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Cosmopolitanism in the Classroom, Orientalism's other "Ism": The Nervous Conditions of Cross-Cultural Literacy

Lisa Eck

Framingham State University, leck@framingham.edu

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Cosmopolitanism in the Classroom, Orientalism's Other Ism: The Nervous Conditions of Cross-Cultural Literacy

Invited Lecture for the Department of Foreign Literatures

China Central Normal University

May 4, 2011

1. SLIDE: title

Let me begin by saying something about the unique design of this lecture. The paper I am about to present is what we might call in the States: a real bargain, **two for the price of one!** What I've done is combine an essay I wrote on two competing theories about the relationship between the SELF and the OTHER – namely the competition between Cosmopolitanism and Orientalism (both of which I will define in a moment) with an essay I published on a novel from the southern African country of Zimbabwe, titled *Nervous Conditions*.

The recipe for the argument goes like this: first let me tell you something about the ideological context in which I teach: the kinds of debates that keep me up at night – losing sleep over the competing claims of Cosmopolitanism versus Orientalism--, and then let me show you how these issues come into play when reading an actual book – specifically a piece of foreign literature, one I have had to work hard to read, and not *misread*. My paper describes a three step process for reading a foreign text – any foreign text, which I hope you will find useful in your studies, here at CCNU.

Okay, let's meet our theorists...

1. SLIDE: Said

Born in Jerusalem, prior to the partitioning of Palestine and the formation of the state of Israel, Said moved with his family at age 12 to Cairo, Egypt, where his father hoped they would avoid the tensions of 1947. Later he attended boarding school in Massachusetts, then earned degrees at first Princeton and then Harvard University. A resident of three countries, his life story exhibits the “nervous conditions” of postcolonial identity I will discuss later in my essay.

2. **SLIDE: Cover of Orientalism** (Jean-Léon Gérôme, 19th century French painter)

To clarify, Said’s focus in the text is on British and French constructions of the Near-East – the Middle East, or the so called Arab World, and the Indian Subcontinent, while excluding China and the Far East. So, while the evidence of orientalism – distorted knowledge of the east, invented by the west – excludes, for the most part, American or Chinese examples, we can still apply Said’s theory to ANY encounter between western SELF and Eastern OTHER.

3. **SLIDE: Definition of Orientalism, in Said’s words**

4. **SLIDE: Guilty Binaries** – if time allows return and look at the cover art (slide 3)

Transition: While all westerners are probably guilty of holding SOME orientalist misconceptions about the exotic East -- is this the only way we can read? Theorist Kwame Appiah, says “No,” and so do historians, Joshua Teitelbaum and Meir Litvak. Let’s hear the historians first.

In “Students, Teachers, and Edward Said: Taking Stock of Orientalism,” Joshua Teitelbaum and Meir Litvak argue that by functioning, for almost three decades now, as the hegemonic discourse in Middle Eastern Studies, Said’s critique has produced what they describe as a “**McCarthyist atmosphere**” in the academe concerning encounters with difference, and,

perhaps worse, a “crippling timidity” in Non-Arab and Non-Muslim students interested in studying Islam, or Middle Eastern history and literature. As part of “taking stock” of Orientalism’s critical legacy, Teitelbaum and Litvak resist the way in which Said’s theory seems to imply the existence of cultural differences so illegible, and so intractable, that despite all academic engagement, people can ultimately only hope to “study themselves” (Litvak and Teitelbaum 16, 9). What interests me, here, is Teitelbaum and Litvak’s concern with how contemporary students and teachers have translated Said’s theory into practice -- be it in their Middle-Eastern Studies classrooms, or in my own World Literature classroom in America.

To be certain, in terms of day in/day out pedagogy, I am deeply indebted to the way Said’s theory of Orientalism urges students to distrust their own self-serving ideas of the foreign Other [e.g. **I’m an individual, but people “over there” have to do what their culture tells them to do...**]. Said’s critique has also encouraged all of us who love literary studies to read texts by non-western authors that represent the voice of the Orientalized Other talking back. Perhaps, you’ve heard the popular tag-line for postcolonial studies “The Empire Writes Back!” That said, I too have experienced, not a “crippling timidity,” so much as a crippling fatigue with the rigidity of Said’s geography, which seems to make a competitive Other or “alter ego” necessary to the construction of *any* cultural identity, no matter which direction the compass points (Litvak and Teitelbaum 2). Even if we accept psychoanalytic theories of subjectification, which posit the abject status of the “Other” as necessary to subject formation, like those Said reviews in his Introduction to *Orientalism*, the cultural means by which we compensate for this recognition of otherness, whether it’s the mother as Other, or immigrant as Other, seems far more up for grabs than this ontology allots for.

5. SLIDE: Said Quote from Culture and Imperialism

Yet, in his 1993 volume, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said remains consistent with this ontological model, for, in his words, “no identity can ever exist by itself...without an array of opposites, negatives, and oppositions” (Culture 52).

However, is this dialectic way of reading the only way readers can find themselves identifying with a foreign Other? Kwame Appiah says “No.” In his book, *Cosmopolitanism, Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah resists Said’s epistemological claim that all identities – national, familial, religious – derive “their psychological energy from the fact that for every in-group there’s an out-group” (Ethics 98).

6. **SLIDE: Appiah/intro**

Appiah’s father is from Ghana, his mother from England. As a person with a bi-racial, hybrid national identity himself, Appiah has a stake in promoting his own particular version of cosmopolitanism.

7. **SLIDE: cover of *Cosmopolitanism***

It’s worth noting Appiah’s other works on RACE and CULTURE...

8. **SLIDE: 4th Century B.C. Cynics**

As ancient a human response to cultural difference as the xenophobia that Orientalism would eventually codify, cosmopolitanism, Appiah reminds us, boasts its own deep history, worthy of study. In *Cosmopolitanism, Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah traces cosmopolitanism back to the Greek Cynics of the 4th Century B.C., who coined the term “cosmopolitan,” to signify someone who identified himself as a “citizen of the cosmos,” or “citizen of the universe,” rather than of a particular polis, or city (Ethics xiv). Intended from the start as a political paradox, or oxymoron, wherein the notion of belonging to a universe – a cosmos – in effect, overpowers, or deconstructs, the sovereignty of “local” citizenship, “cosmopolitanism” has always represented

“a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person [belongs] to a community among communities” (Ethics xiv).

More to the point, as an ancient corrective revisited, cosmopolitanism inverts some of Orientalism’s core assumptions. Rather than anticipating proof of the alien status of the “Other,” cosmopolitanism predicts that in specific cross-cultural encounters, person to person, *similarities*, versus alien differences, are habitually, in play. Appiah insists that on an experiential level “engagement with strangers is always...engagement with particular strangers; and the warmth that comes from shared identity will often be available” (Ethics 98). Where genuine differences are experienced, here, too, the cosmopolitan differs from the orientalist in that, for the cosmopolitan, the purpose of cultural comparison, or exploring cultural contrasts, is to unseat the familiar with the foreign, rather than the reverse; in other words, the cosmopolitan thinker uses his or her knowledge of foreign alternatives, experienced or imagined, to call into question the legitimacy of familiar local, or national, practices, rather than using “the foreign” to prove the superiority of all things home grown, or “home schooled,” so to speak.

“The foreignness of foreigners, the strangeness of strangers: these things,” Appiah reminds us, “are real enough” (xxi). Yet, as he goes on to argue foreignness in our current academic climate has, “by an order of magnitude,” been exaggerated “by well-meaning intellectuals” who risk asserting the pedagogically undesirable position that, essentially, certain human beings are illegible to one another (xxi).

10-12. SLIDES: Three Images from India

What happens with the challenges of cultural difference in the world literature classroom—where, on any given partly cloudy Tuesday, a

group of “native” readers in Framingham Massachusetts are invited to “trespass” onto foreign literary soil? What happens on any given Wednesday, when students in Wuhan, sit in teaching building number three and talk about African-American literature, or British Romanticism? What negotiations go on?

“Thinking globally, but teaching locally,” my pedagogical approach in contemporary world literature courses means working in two opposing directions that produce a useful dialectic tension. First, I work to make hybrid postcolonial identities seem familiar, even analogous, at times, to what we understand as the process of identity formation for the average postmodern American college student. I do this simply by entertaining what discourse theory argues: namely that, colonized or not, all postmodern selves function as sites of competing discourses. Next, working toward an opposite end, bracketing similarities, and stressing historicized difference, I use the Otherness of the cultures reproduced in foreign texts to estrange the American familiar. The intent here is to call into question local culture and local values, just as the original cosmopolitans—the Cynics of the fourth century BC—questioned, as a point of practice, the cultural mores of their own native Athens (Appiah xiv).

13. Slide: Three Steps

As a pedagogical approach, this combination of methods requires two competing mantras: an invitation to identify (“This text is about you!”) and a warning against over-identifying (“This text was never about you!”). Yet teaching postcolonial literature requires hitting *both* notes until they produce a nervous dissonance—a third note—that depends on the unique acoustics of your particular classroom and the specific readers in it (“Because, this is *also* somehow about you!”).

Each time that I've had the opportunity to teach Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions*, I have been able to discern all three notes of this tripartite pedagogy. Although I've taught the novel many times, I focus here on student responses collected during my first such experience, in a class of thirty-seven students in the spring of 2006. It was their verbal and written responses to *Nervous Conditions* that "urged" and, at moments, necessitated the approach I've since had the luxury to formalize. *Nervous Conditions* represents a "must teach" for me, as well as for colleagues of mine who are, like me, interested in this question: Will Westerners' reading always represent an act roughly analogous to colonization—one that perpetuates the inequalities of an Orientalist worldview? Or can Westerners' confrontation with a foreign text result in genuine identification—the kind predicated on the de-centered cultural loyalties that Appiah's ethic of cosmopolitanism finds possible?

14. SLIDE: Nervous Cover and epigram

Technically a colonial, Western reader himself, the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre was able to discern the central message from his sympathetic reading of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), namely that: "the condition of native is a nervous condition" (20). Dangarembga takes her title and epigraph from this same statement. The irony evident in her use of it is that, in this case, Sartre's argument that subjectivity is itself a kind of universal nervous condition is complicated by Fanon's insistence on the historicized colonial Subject. For the latter, the conditions of selfhood cannot be understood without attending to the constitutive "nervous conditions" of colonialism.

15. SLIDE: Nervous Conditions of Rhodesia, turned Zimbabwe

16. SLIDE: Dangarembga's BIO

Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in 1959 in British Rhodesia, but from ages two to six she went to preschool in England, where English became her first language. Back in what had become a falsely or prematurely independent White Rhodesia, free of British rule, but governed by a minority white population of settlers, Dangarembga attended an Anglican mission school in Mutare, where, on her own, she tried to learn her native Shona in an effort to repatriate herself (Veit-Wild 331). Later, as a graduate of a private American convent school in Rhodesia, she was admitted to “Uni” back in Cambridge, where she spent three years studying medicine until, according to Flora Veit-Wild, “feeling out of place in British middle class society, [Dangarembga] abandoned her course and—with Zimbabwe’s independence [imminent]—returned home” (331). Inspired by an atmosphere of heightened self-reflection, cultural revivalism, and nation building, this twenty something author worked in an ad agency, studied psychology at the University of Zimbabwe, wrote her first novel, and joined a drama group for which she wrote three plays (Veit-Wild 331 and Agatucci). After becoming the first Zimbabwean woman novelist published in English (with the aid of the British-based Women’s Press, which released the first edition of *Nervous Conditions* and helped Dangarembga champion her novel at home), she went on to study filmmaking in Berlin (Agatucci). After this final stint as an expatriate, Dangarembga made the decision to raise her two German-born children back in her “native” Zimbabwe, where, as Dangarembga explains in an interview included in the Seal Press edition of the novel, “life is difficult [. . .] but my soul breathes more freely here” (208). Back in Zimbabwe, she wrote the story for *Neria*, which in 1992 became the highest grossing

film in the country's history (para 3 LitWeb). She is the author of a sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, the 2007 *Book of Not*, and several award winning films, including the recent "I Want a Wedding Dress."

Now that you know something about this globe-trotting postcolonial author, what can my working-class students, most of whom have never left the United States, possibly have in common with this author and her work? Because identification was my pedagogical aim ("This is about you!"), I decided that a more self-conscious approach to my students' biographies was in order, one that would move them past the affective fallacy ("This character made me feel x or y"), toward structural insights about their own cultural conditions writ large. To my thinking, the problem of students exoticizing the geographic or temporal Other or, worse yet, just flat out dismissing "people over there" or "people back then" represents a more immediate and, in this sense, practical, pedagogical problem than that posed by essentializing, liberalizing, or domesticating a text—the issues that literary critics most often fret over. Strategically, I encourage the over-psychologizing, book-clutching reading—"She's just like me!"—as an initial reading, in order to establish high stakes of engagement.

This initiative to promote increased identification with both the author of this novel and her chief protagonists – the young Tambu, and her anglicized cousin Nyasha -- took the form of an in-class survey, which asked students to delineate some of their cultural influences and ideological alliances. We learned from studying one another's autobiographical surveys that, sitting next to us in our homogenous-looking class, were, among others:

A self-named, Pro-life, feminist, atheist Jew;

A Venezuelan-born, Mandarin-speaking Chinese Christian;

A Hebrew-speaking, Russian CapeVerdian;

A Portuguese-speaking, Swedish American, who is fluent in American sign language;

THE I D E N T I F I C A T I O N P H A S E : U N P A C K E D

A practice long valued in Women’s Studies classrooms, but looked down on in higher-minded and more discipline-specific literature courses—attention to personal experience or biography—is, I believe, an effective first nod at students’ reading experience. It prevents instructors from discounting the “small world” ways in which students enter a text and, perhaps more important, in the spirit of reader response theory, it reveals local or shared patterns of identification among readers. If a reader’s biography is allowed to be the “other” text being read or reread, interpreted or reinterpreted, in the classroom, students learn to think structurally—to see themselves consenting to “we-based” behaviors that constitute membership in a given family or community. [This insight is particularly valuable for American students who see themselves, first and foremost as an individual – of course their endorsement of the creed of individualism is a “we” behavior in and of itself].

On the second day of teaching *Nervous Conditions*, I encourage this process by passing out a prompt titled “Education, It’s a Family Affair.” It asks students to describe their own educational biographies across three generations. The prompt reads as follows:

What role has education played in your family? How much education did your grandparents have, for example, as compared to your parents, or to you? As you reflect on this intergenerational portrait, stop and make distinctions. Are some forms of education more valued in your family than others? Are some kinds of education viewed as

suspicious, a waste of resources, or a genuine threat? Can you see evidence in your family that education produces progress? You don't have to answer all of these questions; instead, respond to the issues you think are most relevant to your particular family history.

Education as the bridge topic...

Handout: Plot summary of *Nervous*

The story of *Nervous Conditions* is told from the perspective of Tambudzai, a young Shona girl living in a small village in Rhodesia, in the 1960's, whose own story begins with the death of her brother, Nhamo.

Nhamo is sent to live with his uncle (Babamukuru), a strict disciplinarian, and aunt (Maiguru), so that he may be educated by a mission school in the local city and later provide his family with economic support. He falls ill, however, with a severe case of the mumps, and dies suddenly, leaving his parents without a son to support them. Tambudzai, who goes by the nickname "Tambu", is also keen to be educated, so much so that she works on her own mealie, or corn, crop in an effort to pay her school fees. An elderly white lady takes pity on her and parts with ten pounds, so Tambu is able to return to the school that her father cannot, and will not, pay for.

The narrative's opening sentence is famously chilling. Tambu declares: "I was not sorry when my brother died." Her reasons, many and varied, but mostly to do with her brother's arrogance and interference — at one point, he steals her maize, in order to foil her efforts to go to school. In a twist of fate, Tambu's uncle argues for her to go to the mission school after the death of her brother, for there are no other sons available.

The novel then shifts to Tambu's observations of the conflicts between her cousin, Nyasha, who was raised primarily in England and has no foundation of Zimbabwean culture, and her uncle, who is steeped in such tradition. Nyasha and her father spar with increasing frequency over her westernized behaviors and the independent way that she talks to him. Nyasha eventually develops an eating disorder, which is tied strongly to her struggle to deal with the conflict between English and Shona society. Tambu, for her part, advances to the most prestigious boarding school in the country, but at a cost: she experiences a kind of apartheid style segregation there, where she and six other token black students, are not allowed to sleep in the same dormitory room as white students. While she craved an education, the wiser, older narrator of the novel hints that the best use she can make of her colonial education is to use the critical thinking skills she's learned to nervously QUESTION the ideological content of that same education. Has she been taught to OTHER herself and to unlearn her past? The novel leaves the reader with these uneasy, i.e. nervous questions, which they are meant to bring to bear on their OWN education.

In what follows, I share some of the results of my in-class survey by juxtaposing a series of “small world” connections between the novel’s plot and my students’ lives. This exercise inspired what might be called a “local reading.” My students saw in a young Rhodesian girl’s pursuit of an education something of their own efforts at self-determination and economic self-sufficiency.

The first batch of correspondences had to do with poverty, or what some call “the culture of poverty,” including observations about the feminization of certain kinds of labor and the emasculating effects of unemployment. As Tambu’s father, Jeremiah, drinks up the family’s expendable income, including potential money for school fees, her mother Mainini, whose name in Shona means “Little Mother,” works in the garden to compensate (Agatucci). Back in the Dominican Republic, Jasmin’s grandparents “didn’t have enough crops to be able to survive and send their children to school,” while here in the States, Cindy’s mother’s beauty salon kept food on the table when her father was laid off again.

The next set of correspondences had to do with a lack of access to education, especially for women and girls, which, for my students, often proved to be only one or two generations removed. If I can editorialize for a moment, it is a rookie mistake of a lot of novice readers of foreign texts to lock in a relationship between a clearly superior, first-world American present, and an inferior, “backward” foreign country, such as the Rhodesia of Tambu’s youth. However, the novel is set in the 1960’s, and any *honest* assessment of gender and race relations in 1960’s America will produce unexpected similarities like the ones I about to chronicle.

In the novel, Tambu decides that she desperately wants an education, but she comes up against a prejudice held by her family that education

is wasted on girls. Her brother taunts her:

“You can’t study [. . .]”

“Why not?” she counters.

“It’s the same everywhere. Because you are a girl.” (21)

Maria writes: “My mother had to stop going to school after she finished the sixth grade, so her brother could go.”

My student Rebecca confesses: “My grandfather didn’t believe in educating girls, so my mom ran away from home and put herself through college!”

In the novel, a determined Tambu decides that she is going to plant her own field of corn and sell her “mealies,” or cobs, at market to raise her own school fees. My students, Erin and Jenna, both admit that their families have refused to support them with tuition fees, not exactly because they can’t, which is the case for a good many students, but because they won’t. For some of my students, albeit a relative minority, education as a sound investment doesn’t “sell well” at the dinner table. Like Tambu’s patch of corn, that’s an investment that they’re going to have to raise on their own.

It is no surprise that, as Americans with these personal stories in tow, my students think, one-third of the way into the novel, that they are reading a book that is a liberal, feminist (which is to say, a liberal, individualist), “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” narrative—what Tambu describes on the first page of the story as “her escape.” Yet, by the end of the novel, the mature Tambu, who is retelling her tale, comes to doubt the very logic of “escape.” “Escape from what?” the novel implicitly

asks. Everything she has been? We as readers come to see that the theme of “escape” glamorizes displacement and loss while ignoring the problem: Escape to where? The reader is forced to ask: “Are the increasingly colonized spaces Tambu finds Herself, as she moves from the homestead to the mission to Sacred Heart boarding school, truly liberating?”

Yet, with all of this heady optimism in the classroom, inspired by what appears to be cross-cultural, empirical evidence that education increases autonomy, especially female autonomy, the drum beat of liberal individualism threatens to drown out what makes autonomy itself a “nervous condition,” for Tambu and for ourselves. Taken on its own terms, liberalism represents its own nervous condition when it comes to the larger prospect of social change, which requires the progress of groups, not individuals.

Pedagogically speaking, what kind of opportunity do these “small world” connections make manifest? The purpose of indulging in this kind of overidentification—which makes the litmus test of good literature “This is true because I find evidence of the same phenomenon in *my world*”—is to demystify the “Other,” ultimately by converting differences into similarities. Once this is accomplished, the challenge becomes to keep alive, through the rigors of comparative thinking, the differences that help us recognize similarities in contradistinction to the problematic and popular notion of “universal experience,” which substitutes sameness where likenesses merit further analysis.

Here, the overlap of likenesses between reader and character exists in that heady experience of “coming into oneself” as an adolescent, which Gallagher analyzes.

These likenesses lend Tambu an individuality or, put more intimately, an interiority that a “native” reader may not automatically grant the foreign Other. However, in the case of the irrepressible Tambu, the cultural stakes are higher than for the average American reader, *and the differences* between character and reader, it can be argued, do the real teaching.

As Gallagher points out, not all critics approve of full-blown identification on the part of student readers as a desirable pedagogical goal. In a personal email to Gallagher, dated May 9, 1996, Australian critic Gareth Griffiths warns, “picking African texts for undergraduate courses because they mirror our students’ concerns or have ‘appeal’ is a potentially dangerous exercise. In many ways, the act of confronting a text which is resistant, intangible and even difficult is what the process of teaching cultural difference is all about” (qtd. in Gallagher 64). Gallagher, however, amends Griffiths’s valorization of the alienation effect (the text that won’t be colonized!) by arguing that “if difficult difference is all that readers ever encounter, the wall of otherness will remain intransigent” (63).

Indeed, for difference to produce that third space, that site of local ironies and local resistance that Homi Bhabha describes in *The Location of Culture*, as being so necessary, identification represents an indispensable first step for “foreign” readers, reading what is, for them, foreign literature. As critic, Satya Mohanty argues, an overly exclusive focus on difference means that “there is simply no need to worry about the other culture’s views; they provide no reason to make us question our own views or principles” (112). Put differently, difference alone is not inherently valuable: our task is to isolate *significant* differences, knowing that, for better or worse, the terms of significance, as with other examples of signification,

ultimately rest with the reader.

II. Now that we've discussed step one, discovering that this foreign text "is about you!" **step two:** counters by reminding us non-native readers, in a harsh tone: "This was never about you!" As a text that inspires both responses, *Nervous Conditions* is a "must teach" in this regard, because it begins by inspiring immediate identification, especially with young "coming-of-age" readers, only to un-nerve that identification with the conditions unique to the colonized subjects of Rhodesia. Far from being an excuse for passive reading, "This was never about you!" calls students to attend to a material world that is not their own, which means caring enough "to learn it" or – starting with those polysyllabic African names-- , just as children do in every culture, to become a temporary apprentice of this vast adult world, one informed by shared memory and what can literally be understood as *common sense*.

As early as Chapter One, *Nervous Conditions* asks students to entertain foreign conditions and a foreign history. In step with Dangarembga's child narrator, they learn to discern the political realities of colonial occupation through the unconventional tale narrated by her grandmother—a "History," Tambu tells us, "that could not be found in textbooks" (17). While working by Tambu's side in the fields, her paternal grandmother, or Mbuya, describes the forced redistribution of land under the homestead system by using an allegory that exposes British colonialism as a kind of wizardry.⁴ She recalls when the "wizards [. . .] came from the south and forced the people from the land; on donkey, on foot, on horse, on ox-cart [. . .until] at last the people came upon the grey, sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it [. . . and] there they built a home" (18). Her tale explains the kind of

debtors' slavery produced by unfair sharecropping practices, as in the case of her husband, Tambu's grandfather, who, "lured by the wizards' whispers of riches and luxury and driven by the harshness of the homestead, [had taken] himself and his family to one of the wizards' farms [. . .] only to find that they had been enticed into slavery" (18). Mbuya's history lesson alludes to colonial trade monopolies on natural resources, most notably the infamous diamond mines to the south, which seduced away many a man, including her husband. His choice proved to be an eviction notice for his wife and children, who, exiled from the sharecropper's land, returned to the barren homestead, now home to a displaced and orphaned generation. As defiant as it sounds in tone toward the end, Grandmother's tale makes real how compulsory Christianity and mandatory English represented the dual price of a mission education and its promise of upward mobility. She relates how she brought her firstborn son, "who was nine years old [and] wearing a loin cloth, to the mission, where the holy wizards took him in" (19). "They set him to work in their farm by day," she explains, but "by night he was educated in their wizardry," for, as Tambu recounts, she "had begged them to prepare him for life in their world" (19).

Ultimately, if taught to full effect, the foreign history in the novel of the colonization of Rhodesia has the ability to bring the reader back "home," so to speak, to a place of local ambivalence, for the discerning ear will hear in the history just sketched some nervous echoes with what it means to be a Native American inhabiting the displaced lands of the reservations system; or what it means to participate in a given market, to buy a diamond for example; or what it means simply to wake up each day a native speaker of English in a global economy in which that oral skill holds considerable

currency. To its credit, *Nervous Conditions* has the potential to generate in a class of thirty-seven American college students the kind of ambivalence that Homi Bhabha defines in *The Location of Culture* as an opened-up site of resistance, a place in which resistance manifests itself in the form of alternatives, rather than in neat oppositions (173). Is this, perhaps, what we mean by inspiring our students to be more “worldly”? If all goes according to plan, the chorus—“This is about you!” and “This was never about you!”—converts in the classroom into what I argued earlier ought to be the third mode of interpretation—“This is also about you!” This third posture toward foreign texts complicates the binary “to identify or not” by asking the following instead: Identification to what end? Toward what uses or abuses?

III. “THIS WAS NEVER (JUST) ABOUT YOU! ” : MODELING COMPARATIVE THINKING

Cultural comparison in a literature course is not the broad anthropological comparison of culture A to culture B. Rather, the urge to compare is driven by plot: each reader compares choices made *within* a culture by various characters. In practice, difference makes itself significant by combining cultural difference with individual difference. What commends Bruce Goebel’s study of the reading process in “Imagining Difference: Textual Power and the Transgression of the Self” is that he credits readers with a certain “native” complexity that helps them navigate the invitation to identify with a series of fictional characters. Goebel advocates “teaching students to imaginatively transgress their own social positions” (66). To do this, “they must know their own collective value systems in the context of other value systems” (66).

In other words, they must have some practice at cultural comparison. However, Goebel continues, “in order to acquire such knowledge, they must [also] be able to distance themselves from themselves by imagining what it would be like to be different from what they are” (66). It seems evident that this thought experiment is uniquely suited to literature, in particular to prose fiction, in response to which a reader may take turns trying on alternative subject positions. Yet, the collective, multivocal quality of a novel like *Nervous Conditions* reminds us that no single identification, or 1:1 substitution, will satisfy. Instead, we are called, in Goebel’s term, “to distance” ourselves from ourselves, long enough to inhabit the alternatives performed by contrasting characters, each with his or her own circumscribed agency, memorable temperament, and historical contradictions to live out. In effect, the warning “This was never about you!” (or “This was never *just* about you!”) pertains to the characters as well, as the contrasts between Tambu and her cousin, Nyasha, bear out.

One-third of the way into the novel, *Nervous Conditions* complicates the heightened identification between the young, student reader and Tambu by shifting to the format of a split protagonist. Suddenly, American or British readers discover that they have much more in common with the anglicized Nyasha than with the more traditional Tambu, as we discern is the case for the twice-repatriated Dangarembga herself.

In practice, Tambu and Nyasha’s friendship – their intimacy-- suggests a different politics of identification: a call to identify with two characters simultaneously, while keeping their differences in full view. Dangarembga’s novel teaches us that not all black Rhodesian

teenage girls are alike—growing up, as they are, in the midst of both an internal *and* external civil war. As we have seen, the cost of Tambu’s education, or her escape, is best measured by her anglicized cousin, Nyasha, who warns Tambu against what Aegerter calls “internalizing colonial perspectives that render everything ‘native’ unworthy” (236). Nyasha’s privileged opportunities, namely the five formative years that she spent in England perfecting her English and forgetting her Shona, have translated her into a new self that does not belong on either continent. Nyasha explains:

“We shouldn’t have gone [to England . . . our] parents ought to have packed us off home [. . .] Maybe that would have been best. For them at least, because now they’re stuck with hybrids for children. And they don’t like it [. . .] It offends them. They think we do it on purpose [. . .But] I can’t help having been there and grown into the me that has been there. But it offends them— I offend them.” (78)

Nyasha’s not at home in her own clothes, including the imported mini she wears when she first reunites with her cousins. Nor is she at home in her voice; her accent isolates her socially because she is perceived as a snob who is affecting social airs. Nor is she at home in her skin, which is why she decides to take autonomy over the only country she has—her own female, bulimic body—by trying to kill herself from the inside out. In the novel, Nyasha is both teacher and victim. An educator in her own right, she teaches Tambu and the reader to think structurally, to examine the conditions that sponsor individual choices, including her own choice to throw up her dinner, night after night.

Nyasha first explains her self-destructive behavior by analyzing her relationship to patriarchal authority writ large, but also localized, of course, in her own father,

Babamukuru, whose name translates literally as “great father” (Agatucci). She confesses to Tambu:

[. . .] all that fuss over a plate of food [. . .] but it’s more than that really, more than just food. That’s how it comes out, but really it’s all the things about boys and men and being decent and indecent and good and bad [. . .] Sometimes I look at things from his point of view, you know what I mean, traditions and expectations and authority, that sort of thing, and I can see what he means and I try to be [. . .] obedient [. . .] But then I start thinking that he ought to look at things from my point of view and be considerate and patient with me, so I start fighting back and off we go again [. . .] (190)

Later, Nyasha expands her own structural understanding of the underlying conditions of her illness, when, confirming Fanon’s findings, she indicts colonialism as the ultimate nervous condition, because it acts on father and daughter, parents and children, alike. In the following passage, a weakened Nyasha slides from a rant against “them” (“They did this to me!”), wherein “they” refers to her parents, into a theory that implicates another “they”—colonial Rhodesians, including the missionaries who raised her father:

They did it to [my parents] too. You know they did [. . .] To both of them, but especially to him, they put him through it all. But it’s not his fault, he’s good. Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. “He’s a good boy, a good munt [. . .] Why do they do it, Tambu [. . .] to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they’ve done? They’ve taken us away [. . .] they’ve deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. (200)

Here, Nyasha’s interrogation of the emasculating effects of colonialism offers

just one example of why Gallagher includes Dangarembga's popular novel in her analysis of what she calls "pedagogical canons." These are booklists that are shaped not so much by the conventions of literary history or by the tracing of a linear tradition as by the needs of issue-driven courses like mine, where pet issues produce pet texts. "Put simply," Gallagher argues, "*Nervous Conditions* is highly teachable. Put most skeptically, it is politically correct" (61). On the face of it, my own students *are* politically correct in that they self-consciously choose the noun "woman" over "lady" and agree with the sophisticated linguistic logic of identity politics, accepting that the meaning of the "n" word relies entirely on *who* is using it. So, when we come across a passage such as the one previously cited, in which Nyasha adopts the subject position of a racist, colonial Rhodesian, the students can hear the power invested in the "m" word, "munt," even without knowing its etymology or intended meaning. For what is political correctness, if I can offer a defense, but a theory arguing that language has phenomenal constitutive powers, such that names and name-calling become serious business for a culture as a whole? Of course, Gallagher is referring to the novel's political correctness as a limiting feature, something that makes it predictable or makes us skeptical about the originality of its political insights. According to this received definition, political correctness infers pat formulas or easy, self-flattering conclusions. Yet the political dance that *Nervous Conditions* requires of its readers is no easy jig. The novel asks that we balance liberal feminism—especially its dismissal of a patriarchal past—with a postcolonial critique. The latter honors traditional culture and resists the import of white women's feminism, seeing it as a poor fit for third-world women or, worse, as neocolonial pressure.