

'The Condition of the Native': Autodestruction in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Hershini Bhana

[She] lived the backbreaking life of all black people in South Africa. It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people ... had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you (Head 1974:19).

[A]utodestruction in a very concrete form is one of the ways in which the native's muscular tension is set free (Fanon 1967:54).

A friend of mine was reading at a gallery in an upscale neighbourhood, that specialised in African-American art. She looked beautiful in an orange, flowing dress as she read to a group of friends and family, all of them different shades of brown, black and red. Her slow stream of words was suddenly interrupted by a passing car as it back-fired and then back-fired again. Everyone in the room ducked, bodies stiff and bent over, eyes blinked shut, breath held. As if in a photograph, we were frozen in the moment, as bodies overlapped and faces blurred in terror. A micro-second later, we all inhaled and laughed at our absurd short circuiting, at that single collective moment when our nerves, raw from centuries of attempted extinguishing, sparked out of our nervous conditions.

Sartre, in the Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* summarises Fanon's argument that the native manifests a nervous condition, introduced and maintained by the settler colonial with the native's consent. This statement follows a discussion of horizontal violence in which Fanon argues that violence against one's fellow colonised (i.e. horizontal violence) precedes the vertical violence against the coloniser that predominates during eras of independence wars. Dangarembga read Fanon only after she had written *Nervous Conditions*. But her post-novel choice of title was brilliant in that her work takes up where Fanon leaves off to elaborate on

how colonial structures enforce horizontal violence. She thereby crucially adds nuance to the idea of the consensual domination which was and is often (mis)appropriated to justify further colonial aggression. Furthermore, Dangarembga's overt linking of her novel through its title with Fanon's texts makes her work a site of noisy conversation, not only 'between individual psychology and colonial politics' but between women's politics and the masculinist politics of nationalism (Sugnet 1997:35). She reads her feminist narrative, in which the national liberation struggle is only briefly mentioned once, alongside one of the most articulate and passionate discussions of colonialism, thereby not allowing a reading where painfully gendered somatic experiences are separated from colonial/national politics.

The Fanonian claim that all natives demonstrate a nervous condition functions in several discursive terrains that contradictorily make up the racialised body. The claim, on one level, replicates the stereotypic association of blackness with (psycho)pathology. This coupling of blackness and pathology that appears all over the African diaspora is integral to the very definition of blackness for the crazy, diseased black functions as Other to the sane, rational, universal, white Subject. The emotional black can only operate outside of modernity due to the inability of her mind to function within the parameters of rationality, the most fundamental requirement for civilization.

Fanon shows throughout his work how the categories of (psycho)pathology are used increasingly not just to define the Other, but to enable the sequestration and marginalisation of the threat of difference/resistance embodied in the Other. J.F. Miller in 1896, for example, to explain the increase of blacks in insane asylums after 'emancipation', talks of blacks living comfortably

under less favorable circumstances than the white man, having a *nervous organisation* less sensitive to his environments; ... that he has less mental equipoise, and may suffer mental alienation from influences and agencies which would not affect a race mentally stronger (Gilman 1985:140, e.a.).

Miller's scientific definition of the native as mentally weaker than the white man, justifies the imprisonment of a newly released population who posed tremendous threats both to the segregated structure of society based on white supremacy and to white understanding of blackness as necessarily linked to servitude. This discussion of black 'natural' predisposition toward mental dis-ease was translated into the language of eugenics by William F. Drewry in 1908, who linked blackness with genetic propensities towards insanity, thereby providing white communities with the rationale for relegating blacks to manual and not mental labour.

This use of medical categories of pathology to manage the Other's unassimilability is old news to those of us familiar with drapetomania, for example,

the dis-ease causing slaves to run away, or dysaesthesia aethiopsis, "hebetude of mind and obtuse sensibility of [the slave's] body" (Gilman 1985:138).

Fanon undercuts these racist narratives by also talking about the processes whereby the unspeakable violence of modernity writes itself onto the black body, resulting in very real consequences of ill-health. *As if in a photograph, we were frozen in the moment, as bodies overlapped and faces blurred in terror.* These 'bad nerves' are in no way inherent to the native, but produced by the traumatic deracinations and erasures of colonialism. Thus Fanon shows 'bad nerves' to be threefold: part of the stereotypic creation of a dis-eased Other against whom the universal, rational healthy Subject of modernity defines himself; the hegemonic re-writing of difference and resistance into scripts that support the continuation of racist narratives of containment/control of the Other; and the real consequences that the violence of biopower has on us. (Psycho)pathology for the native is thus overdetermined, ambivalently shifting between different narratives, all of which speak to the constitution and consequences of blackness.

Nervous Conditions speaks of the many nervous conditions we suffer. It not only documents the structures that produce these conditions but the different ways in which we manifest our ill-health. Central to the novel is a discussion of food and the eating disorder of anorexia and bulimia that Nyasha develops. I discuss the dynamics around this particular nervous condition in a longer version of this paper. The rest of this article will focus on several of the negotiations that the characters in the novel attempt around various overlapping discourses and the dis-eases they can result in.

1 Black with Dirt

[O]ur mission is to bring them up to the same developmental level as us, to help them learn the European way. If we could just teach them to wash every day and to make sure than they're clean, then we've done something good—even if they don't know that one and one equals two (Mariana Potgieter in Gevisser 1997:34).

It was late afternoon. I had just got done with the compulsory hockey practice, and I was wearily waiting for the school bus, standing a little apart from the other girls who were making plans for 'jolling' this weekend. A group of black women and men, whom I knew to be the grounds and cleaning crew passed by, also on their way home. I turned my head so as not to meet their eyes. The girls' chatter dulled and then resumed when the men and women moved out of ear-shot. 'Dirty kaffirs', one of them said. 'They all smell so bad'. They glanced my way. I turned my

head again so as not to meet their eyes. But as those words echoed throughout my body, I noticed how often I had heard them before, how natural the coupling of dirt and blackness was in the imperial landscape of South Africa. The black body was always described as inherently filthy, **black with dirt**. Dangarembga carefully navigates this disciplinary overdetermination, denaturalising the poetics of dirt and hygiene so central to the British colonial imaginings of the African.

Anne McClintock (1995:226) talks of how

[p]urification rituals prepare the body as a terrain of meaning, organizing flows of value across the self and the community and demarcating boundaries between one community and another.

Culturally specific practices of hygiene become a way of defining the body, with the blackness of dirt demarcating the African from the clean whiteness of the imperial self. Evidence of the African's 'filth' is the blackness of her skin as, with an imperial slight of hand, the 'blackness' of dirt blurs into the racialised blackness of Otherness. Blackness becomes 'a world of universal dirt and filth, and indigenous practices of bodily preparation and sanitation ... the inverse of "civilized" hygiene' (Burke 1996:193). Racial blackness is firmly coupled with dirt. The racialisation of dirt enabled the racialisation of the lower classes in Victorian England whose physical labour and subsequent coarse appearance was attributed to their genetic proximity to the African savage. Manual labour thus is further racialised; to work with one's hands is to get dirty which is to be black which is to be dirty. To clean functions synonymously with to whiten/to civilise/ to be of a higher class. Such popular (mis)imaginings lead local colonial powers and Rhodesian missionaries, as Burke develops, to stress hygienic training in the violent creation of the 'good native'.

Nhamo, Tambu's brother illustrates a native who seems to have internalised the collapsing of the 'blackness' of dirt with the 'blackness' of race. After being at the Mission where western practices of hygiene are stressed, he find himself unwilling to take the bus to the homestead due to the stench and dirt of its other occupants. He wishes to avoid

travelling by bus because ... the women smelt of unhealthy reproductive odours, the children were inclined to relieve their upset bowels on the floor, and the men gave off strong aromas of productive labor ... [Further more the bus terminus was made up off] pale dirty tuckshops, dark and dingy inside (Dangarembga 1988:1f).

His ostensible disdain for dirt translates into a disdain for the black peasant. Nhamo's body, on the other hand, has been transformed/whitened by imperial body rituals; he

returns home often with little other than a plastic bag containing soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste (Dangarembga 1988:9). His appearance is a physical marker of his class privilege, of his greater proximity to the ideal of the modern white man.

Tambu hopes for a similar bodily transformation when she finds out she is going to be educated at the Mission after her brother's death. She desires to leave behind her thick-skinned feet that

had hardened and cracked so that the dirt ground its way in but could not be washed out ... the corrugated black callouses on [her] knees, the scales on [her] skin that were due to lack of oil, the short, dull tufts of malnourished hair (Dangarembga 1988:58).

She expects to 'find another self, a *clean*, well-groomed, genteel self ...' (Dangarembga 1988:58f, e.a.). One of the first acts she thus undertakes upon her arrival at the mission is a hot bath, in which she soaps herself three times.

Yet Tambu, unlike Nhamo, questions the blurring of blackness as dirt into race. Her shifting narrative perspectives provide an interesting commentary on dirt. She continually links the physical appearance of her family with their poverty and not with their lack of hygiene. Her skin is scaly due to the lack of oil, her hair is not neglected as much as malnourished. Her parents do not bathe every night as they lack indoor plumbing and all water has to be laboriously fetched from the river in heavy tin drums.

Tambu further counters colonial claims of the inherent filthiness of indigenous peoples by shattering open the mythic connections of whiteness/white-like and cleanliness. She states:

The absence of dirt was proof of the other-worldly nature of my new home. I knew, had known all my life, that living was dirty and I had been disappointed by the fact ... Yet at a glance it was difficult to perceive dirt in Maiguru's house. After a while, as the novelty wore off, you began to see that the antiseptic sterility that my aunt and uncle strove for could not be attained beyond an illusory level ... (Dangarembga 1988:70f).

Dirt, Tambu says, is everywhere. No amount of white 'civilization' can eliminate its presence.

I find it significant that the western instruments of hygiene, such as the toilet and toothbrush, which function at beginning of the novel as symbols of affluence, civilization and progress, later come to be described as instruments of Nyasha's destruction. The toilet in which Tambu is initially afraid to wash her menstrual rags for fear of dirtying it, becomes parasitic (Sugnet 1997:43). It leaves Nyasha

'grotesquely unhealthy' as it sucks her 'the vital juices' (Dangarembga 1988:199). The toothbrush, which Nhamo brandished as a weapon of civilization on his trips home, is used by Nyasha to help her vomit (Dangarembga 1988:190). Nyasha thus uses the hegemonic discourse of hygiene which attempts to erase the black body, to literally erase herself.

Tambu goes on to depict indigenous rituals of hygiene that help define community, thereby countering claims that natives never washed before whites arrived. She describes with detail the ritualistic bathing and laundry that occurred in the Nyamarira, where children 'could play where [they] pleased. But the women had their own spot for bathing and the men their own too' (Dangarembga 1988:3). *Nervous Conditions* does not stop at showing the continuation of indigenous rituals of body preparation but the text also narrates the Shona's multiple negotiations around western prescriptions of cleanliness. Imperial practices of hygiene were closely linked to the creation of markets for commodities such as toothpaste and soap. McClintock and Burke dwell extensively on the formation of this African market, on the creation and manipulation of 'subterranean flows of desire and taboo' by 'manipulating the semiotic space around the commodity' (McClintock 1995:213).

Nervous Conditions goes further to point at the existence of diverse practices around western hygiene products. The Shona practice of smearing the body with fat, a practice vilified by colonial authorities as uncivilised and dirty, constitutes a perfect example. Vaseline, ever-present in all southern African stores, enabled a continuation of this practice under the guise of the sanctioned consumption of goods. Tambu, after washing for church in the Nyamarira, describes how she 'rubbed a lot of Vaseline on to [her] legs, [her] arms, [her] face and into [her] hair' (Dangarembga 1988:22). She continues and adapts the Shona aesthetic of the beautiful gleaming oiled body, appropriating a western commodity whose consumption was linked to imperial rituals of hygiene. This kind of adaptation and re-appropriation of products was so wide spread in Rhodesia, according to Burke (1996:205), that companies like Lever Brothers even took 'steps to protect products like margarine from being misinterpreted as hygienic substances ...'.

Such reinterpretations demonstrate a crucial method of resistance to the racialised assignment of meaning to rituals of bodily cleaning predicated on the consumption of toiletries. Thus, though Nhamo's nervous condition is his belief in the filth of the black body, the continuation and adaptation of indigenous purification practices, as well as Tambu's linking of dirt to class and impoverishment, resist these racist narratives.

2 A Cleansing or a Wedding: The Better Cure

Nervous Conditions develops on numerous other fronts, indigenous negotiations/reappropriations of colonial prescriptions around behaviour. A crucial

example is the Christian wedding ceremony that Babamukuru insists on for Tambu's parents, Mainini and Jeremiah. The incident of the wedding proves pivotal in Tambu's development for it catalyses her overt politicisation. In this incident, Tambu struggles to articulate the contradictions of colonisation that she feels in her body as two signifying systems collide.

Babamukuru first suggests the wedding at the *dare* when they are discussing the family's recent misfortunes. Jeremiah suggests a 'traditional' solution to the problems; calling in a medium to perform a 'cleansing' ceremony complete with beer and sacrificial ox. The christianised Babamukuru, the patriarch of the family, violently vetoes this suggestion of calling in a 'witchdoctor' (Dangarembga 1988:146). Instead, he states, 'rather than say [these problems] are the result of an evil spirit that someone has sent among us, I have been thinking they are the result of something that we are doing that we should not be doing, or the result of something that we are not doing that we should be doing. That is how we are judged, and blessed accordingly ...' (Dangarembga 1988:146-7). In this scene we see two systems of belief set in opposition to one another, with one having the structural authority to suppress and erase the other.

Babamukuru echoes the colonial assault on our traditional ways of knowing the world in his attempt to superimpose Christian morality on the Shona beliefs of evil spirits. His reaction to a traditional healer is typical of the responses promoted at the missions and at the schools. Indigenous healers were reduced to uncivilised vestiges of another age, ignorant and superstitious. They, along with the entire realm of spirits and the living dead, are contained under the sign of the primitive. Spirits become a fictional product of the rationally unschooled savage mind. An alternate Christian version of the world is proposed, predicated on the punitive notion of sin.

The concept of sin, central in the mission's attempt at disciplining the African, dominates the discussions in *Nervous Conditions* around the wedding ceremony. The wedding ceremony is supposed to cleanse Tambu's parents of sin. As Tambu states:

Sin had become a powerful concept for me ... I could see it. *It was definitely black, we were taught.* It had well-defined edges, and it ... worked like a predatory vacuum, drawing the incautious into itself and never letting them out. And now Babamukuru was saying that this was where my parents were, which meant myself and my sisters too. I could not associate myself or mine with sin so I smothered my misgivings in literal interpretations ... (Dangarembga 1988:150-1, e.a.).

Tambu finds the lack of ambiguities and nuance comforting in this Manichean ordering of her world where the missionaries prescribe certain behaviour and all she

has to do is follow rules to avoid sin. But her inability to ignore the direct devaluation of her parents and her family implied by the idea that their non-Christian union is sinful, forces her to confront the painful contradictions of colonial rule. She finds the definition of sin as 'black', of sin as her family's 'natural' state unless saved by white Christian morality, hard to accept. Tambu struggles to think through the contradictions of a system whose proponents, like Babamukuru, insist that her family are inherently bad/sinful due to their blackness and who try to 'save' them through acts that actually erase them and deny their reality. These cognitive splittings, and her attempt to synchronise the two systems, one of which refuses to find value in the other, cause Tambu to short-circuit, to experience her own nervous condition. She cannot reconcile the ambiguities: 'I had thought that ambiguities no longer existed. I had thought that issues would clearly continue to be clearly delimited ...' (Dangarembga 1988:164).

Her nervous condition expresses itself through a split between her mind and body. Unable to articulate her confusion and the rupture in the racist narrative of progress, she uses her body as a sign of resistance, of unwillingness to accept the proposition that to be Shona is sinful and without worth.

... I was slipping further and further away from [Nyasha], until in the end I appeared to have slipped out of my body and was standing somewhere near the foot of the bed, watching her efforts to persuade me to get up and myself ignoring her (Dangarembga 1988:166).

Her body, left behind on the bed, enacts a resistance in its passivity, in its refusal to participate in a ritual that would negate it. Not only does her mind split from her body but her mind fragments. Her mind

had raced and spun and ended up splitting into two disconnected entities that had long, frightening arguments with each other, very vocally, there in [her] head, about what ought to be done, the one half maniacally insisting on going, the other half equally maniacally refusing to consider it (Dangarembga 1988:167).

Thus Tambu suffers from nervous tension, a crippling mind/body split and fragmentation of her mind due to her inability to reconcile the two opposing world views she encounters. This reconciliation proves especially difficult for her as the western progressive lens she has put her faith in, attempts to relegate her family's beliefs, customs and existence to spectres of primitivism.

Tambu is not alone in her reaction to the Christian wedding ceremony as something that 'made a mockery of the people [she] belonged to and placed doubt on

[her] legitimate existence in this world' (Dangarembga 1988:163). Lucia, Tambu's aunt, seems unenthusiastic. She insists only that they carry off the wedding ceremony well or else people will laugh. Maiguru keeps 'forgetting' to take care of the wedding dress and bride's maids' dresses, until Nyasha has to take over for fear that the dresses would not be ready in time. Tambu's mother, the bride to be, appears so resigned to being denied voice and legitimacy that she states that the whole affair does not matter one way or the other. She remains apathetic, this wedding ceremony is one more thing she has to endure. Only later, just before the most serious onset of her nervous condition when she does not eat or do anything, does she admit her feelings of shame, anger and resentment. She,

[Babamukuru] says this and we jump. To wear a veil, at my age, to wear a veil! Just imagine—to wear a veil. If I were a witch I could enfeeble his mind, truly I would do it, and then we would see how his education and his money helped him (Dangarembga 1988:184).

So who wants this wedding and why? The colonial conversations around marriage were numerous in Rhodesia. Colonial powers, obsessed with control over potentially dangerous black bodies who outnumbered them, and prompted by a recession, turned in the 1920s to advocate 'reconstituted "traditionalism" and "tribalism" ... promoting policies that "bolstered the waning authority of African chiefs and headmen"' (Schmidt 1990:623). These patriarchs constituted the crucial link in the system of indirect rule, simultaneously being coerced by British authorities to help them govern unruly black bodies and being rewarded for the positions of limited (intermediary) power that they occupied. Dangarembga depicts Babamukuru as one of these patriarchs. Nyasha angrily articulates his position, as powerful and ultimately powerless by mimicking a white colonial. 'Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. "He's a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir", she informed in sneering sarcastic tones' (Dangarembga 1988:200).

In the 1930s, Schmidt argues, the colonial state, trying to appease these African patriarchs, whose authority they had previously undermined, collaborated with them to control the mobility and sexuality of African women. Hence, numerous laws around marriage were passed, that gave husbands and guardians power over women. These laws crucially bolstered imperial hegemony in the region. The 1901 Native Marriages Ordinance, amended in 1917, declared all African marriages invalid unless registered. It was the husband's responsibility to register the marriage before cohabitation and if he failed to do this, he could be fined ten pounds or imprisoned with or without hard labor for up to three months. If the husband failed to do this, furthermore, guardians were responsible and could also be punished. In addition, men married under Christian rites could be prosecuted for bigamy. The

Jesuit and Wesleyan Methodist missionaries were also involved, requiring that all those at the mission marry according to Christian practice, monogamously and without premarital sex, or else they were expelled from the missions for sinning.

Babamukuru, as part of the black elite used to prop up imperial power, thus has pressure from the colonisers who 'educated' him to ensure that his family are all married in western ceremonies. He also has tremendous pressure from the missionaries whose acceptance of him as headmaster is contingent on his adoption and promotion of 'Christian' living. Babamukuru's internalisation of the delegitimisation of indigenous customs and beliefs leave him with little choice but to prescribe this Christian wedding ceremony that no one seems to really want. The Christian wedding also enables him to ensure that Jeremiah does not have sexual relations with Lucia since Jeremiah, after the ceremony, can be prosecuted for polygamy. In this way he can control not just the behaviour of his brother, but of Lucia who eventually leaves the homestead to work where Babamukuru finds her a job.

But to read the wedding as merely an abandonment of indigenous beliefs and as an adoption of Christian ones would be simplistic. Babamukuru, perhaps in spite of himself, also uses the wedding as a cleansing—'he as anxious that his brother be *cleansed* of sin as soon as possible' (Dangarembga 1988:160, e.a.). The notion of cleansing oneself is firmly embedded in Shona cosmology where one cleanses oneself of evil spirits using ceremonies prescribed by the medium. The ceremony being used in this cleansing, in an interesting blurring of Shona and Christian beliefs and practices, is the Christian wedding ceremony. When Tete asks, '[a]nd now shall we have a cleansing or a wedding? ... which is the better cure' (Dangarembga 1988:148) I would answer both. In an attempt to theorise the small, tight spaces that resistance can hide in, I would argue that the wedding is being used *as* a cleansing. This subtle appropriation of the 'modern' western practice, this adaptation of the Christian as it converses with Shona beliefs, disrupts progress as a linear narrative beginning with the primitive. The 'modern' and 'traditional' are seen to exist simultaneously, interrupting each other in a cruel diaspora conversation.

3 Me as the Sublimate—Education

Dangarembga problematises colonial models such as education, 'relativizing their dominance as she places them within a network of conflicting ideologies ...' (Bosman 1990:95). Her elaboration on colonial education's exilic function constitutes one of the central axes of the novel. *Nervous Conditions* places us in the midst of a storm about what kind of education African children should obtain. The benefits of selecting a handful of children who rise through the (post)colonial system to become one of the ruling elite, thereby benefiting indigenous communities, are weighed against the education's alienating effects, against the nervous conditions it engenders.

Ketu Ketrak (1995:70) talks of this alienation in his article 'This Englishness will Kill You':

... [t]he entire process of schooling from girlhood into adolescence, the inculcation of British values, leads to the experience of multiple marginalities—from the colonizer's culture, from one's own people, even from one's own voice as it articulates English and other 'forgotten' and consciously re-memoried tongues.

This British-educated child becomes what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o calls a 'black hermit', marginalised from and caught between contradictory, fragmenting wor(l)ds (Gurr 1981:28). This marginalisation is part of a complex process whereby the child is both centred due to the power and prestige of an English education and contradictorily marginalised due to this centring. Thus Tambu, for example, is centred as the star pupil who is going to be with the whites at Sacred Heart, and simultaneously ignored.

... I ran over to the pitch. They all saw me coming ... I saw [Maidei] stop with the ball in her hands to point me out to the others, but as I ran on to the field they were cool and silent. They ignored me (Dangarembga 1988:187).

At Sacred Heart, she is one of six exceptional black students who despite the importance of their distinction, get relegated to overcrowded segregated quarters. Thus both the indigenous and white settler communities centre these children (albeit for different reasons) and simultaneously marginalise and ostracise them.

Dangarembga is careful not to overlook the gender dynamics involved in the selection of the children to receive a British education. Males need to be educated first, primarily due to the southern-African colonial state's desire to create a tier of African patriarchal elites who would make up the backbone of the imperial system of indirect rule. Thus Nhamo, as Jeremiah's son, is sent to school at the Mission, while Tambu is directed to stay at home and stay away from the books. Nhamo goads Tambu with his gender privilege: 'Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? You are lucky you even managed to go back to Rutivi. With me it's different. I was meant to be educated' (Dangarembga 1988:49). In his gloating, Nhamo overlooks that it is the gendered labor of his mother who sells food at the local bus terminus that enables him to go to the Mission for school. The 'fundamental principles of [her] brother's budding elitism' infuriate Tambu who actively resists. Throughout the novel, the collusion of indigenous patriarchy and Victorian beliefs of educating women only to be good mothers and wives (Dangarembga 1988:49).

Maiguru proves an interesting exception in a generation where very few, if any, women were educated by the missionaries and the colonial state. She has

surprisingly received the same level of western education as Babamukuru. She however, unlike Babamukuru, keeps silent about her academic achievements, enabling the community to continually de-emphasise and overlook them while aggrandising her husband's achievements. Tambu, on learning that Maiguru has a Master's Degree states in astonishment, 'I thought you went to look after Babamukuru ... That's all people ever say' (Dangarembga 1988:101). When she tells this to Maiguru, she sees Maiguru's bitterness for the first time. "'That's what they like to think I did'", she continued sourly. The lower half of her face, and only the lower half, because it did not quite reach the eyes, set itself into sullen lines of discontent' (Dangarembga 1988:101). Maiguru's bitterness indicates her difficulty accepting her gendered role—she, like Tambu's mother and Lucia, senses many of its contradictions and injustices. Maiguru attributes her ability to see the contradictions of her situation to her stay in England which gives her a vantage point from which to analyse and critique patriarchy: 'What it is ... to have to choose between self and security. When I was in England I glimpsed for a little while the things I could have been, the things I could have done if-if-if things were-different-But ...' (Dangarembga 1988:101). Maiguru can be said to occupy a location similar to that of what Abdul JanMohamed (1992:97) calls the specular border intellectual, the exile whose 'interstitial cultural space' provides her with a position from which to scrutinise her cultures in order to formulate other utopian possibilities of societal structuring. Maiguru however, proves unable to articulate and follow through on these utopian possibilities. She quickly reverts back to a narrative of feminised self-sacrifice, telling Tambu that 'a good man and lovely children ... make it all worth while' (Dangarembga 1988:102). One sees here the collusion between the 'colonial ideology of separate racial "development" in Rhodesia [that] guarantees minimal interference with [Babamukuru's] power as Shona patriarch' and discourses of 'masculine sexuality ... affirmed by his ability to capitalise his family within a white Rhodesian economy' (Thomas 1992:28). This combination subsume Maiguru's vision of her potentiality as a Shona woman, straining her nerves.

Maiguru eventually snaps under the pressure, leaving Babamukuru to temporarily stay with her brother and his family. Nyasha contextualises Maiguru's departure:

But it's not that simple, you know, really it isn't. It's not really him, you know. I mean not really the person. It's everything, it's everywhere. So where do you break out to? You're just one person and it's everywhere. So where do you break out to? ... (Dangarembga 1988:174).

Nyasha, in a moment of acute identification with her mother, articulates not only the plight of the native woman under a colonial rule that reinforces Shona patriarchy, but

the condition of 'otherness' that affects women everywhere. Nyasha's statement illustrates her own growing sense of helplessness and ineffectuality—she cannot help her mother or herself 'break out'. Nyasha recognises and is damaged by the pattern of daily self-erasure and infantilisation that constitutes her mother's condition. Later in the novel, Nyasha physically re-enacts this erasure and infantilisation by disappearing her body's female curves. After five days, Babamukuru brings 'home' a slightly changed Maiguru. This Maiguru does not use baby-talk as frequently and fusses over her family less. To a limited extent, she reverses the process whereby she sublimates herself, voicing her opinion more often. Yet her nervous condition, though alleviated, remains fundamentally unaltered.

Babamukuru, as the first male child in the family to receive a British education, becomes the patriarch who makes the final decisions concerning the family, as demonstrated in the wedding incident. Tambu's grandmother mythologises Babamukuru's entry into the ranks of the educated colonial elite in a stylised retelling of history (while Maiguru's entry is forgotten). Babamukuru's mother speaks of how she 'walked ... with Babamukuru, who was nine years old and wearing a loin cloth, to the mission, where the holy wizards took him in' (Dangarembga 1988:19). The importance of the grandmother's oral history lies in its multiple meanings. It shows the faith that many people put in colonial education as a way of circumventing imperial racialisation and its accompanying oppression. Education, for many, offered the promise of escape from the Fanonian superstructure of whiteness with wealth and blackness with poverty. The grandmother's faith resonates poignantly as I hear echoes of my own illiterate grandmother talking to me in a language I no longer understand about how important it was that I did well at school.

But Tambu's grandmother's romanticised re-telling of her decision is also a masking of the strategic decision she is forced to make in a world with few options. The history she cloaks in the language of the 'fairy-tale' (Dangarembga 1988:19), of 'the princess and the prince' (Dangarembga 1988:18) is one of enforced black male labor on the farm and in the mines, while children and women were relegated to barren rural homesteads to eke out an impoverished living which grew even more deprived in order to sustain the 'wizards' ... riches and luxury' (Dangarembga 1988:18). It is a story of treachery and black magic, peopled by the ghosts of the Shona, Tonga, the Ndebele displaced from their lands, by spectres of children and dried-up women relegated to barren outposts where nothing ever grows, and by the phantoms of men killed in the gold-mines and white farms. Her oral history is no fairy-tale, but rather an attempt to live with her choices within this haunted social landscape of colonialism.

The grandmother's story offers us a glimpse of the traditional ways of educating children, of passing on agricultural skills and historical memory. It enacts an alternative model of learning that breaks with the stereotypes of Shona life as one

concerned only with physical survival. It demonstrates that education does not have to be accompanied by a painful sublimation of the indigenous/black self. The grandmother's story is a history lesson:

History that could not be found in the textbooks; a stint in the field and a rest, the beginning of the story, a pause. 'What happened after, Mbuya, what happened?' 'More work, my child, before you hear more story'. Slowly, methodically, throughout the day the field would be cultivated, the episodes of my grandmother's own portion of history strung together from beginning to end (Dangarembga 1988:17f).

The grandmother thoroughly integrates the passing on of tribal and personal memory with the physical labor of cultivating food. This is unlike colonial education that teaches a virulent disdain for racialised manual labor, while valorising intellectual labor that is deemed inherently white. Nhamo demonstrates these effects when he returns from the Mission by not helping at all around the home and with the cultivation of food. He would rather spend his time reading. 'He would drink sweet black tea while he read his books and we went about our chores' (Dangarembga 1988:9). The educated elite leave manual labor to others for it is deemed beneath them. In the history lesson with the grandmother, the rhythm of learning echoes the rhythm of cultivation as the grandmother integrates physical and mental learning. The consequences of divorcing the physical from the mental are made clear, for example, in Nyasha's obsession to only teach and nourish her mind while her body starves.

Dangarembga juxtaposes the orality of Tambu's grandmother's history lessons with the textuality of British education. The production of an imperial body of knowledge cannot be separated from its production of written texts. References to these texts such as *Wind in the Willows*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Little Women* and romance novels demonstrate the centrality of the written. Tambu's narrative, that makes overt the power relations embodied in and perpetuated by these texts, opposes the predominant position that such texts occupy. She eloquently states:

I read everything from Enid Blyton to the Bronte sisters, and responded to them all. Plunging into these books I knew I was being educated and I was filled with gratitude to the authors for introducing me to places where reason and inclination were not at odds. It was a centripetal time, with me at the center, everything gravitating towards me. It was a time of sublimation with me as the sublimate (Dangarembga 1988:93).

Dangarembga places the voice of the unaware young Tambu alongside the older, more politically astute Tambu, thereby exposing both the pleasure involved in read-

ing these rich, literary texts and their function of silencing and sublimating her voice. The older Tambu demonstrates how these books, while evocative, function to define the Subject as only white by a cognitive mapping of normative experience. These British texts, replete with snow-flakes, apple trees and the savage 'blackness' of the mad-woman in Rochester's attic, symbolically produce a hegemonic Real, where 'reason and inclination [are] not at odds', where the painful contradictions of colonialism recede into the background (Dangarembga 1988:93). Tambu does not respond to this sublimation by advocating an abandonment of the written and a romanticised 'return' to the oral. Instead *Nervous Conditions* is her attempt to 'tell' the story of the four women she loves and their men—she positions herself to write the oral, to put flesh on the textual body of Othered experiences. She attempts to 'insert herself' into a colonial 'cognitive map' overdetermined by 'all the things ... read ... [by] everything that you're taught' (Dangarembga in George & Scott 1993:312).

Nervous Conditions continues this discussion of British colonial education, documenting several different aspects. Crucially, it requires some sort of physical separation from the indigenous Shona world whose influences are thought of as corruptive. Thus Babamukuru's journey takes him first to the white mission, then to South Africa and eventually to England—always in a direction away from his ancestral 'home' into exile. This physical journey traces Babamukuru's inner path towards greater and greater assimilation. Babamukuru cannot, however, assimilate fully into whiteness as the 'epidermalization ... of [his] inferiority', the inscription of race on his body continually reasserts itself (Fanon 1967:11). As a black man he must ultimately confronts the 'barrier' of race that no amount of assimilation or education can erase. He returns to his 'place' in the colonial scheme of indirect rule as one of the western educated black elite, thereby perpetuating colonial material and cultural hierarchies. His role as headmaster and Academic Director of the Church's Manicaland Region provides him with a site firmly entrenched in colonial discourses, to be the 'good kaffir' (Dangarembga 1988:194).

But Tambu deconstructs the stereotype of an unreflective, passive and easily manipulated patriarch by carefully narrating Babamukuru's ambivalence at playing the role:

Babamukuru did not want to leave the mission ... [but] to decline would have been a form of suicide ... he had no alternative but to uproot himself for a period of five years in order to retain the position that would enable him, in due course, to remove himself and both his families from the mercy of nature and charitable missionaries. My grandmother thought the children would be better off at home ... But Babamukuru, remembering how difficult life was on the homestead, did not want his children to experience the want and hardship that he had experienced as a young child. In addition, he pre-

ferred to have his children with him so he could supervise essential things such as their education and their development (Dangarembga 1988:14).

This passage shows him to be riddled with contradictions, wanting the material benefits that accompany the position of the colonial elite, yet not wanting to experience the accompanying alienation. One sees him wanting to be free of the missionaries' manipulation, while believing in the colonial discourses of 'progress', Christianity and a western education that removes him from the homestead. Babamukuru thus suffers from nerves stretched tight as he attempts to negotiate the different colonial discourses and spaces that provide him with a limited power and that always relegate him to the object of fear, desire and subjugation.

We hardly even laughed when Babamukuru was within earshot, because, Maiguru said, his nerves were bad. His nerves were so bad because he was so busy. For the same reason we did not talk much when he was around either (Dangarembga 1988:102).

The physical distancing required of 'black hermits' mirror an internal distancing from one's indigenous community, what Dangarembga throughout *Nervous Conditions* calls 'forgetting'. The idea of 'forgetting' is a complex one since to forget assumes the existence of an authentic, cultural body of memory. Access to this body of memory often is naturalised, giving rise to stereotypic definitions of what black people know or can do. Dangarembga subtly intervenes by recirculating the trope of forgetting and remembering one's identity, showing its different resonances with different characters.

We are introduced to 'forgetting' as a consequence of British education early on in the novel. Nhamo, on his first visit 'home' from the Mission, has 'forgotten' how to speak Shona. His amnesia makes sense given colonialism's systematic devaluation of the cultural memory of black peoples. Nhamo's forgetting how to speak Shona reflects his physical distancing from the rural community as well as his attempt to distance himself from the painful processes of racialisation. As Fanon (1967:38) states, '[t]o speak a language is to take on a world, a culture' and by strategically forgetting the language, Nhamo is trying to forget the devalued world of the homestead.

He had forgotten how to speak Shona. A few words escaped haltingly, ungrammatically and strangely accented when he spoke to my mother, but he did not speak to her very often any more The more time Nhamo spent at Babamukuru's, the more aphasic he became ... (Dangarembga 1988:52f).

Tambu is careful to expose Nhamo's aphasia as cultivated, as a ploy to consolidate

an elitism based on his proximity to whiteness/Britishness—and not as an actual forgetting. She is unable to conceive of an actual forgetting.

Thus when her friends at the Mission entreat her not to forget them when at Sacred Heart, she thinks,

Don't forget, don't forget, don't forget. Nyasha, my mother, my friends. Always the same message. But why? If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself. And that, off course, could not happen. So why was everybody so particular to urge me to remember? (Dangarembga 1988:188).

But as Dangarembga develops throughout the novel, it is possible to forget oneself, to sublimate one's identity so thoroughly that the self only erupts episodically as nerves. Indeed, a few pages later, Tambu talks about being so busy with exotic languages, games like hockey, nuns and reading that she rarely remembers her family and her friends (Dangarembga 1988:195f). Only upon the deterioration of Nyasha's condition, and her mother's warning of the danger of Englishness does Tambu start to realise that her collective identity is not natural, but can be forgotten.

Was I being careful enough? I wondered. For I was beginning to have a suspicion ... that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the 'Englishness' of the mission; and after that the more concentrated 'Englishness' of Sacred Heart (Dangarembga 1988:203).

Tambu's idea of her community and identity begins to move away from a naturalised one which exists no matter what, towards more of an 'imagined community', where relations are sustained by active acts of identification and coalition around historical, political, and cultural circumstances. This conception of community and identity is closer to the one held by Nyasha. Nyasha, as a second generation black colonial elite, schooled in Britain, cannot assume a naturalised relation to any community. While in England, she forgets how to speak Shona and struggles to re-learn it. Her Shona classmates ostracise her, "'She thinks she is white", they used to sneer, and that was as bad as a curse' (Dangarembga 1988:94). They do not like her English, 'because it is authentic and [her] Shona, because it is not' (Dangarembga 1988:196).

Nyasha does not want to forget. She reads not to sublimate herself but to situate and re-member herself within a larger context of modernity and its terrors.

She read a lot of books that were about ... real peoples and their sufferings: the condition in South Africa, which she asked Maiguru to compare with our

own situation and ended up arguing with her when Maiguru said we were better off. She read about Arabs on the east coast and the British on the west; about Nazis and Japanese and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She had nightmares about these things ... but she carried on reading just the same She wanted to know many things: ... the nature of life and relations before colonisation, exactly why UDI was declared and what it meant (Dangarembga 1988:93).

Nyasha, as Dangarembga states, 'does not have anything to forget: she simply does not know' (Wilkerson 1990:191). Her relationship to a black, African identity has to be painstakingly forged and negotiated; she implodes the myths of natural, authentic communities that cannot be forgotten. Rather, she re-members blackness, one phantom limb at a time, redefining 'blackness' as the painful inscription of meaning onto resistant bodies.

Nyasha points towards the impossibility of a single, authentic black community for the post-colonial subject. Trinh Minh-ha defines authenticity '... as a need to rely on an "undisputed origin", [that] is prey to an obsessive *fear*: that of *losing a connection*. Everything must hold together ... a clear origin will give me a connection back through time ...' (Bosman 1990:95). Nyasha does not have this undisputed origin and her attempts to find such an origin, such as the making of clay water-pots long abandoned by the Shona in favour of tin drums, are romantic and dismissed by Tambu as a way to pass the time (Dangarembga 1988:150). Dangarembga is showing here 'the impossible archaeology of recovering/reinventing what colonialism destroyed' (Sugnet 1997:41). Nyasha's head is described, in terminology strangely akin to Trinh's quote, as 'full of loose connections that are always sparking' (Dangarembga 1988:74). It is this productive messiness, this inability to contain history within a single, developmental narrative, that disrupts essentialist notions of identity. The sparking, loose connections deconstruct a naturalised identity, conceptualised as opposite to Englishness and waiting in the wings to be simply remembered and retrieved. Rather black, female identity becomes something that has to be created, out of the fragments of a rapidly changing Shona culture impacted tremendously by the structures of modernity and colonisation.

4 A Cure for Autodestruction: Somewhere where it's Safe

Nervous Conditions' politicisation of the 'bad nerves' of the native disrupts dominant psychological models of neuroses based on the individual. All the characters' diseases of the nerves, whether it be Nyasha's eating disorder, Babamukuru's violent temper, Maiguru's self-effacement or Tambu's sublimation of the self can be read as another example of '[a]utodestruction ... one of the ways in which the native's

muscular tension is set free' (Fanon 1967:54). The terror of racial and gendered imaginings combine to form a lethal combination that traps the native, making him/her feel silenced, disempowered and ineffectual. But this is such a hopeless and painful discursive place for me to end with; we need healing.

Tambu's mother indirectly provides us with path towards a cure for the native's nervous conditions. Upon hearing of Nyasha's self-starvation and purging, she insists that "'It's the Englishness" "It'll kill them all if they aren't careful"' (Dangarembga 1988:202). She asserts that one cannot expect anyone, not even the ancestors to stomach so much Englishness—that the Englishness that is making Nyasha sick is the Englishness that contaminates and adversely effects all of Shona society, from the ancestors to the children. Tambu's mother's diagnosis finds resonance with Paulo Medeiros (1992:12) when he says that '[i]mplied in the notion of [the native's] dis-order ... is the possibility of a rupture of established order, initially at the individual level but ... increasingly more so at the societal level'. Thus English colonialism, buttressed by certain Shona patriarchs, is seen as the real disorder and society's illness must be cured before the native can be healthy. The only cure therefore has to be independence. As Hill (1995:79) succinctly puts it:

[i]f physical and psychological illness can be read as symptomatic of colonialism, it can be cured only by independence ... And since Nyasha's rebellion against the silencing of her voice and body is a gendered rebellion against patriarchal authority, her personal experience of rebellion figures the guerilla war taking place in Southern Rhodesia during the 1960s and 70s when the novel is set.

Nervous Conditions thus deconstructs the artificial binary of private and public, depicting a world where the native body is racked with dis-eases that are inextricable from the larger dis-ease of colonialism. This space is a garden 'where seeds do grow', the seeds of independence from the hegemony of imperial discourses and its resultant dis-eases/nervous conditions (Dangarembga 1988:203).

Department of Ethnic Studies (African Diasporic Studies)
University of California, Berkely

References

- Barnes, Teresa 1997. 'Am I a Man?': Gender and the Pass Laws in Urban Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930-80. *African Studies Review* 40, 1:59-81.
- Bosman, Brenda 1990. A Correspondence Without Theory: Tsitsi Dangarembga's 'Nervous Conditions'. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 7,1:91-100.

- Burke, Timothy 1996. 'Sunlight Soap has Changed My Life': Hygiene, Commodification, and the Body in Colonial Zimbabwe. In Hendrickson, Hildi (ed): *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Dadzie, Stella 1990. Rev. of *Nervous Conditions*, by Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16,2:374-375.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. Seattle: The Seal Press.
- Fanon, Frantz 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Markmann, Charles Lam (trans). New York: Grove Press.
- George, Rosemary Marangoly and Helen Scott 1993. An Interview with Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 26. 3:309-319.
- Gevisser, Mark 1997. Black and White Together at Warmbaths Primary. *New York Times Magazine* 20 July:32-35.
- Gilman, Sander L. 1985. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Gurr, Andrew 1981. *Writers in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature*. Sussex: Harvester Press.
- Hall, Stuart 1996. The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skins, White Masks*? In Read, Alan (ed): *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Harasym, Sarah (ed) 1990. *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Harris, Meridy 1989. Rev. of *Nervous Conditions*, by Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Agenda: A Journal About Women and Gender* 5:55-59.
- Head, Bessie 1974. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann Books.
- Hill, Janice E. 1995. Purging a Plate Full of Colonial History: The *Nervous Conditions* of Silent Girls. *College Literature* 22,1:78-90.
- JanMohamed, Abdul 1992. Worldiness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Towards a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual. In Sprinker, Michael (ed): *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Ketrak, Ketu H 1995. 'This Englishness Will Kill You': Colonial[ist] Education and Female Socialization in Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey*, and Bessie Head's *Maru*. *College Literature* 22,1:62-77.
- McClintock, Anne 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York:Routledge Press.
- Medeiros, Paulo 1992. Cannibalism and Starvation: The Parameters of Eating Disorders in Literature. In Furst, Lilian R. and Graham, Peter W. (eds). *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*. Pennsylvania: Penn State UP.
- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1986. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Curry.

- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1972. *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. London: Heinemann Press.
- Pape, John 1990. Black and White: The 'Perils of Sex' in Colonial Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16,4:699-720.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 1963. Preface. In Fanon, Frantz: *The Wretched of the Earth*. Farrington, Constance (trans). New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- Schmidt, Elizabeth 1990. Negotiated Spaces and Contested Terrain: Men, Women, and the Law in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1939. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16,4:622-648.
- Sugnet, Charles 1997. *Nervous Conditions: Dangarembga's feminist reinvention of Fanon*. In Nnaemeka, Obioma (ed): *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. London: Routledge Press.
- Thomas, Sue 1992. Killing the Hysteric in the Colonized House: Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 27,1:26-35.
- Trinh T Minh-ha 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Wilkerson, Jane 1990. Tsitsi Dangarembga. In Wilkerson, Jane (ed): *Talking with African Poets, Playwrights and Novelists*. London: James Curry.