

# Peripheral Realism and the Bildungsroman in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and argues that this novel appropriates and resignifies the bildungsroman, thus demonstrating that this genre cannot provide a symbolic resolution for the "nervous condition" of the colonized subject. To do so, I integrate a world-systemic approach with a formalist analysis of genre. Starting from the premise that the modern world-system has been constituted by capitalist modernization and colonial expansion, I read Dangarembga's novel as a localized literary response to these two world-historical forces and analyze the entanglements between formal choices and socioeconomic transformations, as well as their impact on the characters' psyche. By appropriating the realist bildungsroman from a peripheral perspective, *Nervous Conditions* frames the tense relations between a self-reflecting individuality and her social totality. In so doing, Dangarembga rejects the ideological premises of a genre tied to European bourgeois subjectivity and simultaneously reactivates realism and mimesis as dynamic and flexible modes of representation.

Even before the narrative begins, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* establishes a close dialogue with a specific literary tradition and participates in processes of cultural displacement and appropriation. The epigraph, from which the title of the novel is drawn, is a line from Sartre's incendiary preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The condition of native is a nervous condition." Just as Sartre's mediation had allowed Fanon to reach, in rapid sequence, French, European, and American intellectuals, it was also thanks to the consecration of Alice Walker and Doris Lessing that Dangarembga, a young female writer from Zimbabwe, could enter the stage of world literature.<sup>1</sup> After being rejected by several

Zimbabwean publishers, the novel was accepted by The Women's Press (UK) in 1988 and published in the US in 1989. Dangarembga's dialogue with the repertoire that shaped her literary education is certainly one of the factors that contributed to the positive reception of her debut novel.<sup>2</sup> Yet, not enough attention has been given to her active engagement with the canonical genre of the bildungsroman. My most immediate contention is that *Nervous Conditions* appropriates the bildungsroman and demonstrates its inadequacy for the representation of the experience of a colonized subject. In order to do so, on the level of form, Dangarembga recuperates the lesson of realism—its capacity to portray the dynamic relation between individuality and social totality—and integrates it with the exploration of an intricate subjectivity, drawing from formal elements of modernism. Structurally, the novel takes a traditionally bourgeois genre, the bildungsroman, and refunctionalizes it by warping its formal and ideological conventions. Crucially, this operation is made possible by Dangarembga's peripheral perspective: if the traditional bildungsroman was founded on the assimilation of a recalcitrant individual into society through a symbolic compromise (typically but not necessarily a marriage), *Nervous Conditions* rejects this ideological premise and demonstrates instead that, in the colonial-peripheral space, no symbolic or fictional resolution is available, neither individually nor socially.

As Simon Gikandi has noted, "in their literary ideologies and formal preferences [African writers] did not consider romance, realism, and modernism separate categories. They were all different ways of thinking about time, place and identity and thus functioned as the conjunctive sides of the same mimetic project" ("Realism, Romance" 311). In *Nervous Conditions*, "time, place and identity" are saturated by untranscendable contradictions engendered by the combined impact of capitalist modernity and colonial domination. And because resource extraction and colonial occupation have had particularly disastrous effects in the peripheries of the world-system, Dangarembga's peripheral position affords a more pronounced lucidity, which in turn transforms the structural condition of peripherality into a cognitive centrality.

I use peripherality here to characterize the marginality of the locale portrayed in the novel (Southern Rhodesia) with respect to its imperial core (England), as well as the position of the novel itself within a globalized literary system. Thus, the novel's mimetic intent is coupled with an acute awareness of positionality. And because mimesis and positionality are foundational to Dangarembga's narrative project, *Nervous Conditions* can be most productively approached at the intersection of realist representation and decentered positioning, that is to say, through the lens of peripheral realism.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. REALISM, TOTALITY, AND WORLD PERIPHERIES

In a special issue of *MLQ* dedicated to "Peripheral Realisms" (2012), Joe Cleary opens his essay with this quite direct exhortation: "We need, but lack, comprehensive theories and historical atlases of twentieth-century realism" (255). Such lack, he continues, is partially due to the regrettable fact that the two major theorists of classical realism, Eric Auerbach and György Lukács, did not show any interest in the question of imperialism as such, nor in the connections between colonial-imperial expansion and literary representation. Since

traditional realism had failed to “realistically” represent the decisive experience of colonialism, it seemed that realism, per se, could not be—in the late twentieth century—a viable category for addressing the harsh contradictions that newly decolonized societies had to face. Realism was thus essentialized by scholars as ideologically suspect, narrow in its focus, and dismissed as intrinsically conservative. This misrecognition has been primarily the consequence of analytical omissions that are apparent in both Auerbach’s and Lukács’s works. Auerbach, even though he was writing *Mimesis* as an exilic intellectual in a semi-peripheral space, Istanbul, was interested in reconstructing the history of Western realism as a way of salvaging a literary tradition on the verge of annihilation—militarily, politically, as well as culturally—during the peak of Nazi expansion. Lukács, on the Eastern side of the divide that has shaped the history of the twentieth century, had a precise literary-political project, which limited his horizon of investigation to the two poles in dialectical opposition, Western capitalism, and Russian socialism. In both cases, the presupposed totality of everyday life (for Auerbach) and of historical evolution (for Lukács) was evidently partial, for it excluded the experience of colonized subjects, supposedly incapable of (realist) self-representation. Yet, in recognizing this partiality, we ought not to dismiss, aprioristically, the notion of totality (as an epistemological horizon), or of serious representation of social reality (as the object of mimesis). It is solely our historical vantage point, together with path-breaking critical studies, that allows us to detect what remains concealed or utterly excluded by systems of representation, however totalizing they claim to be.<sup>4</sup> Only by considering realism a dynamic mode of representation does it become possible to redress the tendency, still present in some postcolonial scholarship, that views it as politically conservative or deceptively transparent.

This critical prejudice—in part due to rather reductive interpretations of the works of Roland Barthes, from “The Reality Effect” (1968) to *S/Z* (1974)—has had detrimental consequences for the study of literary realism, particularly from peripheral spaces. The preference, among postcolonial critics, for a conceptual toolbox derived from poststructuralist critique and for modernism-related terms—such as “hybridity, polyphony, pastiche, irony, and defamiliarization” (Cleary 265)—has in fact thwarted other potentially productive lines of inquiry, often leaving the “hegemony of modernist (or postmodernist) aesthetic[s]” (Cleary 266) unchallenged. It is not surprising then that this hegemony has reinforced various strategies of assimilation—operating both in academia and in the field of large-scale production—whereby a diverse array of works from peripheral spaces were being incorporated into a supposedly stable postmodern canon under the umbrella moniker of magical realism, a label that was often politically neutralized and made to represent cultural exoticism and literary escapism.<sup>5</sup>

My mention of peripherality in relation to realist representation requires a further clarification, related to the theoretical paradigm this essay adopts for the analysis of genre and narrative techniques in *Nervous Conditions*. Just as the poststructuralist preference for textual dynamics has thwarted the analysis of how literature registers material conditions and historical determinants, the pluralization of literary modernity has obscured modernity’s hierarchies and power asymmetries. As Jed Esty and Colleen Lye have argued, “in the positing of equal but different claims on modernity, there was also a deflection away

from modernity's uneven and unequal effects. Among other things, a concept of alternative modernities sidesteps the issue of global integration under an imperialist world-system" (273). It is precisely this global integration brought by capitalist and colonial expansion that I take, drawing from Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory, as the most productive framework for exploring how literature responds to and refracts external forces that delimit the autonomy of literary expression—or, to use Pierre Bourdieu's vocabulary, writers' "space of possibles."<sup>6</sup> This means that, instead of replicating the dichotomy between peripheral or subaltern particularism versus Western universalism, we ought to recognize how the literary world-system functions as a shared and deeply uneven whole, in which analogous social and political contradictions shape literary expression and produce contingent effects depending on the cultural specificities of the locales where they are experienced. In turn, literature is able to imaginatively rearticulate those external determinants—in *Nervous Conditions*, capitalist modernization and colonial domination—whose impact varies not only synchronically, i.e., in relation to space and geography, but also diachronically, as it is subject to historical change. Peripherality, in this sense, must not be confused with an ontological secondariness or derivativeness: it is instead a structural condition, a historical contingency rather than an essential characteristic. Furthermore, the interaction between a single, uneven world-system and multiple literary fields allows for the integration of a global horizon with localized manifestations: it is precisely at the intersection of these two axes that literary representation arises. And if a globally shared condition of modernity is experienced differently depending on variable cultural determinants, the vexed dichotomy between modernism and realism also acquires rather fluid contours from the perspective of peripheral spaces. Here in fact the repertoire of aesthetic and formal choices is given new function by means of historically and culturally specific strategies, not reducible to an imposed choice between supposedly coherent traditions. By approaching the binary modernism/realism not in stark and irreconcilable terms, we might finally be able to reevaluate the long critical history of these categories and to understand what has really been at stake in the construction of this opposition.

The apical point of the debate can be traced back to the controversy that opposed Lukács to Adorno. Lukács, in a short article written in 1938 titled "Realism in the Balance," had condemned modernism for its subjectivism, which severed the individual from its social totality and from the unfolding of history. Adorno, in an open attack on Lukács's "philistine utterances about modern art" (175), maintained instead that only modernism was able to engage with the epistemic shifts brought by capitalist modernity, which had redefined the conditions, if not the very possibility, of artistic expression. In this canonical controversy, it is crucial to notice that both theorists were praising either realism or modernism for the same reason: their ability to give form to the dialectic between individuality and sociality, subject and history. In other words, the controversy revolved around the question of *adequacy* of the means of representation in giving form to the same historical referents. Rather than staging the opposition in terms of supposedly essential characteristics that would make a representational mode either conservative or counterhegemonic, it seems then more productive to evaluate the affordances each mode has with respect to the social and historical specificities of the object of representation.<sup>7</sup>

These considerations are not meant to propose a relativistic and ultimately sterile understanding of a theoretically productive binary. Instead, what I want to suggest is that first, it should be recognized, as a way of avoiding uncritical partisanship, that we are always dealing with a shifting and highly flexible continuum of formal and aesthetic possibilities available to writers. The distinction between realism and modernism remains in this sense theoretically valid and heuristically useful; yet, as critical-discursive categories, their very definition is always a socially determined process. Secondly, only writers that find themselves in semi-peripheral or peripheral positions are able to exploit, creatively and in their full potentiality, the formal affordances of both modes of representation. If we concede that there are specific features associated with modernism (variably focalized narration, multiperspectivity, focus on internal and psychic fluxes, fragmentariness, stylistic experimentation, non-linearity of the plot) as well as characteristics more in line with realist narration (narratorial omniscience, temporal linearity, mimesis of everyday language, focus on the totality of everyday life) it is in the works of authors who have inherited these categorical differences, often as a cultural imposition, that we can see how productively these formal features are resignified. Specifically, in *Nervous Conditions*, the appropriation of the bildungsroman generates a narrative in which the focus on the familial unity and histories of the female protagonists does not preclude access to the totality of social experience. In turn, the quest of the “problematic individual”—as Lukács has famously defined the hero of the novelistic world (*The Theory of the Novel* 78)—is articulated and experienced as a highly localized struggle. Dangarembga stages this struggle by portraying the lives of two female protagonists and their confrontation with external forces (British neocolonialism and the irruption of capital) and local formations (Shona patriarchal society). In so doing, the condition of peripherality—that is to say, the lack economic resources and cultural validation—turns into a cognitive centrality through which Dangarembga formally reframes the global effects of capitalist modernity and its massive restructuring of peripheral spaces.

## 2. FORMAL NERVOUSNESS

The resignification of the bildungsroman results from the clash between the inherited tradition and the equally strong influence of preexisting forms and cultural practices. And if the cognitive vantage afforded by a peripheral position is manifested most acutely on the level of form, it is from a perspective that Franco Moretti has defined as “sociological formalism” (“Conjectures” 66) that we can assess how *Nervous Conditions*, in appropriating a canonical genre, warps its ideological conventions.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, this formal operation is inextricable from an analysis of its sociohistorical significance, for genre is first and foremost a social contract, or, in Fredric Jameson’s words, a “literary institution” (“Magical Narratives” 157), whose meaning depends on several factors: historical conditions, authorial intention, readers’ expectations, and the symbolic pressure of the literary tradition. Within Dangarembga’s active reframing of the inherited repertoire, the discrepancy among genres that occurs on the level of form is replicated in the social reality the text portrays. Since form, fictional content, and historical background are all determined by the same unsolvable contradictions that generate the

nervous condition of the protagonists of the novel, nervousness (as a theme) and instability (of the form) are manifestations of a fundamental dissonance, which also prevents a stabilizing narrative closure.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, *Nervous Conditions*, at first glance, seems to fit the paradigm of the postcolonial realist bildungsroman, since it chronicles the life journeys of the young protagonist, Tambudzai, and of her cousin Nyasha. If we approach the narrative with the bildungsroman's schematic trajectory in mind, we might conclude that Tambudzai does experience a social emancipation. As a female and as a second-born child, she seems to be destined to domestic and social subalternity; yet, after the death of her older brother, and thanks to the economic patronage of her uncle Babamukuru, she is able to attend the mission school and, after graduation, is admitted to a Catholic convent school, the apex of colonial education. Tambudzai's emancipatory journey engenders a series of conflicts within her family; and in the course of the novel, these interfamilial and intergenerational tensions become metonymical devices that point to wider cultural and political issues that were affecting Southern Rhodesia, the current Zimbabwe, during the 60s, when the narrative takes place.

As this brief summary shows, if we take the bildungsroman in its more immediate meaning—a novel of formation—there seems to be evident points of contact between this genre and Tambudzai's social emergence. However, I want to suggest, Dangarembga's engagement with a genre that had perfectly functioned during the rise of the bourgeoisie in 19th-century Europe is meant to demonstrate the impossibility of its symbolic resolution under different sociohistorical conditions.<sup>10</sup> The structural impossibility to solve—imaginatively—the consequences of colonization and of the irruption of capitalist modernity generates a conscious rejection of the ideological foundation of the inherited genre. As a consequence, the bildungsroman's representational failure, in registering with extreme lucidity the hierarchies and structure of power that determine the lives of the characters, allows Dangarembga to comprehend the experience of the colonized subject in its totality and to continue what Tambudzai defines as her "process of expansion" (*Nervous Conditions* 204) into a future that has yet to be written.

The fundamental opposition in the bildungsroman, as the paradigmatic genre of bourgeois subjectivity, is, as Franco Moretti has argued, "the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*" (*The Way of the World* 15). Significantly, the same contradiction lies at the core of British classic realism, which, Nancy Armstrong maintains, had succeeded in becoming the literary custodian of bourgeois morality by solving the compromise between "a morally authorized individualism and a morally authorized normalcy" (351). Both Moretti and Armstrong revisit and expand the argument, first proposed by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*, that the English realist novel and the European bildungsroman are the ideological and literary correlative to the emergence of bourgeois consciousness. Moretti shows that the bildungsroman constitutes a literary compensation for two opposite pulls that could be kept together only within the fictional space of the novel: individualistic self-determination and collective socialization. Armstrong further suggests that only novelistic representation could fulfill the political promise of the bourgeois order, that is, keeping together individualism, philosophically tied to the Enlightenment notion of subjectivity, and the imperative to harmonize society

through the social contract, which was understood as the only morally acceptable limitation to the ideal of self-determination. The triumph of the bourgeois subject was historically tied to the possibility of solving this dichotomy fictionally: the social order had to become more flexible in order to encompass the rebellious individual, and the subject had to recognize the higher morality of socialization and accept its limitations.

The symbolic failure of this ideological compromise in *Nervous Conditions* derives from the impossibility of reconciling individualism and socialization in the peripheral-colonial space. Tambudzai's and Nyasha's trajectories prove that the struggle between the two protagonists and the social order in which they are thrown cannot be neutralized and fictionally solved—as the traditional bildungsroman would demand. This is ultimately due to the different sociohistorical milieus in which the genre is practiced and to the fact that the capitalist and colonial structures of power imposed on African peoples—and writers—made any compensatory solution impracticable, both in concrete historical terms, and imaginatively.

In a work of fiction, these historical and ideological determinants cannot but emerge formally. The first paragraph of the novel, which famously begins with a quite abrupt confession, is premised on a formal short circuit that immediately makes the bildungsroman structurally unstable:

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are reasons for this more than mere consequence of age. Therefore I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; about Nyasha's rebellion—Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful. (1)

If we compare this opening paragraph and the narrative that unfolds after it, it becomes clear that Dangarembga's novel is structured around a generic conflict between the bildungsroman and the memoir.<sup>11</sup> Tambudzai, the narrating voice, immediately declares that the story she is about to tell will constitute a recollection: "I shall ... begin by recalling the fact." The narrator enjoys a privileged position both temporally and cognitively, from which she can reinterpret events with a higher awareness of their causes and implications. The bildungsroman is here disrupted through the interpolation of another genre, the memoir, which presupposes the calm and informed chronicle of a symbolic journey, narrated retrospectively precisely because it has ended. The decisive fact that the novel is told from a homodiegetic perspective also aligns it with the memoir rather than with the bildungsroman, which is typically framed through the omniscient perspective of a third-person narrator. Yet, the copresence of bildungsroman and memoir does not make *Nervous Conditions* a hybrid text, or a narrative compromise, for Dangarembga rejects the requirements of both genres. The novel cannot be considered a memoir, since it remains open-ended, thus pointing to a future that



cannot be fully articulated, as I will discuss later. In this sense, its ending is framed as a beginning—differently from the memoir, in which narrative ending and full maturity tend to coincide. At the same time, it cannot be considered a bildungsroman, for the tensions that animate the protagonists are not resolved through the acceptance of social integration. As Katwiwa Mule has pointed out, Tambudzai's "self-knowledge" does not correspond to "self-actualization" (108).<sup>12</sup>

Because the formal and ideological requirements of both the bildungsroman and the memoir are shown to be inadequate to her narrative project, Dangarembga devises a different formal configuration that connects the restricted perspective of Tambudzai's first-person narration to the social totality that determines her trajectory. As I discuss in the next section, this operation is crucial for reframing the position of the postcolonial novel in relation to realism and modernism.

### 3. IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN

Whereas the traditional bildungsroman had succeeded in establishing a precarious balance between the unruly subject and the social institutions that could authorize her newly acquired normalcy, this resolution becomes impossible in *Nervous Conditions* because both the individual and the social have been subjected to the epistemic shift along the axes of race and labor brought by colonialism.<sup>13</sup> The female characters that Tambudzai identifies in the opening paragraph as the protagonists of her narrative embody the contradictions that determine the two central conflicts of this novel. The first is *between* the individual and the social. The second—and here lies the fundamental incommensurability between *Nervous Conditions* and the bildungsroman—is *within* individuality and sociality: the irruption of capitalist modernity and the imposition of colonial structures of power in fact generate an internal fissure that affects the psyche of the colonized subject as well as an external disjunction that produces the compartmentalization of the social space.<sup>14</sup>

If the partial flexibility of the social space had allowed the European bourgeois subject to thrive despite necessary limitations to individualism, the rigidity of the colonial order permits integration only at one condition: that the colonized subject accept and internalize her presumed ontological inferiority. This imposition is what Nelson Maldonado-Torres, starting from Fanon's notion of "the zone of nonbeing" (*Black Skin, White Masks* xii), has defined as the "coloniality of being," where *being* points to interrelated processes of dehumanization, while coloniality "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (243). It is through the figure of Tambudzai and Nyasha, who refuse—although in different ways—to be coopted into the structure of coloniality, that Dangarembga articulates, without fictionally solving, the contradictions that have redefined individuality and sociality during and after colonial domination.

Tambudzai is constantly facing different forms of power and social hierarchies that shape her self-perception. Destined to a life of domestic care and familial duties, she understands that the only opportunity to receive an education and leave the poverty of her household is provided by the colonial system. Her struggle is thus twofold: against the patriarchal society of her indigenous culture—the Shona



cultural and linguistic universe—and against a blind acceptance of colonial logic, which would overdetermine her social trajectory. As a woman and a colonized subject, she understands that her emancipatory journey depends on rigid limitations and that she needs to constantly negotiate her space within clashing cultural formations. Her Shona heritage represents a value system and a set of cultural practices to which she is emotionally attached. Yet, the colonial mission, as well as the education it provides, are equally desirable instruments of social emancipation. From the perspective of the colonized, education represents the colonial “gift of literacy” (Gikandi, “African Literature” 383). As Tambudzai explains: “Whites were indulgent towards promising young black boys in those days, provided that the promise was a peaceful promise, a grateful promise to accept whatever was handed out to them and not to expect more” (*Nervous Conditions* 106). What saves Tambudzai from the psychic collapse this set of conflicting forces might trigger is her successful attempt to narrativize her subjective reactions to them. Only by writing hers and her cousin Nyasha’s stories is she able to embark on her process of recovery from the “colonial wound.”<sup>15</sup> Her psychic and affective traumas, in being textualized, become also cognitively manageable.

On the one hand, Dangarembga, through Tambudzai’s self-narration, actively rearticulates the contradictions generated by the clash of multiple forces—Shona culture, colonial education, Christian evangelization, and gender oppression. On the other, she can do so because her narrator simultaneously occupies two positions. By framing a temporal and cognitive displacement—since the narrating subject is experiencing the narrative present but also reconstructing it retrospectively—the novel gives form to a kind of epistemic doubling, or what Louis Althusser termed “internal distanciation” (222). Tambudzai is, in many respects, organically part of the conflictual reality she describes; yet, she can also observe that same reality from a critical distance, albeit momentarily. Retrospective narration, borrowed as we have seen from the memoir, allows her to be partially removed from the reality she is representing. And through this kind of internal mimesis—in which she is both the subject and the object of representation—Tambudzai can make her positionality explicit while enjoying a precarious narrative distance.

The self-reflective process of potential recovery that Tambudzai experiences is impossible for her cousin Nyasha, whose nervous condition becomes pathological, as she develops anorexia nervosa. In this respect, Derek Wright has pointed out the importance of food in the articulation of anticolonial resistance in this novel: “If the intake of neocolonial and educational cultural values in *Nervous Conditions* is expressed through the consumption of food, then the rejection of this supply is, conversely, expressed through the inability or refusal to eat” (113). This seems right. And yet, Nyasha’s refusal of food, which can be seen as another symbol of colonial munificence, needs to be coupled with her rebellion against Babamukuru, her father. Indeed, Babamukuru is the prototype of the assimilated native intellectual who has accepted coloniality as a condition of being and capitalism as a socioeconomic opportunity. In his figure, patriarchy and Victorian morality converge: he is both a fervent Christian and the embodiment of the successful cooptation into what the narrator defines as “Englishness” (203). Had Dangarembga centered the novel on his social emancipation, Babamukuru would have embodied the symbolic resolution that the traditional bildungsroman required.

Nonetheless, Babamukuru remains a central figure in the novel. In this respect, crucial to my argument is the fact that, even within a narrative in which he is not the protagonist, Dangarembga reports Babamukuru's story as narrated by Tambudzai's grandmother. After describing the vicissitudes of Tambudzai's great-great-grandparents, Tambudzai's grandmother traces the prodigious trajectory of her son: from absolute poverty and wretchedness, Babamukuru has slowly progressed toward the socially and economically dominant position he occupies in the novel. This is Tambudzai's response to her uncle's secular parable:

My uncle became prosperous and respected, well enough salaried to reduce a little the meagerness of his family's existence. This indicated that life could be lived with a modicum of dignity in any circumstances if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules. Yes, it was a romantic story, the way my grandmother had told it. The suffering was not minimised but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way. (19)

Babamukuru's story is the potential bildungsroman Dangarembga inserts in a novel that rejects the ideological premises of this genre; "a romantic story," as Tambudzai aptly observes. The double imperative of enduring and obeying is rewarded by the colonial order through a gradual social promotion. Babamukuru, the protagonist of this nested bildungsroman, can only be a heroic figure in the fictional, romantic world of his mother's story. His nested narrative becomes fundamental to Dangarembga's reformulation of the genre: by embedding an idealized bildungsroman within a rejected bildungsroman, Dangarembga provides the reader with a possible path she could have taken and immediately forecloses it. In the course of the novel, instead of transforming the successful story of Babamukuru into a moral tale, she chronicles Tambudzai's and Nyasha's progressive estrangement from him. The precariousness of his dominant position is slowly revealed as the narrator questions the legitimacy of his authority, until she understands the impossibility of accepting the premises of his socioeconomic success: "I felt separated forever from my uncle" (64), she finally declares.

The progressive erosion of Babamukuru's despotic status as the historical embodiment of colonial cooptation, as well as Tambudzai's troubled journey to self-awareness, are thus mirrored, formally, by the rejection of a genre, the bildungsroman, whose verisimilitude was meant to confirm its replicability in the real world.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, whereas believability and realist narration were used, in traditional bildungsroman, to persuade the bourgeois reader that the symbolic resolution unfolding in the fictional realm was perfectly replicable in real life, Dangarembga refunctionalizes verisimilitude by bending it to the specificities of the colonial situation. This means that *Nervous Conditions* still exploits the believability of realist characters; yet, it does so to reverse the aim of the traditional bildungsroman, that is to say, in order to prove that a fictional compensation for the historical contradictions of the colonized space is not available.

But there are other reasons why realism is central to Dangarembga's narrative project. Both stylistically and formally, *Nervous Conditions* can be safely defined as a realist novel: written in a cleverly plain style, its plot progresses linearly, no physical laws are broken—there are no magical realist moments—and the narrative revolves around the social interactions of Tambudzai's extended family.

Furthermore, the narrating voice speaks in a serious, if not documentary, tone, and multiple dialogues are mimetically reported. Dangarembga's choice of realism can be connected to literary production during decolonization, in which mimetic representation was used to produce counter-narratives against the distorted depictions of the colonizer. Intended as instruments of anticolonial struggle, realist narratives were driven, as Gikandi points out, "by the imperative to account for the reality of the nation outside the institutions of colonial rule and its mechanisms of representation" ("Realism, Romance" 317). Yet, this imperative casts light on the narrative and political tensions behind *Nervous Conditions* only partially. Clearly, the need to recuperate the submerged history of a marginalized community is a significant political thrust for Dangarembga. And yet, her rearticulation of the realist code through the rejection of the bildungsroman and through a peculiar use of focalization demonstrates a specific interest in the internal fluxes of Tambudzai's consciousness, as well as in the fraught processes of her psychological evolution: in other words, the novel combines the mimesis of social reality with the representation of an idiosyncratic individuality, formally affiliating itself both to realist and modernist aesthetic modalities.

If realism allows Dangarembga to articulate the contradictions of a colonized society, modernism is used to draw attention to the individualized response of the narrator. Tambudzai's nervous condition is thus given form through a peculiar use of double focalization or, better, split focalization. The homodiegetic narrative, which coincides with Tambudzai's perspective on the narrative present she is experiencing, is continuously juxtaposed to her point of view from a later time—a time when, we are told in the first paragraph, she is writing the story we are reading. By oscillating between the perspective of the young Tambudzai—who embraces the colonial gift of education without questioning its premises—and the adult that is reconstructing her own story from a more informed position, Dangarembga replicates, formally, the fissure within the individuality of a subject in the peripheral-colonial space.

There are numerous instances in which the narrative is interrupted by Tambudzai's mature self, who comments on the naïve perception of the world she used to have. After hearing one of Nyasha's enthralling adventures, the narrator observes: "I was like a vacuum then, taking in everything, storing it all in its original state for future inspection. Today I am content that this little paragraph of history written as by Nyasha makes a good story, as likely if not more so than the chapters those very same missionaries were dishing out in those mission schools" (63). In this and in other passages, the two tensions that animate Dangarembga's writing are brought together: on the one hand, there is the imperative to produce a narrative that would counter mimetic-colonial discourse by exposing its religious indoctrination and refusing its *mission civilisatrice*. On the other, the explicit intervention of a narrating voice that corrects and reevaluates Tambudzai's youthful inexperience connects anticolonial critique to self-reflexive speculation. For the most part of the novel, the narrator reconstructs the world as it was perceived through the eyes of her younger self, and yet, she constantly reminds the reader that her narrative is a recollection, an autoanalysis in retrospect: "Looking back on those days now that I am more able to perceive implications ..." (121), she makes clear before detailing one of the family conflicts caused by her rebellious cousin.

This split focalization is decisive, for it allows Dangarembga to control, formally, the tension between self-interrogation (which coincides with her use of double focalization) and mimetic representation (the depiction of a social totality). Homodiegetic narration and double focalization point to the relevance of psychological introspection and internal fluxes—more in line with the modernist tradition—while mimesis of everyday life and of its sociohistorical background are drawn from the realist aesthetic. The literary tradition is therefore appropriated and transformed as soon as it encounters a locale that has experienced the restructuring of its own indigenous forms, value system, and cultural formations. Modernism is given new function by using double focalization as a way of signaling, on the level of form, the fractured individuality of the narrator. Realism is employed to connect the individual to her social environment. Yet, instead of portraying a pacified totality, the novel registers another fissure.

The social is in fact an equally split space to which Tambudzai is unable to fully belong, nor to fully reject. Her internal chasm is thus paralleled by an external compartmentalization, due to the combined impact of capitalist modernity and colonial occupation. In the romantic story in which Tambudzai's grandmother reports the vicissitudes of her family, she also describes the arrival of the "wizards," namely, the British settlers:

Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land. On donkey, on foot, on horse, on ox-cart, the people looked for a place to live. But the wizards were avaricious and grasping; there was less and less land for the people. At last the people came upon the grey, sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren the wizards would not use it. There they built a home. (18)

Here the historical background is imaginatively transfigured. Southern Rhodesia, before becoming Zimbabwe in 1980, owed its name to the British mining tycoon Cecil John Rhodes. Rhodes is still infamously remembered for leading the environmental destruction of Southern Rhodesia's territory, which had been colonially occupied by the British Empire and exploited for its wealth in mineral resources. Starting from the late nineteenth century, the indigenous population was thus forced to migrate to non-fertile land, triggering a series of processes—land grabbing, forced resettlements, mass displacement—that overturned and restructured Southern Rhodesia's society and economy.

However, and in spite her acute historical awareness, Dangarembga does not engage directly with these major historical events, but alludes to them obliquely through a kind of fantastic transfiguration, as in the story of Tambudzai's grandmother. Furthermore, in displacing the field of conflict from world history to a specific family nucleus, Dangarembga shows that the destructive consequences of forced resettlements into uncultivable land have not ceased to determine the organization of the colonial space, whose primary function is the perpetuation and transmission of economic and social hierarchies from one generation to the next.

In this respect, it seems fruitful to approach how this novel engages with capitalist modernization and the legacies of colonial occupation through the lens of the Marxian theory of combined and uneven development, which posits that, in its global expansion, capitalism has encountered—and managed to impose itself

on—very diverse forms of economic and cultural organization, creating systems of inequality by restructuring preexisting social relations.<sup>17</sup> When analyzed from this critical framework, *Nervous Conditions* can be seen as a paradigmatic example of how postcolonial fiction has been able to register the irruption of capital and the creation of peripheral spaces both on the global scale (Southern Rhodesia in relation to the British Empire) and within a specific locale (white settlements versus indigenous communities). This process is multiscalar because it creates economic cores within the boundaries of the nation; at the same time, the nation itself, from the larger perspective of the world-system, is peripheral. It is also destructively adaptive in its capacity to integrate the colonial order within preexisting structures of power. We can see a perfect example of this arrangement in this novel, in which the Shona traditional patriarchal system, when juxtaposed with capitalist restructuring of the colonial space, allows Babamukuru to achieve his hegemonic status.

Massive economic transformations and the creation of cores within peripheries are further registered by the mobility of Tambudzai, who goes from her native settlement to the mission school, from the misery of her household to the wealth of the city—the symbol of commerce and exchange value—where she goes to sell her mealies to the white settlers (*Nervous Conditions* 27). Yet, her movements are always limited by the compartmentalization of the social space. The mission school is attended only by natives, and when Tambudzai joins the multiracial “Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart” (186)—her highest educational achievement—she discovers that natives and whites are assigned to different rooms in the dormitory. Just as capitalist modernization has traced an economic and social divide between accumulating cores and destitute peripheries, colonialism has provoked another rupture along the axis of race. The two are not perfectly juxtaposable, as Tambudzai’s own mobility, as well as Babamukuru’s double belonging to the wealthy native intelligentsia and to Shona culture, prove. Nonetheless, this novel demonstrates that their effects are visible at the intersection of individual self-representation and collective, socioeconomic transformations and that the combined impact of capital and Empire is most lucidly registered, and most catastrophically experienced, in the colonized-peripheral space. In this sense, *Nervous Conditions* is best understood through the lens of realist representation because it stages the fraught dynamics of interaction between a subject and the evolving social totality to which she belongs, a prerogative that Lukács had famously attributed to realism (“Realism in the Balance” 47).

So far, I have suggested that Dangarembga’s active engagement with generic conventions and conflicting cultural traditions leads to the registration of how external forces have restructured both the social sphere of a peripheral space and the self-perception of its subjects. I want to conclude by briefly addressing how this novel turns its analytical lucidity into an active gesture of narrative imagination. Indeed, Dangarembga not only rejects a genre that has exhausted its ideological function, but, in reframing the interactions between individuality and sociality, she also addresses a central question of postcolonial fiction: how to imaginatively articulate the idea of collectivity.

We might recall here Fredric Jameson’s highly controversial article, in which he famously claimed that “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . *national allegories*” (“Third-World Literature” 69).<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the objectionable determinism of this formulation, it is still important to assess whether the social groups

portrayed by Dangarembga can be interpreted as allegorical representations of a national community—particularly since her novel was written in the years of decolonization—and whether these collectivities could be seen as participating in the imaginative process of nation-building.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, precisely because it exposes the individual and social predicaments that a fictionally homogenous nation could not solve, *Nervous Conditions* refuses to be coopted into a national-allegorical project. The rejection of the bildungsroman must be read, from this perspective, also as a contestation of the promises of the nation. Babamukuru, the potential embodiment of a pacified and stable national whole, represents the pitfalls of postcolonial authoritarianism; his *bildung* can occupy only the brief space of an unconvincing romance, for it implies the submission to a coercive power (whether the colonial occupier or the newly founded state), which the narrator forcefully rejects.

Since the symbolic resolution of the bildungsroman is strictly connected to the fictional construction of the nation, the psychic nervousness of the female protagonists and the formal instability of the narrative are meant to reject the national narrative of inclusiveness and integration. The collectivities *Nervous Conditions* points to are not stably formed or predetermined; instead, they are the outcome of complex negotiations and traumatic choices. They are plural and fraught with tensions, as Tambudzai's conflicted self-questioning demonstrates. *Nervous Conditions*, rather than idealizing a single and cohesive national body, explores the genesis of what *might* be thought of as a plurality of still unformed collectives. In doing so, the novel locates its ultimate horizon in the future, seen as an unfathomable possibility. Yet, a future that, in order to be articulated, needs to come to terms—narratively—with Tambudzai's past and with her society's still unhealed wounds. This is how the novel ends:

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began. (204)

Past, present, and future, instead of progressing linearly in a Benjaminian "homogeneous, empty time," are filled with "*Jetztzeit*" (261), the "nowness" of the past that permeates the historical present and the conceptual articulation of the future. Ultimately, *Nervous Conditions* proves that no collective futurity can be conceived without cognitively comprehending and textually processing "how it all began."

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## NOTES

1. Both Alice Walker's and Doris Lessing's endorsements of the novel appear on the back cover of the first US edition by Seal Press (1989). All the quotations from the novel will be from this edition. As Katrina Daly Thompson points out (49), Dangarembga was not the first Zimbabwean woman to write a novel; Shona writer Joyce Simango had published *Zviuya Zviri Mberi* in 1974. Yet, Dangarembga was the first to write one in English. Interestingly, Dangarembga herself was not aware of her predecessor—which is indicative of the very limited visibility of literatures written in indigenous languages, even among their native speakers.

2. Dangarembga was born in Zimbabwe in 1959, spent her childhood in England, and went back to Zimbabwe in 1965, where she continued her education in a mission school. The fact that she has negated any deliberate engagement with "European forms and experiences" (George and Scott 310), rather than invalidating my argument, displaces it on a—perhaps more decisive—unconscious level.

3. The question of peripheral realism is discussed by the Warwick Research Collective in their recent *Combined and Uneven Development* (ch. 2). In this paper, I employ the analytical framework they develop but depart from their claim that irrealism is better suited to the registration of the impact of capitalist modernity in peripheral spaces.

4. It was Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), who first demonstrated how the artistic production of imperial centers was premised on the suppression and silencing of the world's "heart of darkness" (on which the wealth of empires depended).

5. I am here using the Bourdieusian distinction common in the sociology of literature, according to which the literary field is divided into two opposite poles, large-scale cultural production and restricted production. For a useful introduction to the concept, see Sapiro, "Field Theory."

6. According to Bourdieu, the "space of possibles" is determined by the structural constraints of the literary field at a given historical moment and by the expressive potentialities of writers, their "margin of freedom." See Bourdieu 234–39. For an introduction to world-system theory, see Wallerstein.

7. For a more thorough analysis of this rather harsh debate, see the Warwick Research Collective 57–61. Although I agree with the collective's assertion that staging the antinomy between realism and modernism in absolute terms is unhelpful, I would not subscribe to the idea that there exists, as they call it, an "elective affinity" between peripherality and irrealist aesthetics (68).

8. This consideration is indebted to Moretti's rather controversial "Conjectures on World Literature." Yet, my approach differs from Moretti's in one crucial aspect: the role of preexisting cultural formations and of narrative and social forms in reshaping the inherited tradition is problematically neglected in his model. His implicit assumption is that the periphery lives in a sort of formal vacuum and can only provide content—"local characters" and "local narrative voice" (65)—to the supposedly stable form coming from the core. For an acute critique of Moretti's article, see Arac.

9. The structural impossibility of a conciliatory ending has been noted by Gorle (181–82).

10. The idea of symbolic/imaginary resolution was famously developed by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, where he writes: "The individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of real contradictions" (77).

11. I have profited from Jameson's concept of "generic discontinuity," which he employed for the analysis of science fiction. See Jameson, "Generic Discontinuities in Science Fiction."



12. Mule has been the first to notice that *Nervous Conditions* is “structured as a rejection of the conventions of *Bildungsroman*” (108). Yet, the main focus of his article is the relation between autobiographical writing and female identity formation. I am instead more interested in exploring how the cultural and ideological premises of a genre clash with extra-literary, sociohistorical determinants and how this friction shapes the specific structure of the novel.

13. For a thorough discussion of the synergies between labor and race in the exploitation of colonized subjects, see Quijano.

14. As Frantz Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The colonial world is a compartmentalized world” (3). Fanon was describing Algeria during the war for independence, in which compartmentalization was enforced with extreme violence. Even though in the world portrayed in *Nervous Conditions* a limited mobility is possible, the structuring principle of separation between colonizer and colonized remains effective.

15. See the recent project on colonial wound and decolonial healing by Mignolo and Vázquez.

16. For a discussion of the role of fictionality and verisimilitude in training readers to believe in fictional constructions, see the excellent analysis of Catherine Gallagher in “The Rise of Fictionality,” particularly when she writes: “Novels promoted a disposition of ironic credulity enabled by optimistic incredulity; one is dissuaded from believing the literal truth so that one can admire instead its likelihood and extend enough credit to buy into the game. Such flexible mental states were the sine qua non of modern subjectivity” (346).

17. For a discussion of this concept in relation to the contemporary debate around world literature, see the Warwick Research Collective (particularly ch. 1).

18. For a thorough critique of Jameson’s argument, particularly compelling since the author shares Jameson’s literary-critical and political approach (Marxism), see Ahmad.

19. Dangarembga finished writing her novel in 1984 (Dangarembga, “An Interview” 2013). The Republic of Zimbabwe was officially recognized on April 18, 1980.

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