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Failing Border Crossings and Cosmopolitanism in Brian Chikwava's *Harare North*

Abstract: This article discusses Brian Chikwava's novel *Harare North* (2009) and its representations of unsuccessful border crossings from the perspective of cosmopolitanism. I argue that through the unnamed protagonist's inability or his own unwillingness to cross different material and symbolic borders, the novel gives articulation to the failure of such cosmopolitan ideals as openness to Otherness, acknowledgement of one's own position in the world, and boundary-transgressing dialogue. Chikwava's protagonist seems to be constantly on the "wrong" side of any border that he encounters. As such, he is the unwanted abject on whose exclusion different normative subjectivities are constructed. By addressing the problematics of border crossings and cosmopolitan ideals in a globalised world which is increasingly interconnected but also simultaneously scattered into separate realms, this article draws attention to the intertwined issues of mobility and the processes of transculturation that mobility should ideally entail. In so doing, the present article criticises simplistic tendencies to equate cosmopolitanism with transnational mobility and reduce cosmopolitanism to a mere identity position – a feature that can be observed in current discussions concerning Afropolitanism. Chikwava's novel points at the fact that crossing boundaries and adopting cosmopolitan ethics is not always easy, nor necessarily even desired by those on the move.

Keywords: abject, African literature, Afropolitan, border, Brian Chikwava, cosmopolitanism, mobility

Harare North by the diasporic Zimbabwean author Brian Chikwava is a novel that

addresses the question of mobility from a somewhat uneasy perspective. The novel's

anonymous protagonist, a vehement supporter of the now former Zimbabwean dictator

Robert Mugabe and a member of a violent nationalist youth militia, travels to London

pretending to be persecuted in order to apply for asylum.[1] Chikwava's underprivileged,

abject African traveller comes across as the antithesis of the currently popular figure of

the Afropolitan. The Afropolitan, as formulated by the diasporic author Taiye Selasi (2005), is a fashionable, Africanised – or rather, an "Africa lite" (Musila, 2016: 110) – version of the cosmopolitan. While these "Africans of the world" (Selasi, 2005) with hybrid cultural backgrounds and affinities claim a link to their "original" continent, they feel at home everywhere thanks to their socio-economic privilege and cultural capital. For such affluent, educated, and multilingual world citizens, the world may seem borderless. Simultaneously, however, globalisation is a profoundly unequal phenomenon characterized by the proliferation of borders (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 62). At the less glamorous end of contemporary African mobilities, one can observe travellers who have practically nothing in common with Selasi's "Africans of the world" (2005). The world is far from being "open" to them, and the borders that "Afropolitans" cross effortlessly, represent insurmountable barriers for these underprivileged travellers; the abject in-between states of refugees or undocumented migrants are a case in point (see Chambers, 2008: 3). Underprivileged mobile subjects constitute a darker form of globalisation which is "defined by a sense of crisis within the postcolony itself" (Gikandi 2001: 630). Chikwava's protagonist is positioned on this reverse side of globalisation.

The theme of border manifests itself throughout *Harare North*. In this article, I explore Chikwava's protagonist's failure to cross borders (national, cultural, ideological, and linguistic) against the theoretical context of cosmopolitanism – which I

consider is, in many senses, about successful transcultural border crossings. Besides

being topographical or territorial, borders are also symbolic, cultural, and conceptual

(Schimanski & Wolfe, 2010: 40). Borders, as defined by Johan Schimanski and Stephen

Wolfe, "involve movement of people from one place to another; attempts to control

space with borders, creating situations of radically asymmetrical relations of power; and

attempts to imagine the spatial dislocations of people, objects, or ideologies within the

globalized economy" (2007: 12). It should be underlined that borders are not just

markers of difference and division, but also contact zones (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007:

14; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 7). By "connecting individuals to the world", borders

bring people in contact with Others: from this perspective, borders are central to

cosmopolitanism (Cooper & Rumford, 2011: 262, 273). I argue that through its

treatment of failed border-crossings, the novel exposes the limits of cosmopolitan

ideals. The protagonist's lack of (Western) cultural capital, his broken English,

parochial and nationalist mind set, and confinement to the margins of the society as an

undocumented African migrant, contribute to a state of abjection that informs his life in

London. His abject condition not only makes him the antithesis of the figure of the

Afropolitan, but also distances him from ideals and sensibilities that inform a

cosmopolitan perspective.

In *Harare North*, the cosmopolitan potentials of the border are not realised: its

divisive character is highlighted instead. By highlighting the exclusionary quality of

borders, *Harare North* exposes the contradictory nature of globalisation processes. Globalisation is a fractioned narrative, torn between the discourses of increased mobility and transculturation on the one hand, and the proliferation of borders on the other. Chikwava's protagonist seems to be constantly on the "wrong" side of practically every border that he encounters. He is the unwanted abject on whose exclusion different normative subjectivities are constructed. By discussing the problematics of border crossings and cosmopolitan ideals in a globalised world which is increasingly interconnected but simultaneously scattered into separate realms, this article draws attention to the intertwined questions of mobility and the processes of transculturation that mobility may ideally entail. My reading of Chikwava's novel criticises the idea of reducing cosmopolitanism to a mere identity position or a by-product of transnational mobility – a feature that informs the concept of Afropolitanism in particular. I understand cosmopolitanism as an active ethical engagement – and this obviously is not something that comes automatically with mobility. In this way, this article simultaneously promotes a critical view of the concept of Afropolitanism which it considers to be based on a shallow and misguided understanding of cosmopolitanism as a mere marker of mobility-enhanced hybrid identity.

Cosmopolitanism as an active engagement

Cosmopolitanism is commonly understood as world citizenship. This idea of "being at home in the world" implies an elitist aspect which makes the concept seem like a "luxuriously free-floating view from above" (Robbins, 1998: 1). This is the case of Selasi's "Africanised" adaptation of cosmopolitanism, which reduces the concept to an identity position of affluent, diasporic Africans. Yet, cosmopolitanism is not exactly a personal attribute. As David Hansen argues, "a cosmopolitan sensibility is not a possession, badge, or settled accomplishment. It is an orientation that depends fundamentally upon the ongoing quality of one's interactions with others, with the world, and with one's own self" (2008: 213). This is where current critical discussions on Afropolitanism – or rather, on the figure of the Afropolitan – go wrong. The Selasian concept of Afropolitanism is based on the erroneous and superficial interpretation of cosmopolitanism as an identity of privileged mobile subject – that is, on the figure of the cosmopolit*an* rather than on cosmopolitan*ism* as ethics and politics. While the concept of Afropolitanism does not seem to entail nothing more than the idea of being mobile and claiming hybrid cultural affinities, cosmopolitanism is, above all, an ethico-political commitment. As Pheng Cheah puts it, cosmopolitanism is an "expansive form of solidarity that is attuned to democratic principles without the restriction of territorial borders" (2006: 19). Besides boundary-transgressing solidarity and dialogue, a key element in cosmopolitanism is an "awareness of one's own social position and culture in a global arena" (Beck, 2008: 27). Further, rather than an already achieved condition,

cosmopolitanism is seen by many scholars as "yet to come, something awaiting realization" (Pollock & al., 2002: 1). Literature, as Robert Spencer suggests, can play a role in imagining "the shape of a cosmopolitan future" (2011: 11; see also Shaw, 2017: 4). While, according to Spencer, cosmopolitanism cannot "by definition be realised in works of art", certain literary texts may through "their dramatisations of cultural conflict and convergence foster habits of attention and self-scrutiny that deserve to be called cosmopolitan" (2011: 12).

Instead of engaging in imagining the outlines of a cosmopolitan future, *Harare North* ridicules such aspirations. Because of his inability and unwillingness to cross borders smoothly, Chikwava's protagonist embodies the failure of such cosmopolitan ideals as boundary-transgressing dialogue, openness to Otherness and critical awareness of one's own position in the world – failure whose roots lie in his underprivileged and abject position. Mobility plays an important role in cosmopolitanism: it exposes one to transcultural encounters, which, in turn, may enhance cosmopolitan orientations. Multicultural metropoles such as London are commonly conceived as places where cosmopolitanism "happens" (Johansen, 2014: 11-12). This is, of course, a somewhat simplistic conception: instead of merely passively "happening", cosmopolitanism involves an active engagement with the world, its diversity, and an awareness of one's own place in it (Amit & Barber, 2015: 545; Johansen, 2015: 11-15). In short, while mobility is an important element in cosmopolitanism, "routes and journeys across

boundaries and encounters with Others do not necessarily lead to a cosmopolitan attitude" (Gikandi, 2010: 24; see also Shaw, 2017: 14; Tihanov, 2015: 142). Gikandi draws attention to the way in which underprivileged migrants and refugees may end reproducing rather uneasy forms of locality and loyalty in metropolitan, multicultural, multi-ethnic settings (2010: 23, 26). Gikandi illustrates such a situation with an example of young diasporic Somalis who leave their lives in the West in order to fight for Islam in a crisis-ridden country from which their parents initially fled (2010: 25). Gikandi's example shows that allegedly "cosmopolitan" cities "are characterised as much by separation as mixing, by ethnic encapsulation, marginality and exclusion" (Werbner, 2015: 569-570). "Visual diversity" alone does not make any city cosmopolitan since "the cosmopolitan vision of urban dwellers cannot be taken for granted", as Pnina Werbner stresses (2015: 570-71). This is clearly the case of Chikwava's "hero" and the London he experiences.

Instances of anti-cosmopolitanism

The complexities of Chikwava's novel's title have been observed by several scholars. There is a general unanimity that the title captures the notions of displacement and instability (Chipfupa, 2016: 60; Muchemwa, 2010: 141; Pucherova, 2014: 169; Wicomb, 2015: 50). Besides these notions, I would add, the title also announces the failure of cosmopolitan ideals. From this perspective, Michael Perfect's interpretation –

even if he does not read the novel through the concept of cosmopolitanism – is interesting. Perfect suggests that "Harare North" indicates that, for the protagonist, "London is not in any way an exceptional place but simply another capital city" (2014: 173). In so doing, the text questions the assumption that former colonial subjects would be overwhelmingly impressed by the metropole (Perfect, 2014: 173). The protagonist has never been to London, yet he is not interested in his new environment. Cosmopolitanism, however, necessitates "an engagement beyond the already familiar" (Amit & Barber, 2015: 545). "Harare North" reduces London to an extension of the Zimbabwean capital – a gesture that conveys the protagonist's parochial, anti-cosmopolitan mind set.

The first border that the protagonist fails to cross smoothly is the national border. This failure is conveyed in the opening scene of the novel, set in Gatwick airport. Airports represent "thresholds of nations" (Manzanas & Sanchez, 2011: 112) that function simultaneously as sites of inclusion and exclusion (Huggan, 2009: 11). While being detained is a dramatic start for the story, its description covers hardly one page. What happens during the eight days of detention is not addressed. The protagonist does not seem to be upset when he is detained, but rather, resigned to it, as suggested by his conception that the immigration officers are "only doing their graft" (4). The narrator's resignation at the face of the interrupted nature of his mobility points at his lack of expectations as to his status as an undocumented African migrant in Europe. For

him, there is nothing abnormal in being confined into a state of in-between-ness, materialised in the detention centre which simultaneously is and is not the nation. Later in the novel, his friends (clandestine migrants and asylum seekers like himself) discuss the possibility of acquiring forged EU passports. For them, EU passports represent the ultimate freedom of movement and the luxury of being able to ignore national borders – a form of mobility that is beyond their reach. The utter absurdity of the idea of a borderless world for them is conveyed in how the protagonist suggests that his friend Shingi should have a French passport with the name Jacques Chirac on it. For Chikwava's characters, being a citizen of a borderless world is just as unlikely as being the president of France.

Travelling not only means changing physical environment; it may also change one's conception of the self, the Other, and the world. Transformation and "internal development processes" that mobility may generate form an essential aspect of cosmopolitan consciousness (Delanty, 2006: 27). In effect, as Gerard Delanty argues, "Without this dimension of self-transcendence, cosmopolitanism is a meaningless term" (2006: 43). From this perspective, it is interesting that Patricia Noxolo suggests that *Harare North* can be read as a postcolonial subversion of the *bildungsroman* (2014: 302). The allusion to the genre of *bildungsroman* in the case of Chikwava's novel seems somewhat far-fetched, and, in effect, Noxolo does highlight that while "the protagonist struggles with conflicting truths, [he] does not emerge into enlightenment" (2014: 302).

In a similar vein, David Chipfupa underlines the lack of development informing the protagonist's psychic life. According to Chipfupa, the protagonist "remains by and large unchanged right through the action of the novel. The move to the UK does not […] alter the way in which he views the world" (2016: 62). The possibility of transformation that mobility may enable is dismissed articulately by the protagonist at the beginning of the novel. He notes that he is turning twenty-two, but that he will not tell anyone because he "know[s] this is wrong place to celebrate birthday" (14). This announcement betrays his refusal to see his new environment as an opportunity for him to transform by adopting new views. Displacement does not change anything for him; quite the contrary, he claims that in London, "people change back into they old self" (60). Interestingly enough, he also articulates an awareness of the way in which mobility affects one's identity and how it may enhance an understanding of one's positionality: "In foreign place, sometimes you see each each with different eyes for the first time and who you are and your place in the world suddenly becomes easy to see as any goat's tail" (127-128). Although these words hint at cosmopolitan self-awareness, they do not affect the protagonist's views on a wider scale. He remains attached to the ideas with which he left his home country. He dismisses information that contradicts his nationalist convictions and support for the Mugabe regime as mere propaganda. Yet, when he hears that the village of his late mother has been evacuated by the army because of gem deposits, he needs some time to put "them things together" (177). In the end, he keeps

calling himself "son of the soil" – a term nationalist Zimbabwean "freedom fighters" use to refer to themselves. In his new environment, however, this identity has no validity at all.

The tradition of modern cosmopolitanism is marked by elitist biases – as echoed in Selasi's Afropolitan – and "linked with the universalism of modern Western thought and with political designs aimed at world governance" (Delanty, 2006: 26). For these reasons, traditional cosmopolitanisms have become subject to criticism. There has been an explicit "effort to distance the concept from its former narrow identification with 'rootless' elites", which has resulted in pluralised and democratised understandings of cosmopolitanism (Amit & Barber, 2015: 544). Some theorists have claimed that "cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of the [..] comforts and customs of national belonging" (Pollock & al., 2002: 6). In a similar vein, Achille Mbembe suggests that besides its privileged forms, practical, non-elitist cosmopolitanisms also exist. These practical cosmopolitanisms, exercised by "*petits migrants*" involved in trade, religious practices, or prostitution, tend to flourish in clandestine spaces, be it in terms of land use or migration (2008: 109). From this perspective, cosmopolitanism is necessarily neither utopian nor elitist. Yet, one should resist the temptation of proclaiming Chikwava's protagonist as a grass root or popular cosmopolitan simply because of his marginalised position and displacement. The protagonist does not qualify for a Mbembean non-elite

cosmopolitan as he does not actively get involved in widening his perspective by engaging in transcultural encounters. What needs to be stressed is that cosmopolitanism involves an active ethical engagement – it is not just a passive experience of "being African in the world" as Ashleigh Harris suggests in her reading of *Harare North* as "an Afropolitan novel" (2017: 242). Indeed, I am highly critical of the interpretation of the protagonist as a "less-fortunate Afropolitan", as suggested by Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek in their attempt to undo the class-bound limits of the concept (2016: 287), or Harris's vague interpretation of cosmopolitanism as a mere "experience of worldliness" (2017: 242). Given the protagonist's incapacity and lack of willingness to engage in transcultural encounters, to maintain that he is some sort of a vernacular cosmopolitan as Knudsen and Rahbek (2016: 265-287) and Harris (2017) do, is not only an unconvincing attempt to expand the meanings of Selasian Afropolitanism so as to cover underprivileged mobile Africans whom the notion so overtly excludes. An even bigger problem is the misconception of cosmopolitanism as a passive by-product of mobility that informs the concept of Afropolitanism. In such a reductive understanding, transnational mobility is seen as a condition that "somehow effortlessly develops the toolkit of a cosmopolitan" in those on the move (Tihanov, 2015: 154). There is nothing in Chikwava's "hero's" encounters with others and the world that would indicate cosmopolitan ethical agency. His mindset is marked by his abjection whose roots lie in his underprivileged and traumatizing personal history of an individual living under a

violent political regime. With these premises, cosmopolitan sensibility remains an unreachable ideal that does not have any relevance whatsoever for the protagonist. To say this is not to suggest that there cannot be vernacular or grass-root cosmopolitanisms: non-elitist forms of cosmopolitanism do exist, but they entail an ethical engagement with the world and the Other, and an understanding of one's own positionality. *Harare North*, with its protagonist, is definitively not the right place to look for such engagements and encounters.

The protagonist does not really want to be in London; his displacement is motivated uniquely by money. He has become subject to a fraud back home – he realises the scam after his arrival – and needs to collect a specific amount of money to pay himself out of trouble. He is a reluctant migrant waiting to return home, which contributes to his indifference to his new environment. He places himself above his fellow diasporic Zimbabweans whom he considers have landed in the UK in miserable conditions after a "big journey that is caused by them dreams that start far away in them townships" (30). The protagonist does not cherish any such dreams and despises migrants working in the care sector as what is referred to in the novel as BBC's, British Buttock Cleaners.[2] He refuses to land such a job, "principled" man as he claims to be. His situation, as Perfect has pointed out, is tensioned: he sees London "as nothing more than an economic opportunity" while simultaneously refusing to make any economic contribution to the city himself (2014: 173). While the protagonist despises his fellow

citizens' "BBC" jobs, he has difficulty securing a job for himself. At one point, he

intends to "mau-mau" (65) hotels in order to find a job as a porter in the hope of

receiving "fat tips" from "Saudi princes" (74). When he finally manages to spot a

potential establishment, it does not take long for "two fat bouncers in uniform" (69) to

throw him out. This passage highlights the protagonist's failure to recognise the

existence of a socio-economic border that he is simply unable to cross. His list of hotels

to "mau-mau" includes such luxury establishments as the Savoy and the Ritz, and the

protagonist does not see any discrepancy between such places and himself – a

discrepancy that is flagrant to anyone else, as his cousin's reaction of "nearly fall[ing]

off his chair laughing" when he hears about his adventures (74) suggests. This reaction

embarrasses the protagonist, who states that "Now I have to stop talking about this

because people think that I am dunderhead" (74). Being subjected to the mockery of his

cousin, the protagonist becomes, at least momentarily, aware of his lack of cultural

capital.

Non-dialogue and linguistic nonconformity

After the hotel fiasco, the protagonist finally succeeds in securing a job as a cleaner in a

fast food restaurant. The owner does not hire him immediately because he has doubts

about his English skills. However menial, the job at the fast food restaurant represents

an opportunity to engage in dialogue with other people than the cohabitants of the squat

in which the protagonist now lives with other paperless Zimbabwean migrants – a place that could be called an "ethic enclave" (see Werbner, 2015: 572). This opportunity, however, is quickly lost: the protagonist is totally disinterested in sharing his life with anyone, as the following travesty of a conversation between him and his boss suggests:

> "How is Zimbabwe?"
>
> "OK."
>
> "How is your family back there?"
>
> "OK."
>
> "What's Zimbabwe like?"
>
> "OK."
>
> "How is Mugabe?"
>
> "OK."
>
> "Are you all right?"
>
> "OK."

This quotation conveys the protagonist's indifference towards interaction. He is suspicious about people's motives, and capable of interacting only when he is in a position of power, such as in his unbalanced friendship with Shingi or the other occupants of the squat. The awkward quality of the failed dialogue between him and his boss draws attention to the scarcity of the use of dialogue in the novel: the first-person narrator monopolises the discursive space with his own perspective. The imposition of

the narrator's views is also conveyed in the way in which he recurrently erases his interlocutors' statements by summing them up with the expression, "yari yari yari". This is illustrative of his lack of respect for others – especially those who do not share his opinions. The lack of dialogue betrays the failure of cosmopolitan ideals, for, as Vered Arrit and Pauline Gardiner Barber posit, cosmopolitanism is relational as it "requires an element of mutual willingness for engagement" (2015: 545). Another interesting instance of non-dialogue features in a passage in which the protagonist confronts his boss. Here, the boss talks "fast and mixing proper English with his cockney" (101) so that the protagonist fails to understand him. The protagonist's reaction is to "let rip in [his native language] Shona" (101), after which the boss calls the police as he finds the protagonist's behaviour threatening. This passage illustrates that there is an insurmountable border between the two interlocutors that undermines the attempt to establish a dialogue.

Isaac Ndlovu points out that the protagonist's broken English and his "inadequate language command presents him with the challenge of not being fully integrated into the London English community" (2016: 33). What is interesting in the protagonist's broken English is that it "is neither Zimbabwean, nor reflective of the linguistic proficiency" UK-based Zimbabweans (Ndlovu, 2016: 31). In other words, the protagonist speaks a language that is not spoken by any community, which throws into relief his outsiderness. Yet, the fact that he "seems to enjoy his unorthodox

resourcefulness with the language" (Ndlovu, 2016: 33) supports the interpretation that

he has at least some agency in the creation of his nonconformity. He does not make any

effort to standardise his English so as to better fit into his new environment. Unlike such

contemporary diasporic African protagonists as Sefi Atta's Deola Bello in *A Bit of

Difference*, who "plays up her English accent […] so that people might not assume she

lacks intelligence" (2014: 21) or NoViolet Bulawayo's Darling in *We Need New Names,*

who watches television in order to learn how to "sound American" to "make her life

easier" (2013: 194), Chikwava's protagonist is not interested in "undoing" what comes

across as his abject and definitively "non-lite" (see Musila 2016) "Africanness". The

protagonist's use of language represents a wholesale celebration of being a misfit in a

society that wishes to keep such "unwanted invaders" as undocumented migrants

beyond its borders. As such, the protagonist's use of non-standard and imperfectly

spoken language embodies an anarchic, albeit eventually unsuccessful, attitude.

Parodying the Afropolitan

The failure of cosmopolitanism in the novel can be read in terms of cosmopolitan ethics,

but also in a more superficial and reductive sense as an affluent identity position as

embodied in the Selasian Afropolitan which conveys the idea of Afro-descendants'

presence in the metropolitan milieus of art, fashion, and cultural production (Awondo,

2014: 118). While my main focus is on cosmopolitan ethics, orientations and awareness,

it is tempting to juxtapose Chikwava's protagonist and the figure of the Afropolitan. "You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes", describes Selasi Afropolitans like herself (2005). When it comes to Chikwava's protagonist, the only aspect on this list that relates to him is the word "funny". When he arrives in the UK, he is detained at Gatwick airport after articulating "the magic word – asylum" (4). Eventually, Sekai, the wife of his London-based cousin comes to fetch him from the detention centre. The protagonist carries an old cardboard suitcase he has received from his mother, and observes that Sekai "look[s] at my suitcase in funny way" (5). They set out to leave the airport and take the train to Paul's and Sekai's home in East London. Once it turns out that the protagonist does not have enough money to buy a train ticket, he and Sekai experience a "funny moment" (5). At the couple's house, they sit in the lounge "in funny silence" (7), and London, for the protagonist, is a "funny foreign place" (17). Clearly, Chikwava's narrator's "funny" is not same as Selasi's. While the latter's "funny" refers to something fashionably hybrid (and potentially exotic from a Western perspective), for the former, it signals the trouble that his presence generates in others as well as the uneasy sense of displacement he experiences. The "funny" looks and silences betray the idea that the protagonist is constantly on the "wrong" side of the border and that he fails to fit in London from the very start.

Yet, not to come across as a stylish "Afropolitan" does not bother the protagonist. While "obsessed with style" (Muchemwa, 2010: 142) when it comes to language, he embraces not what Selasi sees as the "gorgeous" character of diasporic 21st-century Africans, but the "goofiness" of caricatured African immigrants from the 1980s (2005). At one point, the protagonist goes to an African music concert. The passage can be read as an ironizing commentary on what has been considered as the consumerist aspects and predominance of style in Selasi's Afropolitan (see Bosch Santana 2013). The protagonist notes that the concert is "crawling with them Africans in they colourful ethnic clothes it make you feel you is not African enough" (137). While others celebrate their link to Africa through their "flashy African clothes", the protagonist and his companions are "wearing jeans" (137). For him, this loud celebration of cultural identity rings fake: he refers to these "Afropolitans" as "lapsed Africans" (137). For him, the "genuine" African is embodied in a musician he refers to as "the original native from Kinshasa" who has "just hit Harare North" (137):

> Kinshasa boy wear black oversize jacket and them baggy grey trousers; you can tell these is clothes that he is suppose to have taken to dry-cleaner but maybe somewhere in the township the original native decide that this is something that he can handle with box of Surf powder and bucket of water; now they is puckered and getting all out of shape in that way that

> make them more African than them thousand cotton garments with blue
>
> lizards, green fish and ethnic pattern. This cheer our face. (138)

The protagonist recognises himself in this clumsy newcomer who does not quite fit into his new environment and is unable to celebrate his "Africanness" in a fashionable way.

While the protagonist ridicules diasporic Africans' "Afropolitan" styles and simultaneously exposes the very shallowness of the concept of Afropolitanism, his own understanding of "culture" is equally superficial. At one point, he suddenly shows interest in his new environment: he wishes to "acquire what they call culture" (146). Soon it turns out that "culture", for him, refers to popular culture phenomena and consumer products with "all them names like Tommy, Diesel, Levi, iPod, Klein and all them such kind of people that stick they names on people's clothes" (147). "Culture" as a set of brands underlines not only the consumerism that informs Western urban cultures, but also the utter ridiculousness of the protagonist's conception of cultural encounters across borders. Unsurprisingly, his shallow interpretations of and engagements in transculturation do not change anything in his outsiderness.

Abject unbelonging

Another instance of being on the "wrong" side of the border pertains to the protagonist's abjection. According to Julia Kristeva, the abject is "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1982: 1). In abjection, the subject struggles with

"something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Abjection, then, is not only revolting to the self, but also part of it. In this way, the abject represents a threat to the boundaries of the subject. As the subject cannot entirely rid itself from the abject, the latter continues to haunt the former. It is important to note that the abject and the subject are constructed dialogically: the identity of the subject relies on the partial rejection of the abject. Therefore, the fact that someone or something is deemed abject is equally telling of the construction of the subject. In his article combining the seemingly incompatible concepts of abjection and cosmopolitanism, Peter Nyers captures this dialogical dimension of abjection when he claims that the concept of abject cosmopolitanism "describes not a *problematic cosmopolitanism for the abject*, but rather a *problematising cosmopolitanism of the abject*" (2003: 1075; emphasis in the original). In other words, the abjection of "abject migrants, the cast-offs of world order" (Nyers, 2003: 1072) is equally revealing of the subject construction of the host societies who deem them as such.

The uneasy dimension of the abject is embodied in the protagonist from the very beginning. When Sekai comes to fetch him from the airport, she throws away the ground nuts that he has brought as a gift as they may "carry disease" (7). Sekai forbids the protagonist from talking to anyone "because she think I end up embarrassing them" (22). In the eyes of his relatives, the protagonist's provincialism, lack of education, and

his uncritical support for the Mugabe regime contribute to his abjection. The relatives are of a higher level of education and critical of the ruling party, and have managed to establish a relatively comfortable diasporic life in London. The protagonist is far distanced from their "aspir[ations] to middle-class status" (Knudsen & Rahbek, 2016: 275). He represents the kind of immigrant the relatives want to dissociate themselves from: an undocumented misfit unable to integrate into the society. Becoming associated, through kinship and national affiliation, to the protagonist, poses a threat to the London-based relatives' middle-class diasporic subjectivities.

The protagonist encounters similar reactions in his interactions with other people as well. Not only is he looked at in a "funny" way, but also when he goes to a café, some customers change tables once they realise whom they are sitting next to. These incidents highlight the abject qualities of the protagonist in the eyes of Londoners. He is familiar with the "usual London way" of looking that tells him that he "is in the wrong place" (225) – words that illustrate his inability to claim the new environment as home. At the fast food restaurant, a group of teenagers comes in regularly to mock him as his hygiene standards come across as questionable. That the teenagers leave the chips they buy untouched highlights the protagonist's abjection. Just as in the case of his relatives, it should be underlined that the protagonist's abjection in the eyes of "quality people in nice clothes" (51) is telling of the identity construction of Londoners, including upwardly mobile diasporic Africans. Here, the protagonist's abjection springs from his

belonging to a class of uneducated, irregular African migrants who work in low-paid, low-esteemed sectors and who often cross the border between wage labour and informal labour. People like the narrator are needed to do the nation's dirty work, which sustains the very phenomenon of clandestine migration the nation is supposed to fight against. The racial dimensions of the protagonist's abjection are conveyed in a passage in which he eats bread with Shingi on a bus. A young child, accompanied by his mother, shows interest in the bread. As Shingi hands the child a piece of it, the protagonist observes "the look of horror" (137) on the mother's face as she wants to prevent her son from eating. According to the protagonist, however, the mother is too "frightened about the racialism thing" to react, so she contents herself with "watch[ing] with sickly smile as she son hit the bread with more fire" (137). The irony here is directed at Western discourses of tolerance among the "aware" members of society. The protagonist's awareness of the complexity of the situation enables him to benefit from his abjection to master the situation. The passage also draws attention to the fact that his abjection is often associated with food. In the postcolonial context, food raises questions related to exoticism, consumption and accommodation of Otherness (Kelly, 2017: 23-25). By associating the protagonist with inedible food, the text suggests that his difference cannot be properly accommodated by the host society. In this sense, the protagonist's abjection can be interpreted as a condition that enables resistance. On a general scale,

however, his abjection is not a resource but an inconvenience as it further distances him from cosmopolitan ideals.

Toward the end of the novel, the protagonist is frequently portrayed inside the squat, sitting on his suitcase in front of the window, observing city life. Watching what happens outside through the window, he feels "like I don't belong to Earth" (122), which explicitly conveys his sense of outsiderness. The old-fashioned suitcase, containing all his belongings, is emptied in the course of his mental breakdown, and becomes the ultimate symbol for his homelessness in the world. The top surface of the suitcase, on which he sits, represents the restricted space that he can truly claim as home. London seems as hostile to him just as he is uninterested in making it his home. The window through which he observes the city is a border that separates him from the life outside and that confines him to the troubled, clandestine space and the "ethnic enclave" (Werbner, 2015: 572) that reluctantly plays the role of the domestic sphere by accommodating random people from the margins of the society. From the perspective of the failure of cosmopolitan ideals, it is illustrative that the protagonist's isolation from the world increases so that eventually, he does not have any interaction with anyone. While already suffering from the symptoms of a mental breakdown, he seems aware of his condition. He compares himself to an *umgodoyi*, a "homeless dog that roam them villages scavenging until brave villager relieve it of its misery but hit its head with rock. *Umgodoyi* have no home like the winds" (226). This comparison symbolises his abject

non-belonging. His balancing between sanity and insanity is conveyed in the way in which he no longer walks on the pavements, but on the white line in the middle of the streets – an element that Zoe Wicomb interprets as his "positioning himself in placelessness" (2015: 58). The novel ends with the protagonist walking half-naked in the streets of Brixton, ripped off of any valid identity. This is a portrayal of a mobile African that stands in flagrant contrast to the figure of the Afropolitan.

Conclusion

Harare North gives articulation to the difficulty of border crossings in the context of Afroeuropean clandestine mobility: if borders are frequently conceived simultaneously as bridges and walls (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007: 17), then clearly in this case, they are more likely to perform the role of the wall. National, linguistic, and cultural borders prove to be insurmountable to underprivileged mobile subjects, in addition to which there may be ideological borders that these mobile subjects themselves are unwilling to cross. The protagonist's inability and his own unwillingness to cross borders is symptomatic of the failure of cosmopolitan ideals – ideals from which his abject, underprivileged position efficiently distances him. By drawing attention to a less glorious dimension of contemporary African mobilities, *Harare North* not merely exposes the rather obvious limits of the figure of the Afropolitan and draws attention to the conceptual emptiness of Afropolitanism. Even more importantly, the novel attests to

the fact that crossing cultural boundaries and adopting cosmopolitan sensibilities is neither always easy, nor necessarily even desired by those on the move.

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[1] While the protagonist is certainly not victim of political violence as he claims to be, behind the satirizing

attitude, the narrative does point at the complexity of his position. His underprivileged background and

lack of opportunities have made him an easy prey for the recruitment of a violent political movement. In

this way, the novel complicates the conception of victimhood. Yet, at the same time, this complexity, as

Michael Perfect argues, can be understood as "a critique of the UK's asylum and immigration services [which are] completely ineffectual at distinguishing between those individuals who are genuinely fleeing persecution and those who are not" (2014: 172). In this sense, it is clear that *Harare North* is a complex novel that teases its readers as Dave Gunning (2015: 130) expresses it.

[2] The concept of BBC is used by Zimbabweans who want to derogate their compatriots living in the UK and working in the care sector; see McGregor (2007).