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Paper(less) Selves: The refugee in contemporary textual culture

Abstract

Refugees, the human waste of the global frontier-land, are the 'outsiders incarnate', the absolute outsiders, outsiders everywhere and out of place everywhere except in places that are themselves out of place – the 'nowhere places' that appear on the maps used by ordinary humans on their travels. (Zygmunt Bauman 2004 80)

TONY SIMOES DA SILVA

Paper(less) Selves: The Refugee in Contemporary Textual Culture

Refugees, the human waste of the global frontier-land, are the ‘outsiders incarnate’, the absolute outsiders, outsiders everywhere and out of place everywhere except in places that are themselves out of place — the ‘nowhere places’ that appear on the maps used by ordinary humans on their travels. (Zygmunt Bauman 2004 80)

I

This essay takes up the above assertion by British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in *Wasted Lives* (2004a), to examine a number of works concerned with the representation of refugees and their experiences in contemporary society. Bauman’s view of refugees as ‘outsiders incarnate’ is especially relevant in the context of what he argues is a subject position synonymous with the increasing intertwining of economic globalisation and international conflict. These are the people whom, drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s thinking, Bauman refers to as an “‘underclass’ ... who have had their “bios” (that is, the life of a socially recognised subject) reduced to “zoë” (purely animal life, with all its recognisably human offshoots trimmed or annulled)’ (2004b 39). For Bauman the refugee is best defined today as part of a continuum with, and encapsulating, a panoply of, identity categories such as ‘economic migrants’, ‘illegal migrants’, ‘asylum seeker’, ‘illegal refugees’, ‘certified refugees’, ‘displaced person’, ‘stateless person’, perhaps even ‘terrorist’, and represents in this brave new world the subject position that best captures modernity’s ever-evolving impetus. Such an approach parallels similar usage by other social scientists such as Giorgio Agamben (2003), Paul Gilroy (2006) and Peter Nyers (2005), and the *Journal of Refugee Studies* which describes its remit as a concern with ‘all categories of forcibly displaced people’. Furthermore in its 2006 report, the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) notes that ‘[m]odern migratory patterns make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the various groups on the move’ (24). The refugee, broadly defined, therefore today constitutes modernity’s underbelly, a subject position inextricable from a political unconscious where it both challenges and gives new meanings to the function of the nation-state. As Agamben puts it: ‘If the refugee represents such a disquieting element in the order

of the nation-state, this is so primarily because, by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the originary fiction of sovereignty into crisis' (2000 20). The paradox lived by refugees each moment of their existence is that while they lack an identity, while they seek a shred of meaning and often of purpose, they need not worry about having too little meaning, for as refugees they mean always — already — too much, an excess of accreted meanings.

Through a reading of a number of selected texts, this essay considers the treatment of refugees in contemporary literature and film within what it identifies as a growing thematic preoccupation in contemporary world culture with a 'refugee subject position'. I do not claim here that the treatment of refugee themes in literature is either new or recent, for it has long been central to writing and art more generally, usually through a concern with the experience of exile or of migration but also with the nation. Agamben's thesis, for example, on the role refugees play in the formation of the nation-state only reiterates how the condition of refugees has been part of Western textual culture since the days of Homer. More recently, both Benedict Anderson, in what remains one of the most influential studies of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1983), and Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994) and *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001), have traced the existence of stateless persons as integral to the emergence of the nation itself. Anderson's well-known work is especially relevant here because it centres on the role of the printing-press in the making of the nation as an affective community of peoples, thus highlighting the importance of the textual in the making of the national entity. Even earlier, Sigmund Freud (1963) too made the point that it is always possible to unite the most disparate group of people, provided they are given a focus for their fears of the other.

What has changed, if indeed it is change in the treatment accorded refugees within contemporary culture, is that the refugee is increasingly accepted as a 'fully-fledged subject position'. My concern in this essay emerges precisely from the way in which the subject position of the refugee has shifted from being temporally-limited and geographically determined — the refugee would remain outside his or her place of residence for a limited period and would always be conscious of the possibility of a return home — to a subject position now intrinsic to power distribution, world economics and wealth management. To this extent the growing visibility of refugees as 'themes' or 'characters' in contemporary culture highlights the intertwining of material and symbolic cultural production. To return once more to Bauman, in a fast globalising world 'millions of refugees and migrants ... [are being turned] out in a fast accelerating scale' (2004b 12). My discussion focuses in particular on Indian novelist, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), British film director Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), South African writer, Patricia Schonstein Pinnock's *Skyline* (1999) and an overtly autobiographical novel by an Angolan writer, Simão Kikamba, *Going Home*

(2005).¹ However, passing reference will be made to novels such as South African Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001), Moroccan Mahi Binebine's *Welcome to Paradise* (1999 in French; 2004) and Australian Nicholas Jose's *Original Face* (2005). This eclectic selection aims on the one hand to bring into relief the point made earlier that the concern with refugees is now especially pronounced in visual and literary narratives throughout the world; but it is also aimed at juxtaposing a range of broad imaginings of the condition of refugees in today's world as part of a larger debate about the political function of literature. While I am conscious that the novels constitute merely individual articulations of each writer's perspective on the refugee phenomenon in contemporary society, I see them overtly intervening in complex debates about politics, human rights, ethics and literature.

II

Indian novelist Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is not a novel about refugees in the strict sense that characterises the works of Schonstein and Kikamba, or even Frears' film. Desai's novel tells the story of a small group of individuals living in a remote Himalayan village, and of the way they are brought face to face with a world they thought they could keep at a distance. This is the shabby, apparently unexciting and deceptively safe world the novel's main character, Biju, a young Indian man, abandons to journey to the USA on fake identity papers, a decision that suddenly places him along a fluid refugee continuum. To the American authorities Biju would fall neatly into the definition of an economic immigrant, but his new life in New York is almost a text-book illustration of a fluid modernity as defined also by Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*. Although Biju's desire for self-improvement accords with modernity's ideological call for endless self-improvement and progress, it leads him to break another of modernity's sacred precepts, the inviolability of the nation state. It is as a result of this latter infringement that he finds himself defined as one of a mass of an 'itinerant underclass', to borrow Graham Huggan's view of the multitudes caught in the vortex of globalisation (Huggan 15) in which subtleties of legitimate or illegitimate claims to protection are overwhelmed by louder discourses of fear and alterity. The novel offers a particularly topical portrait of the complex ways of being a refugee in today's modern world, as defined by Bauman and others — as migrant, legal or otherwise; asylum seeker; exile; marginalised self. For in the semi-legal world that Biju inhabits in New York he regularly comes into contact with people whose status cuts across one or more dimensions of refugee identity in its broader definition. Although a survivor in the way that is second nature to refugees, Biju himself negotiates smartly but anxiously among the multiple identities available to the refugee qua illegal immigrant, asylum seeker, itinerant. However, such deftness comes at great cost to his selfhood. At its most superficial level, this involves a constant flux between acts of literal mimicry and moments when he struggles to reaffirm and 'salvage' his Indian self. In one sense, his move to the USA places his 'original self' as Indian into abeyance without entirely

denying him its meaning. Unlike other fellow Indians, Biju refuses to succumb to 'American' ways such as hamburger-eating. However, while his new self in New York has almost cut him off from his family and homeland, he is luckier than many who pay a much higher price to acquire their 'refugeeness' (Nyers 2006). In part, the novel's impact resides in its depiction of Biju's epic battle to stay true to his Indian self while making his way in the globalised setting of New York.

Recent works such as British filmmaker, Stephen Frears' *Dirty Pretty Things* and Australian novelist, Nicholas Jose's *Original Face*, for example, depict a rather different world where refugees will do pretty much anything to exchange the 'real selves' signified by their names and original documents for the sake of residency in the UK, in the USA or elsewhere in the developed world. In Jose, this means a gruesome excision of a human face and the potential multiplication of people with the same names on their fake documents. Frears' film depicts a similarly disturbing trade in selves and passports where no price is ever too high as desperate people strive to enter the modern world of 'making business', in the words of another refugee figure, in Gordimer's *The Pickup* (62). In London, struggling to save the life of a man brought close to death by a kidney removal gone wrong, Frears' Olesungun Okwe, the Nigerian-trained doctor, requests the Somali's relatives to 'Ask him how much he got for his kidney'. The reply, when it emerges through a mix of pained facial expressions and Somali translated into English by a young girl is a masterstroke in understatement: 'He's English now'. Okwe's angry, cynical response, 'He swapped his insides for a passport', is the kind of line Bauman, Agamben and Frears will understand and speak — aquiver with virtuous rage at the ways of a world where human lives are increasingly no more sacred than the latest fashion gadget. The notion of an 'outsider incarnate' gains suddenly a wholly morbid new meaning. Yet, as Frears' film makes clear, for many people this is one of the few ways out of the miserable life allocated them. For the sociologist, the philosopher, the filmmaker and the novelist — perhaps for the literary critic, too — such base trade in human life makes a mockery of being human yet, from the perspective of those swapping their insides for legal documents, the price is worth paying. The sad irony that most of these texts highlight is that for the refugee the documents often result in very little improvement in quality of life. Frears' film overtly links the harvesting of organs from the bodies of anonymous individuals to their own desperate quest for fake identity documents that will make them 'real' once again.

Yet, for many *sans papiers* the new documents that prove one's legal status often are also the last link to an older self, the self that left home 'a Romanian', 'a Senegalese', 'an Iraqi', 'a Colombian'. Given the fluidity of the (post)modern world, increasingly such selfhoods are lived tremulously, forever on the threshold of other selves, both past and future, all more or less real. 'The future', Bauman declares, 'has always been uncertain, but its capriciousness and volatility have never felt so intractable as they do in the liquid world of "flexible" labour, frail human bonds, fluid moods, floating threats and an unstoppable cavalcade of

chameleon-like dangers' (2004b: 67). His view is that to be a refugee constitutes the very core of that process, a mass of anonymous humanity permanently displaced, forever in motion.

In Desai's novel this fluidity is seen in the waves of 'Mexicans, *desis*, and Pakis' in New York, replaced in Paris by 'Algerians, Senegalese, Morrocans' (23), and elsewhere by Mozambicans, Ukrainians and Nigerians. They are all interchangeable and recognised mainly by the cheap labour they provide and their desperately aimless lives. In a novel marked by a pronounced concern with the wasteful ways of modernity's treatment of human beings, Desai shines a light into the dark recesses of contemporary capitalist culture. For despite their numbers, Biju and the mostly male groups of people with whom he competes for poorly paid jobs and flea-ridden beds shared round the clock, remain invisible to most New Yorkers whose lifestyle they support — an apt comment on Nikos Papastergiadis view that, '[c]ountless people are on the move and even those who have not left their homeland are moved by this restless epoch' (2). This is a point Frears also makes in *Dirty Pretty Things*, that while the politics of the nation-state configure refugees outside its concerns and responsibility, and against its interests, in fact they have become intrinsic to the everyday life of the nation-state's lawful citizens. Echoing Bauman, Frears, like Desai, exposes the materiality that underpins the presence of refugees in the modern world. Thus, in reply to a query put to him by the man who buys the body organs from the Spanish concierge turned organ dealer, Sneaky, 'How come I've never seen you guys?', Okwe observes: 'We are the people you never see. We wash your cars, clean your houses, suck your cocks'. Lives lived largely out of view, they are indispensable to the lifestyle afforded the citizens of London, New York or Paris. If Frears appears to underplay the reasons why individuals such as Okwe now hide in London or Paris, in the process avoiding dealing with cause of their increasingly desperate attempts to gain passage to the USA, it may be argued that the film is as much about the wrongs of world politics as it seeks to show the consequences endured by human beings caught up therein.

Indeed, Desai herself also is careful to distinguish between those Indians and fellow 'third worlders' who live in New York out of desperation and those brought there by well-stuffed bank accounts. At its most self-righteous, *The Inheritance of Loss* posits that even the wealthier, better-educated Indians who now frequent the upmarket hamburger houses in New York where the likes of Biju work illegally, have compromised their Indian identities for the sake of a greater slice of modernity. Since, to many of the Americans they meet the colour of their skin will indelibly mark them as outsiders, they share a 'refugeeness' which is associated essentially with being born in the 'third world'. They wear it each time they step out in New York, in London, in Sydney and they often exploit it to their advantage. To this extent they are caught within a common perception that all 'brown people' are naturally deprived and oppressed and desperate to be

here, there, somewhere. But unlike Biju, frequently this is a perception they can manipulate in the same way that they trade the skills and currency that allowed them legal entry to the 'First World'.

The contrast in Biju's position could not be more dramatic. Having moved to New York in search of a better life for himself and for his father, his closest surviving relative, he expends an incredible amount of energy to get out of India only to waste his life in the bowels of a voracious and uncaring modernity. For here 'India' signifies simply the source of people such as Biju, those multitudes the American and European print media see as a menace to the developed world. These are the people who, like Biju, exist in a state of legal, political and personal limbo: citizens of countries where, for various reasons, they cannot live and who are living in countries where they are not welcome. However, the tenacity Biju displays in trying to get out of India offers a wider comment on contemporary imbalances between nations and peoples. On the one hand it brings into relief the futile existences of millions of people the world over, treated as the flotsam of modernity; as the narrator remarks at one point: 'Biju changed jobs so often, like a fugitive on the run — no papers' (73). Elsewhere the narrator describes his daily existence: 'At 4.25 AM, Biju made his way to the Queen of Tarts bakery, watching for the cops who sometimes came leaping out: where are you going and what are you doing with whom and what time and why?' (75). As an illegal immigrant, Desai's Biju and countless others like him in the developed world exist fully outside the protection of the state yet he is central to the economic forces that keep it afloat. This is Bauman's point when he speaks of 'outsiders incarnate' (80) as indispensable to the present nation state, a 'globalisation of the powerless' (Wells 15) that constitutes the obverse of that other, flashier, globalisation. As noted earlier, they constitute merely the latest source of cheap and expendable labour that fuels the cyclical nature of capitalist economic structures.

Biju's story highlights also the difficulties faced by so-called developing nations confronted with the ever-growing drain on their human and material resources, as the best and brightest of their citizens opt for living elsewhere. There is a certain irony, no doubt intentional, in the way Desai's novel juxtaposes the desperate efforts Biju and other young Indian men devote to the task of migrating to the USA and the benefits that modernity, through capitalist expansion, is said to be in the process of bestowing on India and all Indians. In fact, this is an aspect reflected in all the various texts I refer to here. It is a point made more forcefully by anti-globalisation and postcolonial theorist-activists such as Vandana Shiva (2000; 2002) and novelist-activist Arundhati Roy (1999; 2001). Speaking at the 'Pan African Conference on Brain Drain' in 2003, Phillip Emeagwali, for example, noted that '[w]hat few realise is that Africans who immigrate to the United States contribute 40 times more wealth to the American than to the African economy. According to the United Nations, an African professional working in the United States contributes about \$150,000 per year to the U.S. economy'.² Although

Desai's Biju is not a professional in the way Frears' Okwe is, Emeagwali's argument offers a broader comment on a Brain Drain that is essentially about the loss of each individual to the nation, rather than simply of the departure of a Western-style educated and trained person.

South African novelist Patricia Schonstein Pinnock's *Skyline* (1999) also raises this issue, highlighting in the story of Bernard, a young Mozambican refugee living illegally in South Africa, the loss of potential that his hidden existence constitutes. At one level, *Skyline* celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, telling Bernard's story of overcoming impossible odds. But the figure of a refugee allows Schonstein also to explore the new human geographies emerging in South Africa. Set in Cape Town, South Africa, the figure of the refugee serves in *Skyline* as a focal point through which the novel tells of the profound transformations taking place in an urban landscape that was previously largely the domain of White people.³ Schonstein's novel resonates with the work of Desai and Frears in their concern with the evolving re-mappings of peoples across and within nation states. The novel's account of Bernard's transformation into a legal resident of South Africa positions him as an agent of change, bringing together people who might not have met otherwise. However, although he is embraced by a small group of Cape Town residents who are struggling to cope with the rapidly changing political and social structures in post-apartheid South Africa, this is something of an aberration. In fact, Bernard's story gives face to a phenomenon that since the end of Apartheid has united Black and White South Africans: that being the growing illegal influx of people from other countries in Africa. In the words of a man whose political views suggest he is White: '*You see! The whole of Africa is running into the country and to here at the top of Long Street.... And do they think they can just come here from where they come over Africa and take the people's jobs? What is going on with the government to let them in, hey?*' (10, emphasis in original). Although metaphorically the novel foregrounds the positive dimension of South Africa's return to Africa, it juxtaposes it with the views of those South Africans who feel the new arrivals are taking their jobs. Interestingly, they are mostly White people, such as the 7-Eleven owner or manager whom the young narrator describes as 'stand[ing] in Rambo mode' railing against the state of the New South Africa:

They just got to come down from Africa and take over our country. Fuck up their own place, then come here to steal from us.... This country's just gone to shit. It belongs to illegals now, not us. They bought it! They paid somebody something under the counter. I'm telling you! South Africa belongs to Africa, not us. (50, emphasis in original)

In this new world, Bernard and others like him serve as a metonym of a Pan-Africanism that now sees South Africa returning to Africa, though in this case in a round-about way. Consequently, his 'adoption' by a young school girl who lives in the same block of apartments as he does, 'Skyline' and the old woman who owns the whole block, might be read as a pointed comment on South

Africa's responsibility to reach out to fulfil its role as the engine of Africa's Renaissance once outlined by Thabo Mbeki (1998). In the portrait of a growing intimacy between Bernard and the two figures linking past and future, the young narrator and the very old Mrs. Rowinsky — herself a European refugee from WW II — *Skyline* underlines the random and spontaneous ways in which identities are formed and nurtured. It highlights most of all a view that each refugee is an individual, alone, afraid and in search of kindness. Bernard finds protection from the bitterness of the wider South African nation-state in the company and friendship of a small group of inner city Cape Town residents, but he is luckier than most. As the narrator reveals, '[h]e is here illegally but we are the only ones who know and we would never tell anyone. He bought a passport from someone in Home Affairs and one of the Nigerians on the top floor sold him an ID'. She goes on: '[e]ven though the war is over, he has no home to go back to and he does not know whether his wife and children are still alive' (29).

Indeed, in what is perhaps one of the subtlest comments on the politics of hospitality of the modern nation-state, opening the doors alone rarely will suffice for refugees; the new arrivals from wars and conflicts experienced by growing numbers of people, carry with them the seeds of their own undoing. Despite their unconditional support, Bernard's friends cannot protect him from regularly reliving the memory of his brutalisation during Mozambique's protracted civil war. Of one such moment, the narrator says:

He has a terror again. He lies here on the roof to feel steady. War stalks him day and night, burning him, circling about him with dry flames of nightmare. He has nothing to still the terror with. He cannot shoot it down and it can't pour water onto it. It is barbed wire around his heart and crying in his mind. It is loss and it is unbearable. (74)

As an 'illegal' he is persecuted by the South African authorities who constantly raid 'Skyline' but most of all he is haunted by memories of a level of trauma that makes him increasingly withdrawn. When he dies from a racist attack tinged with jealousy — he is murdered by an Italian restaurant owner who suspects him of making eyes at his wife, but the attack is framed by a racialised view of the need to protect the white woman from the black man — it is as if Bernard had been dead all along. Post-apartheid South Africa never made room for him or others like him, despite the belief of the masses — the 'illegal immigrants and refugees' (8) who 'hitched all the way down Africa' (13) — that '*Nelson Mandela ... the new King of Africa*' (15) has the power to bring peace everywhere in Africa and to resuscitate the many relatives the refugees mourn.

The paradox *Skyline* highlights is that when Africa came calling South Africa was neither ready nor willing to enter into a dialogue, for Bernard is not alone in his discovery that apartheid did not make Black South African people naturally kinder to fellow Africans. In his semi-fictionalised autobiography, *Going Home* (2005), Angolan Simão Kikamba tells a similar story. *Going Home* is the story of a man who moves from being an Angolan refugee in Zaire, to a

Congolese asylum seeker in Angola, and eventually an illegal migrant in South Africa. There he remembers being told that '[t]here are no jobs for foreigners anywhere in South Africa. If you want my advice, you should pack and leave. This is our country' (155). Perhaps not surprisingly, again these words are spoken by a White man; many White South Africans have more to lose from tougher competition for unskilled jobs than their Black compatriots who are long used to scant pickings. Like those Africans in *Skyline* who travelled down 'from the rest of Africa' (8), Kikamba's character's nomadic existence through several different levels of marginality, epitomises the subject position of the refugee today as an example of what Wells's calls the 'globalisation of the powerless' (15). Living in Johannesburg's inner suburbs, Hillbrow and Yeoville, a dense mass of high-rise and low-rise apartment blocks where modernity truly liquefies, Kikamba's thinly veiled alter-ego, Manuel Mpanda, learns that the only thing he can count on is the very instability of being that frames his self as an undocumented self, a *sans-papiers*. Hillbrow and Yeoville exist for Mpanda essentially as further 'stations of the cross', points of reference in a long journey between his condition as a refugee, an illegal migrant and an asylum seeker.

Not unlike Biju and Bernard, though in vastly different ways, Mpanda's situation illustrates the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' brief about the difficulties of deciding on the most apt definition for variously displaced peoples. Having fled Angola with his parents as a child-refugee at the age of 2 (15) to settle in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mpanda later flees again as a young adult, this time to Angola, as the cruel world devised by Mobutu Sese Seko collapses and the nation-state implodes. Writing as an adult, he refers to both places as 'home' (9, 15) but does it almost unaware of the doubleness of being that that implies. As a Zairean/Congolese refugee in Angola ('Zaire' having reverted to its pre-Mobutu designation, 'Congo'), Mpanda finds his way to the slums of Luanda, then a city also in a constantly fluid state as the civil war between Angola's two main political parties and their respective foreign backers dragged on. In the kind of subtle and unsettling shading of degrees of horror typical of narratives about displacement and loss, Mpanda takes up residence in a slum where his life is as much at risk as it was in the Zairean refugee camp. Moreover, although he recalls his father's advice as he left for Angola — 'Do not make the mistake that the crocodile made. . . . He ran away from rain only to dive into water' (33) — he ignores it. Eventually he will also leave Angola for Johannesburg and join the masses walking towards that beacon of opportunity and fairness that in Schonstein is described as '*Mr. Mandela's country*'.

It is a measure of the commonality of experience that unites refugees the world over in their 'refugeeness' that as a Black man living illegally in Johannesburg, Mpanda's refugee position in Johannesburg so closely parallels that of Biju in New York and in fact Bernard in Cape Town. Afraid of being picked up by the police yet desperate to make a living by decent means in suburbs dominated by

drug dealers and pimps, Kikamba's Mpanda and Desai's Biju portray the more insidious aspect of the notion of the refugee as a new kind of person, a citizen of the world unencumbered by nationality. She or he is both invisible and too visible. Conscious of how their foreignness marks them out from the rest of the city, refugees live hidden existences, forever fearful of openly showing their humanity. After a while, as Frears' film shows with such poignancy and perhaps even a touch of melodrama, the refugee skulks around even when there is no need for it. There is something compulsive about Mpanda's refugee journey that reflects a paradoxical desire for permanence that often intersects with an agonistic impetus that may or may not be forced from without. This is the point Arendt made in her essay on Jewish refugees in post-World War II Europe, and specifically on her own feelings about being a refugee. That, too, is Bernard's goal as he diligently sets out to acquire his English from any printed text around him.

Frears' Okwe, caught between two seemingly fulltime jobs, survives by consuming medicinal leaves that allow him to go without sleep for long periods of time. His trance-like existence captures much of the pathos of the experience of refugees the world over: driven by an energy harnessed from the fear of letting down their guard and being caught and sent back to yet another 'nowhere place', and the exhilaration of ever-new risks and opportunities. Okwe's zombie-like wandering across London dramatises both his visibility and his invisibility, the paradox of countless others like him. Survival, after a while, is easier than giving up; Desai's Biju frequently thinks about going home to his father but now finds himself caught in a cycle that, although initially of his own making, has since gained a life all of its own. In a rather perverse irony, the refugee fears most of all the visibility of invisibility, of an unbeing that is always already over-defined, while craving, almost pathologically, the anonymity of the visible. Seen always already as a refugee, her or his humanity remain concealed under the web of political discourses created to re-signify 'refugee' as 'economic migrant', as 'terrorist', as 'inhuman'. Yet to an extent, though fearful the refugee is not afraid — of trying new things, experimenting with new ways of being, of doing, for such fearlessness is crucial to the new self. Risk-taking, often with the most horrid consequences, is at the heart of a refugee consciousness as seen in all four texts.

In each case, the motives for crossing national boundaries vary and the claim to refugee status is precariously balanced on an understanding of responsibility as stipulated in international refugee law and moral obligation. Biju is an economic migrant or an illegal migrant; Bernard has concrete reasons for leaving his country, and a reasonably credible claim to refugee status into South Africa; Okwe, the doctor who fled political persecution in Nigeria, could be seen as a legitimate asylum seeker; Mpanda's situation is closer to that of a 'displaced person'. In contrast, Biju travels to the USA as a tourist but with the intention of staying as long as required to gain a Green Card. Even Mpanda and Bernard readily admit that the move to South Africa was motivated by a desire for financial

improvement. This is an important point because it is crucial to the dilemma of the refugee and to a refugee consciousness: to state at the outset that one seeks financial gain by leaving one's country is to close the doors of the place one seeks admission to; to deny that aspect is to place oneself face-to-face with a series of political, legal and ethical hurdles. Social scientists and human rights activists have sought to address this quandary by declaring the distinction spurious and self-interested. According to Hyland, '[i]n many countries political terror follows as if "naturally" from economic misery' (2), and one might argue that the opposite is just as apt. In Burma/Myanmar, in Zimbabwe, in West Papua and elsewhere the refugee is at once 'political' and 'economic' — the second category, that of 'economic refugee', follows almost seamlessly from the collapse of the polity. Bernard's existence in Cape Town cuts across these two positions: as with refugees the world over, he struggles to gain legal residence in the country by breaking its laws, working illegally outside one of the city's markets. The need to earn a living, his very survival, places him in a position where if found out he will be deemed no longer a refugee or asylum seeker but an economic migrant. Although the label of 'economic migrant' can on occasion allow entry to a foreign country it is reserved for individuals with the sort of economic resources neither Bernard nor Biju or any of the other characters has.

The figure of the refugee — stateless, always already beyond the pale — is depicted in *The Inheritance of Loss*, in *Skyline*, in *Dirty Pretty Things*, and in *Going Home* leading an existence characterised by broken connections, deeply inflected by a more or less conscious fading out from existence. As refugees, as soon as they leave home Biju, Bernard, Mpanda and Okwe are in many ways no longer alive to their relatives for they may never be heard from again. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, for example, Desai writes of 'those [Indians] who lived and died illegally in America' (99), without contact with their families since leaving home. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, these are the people who will die often in the most gruesome manner, as they attempt to cross increasingly firmly policed national borders on land and sea. Often their deaths go unnoticed, un-mourned even, since to many of their relatives absence alone is not sufficient proof that they have died. In Moroccan novelist Mahi Binebine's *Welcome to Paradise* (2004) refugees travelling by sea from Africa across to Europe regularly disappear without trace; one of the central threads in a narrative filled with the *petits récits* of a number of more or less anonymous people, is the story of a woman seeking desperately to reconnect with a husband long lost to the 'nowhere places' Bauman (2004a) speaks of. Although she presumes him still in France, she has no means of contacting him, and the boatman taking her and her small child from Africa across to Europe's southern coast teases her that the lack of contact from her husband probably means that he has a new woman. Binebine's zoom-like narrative perspective, and the fact that much of the story takes place in an unidentified 'nowhere place' in the middle of the night, combine to create

the feeling that the journey the refugee undertakes leads essentially into a void where death is the only certainty. This is in essence the message that nation-states favoured by large numbers of refugees seek to convey. In “‘Bare Life’ and the Geographical Divisions of Labour”, Mathew Hyland cites the former British Home Secretary, Jack Straw’s observation that the suffocation of 58 Chinese people in a cargo container in Dover, in 2001, should serve as a “‘stark warning’ to others considering entering Britain illegally’ (2).

But there is a less stark yet infinitely more unpredictable translation into another self that comes when the refugee acquires the identity papers of someone she or he will never know. As previously noted, even the acquisition of a new identity comes at a price: it represents the moment when the self can become whole through the very act of erasure. Speaking of a fellow would-be refugee in Johannesburg, the narrator in Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup*, remarks that ‘It was the name that was not his name that he responded to’ (41). A refugee himself, Ibrahim ponders how many others ‘had disappeared under their own names, and were living as he did’ (30). In a significant echo of Desai’s, Schonstein’s, Kikamba’s novels, and Frears’ film, in Gordimer too, the *sans papiers*’ metamorphosis into a documented self often means an official existence that bears little or nothing in common with his ‘birth self’ — she or he becomes merely a name on a bit of paper bearing the insignia of a nation-state. In *Dirty Pretty Things*, as the candidates for a kidney removal sign the requisite paperwork, they are offered a choice of nationalities from which to pick — a crude but apt comment on the expedient nature of national labels. Arguing her thesis with reference to what one might see as an earlier incarnation of the present figure of the refugee, the ‘escapee’ from Eastern Europe, Susan Carruthers (2005) notes the ease with which such individuals found refuge in some of the very nations now so intent on closing their borders to all manner of refugees. The escapee, she argues, became in fact central to the West’s war on Eastern Europe’s nations; rather than a figure of fear and hatred, the ‘escapee’ arrived in the West as a symbol of an unquenchable desire for democracy. In stark contrast to the way refugees are viewed in the USA and elsewhere today, the United States Escapee Program ‘*strove* to encourage flight’, hence to create refugees. Ironically, she writes, ‘few scholars scrutinised the ingenuity required to delineate the escapee as a distinct “person” who was *not* simply a refugee by any other name’ (emphasis in original, 913).

Carruthers’ thesis highlights the contrasting reception and treatment accorded today’s refugee, who would probably settle for a bit less scrutiny. To the ‘trained eye’ whose function and purpose it is to detect refugees real and imaginary — the immigration officer, the charity worker, the political activist or the rightwing ‘shock-jock’ — the refugee represents a world that is always a menace to one’s own. That he or she is here now — in Australia, in the United States of America, in Canada, in the United Kingdom — appears to mean only one thing to some: one is over here because one’s place of birth is a mess, a quagmire, a living hell;

it is backward, uncivilised, and in need of development. As a refugee or as a migrant one is always a walking sign of 'elsewhereness'.

There is an interesting parallel in the way refugees, in the word's broadest sense, are defined in *The Inheritance of Loss*, *Going Home*, *Skyline* and *Dirty Pretty Things* and the point made by Bauman, Hyland, Nyers and others, that they serve as an escape valve that deflates the grievances of workers' such as those in the above quotation about 'small wages'. Although they are victims of political and historical circumstances, others see them as free agents moving between places forever on the lookout for the best opportunities.

The strength of works such as those I have referred to is that, in the process of making visible the lives of the anonymous multitudes wandering in search of a safe place to live, they bring into relief the dis/connection between the refugee and the societies in which they exist. At one level the texts foreground those people whom Okwe crudely describes as 'the people you never see. We wash your cars, clean your houses, suck your cocks'. Okwe himself is known among fellow marginalised Londoners for the understated and humane way in which he deals with them. In *Skyline* they are the anonymous masses who live in Skyline, 'and most of them carry forged papers or pay bribes to stay in the country' (8); but '[t]heir music makes each flat [in Skyline] become a village with bellowing oxen coming home at night. Their drumming speaks in the ochre and mud of clay pots and baskets woven tightly to hold beer and sour milk' (9). In Nicholas Jose's *Original Face*, one of the main characters is an illegal immigrant who is known throughout Sydney for her healing hands, either as a masseuse (and the connotative ambiguity is not to be overlooked) or as an acupuncturist. The Bernard whom a small group of Cape Town people embrace has as much to offer them as he has to gain from them. For all the danger and alienation they experience, they live meaningful existences parallel to, even central to, mainstream society. Slowly, painfully perhaps, they seek to move towards a better life in an elsewhere away from their place of birth.

NOTES

- ¹ Patricia Schonstein Pinnock's name on the cover of her works often appears without 'Pinnock'; in fact, her name now appears on all her other works as 'Patricia Schonstein'. Since most of work bears the latter inscription, in this essay I will use 'Schonstein' when abbreviating her name.
- ² Philip Emeagwali, 'How do we reverse the brain drain?', Elsay, Illinois, October 24 2003 online, <http://emeagwali.com/speeches/brain-drain/to-brain-gain/reverse-brain-drain-from-africa.html>.
- ³ It is a well-known fact that in the urban centres of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town especially, but elsewhere more generally, apartheid's strict separation of the races never really prevented non-Whites from moving into certain parts of White-designated areas of the city. However, it is equally accepted that too often this view is exaggerated, for it is important to recognise that non-Whites residing there almost always did so under conditions of extreme duress and uncertainty.

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