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Everyday childhoods in contemporary African fiction

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Abstract: This article contends that humanitarian imagery and sociopolitical discourses that present African childhoods as 'lacking' are being rigorously challenged by African fiction that illuminates the diversity of childhood experiences that make up the everyday. The article aims to show that neither the trope of the African child as silent victim nor the globalised African child whose trajectory is characterised by escape from local and national ties is able to capture the complexity and plurality of 'parochial' (Jaji 2021) childhoods and suggests that new versions of childhood are emerging in African writing. By analysing the role of the everyday and the ambiguity of play in fiction by Tsitsi Dangarembga, NoViolet Bulawayo, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi and Khadija Abdalla Bajaber, alongside stories from the 2021 Caine Prize shortlist, the article showcases the fresh and adventurous narratives of childhood to be found in contemporary African fiction.

Keywords: African childhoods, Caine Prize, Tsitsi Dangarembga, NoViolet Bulawayo Jennifer Makumbi, Khadija Abdalla Bajaber.

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Introduction

The danger of the single story about Africa that Chimamanda Adichie highlighted in her 2009 TED Talk is arguably most persistent in representations of childhood. Adichie's own example rests on a distinction between her own middle-class childhood and that of the houseboy, Fide; 'All my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor.' This links Fide with the African child of Band Aid and Hollywood humanitarianism, demonstrating that the 'absence of sustained and well-informed reporting about Africa in the mainstream [western] media' (Franks 2010: 71) has implications both within Africa and globally.

Conforming to Binyavanga Wainaina's (2005: 92) wry assertion that Africa is 'to be pitied, worshipped or dominated', this humanitarian depiction of the African child also impacts how African women are seen, and see themselves. As Everjoice J. Winn (2007: 79) points out, in the context of humanitarianism 'the bare-foot African woman *sells*' while the gaze of 'the emaciated black child' rewards the viewer with imagined gratitude before the gift of aid is even given. Such images of both child and mother treat Africa 'diagnostically' (Harrison 2013: 528), meaning that the arresting eyes of the child in aid campaigns have become so familiar as to obscure the 'I' of personhood—the agency and creativity that Adichie is surprised by when she visits Fide's village and discovers the rich community life there.

Postcolonial and decolonial counternarratives about Africa are becoming more prominent across disciplines (Thondhlana & Garwe 2021) and the cultural resources of the continent are being showcased globally, not least via the appearance of two African writers (Damon Galgut and Nadifa Mohamed) on the 2021 Booker Prize shortlist. However, despite this enriched visibility of African stories, the same neocolonial images of African childhoods remain in circulation. In the 'global imaginary', to use Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire and Madhu Krishnan's (2021: 97) preferred term, African childhoods easily get caught in the binary of the victim in need of rescue or escape, on the one hand, and the prematurely 'grown-up' child—worker/ soldier/ wife/ parent/ carer—on the other. There tends to be 'a preoccupation with children's social problems' (Wells 2015: 30) while the actualities and variety of day-to-day childhoods—even if they do come with some problems—are often absent.

This tunnel vision that frustrates Adichie and her contemporaries has repeatedly been diagnosed by scholars of childhood who argue, in sympathy with this supplementary issue, that the universalised Northern ideal of the child produces Southern childhoods characterised by 'lacks' (Twum-Danso Imoh 2016). As Olga Nieuwenhuys (2013: 4) declares, postcolonial perspectives are crucial in Childhood Studies because 'the dominance of the North over the South is inextricably linked to Northern childhood(s) representations against which Southern childhood(s) are measured and found wanting.' Referring to the US context, Julie C. Garlen (2019: 54) argues that

the modern obsession with childhood innocence is a foil for white supremacy; black children cannot qualify as 'innocent', 'pure' and in need of protection in the way that white children do. Instead they are judged as 'ignorant' while white children are only 'ignorant' in the context of childhood as an immature phase, which is deliberately prolonged because adults wish to protect children from what they perceive as the harmful knowledge of adulthood.

Garlen's argument has relevance for thinking about African fiction, particularly diasporic writing which, as Christopher Ouma (2020: 2) argues with reference to writers including Adichie and Wainaina, seeks to represent 'a life elsewhere' beyond 'the crisis of nationhood'. Despite the success of Adichie and others in challenging worn-out and damaging tropes about Africa, the global publishing and study of African texts often ensures palatable (and portable) alternatives to the Northern scripting of African childhoods, rather than supporting radical reassessments of the very concept of childhood. This is something an increasing number of African writers are taking issue with. For instance, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi (2020), whose novel *The First Woman* I discuss below, left her American Editor in favour of a Shona one who 'understood the text better' (Obi-Young 2019). This suggests that confronting the 'lacking' African child via the global marketing and scholarly discussion of African literature is not enough—the specificity and diversity of childhoods in African writing may still be ignored. To return to Adichie's single story, there is a risk that the transnational (mobile and global) African child that Ouma (2020) brings into focus succeeds not only in resisting the story of deprivation but in overlaying it with one of predominantly middle-class escape and self-betterment that still does not account for the majority of African childhoods.

This is not to discount innovative transnational narratives of childhood by diasporic writers, but to recognise that they are not the only stories being told about childhood in Africa. As I will discuss with reference to recent novels and short fiction, an ongoing reappraisal of African childhoods is required 'for thinking the social in all of its fullness' (Mwesigire & Krishnan 2021: 98) and to engage with the concerns that animate a new generation of African writers, some of whom are returning to Africa from the diaspora as Adichie's protagonist, Ifemelu, does in her novel of transnational migration, *Americanah* (2013). Mwesigire & Krishnan's (2021: 98) suggestion that the emergence of new African voices can happen 'outside of the dynamics of (post)coloniality and topographies of world literary space which so often dominate discussion on African literary production' can apply to fresh readings of childhood in African texts.

The African bildungsroman

The necessity of this reappraisal is particularly noticeable if we look at the trajectory of Tambu, the headstrong heroine of Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous*

Conditions, which is a staple of African literature in the global classroom. At the end of this ground-breaking bildungsroman of gendered struggle (see Slaughter 2007: 230–231), Tambu's future seems at least well-lit if not bright as she arrives at the Sacred Heart convent to continue her hard-won education. However, when we meet her in the final part of Dangarembga's trilogy, *This Mournable Body* (2018), Tambu is a broken woman, unemployed and suffering mental distress. The later novel's second person address has an accusatory edge to it; 'when you were young and in fighting spirit, growing mealie cobs in the family field and selling them to raise money for your school fees, you were not this person that you have become. When and how did that happen?' (Dangarembga 2020a: 103). The narrator, focalising Tambu's fractured self, concludes that her metamorphosis took place (Dangarembga 2020a: 103) not at her uncle's mission, where 'you remained focused on a better life', but at the convent school where she experienced racism despite a veneer of equality. The horrible irony of Tambu becoming 'substitutable' (Coetzee 2020: 443)—going from being one of the brightest and one of the few black girls to be educated in her region to being cast adrift as not good enough—turns away from the re-creation of the self so prominent in post-colonial fiction towards the collective destruction brought on by Zimbabwe's political and economic collapse. Tambu struggles to confront her situation; 'how awful it is to admit that closeness to white people at the convent had ruined your heart, had caused your womb, from which you reproduced yourself before you gave birth to anything else, to shrink between your hip bones' (Dangarembga 2020a: 104). Having tried and failed to set up a white-led tourism enterprise in her home village, Tambu reluctantly leaves home again—'Your umbilical cord is buried on the homestead; in the empty space that widens at every step, you feel it tugging' (Dangarembga 2020a: 361)—but this time in order to reconcile with herself. Ultimately, she moves from defeat to fragile empowerment working alongside ex-freedom fighters, Lucia and Christine.

Tambu's determination to engage the strength she has as a Zimbabwean woman has its roots in her childhood optimism before her convent education and treads a careful line between her family's rural poverty and her cousin Nyasha's ill-fitting cosmopolitanism; 'there is no affluence even for the anglicised like Nyasha' (Chikafa-Chipiro 2020: 447). This clash of worlds that Tambu is caught in has childhood (past and present) at its centre.[1] When Nyasha's young son is beaten at school her German husband asks 'What kind of country do you build when children are raised in fear?' and Tambu retorts 'What we are is disciplined' (Dangarembga 2020a: 216). She views

[1] In *Nervous Conditions* Nyasha struggles to combine the education she received in Britain with her commitment to the Chimurenga (war of independence) and suffers a mental and physical breakdown. Rosemary Chikafa-Chipiro speaks for many readers invested in Dangarembga's trilogy when she says 'I felt very apprehensive about reading the sequel' (Chikafa-Chipiro 2020: 446) and spells out her own visceral response to Tambu's negative trajectory as a Zimbabwean woman; 'I am Tambu. I walk the streets of Harare and meet many other Tambus' (2020: 447).

Nyasha's position as 'too emotional about everything, [she] takes Western values about many matters too seriously, and this is—well, somewhat primitive' (Dangarembga 2020a: 217). Tambu turns the tables, suggesting that what Nyasha calls 'that damn English upbringing' (Dangarembga 2020a: 175) has not only made her forget how to read Shona but also given her an affinity for Western feminism that she fails to instil in her Zimbabwean students, for whom the lexicon of gender-mainstreaming has little relevance as they wrestle with 'the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations, of futures derailed and lives caught in downward personal trajectories' (Chikafa-Chipiro 2020: 1).

Dangarembga herself writes that she tried to satisfy her readers' wishes for Tambu and her peers to succeed by 'depicting small victories' rather than big ideals (2020b: 468). Her re-examination of what Carli Coetzee (2020: 444) calls 'the hidden curriculum of Black girlhood' chimes with a renewed critical and political focus on African feminisms and makes now a good time to reconsider how contemporary African writing might be freeing childhood (and particularly girlhood) from the humanitarian imaginary in which it is often referred to as having been 'cut short' or saved by migration to the global North. The transnational ideal of a childhood geared towards escape that defines Tambu's early life certainly feels less plausible as writers like Dangarembga reflect on postcolonial 'regression' (Dangarembga 2020b: 467) while others tell stories of migrants returning to African locations full of promise.[2] Tsitsi Jaji (2021: 293) emphasises that, contrary to the Afropolitan desire for global presence, much current African fiction is driven by a fascination with the local, the everyday, as 'the center of the world.' The single story—like all stories with staying power—has not disappeared but its counterweights have become more varied and more challenging for global readers who are better prepared to encounter African complexities and local ones who demand that their realities be represented. As Jaji (2021: 293) argues, whether or not writers have a global readership, 'reading parochially can recover the horizons of liberation in the wake of the disappointments of politics committed to freedom for oppressed people.'

Childhood and the Caine Prize

Testament to this variegated terrain of African writing is the Caine Prize, which has been awarded annually to an African short story since the year 2000.[3] Though increasingly joined by new competitions and publishing opportunities, the prize remains one of the foremost avenues for African writers to enter the global fiction scene

[2] For instance, Adichie's *Americanah* and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013).

[3] www.caineprize.com

(*Wasafiri* 2010: 4).[4] Looking at the shortlist provides a good indication of the priorities and values of writers and readers, most of which are relevant to thinking about childhood. The 2021 shortlist of five contained two stories directly about childhood, one in which recollections of childhood are central ('A Separation' by Iryn Tushabe), and another focused on an 18-year-old protagonist (the winner, 'The Street Sweep' by Meron Hadero). Of course, assumptions about Africa as a whole cannot be made from such small samples. Indeed, this year's selection stands out partly because it includes writers from countries that have been underrepresented (Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Namibia) and sometimes suffer from 'a reductive portrait in the global imaginary' (Mwesigire & Krishnan 2021: 97) and not from those that tend to appear more frequently (Nigeria and South Africa, for instance). However, it's also notable that while three of the five stories feature child or young adult characters whose situation is poor or in some way precarious, in two of those three children do attend school and perceive themselves as relatively privileged; in only one ('The Street Sweep') does the teenage protagonist view himself as living in poverty.

'A Separation' by Iryn Tushabe features recollections of a middle-class childhood: the protagonist is a primatologist whose family does well from eco-tourism and who goes to university in Canada. The story's recollection of childhood is feminist in outlook as the 90-year-old Kaaka gifts her granddaughter the cowrie shells meant for her wedding night even though at thirty and she 'hasn't brought a suitor home' (Tushabe 2021: 5). For the grandmother 'this is just my way of telling you that your worth isn't tied to marriage and procreation' (Tushabe 2021: 5). By amalgamating Ugandan traditional practices with the granddaughter's scientific perspective, Tushabe finds a way, as she puts it in an interview, 'to 'allow the unknowable to seep through, creating room for the unexplainable' (2021: n.p.). Reframing both childhood and old age through dialogue, the story moves beyond what Grace Musila calls 'the family-nation metaphor' (2013: 350), which often traps African child characters in a gendered straightjacket in which home and family operate *as* nation in 'the allegorical mode' (2013: 349). Musila contends that East African short fiction has shifted towards 'possible counter-narratives that propose alternative scriptings of ... familial spaces' (2013: 351). Certainly, 'A Separation' proposes new forms of intergenerational solidarity and cross-cultural conversations that stretch—even if they don't break—the association of women with mothering and the assumption that children will carry the weight of fraught national aspirations (Ouma 2020).

The driving concerns of the Caine prize stories stray far from the tropes of African childhood as defined either by lack or transnational escape; they include education (which has always been a focus of Anglophone African writing, as it is in *Nervous*

[4] Other examples of literary activism that constitute 'creative pipelines' (Mwesigire & Krishnan 2021: 101) include Writivism, Kwani Trust, Brittle Paper and Ibua.

Conditions), racism and colourism, neocolonialism, capitalism, feminism, sexual violence, and disability. There are sharp and often satirical views on white privilege, but this is not the main take-away of these stories; rather it is African-driven social justice. In Rémy Ngamije's 'The Giver of Nicknames,' a 16-year-old black boy reports a white boy for raping a black girl in school. As the accused's parents are rich patrons of the school who employ most of the other students' parents, they buy him out of trouble. However, at the heart of the story is the whistle-blower's ability to empathise both with the rape-victim—he repeatedly asserts that '*she said no*' (Ngamije 2021: 11)—and with his own mother who, he subsequently realises, was raped by his father. He presents himself as an enterprising advocate who challenges both the passive and silent acceptance that his mother expects of children and the culture of cover-up that the school promotes.

Many of the situations in these stories are uncomfortable, but they are also instrumental in constructing child characters that turn adult expectations—familial, communal, national, or global—upside down. Doreen Baingana 'Lucky,' set in a school in Northern Uganda during civil unrest, is a prime example of a child's perspective that invites complexity and ambiguity. As Karen Lauterbach (2021) puts it, 'this is a story about the cruelty of civil war but we are not left crying or sentimentalised.' Instead, the bored and hungry narrator, trapped with a group of peers and their eccentric Maths teacher, is forced to focus on the tedious limbo of the everyday in which 'neither the carefree past or a fantastic future' is available, prompting the children search for what is diverting or unusual in their new normal.[5]

Politics through child's play

Many of the arresting literary moments when the everyday is reimagined occur through children's play or within the playful modes of childhood that defy immiseration. The notion that play can in itself be redemptive comes dangerously close to the humanitarian image-management of African childhoods. However, in the most subtle writing at least, play offers something more substantial in its place. In Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* play and playfulness bring relief from familial and social tensions within Nyasha's household (and shield the children from the actual violence that skirts their lives as the housekeeper Mai Taka is beaten by her husband and political unrest simmers). A trip to the cinema offers fleeting enjoyment while also

[5] This diversity of African stories and emphasis on empowerment and social justice is also present in children's literature. There isn't space in this article to explore this, but a recent showcase in *Brittle Paper* includes works by well-known speculative fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor, Booker Prize winner Ben Okri and actress Lupita Ny'ongo and attests to the 'imaginative nourishment' provided by African writing for children. https://brittlepaper.com/2021/11/insert-final-number-childrens-books-by-african-writers/

foreshadowing the later debates on corporal punishment and the role of fear in controlling children mentioned above. Panashe, the youngest child, doesn't want to see a film featuring Ananse the spider; '"I don't like spiders," quivers your nephew "I don't want to see the spider!"' (Dangarembga 2020a: 205). Panashe is persuaded not by his mother's promises of popcorn and chocolate, made 'as though her son were a little experiment' (2020a: 205) but by the housekeeper's rendition of Incy Wincy Spider. It is Mai Taka, the working-class servant, who reassures the child through cross-cultural nursery talk. By the end of the film, she 'bubbles with enjoyment' (Panashe's and her own), exclaiming 'Oh, those Ghanaians ... when will we be able to do things like that? Like those from West Africa?' , at which 'Nyasha winces and Leon changes the conversation' (2020a: 206). Decoding their response, both Tambu and the reader can see that the consummate storytelling of the Anansi film has thrown into bleak relief the dire situation of Zimbabwe that is eating away at the couple's marriage. In this sense, Panashe can indeed be understood as a next-generation 'experiment' into the sustainability of the transnational opportunities that Tambu once sought. Both his parents are educated and want the same for their offspring. However, Panashe and his sister Anesu's futures are bound up with their country of birth in ambivalent ways. Nyasha describes Zimbabwe as 'peace-loving' while Leon warns about state violence and Tambu functions as their witness and go-between. As Panashe bawls in the cinema 'people turn to see what the tall white man is doing to the little brown person' (Dangarembga 2020a: 206), prompting the question of whether Leon's uncompromising attitude and inadvertent wish to rescue Panashe from his mother's people means that returning to Germany might not be a risk-free alternative to remaining in Zimbabwe. The cinema scene is a pivotal moment in the novel in which play and storytelling link everyday childhood to a larger canvas of social practices, making clear that the doctrine of protecting childhood innocence can be 'a potentially exclusionary form of social practice' (Garlen 2019: 56), operating at the expense of a nuanced understanding of African childhoods as racialised, gendered and impacted by global power dynamics.

Another Zimbabwean novel that has prompted lively and polarised critical debate is NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), which began as the short story 'Hitting Budapest' that won the Caine Prize in 2011. This bildungsroman follows ten-year-old Darling from her home in Paradise, a squatters' settlement in Bulawayo, to a new life as an illegal migrant in the US. The narrative mode is mischievous and picaresque as the children cross borders and 'invade' other neighbourhoods:

> We are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me. We are going even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road ... even though mother would kill me dead if she found out; we are just going ... There are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I'd rather die for guavas. We didn't eat this morning and my stomach feels as though someone took a shovel and dug everything out.' (Bulawayo 2013: 8)

Focalised through Darling, the text traces meaning making processes through which the children combine their immediate needs and wants with an awareness of global history and geography. Chanting '*Who Discovered India? Vasco da Gama Vasco Da Gama*' (Bulawayo 2013: 8), they reverse colonial histories of invasion and pillage by entering Budapest, an area of 'big big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs and neat graveled yards or trimmed lawns' and taking fruit that 'nobody here seems to know what to do with' even though they imagine the streets spitting at them 'to go back where we came from' (Bulawayo 2013: 10). As Felix Ndaka (2021: 79) explores, 'this playful "invasion"' both confirms their marginality in having to steal to eat and 'provides them with imaginative resources that transcend their everyday.' Budapest becomes 'a space where they act out agential versions of themselves—albeit limited and precarious' (Ndaka 2021: 79). For these children who ignore parental rules and the class-based divisions of the city, 'play becomes an avenue of hope, opening up horizons of possibility and being' (Ndaka 2021: 79).

Viewed from another perspective, however, the novel also reveals play to have a darker side: while it can enable agency for child characters, it can also involve children replaying world events for the consumption of adults in a macabre fashion. In the 'country game' that the children favour there's a hierarchy from 'the country-countries' (including USA, Britain, Canada, Australia, Switzerland and France) to second-rate options (including Dubai, South Africa, Botswana and Tanzania) and, finally, 'rags of countries' (including Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Haiti, Sri Lanka) (Bulawayo 2013: 38). The children designate 'this one we live in' as a 'kaka country' (Bulawayo 2013: 14), a 'terrible place of hunger and things falling apart' (Bulawayo 2013: 49). While Ndaka proposes that these games—which also include World Cup and Find Bin Laden—are part of a 'complex negotiation of [the children's] vulnerability, powerlessness, ennui, and agency' within the context of geopolitics, the question of who play is really *for* in the novel provokes critical disagreement. Isaac Ndlovu (2016: 133) argues that Bulawayo's 'stark depictions of squalor and suffering' come close to 'poverty porn' and that she 'gains capital' in a competitive global literary market by 'unrelentingly focusing on the violated rights of the underprivileged, especially children' (Ndlovu 2016: 133) who entertain even as they evoke pity.

The self-actualisation gained through play is only successful—and indeed is only possible—in *We Need New Names* because the children have their own codes and operate in familiar terrain. They are, in fact, 'parochial' as Jaji (2021) defines it; although they filter world events into their games and mix African and American versions of reality, their neighbourhood remains 'the center of the world' (Jaji 2021: 235). Play means they can process the world as it comes to them. In contrast, when Darling migrates to the US and experiences 'ruptured kinships' (Moji 2015: 182) and alienation play takes on the dangerous limit-pushing of adolescence and she no longer recognises it as pleasurable. Though Bulawayo's reader may place faith in 'innocence,

naivety' and 'a childlike curiosity and vulnerability' as rescripting the 'global dynamics of power' (Ndaka 2021: 76) in the first part of the narrative, Darling's trajectory indicates that it is not the innocent/ignorant perspective of the child that is valuable in itself but the capacity of childhood (as a set of social practices) to map a situation, to highlight the parameters of community and the overlapping forms of social life.

In this sense, childhood overlaps with the importance of the everyday, the 'clandestine forms' which Michel de Certeau famously suggested could creatively disturb centralised systems of 'discipline' (Certeau 1984: xiv). Joe Moran argues that the influential French theoretical framing of the everyday in the late twentieth century needs to be repurposed because it 'values the creative and recreational over the banal and boring' (Moran 2005: 10). Moran investigates 'those forms of lay knowledge that, by virtue of being so firmly embedded in specific social contexts, conceal resilient power relationships' (Moran 2005: 13). He doesn't discuss childhood but his insights are consonant with Ouma's observation (2020: 43) that contemporary African writers explore childhood through 'micro-worlds' that counteract 'adult regimes of authority.' Childhood is one of the aspects of the everyday most obviously characterised by the 'cliches, mythologies, stereotypes and unsourced quotations' (Moran 2005: 14) that pepper lived reality and children must therefore provide new scripts for themselves. Because adults take for granted but are also heavily invested in the roles that children ought to play (whether relating to education, morality or social idealism) childhood constitutes an important form of social organisation and one that needs to be deliberately examined, and sometimes resisted.

Returning to *We Need New Names*, while it is tempting to agree with Ndaka that play provides 'a curative intervention' (Ndaka 2021: 83) for the children, the novel's own plot undercuts such a reading, conforming to Moran's suggestion that the everyday 'makes sense of, but also obscures, the reality of cultural change and social difference' (Moran 2005: 14). Darling reports that in Paradise the children have playful encounters with NGO workers that mock the humanitarian recycling of stories about Africa: they dance and sing and pose for pictures in the torn dirty clothing that they are ashamed of because 'After the pictures; the gifts' (Bulawayo 2013: 41). The assumed 'everyday' innocence of childhood is undercut by the children's hidden knowledge of how it is routinely consumed, revealing that evaluations of childhood continue to 'produce and reinforce asymmetrical power relations in new and complex ways' (Rivas 2018: 166).

Later, in the US, Darling experiences an episode in which the discomfort of being labelled a victim returns with a vengeance and, isolated from her childhood friends, she's unable to ameliorate it with humour. In the bathroom at a wedding Darling is approached by a smiling woman who asks 'Can you just say something in your language?,' pronounces it 'beautiful' then expands abruptly into 'Africa is beautiful ... But isn't it terrible what's happening in the Congo? Just awful' (Bulawayo 2013: 118). Darling struggles to respond;

> My brain is scattering and jumping fences now, trying to remember what exactly is happening in the Congo because I think I am confusing it with some other place, but what I can see in the woman's eyes is that it's serious and important and I'm supposed to know it, so in the end I say, Yes, it is terrible, what is happening in the Congo (Bulawayo 2013: 118).

The elliptical organization of this passage mimics the circular reasoning on Africa that the woman is engaged in—as she moves on to discuss 'poor African children' in general Darling tells us 'I'm seeing myself in the woman's face back there ... when the NGO people were taking our pictures' (Bulawayo 2013: 118). The woman is the audience for the photos that Darling wondered about when they were taken. Rather like Tambu, who is addressed as 'you' in *This Mournable Body* because of her dislocation from herself, Darling is made vulnerable by an interlocutor who believes herself to be empowering Africans. Darling has proven herself to be an active interpreter of global politics yet here she confronts herself as a passive victim through a forced show of sympathy for African children whose experience is not hers.

The scene encapsulates the dangers of persistently associating African childhoods with lack as well as the failure of the ideal of a universalised transnational childhood that Darling chases but cannot possess. Darling has lost the idiosyncratic, 'parochial' solidarity through play that allowed her to subvert adult realities and is trapped between the ideal (white/innocent) child that is an object of desire and the African child in need whose image is used to prove the worth of what they themselves can never possess. In this sense, Ndlovu is right that the novel's attempt to 'rescue' Africa entrenches the negative stereotypes it tries to resist, forcing the African child away from everyday, mundane concerns towards weighty situations that 'illuminate something about Europe or America in Africa' (Wainaina's 2005: 94, also cited in Ndlovu (2016: 134).

Conclusion: new adventures in childhood

I'll finish this brief review with reference to two novels that resolutely and positively frame the African child not as 'elsewhere' but as 'right there'. Ugandan writer Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *The First Woman* (2020) is a bildungsroman featuring Kirabo, an inquisitive 12-year old on a determined quest to find out about her mother. Khadija Abdalla Bajaber's *The House of Rust* (2021) is a fantastical feminist anti-quest in which the heroine, Aisha, takes to the sea to save her father and pursues the secret power-hungry monsters of Mombasa rather than marriage and domesticity.

Like Dangarembga's Tambu, Makumbi's Kirabo and Bajaber's Aisha are exceptional—indeed they are magical—and these writers combine African feminism and East African folklore into a mixture that Irenosen Okojie describes as 'the headiest of feminist brews' (Makumbi 2020: n.p.). While Tambu centred her own story in *Nervous Conditions*

with the famous opening line 'I was not sorry when my brother died' (Dangarembga 2004 [1988]: 1), Kirabo is a teller of others' stories, always awaiting the chance 'to wedge in her call to storytelling' (Makumbi 2020: 4) and Aisha uses 'storycraft' to her advantage in defeating monstrous creatures (Bajaber 2021). Kirabo's quest begins with a visit to the local witch (and enemy of the family) and is punctuated by the political tension of Idi Amin's rule and a more open-ended historical everyday consciousness on the other. In 1970s Uganda, families still display out-of-date calendars on their walls, 'attempting to wish Amin away' (Makumbi 2020: 19) and 'newly hatched ghosts' (Makumbi 2020: 20) carry out chores on their way to join the ancestors. As Alex Clark (2020: n.p.) puts it, 'the story captures the surrealism of living in unpredictable and violent times, folding awareness of vast events into the minutiae of daily life.' Similarly, the Mombasa that Aisha inhabits in *The House of Rust* is strewn with decaying colonial relics that are nevertheless marginalised by the focus on the daily practices of the Hadrami community and the promise of the life at sea that Aisha craves. The postcolonial city in *House of Rust* is the scene of 'an old game' (Bajaber 2021: 229) that the heroine must play, 'galvanizing' her to adventure (Bajaber 2021: 4; see also Barnsley 2021).

These are not 'parochial' narratives in Jaji's terms. Indeed, *The First Woman* shares much in common with the cosmopolitan dreams of *Nervous Conditions* as Kirabo seeks a Christian/Western education, securing a place at a girls' Catholic school that she views as 'a ticket to success' (Makumbi 2020: 165). However, unlike Tambu, who tries to stay strong in the face of racial discrimination that destroys her ambition and her pride in her heritage, or Nyasha whose anticolonial rage drives her to collapse, Makumbi and Bajaber's protagonists navigate towards revitalised versions of female identity. In *The First Woman* Kirabo practises 'mwenkanonkano' (the Luganda word for feminism) and freely explores her beliefs and her sexuality with her partner: 'The first time Sio said he believed in mwenkanonkano, he had used the English word feminist. Kirabo ignored it because as far as she knew, feminism was for women in developed countries with first-world problems. But this time he had used the Luganda word.' (Makumbi 2020: 219). *House of Rust*'s Aisha insists to her grandmother that she be freed from the demand to marry, stating 'I don't need you to believe in the story ... I just need you to believe in *me*' (Bajaber 2021: 255).

These novels' explosion of the 'myths' that control women—that 'take the sting out of you' (Makumbi 2020: 430)—also collapse the edifice of the child as either innocent or ignorant. Kirabo and Aisha are too enterprising to be innocent and too perceptive to be ignorant. Despite repeating 'I don't understand' Aisha believes in attaining knowledge that is meant to be shared and will risk her life to access it. This capacity to articulate truths that partially silence Tambu (and Darling) through a combination of everyday experiences and epic-style quests suggests that new ground is being cleared for representing African childhoods. I don't mean to suggest that Makumbi and Bajaber are outliers in this regard—many writers

including Abi Dare, Chigozie Obioma and Lesley Nneka Arimah are undertaking adventures in writing childhood. Dangarembga's recognition of 'the paucity of happy endings in African literature' (2020b: 468) is being balanced by a plenitude of new beginnings.

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