



## Strangers and Necropolitics in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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### ABSTRACT

As a contribution to the recent call for the study of the figure of the stranger in African spaces (Ikhane, 2020), this article examines the first half of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013). The main reason for this, it is argued, is that the description of the protagonist's pre-migratory living conditions throughout this part of the narrative reveals a Zimbabwean nation in which the necropolitics resulting from the failures of decolonisation have turned certain segments of the population into strangers in their own land. Their "living dead" status in a situation of social and spatial marginalisation recalls, in particular, the notion of the stranger as the "socially dead" (Rothe & Collins, 2016). However, unlike this and other classical strangers living in a Western urban context, the literary strangers studied here do not represent an othered minority in the community but, rather, exemplify what appears to be a widely shared condition of "strangeness" in some contemporary African cities.

### KEYWORDS

Stranger; Socially dead; Necropolitics; Living dead; Postcolonial Zimbabwe; *We Need New Names*.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

NoViolet Bulawayo's debut novel *We Need New Names* (2013) recounts the adventures of Darling, a ten-year-old girl who spends her days playing games with her friends in a fictional

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Zimbabwean slum called Paradise. After her family's home is bulldozed, they are forced to set up in this poverty-stricken shantytown. Darling finally moves to the US to live with her aunt Fostalina, where she confronts the difficulties of being an immigrant with a precarious legal status and longs for home. The first chapter of the book, "Hitting Budapest", had been published in the *Boston Review* and won the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing. Two years later, with the publication of the entire novel, Bulawayo became the first Zimbabwean and black African woman to be shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. *We Need New Names* was also shortlisted for other prizes such as the Barnes & Noble Discover Award and the Guardian First Book Award, and was awarded the Los Angeles Times Book Prize Art Seidenbaum Award, the Pen/Hemingway Award and the inaugural Etisalat Prize for Literature, among others<sup>1</sup>. Accordingly, as noted by Jonathan Bishop Highfield (2020: 241), this novel has attracted significant critical attention, mostly following Helon Habila's (2013) use of the pejorative term "poverty-porn" in describing Darling's dire living conditions in Paradise.

In particular, Habila's critique of Bulawayo's stereotyped portrayal of Africa as a space of suffering and death increased the interest in *We Need New Names* within the framework of the efforts to contest and problematise Taiye Selasi's (2005/2013) celebratory notion of the "Afropolitan" (e.g., Cobo-Piñero, 2019; Stobie, 2020; Toivanen, 2015). In her famous essay "Bye-Bye Babar", Selasi refers to Afropolitans as "the newest generation of African emigrants" and describes them as internationally mobile and culturally hybrid, emphasising their multilocal sense of belonging (2013: 258). She also highlights with pride their "multilingual" abilities and "academic successes" (258), thus challenging, among others, the well-rooted conception of the African as a mere victim of the circumstances. Despite this, as pointed out by Anna-Lena Toivanen, Selasi's Afropolitan discourse has been, and still is, "highly criticised", mainly for its "inbuilt elitism" and "disconnection from African 'material realities'" (2021: 10). There are indeed those like Ashley Harris who contend that, rather than "redefining what it means to be African" (Selasi, in Harris, 2020: 8), Selasi's account of the Afropolitan describes, instead, "little more than an African expatriate in a world quite radically dissociated from African everyday life" (Harris, 2020: 8). Others like Rose A. Sackeyfio additionally argue that Selasi's Afropolitanism ignores "the brutal realities of [those Africans in diaspora] whose lives are marginalized by legal constraints, lack of economic opportunities, and resources to navigate hostile environments that label them as *other*" (2021: 4; emphasis in original). In the same vein, and specifically in view of the popularity and celebration of Selasi's controversial essay at the time of Bulawayo's first novel's publication, Brian Bwesigye stresses the need for "a multiplicity of stories" (2013: n.p.) that, taken collectively, show the diversity and complexity of African existences and experiences. Bwesigye was in fact one of the first to claim, unlike Habila, that *We Need New*

*Names* is a necessary denunciation of some of the social injustices many Africans face today, both in Africa and in the West.

The protagonist of *We Need New Names* differs substantially from the successful Afrodiasporic individuals described by Selasi, exemplifying instead the life circumstances of those members of the contemporary African diaspora who are forced to leave their countries to escape human right abuses and then, upon arrival in the West, suffer from different forms of discrimination and oppression. Through the narration of Darling's work experience as an undocumented immigrant in the US, Bulawayo places especial emphasis on how their vulnerable legal situation in the host society too often facilitates their dehumanising labour exploitation and, on many occasions, their eventual deportation (Bulawayo, 2013: 237-250). In this respect, far from evoking Selasi's Afropolitanism, Darling's story rather brings to mind the classical notion of the "stranger" as a foreign figure whose presence destabilises the social order of Western society and who, therefore, "must be expelled from the purified space of the community" (Ahmed, 2000: 22). In fact, the figure of the stranger, which I conceptualise below, is a recurrent representation in the contemporary Afrodiasporic novel, including those narratives that embrace the idea of successful, middle-class Afrodiasporic existences, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2013). After all, as in the case of *We Need New Names*, these literary works frequently portray the recent migration flows from Africa to the West and the difficulties these immigrants encounter when trying to integrate into white supremacist contexts. As displaced and dislocated black subjects who suffer from racialisation and ethnicisation processes in the host community, their protagonists are thus reminiscent, more generally, of the figure of the stranger as the cultural and racial "other" (Ahmed, 2000). Based on this premise, and in the light of the emerging call for a more nuanced understanding of the stranger that explores how "strange(r)ness" occurs "in multiple sites, at multiple scales and through varied ways of being" (Jackson, Harris & Valentine, 2017: 10), a particularly interesting aspect about *We Need New Names* is that the figure of the African stranger also appears in the narration of Darling's pre-migratory situation in Zimbabwe. Hence, this article contends, this novel expands the focus of the classical theory of the stranger beyond an immigrant experience in the West, in turn giving another version of the most common literary African stranger in contemporary Afrodiasporic writing.

Most particularly, as a contribution to the recent call for the study of the stranger in African spaces (Ikhane, 2020), this article examines the representation of this figure throughout the first half of *We Need New Names*, paying especial attention to its connection with the simultaneous portrayal of Zimbabwean necropolitics. In the first section of analysis, the study of Darling's pre-migratory living circumstances in Zimbabwe discusses how the national ruling elite relegates different sections of the population to the position of strangers,

namely through processes of moral and spatial exclusion that perpetuate colonial logics of power. Building on the interpretation of these characters as strangers in their own land, the second section of analysis focuses on the condition of strange(r)ness of the inhabitants of Paradise, which I identify as a result of the necropolitics of a postcolonial Zimbabwean nation-state marked by the failures of decolonisation and, accordingly, as highly defined by their consequent “living dead” status (Mbembe, 2003; 2009). From this reading of the situation of social and spatial marginalisation of the people of Paradise, I propose that connections can be established between their condition of strange(r)ness and the notion of the stranger as the “socially dead” (Rothe & Collins, 2016), which I address in the next section. Nevertheless, conclusions will be drawn on a major difference between this and other reformulations of Georg Simmel’s (1908) classical stranger, all of which generally describe a marginalised individual in a Western community, and the strangers in Bulawayo’s postcolonial Zimbabwe in *We Need New Names*.

## 2. RETHINKING THE STRANGER: STRANGERNESS IN THE AFRICAN NECROPOLIS

The figure of the stranger has traditionally been a major subject of study within the Social Sciences and the Humanities since the publication of Simmel’s classic sociological essay “The Stranger” (1908/1950). Here Simmel describes this social form as someone “who comes today and stays tomorrow”, and whose membership of the group is characterised by a distinctive blend of physical “nearness” and social “remoteness” (402). The main reason for this is that strangers are within the group but are not an integral part of it. As noted by Peter Aloysius Ikhane, this implies that Simmel conceives the stranger, first, within a “geographical context” that maps the “physical boundary within which the stranger is defined” and, second, within “the context of sociocultural beliefs, practices, and customs”. The latter context, Ikhane clarifies, “locates the stranger within [the group’s] worldview or belief system” (2020: 416).

Drawing from the Simmelian stranger, Chicago School sociologist Robert E. Park (1937) developed the notion of the “marginal man”, which raised widespread interest in the immigrant as the model *par excellence* of the stranger (Horgan, 2012: 609). Other influential reconceptualisations of Simmel’s stranger are Alfred Schutz’s (1944) phenomenological account of the newcomer’s experience and Zygmunt Bauman’s (1988–89; 1995) reflections on the postmodern stranger who has been excluded from an increasingly globalised society. In all these classical accounts, including Simmel’s pioneering contribution, the stranger is “an in-between, ambivalent figure, neither friend nor enemy, an insider-outsider who threatens the insider/host’s identity” (Carrera-Suárez, 2018: 17) and “make[s] social, cultural and even physical boundaries porous and unstable”, and more specifically “problematic” (18).

The conception of the stranger as the foreigner, the outsider or immigrant, marginalised subject started to be considered outdated in the late 1980s, namely with the emergence of interest in “the urban, the cosmopolis and the potential cosmopolitanism of the stranger as wanderer and as *mobile*” (Jackson, Harris & Valentine, 2017: 5; emphasis in original). This gave rise to a universalising approach to the idea of “strange(r)ness” which, as evidenced by Chris Rumford’s *The Globalization of Strangeness* (2013), is still prevalent within the theory of the stranger. In fact, Rumford’s argument that the stranger is no longer essentially about the foreignness and otherness usually associated with the immigrant has been acclaimed as “the most sustained attempt to develop an analysis of contemporary strangeness” to date (Bielsa, 2016: 50). For Rumford, the notion that the stranger is only embodied by a portion of society fails to accurately capture the generalised state of strangeness or “social disorientation” which, he asserts, defines the current “experience of globalization” (2013: xii). There is, however, a major problem with his theory, specifically that it thus appears to undervalue the fact that the increased flows of migration, in themselves a result of globalisation, have in turn led to “an intensification of our encounters and confrontation with alterity” (Wulf, 2016: 1). In view of this, it actually seems that the identification of the stranger with the “other”, notably the cultural and racial “other” who generates social anxiety in the West (Ahmed, 2000), is more straightforward than ever, so that the classical approaches to the stranger should be revalorised.

As already noted, the new academic interest in the figure of the stranger seeks to develop a more nuanced interpretation of the ideas of “stranger” and “strange(r)ness” that explores, for instance, how this condition emerges in specific contexts, at specific times and geographies (Jackson, Harris & Valentine, 2017: 10). In this regard, there is a need, in particular, to look at those strangers who inhabit contexts other than Western urban environments and whose condition of strange(r)ness is specific in, among other things, space, time and sociocultural tradition. Not even Sara Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (2000), which is still considered the most important postcolonial study of the stranger (Marotta, 2017: 20), problematises the idea that this figure is paradigmatic of Western cities. In recognition of this, Ikhane denounces the fact that although “the phenomenon of strangerhood or strangeness has been an indisputable aspect of the African experience and lived world”, studies of the stranger in African spaces are “sparse” (2020: 420).

William A. Shack and Elliott P. Skinner’s *Strangers in African Societies* (1979) is still probably the most important work on the stranger in Africa to date (Ikhane, 2020: 420). It drew attention to the usefulness of this figure as a way into increasing knowledge of African social dynamics and cultural practices, much like Ikhane proposes. Drawing on the discourse of the epistemology of difference in Africa, Ikhane is interested specifically in the African

stranger “who came and stayed in societies other than his”, and who “is expected to participate in the daily life of the people” (421). Still, he recognises that there have been other types of stranger in the African context, as is especially evident from the time of the colonial encounter. Ikhane explains in this respect that colonialism “altered, symbolically and in reality, the social and spatial boundaries between the stranger and the local”, for the coloniser generally “disregarded the pre-colonial and traditional insider-outsider status positions which differentiated [these two groups]” (421). Furthermore, Ikhane points out, in the same way that colonial administration was not identical in all African territories, the particular “national histories, experiences, and social diversity” of each of these locations have had, and still have, an “impact on the ways individuals and peoples [have been] construed as strangers” within their borders (424). As Bauman argues, every society produces its own strangers (1995: 1), this being compatible with the fact that several different types of stranger might coexist in the same context, including the stranger who is not strictly a foreigner but a marginalised member of the community.

Indeed, the stranger is not necessarily a foreigner but, borrowing Nira Yuval-Davis’s words, can be someone whose “entitlements as [a citizen who belongs] are under threat, or are even already being taken away from [him/her]” (2011: 35). In “The Integrated Spectacle: Neoliberalism and the Socially Dead”, Dawn L. Rothe and Victoria E. Collins explore this condition of strange(r)ness as embodied by the homeless in neoliberal capitalist society. They explain that the homeless, like the Simmelian stranger, “is fixed within a specific spatial group, yet his/her position [...] contains a tension within communities” (2016: 4), mainly in that s/he is “not common” (Simmel, in Rothe & Collins, 2016: 4) in regard to “the ‘normality’ of participating” in the neoliberal capitalist dynamics of the society (Rothe & Collins, 2016: 4). The homeless are therefore not simply strangers in the community, Rothe and Collins point out, but their ambivalent state of belonging in terms of participation in turn designates them as the “socially unworthy” (15). More precisely, in considering that it is the neoliberal capitalist state itself which enforces their alienation through forms of moral and spatial exclusion (11) that “[confer] upon them the status of the living dead” (Mbembe, in Rothe & Collins, 2016: 4), Rothe and Collins put forward that the homeless can be more accurately interpreted as the “socially dead stranger” (9). Despite contextual incompatibilities, their proposal has been a fundamental source of inspiration for the recognition and interpretation of the condition of strange(r)ness of certain segments of the African population as explained here below.

In particular, my focus is on the situation of social and spatial exclusion of many of the dwellers of the contemporary African city, and which, as will be argued, too often involves not only poverty but also violence and death. It is precisely in this sense that, as in the case of the socially dead stranger, their condition of strange(r)ness can also be conceived as a sort of “living dead” status (Mbembe, 2003; 2019): a living situation in which they are liable to

death. In this respect, especially worth noting is Basile Ndjio's (2006) perception of the contemporary African city as a "necropolis". In "Douala: Inventing Life in an African Necropolis", Ndjio highlights how, after persistent economic decline, many African cities now "manifest themselves as inverted forms of the good city" due to their "chaotic, informal, and dreadful character" (103). Drawing from Achille Mbembe's discussion of the state's capacity to determine "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" in his theory of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003: 27), Ndjio hence contends that the African city is a "a thespian city where insecurity, violence, and terror have become the daily experience of the vast majority of city dwellers" (2006: 103). Their lives, he highlights, "are permanently subjugated to the power of hazard and uncertainty" and, first and foremost, "to the tyranny of death" (103). Similarly, Wale Adebani and Ebenezer Obadare describe the African postcolony as a space marked by the "violence and death" generated by the state, as well as by "the perpetual struggle for the [social and spatial] expulsion of the abject" (2010: 8), generally "the poor and powerless" (55), who constitute a majority of its population. Importantly, against this background, a particularly significant difference arises between the socially dead stranger in the African necropolis and the classical reformulations of the Simmelian stranger, including that of Rothe and Collins. While such reformulations of the Simmelian stranger, as Simmel originally did, typically juxtapose the stranger as an individual with a group of people who represent the majority, by contrast, the African strangers explored in this article do not seem to correspond to an othered minority in the community but, rather, to a wider group of marginalised subjects in the African necropolitical postcolony. In the light of the above considerations on the theory of the stranger, the relevance of this difference lies above all in its emphasis on the context-dependent nature of a condition of strange(r)ness.

### 3. STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* begins with the depiction of Darling and her friends Bastard, Chipso, Godknows, Stina and Sbhoo in the middle of what appears to be their routine journey from their poverty-stricken shantytown, a place ironically called Paradise, to the nearby affluent suburb of Budapest. In the very first lines of the novel, Darling highlights their hunger by hyperbolically stating "I'd rather die for guavas. We didn't eat this morning and my stomach feels like somebody just took a shovel and dug everything out" (2013: 1). Her comment that "there are guavas to steal in Budapest" (1) reveals their state of poverty and economic deprivation, making explicit that the reason why they are going to this location is that here there is food to relieve their hunger. Hence, although located in the vicinity of their slum, Budapest is described as "not like Paradise" but "like being in a different country altogether" (4). A spatial contrast is thus established between these two fictional sites, which

becomes even clearer when Darling adds that Budapest is a “nice” place whose inhabitants are different from them (4), mainly due to their socioeconomic status and racial identity.

As shown in the narration of the children’s experience in Budapest, this location is home primarily to privileged white people and, as a result, “carries a colonial aura” (Ngom, 2020: 12). More specifically, as I noted in “A spatio-emotional analysis of the disgust discourse in contemporary Afrodiasporic fiction: Adichie’s *Americanah* and Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*”, the contrast between Paradise and Budapest recalls Frantz Fanon’s description of the Manichean city as a colonial space that is essentially marked by racial segregation and consisting of two distinct parts which represent the racialised spatial practices of imperialism and settler colonialism (2019: 136). While Paradise is illustrative of “the native town” as “a place of ill fame”, by contrast, Budapest corresponds to the settler’s town as being “strongly-built” and “well-fed” (Fanon, in Suárez-Rodríguez, 2019: 136). This correlation can be best seen when Darling describes Budapest as “big, big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs and neat graveled yards on trimmed lawns, [...] and the big trees heavy with fruit that’s waiting for us since nobody around here seems to know what to do with it. [...] I keep expecting the clean streets to spit and tell us to go back where we came from” (Bulawayo, 2013: 4). The luxury dwellings differ substantially from those in Paradise, where the children live in “tiny” shacks “crammed together” (26) that are made of tin (34). Besides, the depiction of the yards in Budapest as clean and well cared for also contrasts with the portrayal of the shantytown, where Darling has to “walk carefully” so as not to step on rubbish (26). Interestingly, Fanon also mentions the clean streets of the settler’s town, where “the garbage cans swallow all the leavings”, and portrays the native town as “a world without spaciousness” because “their huts are built one on top of the other” (1963: 39).

As regards Darling’s description of Budapest, of particular note is how it ambiguously evokes the figure of the stranger as embodied by both the children and the people of Budapest (Suárez-Rodríguez, 2019: 136). On the one hand, the use of the popular phrase “go back to where you came from”, which the children expect to be addressed to them upon arrival in Budapest, recalls the immigrant stranger who is feared and rejected by the community. Such an exclusionary expression, which Sasha Polakow-Suransky sees as demonstrative of “the combination of fear and xenophobia” that usually emerges in Europe and the US in the face of rapid immigration (2017: 5), is in fact too often directed more generally at those in the West whose appearance differs from that of the majority and, consequently, are racialised and wrongfully recognised as threatening foreigners. Similarly, in the narration of the children’s experience in Budapest, although not a Western location in this instance, these characters are not foreigners in this place in terms of nationality, yet they seem to be in a condition of “out-of-placeness” (Ahmed, 2000: 8) here due to their social circumstances and racial identity. At the same time, however, as Darling suggests when she says that the inhabitants of Budapest



appear not to know what to do with the fruit in their gardens, the residents of this affluent suburb can be also identified with the figure of the stranger, albeit in different terms.

Bulawayo's ambiguous portrayal of the children and the inhabitants of Budapest in the light of the idea of "strange(r)ness" can be interpreted through the idea, previously presented, that the Simmelian stranger builds on two different contexts: a geographical context, on the one hand, and a sociocultural context on the other (Ikhane, 2020: 416). While the condition of strange(r)ness of the children while in Budapest seems to be strongly associated with them being perceived as a threat by its inhabitants, for the latter it is "their unfamiliarity with the environment" (Suárez-Rodríguez, 2019: 136) which marks them as strangers with regard to the wider national sociocultural context. None of them therefore fully correspond to Simmel's stranger, which was not conceived with an African background in mind. However, taken together, they do conjure it up and show two different ways of being stranger in the same space.

Later in the narrative, the chapter "Blak Power" recounts another one of the children's visits to Budapest, specifically their encounter with a security guard and how a gang of revolutionaries break into the house he is watching. Identifying the particular historical context to which the author is alluding is crucial to properly interpret these occurrences. Indeed, the description of Darling's life circumstances in Paradise throughout the first half of the novel makes several references to different historical events, all of which plunge the reader into the national context of contemporary postcolonial Zimbabwe. It is worth noting, however, that such references are intermingled with fictional events at the national scale, as will be seen below, so that their depiction is not completely faithful to the history of the nation.

A major legacy of British colonialism in Zimbabwe was "the continuation of the race problem", specifically the maintenance of "a society of two separate races, one white and the other black" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 219). During the 1980s and 1990s, as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains, "the white community tried to maintain what Dan Kennedy termed 'islands of white' within Zimbabwe [...] through withdrawal to expensive and 'gated communities'" away from blacks, which were usually "guarded by dogs and black guards" (219). Indeed, in the chapter "Blak Power", it is the character of the Black security guard in particular which positions us in this context. Especially worth noting is the first question he asks Darling and her friends, "so what prompts your presence in this territory?", which represents a message of exclusion that only becomes stronger when he adds: "I command you to immediately turn around and retrace your steps. Extricate yourselves from these premises and retreat to whatever hole you crawled out of" (Bulawayo, 2013: 105). The guard's words thus create an image of the children as worms, insects or reptiles through the animalising description of the way they have turned up in Budapest. Their characterisation, to use

Ahmed's (2000: 53; emphasis in original) words, as "dangerous, uncontrollable, [...] and over-reaching space itself" in turn brings to mind once more the figure of the stranger as a threat to the community. The guard wrongfully recognises them as the children of those who are "terrorizing" Budapest (Bulawayo, 2013: 108); that is, the revolutionaries that come into play later in the chapter.

A crucial issue regarding this encounter is that both the children and the guard are black, for this complicates its contextualisation in a scenario marked by racial conflict. Their confrontation is actually the result, to use once again Ahmed's words, of broader "relations of social and political antagonism" that "*mark some others as stranger than other others*" within the nation (2000: 25; emphasis in original). The narrative reflects specifically a Zimbabwean nation with a strong social stratification that divides people depending on their ethnicity and class. The black poor and the privileged white population—that is, the people of Paradise and Budapest, respectively—seem to be both similarly victims of the anti-colonial struggle of a black elite who perpetuate colonial logics of power. This becomes evident as the children's encounter with the guard continues with the arrival of a group of armed black Zimbabweans.

The fact that the revolutionaries question the national identity of the owners of the house, a white Zimbabwean couple, leads once more to identify the inhabitants of Budapest as strangers or, more specifically, as strangers in their own land: "I am an African [...]. This is my fucking country too, my father was born here, I was born here, just like you!" (Bulawayo, 2013: 119), the owner of the house yells at the armed men. The African stranger is, in this case, one whose ancestors came and stayed in a society other than their own (Ikhane, 2020: 421) and is now a citizen by right because of being born in the territory of the state. However, the revolutionaries insist that Zimbabwe is "a Black-man country" (Bulawayo, 2013: 118), or in other words that only Black Zimbabweans are real Zimbabweans. Although the conflict occurs not in a farm but in a suburban area, here the author appears to be alluding to the anti-white land redistribution scheme started by President Robert Gabriel Mugabe in 2000. The government forcibly removed white farmers from their land to distribute it among black Zimbabweans. This violent process of spatial dispossession is referred to in the novel when the revolutionaries give the white man a document to read and, angrily, he shouts: "Bloody nonsense! This is illegal, I own this fucking property, I have the papers to prove it" (117). This period, known as the Third Chimurenga and marked by the efforts of the state to repossess the land inhabited by its white population, corresponds with a "resurgence of race-inspired nationalism" (Nyambi, Makombe & Motahane, 2019: 87) and is in fact recurrently addressed in contemporary Zimbabwean literature (Pfalzgraf, 2022: 3). During this time, as noted by Oliver Nyambi, Rodwell Makombe and Nonki Motahane, white Zimbabweans of European ancestry figured "as unrepentant colonial 'debris' whose rightful place was in Europe", in such a way that they experienced "a crisis of belonging" (2019: 88).

Indeed, in *We Need New Names*, the people of Budapest resemble the stranger not only because of their unfamiliarity with the environment they live in, but also in relation to their rejection by the nation.

#### 4. SOCIALLY DEAD STRANGERS IN A ZIMBABWEAN NECROPOLIS

Matthew Omelsky has contended that alienation in *We Need New Names* “is wrought not through a Fanonian Manichean structure of colonizer and colonized, but largely through the postcolonial state’s subjection of *the majority*” (2020: 58; emphasis added). For him, the best prism through which to read such a situation of alienation is Mbembe’s phenomenological understanding of colonial violence as “a structure that operates externally as an imposition of subjection on the colonized, but also internally in the way the colonized inflicts that imposed violence on the self” (58). This is the type of colonial violence that is most clearly represented in the novel, namely in how the people of Paradise are shown to be victims of the oppression of a local authoritarian ruling elite who, as already noted, perpetuates colonial attitudes.

Although no explicit mention is made of Operation Murambatsvina, a slum clearance programme officially known as Operation Restore Order, Darling’s description of her nightmares, in which “the bulldozers appear boiling” (Bulawayo, 2013: 65), can be read as the result of this large-scale cleanup campaign. Indeed, in the chapter “Real Change”, Darling suggests that this “is not a dream-dream because it is also *the truth that happened*” (65; emphasis added). President Mugabe, part of the Zimbabwean political panorama from their independence from the British in 1980, earned a reputation for contributing to the impoverishment of the nation until his removal in 2017. Of particular note were his abuses of human rights, such as his approval of the massive urban demolition in 2005, which left thousands of people homeless on the outskirts of several Zimbabwean cities. The event is clearly referenced when Darling describes how in her dream men knock down their houses until “everything is broken, everything is smashed, everything is wrecked [...], choking dust everywhere, broken walls and bricks everywhere, tears on people’s faces everywhere” (66). The repetition of the words “everything” and “everywhere” stresses the traumatic dimension of the event and, in turn, justifies the initial portrayal of the adults of Paradise as living in a lethargic and even depressive state. While the men are always playing draughts (2), the women are “busy with hair and talk, which is the only thing they ever do” (1). We can infer, then, that, since the demolition of their houses, the adults have no job or productive activity to engage in.

Starting from the premise that Operation Murambatsvina was aimed at cracking down on illegal housing and commerce in Zimbabwean cities, Amin Y. Kamete has drawn on the theory of the stranger to interrogate the reason why this type of government policy comes

into existence and, in turn, to understand the situation of the victims. He explains that, although Bauman does not address informality in the economic and the social space of the city in his theory of the stranger, the “undecidability” he sees as defining of this figure is “applicable” to the issue at hand. In this sense, Kamete contends that “informals count as ‘strangers’” since, on the one hand, “they threaten” (2017: 14) the “stability and coherence of the social order” (Marotta, in Kamete, 2017: 14) and, on the other, “are liminal outcasts ‘constantly kept at bay’ by the statutory planning system” (Kamete, 2017: 14). He focuses in particular on “the inability of informality to fit into planning’s binarisms” that “revolve around legality/illegality” and which, he states, “instils a sense of unease in technocrats” (2) that results in abusive policies such as Operation Murambatsvina. Specifically, Kamete sees these “attempts to suppress informality as a symptom of hostility” and prejudice towards those “dangerous misfits” whose spatial and social exclusion is justified precisely by binary thinking (2). Although *We Need New Names* does not provide enough information to know whether informality was a way of life for the people of Paradise before the demolition, Kamete’s views allow the consideration that their current situation of physical and social marginalisation might be the result of a preceding condition of strange(r)ness that emerges at the limits of fixed binary categories.

The explicit discourse of disgust in the description of the protagonists’ living conditions suggests that the author has in mind, most particularly, the official version of Operation Murambatsvina. This claimed that the demolition was not simply about removing the dwellings that had been unlawfully constructed and eradicating illegal commercial activities but, rather, that it was principally aimed at restoring sanity in the nation (Harris, 2008: 45). The campaign, whose name translates into English as “Move the Rubbish” (Omelsky, 2020: 59), thus echoed the dichotomous “thinking about dirt and cleanliness” typical of the colonial period (Harris, 2008: 40), effectively disclosing the oppressive nature of the event and the deep-rooted colonial legacy in contemporary Zimbabwe. Similarly, Bulawayo reproduces this rhetoric through her use of the language of disgust and the image of the abject, which has been a major focus of analysis in the critical study of this literary work (e.g., Cobo-Piñero, 2019; Suárez-Rodríguez, 2019; Toivanen, 2015). In this respect, particularly noteworthy is the reiteration of the word “kaka” in allusion to Paradise, as when Bastard states that, unlike in their slum, “Budapest is not a kaka toilet for anybody to just walk in” (Bulawayo, 2013: 12). His words reveal, on the one hand, the exclusionary nature of Budapest and, on the other, borrowing Judith Butler’s (1993) terms, the “unliveable” and “unhabitable” living circumstances in the shantytown.

Most significantly for the purpose of this article, the description of Paradise as a “kaka toilet”, with its direct reference to excremental, recalls the idea of “abject space” coined by Engen F. Isin and Kim Rygiel to refer to those sites “in and through which increasingly

distressed, displaced, and dispossessed peoples are condemned to the status of strangers” (2007: 181). Although Isin and Rygiel do not situate abject spaces in Africa, Bulawayo’s comparing Paradise with the colonial reserves that the British had established in Zimbabwe makes this interpretation of the slum as an abject space even more compelling: “Wasn’t it like this before independence? Do you remember how the whites drove us from our land and put us in those wretched reserves?” (Bulawayo, 2013: 75), one of the adults of Paradise asks another. Reserves, which were “a common feature” of former African colonies, were “land set aside for the exclusive occupation and use of indigenous peoples” and constituted “a strategy of indirect rule” that facilitated social control over them (Overton, 1990: 163). The similarity between Paradise, the colonial reserve and, by extension, contemporary abject spaces such as the refugee camp can be drawn since Paradise is indeed a place inhabited by excluded subjects, both in physical and social terms, who are being “stripped” of their social rights as citizens and, more generally, as human beings (Isin & Rygiel, 2007: 181).

As suggested by the account of the death of a baby named Freedom during the bulldozing process (Bulawayo, 2013: 67), the demolition of the houses of the inhabitants of Paradise, which forced them to move to this shantytown, implies the deprivation of their liberty within their own country. To be more precise, it led not only to physical death in the most unfortunate cases, but also to the death of social aspects of people’s lives, which very much resonates with Mbembe’s description of “the state of exception” as “emblematic” of the living circumstances of the slave in the plantation (2019: 74). For Mbembe, this is the result of “a triple loss: loss of a ‘home,’ loss of rights over one’s body, and loss of political status” (74-75), or what he calls “social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)” (75). Accordingly, the people of Paradise are in the first place deprived of the basic right to decent housing and, as a consequence, are spatially and socially marginalised, or in other words relegated to a condition of strange(r)ness that involves, among other things, poverty, hunger and, ultimately, physical death.

The image of death throughout the first half of the novel inevitably leads to the recognition of a necropolitical landscape. As Joost Fontein notes, “whatever motivations may have lain behind Operation Murambatsvina, it was a massive spectacle of power that clearly displayed the capacity of the ruling elite to deploy state forces as it chose” (2009: 373). Fontein identifies Operation Murambatsvina as an “expression of sovereignty” and, more precisely, of “necropolitics” (373), for it was not just about the right to kill but also about the right to expose other people to death (Mbembe, 2003: 12). In this light, it is worth noting the repeated references to a place called “Heavenway”, which Darling describes as “mounds of red earth everywhere, like people are being harvested, like death is maybe waiting behind a rock with a big bag of free food and people are rushing, tripping over each other to get to the front before the handouts run out. That is how it is, the way the dead keep coming and

coming” (Bulawayo, 2013: 132). These lines, which portray the cemetery located near Paradise, highlight the frequency of deaths in the community, or in other words their vulnerability to mortality. In line with Mbembe’s necropolitics, even though the people of Paradise are not killed directly by the nation’s forces, the living conditions that the state has imposed upon them does expose them to death. In particular, the personification of death as a shadowy figure who is waiting to kill them by attracting them with food suggests that starvation is a leading cause of mortality for the inhabitants of Paradise. Furthermore, the proximity of the slum and the cemetery also metaphorically represents the “subtle boundary between life and death” in their daily life (di Laura, 2020: 72) or, to use Mbembe’s terms, their “status of *living dead*” under “conditions of necropower” (2003: 40; emphasis in original). It is precisely this condition of life in which they are liable to death which most clearly exemplifies the literary figure of the stranger. As Emilia María Durán-Almarza observes of this “literary figure that stands in creative tension with binary thinking” (2022: 76), strangers, “as ambivalent, liminal characters, [...] challenge hegemonic assumptions of the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, what is felt to be safe and what is to be feared” (76-77), or as is particularly the case with the people of Paradise, what is considered to be living or dead. Indeed, the people of Paradise are not simply strangers in their own land, given their situation of social and spatial marginalisation, but, since their condition of strange(r)ness is closely related to their “status of *living dead*” under “conditions of necropower” (Mbembe, 2003: 40; emphasis in original), they can be more accurately read as socially dead strangers in the postcolonial Zimbabwean nation-state.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis above of the representation of the figure of the stranger throughout the first half of NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* broadens the traditional focus of the theory of the stranger on Western urban environments as the paradigmatic setting of this social form. The study of Darling’s pre-migratory situation has placed the stranger in an African setting, namely a fictional postcolonial Zimbabwe, thus revealing other forms of being a stranger apart from that generally connected to the immigrant experience in the West. Specifically, the reading of certain fragments of the Zimbabwean population being depicted in the first chapters of the novel as strangers in their own land has discussed strange(r)ness as a condition that results from the adoption of neocolonial and necropolitical forms of government by the ruling elite in some contemporary African contexts. In this sense, strange(r)ness has been identified with a state of social and spatial marginalisation that involves not only poverty but also violence and death, in such a way that it can be conceived as a sort of “living dead” status (Mbembe, 2003; 2019). This refers, in particular, to the living conditions of the inhabitants of Paradise, whose condition of strange(r)ness broadens the

notion of the “socially dead stranger” (Rothe & Collins, 2016) since, unlike this and other classical strangers, the people of Paradise do not represent an othered minority in the community. On the contrary, these literary strangers exemplify what appears to be a widely shared condition of “strangeness” among the unprivileged masses of the African postcolonial nation-state. Furthermore, the white residents of Budapest have also been read as strangers in their own land because, despite being Zimbabwean by birth, their country rejects them due to their European ethnic origins and, more precisely, due to their presence in the country being a result of British colonialism. The image of strange(r)ness thus arises throughout the first pages of *We Need New Names* as a condition that occurs “at multiple scales and through varied ways of being” (Jackson, Harris & Valentine, 2017: 10) within the same setting, and which is determined by the sociopolitical context. Being aware of the limitations of the study as regards its focus on a literary postcolonial Zimbabwe, this article opens up the possibility of addressing other African and/or Afrodiasporic literary works along the same, and similar, lines of thinking, but within the framework of other African realities. This would help expand upon the study of the stranger in African spaces and highlight the role of context in determining who embodies this social form at a specific time and place.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> More information can be found on Bulawayo’s official website: <http://novioletbulawayo.com/>.

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