

Not at Home in the World: Abject Mobilities in Marie NDiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Cosmopolitans have traditionally been conceived as educated mobile world citizens for whom travel is easy, the world open, and national, cultural and ethnic boundaries meaningless. In the era of globalized postcoloniality, this essentially Western and white travelling position has become subject to revision. Tayie Selasi's interpretation of postcolonial African cosmopolitanism—or Afropolitanism, as she calls it—is as follows:

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – 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 or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on the African Continent 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)

Selasi's understanding of cosmopolitanism rings familiar. One is tempted to ask how it differs from traditional, elitist white pseudo-universalist cosmopolitanisms, except for the merely cosmetic fact that in Selasi's "revision," cosmopolitans are "beautiful, brown-skinned people." While it is true that the globalized postcolonial present has witnessed Africans' increased travel, Selasi's formulation of cosmopolitanism is oblivious of less effortless forms of African mobilities. Selasi's "Afropolitan" identity is indeed constructed in opposition to those less privileged mobile subjects who represent a "mote in the eye of cosmopolitanism" (Gikandi 23)<sup>1</sup> by being "victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of these comforts and customs of national belonging" (Pollock & al. 6). Underprivileged postcolonial cosmopolitans, often "rejects of failed states" (Gikandi 23), are far from being "at home in the world" (see Brennan) as Selasi's carefree "Afropolitans." Such uneasy and less privileged forms of mobility find their articulation in two recent Africa-affiliated novels, Marie NDiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), which I set out to analyze in this article in order to contribute to a more

nuanced understanding of cosmopolitanisms in contemporary postcolonial contexts of mobility.

Indeed, in the globalized postcolonial world, in which mobility obviously continues to be an unevenly distributed resource, mobilities that fall far from the category of class-privileged cosmopolitanism are more easily defined as “threatening, transgressive, and abject” (Creswell 178). The abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva, is “beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). Abjection involves an aspect of uneasiness by being “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (Kristeva 4). Abjection, then, is something revolting and strange to the self, but paradoxically also a part of it, posing thus a threat to the boundaries of the self. As the process of exclusion always remains imperfect, it enables the abject to haunt the system that has cast it aside. In postcolonial studies, the concept of abjection is frequently used to describe the discomfort that informs the making of racialized subjects (Rangan & Chow 409). As such, the concept can be seen to be closely connected to the unease with which former colonial empires deal with their pasts as discussed by Paul Gilroy in *Postcolonial Melancholia*. This is also where the aspect of mobility becomes relevant: mobility enables encounters whereby certain travelling positions become defined as abject. According to Gilroy, by moving to the former colonial center, the racially marked body of the immigrant comes to “represent all the discomfiting ambiguities of the empire’s painful and shameful ... history” (100). This aspect of unwanted intertwinement forms the core of “abject mobility” in the postcolonial context. Most obviously, abject forms of mobility include forced and illegal migration, where the contrast to privileged cosmopolitanism is striking: while “the cosmopolitan is at home everywhere, the abject have been jettisoned, forced out into a life of displacement” (Nyers 1073). Yet, it needs to be underlined that abjection is *not* an attribute of the underprivileged postcolonial mobile subject as such. Rather, abjection is revealing of the processes of inclusion and exclusion that are central in the making of non-abject (white, European, class-privileged cosmopolitan etc.) subjectivity. Therefore, what is at stake in analyzing postcolonial abject mobilities against the theoretical background of cosmopolitanism is the “*problematizing cosmopolitanism of the abject*” rather than the “*problematic cosmopolitanism for the abject*” (Nyers 1075, emphasis in original). Such an understanding of abject mobility emphasizes the way in which the abject and the subject are constructed dialogically, allowing us to see abjection as an element that also marks the “non-abject” societies and mobilities as their identity is built on the impartial exclusion of their “abject” counterparts.

The present article sets out to investigate the connections between cosmopolitanism, mobility and abjection in NDiaye’s *Trois femmes puissantes* and Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*. I argue that NDiaye’s and Bulawayo’s ways of dealing with the abject mobility theme unmasks the processes that produce discomfiting mobile African subjectivities in a postcolonial era that is both marked by the

failures of decolonization as well as insufficient coming to terms with the colonial legacy and racialization. Due to their abjection, NDiaye's and Bulawayo's characters' cosmopolitan world citizenry is marked by an unease that is telling not only of their own subjectivity but also of the context that defines them as abject. Indeed, can one qualify as a cosmopolitan if one's travelling position is marked by abjection? By analyzing the abject dimensions of postcolonial African mobilities, the present article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of cosmopolitanisms in postcolonial and African contexts – an understanding that takes into account less privileged forms of mobility that challenge elitist formulations of being at home in the globalized postcolonial world.

The abject mobility theme manifests itself in the text corpus in two slightly distinct yet overlapping manners. The first dimension pertains to the failures of the postcolonial nation-state to claim the promises invested in it at independence. The social, political and economic problems form the abject essence of the postcolonial nation-state. This abjection imprints the national subjects, who are metonymical parts of the nation. Because of this affiliation, the citizens cannot easily undo the link with the abject postcolonial nation-state even when mobility enables them to leave its geographical space behind; their mobilities carry the abject essence of the national failures with them. This dimension of abject mobility manifests itself in Bulawayo's text, but also marginally in NDiaye's third story. The second dimension of the abject mobility theme has to do with the problematic relations that former empires have with their colonial pasts. Consequently, African immigrants are considered invaders who have no place in the former colonial society. The figures of Fanta and Khady in NDiaye's stories exemplify this aspect. Reversely, this dimension also exposes the feelings of colonial guilt and shame that arise when a white European subject travels to a former African colony, as does Rudy Descas in NDiaye's novel. The second dimension also pertains to the way in which contemporary empires such as the USA are unable to truly accommodate racialized subjects – an aspect that is represented in Bulawayo's novel.

*We Need New Names* by the Zimbabwean diasporic author NoViolet Bulawayo centres on the narrative viewpoint of the protagonist Darling, first as a child and later as a teenager. The child/teenager's narrative voice is reflected in the language: it is funny, naïve, and simple. Besides the chapters narrated by the protagonist, there are also interlude-like chapters, narrated by an extradiegetic narrator in a distinctly lyrical voice. These interludes provide a wider social perspective to the chapters narrated by Darling. The events of the first half of *We Need New Names* take place in an unnamed Southern African country whose condition evokes Zimbabwe's crisis with its economic, social and political upheaval that includes the rise of patriotic discourses. The first half of the novel sets the ground for Bulawayo's treatment of the abject mobility theme: abjection is an element of the failed postcolonial nation-state imposed on its national subjects. Towards the middle of the novel, the geopolitical context of

the story shifts, as Darling immigrates to the USA. Here, the abject mobility theme is articulated from the clandestine migrant perspective. Still, *We Need New Names* is not a migrant novel in the traditional sense of the term: instead of focusing uniquely on the dislocated condition, the novel intertwines specific Southern African localities with the American diaspora. The novel's treatment of mobility is not restricted to migration, but can be understood in a broader manner as pertaining to locality in terms of people's dreams and hopes of an elsewhere – that is, a sort of cosmopolitan awareness (Spencer 4). Indeed, the concept of mobility should not be equated with migration or physical movement, since mobility is equally about “a system of potentials characterized by intentions, strategies and choices” that can be understood not only in spatial, but also in social terms (Canzler *et al.* 2).

With respect to the notion of abject, it is noteworthy how often the term “kaka,” referring to feces, recurs in the text. It is telling that “kaka” is often associated with the state of the characters' home country. Defining one's home country, a failed postcolonial nation-state, in such repulsive terms lies at the core of abjection in *We Need New Names*. It is symptomatic of the abject notion of “kaka country” that those who refer to it as such are citizens of that failed state. As mentioned earlier, the concept of abjection is ambiguous as it signals discomfort about something repulsive that is part of the self and that cannot be treated as an object. The uneasy connection of the abject to oneself finds its articulation in a passage where one of the children smashes a guava fruit against a wall surrounding one of the fancy Budapest houses – Budapest being an elite residential area where Darling and her friends from the shanty town called Paradise often head in order to steal guavas. Another child condemns his act by stating: “Budapest is not a kaka toilet for anybody to just walk in, it's not like Paradise” (12). This signals the children's awareness of their own abjection in the eyes of the socially privileged neighborhood.

In another passage, the children are waiting for NGO representatives to arrive and provide them with clothes and food. This passage portrays the abject/subject paradigm as an encounter between disenfranchised black children living in a failed African state and Western humanitarianism. The children are aware of their position in relation to the “expensive white people” (54): “We are careful not to touch the NGO people, ... because we can see that even though they are giving us things, they do not want to touch us or for us to touch them” (54). The distance that the volunteers keep from the children suggests that the children's racially othered bodies are associated with dirt and danger (see Ahmed 50-51) which poses a risk to their good-willing superiority. When the lorries with the NGO representatives leave, the children run after them, screaming “*Take me with you!*” (56, emphasis in original). This expresses their despair at being stuck in the crisis-ridden postcolonial nation-state – one that puts them in the position of abject subjects – that they do not wish to claim as their own. The acknowledgement of being part of something that one would

rather see banished from one's identity is a feature that informs Bulawayo's novel in a profound manner.

Besides referring to the country and the shanty town as "kaka," the narrative makes use of other grotesque imagery. Once they have managed to steal fruits, the children "walk nicely like Budapest is now [their] country too, like [they] built it even, eating guavas along the way and spitting the peels all over to make the place dirty" (11) as if to tarnish the pleasant neighborhood with their unwanted, poor and uneducated black bodies that symbolize the failures of the nation-state. Back in Paradise, they defecate in the bushes and suffer from painful constipation, which makes them feel that they "are trying to give birth to a country" (16). By associating excremental imagery with nation-building, the novel adheres to the African literary tradition of scatological aesthetics, which, according to John D. Esty, invests excrement with political meanings "as a material sign of underdevelopment; as a symbol of excessive consumption; [and] as an image of wasted political energies..." (34). Moreover, as Esty suggests, "[s]hit ... becomes a symbolic medium for questioning the place of the autonomous individual in new postcolonial societies" (36-37). This idea of complicity is a feature that marks the children's position as abject national subjects in Bulawayo's novel despite their occasional efforts to rid themselves of this uneasy affiliation.

The novel gives voice to the children's desire to imagine themselves somewhere else. The first half of the novel is haunted by the children's ideas of more favorable elsewheres. Their dreams of leaving are intertwined with the "kakaness" of the here-and-now but, as Bastard's account of Darling's aunt's migratory predicament in the US suggests, sometimes the abject condition follows the ones that leave the kaka country behind: "[Your aunt Fostalina] is busy cleaning kaka off some wrinkled old man who can't do anything for himself" (15). The popular discourse on "BBC's" (British Buttock Cleaners), to which the narrative alludes here, denotes a pejorative attitude towards Zimbabwean expatriates working in a low-paid social sector, such as nursing, amongst those still at home (McGregor 473).<sup>2</sup> By portraying the children's dreams of an elsewhere, the narrative articulates a cosmopolitan consciousness that is informed by an understanding of one's own positionality and the existence of a "world beyond one's immediate milieu," as Robert Spencer would summarize some of the central elements of a cosmopolitan perspective (4). This longing for an elsewhere, accompanied by a sense of disillusionment, is closely connected to mobility; it is longing that motivates mobility. As Andrew Smith has pointed out, "the hope ... that *had* been invested in the new nations at decolonization is being transferred to a traveling cosmopolitan position in which the nation no longer seems to be a vehicle for any kind of social or historical progress" (247, emphasis in original). This is a point that is also highlighted by David Scott, whose book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (2004) discusses the ways in which romantic anticolonial narratives that set out to overcome the colonial legacy have lost their credibility

in the face of the failures of postcolonial national projects. Scott writes:

Today nation ... do[es] not name visionary horizons of new beginnings any of us can look toward as though they were fresh thresholds of aspiration and achievement to be fought for and progressively arrived at; to the contrary, they name forms of existing social and political reality whose normative limits we now live as the tangible ruins of our present, the congealing context of our postcolonial time. (Scott 29)

This loss of credibility finds its articulation in Bulawayo's portrayal of abject postcolonial nationhood. In this respect, it is equally interesting that the novel embraces the idea of cosmopolitanism. This concept is more humble in terms of acknowledging the inevitable grip that colonial pasts have on postcolonial presents and futures than anticolonial nationalism, which is essentially a narrative of vindication, as Scott would put it. In other words, whereas postcolonial studies-oriented critical cosmopolitanisms are informed by the idea that the colonial legacy cannot be undone when imagining future horizons,<sup>3</sup> anticolonial nationalism promises new beginnings beyond the colonial past – promises that obviously cannot and have not been claimed. It can therefore be argued that by inscribing nationhood in the realm of the abject and by adopting an abject understanding of cosmopolitanism that does not promise easy new starts, *We Need New Names* articulates a vision that is essentially tragic as it acknowledges the “permanent legacy [of colonialism] that has set the conditions in which we make ourselves what we make” (Scott 21).

In one chapter a group of Third Chimurenga fighters attacks houses in the Budapest area while the children are there to steal guavas.<sup>4</sup> The fighters are yelling their battle cry “Africa for Africans” (111) and acting menacingly with their machetes. The children hide in the guava trees, worrying about what will happen to them if the hooligans do not “find any white people” (112). Eventually, the band manages to find the “bloody colonist” (118) they are looking for, as the white owners of a villa come out of their house:

Who are you? the white man says, looking the boss up and down. You can tell from his voice that he despises him, despises them all, and that if he could see us up here, he would despise us as well. (118)

This episode, during which the group of hooligans expels the white couple from their house and destroys their belongings, gives rise to a need to distance oneself from this kind of abject national community. While in the beginning of the episode the children seem to be excited about what is going to happen, by the end of it they become overwhelmed by feelings of shame in the face of the humiliation that the white couple is made to go through. This signals the children's willingness to reject the abject national identity imposed on them. The abject sort of nationalism that generates unpleasant feelings in the children finds its culmination in the end of the chapter, with “the words *Blak Power* [sic] written in brown feces on the large bathroom mirror” (130, emphasis in original). While the chapter ends with these words

and the narrative remains silent about the children's reactions in the face of this sight, the image of a wrongly spelled expression of black supremacy written with human excrement on a mirror is a thought-evoking one. The mirror invites the children to identify themselves with the abject sort of black power that the Third Chimurenga fighters represent, that is, to see themselves in their abjection. This is an instance of complicity which Esty discusses in his article on scatological aesthetics (36-37). Indeed, the children's way of "hitting Budapest" and their menacing words, "You want us to come at night and defecate all over? Or steal things?" (47) draw an uneasy parallel with the actions of the Third Chimurenga fighters. This disturbing parallel is further emphasized as the children reconstruct in their game a politically motivated murder that they witnessed. During this violent episode, the children actually become a band of Third Chimurenga fighters slaughtering a local supporter of the opposition party (141). Besides these uneasy instances of identification, the children sometimes actively reject the abject national affiliation. One such instance can be found in their "country-game," a pastime in which the children choose different countries as their homes and then try to push each other out. Everyone wants to be a "country-country," which refers to Western welfare states. Then there are other countries that "are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here" (49). And finally, "Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in – who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?" (49).

Towards the middle of the novel, the setting of the story shifts from Africa to the United States, as Darling's dream is finally realized and she moves to Detroit to live with her aunt Fostalina. She travels on a tourist visa; an important detail with respect to the abject mobility theme which is shared with the reader much later. It is notable that the narrative remains relatively silent about the transition from the African continent to the USA. As an immigrant, Darling carries within her the burden of her former home country, memories and habits that, in light of her new life in diaspora, are becoming abject. Illustrative of this uneasy past is the way in which aunt Fostalina throws away an amulet that Darling has brought with her from Paradise, exclaiming "What is this crap?" (150). The lack of transition is a narrative strategy that performs a similar gesture of "cutting off" the abject homeland from the texture of the new diasporic life. This urge to get rid of her abject affiliation recurs throughout the second part of the novel, and its most accentuated manifestations can be observed in situations where Darling tries to undo her ethnic and national background. A good example of "undoing" is her effort to learn an American accent and to master the vocabulary her schoolmates use. Her aunt, by contrast, has never undertaken a similar effort, which results in a scene where she pronounces English in a way that betrays her abject foreigner-ness. Darling promises herself that she will "never ever sound like that" (197).

The abject state of the home country refuses to loosen its grip on the emigrants. The novel gives voice to manifestations of nostalgia, thus conveying a profoundly contradictory idea of nationhood as violent and repulsive, but simultaneously attractive in its communal aspects. Darling cherishes unrealizable dreams of returning to her homeland – unrealizable as her tourist visa has expired, because of which she is in an irregular situation. The guava fruit that Darling receives from home crystallizes this two-fold attitude: on the one hand, it represents hunger and evokes the repulsive image of the children “squatting in the bush, guavas ripping [their] anuses” (160). On the other hand, the mere smell of the fruit evokes home sickness. In addition to this discrepancy, it is noteworthy that in the midst of the chapters narrated by Darling, there are also sections in which the narrative voice is that of an unnamed, external narrator. The language of these chapters differs from the rest of the novel in its lyrical register. The chapters by the external narrator serve as a wider background to Darling’s limited accounts, giving voice to a collective national experience on emigration and the hardships of diasporic life. The intervention of the external narrator conveys a hopeful, affective understanding of the nation as communal belonging despite the crisis, and contradicts the abject imagery promoted elsewhere in the novel. The hopeful, not to say romantic, tone of the interlude chapters fortifies the idea of the Janus-faced character of nationhood: as the state (authoritarian) and as the people (communal). In this setting, the state and the official nationalist discourses it promotes are conceived as abject dimensions of the national identity to be rejected. Yet, as the chapters narrated by Darling suggest, this abject national affinity cannot be totally cast aside.

“Home” is also recalled in less complimentary terms by others when Darling is made to represent the problem-ridden continent. There is a scene in which Darling is in a ladies room at a wedding reception, when a white American woman approaches her with the intention of making Darling stand for the authentic, beautiful yet suffering Africa. There is nothing original in this sort of a scene in the context of African diasporic writing. However, the passage articulates well the abjection that Darling—as a representative of “Africanness”—is made to bear in the logic of popular Western “good-willing” discourses. The American woman talks to Darling about Congo, “the rapes, and all those killings” (175) she has seen reported on the TV news. Being African renders Darling vulnerable to prejudices that reduce her to abjection. This happens also in a passage in which Darling, while working in the supermarket, panics after finding a cockroach in an empty bottle, and her boss refers to her Africanness and states, “You’re just acting up, I know you’ve seen all sorts of crazy shit over there” (253). The boss also uses the term “back there” when referring to Darling’s homeland, rendering it “a place where the sun never rises” (265). Associating Darling with this “crazy shit over there” signals her abjection. The fact of being a “reject of a failed state” (Gikandi 23) is, indeed, an essential element in Darling’s mobile subjectivity: “I didn’t come all the way to America to do meaningless stuff and be nothing”



(275), she maintains – words that embody the abjection of an illegal immigrant with limited means. These words also capture the incapacity of American society to consider African immigrants as part of the national community; they become reduced to “nothing” instead. The fact that Darling is doomed to “do meaningless stuff” points at this failure, challenging therefore the seemingly democratic idea of the “American Dream.” The dilemma is also addressed in a passage in which Darling imagines herself working at the supermarket sorting returned bottles and cans until her old age. This dystopic, Sisyphean vision captures the abject essence of clandestine mobility in the West: the illegal African immigrant is doomed to be simultaneously ejected and held back by a system that needs her contribution in the low-paid sector, while being unwilling to recognize her as an integral part of the community.

While in *We Need New Names* abject mobility is associated with failed postcolonial nationhood, NDiaye’s triptych novel adopts a different approach. Compared to Bulawayo, NDiaye’s way of using the abject is less overtly social than psychological and individual. In NDiaye’s novel, abject bodies are not livable; they are bodies that are not at home in the world (see Ahmed 52). In other words, abjection poses a challenge to the characters’ potential cosmopolitan world citizenry. Stylistically speaking, while *Trois femmes puissantes* employs three different protagonists, the style stays unchanged throughout the novel with its stream-of-consciousness narration that carries NDiaye’s recognizable authorial signature. The focus on the individual and private is reinforced by a narrative technique which Bénédicte Ledent refers to as literary autism. This technique produces an effect that emphasizes the isolation of the characters and the fact that they “fail to engage successfully with the world around them” (Ledent 108). From the viewpoint of cosmopolitanism, this failure is symptomatic of the characters’ uneasy, if not jeopardized, world citizenry. Indeed, the worlds of the loosely connected stories are depicted strictly from the protagonists’ mindscapes; allusions to specific socio-political contexts are reduced to a minimum. Yet, a reading attuned to the social structures informing the seemingly private narratives reveals the often unsaid elements that tie NDiaye’s use of abject mobilities to a wider postcolonial Afro-European context.

When it comes to reading *Trois femmes puissantes* as an African novel, it must be acknowledged that NDiaye, a daughter of a white French mother and a black Senegalese father, born and raised in France, has been eager to dissociate herself from “Africanness” (Moudileno 70). She has resisted being labeled as an African woman writer, which, according to Lydie Moudileno, is not only an expression of the author’s reluctance to accept this “socio-literary label,” but also her refusal to be excluded from the French literary corpus (72). NDiaye’s rejection of the label of African author betrays the idea of black racial identity as abject – a theme that also recurs in her production. While the question of when NDiaye actually “stop[s] being a French novelist and *become[s]* an African one” (Thomas 143, emphasis in original) is beyond the scope of this article, it can be

argued that *Trois femmes puissantes* does not resist the effort of being read as an African (diasporic) novel because of explicit references to Africa.

The mobility theme is present in all three stories, and it is conceived in multidirectional terms between France and Senegal. Abjection finds its expression on a bodily scale, as the characters suffer from wounds and physical disorders. Abjection also marks the characters' familial affinities in the form of colonial guilt. In *Trois femmes puissantes*, the treatment of abject postcolonial Afro-European mobilities is not restricted to the most obvious category of illegal immigration, although this theme is explicitly addressed in the third story. NDiaye's understanding of "the postcolonial condition" invites the reader to see Europe as postcolonial, which is a topical endeavor given that "Europe has effectively been written out of the idea of a 'postcolonial world'" (Schulze-Engler 670). NDiaye's novel performs the gesture of "postcolonializing" Europe by exposing the intertwined nature of colonial pasts with postcolonial presents: the text draws a link between contemporary forms of Afro-European mobilities and the colonial history that also entailed mobility. My analysis focuses on the second and the third parts of NDiaye's novel, as they lend themselves more pertinently to the thematics of abject mobility than the first one.

The protagonist of the second story is Rudy Descas, a white, middle-aged French man who has brought his wife Fanta from Dakar to the countryside in the Gironde region – a geographical setting that is somewhat ironically distanced from the metropolitan centers and trendy clubs in which Selasi's "Afropolitans" assume their cosmopolitan world citizenry. Fanta is a woman who fought her way from difficult circumstances to become a teacher back in Senegal. Fanta's immigration to France is not the only line along which the mobility theme is treated in the novel: Rudy has lived in Senegal as a child and later as a high school teacher. Transnational mobility in this story is constructed in an abject manner since both of Rudy's returns to France are marked by violence and shame. Rudy's first stay in Senegal ends with his father killing his Senegalese business associate and then committing suicide in a local prison. The second time, Rudy is fired from his teacher's post after a tussle between him and his pupils, the latter calling him "fils d'assassin" (179), "son of a murderer" (154). Rudy attempts to strangle one of them in retaliation. These two incidents play a pivotal role in the workings of abjection in this story: they contribute to a repulsive *auto-portrait* of the protagonist, who "oscillates constantly between an overwhelming, generalized culpability ... and a feeling of injustice..." (Parent 82, my translation). Indeed, I read Rudy's character as a contemporary embodiment of colonial guilt and denial.

The roots of Rudy's abjection lie in his father's exploitative attitudes toward doing business in Africa. Rudy struggles against this uneasy genetic link but obviously cannot do away with it. This makes him a reluctant receiver of an abject paternal legacy: "Qui avait jamais attendu de lui qu'il fût aussi violent et abject que son père, et qu'avait-il à voir, lui, avec Abel Descas ?" (212) "Who would ever have

expected him to be as violent and abject a man as his father, and what did he have to do with Abel Descas anyway?" (183-84). Abjection finds its corporeal articulation in the hemorrhoids from which Rudy suffers. They make him feel ill at ease in his body, as if it did not entirely belong to him. This abject experience is also reflected in the narrative's constant references to "un second Rudy" (125) "a second Rudy" (107) or "l'ancien Rudy" (175), "the old Rudy" (151), signaling a discrepancy between his current abject condition and his "real" self.

The feeling of shame that Rudy Descas experiences springs from the fact that he is the son of Abel Descas. Shame motivates his return to France. Rudy feels guilty about his wife's unemployment; Fanta does not have teacher's competency in France. There is an ironic twist in the story's portrayal of Fanta as an idle African immigrant who stays idle at home during office hours; it is equally apparent, however, that she remains an outcast in France. Fanta's world is reduced to the domestic sphere, which is indicative of her limited world citizenry. Rudy suffers from continuous remorse regarding Fanta's current downgraded condition, accusing himself of having deliberately misled her and her poor relatives with his empty promises of a better life in France. Rudy painted her an image of a European Eldorado that is as illusory as the one cherished by the illegal immigrants and their relatives in the third story. This is the "wrong," abject Rudy that he wishes not to be, but that he cannot get rid of, either. This "wrong" Rudy's abjection culminates in these words to Fanta during a quarrel: "Tu peux retourner d'où tu viens" (106), "You can go back where you came from" (89) – words that embody not only Fanta's abjection in the eyes of French society, but also the abject essence of a racist European society. The figure of Fanta, surfacing only in the margins of the narrative, conveys the unease with which French society deals with its colonial past and postcolonial present (see Moura 266). As an allegory of the black African immigrant in France who is not part of society yet inevitably identifiable because of her physical attributes, Fanta is simultaneously visible and invisible, her black body inscribing her in the orbit of abjection and "out-of-place-ness" (Ahmed 53). Abjection that informs "the economy of xenophobia" is not only a process of identification that deems the black embodied subject as dirty and dangerous, but involves equally "the reforming of the contours of the body-at-home [= white body]" (Ahmed 54). In short, abjection produces subjectivities in a twofold manner.

Allegorically speaking, Fanta is in France because Abel Descas was in Senegal: she is the uneasy reminder of the violent colonial project that the empire would like to forget. As Paul Gilroy puts it, "the immigrant ... comes to represent all the discomfiting ambiguities of the empire's painful and shameful ... history" (100). Despite Fanta's marginality in the story, it is symptomatic that she is the center of Rudy's obsessive thoughts. This oscillation between Fanta's relative absence from the narrative and Rudy's obsession with her symbolizes the former empire's abject relation to its colonial past: the colonial past is held at a distance as it disturbs national identity, yet it simultaneously continues to haunt the system. When it comes to Rudy,

he finds it hard to believe that he has mouthed the words associated with racist, anti-immigrant discourses, welcoming his African wife back where she came from. Here, yet again, one encounters the idea of Rudy Descas as two different men: the man he was before the violent incident with his pupils in Dakar, and the abjected subject he becomes following it: “Une telle phrase, il ne pouvait, lui Rudy Descas, l’avoir prononcée. Cela ne se pouvait” (134) “Such a thing he, Rudy Descas, just could not have said. Just could not” (115). This embodies the unthinkable and intolerable essence of abjection well (Kristeva 1), and allegorically reads as an expression of denial of the uneasy colonial past. The words Rudy directs at Fanta evoke the context of the assault that took place in Dakar. “Putains de négros” (217) “Nigger swine” (188) was the insult that Rudy had supposedly directed against the three pupils. These racist words associate Rudy with the colonialist bias his father embodies, making him a reluctant recipient and vehicle for the colonialist and racist paternal legacy. The continuum of colonialist and racist biases finds its embodiment not only in Rudy’s father, but also in his mother, a woman obsessed with blond-haired angel figures. This obsession and her stereotypical perception of Africans denote her uneasiness with having a grandson of mixed origin. It is through the dialectics of the figures of Fanta and Rudy that NDiaye explores the twofold aspect of postcolonial abject mobility: by foregrounding the abjection of the white male figure, NDiaye reveals how the mechanism that creates abject black African mobile subjectivities “tarnishes” simultaneously the white “body-at-home” (Ahmed 54). NDiaye consequently unmasks their mutual dependency and the fact that the burden of the colonial past imprints them both.

The last story lends itself most easily to a “postcolonial” reading because of its focus on illegal immigration from Africa to Europe. This story differs from the preceding one in its treatment of abjection. While Rudy recognizes abjection as an inseparable part of himself, Khady Demba actively fights abjection in her refusal to see herself in the eyes of others. Khady is a childless widow that her in-laws consider a burden; they decide to get rid of her by sending her away with a smuggler to Europe. This is the intertextual link to the second story: Khady’s mother-in-law signals Fanta as the person Khady should contact once she is in France. The other, less articulate intertextual link to the preceding story is Lamine, Khady’s travelling companion: he studied in a Dakarian high school; indeed, this reveals a possible connection to Rudy, who worked as a high school teacher prior to the assault incident. While Khady Demba recognizes that the family reduces her to a state of abjection because of her childlessness, she refuses to be labelled as such. For her, there is no room for “another” Khady: “[I]l n’y avait eu nul interstice dubitatif entre elle et l’implacable réalité du personnage de Khady Demba” (254), “[T]here had never been any dubious chink between herself and the implacable reality of the person called Khady Demba” (223). This certainty is insisted upon throughout the narrative: Khady refuses to see herself in abject terms, and since abjection is expressed on the bodily scale,

Khady's resistance results from a rupture between her body and her identity, as Anne Martine Parent argues (85).

Khady's certainty about anything else but herself, in contrast, is extremely limited, uneducated as she is. By undertaking the attempt to get to Europe – a destination she knows nothing about – she certainly becomes positioned as a cosmopolitan travelling subject, but in an extremely restricted sense: she only knows limited parts of the city she lives in, and nothing beyond that. Khady is mobile despite herself; she does not cherish dreams of a better elsewhere. When Khady and the smuggler finally reach the sea shore where a boat is being loaded with aspiring emigrants, she is scared of the smell of decay that emanates from the wooden boat, and flees, injuring her calf on a protruding nail. The wound stays open for the rest of the story, symbolizing the abject condition that Khady opposes.

After having escaped the unsound boat, a boy named Lamine joins with Khady, and they eventually become romantically involved. During their first encounter, Lamine is terrified at the sight of Khady's calf wound. Symptomatic of her refusal to see her abjection, Khady takes a look at the wound too, "un peu contrariée" (285), "a bit peeved" (249). The image of the repulsive, stinking wound, with its "deux morceaux de chair ... nettement séparés" (287), "two pieces of flesh ... clearly separated" (251) embodies Khady's actual division into her "real" self and the abject condition she refuses to see. Khady's calf wound, as Shirley Jordan suggests, symbolizes the shameful conditions of illegal immigrants: shame that is not an attribute of the immigrants themselves, but rather an element that marks the contextual factors of their mobility and for which the Western reader should feel responsible (271). Yet, I argue that this shameful condition is not a matter of ethical concern for Westerners alone. The initial impulse for Khady's abject odyssey lies in her being a childless widow, a worthless gendered subject in the eyes of a society that has failed to claim the promises of a better future for all its citizens. While NDiaye's text only makes minimal references to the surrounding social context, the fact that Khady walks on streets carrying names such as "l'avenue de l'Indépendance" (263) and "boulevard de la République" (264), as she follows the human smuggler towards the sea, is telling. It suggests that her tragedy is not only that of becoming an abject subject in the eyes of Europe, but also of being one in her home country, whose own failures have left her without value. Her wound is a symbol of these failures as much as it is a symbol of the humanitarian catastrophe taking place on the Mediterranean shores.

When Lamine buys Khady a falsified passport with the name Bintou Thiam on it, "Khady Demba" must give room to a new identity—that of an illegal immigrant aspiring to reach Europe. Here, again, mobility is as much about potentials and imagined elsewhere as it is about concrete movement such as migration. This is also the point at which Khady Demba starts to stand for an abject cosmopolitan in the eyes of "*forteresse Europe*," fighting to keep the unwanted African outside its borders. Before reaching the fence that separates Africa from Europe, Khady and Lamine find themselves stranded in a desert

town, and as a result of having lost their money, Khady is forced into prostitution. This sort of a stagnation-in-movement during which Khady loses her notion of time, captures the liminal qualities of the abject, marked by a tension between mobility and fixity. The fact that she never reaches Europe further stresses the liminal, abject quality of her mobility. In this phase, her wound is not the only corporeal marker of her abjection, since she is infected with venereal diseases. While prostitution and illness make her abject in Lamine's eyes, Khady holds on to her "real" self. It is only through her clients' gaze that she realizes that she is seen as the sickly girl on a dirty mattress, not the Khady Demba that she is. Eventually, Lamine leaves and steals Khady's money, condemning her to prostitution for several years. When she manages to raise a sufficient amount of money, she leaves the desert town and, seriously ill, finds herself in an illegal immigration camp near the European border. As soldiers arrive to tear down the illicit camp, one of them rips off her batik, and Khady realizes that he is disgusted at the sight of her sick body. When Khady is killed in the attempt to climb over the razor wire fence, the narrative still insists, however, that after all her degradation, humiliation and suffering, there is "le propre de Khady Demba . . . , trop volatile pour s'écraser jamais" (316), "the essence of Khady Demba . . . too evanescent ever to be made to crash" (276). The protagonist's desperate certainty of being a subject called Khady Demba – a certainty conveyed through the continuous repetition of her name – and not an abject, childless widow, diseased prostitute, or faceless and nameless unwelcomed aspiring immigrant, is a plea whose tragedy lies in its naivety. The reader is almost compelled to believe Khady's illusory self-perception and to turn a blind eye to her repulsive condition. However, Khady's appalling, inescapable tragedy, proceeding from one misery to another, can be read as an acknowledgement of the plain impossibility of escaping the restrictions of the context she inhabits. There is, therefore, an element of tragic illusoriness, if not self-deception, in Khady's "strength." According to David Scott, tragedy is a narrative mode that accepts the fact that one cannot choose the circumstances in which one lives, and that even the most restricting circumstances produce new subjectivities (135, 159). While Khady Demba refuses to see herself as an abject mobile subject, NDiaye exposes the workings of the colonial legacy by intertwining Khady's tragedy with the context of postcolonial illegal immigration. Indeed, as the story points out, this colonial legacy produces a range of abject African mobile subjectivities that are beyond the subjects' own intention and control.

As my analysis suggests, *We Need New Names* and *Trois femmes puissantes* adopt different ways of exploring the intertwinement of abjection and mobility. In Bulawayo's novel, abjection is a condition that marks the crisis of the postcolonial African nation-state. As citizens of this abject nation, who are also metonymically a part of it, Darling and her like become reluctantly associated with its abjection. In diaspora, abjection takes new forms, as the protagonist is frequently associated with repulsive elements of what is seen to

represent “Africanness.” Racialization and her clandestine position condemn her to an abject liminality that exposes the limits of the accessibility of the “American Dream.” By explicitly referring to an existing national crisis situation, *We Need New Names* adopts a traditional, politically engaged approach typical in the African literary context. By setting the abject state of postcolonial African nationhood as the focus of the narrative, Bulawayo joins a tendency among diasporic African women writers to articulate “a strong interest . . . in national communities,” with nationhood persisting on their agenda as an “emotional as well as a cultural-political presence” (Gagiano 47-48). The trend of addressing national issues in a direct manner instead of treating them through family allegories, suggests that contemporary African women authors continue to have unfinished business with the postcolonial nation.

NDiaye, on the other hand, starts to construct abjection in psychological terms. While the social context in which the experience of abjection takes place is not as articulated as in Bulawayo’s novel, abjection and the mobilities affected by it can be read against the backdrop of colonial trauma, racist discourses and illegal immigration. If cosmopolitanism is a condition of “being at home in the world” (Brennan), or more specifically, as Selasi puts it, being “an African of the world,” then the abject conditions from which the two characters suffer betrays a highly compromised form of cosmopolitanism. NDiaye’s second story embodies the abject way in which colonialist and racist discourses continue to inform the attitudes towards African immigrants in France. The third story discusses illegal migrancy with a protagonist who strenuously opposes the abjection imposed on her. The overall vision that brings NDiaye’s stories together sets the question of abjection in a wider socio-historical context. While the socio-historical context is most obvious in the third story, the second story, with its narrative flashbacks evoking the colonial and decolonization periods, draws a link between the past and the present by exposing the workings of the colonial legacy in the making of abject African mobile subjectivities. In this sense, NDiaye’s novel can be seen to make a similar gesture of “dispersal” as Bulawayo does in hers, since she also traces the roots of her character’s abjection to the postcolonial nation-state’s failures.

Mobility enables encounters whereby certain travelling subjectivities become defined as abject. Abjection, rather than simply being the attribute of these underprivileged travelling subjects, exposes the way in which non-abject mobilities and subjectivities are built on the impartial exclusion of their “abject” counterparts. Elitist “revisions” of cosmopolitanism, such as Taiye Selasi’s account of Afropolitanism, fail to take into account the fact that most African mobilities continue to be determined by race, class, and nationality-based restrictions. These abject mobile subjects are far from being Selasi’s “Africans of the world” – indeed, they certainly do not qualify as cosmopolitans measured against Selasi’s standards. Yet, I believe that in a globalized postcolonial context which is marked by the increased travel of very different sort of mobile subjects, the premises

of what being a cosmopolitan means, need to be criticized and revised. Social class is obviously central in this respect. However, cosmopolitan ideals such as awareness of one's own positionality, and of the world that exceeds the boundaries of the local and the national, may not be that class-related. Contemporary African literatures and their representations of underprivileged forms of mobilities, offer many opportunities for critical endeavors that aim at revising the concept of cosmopolitanism; NDiaye's and Bulawayo's texts are among them. NDiaye's and Bulawayo's novels articulate an understanding of the limits that a context sets on the postcolonial mobile subject – limits that produce abjected subject positions. In their own ways, both novels engage in giving articulation to the “problematizing cosmopolitanism of the abject” (Nyers 1075, emphasis in original): they draw attention to the complex reasons behind abject postcolonial African mobilities, and why they become defined as such in the first place.

## Notes

1. For an astute critique of privileged postcolonial cosmopolitanisms, see Gikandi's “Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality.” Gikandi, unlike Selasi, discusses intelligently the limits of universalizing such “free-willing cosmopolitan” (28) subject positions as the one he himself occupies. Gikandi maintains that refugees pose a challenge to “the redemptive narrative of cosmopolitan movement,” by drawing attention to the violent conditions of many postcolonial nation-states and the consequent statelessness of some mobile postcolonial subjects, as well as to the “cultural blockage that refugees face as they try to enter the orbit of cosmopolitanism” (28). While Gikandi's examples of “coerced migrants” who challenge the logic of elitist cosmopolitanisms with the ideals of world citizenry and openness to otherness are largely about refugees, I think his theorization can also be extended to cover other uneasy African/postcolonial mobilities, such as illegal immigrants.

2. This BBC theme is also addressed in other Zimbabwean works of fiction, such as Brian Chikwava's novel *Harare North* and Petina Gappah's *An Elegy for Easterly*.

3. See, for instance, Walter D. Mignolo's discussion on critical cosmopolitanism. As he argues, “cosmopolitanism today has to become border thinking, critical and dialogic, from the perspective of those local histories that had to deal all along with global designs” (744). The “global designs” he mentions include colonialism.

4. The Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe refers to land reforms introduced as of 2000 to return land to Africans. *Chimurengais* the Shona word for “fight[ing]” and the phrase “Third Chimurenga” is patterned after the first two Chimurengas or anti-colonial revolts: one spanning 1896 and 1897 and second between 1965 and 1980.



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