Rethinking Missionary Colonization in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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The history of British colonialism in Zimbabwe dates back to 1890 with the colonizers' intrusion upon the Shona and Ndebele peoples. This was led by British businessman Cecil John Rhodes, who officially occupied the area in 1889. In his book on Zimbabwe's colonial history, Chengetai Zvobgo describes Rhodes as "an imperialist par excellence" whose major interest in the area was the existence of large deposits of gold in the territory (*History of Zimbabwe* 12). Having obtained political and mining rights from the British South Africa Company, Rhodes and his company set out to "administrate" the area then called South Rhodesia by appropriating land, labour, and material resources from indigenous peoples. This marked the onset of colonialism in Zimbabwe, which continued 1980. Like those of other colonizers, Rhodes's notion of administration was to use indigenous labour to support colonial businesses and lifestyles. Obtaining the so-called imperial charter to govern the land meant that Rhodes and his company of white "settlers" could requisition any land they desired. With the tactical support of the missionaries, they acquired 3,000 acres of land and fifteen gold claims (Zvobgo, *History of Zimbabwe* 15).

However, this history of systematic land theft is often ignored by European scholars. Such is the case, for instance, with German academic historian L.H. Gann, who was notable for his research in Africa. He refers to the obtainment of African land by Europeans as "*grants* of land" (32; emphasis mine), but what he does not make clear is the terms under which these lands were *granted*. He also does not explain whether the European "settlers" had the rights to *grant* land in that area, but he unapologetically declares that owning land in that area would "assure the Colony's future" (Gann 32). Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni discusses the colonial requisition of land in Zimbabwe in his article "Re-thinking the Colonial Encounter in Zimbabwe," in which he argues that appropriating indigenous land and labour enabled the white "settlers"

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to enjoy colonial privileges at the expense of local people. As for the African women, Ndoluvu-Gatsheni writes that they were doubly yoked under laws that subjugated them to traditional and colonial patriarchies (179).

Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a fictional renarration of this history to show the lasting negative effects of colonization and missionization on indigenous peoples in Zimbabwe. While the collusion between colonizers and missionaries has been addressed by historians like Zvobgo (see Kapenzi), Dangarembga re-presents it ironically through Tambu's and her grandmother's unofficial "histories" of Zimbabwe (*Nervous Conditions* 17). Early in the novel, Grandmother Mbuya tells the story of the "Holy and White Wizards," white colonizers and white missionaries, who form an unholy alliance in the pacification and domination of Zimbabweans. By portraying the missionization of the indigenous peoples as an indoctrination of the mind, which left the "natives" as token representatives of the "holy" beings, Dangarembga shows that the missionaries lulled the Africans into a false sense of belonging, making them ripe for European domination. Through critical evaluation, Tambu goes on to show the longterm adverse effects of missionization on "natives." Based on a close reading of Grandmother's and Tambu's tales, this article argues that the Holy Wizards/missionaries actively participated in colonizing the "native" in Zimbabwe. Indeed, Dangarembga's metaphorical use of white and holy wizardry arouses a feeling of incredulity at the way in which those colonizers jointly inveigled authority over Zimbabweans *as though by magic*. By "rearticulating" her story and the stories of others in her community, Tambu readdresses, criticizes, and subverts the effects of missionary colonization in Zimbabwe.

About *Nervous Conditions*: Autobiography, Magical Realism, and Decolonial Storytelling

Nervous Conditions is Tambu's autobiographical narrative of her struggle to acquire missionary (western) education in order to escape oppression and impoverishment. To a young Tambu, the income disparity between her nuclear family and her uncle's family means that missionary education is a path to economic and social progress. But having left her rural Homestead and gained access to the Mission where her uncle Babamukuru resides, Tambu begins to question her previous assumptions about the benefits of missionary education.[1] She observes that in the new spaces, the domestic oppression of women is complicated by the missionaries' subjugation of the position of women and by colour racism. Also, in her uncle's Mission home, scenes of domestic violence stand out clearly as part of the larger subjugation of the colonized local people. Tambu tells her story retrospectively, revisiting scenes from her childhood in an attempt to make sense of her situation as a colonized Shona female. Through her story, Dangarembga warns against the uncritical imbibing of missionary education,

including hegemonic languages and ideals.

By framing this story as a first-person narrative, Dangarembga seeks to address the "injuries" wreaked on indigenous people by missionary ideologies and education. But since no narrator "can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" (Butler 7), Tambu's "autobiography" is also interwoven with that of her community (Mule 106; Rico 78). She uses the avenue of her narration to show how her situation intersects with that of her other family members, especially the women, who are equally yoked under the missionary colonial regime. It is this intersection between her condition and that of others that lends credibility to her story, showing that it is not only a girlish narrative of maturity, but a direct criticism of missionary activities in Shonaland. According to Apollo Amoko, autobiographies "have provided important avenues for African writers to explore new ways of being in the colonial and postcolonial worlds" (197; Mule 95). They also mark "the death of the father as a symbol of stable, unquestioned, traditional authority" (Amoko 200). Tambu's narrative offers the possibility of the end of patriarchal authority. This is evident in how Tambu, Nyasha, and Maiguru, to some degree, defy Babamukuru and the missionary ideologies that underpin his position of supremacy.

By foregrounding Tambu's story with Grandmother Mbuya's "magical" tale, the novel also uses the form of magic realism as another mode of postcolonial resistance. However, *Nervous Conditions* is not a "proto-magic realist" story since, in the ordinary sense, it does not possess the so-called fantastical or supernatural elements that are normally attributed to magic realist stories such as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Amos Tutuola's *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts* (see Quayson 162; Warnes 3). But it can be read as "magic realism" in so far as its language and mode of narration offer "resistance" to dominant discourses on colonial and missionary history (Slemon 10). According to Slemon, in postcolonial studies "magic realism can be seen to provide a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity" (21). Similarly, Theo D'haen writes that the notion of magic realism may be extended to "ex-centric" voices which speak from the margin in order to displace the authoritative position of the center and "to create an alternative world correcting so-called existing reality" (194-95). In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu and Grandmother Mbuya, among others, represent such "ex-centric" voices seeking to subvert the preeminent position of official missionary histories.

By speaking about the potential for "magic realism" to portray worlds other than the hegemonic notion of the world, D'haen also highlights the contradiction inherent in the terms "magic/magical" and "realism." In his first chapter, Warnes discusses the tension in these terms, pointing out that "the term is an oxymoron: magic is thought of as that which lies outside the realm of the real; realism excludes the magical" (2). By my summation, the uncertainties or "vagueness" which Warnes remarks upon mainly lie in the fact that "real/realism" itself is multiple. One cannot assume that what counts for "real" or even "magical" in one system is the same in other sys-

tems. Quayson makes a similar argument about magical realism in African novels; although he proffers the "real" as a way to understand the "everyday," he also talks about the "porousness" of the term (164, 175). By extension, one could also speak about the "porousness" of stories or histories, given that each version of history or reality depends on who is telling it. Zimbabwe's missionary history, as we see in *Nervous Conditions*, becomes different when told from the perspective of the young Tambu. Even though not the focus of this article, it is pertinent to note that in the novel Tambu's version of reality even differs from her cousin Nyasha's. Thus, in one of her climactic scenes, the latter pronounces their "official" history falsehoods: "their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies," she cries to Tambu (*Nervous Conditions* 201).

If that be the case, it might be more precise to think of *Nervous Conditions* as "magical anti-realist" rather than "magical realist," in so far as it is presents colonization as "wizardry." I am using the notion of "anti-realism" as Alvin Plantinga explains in his article "How to Be an Anti-Realist." According to Plantinga, "anti-realism" is "the idea that objects in the world owe their fundamental structure-and, if they couldn't exist without displaying that structure, their existence—to our creative activity" (50). Going by his explanations, one could say that reality presents itself to us as we see or imagine it. This means that it is subjective and usually based on one's perception of objects, events, history, or the world. Therefore, where nineteenth-century missionaries emphasize that "God assisted them to bring light to benighted souls in far-away countries" (Kalu 1-2), Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* shows how Europe's "saving mission" resulted in a "hybrid" (post)colonial individual such as Babamukuru in *Nervous Conditions*. In the context of this novel, the much-acclaimed postcolonial "hybridity" potentially becomes the "native nervousness" that Jean-Paul Sartre discusses in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.[2]

Sartre explains that the status of being "native" results from the colonizer's unsuccessful attempt to "domesticate" or animalize the colonized (15). According to him, this produces a "beaten, undernourished, ill, terrified" person who is "neither man nor animal" (15). Following this line of thought, it is perhaps correct to state that this condition of being "native" or "nervous" can be likened to Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity. In "Signs Taken for Wonders," Bhabha posits that "hybridity represents that ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification" (162). Thus, the hybrid or nervous (post)colonized persons exist in an in-between state because of the colonizers' failed effort to completely "inscribe the colonial text" on their bodies (Bhabha 126). It is this situation of *nervous* incompleteness or in-betweenness, as Bhabha prefers, that Dangarembga captures in her novel.

However, where Bhabha's words signal a positive assurance in the thought that colonization, and the effects of missionization, are never complete, Sartre's, and Fanon's, writings cause us to question more closely the exact conditions of the colonized and the anxieties inherent in that "native" in-between state. As a reminder of how the

colonized got into the state of being "native," Sartre writes that the colonizer attempts to "reduce the inhabitants of the annexed country to the level of superior monkeys in order to justify the settler's treatment of them as beasts of burden" (15). Therefore, when one thinks of the colonial hybrid in Sartre's and Fanon's writing, the image that comes to mind is the depredated condition of the "native." It is safe to state that the ambivalence which Bhabha attributes to the "colonial presence" (150) is, in a more problematic way, equally an intrinsic part of the native presence. It is this latter, more negative, perspective on colonial hybridity that Dangarembga explores in *Nervous Conditions*. The novel shows that "colonial hybridity/nervousness" is a direct result of the interventions of missionaries or those dubbed the "white wizards," because it is through missionary education/indoctrinations that the colonizer attempted to "reduce" *natives*, like Babamukuru, to "superior monkeys."

Based on this general interpretation of the novel, the next part of this article discusses Grandmother Mbuya's unofficial missionary colonial "history" of Zimbabwe (*Nervous Conditions* 17). Adopting the form of a fairy tale, Grandmother Mbuya narrates an allegorical tale, which addresses the multiple systems of oppression that existed in Zimbabwe (*Nervous Conditions* 18-19). The mini-tale offers an indigenous woman's account of the earliest days of colonial and missionary incursion into their community and implicates both colonizers and missionaries in their colonization. Indeed, her story shows how, on taking over the land, the missionaries and colonizers maintained a three-way segregation of spaces for whites, natives, and women. The problem of segregation is addressed more closely in the last section, which focuses on Tambu's critique of Babamukuru as the head of the Mission. As she transits from her impoverished rural home to her uncle's affluent Mission home, she is progressively confronted with the limitations imposed on women by missionary educators. The education available to girls and women should provide an entry into the elite missionary world, but it does not because the missionaries designed "native education" to emphasize Africans' "native status" and domesticity for women. Ultimately, *Nervous Conditions* is a young girl's critique of a missionary-colonized patriarchal society in which western missionary education both alleviates and complicates the problems of the colonized.

Grandmother's Tale: The "White" and "Holy" Wizards

According to Grandmother Mbuya, the "white wizards" are political colonizers who appropriated lands from the indigenous people. She narrates this history as follows:

> Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land […] 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 that the wizards would not use it. There they built a home […]

> My grandfather, lured by the wizards' whispers of riches and luxury and driven by the harshness of the homestead, took himself and his family to one of their wizards' farms. Yuwi! Only to find that they had been enticed into slavery. But one day my grandfather managed to escape to glittering gold mines in the south, where good men were said to be quickly made rich. (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 18)

First of all, the word "wizard," with its religious overtones, immediately suggests that Grandmother's story resides in the world of magic, where it could mean "wise man," "philosopher," "sage," or "a man who is skilled in occultic arts" (*OED*). In a general sense, none of these ideas necessarily connotes evil. But in African contemporary usage, "wizards" and "witches" are not understood as neutral or genial beings, but are believed to be duplicitous people who use their magic to enchant and cause havoc. In the novel, the modification of that term with "white" further complicates the notion of wizardry or the magic it represents. Dangarembga/Grandmother may have done this to mark the foreignness of those settlers, but it is also meant to challenge the flawed idea that whiteness connotes good while black connotes evil, an idea that the missionaries propagated in Africa.[3] Whereas the "whiteness" of the wizards might suggest that they bring good and positive development, it is at a severe cost to the local people. Thus, using the doubly encoded term "white wizard," the text raises questions about the value and cost of missionary education and other colonial development to Africans. In a wider sense, it also raises questions about interpretations and how words can mean different things in varying contexts. Where "white wizardry" may infer good magic in some cultures, in Grandmother's story it forebodes doom.

Furthermore, when Dangarembga explains colonization as "white wizardry," with all the negative connotations of the idea, she suggests that, perhaps, the only way one can contemplate the violence of colonialism and imperialism is by looking at them through the lens of "supernatural" terms such as wizardry. In *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha alludes to "magical realism" as the "literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (6-7). Like Slemon and D'haen, he suggests the possibility of (post-) colonial people decentering authoritative voices and histories through language. Here, the discursive mode of "magical realism" lends Dangarembga the "literary language" to address the inception and mechanism of white colonization in Zimbabwe, not only through the language of the novel, but, as I further demonstrate, by revisioning and subverting (post)colonial ideas/history.

It is worthy of note that Grandmother narrates her story to Tambu while they are on their farm. Since this farm is the same "stony and barren" land where the colonizers had forced Tambu's family to inhabit, reliving that history in that place is a reminder that the actions of the colonizers forced this impoverished family to work an unfertile piece of land. Grandmother underlines this point by saying to Tambu: "'More work, my child, before you hear more story'" (*Nervous Conditions* 17). Her statement infers a direct link between labour and reward. In the light of their history, however, this is not the case because, as we know, their labour is not necessarily

rewarded. Grandmother's story shows that, having systematically taken control of the area, the intruders force indigenous peoples to toil for the colonizers who reap the fruits of indigenous labour.

The white colonizers also kill Tambu's grandfather, who reportedly "had not been a good man" (*Nervous Conditions* 18). Since Grandmother's tale is about her family's colonization, it is not a surprise that it does not end happily. And yet, her ironic tone begs the reader to reexamine the concept of the moral term "good man" as she uses it in her tale and, by extension, to wonder why Grandfather failed at the mines. It is possible that "good man" stands for "good worker" or "hard worker," as one may assume initially. However, given the context, it is more likely that "good man" is a critical reference to the colonial notion of a "good African," a derogatory term that colonialists used for Africans whom they forced into serfdom.[4] In colonial history, colonizers used other similar terms to denigrate Africans, such as "good nigger" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 35). Fanon explains that in the effort to further infantilize and dehumanize the "black man," the colonizer posed him as "a good nigger," meaning someone who was childlike and eager to serve the white master (35). He further states that, to the colonizer, this "good nigger" is in turn a "good slave, the faithful slave, the slavish slave [….] The-good-soldier-under-command, (and) the brave fellow-who-only-knows-how-to-obey" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 198, 103). In short, the white colonizer weighed the "goodness" or value of colonized Africans by degrees of servitude and slavery. It is plausible that the colonizers killed Tambu's grandfather because he refused to play the role of slave or rebelled against being colonized.

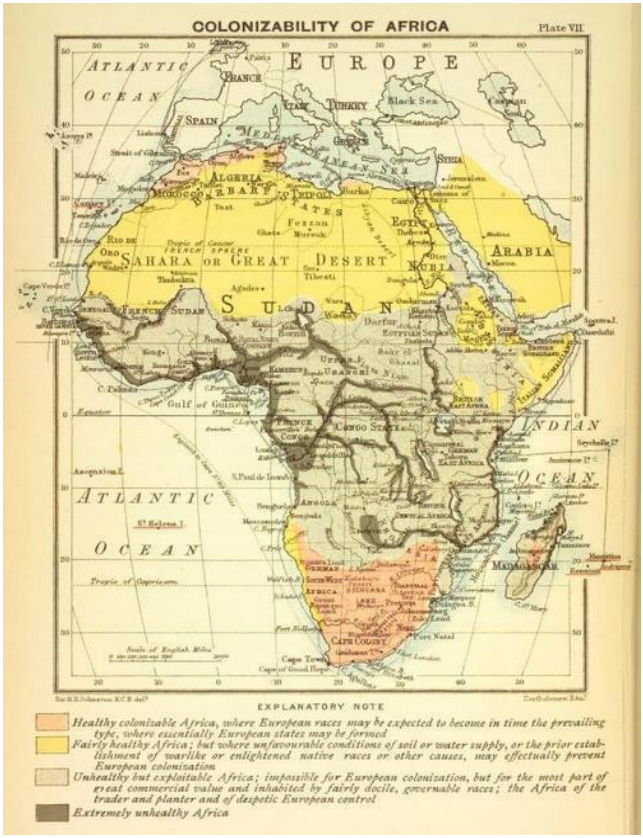
Sartre reiterates this point in his "Preface" to *The Wretched*; concerning the subjugated native person(s), he writes:

> Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language (colonial language) for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours. Sheer physical fatigue will stupefy them. Starved and ill, if they have any spirit left, fear will finish the job; guns are leveled at the peasant; civilians come to take over his land and force him by dint of flogging to till the land for them. If he shows fight, the soldiers fire and he's a dead man. (14)

In the opening parts of this article, I have already discussed the negative effects of the colonizer's failed attempt to dehumanize the "native." In addition, Sartre points out here that the colonizer killed the native person who refused to bow down to colonial dehumanization. His comments recall the violent aspects of colonization; it was not only a matter of "soft" indoctrinations through missionary conversion, education, and the like, but also involved the flogging, torture, and murder of those whom the colonizer deemed unwilling to play the role of "good" slave. In her short story "The Headstrong Historian," Chimamanda Adichie calls such moves "pacifying with Bullets." Amongst other things, Adichie's story, which she presents as a revisioning of missionary/colonial history, depicts the lasting negative legacies of missionary and colonial indoctrination on the (post)colonized.

Dangarembga's critical reference to the notion of "good man" or "good African"

also recalls the nineteenth-century colonial categorization of precolonial Africa into regions of usefulness to Europe. This was a scheme initiated by Sir Henry Johnston, a contemporary of Rhodes, and a participant in the so-called scramble for Africa. In *A History of the Colonization of Africa*, Johnston presents a Eurocentric map of Africa, which he produced in conjunction with J.G. Bartholomew, ranking the viability of African territories for colonization.[5] Later in 1967, Albert Memmi criticizes this colonial notion of "colonizability," contending that it enabled the invaders to depredate African territories (88). Furthermore, he adds that colonized persons who refused to be subjugated were killed. *Nervous Conditions* reiterates this history through Grandfather's struggle and eventual death at the hands of the white colonizers. However, as further discussed, the novel shows that because of continued missionary indoctrination, later generations of colonized Africans, such as Babamukuru, become more docile to serving the wishes of missionaries and colonials.



Johnston's and Bartholomew's map delimits African peoples, lands, and spaces into "healthy colonizable Africa," "fairly healthy Africa," "unhealthy but exploitable Africa," and "extremely unhealthy Africa" (Johnston Plate VII).

Upon Grandfather's death at the mines, Grandmother heard about other settlers on their land. According to her, although these are similar to the "white wizards," they are "holy" (*Nervous Conditions* 18-19). Based on her assumption about the "holiness" of the missionaries, she indentures her son, Babamukuru, to them:

> And then she heard that beings similar in appearance to the wizards but not of them, for these were holy, had set up a mission not too far from the homestead. She walked, with my uncle, with Babamukuru, who was nine years old and wearing a loin cloth, to the mission, where the holy wizards took him in. They set him to work in their farm by day. By night he was educated in their wizardry. (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 19)

The tale presents the image of an abjected Grandmother who is forced, by missionary/colonial occupation, to give out her nine-year-old child to the missionaries. Since the novel does not mention that those missionaries purchased farmland from indigenous people, we can only assume that, like the white wizards, they *appropriated* useful portions of African lands for themselves and made Africans work on those farms.

Though the young Babamukuru's time with the missionaries later enables him to access advanced educational opportunities, the novel also suggests that living with the missionaries was a form of enslavement. For instance, Grandmother reports that the missionaries exploited the young boy much as they exploited indigenous lands: "they (the missionaries) thought he was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way that land is, to yield harvest that sustain the cultivator" (19). The agrarian terms of her description emphasize the unequal nature of his relationship with the missionaries and his objectification as mere asset. Later in the novel, Babamukuru's daughter Nyasha makes a similar point concerning the manipulation of other young Africans by white missionaries. She says that "the new crop of educated Africans that had been sown in so many Sub A and Sub B night classes and was now being abundantly reaped as old boys returned to the mission to contribute by becoming teachers in their turn" (63). Clearly, the missionaries enslaved the students by deploying them first as farmhands and later as mission agents (*Nervous Conditions* 106-07). Thus, when Tambu later declares that the missionaries "were about God's business here in darkest Africa. They had given up the comforts and security of their own homes to come and lighten our darkness" (*Nervous Conditions* 103), her tone about the motives of those missionaries in Shonaland, Zimbabwe, is noticeably cynical.

Through Grandmother's tale, *Nervous Conditions* refutes the wholesale idea of missionary charity and selflessness in colonial Africa. Even though those missionaries provided charitable services such as western education, social reforms, and healthcare systems, they came at a high cost to the native people, because they appropriated indigenous workforces to build and maintain those services (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 177-78). Moreover, the indigenous people also paid exorbitantly for such amenities. In the case of children, the missionary educators framed the appropriation of labour as part of the children's learning. In fact, this issue dates back to the beginning of the colonization of Africa when English evangelical and social reformer T.F. Buxton proposed that the way to "save" Africa was to use African labour in growing crops for British/

European consumption.[6] It resulted in the exploitation of Africans and their lands.

Ultimately, by implicating the missionaries in colonial land appropriation and the abuse of indigenous labour, Dangarembga demonstrates their collusion with the colonial administrators. This is even apparent in the way Grandmother stresses the "holiness" of the missionaries as if to show that they are different from the colonizers. However, her ironical tone makes it apparent that the acclaimed difference(s) do not exist. Kapenzi further summarizes this point in the following anecdotal story:

> There was always the white missionary […] who arrived first with a Bible (or Bibles) in his hand and claimed to be a messenger of God. He would sweeten the hearts of the Africans with his message of truth, love, brotherhood and afterlife. Then he would request for a prayer […] during which he instructed the Africans to kneel and close their eyes. He would then make a long, long prayer and when he pronounced Amen, his fellow Europeans had occupied the Africans' land the Africans themselves had Bibles in their hands. (3)

Though Kapenzi's story is probably fictional, it uncannily captures the process of missionization-colonization in Southern Africa. It is the same sort of picture that Dangarembga paints by depicting both the colonizers and missionaries as "wizards." She re-narrates missionary/colonial history as a tale of magical realism/anti-realism; perhaps this is the only way that one can depict the absurdity behind colonial reasoning, in which one group invades another (with weapons) claiming that "they had given up the comforts and security of their homes to come and lighten […] (African) darkness" (*Nervous Conditions* 103). Grandmother's "history" arouses a feeling of incredulity at how the settlers took over African territories *as though by magic*; yet, her narrative shows that it was not magic or "wizardry" at all. Instead, it was a "matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations" (Mbembe, "Necropolitics" 25).

Overall, Grandmother Mbuya's tale(s) highlight the manipulability of history. As noted at the beginning of this article, the "porousness" of reality that Quayson discusses is a reminder that there are also many versions of (missionary) history; each version depends on the narrator and/or the narrative perspective. Tambu refers to Grandmother's tale as "history that could not be found in the textbooks" (*Nervous Conditions* 17); this is a way to distinguish her indigenous female voice from the official missionary/colonial histories mainly narrated from male and white perspectives. Her tale critiques those other known histories, while pointing to the possibility that they might be equally fictional. Tambu reinforces this point later in the novel; responding to Nyasha's critique of their official history, she states: "today I am content that this little paragraph of history as written by Nyasha makes a good story, as likely if not more so than the chapters those very same missionaries were dishing out to us in those mission schools" (*Nervous Conditions* 63). Her comment not only casts doubts on the veracity of missionary histories, but also highlights the changeable nature of those stories as well as the importance of continually revisiting them.

In that episode, Nyasha's and Tambu's scornful manners warn the reader to be cautious about accepting any "story" uncritically. D'haen reiterates this point, warning that although dominant groups "may have thought themselves as critical or subversive, […] their issuing from 'privileged centers' made their discourse suspect to those marginalized…by these same societies" (195). From this perspective, the history presented to Tambu and Nyasha would be "lies" because it is presented to them by the same people who colonized, missionized, and annihilated them (*Nervous Conditions* 201).

Tambu's Tale: The Intersection of Local/Missionary Patriarchies

Although Dangarembga is concerned with renarrating missionary colonial history in Zimbabwe, she is equally concerned about the connection between missionary activities and the effacement of women and children from existing narratives. In telling her story, Grandmother comments that "the white wizard had no use for women and children. He threw my grandmother and her children off his farm" (*Nervous Conditions* 18). This seemingly innocuous remark is a comment on the deliberate exclusion of women and children in missionary, colonial, and traditional spaces. And Tambu's story, which is the focus of the novel, is a way to reassert those missing voices. By closely examining her uncle Babamukuru as an agent of the mission, she shows that girls and women in her Shona community are subject to both missionary and traditional male patriarchal authorities.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Babamukuru embodies the intersections of missionization, colonization, and patriarchy. Backed with missionary education and economic success, he represents all that is powerful to other Africans. This is most evident in the domestic space of his home, where his patronizing attitude creates a master/serf relationship between himself and Maiguru, his wife. On the surface, they are the ideal missionary family, "intelligent" and "trained," but the situation in their home can only be read as an "allegory" for Zimbabwe's colonial situation (*Nervous Conditions* 14; Osei-Nyame 58). Tambu becomes aware of this issue during her first family meal at the Mission. She observes that Maiguru waits on Babamukuru with slavish devotion, all the while interspersing her comments with childlike nicknames such as "Daddy-dear," Daddy-pie," or "Daddy-d" (*Nervous Conditions* 80). Even when viewed in the most simplistic way, Maiguru is clearly overly anxious to cater to her husband's interminable needs. For his part, Babamukuru not only accepts the mindless adoration as his due, he scolds his daughter, Nyasha, for not adopting her mother's self-effacing attitude. Questioning Nyasha, he asks: "'What are you doing, Nyasha?' […] 'What about your mother, here?' […] 'Do you think she doesn't know what she's doing, waiting on me like this?'" (*Nervous Conditions* 81). In Tambu's descriptions, Babamukuru enacts this family meal as if he were a lord and his female

relatives his adoring slaves.

Babamukuru's mealtime is apparently not a period of family interaction. Rather, his forbidding disposition and pseudo gentility preclude any familial feelings at the family dinner table. The farcical nature of their mealtimes is reinforced by the extensive display of rich food and Babamukuru's conspicuous consumption of same. In short, his dinner table uncannily resembles the situation of obscene excesses that Mbembe describes in "Provisional Notes." Using a case study of early postcolonial Cameroon, Mbembe writes that the newly conscripted leaders in postcolonial Africa indulged in excessive behaviours, such as taking "a certain delight in eating and drinking" ("Provisional Notes" 9), and that they also relished maintaining authority over their subordinates. Babamukuru represents this class of leaders within his domestic space. During the meal, he feasts on assorted food from the "pile of plates" laid out in readiness for him while accepting the submissive adorations of his wife (*Nervous Conditions* 80). Essentially, Babamukuru is among the class of elite Africans about whom Fanon writes.[7] Fanon finds them potentially problematic because they are the quintessential colonial (missionary) mimics whom the colonizer reduced/attempted to reduce "to the level of superior monkeys" in order to govern through them (Sartre 15). Armed with missionary education/training, as well as greed, the "educated" Africans use their power to perpetuate the situation of colonization upon the suffering masses in (post)colonial Africa.

Later in *Nervous Conditions*, Maiguru reveals to Tambu that Babamukuru even appropriates her earnings, leaving her vulnerable to his whims (101, 172). Curious about her aunt's childlike dependence on her husband, Tambu asks the older woman, "'what happens to your money?' [….] 'The money that you earn. Does the Government take it?' [….] 'You could say that,' my aunt laughed" (*Nervous Conditions* 101). Although Tambu's mind goes to the oppressive colonial system in Zimbabwe at that time, Maiguru means her husband's oppressive domestic government. In short, the novel underlines the fact that Babamukuru treats his wife, Maiguru, the same way that the colonial government treats the colonized in that society.

Babamukuru's patronizing attitude towards his wife, especially, is a direct reference to an actual "customary law" that the colonial government established in Zimbabwe. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni states, the law stipulated that African women were to be considered "perpetual minors" (179). Ndlovu-Gatsheni also asserts that the Native department of the colonial government promoted this quasi-"customary law" in a bid to control African women. Thus, those women who were previously subjected to preexisting traditional patriarchy were forced under the dual umbrella of traditional and colonial authorities. This situation has persisted in postcolonial times; this is why Babamukuru's character, a symbol of these dual oppressive authorities, "resonates" in the novel (Da Silva 2).

Further to the above point, white missionaries in Africa also specified that the primary roles of missionary wives were reproduction and housekeeping. Though in pre-missionary/precolonial African societies, women had some level of socioeco-

nomic independence from men,[8] the missionaries offered girls and women a form of education that was tailored only towards domestic roles (Montgomery 230-31). Specifically, in the Zimbabwean context, Carol Summers writes that since the white missionaries considered African girls and women "less threatening than men" (80), marrying them off to the male converts was a way of ensuring the latter's docility. Therefore, those missionary wives, like Maiguru, were tools used by the missionary to ensure the proper administration of the missions and their husbands' advancement within the mission (Summers 90). Maiguru's case shows that western or missionary education, which could have served to free them from patriarchal bondages, further commodified them for missionary use.

As the family patriarch, Babamukuru's narrowminded views on women and marriage extend beyond his wife and daughter and include other women in his family. This becomes evident when he insists on staging a church wedding between Tambu's already married parents, Ma'Shingayi and Jeremiah (*Nervous Conditions* 146-47).

On the surface, Babamukuru claims that the church wedding will cleanse their family's sins because Jeremiah, his brother, had an extramarital relationship with his sister-in-law, Lucia (127, 146-47). But his claims are questionable, because rather than addressing the erring Jeremiah directly, he appears to partly blame Ma'Shingayi by implying that the affair happened because the two did not marry in a church. Tambu also speculates that Babamukuru is keen to have a church wedding because he wants to maintain his standing as the "good African" at the Mission (*Nervous Conditions* 165).[9]

Whatever the reason, the discerning Tambu is against the remarriage because she feels that it somehow obliterates her existence and family history. She describes her feelings as follows: "whenever I thought about it […] images of my mother immaculate in virginal white satin […] I suffered a horrible crawling over my skin, my chest contracted to a breathless tension and even my bowels threatened to let me know their opinion" (*Nervous Conditions* 149). Her words imply physical and mental revulsion over the proposed wedding. But more than the hypocrisy of one's mother in symbolic "virginal white," Tambu is repulsed because the suggestion of *virginity*, even in a metaphorical sense, questions her legitimacy and invalidates her and her siblings' existence (*Nervous Conditions* 162; Searle 59). Dangarembga highlights this issue to address a history of colonial missionaries delegitimating African marriages, and children, because they did not consider "native" marriages in concordance with missionary teachings. Based on actual Zimbabwean history, Zvobgo argues that the missionaries simply misunderstood the African system of polygamy and, moreover, desired to impose white European ideas of marriage on Africans (*Christian Missions* 105).

William F. Purcell also discusses this issue within the context of John Munonye's novel *Obi*, which is set in a fictional Igbo town in Nigeria. Addressing the missionary marginalization of African women, Purcell argues that those missionaries disbanded marriages that predated their entry into the African continent under the guise that

the marriages did not adhere to biblical teachings. This is debatable because the two main Bible passages on which Christian marriages are based do not expressly state that a marriage ceremony has to be in the form of a white European wedding.[10] In any case, as Purcell points out, the dissolutions of so-called heathenish marriages made a mockery of missionaries' notion of charity because it shows that they were concerned neither about the women nor the children. This is because the women were separated from their spouses and could not remarry while the children were deprived of fathers and often left uncared for. Through the incident of Jeremiah's and Ma'Shingayi's wedding, Dangarembga questions white missionaries' maltreatment of women and their interpretation of the Bible to Africans. Ultimately, the larger problem is that missionaries, and colonial administrators, invalidated any history or practice that predated their arrival in the African continent.

The imposition of a church wedding on her parents is a crucial turning point for Tambu because it forces her to acknowledge Babamukuru's role in mocking and effacing their past (*Nervous Conditions* 165). Prior to this time, much of her "narrative of escape" from poverty and subjugation (Mule 105) is hinged on her faith in her uncle who supposedly escaped colonial and traditional oppressions. With this incident, she realizes that he is very much like the missionaries who schooled him (Searle 59). The contentious wedding is a moment of truth that unmasks him as a missionary colonial agent and oppressive domestic ruler. Babamukuru's unmasking enables Tambu to regain her critical perspective (*Nervous Conditions* 164). According to Amoko, the attempt "to establish a firm distinction between her present, fully-formed identity and her old, naïve self" (206) is a common feature of autobiographical narratives. Due to her instinctive resistance to the missionary "wedding," Tambu reasserts her critical reasoning, enabling her to see through her uncle's/the missionaries' "saving" mission. Tambu's emancipation comes from realizing the importance of critiquing her uncle and the missionary/colonial system that underpins his authority.

Yet, despite his flaws, it is vital to also see Babamukuru and others as *victims* of missionary indoctrination.[11] His stance on Jeremiah's and Ma'Shingayi's marital state, for instance, is informed by his missionary education, which does not consider traditional Shona marriages to be valid. Like many missionary-educated Africans, he has been converted to the view that African traditions are "black," meaning sinful and inferior to white European traditions (*Nervous Conditions* 150). As noted above, this was a key nineteenth-century missionary message to Africans, a flawed and prejudiced indoctrination that has continued to influence the self-perception of some postcolonial African Christians (see Werbner). Recognizing this fact, Babamukuru's daughter Nyasha correctly interprets it as a colonization of the mind. To Tambu, she says: "it's bad enough […] when a country gets colonised, but when the people do so as well! That's the end, really, that's the end" (*Nervous Conditions* 147). As such, Babamukuru is not completely a figure of power, but also inhabits a "compromised position" in his world (Osei-Nyame 59). He is burdened by the system he serves and consequently suffers the form of "nervous conditions" that Sartre identifies as a

symptom of the colonized "native."

Conclusion

Nervous Conditions is a critique of missionary activities in colonial Zimbabwe. As the title of the novel implies, it explores the precarious conditions of missionized and colonized people, especially girls and women, in a predominantly male world. According to Osei-Nyame, the novel clearly engages with Fanon's "representation of what a politics of nationalist resistance must constitute" (61). In this case, the resistance is through the art of storytelling and retranslation of existing missionary/colonial histories. This is presented early in the novel through Grandmother's fairytale-like "history," which arouses the reader's disbelief at the thought of a group invading an Other in order to "civilize" that Other. It is not a romantic tale but a horror story about land theft, enslavement, and the mass murder of indigenous peoples.

Tambu takes over the narration from her grandmother to show the lasting problems of missionization and colonization. From a female perspective, she shows that the male subjects are more advantaged than the females. Thus, Babamukuru, who is backed by his twofold authorities of community and mission, represents an unyielding force aimed at keeping girls and women like herself subdued. While Tambu is the autobiographical narrator, hers is a communal voice highlighting the varying problematic circumstances of other colonized African women and how they redress their individual marginalizations. According to Amoko, the autobiographical narrative form provides "avenues for African writers to explore new ways of being in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. By telling stories of individual passages from childhood to adulthood, the authors critique the past and present and offer alternative futures" (197). Dangarembga positions her postcolonial critique as both Tambu's autobiography and Grandmother's fairytale of magic and wizards; as Slemon would say, this is in order to "transmute the 'shreds and fragments' of colonial violence and otherness into new 'codes of recognitions' in which the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized […] can again find voice" (21). Through these stories, Dangarembga criticizes missionary and colonial histories in Zimbabwe and emphasizes the importance of retelling history as an act of demissionization and decolonization.

Notes

1. I will capitalize "Homestead" and "Mission" to signal their symbolic meanings as artificially constructed spaces signifying native lack and missionary/colonial affluence.

2. In the famous "Preface," Sartre writes that "the status of 'native' is a *nervous condition* introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*" (19).

3. See Opata's chapter "Angels Are White, Devils Are Black" in *Ekwensu in the Igbo Imagination*.

4. Dangarembga ironically uses "good African" in the novel to denote later generations of colonized Africans, like Babamukuru, trained to take on missionary/colonial responsibilities (*Nervous Conditions* 107).

5. See the illustration.

6. Kalu discusses Buxton's proposal to "save" Africa through trade, agriculture, and missions (81-82; cf. Chamberlain 19). Babs Fafunwa contends that it was ideas such as this that instigated the tripartite notion of "Commerce, Christianity, and Colonialism" (meaning "Bible, Business, and Bullet") (Fafunwa 74).

7. See "The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness" in Fanon's *The Wretched*.

8. In *Nervous Conditions*, the women exercise degrees of authority, including Tambu's aunt Tete (who is a Patriarch) and the strong-willed and independent minded Lucia. Other non-fiction works that discuss this matter include Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters* and Obioma Nnaemeka's "Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries."

9. See the discussion of "good man" in the previous section.

10. See Gen. 2:21-24 and Mark 10:9 (*NKJV*). In both cases, the Bible speaks about "joining" rather than a ceremony.

11. Dangarembga also explains that, though Babamukuru is the traditional/missionary patriarch, he is equally "in a position of powerlessness" in his colonial society (Petersen 345).

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