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Narrating a Nation Left Behind: The Innocent Child in Two Novels of Zimbabwe

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*Child narrators and protagonists have been a recurring feature of much of the literature produced in and of Zimbabwe since independence 1980. Their experiences of growing up have often been seen as mirroring that of the nation itself, such as in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *We Need New Names* (2013), depicting childhood as inherently political and directly involved in social and historical transition. This article asks what happens when the child is not an explicit embodiment of the nation's growth and development through painful historical phases, and examines the child narrator in *The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam* (2008) by Lauren Liebenberg and *Peace and Conflict* (2014) by Irene Sabatini. Instead of being placed centre stage in the midst of turbulence, war and social change, the child narrator in Sabatini's novel remains at the periphery of repressive politics, acting as a spectator, commentator and investigator. Liebenberg's narrator is more politically informed than Sabatini's, and family tragedy converges with the end of white rule in Rhodesia. Both narrators depict the disconnect between past, present and future through their innocence and naivety. This position enables an instructive approach in the novels to the nation's past and present. Through their separate trajectories, the novels channel a nation left behind, stagnant in its repressive measures and unable to move forward. Instead of representing the nation and its development, the child narrators in the two novels suggest that the colonial past and violent present of Zimbabwe cannot be reconciled.*

Keywords: child narrator; innocence; Zimbabwe; childhood; repression; past; present

Child narrators and protagonists have been a recurring feature of Zimbabwean writing in the last few decades.¹ Novels such as *Nervous Conditions*, *We Need New Names*, *Unfeeling* and *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird*² all centre on child or adolescent protagonists who struggle to make sense of complex problems relating to the nation and its transformational periods. Central themes in the texts concern the end of white rule,³ the violent land reform programme at the turn of the new millennium⁴ and political and social instability in Robert

1 Child protagonists also feature frequently in literature from other African locations, such as Nigerian novels. See, for example, M. Hron, 'Ora na-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels', *Research in African Literatures*, 39, 2 (2008), pp. 27–48.

2 T. Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Banbury, Ayebia Clarke, 2004 [1988]); N. Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* (London, Vintage, 2013); I. Holding, *Unfeeling* (London, Pocket Books, 2006 [2005]); A. Eames, *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* (London, Vintage, 2012 [2011]).

3 Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*.

4 Holding, *Unfeeling*; Eames, *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird*.

Mugabe's Zimbabwe.⁵ Hence the novels can be argued to comment directly on matters relating to the state of the nation. This article examines two recent novels, *Peace and Conflict* and *The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam* (henceforth *Delights*), in which the child narrators go beyond representing and embodying the developing independent nation.⁶ Instead, innocence emerges as a central theme through which both stories are told.

In *Peace and Conflict*, innocence and goodness prevail through Robert, the narrator, and act as counterforces to the repressive state of Zimbabwe, which is suggested to hold no future for its citizens. Nyree in *Delights* embodies a more politically informed perspective, and her innocence along with the Rhodesian era both come to a brutal end in the novel. Thus innocence is tied in with the nation's past, present and future, and the figure of the child no longer represents the developing nation and its troubles but becomes an independent commentator. The role of the child narrator in Zimbabwean writing has not been previously examined from this perspective, and the two novels in focus have also received relatively little scholarly attention.⁷ This article particularly focuses on the innocence and naivety of the two narrators, on the precocious child whose voice balances between being overtly instructive on the one hand and profoundly helpless, in need of protection and guidance, on the other. The argument is that it is precisely this balancing act that enables the novels to comment on the political past and present of Zimbabwe and to show how the two cannot be reconciled.

The sheer number of Zimbabwe-related novels featuring child narrators suggests that authors have deemed the child protagonist the most effective medium for commenting on and critiquing past and present developments, even to the point of it becoming an 'obsession with childhoods/children in a literature situated in a history of anti- and post-colonial resistance and violence'.⁸ However, a distinction needs to be made between 'protagonist' and 'narrator'. The narrator in both novels examined here tell the story from a first-person perspective rather than from omniscience. This is my central starting point. The children in the two novels are examined as first-person narrators, as their points of view shape the story. The first-person narrator has often been deemed unreliable,⁹ and Per Krogh Hansen argues the following: '[i]n most cases the reader's attempt to interpret is left unresolved, if not downrightly rejected, by the text itself'.¹⁰ This is an important observation and, as the subsequent analysis shows, the novels by Sabatini and Liebenberg to some extent contradict this as they build on the gap between the limited knowledge of the child narrators and the deeper insight of the adult reader, encouraging readers to read between the lines. The precocious child narrators are neither oblivious to nor fully immersed in ongoing political upheavals, placing them neatly on the sidelines, from which they proceed to make forceful commentary on Zimbabwe's past and present, chastising the nation and its repressive politics.

The child narrators in *Peace and Conflict* and *Delights* are ten-year-old Robert and almost-nine-year-old Nyree, whose first-person narratives reveal joys and immediacies of

5 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*.

6 I. Sabatini, *Peace and Conflict* (London, Corsair, 2014); L. Liebenberg, *The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam* (London, Virago, 2009 [2008]).

7 An exception is A.R. Musvoto, 'Narrating the Country: A Rhodesian Girl's Account of the Colony', *Commonwealth Youth and Development*, 11, 1 (2013), pp. 70–77.

8 R. Muponde, *Some Kinds of Childhood: Images of History and Resistance in Zimbabwean Literature* (Trenton, Africa World Press, 2015).

9 See, for example, E. D'hoker and G. Martens (eds), *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

10 P.K. Hansen, 'First Person, Present Tense. Authorial Presence and Unreliable Narration in Simultaneous Narration', in D'hoker and Martens (eds), *Narrative Unreliability*, pp. 317–38.

childhood but also undercurrents of danger and darkness. Robert lives in Geneva, Switzerland, with his Italian–Zimbabwean family and attempts to solve the mystery surrounding his neighbour, Monsieur Renoir, who turns out to be a British citizen who fought against the Mau Mau in Kenya. Another subplot concerns Robert’s aunt, who is jailed and tortured by the Zimbabwean government. Nyree, on the other hand, explores life together with her sister Cia on their parents’ Rhodesian farm during the war that erupted after the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI). Things change drastically when their cousin Ronin comes to live with them, wreaking havoc on the farm and being openly racist towards the farm workers. The novel ends in tragedy when Ronin chases the two girls through the forest, eventually causing Cia to fall into a stream and drown. Despite these turns of events, neither novel puts the narrators in harm’s way as explicitly as is done, for example, in *We Need New Names* or *Unfeeling*. The children at the centre of Bulawayo’s novel have no way of escaping poverty and dispossession. The 16-year-old male protagonist in *Unfeeling*, for his part, tries to come to terms with the unimaginable atrocities of which his family became victim during the land reform. This sets *Peace and Conflict* and *Delights* apart from these other recent representations of childhood, enabling new views of the role of the child narrator’s innocence, and also through depictions of white childhood as represented in *Delights*.

Previous representations of childhood have been examined by Robert Muponde, among others, who has published extensively on the figure of the child in Zimbabwean writing. He defines a number of Zimbabwean novels about children and childhood as ‘versions of the category of the novel of becoming’ that portray childhood as ‘an ideology of subversive writing’.¹¹ Neither *Delights* nor *Peace and Conflict* fit into such a category, as they cannot easily be read as being symbolic of the ‘child-nation’.¹² Thus, instead of depicting childhood as an embodiment of a nation in the making, both novels examined here portray a nation stagnant in its repressive measures and unable to move forward. This article thus sets out to explore what happens when the child is not an explicit representation of the nation’s fragile future, an embodiment of growth and development through painful historical phases, but instead used to depict the disconnect between past, present and future.

The Child Narrator

Irene Sabatini’s first novel, *The Boy Next Door*, and her later work *An Act of Defiance* explicitly take issue with repressive politics and violence in Zimbabwe, whereas *Peace and Conflict* is set in Switzerland in 2012.¹³ Thus the novel belongs to the Mugabe era even though the perspective is not from within Zimbabwe. Throughout the story, Zimbabwe remains a mere backdrop, subtly brought into the narrative from time to time. The family had visited Zimbabwe three times, and Robert had to be ‘deprogrammed’ so that he would not by mistake, for example, call the president ‘Bob the Butternut’: ‘[w]e’re going to Zimbabwe again for the summer holidays, if they don’t have elections then. People get killed during elections in Zimbabwe because Bob the Butternut wants to rule for ever. It’s not a democracy like Switzerland’.¹⁴ The voice of the precocious child emerges in these lines and sets the tone for the entire novel. The difference between Zimbabwe and Switzerland is made explicit, and oppression is mainly expressed through the subplot concerning Aunty Delphia, who is jailed, tortured and raped by people connected with the

11 Muponde, *Some Kinds of Childhood*, p. 165.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

13 I. Sabatini, *The Boy Next Door* (London, Sceptre, 2010 [2009]); I. Sabatini, *An Act of Defiance* (London, Indigo Press, 2020); Sabatini, *Peace and Conflict*, p. 137.

14 Sabatini, *Peace and Conflict*, pp. 21, 22.

Zimbabwean government. Robert's own encounters with colonial oppression relate to Monsieur Renoir, the neighbour whose past as a police officer in Kenya during Mau Mau is later revealed.¹⁵ His actions, when trying to coerce villagers into giving up Mau Mau sympathisers, caused the death of a young boy.¹⁶ The two storylines thus reveal repressive politics in different locations and eras, and Robert becomes the commentator observing both from his position of temporal and geographical safety.

While Sabatini's approach to the colonial past concerns Kenya and is indirectly referred to through Monsieur Renoir's story, which is gradually revealed throughout the novel, Lauren Liebenberg offers direct access to white Rhodesia through her narrator. Addressing the past through the voice of a child has been a recurring topic not only in novels but also in a number of memoirs connected with Zimbabwe, starting with the first volume of Doris Lessing's autobiography, *Under My Skin*.¹⁷ Other memoirs published in recent decades include Peter Godwin's *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa*, Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, Wendy Kann's *Casting with a Fragile Thread* and Lauren St John's *Rainbow's End*.¹⁸ All of these white writers' memoirs also end with the author leaving Zimbabwe. Toward the end of Liebenberg's novel, Nyree's family leaves too, marking the end of white rule. Thus the story of Nyree functions as a manifestation not only of Rhodesia but also of the transition to independence, as the child's perspective is replaced by a more mature, knowing narrator.

The description of white childhood through Nyree's and Cia's adventures in *Delights* bears an uncanny resemblance to Fuller's childhood memoir, drawing on similar imagery and discourse. Fuller grew up on a succession of farms in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia, and the family struggled to make ends meet. The similarities between the two texts are manifested through the absent father participating in the raging civil war, the presence of black servants and farm workers, and the explicit indoctrination of the children into white beliefs and politics. Liebenberg writes: 'Dad is a hero and a stranger. He goes away for long, long stretches of time – we hardly notice he's gone, so used are we to his not being there – because he has to fight the Terrs'.¹⁹ The girls are no strangers to colonial violence and warfare, emphasising the precocious voice of Nyree, who is aware of the ongoing war but lacks insight into the racialised politics that led to the civil conflict.

The two novels under scrutiny in this article offer somewhat different versions of the child narrator. Sabatini allows for the entire novel to be told from Robert's perspective, whereas a more mature voice can be detected from time to time in *Delights*, and it is also stated from the outset of the novel that the story is based on memories of a presumably adult person reminiscing about their childhood and Rhodesia: '[i]t was so long ago, though, and I was only a child. I wonder how much of what I remember is the truth. What I do remember is that once he came a kind of madness bloomed in our garden of innocence'.²⁰ 'He' here refers to Ronin, cousin of the two girls. The implications of such slippages between child and adult narrator are significant, particularly as the novel deals with white Rhodesia and its perpetuation of white rule. The direct reference to innocence emphasises this, as the 'garden of innocence'²¹ implies a paradisiac setting for white children in Rhodesia, but, as *Delights*

15 *Ibid.*, p. 342.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 345.

17 D. Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949* (London, Flamingo, 1995 [1994]).

18 P. Godwin, *Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa* (London, Picador, 1996); A. Fuller, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (London, Picador, 2002); W. Kann, *Casting with a Fragile Thread: A Story of Sisters and Africa* (New York, Picador, 2006); L. St John, *Rainbow's End: A Memoir of Childhood, War and an African Farm* (New York, Scribner, 2007).

19 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 26.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

21 Liebenberg's later novel is also a kind of coming-of-age story where innocence plays a central role. See L. Liebenberg, *The West Rand Jive Cats Boxing Club* (London, Virago Press, 2011 [2010]).

shows through Ronin's brutality and the end of white rule, innocence is a mere illusion. The symbolic value of and the expectations placed on representations of childhood rely partly on the innocence of children, on their helplessness in an adult world,²² and this also has a lot to do with the voice in which the story is told.

The discrepancy between the more knowledgeable, worldly child (Nyree) and the truly innocent child (Robert) therefore mirrors the gap between past and present Zimbabwe. Nyree with her insight and hindsight is able to look further and predict the tragedy to come when compared to Robert, who is fully rooted in the non-Zimbabwean, safe present. The use of child narrators and protagonists to address sensitive and difficult political issues has been studied by, among others, Robyn Wilkinson, whose main hypothesis concerning *We Need New Names*, a novel that has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, offers the insight that such an approach provides a way to critique national politics and to address topics that may otherwise be too complex and sensitive.²³ A similar statement is made by Susan Mann, who argues the following: '[t]he child itself represents the socially, and often culturally, blank slate, the uncontaminated potential in a context that is often loaded, guiding the reader to gauge the justness of a situation, social or otherwise. In many instances, although the language is childlike, the issues are not'.²⁴ This rings true for both novels examined here, although Liebenberg's novel is written in a somewhat less childlike language when compared to *Peace and Conflict*. The sense of foreboding present throughout the novel can be connected with its temporal dimension, as it is set in the colonial past. *Peace and Conflict*, for its part, was written before the end of President Mugabe's rule. Thus it emerged from the period on which it comments. Such a perspective requires a less knowledgeable narrator, as no hindsight or foreboding is possible. Of the two narrators examined, only Robert can be said to represent a 'blank slate' and 'uncontaminated potential', as he is aware of bad things happening in Zimbabwe but is not immersed in them or forced to confront them. Nyree, on the other hand, senses dark forces at play from the beginning: 'I am shadowed, too, by foreboding'.²⁵ Such insight exemplifies a slippage between child's voice and omniscient (adult) narrator, which can be detected again towards the end of *Delights*.

Robert as the innocent narrator makes evil approachable, mainly through the colonial brutalities and post-colonial oppression depicted in the novel, yet without losing a sense of urgency. After he has found out that his aunt has gone missing in Zimbabwe, Robert asks his father whether she is going to be tortured: 'I knew all about war and terror and torture, all the stuff the bad guys did. I was happy that I lived in Switzerland'.²⁶ Again, the separation and profound difference between Zimbabwe and Switzerland is made clear. Robert's knowledge of the topics comes from a course called 'Peace and Conflict' that he took at school, emphasising the childish naivety of his comment. This is further underscored when he wonders whether his aunt is scared having been arrested, concluding that she must not be as she had been in difficult situations before with the animals she worked with as a veterinarian.²⁷ Employing the child narrator in such ways in a novel for adults allows the reader 'to gauge the justness of the situation', as Mann argues. The adult reader presumably understands that Robert cannot fully comprehend what is happening to Aunty Delphia as he

22 Cook, *Symbolic Childhood*, p. 6.

23 R. Wilkinson, 'Broaching "themes too large for adult fiction": The Child Narrator in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*', *English Academy Review*, 33, 1 (2016), pp. 123–32.

24 S. Mann, 'Out of the Mouths: Voices of Children in Contemporary South African Literature', in E. Mengel and M. Borzaga (eds), *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel – Essays* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2012), p. 337.

25 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 7.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

27 *Ibid.*

makes sense of the situation through his own experiences. Such a rhetorical decision makes the political statement even more forceful, as it is not about what is being explicitly said. Aunt Delphia remains at the periphery of the story, leaving Robert protected throughout and enabling him to keep his innocence intact. A comment by David Mastey, who has examined child soldier narratives, is here relevant: '[children] are defined by an absence, or by what they are not'.²⁸ This refers to children not being adults and not possessing the skills and insights that come with adulthood. In the case of Robert, the absence is connected directly with Aunt Delphia and with what he can and cannot comprehend.

Approaching state repression in a manner that is neither graphic nor too explicit arguably makes naivety a virtue and shows that being naive is not the same as being ignorant. Mann explains that the child narrator is 'not complex enough, or sophisticated enough, to hide anything, so it tells the reader how things are in a naive and free manner'.²⁹ This enables a 'double reading for the adult to read between the lines and see the things that the child sees but may not yet fully understand'.³⁰ These notions are manifested particularly well through the fact that Aunt Delphia is raped, but Robert does not fully realise this. He overhears his mother on the phone asking if Aunt Delphia is on antiretrovirals, which indicates that she was raped.³¹ Robert later finds out on the internet what the medication is for but does not look further into HIV: 'I didn't want to read more'.³² The severity of what has happened is thus never revealed to Robert, who gets to keep his childish innocence through his own decision not to look into HIV. Such self-preserving measures seem almost exaggerated, emphasising Robert's choice to stay ignorant as more knowledge in this case would blur the lines between child and adult. This is an example of the 'double reading' suggested by Mann.³³ There is no foreboding or premonition as in *Delights*, and nothing beyond the present moment is allowed to enter the stage.

Nyree's child's voice, too, seems forced at times, for example when Ronin deliberately overturns Jobe's, the 'old houseboy',³⁴ tank for washing clothes. Cia tries to help him to clean up, feeling sorry for Jobe, but he declines any help: '[i]f it is years that have taught Jobe the futility of punishing hatefulness born of hating your own skin, or merely the futility of trying to defend yourself from a position of weakness, Cia hasn't yet learned the lessons'.³⁵ The hatefulness to which Nyree refers implies deeper insight about the racial complexities of Rhodesia than could be expected of a child, particularly when compared to her earlier statements about fighting the 'Ters'. Robert's innocence, on the other hand, also seems forced in the example about HIV. These two observations about the child narrators emphasise their instructive purpose, as the child, in one case, is aware of the racial divide in Rhodesia and realises its destructive power, and, in the other, the child makes a conscious decision to remain unaware of the potential consequences of being jailed and tortured in Zimbabwe. Both storylines seem constructed for rhetorical and instructive purposes.

The fact that Robert has a choice not to know more than he can deal with allows him to remain a child not only from a political perspective but also from a sexual point of view. Mastey talks of 'pathological naivety'³⁶ in connection to the fiction he examines, where the child protagonist struggles to understand what goes on around her. Robert is not

28 D. Mastey, 'The Adulterated Children of Child Soldier Narratives', *Research in African Literatures*, 48, 4 (2017), p. 43.

29 Mann, 'Out of the Mouths', p. 339.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 340.

31 Sabatini, *Peace and Conflict*, p. 97.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 234.

33 Mann, 'Out of the Mouths', p. 340.

34 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 95.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

36 Mastey, 'The Adulterated Children', p. 47.

pathologically naive: he is good at finding out about things on his own and enlists his friends in the process, but he borders on being excessively innocent. This seems somewhat uncharacteristic of Robert, who is very curious about his neighbour and makes a number of enquiries online in order to find out about his past. Robert not learning more about HIV is an authorial intervention aimed at keeping the child's innocence intact while presuming that the adult reader understands the purpose of antiretrovirals. Robert can go this far in the adults' world but no further. Dealing with the topic of sexual violence in such a manner is far removed from, for example, *We Need New Names*, in which one of the characters, only 11 years old, is pregnant, having been raped by her own grandfather.³⁷ Bulawayo's children have no way of escaping the lawless, uncaring world around them and are forced to cope with unimaginable hardship. The two sisters in Liebenberg's novel also seem to realise that the world they inhabit is slowly crumbling around them.

Nyree, the narrator in *Delights*, and her sister are far more attuned to historical events happening around them than Robert is, despite the relative remoteness and security of the farm. The 'glory of the UDI' is familiar to the girls,³⁸ and they go to a 'special assembly' at school to commemorate and pray for those killed when an aeroplane is shot down, particularly for 'the little kids who were innocent lambs'.³⁹ This probably refers to the plane shot down in 1978,⁴⁰ causing an outrage among the white population in particular. The reference to lambs carries significant religious and racial connotations, lambs often being pictured as white, inherently defenceless and in need of protection. The Gukurahundi is also mentioned towards the end of the novel when things have already started to unravel at the farm: '[t]here are rumours leaking out of Matabeleland in the south. Rumours about the people being massacred'.⁴¹ Jobe loses his entire family. Repression in the novel is thus exemplified from the perspective of white Rhodesia, but majority-ruled Zimbabwe's troubled future is also dealt with briefly.

Both narratives also convey distance, geographical or temporal, which is significant for the interplay between repression and innocence. This has been noted by Mann as well, who states that 'the process of fictionalization, and the addition of a child narrator or protagonist, immediately gives the writer, not necessarily the reader, an illusion of distance from the tale, perhaps even a sense of control'.⁴² In *Peace and Conflict*, the distance from Zimbabwe and its political affairs is physical as Robert lives in Geneva, a safe haven far away from any political repression and persecution. He is able to go on with his life as before even though terrible things happen to his aunt. In *Delights*, the distance is temporal, as the narrator remembers childhood and the end of white rule from an adult perspective. The indication is thus that temporal distance emerges in two separate dimensions: the personal one as the narrator looks back on early childhood, and a political/historical distance as white Rhodesia comes to an end in the novel. The innocent narrator, neither victim nor perpetrator, can bridge such distances, forming a bond between the reader and the story. The child, telling things as they see them, also gives the author the opportunity to challenge the reader and to urge them to see certain patterns and connections, guiding the reader in a particular direction.

37 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, pp. 40–41.

38 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 31.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

40 J. Mtisi, M. Nyakudya and T. Barnes, 'War in Rhodesia, 1965–1980', in B. Raftopoulos and A. Mlambo (eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2009), p. 164. See also R. Bourne, *Catastrophe: What Went Wrong in Zimbabwe?* (London, Zed Books, 2011), p. 78–9.

41 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 233.

42 Mann, 'Out of the Mouths', p. 345.

Children of Innocence

Novels for adults featuring child protagonists offer possibilities to examine the past, present and futures not only of the child itself but society which surrounds it, as the child's development often symbolises the growth of the nation. As Cook states, 'the construction of the child is always political' and 'childhood remains engaged in the world, always standing for something more than itself – for futures and pasts, for hopes and anxieties, for strengths and weaknesses'.⁴³ It is thus understandable why the child and childhood have been such prominent features in Zimbabwean (and other post-independence African) writing. As Muponde argues, the connection between the nation and the child comes to mean that the post-colonial nation is 'imagined first and for all time as a child',⁴⁴ which is still in the process of becoming a fully developed country in its own right. The inevitable question that then arises is at what point the post-colonial nation ceases to be a 'child', when it matures and grows up and how this connects with innocence. Maxwell Okolie argues that childhood in African writing connects with the past before colonisation, 'the moral and natural nobleness that Africa ever stood for',⁴⁵ which implies not innocence but a certain purity and blank slate, as argued by Mann. Hence it is no surprise that the cataclysmic events toward the end of *Delights* involve three white children, whose innocence is inevitably tarnished by the fact that they are part of colonial structures.

Constructions and representations of the child narrator as portrayed in the novels negotiate and, to a significant degree, also foreground innocence with regard to the nation's past, present and future. This stands in contrast to earlier studies of childhood in Zimbabwean and African writing, which have often seen childhood as inevitably connected with violence and resistance, as seen in Tendai Mangena's study.⁴⁶ As James, Jenks and Prout argue, '[c]hildren, then, have a natural goodness and a clarity of vision'.⁴⁷ This clarity is also discussed by Mann.⁴⁸ Emphasising innocence and the need to preserve it made children subjects and enabled them to be seen as individuals,⁴⁹ but innocence is also itself politically contested. In addition to these notions, Richard K. Priebe makes the following statement about African narratives of childhood in particular: '[a]ll African narratives of childhood are profoundly political, saying as much about countries as about individuals. Here the political is buried deeply beneath the personal'.⁵⁰ This resonates particularly well with the post-colonial condition, which has seen works such as Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Chris Abani's *GraceLand* emerge.⁵¹ However, opposing views have also been presented. Aghogho Akpome argues the following about the role of the inner worlds of children and their experiences: 'childhood and youth identities become cast, not merely as tropes of transition, but also in ontological terms as distinct

43 D.T. Cook, *Symbolic Childhood* (New York, Peter Lang, 2002), p. 6.

44 Muponde, *Some Kinds of Childhood*, p. 166.

45 M. Okolie, 'Childhood in African Literature: A Literary Perspective', in E.D. Jones and M. Jones (eds), *Childhood in African Literature: A Review* (Oxford, James Currey, 1998), p. 35.

46 Muponde too has examined the child of resistance: R. Muponde, 'Children of Resistance: Childhood, History and the Production of Nationhood in Two Zimbabwean Novels', in R. Muponde and R. Primorac (eds), *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2005), pp. 119–30.

47 A. James, C. Jenks and A. Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998), p. 13.

48 Mann, 'Out of the Mouths', p. 336.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

50 R.K. Priebe, 'Some Thoughts on the Idea of Exit in Recent Narratives African Narratives of Childhood', in S. Helgesson (ed.), *Exit: Endings and New Beginnings in Literature and Life* (Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi), p. 22.

51 M. Behr, *The Smell of Apples* (London, Abacus, 1995 [1993]); B. Okri, *The Famished Road* (London, Vintage, 2016 [1991]); C. Abani, *GraceLand* (New York, Picador, 2004).

modes of being',⁵² where the child's personal life and experiences take centre stage. The character development and inner world of Robert, largely focused on helping his aunt as well as finding out about his neighbour and the mysterious medal he gives to Robert, is far removed from Nyree's 'foreboding'. Nyree inevitably represents something of a trope of transition, but the same is not true for Robert, who occupies a space that is freer from burdens of history.

Juxtaposing these two novels in such a way enables an examination not only of descriptions and constructions of childhood where the political remains covert but also of notions of agency and seeing children as independent actors with the ability to bring about change. The optimism detectable in *Peace and Conflict* is not tied to the nation's future – at least not that of Zimbabwe, which is merely described as a place to be left behind if possible – but to innocence. Darkness and despair in *Delights* are also tied to innocence, particularly through Cia, who becomes victim of Ronin's brutalities while remaining the youngest and most innocent of the sisters. This is alluded to from the outset of the novel, with Cia being about a year younger than Nyree:⁵³ 'Cia is my sister and I am her leader'⁵⁴ implies a hierarchy between the girls based on their age difference. Cia also sometimes sleeps with Nyree in her bed, 'and we snuggle down gratefully together'.⁵⁵ The hypothesis is that Robert, unlike Nyree, gets to keep his innocence as he is part of Zimbabwe's diaspora, of those who have left and lead a good, secure life elsewhere. Nyree embodies Rhodesia, and the tragedy that the family faces comes from within, another implication that the colonial project itself could not last.

The concept of innocence in relation to white supremacy and to the constructions of certain kinds of childhoods has been discussed by, among others, Julie C. Garlen.⁵⁶ She asserts that defining innocence largely takes place 'in relation to its absence, in that we can define what it means to be innocent by identifying what we seek to protect children from'.⁵⁷ Here, *Peace and Conflict* can offer particularly interesting insights, as Robert never fully understands the extent of what his aunt has been through in prison and is protected even by his older brother George, who is only 14 but has a deeper understanding of what has happened.⁵⁸ Writing the novel from George's perspective would thus have provided a completely different story also in terms of politics and repression in Zimbabwe. Robinson argues that 'childhood innocence has been mobilized to justify the regulation of children's access to important knowledge, which has undermined their development as competent, well-informed, critical-thinking and ethical young citizens'.⁵⁹ This connects with Robert, but, as the analysis shows, he still remains a critical thinker and an ethical citizen despite not having complete understanding of what goes on around him.

Different definitions and theorisations of innocence in connection to sexuality are also relevant here, as the political dimension of innocence is comparable to the sexual one: '[c]hildhood innocence is most frequently equated to purity and naïvety, which is positioned in contrast to sexual knowledge. This innocence is perceived as natural and normal in the child, who is essentially constructed as asexual'.⁶⁰ It can be argued that the purity and

52 A. Akpome, 'Child and Youth Protagonists in Habila's *Measuring Time* and Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, 55, 2 (2018), p. 17.

53 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 4.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

56 J.C. Garlen, 'Interrogating Innocence: "Childhood" as Exclusionary Social Practice', *Childhood*, 26, 1 (2019), p. 56.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

58 Sabatini, *Peace and Conflict*, p. 2.

59 K.H. Robinson, *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood: The Contradictory Nature of Sexuality and Censorship in Children's Contemporary Lives* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013), p. 8.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

naivety outlined by Robinson, whose focus is here on western perceptions of innocence, also emerges in relation to politics and political knowledge and understanding. Innocence from a point of view of politics means that the child should be apolitical. Robert can be argued to be profoundly apolitical (and asexual, as confirmed earlier) in his innocence, but mainly because he is no longer living in Zimbabwe. Contrasting this to other novels of Zimbabwe shows that Robert is something of an exception. Both *We Need New Names* and *Unfeeling* portray child and adolescent protagonists who have no way of escaping political events and wrongdoings around them, becoming themselves fully involved in what goes on. Davey in *Unfeeling* takes it upon himself to avenge his murdered parents, and Darling in Bulawayo's novel lives immersed in poverty, deprivation and repressive politics: '[w]e are tired. Our voices are hoarse. Our faces are drained. Our weapons dangle at our sides, all bloodied. Our clothes are bloodied. The flag of our country is bloodied'.⁶¹ The collective 'we' explicitly suggests speaking for the entire nation and its dispossessed citizen, but no such political agendas surface in the novels examined in this article.

Nyree and her family, for their part, come to represent the history of Zimbabwe and the brief existence of white rule. An exploration of childhood in connection to the Zimbabwean nation and to nation-building becomes a story of defeat, not of 'heroic triumph',⁶² inevitably so, as the Rhodesian era eventually comes to an end in the novel too. The discrepancy between paradisiac Rhodesia and the brutalities of racism and war presented in works such as *Delights* and Fuller's childhood memoir indicate that depictions of childhood inevitably carry a significant amount of ambiguity, subjectivity and complexity. As Garlen states,

[t]his fantasy of childhood as a blissful epoch of care-free enchantment is a powerful social construct that scripts an expectation for what children's experiences 'should' be like and incites parental anxiety, fueled for some by the nostalgia for our remembered childhoods, and for others by the desire to protect our children from the traumas we ourselves endured.⁶³

Nostalgia emerges in *Delights* too, and this can be seen to some extent as a nostalgia for the colonial project,⁶⁴ sometimes even termed 'postcolonial nostalgia'.⁶⁵

Peace and Conflict can be argued to fall into Garlen's second category, a fantasy of childhood where children are protected from traumas, but *Delights* too shows similar tendencies, albeit not nearly as explicitly. Before his final act of terror, when Cia falls into the stream and dies, Ronin also kills the girls' dog. The girls agree never to tell anyone what happened. The following lines also suggest lack of innocence or an innocence less pure due to what has happened and also indicates Nyree's desire to protect her little sister:

[h]e fills me with fear, but it is more than that, more than just fear. The secrecy that shrouds what is between us binds us. We are intimate in a sordid way. It makes me feel soiled. I hope Cia's feelings for him are cleaner than that – just pure, clean hatred.⁶⁶

Feeling soiled gets an almost sexual connotation as Ronin's violent act against the dog becomes a secret between the children, a heavy, traumatic burden that they struggle to come to terms with. The destruction of innocence also works to highlight its importance.

61 Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, p. 143.

62 Muponde, 'Children of Resistance', p. 123.

63 Garlen, 'Interrogating Innocence', p. 55.

64 For a more detailed discussion of settler discourse, see L. Englund, 'Re-Examining Settler Discourse in Alexandra Fuller's Autobiographical Writing', *Scrutiny* 2, 23, 1 (2018), pp. 73–87.

65 See, for example, D. Walder, 'Writing, Representation, and Postcolonial Nostalgia', *Textual Practice*, 23, 6 (2009), pp. 935–46; A. Rasch, 'Postcolonial Nostalgia: The Ambiguities of White Memoirs of Zimbabwe', *History and Memory*, 30, 2 (2018), pp. 147–80.

66 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 195.

The significance of innocence is, therefore, further emphasised when it is absent. Garlen suggests that '[c]hildren born to circumstances of poverty, abuse, or discrimination are always already excluded from innocence'.⁶⁷ This rings particularly true for novels such as *We Need New Names*. This novel has been widely studied and also become controversial to some degree, with Helon Habila, for example, connecting the novel with the term 'poverty porn'.⁶⁸ The children in Bulawayo's novel live in a reality far removed from the safety of Robert's Geneva or even Nyree's Rhodesian farm. Their innocence or lack thereof conforms to Garlen's definition of children 'who were never entitled to "childhood" in the first place'.⁶⁹ Her suggestion is that, instead of focusing explicitly and exclusively on innocence, viewing childhood from a perspective of justice might be more useful. She argues that 'we have constructed silence as safety',⁷⁰ which refers to the way in which children's experiences 'that fall outside the boundaries of innocence'⁷¹ are silenced in an effort to keep them protected. A call for acknowledging the experiences of children is embedded in these notions.

Robert and Nyree as fictive characters and narrators are not silenced by adults around them but, instead, they practice self-silencing. For Robert it is the antiretrovirals and their purpose that stay partly outside his experience, and for Nyree it is not telling the full story to her parents after Cia drowned. She implicates Ronin but does not reveal that Cia 'begged me to save her, that I failed her, that I saved myself'.⁷² Nyree takes on part of the guilt for Cia's death, and this effectively ends her childhood. Instead of silence being a protective measure aimed to preserve innocence, it brings innocence to an end, but it is Nyree's choice to do so, implying agency on her part. From a contrasting point of view, Priebe argues that '[c]hildhood, both real and imagined, is a phase of possibility'.⁷³ Possibility, but not agency, is somewhat absent in the depiction of childhood in *Delights*, whereas Robert embodies both, being used as a medium by Sabatini to rebuke the repressive measures against hard-working, virtuous citizens of Zimbabwe. Innocence, too, is defined not through what it is but through what it is not. The absence implied is an absence of violence, of physical and psychological harm.

Liebenberg's novel ends with the farm being taken over by the new majority government. The transformation from the beginning of the novel has been complete, as the children explore their surroundings: 'there's nowhere but the farm'.⁷⁴ Towards the end of the novel, the tone has changed significantly: '[a]nd now we have lost it all, of course. Those are her words, Mom's, her voice crisp and brittle. It's Comrade Mugabe who's taken it'.⁷⁵ The 'of course' gives away the mature narrator, suggesting anger, irony and nostalgia. The novel's ending reflects the end of white rule, and a similar sentiment can be found in Fuller's memoir:

[o]ur farm is designated as one of those that, under the new government, may be taken away (for nothing) or bought (at whatever nominal price) by the government for the purpose of 'land redistribution'. [...] Mum grits her teeth and talks between them, so that the words are

67 Garlen, 'Interrogating Innocence', p. 63.

68 H. Habila, 'We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo – review', *Guardian*, London, 20 June 2013, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/20/need-new-names-bulawayo-review>, retrieved 30 April 2019.

69 Garlen, 'Interrogating Innocence', p. 63.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 64–5.

71 *Ibid.*

72 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 221.

73 Priebe, 'Some Thoughts on the Idea of Exit', p. 24.

74 Liebenberg, *Delights*, p. 4.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

sharp and white-edged. [...] ‘We fought for this land, Tim! We fought for it,’ and she makes her hand into a fist and shakes it. ‘And I’m not letting it go without a fight.’⁷⁶

In terms of fiction and the political/apolitical child, Nyree and Cia in *Delights* are to a large extent assigned or ascribed a political role in their capacity as white children in Rhodesia during the civil war. This is emphasised also by Niall Nance-Carroll, who examines a Chilean novel in his article on innocence and writes that ‘being apolitical shields children from politically motivated attacks’, but ‘they are often deployed in political rhetoric’.⁷⁷ Nance-Carroll explains this further: ‘[c]hildren in general can thus be considered “politicized” (here used to describe an instrumental or symbolic status assigned by adults to children who may not even be aware of their political role). Less often are individual children “political” in the sense of their own intentional intervention in political matters’.⁷⁸ Such notions ring true for *Delights* as well, in which the tragedies that the children face are not political but brought on by their malevolent cousin. Symbolism is, however, strong, as the family eventually packs up and leaves, manifesting the concrete closing of the door to an idealised past: ‘[t]he house has aged. It has shrunk, of course, but more than that, our desertion has weakened it against time, sapped it of its grit’.⁷⁹ This can be read as an allegory of the history of white rule in Zimbabwe and the exodus of white citizens after independence.

Innocence becomes a device or technique used by both authors, as Sabatini reinforces Robert’s innocence through his own decision to stay ignorant, and Liebenberg makes Nyree the embodiment of white Rhodesia. She represents its endeavours to stay intact and its inevitable failures to keep its (white) citizens safe from themselves. Thus innocence comes to manifest the goodness and ‘clarity of vision’⁸⁰ that children possess, even in the absence of goodness. *Delights* manifests a changing society at a historical threshold, whereas *Peace and Conflict* is told from the perspective of what happens when society is no longer depicted as being in transition. On the contrary, it is seen as no longer moving forward, unable to go beyond itself in its oppressive measures against innocent citizens. The fact that Aunty Delphia is a veterinarian working with injured animals trying to protect wildlife in Zimbabwe works to reinforce her innocence as well. Such a noble profession adds to the instructive purpose of the novel, as even animals, arguably the most innocent creatures of all, are faced with repression and literally being hunted down.

Conclusion

The two novels examined here suggest, through their depictions of the innocent child, that Zimbabwe as the post-colonial child nation⁸¹ is a place of no tangible and tenable future, not for its citizens past or present as portrayed in the novels. The past and present cannot be reconciled, as Nyree’s family pack their belongings and leave after Cia has died and white minority rule come to an end in Rhodesia. The novel indicates that the independent majority-ruled nation will be forced to face new troubles and repressive measures against its citizens, but the future holds no promise of a place for Nyree in Zimbabwe. Robert and his family, for their part, are able to help Aunty Delphia, a victim of political persecution, because they too are removed from the actual reality of Zimbabwe. Innocence emerges as a

76 Fuller, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, pp. 155–6.

77 N. Nance-Carroll, ‘Innocence is No Defense: Politicized Childhood in Antonio Skármeta’s *La composición/ The Composition*’, *Children’s Literature in Education*, 45, 4 (2014), p. 272–3.

78 *Ibid.*

79 Liebenberg, *Delights*, pp. 237–8.

80 James, Jenks and Prout, *Symbolic Childhood*, p. 13.

81 Muponde, *Some Kinds of Childhood*.

central stylistic and rhetorical tool for both Liebenberg and Sabatini. It converges with definitions of the apolitical child, who, in the shape of Robert, is able to seek justice, as suggested by Garlen, but remains reliant on adults in order to help Aunt Delphia. The arrest, torture and rape of his aunt is a storyline beyond his power and range of influence, although Robert does his best, within certain limits, to understand what has happened to her. These limits highlight his innocence and stand in stark contrast to Sabatini's later novel *An Act of Defiance*, in which many of the implied horrors of *Peace and Conflict* are explicitly and overtly addressed and told in harrowing detail.

Seeing innocence as absence is a central observation in the analysis, as it works to explain and illustrate the role of the child narrator in novels for adults. In Robert's case, there is the absence of rape in explicit terms, and of how HIV is contracted and spread. For Nyree, the absence is not as straightforward, being connected with the racism and beliefs that surround her, which are never fully challenged. Robert's brother George, too, is 14 and understands more deeply what kind of torture Aunt Delphia has suffered. Presenting childhood and children in this way, emphasising not what they are but what they are not, also applies to the nation itself. Zimbabwe becomes a place of absence in both novels, which depict departure. The absence is related to the future, to the realisation that what and where the nation has been may not provide a bridge, a pathway, to what it will become if that future, too, is grounded in repression and persecution.

The temporal distance in *Delights* and the physical, geographical distance in *Peace and Conflict* point to a rift between the Rhodesian past and Zimbabwean present, and between repressive politics in modern Zimbabwe and the safe haven of Switzerland. The impossibility of the future is implied in Aunt Delphia's application for refugee status.⁸² These notions go beyond any representations of childhood as a mirror of the developing nation. Nyree's and Robert's development and future trajectories are unknown but are likely to be even less connected with Zimbabwe. This goes against Odile Cazenave's writings on representations of children and youth in francophone African novels: 'the writers ponder the future of these children and the future of society', and, further, '[e]ach work in turn raises new questions on how to reconcile the past with the present so that the future might become viable again'.⁸³ Neither Robert nor Nyree embodies futures tied to the nation, and this is where both Sabatini and Liebenberg's child narrators differ from many previous depictions and representations of children and childhood in both Zimbabwean and other African contexts.

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82 Sabatini, *Peace and Conflict*, p. 207.

83 O. Cazenave, 'Writing the Child, Youth and Violence into the Francophone Novel from Sub-Saharan Africa: The Impact of Age and Gender', *Research in African Literatures*, 36, 2 (2005), p. 62.