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**Abderrahmane Laheg**  
Kasdi Merbah University-Ouargla, Algeria  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7315-1967>  
[abderrahmane.laheg.edu@gmail.com](mailto:abderrahmane.laheg.edu@gmail.com)

## **Necropolitics of the Zone of Nonbeing in the Selected Writing by Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ray Bradbury**

### **Abstract**

In the imperial epoch, social practices of division, classification and differentiation are more than often adopted by sovereignties as means for maintaining absolute authority and solidifying racial discrimination. Binaries such as 'us' and 'them', colonizer and colonized, and master and slave are usually the blueprints of extremist ideological doctrines. Following literary narratives through different contact zones, as that in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not* and Bradbury Ray's short story "Way in the Middle of the Air", a recurring motif of racialized abnegation and annihilation could be discerned. Be it slavery or colonization, Black subjects are entangled in an inevitable neurosis. A simultaneous revision of the theoretical framework of Frantz Fanon and Mbembe Achilles highlights a relevance between two conceptions, which are the zone of nonbeing and necropolitics. Whilst the first term describes the atmosphere that engulfs the existence of Black people who co-exist with White supremacists, necropolitics as introduced by Mbembe explains and distinguishes the mechanisms that manipulate and relegate Black people into this zone of nonbeing. Rereading both fictional works through such a lens foregrounds the imperial autocratic rules manipulating death zones.

**Keywords:** *abnegation, colonization, contact zones, necropolitics, non-being, slavery*

**Abderrahmane Laheg**  
Kasdi Merbah Universiteti-Ouargla, Əlcəzair  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7315-1967>  
[abderrahmane.laheg.edu@gmail.com](mailto:abderrahmane.laheg.edu@gmail.com)

## **Tsitsi Dangarembga və Ray Bradbury tərəfindən seçilmiş yazıda yoxluq zonasının Nekropolitika**

### **Xülasə**

İmperatorluq dövründə bölünmə, təsnifat və diferensiaslaşmanın sosial praktikaları suverenliklər tərəfindən mütləq hakimiyyəti saxlamaq və irqi ayrı-seçkiliyi gücləndirmək vasitəsi kimi daha çox qəbul edilir. "Biz" və "onlar", müstəmləkəçi və müstəmləkəçi, ağa və qul kimi ikiliklər adətən ekstremist ideoloji doktrinaların planları olur. Tsitsi Dangarembga-nın *The Book of Not* və Ray Bradbury-nin "Way in the Middle of the Air" povestində olduğu kimi müxtəlif təmas zonaları vasitəsilə ədəbi povestlərdən sonra irqiləşdirilmiş imtina və məhvin təkrarlanan motivini görmək olar. İstər köləlik olsun, istərsə də müstəmləkəçilik, qara subyektlər qaçılmaz nevrozun içinə girirlər. Frants Fanon və Mbembe Axillesin nəzəri cəsədinin eyni vaxtda nəzərdən keçirilməsi, yoxluq və nekropolitika zonaları olan iki konsepsiya arasında aktuallığı vurğulayır. Birinci termin ağ supremasistlərlə birlikdə mövcud olan qara insanların varlığını əhatə edən atmosferi təsvir edərkən, Mbembe tərəfindən təqdim edilən nekrosiyasət qara insanları manipulyasiya edən və bu yoxluq zonasına salan mexanizmləri izah edir və fərqləndirir. Hər iki bədii əsəri belə bir obyektiv vasitəsilə yenidən oxumaq ölüm zonalarını manipulyasiya edən imperiya avtokratik qaydalarını ön plana çıxarır.

**Açar sözlər:** *abneqasiya, müstəmləkəçilik, təmas zonaları, nekropolitika, yoxluq, köləlik*

## Introduction

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, axiomatic and politically dominant paradigms had been severely questioned and hierarchically deconstructed. The supremacy of ideologies such as colonialism, capitalism and Euro-centrism had been contested with opposite binaries such as postcolonialism, communism and pluralism. As a result, the traditional topos of sovereignty have been rendered obsolete. In other words, the southern hemisphere advocated its presence through consolidating and re-fostering its autochthonous cultures and social norms.

As Mykola Kozlovets clarifies in his research paper, “Europocentrism: Theory, Ideology and Practice”, the brutality of Western oppression and its attempts to erase the native ‘other’ backfired on the colonizer and fueled the proliferation of subsequent “de-westernization” waves. Such counter-ideologies are easily observed, for instance, in India’s “Hinduisation”, Middle East’s “re-Islamization” and Japan’s recourse to Asianization. Through a similar line of thought, maxims of ‘Afro-centrism’, ‘going native’ and ‘Africana womanism’ were celebrated in myriad African countries (Huntington 80-88 qtd. in Kozlovets, 2019, p. 20; Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 133). In retrospect, such a proclivity towards decolonization and cultural dis-estrangement helps in understanding the former principles and motives that gear-shifted the colonial times.

Notwithstanding the variation and numerousness of colonial tyrannical mechanisms, their logical connectives are reducible and traceable back to the fallacious and rudimentary division of the ‘civilized us’ and the ‘barbaric them’. Such a division generatively purports the veracity of iniquitous practices. Conspicuously, it serves as a constitutional custom vindicating the significance of certain lives over others, based on racial and ethnic grouping. Indeed, an unprofessed yet a ruling code authorities exerted is the racialized regulation of the right to let live or kill.

Such an inexorable imperative has been conceptualized and coined by the Cameroonian philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe first in 2003, as necropolitics. Mbembe detects and unveils the way racist and extremist agendas cement the grounds of inequality, armament, antipathy, and phobias as apparatus to either socio-economically exclude or simply kill the so-alleged adversary of state, religion or ethnicity. The (bio-)necropolitics, as introduced by Mbembe is rather a theoretical amalgamation in between Michele Foucault’s biopolitics and Frantz Fanon’s conception of the ‘zone of non-being’ in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (“Achille Mbembe”, 2016; Mbembe, 2019, p. 66; Fanon, 1967, p. 2).

The Black body is rather in a continuous process of (de/re) construction. Fanon demonstrates that any moment of coexistence or contact with the White world is befuddling the Black subject’s psyche. Fanon further confirms that both worlds, White and Black “follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible” (Fanon, 1963, p. 38-39). Even spatial co-habitation does not erase the bold boundaries, that ascend beyond the geographical axis, fending off any form symbiotic relationship. As the self-proclaimed master-race flags the existence of the other as subversive of his own, a set of ex/implicit regulations in form of limitations, classifications and prohibitions permeate the very psychosomatic interactions of the subjugated race.

Literature, in particular, encapsulates the complexities of those encounters between the White colonizer/master and the subjugated Black body. At the same time, literature has been resorted to by writers as a platform for resistance, where numerous genres and literary devices have been weaponized to rewrite history, centralize the margins and remarkably protagonize the antagonized ‘other’. The native, after years of being (under-)represented and demonized by the European pen, made a presence in (non-)fictional narratives and voiced his/her existence. Remarkably, literature allows the investigation of phenomena through varied and dissimilar contact zones, which confers the advantage of thorough understanding of the targeted phenomenon. Necropolitics, for instance, is reigning supreme in colonies and slavery zones. Thus, the writing of Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ray Bradbury serve as the practical corpus of this study.

## Research

### Two Zones, One Fate: Contextualization of Dangarembga’s and Bradbury’s Writing

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a Zimbabwean author who mainly writes in English. She is acclaimed for her series of semi-autobiographies, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body*. The books which were published respectively in 1988, 2006 and 2018, follow the adventures and struggles of a young Shona protagonist from the age of thirteen years old till being a middle - aged

women (Flores, 2020, p. 146). The protagonist Tambudzai acquaints the reader with the cultural mores and traditions of her indigenous world. She further discloses the bitter realities of life amidst colonization and war of independence, and finally discusses the prospect of Zimbabwe in line with post-independence and nationalist parties. Simultaneously, Tambu discloses glimpses of the author's own life. Myriad similarities could be observed, such as both the author and the protagonist are graduates of missionary schools. Both of them had direct contact with the British colonizer. Both of them were psychologically wounded and culturally alienated. Conspicuously, none of them escaped the subversive dents of the colonizers' necropolitics ("Achille Mbembe: Biography", 2016).

The contact between the colonizer and the colonized was accentuated most in her second fictional publication, *The Book of Not*. The book thoroughly screened this encounter and its multilayered indications. Two main parallel plotlines guided the book's events. First, it recounts Tambudzai's enrollment at a high school that is pertinent to White British settlers. Second, it lays the ground for the economic and political conditions that preluded the violent outbreak of war of independence by Rhodesian fighters. The first plotline brought about the fact of racial segregation in Tambu's high school and dormitory, and the dehumanizing degradation she endured, from her White classmates (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 66).

The Gruella war of independence cracks unbridgeable political chasms and psychological fragmentation into Tambudzai's identity construction. Amongst her hostile White classmates, she was by no means allowed to display the slightest traces of sympathy towards her sister, who lost her leg in the war (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 30). At the same time, any declared support to the colonizers, who granted her an educational opportunity, would flag her by the resistance fighters as a disloyal spy.

Through a different context Ray Bradbury, of Fahrenheit 451 fame, is prefigured as a voluminous American author, with around 30 books and 600 short stories. Such profuse literary production encompasses a wide variety of genres, ranging from realistic fiction, to fantasy, horror, mystery and science fiction ("Typewriter", 2019; "Ray", 2013). His widely acclaimed work, *The Martian Chronicles*, is a fix-up novel published in 1950. Remarkably, the constituent twenty-seven stories could be classified as sixteen full stories and eleven "bridge[s]", which are rather fragments that serve as nexuses in between the full stories. Worthy of mention, the book had been revised and refined in a published second edition in 1997. Correspondingly, the first edition chronological order starts in January 1999 and concludes in October 2026; the second edition makes a temporal deviation as it opens with January 2030, and spans till October 2057. In spite of the modifications, the time lag of twenty-seven years between the first and last short story is preserved in both editions. In addition, whilst two short stories were inserted within the updated collection, "Way in the Middle of the Air" was withdrawn (Reid, 2000, p. 25-26).

"Way in the Middle of the Air" delves into the depths of White supremacy and the institution of slavery. The short story narrates the sudden gathering of all black slaves, who live in the Southern states of America, around a rocket, which is supposed to help them escape earth altogether and head towards Mars. The outrage of White masters is personified through a racist character, Teece, who demeans the Blacks as useless yet he is utterly furious over their escape. He desperately forbids black man named Belter from joining the rest over a debt of fifty dollars. As the crowd around pays this fifty dollars, Teece directs his anger towards his boy servant Silly. As his attempt of instilling fear inside the Black escapee was futile, he sabotages Silly's plan to escape with a fake contract and vain excuses yet again to no avail (Cruz-Duarte, 2020, p. 22).

### **Necropolitics of Colonial Contact Zones in Dangarembga's *The Book of Not***

Tambudzai was implicitly yet persistently guided towards inevitable social and cultural self-abnegation. She was constructed by the White master to inhabit an economic, educational and ideological cul-de-sac. Her diploma, which is identical to that of her White classmates, neither holds the same value nor does it offer the same opportunities. Tambudzai's frustration mirrors such a bitter realization, "I was only marginally better paid than the beggars, who, fulfilling the prophecies of the whites" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 198).

A prominent necropolitical strategy is that the Black body is repeatedly indoctrinated the axiom, that even diligence and perseverance cannot compensate his/her inherent vice. His/her Blackness

cannot be whitened or paled by non-inherent qualities. Tambudzai became aware of skin color differences only when she co-existed with White supremacists in The Sacred Heart Young ladies High School. The colonizer dooms the Black colonized subject with made-up flaws and demerits that cannot be overcome, as Tambu accepts “I was ... a biologically blasphemous person” (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 64). Such a necropolitical technique surrounds the Black victim with an atmosphere of perpetual defeat and self-hate. Blackness as an identity constituent becomes the Black person's enemy. Each extra day in the high school was turning Tambudzai's against herself and her body, “... my bodily aberrations, as I increasingly thought of them, once more got me into trouble” (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 64).

In addition, whilst the schoolbooks were drafted to brain-wash her into perceiving her native tribal system as a barbaric entity, her family and indigenous community were fighting, in the opposite direction, to disclose the truth of the British as they really were, parasitic and oppressive colonizers. Tambudzai neglected her native language, even though she condemned the same deed when it was committed by her brother Nhamo after he was enrolled at the missionary school, as she spitefully complained back then “there was one terrible change. He had forgotten how to speak Shona... He talked most fluently ... in English” (Babalola, 1986, p.146; Dangarembga, 2004, p.53).

Her zone of nonbeing materialized in a collateral relation with the mounting inner contradictions and cultural disharmony. She was all that the colonizer did not want her to be, and therefore she wanted to be all that she was not. She was catapulted into the middle of irreconcilable binaries. Tambudzai was not constructed to thrive; she was programmed by imperial configurations to serve the empire and barely survive. Dangarembga openly states, “I was a baby, much as a newly born draught ox is a calf, to be broken in in due course to plough a predetermined furrow” (Dangarembga, 2022, p. 29).

Dangarembga's interviews and speeches are reflections of the author's high awareness of the biopolitics manipulating Black bodies at micro/macro levels. In her collection of essays, *Black and Female*, she points out that the educational scholarships her parents received to continue their university studies in London were not, in effect, an act of generosity or support towards the native African, by the British empire. She clarifies that the empire resorts to the “illusion of giving, to obtain for itself the best that it covets” from the manipulated other (Dangarembga, 2022, p. 24). Dangarembga's enlightenment about the working mechanisms of the empire is further manifest in her confession:

Empire is like a guillotine. Empire required my parents ... to travel to London ... to enable them ... to ... be even more useful to empire than they would have been without this specific imperial inculturation... by educating other black bodies in the ways of empire, thus delivering a new generation of bodies useful to empire... (Dangarembga, 2022, p. 29)

#### **Necropolitics of Slavery in Bradbury's “Way in the Middle of the Air”**

Fanon describes the zone incarcerating the Black subjects as “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region” (1967, p. 2). The devastation of its nullifying void is manifest in its captives' undertaking suicidal escape-ways, notwithstanding the probable gloomy consequences. Similar to the prisoner, whose life dwindles between extreme hopelessness and obsession of fleeing the bars of his/her cell, the Black person becomes absorbed in escaping the zone of nonbeing. Such a pattern could be easily traced in Bradbury's “Way in the Middle of the Air”. The rocket which guarantees neither a safe trip nor a promising destination is still favored over any other possibilities. The conversations between Teece and those heading towards the rocket reconfirmed that even though the escapees were promised better conditions at the plantations and were intimidated with the explosion of the rocket in the middle of the sky, yet still they opted for the rocket (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2013):

“... Them crackpot scientists, they don't know nothin', they kill you all off! [Teece claimed.]”

“I don't care. [One of the escapee responded.]” (Bradbury, 2003, p. 3).

The short story's conversations between White and Black characters explain the atrocious conditions that led to the recourse to such a perilous escape. As Teece's worker, Silly, decides to leave him, Teece weaponized the laws against him. Noteworthy, the laws Teece resorts to are clearly not the same rules that govern the relationships between Whites within each other, ““It's your workin' paper. You signed it, there's your X right there, ain't it? Answer me.” “I didn't sign that, Mr. Teece.” The boy trembled. “Anyone can make an X.”” (Bradbury, 2003, p. 6). Clearly, no laws regulate the

plantations and the institution of slavery in general, except one rule, which confirms that the White man enjoys an unlimited sovereignty.

Necropolitics is what governs the life between the White and the Black subject. As Marina Gržinić explains, “it is ‘necro’ in that the objects of management are death zones” (Gržinić, 2018, p. 17), which brings about yet another heinous practice. Bradbury made implications to the historically based Ku Klux Klan extremists, through mentioning the lynching of the slaves by Southern Americans. The discursive motifs of Teece’s speeches mirror the authority to kill, as he repeatedly expresses: “By God, I’ll horsewhip you!” (Bradbury, 2003, p. 3), and on another occasion he provokes his fellow White men to declare war on the Blacks and mobilize the government against them, “Telephone the governor, call out the militia,” cried Teece (Bradbury, 2003, p. 2).

Such an attitude is evocative of Susan Buck-Morss’ demonstration about the socio-economic complexities slavery creates in between the White master and Black slave. As she sets forth slavery incriminates the society into an ethical paradox. The White master fights for his right for “freedom of property”, whilst the slave loses freedom over his/her existence and self-being. The two contradictory rights nourish an abnormal and unjust relation, where power and politics cooperate to overweigh the scale of commodity over the life value of the slave, as in Buck-Morss’ words “humanity is dissolve[d]” (qtd. in Mbembe, 2019, p. 75). Reading Teece’s statement: “He’s mine. I’m lockin’ him in the back room ...” (Bradbury, 2003, p. 6), it becomes apparent that Bradbury’s “Way in the Middle of the Air” is a fictional contextualization of Buck-Morss’ claims. Teece’s right to freedom of slave ownership eclipses Silly’s right to humanly exist.

### Conclusion

This research paper discusses the zone of non-being, as theorized by Frantz Fanon, and necropolitics, as conceptualized by Mbebe Achille, through x-raying two different contact zones, that of colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not*, and the one of slavery in “Way in the Middle of the Air” by Bradbury Ray. Accordingly, the Black subject is either relegated to the status of below-being or non-being. The racialized body is implicitly supervised and induced towards a zone of self-destruction and agency negation. The protagonist in Dangarembga’s semi-autobiography is neurotically fissured into discordant fractures, pulling Tambudzai apart in between submission and revolution at the same time. Black slaves in Bradbury’s short story are rather dwelling in the zone of non-being and its abnegation of agency, identity and subjectivity. They are worth no more than the commodity they produce. In a vicious circle where commodity produces another commodity, they are unjustifiably susceptible to replacement, punishment and killing.

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