Oberlin College

Reading and Teaching Third World Women’s Literature in the First World: Colonialism and Feminism in *Crick Crack, Monkey* and *Nervous Conditions*

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Prologue

A year ago, I designed and implemented an independent study project to work with 24 primary school students, 18 of whom were girls, in a semi-rural village in northern Tanzania in an effort to "bridge cultures" through environmental education. During this month-long intensive curriculum project, I guided the students in learning how to use computers and the Internet to learn about environmental issues.

From this project in Tanzania, I gained a perspective not only on working with limited resources to create a meaningful learning experience in a short time period, but also on the characteristics and differences between pedagogical goals and methods in this particular African community and the North American community with which they were communicating. Not only did I experience the differing values in educational and cultural exchange between the First and Third Worlds, but I also experienced the frustrations of working in an education system that overtly prioritized the needs of males. I saw this manifested in a school system where men occupied positions of power (principal, head teachers), where female students were consistently excluded from secondary education, and where subordination of women was expected. While my perspective derives from a relatively short period of study and a small geographic area, I am inspired to use this experience as a jumping-off point in my own studies. Reflecting on this experience, I am interested in why cultural exchange between the two groups of students felt unequal. For the Tanzanian students with whom I was working, this project became the focus of their lives, as they became intrigued with the personal connections to "Merikani" (America) that throughout their childhoods had taken on mythical proportions as a symbol of wealth and opportunity. For the American students (a fifth-grade class in Seattle), time devoted to the project was scarce, communication was sparse and their connection with the Tanzanian students
was a peripheral supplement to a busy schedule dictated by rigorous preparation for impending
standardized tests. Their teacher’s failure to prioritize this project showed me either that she had
little power over what and how her students were learning, or that she herself believed that the
exchange between the Tanzanian and American students was peripheral to “more important”
(nationally recognized, encouraged and required) educational endeavors.

I became intrigued by the ubiquitous sense in Tanzania that education was “good.” I
continually noticed an association between higher education and the West, and an unwarranted
respect assigned to me because I represented success within the regimes of Western education.
For example, as a college student entering an education system led by adult Africans who held
respected positions in their community, I was elevated to a status above that of headmaster and
teachers, in part because I spoke English fluently and because I had finished high school and was
soon to graduate from university. As I entered a classroom, a chorus of “Gude morning, teacha,”
inevitably met my ears, followed by diligent work throughout the room. In response to this
attitude of veneration, I made it a goal to redirect this respect for me into students’ respect for
each other, “teaching” classes in a circle (as opposed to a hierarchical arrangement in which I
stood at the head of the class) and resisting supplying omniscient answers to the students’
questions, instead asking them to answer questions as a group.

I learned about a literary work (Nervous Conditions, by Tsitsi Dangarembga) written by a
woman who had grown up in the Third World and had continued her post-secondary education
in the First World. I read Nervous Conditions and questions related to those that had been sowed
when I was in Tanzania began to germinate: what and why were there different values of
educational cultural exchange, how and why did the educational system prioritize males, and
from where came the Tanzanian veneration of education (especially Western education)?
Dangarembga’s story spoke to these questions. I searched for other works by African women that might be fertile ground for my growing questions. I found several, and as I clarified my focus on issues prevalent throughout the former colonies, I was led to Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey*, a text from the West Indies in which I found themes related to education and the acquisition of English as a second language and the ways in which these themes interacted with race and class relationships in a colonial context.
Introduction

In this essay, I examine two novels by Third World women writers, with a view to exploring how to read and teach Third World texts in a First World context. Teaching these (and other Third World texts), I contend, must entail negotiating their status as “other” to First-World, Western texts and must include recognizing this status as imposed by the First World readership and as a heuristic to develop an understanding and a pedagogy that is able critically to examine the First World or West’s naturalizations of its own pedagogical and knowledge-based claims. To do this, I focus specifically on the subject of education; in this regard, colonial education, as it is explored in these two novels. For the protagonists of these novels, colonial education is the means through which they “escape” poverty and gain social mobility. At the same time, it is a deeply alienating, separating force between worlds. In gaining a colonial education, they are drawn into the culture of the pedagogy and curriculum, but both gain a critical distance through education that allows them to develop skeptical/realistic perspectives on colonialism. In a First World educational system, this critical distance is difficult to find when Western texts occupy the center of the canon and perspectives outside the culture of this central literature are discouraged. Teaching Third World literature in a First World setting not only brings into question this definition of the Third World at the global “margin” but also brings the process of personal identity development into the classroom in the context of “postcolonialism.”

In particular, studying texts about and by Third World women places these women at the “center” of the discussion. In this essay, I consider the role of literature by women and Third World subjects in a newly globalized world in which pedagogy and curricula founded in colonial patriarchy are prepared to release their historical dominance. We can then see that introducing
literature by Third World women into the First World classroom begins a process of
deconstruction of local and global hierarchies of race and gender.

Education is, as constructed by society, first and foremost, a journey of the self, of
identifications and realizations of selves within cultures, because all academic, literary discovery
is made meaningful by its connection to an existing identity. A study of literature is significant
for students if it provides connections through which they can learn about themselves in a
broader cultural context. So, by being exposed to a standard Western array of English literature,
primarily written by authors from Britain and the U.S., secondary and post-secondary students
are likely to place themselves within a Eurocentric literary culture.

Additionally, Third World texts act as a binary with First World texts. When students are
introduced to Third World literature, it assumes a position of marginality, important primarily for
its sense of “otherness.” Clichéd images of barbarity and primitivism (associated with the Third
World) that are ingrained in people living in the First World through popular culture and early
education necessitate a deconstruction of preconceptions before students of literature can
develop critical tools to understand a text with views sensitive to racism, classism and sexism.

Teachers, too, are operating from within an anglocentric system of education, and it is
perhaps a greater challenge to teach a Third World text than to study it. The challenge (in
education and in this paper) lies in bringing Third World texts into the center of First World
education as well as in shifting the study of these works from the limited perspective of “other”
into a central position for understanding the connection between literature, the self, and culture.

Literature originating outside Western culture can provide an important instrument for
Western education, in addition to being crucial to education within its culture of origin. Far from
being “less valuable” than English classics, it challenges boundaries of “otherness” by bringing
this otherness into the center of Western academic discourse. Not only is this important to students for whom Western education is a reflection of what they identify as their culture, but it also is important for women and minorities whom Western education (and, in fact, the entire English language) was designed to dominate because it validates their experiences.

Literature is rich in material for personal identity development because of its qualities of what Gayatri Spivak describes as both “medicine and poison” (278) in “The Burden of English,” the clandestine aspects of the author’s intent and ideology that carry a different message for each reader. A teacher’s most important role is to guide students through these “medicines” and “poisons” in literature as they seek individual and interconnected identities. Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* are both written by women from the Third World who grow up in an education system influenced by the literature and by the pedagogy, of the cultures of their colonizers. Through these books, it is my intention to explore the possibilities for literary study in the First World as a vehicle for broadening an understanding of Third World culture and identity in the First World. *Crick Crack, Monkey* illustrates the ways the deployment of the colonizers’ English language within education and between classes is used to reinforce colonial power relationships locally (in Trinidad) and globally (intra-culturally). The protagonist uses education both as a means of assimilation and subsequently as a means of resistance against colonial culture. *Nervous Conditions* places women centrally in positions of subjugation, but engages in a discussion of the complexities of their positions in a patriarchal educational and broader social system. For the First World reader, the modes of resistance within *Nervous Conditions* present possibilities for incorporating resistance into First World educational systems.
Colonial Education and *Crick Crack, Monkey*

Education can perpetuate cross-cultural understanding through language—both through the study of language itself and through its role as a vehicle for academic study. Within former colonies, the languages of the colonizers have widely become the languages associated with wealth and power, technology and government, the languages of the institution—the languages in which most academic subjects are taught. In many areas formerly colonized by Britain, English has become the official language, even when English is little-used by the majority of citizens. In his 1952 publication *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon links language tightly with culture and contends that when a native language is made secondary or tertiary, so is its culture. “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country” (Fanon 18). Each language is formed by—and forms—the people using it.

*Crick Crack, Monkey* is the story of a young girl’s childhood in Trinidad and her struggle, caught between two sets of socioeconomically different relatives after her mother dies and her father goes to England. This girl, Tee, studies and emulates Western culture inspired by her Westernized school experiences. Merle Hodge, who grew up in Trinidad, wrote the novel in 1970 as a fictional autobiography, narrating it from a reflective first person point of view, sometimes seeming adult-like and sometimes seeming child-like.

In her article, “The Burden of English,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes that, in a study of literature in the context of a Western educational system (that is, an educational system constructed on Western culture and ideals, whether in a First World or Third World setting), the “goal is to shape the mind of the student so that it can resemble the mind of the so-called implied
reader of the literary text” (Spivak 276). This framework for literary study originates in an historical emphasis on self-discovery as a pedagogical tool. In formerly colonized areas, an education system developed in formerly colonized areas continues to dominate in part because of direct neocolonial influence (in the form of international aid, infrastructure, etc.) by the First World and in part because of subtler tactics such as English language acquisition and Western cultural assimilation as both symbols of affluence and realized tools for social mobility.

While a student’s quest for self-discovery through literature is not inherently problematic as a pedagogical method, major problems arise when a literary work is idealized in an unbalanced power system. Spivak goes on to write: “The figure of an implied reader is constructed within a consolidated system of cultural representation. The appropriate culture in this context is the one supposedly indigenous to the literature under consideration” (276). Spivak is making a point related to theories of the relationship between author and reader. As an author writes, he/she is not only creating a text of self, but also creating an implied reader. The reader, in turn, creates a text that is not only based on the author's intentions, but also is related to the experiences of the reader in a particular historical—cultural, social, and political—moment. So, a text written by a white male from the context of a First World culture will be created differently by each global reader. For a Rhodesian girl reading a text in the setting of a Western school in her village, this text will be created not only in terms of its literary value in the “canon,” (the position from which this text might be viewed in its culture of origin) but will also take on elements of power related to the racial and gendered relationship between author and reader.

In *Crick Crack, Monkey*, Spivak’s assertion that “Our ideal student of British literature must so internalize this place of cultural self-representation that she can, to use the terms of the
most naive kind of literary pedagogy, 'relate to the text,' 'identify' with it" (276) becomes starkly apparent in Tee's creation of an "other," an imaginary friend who embodies qualities of the ideal British subject that she feels drawn to but separate from. An imaginary friend, Helen spends her vacations at the sea-side, is closely familiar with exotic (to Tee) fruits like apples and enjoys eating scones by the fireside. These images, drawn from English literature, are based in British culture. They represent a world of self-betterment and, because they appear in literature accessible in school, they are directly tied to education, which is a tool for social mobility in the Third World portrayed in Crick Crack, Monkey.

While Tee's imaginary friend Helen is a sincere expression of Tee's interpretation of what she is learning, and so is a valuable product of Tee's development, she is a problematic figure in her reinforcement of the colonial ideal, which not only glorifies the literary subject but also negates the marginalized "reader," in this case Tee. Tee describes Helen as "my double," (61), but goes on to say: "Helen wasn't even my double. No, she couldn't be called my double. She was the Proper Me. And me, I was her shadow hovering about in incompleteness" (Hodge 62). Tee creates a superior self that is rooted in the realm of the imaginary, thus internalizing the values and ideals of the British writing she is reading and choosing positive words for Helen and negative, subordinating vocabulary to describe herself. Tee reads and internalizes with the assumption that she is the "implied reader" (Spivak 277), imagining that the text was written for her. Thus, she reverses the process typical of Western education, in which the text is an extension of the reader's cultural reality, and instead creates a cultural reality for herself that is congruous with the text but incongruous with her actual life.

Taking into account this relationship of power between the culture of a text and a reader positioned outside that culture, we then must realize that we are operating in a system of
education formed by the Western expectation that students will relate to a text. This sense of “relating to the text,” then, presents a situation in which a Third World woman is emulating a First World man. This is, in fact, the situation Tee is in, and becomes problematic when she discovers that because of systematic neocolonial oppression, she will probably never attain the status or power of the white male she is emulating. Because she has identified with literature based in a white, male, middle class culture and written in a white, male, middle class language throughout her entire educational career, she is unable to return to a place of uninformed subjugation or a community of resistance based in acceptance of Western influences. Therefore, she occupies a space of confusion and self-doubt, unable to relate to or be acknowledged fully by either culture.

Discussions of education must include the idea of civic access, power within a community and access to resources outside a community, which is directly linked to women’s access to resources, power in decision-making in a community. In Crick Crack, Monkey, Tee, undergoing struggles of identity, pinpoints particular factors in her education as affecting her desired sense of self. In particular, through literature she discovers an “ideal” white identity rooted in a First World culture that is materially, albeit not imaginatively, inaccessible to her as a Third World subject. She tells us:

Books transported you always into the familiar solidity of chimneys and apple trees, the enviable normality of real Girls and Boys who went a-sleighing and built snowmen, ate potatoes, not rice, went about in socks and shoes from morning until night and called things by their proper names, never saying “washicong” for plimsoll or “crapaud” when they meant a frog. Books transported you always into Reality and Rightness, which were to be found Abroad (Hodge 61).

Tee grows up with a feeling that there is something unclean, immoral about her family, about her aunt Tantie. First through books and then through Auntie Beatrice and her cousins, she is
convinced that attaining whiteness—if not in skin color, then in personal hygiene, eating habits, language and manners—should be one’s goal in life. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses this internalization of inferiority as a psychological dilemma. “For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (10). Through Tee’s perspective, influenced by two social strata—the lower class of her homestead and the upper class of the mission—Hodge highlights the struggle to escape “blackness.” Tee repeatedly laments that Auntie Beatrice did not raise her from the beginning. She says: “If I had never lived [with Tantie], if Auntie Beatrice had whisked us away from the very beginning and brought us here, then I would have been nice. I would have been one of them...” (Hodge 100). She would feel comfortable wearing makeup, using a plate and knife and fork to eat, she would feel comfortable in expensive clothes, she would, in fact, feel comfortable wanting to be white.

As it is, she has grown up with Tantie and her grandmother Ma, who embody a different attitude toward whiteness, one in which the “goal” of whiteness lies under a surface of pride in their original cultural heritage. The ancestor Ma respects “was a tall straight proud woman...for all the heavy loads she had carried on her head all her life” (19). Compared with the reverence for “The White Ancestress” that is prevalent in Auntie Beatrice’s house, it seems that the values passed on to Tee from Ma and Tantie offer Tee comfort in her black identity. At the same time, however, Tantie takes Tee to school, takes part in the “shamefaced race” to make sure Tee gets into school. Tantie wants Tee to go to school, expressing “disapproval and disgust blasted government wouldn’ build school for the chirren what the blasted government there for but to build school for the chirren” (22). Although Tantie’s desire for Tee to go to school doesn’t overtly communicate to Tee that whiteness is an ideal, her value for schooling is communicated to Tee through her behavior as she joins the other women charging the ABC school. Later, her
reluctance to draw Tee back from the world of Auntie Beatrice confirms Tee’s sense that Tantie approves of her transformation out of Tantie’s culture into a “white” culture.

From the beginning of Tee’s school experience, Western values are presented as the desirable “norm.” She says: “My reading career also began with A for Apple, the exotic fruit that made its brief and stingy appearance at Christmastime, and pursued through my Caribbean Reader Primer One the fortunes and circumstances of two English children known as Jim and Jill, or it might have been Tim and Mary” (Hodge 25). School remained an experience very detached from Tee’s home life, especially under the tutelage of Mr Hinds, a teacher who believed in an innate superiority of all things English. Tee tells the reader: “Or under Mr Hinds’ direction we would recite Children of the Empire Ye are Brothers All, or sing God Save the King and Land of Hope and Glory” to Mr Hinds’ admonishments: “Not an eyelid must bat not a finger must twitch when we honour the Mother Country” (Hodge 26). Learning through foreign cultural references creates conflict for Tee because although Tantie has taught her that school is good, that it is a somewhat mysterious path to a “better” life, Tantie has also verbally scorned Auntie Beatrice’s affectations of English pronunciation and house decor. Tee struggles to discover what is acceptable, and instead finds that school is a main cause of her inability to “fit in” in either culture.

Through school, Tee is put in a position between worlds, convinced by books and by those around her that she must escape from one but not fitting in with the other. She is caught in a space of limbo between differing expectations of different cultures that are assymmetric in terms of power. Partly because she is a developing child and partly because she is a self-reflective person, negotiating this space results in a redefinition of identity. Tee becomes neither black nor white in self-definition, illustrating Fanon’s idea of not understanding her own culture and not
being understood as a result of education. While Tee is miserable when she lives with Auntie Beatrice, and at first longs for Tantie and Ma, she grows away from them in her own identity so that eventually she dreads going back. “I was afraid of one thing more than anything else in the world. Sooner or later Auntie Beatrice would be so tired of the sight of me that she would send me back to Tantie” (Hodge 103). Hodge never resolves Tee’s situation, leaving us with a drunken speech by Tantie about losing Tee and Tee’s wish “that it were next morning and a plane were lifting me off the ground” (111), a reference to her impending flight to Britain and the start of a “new life.” This conclusion to the story leaves the reader in a similarly unresolved position, unequipped to assign Tee a label of identification. We can only conclude that her hybridity (her identity as a product of two distinct cultures) is a product of her original culture in Tantie’s home, her new culture in Auntie Beatrice’s and their interaction within her and as a result of her education.
**Education in Power Hierarchies: *Nervous Conditions* and the "Other"**

First published in 1988, *Nervous Conditions* is a fictional autobiography. The narrator is Tambu, as an adult. In the story, she describes herself as a young, at times tormented girl, caught between two worlds. The telling of the story seems to support her in sorting out, untangling her confusions. Through telling her own story of identity development (potentially, a text of learning for others), she acknowledges the growth of a "seed of a suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the 'Englishness' of the mission; and after that the more concentrated 'Englishness' of Sacred Heart" (203). She is only able to come to this conclusion after she has experienced, assessed and exposed the falsely glorified Western culture. Just as Tambu grows to see that "the colours [of paint in the kitchen of the mission] were not co-ordinated" (67) (earlier having been awed by their Western elegance) and that "the antiseptic sterility that my aunt and uncle [her Westernized African caregivers] strove for could not be attained beyond an illusory level" (71), she begins to see the ignorance and prejudice in the Western education and the male, Westernized power figure that Babamukuru (her uncle) represents.

Although fictional, *Nervous Conditions* takes place in a very specific historical moment, in the late 1960's in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Clearly, certain historical expectations of gender, class and race are important to the novel. During the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, education was a tool of European imperialists, part of a nexus of colonial hegemony within the colonies. The colonizing nations used education nationally to reinforce support for colonial occupation. Edward Said writes: "Between 1745 and 1945...When most European thinkers celebrated humanity or culture they were principally celebrating ideas and values they
ascribed to their own national culture, or to Europe as distinct from the Orient, Africa, and even the Americas” (44).

At the same time that it helped enforce colonial power both at the “core” and in the “margins,” education was also a liberating tool within the colonies. Knowledge of European language and culture served as a mode of indoctrination into colonial ideology and as a vehicle for “escaping” a culture of the oppressed. In his preface to Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that the “colonizers” “had the Word,” the “colonized” “had the use of it” (7). While overt European imperialism—marked by military occupation and domination of Third World countries—came to an end by the middle of the twentieth century, many areas of the world continued to lie in a shadow of imperialism. Said writes: “Hardly any North American, African, European, Latin American, Indian, Caribbean, Australian individual—the list is very long—who is alive today has not been touched by the empires of the past” (Said 5).

Facets of imperialist influence still permeate both colonized and colonizing cultures. During the two World Wars, colonial resistance relied (among other things) upon the “colonized” emphasizing the credibility of their own culture and also their access to modernity and “civilization” via colonial education. Even revolutionary social movements saw education as a means to provide colonial “subjects” with power.

In Nervous Conditions, experiences centered around education form a central force in both the assertion of neocolonial influences and in the resistance against colonial domination. The tension between two cultures, these two settings, both within the so-called Third World, contributes to the complexity and ambivalence of Tambu’s character. Tambu’s family’s farms and the river Nyamarira, the site of her original culture, embody the “traditional” culture of Rhodesia, described romantically in Tambu’s early memories as “The river, the trees, the fruit
and the fields” (3). When she is 13, Tambu moves to the site of a more urban, affluent culture where she attends a more Westernized school.

In her description of the homestead, Tambu relies frequently on words and references to objects unfamiliar to the English-speaking reader, thereby drawing the Western reader into her world but simultaneously distancing the reader. She writes: “From the fields the road grew shadier with shrubs and trees. Acacia, lantana, msasa and mopani, clustered about on either side. If you had time you could run off the road into more wooded areas to look for matamba and matunduru” (3). She describes the fruit near the homestead as “Sweet and sour. Delicious” (3).

The majority of Tambu’s early childhood memories are fond, illustrated by happy chores and enjoyment of her environment. Her early language is marked by many words in Shona (her first, African language) and depicts affection for experiences relatively unshaped by Western language and culture.

When her brother, Nhamo, dies, Tambu is given the opportunity to live at the “mission” (her uncle, Babamukuru, aunt, Maiguru and cousin Nyasha’s Westernized home) and to attend a more Westernized school. As she gathers a perspective influenced both by this schooling and by Nyasha’s rebellious behavior and vocal opinions, the voice of the narrator (an adult telling the story of her youth) loses its Shona words and phrases. She desires to “escape” the inadequacies of the homestead and education is what she has internalized as the means of “escape,” the path away from the “squalor” of the homestead. The reader recalls Tambu’s efforts early in the story to realize her educational goals. She planted her own mealies to earn money for school fees, providing what her father couldn’t—or wouldn’t—because she was female (and her brother was a more “worthy” recipient of education). Tambu tells the reader: “Nhamo [Tambu’s brother], if given the chance, my uncle said, would distinguish himself academically...Nhamo would lift our
branch of the family out of the squalor in which we were living” (4). This view is reinforced from every influential direction in Tambu’s life. She listens to her father, who is portrayed as an ineffectual puppet of her uncle, tell her brother: “If I had your brains...I would have been a teacher by now. Or maybe even a doctor...Do you think we would be living the way we are? No! In a brick house with running water, hot and cold, and lights...It would have been good, if only I had the brains” (5).

Tambu’s earlier contentment within her culture is thrown into question as those around her glorify ideals introduced by colonial powers. Even Tambu’s mother, who was skeptical of the system that “took away” her son, “was determined” to send him to school, and by selling eggs and vegetables at the bus terminal she “scraped together enough money to keep my brother in school” (15). Even in the years when Tambu sees her homestead as imbued with sustenance and love, she hears intimations of its inadequacy filtering through her uncle Babamukuru to those around her and senses it herself. The tension between the culture of the homestead and the Westernized culture of the mission only grows more intense for Tambu when she leaves the homestead to live with Babamukuru.

The emphasis on Western ideals as providing access to an “escape” from a “squalid” lifestyle becomes especially apparent at the moment Tambu arrives at Babamukuru’s. In her first moments in a house she experiences an “insistent message of comfort and ease and rest” (70). She comments on the rooms of the house, which appear to be “local interpretations of British interior-decor magazines” (70). That alignment of Westernized lifestyle with notions of comfort and ease underlies Tambu’s confusion and unease about where she belongs. For example, Tambu is tempted by the comfort of a “Western” home, but is convinced that she will never be able to attain a position of autonomy in it, seeing herself as an “angel” in “God’s” (i.e.
Babamukuru’s) “Heaven” (70). As an “angel,” she is a subservient figure, both as a gendered subject within an indigenous and colonial patriarchy and as a colonial subject.

Despite a love for the homestead and the familiar ways of her childhood, she is plagued by an attraction to the Western culture of wealth and consumption and a sense that it will alienate her from her original culture. One source of comfort is the belief that education (which is her means of entry into this culture) is good and will bridge the divide between the two worlds.

Tambu describes reading Western classics: “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” (93). For Tambu, the texts themselves and the process of “being educated” are so linked that it is difficult for her to step outside the texts to look critically at her educational situation. This unconflicted view of the value of education is rattled when her cousin Nyasha, a fellow student, questions and challenges her teachers. Observing Nyasha, she begins to question her own stance and eventually even questions herself, wondering if hers is a perspective of weakness.

Confused and ambivalent, Tambu sees education as a mode of “escape” from the poverty of her childhood, but she also sees it as a portal into a white, male world, a world with which she is, ultimately, unable to identify. This confusion is magnified when she is sent to a convent school primarily for white Africans called Sacred Heart. There, Tambu is culturally isolated in a world where European, elitist values penetrate the curriculum. At the mission, Tambu was surrounded by fellow students with similar backgrounds to hers. At Sacred Heart, many of the girls, because they are white, are both more familiar with and feel more entitled to the Western culture of their education. Tambu feels unworthy and compensates for her feeling of unworthiness by studying harder than the other girls. The library at Sacred Heart becomes her
escape from the world, her place to bury herself in Western culture. Still, this taste of Western culture is bittersweet. She says of the library: “The sheer number of books in that library made me deeply ashamed of my ignorance” (195). Tambu believes that the books represent the knowledge she ought to own.

Educational systems are inextricably tied to culture, both reflecting cultural ideals and contributing to the formation of new values within a culture. Indeed, it was by imposing Western education that imperialist powers historically asserted their influence over many parts of the Third World. Drawing on an example from another formerly colonized area, India, Gauri Viswanathan (1995) argues that the study of English literature was an important tool for colonial expansion. Viswanathan contends that the institutionalization of literary study in Britain was informed by and sought to inculcate a colonial ideology both in the imperialist countries and in the colonies.

In many parts of the world deemed “postcolonial,” “underdeveloped” or “developing,” (all problematic terms that reify systems of global power and Western dominance by defining large groups of people in subordinate relations to others), education has remained one of the most persistent and embedded institutions of neocolonial oppression. In a present-day international situation marked by “globalization”—in the context of this paper defined as the connections between people across boundaries of geography through high-speed communication, international corporate trade, cultural exchange and travel aided by electronic communications—education, more than ever before, has become a tool of social mobility. Describing education in terms of globalization, Fazal Rizvi writes: “[Globalization] has a culturally interactive disposition, even to the point of commodifying difference, constructing it so it can be sold...Notions of mobility, transculturalism, and diaspora are especially significant” (222).
Despite movement toward universal public education, in most areas of the world, attending
ing school, and higher education in particular, remain a privilege of the wealthy or powerful.
Indeed, even in the U.S., where public education is supposedly accessible to all, poor (and often
urban, non-white) communities often have fewer resources, teachers and safe school spaces than
affluent (white) communities with access to private funds and choice of private schools.

As we see in *Nervous Conditions*, secondary education within the Third World provides
the opportunity to gain a critical distance from education, a distance that allows subordinated
subjects to look at systems of oppression realistically. While Tambu’s primary education
provides enough Western knowledge (the English language, British culture) for her to develop an
appreciation for Western education, it is through the privilege of this education that she begins to
question its worth.

As we attempt to incorporate Third World texts in First World educational settings, we
can encourage this questioning of privilege and the universal good of education and the ability to
appreciate the “other” without being oppressed by it. In current First World educational systems,
these problems of colonial control and motives for education as well as an amplified sense of
“other” becomes clear.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon addresses the problems associated with the distancing
of minorities from original cultures through colonial education: “The educated Negro, slave of
the spontaneous and cosmic Negro myth, feels at a given stage that his race no longer
understands him” (14). Fanon suggests that becoming “educated” means becoming the white
conception of black, of embodying the expectations of white men to be subordinate and inferior
(a slave). Consequently, by participating in white expectations of him, “not only must the black
man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 110) and because of this
identity defined in relation to white culture, the black man can no longer “understand” his “race.” On his own terms, Fanon’s concept of “understanding” a race highlights several important elements of this discussion. First, that an understanding of one’s identity is imperative for non-hierarchical intra-cultural relationships. And second, that with an understanding of self comes, necessarily, a recognition of “other.” When identities can be established non-hierarchically, “other” loses its negative connotation. It is important, in a world dependent on globalized communication, that a notion of “other” does not contribute to hierarchies of power.

Dismantling hierarchical notions of “other” can be but is not often facilitated by education, and is subject to the potential social inequities of education quality and accessibility.

_Nervous Conditions_ creates for the Western reader a critical distance from the text—a space between personal experience and the text (similar to the critical distance Tambu gains from her own education as she discovers its “poison”—in terms Fanon describes as related to race. The relationship between the Third World subject presented in _Nervous Conditions_ and the “other” of Western culture accentuates the alienation of the Third World subject in the First World. Though Fanon’s subject is the black man, this idea of critical distance presents itself in subjugated women characters in _Nervous Conditions_ and exposes patriarchal values in both the Third and First Worlds.

Ostensibly, _Nervous Conditions_ is the story of five women. However, told from Tambu’s perspective, each of these women’s stories amplifies our understanding of Tambu, her growing and changing sense of personal identity. Tambu introduces her story as one of “escape” (page 1). The ways in which Tambu is escaping, that is, “getting free from captivity or confinement” or avoiding “a dangerous, harmful, or unpleasant situation” (Encarta World Dictionary) define
her experiences and identity as she moves from the homestead to the mission to the convent school.

In *Nervous Conditions*, education is a means of "escape," of exiting a life of burdens, and for women, this exit is made more meaningful by education's scarcity and by the intensity of the burdens women carry. For Tambu, educational opportunity carries a sting when she considers the many other candidates not "awarded" the same opportunity. She attended secondary education because she had been exposed to Western cultures and values, and was seen by whites as more promising because of this.

As more and more minorities and women gain access to higher education, more enter an academic world shaped by those with cultural experiences much different from their own. *Nervous Conditions* brings into question the intense incongruity between the conceptions of the worth of Western education in the Third World for social mobility and the actual quality of the education system in providing a liberating experience for the student. In Tambu's case, education was an opportunity offered at the cost of a solid sense of identity in her original culture. Tambu's desire for and then acquisition of education fueled her internal struggle. She found peace and satisfaction neither with the lifestyle of her youth nor with the position of hybridity and marginality her education provided. By looking at this novel in the context of the First World, we can examine education from a perspective outside the context by which we have been most influenced, and realize that many aspects of education in the First World are as hegemonic as those illustrated in this novel.
Feminism and *Nervous Conditions*: The Female Relationship Model and Diversity of the "Female Experience"

Undertaking a discussion of *Nervous Conditions*, in which girls and women in traditionally oppressed positions are able to defy the expectations of patriarchal communities through their supportive friendships with other women, requires an examination of the local historical and political context of this discussion. Several significant problems arise in assuming an "outside" (i.e. white, middle class) perspective of characters and authors interacting with a framework of "Third World feminism." First, this discourse runs the risk of assuming that women are a homogenous social group. Ien Ang writes: "It is now widely acknowledged that differences between women undermine the homogeneity and continuity of ‘women’ as a social category: differences produced by the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on" (395). Considering a categorization of women through some innate shared identity is an implied universal connection between women through oppression, in which women are created as subordinates and victims across cultures. Chandra Talpade Mohanty cautions: “As history (and recent feminist scholarship) teaches us, ‘races’ and ‘nations’ haven’t been defined on the basis of inherent, natural characteristics; nor can we define ‘gender’ in any transhistorical, unitary way” (5). This warning is important to remember in the current movement to create solidarity among women despite (and perhaps because of) the hurdles of cultural “boundaries” in an increasingly globalized scale.

This quest for solidarity presents the dilemma of white women who create women of color as “the other” rather than seeing themselves as part of and responsible for deconstructing racism. Ann Russo argues in her essay “We Cannot Live Without Our Lives”:

If we [white women] want to be involved in a movement which speaks from and to the commonality as well as diversity among women, it is necessary for us to acknowledge our privilege, understand how the conditions of our lives are
connected to and made possible by the conditions of other women's lives, and use what we have gained from that privilege in the service of social change (299).

Russo is arguing that for women to participate in a discussion categorizing women as a group, they can only cautiously attempt to represent women outside their own experience. Russo's contention that white women must recognize privilege in order to initiate social change is, in fact, only the preliminary stage for unity in terms of women cross-culturally and this creates its own problems. Through recognizing and labeling difference, we are, in fact, creating it. Naming "white privilege," furthermore, implies an "other" without naming it (and, indeed, this implication is embedded in imperialist ideology; the term "white" was originally intended as a neutral term). Naming "white privilege," therefore, contributes to a cyclical creation of power and subordination. So, through recognizing sexism and racism, we are to an extent creating them, but without naming them as such, we can never work to resist and eradicate them.

It is impossible to present a cohesive analysis of an author's representation of the "female experience" (just as it may be impossible to portray a unified analysis of any system of thought based specifically in historical and individual contexts). Dangarembga's intricate construction of female experiences, including at least five women differently positioned in contexts of power and privilege, presents limitations crucial to averting reductive analyses of the "female experience." The value lies in recognizing the existence and diversity of the female experience vis-à-vis privilege, oppression and inequality. Through this recognition, women can move toward a coalition (as opposed to a unification) of feminist ideologies and so deconstruct the cultural and political boundaries placed by historically divisive discourses and practices.

In the 1970's and 1980's, at a time when women across cultures were beginning to bring discussions about feminism and privilege into academic discourse, fictional writing by women
within the Third World began to attract attention internationally. Tsitsi Dangarembga contributed to the body of works that inspired this fascination within Western and Third World academia for writing by women from “postcolonial” countries. Within *Nervous Conditions*, female characters negotiate the struggle to embrace their identities in patriarchal societies even as colonialist values act to erase or devalue these identities. As the strong women in the novel—women who are accustomed to serving and providing for others—face their own trials, they look to other women for support. When Mainini is sick with grief at her perceived loss of Tambu to “Englishness,” Lucia nurses her and encourages her back to health. When Lucia needs income and independence from Takesure, it is Maiguru who convinces Babamukuru to find her a job.

While works portraying women in marginal roles don’t inherently undermine female power (a common misconception of Western feminism), in the historical context of colonialism female marginal literary roles contribute to what Mohanty views as: “third world women as subjects outside social relations, [rather than as] constituted through these very structures” (72). In *Nervous Conditions*, women characters balance conflicting expectations within their cultures and are then judged by both their fellow community members and by outside critics (Western readers).

Women supporting women is a central theme of *Nervous Conditions*. Especially Nyasha, who is struggling with her domineering father and Western concepts of body image that contribute to her anorexia, looks to Tambu, her friend and cousin, for support. Nyasha, who was born in the Rhodesian community within which the novel takes place but lived in England for five years, is expected by Babamukuru to become a dutiful wife and mother, expectations reinforced in her African community, but not emphasized within her Western education. Influenced both by her parents and by her experiences in England, she struggles to adapt to her
native culture after having lived in England. She strives to fulfill expectations from the two worlds and finds herself adrift in the chasm between them. Tambu, her confidante, is a source of strength for Nyasha, with her respect validating her as a whole person and as a Westernized colonial subject. Tambu says: “Nyasha’s energy, at times stormy and turbulent, at times confidently serene, but always reaching, reaching a little further than I had even thought of reaching, was beginning to indicate that there were other directions to be taken, other struggles to engage in besides the consuming desire to emancipate myself and my family” (152). Nyasha feels this respect from Tambu and draws strength from it. However, though she is a strong character throughout the novel, Nyasha’s internal resolve to resist assimilation wears thin, and she looks to Tambu for strength, writing her letters and confiding in her when she returns to the mission. Nyasha describes assimilation as an attempt “to forget who you were, what you were and why you were that...intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves” (179). Tambu’s own position of cultural angst at Sacred Heart, however, prevents her from supporting Nyasha by replying to her letters, and it is only when she returns home that we see how important this support system could have been.

Nyasha articulates her belief that Sacred Heart school and Western education by extension is a tool of assimilation. She says:

So they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself” (179). “[The girls at school] resent the fact that I do not read their romance stories...They do not like my language, my English, because it is authentic and my Shona, because it is not! They think that I am a snob, that I think I am superior to them because I do not feel that I am inferior to men. (196)

Tambu respects Nyasha’s rebelliousness and so supports Nyasha, but she never allows herself to let go of her belief that European education is superior to European-influenced African education, saying “I might have believed [Nyasha], but everybody knew that the European
schools had better equipment, better teachers, better furniture, better food, better everything” (179). Even as Nyasha is supported by Tambu, the system (specifically the education system) influenced by Western ideals makes it impossible for Nyasha to escape the domination of First World values reproduced in a Third World education that excludes her both from the culture that she grew up with in England and the culture she encounters when she returns to Rhodesia. And, Tambu’s education at Sacred Heart detaches her from Nyasha, creating a gulf that she is too busy and occupied with imbibing Western culture to span.

Dangarembga presents an educational system that undermines female power. In addition to describing Nyasha and Tambu’s relationship of support, she balances this presentation with carefully constructed oppressive female characters, characters who, through their support of men and male dominance, perpetuate the oppression of other women within the text. These contrasting characterizations of women might appear to defy Dangarembga’s purpose if she strives to disseminate feminist ideology throughout the community of African literature. It is my contention that this diversity of female characters within the texts illuminates Dangarembga’s complex reality that there is no one African woman nor one feminine relationship model and thereby strengthens the place of women in the literature. Just as First World men are various and fascinating, so are Third World women. Some women contradict and some fit the “notion that some women in contemporary African literature are stronger, more articulate, and more independent than ‘real’ African women” (Aidoo 17). Ama Ata Aidoo, in “Literature, Feminism and the African Woman Today,” addresses one of the problems of interpreting a work of fiction according to specific, biased cultural values that differ from or even oppose the author’s intentions. Working with depictions of African women in fiction that have led to various stereotypes about them (based on the simplistic fusion of diverse groups of people),
Dangarembga creates female characters on a spectrum of opposition to and compliance with patriarchal and racist systems of thought.

Maiguru, Babamukuru’s submissive wife and Nyasha’s mother, seems to embody a contrast to the strong female characters of Tambu and Nyasha. In a society in which Western education has high status, she has been exposed to opportunities of empowerment while obtaining a Master’s degree in England, but she remains subservient to Babamukuru. Tambu describes her in this way: “Dressed in flat brown shoes and a pleated polyester dress...she did not look as though she had been to England” (37). Just as she is reluctant to change her style of clothing, Maiguru seems reluctant to recognize her power as an educated woman.

We catch a glimpse of her resistance to this subservience, however, when she tells Tambu that Babamukuru’s family likes to think she traveled to England just to look after him. She does leave home, so to assume simply that she occupies the space of “the oppressed” doesn’t fully reflect her position within a patriarchy and between two cultures that clash within her. Even as Maiguru carries out the expectations of the traditional culture, leading the food preparation at large family gatherings, for example, she recognizes the sacrifices she is making and is resistant to devaluing herself as an educated, working woman. When Tambu describes Maiguru’s facial expression, she says: “The lower half of her face, and only the lower half, because it did not quite reach the eyes, set itself into sullen lines of discontent. She bent over her books to hide them, and to prove that she was not unhappy at all she made a chuckling sound” (Dangarembga 101). Maiguru’s face reveals to Tambu what becomes apparent to the reader: that Maiguru is concealing her unhappiness with her position in her family, that she is a fractured subject, torn between her “traditional” (subjugated) position as a woman and the position of independence, wealth and power that Western education lends to its male participants. Although she seems to
resist the “traditional” expectations internally, she outwardly reinforces patriarchal oppression.

The following discussion at the family dinner table after Nyasha has told her parents she isn’t hungry illustrates this:

“She has had enough, Baba[mukuru],” Maiguru said, but Babamukuru was adamant. He was very upset.
“She must eat all her food, all of it. She is always doing this, challenging me. I am her father. If she doesn’t want to do what I say, I shall stop providing for her—fees, clothes, food, everything.”
“Nyasha, eat your food,” her mother advised (189).

While at first Maiguru is concerned for her daughter and wants to accommodate her, when she is forced to make a decision, she capitulates to Babamukuru’s patriarchal oppression. Maiguru’s insecurities affect her relationship with Nyasha. Within this “traditional” culture, both exist as the “other” to women around them, and both struggle to fit back into the expectations of their community.

Mainini, Tambu’s mother, also presents a conflicted female character. As with Maiguru, education becomes a center of conflict for Mainini, although because she is not educated herself, this conflict is played out through her children—first as she negotiates Nhamo’s education, then Tambu’s. Tambu describes her mother’s growing distance from Nhamo as Nhamo becomes educated at the mission. And, although she is “alarmed” at his “aphasia” (53) as he learns English and forgets Shona, she accepts that this is a necessary byproduct of becoming educated when her husband tells her: “How will the boy remember his English without speaking it? Doesn’t he speak with us when he wants? He is dedicated to his studies” (53). Tambu tells the reader: “Mother did not say anything against Nhamo’s language after that, but she was still unhappy. She did want him to be educated, she confided to me, but even more, she wanted to talk to him” (53).
Even Mainini, though, the paragon of female subordination, the mother who tells her daughter: “When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them” (16), emerges as an oppressive character. She takes her anger toward her husband and brother-in-law out on Maiguru, who to Mainini symbolizes wealth and power through her education, but as a woman is more accessible to her, and so Mainini becomes the oppressor. Of Maiguru she says:

I am only saying what I think, just like she did. She did tell us, didn’t she, what she thinks, and did anyone say anything? No. Why not? Because Maiguru is educated. That’s why you all kept quiet. Because she’s rich and comes here and flashes her money around, so you listen to her as though you want to eat the words that come out of her mouth. But me, I’m not educated, am I? I’m just poor and ignorant, so you want me to keep quiet, you say I mustn’t talk. Ehe! I am poor and ignorant, that’s me, but I have a mouth and it will keep on talking, it won’t keep quiet (140).

Mainini becomes resistant to the hierarchy that she sees as created by education, thus contributing to the “strong woman” image, but she also perpetuates oppression of other women outside her “female and poor and uneducated and black” position of “suffering” (89). Through Mainini, Dangarembga illustrates her earlier point that “the very facts which set them apart as a group, as women, as a certain kind of person, were only myths” (138). The complexities of the female characters and their relationships resist the expectation that there is a single literary “model” for women characters and relationships.

Lucia, too, contributes texture and complexity to Dangarembga’s portrayal of women and helps to expand Western expectations. Lucia “had been brought up in abject poverty,” but “her spirit [was] unfettered” (127) and she is described as “bold,” “plump” and “strong” (127). Lucia fulfills these descriptions, especially when the dare (patriarchal family council) accuses her of being “loose.” She asserts a position of power over Jeremiah (Tambu’s father), Takesure (a distant relative with whom she has a sexual relationship) and Babamukuru, saying:
It was because this man, this Jeremiah, yes, you Jeremiah, who married my sister, he has a roving eye and a lazy hand. Whatever he sees, he must have; but he doesn’t want to work for it, Jeremiah... As for Takesure, I don’t know what he thinks he can give me. Whatever he can do for me, I can do better for myself (144).

Lucia is able to stand up to the men who take advantage of her, but she isn’t simply a character of brute strength and resistance. She, too, depends on Babamukuru. When he finds her a job, she exclaims to him: “Truly, we could not survive without you. Those foreign places, those places you went, did not make you forget us. No! They enabled you to come back and perform miracles!” (159). Even as Dangarembga creates a character in Lucia who is strong and capable, her relation to the family’s patriarchal system is far from simple, and her lack of education puts her in a position of “grovelling” (160) for her basic needs to be met.

Each woman character in Nervous Conditions contributes a dimension to a multifaceted female identity and web of female relationships of support and oppression. Dangarembga shows that there is no paradigm for feminist resistance in Third World literature, that there is a dialectic between men’s oppression of women and other oppressions within a patriarchal system (i.e. women’s oppression of other women stemming from a patriarchal system) and that an unquestioned doctrine of education as a “universal good” often provides as much “poison” as it does “medicine.”
Conclusion

In a First World educational setting, cultural alienation through curricula and methods isn’t as common as in the Third World, because the culture occupying the center of First World education is the culture with which the majority of students and teachers are familiar. For many, the literary references are part of the local environment and customs, English is spoken as a primary language, and there is no confusion about exalting the “Mother Country” because it is the center of students’ cultural world, and there is no pressure to exalt the periphery, or even to acknowledge its existence.

However, as the First World is becoming more diverse, and as schools are becoming more accessible to a diverse population, the traditional references of Western education—primarily white, male and related to a hierarchical position of power between the First and Third World—are becoming less and less relevant to students’ experiences, and more problematic to teach. For teachers, educational material originating outside the First World is crucial in formulating curricula that validates (rather than alienates) minorities. Furthermore, teaching methods that transcend models designed to enforce domination and subordination (which include not just colonially influenced education but also authoritarian teaching models such as the “Fordist” model, designed to produce “a disciplined and reliable workforce” (Burbules and Torres 35)) will be necessary if education can really become a universal “good.”

While education presents the opportunity for identity development for individual students, the emphasis of education should lie on the process of multidimensional discourse, influenced by other students, teachers, parents and society. The goal of a “product”—the ideal colonial subject (or, in a First World context, the ideal colonizer), assimilated by education but not yet critically distanced from it—imposed by colonial educational ideals, must go. This
purpose of education has been defined by upper-class white males over hundreds of years, and resisting it means creating an education system that addresses the needs and identities not just of the upper echelons of society, but of every class, color and gender person, an education system that actively questions social constructs.

My experience in Tanzania inspired in me an excitement for working with children, helping young people discover their own identities and their relationship to their own environment and the global environment. It also opened my eyes to teaching methods and educational systems in the Third World that I found oppressive, especially to women, and when I returned to the First World, I saw this same oppression covertly rooted in American education. Interested in how I could analyze teaching methods and feminism in the Third World as a vehicle for bringing a greater understanding to First World education, I turned to literature. Two novels in particular deal with the very issues I wanted to investigate, and it is my intent to use the investigation and analysis that followed in formulating my own curriculum content and pedagogy in future teaching experiences.

Returning to Sartre's words:

If violence began this very evening and if exploitation and oppression had never existed on the earth, perhaps the slogans of non-violence might end the quarrel. But if the whole regime, even your non-violent ideas, are conditioned by a thousand-year-old oppression, your passivity serves only to place you in the ranks of the oppressors (25).

Teaching, for me, is a form of empowerment, a way of helping students construct new understandings of the literature and cultures around them. Furthermore, teaching is a way for me to act as an agent of change to an education system rooted in patriarchal, colonial principles, principles that were formulated both to oppress colonial subjects and to unify colonial powers in justifying oppression.
Although the term Third World "obliterates profound differences between a whole range of non-western countries and situations" (Jameson 67), I will use the Three Worlds model terminology in this paper to distinguish significant geopolitically different areas of the world. The Three Worlds model (Appendix A) was implemented after World War II, and compared with labels of "developing," "underdeveloped" and "postcolonial," this system indicates cultural and political differences, spurred by imperialism, between the Third World, socialist Second World countries (which have now essentially disappeared as a communist bloc) and capitalist First World countries.

"Culture" carries significantly different meanings in different cases, ranging from the material (primarily within fields of cultural anthropology) to the symbolic (within historical and cultural studies). Raymond Williams’ definition of culture in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* includes several important points. He defines culture as: "(i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development...(ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general...(iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (90). For the purposes of this paper, culture is considered to be a combination of these three, a process of aesthetic transformation, a way of life and the products and influences of intellectualism and art.
Selected List of Works Consulted


Appendix A: Three Worlds Model

Source: http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/third_world_countries.htm