Porn and Why Does it Matter for Development?* Online: <<http://aidthoughts.org/?p=69>>. 4 September 2015.
- Dortonne, N.  
2015 *The Dangers of Poverty Porn*. Online: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/08/health/poverty-porn-danger-feat/index.html>>. 4 September 2017.
- Dombo, S.  
2018 *Private Print Media, the State and Politics in Colonial and Post-colonial Zimbabwe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Du Bois, W.E.B.  
1975 *Black Reconstruction in America*. New York: Atheneum.
- Edwin, S.  
2016 (Un)solving Global Challenges: African Short Stories, Literary Awards and the Question of Audience. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28(3): 359-371.
- Fanon, F.  
1986 *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.

- Friendly Atheist Blog  
 2011. *Reporters Witness a Christian Pastor Molesting Women at Demon-Banishing Service*. Online:  
 <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2011/04/26/reporters-witness-a-christian-pastor-molesting-women-at-demon-banishing-service/#QYo2IFHDZ1WgZBGP.99>>. 26 April 2011.
- Gilroy, P.  
 1993 *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Hanlon, J. Manjengwa, J. & Smart, T.  
 2012 *Zimbabwe Takes Back its Land*. Sterling: Kumarian.
- Mbembe, A.  
 1992 The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony. *Public Culture* 4(2): 1-30.
- Meldrum, A.  
 2000 *Mugabe Praises Farm Invasions as Two More Die in Violence Claims More*. Online:  
 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/jun/02/zimbabwe.andrew.meldrum>>. 15 February 2018.
- Musanga, T.  
 2016 Perspectives of Zimbabwe-China Relations in Wallace Chirumiko's *Made in China* (2012) and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 29(1): 81-95.
- Ndebele, N.  
 1986 Rediscovery of the Ordinary. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12(2): 143-157.
- Ndlovu, I.  
 2015 Ambivalence of Representation: African Crises, Migration and Citizenship in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. *African Identities* 14(2): 132-146.
- Nehanda Radio  
 n.d. *Fingers, Privates, Biscuits and Ice Cream*. Online:  
 <<http://nehandaradio.com/2011/04/24/fingers-privates-biscuits-and-ice-cream>>. 7 February 2018.
- Ngoshi, H.T.  
 2016 Carnivalising Postcolonial Zimbabwe: The Vulgar and Grotesque Logics of Postcolonial Protest in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. *Journal of Literary Studies* 32(1): 53-69.
- Peschel, S.  
 2015 Zimbabwean Author NoViolet Bulawayo: *I Like to Write From the Bone*. Online:  
 <<http://www.dw.com/en/zimbabwean-author-noviolet-bulawayo-i-like-to-write-from-the-bone/a-18572543>>. 7 February 2018.
- Roenigk, E.  
 2014 *5 Reasons Poverty Porn Empowers the Wrong Person*. Online:  
 <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/emily-roenigk/poverty-charity-media\\_b\\_5155627.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/emily-roenigk/poverty-charity-media_b_5155627.html)>. 4 September 2017.

WAYS OF READING BLACKNESS: ...

- Sachs, A.  
1991 Preparing ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional guidelines. *TDR* 35(1): 187-193.
- Selasi, T.  
2005 *Bye-Bye Babar*. Online:  
<<https://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>>. 2 September 2017.
- Sibanda, K.  
2015 *Lancaster House Accords: What Britain owes Zimbabwe*. Online:  
<<http://www.jpost.com/Blogs/From-Solomons-Temple/Lancaster-House-Accords-What-Britain-owes-Zimbabwe-406561>>. November 2017.
- Sibanda, S.  
2012 Through the Eyes of the Other: An Analysis of the Representations of Blackness in South African Youth Novels by White Writers from 1976 to 2006. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of the Witwatersrand.
- The Economist*  
2000 *Out with Those White Farmers*. Online:  
<<https://www.economist.com/node/14465671>>. 15 February 2018.
- Toivanen, A.L.  
2015 Not at Home in the World: Abject Mobilities. In: Marie N. Diaye's *Trois Femmes Puissantes* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. *Postcolonial Text* 10(1): 1-18.
- Wainaina, B.  
1992 How to Write About Africa. Online:  
<<https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>>. 4 September 2017.
- Zengeni, K.T.N.D.  
2017 *Zimbabwe: A Country Profile*. Online:  
<<http://jis.uum.edu.my/images/pdf/7jis/jis79.pdf> >. 2 November 2017.

**Silindiwe Sibanda**  
University of Pretoria  
silindiwe.sibanda@up.ac.za