Thinking Globally, Teaching Locally, the Nervous Conditions of Cross-Cultural Literacy

Lisa Eck

Framingham State University, leck@framingham.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.framingham.edu/eng_facpub

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons at Framingham State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Framingham State University. For more information, please contact vgonzalez@framingham.edu.
Thinking Globally, Teaching Locally: The “Nervous Conditions” of Cross-Cultural Literacy

Lisa Eck

The foreignness of foreigners, the strangeness of strangers: “these things,” Kwame Appiah reminds us, “are real enough” (xxi). Yet, as he goes on to argue in Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers, the significance of 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). What happens with this predicament of intractable cultural difference in the world literature classroom—where, on any given partly cloudy Tuesday, a group of “native” readers are invited to trespass onto foreign literary soil? Take my small state college’s Global Perspectives in Literature, regularly offered as a recommended course for future teachers and also chosen by students of multiple majors looking to fulfill a diversity requirement.

“Thinking globally, but teaching locally,”¹ my pedagogical approach in this course, as in other 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 epistemological 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

Lisa Eck is assistant professor of world literature at Framingham State College in Framingham, Massachusetts, where she teaches courses on postcolonial Anglophone fiction. Her recent essays include a collaborative study of Jeanette Winterson and Michael Ondaatje (for the 2007 Hampton Press volume Collaborating, Literature and Composition) and an analysis of Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran (for the forthcoming collection Individualism: The Cultural Logic of Modernity).

College English, Volume 70, Number 6, July 2008
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). 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 overidentifying (“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 four times, I focus here on my first such experience, in a class of thirty-seven students in the spring of 2004. 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 of a foreign text result in genuine identification—the kind predicated on the de-centered cultural loyalties that Appiah’s ethic of cosmopolitanism finds possible?

Technically a colonial, Western reader himself, Jean-Paul Sartre was able to discern from his sympathetic reading of Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth (1963) that, as Fanon puts it, “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. Yet Sartre’s and Fanon’s positions are not as divergent as they might appear. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre describes our shared epistemological condition as a scandalous form of isolation, or “the reef of solipsism” (223). From this reef, subjects are certain only of their status as subject. They appear trapped in their own solipsism, experiencing others simply as objects of perception—a circumstance that makes their respective subjectivities the occasion for deep, existential doubt. But the Other, Sartre reminds us, is no passive object. The Other gives subjects their outside, their self-consciousness, the self-knowledge produced by “the look” or gaze of another. The result is the nervous knowledge that Fanon exposes in Black Skin, White Masks, namely that a person is actually constituted from without—a process
that internalized oppression often masks. Thus, Sartre's abstract theory of a universal subjectivity and shared epistemology can also be seen as housing a concrete and useful politics. It is the Other, Sartre urges, who saves us from the possibility of real solipsism, because the alterity we witness in others must also delimit each and every one of us (257). On closer inspection, we are, in all humility, the Other's Other. Applied to the task of teaching, Sartre's warning against the traps of solipsism translates into a useful warning for students against self-absorbed or self-indulgent readings. His concept of “the look” plays out in discursive terms as the sensation students often have that a foreign text, such as Nervous Conditions, is looking back at them, constituting their Western outsiders, with a gaze they’ve never experienced before.

This combination of Sartre's philosophy, Fanon's politics, and Dangarembga's fiction helped me articulate the three teaching slogans that have changed the way I teach postcolonial texts. “This is about you!” predicts that, with the philosopher's help, students will discover examples of our common “nervous” condition—the human condition. “This was never about you!” reminds students to take seriously the historian's imperative: to look for examples of subjects' radical historicity. The novelist's activist slogan, “This is also about you!” predicts that the dialogic form of the novel will compel students to make cultural comparisons that result in nuanced forms of identification. Understood as a politics of reading, slogan number one—“This is about you!”—aims to deconstruct a rigid binary between reader and text, one that places Western readers in a state of perpetual cultural illiteracy based on their ideological place of origin. However, if understood progressively, the result of the second and third slogans—“This was never about you!” and “This is also about you!”—is a politics of reading that ultimately steers clear of a liberalism that puts too high a premium on universal experience, by allowing the reader to experience the seduction of overidentification, only to discover the need for balance. For its part, Dangarembga's novel deliberately puts to the test the liberal individualism promoted by Western “first wave” feminism, along with the related issue of liberalism’s faith in linear progress, implicit in the form of the bildungsroman.

More aptly read as both a bildungsroman and an antibildungsroman, Nervous Conditions is a text chronically conflicted about the developmental assumptions imbedded in this imported form—the European novel of education, or, more loosely, the novel of “formation.” While tracing the trajectory of the protagonist's, Tambudzai's, coming of age in the tradition of the unique, autonomous, rational, self-made individual, speaking to us in none other than the first person, the novel actively subverts the assumption that education is somehow a universal act of becoming, brought about by exposure to a monolithic “body of knowledge” that imports and exports well.
“Negotiating Individual Biography and Historical Contextuality”: Teaching in Opposite Directions

On day one of my teaching of the novel, a charged question animates our discussion: “Given the experiences of Dangarembga and of her protagonist, who will you become as a result of your education?” At Framingham State College, 90 percent of the students are local, some with strong regional accents that mark them as “natives.” Perhaps I inadvertently disempower my students with an increased awareness of their own provinciality by emphasizing the well-traveled, expatriate or repatriated authors in the course, such as Dangarembga. Yet, in the interest of estranging the familiar—indeed, what does a typical life look like in diaspora?—I rehearse Dangarembga’s biography as follows. 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 twentysomething 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).

Ultimately, this exercise at mapping the spatial coordinates of postcolonial subjects teaches students to historicize the voices they read, with the intention that they learn to acknowledge the large and small historical forces that circumscribe their own choices and utterances. My students observed how, contrary to the linear logic of a routine biography, various times (precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial) can
coexist for postcolonial subjects such as Dangarembga in an unmapped, often uncertain present. The surprise result of this crash course in postmodern determinism, or radical historicity, was that, in that first class, many students began to uncover the complex, sometimes wondrous, sometimes nervous conditions of their own identities.

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 cultural conditions writ large. This initiative 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

A self-named, Pro-life, feminist, atheist Jew;
A Venezuelan-born, Mandarin-speaking Chinese Christian;
A Hebrew-speaking, Russian Cape Verdian;
A Portuguese-speaking, Swedish American, who is fluent in American sign language;
and an Italian American agnostic Army brat . . . to name a few.

Perhaps my students’ biographies can, after all, compete with the experiences of a proudly returned, twentysomething, feminist, postcolonial, Shona-reviving, textbook editing, movie-making, Anglophone author like Dangarembga, or maybe not. Whichever the case, I am aware that, pedagogically speaking, this consciousness-raising exercise is partially flawed. To be sure, it has the merit of drawing out local examples of hybridity (“This is about you!”) But in my effort to make the analogy that the postmodern American college student occupies as many hybrid subject positions as the postcolonial Anglophone authors I teach, I risk sacrificing significant global differences in the interest of insisting on an ethic of identification. This is why the “identification phase,” I argue, should be only a provisional stage when teaching a foreign text to “native” readers.

The dialectic repeats “This is about you!” and “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, 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. 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. Mbuya 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 instead asking the following: Identification to what end? Toward what uses or abuses?

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 invite the overspsychologizing, book-clutching reading—“She’s just like me!”—as an initial reading, in order to establish high stakes of engagement. Over the last several years, Nervous Conditions has inspired identification in my students like no other text we’ve read. Identification of this variety begins in the personal realm, as a kind of eye to eye (or, literally, I to I) friendship between two individuals, but there is no reason that it needs to stop there, stuck in a sentimentalized place or resigned to the shrine of liberal individualism, wherein universal subjects may meet and greet. For Lindsay Aegerter, the merit of studying Dangarembga’s main characters, Tambu and her anglicized cousin Nyasha, is that “their voices are both individual and collective; they negotiate both individual biography and historical contextuality and community” (23). When considered as a pedagogical principle, learning to “negotiate individual biography and historical contextuality and community” translates into precisely the effort that I want my student readers to undertake. But this contract requires first that I be willing to invite students’ own individual biographies into the classroom.

**The Identification Phase: Unpacked**

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.

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.

In what follows, I share some of the results of this 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. 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.” 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.
Both Erin and Jenna 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 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.

In the novel, we learn that Tambu’s beleaguered mother, worn into submission by poverty, got pregnant for the first time as a teenager. She married young and took up family life without question, with no stray ambition left over for education. In Shannon’s case, her mother had her in high school and then went on to get her GED, but she never went to college. Instead, she deferred the dream of college onto her daughter.

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 as the story of “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 in truly liberating?” Still, in the function of narrator, Tambu faithfully records, in the first person present, the perceptions of the young, independent girl who sold her mealies and earned her fees and who, as a result of her brother’s unexpected death, is on her way, as his lucky replacement, to the mission school at which her uncle is the Headmaster. Here, in her new school, she expects to neatly escape one self and acquire a new one. She explains:

When I stepped into [my uncle’s] car I was a peasant. You could see that at a glance in my tight, faded frock that immodestly defined my budding breasts, and in my broad-toed feet [. . .] hardened and cracked so that the dirt ground its way in but could not be washed out [. . .] This was the person I was leaving behind. At [my uncle’s] I expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived on the homestead. At [my uncle’s] I would have leisure, be encouraged to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, the creation of consciousness, rather than mere sustenance of the body. (58–59)

Susan VanZanten Gallagher describes the broad-based identification that Tambu’s efforts at transformation inspires in her typical student, for whom the “creation of consciousness” and a brand-new, physical self are inextricably linked. She writes:

The details of Tambu’s physical transformation graphically depict the realities of African rural life, but the conjunction of a new intellectual identity with a transformed physical body is similarly enacted by American first-year students who pierce parts of
their body and dye their hair various vivid hues. Tambu’s struggle to define herself in terms of both her family and her education, her traditional upbringing and the new world opened up by education, makes her accessible to American college students, even while many of the cultural practices and assumptions that she describes remain unremittingly different, foreign, or other. (63–64)

Although Gallagher’s observations treat the self-conscious performance of new identities by “American first-year students,” thus stressing the common issue of age or “coming of age” as the connection between Dangarembga’s protagonist and her own students, she doesn’t comment on how class affects her students’ ability to identify with Tambu’s journey of “becoming.” Just as Tambu tries to erase her origins or to “other” her past effectively by imagining herself becoming someone “who could not have been bred, could not [even] have survived on the homestead” (59), a good many of my students, like Tambu, are explicit about wanting to leave not just an individual past, but a specific familial past, behind them, particularly one circumscribed by poverty. In this regard, their view of transformation differs radically from that of the other, middle-class students in the class.

In the process of narrating their own stories, my working-class students labored in the spring of 2004 to provide evidence for the same equation on which Tambu has staked her identity—namely, the unexamined, middle-class assumption that education does produce progress. Angela reports: “My sister is making more money than my father; she has only been at her job for two years, while he has been there for over twenty.” Reflecting a similar judgment, Maggie writes: “Not everyone in my family has gone to college, but the ones who have definitely show progress. They are the ones with houses and families. The others who haven’t gone to college still live at home or have an apartment.”

Like Tambu’s Aunt Lucia, who enters the first grade as an adult, as determined and rebellious as Tambu to acquire an education, many of my students have female family members who are currently in school. Their own histories reveal a female appetite for education that crosses generations. Rachel explains: “My grandmother, after her tenth child turned eleven, went back to school [. . .].” “One of my most vivid memories as a child,” recalls Jessica, “is the night my mother came home from night school with her degree.” With similar pride, Sara boasts: “My mother, the “over-achiever” as we call her, just graduated from Lesley College.”

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 irrepresible 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. Readers of Dangarembga learn that, contrary to American popular belief, individualism does not always serve Tambu well. As Aegerter argues: “despite some remorse at leaving her mother [on the homestead], at this point in her young life Tambu is consumed with self—a position that threatens the fabric of her African identity as it approximates a more Western ideal of individualism” (236). Aegerter warns that willful misreadings on the part of American readers may distort the politics of Dangarembga’s novel and silence its alternatives by effectively censoring a model of selfhood that must answer to community to survive. More specifically, she warns that “although Tambudzai strives for the autonomy her father’s family denies her, an exclusive focus on her individuality negates the communal ethic of her family and culture and risks embracing Western mores that privilege the individual over her community” (235). To the consternation of most critics, including Aegerter, who interrogate individualism as an ideological import and nothing more, Dangarembga never really accounts for the origins of Tambu’s fierce appetite for autonomy or for her “native” sense of being entitled to an education. Minimized or demonized by critics such as Biman Basu, the novel’s insistence on “deploy[ing] the category of transcendent consciousness,” (7) or what in practice translates as Tambu’s self-awareness, represents the very trait that makes her heroic to student readers and suspect to postcolonial critics.

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 Bhabha describes, identification represents an indispensable first step for “foreign” readers, reading what is, for them, foreign literature. As 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.

“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. And yet, by way of underscoring the transgressive possibilities that identification generates for authors and readers alike, it is possible that Dangarembga learned about her hybrid, anglicized self more by writing, or imagining, the native Tambu than via the more autobiographical Nyasha.

As Aegerter demonstrates, once Tambu establishes her life at the mission, it is virtually impossible to read these characters in any way other than in tandem. “Although Tambudzai and Nyasha are ‘whole’ as individuals,” concedes Aegerter, “it is only in their friendship that their greatest fullness and integrity of identity are experienced” (234). Ultimately, their friendship operates as a political metaphor by healing “the rupture between rural and urban Africa” (Aegerter 234), but it can also, for our purposes, be understood to traverse a different political divide—that between “native characters,” with competing claims of authenticity, and foreign readers. Tambu and Nyasha’s intimacy suggests a different politics of identification: a call to identify with two characters simultaneously, while keeping their differences in full view. At the risk of sounding corny, the possibilities of friendship as a pedagogical model lend themselves to a closer examination of the more literary issue: the friend as Other is someone who can read you, and reread you, making you feel culturally legible, socially malleable, and psychologically singular all at once.

Dangarembga’s novel insists that, just as not all black Rhodesian teenage girls are alike—growing up in the midst of an internal and external civil war—so all readers are not alike, including American college students. It is significant that what divides Tambu and Nyasha is their reading preferences. In her life at the mission, Tambu inherits Nyasha’s library of British literary and social classics, texts that the “returned” and politicized Nyasha has sworn off. Tambu narrates the plot of her own bildungsroman in the reading that she does outside of the mission’s classrooms:

Most of [my education] did not come from the lessons they taught at school but from Nyasha’s various and extensive library. I read everything from Enid Blyton to the Brontë 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. (93)

Clearly, Dangarembga’s irony is intentional, given how the older Tambu narrates the younger Tambu’s self-absorption, her heady but naive focus on authoring herself in the tradition of the rational, autonomous, self-made individual who is some-
how able to bring reason and desire, theory and practice, together in the service of a harmonious, centered whole. Yet who could deny any young girl the thrill of identifying or overidentifying with what, we guess, is Brontë’s Jane Eyre? Although not explicit, the intertextual presence of Jane Eyre—a liberal, individualist heroine if there ever was one—produces exciting, which is to say, “nervous” possibilities for interpreting this phase in Tambu’s development. As Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* dramatizes, Jane’s liberation is contingent on being on the right side of the politics of Empire. So too, in the pursuit of an education, Tambu sides with the colonizers by taking advantage of the financial resources of colonial donors, from the high-minded charity lady, Doris, who buys all of her corncobs, or mealies, at market with no intention of eating them; to the Anglican Church’s sponsorship at the Mission School, secured by her uncle; to, finally, her scholarship at an elite convent school, Sacred Heart, which she earned by trusting in the equation that a colonial education promised “a place in which reason and inclination were not at odds” (93). Ultimately, Tambu will come to question her gratitude to Enid Blyton and Charlotte Brontë. But, in the meantime, as Rahul Krishna Gairola reminds us, the gratitude that Tambu feels is real, as it is for other colonized speakers of English who are offered a chance at a much coveted education. In a colonial economy, “being able to speak English constitutes the utterance of intelligence—both within and outside of the colonized country” (para 5). Put differently, if a young girl’s first experience of a thinking, articulate, intelligent self is sounded out in English, by what method can she learn to separate her gratitude from its apparent source? As we see with Nyasha’s “rebellion” against her own elite, anglicized education, perhaps the ultimate proof of being educated is to turn that education on itself.

In the spirit of demystifying colonial texts, Nyasha’s early response to Tambu’s taste in reading is that she’s “reading too many fairytales” (93). In contrast, Tambu tells us, Nyasha “preferred reality. She was going through a historical phase. She read a lot of books that were about real people, real peoples and their sufferings” (93). This is the wish I have for my students: namely, that, at this point in their education, they follow Nyasha’s lead and go past the imaginative work of identification, entering their own “historical phase.”

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.

“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.

Thinking structurally functions both as a method of interpretation and a measure of maturity— proof of the “coming of age” that the bildungsroman has promised. In the following passage, Tambu credits Nyasha with having taught her how to think:

Nyasha was something unique and necessary for me. I did not like to spend too long without talking to her about the things that worried me because she would, I knew, pluck out the heart of the problem with her multi-directional mind and present it to me in ways that made sense, but not only that, in ways that implied that problems existed not only to be worried over but to extend us in our search for solutions. (151)

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” (Agatuccci). 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 indict 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.

Gallagher goes on to speculate about which ideological opportunities or politically correct concerns are fueling the novel’s popularity and with whom. “Graduate students,” she argues, “may want to teach Dangarembga for feminist reasons, but only a few first-year students taking ‘Introduction to Literature’ will want to read it for this reason” (63). To the contrary, I find that first-wave feminism—of the liberal, individualist variety—has been internalized by my typical student, both male and female, to the extent that the more politically correct notion of a global feminism represents the more difficult concept. Put simply, Nyasha’s eating disorder makes her legible as a victim of Western-style sexism, but her “cure,” we come to understand, needs to be African because, metaphorically speaking, her “nervous condi-
tion" can be pathologically traced back to how her anglicized education makes her illegible in her own home and to the members of her own family.

"This Is Also About You!": Risking Twilight’s Third Note

In the final two days on the novel in my spring 2004 course, my pedagogical aim was to turn the comparative gaze back onto ourselves, in order to think structurally about our own “native” conditions in relationship to those of Others. By day five (of six classes total, or eight contact hours), the nouns on the table—education, home, progress, self-determination—were met with a consistent spirit of critique. Much more urgently than I expected, my students saw the cost of Nyasha’s and Tambu’s education at the hands of the mission schools as a sum of net gains and net losses. They were far more willing and able to critique the notion that education leads to unmitigated progress than I had initially expected, based on the early, reflective essays I have cited earlier. Caroline wrote: “I both agree and disagree with the statement that education produces progress, but [certainly] it’s not the only thing that does.” Or, as Tálita remarked, “in my family, school wasn’t for all us kids.”

Of course, to take on the topic of education, in the classroom, is a heady experience, doing what our narrator Tambu does: turning one’s education on itself. Suddenly, the “cost” of education had become a loaded metaphor. In the novel, Tambu’s mother complains that education has made strangers out of her children. “It’s the English, English,” she laments (184). They have forgotten their native Shona in favor of English, and they have learned to be ashamed of their family’s poverty or, in the case of White Rhodesia in the early 1970s, of the homestead’s increasingly impoverished, or bowdlerized, local traditions. In our final discussions about the novel, my students described a similar contest between the culture of home and the culture of the classroom. They understood that their goal was to become, in part, estranged from a familial past they wanted to displace, or escape—yet at what cost to their local identity?

Education is the bridge topic between Dangarembga’s American readers and her “foreign” text. But I also spend time trying to establish the dramatic difference in access to education represented by Tambu’s rarified opportunities: first at the mission school and then at the convent school, where she is one of a half dozen token black students chosen from an entire nation whose majority population is black African. Students may not fully understand the pressures produced by Tambu’s conversion to Christianity, which was compulsory for her admission to the Mission School and to her Catholic boarding school. Likewise, they may not always see the similarities between the slow processes of school desegregation in the America of the 1960s versus the Rhodesia of the 1960s. But, perhaps because the differences
between Tambu’s conditions and their own are not always tracked with consistency or accurately qualified, my students were able to make that third and final ironic turn: “This is also about me.” They asked each other: “Do you think we have reliable access to education? Are our schools and institutions of higher learning truly desegregated? Several asked themselves: “When I went to Catholic school as part of a school choice program, was that a genuine choice?”

After I taught Nervous Conditions the first time, it became my turn to examine a local value of mine and reverse the gaze onto my own teaching. I learned that the rigors of a liberal arts education, perhaps my most familiar and motivating value, represented a nervous condition for some of my students. In turn, my students were busy teaching me about the value of the individual, the parochial, and the local, as indispensable parts of a global curriculum. In other words, I learned that the study of “over there” requires a more attentive approach to “right here,” including what Edward Said calls for in the introduction to Orientalism: a critical examination of ways in which I, myself, reproduce the Orientalist binary of “here versus there” in my teaching and scholarship.7 The corrective, of course, is to forego the stark black/white order of “daylight” in order “to interpret more in twilight,” as Bhaba urged, shortly after the Los Angeles riots (233). In doing so, Bhaba continues, we “make ourselves part of the act[,] we have to interpret[,] we have to project more,” that is, until “the thing itself in twilight challenges us to be aware of how we are projecting ourselves onto the event itself” (233).

A future lesson plan could include, for example, using Nervous Conditions as a way to approach the “grey” topic of current U.S.-Zimbabwe relations: the contradiction of a country with a literacy rate of 90.5 percent and unemployment at 80 percent (U.S. State Department; Gavin 3); the possible links between the homestead system described in the novel and the violent farm invasions and land seizures that have passed for “land reform” under the Mugabe regime; the politics of Western HIV-aid to southern Africa, and so on (Gavin 7–8). One of the benefits of such a lesson plan would be to draw attention to the limits of personal politics—even the hard-won discoveries of individual students—in order to ask questions about national politics in a postcolonial world that has been made suddenly legible through literature.

Offering up a similar test, Biman Basu argues that the effort in Nervous Conditions to deploy “the category of a transcendent consciousness” or “liberated subjectivity” is ultimately “unconvincing” (7). In contrast, along with Christopher Okonkwo,6 he advocates that the true merit of the novel rests in its “meticulous [. . .] attention to physical space, both geographical and bodily,” which helps readers witness “the process of enculturation as a material process,” especially when Tambu occupies the culturally intermediate space of the Anglican mission (7). As the details
of life both at the homestead and at the mission come into fuller view, the material-
ity that Basu commends has the positive effect of confounding the American reader,
so that, even though this story comes to us in our “native” tongue, its content re-
quires more than personal identification, or people-to-people diplomacy; instead, it
requires structural thinking about forces larger than the self. Basu recommends that
Tambu’s
assertions of awareness may be read as her subjection to a micropolitics of power, as
her subjectification in a process of discipline. If power is apprehended not negatively
as repression, prohibition, or objectification but positively as producing subjects, the
narrator’s rhetoric of consciousness signals this subjectification and serves to elide the
materiality of her contradictory positions [analogous to Dangarembga’s herself, as a
“transnational intellectual”]. (21)
Basu’s point is a good one: even Tambu’s rebellions are a bit of an import, represent-
ing, as he argues, a positive response to oppression that threatens to make her complicit
with the continued oppression of the majority of black Rhodesians. However, to my
thinking, this is ultimately too pessimistic, or limiting, an interpretation of the pos-
sibilities of education in the novel. As a transnational intellectual, Dangarembga,
like Franz Fanon before her, can use her English, as he used his French, to turn the
tables on her colonizing teachers. In my reading, this turn, this upsetting of the
furniture, should not be read as proof of “false consciousness” or an internalized
“micropolitics of power,” but rather as genuine critique, which we all can learn from,
including the “father” of the notion of “false consciousness,” Sartre himself. Indeed,
in his introduction to The Wretched of the Earth, Sartre describes Fanon’s use of Sartre’s
native French tongue as follows:

[As] an ex-native, [Fanon], French-speaking, bends that language to new require-
ments, makes use of it, and speaks to the colonized only: “Natives of all underdevel-
oped countries, unite!” What a downfall! For the fathers, we alone [the French, and
other colonial powers] were the speakers; the sons no longer even consider us as valid
intermediaries: we are [now] the objects of their speeches. (10)

This second stage, the reversal of the gaze, helps contextualize my classroom slogan,
“This was never about you!” The reversal of the gaze was a necessary step for Sartre,
who marvels at how the colonizers can become the object of the colonized. Yet
Fanon’s own process of becoming “a native intellectual,” as described in his chapter
“On National Culture,” goes further than Sartre’s inversion,8 to include a sequence
of three notes that closely resemble Tambu’s intellectual journey, as well as the tri-
partite pedagogy that I track with my students. In the first phase (“This is about
you!”), the native intellectual overidentifies with his foreign education, “[throwing]
himself greedily upon Western culture.” In the second phase (“This was never about
you!”), he draws a clear opposition between the “bad habits drawn from the colonial
world” and “the good old customs of the people [. . .] which he has decided [contain] all truth and goodness” (221). Thus, he produces a sort of exoticized, or what Spivak would call “museumized,” version of precolonial culture, understood as the inverse of all things colonial (“Close”). In the third phase (“This is also about you!”), Fanon argues, the native intellectual must speak honestly to the mixed realities of the present as part of the fight against the forces of occupation (223).

Fanon’s true legacy, which Dangarembga inherits to full effect, demonstrates how the history of colonialism affects all parties. Students in Global Perspectives in Literature learn that the legacy of colonialism is everybody’s business, just as selfhood ought to be every young girl’s nervous prerogative.

Notes

1. An earlier, shorter version of this essay was presented at the American Comparative Literature Association’s annual conference, in March 2004, as part of a panel, organized by chairperson Dr. Karen Davis, titled “Thinking Globally, Teaching Locally: World Literature at the Regional College.”


3. See Aegerter 23.

4. All references to specific words in Shona and their English translations are indebted to the guide developed by Katrina Daly Thompson and Cora Agatucci as part of Dr. Agatucci’s online study guide for Nervous Conditions at http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/dangarembga.htm.

5. Comparable to Homi Bhabha’s call for engagement, Said calls for a kind of humanistic identification with dislocation, exile, and diaspora that does not immediately jump into evocations of the figurative, for example, fetishizing exile, or, as is more often the case in my classroom, hybridity, as metaphoric sites of resistance, without paying witness to real human loss. In his essay, “Reflections on Exile,” Said offers the following corrective: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (172). He goes on to ask “Why has [exile] been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture? [. . .] Against this large, impersonal setting, exile cannot be made to serve notions of humanism” (“Reflections” 173–174).

6. See Okonkwo.

7. In the introduction to Orientalism, Said singles out American scholars, in particular, as having inherited the Orientalist position, post-World War II, from Britain and France (17). No one, especially Americans, he argues, “will have failed to note how ‘East’ has signaled danger and threat during this period (26)—a comment that is particularly apt in the post-9/11 era.

8. For this reason, it is possible to argue that Sartre misreads or, at least, underreads Fanon’s project in Wretched of the Earth.

9. See Gayatri Spivak’s conversation with Sneja Gunew, titled “Questions of Multiculturalism,” in which she resists multiculturalism’s desire to see all Australians (or Indians, for that matter) as “belonging to specific cultures” (412) because of its tokenizing and ghettoizing effect (414).

Works Cited


