Africa as an Identity, Africa as a Curse: Language and Assimilation in Bulawayo

NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* is almost explicitly a book about identity politics. When Darling emigrates from Zimbabwe to the United States, she struggles to maintain contact with her old friends, her tradition, and who she believes she is, while facing overwhelming pressure from a hostile ‘America’ which she feels cannot understand or accommodate her. The question throughout is how to conceive of her multiple nationalities, and the multiple ways she can view her condition: is she American for living in America, a Zimbabwean for her family in Zimbabwe, an ‘African’ for her heritage and culture? And if she is a Zimbabwean or an ‘African,’ what obligations does she have within a white American society? The conflict between Darling’s idealistic representation of her identity and her home country, including a refusal and even an inability to ‘give up’ her attachment to the space she insists is her “home,” and the material conditions which demand ‘assimilation’ for the achievement of the ‘American dream’ of economic prosperity, are the framework through which Darling progresses through American society. But while the text leaves Darling questioning her identity, it gives its readers a powerful statement about the way in which members of a diaspora are able to relate to their racial and ethnic heritage.

In this essay, I hope to use the construction of speech in *We Need New Names* to access its conception of identity within the diaspora. Speech, and particularly its interaction with class, is an access point to underlying assumptions about ‘the way things are’. The use of English in consumption and as a status symbol, and the discourse around these usages, ultimately leads to a conception of ‘African’-ness, and of African speech, as an obstacle and a curse. I claim that this pattern is what the text would like to show as leading to the identification with ‘suffering’ for those in the diaspora: robbed by their need to ‘assimilate’ to American society of their identification with an authentic and complete view of their past and their heritage, those in the diaspora look instead towards their current conditions for ways in which they are ‘African’ and find only fetishized suffering and immigrant struggle.

In view of this claim, we can examine the novel not only from the perspective of African literatures but from the perspective of American studies and the intersection of these fields. Bulawayo is indeed invested not only in issues of African diaspora but of an ‘immigrant experience’ for those from financially and politically unstable countries, forced to work low-wage jobs and separate from the culture of their home countries. As a result of this observation I have looked for sources for this text in the field of American studies, with a focus on ethnic studies and immigration. “Assimilation, Citizenship, and Post-Ethnicity” by Graham Thompson examines books about the experiences of oppressed racial minorities and their relationship to labor. Attempting to give a fairly broad survey, he focuses on both Asian-American and African-American narratives from the 1950’s to the 1990’s. The portion of his analysis that I find particularly interesting targeted the book *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, claiming that in this text the main character’s connection to her ancestry, made up largely of slaves on Southern plantations, was through the ways that she was persecuted in her own society. I notice these same trends in Bulawayo’s novel, where Darling’s connection to ‘Africa’ was formed through the ways in which she was reminded at every step by the white American society of her ‘otherness’. However, while Thompson focuses on the solidarity created through this connection, and the community which is built through the common bond of labor, I claim that Bulawayo’s novel wants to present all the ways in which this is problematic through an emphasis on the whiteness and Americanness permeating Darling’s own relationship to ‘Africa’.

Another discourse that *We Need New Names* is in conversation with is shown in the paper “Reimagining the Diaspora: History, Responsibility, and Commitment in an Age of Globalization”. This paper claims that belonging to the African diaspora entails feeling an “emotional bond sustained by commitment” (Nnaemeka 130). Nnaemeka argues that the avoidance of the kind of identity struggle that Darling experiences is through commitment to the advancement of ‘Africa,’ both economically and financially. While much of the paper targets academics in the diaspora, this solution is seen to apply to all ‘Africans’ abroad: while to Darling being an African in America is framed as an obstacle, this discourse from the ‘African’ point of view places being in America as the privilege, taking for granted that this would then be used to assist those in need in Darling’s homeland.

I read Bulawayo as rebutting Nnaemeka’s argument; while Nnaemeka sees Africans in the diaspora as a tool for global equality, Bulawayo sees ‘Africanness’ as inherently an obstacle within the diaspora, making the cost to them of trying to help family abroad higher than the cost to anyone else. And in the chapter “How They Lived,” *We Need New Names* frames laboring to help ‘Africa’ as just another form of suffering-as-remembrance. The invisible narrator reflects,

And every so often we listened over the phone to the voices of our parents and elders, shy voices telling us what was needed. They had long since ceased to be providers for us; we were now their parents. Our extended families sent requests and we worked, worked like donkeys, worked like slaves, worked like madmen. When we hesitated, they said, You are in America where everyone has money, we see it all on TV, please don’t deny us. (Bulwayo 247)

The way in which the narrator relates in this scene, and in this chapter, to ‘Africa’ is as a burden. The distance maintained by the narrators from the inquisitive white society, wondering “why they work so hard,” becomes not a choice but a gap in understanding. The striking parallel within this passage to “working like slaves” once again links the narrator’s race and ethnicity to their suffering: they work like slaves because they are African. The framing of these payments as a patriotic economic commitment to Africa, a safeguard against a loss of identity, are thoroughly deconstructed here: every dollar spent there is a removal, in the narrator’s mind, from the ‘home’ of their childhood and another example of the ‘suffering’ that befalls all Africans.

It is not just the invisible narrator but Darling too who views her African-ness in this way. She, like the narrator, situates herself in America in terms of money and affluence, and values as a result the skills to be ‘successful’ within an American society, both as a laborer and a consumer. Revealing speech as a mechanism used by her classmates to persecute her, she reflects,

And then the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don’t know how to listen; they are busy looking at you falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying. I have decided the best way to deal with this all is to sound American, and the TV has taught me just how to do it…If you do it well, then before you know it, nobody will ask you to repeat what you said…I don’t know why Aunt Fostalina doesn’t think to learn American speech like this, seeing how it would make her life easier so she wouldn’t have to have a hard time like she is right now. (Bulawayo 196-199)

Here sounding American ‘well’ is considered not only a useful skill but a merit, and it is seen to reflect almost on Aunt Fostalina’s character that she has not bothered to learn. Sounding American becomes a method of advancement: Fostalina’s “having a hard time” applies not only to the phone conversation she is caught in but is seen to apply to a broader condition, with “time” open to interpretation as a month, a year, or a life stage as well as a minute. In opposition to speaking English “well” is speaking English as an “African” or a foreigner. The identification in the first sentence as a non-native English speaker immediately becomes an identification of one who struggles to be understood, and Darling’s ‘Africanness’ itself becomes implicated in this struggle. Even when, in the first sentence, the narration appears to be pinning the struggle on the native English speakers, the imagery of “falling,” of submission, and ultimately of dependence demands that the speaker conceive of their language and their identity only in relation to the English language and American identity. It cannot be any wonder, then, that by the end of the text Darling sees ‘Africanness’ not as the nostalgic home of her youth but as a place of struggle and of suffering: this is the way in which she identifies with that label in her American life.

Issues of speech come up again with Marina and Kristal when they are driving to the Crossroads Mall. Kristal and Darling begin arguing and Darling insults Kristal’s ability to speak English, saying,

Well, it’s true, everybody knows you can’t speak proper English…All that nonsense you speak. Is it hard for you to just say *I beg your pardon?* Or simply, *What did you say?* (Bulawayo 223)

The use of the word “proper” immediately sets Darling’s English against an “improper,” socially unacceptable and even ‘savage’ way of talking. Kristal’s speech patterns, later revealed to be connected, in her mind, to her race and ethnicity, are immediately called out as ‘improper’ in connection to their “Africanness”. Darling continues to use the word “simply” to describe ‘proper’ English, placing it as natural and essential: Kristal is being insulted here in that she can’t relate ‘properly’ to a white American society. The jab at her intelligence in “is it hard for you” is a jab at her labor value and class value, where the use of ‘proper’ English is seen to enhance both whereas Kristal’s self-identified ‘African’ English is yet another obstacle. Darling then thinks,

I am starting to talk fast now, and I have to remember to slow down because when I get excited I start to sound like myself, and my American accent goes away. (Bulawayo 223)

Darling’s “self” sounds Zimbabwean here only in connection to the loss of her American accent. Even in a declaration of her identity Darling sees her being ‘African’ as a loss of ability to communicate and be ‘successful’ in American society. Also significant is Darling’s use of the passive voice here, in opposition of Kristal’s assessment of ‘proper’ English as “tryna front” (Bulawayo 224). Darling considers herself to have learned to “sound American,” and her inability to maintain an American accent while talking quickly is attributed not to a personal failing but to a malignant “self” that overwrites her ‘proper’ way of speaking.

While the ideas of ‘success’ permeate the text, full of characters desperate to keep their immigrant status and remove themselves from ‘African suffering,’ there is one character removed from this ideology. Tshaka Zulu, in his complete removal from American society through insanity, is also removed from the conditions which demand a relationship to ‘Africa’ like Darling’s and the others in the diaspora. I propose a reading of Tshaka Zulu where, in his ‘episodes,’ his refusal to speak in English is an essential part of his performance of an empowered ‘African,’ a master of warfare who refuses to ‘suffer’ helplessly. By his removal from the pressures to achieve ‘success’ and to ‘blend’ in to an America repulsed by his homeland, Tshaka Zulu alone is able to maintain a view of ‘Africa’ separated from ‘immigrant struggle’ and the American discourse of ‘need’. Tshaka Zulu rants,

If we ever let them settle, then the whole motherland will fall, and we will be ruled by strangers. We will be forced to speak tongues from white lands, worship their wretched gods. They will enslave us on our own soil; we will be their dogs… I say no, by my father’s black cow, today will be death or victory. (Bulawayo 274)

The historical inaccuracies here, specifically the mixture in time periods between the Tshaka Zulu that this man imitates and white colonialism of Africa, reveal this to be not an ‘authentic’ representation of Africa but a competing one. Tshaka Zulu performs ‘savagery’ with his dress and weapons, but does not ask for ‘taming,’ forming a counterpoint to the desperate starving ‘Africans’ without the benefits of “civilization”. We see this discourse is possible through a removal from the culture of the “white lands”: by refusing foreign “tongues and gods” the ‘savage’ Tshaka Zulu represents is able to protect an African pride.

There is an ironic note to Tshaka Zulu’s rant. The defeat at the hands of white colonists is seen by the reader to have happened long ago, and Tshaka Zulu’s discourse is therefore placed in the distant past- it is seen to end, in fact, the moment the white people first take slaves and found colonies. By placing African pride in opposition to contact with white people, Bulawayo symbolizes not only the loss of agency in depending on ‘the West’ for food, currency, and culture but also Darling’s own loss of identity and heritage in her exposure to the pressures of white society. Tshaka Zulu works to place ‘true’ African-ness outside of white influence and society and, therefore, outside the reach of Africans in the diaspora. His death at the hands of white police officers reinforces once again the incompatibility of the white state and black history, where the Americans see crazy and dangerous in Tshaka Zulu’s resistance to colonialism and execute him accordingly. His form of resistance could not exist within white American society.

*We Need New Names* positions the unavoidable need for immigrants to adapt to, and be ‘successful’ within, American society as contradictory to the maintenance of a ‘legitimate’ ethnic and national belonging. ‘African-ness’ can only inhibit success within the white-dominated American capitalist system, leaving those in the diaspora no links to their homeland except the ones they experience as suffering. This form of African-ness is, then, the only form acceptable to the white American society, and those in the diaspora are forced to perform and perpetuate the same suffering African narrative that they aim to escape. The entire microculture around immigration is shown in Bulawayo to be corrupted with this ideology of persecution, where the common thread binding those who are ‘African’ is the oppression they face because of their foreign-ness and identification with Africa. But this oppression, labeled ‘African’ by diaspora members, is shown to be drastically different than the experiences of the ‘real Africans’ in Zimbabwe.

Bulawayo’s novel is, I claim, to be read as pessimistic towards ideas of ‘African heritage’ within the diaspora. There is no space left within American society for a legitimate representation of ‘Africa’ to exist. However, the text leaves its diaspora not without community. By reading through the reactions of the characters to their material conditions, as opposed to their constantly changing ideals, we see that the novel is heavily invested in a universal ‘immigrant experience,’ an experience of othering and ‘foreign culture’ that speaks predominantly to conditions and society in America itself. Ultimately, Bulawayo places Darling as an American, existing within an American society: she is unable to transcend the political and cultural boundaries of the country she must exist within.

Works Cited:

Bulawayo, NoViolet. *We Need New Names*. Back Bay Books, 2013.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. “Re-imagining the Diaspora: History, Responsibility, and Commitment in an Age of Globalization.” *Dialectical Anthropology*, Springer, 2007 pp. 127-141.

Thompson, Graham. *The Business of America*: *The Cultural Production of a Post-War Nation.* Pluto Press, 2004.