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Taking Pictures: The Economy of Affect and Postcolonial Performativity in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Abstract: This essay considers the dual register of the term "affective economy" and in the process hones in on the use of photography and videography in NoViolet Bulawayo's 2013 novel *We Need New Names*. It builds on Susan Sontag's consideration of the emotional trade in photographs to examine how the neoliberal privatization of aid and charity has created a brisk trade in and expectations about African subjects' performance of suffering. This performance fosters an affect of superiority in consuming, Northern subjects that reinforces the capricious nature of private interest and investment in the Global South. Bulawayo's novel adroitly distinguishes between performances of suffering that are meant as tokens of exchange with outsiders and the necessity of suffering as a point of emotional cathexis within the community. It offers a critical depiction of collective mourning in response to the failure of democratic elections and underscores politics' utter dependency on economics under neoliberalism.

Keywords: affect, economy, photography, globalization, NoViolet Bulawayo

Helon Habila's review of NoViolet Bulawayo's 2013 novel *We Need New Names* accuses Bulawayo of engaging in the depiction and proliferation of "poverty porn."[1] As he remarks, her novel draws from the well of "suffering African" images: "[C]hild soldiers, genocide, child prostitution, female genital mutilation, political violence, police brutality, dictatorships, predatory preachers, dead bodies on the road-

side." His objection to this litany of images is the "sort of creeping horror that leads to a desensitisation to the reality being represented." Habila's critique of Bulawayo's novel is hardly fair, as evidenced by the grammar of his sentence that references "the *reality* being represented" (emphasis added). Habila cannot quibble with Bulawayo's truthful representation of suffering (nor should he, considering that his own books traffic in these of-the-moment reflections of contemporary African life).

Habila is not alone, however; a growing chorus of African writers are agitating for alternatives, asking for, as it were, other realities to be depicted. Transnational Congolese novelist Alain Mabanckou concurs, remarking in his *Letter to Jimmy*:

> A variety of African literature known as "child soldier" literature—or as "Rwandan genocide" literature, when it was created more in protest than in an effort to truly understand the tragedies—convinced me definitively that we were not yet free of the vortex of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and that the sentimentality and moralizing current that runs through some of these works does harm to African literature. If we are not careful, an African author will be able to do nothing but await the next disaster on his continent before starting a book in which he will spend more time denouncing than writing. (68)

Both Habila and Mabanckou couch their concerns in the assumption that African novels are consumed primarily by white, Euro-American readers. In a 2014 *New York Times* editorial, Nigerian novelist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani remarks that although "in the past decade, marvelous things have happened for African literature[,] . . . success for an African writer still depends on the West." As support, she cites macroscopic publishing trends that indicate most African literature is generated in and therefore for the West, with limited or no access to publication or distribution available on the continent. Such is the bind of the contemporary African novelist; in spite of economic and political gains, African writers are still beholden to Western desires for African literature. Habila, Mabanckou, and Nwaubani agree on Westerners' appetites: "Why else

have brutality and depravity been the core of many celebrated African stories?" Nwaubani asks rhetorically.

It thus seems a truth nearly universally recognized that African literature is still written, on some level, with the Western reader in mind. Yet this is where Habila's critique of Bulawayo's work misses the mark. Yes, her novel trades in images of gut-wrenching suffering and there are moments of breathtaking violence and pain throughout. Bulawayo, however, is not guilty of sentimentalizing or monumentalizing this violence, as Mabanckou suggests. It becomes clear over the course of the novel that Bulawayo's critique of the developed world's appetite for images of suffering is a funhouse mirror that shatters stereotypes held by sub-Saharan Africans of ungoverned, unproblematic wealth often associated with American life.

As much as wealthy Northerners might want to deny their presumption of superiority, the Western world perpetually and unconsciously performs this superiority in its affective consumption of the postcolony. Northern consumption of postcolonial literature tends to favor novels that confirm presumptions of Southern suffering or depict characters whose class status renders them "relatable" to Northern readers. *We Need New Names*, which explicitly reframes the rhetorical terms of postcolonial theory, emerged among a cluster of interrelated and celebrated transnational novels. 2013 saw the publication of Bulawayo's novel, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowlands.* Yet the rider "transnational" also highlights the univocality of the class status of these texts' characters—they are subjects with the capital necessary for expatriation and/or repatriation and their concerns are more in keeping with the bourgeois concerns of wealthy Northerners than the plight of the much larger proletarian citizenry of the postcolony. Unlike Adichie, Selasi, and other contemporary transnational women writers, however, Bulawayo is consciously engaged in creating a new discourse from the problematic but generous(ly hybridized) space of the displaced, transnational citizen who is tethered to a postcolonial and a metropolitan "home" and denied citizenship in both. As Bulawayo explains in an interview with Claire Vaye Watkins, she is "trying to say that we need new identities, new

ways of seeing things, new ways of being," especially in the wake of the "lost decade" in Zimbabwe's recent history, which as a result of Robert Mugabe's authoritarian politics was filled with strife, cronyism, fraud, and corruption (Bulawayo, "Interview").

Bulawayo's novel relentlessly critiques presumptuous Northern superiority to postcolonial subjects and dissects how postcolonial suffering is commodified and traded by Northerners in a materialist affective economy that is grounded in the production and dissemination of telegenic images of suffering. By skewering the supposition of generosity and conscience that undergirds the trade in postcolonial pain through *causes célèbres*, Bulawayo reveals a set of social habits enacted by consuming (Northern) subjects that efface the complex subjectivity of the producing (Southern) subject. This habitus of individual aid is a symptom of neoliberal late capitalism, which displaces the impulse to provide aid, assistance, and charity to private subjects, reifies Northern subjects' assumption of privilege, and reiterates the necessity of the performance of Southern suffering.

Analyses of the economy of affect diverge according to two understandings of the terminology. On one hand, the "affective economy" describes the late capitalism of highly modernized nations: the increasing manufacture not of material goods but of intangible *technês* (such as computer programs, applications, and algorithms and inter-referenced databases, marketing campaigns, and social media management) used to make and distribute consumer goods as well as cultivate, distribute, market, and commodify services and experiences. This transition from tangible, material commodities to intangible, experiential, processual, and service goods is rooted in the waning of Fordism and the rise of Toyotaism (which stresses management, experience, and virtuality). Understanding it permits us to see that the economic subjugation of the Global South is accelerating. Michael Hardt writes:

> The fact that informatization and the shift toward services is most recognizable in the dominant capitalist countries should not lead us back to an understanding of the contemporary global economic situation in terms of stages of development—

> as if today the dominant countries were informational service economies, their first subordinates industrial economies, and those further subordinated agricultural. (92)

Hardt lobs a corrective to first/second/third world terminology (irrelevant in the neoliberal era following the "end of history") as well as the teleological insistence on the necessity of "developing" as opposed to (having already) "developed." The rhetoric inherent in the present perfect links the fate of so-described countries to an asymptotic relationship with the completed work of development and maintains an irreducible gap between the teleological endpoint and the work of these nations' implied economic aspirations. It is important to note how earlier ideologies of the international division of labor, from colonialism and imperialism through the era of modernization, have continued to "exclude" sub-Saharan countries "from capital flows and new technologies, from even the illusion of development strategies," thus pushing these societies *en masse* to the "verge of starvation" in an incoherently organized late capitalism that continues to privilege the privileged (Hardt 92).

On the other hand, a burgeoning trade in "affect" as a commodity[2] is a result of the mystification of production and the rarification of "service" and intangible goods (smartphone apps, social media platforms) in the affective economy. In this economy, our affective/emotional/psychological profiles determine our ability and desire to consume.[3] Affect is generated and expended in material and immaterial production, but it primarily fuels the latter (just as, in classic economic examples, bread metabolizes in the manual worker's body). Affect "appreciates" or accrues "interest" when the affect generated in the exchange of object and sign gains value through the labor of evaluation, criticism, and appreciation. Hardt ties this accumulation of surplus affect to the "processes of economic postmodernization" (or "informatization") (90). These two versions of the affective economy—the economy that depends on the affect of the producer and the economy that depends on the affect of the consumer—thus necessarily collude in the determination of value *in* affect.

Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the surplus value attendant to affect is situated in a "non-place . . . that is no longer either *outside* or

inside capital" (82). Affect has its own economy of value that does not yet appear to be totally coincident with the extant financial economy of value but certainly impinges on it. The value of affect in the affective economy is such that "labor-power is presented *as* the social fabric, as population and culture, traditions and innovation, and so forth—in short, its productive force is exploited within the processes of social reproduction," and affective labor *is* the labor that is masked by our focus on traditional forms of labor (Hardt and Negri 83; emphasis added). Increasing "investments" in affect, however, have begun demonstrating the links between the circulation of capital (as traditionally understood) and the circulation of affect-as-capital (in this newer sense). Affect (understood more capaciously not just as the Spinozist "power to act" but also as emotion or feeling) is already imbricated in the uneven productive practices of capitalism. Sub-Saharan Africa, sidelined from both the projects of modernization and informatization, is subjected to a circuitry of affective production and exchange over which it has no control.

Bulawayo picks up on the paradox contained herein: deprived of the ability to provide for themselves through formerly structural means such as a national infrastructure of manufacturing or a consolidated and efficacious agricultural industry, Zimbabweans are structurally subjugated. Increasingly, the only means by which they can provide for themselves is to trade on their bodies' apparently limitless capacity for generating affect, not just for themselves but for expropriation. It is no surprise that the parents of Darling, the protagonist in *We Need New Names*, are both essentially ejected from Zimbabwe in order to satisfy their basic material needs. Her mother trades goods on the southern border with South Africa and her father left "with everybody [else]" across that border. He asks: "Is this [Zimbabwe in the early aughts] what I went to university for?" (Bulawayo, *We Need* 91–92). As Darling notes, everyone with any education or skill has fled: "I don't go to school anymore because all the teachers left to teach over in South Africa and Botswana and Namibia and them, where there's better money" (30–31). The global flows of capital in contemporary capitalism are such that the movement of bodies over borders to satisfy material needs is inevitable. The novel makes clear, although never explicit, that the Zimbabwe it depicts is

bereft of industrial labor and employment for unskilled workers. The only appearance of remunerated labor is at a jobsite funded and overseen by Chinese contractors. Even there, it is not clear that the jobsite pays adequately—the children go to see an acquaintance, Moshe, only to be told that he left for South Africa, where the pay is better, days before (44). Ironically highlighting the income inequality rampant in Zimbabwe's economy, a Chinese man brags to the children: "We build you big mall. All nice shops inside, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Versace, and so on so on" (46). The construction of a luxury shopping center in a country that lacks adequate employment infrastructure is paradigmatic of late capitalism's hyperbolic income inequality. The children laugh, their only coping mechanism for the perversity of their poverty in the midst of self-indulgence.

Bulawayo is fairly uninterested in describing the material economy of her characters—at least until Darling arrives in "Destroyedmichigan" (Darling's apt portmanteau for "Detroit, Michigan")—but her recurrent description of their poverty is a reminder of their economic disenfranchisement. These descriptions work at a low buzz in the text. Despite Darling's critical eye, readers do not see *into* poverty; instead, they are asked to look outward from within the experience of it.

It is this critical eye that permits Bulawayo to focus less on the faux-naïve strategy of seducing her bourgeois readers with the exoticism of the Southern Other's poverty, as Habila suggests, than in registering critiques of uncritical Northern privilege in terms that the reader cannot escape being interpellated by. In Northern hands, Bulawayo's text becomes a mirror-cipher for the bourgeois Northern subject: as Jacques Lacan argues, the "mirror stage" of psychological development is not a discrete moment in children's coming-into-consciousness but rather an internalized structure that continues to frame the subject's self-awareness through the rubrics of refracted or reflected desire. The text's cultivation of this mirroring is a perversion of one of the mechanisms it works to undermine—the viral cause.

In the contemporary era of social media, informatization, and the privatization of the aid/development industry under neoliberalism, the worlds of research, charity, and humanitarianism fight for people's at-

tention and resources alongside consumer goods. All clamor for capital and innovations in viral marketing mean that social causes employ social media tools to generate financial support. A chief instance of this in contemporary Africa was the runaway success of the Kony 2012 video, which was cannily edited and collated to reveal the tremendous ideological and physical abuse of children and their conscription in Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. As Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middagh note, more than sixty percent of young people polled said that they were familiar with this particular cause because of social media (52). The commodification of humanitarian causes has unfortunately created a thriving economy of "slacktivism," which is broadly understood as virtual indulgence in affects of outrage and anger that are typically enacted by the propagation of information about a cause on social media platforms rather than participation in the political cause itself. The 2014 social media campaign against Nigerian terrorist organization Boko Haram under the umbrella of #bringbackourgirls is a recent example of this approach. Celebrities and citizens worldwide posted photos online in which they held signs bearing the hashtag in an inchoate effort to spur the Nigerian government to action in rescuing schoolgirls, who were mass-abducted by Boko Haram. The problem with slacktivism is that it does not often achieve its ambitious goals. It competes for attention with the twenty-four-hour news cycle, targeted advertising, and the irruption of other causes. Slacktivism ostensibly ennobles the practicing subject at the cost of material social or political reform.

Patricia Daley points out that "[h]umanitarian aid comes increasingly from Western governments[,] . . . [is] supplemented by donations from citizens [and] has become corporatised and professionalised at the same time that neoliberal economic restructuring has reduced state-provisioned social welfare" (375–76). Daley draws on the work of Mark Duffield, who contends that the contemporary humanitarian system functions "as an international insurance of last resort for the world's non-insured and erstwhile self-reliant peoples" who receive aid when "self-reliance breaks down and former colonial states, never having developed a welfare system, prove unwilling and unable to cope" (qtd. in Daley 66–67). Neoliberalism means that, although the largest percent-

age of humanitarian aid still comes from governmental agencies, this aid is shrinking in the national budgets of donor nations even as it is increasingly necessary to address humanitarian issues in countries that do not have the resources to fight such problems (as the recent West African outbreak of Ebola has proven). The foreshortened "cycle" of these causes is abetted by the increasing participation of celebrities in the commodification of humanitarian causes, the result of which is

> that celebrities, as branded commodities—in essence neoliberal subjectivities—and their advocacy, serve to enhance consumer capitalism—thus helping firstly to commodify humanitarianism as a largely privatised concern that sits easily with neoliberal imperialism and secondly to divert attention from the structural inequalities associated with such forms of domination. Celebrity activism involves new configurations of networked relationship[s] that obfuscate the workings of neoliberal imperialism; thus reinforcing global power hierarchies in which hegemonic powers are depicted as humanitarian 'saviours' whilst enforcing 'accumulation by dispossession' in the periphery. (Daley 377)[4]

This process culminates in what I call the "affect of superiority"—a consolidation of proliferating minor affects that permit the Northern subject to feel better *than*, feel better *about themselves*, and appear noble and generous.

So it is that the subjects on the receiving end of humanitarian aid (in Bulawayo's novel, poor Zimbabwean children living in shantytowns on the edge of upper-class enclaves) are likewise reciprocally, neoliberally subjectivized and—given their dispossession at the edge of globalized capital flows—subjugated. Bulawayo's children are called into being as subjects in order to reify their structural subjugation to material flows of capital and modes of exchange. Humanitarian assistance is increasingly displaced from structural aid provided by governmental agencies to the personal interventions of private charities. This is not to say that structural aid is inherently helpful: as Chenjerai Hove remarks, the strictures and adjustments required in exchange for a loan from the

International Monetary Fund (IMF) can be very damaging to struggling economies. He observes that Harareans have renamed the IMF the "Infant Mortality Fund" (76).[5] Displacing structural, governmental aid with privatized charitable aid, however, encourages the affective exploitation of Southern subjects, as Bulawayo argues. African subjects are expected to suffer telegenically and perform their immiseration for an audience both near and far in order to receive necessary aid and materiel. Bulawayo trots out an obvious straw man for these self-congratulatory attitudes and the affect of superiority that participation in these causes permits. Eliot is an old-style colonial intent on explicitly mining less privileged countries of rare and endangered resources, such as the "ivory slab the shape of the African map" that Darling steals from him knowing that it means nothing to him and that he will not notice its absence (Bulawayo, *We Need* 284). Eliot is an easy target: "He has traveled all over Africa but all he can ever tell you about the countries he has visited are the animals and parks he has seen" (269). Eliot knows that he has to perform interest in African people, but he does so without any irony or self-awareness. He asks Darling, for example, to teach him "[her] language because he says he and his brother are going to [Zimbabwe] so he can shoot an elephant" (268). She comments: "I don't know where my language comes in—like, does he want to ask the elephant if it wants to be killed or something?" (268).

The commodification of humanitarian causes indulges Eliot's inflated sense of self and empowers him to treat subjugated postcolonial subjects as if they are required to need his assistance. He owns a chain of hotels and employs people from "Senegal, Cameroon, Tibet, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and so on" (263). Darling's Aunt Fostalina, dripping scorn, remarks: "It was like the damn United Nations there" (263). Eliot sees himself as a savior, which Daley argues is increasingly the *modus operandi* of the humanitarian-industrial complex. Neoliberal solutions that insist on the value of individuated subjects encourage donors to view solutions to humanitarian crises as interpersonal rather than structural. Accordingly, Eliot has "been nice to [Darling] like [she is] from Uganda, like [she is] one of the heartbreaking kids in the film" (Bulawayo, *We Need* 269). The neoliberal bait-and-switch—replacing the collective/

structural with the individualist/interpersonal—permits Eliot to substitute Darling for one of the children in the viral video, thereby excusing himself from participating in the commodified cause and working to understand the structural issues inherent in such humanitarian crises.

Eliot's wealth, in large part, permits him to be this sort of mindless, ineffectual, and offensive character, although Darling later discovers that his interest in Africa extends to a fetishization of African women's bodies (namely, her Aunt Fostalina's). Tellingly, Fostalina emerges from an assignation with Eliot "wrapped in her favorite wrap cloth, the one with the little fading flags of our country" (281). Eliot's daughter Kate is also implicated in the neoliberalization of humanitarian aid; she returns from college with anorexia, attributed as the result of a bad breakup. Having experienced hunger, Darling has no sympathy for Kate's self-starvation. Kate unironically sports an "Invisible Children T-shirt" that "stick[s] to her body, bones screaming through the fabric" (267). She has participated in the literal substitution of consumption for aid, which Daley argues is an extension of neoliberalization. In Darling's eyes, Kate's self-imposed hunger is unethical. Darling thinks to herself: "You have a fridge bloated with food so no matter how much you starve yourself, you'll never know real, true hunger" (Bulawayo, *We Need* 268). The irony of passively supporting a political cause that targets true suffering through hunger is not lost on Bulawayo, although the text implies that it is lost on wealthy Northerners.

Kate is not the only passive-activist in the text, and not the only one who, as Darling notes, suffers from a fundamental un-self-consciousness. Early in the text, before Darling has left Zimbabwe for "Destroyedmichigan," she and her friends rove through the wealthy enclave of Budapest in search of guavas. The middle-class houses are protected from prying eyes and the jealousy of their adjacent shantytown neighbors by "tall fences and Durawalls" (4). The children stumble into an encounter with a "tall, thin woman" eating a slice of pizza, who then "aims what is left of the thing at the bin by the door, misses, and laughs to herself like a madman" (6, 7). Darling, anticipating her later reflections on Kate's anorexia, remarks: "We have never ever seen anyone throw food away, even if it's a thing," which, she skeptically

suggests from the limitations of her own postcolonial life, it is not—or should not be. This unnamed woman is wearing a t-shirt that says "Save Darfur" and is blithely unaware of the damning irony of wearing a shirt supporting a Sudanese humanitarian cause in a country with its own remarkable problems. Damning, too, is her invocation of a "Jesus diet," a sly backhand by Bulawayo to prod at the ironic excesses of wealthy Northerners. The text suggests that someone who advertises her own privileged nobility on a t-shirt should aspire not to Jesus' thinness but to his un-self-conscious charity. Problematically, the thin woman is not explicitly racialized, but she is implicated in colonialism by virtue of her declaration that she is "visiting [her] dad's country" while she fingers a golden map of Africa on a chain around her neck (7). Although Darling's country is never named, it is quite clearly Zimbabwe, which renders the thin woman's claim to "home" potentially potent. It recalls, as other white characters do in the novel, the tenuous claim to ownership of the wealthy, white, ex-"Rhodesian" land-owning class.

This thin woman also initiates the novel's ongoing discourse about the commodification of suffering in the Global South. She is carrying a camera around her neck, which is a clear marker of economic privilege. When she explains that it is a camera, Darling rebuts: "[W]e all know; even a stone can tell that a camera is a camera" (6–7). This seething response indicates the consciousness that impoverished postcolonial subjects have of their own material inequality. The moment reveals the thin woman's casual, uninterrogated privilege: she feels compelled to tell them what they already know, as if they could not already know it. Likewise, she asks the pregnant Chipo how old she is, but only responds with an unhelpful "Wow" after learning her age, a word that sums up her presumption of moral superiority to this pregnant child (7).

When the thin woman asks the children for a photograph, it comes as a surprise, if only because the children are accustomed to being photographed without their permission. Herein lies the meat of Bulawayo's mirrored critique of the Northern presumption of privilege and its cultivation of their affect of superiority. In their study of the differences between Associated Press and UNICEF images of children in and around the Sudanese civil war, Sadaf Rashad Ali, Debbie James, and Fred Vultee

state that images of children in conflict "serve institutional values and practices" that "personify foreign and domestic polic[ies] and organizational agenda[s] of adults" (3).[6] The novel associates the request for photographs with palpable bodily suffering or disability—the thin woman, for instance, requests a photograph only after she has inarticulately moralized about Chipo's pregnancy. In directing the shot, she requests: "[Y]ou, look this way, no, I mean you, with the missing teeth, look at me" (Bulawayo, *We Need* 9). This art direction is a form of virtual violence that calls attention to the woman's undeniable privilege and aesthetically arranges the vicarious horror that she assumes she is capturing, implicating disfigurement as the condition of the Southern subject. Susan Sontag's work on photography captures the oscillation between viewers' assumption of their superiority and photographers' need to indulge their own curiosity and the curiosity of their audiences. This is ramified in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which she extends her critique of photography and the trade in images of suffering. She poignantly remarks that "[b]eing a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists" (18).[7]

Yet Sontag is speaking about only a part of a greater movement—the contemporary practice of "voluntourism" in which Northerners travel to impoverished countries to offer unsolicited humanitarian aid. Although the thin woman is not explicitly a voluntourist, she encapsulates many of its most problematic premises. Unlike Eliot, who espouses no such rhetoric of being useful, travelers to the Global South increasingly go with a desire to be helpful. Harng Luh Sin observes that "the perception that volunteer tourism can actually bring about sustainable changes or eradicate (or at least lessen) poverty in the world, is perhaps a utopian dream" ("Who" 991). This "utopian dream" is more apparent to Sin as an outside observer than it is to participating voluntourists, who can only "*sense* that they are developing (or at least performing a 'self' that has developed) a deeper understanding of local conditions" (Sin, "Volunteer" 492; emphasis added). Bulawayo's novel preemptively subverts the expectations of readers in pursuit of "poverty porn"—and

shows the results of their misdirected and unrequested attempts to help. Sin's research, which focuses on Cambodia, presents some of the locals' responses to this new wave of "helpful" visitors: They are "rich kids who have nothing better to do. They don't know anything about the developing world and they are just big guys who think they can develop things in one month's time. I don't like that. They are too spoilt. They are not meant for Cambodia. . . . They don't learn anything because they think they want to change this world" ("Who" 988).

Sontag reminds us that "photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate" (*On Photography* 6). Images of suffering flatten the material reality of that suffering into a rhetorical statement; as a result, one can imagine that the thin woman's photographs of Darling and her friends will be used to consolidate Northern pity for suffering Southern children, even as they efface the children's individual subjectivity and agency in the service of rhetorically reiterating the construction of a class of Suffering Other. Sontag argues that "[p]hotographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed" (*On Photography* 80). Ali, James, and Vultee extend this point when they argue that photography is a "smoothing process that fits children into an ideological role that supports social order and stereotypes their bodies, movements, and facial expressions ensuring their recognizability to distant First World viewers" (3). Photographs are the modern objects that consolidate an uneven discourse that dehumanizes postcolonial subjects and insists on the moral superiority of the Northern subject.

"Uglifying," in Sontag's estimation, "is a more modern function" of photography, inasmuch as it is "didactic, it invites an active response" (*On Photography* 81). And so the thin woman's photos of the children, specifically in their pregnancy and dental decay, interpellate them as a commodified, tradable good: they are unwittingly performing suffering. To this end, Darling is reminded of a fable that the Mother of Bones, the local sage, told her: "Dudu the bird . . . learned and sang a new song whose words she did not really know the meaning of and . . . was then caught, killed, and cooked for dinner because in the song she was actually begging people to kill and cook her" (Bulawayo, *We Need* 9).

Darling guesses that the images the thin woman's camera captures might be used in the same way. Although the children may smile, strike poses, and look pretty, as if in control of their appearance, they cannot be assured that their pictures will not constitute a Northern tableau of suffering or be decontextualized; the thin woman is the one who controls the circulation of their images.

Bulawayo assumes photography to be an objectifying *techn*ê; nowhere in the novel is photography or videography used in a way that is not objectifying. When Darling and her American friends gather together to view images, they scroll through encyclopedias of pornography on XTube and Redtube (200). Her uncle Kojo gorges himself on "a war channel in case he is able to pick out his son from among the other American boys dressed like soldiers" (280). He "watches nothing but the war—soldiers bombing things, soldiers walking streets carrying big guns, soldiers crawling on the ground, soldiers making things explode, soldiers smashing building, soldiers in big ol' cars crawling all over, children trying to dodge the soldiers to play on the street like they are supposed to" (261). There is no escaping our appetite to consume images of debasement and destruction. The fund of such images is tremendous, but so, too, is our conditioned desire. Although it is not the scope of this essay to dissuade people against the cultivation and dissemination of images of suffering, it does seek, through Bulawayo's searching critique, to force readers to confront the mirror being held up to them as uncritical consumers of humanitarian causes and likewise to hold up a mirror to those captured photographic subjects traded in the information-sphere as objects to excite pity and cultivate an unearned sense of superiority. Indeed, Kate's and the thin woman's participation in the neoliberal commodification of suffering is a resurgence of the colonial impulse; E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* suggests that "[i]t was, in a new form, the old, old trouble that eats the heart out of every civilization: snobbery, the desire for possessions, creditable appendages" (261). Buying these affective commodities—both in the literal sense as commodities rebranded for their value-added quality of being in some immeasurable way "ethical" and also in the figurative sense—is, to build on David Harvey's work (and his famous formulation "accumulation

through dispossession"), an extension of the colonialist desire to cultivate superiority through affective dispossession. Trade in these images is increasingly a matter of accruing "creditable appendages" that "prove" our ethical consciousness.

When Darling attends the wedding of Dumi, one of Fostalina's exes, she is confronted by the self-consciously left-liberal version of this affective economy of suffering. While Kate, Eliot, and the thin woman are essentially flattened into caricatures of uninvested Northerners, at the wedding, Darling encounters the disappointing reality of interest. A woman in a blue dress fawns over Darling, asking her to "just say something in your language . . . anything, really" (174). When Darling does so ("*sa-li-bo-na-ni*"), the woman responds with oppressive enthusiasm, gushing, "Isn't that beautiful?" (Bulawayo, *We Need* 174). The woman's unironic celebration of all things vaguely African is an indictment of liberal Northerners who overcompensate for the dislocated suffering of others by cultivating superficial enthusiasm and collating disparate knowledges. She continues: "Africa is beautiful. . . . But isn't it terrible what's happening in the Congo? Just awful" (175). The woman participates in the commodification of suffering and the exchange of affect that metabolizes Southern suffering as Northern self-reassurance. The primacy of nebulously considered African suffering trumps any particularity: "Jesus, the rapes, and all those killings! . . . I mean, I can't even—I can't even process it. And all those poor women and children. I was watching CNN last night and there was this little girl who was just—just too cute, she says. Her eyes start to mist and she looks down" (175–76). The woman in the blue dress recalls the sort of inchoate moral superiority that the voluntourists express and the local Cambodians decry in Sin's research. Northerners assume that because of their economic power they are capable of swooping in, providing an easy fix, and then returning to the comfort and security of their geopolitical privilege.

The woman references "[t]he rapes and the killings" as if there is no specificity to the sweeping crimes against humanity carried out in long-simmering internecine postcolonial conflicts. The sheer weight of the generic anonymity of the suffering is enough to bring her to tears, even as she fails to understand that the groom in the wedding

is Zimbabwean, as is Darling—not Congolese. The woman also flattens Africa, as if the postcolonial political problems of individual countries are structurally identical across the continent. She lauds her niece, who is "going to Rwanda to help" (176). "She's in the Peace Corps, you know, they are doing great things for Africa," she intones, as if rehearsing a vicariously self-congratulatory mantra (176). When she continues, explaining that this same niece "went to Khayelitsha in South Africa to teach at an orphanage[,] . . . she puts her hand over her heart and closes her eyes briefly, like maybe she's listening to the throb of her kindness" (176). Darling's commentary exposes the self-celebrating projective activity of "doing great things *for* Africa" (176; emphasis added). The woman is not a participant in these charitable activities but accepts and doles out praise as if she, herself, has done such things, revealing the dangers inherent in the privatization of humanitarian aid. This interaction suggests that such privatization permits Northerners to assume responsibility for good works that they have not performed. The link becomes evident when the woman crows: "[O]h, she took such awesome pictures! You should have seen those faces!" (176). The visual economy of images of suffering and beaming children—the "cute" ones, anyway—is made clear, and the suspicion that Darling had fostered vis-à-vis the fable of Dudu the bird becomes starkly real: "Then I'm seeing myself in this woman's face, back there when we were in Paradise when the NGO people were taking our pictures" (176–77). Darling realizes that pictures of her might be pawed over and mined for the affect of superiority by countless white Northern strangers and her experiences of hunger and poverty might permit others the benefit of self-congratulation.

Privatized humanitarian aid, it bears insisting on, is not "free." Humanitarian assistance in this system is not disinterested. In order to justify its own existence and efficacy, it must provide results and, inside the logic of capitalism, continuously seek its own expansion. In the process of delivering the assistance that an aid organization is charged with giving, it requires reciprocal production from the recipients. Gone are the days in which such reciprocal labor would be performed manually for starvation wages while bolstering an exploitative industry export-

ing raw materials—although those days exist simultaneously, geodisparately with the contemporary affective economy. Instead, Southern subjects are expected to actually suffer, and to perform that suffering telegenically, in exchange for material assistance. In the novel, the arrival of a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Paradise is anxiously anticipated because it provides necessary goods that the children's parents are unable to provide on their scratched-together wages from the informal labor economy. The children's anxiety and enthusiasm is an affective challenge to the NGO workers' *a priori* self-congratulation: "What we really want to do is take off and run to meet the lorry but we know we cannot. Last time we did, the NGO people were not happy about it, like we had just committed a crime against humanity" (51). The children's unbridled performance of anxiety and anticipation is an affront to the self-conscious dignity that the NGO workers require in return for their donated school supplies. There is a barely subterranean threat that if the children continue to clamor, the aid will dry up because of the aid workers' anxiety, fear, and self-protection.

Indeed, much like the woman in the blue dress, the NGO workers have created a profile of aid recipient that adheres to strict but unvoiced rules about appropriate behavior. This behavioral policing covers interpersonal interactions with the NGO workers as well as the pictures that are inevitably harvested with each supply drop. The children have internalized the rules, and as the NGO lorry pulls up (late; as Darling notes, "they were supposed to come on the fifteenth of last month and now we are on another month"):

> [W]e are singing and screaming like we are proper mad. We bare our teeth and thrust our arms upwards. We tear the ground with our feet. We squint in the dust and watch the doors of the lorry, waiting for the NGO people to come out, but we don't stop singing and dancing. We know that if we do it hard, they will be impressed, maybe they will give us more, give and give until we say, NGO, please, do not kill us with your gifts! (51).

Darling renders explicit the idea that their performance—here, of a monstrous joy—is what is being traded for supplies. Darling also un-

derscores the imbalance of the exchange: there is no reward, unfortunately, for exceeding expectations with their performance. One of the mechanisms of control in this transfer is the role of Sis Betty, whose "job is to explain us to the white people, and them to us" (51–52). She occupies the role of "factor," who in the colonial period acted as an aide to slave trading or as an intermediary for the colonial authorities. Ayi Kwei Armah writes that under colonialism, "the educational process is turned into an elitist ritual for selecting slave traders . . . [but the] factor is a link that must be hidden. An irreplaceable link whose functioning depends on his being embedded in 'his' people, destroying them—a solvent—yet protected from reprisals because his functioning is secret" (222–23). There must be an intermediary in the enactment of the economy of affect, a middlewoman who facilitates the NGO's benevolence but who, in her eagerness to maintain the economic security of her position, actively works to ensure that the affect that is mined is performed to certain standards.

Sis Betty is a crucial link in the distribution of aid, but she functions like a colonial factor, carefully selecting, cultivating, and grooming the children to behave as the NGO workers already expect and desire they will behave:

> What are you doing, masascum evan? Liyahlanya, you think these expensive white people came all the way from overseas ipapa to see you act like baboons? Do you want to embarrass me, heh? Futsekani, don't be buffoons zinja, behave at once or else we'll get in the lorry and drive off right this minute with all this shit! she says. Then Sis Betty turns to the NGO people and smiles her gap-toothed smile. They smile back, please. Maybe they think she just told us good things about them. (Bulawayo, *We Need* 54–55)

Sis Betty's livelihood depends on her ability to wrangle the performances and photographs out of the children that are the currency with which the NGO workers are paid. Without acknowledging the financial boon of trading in these photos, Darling remarks on the affective currency generated in this encounter:

> They just like taking pictures, these NGO people, like maybe we are their real friends and relatives and they will look at the pictures later and point us out by name to other friends and relatives once they get back to their homes. They don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't do it; they just take the pictures anyway, take and take. We don't complain because we know that after the picture-taking comes the giving of gifts. (52)

Darling's invocation of "gifts" is an unwitting acknowledgement of the uneven exchange between the children and the NGO workers. She obscures her own exploitation by imagining that the exchange is mediated outside of traditional material commodity flows. There is a poetic melancholy in her repetition and reiteration of the word "take," which is unencumbered by its object, "pictures," and carefully swept over with the word "gift." The children's dirty and torn clothes are a crucial aspect of the exchange. If they were permitted to clean up or had the resources to do so, the interest driving the distribution of aid would ebb. Like the thin woman in Budapest, the NGO photographer is "so surprised" by Chipo's pregnancy that he pauses. He all too briefly has the opportunity to evaluate his presumptuous superiority, but he quickly "remembers what he came here to do and starts taking . . . away again" (52). The object, pictures, is once more effaced to reveal the true, immaterial nature of the exchange.

The distance between the Northern subject and the Southern object must be carefully maintained, and the children rehearse the unconscious rules that limit their exposure and frame their performance: "We are careful not to touch the NGO people, though, 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). Touch would collapse the difference between subject and object and force the NGO workers to confront their shared humanity. The camera lens is understood as a prophylactic against this realization. Likewise, as Godknows, one of the children, reminds his friends, "[y]ou are not supposed to laugh or smile. Or any of that silly stuff you are doing" (54). In doing so, he repeats Sis Betty's injunction

against affective excess and insists on the supposed dignity of solemnity and gratitude.

The dynamics of the uneven exchange of humanitarian aid for the performance of suffering reaches its apex in the fever dream of Bornfree's funeral. A young leader of the opposition party clamoring for change from Mugabe's regime, Bornfree is brutally murdered for daring to pose a challenge to the existing administration.[8] When BBC journalists arrive at the funeral to film this melancholy coda to a failed democratic revolution, they immediately retreat behind the distancing tools of their trade: "One is looking at everything through a thing, and the other is busy taking pictures" (136). The funeral proceeds, but at the end of the ceremony the children spontaneously begin to play-act the traumatic event of Bornfree's murder, making up the improvisational rules as they go along, "proper drunk with verve" (140). Their imaginative performance of the murder is unsurprisingly captivating and serves a clear social purpose for the mourners, who "don't make any sounds. There is this big black silence, like they are watching something holy. But we can see, in the eyes of the adults, the rage. It is quiet, but it is there" (143). The children do not enact this drama because there are cameras present but because they feel the collective compulsion of the people to work out and cathect their collective rage. It is clear, though, that the gruesome performance ends when it becomes too exhausting to revisit the original trauma: "[A]nd then finally, finally, we just stop. We are tired. Our voices are hoarse. Our faces are drained. Our weapons dangle at our sides, all bloodied. Our clothes are bloodied. The flag of our country is bloodied" (143). The performance pertains to and remains within the community, a witness to violence. It both appears and disappears suddenly and, crucially, the Northerners present miss the point:

> What kind of game is that? we hear somebody say behind us. We turn around to see the two BBC men have returned. They are watching us with their things, standing there among the graves. The camera clicks a few times, taking our pictures. Then the tall one with hair all over and a jungle on his face asks

> again, What kind of game were you just playing? and Bastard puts his shirt on and says, Can't you see this is for real? (143)

Bastard, one of the children, articulates their refusal to enact this communal drama intelligibly for a consuming audience of outsiders. The stakes are suddenly too high. Whereas the children are resigned to trading their performative affect for material supplies, there is a sense that the BBC men are too late to have anything to contribute. Instead, they sit back while the promised change is fought over. It is only when the cynically feared failure occurs and resistance is quashed that the Northerners arrive to broadcast the now dead, once hoped for change.

Bulawayo intervenes in the burgeoning economy of affect in the Southern world. Because private causes must compete for support and donations in an international affective marketplace, Southern subjects' suffering is required to spur charity. This goodwill is undergirded by the affect of superiority that Forster describes. Donors desire a "creditable appendage" that bolsters their self-conception as "saviours" (Daley). The continual reiteration of this suffering, one fears, creates an exploitative dependency in the suffering subjects to continue manufacturing the conditions of their own suffering at the behest of the North, which requires their economic and affective subjugation. Bulawayo describes Southern subjects as experiencing what I call *suffering fatigue*: it becomes exhausting to perform immiseration, and continual suffering is likewise exhausting.[9] There must be some remainder kept back, something hoarded and guarded to ensure the survival of affect. If the sought after change is ever to occur, there must be some fund of hope and optimism to draw on after the Northerners have pulled up stakes, piled into their lorries, and driven off once more. More to the point, I think, is the notion that the demand for telegenic suffering does the awful work of alienating Southerners from their own affective experiences, even as the trade in these images obscures other, more harrowing experiences on the ground.[10] Habila's and Mabanckou's characterizations of Bulawayo's representation of this suffering as "poverty porn" miss the point altogether, as Bulawayo's oscillation between performative and materialist critique demonstrates.

Notes

1 As far as can be determined, "poverty porn," although not necessarily a new concept, is a relatively new term. In what may be the first use of it, Collins defines "poverty porn" as "any type of media, be it written, photographed or filmed, which exploits the poor's condition in order to generate the necessary sympathy for selling newspapers or increasing charitable donations or support for a given cause."

2 It is hardly a secret that Facebook and other social media sites mine information from the data inputted by users. An example is Facebook's "like" feature: algorithms register the content and tenor of the post liked, and that information accretes to a user's consumer profile at the nexus of marketing algorithms. Gradually, one's cumulative "social" behavior is capitalized on by virtue of its commodification. Users' profiles enable all aspects of Internet marketing and commerce, both legitimate and illegitimate and can be harnessed to guide and direct marketing. Such a profile can likewise be used by hackers to determine the value of an identity and its attendant credit. See Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit, *Networked Affect*.

3 For Hardt "the productive circuit of affect and value has thus seemed in many respects an autonomous circuit for the constitutions of subjectivity, alternative to the process of capitalist valorization," by which he means an alternative to the varieties of commodity and currency exchange inherent in capitalism (M-C-M, etc.) (Hardt 89). However, Ahmed observes that the accumulation of the surplus value of affect is indistinguishable from circulation because it is "produced as an effect of circulation . . . between objects and signs" (45). In the affective economy, the immaterial stimuli that determine our behavior as producers and consumers in the material economy are important as loci of pre-capitalization. Our health and wellness, our moods, and our social relationships and impingements create the conditions that lead us to desire consumption. Tomkins argues that "interest" is the "activator affect" for further affects—we must be interested in something if we are going to take joy in it.

4 Daley's citation of "accumulation by dispossession" is a reference to the cornerstone argument of Harvey's *The New Imperialism*.

5 Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* remarks on the awful legacy of Northern financial interventions in the Global South, tracing a wide range of human rights abuses, increasing income inequality, and the structural violence inherent in the hegemonic imposition of "structural adjustment programs." The text is a potent rebuttal to conservative economists like Jeffrey Sachs, who push privatized aid as the solution to the South's proliferating material woes.

6 This augments what Lee Edelman calls the rhetoric of "reproductive futurity" that permeates neoliberal politics and serves as a rallying cry for social or political action.

7 In *On Photography*, Sontag argues that early photography produced an arrogantly constructed humanism, which rendered the camera an "instrument of that

essentially middle-class attitude, both zealous and merely tolerant, both curious and indifferent" (56).

8 Peter Godwin describes this historical moment poignantly, explaining that, in 2008, "I am on my way home to Zimbabwe, to dance on Robert Mugabe's political grave," only to discover that "Mugabe has not conceded defeat after all. There is no political grave on which to dance" (5, 14). Morgan Tsvangirai's long-simmering democratic challenge, which had seemed on the cusp of success, was stymied once more by Mugabe's iron fist. Bulawayo narrates the moment from the perspective of the children who are swept up in the euphoric optimism of the political movement: "Now when men talk, their voices burn the aid, making smoke all over the place. We hear about change, about new country, about democracy, about elections and what-what" (59). All of this optimism is exhausted in the political violence, repression, and doctored electoral results, culminating in the horrifying tableau of Bornfree's funeral.

9 I am invoking the concept of "compassion fatigue," the experience of exhaustion that caregivers to the ill, disabled, or dying often feel. Likewise, "suffering fatigue" is meant to reverberate doubly—both as suffering (from) fatigue, and being fatigued by the perpetual performance of suffering.

10 The gulf between the aesthetic or public performance of suffering and the actuality of suffering has been cynically abridged by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who, during his country's attacks on Gaza in 2014, claimed that the Palestinians were rhetoricizing their "telegenically dead" fellow-citizens to bolster support for their cause. Mbembe's "necropolitics" seems an ever-more-important piece of evidence in analyses of contemporary neoliberal hegemony.

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