

An Introduction to Afro-pessimism

Along with slavery in the United States, the Holocaust in Germany and many other forms of systemic oppressions of a people, colonization and imperialism takes its place in the list of societal atrocities. Beginning in the 15th century, Europeans and other world powers embarked to regions outside of their territorial boundaries to claim and exploit resources from lands they deemed inferior. They stretched their dominating forces towards regions in the Americas (15-16th c.), Southeast Asia (19th c.) and most prominently, the continent of Africa.

The infamous “Scramble for Africa” took place following the Berlin Conference of 1884 where various European countries claimed different portions of Africa for extortion, like carving a pizza for consumption. From this time onward, European powers became superimposed on different African regions resulting in an unintentional alteration of culture for those in these lands, and further a reformation of life, governance and identity. Despite resistance from the natives, European countries such as Britain, France and Spain (to name a few), proceeded to set up systems to extinguish the empires that existed before their arrival and mold Africa into a hotspot for extraction. The negative effects of this extortion range from political to cultural. Not only did Europe destroy the political framework of the civilizations that existed before them, they destroyed the cultural identity of the people of these lands.

A majority of Sub-Saharan African countries gained independence around the 1960s, to the jubilee of its inhabitants. Free from the European colonizers, Africans were ready to reform their cities and become thriving World Powers along with their former dominators. Many in and out of Africa had hope for the continents new journey. However, as the years progressed those once full of hope began to see how the African continent appeared to falter economically, politically, socially and globally. Death rates, poverty and debt increased exponentially while

world trade and political stability decreased. Increasingly, the African continent became looked down upon as it seemed to deviate from the potential it had prior to colonization.

Thus, the discourse of Afro-pessimism was created during the 1980s by Africanists in Western countries who “dominated the debate” of Africa’s fate (Reiff 10). This discourse was founded on the ideology that the “future [of Africa] was likely to be far worse than the past” (10). Its believers developed an “ingrained pessimism” positing that the reason for Africa’s decline was due to the corruptive whims of African politicians and the inability to develop following colonialization. Its premises suggest “the meaning that something is wrong with Africans” (Ebanda 337). The main characteristic of the African continent becomes one of futility as these theorists focus mainly on African “war[s], poverty, natural disasters, corruptions, diseases and famine, criminality, environmental degradation, mismanagement of natural resources and crisis of governance” (Sharkda et al. 11). Their negative opinions about the abilities of Africans are extreme, positing either abandoning or recolonizing the continent to fix the ills they don’t think Africans can mend. These negative narratives of Africa become justification for Afro-pessimists to view it as hopeless, considering it as the “dark continent” or the “lost continent” (Reiff 12). Afro-pessimists ultimately believe that “noir c’est noir, il n’y a pas d’espoir” [black is black, it is hopeless]” (Gahutu 6).

In order to understand the Afro-pessimist phenomenon, it is important to note the different perspectives that hold this opinion. The first, is from the Western perspective. This greatly has to do with the representation of Africa in the media and the propagation of negative African epithets in the West. The second deals with the internalization of these negative tropes by Africans (in and out of Africa) who consider their continent blighted which then effects how they view themselves. NoViolet Bulawayo’s novel *We Need New Names*, on the surface seems to

present these Afro-pessimist mentalities due to its setting in a make-believe poverty-stricken shanty town in Zimbabwe during a time of political unrest. However, comparing the ideas of both kinds of Afro-pessimism, we can see Bulawayo complicating the traditional viewpoint of Africa's futility through Darling's child-like point of view.

Western Afro-pessimism

It would be negligent to overlook colonialism's effect on Africa and its subsequent connection with poverty and what's considered Africa's downfall. However, this phenomenon is the bases for the Western Afro-pessimist mentality. Westerners have had a negative conceptualization of Africa and African people before colonization and Africa's participation in the global economic system. From the moment the African continent was discovered, the African body was belittled, harassed and "monstrosized" (for lack of a better term). As Tom Meisenhelder argues in his sociological essay "African Bodies: 'Othering' the African in Precolonial Europe," Europeans have consistently perceived themselves as "the center of the important world" and Africa as a "marginal and alien place" since the earliest descriptions prior to colonization (Meisenhelder 101).

Due to differences in skin and bodily shape along with culture, Africans were deemed savage and inadequate in comparison with their fairer "civilized" Western counterparts. Original depictions of Africans by Europeans described them as "black" and "naked," mixing fact with fiction as it was "not true that African bodies were naked" (103). Later descriptions and discussions of Africans proclaimed them to be a "different species from Europeans," believing them to be the "missing link between apes and humans" (104-105). Diaries and journals of early Europeans display detest about Africans, considering them "sinful heathens" and "underdeveloped primitives with a lesser intelligence" (106). Thus, Africans were deemed

“inferior human beings,” an inferiority confirmed by their phenotypic traits and cultural practices and European travelers took it upon themselves “to cure Africans of this blackness, to ‘whiten’ them,” later giving justification for colonization and imperialism (106, 105). Despite popular thought, these perceptions still hold potency in the conceptualization of Africa and Africans today.

These ideologies ultimately become the foundation of Western Afro-pessimism. In the modern day, Africa is depicted as completely helpless, an idea buttressed by representations of African poverty, disease and disaster. Media never seem to show any positive representations of Africa, and are apt to propagate the images already embedded in the minds of Westerners. Journalists and news casters persistently perpetuate negative imagery of Africa suggesting “there is no hope for sub-Saharan Africa, because the continent is poorly run and unable to govern itself” (Ebanda 339). These portrayals often compare Africa to Asia, a nation that similarly overthrew colonization but seems to thrive more than the African continent. Additionally, part of Asia’s “success” is that it was never as entirely colonized as Africa. Implicit in these reports is the suggestion that “Africa is to blame for its own ills and its lack of agency” (342). In the 21st century, “pessimism amongst Western governments and donors” continued to increase as “Africa’s political instability continued to grow” (342). The most potent example of this Western mentality in modern day media and government is President Donald Trump’s statement, angrily rejecting immigrants from what he termed “shithole countries.”¹ Similarly, other Western countries like France assert that they “cannot welcome all of the misery of the world,” a notion “many other European politicians in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom” express as well

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.73da5d0aa367

(Ebanda 339). This form of Afro-pessimism is often contested and queried among scholars who target the evident racial stereotyping embedded in the mentalities of Westerners.

This mentality of the West towards Africa is further discussed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's phrase "The Single Story of Africa." In her TED Talk, Adichie discusses the ways in which the stories of Sub-Saharan Africa portrayed in the West are wrapped in "negatives, difference, and darkness."² As she recounts her experience coming into America and interacting with the minds of the West, she asserts that The Single Story of Africa maintains that there is "no possibility of Africans being similar" to Westerners, "no possibility of feelings more complex than pity" towards Africans, and "no possibility of a connection as human equals" when the two combine. To Westerners, Africa is a place "of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals" yet fraught with "incomprehensible people fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner." Adichie asserts that to insist on these negative stories is to flatten and overlook the many components and stories that form the African continent. Likewise, NoViolet Bulawayo critiques this wholly racist perception as well, specifically portraying the ways media works directly to propagate this imagery.

Photo Ops and Distorted Reality

When reading and analyzing literary works, we rarely take tragedy to be the theme or the message that the author intends to make. In a novel about rape, it is rarely assumed that the author intends to promote rape culture or merely exemplify its existence. African American novels about slavery don't merely inform us about slavery, but are often about the ways in which

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https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en#t-795595

people dealt with it, endured it, escaped it. We, as the literary audience, focus on how the character *deals* with said phenomenon and extract from it a message the author intends to portray. Our task is to understand and empathize with the (real or imaginary) conditions the characters face. Thus, characters and their *interaction* with surrounding external inhibitors make up the substance, the nucleus the meat of a novel that we, the readers, must chew and swallow.

The setting of the first half of Bulawayo's novel takes place in a poor shanty town in what is presumed to be Zimbabwe. Here, Bulawayo portrays the tropes typically affiliated with the African continent such as poverty, AIDS and starvation. In addition, Bulawayo provides moments that depict the political instability of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe's time in office. These vital aspects often override readings of this book which give it the appearance of being wholly Afro-pessimistic. Critics take Bulawayo's realistic depiction as corroborating the negativity that shrouds Africa. Thus, to these critics, the negative tropes of Africa become the main focus and Darling and her friends become mere bystanders to the story's plot. But, like other literary texts, the tragedy and woeful circumstances that surround *We Need New Names* does not, and should not limit the literary interpretation of the story. Bulawayo's choice to make the protagonist of this novel a ten-year-old from Zimbabwe should not be overlooked at the expense of buttressing epithets of Africa that these critics have assumed Bulawayo to propagate.

Although these negative tropes are vital to the novel's plot, it is Darling and her friend's (Chipo, Sbho, Bastard, Godknows and Stina) *interaction* with these themes that are of importance. It is *here* that we can see Bulawayo exemplifying the limitation of the Afro-pessimist perspective. Darling and her friends are all ten to eleven years of age. They spend their days adventuring, traveling to neighboring prosperous cities like Budapest and stealing guavas to subdue their hunger. Although Darling et al. are poor, hungry and no longer able to go to school,

they all seem to have a knowledge of things beyond their age and a vibrancy that energizes the first half of the novel. The children often banter about things considered far above their scope like Vasco de Gama's voyage to India, famous soccer players like Drogba, modern American musicians like Lady Gaga and even current global affairs like terrorism in the U.S and Osama bin Laden. Despite their poverty, the children have an intelligence that is often considered nonexistent from the Western point of view.

In contrast to this notion of African mental inferiority, Bulawayo depicts these children as having an intrinsic intelligence; one that allows them to subsist and navigate through life's perils unscathed and persistent. There is more to Darling and each of her friends than just being poor children in Africa. For instance, Bulawayo describes Stina as an intelligent car expert, able to "look at one [car] and tell you what kind it is" (112) in this case, the rare and second most expensive Lamborghini sports car, the Lamborghini Reventón. Sbho's talent in acting and impersonating is foreshadowed as she attempts to mimic doctors from the TV show *ER*. Later, we learn that she becomes a part of a theater group, "traveling and performing all over the world" (286). Bastard's character is unique in that despite the lack of a father figure in his life (alluded to by his name), he rises as the leader of his group of friends, striving to portray braveness and manly vigor in all their adventures. Chipo's growth after being raped (a transnational phenomenon that has relevancy in every continent and every region of the world), exemplifies the battle of rape survivors as they transition from silence to speech amidst their trauma. And lastly, Darling's meticulous depiction of these events as they occur in the first half of the novel crowns her as the sagacious storyteller who invites us, (the readers), into the complexity of African poverty. Yet, Western Afro-pessimists can't seem to grasp this complex way of being affluent but in poverty, and only focus on negative imageries of this phenomenon.

Bulawayo examines the media's propagation of this limited, one-sided representation of Africa and African poverty through her use of the camera. Cameras are meant to capture moments and reflect a digital image of reality. Their usefulness has become more potent in modern day because the moments they capture can now be spread all over the digital world and viewed from places distanced from their origin. This, typically, is the reason they are treasured devices of our society as they allow us to look back on the past and vividly see former experiences. Yet for Darling and her friends, the camera becomes a mockery of their circumstance and a distortion of their truth for the whole world to see.

In the first chapter, Darling and friends come across a thin "fierce hair[ed]... large eye[d], smooth skin[ned]" woman from London. Amidst her arrival with her "pink camera" (10), we become aware of the children's all-consuming hunger and starvation. The children all look at the food in her hand, but remain silent as Bulawayo through the voice of Darling meticulously describes the substance for us readers. After Darling describes what seems to be a pizza, Chipo, the hungriest of the group "points at the thing and keeps jabbing at the air in a way that says *What's that?*" (8), whilst rubbing her stomach. Yet the Londoner, looking at these poor children from Africa, assumes that Chipo is unfamiliar with the camera she holds around her neck. She automatically assumes that the children lack knowledge of technology due to their status, to which Darling internally responds "even a stone can tell that a camera is a camera" (9), insinuating the absurdity of this woman's demeaning assumption. Thus, this scene not only portrays this Western woman's "uninterrogated privilege" as she flaunts her "economic privilege" by holding a camera around her neck, but also her intrinsic belief in her superiority and intellect over these children because of their differences in status and origin (Arnett 160).

This Western woman not only undermines their intelligence, but she also undermines their hunger. Soon after she points out her camera to the children, she throws away the rest of her food, to the awe and indignation of Darling and her friends. She then proceeds to ask the children questions and tell them about her “Jesus Diet.” Although she acts like she cares about the children’s poverty, she doesn’t help them. To her, they are helpless. Instead she mindlessly flaunts her privilege by being able to diet and waste food, and ironically wears a “shirt supporting a Sudanese humanitarian cause” whilst in Zimbabwe, a country with “its own remarkable problems” (Arnett 160). This woman, presumably white, hailing from the “wealthy, white, ex-‘Rhodesian’ land-owning class” sees their poverty and hunger yet disregards them because of it, insensitively flaunting her privilege.

The unnamed woman proceeds to ask the children permission to take their pictures, a request the children aren’t familiar with in their countless experiences with nonconsensual photo ops. She instructs the children to reach out of the bars of the gate separating them. Although the children did not beg (despite their desire to obtain the discarded food), the woman distorts the truth, by depicting them as doing so. The bars of the gate blocking her from the children become like prison bars when captured in an image, symbolizing their imprisonment and entrapment in the African continent. As if to intensify the irony of this scene, the woman further instructs them to shout “cheese, cheese, cheeeeeeeese” (11). Although “cheese” is commonly used as way to procure a smile, the word suggests a double meaning here as it adds to the element of the children begging for food. Though the children have no idea what cheese is, they say it upon the woman’s request, unknowingly begging for food that they never will receive. As if they realize the implications of this event, the children walk away from the woman snapping pictures of

them, one by one, and attack her with a string of insults, retaliating against the degrading actions she took towards them.

Similar insinuations of inferiority and degradation of the children are portrayed in their interaction with the “NGO people” (53). This generic phrase references different kinds of non-profit organizations that swoop in to help Africans without actually consulting them. Although they are distinct from Western governments, they exhibit the same notions of Africa’s futility upon interaction with its people. Darling depicts how they come regularly, bearing supplies, clothing and the like. Their arrival brings forth calculated anxiety and joy from the children who are aware of the “gifts” they will bestow upon them each fifteenth of every month. There becomes an unspoken contract between the children and the NGO people to better obtain the gifts the children need for survival. If Darling and her friends keep their distance, “careful not to touch the NGO people,” scream and sing like they are “proper mad,” and remain complicit as the NGO people take their pictures, the NGO people will “be impressed, maybe...give [them] more, give and give until [they] say, NGO, please do not kill us with your gifts!” (56, 53). When the NGO people are around, they act out of character, in ways they wouldn’t dare and with the permission of their parents, who on normal circumstances, “would seize switches or pounce on [them] with their bare hands” (56).

Thus, Darling and her friends become victim to the worst portrayal of themselves in order to obtain necessities for survival. The cameramen who snaps the photos doesn’t care that they “are embarrassed by [their] dirt and torn clothing, that [they] would prefer [the NGO people] didn’t do it” (54). Darling continues to portray their discomfort in their pictures being taken:

When he sees Chipo, with her stomach, he stands there so surprised I think he is going to drop the camera. *Then he remembers what he came here to do* and starts taking away again, this time taking lots of pictures of Chipo. It’s like she has become Paris Hilton, it’s all just click-flash-flash-click. When he doesn’t stop she

turns around and stands at the edge of the group, frowning. Even a brick knows that Paris doesn't like the paparazzi.

Now the cameraman *pounces* on Godknows's black buttocks. Bastard points and laughs, and Godknows turns around and covers the holes of his shorts with his hands like he is that naked man in the Bible, but he cannot completely hide his nakedness. We are all laughing at Godknows. (54-55, italics mine)

As the other children attempt to hide their disgrace, Bastard, the leader of the group, "takes off his hat and smiles...makes all sorts of poses: flexes his muscles, puts his hands on the waist, does the V sign, kneels with one knee on the ground," in an attempt to show his better self (55). As Godknows asserts that that it not how he is "*supposed*" to act, Bastard insists, "*I want them to see me. Not my buttocks, not my dirty clothes, but me.*" (55, italics mine). Each time the camera is used in the novel, it is used to depict negativity, so much so that the BBC and CNN coming to "shake their heads," snapping pictures of her tragedy become a part of Darling's recurrent nightmare (69). Camera's become something dark and cryptic for Darling and friends as Darling describes a photographer as clicking "away at his camera like he is possessed." (138). Bastard, acknowledging this trope of the camera, desires to be captured in a positive light that is still a component of his character. He yearns for his better self to be depicted, instead of the continuous hopeless, negative, despairing indication of his character.

If we read the first half of *We Need New Names* and extract from it, that it is merely "poverty porn" due to the conditions Bulawayo portrays, we become subject to the Western Afro-pessimist mentality. Like Adichie asserts, this limits the West's understanding of the true reality of those in conditions distinct from it. Darling and her friends' amalgamation of different kinds of traits, inherent in all places and all faces, become compounded into a negative singularity because they are African and because they are poor. Instead of the true complex

reality and identity of those of Africa being represented, the Western media continues to mask it with a negativity which becomes even more problematic as it seeps into the minds of Africans themselves.

African Afro-Pessimism

It is necessary to note that there isn't specific research to prove that Western Afro-pessimism occurred before African Afro-pessimism. However, Africans never perceived of themselves as primitive before interaction with the West, in the same way that they didn't perceive themselves as particularly African until they became aware of Europeans, who named them as such. Thus, it is reasonable to say that African Afro-pessimism came as a result of Western Afro-pessimism.

African Afro-pessimism is similar to the Western notion of Africans, as it too posits that Africa is a "weak," "dying" continent (Reiff 21,13). This notion became prevalent in the minds of Africans during the 1970s "when much of the rest of the poor world...began to make real progress towards sustainable development" (10). The time period of woeful productivity was considered the "lost decade" (11) where Africa's involvement in world trade significantly declined. Growing rates of poverty coupled with increasing amounts of disease and ailment created an "ingrained pessimism about Africa's future" (10) as African's continued to compare themselves to the Western world that consistently looked down on them. Because "Africans are failing to live up to a set of criteria generated by Westerners," the African form of Afro-pessimism utilizes the same language as that of "the early builders of the British Empire" (Ebanda 338). The inhabitants of Africa also begin to believe that Africans are "incapable of running viable states and economies," and as a result this discourse becomes potent in the minds

of the natives “reflected by their non-stop migration toward Western countries” (339). This mentality becomes especially potent in the minds of African youth.

The minds of Darling and friends are wholly Afro-pessimistic in the first half of Bulawayo’s novel. So much so, that Darling becomes one of those youths who yearn for and finally arrive in the Western world, namely America. As the children have been conditioned to think of themselves as inadequate and merely poor (as portrayed in their interactions with cameras), this reflects how they see themselves in comparison to the West. For them, the West is the answer to all their difficult circumstances and thus they continue to diminish their country (and in extension themselves) until they can finally escape it. But when Darling finally breaks free from what she considered her prison, she yearns back for that which she was once conditioned to detest. Bulawayo foreshadows this appreciation for what is gone even before Darling experiences her new life in America.

Kaka Country Game

Despite their desire to be represented accurately in the pictures taken of them, Darling and her friends still harbor some negativity towards their own land. Throughout the novel, Darling and friends express their revulsion as they consistently refer to it as a “kaka country.” “Kaka” is another reference for feces or wastes. They exhibit their distaste with their lives by equating it to excrement similarly to Donald Trump’s assertion that Africa and Haiti are “shithole countries.” They make a distinction between their homeland (“kaka country”) and Western regions of the world (“country countries”) insinuating their ingrained belief that their country is inadequate in comparison to others (61). Although the majority of Zimbabwe is riddled with poverty-stricken shanty towns, the neighboring suburban cities inhabited by tourists

and Westerners thrive. Significantly, these suburbs are consistently named after non-African places, like Budapest, adding to the children's mentality of seeing success as a non-African trait.

In one particular scene, Darling and friends take part in a game they call "Country Game" (60). This elaborate activity begins with the children fighting to choose a country that they will represent. Darling describes how everyone struggles to be countries of the West such as "U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them" (50). When these options dissipate, the children are forced to "settle" for places that are not "country countries" but are at least not "rags of countries" like "Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka," and lastly their place of origin, Zimbabwe (51). All of the children desire to be as distanced as possible from their homeland and disown their country because they've been consistently treated like they are inadequate because of it. Furthermore, as they criticize Zimbabwe, they also seem to demean themselves, being descendants of this "kaka country." As Darling and friends enter into neighboring prosperous cities inhabited by tourists and other Westerners, Darling personifies the street referring to it as so clean it would "spit and tell us to go back where we came from" (6). The Westerners are typically characterized as "beautiful," "clean and pretty" while Darling consistently refers to herself and others of her land as "dirty," "ugly" vermin like "ants... swarms... flies" (126, 8, 75). In all these ways, Darling and friends view themselves with negativity due to the pessimism propagated by the West.

For Darling, her only redeeming quality is the fact that she will soon be able to actually leave Zimbabwe for what is considered to be the utopian United States. She considers herself superior to her friends merely because of this prospect. Her idealistic view of America is so potent, that she references it as her own, claiming it as "My America" and calling everyone else

“jealous” for not being able to make that assertion (17). Just like the African Afro-pessimist discourse asserts, she believes America will be the answer to all her problems, believing she will be wealthy enough to send multiple gifts and she will own a Lamborghini Reventon: “I just know, because of this feeling in my bones, that the car is waiting for me in America” (113). However, Darling soon finds in her new life in the U.S that it isn’t as utopian as she thought it was. She begins to long for her homeland and all its positive aspects she once did not appreciate.

Despite the difficulties encountered in Zimbabwe, we nevertheless see, in the novel’s first half, many of those aspects Darling will long for when she is in America. Darling and friends walk about their country freely and explore different areas without the fear that they will be deported. As much as they detest it, they exude a sense of ownership over their homeland, as they roam about unbothered, without restriction. They laugh, shout and play wherever they want, whenever they want and don’t feel compelled to remain subordinate when they are not crowded by inhibitors from the West. Though Darling and her friends quarrel, they all seem to have a deep care for one another as they try to alleviate the pain of Chipso due to her pregnancy and speak and defend her whilst she silently copes with her trauma. As Darling copes with nursing her father who is dying of AIDS, her friends assist her. Despite the pain and suffering her father suffers due to his ailment, as the children surround him, “cradl[ing]” and dancing with him as they sing “Jobho,” Darling describes how “a strange light” appears “in his sunken eyes, like he has swallowed the sun” (105-106). Moments like this, of complete compassion and togetherness, are everywhere in the first half of the novel, prompting Darling to believe that “when I’m not with them [her friends and family] I feel like I’m not even me” (96). Thus, what is evident despite their poverty, is this sentiment of joy, unity and connection which Darling begins to hunger for, soon after her arrival to the U.S.

Although Bulawayo portrays the children as being wholly Afro-pessimistic, she foreshadows the future appreciation of this land in the name of the shanty-town the children reside. Many critics believe the name of Darling's shanty-town, Paradise, is ironic in that the poverty in this area doesn't exemplify anything close to Paradise. For them, Paradise seems allude to "a desire, an aspiration and a longing to graduate to a suburb that offers all the amenities and dignity, such as Budapest (Chitando 116). However, what seems more potent is that to Darling, this area actually *does* become a place of Paradise, especially after she moves to America. When Darling reaches "Destroyedmichygen," what used to be "My America" changes into "My country" (referring to her home in Zimbabwe). She quickly disowns America as she realizes it isn't what she thought it would be. Although she no longer is racked with physical hunger, starving and only sustaining on guavas, she endures an emotional hunger for Paradise, proclaiming "I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that" (155). Though she no longer has a need to use guavas to subdue her hunger, she yearns for them, consumed with "sadness" as she thinks about "the length of time, maybe years, before I will taste guava again" (195). She is filled with an all-encompassing "dizziness" whenever she speaks to her loved ones, recollecting their hunger, yet togetherness at home where, "everything is sweeter than dessert" (207-208). As Chipso describes the scenery of Paradise to Darling in America, Darling states: "My throat goes dry; my tongue salivates. I am remembering the taste of all these things, but remembering is not tasting, and it is painful. I feel tears start to come to my eyes and I don't wipe them off." (211). Bulawayo's naming of this imaginary shanty-town, Paradise, is not only ironic because its poverty contradicts its assumed prosperity, but because its prosperity isn't truly cherished until post departure.

Furthermore, although *We Need New Names* is branded as “poverty porn,” perpetuating negative mentalities and epithets of Africa, seemingly making it wholly Afro-pessimistic, this novel actually complicates this discourse. Bulawayo debunks the limited perspective of the West by showing how there is more to Africa than poverty. Africans have intelligence and persistence to thrive despite their circumstances. But because the West is so attached to this negative perspective about Africa, they display it through the media and other social forums, allowing this mentality to perpetuate throughout generations. As Adichie states in her Ted Talk, if you “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, that is what they become.” And thus, this mentality seeps into minds of the African themselves as they begin to demean their self-worth based on Western depictions, proving that “--Afropessimism is certainly a practice of representation, perhaps more so than anything else” (Ebanda 344). This representation results in a need for the African to distance themselves from what makes them who they are, and opt for places in the West where they believe their problems will be alleviated. But as we learn from Darling’s experience, there is something truly paradisaical in that which was once detested. Despite the negative tropes ingrained about Africa, there is a hidden gem within it, which Darling only discovers when she comes to America where things also aren’t as they are traditionally depicted. Ultimately, the assertions of the Afro-pessimist discourse become imperfect as Bulawayo shows how it insufficiently characterizes Africa and African people. It becomes clear that there is a need to expand notions of Africa past mere negativity, to something that encapsulates all its intricate ways of being. Afro-optimism has risen to try and correct these ideals of negativity.

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