

Transnational Dis-locations and Re-emplacements: Finding Home in NoViolet Bulawayo’s “We Need New Names” by Maruping Phepheng

Abstract

Drawing on the novel *We Need New Names* (2013) by expatriate Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo, this paper examines the altering impact the host-land can have on the diasporic, and how factors prevailing in the new spatial setting can be constitutive of new identity and the reconstruction of memory. Central to this paper are themes of (un)belonging, of inclusion and exclusion, of assimilation and re-emplacement, of dis-locations and home in the diaspora. Scholars of the novel have suggested that *We Need New Names* is not a migrant novel in the traditional sense of the term: instead of focusing uniquely on the dislocated condition, the novel intertwines specific Southern African localities with the American diaspora. Bulawayo depicts harsh conditions at home - fractured families, disease, hunger, and death - rendering mobility a necessity. The novel’s treatment of mobility is not restricted to migration, but can be understood in a broad way to pertain to locality in terms of people’s dreams and hopes of a home elsewhere. Also examined is the use of online and cyberspace communication between host-land and homeland. The paper attempts to establish whether this form of communication has the effect of collapsing divisive borders. Centrally, this paper examines the transformation of memory and identity in the diaspora through the lens of space and place.

Home is a notion that only nations of the homeless fully appreciate and only the uprooted comprehend. (Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*).

NoViolet Bulawayo, like Tendai Huchu, Charles Mungoshi, Yvonne Vera, and Shimmer Chinodya, to name a few, is a prominent Zimbabwean author. Born Elizabeth Zandile Tshele, Bulawayo was born 12 October 1981 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe. She was a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and was recognised with a Truman Capote Fellowship. A winner of numerous awards, Bulawayo wrote *We Need New Names* (2013). “Hitting Budapest”, the opening chapter, is the short story that won Bulawayo the 2011 Caine Prize for

African Writing. In *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo intricately tells the story of her lead character, Darling, and her peers Bastard, Godknows, Sbho, Stina, and Chipso. Darling travels to the United States to live with her aunt on a tourist passport and continues to live there illegally after the visa's expiration. This story is about a struggling African country and the suffering of its people, and the immigrant experience in their adopted country. It is a story where the main characters accept that their best chance for a better life lies elsewhere. In this paper I argue that Darling, the main character, in imagining her environs as temporary, seems to be rejecting "meaning" and "experience", preferring a disconnect with her new spatial reality.

I agree with Anna-Leena Toivanen when she observes in her 2015 paper that *We Need New Names* is not a migrant novel in the traditional sense of the term: instead of focusing uniquely on the dislocated condition, the novel intertwines specific Southern African localities with the American diaspora. The novel's treatment of mobility is not restricted to migration, but can be understood in a broader manner as pertaining to locality in terms of people's dreams and hopes of an elsewhere ... (4)

We Need New Names is a work which gives voice to those who want to imagine themselves some-where else, effecting their own mobility. The first half of the novel is troubled by the children's ideas of more favourable elsewhere. Their dreams of "mobility" are intertwined with the unbearable condition of the here-and-now, but, as Bastard's account of Darling's aunt's migratory predicament in the US suggests, sometimes the miserable, traumatising and oppressive conditions follow the migrants that leave the troubling country behind. Toivanen further explains that what motivates this kind of mobility is the "longing for an elsewhere, accompanied by a sense of disillusionment" (5). This is "closely connected to mobility; it is longing that motivates mobility" (5). Apart from the realisation that the reality of the host country is not what the migrant had imagined, disillusionment also takes the form of recognition that the hosts have equally imagined ideas, often stereotypical, about migrant home countries.

Inescapable here are themes of acculturation and adaptation of immigrants in their new space and place, themes of which are a

function of displacement, disintegration, longing, isolation, and reformulation of identity. Bulawayo's novel has such multiple implications. She demonstrates different aspects of immigrant people and their experiences, including the paradox of belonging and yet not belonging. Bulawayo explores the notion of home, roots, and cultural identity. Reflecting on her writing in a Caineprize.com interview Bulawayo offers that "[y]our race is never an issue (when you are at home) because you're living in a space where everyone looks like you." She continues: "Then going out, you realise, I'm not from here. I'm this other thing." This "other thing" is not always at home in a space that can be both welcoming and marginalising. Reflecting on life away from the homeland, and on longing for home, Bulawayo accepts in *The Guardian* interview that "life outside the homeland is a story of perpetual mourning for what is gone." She also accepts that "the simplest things can trigger that melancholy, from walking down the street and hearing on the car radio a song from home, to the smell of food, to a face that looks like somebody's face" (*theguardian.com* interview).

One of the most common ideas in immigrant novels is the idea of assimilation, but, interestingly, what stands out regarding Darling is a melancholic attachment to a previous life. At home, she already anticipates her future life in the United States. This longing for an elsewhere is made clear by Darling prior to her move: "when that time comes, I'll not even be here; I'll be living in America" (10), "it won't be long, you'll see" (14). When in Detroit, Darling laments that "[s]ome things happen only in my country, and this here is not my country; I don't know whose it is" (147). So, for Darling, much like Tendai Huchu's *Magistrate in The Maestro, The Magistrate & The Mathematician* (2014), Detroit is not anything like her country: neither the people she knows nor the spatial setting she is used to are in sight. This lends credence to Elizabeth Mavroudi's assertion that "traditional definitions of diaspora centre around the creation of boundaries (of identity, community and the nation state) and a focus on roots and the homeland" (2). It is winter when Darling arrives in Detroit and unaccustomed to snow, she hopes to see the known and familiar when it melts: "Maybe I will finally see things that I know, and maybe this place will look ordinary at last" (159). That Darling understands her new space and place to be transitory brings to mind

Kelly Baker's assertion that "being-in-place [is] understood as an embodied practice, which, both mental and physical, is constantly evolving through everyday encounters" (24). Darling is faced with her everyday lived experiences which are meant to be constitutive of her new spatial setting, but she somehow imagines it to be a passing impermanence. In *On The Move: Mobility In The Modern Western World* (2006), Tim Cresswell argues that "[a] place is a center of meaning - we become attached to it, we fight over it and exclude people from it - we experience it" (3). Yet, here, Darling seems to reject both "meaning" and "experience".

Darling finds that her envisioned life in the United States does not correspond to her reality. She reflects that "this place doesn't look like my America" (150) and does "not feel like my America" (188). In the United States, Darling compares her surroundings to her past life in her idealised Paradise. For instance, in the beginning of the novel while Darling is still in Paradise, her friend Bastard wears "a faded orange T-shirt that says Cornell" (12). Later when Darling is in the United States, this t-shirt is once more seen, this time worn by an American, which makes Darling think that this girl "is wearing Bastard's Cornell shirt" (267). So, in the diaspora, Darling keeps a close attachment with her past and therefore in a sense collapses the spatial barriers imposed by her new environs. Almost anything makes her miss home. An example is when Darling hears her friends on the phone and she begins to think and reflect about what she would do if she were home:

Time dissolves like we are in a movie scene and I have maybe entered the telephone and travelled through the lines to go home. I've never left, and I'm ten again and we are playing country-game and Find bin Laden and Andy-over. We're hungry but we're together and we're at home and everything is sweeter than dessert. (205-06)

Darling is continually caught between two different cultures – different "meaning" and "experiences" - and is temporally trapped in-between the idealised past in Paradise and the future oriented "My America." Although her past was filled with poverty and hardships, she only reflects positively on this life compared to how she thinks about her so-called "America." Darling concedes that "[t]here are two homes inside my head: home before Paradise, and home in Paradise; home one and home two" (191). What is notable is that, in

terms of “home-home” (220), the United States is not mentioned at all. This adds to the sense of the United States being a temporal spatial setting. In fact, Darling never accepts her life there as home: “In America, roads are like the devil’s hands, like God’s love, reaching all over, just the sad thing is, they won’t really take me home” (191).

Darling experiences moments of existential community during her life in the United States. When Aunt Fostalina invites Uncle Themba, Aunt Welcome, Aunt Chenia and others over - like Huchu’s Magistrate, who heavily depended among others on food and language to “remember” home - they make Zimbabwean food and sing and dance to music from their homeland. During one of these occasions, Darling “belongs”, and concedes that “the reason they are my relatives now is they are from my country too - it’s like the country has become a real family since we are in America, which is not our country” (161).

Online and cyberspace communication is prominent in *We Need New Names*. It is Darling’s way of maintaining contact with the homeland, including with her new American friends who are frequently connected to the cyber space with their smartphones. So, at various levels online and cyberspace communication collapses borders, giving rise to “new” communities. This form of communication becomes a site on which the illusion of “home” is constructed. Additionally, having access to online and cyberspace communication cannot hide the fact that Darling has lost touch with her old friends. Contact with “home” is lost because neither the host-land particularities nor the old friendships correspond to an ideal – her diasporic life is far from alluring, and her former friends’ naïve zest over her way of life simply leave her ill at ease. The “awkward silence” (207) that punctuates Darling’s interactions with her former friends encapsulates this double-edged awkwardness.

Although migrant literature is constructed on the idea of home and host countries, digital information communication technologies and media “bridges” and conjoin home and host spaces. In her 2006 paper, scholar Victoria Bernal argues that cyberspace offers the possibility “to bridge distance or at least render it invisible, making physical location irrelevant” (168). Darling uses the laptop to contact her mother back home in order to “bridge” the distance and to make

“physical location irrelevant”. When Darling asks through a Skype call about her other friends - in the process, and as Bernal would put it, forming a “national space within the cyberspace” (169) - Chipo says that, just as Darling, most of them have left the country. From the beginning, there is an unsettling element in the Skype call, with the interlocutors not knowing what to say next. Darling then starts to feel guilty about her comparatively advantaged position, feeling sorry for Chipo, who is stuck in the crisis-ridden post-colony. Chipo points out: “But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on?” (285). So Chipo denies Darling her national identity, and when Darling claims that it is her country too, Chipo accuses her for leaving: “What are you doing not in your country right now? ... If it’s your country, you have to live in it and not leave it” (286). Chipo’s words hurt Darling, who “hover[s] the mouse cursor over the red phone thingy” (286) wanting to hang up. Chipo, however, goes on to tell Darling that she has a “stupid accent” (286) that is not natural. At this point, Darling ends the call. She throws the laptop against the wall. The laptop - significantly unlike Huchu’s Maestro who had in his flat no objects from “home” - hits an African mask that Darling has placed on the wall. The objects fall simultaneously to the ground, illustrating Darling’s sense of diasporic non-belonging: she is at home neither in the over-branded and over-technologised American culture, nor can she identify herself in the nostalgic idea of traditional Africa represented by the mask. 8

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