



*Moulding Afropolitan Identities on Transnational Routes in NoViolet
Bulawayo's We Need New Names*

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Abstract:

Recently, defining and demarcating identity have been further complicated by the intensive transnational ties and practices sustained across borders. Transnational mobilities is a pressing topic across disciplines and the African contemporary novel is no exception. This research paper delves into transnationalism as a potential analytical theory and its potential to study the complex identities of transnational agents across borders. Through the lens of transnationalism, this paper aims to trace the shaping of African identities into Afropolitan identities on transnational routes and how these identities are a coping strategy with the linguistic, and socio-cultural differences in the debut novel of Zimbabwean author No Violet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* (2013), a novel that intertwines transnational shaping of Afropolitan identity with the unprivileged immigrant experience.

Keywords: Afropolitanism; Afropolitan identity; Migration literature; Transnationalism; Transnational literature; *We Need New Names*.

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“We need new names not because we are new – we are not; rather, we need new names because we have new stories to tell about our world.” Chielozone Eze

I. INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of migration flows along with the intensified transnational practices have been a pressing issue in the 21st century across disciplines. Transnational ties are hard to trace back to an exact date, for mobility across borders has always existed. The mobility in the global age prompts an unprecedented flexibility between cultures, languages and societies, and this flexibility is projected on the literary scene as the migrant novel skewed from the linear storyline and the single story. This is marked by the increased interest in what would be referred to as ‘transnational literature’ in this paper. Most definitions of Transnationalism agree that it is a reality in the global age. It is defined By Steven Vertovec, a leading scholar in transnational studies, as the “sustained cross- border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation- states” (2009). These ties “has entailed the increasing extent, intensity, velocity and impact of global interconnectedness” (Vertovec, 2009) and resulted the demise of the senses of exile and alienation on foreign lands. Flows of people across national borders is paralleled by an increasing proliferation of research in transnational studies since the 1970’s. Transnationalism continued to seep through disciplines and “today transnationalism is everywhere, at least in social science” (Vertovec, 2009). This multidisciplinary shift is altering the literary scene, and ought to be matched in literary theory and criticism because the homogenous national cultures and identities are fading away in transnational literature among other literatures. Migrants engage with their old identities, practices and perceptions in complex activities in the new localities. The intense friction with a new language, culture and mind-set while maintaining the ties to the old ones potentially shapes the perception of identity and forges in a new. The new identities that generated from the simultaneous presence in several locations allow transmigrants to accommodate to the circumstances and ideologies they encounter during their transnational experience (Schiller et al, 1992). The rise of global transmigration along with the cosmopolitan culture continue to add layers to the notion of identity which intrigues new modes of study in academia. In this paper, the focus will be on the socio-cultural and anthropological takes of transnationalism and the impact of this global phenomenon on social relations and modern identities in African Contemporary Literature, namely Afropolitan Literature.

Avoiding losing relevance or being limited with existing literary theories, transnationalism is believed to supplement what is lacking to address the new literary scene and provide a fresh analytical lens to study transnational, new diasporic, migrant and travel literature. The geographical demarcations of cultural interactions proved permeable in the face of globalization. The centrality of the nation is losing its ultimate grip on dictating a sense of belonging and allegiance; it ceased to be the sole maker and marker of identity. Since the 1970’s, when scholarships on transnationalism proliferated, the theory has been appropriated by many fields mainly philosophy, sociology, anthropology and cultural history. Research has been dedicated to define, develop and expand it and eventually build it to the large-scale concept of today. Literary studies, however, are still deeply-rooted in nationalist, post-colonialist discourses. Culture and identity are still studied within the borders of the nation, even the external impacts on these two notions are studied within the nation-state with regard to the external impact. Literary studies that insist on national and postcolonial views of literature may not capture the fluidity of culture and identity across and beyond national borders. Critics are hesitant to adopt transnationalism in studying literature the same hesitance and primary-rejection that faced post-colonialism at its onset. Transnationalism as a new lens to study contemporary literary works across national borders may offer the potential of expanding the limitations of nationalist and postcolonial discourses. More voices from formerly colonized and marginalized regions are incorporated into English literature, thence the breadth of literary study is ought to comply with newer, complimentary or supplementary theories to properly cover the new works of literature. This literature written by transnational authors narrates intricately different experiences and portrays new multifaceted identities that can’t be perceived thoroughly through a nationalist or postcolonial lens, as long as literary theory and criticism is concerned. As for literary production, single stories and linear storylines do not cover the

intricate trajectory of a transnational experiences or the complicated identities of transnational subjects which prioritizes authors who actually lived the transnational experience to tell the story. Thus, a growing number of theory critics lay their hopes on transnationalism, as an analytical lens, in supplementing and/or replacing other literary theories when studying such literary works.

The last decade witnessed what is referred to as 'the renaissance of African diasporic literature'. A new generation of African writers, transnational African writers, are contributing to the literary scene with transnational African stories narrating the new African migrant novel. This genre follows the journeys of immigrants of different generations in the West while they are still related to Africa. These writers lived, have access to transnational mobility which afford them the transnational voice to address issues between African locales and the world. They create what merges cosmopolitan culture with African roots and narrative that resulted in Afropolitanism as a transnational identity and a literary movement. The African migration novel is not certainly a 21st-century novelty; "what becomes evident is that contemporary African migration novels signify on antecedent texts; Beti, Emecheta, and Bâ laid the groundwork and planted the seeds for the literary fruit that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Chis Abani, Okey Ndibe, Teju Cole, Nandi Odhiambo, and many more contemporary African writers harvest" (Taylor, 2019). Contemporary African writers paved the way to Afropolitan writers to write about being an African in the world while engaging with migrant issues to challenge and change "the belief that the continent and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions" (Gikandi, 2011). These authors, although "lost in transnation" (Selasi, 2015) eventually find a balance in that transnational space and identify themselves with it; they embraced this "in-between" aesthetic, using it to create a sense of melancholic liminality in their work (Fetterolf, 2017). These writers are ascribed Afropolitans, or Africans of the world writers who "show a tendency for transnationalism, notably the experience of migration among young Africans to the Global North (describing) the connectivity of people, places and cultures across nations" (Gourgem, 2017).

This research paper is twofold. First, it studies the interconnectedness between transnational studies and the Afropolitan novel, starting by Transnationalism and Afropolitanism as theoretical frameworks followed by a brief presentation of interconnected relation between transnational literary studies and the Afropolitan novel. Second, it analyses the Afropolitan novel *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo using literary transnationalism as an analytical lens to trace the reformulation of African identities on transnational routes and the rise of Afropolitan identity. Bulawayo is part of the 'contemporary African literary renaissance' and shares the Afropolitan perspectives of a , 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" (Gourgem, 2017). From the perspective of the observant child-narrator, the novel follows the story of 11-year old Darling who flees the crises ridden post-independence Zimbabwe in search of greener pastures in The US. Bulawayo does not provide the polished image expected of Afropolitan elitism, she chose "to grapple with the precarious existence of an immigrant life (...) with little room even to acknowledge feelings of alienation and hyphenation" (Goyal, 2017) in order to highlight the importance of class for transnational Africans who experience an underprivileged mobility across national borders. The underprivileged hunts Darling and her likes of undocumented immigrants to have proper jobs or score scholarships, yet they strive to bridge the transnational gap, build new identity and reconcile with the drastic changes of lost and new acquired segments of one's self (Fetterolf, 2017).

II. Theoretical Frameworks

In this paper, Transnationalism is presented as an area of research and a potential literary theory to study transnational literature/ migration literature namely the Afropolitan novel. It is used as a lens to follow the formation of the Afropolitan identity following the

migration journey of Darling in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. For that, this section would go through Transnationalism and Afropolitanism as theoretical frameworks and introduce the impact of transnational links and practices in the formation of Afropolitan identities on transnational routes.

1. Transnationalism:

Before the grounding of transnationalism as a solid scholarly research agenda in the 90's by a cadre of researchers in distinct disciplines such as Glick Schiller and associates, Portes, Guarnizo, Smith, Vertovec... to name a few, the concept was close to becoming an 'empty conceptual vessel' because: "[it] has been rapidly 'assimilated', indeed appropriated and consumed by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, geographers and other scholars. The concept's sudden prominence has been accompanied by its increasing ambiguity" (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). The aforementioned scholars among others since then provided the cornerstones, the outlines and the foundation of the concept by deftly linking the reasons, development, processes and results of transnationalism while also expanding the horizons of other disciplines and scholarships to contain the concept without limiting or trimming it. Transnationalism emerged as a new conceptualization to capture the different experiences of migrant population. Nina Glick Schiller and her associates introduced the theory anew in their 1992 requisite article "Transnationalism: a New Analytical Framework for Understanding Migration". In the article, they renounced the earlier conceptions of migration that no longer suffice to authentically portray the experience of a migrants. The earlier experience was equivalent to permanent rupture, complete abandonment and the arduous challenges of learning new languages and cultures. The new conception, however; highlights the networks created by migrants which bring together two societies into a single social field (Schiller et al, 1992). Transnationalism, at this point, is needed to rectify the obsolete conceptualizations of migrant experience and bring to the light the multiple ties created and maintained by 'transmigrants' across national borders. These ties permit transmigrants to live in two societies simultaneously. Transnationalism, then, is the process following which migrants create and maintain social, economic, political and cultural ties that span national borders.

Schiller and her associates believe that limiting social science to concepts such as: tribe, ethnic groups or a nation succeeds solely in limiting the ability of researchers to fully perceive the phenomenon of transmigration. Hence, they situate transnationalism in time, space, world systems and sociological theories to take into account every aspect of the theory from the daily activities of transmigrants to the global changes generated by their networks (Schiller et al, 1992). Unlike the previous scientific researches that study migration as a separate phenomenon within the borders of the host country neglecting the phenomenon's implication in the home land and the networks created between two or more nation; transnationalism is an unbound social science that tends to analyse transmigration as part of a global phenomenon. Steven Vertovec thoroughly articulated a description of transnationalism extracted from the fundamental social literatures of the late 90's stating that:

Transnationalism describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual- arena of activity (Vertovec, 2009).

Transnational migrants are indeed living here and there across borders; creating this imaginary in-between 'third space' as coined by Homi Bhabha. Transnational practices question the geographic imperatives and compel the reconceptualization of the binary locality and mobility (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). They also question the boundaries of transnationality since the active agents of transnationalism; transmigrants, are unbound culturally, politically and economically. Guarnizo and Smith agree that: "Such relations are dynamic, mutable, and dialectical. They form a triadic connection that links transmigrants, the localities to which they

migrate, and their locality of origin" (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). Transnationalism is not to be assumed boundless neither is to be confined to one locale or agent; some of the proved to be obsolete or rather overly bound social definitions are to be revisited, expanded and redefined.

2. Afropolitanism:

Transnational Africans are moving seamlessly across social, cultural and linguistic borders and constantly questioning the parochial perception of their new reformulated identities. National and hyphenated identities proved unfitting for the complex and multilayered new identities of transnational Africans who embrace diversity and celebrate being a citizen of the world. Afropolitanism, the ever controversial label, points to a fundamental shift in the conceptions of African identity; "a shift that highlights the fluidity in African self-perception and visions of the world (...)one cannot understand Afropolitanism without understanding cosmopolitanism, whose idea it replicates in an intellectual mimetic gesture" (Eze, 2014). It is, for many transnational Africans, an alternative identity for those who maintain emotional allegiances with African locales while embracing diverse world cultures. Afropolitanism, a version of 'rooted cosmopolitanism', was first coined and defined by Taiye Selasi in her acclaimed essay "Bye-bye Babar" in 2005,

(...) the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e. g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic [sic] or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent [sic] to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie's kitchen. Then there's the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (Selasi, 2005)

Although the bit 'We are Africans of the World' would have sufficed to preserve the African sense of attachment to the African roots while embracing cosmopolitanism to offer a new way of existing in the global world, the other specific detailing brought the voice of dissent that harshly criticized it of elitism, classism and exclusiveness. Afropolitanism, however; has been since developed and expanded by prominent scholars namely Achille Mbembe, Simon Gikandi and Chielozona Eze to render it to more than a rubric embraced by Afro-hyphenated intellectuals enjoying global mobility.

Cosmopolitanism, from the Greek word 'kosmopolites' means a citizen of the world. Cosmopolitans, the global category from which Afropolitans were born, "have traditionally been conceived as educated mobile world citizens for whom travel is easy, the world open, and national, cultural and ethnic boundaries meaningless. Easy mobility appears to be a main qualification to be a cosmopolitan or, by extension and definition, an Afropolitan (Gikandi, 2011). This account in addition to maintaining allegiance to Africa and celebrating African roots resulted in Afropolitanism as an identity and literary and artistic movement. Achille Mbembe, a leading scholar and proponent of Afropolitanism, believe in the potential of Afropolitanism as an alternative solution for Africa to cope with globality since "the paradigms of African literature, philosophy and art are so ossified and institutionalized that they become useless in an increasingly mobile and transient world" (Mbembe). Mbembe disagree with Selasi's on two account, her assumption that African translocation is a recent phenomenon and the exorbitant openness to diversity as it threatens and commodifies Africaness. He nonetheless shares her vision that embracing diversity is what underlies Afropolitanism: "embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the ability to recognize one's

face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlies the term 'Afropolitanism' (Mbembe, 2007). "Committed to openness", Chielozona Eze identifies himself as an Afropolitan and states that Afropolitans lay claims to both Africa and the world at large and able to perceive the world from not only double, but multiple consciousness "in a flexible gesture of unbounded humanity" (Eze, 2016).

What Scholars and authors who advocate Afropolitanism share is the wish to move away from postcolonial binaries of the empire/other, eradicate Afropessimism, and expand the qualifications of identity to more than 'blackness' and 'africaness'. Simon Gikandi believes that Afropolitanism has the necessary tools, the transnational links, and the cultural knowledge to achieve this vision. Afropolitanism might be Bhabha's third space in which the Western metropolis and the African origin coexist to 'rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis' (Gikandi 2011), and overcome the malady of Afropessimism— the belief that the continent and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped [in] a vicious circle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions' (Gikandi, 2011), hence Afropolitanism is hailed as "a promise of vacating the seduction of pernicious racialized thinking" (Mbembe, 2007). The privilege of mobility and the elitism of Afropolitanism continue to be a main shortcoming that is repeatedly criticized. Afropolitans are a scant minority which established and prospered in the Western opportunity land. Although these 'Africans of the world' serve as a well-educated African voice in the global arena, it may fail to voice the narratives of underprivileged Africans (Cobo-Piñero (2018). These aforementioned scholars elaborated the exclusive scope set by Selasi and addressed other types of underprivileged mobilities. Simon Gikandi questions the less effortless experience of underprivileged transnational agents who cosmopolitan narratives failed to include and cover, "Where do these people, the rejects of failed states, fit into our fascination with identities constituted across boundaries? (...) do they become cosmopolitan in the same way as the African elites who move and shake things in the corridors of the American or European university and boardroom? Do they become cosmopolitans in the same sense as the intellectual class (...)? And how do we tell the stories of those who are not yet quite cosmopolitan even when they inhabit the spaces that have come to be inscribed as global?" (Gikandi ****). Many contemporary African works today that are acclaimed Afropolitan works enlarged the tight set of criteria Selasi offered when she first coined the term Afropolitanism. Works such as: ---- offer a more nuanced Afropolitan portrait. Such a less privileged mode of mobility are portrayed by Bulawayo in *We Need New Names*, a novel that expands the Afropolitan scope and shed the light on the stories of those who or not yet cosmopolitans.

III. Literary Transnationalism and the Afropolitan Novel:

Continuous migration flows are unrelentingly blurring concepts of national culture and national identity. The reformulation of these concepts prompts a new lexicon and a new lens to conceive the intricacies of transnational narratives. The migration flows and the diasporic communities of the last decades emphasizes three key differences from earlier forms of migration: it is largely voluntary, rather than coerced; it is connected to globalization; and it results from the failure of the postcolonial state. p642). This new form of migration is paralleled in contemporary African literary works that stepped away from the postcolonial tone. Centre/periphery and empire/other dichotomies of postcolonialism cannot account for the new stance of transnational African novel. Authors moved from subversive narratives and Afropessimism is avoided to place the African story in the global arena. African identities that were once portrayed shattered as a result of exile and diaspora are more complex and multi-layered with the rise of cosmopolitan culture among transnational Africans. Postcolonialism and the imperial perspective of literature will not suffice the new large scale of identity and nationalism may not stretch enough to cover the fluidity of culture. Transnational narratives are using a new language that nationalism and postcolonialism lack. The hesitance in embracing transnationalism in political and social-cultural fields is understandable given the sanctity of 'nation'. The field of literary studies is no exception with the relative lack of a critical discourse because the study of literature has been for a long time routinely divided according to national borders. Vertovec contends that transnationalism is, among other takes, a social group, a type of

consciousness, and a mode of cultural production. These takes on transnationalism as an analytical lens * the study of transnational literature to analyze issues of identity belonging and cultural diversity as the journey of transmigrant characters unfold to mirror experiences of transnational agents across-borders.

According to Paul Jay, the travel of literature across borders predates the rise of globalization, but this latter catalyzed the drastic proliferation of transnational literature. He agrees that literature with all its genres have always been mobile even before the nation-state come to existence (4). The interest in difference, connected as it is to the study of minority, multicultural, postcolonial, and transnational literatures, was dramatically accelerated by the forces of globalization which “made available to a global audience literary works by an increasingly mobile group of writers (...) These works are linked both by the historical circumstances of their production, and by their shared exploration of subjects that deal specifically with transnational experience—with migration, displacement, exile, border crossings, cosmopolitanism, globalization, and the forms of personal and cultural hybridity these forces have produced.” (Jay, 2021). The fact that transnational literary works, namely Afropolitan, are written in English language makes it impossible to understand these works outside the trifecta of transnationalism. English literature in the age of globalization is increasingly transnational and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to understand without recognizing its relationship to a complicated web of transnational histories linked to the historical processes of globalization, hence "English" was becoming defined less by a nation than by a language (Jay, 2021). This calls for the exigency of transnationalism in literary theory because it “allows literary critics to appreciate characteristics of texts, of their marketing and reception, and of the identities of authors and literary characters which other concepts do not illuminate or gloss over.” (Wiegandt, 2020). It would supplement the field of literary theory with the necessary scope to “identify that point at which two or more geo-cultural imaginaries intersect, connect, engage with, disrupt or conflict with each other in literary form”(Morgan, 2016).

Although literary transnationalism is still hesitantly approached, there is a growing interest in the complexity, nuanced and analytical potential of transnationalism to analyse how literary production, circulation and reception are shaped by sustained transnational practices. Many scholars are contributing to the rise of transnational literature as both a field of study and a kind of literature. Transnational individuals develop a de-centralized sense of belonging, their sense of attachment goes beyond nationality and national borders (Vertovec, 2009) and this is paralleled in transnational literature that is emerging and proliferating at a time when the borders of the modern nation-state have become increasingly porous” (Jay 2021), and these scholars believe that it is ought to be conveniently matched in literary theory studies. Donald E. Pease conclude that the term ‘transnational’ has replaced ‘multicultural’, ‘postcolonial’, and ‘postnational’ as the most frequently invoked qualifier (qtn Gourgam, 2017). Afropolitan novels are moving from the postcolonial agenda and the presentation of Africa with an Afropessimist tone, they are also “[breaking] with nativism and nationalism which long rutted the landscape of African writing” (Gourgam, 2017). The Afropolitan novel jettison the old modes to present the African narrative anew in the global arena; it “present(s) fresh ways to conceive of race and racial formation in a global frame, as well as innovative forms of representing black humanity, agency, and futurity in the literature of migration and diaspora” (Goyal, 2017). It liberates Africa from the narrow conceptions of race and anti-colonialism to present African characters with multilayered identities that position them beyond the confinement of the African continent. Transnationalism in a way, set the ground for Afropolitanism as an identity and contributed to widespread reception, acceptance and success of Afropolitan novel.

IV. We Need New Names; More than Afropolitanism:

NoViolet Bulawayo, the penname of Elizabeth Zandile Tshele, was born in 1981 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe. She immigrated to the USA at the age of 18, where she continues to

reside. Her pen name pays homage to her deceased mother 'Violet' and the Zimbabwean town where she spent a part of her childhood. She is part of the third generation of African writers who are contributing to 'the African literary renaissance'. These writers lead transnational lives in the West while addressing issues in Africa and engage with the intricacies of the contemporary African migrant/transnational story. The transnational experience of these writers afford them the transnational voice, the literary creativity and the Western freedom to write about political issues without any reservations. This generation, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, Warsan Shire, Taiye Selasi and Petinah Gappah, "occupy a liminal space, straddling two drastically different worlds while trying to address both" (Fetterolf, 2017).

We Need New Names (2013) is NoViolet Bulawayo's debut novel. It opens with the Caine's Prize winning short story "Hitting Budapest". The novel is narrated by Darling, a child in Zimbabwe at the beginning of the novel and a teenager in Detroit, Michigan at its end. The novel is divided into two distinct sections, starting with Darling's adventures with her group of friends in the shanty town ironically named Paradise. This section delivers grotesque and satirical reportage of the absurdities of the newly-independent Zimbabwe and hurtles through a series of many familiar depressive scenarios of rape, incest, aid-dependence and starvation. This section portrays more than the pages are expected to offer which labeled the novel as poverty-porn story and an account from the postcolonial Afropessimist narratives. It is set in a poverty-stricken shantytown in Zimbabwe during the 'lost decade' of Mugabe regime, when all promises of change failed miserably. This led to unprecedented numbers of emigrants fleeing their realities and seeking better futures. Darling is the privileged one among her playmates Bastard, Godknows, the pregnant eleven year-old Chipo, Sboh and Stina, whom she used to scavenge for guavas with to appease their starving bodies. The second section of the novel is the story of how Darling's America becomes 'DestroyedMichigan'. Ironically the mispronunciation of Detroit, Michigan, DestroyedMichigan comes to destroy Darling romanticized dream of a better life in America. Adolescent darling with her unequivocal portrayal of her underpaid jobs as an undocumented African immigrant narrates the reality of the 'American dream': "When I'm not working at the store, I have to come here, even though I don't like the idea of cleaning somebody's house, of picking up after someone else, because in my head this is not what I came to America for (Bulawayo, 263). In the novel, Darling crosses geographical, cultural and linguistic borders and navigates the distance constantly renaming, redefining and reshaping her identity and her perception of many notions like home, distance and the American dream.

The novel is a customary story of American immigration with a contemporary African twist. Unlike the traditional migrant novel revolves around the dislocated condition, Bulawayo's 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 – that is, a sort of cosmopolitan awareness" Toivanen 4. The collective tone used at occasions in the novel further accentuates the broader spectrum of immigrants Darling's journey strives to cover. Although the novel is included in the 'African literary renaissance' among African contemporary transnational novels, the novel is criticized of "cementing a racialized and neocolonial narrative of the dysfunction of the postcolony by parading well-worn tropes like children without the supervision of adults, doing warped things like staging a mock abortion for their 11-year-old friend whose grandfather raped and impregnated her" (Goyal, 2017). GUARDIAN REVIEW states that "There is a palpable anxiety to cover every "African" topic; almost as if the writer had a checklist made from the morning's news on Africa". This review is somehow an Afropolitan disappointed commentary on an African novel that portrays realistic events happening for underprivileged Africans. The question that rises here is whether this review exclude transnational African novels that voice underprivileged accounts of the African shantytown from Afropolitanism or does it indirectly highlight the tight scope of the Afropolitan novel to include various backstories of African migration to the West.

In Michigan, Darling's infantile dreams of living a lavish life free of hardships are destroyed by the reality of the life of unethical immigrants in the West. She grows out of her identity that formed while hunting for guavas to embrace a new forms of identity that relates her to a large spectrum of underprivileged immigrants. This identity of 'affinity' as Eze coined gather these immigrants with their common struggles; since "like us, they had left their

homelands behind (...) we had never seen their countries but we knew about everything in those pictures; we were not altogether strangers” (245). Darling engages with her African-American identity while still scavenging for food in Paradise as she lives her imaginary transnational dreams. Eze believes that the interior mobility is enough to form an Afropolitan identity; “One does not need to have crossed geographical boundaries to be Afropolitan; one only needs to cross the psychic boundaries erected by nativism, autochthony, heritage and other mythologies of authenticity” (Eze model). The Afropolitan is not defined by the easy access to mobility but by transcending invisible boundaries while adopting ‘a humanistic stance’ and the willingness to occupy a ‘third space’ between several nations and cultures. This perspective, and the transnationality of Bulawayo’s narrative, categorized *We Need New Names* as an Afropolitan novel by many critics; “Darling and her fellow displaced residents of Paradise [are] true Afropolitans” (Eze, 2016). The novel defies the qualifications and characteristics set by Selasi in 2005. It is far from the polished image of the intellectual, privileged, fashionable African elite in a jazz club. Bulawayo’s does not celebrate mobility nor sugarcoats the African reality. The novel sets class as a key factor in the transnational experience, and racialized the narrative of African Afropessimism alongside the immigrant story of a would-be Afropolitan Darling (Goyal, 2017). *We Need New Name* trespasses the traumas of the failed-state and the blueprint of what an Afropolitan novel is ought to present, it “escapes both poverty porn and the immigrant story of reinvention, connecting Zimbabwe to the US by showing us vulnerability and precarity in each location, foregrounding inequality in the place of easy mobility, and asking for new names over new nations” (Goyal, 2017). The Afropolitan novel, accordingly, is capable of weaving the past traumas with the challenging transnational present all while bridging the distance between two distinct localities and reformulating a new identity. Bulawayo’s take on Afropolitanism is one that is willing to relate and understand the cosmopolitan ‘empathetic imagination’ of the world. Darling narrates its way to the Afropolitan agenda, and fit, although abjectly, in a cosmopolitan world.

V. Becoming Afropolitan on Transnational Routes

The transnational experience is the interplay of two or more simultaneous cultures, ideologies, languages and ethnicities. The complex social relations of transnational migrants mold fluid identities to ease their fitting in both home and host societies. Some migrants may identify with one society more than the other, but the majority embrace complex identities to link them simultaneously to more than one society. These multiple linkages allow migrants to accommodate easily in the new societies resisting to several forms of insecurity and alienation (Schiller, 1992). The triadic connection between transmigrants, host and native localities is not where the complexity of transnationalism ends, the contextual differences abroad forges extra variables that further entangles and enlarges the concept of transnationalism. It is axiomatic that the nature of triadic connections differ in scale, nature and scope. The contextual differences, however; dictates somehow the nature of life of transmigrants as per their class, gender and regional origins (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). These factors will be eventually perceived mutable as they are liable to be ameliorated or deteriorated, yet initiatively these very same factors decide somehow the destination and opportunity for the transmigrants: “... class, gender, and regional origin emerge as critical determinants of migrants’ destination, attainment, and transnationality” (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998).

Since the beginning of the novel, Darling refers to The USA as ‘my America’ and aspired to “[blaze] out of this kaka country” (Bulawayo, 2013), with the utmost romanticized dream of a naïve child, Darling pictures her life in America as lavish and poverty free; “eating real food and doing better things” (Bulawayo, 2013). Bastard and the other playmates have a more realistic view of migration to America, they are already aware of the narratives that African immigrants work the undesired jobs: “Well, go, go to America and work in nursing homes. That’s what aunt Fostalina is doing as we speak. Right now she is busy cleaning kaka off some wrinkled old man who can’t do anything for himself” (Bulawayo, 2013). Country game that Darling plays with her friends is a satirical take on the economic imbalance and extreme inequality that some countries are blindly desired just by their names among destitute children who never left their countries to explore these imbalances for themselves. The children

ironically fight for the names because: “everybody wants to be the US, and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece. These are the country-countries” (Bulawayo, 2013). The countries are decided, more ironically, by the children’s power hierarchy because “[n]obody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this we live in – who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?” (49); this vision is contradicted later in the novel when Darling discover the importance of class in dictating the future that awaits unethical immigrants. “The characters, however disempowered, speak with an immediacy that removes them from a static or sentimentalized role of the victim” (Cobo-Piñero, 2018) which marks a shift from the Afropessimist tone of postcolonial narratives. Simon Gikandi classifies the underprivileged characters who live outside Africa in their imagination as “the first type of Afropolitan”. The characters are “true Afropolitans”, according to Eze, since they broke the “psychic boundaries” out of a country failed them and their parents who become starving, barefoot squatters.

While it is undoubted that the setting of the novel is Zimbabwe during the rule of Mugabe during the ‘lost decade’ of the country, the country remains unnamed and the period unset plainly in the novel enlarging the scope that the plot represent. The sanctioned demolition of illegal urban houses, the economy of precarity, the closing of schools and the corrupt regime led to what Gikandi calls ‘rejects of failed states’ (2010). This failure resulted in unprecedented numbers of emigrants to The USA and South Africa, Zimbabweans started ‘leaving everything that makes them who and what they are, leaving because it is no longer possible to stay’ (Bulawayo, 2013). The migrants already have shattered identities because they lost all that make them what they are. The transnational experience is in a way built on the rabbles of disappointment and the hopes of a better future. Shedding the local identity in order to assimilate in new Western societies and acquire a new sense of a cosmopolitan identity does not seem as a hefty of a price when the political and economic realities of their origin locales stripped them of whatever identity they once had. As these migrants are ripped of their identity “a sense of belonging is only possible in the country that is expunging them due to its economic and political problems. Their migration is coerced and disruptive to their sense of being and as a result these migrants are depicted as losing all psychological and cultural supports for being whole” (Ndlovu 2015). The national identity is lost with the sense of belonging in the unhomey failed state. Describing emigrants, Bulawayo says: “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”. The transnational experience does not eradicate the old identity for these immigrants; it rather offers a boundless identity that seek a home beyond any national borders that may once again disappoint. Although migration is based on a hope for a better reality, the West’s perception of African immigrants remains racialized and narrow; “when they asked us where we were from, we exchanged glances and smiled with shyness of child brides. They said, Africa? We nodded yes. What part of Africa? We smiled. Is it that part where vultures wait for famished children to die? We smiled. Where life expectancy is thirty-five years? We smiled. Is it there where dissidents shove AK-47s between women’s legs? We smiled. Where people run about naked? We smiled. That part where they massacre each other? We smiled. (Bulawayo, 2013)

The shifting identity appears to be a recurrent concept in the novel with the previous generation back in Zimbabwe. Darling’s mother and aunt, forced by historical complexities and political crisis, constantly redefined ‘home’, before independence and after independence and then the home after the demolition of their proper habitable homes before ‘things fall apart’ during the corrupt regime of Mugabe; “when someday talks about home, you have to listen carefully, so you know exactly which one the person is referring to” (Bulawayo, 2013). These historical complex multi-layered identities urges a sense of forced flexibility between homes and a broad identification that contain many fragments without excluding any. The hardships encountered in Detroit, Michigan as an underclass immigrant demolish Darling’s infantile dreams. Darling left all the details that crushed her realistic expectations when she writes to her friends; she admits that: “I left out these things, and a lot more, because they embarrassed me, because they made America not feel like My America, the one that I had always dreamed of back in Paradise”(Bulawayo, 2013). She juggles her homesickness with the unforgiving weather

and the different type of hunger she is countering in the US, yet she endured because if she returns to Paradise, she “wouldn't be having enough food, which is why [she] will stand being in America, dealing with the snow; there is food to eat here, all types and types of food. [...] There are times, though, that no matter how much food I eat, I find food does nothing for me, like I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that (Bulawayo, 2013).” Darling homesickness is aggravated by her sense of estrangement observing the strange landscape in which she misses every detail of her home, the blue sky, the games, the smells; “I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my head, everything” (Bulawayo, 2013). Yet again, Darling strived to adjust and blend in copying America's fashion and make-up from magazine, learning the accent from TV programs. When Darling is to talk to her friends back home, she no longer blends in their circle; she misses them yet she knows that they will not understand each other's circumstances. She starts avoiding the calls at times stating that “it's hard to explain, this feeling; it's like there's two of me” (2013). Because as Darling is striving to blur the boundaries she encountered in the American society, other boundaries emerge to separate her from her old self which leaves her with divided identity, she states “one part that is yearning for my friends; the other does not know how to connect with them anymore, as if they are people that I have never met” (2013).

The first section of the novel offers explicit critiques on the World's perception of African realities. During Darling's visit to the rich neighborhood Budapest to steal guavas, Bulawayo presents an interval character that contradicts completely the impoverished children.

A privileged young woman with a high fashion and a London accent, whose clean feet surprise the children and throwing food away enrage them. She refers to Zimbabwe as her father's country while wearing a necklace of Africa. Her first intuition after seeing them was to photograph the barefoot hungry children. This short scene in the novel speaks volumes of fetishizing African poverty, the commodification of African culture and the new identities embraced by Westerners of African descent. NGO aid worker, are another interval, that is plainly criticized in the novel. It exposes “the limits of their humanitarian stance, warning potential readers of the pitfalls of voyeuristic appreciation of suffering when it is divorced from larger social and historical contexts or from any meaningful attempt to engage the victim” (Cobo-Piñero, 2019). The children quickly realize that even though the aid workers “are giving us things, they do not want to touch us or for us to touch them”, they responds to Darling's “thank you much” with a shocked silence, leading her to wonder “like maybe I just barked” (Bulawayo, 2013). Bulawayo satirically taunts the aid of NGO agents when they offering them toys instead of far more important necessities in exchange for pictures to share with the world: “they don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't do it; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take” (Bulawayo, 2013). The pregnant Chipo draws the most attention, leading Darling to comment on her newfound celebrity: “it's like she has become Paris Hilton, it's all just clickflash-flash-click” (Bulawayo, 2013). In the second section of the novel, on a phone call with Chipo, Darling shares that she is aware of the insufferable situation from a BBC program. Chipo's response brutally criticizes Westerners who believe that they understand the African struggle from TV screens: “you think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering, so it's us who have a right to even say anything about that or anything about anybody (Bulawayo, 2013). It also shows that the privilege of mobility strips away Afropolitans from the right to be the voice of African suffering back home, they are not living that reality, so they are unable to understand it. When Darling defends that it is her country too, the response strips her further of her old national identity: “you left it, Darling, my dear, you left the house burning and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn't even suit you, that this is your country?” (Bulawayo, 2013).

Three important chapters in the novel served as commentaries on socio-political realities that led to drastic changes in the lives of those who were failed by their nations. “How They Appeared” narrates the inhabitation of the poverty struck shantytown by a ragtag group after their homes were bulldozed by authorities, “How They Left” is those who migrated seeking a

better life in other countries,” “How they Lived” succinctly accounts the inaccessibility of the American dream for ‘illegal’ and undocumented African immigrants. The first two aforementioned chapters are written in third person plural ‘they’, whereas the final one shifts to a first person plural ‘We’. Darling who narrated the others chapters from a remote observer’s perspective, locate itself among the immigrants and narrates from within:

The others spoke languages we didn’t know, worshipped different gods, ate what we would not dare touch. But like us, they had left their homelands behind. They flipped open their wallets to show us faded photographs of mothers whose faces bore the same creases of worry as our very own mothers, siblings bleak-eyed with dreams unfulfilled like those of our own, fathers forlorn and defeated like ours. We had never seen their countries but we knew about everything in those pictures; we were not altogether strangers (Bulawayo, 2013).

This collective tone, in which Darling finds a sense of belonging to a minority that she identifies herself with is the space where an Afropolitan identity is formed “calling for a new, more nuanced understanding of identity” (Eze,); a cosmopolitan belonging to the world with dear African roots. Darling, and generally the underprivileged unethical immigrants, form a sense of solidarity based on common struggle and marginalization, as Mbembe puts it “one’s face in that of a foreigner” (28). The chapter “How they lived” also highlights how these undocumented immigrants shed more parts of their identity, mainly their names to go by Western names, as a price to fit in Western societies: “we did not meet stares (...) we avoided gazes. We hid our real names, gave false ones” (Bulawayo, 2013). The same chapter shows how underprivileged Afropolitans paid higher prices to remain in the US as they begged, lied, charmed, and bribed to maintain a life of juggling underpaid jobs. This resonates with the desperate endeavours of Zimbabweans in the first section of the novel to obtain a visa to a promising future: “Nqo worked the fields of Botswana for nine months. Nozipho, like Primrose and Sichelokuhle and Maidei, slept with that fat black pig Banyile Khoza from the passport office. Girls flat on their backs, Banyile between their legs, America on their minds (Bulawayo, 2013). Bulawayo’s narrative shed the light on underprivileged Afropolitans who indeed succeeded to travel to the West, yet lived devoid of any privileges the West can offer in their imaginations. Bulawayo presents us with more critical Afropolitans with concerns of social injustices and lack of agency; “These concerns are increasingly present in Afropolitan scholarship, which is turning to more situated and contextualized representations of the ‘Africans of the world’” (Cobo-Piñero, 2018).

At the end of the novel, Darling encounters her American boss’s daughter, Kate, wearing the same Cornell University T-shirt her friend Bastard wore back home. She remarks that the connection with ‘her’ America started before she arrived: “I felt like I already knew the place, like we had a connection” (Bulawayo, 2013). At that point in the novel, Darling is making a sense of distance and moulding a new identity, for Darling of Shantytown would have flaunted seeing the T-shirt in America, yet she found nothing to say when she wanted to tell the girl about Bastard to Kate. Kate, although being close in age to Darling, but her privilege leave her with an only concern, to look ‘sexier’ for her boyfriend. Darling, until this point of the novel, was the silent-observer narrator, yet when countering Kate about her ridiculous problem she voices all the frustration of social injustices, the anxiety of belonging and the struggles to maintain a life as an undocumented immigrant:

Because, Miss I want to Be Sexy there is this: You have a fridge bloated with food so no matter how much you starve yourself, you’ll never know real , true hunger. Look around you, and you have all these riches you don’t even need; upstairs, your bed is fit for a king; you go to Cornell, where you can be anything you want; you don’t even have to clean up after yourself because I’m doing it for you, right now, you have a dog whose wardrobe I couldn’t afford; and what more, you’re here, living in your own country of birth, so just exactly what is your real problem? (2013)

The subaltern in Darling who lived through hardship spoke in an outburst of all the times, from Paradise to Detroit, where she was, hungry, barefoot, homeless and misrepresented, adding the slim chance to get by in America where she once romanticized of achieving a privileged life and driving her Lamborghini.

Added to the concerns of transnational Africans, language is either the barrier or the key to decrease the anxiety of belonging. African critics denounce all African literature written in English language, the language of the oppressor and colonizer. They believe that the intimacy of narrating local voices is lost when writing in a foreign language. Other pan-Africanist writers who chose to write in English used the language as a counter-weapon to subvert the colonial narratives and debunk the distorted history. Writing in English was a literary resistance addressed to the Western world with its language. Afropolitan transnational writers embrace this stance of writing with a global language without the stance of resistance that is deemed outdated. They chose the global language to create new meanings of African image and voice the African story to the world. The use of English language in the first section of the novel is rare and used only with foreign western characters. When Darling speaks in English on the phone with the British family of the raided house in Budapest, she flaunts her English and wishes for the phone call to elongate so that she can speak it more. She remarks her friends' jealousy of her language proficiency: stating "everybody is looking at me like I'm something" (Bulawayo, 2013). The English that was once granted her timely superiority among her playmates becomes her assimilation way in the American society. Darling watched TV shows like *Friends* and *Glee* to cultivate her accent and blend in more. She stored slang expressions like "yikes" "*pretty good, pain in the ass, for real*" "under her tongue (...) ready to use". She even despises her aunt Faustalina's accent and promises herself to "never ever sound like that" (Bulawayo, 2013) which conveys a twisted nature of assimilation that bridges the gap with the foreigners yet creates another with family who failed to master the language and assimilate properly. An argument between Darling and Kristal, her also immigrant friend, marks how the language is among the aspects that creates a hierarchy between immigrants and American born. Darling criticizes her friends' unclear accent "when I first met you I couldn't understand anything coming out of your mouth, not a single word, nada, and you sit here and say you are American and speak English" (Bulawayo, 2013). Darling speaks correct English following her textbook language lessons, she is scornfully reminded that she is being a pretentious unethical immigrant striving to sound like "stupid white folks". A native accent has been a source of anxiety for Darling because she discovered the importance of sounding American in facilitating the accumulated struggles of undocumented immigrants; she states that "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, 2013).

VI. Conclusion:

Recently, defining and demarcating identity have been further complicated by the intensive transnational ties and practices sustained across borders. Transnational mobilities is a pressing topic across disciplines and the African contemporary novel is no exception. This research paper delves into transnationalism as a potential analytical theory and its potential to study the complex identities of transnational agents across borders. Through the lens of transnationalism, this paper aims to trace the shaping of African identities into Afropolitan identities on transnational routes and how these identities are a coping strategy with the linguistic, and socio-cultural differences in the debut novel of Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, a novel that intertwines transnational shaping of Afropolitan identity with the unprivileged immigrant experience. Diasporic African works and literature of the exile existed to 'write back' and challenge the Western canon. For long decades, African literature was a mode of resistance and advocating for Africanity. African authors, who led diasporic lives, wrote to debunk the Western narrative and the alleged superiority/centrality of the West. What shifted lately is the paradigm of the 'diasporic' African novel and its agenda, the emergence of a group of transnational Africans who grasped the transnational experience and embraced globality stepping away from the patriotic stance of nativism and the postcolonial agenda. This change is synchronising the change in the global arena to African literature to discourse the

experiences of African immigrants on transitional routes and how it reformulates their identities. This paper traces the interconnectedness between transnational ties and the importance of literary transnationalism with the Afropolitan novel and Afropolitan identity. African transnational agents, Afropolitans, attempt to bridge the gap between two distinct nations and make a meaning of the distance to reconcile with the new transnational life and acquire a new identity that tolerates the anxiety of blending in the host society. This is further scrutinized following Darling's story from the unhomely atrocities in crisis-stricken post-independent Zimbabwe to Detroit, Michigan in a desperate attempt for a promising future. Bulawayo's novel intertwines the struggles and trauma that matches a postcolonial narrative with a new take on the immigrant novel. She highlights the shortcomings of cosmopolitanism, the inaccessibility of the American dream and the importance of class for the transnational experience of underclass undocumented immigrant. *We Need New Names* portrays the moulding of Afropolitan identities on transnational even though the novel fits abjectly with the Afropolitan model.

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