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We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo. Paradigms of Migration: The Flight and the Fall

Abstract I: Il saggio analizza i paradigmi che definiscono l'esperienza della migrazione nel romanzo di NoViolet Bulawayo (n. 1981, Zimbabwe), *Abbiamo bisogno di nomi nuovi* (trad. it. 2014), un esempio della nuova letteratura africana, (o 'afropolitan?'). La migrazione verso gli Stati Uniti, vista dagli occhi di una ragazzina, assume il valore di un volo emancipatorio, soprattutto visti i fallimenti di altri flussi migratori interni (forzati), oltreconfine (Sudafrica), o persino verso l'Inghilterra. Per contrappunto, al volo si alterna il paradigma della caduta. La prima esperienza americana è la neve che cade, in seguito sarà l'inciampare nella lingua inglese a essere paragonato ad una caduta; infine, la caduta fisica e psichica dei migranti illegali nell'invisibilità di lavori indesiderabili e nella 'bugia' (Mehta 2016) lascia il posto alla caduta nella psicosi e nel disordine mentale, visto attraverso gli studi di etnopsichiatria di Roberto Beneduce (2015-2016) e un recentissimo racconto sulla migrazione, di Maaza Mengiste, "This is What the Journey Does" (2018).

Abstract II: This essay analyses paradigms of migration in *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo (b. 1981, Zimbabwe), a recent example of new African (or 'Afropolitan?') literature. A teenager idealises migration to the United States as a flight to emancipation, if compared to internal flows of forcedly removed people, or unsuccessful flows to South Africa, or even to Britain. As a counterpoint, a downfall follows the flight. The first American experience is a snowfall, then stumbling on the English Language is compared to a fall; physical as well as psychic downfalls send illegal migrants into the invisibility of undesirable jobs and into lying (Mehta 2016) but also into a mental condition. This final outcome of migration has been approached with the tools of ethno-psychiatry (Beneduce 2016-2018) and the recently published short story about migration by Maaza Mengiste, "This is What the Journey Does" (2018).

In the debut novel by the Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo (Elizabeth Zandile Tshele, born 1981 in Tsholotsho) *We Need New Names* (2013), various paradigms of migration are at play. In particular, 'flight' and 'fall' as paradigms of migration come through the eyes of a ten year-old child. In the words of Darling, the protagonist and first-person narrator, migration is synonymous with emancipation from starvation, illiteracy, unemployment, forced

removals, epidemics, structural violence, and it pivots around the metaphor of a flight away from home. Reviewers, among whom Helon Habila, have highlighted how all this appears to mirror a checklist of African bad news. Bulawayo belongs to a new generation of African writers (Bwesigye 2013), whom the novelist Taiye Selasi (Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu) named 'Afropolitans': "the newest generation of African emigrants. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world" (Selasi 2013).

Selasi's new coinage was met coldly by the scholar and media expert Marta Tveit on the basis that the definition creates a ghetto for an élite of westernised, well-off people, more generally definable as "disembedded, modernised, travelling global citizens" (Tveit 2013). Similarly, the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina dismissed the concept as "commodification of African culture" and proposed the notion of 'Panafrikanism', thus marking identity with a more political and philosophical bias (Wainaina 2013). Quite interestingly, Selasi then twisted the concept towards a more individual rather than a collective life experience: "what it means being a local" (Selasi 2014). However, the concept goes back to the 1990s (Hannerz 1990; Schone 2009: 2) and, later on, to what the African philosopher and anthropologist Achille Mbembe wrote about Africa being itself a varied space and identifying Johannesburg with the thriving centre of Afropolitanism¹.

These writers have also been defined as 'transnational' or 'post-national', for they belong to two or more nations, languages, and cultures and freely move across them. Yet, it is necessary not to idealise trans- or post-nationalism as a wished-for condition. In his essay *The Secret Life of Cities* (2016) the Indian-New York writer Suketu Mehta warns us all that to transcend nationality is something a migrant is not ready to do, nor ready to accept at all. His/her loyalty stays with both nations. In his study on urbanized migrants in the States, Suketu Mehta claims that even the term 'globalized' is not correct, for it only applies to rich business people, floating between airports, five-star hotels and conference-halls, without grasping the reality of the surrounding 'local'. The new definition coined by Suketu Mehta, as an alternative also to 'Afropolitan', which stigmatises people from one continent, is 'inter-local': meaning, a person who is able to connect with two or more places that concern him/her, who is not linked to one single nation, who is connected and interacts with the texture of his/her surrounding physical reality, and who is characterised by multiple, heterogeneous belongings (Mehta 2016: 79).

Another possible definition for these writers could be 'transatlantic', a term suitable for writers who feel they share a common history with the Atlantic slave trade and see both sides of the Atlantic as having African roots. The latter definition is less pertinent if referred to Bulawayo, for the transatlantic perspective is marginal to her discourse². Conversely,

¹ "A way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity – which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world. It is also a political and cultural stance in relation to nation, to race and to the issue of difference in general" (Mbembe 2007: 28).

² Bulawayo makes one passing reference to the States as the final destination of the slave trade: "Is not 'Melika also that wretched place where they took looted black sons and daughters those many, many years ago? [...] In the footsteps of those looted black sons and daughters, we were going, yes, we were going" (Bulawayo 2013: 241).

'panafrican' is a term that has been recently revived and foregrounded by those African writers, artists and intellectuals who live in Africa rather than in the West³, and who give a more political bias to the debate that on the one hand tries to define the condition of migrant and diasporic people, but on the other hand pivots only around those privileged ones who are working for the cultural industry.

NoViolet Bulawayo, after all, is a young African writer. Somehow, she has a lot in common with all the writers quoted by Ugandan writer Brian Bwesigye, who are the protagonists of the brain drain that characterises African countries⁴, but, differently from them, she portrays her own Africa, thus avoiding 'Afropolitanism' as "the new single story about Africa"; most interestingly, she consciously adopts specific linguistic features: her mother tongue, together with African tropes (metaphors), rooted in Africa's nature, culture and imagination⁵.

Migration as a Flight to Emancipation

Bulawayo's novel makes it clear that previous generations used to connect migration with England, the colonial motherland. Godknows, one of Darling's child-mates, has an uncle who migrated to London, but is moving to Dubai. Similarly, Darling indirectly refers to Britain: "Maybe it's a British Airways plane like the one Aunt Fostalina went in to America. It's what I will take myself when I follow Aunt Fostalina to America. [...] But I don't know why I have to take a British Airways plane to go to America; why not an American Airways one?" (Bulawayo 2013: 34). In Darling's childish mind the experience of migration to Britain and the States conflates.

The novel covers the decade after year 2000, when Mugabe was re-confirmed and the efforts for a real change in the country failed dramatically. The new generations started migrating either to the now democratic South Africa, or to the States, remaining the main dream country and land of opportunity. Darling is the lucky one, the pre-destined one of a gang of children living in the dispossessed neighbourhood of Paradise. With Darling, Bastard, Godknows, the pregnant eleven year-old Chipi, Sboh and Stina share an insatiable hunger that they try to satisfy by stealing all the guava fruits from the trees of the house-gardens in the well-off neighbourhood of Budapest, where mostly white people live.

When Darling thinks of "migrating" to her aunt Fostalina, to Detroit, Michigan, she thinks she will exclude herself from poverty and hunger, and will spare herself the need for stealing:

³ This is the case with Yewande Omotoso, daughter of the Nigerian writer and academic Kole Omotoso now living in South Africa, who has revived the term 'panafricanist'. Cp. Michele Farina, 'Sono 'panafricana', non afropolitan', *Corriere della Sera. La lettura*, May 13, 2018: 21.

⁴ Brian Chikwava's *Harare North*, about Zimbabweans in London; Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, about African prostitutes in Belgium; Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, about Ethiopians in Washington (DC); E. C. Esondu's collection of stories, *Voice of America*, about Nigerians in America; Teju Cole's *Open City*, set in New York (Bwesigye 2013).

⁵ A thorough stylistic analysis of metaphors and tropes is not possible here for reasons of space, although it would deserve to be delved into. Just one example is enough "Paradise is all tin and stretches out in the sun like a wet sheepskin nailed on the ground to dry; the shacks are the muddy colour of dirty puddles after the rain" (Bulawayo 2013: 34).

Bastard says when we grow up we'll stop stealing guavas and move on to bigger things inside the houses. I'm not really worried about that because when that time comes, I'll not even be here; I'll be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, eating real food and doing better things than stealing. But for now the guavas (Bulawayo 2013: 10).

Darling sees herself projected into a future and an elsewhere that will free her for ever from any needs. When she tells that to her friends, they respond with a less idealised perspective, based on what they often hear from adults:

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, you think we've never heard the stories? Bastard screams to my back but I just keep walking (Bulawayo 2013: 15).

The other children have a much more realistic view of migration, as nothing but a chance to fill in the job vacancies that most people despise in the West and that are therefore available to foreign workers.

What Darling also "flies away from" is gender violence, of which the novel presents three episodes, all narrated with total detachment by unsympathetic and cynical children. First, they discuss Chipó's pregnancy only to tease and convince her to tell them who is responsible for her condition. Yet Chipó has withdrawn into complete aphasia. She plays with them but does not verbally interact with them. They seem indifferent as if such a condition were normal after all, even at such a young age. Second, while on their hunting expedition for guavas, they see a woman hanging from a tree. They are totally indifferent – "Can't you see she hanged herself and now she's dead?" (Bulawayo 2013: 17). Again, they do not perceive anything wrong with that: "a tall thing dangling in a tree like a strange fruit. Then we see it's not a thing but a person. Then we see it's not just a person but a woman" (Bulawayo 2013: 17).

The vision is both frightening and mesmerising and the way it has been worded, in spite of betraying a childish, naïf, and metaphoric translation of something unfamiliar into something familiar, "a strange fruit hanging from a tree", is in fact a refined citation from the poem "Strange Fruit", published by Abel Meeropol, in 1937, and famously sung by Billie Holiday in 1939, to remind people of the racist, lynching practices against African Americans. This might count as one more tribute to a transatlantic or black Atlantic history. It also shows that children's speech, idioms, and jargon sometimes may easily overlap with the speech, idioms, and jargon of adults, creating complex intertextual meanings. Indeed, the woman looks like a fruit or a flower. She hangs from a green stripe, which is like a stem, she wears a yellow dress, which is like the corolla of a flower and has red shoes, which are like stamen. This image of eerie beauty scares the children, who throw stones at her and even think of stealing her shoes in order to sell them and then buy some bread with the money they might get. However, the woman's dead body leaves them completely indifferent. Death thus appears as absolutely 'normal'.

The third episode of violence takes place grotesquely and spectacularly during the religious service, on Easter Day, when Darling puts on her good, yellow dress and goes to church with her grandmother. Here a woman is dragged on the ground while screaming insults and pleas to the men who hold her, then the Prophet, a corrupt preacher, who while presiding the ceremony, points his stick against the woman and orders the demon who he says inhabits her to leave her body. In the end, he physically assaults her in what should be a ritual of exorcism. This time young Darling sympathises with this woman, she mentally talks to her in order to claim she is not part of that violence. Chipso, on her side, reacts to this public show as if she were undergoing a psychic transfer by speaking for the first time ever since she became pregnant to reveal that her grandfather raped her, recognising in the Prophet's gestures the violence of sexual intercourse.

Darling had also submitted herself to a ritual of exorcism. The Prophet had shaken her to the point of causing her to vomit, and by doing so suggesting that he was freeing her from the spirit who possessed her, that is to say, the spirit of her dead grandfather. He had been killed by the whites in a colonial war and had been denied proper burial.

This idea of 'possession' is clearly manipulated by the fake prophet. He does not 'embody' a syncretic religion inspired by both Christian Evangelism and local Animism. He rather seems to keep the two religious systems separate, in order to make profits according to the situation, since he wants to be paid in Dollars or Euros for his services.

Yet, possession also alludes to what the ethno-psychiatrist Roberto Beneduce analyses as the embodiment and incarnation of one's past history⁶. Darling identifies – or is identified by her community – with her grandfather, a man who once had been photographed with "a bone going through his nose and wearing earrings" (Bulawayo 2013: 24). He had fought against colonial expropriation of the land and had died for it. When analysing the experience of suffering of the African migrants to Italy, Beneduce writes:

By approaching the symptom as a fluctuating signifier which cannot be circumscribed, or linked to a single event, I seek here to explore its ghostlike nature, its power to reveal the past and its painful knots. By "past" I mean not just the individual past of the patient, but also the collective, haunting past s/he has inherited. This past we call "history" is a past always confronted when stumbling upon other people's memories (Beneduce 2016: 264).

Parenthetically, one might notice that another way 'to incarnate' one's past history is symbolised by the author's pen-name, which is the toponym of her place of origin. This is another type of the symptoms Beneduce elaborated on to identify the migrants' condition (2016: 262). Bulawayo's pen-name becomes a symptom of her will 'to incarnate' her (people's) land and history. Like Jamaica Kincaid (Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson) before her, who migrated from Antigua to New York to become a successful writer and who similarly chose to name herself after an island, so that her provenance would become self-evident and

⁶ Here the term 'possession' seems to correspond to "a mnemonics able to transfer from generation to generation the incorporated memory of precise historical events" (Beneduce 2008: 96-97; my translation).

able to construct her Caribbean identity in the face of the world. Bulawayo, too, has built her Zimbabwean identity quite clearly and meaningfully⁷.

Never naming the country nor its dictator, Mugabe's Zimbabwe is depicted as a famished and despondent country, now left in the hands of Chinese entrepreneurs. In addition to hunger and gender violence, endemic structural violence⁸ is one more reason for migrating to the US, because its alternative, migration to South Africa, has proven more than an unsuccessful move for many. Once in the land of gold and diamonds, the male migrants disappear as if swallowed by the mines in which they work. Moreover, they never send anything back home, or when they do come back, they do so only to die of Aids.

Darling is a traumatised child. She is scared by a recurrent nightmare, and as a consequence she resists sleep. She experienced a forced removal, after witnessing the destruction of her village by bulldozers and a baby killed and maimed under the ruins. Chased by armed policemen, she and her family lost their nice, "real" house with running water. Later on, she observed the humiliation of many, their families and their astonished children in a chapter where the personal pronoun "they" is stressed: *How they appeared*. "They did not come, no. They just appeared [...] like a wretched sea. [...] They appeared with the dust from their crushed houses clinging to their hair and skin and clothes [...] they appeared broken – shards of glass people" (Bulawayo 2013: 74).

In this emblematic, short, elegiac and mournful chapter, the grief and the suffering of the people, their complete destitution and loss is symbolised by a single missing item: a stool. This singled out object can be referred to as the "unhappy object" that characterises the "melancholic" migrant's fixation on a sore, a scar, or a negative experience (Ahmed 2007: 131-135).

Woman, where is my grandfather's black stool? I don't see it here.

What, are you crazy, old man? I don't even have enough of the children's clothes and you're talking about your dead grandfather's stool!

You know it was meant to stay with the family – my greatest grandfather Sindimba passed it on to his son Salile, who passed it on to his son Ngalo, who passed it on to his son Mabhada, who passed it on to me, Mzilawalandelwa, to pass on to my son Vulindlela. And now it's gone! Now what to do? [...] All I'm saying is that stool was my whole history-

And like that they mourned perished pasts (Bulawayo 2013: 75).

⁷ In a public interview the writer explained that Violet was the name of her mother, who died when she was only 18-months old, that "No" means "with", thus NoViolet is a way to honour the memory of her mother, while Bulawayo is the name of her hometown and alludes to her feeling homesick, for she could only go back to her country from the States after 13 years (Bulawayo 2013). Cp.: *Eat, Drink and Be Literary: NoViolet Bulawayo presented in partnership with the National Book Foundation, Moderated by Ben Greenman, BAMCafé, 19 March 2014*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjOGa5BH8Ok> (consulted on 25/05/2018).

⁸ "First used by a Norwegian researcher, Galtung (1969), the term refers to any limitation to human needs, both political and economic, it involves contexts of social inequality in contemporary anthropology. Moreover, it has come to cover notions of violence caused by international trafficking and labour or infantile exploitation. Paul Farmers (1999) uses it to refer to violence inherent in political and economic relations" (Beneduce 2008: 129-130; my translation).

The missing stool is a fracture in the pattern of life, a gap between the past and the future that does not allow tradition or even only a family genealogy to establish themselves; that does not allow a father to leave anything to his descendants: his own he / story. The stool has, indeed, a very important meaning. Like the traditional headrest, the stool is one of those objects that are “common, individually owned and used, but they were also cherished. Like other personal objects, headrests were associated with the body” (Becker 1999: 82). Becker goes on quoting the art historian Roy Sieber: “Objects constantly handled [...] are believed to be imbued with a physiological exuvia as well as with the mystical quintessence of his [owner’s] individuality, creating a powerful psychic bond between owner and object” (Sieber 1980: 17).

The stool is an object with accumulated content and meaning, it represents “connection to one’s kin, one’s ancestors and one’s home, intended as a place of tradition and custom (a sanctuary), of family and value (a temple), and of history and memory (an archive)”. It is a deeply significant home item. Losing it while one’s home has been bulldozed meant to have lost everything, for that home was much more than a simple shelter and the stool was itself that home (Becker 1999: 81-83). Finally, even internal migration might equal total loss.

Darling has to undergo one more trial, she has to see her father die of Aids, after his unexpected return from South Africa. At this stage, Darling confesses that the children had found a letter in one of the pockets of the dead woman. She had taken her life because she, too, was infected by Aids.

There is one more act of violence Darling and the children witness: a pro-Mugabe riotous mob is ready to loot white people’s homes, and to confront the whites with racist slogans. Thus, a white man and woman are chased out of their home, they are given a document announcing the expropriation of their possessions, they are taken away as prisoners, most probably to be executed. The children visit the looted house, and when they open the fridge they enter a different world of bounty and food never seen before nor dreamed of (Concilio 2018: 227-242).

Another eye-opener on a world of violence is represented by the funeral of Bornfree. In his case, not only a youth of twenty-five is buried, but also the dream of a postcolonial, post-Mugabe country. After the elections nothing changes. That is why Darling chooses to leave the country. She can migrate to join her Aunt Fostalina and this will be her pass to emancipation from starvation, precocious death, illiteracy, unemployment and, above all, endemic structural violence.

A short chapter, just two pages long, like a litany, liturgically acknowledges all those who go away, the children of the land: *How they left*. The narrator steps aside and becomes external, a heterodiegetic and omniscient observer:

Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with strength are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with loss are crossing borders. Those in pain are crossing borders. Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing-to all over, to countries near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce. They are leaving in droves (Bulawayo 2013: 145).

It is easy to understand why Darling sees migration as a flight from a country that is not at war, if not with itself, where people are famished, droughts and climate can challenge human and animal existence, political dissidents are tortured and killed, whites are persecuted, and from a country where Aids kills. Sara Ahmed acknowledges how, in specific contexts, “planes are happy objects [...] associated with flight, with moving up and away” (Ahmed 2007: 134).

Migration as Fall

There are various ways in which this novel is a bildungsroman in reverse. It is not necessarily a straightforward journey into happiness, to use Sara Ahmed’s paradigm in discussing multiculturalism and integration. All the rites of passage, the steps into knowledge and consciousness and, ultimately adulthood are for Darling a slow and gradual descent into hell, rather than a paved way to her individual development and personal progress: the hanged woman, her dying father, the abduction of the white couple, the arrival of homeless people and the departure of masses, the funeral of a young activist are all experiences that accelerate the child’s maturity, rocketing her into the realm of adulthood and life as it can be. Similarly, migration to the US, rather than being the dreamed-of flight towards liberation, is also looked at as a fall.

Thus, migration is a sort of downfall, from Paradise to paradise. Paradoxically, Paradise is the poverty stricken slum where Darling and her friends live, and yet it is the longed for space of infancy. The true paradise must be elsewhere. “America” materialises on Darling’s lips as “Destroyedemichigen”, once again, a crooked, broken – at the very level of language – version of a paradise. Once looking out of the window, the girl only sees a heavy downfall of snow. And snow means rejection. The rejection the landscape and the climate exert on the subject: “like it’s telling you, with its snow, that you should go back to where you came from” (Bulawayo 2013: 148). The world is not at all as it should be, as it was imagined: “this place does not look like my America, doesn’t even look real” (Bulawayo 2013: 150).

Slowly, with the snow melting, Darling adapts herself to life in the States, she even participates in a wedding where an African man gets married to a white woman, most probably to get a green card. Here, Darling meets an amazing character: Tshaka Zulu.

People are standing in a circle, listening to Tshaka Zulu sing a traditional song. Even though his body is all wrinkled with age, he looks beautiful and fierce in a knee-length skirt made of sharpened bones, and hoop earrings dangle from his ears. On his head is a hat made of animal fur. He wears matching armbands around his thin arms. In one hand is a long white shield scattered with little black spots. Tshaka Zulu has the large booming voice [...]. When the song finishes everybody applauds, and Tshaka Zulu beams with pride. It is his thing to perform at weddings and wherever people from our country are holding events and looking at him at it you would never think there was something wrong with him, that he was really a patient at Shadybrook (Bulawayo 2013: 178).

Tshaka Zulu's attire and ceremony is too carefully staged to be just a fake show. In this grotesque marriage, Tshaka Zulu is the only serious person, 'embodying' the figure of a Shaman, or the most cruel and violent soldier king in the history of Africa, a leader who was able to unite the Zulu nation, and successfully lead his people against the British colonisers, as Thomas Mofolo's historical-novel hero shows⁹.

Tshaka is "true", is real, is sincere. His performance is neither a game nor a mere performance like back home, after the funeral of Bornfree, when all the children started mimicking the torture and death of the young political activist, and when the BBC journalists asked "What kind of game were you just playing?", the children answered: "Can't you see this is for real?" (Bulawayo 2013: 144).

As specified before, this novel plays on reversals. In order to create a world looked at through the eyes of children, reality and fiction are turned upside down and are difficult to tell from each other. Thus, Tshaka has to be taken seriously, in spite of the fact that he is resident in a local mental health clinic. This ceremony anticipates his final flight / fall.

The fall becomes relevant in one more episode of the novel, when Darling observes her Aunt stumbling on the English language, while on the phone:

The problem with English is this: you usually can't open your mouth and it comes out just like that – first you have to think what you want to say. Then you have to find the words. Then you have to carefully arrange those words in your head. Then you have to say the words quietly to yourself, to make sure you got them okay. And finally, the last step, which is to say the words out loud and have them sound just right.

But then because you have to do all this, when you get to the final step, something strange happened to you and you speak the way a drunk walks. And because you are speaking like falling, it's as if you are an idiot [...]. And then the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don't know how to listen; they are busy looking at your falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying (Bulawayo 2013: 193-194).

The fall is not only psychological. It does not only involve stumbling on the language, in terms of a Freudian twist of the tongue. In fact, migrants can perfectly master the language that constitutes the new reality in which they live. Switching from one's mother tongue to English is seen as both a flight and a fall: "When we were alone we summoned the horses of our languages and mounted their backs and galloped past skyscrapers. Always, we were reluctant to come back down" (Bulawayo 2013: 240).

When Darling eventually receives a phone call from home, from her own mother, after a long time, she is asked what it felt like falling down:

How was it falling? Mother says.

Falling? I say, racking my brain to figure out what she means.

Falling from where? I say.

⁹ Originally written in Sesuto and in a biblical style, it is one of the first novels written in Africa, as a product of Missionary education (Mofolo 1931).

Falling from the sky because I apparently did not give birth to you. Maybe an angel did because otherwise you'd know you actually had a mother and you'd maybe call her every once in a while to see how she's doing, Mother says (Bulawayo 2013: 205).

The idea that migration is like falling from the sky, a sort of new birth that erases the past and provides only the future, had already been employed by Salman Rushdie in that unforgettable opening of his novel *Satanic Verses* (1989):

'To be born again' sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, 'first you have to die. Ho ji! Ho ji! To land on the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-taa! Taka-thun!' [...] Just before dawn one winter's morning, New Year's Day or thereabouts, two real, full-grown living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky (Rushdie 2008: 3).

Recalling an air accident occurred over London, Rushdie imaginatively, literally drops two Indian migrants on English territory as angels falling from the sky. Their arrival and their presence in the country is as that of aliens, and soon they are even transformed into monsters – once again, literally and not only metaphorically – by the simple power of description the British exert over them. This is Rushdie's way to describe the process of "othering" to which migrants are subjected by a racist gaze.

Differently from Rushdie, Bulawayo chooses the paradigm of the fall as a way to describe the full immersion of the migrant into a totally new reality. No matter how distant the two narratives might appear, the urge to equating migration to fall also hints at the implied idea of integration as "a key term for what we now call in the UK 'good race relations'. Although integration is not defined as 'leaving your culture behind' (at least not officially), it is unevenly distributed, as a demand that new or would be citizens 'embrace' a common culture that is already given" (Ahmed 2007: 131). The fall is the perfect metaphor of that 'leaving everything behind' and 'embracing' a pre-packed culture.

The fall is also paired with what Bulawayo explicitly calls "the costs" of migration, or "to pay for a new life". In her novel, actual falls are also part of the price paid for integration, such as that of a worker in the building industry: "Ecuador fell from forty stories working on a roof and shattered his spine, screaming, ¡Mis hijos! ¡Mis hijos! On his way down!" (Bulawayo 2013: 244).

Another type of fall is the fall into invisibility that affects all migrants and seems to be a universal experience, as well as the fall into lies. This is a common preoccupation of both Suketu Mehta and Roberto Beneduce, who look at the effects of migration on people's daily lives. The lies to those who remained at home and the lies to the authorities or their representatives in the host country. When Darling writes her first letters back home, she is careful to:

leave out some things as well, like how the weather was the worst because there was almost always something wrong with it [...]. That the house we lived in wasn't

even like the ones we'd seen on TV when we were little [...]. I didn't tell them how in the summer nights there sometimes was the bang-bang-bang of gunshots in the neighbourhood [...] and how one time a woman a few houses from ours drowned her children in a bathtub, all four of them, how there were poor people who lived on the streets [...]. I left out these things and a lot more, because they embarrassed me, because they made America not feel like My America, the one I had always dreamed of back in Paradise (Bulawayo 2013: 188).

Migrants more often than not need to tell lies to those back home, to omit what is unbearable and to show that they are successfully improving their social status. Suketu Mehta provides examples of how a Bengali in New York used to live with a big Mercedes-Benz parked in his lane. The car's maintenance had cost much more than the family could afford. But, once photos were sent back home, that was a message of prosperity (even though only apparent prosperity). Rwandans, on the other hand, are financed by the Netherland's Government to buy furniture. In turn, they buy very cheap pieces of furniture, and save money for their journey back home, where they arrive equipped with the most expensive and eccentric shoes and clothes on. These kinds of lies also might entice other people to leave their countries. A man from Delhi eventually visited his legendary cousins in Kentucky, only to discover what a squalid life he was living there and became furious at his lies (Mehta 2016: 17-22).

Roberto Beneduce detects the same attitudes towards lies in migrants to Europe and to Italy, while quoting Sayad (2004: 17-25) and Bourdieu (2004: xiii): "when they analysed the silences and the lies told by immigrants to their families about all things concerning their jobs, the difficulties of integration, and life in Europe with its misery and loneliness, they talked about 'innocent' lies" (Beneduce 2015: 557).

Much more tragically, claims Suketu Mehta, migrants inevitably live in a world of lies. They lie in order to survive. They must wear masks. An asylum seeker from Congo testified what it means to be paperless in New York: it means you are not yourself, for most of the time you are someone else. A first person with a name rented from a legal migrant; a second person, victim of rape and torture; a third person, the true young middle-class African woman living in the States under a secret name (Mehta 2016: 22). Both Mehta and Beneduce stress that migrants are forced to tailor and stage their narratives to satisfy the authorities' and bureaucrats' hunger for gruesome stories and atrocities. And yet, "Changing name, inventing a story, disavowing your birth-town, or your age, constitute a painful process, perceived as both a necessary tactic and a dispassion with little possibility of redemption" (Beneduce 2015: 564).

Darling, too, is ready to narrate this fall into invisibility conferred by the lies forced upon migrants by state bureaucracy, for, as Beneduce reminds us "lying is often the only possible reply to the hypocrisies that regulate migration, or the laws on the recognition of human rights" (2015: 562):

For the visas and passports, we begged, despaired, lied [...] we applied for school visas because that was the only way out.

Instead of going to school, we worked. [...] Security cards said Valid for work only with INS authorization, but we gritted our teeth and broke the law and worked; [...] And because we were breaking the law, we dropped our heads in shame; [...] we were now illegals. [...] And because we were illegal and afraid to be discovered we mostly kept to ourselves. [...] We hid our names, gave false ones when asked. [...] And when at work they asked for our papers, we scurried like hens and flocked to unwanted jobs (Bulawayo 2013: 240-243).

Moreover, the costs of migrating also affect the psychic life of migrants. There is another type of fall: Tshaka's fall into madness. Tshaka lives in a mental health clinic, where now and then he gets into fits of eccentricity, and Aunt Fostalina is called in to help. She just stays there and listens to whatever Tshaka has to say:

Tshaka Zulu is wearing his traditional dress and standing on the bed. [...] Tshaka Zulu picks up his shield, raises it above his graying head, and shouts, Bayethe, I welcome you to my kraal, do you want to see my spear? And I have to try hard to suppress a laugh. I know he is not himself and all, but this is something else. The good thing, though, is that he is not dangerous. He gets down from the bed and proceeds toward his wooden stool, the kind that old men used at home, and sits under the poster of a topless Masai girl, crazy beads all over her body (Bulawayo 2013: 234-235).

Tshaka Zulu is not the only character affected by mental disorder in the novel. Born-free's mother, after the death of her 25-year-old son, runs away from the cemetery and ever since she never stops walking around aimlessly. Prince, a newly arrived cousin, on his way to Texas, stops at Aunt Fostalina's place, he "has burn scars on his arms and back where they burned him. He is young but now he looks aged. [...] His face is hard and terrible and the light in his eyes is gone" (Bulawayo 2013: 155). Perhaps, Prince is a political dissident who underwent tortures back in Zimbabwe, now he is in the States with his little zoo of wooden animals, probably to sell them as Africa's exotica. He polishes them, he plays with them, as if he were a child. Only Aunt Fostalina understands that "he is coping with everything that happened there" (Bulawayo 2013: 158). And still:

Prince is talking to himself more and more, like maybe the people in his head have really come out and he can see them. Sometimes he yells and screams and kicks like somebody is trying to do things to him. Aunt Fostalina shakes Prince to make him stop but she is not strong enough. He is flailing his burned arms and screaming for help now. When he stops Aunt Fostalina wraps him in her thin arms like he is a baby. [...] When he starts talking again she sings him a lullaby (Bulawayo 2013: 159).

Finally, Uncle Kojo, Fostalina's partner, turns mad when his son TK enrolls to go to Afghanistan and does not send news. His father starts driving his car all over the place without a precise destination, to the point that Darling now calls him 'Vasco da Gama', for he never stops driving around, to assuage his grief.

All these cases of fragility and vulnerability that affect those who have experienced a

tremendous loss, also affect migrants, whose unstable life and whose adaptability undergo unbearable trials. It seems that the condition of migrancy – no matter where from – always involves traumas and mental breakdowns. Or at least a clash between “traumatic pasts, myth production, politics of self, historical imagination, as well as contemporary threats, new conflicts, and individual trajectories” (Beneduce 2016: 262).

Perhaps, this is why Bulawayo forges chapters where the collective pronouns ‘they’ and ‘we’ become symbols of universality, of a common, shared experience and destiny for migrants. The chapter entitled *How they lived* is clear example of this:

And when they asked us where we were from, we exchanged glances and smiled with the shyness of child brides. They said, Africa? We nodded yes. What part of Africa? We smiled. [...] Is it where the old president rigged the election and people were tortured and killed and a whole bunch of them put in prison and all, there where they are dying of cholera – oh my God, yes, we’ve seen your country –, it’s been on the news [...] water in our eyes broke [...] we wept (Bulawayo 2013: 238).

The first person plural pronoun ‘we’ does not only include Zimbabweans, naturally, but migrants as such. They are described as taken by fits of bulimia for in the US they see more food than in all their life, they “eat like pigs, like wolves, like dignitaries, like vultures, like stray dogs, like monsters [...]” (Bulawayo 2013: 239). Their dreams soon come to an end, they leave school and go to work, they become illegals. And once illegal, they start providing false names, they even start calling one another with the name of their countries, “crafting a different subjectivity for themselves”¹⁰. Now, for real. Not as in the games of the nations Darling used to play with her mates as a child back home. Now in the real world any bad job is a good job: low-paying, backbreaking, cleaning toilets, picking tobacco, butchering animals, working like donkeys, like slaves, like madmen in order to send money home, without any chance to go back to visit relatives and old parents, for the lack of the right papers. The life of the migrant is the life of an exile, for ever excluded, for ever elsewhere, never able to re-enter the land of the ancestors. An endless fall:

For the visas and passports, we begged, despaired, lied, grovelled, promised, charmed, bribed – anything to get us out of the country. For his passport and travel, Tshaka Zulu sold all his father’s cows, against the old man’s wishes (Bulawayo 2013: 240).

Tshaka Zulu’s case is emblematic. In his case, there appears an intertwining of “cultural idioms of suffering and forms of historical consciousness” (Beneduce 2016: 263). On the one hand, like any other migrant he had invested all his possessions to pay for his journey, he lost everything, he had to give up everything. At home, Tshaka Zulu might have been a shepherd or might have become a shaman¹¹. Here, in the US, he only incarnates the delu-

¹⁰ “Inventing a new name, age, and, in some cases, even nationality, are acts that represent a complex and tiring work of bricolage aimed at overcoming problems. We should ask what its psychological costs are” (Beneduce 2015: 563).

¹¹ “I don’t know exactly what kind of craziness Tshaka Zulu suffers from; Aunt Fostalina told me the name

sional phantasy of a warrior king without a kingdom, without a war to fight. And yet, the allusion to the fact that he had to sell and sacrifice all his father's cattle, without the old man's consent, permission and blessing seems to echo a historical event. In 1856, a fifteen year-old Xhosa girl named Nongqawuse produced a prophecy, claiming that all the cattle should be killed so that the Xhosa people would regain their supremacy and would be able to defeat the white men, when the dead would rise again and come to their help. The killing of the cattle and the destruction of the crops caused starvation and destitution. Xhosa people, the survivors of this silent massacre, were removed as slaves by colonial authorities, causing the complete debacle of the Xhosa nation. Tshaka Zulu's sacrifice of his father's cattle sounds reminiscent of that terrible historical fact, that instead of stopping colonialism, ended up paving the way to it. Selling his cattle and buying his flight to the United States, Tshaka Zulu had earned his downfall:

At Shadybrook, Tshaka Zulu meets us at the door [...] hands me a real spear, and says, Be armed, warrior, those white vultures, wretched beaks dripping with blood, must not be allowed to settle on this black land. [...] In addition to wearing his dress, Tshaka Zulu has painted his body a bright red color, and his head is all red and black and white feathers. [...] Tshaka Zulu is rushing, his animal-skin skirt swooshing, the colourful feathers on his head dancing. Then he breaks into a run, [...] Tshaka Zulu's spear sails in the air, but it doesn't go far before falling on the pavement. By the time he bends to pick it up, the police cars have descended. Doors open and bang and I'm seeing guns all over [...]. Drop your weapon! Stop! Get on the ground! Show your hands! Drop your weapon! Drop your weapon! And I know that Tshaka Zulu will not drop his weapon. When I look over my shoulder, he is lunging skyward like some crazy plane trying to take off (Bulawayo 2013: 273).

In this tragi-comic climax, Tshaka Zulu's flight of freedom is symbolic of his condition, but also of his aspiration. He had become enslaved by his own migrancy and his derangement now works as a "counter-memory" in Beneduce's terms (2016: 264). In this final scene, that looks like an episode of a typical American TV criminal series, where the police always comes right on time to save the good ones and punish the bad guys, the police is waging war against a harmless old man, staging the hallucination of a warrior king defeating white colonial powers (or, his own "internalization of hegemonic forces" – Beneduce 2016: 263) on the land of the Blacks. Darling knows and is sure that he will never drop his weapon.

What Beneduce writes about migrants 'embodying' their past history is quite clear here. The failures of one's life "namely social marginality, paranoid symptoms, racial phobia, violence, an unaccountable resentment of the small pitfalls of daily communication, and

one time but I have forgotten it because it was a complicated name" (Bulawayo 2013: 236). This seems to match the term 'Shamanism' intended as having to do with "the experience of suffering and illness in Shamans' biographies (Lewis). They were described as "hurt doctors. This does not match, conversely, the assumption that Shamans are affected by serious psychic problems (Davereux). Today there are an increasing number of occurrences of 'urban Shamanism' or 'Neo-Shamanism', a phenomenon that originates in social, economic, moral and cultural uncertainty (Lindquist 2006)" (Beneduce 2008: 112; my translation).

an overwhelming feeling of dispossession" (Beneduce 2016: 264), become the symptoms of mental disability, fragility and vulnerability. Migrancy turns into a mental condition. Tshaka's flight, his attempt at taking off towards the sky is, in fact, a final fall. Derrida reminds us that the word symptom "means 'fall': case, unfortunate event, coincidence, what falls due [échéance], mishap" (Derrida 2002: 374). Similarly, Sara Ahmed speaks of the melancholic migrant, who "cannot let go of his suffering, as incorporating the very object of own loss":

The melancholic migrant holds onto the unhappy objects of difference, such as the turban, or at least the memory of being teased about the turban, which ties it to a history of racism. Such differences – one could think of the burqa – become sore points or blockage points, where the smooth passage of communication stops (Ahmed 2007: 133).

A similar occurrence has been detected by the Ethiopian writer Maaza Mengiste, who tells of a similar experience¹². She describes a man in a café, in Florence: "I recognize him for the East African that he is, a young man of Eritrean or Ethiopian origin with a slender frame, delicate features, and large eyes. He has the gaunt look of other recently arrived immigrants whom I have met, a thinness that goes beyond a natural state of the body" (Mengiste 2018). The man seems to want to pass unnoticed, to recoil and shrink, to make himself invisible, till the moment he goes out and, almost tipping over, gains speed and bumps into passers-by:

Then, abruptly, he stops. He is so still that curious eyes turn on him, this sunlit figure stepping calmly into the middle of the busy intersection. He stands there, immobile and slightly stunned as cars come to a halt and motorcyclists slow. Traffic waits for him to move. Instead, he begins to gesture, a conductor leading an invisible orchestra. His bony arms bend and extend, propelled by an energy only growing stronger. Each sweep of his hand pulls the rest of him upward then twists him in an awkward circle. He continues as observers pause, then shake their heads and walk on by. Soon, he is working his mouth around words, and even before he starts, I know he is about to shout (Mengiste 2018).

The man has become visible and audible, although no one pays attention to him, he is shouting in order to feel alive, suggests the author, acting as if in a Shakespearian drama, conducting an invisible orchestra, twisting his body in an urban and trafficked space. He is not mad, he is not a lunatic. On the contrary: this is "what the journey does". He incarnates his journey, the violence, the traumas, possibly even the tortures, or simply the loss of a whole life.

"Lazarus", writes Mengiste, he is like the biblical one, who has come back alive from a journey that had deeply transformed him: "You did not leave home like this. This is what the journey does" (Mengiste 2018) and the author cannot but empathically feel ache in her chest:

¹² *The New York Review of Books* (Mengiste 2018).

It comes again, that ache in the middle of my chest. For a moment, it is so strong that I am sure he can feel it. I am certain it is a tether binding us together and he will turn in just the right way and I will be exposed. If he looks at me, then our lives will unfold and in front of us will be the many roads we have taken to get to this intersection in Florence and we will reveal ourselves for what we are: immigrant, migrant, refugee, African, East African, black, foreigner, stranger, a body rendered disobedient by the very nature of what we are (Mengiste 2018).

Both the East African man of Mengiste's short story and Tshaka Zulu's performance in Bulawayo's novel are clear examples of "what the journey does", as well as ways to acknowledge symptoms in migrants' narratives, avoiding "compulsive diagnoses" (Beneduce 2016: 271).

Beneduce claims that "after all, asylum seekers, immigrants, and refugees are, broadly speaking, 'dominated subjects'. They are a heterogeneous group, but they all react in the face of unbearable situations of injustice" (2015: 560). Similarly, in spite of the fact that individual experiences of migration are all different from each other and that flows of migration in different countries are not necessarily comparable, indeed there are certain affinities of vulnerability among migrants, whatever the countries they come from, whatever their age and gender, that often enough pass through the lies of their lives, as both Suketu Mehta and Roberto Beneduce say, by providing a psychological profile of migrants from a variety of places of origin. As a final remark, it must be added that both Mengiste and Bulawayo do not surrender to a representation of happy integration. Indeed, they do neither obliterate nor negate the migrant's 'melancholia', thus refusing one single story about migration and including cases of male mental disorder – or, better, "traces of historical events, expressions of present dispossession, and symptoms, all at once" (Beneduce 2016: 273) – in their narratives.

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