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Publisher: Routledge

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## Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rscr20>

### A "Touch of Africa": liberal bildung through an encounter with African immigrants in Andrew Brown's Refuge

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Published online: 22 Jun 2015.



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To cite this article: Rebecca Fasselt (2015) A "Touch of Africa": liberal bildung through an encounter with African immigrants in Andrew Brown's Refuge, *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 20:1, 128-146, DOI: [10.1080/18125441.2015.1039052](https://doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2015.1039052)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2015.1039052>

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# A “TOUCH OF AFRICA”: LIBERAL *BILDUNG* THROUGH AN ENCOUNTER WITH AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN ANDREW BROWN’S *REFUGE*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article engages with the emergence of a “reconstructed liberalism” (Blair 2012) in South African fiction published after 2000 through a reading of Andrew Brown’s 2009 novel, *Refuge*. The novel, I argue, forms part of a body of fiction that views post-apartheid immigration from elsewhere on the African continent to South Africa through a predominantly liberal perspective. Reading Brown’s novel through the framework of the liberal *Bildungsroman*, I show that it is, however, largely the white characters who undergo a positive development through the encounter with Nigerian immigrants and refugees, while no such solution is offered for the migrant characters. Evoking “liberalism’s fetishization of victimhood” (Attwell 1993: 80), the novel partly constitutes African migrants as self-validating others. Yet, I also draw attention to the textual strategies employed that undercut any interpretation based on an uncritical adoption of a liberal stance in its engagement with migration. Brown’s text productively

1 This article has benefitted from comments and suggestions by Sikhumbuzo Mngadi as well as anonymous referees for this journal.



juxtaposes the main character's embrace of the liberal ideal of a transparent world to one of the migrant characters' insistence on the unknowability of other human beings.

**Key words:** reconstructed liberalism, liberal novel, post-apartheid South African literature, Andrew Brown, immigration, xenophobia

Commenting on Andrew Brown's second novel, *Coldsleep lullaby* (2005), Christopher Warnes writes that the novel is "defined by a desire to develop a liberal postapartheid pedagogics which deliberately activates a colonial racist trope ... in order to reveal how it conceals the true source of violence" (in Graham 2012: 140). The author's third novel, *Refuge* (2009), makes use of a similar liberal register that surfaces mainly in relation to the post-apartheid question of (im)migration from elsewhere on the African continent. In both novels, as Jonathan Amid and Leon de Kock (2014: 58) suggest, Brown "offers compassionate, three-dimensional interrogations of the politics of otherness, using networks of transnational human trafficking as the generating circumstances". While these critics invoke the notion of post-apartheid liberalism in the context of Brown's writing, *Refuge* has not yet been read in relation to what Peter Blair (2012: 493) has termed a "reconstructed liberalism" in South African fiction after apartheid that foregrounds "tolerance, non-racialism and the individual's inner world".

In this article, I demonstrate that Brown's novel recalls and re-situates the liberal novel of apartheid writing through its engagement with African migrants from elsewhere on the African continent.<sup>2</sup> I contend that *Refuge* exemplifies Blair's idea of a "reconstructed liberalism", but also features moments in which key liberal assumptions are subjected to critique. Eager to raise awareness about the human rights violations experienced by African migrants, who are mostly identified as refugees in the text, *Refuge*, I argue, stages the development of a liberal humanist consciousness on the part of the white protagonists resulting from the encounter with the Nigerian woman, Abayomi, and her family. Yet in doing so, the text to some degree exhibits what David Attwell (1993: 80) calls "liberalism's fetishization of victimhood". This seems the case, as Brown's South African central character becomes an advocate of African non-nationals and establishes meaningful bonds with them in defiance of the widespread xenophobic attitudes in his social surroundings. The interaction between foreigners and locals in the text, however, principally facilitates the positive

2 The distinction between "migrants", "immigrants" and "refugees" is often not as clear-cut as commonly assumed. Landau and Segatti, for instance, invite us to "rethink three divisions: between documented and undocumented migrants; between voluntary and forced migrants; and between international and domestic migration" (53–54), arguing that such clear differentiation often does not make sense, given the presence of multifarious and complex migration patterns in South Africa.

development of the white South Africans, whereas African migrants largely remain cast as victims of hardship and abuse.

While invoking the classical structure of the *Bildungsroman*, I demonstrate that Brown's novel in part deviates from its narrative sequence of "home – away from home – home again" (Koldtoft 2009: 19) inasmuch as it does not end with the societal "incorporation" (Slaughter 2007: 23) of its main protagonist. This would imply his subjection to the conditions and conventions of his social surroundings. However, these conditions do not afford a space to African migrants and refugees, who have become an integral part of the central character's newfound liberal identity, which thus transgresses narrow national allegiances. Espousing a rhetoric of victimisation and perpetuating stereotypical conceptions in the representation of the African continent, the author nonetheless also reintroduces the established citizen-versus-foreigner hierarchy. In this way, the novel writes its South African characters into the fold of a more inclusive, liberal South African society, which affords accommodation to certain strangers only. Positioning liberal South Africans as defenders of migrant rights in a hostile and xenophobic environment, the novel furthermore runs the risk of becoming a narrative of white self-validation with a consequent avoidance and disguise of complicity.

This form of liberal humanism, however, is not fully sustained throughout the text. Brown's novel productively juxtaposes the main character's embrace of the liberal ideal of the transparency of the world to one of the migrant characters' insistence on the unknowability of other human beings. The novel thus also features moments in which a more ambiguous stance towards liberalism is adopted.

## THE LIBERAL TRADITION AND ITS POST-2000 RECONSTRUCTION

Before proceeding to detailed textual analysis, it seems helpful to provide a brief background to liberal fiction in South Africa. Delineating trajectories in the liberal novel, Tony Morphet (1996: 53) notes that works such as Alan Paton's<sup>3</sup> *Cry the beloved country* "opened a fictional discourse which sought to explore the ways in which life-sustaining bonds could be forged between people across the racialised lines of division. In setting its purpose against division and alienation, the liberal novel self-consciously assumed the burdens not only of white fear and guilt but of the formation of a redemptive consciousness as well." An in-depth engagement with the complex debate around liberalism in South African textual culture, where the term

3 Paton himself provides the following definition of liberalism: "By liberalism I don't mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom" (in Alexander 1994: 383).

has in the past been applied to very different ideas, goes beyond the scope of this article. There is, however, a basic definition of the term that informs my discussion of the text under consideration here, and this is indebted to Peter Blair's engagement. In order to discriminate between liberalist and other ideologies promoting "equality, constitutionalism and the rule of law", Blair (2012: 475) draws on Paton's criterion of the "writerly 'attempt to comprehend otherness'" and David Welsh's criteria of "tolerance of conflicting viewpoints", "an optimistic belief in the possibilities of individual and social 'improvement' and 'compassion'" (in Blair 2012: 475).

By the 1960s, according to Blair (2012: 477), liberalism "was regarded by most blacks and leftist whites as a quietist ideology complicit with colonialism rather than a disinterested mediator or credible oppositional strategy". Displaying its resurgence in the post-apartheid era, however, *Refuge* no longer applies it in relation to the former internal racial other, but to the "stranger" from the African continent. It is in this context that old forms of liberalism in South African fiction, marked by their deep embeddedness in the local, are redefined and enter into conversation with the growing body of liberal human rights narratives dealing with migratory processes across the globe. Particularly the response by South African authorities to the so-called xenophobic attacks<sup>4</sup> of May/June 2008 that rapidly spread across the country's townships and informal settlements, leaving 62 people dead and one hundred thousand displaced (Hassim *et al.* 2008), displayed their embrace of worldwide liberal human rights discourse. The attacks resulted in the official establishment of shelters for "refugees" by the UNHCR on South African soil. Drawing on Liisa Malkki's international work on refugees and refugee camps, Steven Robins observes that African migrants in South Africa displaced by the violence and accommodated in so-called "safety sites" underwent a sudden process of relabelling, once they had made demands on the authorities to improve their situation. They were now no longer "innocent refugees" and "victims" but "troublemakers" (Robins 2008: n.p.), exemplifying the binaries and lack of ambiguity that often structure liberal human rights rhetoric. Neocosmos (2010: 113) goes a step further, arguing that because of "the political passivity induced by liberalism, Human Rights Discourse makes xenophobia possible". He continues, "[u]ltimately, Human Rights Discourse, which forces people into victim-hood as it has come to constitute a humanism without an emancipatory project, has discarded human agency in favour of appeals to the state".

The humanism promoted in Brown's novel does not make any appeals to the state but similarly lacks an emancipatory vision that frees African immigrants from the fetters of victimhood. Against this background, Brown's novel may be considered as an example of what Blair (2012: 494) refers to as the "new, reconstructed liberalisms" of post-apartheid writing, texts that advocate an ethic of reciprocity and

4 For a problematization of the labelling of the violence as xenophobia, see Landau 2011. There were similar occurrences of xenophobic violence in early 2015.

non-racialism. The novel, one may suggest, thus forms part of a body of texts such as Nadine Gordimer's *The pickup* (2001) and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001), which are concerned with post-apartheid migration to South Africa. These novels, Blair (2012: 492) maintains, "bring different, essentially liberal perspectives to bear on the opening up of South Africa to transnational migration".<sup>5</sup>

## BROWN'S REFUGE

Andrew Brown's choice of the title, *Refuge*, for his third novel<sup>6</sup> instantaneously announces its preoccupation with migrants and refugees. Yet the text's concept of refuge differs from popular understandings of the notion in the context of refugee narratives. The novel narrates the flight of a Nigerian family from political persecution under the Abacha regime in their home country and the subsequent difficulties they face as refugees in South Africa. However, it does not simply envisage the quest for and provision of shelter in terms of the dualistic structure of the rooted citizen and the moving, uprooted refugee. The text's main South African character, Richard, equally expresses a desire to find a place of personal refuge. Richard, a middle-aged criminal lawyer, tries to escape from his mundane, white middle-class existence and his midlife crisis. This conception of mutuality is mirrored in the novel's mode of narration, which alternates between chapters in which Richard and Ifasen, the husband in the Nigerian family, serve as the key focalisers. For Richard, the commercial realm of the massage parlour and the services of the Nigerian masseuse Abayomi, who, in turn, takes advantage of his professional skills as a lawyer when Ifasen is wrongfully arrested for drug dealing,<sup>7</sup> offer him precisely such an opportunity for refuge. His encounter with the masseuse comes to constitute a rite of passage in his life. While triggering his sexual reawakening steeped in images of Abayomi's exotic

5 As examples of this "reconstructed liberalism", Blair further mentions novels by K. Sello Duiker and Henrietta Rose-Innes. He contends that "[g]iven the emphases on tolerance, non-racialism and the individual's inner world (including a new explicitness, for liberal fiction, about sexuality), these might be considered works of reconstructed liberalism" (2012: 493). Whereas Gordimer's and Mpe's novels certainly bring to mind the "tradition", Mpe's complex narrative technique of "present absences" in *Welcome to our Hillbrow* may be read as a critique of the liberal imagination (Fasselt 2014) and the ironic distance of Gordimer's narrator in *The pickup* appears to express equal doubts.

6 In reviews, the novel has frequently been labelled a thriller, with critics taking the cue from Mike Nicol's cover commendation, calling *Refuge* a "gripping tour de force ... powerful, fast, beautifully written". In an interview with Nicol on the *Books live* website, Brown voices his annoyance about the label, stressing that "*Refuge* is not meant to be a crime thriller at all and I really don't feel that it falls into the genre of crime writing. It would be just as inappropriate for example to label it as 'erotica' merely because it contains some explicit scenes" (Nicol 2010: n.p.).

7 The author states in an interview that "the title of the novel is an accurate encapsulation of the central theme: it is about people seeking refuge from things (one of those things being crime) and seeking refuge in things (in each other, in sex, in power)" (Nicol 2010: n.p.).

sexual otherness, it at the same time propels him onto a path of personal growth that leads to the development of a liberal consciousness. This unfolding of the narrative thus allows for a reading of the novel through the framework of the *Bildungsroman*.

Brown's novel features the commercial space of the massage parlour, a setting that also plays a crucial role in K. Sello Duiker's *The quiet violence of dreams* (2001). Duiker's novel displays how the entertainment of clients in the parlour exploits the vocabulary of genuine affection to conceal the impersonal, commercial aspect of the relation between masseur and client. This language of concealment and illusion informs Brown's engagement with the commercial space of the massage parlour and eventually leads to the "downfall" of Richard. He fails to admit fully that his embrace of the liberal ideal of transparency and his search for "real" emotion cannot be transferred to his encounter with the masseuse. Abayomi continually transgresses the border between the professional and private realms, playing Richard's lover even outside the massage parlour. The end of the novel finally reveals that Abayomi's Russian boss, human trafficker and gangster Svritsky, designed this blurring of boundaries as a cunning plan with the intention of ousting Richard as his lawyer.

In the following, I trace the criss-crossings between the provision of a commercial service and its transgression into the private realm from the perspectives of both Richard and Abayomi. I begin by reading Richard's sudden acquisition of a liberal consciousness resulting from his interaction with Abayomi through the framework of the midlife *Bildungsroman*. Placing Brown's aspirations to educate readers about the plight of Nigerians in South Africa and his deployment of the "rhetoric of urgency" in the context of apartheid writing, I argue in the second section that Richard represents the ideal of transparency at the heart of the liberal realist novel. Abayomi's inscrutability, however, to some extent attenuates such an interpretation. The withholding of Abayomi's thoughts partly questions the novel's tendency to emphasise the victim status of the Nigerian couple, which is in turn grounded in its evocation of the liberal tradition.

## BOURGEONING LIBERAL CONSCIOUSNESS

*Refuge* centres on the character development of its main white protagonist through his encounter with African immigrants. Although the novel does not constitute a *Bildungsroman* in the conventional sense, given that it abstains from tracing the character's maturation from childhood into adulthood, it nonetheless adopts elements of the genre. It narrates Richard's "journey of discovery" (De Kock 2010: n.p.), which leads to his personal and social growth. On the basis of its connection between midlife and the *Bildungsroman* genre, we may read *Refuge* through Margaret Morganroth Gullette's notion of the "progress narrative of the middle years" (1988: xi) or what one may call a "midlife *Bildungsroman*". This sub-form seems to imply that a reorientation triggered by personal crisis and stasis in midlife may bring about



positive change. Taking a stance against predominant views of midlife as years of decline, Gullette (1988: xiv–xv) stresses that plots in midlife progress novels “might move the evolving and sometimes consciously questing protagonist from randomness to meaningfulness ... from pain to serenity, from stasis to activity, from defect to fulfilment, from drive to freedom, from loss to recovery”. The catalyst of Richard’s reorientation and *Bildung* is essentially his meeting of the Nigerian masseuse Abayomi, who, in addition to sexual excitement and false romance, also arouses liberal humanitarian sentiments in him. Yet with the novel’s adoption of elements of the liberal *Bildungsroman*, Brown’s refugee characters are in danger of becoming the mere backdrop against which the white character’s consciousness-raising and metamorphosis unfold.

As the prologue reveals, Richard’s life “has been an accumulation of regrets” (2), but he knowingly keeps on following the path once taken without being able to leave behind his deadening, yet predictable, daily routine. Following the recommendation of his Russian client, Svritsky, he decides to visit the massage parlour, “Touch of Africa”, to escape from the dullness of his everyday reality. The prologue stages the unfolding of a rite of passage in Richard’s life, emphasized by its highly symbolic setting at the doorsill of the massage parlour and the overriding use of a vocabulary of change, uprooting and contrast. The door as a moveable barrier that can either open or close passages into another space may be a symbol of openness, hospitality and safety, but can also signal hostility and insecurity. This duplicity lends a powerful symbolic weight to the door in the novel, as it becomes a marker of possibility and renewal yet also anxiety for Richard and the Nigerian characters alike. In the prologue, the doorway signifies the passage into a new, alluring yet at the same time a frightening and uncontrollable world. Standing indecisively at the open door, Richard ponders, “[a] step back, the door will close again and he will have only the glimpsed memory of another world. A step forward, the door will shut behind him and he will enter the whirlwind unleashed and be pushed along its tumultuous path of death and rebirth” (1). The discrepancy between the brief narrative space taken up by the description of the actual crossing of the doorsill into the parlour, Richard’s long, elaborate deliberations on his current state of life and his envisioning of the world behind the door, furthermore illustrates the intense impact that he feels the transgression of this threshold will have on his life.

Hearing Abayomi’s voice from behind the door before catching a glimpse of her physique, Richard is instantaneously intrigued by her: “The sultry lilt, the suggestion of foreignness in her accent, the undertow of eroticism, all combine in an instant to unbalance him. It brings with it a freshness that unseats him and lifts his staidness” (1). Richard’s meeting with Abayomi is framed in the language of colonial encounter, exhibiting the concomitance of desire and repulsion at the heart of colonial discourse. The doorway “beckons but is ultimately treacherous” and beyond it lies a “dusky interior” (1). The name of the massage parlour, “Touch of Africa”, underscores this

impression, bringing to mind the trope of unbridled African sexuality. Moreover, the name of the parlour disguises the visitor's status as a client, who is expected to abide by the rules of the establishment. For the figuration of physical touch contained in its name leaves calculatingly indeterminate the ascription of passivity and activity to masseuse and/or client. Although sexual intercourse is strictly not part of the services offered in "Touch of Africa", the name adroitly disguises (or at least imparts ambiguity to) the client's confinement to passivity in his encounter with the masseuse. The genitive in "Touch of Africa" can be read as either subjective or objective. On the one hand, Africa is the subject performing the act of touching; on the other, the name deliberately seems to leave open the possibility of the client as active subject. The interior of the parlour, as well as Abayomi's conduct, further reveal a gentle concealment of the commerciality of this act. It is designed with the express intention of blurring the boundaries between the two orders of the commercial and private and of creating the illusion (for the customer) that the erotic massage might not be merely an act of economic exchange but may take place freely and out of "authentic" desire. As Richard enters the parlour, he notices the absence of a reception area and observes that "[t]he interior of the building had all the appearance of a carefully furnished home" (80). The design of the flat thus serves to conjure up a homely atmosphere, papering over the commercial nature of the massage and masking the ulterior motive of profit.

For Richard, the disguise of the commercial in the robe of the private contributes to the confusion over his relationship with Abayomi and intensifies his desire to transgress the boundaries and restrictions of a commercial transaction. At their first meeting, Abayomi lays out the conditions of conduct at the parlour to Richard, reminding him that he cannot touch her, "only I touch you" (82). However, she does not present these boundaries as irrevocably drawn, allowing for Richard's fantasies to wander by hinting at their possible future transgression once the two parties to the arrangement have become more familiar with each other (82). Abayomi consciously plays with this possibility by criss-crossing the borders between the professional/commercial and private sphere in her engagement with Richard, showing a "delicate combination of distance and affection" (91) that continues to unbalance him. Although acutely aware of the exchange situation, Richard begins to muse about his connection with his masseuse in the language of a love relationship. He describes her expression as "open and warm, as if she knew him and was genuinely pleased that he was there" (81) and ponders wistfully: "His amazement was naive, he knew, but he had not anticipated the intimacy. There was a seeming sincerity in her actions: she was tasting his body" (88). During their encounters, Richard constantly engages in a similar decoding of her gestures, facial expression and speech, yet the novel for the most part denies us access to Abayomi's thoughts, so that we can never be sure about the validity of Richard's interpretations. His fixation on sincerity bespeaks his

desire to eradicate the ambiguity that is central to their relationship, ironically the very quality of his former life from which he intended to escape.

Not only does the massage generate a feeling of bodily rejuvenation and of being "alive again" (91) in Richard, but the anticipated life-altering impact of his visit to the parlour appears to bear fruition with immediate effect: "The shift in him had been so complete, so unanticipated, that he had expected everything to appear altered" (91–92). Miraculously, Richard's sexual experience at the parlour elicits a deepening social awareness that makes him more receptive and hospitable towards his surroundings. Visiting a bar where he is the only white customer after the massage session, he requests a beer that "doesn't come from here" (93) and engages in a conversation with the Mozambican barman, asking him about his experience in South Africa (94). Yet it is at the dinner party his wife has organised at their house on the same evening that Richard's newfound liberal consciousness surfaces most prominently. When the conversation moves towards the question of post-apartheid African immigration and the usual stereotypes against African migrants are replicated, Richard gets visibly annoyed and leaves the table, imagining

the various pockets of people out there, all going about their evening affairs, disparate and yet all part of a city which, until now, had somehow passed him by. Svritsky – did he even have a family, Richard wondered – and the Mozambican in the bar, the masseuse, the man on the motorbike, all the people who had passed unseen beneath his gaze. His consciousness had expanded so suddenly that it had seemed to explode. (105)

Richard's development of a social consciousness after his very first meeting with Abayomi seems overhasty and not sufficiently motivated. He leaves the massage parlour with a tingling body, a sense of newness and interest in the "foreign", yet the narrative voice does not plausibly illustrate how this experience immediately triggers his advocacy on behalf of African immigrants and refugees. It appears that compositional motivation – the function of Richard's burgeoning liberal views in the "overall intentional framework of the work" – is given precedence over causal motivation that "connects events in terms of a meaningful causal structure" (Jannidis 2003: 43).

Richard also becomes a public advocate of his emerging social consciousness. When a guest at the party cites the well-known adage TIA – This is Africa – from Edward Zwick's film *Blood diamond* (2006), asserting that "[t]here is no solution, *boet*. Just the problem ... – TIA"<sup>8</sup> (105),<sup>8</sup> Richard spoils the dinner party. His questions lead beyond the norm of what is acceptable at a social gathering in his circle. He harshly rejects the motto TIA, calling it a "Hollywood throwaway line"

8 Diana Adesola Mafe notes that the film's "script itself ends up affirming one of the most common stereotypes about Africa, namely, its propensity for chaos. The film's essentialist catchphrase 'TIA (This is Africa),' confidently spoken by white characters, repeatedly stresses the continent's 'natural' state of confusion" (2011: 94).

(106) and questioning the guest: "What the hell ... [do] you ... know about this continent? Or care!" (106). His wife apologises for his unacceptable behaviour to the clearly offended guests, while another questions her "when did your old man become such a bleeding-heart liberal ...?" (106).

Richard, in turn, stresses his remoteness from such popular representational regimes and their reductionist framing of the African continent:

He wished, ridiculously, that Abayomi were there with him. He longed for her presence, the sense of another world that she carried with her. They hadn't spoken much during the session, but he knew that she would captivate them, and decimate their small-minded views .... She would shine, statuesque, and sweep the cluttered table clean .... And he, Richard, would laugh aloud, with real mirth and delight. How strange it was to feel so passionate about a stranger. (107)

Although not devoid of a sense of self-mockery, Richard's self-fashioning sidesteps his own implication within these representational structures, emphasizing his newfound liberal attitude.<sup>9</sup> His dissociation from the social norms of his circle caused by his encounter with Abayomi evokes elements of the conventional structure of the *Bildungsroman*, in which the strife for *Bildung* of its main and traditionally male protagonist is triggered by the cleavage between him and his social surroundings. Images of confinement recur frequently throughout the opening pages. These depict Richard as a prisoner of his "small-minded" circle as well as of the urban landscape of walls, fences and gates he inhabits. For the first time, it seems, Richard casts a conscious glance over the "security fencing". He becomes aware of his truncated and isolated life: "Inside his domain, behind the high fence and the security perimeter, among the oak trees and swans, his life was a fiction, a tamed version of living" (107).

Yet most of all, Abayomi reawakens within him a sense of curiosity that had died with his entry into adulthood, to be overtaken by fear and suspicion (194). According to Giovanna Summerfield (2010: 81), curiosity is a recurring theme of the traditional *Bildungsroman*; and in *Refuge*, this humanist impulse triggers the individual's active engagement with his environment. As Richard admits to Abayomi, "I don't have the curiosity to try to understand the people and things around me. Meeting you has

9 Richard's newfound liberal humanism is most succinctly expressed by the author himself, who relates in an interview that Richard "comes to understand the true depth of the horror that faces the vulnerable and poor, but he also comes to understand a whole lot more about himself and about how he actually fits in amongst those around him" (Brown, cited in Nicol 2010: n.p.). Echoing Coetzee's remark that beggars "haunt all good liberals" (1992: 373), he continues: "It's a bit like driving past the same beggar your whole life, refusing to make eye-contact in case he asks you for something. Then one day your car breaks down right next to him. He helps you open the bonnet and you start to talk to him: it turns out that he knows your grandmother or that he worked in your grandfather's shop. An entire world of humanity opens up between you and you come to regret your self-imposed isolation" (in Nicol 2010: n.p.).

taught me so many things .... But most of all, I think you have shown me that” (194). The gift of curiosity, in his view, enables him to become more accommodating and hospitable towards his fellow human beings. Emphasizing Richard’s social growth in this manner, Brown follows the established pattern of the *Bildungsroman*. According to Slaughter (2007: 253), it “posits as the culmination of modern subjectivation the cultivation of a democratic, humanitarian sensibility – a profound fellow-feeling that enables the *Bildungsheld* to recognize the equal humanity and fundamental dignity of the human personality in both the self and others.”

Yet even if Richard thinks he has overcome his initially domineering sexual curiosity, the ultimate goal of which lies in the sexual act, curiosity and sexual desire remain intertwined throughout the novel. If we cast a glance at the etymology of the adjective, “curious”, the inclination to impose upon and dominate the object of inquiry that has overlaid its earlier more genuine concern for the other becomes manifest. Deriving from the Latin *curiosus* (from *cura*: care), the primary sense of “full of care or pains, careful, assiduous, inquisitive” (“Curious”) has given rise to a secondary meaning predicated of the object, namely “[d]eserving or exciting attention on account of its novelty or peculiarity; exciting curiosity; somewhat surprising, strange, singular, odd; queer” (“Curious”, def. 16a). This results in a restriction of the inquiring drive to what is deemed unusual and off the beaten track. Barbara M. Benedict (2001: 4) points out the link between curiosity and imperialism, observing that “[i]n this capacious power to usurp meanings, co-opt categories, and overturn conventions, curiosity is imperialistic and aggressive. A product of the age of discovery, it vibrates between the spectator and the spectacle, the possessor and the possession, struggling to subsume one or the other.” Richard vacillates between the poles of “caring” and imperialist curiosity until the very end, drawing attention to liberalism’s complicity within repressive structures, which, however, remains unacknowledged.

The novel closes with the breakup of Richard’s marriage and the loss of his job as a consequence of Svritsky’s successful plan to oust him as his lawyer. Yet it also stages the opening up of new opportunities for Richard, as he is able to realize an old dream with the opening of his own legal practice. The ending, in this fashion, remains somewhat open and deviates from the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, where “the meaning of events lies in their *finality*” (Moretti 2000: 7, original emphasis) and which conventionally ends with the full reintegration of the individual into society. Nonetheless, we gain a sense that Richard has escaped the “anomie of his ‘circle’” (De Kock 2010: n.p.) and has become the representative of a more humane South Africa. Once more, Richard appears as the only protagonist who undergoes development in the novel. His encounter with Abayomi and the Nigerian community reconstitutes his ability – even if at times tempered by imperialist rhetoric – to engage with others outside the closed sphere of middle class white South Africans. In this, the novel follows the plot scheme of white redemption used in Neill Blomkamp’s

2009 science fiction blockbuster, *District 9*, where the rather disagreeable central white character is unfettered from his constricted, prejudiced world-view through his befriending of two aliens. In this sense, those victimised in public discourse come to liberate him from the stagnation in his life. The central dramaturgical function of the immigrant characters is thus reduced to that of helpers of the liberal hero. Richard's development and transformation contrast with the stasis of the refugees, which to some extent maintains the binary paradigm in spite of the entanglement and layering of refuge seeking and provision. Thus, in contrast to Richard's transformation, nothing changes for Abayomi. This is apparent in the circular structure of the novel. It opens and closes with her welcome of a client to the massage parlour.

The novel's educational project is closely aligned with the notion of "narrative urgency", which I will explore below. This will allow me to embed the novel within the tradition of politically committed writing in South Africa, but also to draw attention to its own awareness of the limitations and contradictions within the liberal idea of transparency. This, as I argue below, comes into focus most pronouncedly in a scene staging Richard's hospitable reception by Abayomi's Nigerian relatives.

## AN "AFRICAN" EDUCATION AND NARRATIVE URGENCY

While Richard's encounter with Abayomi ostensibly makes him more open towards the people around him, Abayomi for her part serves as his educator about Nigeria, a country and culture of which Richard is largely ignorant. Brown appears to assume the same of his (traditionally white middle-class) South African readership. The novel, it seems, is designed to instruct the average South African reader about Nigeria in the same manner as Richard achieves his *Bildung*, making use of the "didactic effect of the classical *Bildungsroman*" (Slaughter 2007: 246). In the appendix of the novel, we find a "Bibliography and Resources", where the author recommends the "informative websites [www.motherlandnigeria.com](http://www.motherlandnigeria.com) and [chiamaka.com](http://chiamaka.com)" for an "accessible introduction to Nigeria and its people" and further provides a list of monographs for consultation, without, however, mentioning any literary texts. This absence demonstrates the relative scarcity of intertextual dialogue between recent South African fiction and writing from Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent, a form of textual dialogue that would, perhaps, contribute towards changing the dominant rhetoric of apartness towards a more reflective engagement with African "elsewheres".

Apart from these paratextual educational materials, the author at times integrates passages with a somewhat didactic undertone into the main text. Within the framework of Ifasen's reflection – presented in free indirect discourse – on "their self-imposed banishment from their homeland" (25), we retrospectively learn about the reasons for the family's flight to South Africa. Abayomi's brother's involvement in the Free Biafra Movement and his open protest against the Abacha regime cause a

police visit to the house of Ifasen's parents in Abeokuta, where the couple has been hiding to ensure Abayomi's safety from anti-Igbo violence. Ifasen's perspective is, however, soon taken over by a rather schoolmasterly omniscient narrative voice, which relates to us the vita of both protagonists in an attempt, it seems, to educate the reader about Nigerian history, whose most renowned conflicts – infighting between Muslims and Christians as well as the Biafran war – are neatly packaged into the families' fictitious histories. Ifasen's Hausa parents, particularly his mother, cannot hide their disapproval of their son marrying a non-Muslim woman of mixed Igbo and Yoruba descent. Abayomi's father was strongly involved in the Pro-Biafra movement and later executed by the military in his own home, where prominent dissidents (among them Ken Saro-Wiwa) had frequently gathered when Abayomi was a girl. Intercalated sentences such as the following reveal the novel's educational aspirations: "By 1970 the Biafran dream was in bloody tatters and more than a million people had been slaughtered. Britain turned a blind eye to the atrocities, and the world pretended that Biafra had never existed" (27). It is particularly in passages like these that the author's instructive voice, impatient to undercut the bogus refugee cliché, seems to appear behind the narrator.

The author himself reveals that the novel "is trying to be a social commentary – a protest almost – against the way in which we treat refugees and non-South Africans in this country" (in Nicol 2010: n.p.). As he notes in an interview, Nigerian nationals are faced with particularly harsh stereotypes in South Africa (Brown 2009). Part of Richard's education, as well as the reader's, it appears, is the lesson that not all Nigerians are drug dealers and conmen.<sup>10</sup> Reviewing the text, De Kock (2010: n.p.) observes its resemblance to earlier literary traditions: "It is rare in South African writing, in its current hue of 'lightness' ... to find a work that recalls the feel of the older literature, in which heartbeat issues drove the writing like a hot pulse." He further contends that the novel "in the urgency of its narration, and its shock of recognition, recalls the jolt one associates with works like Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians*, Gordimer's *The conservationist*, Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* and Brink's *Looking on darkness*" (2010: n.p.). Brown emphasises that while he initially devised the novel as a story about Richard's encapsulated middle-class life, he expanded the narrative around the Nigerian couple after the occurrence of the 2008 violence, which shocked him into the realization that South Africa no longer merely welcomes but itself creates refugees (Brown 2009). Like a number of South African authors and critics (see Fasselt 2013; 2015), Brown directly responds with

10 Again, the novel establishes a dichotomy between innocent, unwelcome, and criminal African non-nationals by introducing the figure of the Nigerian Sunday, who shares the flat with Abayomi and Ifasen and steals from the couple, as well as swindling Richard out of a large sum of money and offering him drugs. While resembling the folkloristic figure of the trickster, with its cunning resistance to definition, Sunday appears largely caught in the straightjacket of the conman figure.

his writing to the inhospitable and violent conditions African migrants face in the country. In the urgency of their impact, the attacks thus seem to have heightened the novel's orientation towards politically relevant issues.<sup>11</sup>

For De Kock (2010: n.p.), it is primarily the "urgency of ... narration" in *Refuge* that inclines him to link the text to South African writing under apartheid, reminding us of a reformulation rather than complete break with former cornerstones of South African fiction (Samuelson 2010). Literary critics have primarily associated the language of urgency with the work of black writers during apartheid. Aesthetic concerns, as Oswald Mtshali famously proclaimed, were subordinated to a "language of urgency" (1976: 127), resulting in a predominant style of documentary realism. Louise Bethlehem, in her incisive article, "'A primary need as strong as hunger': the rhetoric of urgency in South African literary culture under Apartheid", also focuses on its presence in texts by white authors, asserting that

the frequent recourse to the notion of urgency by both black and white South African writers and literary scholars in English reflects their thoroughgoing will to power over the exteriority, the concrete datum, of the lived social relations of apartheid South Africa. Precisely because the ethical claims or quest for social agency of the South African literary critic are rooted in an instrumentalist conception of language, the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified connection must be denied. This being so, it becomes possible to see the rhetoric of urgency as seeking to weld signifier to signified, a constitutive condition of all realism, one might argue. (2001: 378–379)

For Bethlehem, this sidestepping of the inevitably mediated nature of representation in fiction primarily has an "ideological function" (2001: 382) and allowed writers to assume an ethical position. Yet she argues that close attention to the figurative language of writers during apartheid at the same time undermines this ethically prescribed wishing away of the intrinsically mediating nature of language (Bethlehem 2001; 2009).<sup>12</sup> Of particular interest for our reading of Brown's novel here, however, is Bethlehem's reference to Michael Vaughan's critical engagement with the mimetic aim of liberal novels. He stresses that these promote "an ideal of transparency – of absolute clarity. Liberal fiction aims at clarity, ease and concreteness of exposition.

11 Zukiswa Wanner and Lauren Beukes, for instance, equally highlight the direct influence of the events on their writing. Wanner notes in the afterword of her novel, *Men of the South*: "I was at the Franschhoek Literary Festival in 2008 when Johannesburg started burning. It was here, while I mused on the senselessness of the negrophobic attacks ... that the character of Tinaye Musonza [the Zimbabwean in her novel] was conceived" (Wanner 2010: 219). Her Congolese character in *Zoo city*, Beukes relates, was equally "inspired by the shame and horror of the xenophobic attacks in 2008" (Beukes 2010: n.p.).

12 Similarly, the generalizing tendencies of apartheid writing have to some extent been qualified by critics such as David Attwell, who in his book, *Rewriting modernity* (2005), makes a case for the existence of modernist experimentalism in black South African writing.



It is fiction that works within the conventions of *realism*, whereby the perception of reality is treated as a non-problematic issue" (Vaughan 1982: 120, original emphasis).

The novel's "rhetoric of urgency" surfaces powerfully in Brown's narration of the plight of Abayomi's husband, Ifasen. He is wrongfully incarcerated for drug dealing and subjected to "the brutal reality of Pollsmoor's awaiting-trial section" (151), where he is gang-raped. In a meeting between Ifasen and Richard, who has promised Abayomi to take on her husband's defence, Ifasen addresses him with the words: "'You look at me and only see an accused .... You cannot see the person behind the label that has been stuck on me. I did not ask for it. I did not put it there. You did. It does not serve you to pull it away. And even when I am found innocent, I will always be the accused in your eyes'" (224). This passage appears highly invested with the author's ideological aim to condemn the stereotype of the immigrant as criminal. Yet an emphasis on crisis, desperation and innocence is an equally problematic refrain for the immigrant/refugee, as is the accusation of drug trafficking and fraud. According to Rosello, the refugee in contemporary discourse is "always imagined, or fantasized, as innocent". She continues:

The 'real' refugee is welcome, but it is often assumed that individuals who invoke the Geneva Convention are not 'real' refugees, that they are cheating: they are suspected of self-servingly taking advantage of the treaty. They are implicitly or overtly accused of lying about their lives, of embellishing (so to speak) their autobiographies to include some of the elements of persecution that give them the right to seek asylum in another territory .... The bad refugee stretches the definition: the real refugee must be innocent, powerless, a victim. (2001: 156)

While the narrative's emphasis on Ifasen's innocence appears to display the language of transparency and clarity that Vaughan criticizes of apartheid's liberal writing, a closer look at the novel's key scene of hospitable exchange provides us with an implicit critique of such an assumption.

Richard's African *Bildung* or, as Abayomi terms it, his introduction to the "'real Africa in his city'" (182) extends beyond this confrontation with his stereotypes of African/Nigerian immigrants and Abayomi's attempt to familiarize him with the politics and history of her "poor, beautiful, suffering, awful country" (136). She also introduces him to her Nigerian relatives in Cape Town, who welcome him warmly at her cousin's christening ceremony. While we gain a sense that the author somewhat idealizes the hospitality of Abayomi's relatives, the scene also turns upon the problem of the liberal "ideal of transparency". It juxtaposes Richard's cultural need for intelligibility and transparency with Abayomi's inscrutability and thus introduces a form of metanarrative that questions the accommodationist stance of the liberal imagination. On their way to the function, Richard complains to Abayomi about the officious behaviour of a young prostitute who tried to win him as a customer while he was waiting for her in his car. Abayomi reveals to him the desperate story of the girl, reminding Richard that "'[w]e do not know people's

stories .... We don't know why they have ended up where they are. We don't know who they are'" (183). Richard's reply that he feels he knows Abayomi, even though intended to lighten up the conversation, appears to stand for the liberal belief in a transparent reality and the knowability of the other.

His hospitable reception at the house of Abayomi's relatives further accentuates these divergent assumptions. Focalised entirely through Richard, the scene gives weight to his emotional response elicited by his warm welcome. Upon entering the house, Abayomi's cousin greets him with the words, "[y]ou are welcome with us, Richard' ... holding his hand in a strong grip. He opened his arms in a show of hospitality, allowing them to pass and step down into the small garden" (185). Another family member bows in front of him, making Richard "bewildered by the respect meted to him" (187). In contrast to his wife's dinner parties, where food seems to be prepared mainly with the motive of gaining acclaim as a host, Richard has "a sense that the food here had been prepared with heart rather than out of a desire to impress" (192). The space of welcome offered to him is in his eyes liberated from the hosts' desire to reassert their sovereignty as hosts – the motive that appears to drive Richard's wife in her provision of food and drink for her visitors. The matriarch of the household, even though thoroughly scrutinizing Richard upon his arrival and hovering over him during his entire visit, appears as a sympathetic and humorous host who educates him about her family's customs. She familiarises Richard particularly with the different foods served, whose exotic smells were "filling the passage with a swirling festivity of spicy aromas" (187).

Besides being touched by his warm reception, Richard is almost moved to tears by the tenderness the father of the newly christened baby displays towards his child and wife (189). This vocabulary of genuine, unsullied sentiment comes to characterize both his perception of his hosts and his reaction towards their extension of hospitality. This focus on the almost heart-wrenching goodness of his hosts, who, despite their inhospitable treatment in the country, open their home to him with such sincerity,<sup>13</sup> bypasses the inherently ambiguous nature of his relationship with Abayomi. Rather, it embraces a mode of "transparent signification" that Bethlehem (2001: 375) assigns to liberal fiction. Brown's emphasis on the culinary aspect of the Nigerians' hospitality further heightens this impression, being reminiscent of multiculturalism's frequent fetishisation of food as an instrument with which to paper over the disconcerting qualities of the other. As Anita Mannur (2010: 225) stresses, "[w]hen one thinks about food, there is an expectation of happiness – food brings people together; food allows people to 'experience' other cultures. The practice of 'multiculturalist eating' is affectively fulfilling because it satisfies one's craving for otherness while keeping all that is uncomfortable at bay." In this light, Richard's

13 In fact, throughout the novel the word "welcome" is only pronounced by members of the Nigerian community.

transformation from numbness to sincere feelings seems to be advanced here by the idealised hospitality of African immigrants that displays an optimistic belief in individual agency and compassion.

Although the episode is steeped in the diction of truthfulness, Brown at the same time cautions us against Richard's liberal inclination to ascribe clarity and transparency to his surroundings. If we recall Abayomi's statement regarding the unknowability of the other, Richard's impression of his genuine welcome emerges in a somewhat different light. While his initial discomfort about Abayomi having to justify his presence soon fades, he notices "Abayomi's face focused on him, a slight frown creasing her forehead" (189) during the ceremony and for the first time since meeting her feels a "full flush of guilt" (189). Richard's reaction seems explicable by his intrusion into Abayomi's intimate family circle, but her face, significantly enough, remains inscrutable – we do not know what causes her to frown – and hence refutes alignment with the genuine "hostness" of her relatives. Abayomi in this instance cannot be easily accommodated within liberalist formulae. Her facial expression, we may tentatively suggest, stands for a momentary discursive break and is symbolic of the limits of liberal discourse. In a sense, we may read Abayomi's frown, which cannot be accommodated within the context of Richard's general reception at the christening, as exceeding the conventional liberal script. Her incalculable expression prompts us to think African immigrants beyond common representational modes and conceive the hospitable exchange here not merely as a celebratory sharing of food. Brown, therefore, subjects to scrutiny Richard's liberal assumption of clarity and enfolds his "urgent message" within a narrative strategy that does not primarily aim at closing the gap between the word and the world (Bethlehem 2001) but also problematises, however briefly, the text's positioning of the Nigerians in terms of the trope of the innocent refugee.

*Refuge*, as I have argued in this article, can be read in light of Blair's notion of a post-2000 reconstruction of the liberal novel. But what distinguishes Brown's *Bildungsroman* from the liberal visions Blair discusses is its awareness that the liberal text cannot fully grasp the experiences of the Nigerian characters. Brown's reconfiguration of liberalism thus propels us to carefully tease out textual layers of ambiguity that may undercut dominant framings of African migrants. The novel shows that the resurgence of liberalism after 2000 has taken on an expanded scope that is no longer primarily tied to the space of the nation but also reflects on issues of a larger, global reach.

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