

**Pedagogical memory and the space of the postcolonial classroom: Reading
Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*.**

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses issues of the mnemonic space of the literature classroom by interrogating a classic text of African women's writing, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) for the ways it speaks about education in 1960s and 1970s late-colonial Rhodesia. The article suggests that the novel reviews and critiques a number of memorial strategies that were crucial to the colonial educational system, thereby facilitating a reflexive application of the novel's concerns to the contexts in which it is often taught, that of today's postcolonial classrooms. The article seeks to place Dangarembga's novel in the context of its present moment, contemporary South Africa – that of the present critic's site of practice, both pedagogical and scholarly, and that of many of this article's readers. This present moment, in turn, is made up the many sites, successive and simultaneous, in which the novel's work of memory is being re-activated in the minds of students as readers and writers. Via a dialogue between the textual past and the pedagogical present, one which is often subject to critical amnesia, the article seeks to inaugurate a debate on the nature of pedagogical memory in the space of the postcolonial university or high school literature classroom.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's now classic novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is a *Bildungsroman* in every sense of the word: it is a novel of development and upbringing (*Bildung* in the sense of *educative* aspect of 'formation', from the German verb *bilden*) and it is a novel of education (as in the modern scholastic and *educational* sense of the German, usually as a cognate together with 'school', 'university' or 'continuing'). The novel thus undertakes a double project: namely, to commemorate and memorialize the development of the self through the institution of teaching and learning. That narrative development tracks the protagonist Tambudzai's trajectory from a rural primary school, via a mission school (whose Headmaster is her authoritarian uncle Babamakuru), finally to elite colonial convent school. These educational and institutional inflections of *Nervous Conditions* are usually acknowledged in the critical literature on the novel as peripheral contexts for the more central issues of the

condition of women and emergent feminist consciousness in Africa (Ahmad 2010: 51-83; Patchay 2003; Shaw 2007; Sugnet 1997) or of the process of incipient postcolonial state-formation which forms the political background to the novel (Sugnet 1997: 33-4). Such critical approaches are vitally informative and significant, central as they are for literary responses to the subsequent development of the postcolonial polity in a more general sense (e.g. Mbembe 2001).

However, they all demonstrate a curious form of forward amnesia. By forward amnesia I mean not an amnesia directed towards the past which formed the work's conditions of possibility, but rather, the future which forms the unfolding history of its public impact (its *Wirkungsgeschichte* [see Jauß 1970: 144-207; also Culler 1983: 47-79]) and the successive contexts of its reception. To that extent, these various contextualist readings elide a major part of the memorial work of the sort that the novel undertakes: namely, the moment of remembering itself in the construction of the mnemonic chain – which, concretely, means the remembrance of the text in the educational institution where the critic is usually located (for a single notable exception see Bravman & Montgomery 2000).

This amnesia is the mnemonic equivalent of other forms of elision that contemporary thought has become alert to: the elision, since the emergence of perspectival representation, of the observer's own constitutive location within the visual schema (Burgin 1996: 142-3; Foucault 2002: 7-9); or the elision of the influence of the observer or its proxy, the scientific instrument, in the gathering of scientific data (Planck 1936: 21-2). Curiously, however, literary history has rarely paid attention to this elision. Memory studies have taken on board the concomitant notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (e.g. Freud 1966: XIV, 148-50; XVII, 37-8 n6, 45 n1), thus posing the question of the re-contextualization of memory in the present, but only an often-derided facet of New Historicist scholarship, its tendency to use anecdotal evidence

from the critic's present (see for instance Greenblatt 1990: 1-9, 167, 173), has made this recognition a fundamental element of literary historicism.

Certainly most critics of *Nervous Conditions* take cognizance of the early-mid-1980s moment of the novel's composition (written in 1984, but published in London only in 1988), towards which the narrator implicitly gestures. But the constitutive role of subsequent respective moments of reception and critique which re-activate the text's narratorial voice in the reader's consciousness, and bring its mnemonic activity back to life in the work of critical commentary, are curiously absent from scholarship on the book.

This article seeks to rectify this strange form of critical amnesia, the forgetting of the critic's own present. Significantly, as has been shown by hermeneutics (Gadamer 2004), the only standpoint from which the historical past and its textual memorialization can be envisaged is that of the present. The hermeneutic relationship opens up a dynamic, two-way relationship between past and present which is central to the notion of readerly and pedagogical memory which I sketch in this article. I seek here to place Dangarembga's novel in the context of its present, contemporary South Africa – that of the present critic's site of practice, both pedagogical and scholarly, and that of many of this article's readers. This present is made up the many sites, successive and simultaneous, in which the novel's work of memory is being re-activated in the minds of readers. The multiplicity of these contexts, future in relationship to the past narrated by the novel and the past in which the novel was crafted, inevitably has a retroactive impact upon the past that the text commemorates, whether historical or textual. Significantly, recent notions of 'queer time' recognize that

time is an 'open whole' where the past can always produce new potentials for new futures, which in turn open up new pasts. . . . the burden of the past compels us to read what the past must have wanted to say, while at the same time we recognise that the

spirit of that wanting-to-say may not have been present to the past itself. (Colebrook 2009: 14)

Such notions of ‘queer time’ explore the ways in which the past reaches forward to claim the present in ways that the past itself cannot have imagined. In the more colloquial idiom of fiction, David Dabydeen imagines a reader who feels ‘intrusive and uncomfortable when I read [books from the past] because I was from a future they could not envisage’ (1993: 9). Yet, paradoxically, it is the present which compels the past to respond to a future necessarily beyond its horizon until the present revisits it.

The present I am speaking of here in my reading of *Nervous Conditions* is one that the novel itself *does* imagine, but can only do so retrospectively, that is, via the detour of the specific past that it describes: that of education. However, by virtue of the fact that it is a novel of education most often read in educational establishments such as senior high school (a number of our students have read it as early as Grade 9) or universities, the novel willy-nilly finds its own work of ‘educative’ and ‘educational’ memorialization extended *forwards* into the multiple futures of the ever-transformed contexts of new classrooms or lecture theatres.

In this article, I propose a reading of *Nervous Conditions* that focusses on the ongoing re-contextualization of the text in our own contemporary South African educational system, and more specifically in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 34) calls the ‘condensing and complexly representative space of the classroom’ that each of us inhabits at various points in her or his professional lives. In the pedagogical space of the literature classroom, I posit, a work of mnemonic reflection takes place which is actively anticipated and triggered by the text’s own work with memory, various aspects of which I will detail in what follows.

Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* stages its own work of narrativized memory from the very outset by ostentatiously foregrounding its double times, those of the narrated story

and that of the narrative discourse respectively (see Chatman 1978). The novel departs from this standard dual declination of narrative temporality, however, by adding a third temporal strand, that of the time of reading (see Bal 1997: 81-3). The (in)famous opening lines of the novel are striking in this respect:

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 the mere consequences of age. Therefore I shall not apologize 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. (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 1; emphasis added)

The narrative stages the moment of memory, and the constitutive mnemonic activity of 'recalling the facts as I remember them' (ibid: 1). That moment is dramatized by an anticipation of the standard autobiographical topos of the convergence of the narrated events and the process of narration (Currie 2007: 62), in the narrator's own words, 'the events that put me in a position to write this account' (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 1). Similarly, these chains of narrated events and processes of narration are rhetorically gathered up under the topos of 'feeling', in a disjunctive connection which contrasts feelings in the present moment of narration and the past narrated times. All these operations are standard strategies of the *Bildungsroman*'s double temporality, which necessarily contrasts the state of the protagonist in a genetic moment of youth to that of her or his state at a more mature moment closer to the moment of narrating (see for instance Köhn 1969; Redfield 1996; Selbmann 1994).

What distinguishes Dangarembga's narrative incipit, however, from this well-known dual structure, is the prominence accorded to a third moment, that of reading. This third moment corresponds to what Peircean semiotics identified as the third element in the

semiotic triangle, namely the ‘interpretant’ (Peirce 1974: 51). The aspostrophic address to the reader, active from the second line with the pre-emptive ‘Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as *you* may define it’ (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 1; emphasis added) appears at first glance to be coeval with the moment of narrative discourse. However, to the extent that the text will be opened and read again and again by many successive readers, this apostrophic address also participates in a permanently extendible chain of successive future moments. Thus Dangarembga’s text, from the very first line onwards, envisages memory as a complex process suspended between the respective dimensions of the past, present and the future, and between the narrative dimensions of story, narrative discourse and what one might term ‘reader discourse’.

It is the presence of ‘reader discourse’, foregrounded ostentatiously, albeit as a conflicted and controversial mode of discursivity, which, I posit, points us towards a mode of reading which is predominantly ‘presentist’ rather than historicist in its orientation (see for instance Hawkes 2002; Grady & Hawkes 2006). The ‘presentist’ contextual reading which I propose in what follows rests on the premise that the site where most of us, whether students or teachers, activate Dangarembga’s text, is the literature classroom or its cognates (the study, the office, the library). If the novel itself appears to foreground the domestic spaces adjacent to the school buildings themselves (Okwonko 2003), it is none the less in the latter that the text will be most consistently discussed and debated in today’s Africa. Curiously, however, classroom teaching is more conspicuous by its absence than by its presence from the critical literature produced under the name of research. Where pedagogy does figure as a topic within postcolonial literary studies, it is generally in connection with the ‘content’ of teaching rather than with its ‘form’ (Collet, Jensen & Rutherford, eds 1997; Joshi, ed. 1994). What is neglected in this concentration upon content is the ‘*process* through which knowledge is produced’, in other words, the ‘“how” . . . involved not only in the transmission or

reproduction of knowledge but also in its production' (Lusted 1986: 2-3). This neglect is all the more paradoxical that teaching constitutes the principal condition of possibility for most scholarly writing and publishing undertaken done by university-based academics. The postcolonial critic and theorist (and trainer of West-Bengali primary-school teachers) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance, has repeatedly reminded fellow academics that 'the transactions in the classroom' are the 'most practical aspect of our trade' (Spivak 1992: 299; see also Spivak 1993, Spivak 2012).

The reading and glossing of a literary text in the classroom is not marginal to the production of scholarly research on the same text, but on the contrary is its constitutive precondition in eminently material and even economic ways. For these reasons, I propose to elevate the consistently elided classroom to the status of 'presentist' context, focalizing my reading of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* via the perspective of the contemporary South African literature classroom (implicitly that of the university, though my comments could quite easily also apply to senior secondary classrooms). Such a reading does not impose an extraneous factor upon the literary text. On the contrary, the literary classroom in fact may be precisely that supposedly mundane context, that neglected 'supplement', which in fact is central in generating more prestigious aspects of higher education 'outputs'.

Narrative Dissonance and Memory

When Dangarembga's narrator makes such statements as 'It looked very sophisticated to me at the time. But looking back, I remember ...' (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 67) the text stages a temporal split between the self of the narrated action and the self doing the narrating which is a distinction inherent in all discursive utterances (Todorov 1973: 65-6). Such a divergence is the mainspring of all narrative creation, particularly so in autobiography, where these two selves ideally converge at the end of the text, as the narrator arrives at the moment

of deciding to begin the writing process which has culminated in the text just concluded. Such divergence is also typical for the *Bildungsroman*, which depends upon the distance between the two selves precisely to measure the process of ‘formation’. In Dangarembga’s novel, however, this structure is prised apart so as to vitiate any possible moment of convergence or reconciliation, as we will see below. In this way, memory becomes a differential process, in which the two selves and their narratives are posed against each other in agonistic fashion.

This exacerbated split is repeatedly foregrounded by the text so as to generate an ironical distance with regard to the project of colonial education. Thus the narrative’s two selves are constantly struggling against each other: ‘I was going to be developed in the way that Babamukuru saw fit, which in the language I understood at the time meant well’ (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 59). The term ‘development’ contains residual colonial elements continue to resonate in the postcolonial moment of the text’s narration, and of our own contemporary readings (Mustafa 2009, see also Ferguson 2006: 176-93).

At times, not only does the implicit split between narrated and narrating selves work to drive a wedge between the various aspects of the autobiographical subject in its memorial task, but other stylistic devices also amplify the dissonance. Just as the customary double temporality of the *Bildungsroman* is problematized by a third temporality, that of reading, so too the customary split between youthful narrated self and older narrating self is exacerbated by other stylistic devices. Thus the narrator says:

Consciously I thought my direction was clear: I was being educated. When I had been educated I would find a job and settle down to it, carrying on, in the time that was available before I was married into a new home, Babamukuru’s great work of developing the family. . . . these were the goals and this was how I was to reach them. (ibid: 154).

The overarching irony which governs this narrative, that is, the necessary schism between what the narrated self says (or thinks) and what the narrating self means in narrating those earlier thoughts, is intensified here by the use of a form of autobiographical Free Indirect Discourse. FID blends the voices of protagonist and narrator so as to produce a middle voice between Direct and Indirect Discourse which echoes the character's thoughts without the intrusive markers of narrative buttressing (the 'I thought' of the opening sentence of this passage). By making the two discursive voices converge in the above instance FID, Dangarembga's text stages a collision between their respective perspectives, thereby amplifying the conflict between them. In this way, she achieves the reverse of what FID is generally assumed to do: she increases, to the point of crisis, the ironic distance between their respective points of view. Thus the two vectors of narration, that of educational, developmental intentionality, oriented to the future, and that of narrative memory, oriented to the past, increasingly tear apart.

This chasm becomes definitive and irreconcilable at the end of the novel, whose conclusion has been recognized by many critics as highly indeterminate (Gorle 1997: 180-3; Okwonko 2003: 69-70; Sugnet 1997: 46-7). The strand of pedagogical critique which increasingly subverts the discourse of education as a developmental project for the colonial subject (Mustafa 2009) is projected back from the narrator's present stance to that of the protagonist's former self:

I was beginning to have the seed of a suspicion, no more than the 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.
(Dangarembga 1988/2002: 208)

The organic ‘seed’ metaphor generates its own temporality of growth. But between the final moment of the narrated events, and the moment at which the project of autobiographical writing is embarked upon, there lies a hiatus:

I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. . . . 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 process whose events stretched over many years and would fit another volume, but the story I have told here . . . [is the] story [of] how it all began. (ibid: 209)

The text pays lip service to the topos of the convergence of narrative progressions, by virtue of which the narrative of the lived life ends at the moment of the present writing, with the two selves meeting. But in fact, this story of ‘how it all began’ (ibid: 209) does not bring us up to the present moment of finalized narrating, nor even of the moment at which the protagonist *begins* to write (both presumably located roughly in the real world time of the early 1980s). On the contrary, the text stops well short of that point. The story-line breaks off at the moment the later process of narration begins to become *possible* (perhaps sometime in the real-world moment of the early 1970s), leaving untold the subsequent story of emancipation. This is the temporal chasm which yawns between the moment of dawning suspicion and the moment of narrating. This chasm is figured as a further, albeit as yet untold story: ‘another volume’ (ibid: 209).

It is no chance that this ‘other volume’ remains blank, for its temporal slot remains outside the text. (That this other volume did appear almost twenty years later [Dangarembga 2006] does not fundamentally change this point about the 1988 text). That temporal slot remains in a time which is that of the narrating – or that of the reading. This ‘other volume’ is supplanted by the ‘time-of-reading’ inhabited by the current reader or critic. That ‘time-of-

reading' is not a temporality of passive reception, but rather, one in which the reader (Barthes' infamous 'scriptor' [1977: 145]) must active constitute the narration, often in a highly non-linear mode, as it forms in her or his consciousness (West-Pavlov 2012: 91-2); the active character of this reception is all the more evident in the critic's or student's work of developing a meta-narrative which glosses and interprets the novel: 'every text is eternally written *here and now*' (Barthes 1977: 145). There are, as it were, two volumes under the one cover: that which was written by the author, and that which is to be 'written' by the reader, each with their specific temporalities. What then is the specific mnemonic temporality of the reception of a text (that is, of its 're-writing' through the acts of reading, discussion, commentary) such as Dangarembga's novel – and how might that specific mnemonic temporality look in the context of classroom teaching in post-apartheid South Africa?

Nervous Conditions and the Mnemonic Structures of the Classroom

Because the novel's subject is education itself, I suggest that the memorial process enacted in the novel via the temporal split within the narration can be replicated in the moment of its reading and analysis in class, as students meditate upon their own experiences of literary education and the meta-narrative narratives which sustain them (see Evans 1993). In other words, the third narrative time to which the text itself gestures, that of reading, may be also construed as a multiple, and by the same token, productive of critical thought. It is in the classroom that memorial narratives, arising out of those the text itself mobilizes, are created out of a dialogical split in the reflecting self in such a way as to offer, albeit tentatively, some suggestions for creating 'a new imaginary for the humanities' and offering some possible routes out of the much-discussed current crisis of those disciplines in South Africa and (Academy of Science of South Africa 2011: 57, 125-31).

In South Africa, almost twenty years after the end of apartheid, we look back to the racially segregated and massively hierarchical educational system of the pre-1994 period as a late-colonial residue lasting well into the postcolonial era. Two decades later, however, inequities appear to be rife within the system despite all the rhetoric of equality of access and gigantic efforts to dismantle the authoritarian pedagogies of the early era (Bloch 2011; Marais 2011: 322-33). Clearly our pedagogical contexts and their constitutive practices are possessed of their own innate, often invidious forms of memory. They are unable to forget, unable to ‘unlearn’ divisive educational modes (compare Soudien 2012). These mnemonic pedagogical modes inform and drive educational policy in the present, sometimes as the ‘other’ which must be banished from our contemporary practices, sometimes as a residual sedimented trace of the past, sometimes as a spectre which persists in persistently returning to haunt contemporary educational policies and structures (as Derrida’s references to South Africa now, in retrospect, seemed to have warned from the outset [1994: xv-xvi]).

In response to this situation, I would like to suggest two ways in which the text points towards pedagogical strategies in the classroom. The first is in the amplification, in the live dialogue which is the classroom, of the temporal schisms enacted in the novel’s narrative structure, culminating in critique. The second, is the integration of such schismatic protocols in a process which goes beyond critique and its corrosive but often nihilistic force, towards creativity, in a dynamic which ultimately may have much in common with that of narrative itself.

Nervous Conditions frequently has recourse to the topos of the developmental trajectory as progress to conceptualize the project of colonial native education to which the narrator is made party: ‘I was sure I was on the path of progress. I did not want to be left behind’ (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 200). This is a topos which certainly underpins the educational narrative of many of our students. One classroom strategy which I employ in

teaching Dangarembga's text is to collate *viva voce* examples students' own narratives of educational expectations and experiences, using them as living pedagogical material; out of this exercise, it becomes possible to create a textual counterpoint between the students' 'everyday texts' (compare Ehlich 1980) and that of the literary text. Some of those student narratives are inflected by notions of social improvement, others by ideas of acquisitive neoliberal entrepreneurship. Such narratives are malleable, however, and the experience of education will almost inevitably rework them. The classroom is one place where that narrative transformation may be reflected, with the help of refraction via another narrative, that of Dangarembga's split narrator Tambudzai. In other words, what such classroom strategies seek to set in motion is a dovetailing of two sets of educational narratives, one literary and one 'everyday' and student-generated, whose respective split temporalities may reciprocally inflect and transform each other in the process of reflective discussion.

In this respect it is significant that the topos of 'the path of progress' is fundamentally questioned by Tambudzai's discussions with her cousin Nyasha, whose ideas constantly contradict the mission-schoolroom rhetoric of docile learning:

If I had been more independent in my thinking then, I would have thought the matter through to a conclusion. But . . . I didn't want to explore those treacherous mazes that such thoughts lead into. I didn't want to reach the ends of those mazes, because there, I was beginning to suspect that I was not the person I was expected to be, and took it as evidence that somewhere I had taken a wrong turning. So to put myself back on the right path I took refuge in the image of grateful poor female relative. That made everything a lot easier. It mapped clearly the ways I could or could not go, and by keeping within those boundaries I could avoid the mazes of self-confrontation. (ibid: 118)

‘Self-confrontation’, something the narrator’s adolescent self strenuously avoids, is precisely what the text itself orchestrates. It is manifest in the conflict staged between the narrated self and the narrating self at the opening of this passage in the phrasing of ‘If I had been more independent in my thinking then . . .’ (ibid: 118). Such ‘self-confrontation’ is the essence of critique. What the self, in its mnemonic and temporal self-distancing through the work of dissonant autobiography, does, is the germ of the critical self’s role in society, and in particular the role of art in its critical refraction of societal norms (see Collini 2002). The core of Enlightenment selfhood, Siegel has suggested, is a temporal distance through which the self objectifies itself, and in so doing enhances its own status as subject. Memory plays a central role here by offering a succession of foils for self-construction (Siegel 2005: 33, 440). The model of cultural critique, which posits a synchronic relation of distancing from social processes and above all from the ideologies which seek to legitimize them and mystify their functioning (Zima 1997: 227) reposes upon the prior work of mnemonic self-distantiation. The activity of critical thinking thus anatomized is perhaps the among the core skills that university education, and in particular training in the social sciences, may impart to students in their role of citizens of the nation.

Such sentiments, however, have become so much of a common-place in educational thinking that their character as platitude may simply reveal how ineffectual critical thinking really is to cause change. We cannot dispense with the principle of critical thinking, but it may nonetheless be worth asking whether such notions, by virtue of their patently anodyne character within the political order, are merely in fact deeply complicit in the maintenance of the status quo:

The critique of text never actually transforms texts or even necessarily produces better, more elaborated and developed texts; not does it commonly change the opinion of adherents to the positions or claims elaborated in those texts. Critique tends to

generate defensive self-representations or gestures of counter-critique, which give the complacent reader a vague sense that one not need bother further with a position once it has been adequately criticized. (Grosz 2005: 2-3)

For this reason it is vital to pose the question of alternatives to the notion of critique, as theorists as diverse as Paulson (2001), Sedgwick (Edwards 2009: 107-14) or Latour (2004) have done.

What forms of mnemonic activity are enacted in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* which may be capable, via their role models of broader social practice, or as of triggers for debate, for provoking other modes of reflection in the classroom?

Let us begin with a negative form of mnemonic activity which functions as a counterfoil for other more positive forms: that of forgetting. Forgetting is identified by Nyasha, who in Dangarembga's text's personifies critique *par excellence*, as the central strategy of the colonial education which the protagonist so aspires to. Colonial education for a native elite, Nyasha, suggests

is a marvellous opportunity . . . to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others – well really, who cared about the others? (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 183)

The linear trajectory of progress is thus conceptualized as an artifice which depends upon the erasure of all the 'traditional' baggage carried by the native subjects that colonial education aims to reform. Amnesia, the failure of memory, is the operation which rarefies and streamlines the narrative of selfhood so as to make it conform to the linear vector of progress and development.

Against this topos of educational ‘dismemory’ (Morrison 1987/1988: 118) following the rarefied, impoverished vector of time’s arrow, the figure of Nyasha embodies a counterposed form of positive pedagogical mnemonic activity, one seldom beholden to the colonial education offered in the novel’s mission school. Nyasha is possessed of a ‘multi-directional mind’ and, in the words of her disapproving parents, ‘Her head is full of loose connections that are always sparking’ (ibid: 154, 74). Rather than the single trajectory of educational as a linear, accretive process, Dangarembga sketches here an alternative spatiality of learning which is non-linear in the sense of chaos theory. Such a learning trajectory produces unpredictable results in a manner which is coeval with the creativity of the natural, material world itself (Gleick 1988; Bennett 2010): the text stresses ‘Nyasha’s experimental disposition, her insistence on alternatives, her passion for transmuting the present into the possible’ (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 182). The model of memory that is implicit in this spatial figure (‘multi-directional’ ‘loose connections’) is that of ‘queer time’ (see Dinshaw et.al. 2007) which moves backwards and forwards, reworking the past in the light of the present, allowing the past to reach into the present in ways it could not have imagined so as to produce paradoxical mnemonic forms. Such forms are gestured at by König, Evans and Falk (2011) by the notion of ‘remembering forward’, by Glissant when he produces the notion of ‘a prophetic vision of the past’ (1969: 187), or by Malouf and Naipaul they evoke ‘ghosts of [or from] the future’ (Malouf 1986: 16; Naipaul 2002: 30). Such notions of ‘memories of the future’ disturb the linear, causal notion of time posited by customary concepts of memory, obliging one to think of the work of memory as inherently revisionist and constructivist. In more objectivist neuro-cognitive terms, future-cognition is constructed with the aid of a memory bank located in a precise neural site; that memory bank is constantly being revised on the basis of ‘future experiences’ as they become present, thus weaving the cognitive experience of temporality out of a fabric of ‘memories of the future’ (Ingvar 1985). These

notions of mnemonic ‘entanglement’ (compare Mbembe 2001: 14), whether philosophical, literary or scientific in tenor, all resonate with the ‘multi-directional’ ‘loose connections’ that Dangarembga poses against the colonial pedagogy of forgetting (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 154, 74).

The site of this form of learning is situated ostentatiously in opposition to the colonial school, outside its constructing walls: Tambudzai’s critical apprenticeship under the tutelage of Nyasha takes place largely, if not exclusively, in the girls’ shared bedroom. This form of learning is one in which the cognitive work and process of ‘queer memory’ underpin the business of learning, or more precisely, knowledge production. In brutal contrast, the metropolitan and even more so the colonial educational systems are posited on the principle of the student as *tabula rasa*, and literally so: in Camara Laye’s classic autobiography of a colonial childhood in French Guinea, education is epitomised by the topos of the blank surface waiting to be written: ‘The blackboard’s blank surface was an exact replica of our minds. We knew little, and the little we knew came out haltingly’ (1953/2010: 52). The intellects of colonized subjects are conceptualized as void of content, waiting to be filled by colonial knowledge.

Paulo Freire, also writing from a residual colonial situation, termed this the ‘banking’ notion of education founded on a notion of the learner as a conceptual void. ‘Banking’ involves a very particular mnemonic temporality: ‘The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable. . . . The student records, memorizes and repeats these phrases . . . Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the student to memorize mechanically the narrated content’ (Freire 1982: 45). This narration, in which teacher and students are frozen into subject and object roles respectively (ibid: 45) also freezes time by means of a fundamental amnesia. The students forget what they already know: ‘They call themselves ignorant and say the “professor” is the one who has knowledge

and to whom they should listen. . . . Almost never do they realize that they, too, “know things” they have learned in their relations with the world and with other men [*sic*]’ (ibid: 39). The ‘weak’ mnemonic work of rote-learning implies an epistemological terrain cleared of prior knowledge and its embedded, embodied memory. Once again, as Dangarembga’s Nyasha character says, such a pedagogical process is ‘a marvellous opportunity . . . to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that’ (Dangarembga 1988/2002: 183).

This form of amnesia is exemplified in the gradual elision of the intimate connection between labour and education in *Nervous Conditions*. This link between learning and production is evinced in the narrator’s grandmother: she ‘gave me history lessons . . . History that could not be found in the textbooks; a stint *in the field and a rest*, the beginning of the story, a pause’ [Dangarembga 1988/2002: 18; emphasis added]). If the narrative of educational development is initially ‘earthed’ in this literal manner (‘This was the plot I chose for my field’, says the narrator in a lapidary phrase [ibid: 20]), however, this connection to the enabling network of manual labour is progressively forgotten in the subsequent narrative of education. The narrator’s early determination to subsidize her schooling, against the resistance of her brother and father, by cultivating and selling her own mealies, contrasts starkly with her brother’s disdain for manual work. His attitude epitomizes the forgetting of primary conditions of production inculcated by an education which never the less depends upon those conditions of production. Prior, ‘grounded’ knowledge already possessed by the colonial student is discarded in favour of a *tabula rasa* sort of docile receptivity to metropolitan knowledge.

This form of educational amnesia as a basic pedagogical structure subsequently determines the static nature of education. The inherently dynamic character of the classroom, in which, ideally, teacher- and student-knowledge memories would interact with one another

to produce hitherto unknown knowledges owned by all the parties involved is reified into a replication of already-known facts. In this situation of stasis, ‘presentation [is] a (mere) supplement to inquiry’; this form of passive memory, which reproduces the already-known, embodies a more insidious amnesia, a forgetting of the fundamental reality that ‘every pedagogical exposition, just like every reading, adds something to what it transmits’ (Ulmer 1985: 162). What is neglected here is the ceaselessly productive character of teaching and learning: ‘Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men [sic] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’ (Freire 1982: 46).

Today: skills versus tradition ... and non-linear pedagogy

It is at this juncture that it may be salutary to contextualize this pedagogically inflected reading of Dangarembga’s Rhodesian/Zimbabwean novel in the specific locus of the contemporary South African university high school or classroom. It is significant that the respective contexts of post-1980 and post-1994 education reform in Zimbabwe and South Africa both display significant traits of authoritarianism and the pedagogical inculcation of forms of docile patriotic citizenship (Matareke 2011: 3), according to which ‘the people are the historical “objects” of a nationalist pedagogy’ (Bhabha 1994: 149). Within this context, the widespread phenomenon of visibly sinking levels of basic literacy skills, shrinking reading- and composition-competence, broader textual-analysis competence, and more disturbingly the atrophy of a general capability to make critical-compassionate-analytic judgements about one’s own society, render a transformative pedagogy urgently necessary. Yet creative resources are equally clearly there among young people, as the InZync Poetry Slams in Kayamandi township near Stellenbosch have revealed (Oppelt 2012a, Oppelt 2012b, Oppelt 2012c). Similarly, it has proved productive in my own teaching of the text to engage

students' prior knowledges, narrative skills, and the strategies they implement in negotiating tertiary education (not all of them necessarily critical or creative in a manner acceptable to the academy!) via discussion of and debate about Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. As *Nervous Conditions* is a narrative about narratives of *Bildung*, in all the senses of the word, as indicated at the opening of this essay, my own classroom practice itself involves an inaugural foray into student storytelling. Such 'hands-on' exercises seek to gather a sample of the narratives of school or university in which their own visions of the educational trajectory are encoded.

Such exercises offer possible ways, albeit limited to single groups of students, of repositioning the literary humanities as a live engagement with individual and collective narrative processes within the broader field of educational policy today. Such exercises may be conceptualized as localized attempts at reconnecting literary study with dynamic, creative resources available at ground-level but largely ignored by educational rhetoric. The current governmental rhetoric of education in South Africa, in the wake of the ill-fated 'Outcomes Oriented Education' paradigm, is contradictory. On the one hand a notion of 'skills' which is part of global alignment of higher education with the pragmatic demands of the neo-liberal market economy (Levidow 2002) evokes, slightly desperately, the curricular rigidity, the rote-learning, and the short-sighted utilitarianism of its forerunners. Thus post-OBE educational policy is revealed to be haunted by the paternalism of earlier eras, with the difference that the limited erstwhile tolerance for high-cultural niches such as the humanities has diminished considerably. On the other hand, the humanities in particular are given the narrow brief of exploring and rejuvenating structures of 'indigenous' and 'popular knowledge' which resonate with the revamped paradigm of the African Renaissance (Minister of Higher Education and Training SA 2011: 22, 34-6). Here we may detect an

invidious haunting by another discarded paradigm from the past. What do these contradictory demands mean for the mnemonic practice of classroom literature teaching?

Obviously, 'the traditions of popular education in the country' (ibid: 22) which the humanities are called upon to recuperate is a notion that must be defined, and its definition will be highly politicized, for such traditions may include contestatory and undocile processes. Remembering such traditions may activate protocols that conflict significantly with other tendencies, particularly those closely allied notions of market utilitarianism and national patriotism, within current educational policy. For 'indigenous' and 'popular knowledges' will combine both critique and creativity in ways that must, willy-nilly, produce unexpected results and previously unknown knowledges (see Stein & Newfield 2006) – if they are not contained by the potent seductions of consumerism and populism, an all too likely scenario, alas. None the less, such unruly processes may also emerge within the privileged forum of the university classroom in the ambit of literary form as an object of discussion and reflection among a group of students and teachers. For an engagement with the literary text in all its 'strangeness' (Lévesque 1978) implies a focussing, a distancing, a framing of practices of meaning-making (a critical, analytical aspect), in order to make new meanings (a positive, creative aspect). These, indeed, are precisely the elements which are constantly at work within the narrative strategies of Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*, and they are more broadly, the pedagogical phenomena which are so urgently needed in the contemporary literature classroom.

As Bhabha remarks, 'In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative' (1994: 145). In other words, the linear narrative of national development must be reiterated time and again so as to cement its precarious hegemony over more disparate memories and experiences of cultural belonging. Yet

performance, and in particular pedagogical performance, is unpredictable. Every teacher knows that, in flagrant contradiction of the teacher-training precepts of lesson-planning, no class ever goes quite as planned – and this is all the more so when a literary text, with its own potential to inspire debate, imagination, creativity, is the ferment at the core of the literature classroom. Thus, the two aspects of ‘national’ temporal narrative in its pedagogic manifestation will never present a neat or seamless match. This split within a ‘conceptual territory where the nation’s people must be thought in double time’ (ibid: 149) is isomorphic with the narrative split orchestrated by Dangarembga in the multiple diegetic temporalities of *Nervous Conditions*, and it is also constitutive of the literature classroom where this text is implemented as an Africanist classic. Exploring the text of *Nervous Conditions* with students is not enough, however. Ideally, textual reading should go hand in hand with an exploration, with students, of the narrative strategies and narrated memories of education they have as part of their extant repertoire of conceptual resources. Thus the pedagogical performance of a national identity, but also of more dispersed and contradictory students identities and histories, will necessarily depend upon and produce multiple and often incommensurable mnemonic structures.

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