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Uncommonly Other in Belfast, London and Harare: Alienation in Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* and Brian Chikwava's *Harare North*

This paper will investigate the means by which these authors probe, notably through generic instability, the construction, internalisation and rejection of the nation (both that from which they have fled and that in which they seek solace) and its accompanying ideologies, along with the politics of truth-telling, on a personal and a public level. Relying on Jacques Rancière's work on dissensus, I would like to show how both McLiam Wilson and Chikwava expose the interaction of politics, economics and otherness at both the centre of the Commonwealth (London) and its margins (Belfast and Harare).

Due to its position at the centre of an empire which, at its height, sprawled across and incorporated huge swathes of land in all continents, London has unsurprisingly been a popular destination for migrants from various parts of the Commonwealth and beyond. Exactly twenty years separate the publication of the two novels which will be the focus of this article and yet both, despite the temporal and geographical disjuncture, proffer interesting explorations of what it means to be a Commonwealth migrant other in contemporary London.

Set in the late 1980s, McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* (1989) is the story of an Irish tramp who, having experienced the Troubles at first hand, now lives in London, while Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009) recounts the experience of an unnamed young Zimbabwean (and former "Green Bomber") who has just arrived in the British capital spuriously claiming asylum, having fled his troubled native country. Ripley walks the streets of London, commenting on his present life as a homeless person and reminiscing about his past life, while the unnamed narrator of *Harare North* moves into a squat from which he gradually evinces all other squatters and strives to make enough money to go back to Zimbabwe, bury his mother and pay off his debts.

I am deliberately using the term Commonwealth¹ (as opposed to postcolonial) here so as to draw attention to one of the harsh ironies of the migrant experience evoked in both novels, which is that of an abject poverty in which the very notion of "commonwealth" is exposed as a fiction when considered from a grassroots perspective. The crossings from Belfast and Harare to London, which confer the status of outsider onto both protagonist-narrators, are compounded by further to-ing and fro-ing between past and present, as each highly unreliable narrator struggles to make sense of, or come

1. The Republic of Ireland is not, of course, a member of the Commonwealth, but the six counties of Northern Ireland are part of the UK. The protagonist of this novel is a young Catholic man from nationalist West Belfast, but McLiam Wilson, not unproblematically as we shall see, works hard to ensure that the character-narrator establishes a significant disdain for republican activism, dismissing it as a form of atavistic violence. Zimbabwe's relationship with the Commonwealth is no less complex, although for different reasons. The Commonwealth refused to acknowledge Ian Smith's UDI in 1965 and then, when Independence was obtained in 1980, Zimbabwe returned to the Commonwealth. The situation evolved again at the beginning of the 20th Century when Zimbabwe was once again excluded (and then withdrew) from the Commonwealth, following a breach of the Harare Declaration by President Robert Mugabe. It is important to stress that I am not arguing in favour of replacing the term "postcolonial" by "Commonwealth"; my aim is simply to underscore that both McLiam Wilson and Chikwava, far from highlighting successful immigration and integration, focus on the double standards embodied in the term "Commonwealth," since, as they show, the "wealth" flows centripetally to London.

to terms with, his previous experiences as both victim and perpetrator of violence in his native country and in London through a series of analepses which punctuate the narrative. Moreover, the deliberate usurpation of both narratives by other genres or discourses, whether literary or ideological, which threaten to destabilise the main narrative, provide even more evidence of cultural and political criss-crossing and suggest that both McLiam Wilson and Chikwava are interested in undermining totalising truth-claims. Relying on Jacques Rancière's elaboration of what constitutes "dissensus," I would like to go beyond a mere analysis of the text book postmodern characteristics of both these novels² and their evident attempt to give voice to a particular kind of migrant experience, to proffer a discussion of just how dissensual, in the Rancierian sense, these narratives are.

Jacques Rancière identifies consensus as "a catchword for our time" yet reveals the dangers of what he sees as a "tendency to minimize its meaning" to something corresponding to "a mode of symbolic structuration of the community that evacuates the political core constituting it, namely dissensus" (*Aesthetics* 115).³ Consensus reduces the various peoples that make up a given political community to "a single people identical with the count of a population and its parts, of the interests of a global community and its parts" (*Aesthetics* 115). This means that "those who have no part" (Rancière, *Dis-agreement* 14), or s/he who is excluded from the political community, the "conflictual actor, an actor who includes himself as a supplementary political subject, carrying a right not yet recognized or witnessing an injustice in the existing state of right" (*Aesthetics* 116) embodies dissensus by disturbing the "distribution of the sensible," that is to say, the "distribution and this redistribution of space and time, place and identity, speech and noise, the visible and the invisible" (Rancière, *Literature* 4). The "precarious lives" (to borrow Judith Butler's term) of the two protagonists of these novels, recounted in first person narratives, are dissensual in so far as they make "visible what was invisible" and make "audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals" (Rancière, *Literature* 4). This resonates with a point McLiam Wilson has made in another context; in his non-fictional photo-chronicles of "the dispossessed" of London, Glasgow and Belfast, he has this to say: "the poor are largely ignored or patronized. They are seldom treated as people with their own particularity and their own dignity. *Unheard or voiced-over*, it is they who have to endure deprivation and its multiple opprobrium" (McLiam Wilson & Wylie 7, my emphasis). Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou in their recently published dialogue also stress the relationship between dispossession and belonging, suggesting that "belonging is not just about being and having but also about longing: perhaps longing for a different way to cohabit the political" (Butler and Athanasiou 159). This is precisely what McLiam Wilson and Chikwava

2. *Ripley Bogle* in particular ticks all the boxes of contemporary postmodern fiction: an unreliable narrator constructs his own contrived narrative in a sort of fictional autobiography which takes place over three days. In the course of the narrative, which shifts back and forth between the two diegetic strands of his childhood and youth in Belfast and his present existence in London, he borrows from Joyce, Beckett, Shakespeare, Dickens and Orwell and pushes generic boundaries to the limit, incorporating both poems and theatrical conventions into his story, thereby inscribing on a formal level his own bastardy and that of the six countries of the North of Ireland. *Harare North* also boasts an unreliable narrator and underscores the malleability and potential inadequacy of language through the contrast between the choice of Pidgin English for the narrator and the fine line between his political indoctrination and his own spurious use of English.

3. Hereafter, all references to Rancière's works will be abbreviated as follows: *Aesthetics* for *Aesthetics and its Discontents*; *Dis-agreement* for *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*; *Politics* for *The Politics of Aesthetics* and *Literature* for *The Politics of Literature*.

attempt to do in these novels: offer “a different way to cohabit the political,” and this also extends into their representations of the nation (Ireland, Zimbabwe or England) as a space of alienation which constantly strives to silence a dissensus which these narratives work hard to nevertheless voice.⁴

Both McLiam Wilson and Brian Chikwava contribute to developing the “alternative and revisionary narratives of subaltern city spaces which do not easily succumb to the demands of authority” identified by John McLeod (4), a point which resonates with Rancière’s understanding of what dissensus entails. They express, like other Asian and African writers “a keen interest in labour (both its dignity and indignities); an uneasy relationship with what is ‘perceived’ as mainstream culture – and an attendant refusal to neglect the marginal sectors of society; and, most of all, a hunger to find a literary voice capable of evoking the hopes and fears, the din and chatter, of people who speak in tongues dissonant to the ears of longer-resident Londoners” (Sandhu xxv).

Hilarious Squalor

Perhaps the most striking aspect of both novels is the recourse to humour even in the face of graphic descriptions of extreme hunger and deprivation, what Ripley Bogle refers to oxymoronically as “hilarious squalor” (193). Early in both novels, the narrators evoke the discrepancies between a London full of wealthy Londoners and their own experience of alienation and rejection. Yet both are also intensely aware of London as a space in which many different nationalities collide. As Ripley puts it: “Though Mick as Mick can be, I don’t feel at all foreign in traipsing these streets. It’s a city of foreigners anyway. Hardly an Anglo-Saxon face to be seen. Good old egalitarian England! Arabs, Africans, Americans, West Indians, East Indians, Germans, Pakistanis, Jews, Chinese, Japanese, French, Scottish, Irish and, doubtless, a liberal deposit of the fucking Welsh” (18). The list of nationalities not only disturbs stereotypical notions of otherness by culminating in a vulgar rejection of those who are closest to and least distinguished from the English, but also reinforces foreignness as part and parcel of Englishness, although the exclamative declaration of England’s egalitarianism can only be sarcastic given the racism to which Ripley is subjected. Even the very notion of Englishness is pared back down to the largely defunct hyphenated term “Anglo-Saxon” so as to undermine any claims to racial or cultural purity.

Ripley in fact expresses himself in a biting satirical mode for most of the novel and in so doing highlights the discrepancy between the idea of Englishness associated with wealth and pleasure and a much more down-to-earth description of the ugly underbelly which is the other side of the coin. In one bathetic moment, he considers how the Queen’s corgis have a better life than he does (6). Conscious of his “part in this opera of wealth and opulence,” the role of poverty “integral to the success of the greater piece” (18), he mocks “the pleasure-seekers” who “spend their large and little piles of cash and plastic on booze; meagre restaurant meals gobbled in by waiters; two hours’ brainless diversion with the banal herdhappy coloured lights of a cinema; or

4. As I have argued in my discussion of work by another Irish writer, Patrick McCabe, the Rancierian perspective is not incompatible with a postcolonial one. Rancière’s thinking on the distribution of the sensible, dissensus, politics and aesthetics resonates strongly with postcolonial endeavours to lay out a different set of coordinates in the distribution of the sensible, bringing to the fore those voices and stories literally wiped out of existence in colonial History. See McCann 67.

the wheedling, egocentric rantings of some bunch of half-arsed thespian mediocrities” (59). Here, Ripley’s dumbing down of cultural outings to so many mind-numbing or self-indulgent activities is intensified through slippage between his sophisticated use of language and a vulgar vernacular. The lexical field of theatre here and throughout the novel calls attention to “the politics of performativity: norms, names, signs, practices, and regulatory fictions” (Butler and Athanasiou) which uphold societal divisions and which Ripley constantly exploits in order to expose his own existence as that of one actor in an overall performance. The vacuity of the lifestyle of the wealthy is placed in sharp contrast with the raw material conditions in which Ripley must bed down for the night:

(Our scene suddenly staggers under a weight of filth and rubbish; half-eaten hamburgers, sodden newspapers, decrepit syringes, used condoms, floating turds, discarded people, tramps, thieves, harlots, runaways, rapists and lunatics. Men slump in seamy corners, slobbering, bawling and pissing themselves. Basically, your average British train station.) (56)

The reference to “our scene” creates a cinematographic effect which is reinforced by the stage direction style parenthesis and which amplifies the effect of juxtaposing two parallel worlds. The list-like association of scatological detritus and various groups of outcasts suggests that the two are perceived as being linked, particularly since the station population is introduced by the term “discarded people” and follows “floating turds,” yet the final sentence devastatingly attributes the waste to the whole of the British population and suggests that the homeless are part of what has been cast away by those who have.

It is perhaps in the descriptions of extreme hunger that Ripley’s black humour is so disconcerting. Describing in intricate detail the various stages of hunger, he punctuates his depiction with throwaway remarks which both diminish and embellish his condition: the first stage is “a doddle,” “easypeasy” and allows one to express oneself in a manner which is “airy, dashing, pyrotechnic in scope and beauty” and to be able to “write plays, poems, play probability and find three separate cures for cancer” (21). This ostensibly positive, yet utterly hyperbolic, presentation of the effects of hunger is bathetically undercut by Ripley’s description of the next stage during which “[a]gony sticks a knobbly great pole up your arse and waves it around in your already stretching abdomen” (21). The use of a vulgar vernacular here undermines the previous absurd exaggeration and enables the narrator to gradually build towards the violent climax during which “[a]gony interrupts and rapes you violently” (21). Here the strong personification transforms the experience of hunger into a violent assault and implicitly points the finger towards an external attacker.

The unnamed narrator of *Harare North* also frequently employs humour when faced with the squalor of his new existence in London. Initially, external irony contributes to this humour, such as when Sekai, his cousin’s sister expects him to buy his own Underground ticket and he states: “I only have Z\$1,000,000 in my bag, which even if I exchange will come to something like £4” (5). The stark contrast here between hyperinflation in Zimbabwe and the cost of living in London immediately draws attention to economic dysfunction, particularly through the juxtaposition of the adverb “only” with the exorbitant sum of Z\$1,000,000. Recourse to irony becomes more implicit though when the narrator complains about how Sekai throws out the nuts he has brought from

Zimbabwe: “She say I should never have been allow to bring them nuts into the country because maybe they carry disease. Then she go out and buy us McDonald’s supper” (7). The suggestion clearly is that a “McDonald’s supper” is potentially just as suspect and that attitudes to food are culturally determined. Yet this remark also underlines a distinction among migrants based on the degree of their integration into British society; later in the novel, Sekai invites a number of colleagues, all of whom are (Russian or African) immigrants, to dinner and forces the narrator to dine alone in his room for fear that he will embarrass her. The diasporic community is therefore presented here and elsewhere in the novel as fragmented and multiple.

A series of lively similes and metaphors also reveal the often comic way in which the narrator comments on life: “History is littered with them ruined underpants of small people leaping about in vex style and trying to save they bread from the long throats of big people” (55); “Tim watch this and don’t say nothing because he is breastfeeding the machine” (97). In the first example, the deployment of a scatological register reveals an unorthodox view of History and a focus on the very real, material concerns of the “small people” while the second example, a description of the narrator’s employer’s attitude towards his cash register, humorously calls attention to an almost organic link between the chip shop owner and his money. Even the difficulties of prison life in Zimbabwe are presented in a comical manner which in fact amplifies rather than attenuates the horror of the narrator’s experiences: “it is full of them people that carry likkle horrors such as them sharpened bicycle spokes and they want you to donate your buttocks so they can give you AIDS” (21). The discrepancy here between the altruistic act of donation and prison rape speaks volumes about the ironic prism through which the narrator views the world and draws attention to his mastery of the intricacies in the English language despite the constant recourse to a sort of pidgin throughout the novel. Conversely however, when the narrator learns that he is HIV negative, his comic response, “Who ever hear of good news that is negative?” (212) emphasises how his literal understanding of English has led him to misinterpret the result and to perpetrate random acts of violence because “you was knowing that tomorrow you was going to be dead” (212).

In both cases, the narrators’ elaborate use of language, whether pidgin, as is the case of the narrator of *Harare North*, or florid, sophisticated rhetoric, as is the case of Ripley Bogle, enables them both to move away from an identity “grounded in a single migrant metanarrative” towards a “multi-discursive form of narrative diaspora space” (Murray 127) and to use humour as a tool not just to uncover the fundamentally hierarchical dimension of English society but also to dissimulate their own tendency towards the perpetration of destructive acts of violence linked to the conflicts in the North of Ireland and Zimbabwe.

AlieNation and Dissensus

Both narrators spend significant parts of their accounts mulling over their experiences as observers of and actors in political conflict in their respective countries of origin. The narrator of *Harare North* may well have come to Britain as an asylum-seeker but he admits very early on that this is simply a ruse to be accorded entry to the UK and that up until his departure from Zimbabwe he was a member of the notorious “Green Bombers.” Ostensibly “youth militia camps that were intended to establish the basis of

a compulsory National Service scheme” (Ranger 219), these compulsory youth programmes became propaganda training camps in which the material used “is crudely racist and vilifies the major opposition party in the country” as well as being “historically simplistic and racist and glorify[ing] recent ZANU-PF national heroes along with the land resettlement programme” (Solidarity Peace Trust document, qtd. in Ranger 219). Moreover, these groups have violently persecuted members of the political opposition as recent Human Rights Watch reports have shown (HRW 5-6). The narrator has therefore been implicated in violent political reprisals in Zimbabwe and continues to remind his fellow squatters of his Green Bomber credentials so as to coerce them into letting him pay no rent and eat as he pleases. Ripley Bogle, on the other hand, cannot be accused of political activism since he goes out of his way to dissociate himself from nationalist republicanism, to such an extent that he betrays his best friend to a faction of the IRA who are after him and thereby seals his ugly fate.⁵ The ideological positions adopted by these two protagonists both in their former lives and presently in London, and the violent consequences which ensue are, as we shall see, what contributes to their two-fold alienation and what renders the poetics of dissensus in these texts so complex.

Ripley Bogle is at pains to present himself as a hybrid figure, nicknaming himself “Ripley Irish British Bogle” (16) and exaggerating the paradox of his great-grandfather “having his legs and most of his testicles blown off at Passchendaele while fighting for the British nation against the German army – while his brother [...] was having his head blown off on O’Connell Street while fighting for the Irish nation against the British army in the Easter Rising” (8). His scathing sarcasm, reinforced by the parallelism, immediately establishes a distance from nationalist discourse and the emphasis is placed on the inherent moral wrongness of the violence of war as opposed to the specificities of postcolonial conflict. A similar process is at work in Ripley’s memories of the night internment without trial was introduced⁶ during which the emphasis is placed on the youth and inexperience of the British soldiers who are “slightly diffident” (32) as they raid his house and for whom he even feels “a veiled tenderness” (35). This may well be an effective recreation of a child’s perspective on what has since widely been recognised as a mismanaged and extremely violent incursion into Catholic housing estates, but it also, because it remains uncontradicted by the older Ripley, minimises British responsibility and paves the way for his later presentation of IRA activists as fanatics who conform to an atavistic norm of Irish violence long expounded in British propaganda (Lloyd 63-4). The novel is peppered with references to an Irish propensity to mindless violence to such an extent that any ideological context for the conflict is evinced and paramilitary actors reduced with biting sarcasm to “crooks, thugs – they were just bad boys” (304).

The narrator of *Harare North* moves in the opposite direction as he consistently vindicates the “Green Bombers” operating on behalf of the government in order to

5. Indeed, Ripley is so dissociated from militant republicanism that as his friend lies slowly dying, all he can think about is his own desire to urinate.

6. Internment without trial (or “Operation Demetrius”) was a British army military operation which began on August 9th 1971 and effectively enabled security forces to arrest and imprison without trial anyone suspected of involvement in republican paramilitary activity. Because the majority of those arrested had no links to republicans and because no loyalists were arrested in the first sweeping operation, mass demonstrations and intense anger followed on from the arrests and these were compounded by rumours of torture of those arrested. These allegations were subsequently acknowledged, both in writing by political prisoners themselves, in the Walker report (Walker 1972) and later by Amnesty International.

quash any opposition. Far from portraying himself and his former comrades as “thugs” or “just bad boys,” he depicts a group of young people carrying out their duty in a jovial, friendly manner. What Sekai depicts as “bunches of uneducated thugs that like hitting people with sticks” is dismissed by the narrator as “propaganda that she hear from papers and TV in this country” (8) and explained as follows: “the Green Bombers is there to smoke them enemies of the state out of they corrugated-iron hovels and scatter them across the earth” (8). The obvious irony here of where and how propaganda operates is strengthened by the strong imagery which implies guerrilla war tactics. That the narrator himself is a victim of propaganda becomes obvious in his total espousal of ZANU-PF rhetoric: “If you is back home leading rubbish life and ZANU-PF party offer you job in they youth movement to give you chance to change your life and put big purpose in your life, you don’t just sniff at it” (17). The opposition here between “rubbish life” and “big purpose” highlights the means by which the party recruits youths, yet at the same time the final phrase also reveals the ultimate absence of choice. What is more shocking is the subversion of language within propaganda which the narrator has internalised. A seemingly innocuous remark at the beginning of the novel, “[f]or traitors punishment is the best forgiveness” (19) takes on a much more sinister meaning as the reader becomes accustomed to the narrator’s vernacular and his deliberate misuse of language. In a grotesque subversion of the rhetoric of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in neighbouring South Africa, forgiveness, far from signifying pardon, actually becomes a by-word for extreme physical violence. This “forgiveness” is a threat not only for perceived traitors or enemies of ZANU-PF, but for anyone who angers the narrator and the more positive the adjectives surrounding the “forgiveness,” the more serious the beating. As the narrator warns one of his fellow squatters: “If you so much as touch she again, you can expect some very sweet tender loving caress from me. And heaps of forgiveness” (132). The use of three adjectives, unseparated by commas, emphasises through irony the extent of the threat and the degree of subversion in language. It gradually transpires that the narrator has had to flee Zimbabwe because of a specific incident concerning “forgiveness,” during which the “falsehoods” of the “traitor” are “stronger than overproof brandy and of course [...] get us drunk” so that in the end “[b]y the time we is sober and staggering all over with big hangover the police is crawling all over me” (20). The move from simile to conceit enables the narrator to refrain from verbalising what is obviously a frenzy of violence and to present it as a socially acceptable act and it is never really clear just to what extent he is being manipulative or just so deeply affected by his indoctrination that he cannot express himself otherwise. Unlike Ripley, who distances himself from political conflict and operates in a simplistic ideological vacuum in which resistance to state-endorsed brutality is portrayed as stemming from an atavistic propensity to violence, the narrator of *Harare North* is more than implicated in simplistic ideological propaganda which justifies state-endorsed violence.

Both protagonists find themselves alienated at home due to their actions: Ripley for having dislodged his girlfriend’s five-month-old foetus from her uterus using an old paintbrush and for having betrayed and ensured the death of his best friend, and the narrator of *Harare North* for having been too enthusiastic in his dishing out of “forgiveness” to a “traitor.” They also find themselves equally alienated once in London. Ripley’s experiences once in England are no more comfortable than those of his

childhood and are fuelled simultaneously by his contempt for the students and teachers at Cambridge where he is reading English and by the overkill in his cultivation of all the stereotypes of Irishness: "I kept chancing my arm. I pushed my luck, shoved my fortune and jostled my fate. [...] I picked fights, skipped lectures, told lies, got pissed, taunted dons" (256). Here the cultural clichés of the luck of the Irish, the drunken Irish, the Irish as brawlers or the sarcastic Irish sense of humour are all present and are accompanied by the attending clichés of upper class English students and faculty: "polite, charming, ready to accept and eager to include," they also hide "some kind of secret, some unspoken thread which united the strands of their race," abound in "selfishness and sterile egotism" and "dislik[e] the notion of people differing from themselves" (202), so that, "[e]mpireless and declining, they were sad, sad folk" (203). In having his narrator-protagonist simultaneously claim allegiance to his Irishness and his Britishness only to then reject both through excessive recourse to stereotype, McLiam Wilson ensures that Ripley is doubly alienated; he performs his Britishness in Ireland and is rejected because of it and performs his Irishness in England and is rejected there too, refusing in both cases assimilation and "inclusion" which characteristically "ma[ke him] want to puke" (252).

All this might initially suggest that McLiam Wilson is indeed carving out "a different way to cohabit the political," (Butler and Athanasiou 159), which is the point of view of most critics who underline how the self-reflexive dimension of the novel resists "dominant narratives of decolonisation" and stress the benefits of "an interstitial position from which he can interrogate both Englishness and Irishness" (Kennedy-Andrews 120). I would contend, however, that the apparent dissensus, which is the consequence of this double alienation, that is to say the exposition of a fractured, heterogeneous and excluded other "who is separated from the community for the mere fact of being alien from it" (Rancière, *Aesthetics* 116), belies a more sinister consensus in which the ostensibly interstitial space inhabited by Ripley, both ideologically and physically, actually reveals itself to be a reproduction of dominant ideologies on the conflict in the North translated into spatial terms. Ripley Bogle becomes a sort of allegory of the North: he is both British and Irish; the hackneyed trope of maternal land raped or sexualised by the coloniser is trotted out in the opening sentence of the novel when a British soldier pays for sex with his prostitute mother and impregnates her; he has "the gift of the gab," looking simultaneously to Orwell and Dickens, Joyce and Beckett⁷ in his literary borrowings; he conforms to the stereotype of inherently violent, uncivilised "Celt" (202) and yet could almost be describing himself when he describes the British as "remote, impersonal, disengaged" or fearing "human, interior congress" (202).

However, the constant attention paid to his body's failing integrity and grotesque overflowing (ingurgitation, urination, vomiting, bleeding) is indicative not so much of a method of resistance, a desire to "let his body wither and fall apart rather than be cannon fodder for a conflict he does not believe in" (Magennis 98), as of an utterly consensual representation of the North of Ireland as a space which violently overflows and contaminates its surroundings. This is in spite of the fact that the structural (as opposed to satirical) irony of this novel resides in the fact that Ripley's own unreliability (which emerges clearly at the end with his admission of three important lies told

7. For an in-depth reading of this self-reflexive intertextuality, see Kennedy-Andrews 118-9 and Murray 129-33.

during his account) and his recourse to extreme violence against another tramp “subtly question the surface meaning of the text itself” (D’hoker 474) and provide “an unwitting indictment of Ripley himself” (471). The apparent dissensus offered by McLiam Wilson in the form of this tramp’s narrative ultimately reveals itself to be a means of reinforcing ideological consensus on the Northern Irish question. Objectionable, solipsistic and violent, Ripley symbolically embodies every negative cliché about the North.

The narrator of *Harare North* is also fiercely critical of Londoners and London life, but rather than indulging in satirical stereotype as Ripley does, he observes the systematic exploitation of migrants, ironically thanks to his knowledge of history acquired during his time in the National Youth Service training programme: “Immigrant people’s contribution to this country is equal to one Mars bar in every citizen’s pocket every year” (24) he initially remarks before quickly deciding that “Harare North is big con. We have already put many Mars bars inside people’s pockets, and now look” (51) when a fellow migrant with a fake bus pass is refused entry onto a London bus. The narrator’s statements are indeed borne out by recent studies on the positive fiscal impact of immigration in the UK (Vargas-Silva n.p.). Nevertheless, the narrator is overtly exploited because of his migrant status in his first two jobs, which then pushes him to blackmail his cousin’s sister as an easier source of revenue and to sponge off his friend Shingi.

The narrator’s harshest criticisms are reserved for what he deems as the worst possible job and that undertaken by many immigrant Zimbabweans, that of “BBC – British Buttock Cleaners – looking after old people that poo they pants every hour” (41). His recurrent catchphrase “I am principled man” (65, 81, 83), highly ironic given the spurious principles with which he has been indoctrinated, prevent him from accepting this relatively well-paid work. The acronym of course also ironically evokes the iconic British Broadcasting Corporation and the subversion of this British institution, mocked here and associated with excrement. It also implicitly highlights Chikwava’s desire to emphasise other, more insidious forms of propaganda within Britain in which the BBC plays a prominent role, cleaning up after the government, as well as the obvious linguistic monopoly propagated through the BBC World Service. This is extended when Shingi is later employed as a “BBC” in Westminster and complains about “some big battle he have in the gents’ toilet with one joist of poo. He swear it can support roof of House of Commons” (190). Aside from the scatological humour, this anecdote also obliquely suggests that the home of British policy-making is upheld by excremental politics. The dissensus which emerges in this novel is therefore not just the predictable exposure of the abusive propaganda of ZANU-PF and the corruption of Zimbabwean youth, but more interestingly, through the perspective of this rejected outsider living in a squat on the margins of society, a more unexpected indictment of contemporary British society.

Multiple layers of alienation are therefore at play in both novels. Moving beyond a mere interrogation of migrant life in London and the forms of discrimination to which immigrants are subjected, or the violence they are fleeing in their native countries from which they are now estranged, *Ripley Bogle* and *Harare North* present a more complex interaction between alienation and belonging and voice a double dissensus which “disinter[s] those society [whom] unwittingly and unintentionally deposits in its dark underground shoals” (Rancière, *Literature* 20): twice alienated from the places that constitute home, the narrators continue to endorse state ideologies even as they disrupt identity politics. At the heart of both novels is an inescapable reflection on fluctua-

ting identities and on the politics of performativity: Ripley self-reflexively performs his Britishness and his Irishness, voluntarily merging the two, while his homelessness is a means for McLiam Wilson to express his character's absence of connection to any one place, in other words his subversion of his *roots* as he takes his circuitous *routes* through London. However, although he exploits the figure of the tramp so common in Irish theatre,⁸ he also subverts and indeed tones down its otherness and the novel's potential dissensus by kowtowing to the consensual position on the contemporary conflict in the North, emptying it of any colonial context and presenting anti-British resistance as driven by "senseless sentimentality" and "savagery" (190).

Chikwava is arguably more successful in proffering dissensus, particularly since his protagonist ends up gradually usurping his dying friend's identity to such an extent that at the end of the novel when he looks into a puddle instead of his own reflection he sees Shingi looking back (229). This is all the more significant as the name Shingi[rail] signifies perseverance in Shona, suggesting that the narrator's resilience will prevail through a sort of metamorphosis. By the time the narrator "becomes" Shingi, he has lost all the contents of his precious suitcase which is now "full of nothing" (228) rather like himself. The final image of the novel is of the half-naked, half-mad narrator trying to distinguish between himself and Shingi in the backstreets of London. This ontological instability is a means for Chikwava to present a character who is "the event of its multiple exposures – both within its relatedness to others and within its exposure to the normative forces that arrange the social, political, and cultural matrices of humanness" who has been "omitted from human discursivity" (Butler and Athanasiou 32 and 33 respectively) since, as an illegal immigrant, he literally does not exist in Britain, and who, through his narrative, simultaneously provides evidence of and contests the fact that "the human has no 'proper' place to take outside social situatedness and allocation, including the exposure to the possibility of being undone" (Butler and Athanasiou 32). What his narrative reveals is that even this immigrant illegal squatter can be "dispossessioned," a dispossession which is placed in ironic parallel with the land resettlement programmes put in place by Mugabe and which results in the narrator's mother's village being bulldozed. Yet he is also just as capable of possession, whether it be Shingi ("I possess him" [38]), the squat, or Shingi's identity papers.

Related to the ontological instability of both narrator-protagonists is the ghost of Beckett's *Molloy* which haunts both novels. The body of Molloy, another vagrant, is, like Ripley's, grotesque and overflowing; like both narrators, Molloy is intelligent and cultivated, obsessed with his mother and has a distinct propensity to violence; finally, Molloy and Moran, the other character in Beckett's novel, become subsumed into one at the end of the novel, just like the narrator of *Harare North* and his friend Shingi. Both McLiam Wilson and Chikwava are obviously nodding to Beckett in their creation of contemporary avatars of Molloy, all the more so as both novelists are clearly interested, like Beckett, in exposing the fault lines of identity, (alie-)nation and dispossession, specifically in this case where migrants to Britain are concerned. However, where Beckett's work remains profoundly dissensual, to the extent that it cannot easily be contained within a hermeneutical analysis and no overt political message can be imputed to it, thus respecting the interpretative authority of the reader dear to Rancière, McLiam Wilson's

8. One thinks notably of both Sygne and Beckett in this respect.

novel, in attempting to deliver an overt political message and notwithstanding the marginal figure used to convey that message, does not quite manage a “redistribution of the sensible.” Brian Chikwava’s novel on the other hand constitutes a political work in the Rancierian sense because it “disrupt[s] the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle” (Rancière, *Politics* 63). The unnamed narrator of *Harare North* certainly observes his past and present homes through a particular prism, but the political import of the novel resides in the fact that the marginalised voices “do not appear in scripted ways,” that the migrant characters “manifest a voice they [are] thought not to possess” (Tanke 104). The characters in this novel all demonstrate agency and in spite of their precarious existence are subtly placed on equal footing with even the highest echelons of British society at the Houses of Parliament, thereby thwarting any hierarchical distribution of the sensible. In the final analysis, both *Ripley Bogle* and *Harare North* literally “tunnel into the depths of society” and focus on “the hermeneutics of the social body” so as to uncover ‘the equality of all subjects and [...] the availability of all expressions’ (Rancière, *Literature* 21), and in that respect propose a literature which, if not always dissensual, is resolutely political.

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