



Decolonising the Voice 2: Estranged Voices

[00:00:20] LISTENING EXERCISE ONE

Deelee Dubé: *We Need New Names* is an exhilarating narrative debut about the unflinching and formidable story of a young girl's journey out of Zimbabwe and to America, written by Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo. Published in 2013 *We Need New Names* (2013) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, making Bulawayo the first African female writer to earn this distinction. It is reminiscent of the great storytellers of displacement and arrival who have come before her from Junot Díaz to Zadie Smith to J.M. Coetzee while Bulawayo conveys an authentic story of her own.

From my own perspective this story tends to evoke a sense of personal estrangement which perhaps may stem from the polarity between my Black British identity and Southern African lineage. Although a fond Londoner, I sometimes find myself sensing a perpetual longing and curiousness for the distant lands of my predecessors, a place where the soles of my feet have yet to tread and experience the touch of Southern African soil that somewhat may or may not seem to be foreign to me. I have yet to discover and see.

[00:02:14 to 00:04:40] Extract from *We Need New Names* (2013), read by Deelee Dubé

Darling is only ten years old, and yet she must navigate a fragile and violent world. In Zimbabwe, Darling and her friends steal guavas, try to get the baby out of young Chipso's belly, and grasp at memories of Before. Before their homes were destroyed by paramilitary policemen, before the school closed, before the fathers left for dangerous jobs abroad. But Darling has a chance to escape: she has an aunt in America. She travels to this new land in search of America's famous abundance only to find that her options as an immigrant are perilously few.

(Summary from Goodreads Review of Books).

Look at the children of the land leaving in droves, leaving their own land with bleeding wounds on their bodies and shock on their faces and blood in their hearts and hunger in their stomachs and grief in their footsteps. Leaving their mothers and fathers and children behind, leaving their umbilical cords underneath the soil, leaving the bones of their ancestors in the earth, leaving everything that makes them who and what they are, leaving because it is no longer possible to stay. They will never be the same again because you cannot be the same once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same.

(Bulawayo 2014: 146)

The first extract that you have just heard from Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, significantly highlights the psychological, emotional and physical trauma that is experienced in separating from the motherland – Zimbabwe – when, as she says in the extract, 'it is no longer possible to stay'.

Please reflect on the use of words used such as 'blood', 'wounds', 'soil', 'footsteps', 'shock', 'hunger', 'grief' and 'loss' in relation to the process of emigration from Zimbabwe. Try to imagine the ways in which they reflect the painful reality involved in moving away from everything that is familiar and 'known' towards a culture that is hostile and rather foreign, to your experience. Allow the readings, as spoken by myself, to assist in your auditory experience and understanding of the voice/sonics behind the words.

Note down any responses that resonate with the experience of belonging and separation from your ancestral roots.



[00:06:25] LISTENING EXERCISE TWO

Deelee Dubé: The second extract you will hear from Bulawayo sums up the problem in which language itself becomes a literal separation and a barrier to the individual's task of finding their own identity in a white dominated society.

Another interesting paradox here is that while the author speaks of countless obstacles encountered in English pronunciation, here I am learning and attempting to speak with a Southern African accent, whilst hoping that it sounds right but also having to rely on and lean into the inherent and innate memory of my maternal late grandmother's and my mother's vernacular and speech pattern. In my attempts, I begin to feel a closeness to my ancestral roots. I also become consciously aware of this sense of otherness, in knowing that as a Londoner I too have this sense of cultural longing. Oftentimes when I feel this way, I start listening to songs and music from my childhood, music that I found in my mother's highly eclectic record collection, which was diverse in style from pop and rock, classical to country & blues, to soul, jazz and swing and world music artists such as Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Paul Simon and Black Mambazo, Ipintombi Thomas Maphumo and more. These kinds of sonics take me to a place of familiarity. They transport to a land that I have yet to see and explore.

[00:08:50 to 00:10:15] Extract from *We Need New Names* (2013), read by Deelee Dubé

The problem with English is this: You usually can't open your mouth and it comes out just like that – first you have to think what you want to say. Then you have to find the words. Then you have to carefully arrange those words in your head. Then you have to say the words quietly to yourself, to make sure you got them okay. And finally, the last step, which is to say the words out loud and have them sound just right.

But then because you have to do all this, when you get to the final step, something strange has happened to you and you speak the way a drunk walks. And, because you are speaking like falling, it's as if you are an idiot, when the truth is that it's the language and the whole process that's messed up. And then the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don't know how to listen; they are busy looking at your falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying.

(Bulawayo 2014: 193)

Write down any of your impressions/thoughts/feelings about the experience of listening to these words, about words themselves and any echoes or recognitions that may arise. Draw your attention to the breath and breathe freely as you listen to the words and reflect.

[00:11:00] LISTENING EXERCISE THREE

Deelee Dubé: The final reading is from the work of Guyana born poet, Grace Nichols (born 1950). Her collection: *i is a long memoried woman* won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1983 and it talks about the ways in which racism separates individuals from their mother tongue.

This final reading draws my attention to speak to the memories of my late grandmother who emigrated from Zimbabwe to the United Kingdom in the 1960s. Although she never really lost her Zimbabwean accent, she maintained her role as a nurse and worked for the NHS once settled in London. I recall her stories about apartheid and the harrowing impact it had on her and members of our family, and how it served to be a major contributing factor towards her move to the UK for a better life.



See if you can notice how the following short poem affects your breath in any way, or your sensations of feeling grounded – or not – and your own impulse to speak out.

[00:12:38 to 00:13:00] ‘Epilogue’ by Grace Nichols, read by Deelee Dubé

I have crossed an ocean

I have lost my tongue

From the roots of the old

one

a new one has sprung

(Nichols in Sage 1999: 468)

Clips Summary

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Works Cited

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Notes

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