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Disaffection and *You*-Narration in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Tambudzai Trilogy (1988–2018)

This essay explores the representation of unfeeling, or disaffection, in narrative form through the writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's critically acclaimed 'Tambudzai trilogy.' The narrative form I focus on is the shift in grammatical person of narration from the first person *I* to the second person *you*. The first instalment, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), opens with the defiant voice of its first-person narrator and protagonist, Tambudzai, but soon begins to oscillate between first and second person for self-reference. By *This Mournable Body* (2018), Tambu's loss of selfhood is reflected in the narrator's obstinate refusal to emerge as an '*I*' at the level of discourse. I argue that Dangarembga inscribes Tambu's institutional racial othering in *you*-narration and that this self-estrangement parallels the mode of unfeeling that Xine Yao (2021) calls "unsympathetic Blackness." The trilogy, in line with recent work by contemporary scholars turning away from feeling towards negative feeling or the negation of feeling, unpicks the seams of a Western affective politics of sympathetic recognition.

1. Introduction

"I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all." (Dangarembga 2004 [1988], 1) This is the arresting first sentence in the first instalment of Tsitsi Dangarembga's critically acclaimed 'Tambudzai trilogy,' *Nervous Conditions* (1988).¹ Readers are immediately introduced to the defiant voice of its first-person narrator and protagonist, Tambudzai. But by the final book of Dangarembga's trilogy, the occasional oscillation between first and second person for self-reference culminates in the narrator's obstinate refusal to emerge as an *I* at the level of discourse, reflecting Tambu's loss of selfhood. At the level of the story, Tambu's development parallels her nation's: *Nervous Conditions* is set in the late 1960s and 1970s Rhodesia, before the country gained its independence from Britain in 1980 and became Zimbabwe. This initial promise, however, is gradually but systematically and structurally eroded by and through the colonial institutions that remain in place. When Tambu attends the European school, Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, in *The Book of Not* (2006), it sets into motion a process of irreversible psychic annihilation culminating in the haunting inner voice in *This Mournable Body* (2018).² As Blake Morrison writes of the last novel in the trilogy in the *London Review of Books*: "If you are looking for a loveable heroine, or for an inspiring story of feminist solidarity, forget it. This is no portrait of the happy African, a cliché Tsitsi Dangarembga wishes to retire" (2020, n. pag.). But what might we apprehend through the negativity and negation of

feeling by resisting its resolution or subsuming it under discourses of overcoming? And how exactly is this encoded in the second-person narrative form?

This essay offers an extended critical discussion focusing on the under-examined intersection between race, affect, and *you*-narration. While the publication of *This Mournable Body* marked the end of Dangarembga's trilogy and prompted a special issue on "Contemporary Conversations Roundtable on Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nyasha and Tambudzai Trilogy" in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, each of the contributions in this issue is only an average of three to five pages. I expand upon observations from contributors such as Eleni Coundouriotis and Lily Saint to argue that Dangarembga inscribes the institutional racial othering Tambu experiences in *you*-narration and expresses a self-estrangement that parallels the mode of unfeeling Xine Yao (2021) describes as "unsympathetic Blackness" in her taxonomy of disaffection. Alongside "queer frigidity," "Black objective passionlessness," and "Oriental inscrutability," "unsympathetic Blackness" is one of four "coded categories" Yao identifies as structuring the Western cultural imagination that are "deployed to flatten out and invalidate individual and collective subtleties" that deviate from Western expressions and models of feeling (6). Yao defines disaffection as both negative feeling and the negation of feeling that illustrates how the Western liberal project of inclusion today is contingent upon a politics of recognition and sympathy. As Yao surmises, "[s]ympathy emerges from the colonial imposition of the Enlightenment episteme, whose universality is a function of the overrepresented status of whiteness" (12). If "sympathy is the fundamental mode of apprehending affects, feelings, and emotions" (13) and plays a pivotal role in legitimising those affects, feelings, and emotions, those who do not sympathise are viewed as less sympathetic in turn. Like recent work by contemporary scholars such as Yao (see, e.g., Ahmed 2014 [2004]; Kim 2013; and Mitchell 2020), the Tambudzai trilogy turns away from feeling towards negative feeling or the negation of feeling, to unpick the seams of a Western affective politics of recognition predicated upon affective legibility and sympathetic recognition.

2. Current Narratological Debates on *You*-Narration

Most accounts tracing the development of second-person narrative studies begin with the publication of Michel Butor's *La modification* (1957), which remains the exemplary text cited in numerous definitions of the form because its *you*-narratee is clearly also the protagonist.³ However, *La modification* is actually preceded by at least three other works of fiction written in the second person in German and Dutch: Paul Zech's *Die Geschichte einer armen Johanna* (English: "The Story of a Poor Johanna"; 1925), Harry Mulisch's short story "Chantage op het leven" (English: "Blackmail on Life"; 1953), and Herman Teirlinck's *Zelfportret of het galgenmaal* (English: "Self-Portrait or the Last Meal"; 1955). Another point of contention arises in the correspondence between narratee and protagonist in this

definition of *you*-narrative. According to Brian Richardson (1991, 311) and Monika Fludernik (1994, 288), the protagonist may differ from the narratee, but Fludernik asserts that the *you* must refer to a fictional protagonist in order to qualify as “second-person fiction proper.” The complex distinction between *you*-protagonist and *you*-narratee is evident in the sentence with which this article begins: “I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all.” The *you* in this and many other sentences throughout *Nervous Conditions* could be a case of the impersonal or generalised *you* as well as what David Herman calls “*actualised address*” or apostrophe “that exceeds the frame (or ontological threshold) of a fiction to reach the audience, thus constituting ‘vertical’ address” (2004 [2002], 340–341; italics in the original). The former, which Melissa Furrow (1988, 372) calls the “‘pseudo-deictic’ *you*,” is commonly found in *you*-narratives, proverbs, maxims, recipes, instruction manuals, song lyrics, and astrology, and the latter cases of vertical reader address is characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels like Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847).

Jarmila Mildorf (2023, 105) follows Fludernik in defining second-person narratives as “narratives which are addressed to the ‘protagonist’ of the related events,” adding that cases in which the narrator “relate[s] someone else’s” experience as opposed to their own could “be considered special cases of narratives of vicarious experience.” Mildorf also adopts Fludernik’s typology which synthesises Genette’s terminology (1980 [1972]; 1983 [1980], 92–93 and 133–34) with Franz Karl Stanzel’s model (1984) to both account for their respective blind spots and better accommodate the range and specificity of second-person narratives. Genette categorises second-person narration as heterodiegetic but, as Fludernik (1994b, 446) points out, this “ignores the overwhelming number of second-person texts in which the narrator as well as the narratee participate in the actions recounted on the *histoire* level” while Stanzel only considers *you*-narratives from the vantage point of the teller-mode in his typological circle. Fludernik proposes the term “homocommunicative” for “narratives in which participants on the communicative level (narrators, narratees) also function as protagonists” and “heterocommunicative” for narratives “in which the world of narration is disjoined from that of the fictional world” (446).

While Fludernik’s *homocommunicative/heterocommunicative* distinction is clearly very useful for Mildorf’s comparison between conversational and literary *you*-narratives (Mildorf 2012, 75–98; 2023, 108–23), I prefer to describe *you*-narratives as homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, and autodiegetic and distinguish them in the following way:

- (1) *Homodiegetic*: narratives in which the narrator and *you*-protagonist (who may or may not be the *you*-narratee) exist in the same diegetic realm.
- (2) *Heterodiegetic*: narratives in which the narrator and *you*-protagonist (who may or may not be the *you*-narratee) exist in *different* diegetic realms.

- (3) *Autodiegetic*: narratives in which the narrator is the older narrating-*I* addressing their younger, experiencing-*I*. In this case, the narrator, *you*-protagonist, and the *you*-narratee are the same figure, separated by temporal distance

You-narratives may fit one of the categories above or they may move between them. For example, Mohsin Hamid's novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) would be a heterodiegetic *you*-narrative because the narrator reveals information that the *you*-protagonist simply would not have had access to and continues to narrate the story after the *you*-protagonist dies. By contrast, the *you*-narratee in the novel *You Are Eating an Orange. You Are Naked* (2020) by Sheung-King is the narrator's beloved (homodiegetic) until the final chapter in which the *you*-protagonist is the narrator himself (autodiegetic). Similarly, Abigail Bergstrom's *What a Shame* (2023) oscillates between autodiegetic, homodiegetic (address to the narrator-protagonist Matilda's unnamed ex-boyfriend), and heterodiegetic (address to Matilda's unnamed dead father) *you*-narration throughout. All three forms can occur in fiction, while non-fiction is limited to homodiegetic and autodiegetic *you*-narration (since the narrator of a memoir or essay occupies the same extratextual world as the reader). Fludernik's distinction between homocommunicative and heterocommunicative narratives is developed with works of fiction in mind and, if Sandrine Sorlin (2022, 21) is right to think that Herman's concept of doubly deictic *you* cuts across the fiction / non-fiction divide in all six types of *you* in her model, then all *you*-narratives might be described as heterocommunicative. Defined as the superimposition of multiple deictic roles – one of which must be situated inside the diegesis and the other outside – Herman's (2004 [2002], 342–343) doubly deictic *you* encompasses both fictionalised reference to a *you*-protagonist and apostrophic reader address in such a way that cannot be disentangled. Mildorf (2023, 2 and 91), too, agrees that double deixis is a useful narratological concept for her own work on the “convergence between fiction and non-fiction in everyday storytelling” (what she calls “fictional contamination”) because it “captur[es] the shifting and multiple meanings of *you*.”

Mildorf's study touches upon affect in constructed dialogue and perspective-taking (78–82) but doesn't engage with affect theory as such. Sorlin's *The Stylistics of “You”* (2022) devotes a chapter to *you*-narration and self-othering in Jim Grimsley's *Winter Birds* (1994) from the perspective of trauma (83–104) and the role of *you* in cultivating empathetic and ethical responses in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988), Neil Bartlett's *Skin Lane* (2007), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's “The Thing Around Your Neck” (2009) (154–196). Like Sorlin, this essay is interested in the representation of self-othering in autodiegetic *you*-narration; the self-address whereby Adichie's *you*-protagonist “Akunna speaks to her own divided self” (184) is also a dynamic at work in the Tambudzai trilogy. While in prior work I have discussed *you*-narration as the narratological rendering of the phenomenology of shame in the BBC television series adaptation of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's original one-woman play *Fleabag* (2016–2019) and Car-

men Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019) (Wong 2021, 1689–1711; 2022, 42–49), here I take the imbrication between the second-person form and negative affect in a new direction with Yao's taxonomy of disaffection.

3. *You*-Narration in the Tambudzai Trilogy (1988–2018)

If, as Fludernik asserts, a *you*-protagonist is the defining feature of “second-person fiction proper,” then how might we understand the way second-person narration develops in Dangarembga's trilogy? Tambudzai is clearly the first-person narrator and protagonist of both *Nervous Conditions* and its immediate sequel *The Book of Not*. She addresses a *you*-narratee throughout but this appears to be an other – perhaps the reader, or perhaps the voices of others internalised by Tambudzai. What troubles any relatively straightforward method of categorisation is the way Dangarembga's use of *you*-narration evolves over the course of the trilogy. The use of *you* to address some absent and unidentifiable interlocutor – resolvable, perhaps, as the extratextual reader – appears notably more often in *The Book of Not*, which documents Tambu's experience at the prestigious European boarding school, Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart. Towards the end of *Nervous Conditions*, the reader learns that two places are offered, out of “all the African Grade Seven girls in the country,” to the girls who scored the highest in the exam and Tambu was one of them (Dangarembga 2004 [1988], 181).

Tambu's troubled cousin Nyasha, daughter of her revered Babamukuru who is both head of their family and head of the mission school that Tambu is allowed to attend following the death of her brother, is much less hopeful about what it means for Tambu to board at Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart:

It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others – well really, who cared about the others? (182)

Having spent her formative years in England before returning to Rhodesia with her family, Nyasha's sense of belonging to either culture is estranged. Nyasha experiences the contradictions of colonialism from both sides: the constant uprooting and disenchantment that comes with first internalising a British view of Rhodesia before then being asked to unlearn the components of that view her father finds disagreeable. Nyasha is sceptical of what it represents. While at first the opportunity to attend Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart on a full scholarship “represented [...] a sunrise on [Tambu's] horizon” (208), the so-called opportunity soon kickstarts a process of irreversible psychic annihilation and self-estrangement reflected in the increase of second-person self-address in Tambu's narration.

The frequent switches to autodiegetic *you*-narration in *The Book of Not* formalises Tambu's mounting estrangement from not only her white European teachers and classmates but also her own family. Tambu's “bifurcated self” is, as

Coundouriotis (2020, 448) writes, a product of colonial education and her “nervous conditions” are what Lily Saint (2020, 450–451) recognises as the “destabilized psychic and emotional states” of “the colonised subject.” Alienated from her own family and by the vitriolic racial divisions inherent in the colonial institution where there is a 5% quota of Black girls (who are forbidden from using the same toilet as the white girls), the forms of self-estrangement reach a devastating extreme in *This Mournable Body*, where the narration is entirely in the second person and Tambu’s narrating-*I* is completely effaced. The narrative form reflects Tambu’s loss of *unbu*, the Shona word for a kind of personhood defined by the interconnectivity of the self to others expressed by the common saying “I am well, if you are well too,” translated from “*Tiripo, kana makadini wo.*” (Dangarembga 2021 [2006], 80 and 302). In *This Mournable Body* the failure of Tambu’s ability to feel connected to others that began in *The Book of Not* imbues her with a seemingly inexplicable and profound sense of shame (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 143 and 264).

Tambu’s estrangement from her family and herself is foreshadowed in her brother Nhamo before he died: “when Nhamo came home at the end of his first year with Babamukuru, you could see he too was no longer the same person” and though he was taller, healthier and had smoother skin, “[h]e had forgotten how to speak Shona” (Dangarembga 2004 [1988], 52 and 53). This description posits speech as the first site of estrangement from one’s own community – what the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o terms the “cultural bomb” in his influential study *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (2005 [1986]):

[T]he biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, [...] and ultimately in themselves. (3)

Language, for the colonised subject in particular, is deeply connected to a culturally informed self and losing that language triggers a loss of this self. For Dangarembga (2022, 14–15 and 111–153), decolonisation must first take place as a discursive event in the imaginary before it can materialise meaningfully in society. But Nhamo had not forgotten Shona. What Tambu witnesses is the tension within him between his cultural identity and the colonial values being taught to him:

But the situation was not entirely hopeless. When a significant issue did arise so that it was necessary to discuss matters in depth, Nhamo’s Shona – grammar, vocabulary, accent and all – would miraculously return for the duration of the discussion, only to disappear again mysteriously once the issue was settled. (Dangarembga 2004 [1988], 53)

Tambu observes that “[t]he more time Nhamo spent at Babamukuru’s, the more aphasic he became and the more my father was convinced that he was being educated” (53). The school as a colonial institution and what Ngũgĩ calls a “cultural bomb” first annihilates Nhamo’s belief in Shona and soon his environment – his family. He withdraws from his family, sometimes refusing to visit during the school break, and mistreats his sisters. Then, in November 1968, Nhamo

suddenly dies while in Babamukuru and Maiguru's care right before he was expected to return home to see his family during the school break (54–55). When Tambu's mother learns of her son's death, she articulates her loss as twofold: "First you took his tongue so that he could not speak to me and now you have taken everything, taken everything for good. [...] You bewitched him and now he is dead" (54). Though Tambu's parents were eager to send Nhamo to the school in hopes that his education would bring prosperity to their impoverished family, they did not foresee how the tendrils of a colonial education would wedge itself between them. Writing about assimilation from a different context, the Korean-American poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong (2020) describes the suspicious racialising gaze of white Americans as a process reproduced in the assimilated children of immigrants: "I used to see my father the way other Americans saw him: with suspicion" (27). While the immigrant's experience of internalised racism differs from the kind legitimated by settler colonialism, parsing the effect through 'suspicion' offers another way of understanding how Nhamo and Tambu's colonial education teaches them to first regard their family and culture with suspicion before turning this suspicion inwards to the self.

Divisions within the nation and self are also reflected in the family. While Tambu's sister Netsai is described in *Nervous Conditions* as "a sweet child, the type that will make a sweet, sad wife" (Dangarembga 2004 [1988], 10), she becomes involved with the resistance forces in *The Book of Not*. This causes Tambu to be regarded as "Other" by her own family because

there was the constant strain of not asking and not being told about Netsai's movements. If you went to school with white people and sat next to them in class, wouldn't you end up telling them something? One day the white people would discover my sister's activities (Dangarembga 2021 [2006], 10).

Articulating the internalised suspicions of her family, Tambu addresses herself as *you* ("If you went to school with white people [...], wouldn't you end up telling them something?") before switching immediately back to the narrating-*I* (implicit in "my sister's activities"). But Tambu has also internalised the suspicions from the other side: Tambu is afraid of being discovered by "the white people" and implicated by Netsai's participation in the guerrilla war and consequently bore "the constant strain of not asking and not being told about Netsai's movements." Knowing about Netsai's activities and whereabouts would not only endanger Netsai, but also threaten Tambu's already precarious social position in the school and this precarity is a specific product of the coloniality in the history of Zimbabwe.

You-narration in *The Book of Not* foregrounds the movement towards self-aversion and alienation from others that comes to fruition in *This Mournable Body*, where the deeply lodged hostile utterances of all the voices from her past transmute into "the hyena" that lives inside Tambu's head: "Every minute of each twenty-four hours taunts you with what you are reduced to" (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 73). Tambu is haunted by the disappointment and disillusion of what she thought her life would amount to – after all, the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart was "the institution that offered the most prestigious education to

young women in the country, and [...] the key to my future. No, I could not tolerate the idea of failure” (Dangarembga 2021 [2006], 34). Now that Tambu views herself as the very failure she “could not tolerate,” she can no longer tolerate herself nor utter *I*. As the linguist Roman Jakobson (1987 [1956], 106) notes in “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” children learn to use the *I-you* pronouns last but in some types of aphasia they disappear first. I read the *you*-narration in *This Mournable Body* as a manifestation of Tambu’s aphasia, like Nhamo before her.

Similarly, in his review of *This Mournable Body*, Morrison (2020) observes that the second person “hints at Tambu’s detachment from the person she used to be, her fractured and faltering sense of identity” (n. pag.). Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak (2013 [1985], 82) demonstrates via a deconstructive reading of different subject formations how Western intellectual production and colonial discourse is reified by the silence of the Third World, that “what the work *cannot* say becomes important” in thinking about “the consciousness of the subaltern.” Spivak borrows the category of ‘the subaltern’ from Antonio Gramsci’s work on class distinctions to describe those who are constructed as inferior or subordinate. Tambu exemplifies Spivak’s assertion that class, race, and gender (“Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways” [90]) can all be mechanisms of oppression. If, as Spivak argues, “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (2013 [1985], 103), then Dangarembga’s subaltern *you*-protagonist has little choice but to resort to interior dialogue:

You have failed to make anything at all of yourself, yet your mother endures even more bitter circumstances than yours, entombed in your destitute village. How, with all your education, do you come to be more needy than your mother?
(Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 45)

Despite all the promises of her education, *This Mournable Body* begins with an impoverished middle-aged Tambu living in a dilapidated youth hostel. She has been unemployed since resigning from an advertising agency where she was paid “miserly wages for copy white men put their names to” (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 178). The erasure of coloniality is inextricably linked to the trilogy’s overarching theme of substitution, like when Tambu takes up Nhamo’s place at the mission following his death or the numerous occasions on which Tambu is mistaken for another Black girl (443–444). Unlike the structure of narration in other autodiegetic *you*-narratives such as Paul Auster’s two-part memoir *Winter Journal* (2012) and *Report From the Interior* (2013), Junot Díaz’s short stories in *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012), Andrew Cowan’s novel *Your Fault* (2019), and Carmen Maria Machado’s memoir *In the Dream House* (2019), wherein a latent narrating-*I* situated in the narrative future addresses a present *you*-narratee, *This Mournable Body* is formally more comparable to the television series *Fleabag* in the way it represents story and discourse as occurring *pari passu* (Wong 2022, 1698). There are no proleptic interjections giving the reader the impression that the narration is Tambu’s inner voice narrating events as they happen. Although Tambu is prone to speculate and fantasise different futures, they never come to fruition and often end swiftly in self-derision as in the following passage:

You spend the morning writing a letter to your cousin Nyasha, who has become a filmmaker in Germany, in which you ask for advice concerning leaving Zimbabwe. You want nothing more than to break away from the impeccable terror of every day you spend in your country—where you can no longer afford the odd dab of peanut butter to liven up the vegetables from Mai Manyanga’s garden or the petty comfort of perfumed soap—by going away and becoming a European. You do not post the letter. Instead, you tear it up and laugh bitterly at yourself: If you cannot build a life in your own country, how will you do so in another? (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 70)

Tambu does not post the letter nor pursue leaving Zimbabwe for Europe because, as the disillusionment with her once-promising education has taught her, relocating to Europe is unlikely to improve her circumstances. The anticipation of retrospection, then, does not produce hopeful proactivity but the unshakeable conviction of entrapment and futile resistance (73). When she is finally offered a job as a teacher, Tambu cannot resist the allure of the future possibility in “reinvent[ing] yourself as a model teacher” but the burdens of her past trauma soon interfere with this ambition (110–111). Her “smouldering resentment” towards the new generation of students born free in postcolonial Zimbabwe culminates in a horrifically brutal attack where she renders a student permanently deaf, suffers a nervous breakdown, and ends up in a psychiatric hospital (110–111). The educational institution has, once again, unravelled her:

Now you understand. You arrived on the back of a hyena. The treacherous creature dropped you from far above onto a desert floor. There is nothing here except, at the floor’s limits, infinite walls.

You are an ill-made person. You are being unmade. The hyena laugh-howls at your destruction. It screams like a demented spirit and the floor dissolves beneath you.

“Good evening,” the hyena says. (127)

For Coundouriotis (2020, 449), there are two conflicting ways of interpreting Dangarembga’s use of *you*-narration: it either enables “a forbidden truth” to be told, “taking the difficult story away from the ‘I’ in order to give it more authority” or it “offer[s] a hypothetical, full of negation that needs to be purged to assure that it will not take hold as the real.” However, if the latter is understood as negative inner speech, or what Denise Riley calls “malediction” (2005, 9–27; see also Wong 2022, 42–49), then it is not necessarily incompatible with the first interpretation Coundouriotis proposes. In this reading, self-derisive and self-negating speech constitutes a sort of “forbidden truth” because it is intolerable for a stable and coherent sense of selfhood. The outbreak of negative inner speech, then, represents a purging. In this passage, autodiegetic *you*-narration clearly differs from the voice of the hyena, which is distinguished by quotation marks. The hyena’s voice reproduces negative inner speech while the self-address is disaffected. The hyena is observed by this detached latent narrating-*I* and becomes indistinguishable from the doctor performing her evaluation to a disoriented and sedated Tambu. The “limits” and “infinite walls” materialised as the hospital were, in fact, always already present in the limitations of race, gender, and class that have been obstinately keeping Tambu in place.

After Tambu is rehired by her former boss, Tracey Stevenson, to join her ecotourism start-up company Green Jacaranda, her life appears to move in an

upwards trajectory (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 219). However, the narrative takes a devastating turn when Tambu returns to her homestead to recruit her family for the company's newest project: Village Eco Transit. At first Tambu is led to believe the project aims to give tourists an authentic village experience, though she soon realises that what Tracey and those higher up in management were asking for was not only inauthentic, but also a degrading performance of what white colonists imagine Africanness to be:

“They’re talking the rest of it, you know, all those things they say go with villages on . . . uh, on our landmass, like dancing authentically . . . minimal, like, agh, loincloths, naked . . . torsos.” [...] As you begin to understand, the air in the room floats to the floor. [...] Naked male chests are normal in traditional dance. Tracey can only be talking about the women. (330)

What transpires is a humiliating spectacle of song and dance playing up all the racial stereotypes of African customs, involving

Java print skirts and wraps, leg rattles, as well as hand rattles and drums [...] Aunts and cousins, sister-cousins-in-law and age-mates you ran to primary school so many years ago are tying straps, adjusting headpieces, and arranging Zambia cloths. They practise songs softly under their breath as they walk in and out from the side and back rooms for more intimate changes. (352)

Tambu is relieved that the women, in an act of rebellion or self-protection against Tracey's demands, refuse to bare their chests and instead scantily clad themselves with shells. But it is also too late: Tambu has betrayed their trust and turned her village and its inhabitants into a spectacle for her own professional advancement.

4. “Unsympathetic Blackness” as Subaltern Disaffection

Various forms of loss and treachery bear the affective weight of Dangarembga's trilogy: the death of Tambu's brother Nhamo, the leg her sister Netsai lost, the student she attacked and rendered deaf in one ear, the women in her family and village that she humiliated, and the future that never materialised. For Morrison (2020), Dangarembga's second-person narration reproduces the structures of oppression to which Tambu is subject so that the reader is “hemmed in”: “Where Tambu's “I” is inviting, her “you” is coercive. We're hemmed in, unable to deny the qualities we share with her, even when she's inhumane. It's an oppressive narrative method – apt for a novel about oppression.” (n. pag.) In forcing the reader to reckon with “the qualities we share with [Tambu], even when she's inhumane,” Dangarembga makes the affective interiority of disaffection legible. For example, when Nyasha is on the brink of tears at the revelation that her son's teacher resorts to corporeal punishment to discipline the children, readers may find Nyasha more comprehensible than Tambu, who perceives Nyasha's reaction as “a nauseating act of ghastly femininity”:

You have no desire to expend energy on sympathy for a minor matter of corporeal punishment. Women in Zimbabwe are undaunted by such things. Your cousin, on the other hand, has been enfeebled by her sojourns first in England

then in Europe. [...] Zimbabwean women, you remind yourself, know how to order things to go away. They shriek with grief and throw themselves around. They go to war. They drug patients in order to get ahead. They get on with it. (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 215)

What initially appears like Tambu's "lack of feeling" exemplifies what Yao (2021, 6) terms "unsympathetic Blackness," a mode of "disaffected unfeeling that emerges within dominating structures of feeling from a range of precarious positions within the axes of oppression that constitute the biopolitical hierarchy." Yao illustrates, in their reading of Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855), how the false universality of white sentimentalism is apparent in the American Captain Amasa Delano's differential perception in the beheading of the enslaved Babo and the discovery of the enslaver Alexandro Aranda's skeleton.⁴ While Delano is sympathetic towards the Spanish enslaver Benito Cereno (whose ship *San Dominick* he has boarded to assist), the same sympathies are not extended to Babo and the other enslaved Africans (29–30). Babo is praised when Delano observes him caring for his enslaver Cereno, but upon realising that Babo is actually the rebel leader, the narrative reveals the precarious position of the unsympathetic Black subject. It turns out that Cereno was merely the figurehead Captain of *San Dominick* enslaved by Babo and, against the combined forces of the American and Spanish, the Africans' uprising ultimately fails. "Benito Cereno" ends with Babo's public execution following a trial and Cereno's death. Babo is unsympathetic because, according to the logic of slavery and sympathetic recognition, he "betrays his obligations to feel for his enslaver" (52). If sympathetic recognition – that is, legible affective interiority – signifies humanity, then to "not have sympathy for others means forfeiting the recognition that they are deserving of sympathy" (31). As a figure of unfeeling and noncompliance seen through the gaze of Delano, Babo's unsympathetic Blackness is heightened next to Cereno's sentimentalism and guarantees his own negation as human. Where Cereno is cast as "a sympathetic victim," Babo becomes the "unsympathetic villain [...] despite the actual power dynamics of enslavement and Cereno's role in condemning the Black man to death" (65).

Returning to *This Mournable Body*, Nyasha's earnest expressions of righteousness reiterates dominant structures of feeling in the West, predicated upon sympathetic recognition. Tambu's description of this as "a nauseating act of ghastly femininity" would be illegible from within that structure of recognition, however, the narration counters this illegibility by revealing that Tambu's affective interiority is marked by exhaustion and pragmatism ("You have no desire to expend energy on sympathy for a minor matter of corporeal punishment. Women in Zimbabwe [...] know how to order things to go away"). Recalling the opening of *Nervous Conditions* once more, Tambu is resolutely unapologetic about what might appear as "callousness" or "lack of feeling" because "it is not that at all." Rather than regarding Tambu as having an actual lack of feeling, we might view her as simply deviating from dominant structures of feeling. What is crucially at stake when Black people deviate from dominant structures of (white)

feeling like “sympathy” and “sentimentalism,” is that they often become unrecognisable to white people and are habitually treated as undeserving of sympathy.

While unsympathetic Blackness is not a successful mode of resistance or tactic of survival in “Benito Cereno,” unsympathetic Blackness and the other categories of disaffection have insurgent potential beyond resistance. By allowing alternative and oppositional structures of feeling, Yao (2021, 6) argues that “the reading of unfeeling as oppositional negation functions as a defensive denial of the quickening, flourishing, and renewal of alternative forms of sociality made possible by feeling otherwise.” On the one hand, Tambu is unsympathetic and difficult to sympathise with; but on the other, her disaffection can be read as a form of oppositional negation. In the passage above, Tambu explains that Zimbabwean women have no energy for sympathy and “know how to order things to go away” in order to “get on with it.” This is markedly apparent when Nyasha suggests Tambu apologise to the student she attacked, and the reader is told that: “Seeing no sense in revisiting such an unthinkable aberration, you have put it firmly behind you.” (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 178) Spivak’s concept of the subaltern subject is useful here because the emphasis it places on the subaltern of imperialism is particularly appropriate for the unique and complex legacy of settler colonialism in Zimbabwe. As Dangarembga (2022, 4–5) explains, three key pieces of Rhodesian legislation “entrenched [the] separation of races” in 1923 – the same year the British colony achieved a self-governing status. Put differently, Rhodesia has a unique history in which it was structurally made to enforce segregation to the detriment of its own peoples (a form of self-oppression under the guise of self-governance) leaving a group of virtuous white citizens to advocate for desegregation initiatives: “The ultimate goal of these citizens was to create some sort of multiracial society. The desegregationists were of the opinion that white rule had had a civilising effect on Africans, and that this new civilisation showed in African behaviours and institutions” (Dangarembga 2022, 9–10). The logic behind this legislation mirrors the logic of the colonial education system and illustrates how deeply the counter-intuitive impulse toward self- and cultural annihilation is entrenched in the sociopolitical constitution of Zimbabwe. What happens to the consciousness of the subaltern subject doubly effaced by the ideological construction of gender and race and disempowered by class?

The narrative offers two answers in the characters of Tambu and Nyasha; the two are presented as doubles and the trilogy is sometimes referred to as the “Nyasha and Tambudzai trilogy.” Tambu’s nervous breakdown in *This Mournable Body* mirrors the one Nyasha suffered in *Nervous Conditions* (Coundouriotis 2020, 448) and by contrasting their upbringing and affective dispositions, the trilogy explores the bind of coloniality. Having spent a significant period of time with her family in England as a child and Germany as a young adult where she seems to have learnt the “enfeebl[ing]” excess of Western sentimentalism (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 215), Nyasha can only feel according to structures dominant in the West. For Tambu, who remained in Rhodesia and lived through its transition to Zimbabwe, the wider sociopolitical impact of self-governed oppres-

sion and the absorption of civility as ideologically constructed manifests in her internal critique of Nyasha's sentimentality as "somewhat primitive" (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 217). While this subverts the colonial assumption of African primitiveness and Western sophistication by suggesting the opposite, Tambu's critique is ultimately directed at another subaltern woman rather than the colonists. In her examination of anger and space in the first two books of the Tambudzai trilogy, Sue J. Kim (2013, 101–128) explores how the "large" and "small anger" of Tambu, Nyasha, and the other black female characters (Lucia, Maiguru, and Mainini) is staged in the overdetermined spaces of neocolonial Rhodesia. Published before *This Mournable Body*, Kim asserts that "[o]f all the fictional characters" examined in her study that "Nyasha perhaps best understands that her anger is systemic, historical, and ideological, but even she cannot escape the hegemonic construction of anger as individual and pathological" (110). For the subaltern woman, anger is often pathologized and we see how Nyasha's resistant anger has been pacified or neutralised into sentimentality by the end of the trilogy.

Unsympathetic Blackness and Black writers' rejection of sentimentality is not unprecedented in literary history. Expressing an aversion to maudlin expressions of sentimentality from a different vantage point, James Baldwin writes the following in his excoriation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 protest novel:

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*. Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excess and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty (Baldwin 1984 [1955], 14)

Like others of its kind, Baldwin objects the sentimentality of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because it is catalysed by "the intense theological preoccupations" of its author (20). The result is that "the aim of the protest novel becomes something very closely resembling the zeal of those alabaster missionaries to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and thence into slavery" (20). The virtuous sentimentalist parading their feelings and imposing their Christian morals incites scepticism in Baldwin because it is historically a mechanism of slavery. White missionaries enslaved Africans and inflicted violence in the name of God. According to Katharine Gerbner's (2018, 2) study of conversion slavery, while Protestant slave societies were defined by their anti-conversion stance, "enslaved Africans in Spanish, French, and Portuguese colonial societies were regularly introduced to Catholicism and baptized, whether willingly or not." Similarly, Dangarembga writes in her collection of essays *Black and Female* (2022) that "[t]he introduction of British colonial rule in Africa coincided with the latter stages of the Victorian era," which was governed by "a strong religious drive for high moral standards" (11). Crucially, the European school Tambu attends in *The Book of Not* is also a Catholic school run by nuns and the sympathy and sentimentality that Tambu refuses might be viewed as the Western conception of sympathy rooted in colonialism and inextricable from the religiosity that enabled it.

Another key figure in the history of sympathetic recognition as colonial imposition is Adam Smith. Before *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) established Smith's reputation as a political economist, he was a moral philosopher (Haakonssen 2012, xxii). Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) remains an important touchstone in Western moral philosophy and, as such, its logic concerning the concept of sympathy is worth following closely. In Yao's (2021, 13) reading of Smith, sympathy "is the fundamental mode of apprehending affects, feelings, and emotions"; it is both legitimising *and* legitimises the feeling subject. The logic of sympathy is also racial. Yao takes us to this passage in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1976 [1759]) where he claims that:

Barbarians [...] being obliged to smother and conceal the appearance of every passion, necessarily acquire the habits of falsehood and dissimulation. It is observed by all those who have been conversant with savage nations, whether in Asia, Africa, or America, that they are equally impenetrable, and that, when they have a mind to conceal the truth, no examination is capable of drawing it from them. (208)

Smith reasons that by "smother[ing] and conceal[ing] the appearance of every passion," the affective interiority of peoples from "Asia, Africa, or America" (all "savage nations") is illegible ("impenetrable") and therefore become "habits of falsehood and dissimulation." He uses the notion of sympathy to distinguish civilised nations from the barbarous ones and portrays "the savage" as "the ultimate figure of unfeeling" who "expects no sympathy from those around him, and disdains, on that account, to expose himself, by allowing the least weakness to escape him" (Smith 1976 [1759], 204–205; see also Yao 2021, 13–14). By not engaging in the economy of reciprocal sympathy, the barbarous savage's feelings are illegible and his humanity is delegitimised. Yao gleans the following from their reading of Smith:

These Asian, Black, and Indigenous peoples deny affectability, caring not whether they are sympathetic to Western scrutiny—and Smith is unsympathetic in turn, unable to recognize these racialized feelings. [...] Smith is unable to comprehend the possibility of the emotional complexity of peoples of color or the validity of their affective interiority as fully human subjects. For Smith, they are inexpressive and therefore unsympathetic; for Stowe, they are expressive and therefore sympathetic. (2021, 14)

Yao derives their term "affectability" from the philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva, who defines it in *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007) as "[t]he condition of being subjected to both natural (in the scientific and lay sense) conditions and to others' power" (xv). Ferreira da Silva (2007, xv–xvi) refers to "[t]he scientific construction of non-European minds" as the "affectable 'P'" and "Man, the subject, the ontological figure consolidated in post-Enlightenment European thought" as the "transparent 'P.'" The emphasis on the constructedness of both an affectable and a transparent *I* is Ferreira da Silva's way of parsing a certain historical specificity to how racial difference came to resignify "substantive difference," or "God-given bodily traits that correspond to continental borders and are immediate (preconceptual) indexes of the universal determinants of cultural particularity" (2007, 132). In this context, Yao reads Asian, Black, and Indigenous affective illegibility as a refusal of "[t]he condition of being subjected."

Affectability renders the power disparity between the transparent *I* and the affectable *I* legible in the way Smith judges peoples of colour for their illegibility according to Western “civilised” understanding. According to Yao, the impulse to “flatten out and invalidate individual and collective subtleties” based on racial difference implicit in Smith’s deploring of Asian, African, and Indigenous unfeeling is echoed in Charles Darwin’s call for “the universality of readable affects across race and species” in *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) (2021, 5). But notions of the universal “human” have never been universal.

Sylvia Wynter (2003, 266–267) traces the current Western (bourgeois) conception of the human through what she calls “epistemic breaks” and finds its origins in sixteenth-century Renaissance humanism’s idea of Man overrepresenting itself as the human itself. Building on Michel Foucault’s (1991 [1966]) epistemological study of how the concept of ‘Man’ is a modern invention, Wynter (2003, 263) explains that “the Renaissance humanists’ epochal redescription of the human outside the terms of the then theocentric” became “the first secular or ‘degodded’ [...] mode of being human in the history of the species.” Without oversimplifying the full complexity and nuances of Wynter’s project, the move from a “theocentric” world to a secular one – the “degodding” of the world – precipitated the need for a radically new structuring principle. Prior to the epistemic break from religion, the structuring principle in Latin-Christian Europe was between the spirit and flesh, heaven and earth – and Wynter turns to archaeo-astronomers who have discovered that “every human order, from the smallest hunter-gatherer groups one can imagine, to those of large-scale civilizations such as that of Egypt and China, all had mapped the structuring principles of their societies, onto the heavenly bodies” (qtd. in Scott 2000, 175). The structuring principle was a value distinction which now needed to be reordered and evolved into “the rational / irrational structuring principle” used to distinguish “rational humans” from “non-rational animals” (Wynter qtd. in Scott 2000, 176–77). This rational human / non-rational animal distinction in Wynter informs Zakkiah Iman Jackson’s (2020) critique of Western science and philosophy’s conception of “the human,” which turns to literary and visual texts that disrupt the raciality of the human-animal distinction. Jackson explores alternative conceptions through “the history of blackness’s bestialization and thingification: the process of imagining black people as an empty vessel, a nonbeing, a nothing, an ontological zero, coupled with the violent imposition of colonial myths and racial hierarchy” (1). With the Darwinian revolution, Man was redefined in purely secular, biological terms (Scott 2000, 177); the structuring principle then becomes the selected vs. the dysselected and the evolved vs. the non-evolved, which fuels scientific racism.

The invention and overrepresentation of (white) Man then becomes instrumental in the colonial construction of “world civilisation” and the ensuing “African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation” (Wynter 2003, 263). In other words, the role of sympathy articulated in Smith’s moral philosophy and the universal legibility of emotions in Darwin centre their arguments around a concept of “the human” that, since Renaissance humanism, has

always been “the overrepresentation of Man as if it were the human,” used “to legitimate the subordination” of peoples of colour (267). Likewise, Ferreira da Silva’s (2007, xiii) philosophical investigation of the sociology of race relations finds that the post-Enlightenment defined “Man” by his rationality and “de-
 ploy[ed] racial difference as a constitutive human attribute.” Sexual difference was, of course, also deployed in the same manner (Ferreira da Silva 2007, xxviii). The widespread assumption that women did not naturally or biologically possess the capacity for reason prompted publications like Mary Wollstonecraft to author *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).⁵

Following Wynter, Ferreira da Silva, and Yao’s critique of sympathetic recognition and a falsely universal legibility of emotions, I read Tambu’s “unsympathetic Blackness” as neither “callousness” nor genuine “lack of feeling” as such but a mode of unfeeling that “threatens a break from affectability” (Yao 2021, 5). If “[e]motional expression is presumed to be the signifier of affective human interiority” (5) and people are only recognised as legitimate subjects if they are affectively intelligible, then this defaults to an understanding of feelings that risks overrepresenting whiteness as universality. This is how a false equivalence between legible or intelligible feelings with humanity – and therefore illegible or unintelligible feelings with *inhumanity* – functions to deny oppositional collective and individual subtleties of feeling. Furthermore, this overreliance on *expression* to evince *emotion* is what Rei Terada (2001, 11) calls the “expressive hypothesis,” the objection to which does not “discredit emotion, but [...] extricate[s] it from expedient mythologies.” What Yao rejects as an extension of coloniality is the universality of sympathy that undergirds the politics of recognition in Western philosophical and ethical discourse. Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson (2003, 189), too, remark on sympathy’s central role in Western ethics “as though in order to come to any recognition of common humanity, the other must be assimilated, meaning in this case, utterly displaced and effaced.” Taking Ferreira da Silva’s assertion that “[a]ffectability defines raciality,” Yao (2021, 5) argues that disaffection is “a quotidian tactic of survival” for minoritised peoples precisely because of the threat it poses to affectability.⁶ Sympathy may be a choice for the privileged, but “the marginalized do not have the luxury of being unsympathetic without forfeiting the provisional acceptance of their capacity for affective expressions and, therefore, the conditional acceptance of their humanity” (4). If feeling and expression in accordance with Western taxonomies legitimises the subject, then the opposite is true: *not* feeling or the refusal to express that feeling delegitimises someone’s humanity.

While *you*-narration is a form which coerces readers like Morrison (2020) into identifying with an embittered and faltering protagonist, this reading implicitly privileges a universality of feeling predicated upon Western moral philosophy and affective legibility. I am more interested in the insurgent potential in disaffection and Tambu’s unsympathetic Blackness as a deliberate break from affectability. Without the presumption of lack or moral failing, I argue that *you*-narration reproduces the sense of estrangement Tambu feels from herself and “the person she used to be,” or the person she thought she was. The doubly

deictic *you*'s capacity to transmit negative affect exceeds the bounds of narrative reference in spite of all the ways it may exclude the *you*-reader. In so doing, the reader is afforded more than a glimpse into the subaltern's subjectivity:

You grow increasingly galled by your cousin and her assumption that everyone has the luxury she has of surviving without being obsessed with one's own person. All three of them think that now she has taken you out of the institution into her care, everything is wonderful for you. They do not know what it is to struggle with the prospect that the hyena is you, nor how this combat marshals in the task of finishing the brutish animal off, while ensuring you remain alive yourself. (Dangarembga, 2020 [2018], 189)

In this passage, Tambu has recently been discharged from the psychiatric hospital and entrusted to Nyasha's care but remains alienated from her family. One of the major factors already discussed is Tambu's education: she was the only one educated at a colonial institution in Zimbabwe which has produced the hyena ("They do not know what it is to struggle with the prospect that the hyena is you"). Frantz Fanon (2021 [1952], 191) had long anticipated the inevitability of racialised self-loathing as a product of colonial education which "desperately tr[ies] to make a white man out of the black man" only to then diagnose him with an undeniable "dependency complex regarding the white man." The subaltern suffers the same affliction with the added abjection of the African female.⁷

5. Conclusion

In the Acknowledgements at the end of *This Mournable Body*, Dangarembga credits Teju Cole and his 2015 essay "Unmournable Bodies" responding to the terrorist attack on the satirical French magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, for her title. While Cole does not diminish the tragedy of the shooting, he maintains that it is not the only threat to Western liberty. Cole's titular question hones in on what makes certain lives more meaningful – and thus, mournable – than others in mainstream media and, by extension, the Western cultural imagination. Like Cole's provocation, *This Mournable Body* asks the reader whether not only the flawed and forgotten subaltern women populating her fictional trilogy but the real Others in Zimbabwe can also be mourned. The novel's use of doubly deictic *you*-narration demonstrates the process of institutionalised racial self-othering while simultaneously inviting the reader to inhabit Tambu's interiority despite the ways in which her disaffection may alienate and mourn her losses.

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¹ *Nervous Conditions* (1988) was the first novel to be published in English by a Black Zimbabwean woman.

² *This Mournable Body* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2020.

³ See, e.g., Lejeune 1975, 13–46; Lejeune 1989, 7; Kacandes 1994; Kacandes 2001, 157–62; Prince 2003 [1987], 86; and DelConte 2003.

⁴ Melville's novella is based on the real Captain Amaso Delano's memoir *Narrative of Voyages and Travels* (1817). Though Delano is not the narrator, he is the main focaliser. Yao (2021, 217n15) cites Carolyn Karcher's (1980, 128) succinct observation that "Benito Cereno" is "an exploration of the white racist mind and how it reacts in the face of a slave insurrection."

⁵ While Wollstonecraft may well have been writing in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Sandrine Berges (2013, 19) notes that the text is crucially dedicated to the Marquis de Talleyrand in Wollstonecraft's "Preface" and "presents her work not as a defence of women's rights, as the title indicates, but more particularly as a proposal for educational reform."

⁶ Although Yao reads unfeeling as oppositional negation, she cautions against fetishising resistance: "the uncritical valorization of unfeeling as triumphant resistance ignores its risks" (2021, 6). See also Viet Thanh Nguyen's (2002) critique of the valorisation of Asian America in *Race and Resistance*.

⁷ In Jackson's (2020, 8) words, "an idealized white femininity became paradigmatic of 'woman' through the abjection of the perceived African 'female' (Gilman 83–85). Female, rather than woman, African femaleness is paradoxically placed under the sign of absence, lack, and pathology in order to present an idealized western European bourgeois femininity as the normative embodiment of womanhood (Gilman 85–108)."