Representations of rhizomatic identitarian trajectories in selected contemporary Southern African narratives

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Abstract: The subject of identity is a very complex one as highlighted by the amount of scholarship on this topic as well as a varied range of perspectives that have been used to approach it. Probably, it is because identity is a life-long process that it continues to take new forms and new directions through deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, the ‘lines of flight’ from Deleuze and Guattari’s vocabulary. Furthermore, identification takes place in a web of complex and multiple dis/connections hence, identity is neither a fixed nor a complete “assemblage” but rather an on-going troubled process of “becoming”. These are provocative ideas that demand renewed conversations to (re)consider conceptualisations of identity in the context of persistent self-other logics and the fear of difference in contemporary times in which displacement, migration and mobility inform the processes of “becoming” in fictional narratives. From rhizomatic conceptualisations, the present article takes interest in how post-colonial subjects engage in “becoming” and the

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Identity is a complex and complicated issue and researchers have used different approaches and perspectives to discuss and analyse it. It is a life-long process and continues to take new forms and directions through re-organisation of structures and contexts and restructuring of settings within Africa and beyond. As noted in this paper, identification takes place within complex and multiple dis/connections hence, identity is neither a fixed nor a complete collection of things or people but an on-going and troubled process of discovering who we are. These issues and ideas push us to want to (re)consider how we conceptualise and perceive identity in modern times, where displacement, migration and mobility inform the processes of “becoming” in fictional narratives. Based on the ideas, thoughts and ways of thinking described by Deleuze and Guattari, we focus on how post-colonial subjects engage in re-asserting themselves in society and the fluid, contested and precarious identities they carve as portrayed in selected literary texts from South Africa and Zimbabwe.
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**Subjects:** Language & Literature; Literature & Culture; Literature & Race

**Keywords:** Rhizome; assemblage; becoming; de/reterritorialisation; identitarian trajectories; migration; post-colonial subjects

1. **Introduction**

For quite some time, the Southern African fictive landscape has been occupied with the topic of identity yet, the subject has remained topical and recently gained renewed attention in academic conversations about the baffling enduring legacy of self-other-logics, xenophobic practices, gender dichotomies, geopolitics and racist traditions in the emerging dis/connected postcolonial world. The question of identity remains a nebulous and highly contested concept, especially when considering that there is no consensus among scholars about what constitutes identity. Stuart Hall (1987) argues that the post-modern subject has no fixed, essentialist, or permanent identity since identity has become a “moveable feast” (trans)formed continuously in relation to the ways we are (re)presented and addressed in different cultural systems. Interestingly, identity is related to the nexus between belonging and a sense of self. Hall (1995) further observes that in contemporary times, old identities, which stabilised the social and political world for aeons, are in decline, giving rise to new and ever evolving identities that have caused fractures and fissures in the modern notions of the individual. These are critical dimensions about the impossibility of achieving a complete and unitary, uncontested and authochtonous identity. The study taps into the Southern African literary writings, which provide complex fictive cultural avenues to explore and construct indepth analyses of binary logics and the complexity of becoming in contemporary times. The selected novels provide fictive sites for the interrogation of dialectics and articulations of identity. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) rhizomatic notion has been utilised to analyse different forms of fictional genres but in this study, it is employed to interrogate identity construction in contemporary emigrants texts selected from South African and Zimbabwean (Southern African) literary ouvres. The selected fictional texts analysed in this study are: *Harare North* by Brian Chikwava, *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo and Phasame Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. These texts share intriguing thematisation of politics of difference embedded in linguo-cultural composition of the texts, identity misrepresentation and haunting narratives of migration, common to all the three texts. The selection of the three novels is also inspired by transcultural and transnational frameworks in the sexual languaging, which seems to defy neat nationalist canonisation and prescriptive bordering. Furthermore, South Africa and Zimbabwe are neighbouring countries located in the southern hemisphere of the African continent. These two nations’ geographical proximity provides a rich site to interrogate linguo-cultural contact spaces and how self-other logics are challenged, paving way for new identities to emerge. The study makes a unique contribution in the sense that it brings to the fore, the problematic and nuanced dynamics of identitarian trajectories assumed by postcolonial subjects and, most importantly, “the fear of difference” attached to identity perceptions. The self-other logics hamper on gemene efforts to re-imagine and re-construct a networked “decolonised” world in the Southern African’s postcolonial environment. The persistent Cartesian dichotomies based on racial geographical, linguo-cultural and political differences are quizzed from a rhizomatic lens that troubles, black/white, political, linguo-cultural binary constructions. From a rhizomatic conceptualisation, the present article assesses misrepresentations of identity, unbelonging and state of otherness that amplify fragilities and become detrimental to healthy human relations in general. The following research questions help to frame the discursive terrain in this study:

- What is the relevance of rhizomatic concept in conversations about identity constructions in contemporary Southern African fictional texts?
• How can the postcolonial world reconstructed through new rhizomatic perceptions of identity, benefit not only Africans but humanity in general? and
• How do the selected novels thematise and critique the politics of difference embedded in identity mis/representation?

2. Rhizomatic as a conceptual framework
This section locates the study into the realms of rhizomatic theory and proceeds to highlight the relevance of insights from the rhizome concept that could be useful in debating the subject of identity. The study is interpretivist in nature, situated in a qualitative research tradition that seeks to examine, describe and evaluate the fictive human worlds portrayed in the purposively selected Southern African fictional narratives. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) concept of the rhizome, the present article adopts a qualitative research approach and analyses selected literary texts from Zimbabwe and South Africa as primary data. The selected narratives are: Harare North written by Brian Chikwava, NoViolet Bulawayo’s We Need New Names and Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow. This study evokes the metaphor of networks that is central in rhizomatic theory. A rhizome is a subterranean stem, which has multiple entry ways. According to Deleuze (1993), a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections, therefore, multiplicity is a defining characteristic of this concept. A rhizome has hybrid connections since it operates in space without boundaries. It (re) connects over fissures and gaps, deterritorialises and reterritorialises itself all at once (Deleuze, 1985:233). “The rhizome connects any point to any other point and must be” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980:7). The present article teases out conversations about identities and looks at how contemporary subjects branch out rhizomatically beyond bicultural, linguistic, racial politics among other forms of self-other dichotomisations in order to chart new possibilities in the identity project. The organic image of the rhizome is used to probe the limitations of such dichotomous complexities and their impact on the conceptualisation of contemporary multi-faceted identities in the context of mobility, dis/placement and migration. According to Grosz (1994), in Deleuzian vocabulary, there is a critical term of multiplicity, which refers to an ever-changing, non-totalising collectivity. This concept, together with the rhizomatic metaphor, provide a theoretical framework to discuss possibilities of re-imagining new identities against traditions of othering and discriminatory practices. The notion of multiplicity means an ongoing assemblage, which undergoes permutations, combinations and transformations. Significantly, “every assemblage is collective” (Deleuze, 1993:255). In addition, terms of reterritorialisation and “lines of flight” explain the possibilities for movement or expansion into new identitarian territoires (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980:21). The lines of flight refers to the connection between nodes in the process of becoming. It means the coming and going, the occupation of the space/s in between. Deleuze (ibid) further explains that the location of one in between is not a stable point but a site of metamorphosis. The complementary term rhizomatic framework is deterritorialisation, which is interrogated as a notion of ruptures, departures and fissures. It refers to movements that produce change in and out of the previously constructed assemblage. In other words, to deterritorialise is to free up fixed ideas, relations or structures, thereby, uncovering the limits of such structures. Together, these concepts suggest that a rhizomatic framework privileges flexibility, impermanence, precocity, multiplicities, interconnectedness and mutability necessary for re-thinking identity construction in contemporary societies.

3. Identity and its problematicas
The foregoing section addresses methodological and theoretical issues and focuses on the notion of identity and its nuanced dynamics. Goldberg and Solomos (2001) note that “identity” has taken on many different connotations that, sometimes, it is obvious that people are not talking about the same phenomenon. Part of the problem is that contemporary perceptions of identity further complicate conceptualisation of this term. For example, Hall (2003: 222) proposes:

Rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of identification, and see it as an on-going process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity, which is already inside us as individuals, but from a lack of wholeness, which is ‘filled’ from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by others.
He also adds that identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices represent, we should think of identity instead as a “production”, which is always in process, and constituted within, not outside representation (Hall, 2003: 222).

Elsewhere, Lyotard (1984:15) argues that “a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before”. For Gilroy (1993), identity is unfinished, unstable and mutable. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1994) adds that identity is never a priori or finished product but rather, a problematic process. Gilroy (1993) and Mavengano and Hove (2019) are of the view that the identity question is a site of struggle against existing essentialist perceptions. Needless to say, these views redefine traditional parameters and perceptions of identity. The idea of movement and mediation overrides the claims of roots and rootedness because absolutism is displaced by fluid, amorphous and mobile identities (Hove, 2018). Hall (2003) thus, rightly argues that identity does not originate from a fixed root and proceed in a straight, unbroken line. These are insightful ideas, which need to be further interrogated in contemporary conversations about identity conceptualisations within the rhizomatic theory. Considering the fact that the rhizomatic is anti-genealogy, it becomes an indispensable framework in examining the complex dynamic formulations of identities in contemporary times. Thus, the present article builds upon these ideas and contributes to the on-going debates about identities in the Southern African postcolonial spaces that constitute the habitus of the narratives selected for this evaluation.

4. Language cultural and linguistic ambivalence
The selected fictional narratives in this article articulate very significant cultural and linguistic shifts. In a different context, but relevant to this study, Said (1993: xxv) made a remarkable observation that all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and constitutes of “a thousand plateaux” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). Sen (2004) concurs with Said that cultures and nations are neither unitary nor static entities. No culture, past or present, is a conceptual island unto itself, except in the imagination of the observer. These observations are significant in discussing cultural and linguistic politics that inform articulations of identities in selected fictive discourses interrogated in this article.

One way to conceptualise cultural hybridity is to consider how the narratives construct characters who straddle two or more cultures. It is only by engaging with such representations and examination of subjects who travel between cultures and occupy interstitial spaces that we can be used to cultural identification. The textual construction of Harare North, We Need New Names and Welcome to Our Hillbrow, reflects multicultural sites where demarcation between hybrid and pure cultural forms is obscured, which further complicates the debate on identity representation. The configuration of pluralilingual and multicultural texts could be understood as “an antidote to essentialism” (Hove, 2013: 64). Such textual construction troubles linguistic and cultural dichotomies in notions of hybridity and im/purity. In Harare North and We Need New Names, chiShona, isiNdebele and English are deployed in weaving the texts to underscore the cultural interactions in multilingual fictive settings of Zimbabwe, America and Britain. For instance, in We need new names, Prince, a Zimbabwean who migrated to America, only calms down in America’s nerve—wrecking environment when he listens to the following isiNdebele song sung to him by a fellow national Fostalina:

   Sobasbiy’abafowethu [we continue burying our brothers]

   Savavuka sawela kwamany’amazwe [we found ourselves in other countries]

   Laph’okungazi khon’uboba lomama [where my father and mother have never been] S’landel’ inkululeko [looking for freedom] (Bulawayo, 2013:159).
Going by the semantic interpretation of the song, it cannot function as a lullaby but its therapeutic effects seems to be derived from its cultural appeal to both Fostalina and Prince, who share the Ndebele cultural background. These two characters saddle between Ndebele and Shona cultures from their homeland Zimbabwe as well as English culture, which they adopt in America as immigrants. The linguistic construction speaks about cultural hybridity of the characters as well as a contemporary reality in multilingual and multicultural contact spaces like America, Britain and South Africa, which serve as fictive settings of the texts under discussion. Whereas, in Welcome to Our Hillbrow, the contemporary lingo-cultural plurality in post-apartheid South Africa is visible in the inclusion of isiZulu and seSotho in textual fabric of the novel. These are some of the major ethnic groups in contemporary South Africa. In addition, the presentation of African thoughts and expressions in translated passages in these texts, serves as a nexus of identity tensions and reflects the importance accorded to African oral-aural traditions in spaces where whiteness was previously the privileged and undisputed mediating chroma. Expressions such as “Mother of Bones”, “Hawu, Mother Love”, “the NGO people”, Please come bantu (Bulawayo, 2013:56) are telling evidence of Shona and Ndebele cultural translation. This hybrid cultural configuration is in line with rhizomatic theorisation of identity because a rhizome has multiple interacting parts, therefore, welcomes numerous relations and, at the same time, shows vulnerability of subjects with multi-belongings. This reading concurs with Steiner (2010), who notes that conflicting identities are negotiated and appropriated through languaging and language use in the African novel. Therefore, the accents of African migrants in America, long ridiculed as non-native, evokes the language debate and colonising logics embedded in such a debate. In other words, translation and translanguaging in these novels problematise claims about language ownership and existence of pure cultural forms. It is particularly significant if such linguistic innovations are viewed as gestures of resistance and identity retention, a Caliban-esque version of subverting the language of the colonising Prospero. In this way, the narratives respond to debates about language rights. Fostalina’s English accent in We need new names, is assumed unintelligible by the white sales lady in America. This languaging by Fostalina borders on an act, which violates rhizomatic principles. From a rhizomatic sense, any barriers to articulation are refuted since they are based on the notion of closed unitary systems. Thus, linguistic construction of the texts helps to chart a new consciousness. The novels probe and reject monolithic formulations of cultural and linguistic identities. Immigrants assert their presence in new spaces. In addition, language is also used to convey the inability of migrant characters to be linguistically adaptive to the new societies. In this case, immigrants are linguistically marked as outsiders who cannot fit into the American linguocultural mainstream. Their narratives become, ipso facto, blended African narratives about precariousness as acts of communication possessed of their own aesthetics and truth-values, that the reader is called upon to respond to imaginatively in order to challenge injustice of the global spaces in the sojourner who finds temporary and elastic respite.

In Harare North and We need new names, Ndebele and Shona are utilised by immigrant characters to reconnect with their families in Zimbabwe. Shona and Ndebele words also foreground a particular identity, yet, this identity is ruptured by the English habitus and culture. Apparently, each linguistic code is a strand that makes up an individual in a rhizomatic web, showing a more nuanced construction of the contemporary subjects whose identity is always troubled. Most importantly, this could be part of the assimilation process that facilitates navigation of new cultural terrains, denying individulas their voices and exposing their languages to language death (Nkamta & Hove, 2020). Immigrants have to learn the language and culture of the new society thus, making new cultural and linguistic connections.

It is critical to note that Harare North radically transforms the English language to suit semantic and expressive intentions of non-native users. English is deterrioralised by the immigrants. Innovations are distinct from both British and Zimbabwean societies. Bhabha (1994) asserts that cultures are never unitary silos from which we retrieve linguistic and semantic constructs. Therefore, identities are endlessly re/constructed in intercultural interactions. The contemporary
world, therefore, is becoming a complex cultural and linguistic web. The narratives effectively suggest a new human space that is expansive in nature and unbounded by any barriers.

In Welcome to our Hillbrow, metropolitan identities in the cityscape are represented through hybrid linguistic codes. In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari’s argument that metamorphosis in the rhizome facilitates deconstruction of old structures and formation of new ones, a new line of flight in which all forms and significations collapse becomes evident in the linguistic resources that the characters bring into their conversations about petty and weighty matters. The use of untranslated cultural terms and idiomatic expressions becomes an endorsement of the diversity in cultural expression. “Makwerekwere” (foreigners) are accused of “stretching their legs and spreading their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants” (Mpe, 2001 p. 26). Traducing linguistic boundaries foregrounds and privileges a multicultural, multinational and global orientation. A culturally hybridised identity is quite pronounced and celebrated through the fusion of isiZulu, seSotho and appropriated English language. Notably, the linguistic plurality of contemporary societies has a mark on the kind of identities formulated. The narratives create a polyglissic literary space that deconstructs monolingual hegemonic discourses. They are multilingual and transcultural narratives, which concretise the slippages of cultural identities and the porous linguistic borders. In other words, the selected novels inscribe polysemy and modify existing perceptions of the monoglossic. Yet, the attempts to re-imagine new linguo-cultural identities in contact spaces are resisted in exclusionary narratives that privilege self-other dichotomies.

5. Home, place, roots or routes and (un)homing

Another area of engagement with the notion of identity is through assessment of the term “home” with other related notions, such as belonging, place, roots and routes. The notion of “home” is, sometimes, associated with connotations of hospitality, intimacy, friendliness and harmony. In this section, our attention is drawn to the semantic problematics of the term “home”.

In the novels, We need New Names and Harare North, the homeland is in “tatters” and even children like Bastard wish to leave the country: “I don’t care, I am blazing out of this kaka country” (p. 13). What is un-homing the “home” is that it is an undesirable “house of hunger” where “things are falling apart”, explaining why citizens are “fleeing in droves” (Bulawayo, 2013 p. 145). The inescapable intertextuality of the text is evident in cross-cultural references to Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Dambudzo Marechera’s House of Hunger. Even the name “bastard” iconifies the wanton and reckless sexual orgies in the making of this character. Citizens, perceived as “enemies of the state” or “change people” (derogatorily sarcastic term affixed to perceived followers of the MDC party) are displaced, beaten up or brutally killed by the state. The novel exposes fault ideas about African nationalism borne out of egocentric culture of nationalist leaders who violate democratic tenets and unleash an orgy of violence. This postcolonial environment speaks about the myths and allusions embedded in discourses of liberation and decolonisation, whose semantic emptiness is laudable. Exclusionary discourses constructed around national politics inscribe otherness to those non/nationals deemed unfit to be called Zimbabweans because they support the “wrong” political party. The fear of political difference informs hostility towards the perceived “enemies of the state” (Bulawayo, 2013: 50). The troubling question is who then is Zimbabwean? Darling’s recollections, death, dehumanising poverty, helplessness, hunger, sexual abuse and violence foreground the unhomeliness of the “homeland” (Mavengano & Hove, 2019). Despite his loyalty to the Mugabe regime, the main character in Harare North also admits that ordinary people “back home” suffer from poverty and economic problems.

The ambivalent position of the subaltern poor in Zimbabwe is illuminated in both novels. They suffer from multiple forms of exploitation and marginalisation as symbolically represented by the ironically and satirically named slum community “Paradise”. The shacks in Paradise vividly capture the grimness of the place and the degraded subaltern identities of its inhabitants. Hence, the slum-dwellers feel despised and alienated by the Mugabe regime. In one scene, Darling’s disconnection from her mother is satirically captured when her mother asks, “How was it falling?—falling from
the sky because I apparently did not give birth to you. May be an angel did” (Bulawayo, p. 205). Darling also admits her detachment from the homeland: “with time, I stopped writing altogether. I just started putting off, telling myself I will write tomorrow, next week, in a couple of weeks” (p. 188). Another significant insight is that the sense of belonging to a particular community changes over time. Darling feels detached from her childhood friends and her mother/land. The bond has been loosened and deterritorialised. Deleuze and Guattari (1980) explain that rhizomatic lines open a range of possibilities and lines of flight. The line of flight carries Darling away and the character has developed new “shoots” of friendship in America, causing (dis)continuities with previously established relations. Thus, belonging, like identity, is not a destiny or a sense of arrival but rather, transient. The ever-changing nature of belonging and identity is in line with the concept of the rhizome. Since a rhizome may be broken at any given spot, yet, it will recuperate from one of its old or new lines (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). The relative significance of Paradise, as a “home”, only comes through childhood memories, which sadly remind Darling about marginality and suffering in Zimbabwe. This articulation succeeds in revealing the contradictions and inconsistencies related to her assumed home. The ambiguities surrounding the notion of home are more profound because it is neither a place of affection nor a physical place any more. This further complicates the notion of original and permanent roots.

It is also not surprising that Darling has no spiritual attachment to her homeland. Both Christian prophets and African traditional healers are criminalised. The myth of heaven and its glory are both unattractive to Darling. It seems Christianity is used to divert sufferers from the harsh realities of the contemporary universe and its debilitating conditions. The African tradition and Christianity have become corrupt practices of exploiting desperate poor people hence, Darling is detached from both. Interestingly, even Chikwava’s pro-Mugabe protagonist is politically exploited by ZANU PF. His escape to London ironically heightens the discomfort represented by the Zimbabwean state.

We can also interpret mental illness and depression as evidence of a shattering sense of being unhomed. Bornfree’s mother gets mad after her son was ruthlessly killed by ZANU PF supporters. Another character, Prince, runs off to America after being tortured by ZANU PF but starts talking to himself and, sometimes, “yells and screams” (Bulawayo, p. 159). He sustains scorched arms and scars through ZANU PF’s torture ironically called “forgiveness”. These cases amplify social and economic fragility that ultimately leads to mental breakdown. We note that “speaking to power” in Zimbabwe is a risky move. Most essentially, belonging to the nation space is highly regulated by ZANU PF.

Yet, it should be noted that shedding national identity is also very difficult and complicated for immigrants since they are interrogated on where they come from:

And when they asked us where we were from, we exchanged glances and smiled with shyness of child brides. They said Africa? We nodded yes, what part of Africa? We smiled. Is it where the old president rigged elections? (Bulawayo, p. 238).

The above extract makes a compelling point about the ineluctable homeland, which always recuperates images of pain and scandal. On the other hand, the host societies do not offer a sense of being homed: in asking the questions they do, the hosts enhance the sense of being outsiders. They magnify the pain of being led by a geriatric, who clings to power at whatever cost. The visitors are only definable by who the ruler is: their identities emerge from the concentric ring of power and bitterness. The following citations lead to such interpretation. Immigrants’ continuous search of “home” is captured when Darling says, “in America, roads are like the devil’s hands, like God’s love, reaching all over, just the sad thing is, they won’t really take me home” (Bulawayo, p. 124). She continues to live between the two countries as evident in her mental flights to Paradise back in Zimbabwe:

If you come here, where I am sitting and look outside the window, you will not see any men seated under a blooming jacaranda playing draughts – you will not see anyone playing
country-game or chasing after fire ants. Some things happen only in my country, and this here is not my country (Bulawayo, p. 147).

In addition, immigrants in America “eat like pigs, like wolves, like dignitaries, like vultures, like stray dogs, like monsters” (p. 239). This extract conveys a complex mixture of images of hunger, un/belonging and unfamiliarity, which become problematic metaphors of origin, belonging and identification. Our attention is drawn to the dynamics of belonging. For the immigrants, belonging is defined and monitored by those perceived as insiders. Darling’s lines of flight are, sometimes, triggered by the smell of guavas from home and her native language, Ndebele, that loosens “the tongues”. This again illuminates a number of challenges with regard to perceptions of home. This is particularly interesting if we consider that post-2000 Zimbabwean society is not a homely space for many ordinary people like Darling. It is characterised by hunger, poverty, political and racial antagonism and, therefore, ceases to be a place of residence. Significantly, the “home” is not idealised but, rather, used to present a realistic version of “un-homed” citizens (Muchemwa, 2013). The image of a ruined country is a powerful metaphor to highlight the unhomeliness of the post-2000 Zimbabwean society.

Gilroy’s (1993) tropes of roots and routes are useful for further debating the shifting meanings of belonging, home and origin. The homophones are useful spatial metaphors where roots are associated with parochialism and conservatism whereas, routes refers to mobility, uprooting, new directions and re-rooting. Routes is relevant in debating the various identification trajectories taken by migrants because it privileges mobility and discovery. Gilroy asserts that roots and routes complement each other in shaping identity. In the same vein, Clifford (1997) explains that roots and routes are not necessarily opposed but rather intertwined. These ideas complement the rhizomatic framework where home for the migrant characters is not a fixed location since it remains an abstract construct. The unreal loyalties of Tshaka Zulu in We Need New Names and the unnamed protagonist in Harare North, make them live outside both the cultural and national spaces. They alienate themselves by failing to negotiate identities in new environments. Gustafson (2001: 668) states that “today, social scientists are skeptical about the primacy of place and space attachment, as people seem to be increasingly mobile, and social relations and other everyday practices are disentangled from physical locations”. Although both roots and routes are part of the modern ways of identification, they offer new conceptualisations of identity and belonging in contemporary times. The narratives reveal a tragic searching for home. For Tshaka Zulu, home is reconstructed and reimagined through a set of pictures, Ndebele cultural dressing and dances, but this imaginary home is just a psychological construct. His frustration leads him to insanity. His quest for safety, stability and fixity leads to destructive resistance opposed to bi-lingual and bi-cultural identity. Thus, the novel suggests negotiating transnational identity matrices in transcultural spaces as a fundamental survival strategy.

In Welcome to Our Hillbrow, exclusionary narratives are used to discriminate against aliens, foreigners or Mkwerekwere. Such narratives are projected in both political and social practices. Social injustices are informed by xenophobic views, such as “Hillbrow used to be fine until the Nigerians came” (Mpe, p. 118). The indelible experience of African immigrants is dreadful because “makwekwere” do not enjoy legal protection in post-apartheid society since they have to bribe some police officers to escape deportation and harassment in Hillbrow. However, South Africa is a troubled “home” for both immigrants and the perceived insiders and locals. Both Johannesburg and Tiragalong village tragically alienate “insiders and outsiders”, who ironically, have become “wanderers” in Hillbrow. Perhaps, it is worth noting that one of the most enduring street names in Hillbrow is called “Wanderers Street”. The novel offers a complex picture of cultural, gender and racial prejudices, which are all contested. The country’s un-homeliness is caused by apartheid legacies of racial tension, segregation, social inequalities and violence. These antagonisms are fomented by a new exclusionary sensibility that stokes xenophobic sentiments and callous attacks on foreigners. The title of the novel conveys this desire for a nation space that “welcomes” all and embraces new forms of interactions among humanity; the title is, in itself, a counter-discursive
strategy that privileges warmth and embrace rather than the antagonism of hatred of the alien. Together, the novels present a compelling way to think about the danger of absolutism and exclusionary spaces. The notions of identity and belonging have become precarious, ambivalent and complex in a modernity where the African sojourner is projected as vermin and encroaching to foul the sanity and rainbowism of South Africa.

6. Racism and racing identities
An examination of the selected novels shows that race and identity are closely linked. The insider/outside binaries and various manifestations of racism are conveyed through the way in which immigrants are treated in America and the United Kingdom. The foreigners experience punctuate agony.

Masemola (2014) regards America as a zone of exception and non-being for black people. He comments on Obama’s rhetoric of a non—racial American society and points out the challenges of erasing the race marker. Masemola cites the shooting of Trayvon Martin as telling evidence of “stand your ground policing”, which is more visible in the present-day racialised discourse of Donald Trump and his administration. Masemola argues that racism hides behind the cloak of colourblindness and other racial myths. He draws attention to the disjunction and inconsistencies between political rhetoric and racing reality. Politicians’ paradoxical behaviour could also be discerned from Mnangagwa’s rhetorical sayings in the present Zimbabwe, where he scandalously claims that ‘The voice of the people is the voice of God’, and ‘I am as soft as wool; a listening president.’ Contrary to this empty rhetoric, when ordinary people actually “voiced” their grievances through demonstrations in August 2018 and January 2019, the Zimbabwean army and police descended on them and used live ammunition to silence the “voice of God”.

The narrative is controlled and regulated because blacks are regarded as a potential threat to European society. African migrants are viewed as stereotypes and dehumanised in these “zones of non-being” (Fanon, 1963). There are always the dividing lines between the frontiers of these humanities in America. “Americans do not have exactly a smile-smile but just a brief baring of teeth” (Bulawayo, p. 174). In both British and American societies, immigrants are turned into Fanon’s “the wretched of the earth” by taking the demeaning jobs of cleaning “kaka (faeces) off some white wrinkled old man” (p. 15). The tragic effects of racism make immigrants “sit with one buttock” and “speak in whispers” (Bulawayo, p. 146) reflecting the total discomfort in these new places. Siziba (2017) claims that the namelessness of Chikwava’s protagonist foregrounds the invisibility of African immigrants in London so ably dramatised in Ralph Ellison’s The Invisible Man.

It should be noted that whiteness is sanitised in a bid to maintain racial identities constructed during colonialism. The English society in London thinks Africans from the west bring AIDS and other “dirty illnesses” to this centre of human civilisation. It is unfortunate that media reports in South Africa also claim that “AIDS’s travel route into Johannesburg was through Makwerekwere and Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which these Makwerekwere basked” (Mpe, p. 4). However, Refilwe contests such racial prejudices when she mentions that “there were white prostitutes and white criminals who sold drugs to street children in Hillbrow” (Mpe, p. 103). It is clear that the imperial voyages from Africa to Europe were never restricted through border policing and institutionalised racial injustices. Ironically, one’s positioning in the “mother of human civilisation” is definable by the particularities of race, border policing and an elaborate surveillance machinery. This view exposes an ironic picture about the English society. White civilisation parades serious limitations. The English world is as ignorant as the uneducated protagonist in Harare North, who thinks being HIV negative means one has AIDS. Such similarity is not a mere coincidence but a mockery of the fallacious view that Europe is the “origin” of human knowledge and literacy. The English society’s false claims and exclusionary perceptions are challenged in this narrative. In rhizomatic theory, such racial binary oppositions are contested. The novels contend that intercultural and interracial relations are possible lines of human connection. Refilwe and her Nigerian lover offer a humanised challenge to predertermined categories in as much as the marriage
between a white American woman and a black Zimbabwean in We Need New Names reconstructs a racial and continental rhizome.

The narratives also contest “naturalised” derogatory representations of Africa. African lives are framed by hunger, disease, poverty, misery, suffering and violence. The BBC journalists in Zimbabwe captured Bornfree’s funeral with the sole intention to endorse Eurocentric images of “barbaric and violent” Africans. Ironically, both America and Britain have their share of violence because there are “band-bang of gunshots in the neighbourhood and a woman kills her children in a bathtub” ( Bulawayo, p. 188). The passage speaks about persistent Eurocentric mis/representation of the African world. Commenting on South African race relations, Patterson (2017) notes that the promises of freedom and social cohesion enshrined in the notion of the “rainbow nation”, are interrogated in post-apartheid novels because racial apartness, hate and inequalities still prevail. Similarly, Milazzo (2013) asserts that in post-apartheid society, blackness [or whiteness] is a site of struggle supporting the claim that South Africa has remained a divided land. Yet, the narratives undermine racial discriminatory categories and suggest alternative relations that call for solidarity.

This is in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic model. From a rhizomatic perspective, heterogeneity is a fundamental quality of humanity. In Mpe’s novel, the human world is brought together. Heathrow, Lagos and Hillbrow are part of “Our World” (p. 13). The capitalisation of the pronoun “Our” is suggestive of co-ownership of shared beliefs and values across humanity (Putter, 2012). However, it is essential to note the complexity of breaking down long-held linguistic, cultural and racial paradigms.

7. Complex feminine and masculine identities

The selected narratives show vexed gender identities that are increasingly becoming complex, hazy and problematic in contemporary times. The ambivalence surrounding such identities emanate from transformation in the cultural, political and social realms. Mkandla (2015) observes that contemporary Zimbabwean literature reveals that men find it difficult to sustain the normative masculine roles in a changing socio-economic environment. According to Mkandla (2015), the recent multiple economic and political crises in Zimbabwe have undermined the legitimacy of masculine power. Women take “breadwinner” roles, which reterritorialise gender identities. Remaining a “man” within the confines of traditional masculinity is impossible in harsh economic conditions; this fluidity paves way for new gender flights. This, ultimately, modifies and complicates the hegemonic male authority. Women assert their presence in society by actively participating in domains previously dominated by males, fostering and inventing new gender relations. These novels interrupt fixed strictures as new paths are formulated and normative paths collapse to blur the gender borders. Apparently, phallocentric behaviours and attitudes are destabilised by rhizomatic ruptures that engender new possibilities of gender conceptualisations. Interestingly, the novels expose the fallacy of stable gender binaries since these are subject to changing social conditions. For Deleuze (1993), a rhizome is constantly shifting or in motion, allowing new formations. In the same vein, gender relations are reconfigured in the process of becoming.

The changing social and economic contexts impacted on gender identities. In We Need New Names, Darling’s mother indulges in sex with an unknown lover who visits her during the nights. The husband has abandoned her, paving way for new sexual connections. Similarly, in Harare North, Sekai cheats on Paul and the narrator sympathises with the latter for “pounding front bum that have already been thief by this pointy-headed Rasputin” (Bulawayo p. 102). This sexual act subverts and undermines patriarchal norms. The legitimacy of patriarchal power is threatened by the shifting configurations of masculinities. Darling’s father is desperate to remain a “man” in the face of economic hardships. This is telling indictment of masculinity in crisis. He is a university graduate but his education does not turn him into a productive individual contributing to the survival processes expected from a male figure. He is frustrated and ultimately migrates to South Africa. It seems that his dreams of a better life were shattered in the diaspora where he ended up being infected by HIV. He feels emasculated by his failure to provide for the family. He only returns to the family when he succumbs to AIDS. He had kept
his family in the dark about his migrant condition specifically because of his slighted and diminished male ego. Chitando (2016: 117) rightly notes that in post-2000 Zimbabwean society, “men are castrated by both the economy and the state”.

The narratives also expose and attack the excesses of masculinity. In Harare North, the economically disempowered male character in desperation joins the “Green Bombers”, terrorising perceived “enemies of the state”. In one of the most telling passages, the narrator says:

Green Bombers only look for enemies of the state (...) [They are] there to smoke them (...) Comrade Mugabe is powerful wind, he can blow snake out of tall grass like it is a piece of paper (Chikwava, p. 8).

The main character in Harare North is sexually abused in prison. He is thus, metaphorically womanised. He epitomises an exploited and subordinated masculinity. Sadly, he feels a “man” in his execution of violent acts. His narrow-mindedness is reflected when he takes pride in the dance of violence enacted by “the boys of jackal breed”, which refers to ZANU PF’s youth militia terrorising perceived opposition party members. He recalls, “Those days when we go to Goromonzi because of them British-sponsored MDC party supporters. They were crawling on and under every rock, man, even beating up some of our supporters” (Chikwava, p. 180). Although he comes from the impoverished class in Zimbabwe, he is uncritical in his participation in this state-sponsored orgy of violence:

If you is back home leading a 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 and walk away when no one else want to give you graft in the country even if you is prepared to become tea boy (Chikwava, 2009 p. 17).

The passage is provocative and remarkable in the sense that the speaker ironically occupies a position of liminality yet, he disregards the fact that his poverty is a result of Mugabe’s poor administration of the country. He even plans to burn down Paul and Sekai’s house in London for calling Mugabe a “stubborn old donkey” (Chikwava, p. 17). He intends to raise money in order to perform a cultural ritual for his late mother. The “umbiyiso”, which is a cultural spiritual appeasement, can be interpreted as a metaphor for spiritual exorcism. He desires to forge a new dignified male identity different from that of the offender, who has committed untold crimes against humanity. It could mean that his dead mother serves as metonymy of the offended people: if he appeases her spirit, then, he would have exorcised the demons of the past and this would allow him the recuperation that he so desperately needs.

Such undesirable masculinities are also presented through Chipo’s grandfather and Prophet Bitchington Mborro, who sexually abuses female characters. Hove (2014) observes that the emasculated and subordinated masculinities perform rehearsed and institutionalised maleness on women’s bodies. Such men believe in their phallic strength to impose and assert themselves. This behaviour is condemned by Darling and her friends through the graffiti representations of the destructive “phallus”. The destructive phallus is more visible if we consider the fact that children from Paradise slum live in squalid conditions created by Robert Mugabe’s male-dominated administration.

We can also interrogate the gender identities constructed by migrants. Black African masculinities in diasporic spaces struggle to adjust to new cultural environments. Male characters feel overburdened by anxiety and the enveloping sense of loss. They want to hold on to patriarchal practices and ideologies. For example, Kojo, a Ghanaian, dictates to Fostalina, his partner in America, the definitive duties of a wife. He states, “in my country, wives actually cook hot meals every-day for their husbands and children” (p. 156). However, Fostalina resists this and immediately reminds him that they are living in America not Africa: “Yes, in your country maybe, but this is
America, and *nxa ubonaengani ubelhoyi lapha manje uzotshetshela ngereza faname!* [and do you think that you have a servant here. You will scrape your bum if you use a razor blade to wipe your arse, my boy] (Bulawayo, p. 156).

In addition, Fostalina’s new “slim” body offends Kajo who desires a “fleshy African woman”. Kajo laments, “Look at you, bones, bones, bones (...) there is actually nothing African about a woman with no thighs, no hips, no belly, no behind” (Bulawayo, p. 134). The body semiotics projects female resistance and the shifting power dynamics. The body becomes an inscription of new gender identities. The new socio-cultural context provides alternative lines of flight for female gender identification. Furthermore, both Fostalina and Sekai in *Harare North*, cheat on the partners they live with. According to the protagonist, Sekai “have turned into lapsed African” (p. 115). These women deviate and violate African cultural and patriarchal conceptualisations of the female body and its possible agency. The cultural dialogue in this diasporic context informs the formation of new gender relations. The female characters re define their sexuality, which is no longer controlled by men and this is a threat to patriarchy.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, women are denied meaningful roles. The presence of women in a male populated cityscape attracts demeaning identities. They are labeled “prostitutes”, who possess “destructive genitalia power” that brings AIDS and death. They are also viewed as a moral threat, “Hillbrowan women are loose thighted with voracious appetite—thighs in search of wandering penises” (Mpe, p. 116). Women are also viewed as sexual objects because they provide short-lived “under waist bliss”. However, men are warned to be on their guard because these “women were bound to bring disasters upon any man’s life” (Mpe, p. 44). In Tiragalang village, women are “necklaced” for witchcraft. Such representations are meant to inscribe tropes of invisibility and insignificance of women. Female gender is degraded, traumatised and stigmatised. Women’s sense of autonomy is resisted by a male dominated society. Morrell (2001:18) observes that “South Africa, until recently, was a man’s country. Power was exercised publicly and politically by men.” However, the selected narratives expose the limitations of such gender discrimination.

8. Citizenship and national identification

Probyn, (1996:19) insightfully explains that “belonging is a desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places or models of being, and ways in which individuals and groups are caught with wanting to belong, wanting to become”. The narratives examined in this article reveal that being a “citizen” of a particular country is complicated, considering the fact that citizenship is related to obligations and rights that should be enjoyed within the cartography of a state. We also observe that parameters, which define citizenship, are dictated by those who possess power.

In Zimbabwe, political affiliation is an essential determinant for national identity and a sense of belonging. Those who are politically “incorrect”, occupy a position of liminality and their sense of belonging is perilous and precarious. In *We Need New Names*, Bornfree is killed by ZANU PF supporters for being a member of the “Change people”. “Citizens” are violently killed for their political affiliations. Exclusionary perceptions of citizenship are emphasised. The nation space is a site of exclusion and discrimination and certain populations are excluded. Those labeled enemies of the state become “unwelcome citizens” and pushed to the margins of the society. The selected narratives reveal that the post-2000 Zimbabwe is a nation which disregards principles of justice and good governance. The ineffable grief of the “citizens” is summarised by the “kaka” trope, which embodies everything that is undesirable, reeking of the scatological that is primed and articulated so intensely in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

We also note that the second generation of migrant children in America is disconnected from any sense of national identity, as evident in the following extract. The narrator in Bulawayo’s novel bemoans:

> When our children were old enough and we told them about our country, they did not beg us for stories of the land we had left behind. They went to their computers and Googled,
googled and googled. When they got off, they looked at us with something between pity and horror and said, Jeez, you really come from there? (Bulawayo, p. 249).

A pro-Mugabe riotous mob destroys house property owned by a white couple in Budapest because “Africa is for Africans.” This is what Masemola (2014) calls a return of race. Stressing local identities disregards new ways of identification and is against bringing the human family together. Clearly, in Africa, race has become a feasible political tool used by failing governments to brainwash ordinary people. Similarly, the colonial past and racial card are used to divide the people and weaken opposition to the monolithic one party state in Zimbabwe. We note a selective historiography and memory that is reconstructed by ZANU PF to suit its political agenda thereby, creating contested and monolithic versions of history. Multiple failures of the government are deliberately and conveniently forgotten because the regime always blames the “West”. Clearly, national identities and nationhood are defined by the powerful ruling party (Mavengano & Hove, 2019). The “country game” played by children in We Need New Names, conveys the ineffable desire to change national identities. Mavengano and Hove further posit that the country game also criticises and shows the limits of fixed national identities. Children reject countries that are characterised by hunger, wars, poverty and other undesirable traits and choose developed nations with the potential of offering comfort and stability.

In Mpe’s text, the problematic conception of nationhood is captured in the following citations: “Your cousin insisted that people should remain in their own countries (...) South Africa has too many problems of its own” (Mpe, p. 20). In another passage, the narrator says, “Makwerekwere convenient scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in people’s lives” (p. 118). Even the white superintendent in Van der Merwe street holds makwerekwere responsible for “crime and grime in Hillbrow”(p. 17). Yet, Refentse argues, “many of the makwerekwere you accuse of this and that are no different to us—sojourners in search of greener pastures” (p. 18). Also, the South African government’s double standards and lack of political commitment is under a sharp surveillant gaze in the following evidence:

No one seemed to care that the treatment of the makwerekwere by the police and lack of sympathy from the influential Department of Home Affairs, ran contrary to the human rights clauses detailed in the new Constitution of the country. Ambiguities, paradoxes, ironies – the stuff of our South African and Makwerekwere lives (Mpe, p. 23).

Significantly, in Welcome to our Hillbrow, changing human relationships are portrayed as a collective responsibility that requires effort from Hillbrowians, Alexandrans, Johannesburgers and Oxfordians (p, 122). Together, these people form a rhizomatic constellation without prejudice against women and “lekwerekwere”. Fundamentally, the narrative generates and sustains dialogues between different geographical places, different cultures and different languages.

9. Concluding remarks
Stereotypes and self—other traditions have a lasting and debilitating effect on linguo-cultural, economic and political relationships and identity construction as indicated in all the three fictive texts analysed in this study. It is thus, logical to conclude that the Southern fictive landscape in contemporary times, as shown in the texts, struggle to proffer new horizons of possibilities in identity representation. Nevertheless, Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic framework suggests new human understandings. In light of the foregoing, it is appropriate to say that the subject of identity is multifaceted and several identities are at play in each lived space and moment and the article has stressed instability and fluidity of contemporary identities. All the identity categories discussed above are sites of interrogation, trouble and contestation of established epistemologies. Migration, as a line of flight, generates new meanings and relationships. This article does not present any claim of a single stable identity, but rather, offers possible lines of flight in the ever-changing complex web of identification in a precarious, nebulous and fluid modernity. Since totalising knowledge is frowned upon from a rhizomatic theory, this article acknowledges that the ideas raised here are temporary and subject to more connections that lead to de/reterritorialisation. There are numerous possible lines of flight in
the academic rhizome that could be exploited for more challenging insights. All the three texts examined in this article, reflect a desire to change the current human plight and create a different humanity defined by collectivity and connectivity.

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