



By Novuyo Rosa Tshuma



I attended a private high school, Girls' College, in my teens. It is situated in the leafy suburb of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. We received what was deemed "the best education", which is to say, distinctly British. We had etiquette lessons in form one, at age thirteen, where we were taught how to talk, how to walk, how to laugh, how to eat, how to pour tea, how to sit. It was a stellar education into the ways of British bourgeois society.

We had to read the Bible during assembly. You had to practise the reading beforehand, in the presence of an English teacher, to make sure you got the pronunciation right. If you mispronounced a word during assembly, the whole room would fall apart in hushed giggles. And yet, pronunciation is a matter of one's mother tongue, in which case, there are many ways to speak English, particularly seeing as it has become a dominant global language. And yet, because of our multiplicity, it has also come to be possessed by and thus carried by multiple dialects, cultures and ways of being.

The British Englishness we learned at school was a form of education that alienated the black pupils from themselves and fostered in the white pupils their British, albeit colonial, heritage.

During Africa Day, there were readings during assembly in Ndebele, and when the white girls mispronounced Ndebele words, the assembly would, in contrast to when the black girls read English, fall into solemn silence, and afterwards clap their hands enthusiastically for an effort well done.

We did the Cambridge IGCSE examinations for our O, AS and A levels—the crucial exams taken at age sixteen, seventeen and eighteen—and so we learned European history, that is to say, world history from the perspective of Europe. This history encapsulated the partitioning of Africa at the 1884 Berlin Conference, as well as the World Wars I and II. Everything was told from the vantage point of Europe, which, to quote Achille Mbembe in his seminal treatise *Decolonising Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*, tried “to portray colonialism as a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression.” We studied Jayne Eyre and William Shakespeare in our English class. As the forward-looking, cosmopolitan future of tomorrow, we also studied French.

The need to study for the British Cambridge exams instead of the local Zimsec ones was necessitated by the fact that the teaching profession, along with other civil servant professions, had deteriorated along with the economic and political mayhem in Zimbabwe, starting from the early 2000s. The teachers in government schools went for months without pay, and thus went on strike frequently, or simply had to find other means to support themselves. As a result, the education system was in chaos, and students who wrote the Zimsec exams would receive results for subjects they had not taken in school, giving them ground to question the results for the subjects they had really taken and may have, according to the dubious results, failed. A private education, and doing the Cambridge IGCSE exams, became a much sought-after alternative to the local Zimsec exams, one that could guarantee not only a “stellar education”, but also increase one’s chances of gaining entry into reputable universities outside the country. The university system in Zimbabwe—once lauded as one of the best on the continent—had also deteriorated, thanks to the crises crippling the country.

I became “African” in the USA, someone from Africa, not the real Africa, if there can be said to be such an Africa, but the Africa of the Western imagination.

At the time of my high school education, from 2001 to 2007, we were going through what we believed would be a short nightmare, but which has endured for the past two or so decades. The city of Bulawayo, and the whole country, was knotted in never-ending bread, mealie-meal and fuel queues. The city was a hive of energy; we laughed at ourselves and cluck-clucked over this terrible situation, as though refusing to bow to the burden of grief and struggle, and humiliation. There was comfort to be found in this communal suffering; perhaps it took away the sting of it, a little bit.

We did not know it then, and it felt new to us and anguished us greatly, but we, once deemed the bread basket of Africa, had become yet another post-colonial cliché. Zimbabwe is currently involved in a struggle for self-realisation where its denizens refuse to accept as normal the abnormal, tragic conditions of the country, a route which has been taken by the majority of post-colonial societies. Spaces like Nigeria, for instance, where this has been going on for decades, have come to somehow find a logic within and a “normalcy” to their dysfunctionality. Perhaps Zimbabwe has a few more decades to play out its anguished, fighting spirit against the post-colonial condition. Perhaps something new, something other than what has come before, will emerge out of this struggle. Post-colonial societies are nothing if not prime sites of experimentation and struggle to bring about new forms of societal organisation. The planet is dying; capitalism has continued to wreak havoc and exploit the black and brown world; we need a new way of being.

My high school education, including the etiquette classes, felt like a performance. One that had social currency, for Girls’ College is a respected school that is successful both academically and in sports. But outside this artificial school life, I had a home to go back to, a society to traverse, friends and relatives to interact with. One was aware, at once, of inhabiting two worlds, one extremely

utilitarian and divorced from one's society, and yet possessing high currency—the high school setting and its teachings—the other filled with various strands of knowledge which one had access to and partook in but whose utility was not clear in the society. This kind of knowledge was garnered from my grandmothers, for instance, from my aunts, from my Ndebele culture, from the eclectic youth culture of our society, from the adaptation of and application on home soil of a multicultural perspective—a testament to the mobility of knowledge—and the shared hopes and dreams of nationhood (not to be confused with nationalism, which is a form of jingoism that is more divisive than it is consilient).

For me, my life at school and my life in my society demonstrated the difference between education and knowledge. Education is very much a top-down approach that is harnessed by the state to meet its functionary needs (and in many spaces in Africa not even that; the education seems not to be geared towards the needs of the state in service to its denizens, but rather the state as an arm of globalisation, through which the best knowledge and resources flow from the periphery to the centre).

Art is where living occurs; living as a wondrous site of struggle, where life bursts from the dark, wet confines of the womb into the piercing light of existence, where woman exercises that great gift endowed to her by consciousness: freedom.

Knowledge, on the other hand, is fertilised by the communal meeting of shared hopes, dreams, values, cultures, traditions and ways of being. This is what makes up a nation—a group of people who share bonds due to common values and hopes. Artists can be said to be the harbingers, agitators, keepers and illuminators of the spirit of nationhood.

The British Englishness we learned at school was a form of education that alienated the black pupils from themselves and fostered in the white pupils their British, albeit colonial, heritage. But more interesting in this meeting of various cultures, albeit not on equal footing, was the manifestation of the various cultural identities and combative histories that make up the country Zimbabwe.

In contrast, English as it is used in daily life in Zimbabwe, as one more quilt in the fabric of society, is knowledge in action. Such an English becomes, inevitably, diluted into local cultural ways of being, for though it is a form of education that was imposed from without, it becomes a form of knowledge through its adaptation in society. Knowledge springs from within a society, since it is utilised within and for that society. It is an organic process that is nevertheless dynamic since it has the power to adapt new ideas for the benefit of the community—the nation—that utilises it to better realise its goals and ideas of self. This is the difference between education and knowledge.

Thus, the dilution of English becomes a joyful assault on colonial modes of being and their accompanying Macaulayan attitudes to non-European languages. Such a dilution is also a testament to our interconnectedness and the curious, inventive human spirit; the idea of exclusivity has always been a myth - all knowledge is made up of diverse strands from multiple cultures. No one civilisation has a right to or a special claim to knowledge.

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There have been times, during my time in the USA, when I have tried to replicate the intimacy of home. The person reflected back to me here is somebody I struggle to recognise. This is probably an inevitable process of being thrust into a different culture; however, because of the history of Africa as a concept and a group of people who were “owned”, “created”, enslaved and appropriated by Western ideology under the banner of colonialism and slavery, the immersion as one from “Africa”

into such a culture still carries the hegemonic trauma of such a history.

I became “African” in the USA, someone from Africa, not the real Africa, if there can be said to be such an Africa, but the Africa of the Western imagination, that place where, as Achille Mbembe writes in *On the Post Colony*,

‘the actual is no longer perceived except through the mirror of perversity that is, in truth, that of the subject uttering this discourse... Picking up rumour and gossip, amplifying them in the telling, it claims to throw light on things that haunt and obsess it, but about which, in truth, it knows absolutely nothing’ (2010: 178-179).

Random people wanted to help me, all because “I was from Africa”. My ability to speak English fascinated them, especially because I was neither a refugee nor an uneducated immigrant. People offered stories about having given relief to Africa with this or that aid organisation. It was a stark, shocking experience of the legacy of that other “Africa”, the one of the 1884 Berlin Conference, when the powerful nations of Western Europe decided to appropriate and enslave the continent and all that was in it. This legacy is inextricable from the Western lexicon; furthermore, “Africa” is what the West knows; “Africa” was once a property of the West; the West ‘knows’ Africa, and nothing made this starker than the confidence with which people would attribute to me experiences of a continent which were not my own and which I did not recognise.

This is where Art becomes important. Art is where living occurs; living as a wondrous site of struggle, where life bursts from the dark, wet confines of the womb into the piercing light of existence, where woman exercises that great gift endowed to her by consciousness: *freedom*. Art is the exercise and utilisation of knowledge; it is also the manufacturing of education into knowledge. For education to be useful in a society, it needs to be adapted into knowledge, especially in Africa where many of the education systems were inherited with little modification from colonial times and which thus perpetuate the current system where everything that the continent possesses is siphoned by powerful hegemonic forces towards Western spaces.

An example of the adaptation of education into knowledge and its successful utilisation in a society is the application of the dialectic method of critique by the Martinique-born philosopher Frantz Fanon, which is the style of inquiry in his seminal *The Wretched of the Earth*, and which he innovated from the German philosopher Hegel. The dialectic is a method of philosophical inquiry that is bent on interrogating the nature of reality with the intention of unearthing insights about the human condition, as Fanon managed to do via his interrogation of the colonial situation. Fanon also adapted Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish under capitalism to include the racial fetish under colonialism; Marx himself adapted Hegel’s dialectic method in his interrogation of the workings of capitalism and the commodity fetish. As such, what is important for the continent, particularly in this highly mobile 21<sup>st</sup> century, is the manufacture and application of knowledge. It does not matter where knowledge comes from; what is important is how it is used. When knowledge is adapted, as Fanon shows, it is able to bring enlightenment to a society about itself.

If Art is the soil where human existence in all its contradictory, impulsive, celebratory, mournful, meaningless, meaningful, meaning-making capacity sprouts, tearing through it with all the existential potential to grow into something essential, if this is what Art is, then knowledge is the fertiliser for that soil.

Art is both a safe and a vulnerable meeting space for all peoples; safe because it involves simulation, and vulnerable—and thus dangerous to the nationalist, jingoist, exclusivist and divisive propagators in our societies—because it breaks down our walls and pierces through our prejudices. This becomes ever more important for the African, who has only recently been seen to have a right to the freedom

that is hers by virtue of her consciousness (but who has always had inherent possession of this consciousness and thus this freedom; to recognise something is to come into knowledge of something *that has been always there*). For the African, who is only in recent decades coming out of an age where she was once someone else's property, where she was once a slave, where she was once deemed to be not a human being but a "thing: that could be appropriated and utilised like a horse and sold on the market like a mule, this Art, this creative expression of her humanity, this cry, this song, this poem, this story, this dance, this mourn, this groan, becomes ever more important.

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It is why, in authoritarian spaces, knowledge, because of its dynamic and uncontrollable nature and its inevitable fostering of the new, that is, of Art, is all the more threatening to a state, because its outcomes cannot be controlled. It is always prone to creation and experimentation; it picks up different ideas and ways of being wherever it encounters them and patches them up into something innovative, and thus may not necessarily align with the state's objectives. Its alignment, where it thrives, is first and foremost to humanity, to living, to *life*, in all its spectacular multiplicity and diversity.

In Art, we see people; and in Art, we may even refuse to see them. This is why it's such a joy to encounter Darling in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. Darling exists, loves, hopes, dreams and defies at the margins of society; one can almost call her subaltern, in the sense of one who cannot speak or one whose voice would not be heard otherwise. She is, to stretch the metaphor further, a subaltern who has been thrust into conversation with hegemonic spaces, or spaces of privilege, through her international mobility via *We Need New Names*. Her psychology is a delight to behold; to read her is to come into contact with her *knowing*—and not her education. For she is not educated in the conventional sense, and this is perhaps why conventional methods of trying to apprehend her find her so slippery. Through the text's Ndebele-ised English, which is a form of translation of Darling's Ndebele, we experience her worldview, which, in her ten-year-old rendering, is delightfully unself-conscious and unapologetic. Her narrative speaks *from* her and also *beyond* her, so that we come into contact, via the novel, with that double consciousness that is the gift and the curse of the African.

Listen. Listen; when Darling and her friends come across the woman from London who lives in the posh suburb of Budapest, what do they say?

"...you only look fifteen, like a child, Godknobs says, looking at the woman now. I am expecting her to reach out and slap him on the mouth but she merely smiles like she has just not been insulted.

Thank you, I just came off the Jesus diet, she says, sounding very pleased.

I look at her like, what is there to thank?"

What we encounter here is the meeting of two cultures in conversation, on equal footing as existential modes of being in the world—for Darling has not learned to question her way of being in the world, and approaches the world confidently through her cultural lens.

Let us eavesdrop a little more on Darling; what does she do to the picture of Jesus that is hanging in

the shack of Mother of Bones' wall?

"He (Jesus) used to have blue eyes but I painted them brown like mine and everybody's, to make him normal."

There is something refreshing about Darling's easy attribution of normativity to her cultural way of comprehending the world; to understand blackness and black people as "normal" is part of what the colonial project sought to destroy, and what post-colonialism has sought to reinstate, albeit at times in painfully self-conscious ways. To be educated against yourself, that is to say, to be taught ways of being that glorify whiteness while concurrently denigrating what one is, be it Ndebele or African or black, is to introduce a painful self-consciousness in the African subject. In *We Need New Names*, it seems as though Darling was never touched by the self-alienating effects of colonialism. Hence perhaps why she is such a (delightful) anomaly as a "post-colonial" fictional character.

And what about after the NGO trucks have come and gone, and the children have gotten their gifts from the NGO people and are running after the truck and waving goodbye, what does Darling say?

"...we take off and run after it; *we have got what we wanted and we don't care how they want us to do.*" (Emphasis added.)

Any African or non-white person who has had to straddle the "formal" or reified world, which is still indelibly white, with its Macaulayan teachings and its self-glorification, and her own world, where she is in sync with her familial and cultural ways of being, is familiar with simulation, the acting that one slips into when one is in the white world—such as I used to slip into at my high school Girls' College with its distinctly British education—and the other version of one which one slips into when one is in one's home or cultural setting.

Thus, we can appreciate Darling's double consciousness with regards to the NGO people, which she herself seems unconscious of, probably because she is a child and has not yet learned how to be self-conscious in the world, which is the painful condition of being a post-colonial subject in a neo-colonial globe.

And what does Darling say of home, when she is overseas in America?

"No matter how green the maize looks in America, it is not real. They call it corn here, and it comes out all wrong, like small, sweet, too soft. I don't even bother with it anymore because eating it is a really disappointing thing, it feels like I'm just insulting my teeth."

"In America, the fatness is not the fatness I was used to at home. Over there, the fatness was of bigness, just ordinary fatness you could understand because it meant the person ate well, fatness you could even envy. It was fatness that did not interfere with the body...But this American fatness takes it to a whole other level: the body is turned into something else."

What is endearing about Darling's uncanny, if a little biting, criticism is her absolute lack of infatuation with and reification of America, which is the all too common trope of the immigrant story; that is to say, Darling privileges an understanding of the world from her own cultural lens, inadvertently becoming, in the process, the "ungrateful immigrant". Her ability to give herself and her way of being free reign in her consciousness is refreshing to behold; it's a way of apprehending the world against which the African is educated and which, in her polemic against a hegemonic white world, she strives to attain but cannot due to the fact that she already possesses a double-consciousness. What is born from such an existential struggle is the creation of novel ways of being that cannot be anticipated, which is how all new things are born, becoming, inevitably, larger than the sum of their parts.

Darling as a consciousness, a semi-subaltern consciousness, if one may say so, is an example of the value of Art to the African. The question the post-colonial African seeks to answer is, *Who am I in the World?* The answer being that *I am a human being*. Humanity is not contingent on circumstance; its very recognition is what leads to its ability to express itself materially in the world; the inability to recognise it, and the brute force used to deny it its realisation, as was done to the African under colonialism and as is being done under neo-colonialism, does not mean it ceases to exist.

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As such, Art, because it's an expression of womankind and her dynamism and multiplicity, traffics, inevitably, in knowledge, and knowledge traffics in Art. Knowledge in and of itself is a multi-purpose tool, and who is using it and to what ends is more the point than its intended purpose; in "educating the native" so as to control colonised societies, the coloniser never dreamed that the native would one day take this education and use it against him. But she did!

Thus, the African, in answering the question, *Who am I in the World?*, through being, living, celebrating, crying, mourning, dying, striving, dreaming, hoping, thinking, loving, expressing is, like all humans, a trafficker in multiple knowledges, and, in claiming her place in the world, has the right to utilise all forms of knowledge towards her self-realisation. That is to say, she has access to everything that has ever been discovered and created by womankind, of whom she is not only an inheritor, but a builder and partaker.

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