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The symbolic image of braces that are placed on the teeth for correction
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Moving Worlds

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On the Back of a Hyena: Depression and the (Post-)Colonial Context in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*

AMY RUSHTON

Reading for mental distress in Tsitsi Dangarembga's classic novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), is well-trodden territory, particularly focused, as it has been, upon Nyasha's disordered eating.¹ Clare Barker reminds us that multiple 'nervous conditions' are evident throughout the narrative, complicating 'diagnostic boundaries between the normal and the pathological', and encouraging 'critique of the processes by which healthy bodies and psyches are rendered unhealthy and endangered'.² To date, however, relatively little attention has been paid to the depressive, dissociative tone and behaviour of Tambu, the narrator-protagonist of *Nervous Conditions* and its two sequels, *The Book of Not* (2006) and the recently published *This Mournable Body* (2018).³ Yet it is Tambu who controls the narrative in all three novels, a narrator who, as Dangarembga stated in 2004, 'may not have been psychologically contorted when she was fourteen [but] definitely is now'.⁴ In this article, I argue that *This Mournable Body* unleashes a specific mental distress that has been building within Tambu since *Nervous Conditions*: a severe, chronic depression cultivated by ongoing colonial oppression within 'free' Zimbabwe and its intersecting racial, gender, and economic inequalities.

In exploring the disruptive potential of mental distress in *This Mournable Body*, I find that Frantz Fanon proves to be a productive corollary. This is not surprising perhaps given that it has long been common practice to discuss Dangarembga's work in dialogue with Fanon. The title, *Nervous Conditions*, after all, is inspired by the English translation of Jean Paul Sartre's controversial preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*.⁵ More significantly, the recent publication of Fanon's previously inaccessible remaining work – speeches and lectures, alongside plays and academic papers – further strengthens and adds new dimensions to the epistemic bonds between these two canonical writers. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon observes that 'successful colonization' is characterized by 'a regular

and important mental pathology which is the direct product of oppression'.⁶ Note that this pathology is not characterized by fear but by a kind of calm; for Fanon, successful colonization prevails over a *subdued* community. In postcolonial studies – particularly in the humanities – we tend to, understandably, focus on the traumatic effect that life under colonialism inflicts upon subjectivity. Yet it strikes me that Fanon's work draws attention to the subterranean disquiet and distress that takes a psychological toll. When Fanon speaks of the warped 'consistence, coherence and homogeneity' established within the colonized world and how oppression 'depersonalizes' the individual, it is difficult to ignore the parallels with the *long durée* of chronic depression's banal, often dissociative experiences.⁷ As Ann Cvetkovich observes, the typical characteristics of depression – silence, weariness, and numbness – are *perfect* conditions for the perpetuation of oppression.⁸ Depression is not only an 'affective register' of societal discontent but also 'one that often keeps people [from] really noticing the sources of their unhappiness'.⁹ Contemporary depressive subjects struggle to see the reasons for their unhappiness or distress beyond themselves; messages reinforced by a neoliberal society and bio-psychiatric model tell us that the fault lies within us and not to look beyond ourselves. Cvetkovich is referring specifically here to a contemporary North American context, but the parallels between depression in a neoliberal capitalist world and the twentieth-century colonial context are not only striking but, I would argue, part of the same historical lineage.

Of course, there are inevitable problems when referring to depression in a colonial context. Writing at a time of ongoing colonization across Africa, Fanon reminds us that colonialism is not only concerned with political, geographic, cultural and ideological domination but also *psychological* domination. For Fanon, if the aim of psychiatry is to reconcile patient to situation, then this is impossible in a racist society, absurd in the colonial context, and undesirable for a decolonizing society. There is a twin violence at work: the Eurocentric origins of the psychiatry transported to the majority world, and the impossible conditions for recovery, which usually means conforming to white, European logics of 'success'. China Mills, for example, has urgently drawn attention to the contemporary construction of depression among other mental 'illnesses', and to how psychiatry, 'a colonial legacy in many parts of the global South', has served to propagate 'new and continued forms of oppression' by controlling subjects via diagnosis and treatment.¹⁰ My intention here is not to diagnose or read for depression in *This Mournable Body*; I contend

that Dangarembga's third novel mediates depressive states-of-mind as an *affective* psychological and physical exploration of a violently oppressive colonial – and postcolonial – world. Tambu's increasingly depersonalized narration is reminiscent of Fanon's observations of the alienated and dissociative psychological condition of the colonized subject – particularly by the third novel.

Who are 'you'? Tambu's progress

Published across a thirty-year period, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not*, and *This Mournable Body* document the life of Tambu from adolescence to middle age. Considered a classic of postcolonial fiction and one of the most widely taught Anglophone African texts, Dangarembga's first novel follows Tambu from her home in a rural homestead in Rhodesia to her uncle's home, where she is permitted to be educated after her elder brother unexpectedly dies. Although desperate for further education, Tambu finds that the opportunity brings neither peace nor satisfaction. Her disquiet is further emphasized by her cousin and agetate, Nyasha, who is quick to point out the hypocrisies and contradictions of social advancement in a colonized world. The sequel, *The Book of Not*, picks up where *Nervous Conditions* leaves Tambu: at a Catholic boarding school, where Tambu finds herself in a tiny minority of black students. Unlike the first novel, *The Book of Not* sees the political realm creeping into Tambu's world as the fight for independence impacts the school girls. After a promising early academic career, Tambu's determination is steadily crushed by the injustices inflicted upon her, such as being denied the school prize in favour of a less-deserving white student and, in her career in an advertising agency, when her work is credited to a white male colleague. *The Book of Not* ends with Rhodesia becoming Zimbabwe and Tambu finding that her supposedly post-independence world does not offer the opportunities she expected.

This Mournable Body confirms suspicions that things are not well with Tambu. Once again, it begins immediately after the previous novel's events. Tambu is unemployed, having resigned from her copywriting job, and in need of cheaper accommodation. Her distress spirals in a world where her blackness and femaleness are further undermined by the restricted opportunities for employment and advancement in Zimbabwe. Oscillating between, on the one hand, extremes of anger and enjoying witnessing (and then perpetrating) violence inflicted on young women and, on the other, retreating to her bed and tangled thoughts, Tambu has concerns that she 'will start thinking of ending it all'.¹¹ Instead, she

endures a mental and emotional collapse that leads to her being admitted into hospital care and then released under the supervision of Nyasha, who has returned from Germany with a husband and children in tow.

The changes in Tambu's psychological character are emphasized in *This Mournable Body's* choice of narrative perspective: the first person 'I' narration of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* shifts to the second person 'you', thus implicating the reader in Tambu's thoughts and behaviour. This narrative shift not only heightens Tambu's dissociative state of mind but also circles back to the first book. As we know, the title, *Nervous Conditions*, is derived from a section of Sartre's controversial preface. In the preface, Sartre argues why Fanon's work is important for a European readership by attempting to convey the viewpoint of the oppressed 'natives' under colonial rule:

Europeans, ... Fanon explains you to his brothers ... If I were them, you may say, I'd prefer my mumbo-jumbo to their Acropolis ... [Y]ou've grasped the situation. But not altogether, because you *aren't* them – or not yet. Otherwise you would know that they can't choose; they must have both. Two worlds ... they dance all night and at dawn they crowd into the churches to hear mass; each day the split widens. Our enemy betrays his brothers and becomes our accomplice; his brothers do the same thing. The status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*.¹²

While the binary distinction between 'colonizer' and 'native' is, rightfully, more complex in Dangarembga's trilogy, Sartre's troubling assertion that the 'nervous condition' of the colonized subject is *consensual* provides an important lens through which to view Tambu.¹³ Caught up in a world shaped by white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy, Tambu's anxiety is fuelled by the impossibility of equilibrium: as the trilogy continues, Tambu's mental distress unravels as she confronts the reality of the colonized and then post-independence world she lives in. No matter how hard she strives, Tambu's being black, female, and African forms multiple barriers to her access to education, money, and status. Tambu's willing attempt to succeed in an inequal and unjust society dooms her to psychological collapse.

Aside from the notion of anxiety as a key component of colonial oppression, Sartre's preface mirrors a crucial formal shift in *This Mournable Body*: in his insistence on addressing the reader as 'you', Sartre attempts to bridge a gap of experiential understanding but, instead, perpetuates the othering distance between the presumed European reader and the silent African subject by reinforcing the oppositional binary.¹⁴ However, Tambu's subdued presence and, later, dissociative voice in her own narratives allows

Dangarembga to reappropriate the othering, dissociative perspective created in Sartre's preface. Compare the opening lines, first, from *Nervous Conditions* and, second, from *This Mournable Body*:

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 ...¹⁵

There is a fish in the mirror. The mirror is above the washbasin in the corner of your hostel room. Still in bed, you roll onto your back and stare at the ceiling. Realizing your arm has gone to sleep, you move it back and forth with your working hand until pain bursts through in a blitz of pins and needles.¹⁶

The direct, assertive retrospective narrative has now been replaced by an unreal, dissociative perspective, a narrative process that began in *The Book of Not*: the second novel opens with an ablated leg arcing through the air before landing in a tree, the circumstances of the image being unclear and surreal.¹⁷ The limb, in fact, belongs to Netsai, Tambu's younger sister and a guerrilla soldier in the war of independence. Tambu is witnessing her sister's lifechanging, and near-fatal, injury caused by Netsai's stepping on a live explosive as she heads back into the bush from their village. By *This Mournable Body*, Tambu does not even seem to be controlling the narrative perspective in the novel's opening lines: after the first-person accounts of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, it is jarring to no longer be 'hearing' from Tambu but to be embodying her – especially during such a tumultuous and disconcerting narrative.

Although *This Mournable Body* marks a shift in the intensity and narration of Tambu's mental distress, her seemingly depressive behaviour is consistent across the trilogy. There are clues in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* that Tambu is undergoing mental distress, although the more explicit incidences are observed by her in other characters.¹⁸ Tambu's own distress is largely characterized by lethargy and stasis – which does not make for the most dynamic action. One of the reasons I think the depressive quality of Tambu has not been subject to critical scrutiny is that depression is, frankly, not very exciting nor dramatic. Furthermore, the representation and interpretation of depression is also, arguably, less legible within the critical frameworks most frequently applied to *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. It follows then that Nyasha's explicit hybridity and self-professed cultural conflicts are more straightforward to analyse alongside established ideas associated with postcolonial criticism: Tambu's cousin readily articulates her own 'nervous conditions' within

the first novel and the reader is able to satisfactorily ‘diagnose’ her various disorders. Such a reading strategy is not inherently misguided: indeed, the theoretically referential quality of Nyasha’s distress is one reason why *Nervous Conditions* endures as a useful and popular text for teaching. However, Tambu’s own turmoil is equally significant, albeit more slippery in its meaning – and necessarily so.

As previously stated, my intention is not to ‘diagnose’ Tambu as a chronic depressive; rather, I am exploring the potential of depression as a critique of colonialism and its legacies, as opposed to, say, a reading that prioritizes traumatic theories. Throughout *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu’s own inner turmoil is heightened whenever she cannot occupy herself: ‘there were things I was not supposed to be thinking of, and the thoughts would creep back in ... leaving me anxious and sleepless without knowing exactly why’.¹⁹ By *This Mournable Body*, Tambu becomes increasingly weary, her time devoted to suppressing ‘feelings of doom’ while sitting on her bed, staring out of the window.²⁰

As Cvetkovich suggests, depression is frequently characterized as a sense of impasse, of feeling ‘stuck’, and ‘that things will not move forward due to circumstance – not that they can’t, but that the world is not designed to make it happen or there has been a failure of imagination’.²¹ The slowing of moments and lethargy associated with the depressed body appear to be a consequence of the stasis of the depressed mind. I do not mean that the mind is inactive; rather, that the depressed person cannot psychologically nor physically move beyond their present.

The sense of impasse with depression is important because physical stasis is a key part of colonial control, a symptom of the banality of everyday violence. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon conveys the lived experience of the colonized subject – the alienation from self and community – by presenting the colonial world as one in which the ‘native is a being hemmed in’:

The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression.²²

Here, Fanon makes clear the relationship between the somatic empowerment of physical and psychological freedom and the pervasive, insidious effects of living in a colonized environment, particularly the segregated settler colonies of Algeria and Zimbabwe. The restrictive, controlled environment of the colonial world provides the perfect conditions for the mind to experience a failure of imagination, denying

even a discernible glimmer of liberation on the horizon. Depression is a logical response to the colonial world's deep, unjust entrenchment of inequality.

Of ants and Njuzu: Dissociation

The lethargy and stasis associated with depression do not have to mean passive acceptance of the colonial status quo. In *Nervous Conditions*, young Tambu's one moment of rebellion against her benefactor uncle is in her refusal to leave her bed and attend the legal wedding ceremony he enforces on her parents, an event which causes her deep shame at her parents being forced to submit to a public act that, essentially, confirms Tambu's hitherto 'illegitimacy' and feels like a mockery of her immediate family.²³

Tambu's lethargy becomes a recurring pattern from *The Book of Not* onwards: however, her dissociation of consciousness and bodily self in *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body* is no longer an act of rebellion against others but rather a form of self-harm. Tambu finds herself unable to sustain her younger self's levels of ambition and motivation in the face of her increasing exposure to racism in a society built upon white supremacy. In *The Book of Not*, her comprehension of the racism restricting her social progress is not fully realized. By the time of *This Mournable Body*, she is able to identify her time at the Catholic boarding school as the defining moment of her 'metamorphosis' from the determined young girl of *Nervous Conditions* to this ground-down, subdued woman of the present:

how awful it is to admit that closeness to white people at the convent had ruined your heart, had caused your womb, from which you reproduced yourself before you gave birth to anything else, to shrink between your hip bones.²⁴

Not only does confrontation with the colonial world lead to a 'failure of imagination' for Tambu, it also produces a failure of self-creation, of identify formation. The womb, a space of creation, becomes a space of failure.

Tambu's sense of alienation from herself and others is heightened by her mental and emotional states taking the form of ants, hyenas, fish and snakes. As she unpicks her memories of encountering and taking on the lessons of white supremacy, Tambu is increasingly beset by ants crawling around and over her. Whenever ants appear in *This Mournable Body*, it is never clear to Tambu nor the reader if the ants are material or imagined. What *is* apparent is that ants are symbolic of Tambu's uncomfortable, intrusive thoughts; even her thoughts are removed from her, depersonalized and manifested as swarming insects. When she wakes up

on the street, hungover from a night out with Christine, the niece of her landlady and a former comrade of Netsai's from the liberation struggle, Tambu notices '[a]nts and tiny spiders' scurrying around her 'in indignation', before 'trek[king] over [her] body'.²⁵ Due to her actually lying on the ground, outside, it is possible that these insects exist; however, as her hungover, exhausted state allows her critical and self-loathing thoughts to occupy her mind, Tambu continues to find the insects on her body and starts to see the ants within her lodgings.²⁶ As '[t]he ants file with you, past you, and into you',

[y]ou panic at this symptom that persists into relative sobriety. ... In dread you traverse your room. Even as you lower yourself onto your bed, you know it is not your intention to engage with the things that must be faced. The insects advance up the bed's legs and into the covers the moment you thud onto the mattress.²⁷

Even her own emotions and thoughts appear to be separated from her inner and bodily selves. At Nyasha's home following her breakdown, Tambu notices her uncle's old desk, and is prompted into self-reflection, struggling to fathom why, unlike herself, 'Nyasha's peculiarities do not prevent her from achieving'.²⁸ As Tambu reflects, she sees an ant running across the desk, and is 'suspicious that it has crawled out of [her] imagination' due to the insect being symbolic of her intrusive thoughts. Checking, she closes and opens her eyes, and finding 'it is still there, on urgent business', decides that she 'will be like the ant': 'You do not yet know how, but come what may, you will focus on the prize until you possess it.'²⁹ Tambu here attempts to change the significance of the ant: rather than being a manifestation of her own reeling narrative and alienated self, she chooses to interpret the ant as symbolic of industriousness and single-minded determination. Her young self, essentially. This interpretation does not last long: a few pages later, Tambu squashes an ant which leaves no physical trace on her finger.³⁰ Even before the symbol of her rediscovered determination can be fully realized, she unthinkingly obliterates it.

Ants are only one of a few animals associated with Tambu's dissociative, depressive state. Although Tambu's distress shares the recognizable characteristics of what is frequently recognized as depression, *This Mournable Body* adds further contextual layers to her experience. In other words, Tambu's depression is reminiscent of conditions diagnosed and 'treated' by European psychiatric discourse, yet there are also connections to existing, culturally specific ideas of (un)wellbeing due to spiritual interference. In the novel's opening, it is possible to read the 'fish in the

mirror' as a hallucination, thus heightening Tambu's dissociative sense of self: 'the fish stares back at you out of purplish eye sockets, its mouth gaping, cheeks drooping as though under the weight of monstrous scales. You cannot look at yourself'.³¹ The uncanny appearance of the fish that is both Tambu and not Tambu is reminiscent of the *njuzu* in Shona mythology (the Shona being Tambu's people), 'a water spirit which sometimes has human head, arms, and torso and a fish tail', 'usually pale in complexion with long, straight hair'.³² The *njuzu* features in another classic Zimbabwean literary text, Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger* (1978), where Marechera names the spirit 'manfish' due to its human-like appearance.³³ Although the *njuzu* is 'usually an ambivalent figure, with a capacity for extremes of good and evil', Marechera's manfish is 'an evil, disruptive creature'.³⁴ At its most threatening, the *njuzu* is known to 'inhabit deep pools and seize children', destroying families.³⁵ Most significantly, Grant Lilford suggests that, in Shona literature, the *njuzu* functions as a 'catalyst' for 'social disorder and conflict ... underscoring and exacerbating existing conflicts'.³⁶ As *This Mournable Body* opens, Tambu recognizes the *njuzu* in the mirror as being both herself and yet *not* herself:

You pad away from the washbasin to pull your wardrobe door open. The fish bloats to the size of a hippopotamus in the oily white paint that covers the wardrobe's wooden panelling. You turn away, not wanting to see the lumbering shadow that is your reflection.³⁷

At the beginning of the novel, Tambu-as-*njuzu* overwhelms her sense of self and, as in Marechera's *The House of Hunger*, the *njuzu* signifies disruption. Tambu-as-*njuzu* foreshadows the disruption to come: chiefly, the violence she inflicts upon herself and others.

Riding hyenas: Violence

Alongside ants and the *njuzu*, Tambu's depression is characterized by a further non-human counterpart, one that also has connections to Shona lore. Like the ants and *njuzu*, the hyena is a complex manifestation of distress that is both bound up with Tambu's sense of self and yet also threatens to destroy her. In *This Mournable Body*, the hyena's laugh becomes a terrifying sign of Tambu's distress at its peak, erupting when her sanity threatens to break apart completely. In the second part of the novel, Tambu awakens in the psychiatric ward of a hospital with the following thoughts:

Now you understand. *You arrived on the back of a hyena.* The treacherous creature dropped you from far above onto a desert floor ... *You are an ill-made person. You are being*

unmade. The hyena laugh-howls at your destruction. It screams like a demented spirit and the floor dissolves beneath you.³⁸

Hyenas have significance in southern African folklore as witches' familiars; David Lan explains that witches travel at night, 'rid[ing] on the backs of hyenas'.³⁹ A person may become a witch by being 'involuntarily possessed by the *shave*, or non-human spirit, of the hyena'.⁴⁰ Tambu's statement that she 'arrived on the back of a hyena' implies that she recognizes something of the witch about her condition, yet the hyena is also 'treacherous' as it has dropped her wilfully. The ambivalence of the hyena's significance to her condition denies Tambu, and the reader, a straightforward reason behind her distress: the hyena's agency – as suggested by treachery – suggests that witchcraft cannot be the sole reason for her distress.

That Tambu sees her interior and exterior selves as external creatures suggests that she understands herself as barely human, barely a person. In the midst of her psychological ordeal, she claims that she is simultaneously 'an ill-made person ... being unmade', a never fully formed person who is now unravelling even further.⁴¹ In her view, along with a family, an education, and a society that has failed her, Tambu is confronted with the realization that she has somehow failed to 'make' herself into a useful and productive person. Without the perception of success or illusion of possible attainment, the little sense of self she possesses further dissolves. The hyena laughs because it already knows that Tambu cannot succeed in a world that is designed to obstruct the social advancement of a young black woman. The hyena knows because the hyena *is* Tambu: '[t]hey do not know what it is to struggle with the prospect that the hyena is you, nor how this combat marshals in the task of finishing the brutish animal off, while ensuring you remain alive yourself'.⁴² From experience, the frightening aspect of severe depression is one's awareness that, even during bad episodes, extreme self-loathing thoughts are both out of our control and yet emanating from us. Even when we can recognize in the moment that internal criticisms are plainly false or a warped version of a truth, in the same moment such falsehoods and half-truths still convince us. Severe depression is parasitical and contradictory:

You feel you are creeping over the edge of a precipice and that this cliff beckons you; worse, that you have a secret desire to fall over its edge into oblivion and that there is no way to stop that fall because *you are the precipice*.⁴³

Tambu's experience captures the paradoxical, entangled nature of acute distress. She is scared of the hyena, yet she *is* the hyena, just like she cannot

stop her fall because she *is* the precipice, barely separating herself from oblivion. In this section of the novel, Tambu is simultaneously victim and perpetrator.

Tambu's connection to the disruptive *njuzu* and the 'brutish' hyena emphasizes how the assumed characteristics of depression may manifest themselves in specific culturally situated ways in oppressive contexts. Indeed, in Tambu's world, the violence of the everyday produces a different kind of violence associated with psychological distress. Rather than the self-violence or suicidal ideation more readily associated with depression or melancholia, Tambu projects her anger onto the world, eventually lashing out with disastrous consequences. Tambu's psychological distress erupts as violence against others, rather than the self. In *This Mournable Body*, her decisive mental 'break' begins with her beating a school pupil about the head, so severely that she causes the girl to become deaf in one ear.⁴⁴ That the target of her rage is a young woman is significant, both in relation to her entanglement with the hyena *shave* and the *njuzu*, and how this circles back to Tambu's story across the three novels. A person can be transformed into a witch by being possessed by the *shave* of a hyena, and in Shona lore, '[w]itches kill people, including their own children'.⁴⁵ Similarly, the *njuzu* are associated with the stealing of children, as aforementioned.⁴⁶ Lan suggests that in the case of witches, '[e]nvy is the motive most commonly ascribed, either envy of the rich by the poor or of the fertile by the barren'.⁴⁷ Throughout the trilogy, Tambu's envy of others is a recurring trait: she envies her elder brother, her cousin Nyasha, her classmates at Sacred Heart – particularly Tracey, who then ends up as her colleague and eventual employer. Whereas envy helped to drive her previous sense of ambition, by the conclusion of *The Book of Not* Tambu understands that her efforts bring her no closer to the economic and professional success she craves. In *This Mournable Body*, her disappointments have no outlet except to sink her into resentment with the 'question of who can and cannot, who does or does not succeed, return[ing] to echo ominously ... Once more, you hear the hyena laughing as you drift off to sleep'.⁴⁸ Tambu's envy, along with her self-loathing, transforms into an anger that will lead to violence.

The correspondences underlined between Tambu's psychological state and the political situation in Zimbabwe are significant. Events in *The Book of Not* appear to promise a new dawn, and the alleviation of the gendered and racial injustice of the colonial world. Yet the eruptions of overt violence in the second novel are directly linked to Zimbabwe's anticolonial moment: Netsai losing her leg, the parental deaths of (white)

schoolmates, and Babamakuru's spinal injury due to a stray bullet during independence celebrations. This does not surprise since we know from Fanon's work that the colonial world is one defined by violence. However, Fanon's understanding of violence is much more nuanced: violence is banal, commonplace, normalized. As he points out,

The colonial regime is a regime instituted by violence. ... But the violence ... is not only a violence perceived by the spirit, it is also a violence manifested in the daily behaviour of the colonized towards the colonized: *apartheid* in South Africa [etc]. ... Colonialism, however, is not satisfied by this violence against the present. ... Violence in everyday behaviour, violence against the past that is emptied of all substance, violence against the future, for the colonial regime presents itself as necessarily eternal.⁴⁹

The violence of colonialism is not a problem of the past, as Fanon makes clear here; colonialism is embedded within the fabric of any society upon which it stamps.

Although Tambu cannot always articulate injustice beyond its direct relationship to her own experience, she is aware of the suffocating entrenchment of racism and sexism that are exacerbated by colonialism. Tambu's frustration at her inability to 'progress' comes to a head in the third novel, fuelling her anger which turns outwards to focus upon the younger generation and their perceived advantages. Unhappily employed as a high school teacher, Tambu bitterly notices that her 'pupils are all born frees' (born at, or near, the end of the war for independence), who 'expect more of the world than you ever dreamed the planet contained'. Their confidence 'ignites a smouldering resentment, a kind of grudge' within her.⁵⁰ One may expect the target of Tambu's eventual outburst to be Esmerelda, since she is a student who embodies the confidence and assuredness Tambu begrudges the younger generation. In fact, Tambu's internalized violence is unleashed upon the head of Elizabeth, 'a meek girl' whose parents are struggling to keep up with rent, never mind school fees.⁵¹ In other words, Tambu may be lashing out externally but the target of her violence appears to be herself: Elizabeth is symbolic of Tambu's younger, determined self, before she was crushed by the racism and misogyny that obstructed any chance of success.

Tambu's violent act is horrific but there is an inevitability about her lashing out. From an early age, she has been discriminated against due to her gender and her blackness. What is the 'rational' response to realizing that society is rigged against your very existence? At the end of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu-as-narrator recounts: '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.⁵² By *This Mournable Body*, Tambu *knows* what is feeding her various nervous conditions, making the *njuzu* bloat ever larger and provoking the hyena within to cackle. *This Mournable Body* reminds us that depression need not be ‘silent, weary, numb’ but may also be ‘loud, agitated and intensely felt’.⁵³ Depression can be manifested and expressed in ways disruptive to societal norms, rather than simply being restricted to an individual, personal disruption.

A conclusion: the road to recovery

Dangarembga’s Tambu trilogy offers no concrete, actionable ‘solution’ regarding how to decolonize the depressed mind. But there are gestures towards what it might take for alienated subjects to survive in the colonial world. *Nervous Conditions* and *This Mournable Body* both feature a public ceremony involving Tambu’s mother, both of which result in Tambu confronting her ethical boundaries. In the first novel, it is the forced wedding ceremony of her parents that causes Tambu to rebel by refusing to get out of bed. In *This Mournable Body*, it is another faux-‘traditional’ ceremony back in her home village, a ceremony that requires the participating women to be semi-naked. Tambu is part of an ‘eco-tourism’ company and has been asked to organize this sham ceremony to entertain clients. Her mother, understandably, becomes overwhelmed by embarrassment and disrupts the performance. The chaos and fallout leads Tambu to resign from the company. But what is surprising in this instance is that Tambu confronts the shame she feels and wishes to be reconnected with her family and wider homestead community. In a few whiplash paragraphs, Tambu is *becoming* reconciled and integrated within the community she has tried desperately to get away from. Her dissociative self appears to become less fragmented when she decides to become a more active part of her community:

[Christine] says, your education is not only in your head anymore: like hers, now your knowledge is now also in your body, every bit of it, including your heart ... This is the small first step toward maintaining your knowledge in the location of which Christine spoke.⁵⁴

At the conclusion of *This Mournable Body*, Tambu’s mind and body appear to be on the way to union. This belated ‘dis-alienation’ of Tambu’s sense of self is not necessarily ‘freedom’ but is a gesture to a recovery of selfhood. The trilogy embodies what might be identified as Fanon’s ‘essential aim’, according to Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young: ‘namely, to think and

construct freedom as *disalienation* within a necessarily historical and political process'.⁵⁵ With its second-person narration and the culminating events of the novel, *This Mournable Body* destabilizes the trilogy's focus on the individual, underlining Fanon's argument that 'colonialism has not simply depersonalized the individual it has colonized; this depersonalization is equally felt in the collective sphere'.⁵⁶ The importance placed on the return to 'the collective sphere' at the end of the trilogy adds to the subversive potential of depression in a colonial context. Whether or not Tambu continues her somatic education towards liberation of the mind and heart is a process that looks likely to remain 'off the page' for the reader. For us, what it means to decolonize mental illness is an ongoing and continuous process in our world. May the hyenas and black dogs release us from their grip, so we can see the historical and political systems which feed them.

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NOTES

1. An example of the critical attention devoted to Nyasha, particularly to reading her disordered eating, is evident in her being the centre of many of the essays in *Negotiating the Postcolonial: Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*, eds, Ann Elizabeth Willey and Jeanette Treiber (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2002).
2. Clare Barker, *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: Exceptional Children, Metaphor and Materiality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 66.
3. Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* ([1988]; Banbury: Ayebia Clarke, 2004); Tsitsi Dangarembga, *The Book of Not* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke, 2006); Tsitsi Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2018).
4. Dangarembga, 'Interview with the Author', in *Nervous Conditions*, p. 209.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface' to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington ([1961]; London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 7–26.
6. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 201.
7. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 237.
8. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2012), p. 12.
9. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, p. 12.
10. China Mills, *Decolonizing Global Mental Health: The Psychiatrization of the Majority World* (Hove and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 8, 9.
11. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 37.
12. Sartre, 'Preface' to *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 11, 12, 16, 17 (original emphasis).
13. As I've discussed elsewhere, Africa has a much longer history of cultural contact and movement within and outside of the continent prior to European interference: Amy

- Rushton, 'No Place Like Home: The Anxiety of Return in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*', *Études Anglaises*, 70:1 (2017) 45–62.
14. Even in the original French version of the preface, forms of 'you and 'your' ('vous', 'votre' and 'vos') appear approximately one hundred times: 'Préface à l'édition de 1961 par Jean-Paul Sartre', in Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* ([1961]; Paris: La Découverte & Syros, Paris, 2002), pp. 17–36.
 15. Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 1.
 16. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 5.
 17. Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, pp. 3–4.
 18. In *Nervous Conditions*, Maiguru – Nyasha's mother and Tambu's aunt – retreats to her bed soon after Tambu's arrival; Tambu's mother exhibits signs recognizable as postnatal depression; and Nyasha suffers a breakdown after Tambu leaves for the Catholic boarding school.
 19. Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 152.
 20. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, pp. 36–7.
 21. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, p. 20.
 22. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 40.
 23. Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 168.
 24. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 82.
 25. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 82.
 26. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 82.
 27. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 83.
 28. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 134.
 29. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 134.
 30. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 149.
 31. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 5.
 32. Grant Lilford, 'Traces of Tradition: The Probability of the Marecheran Manfish', in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*, eds, Anthony Chennells and Flora Veit-Wild (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1999), pp. 283–98, p. 286.
 33. Dambudzo Marechera, *The House of Hunger* ([1978]; Illinois: Waveland Press, 2013), pp. 123–30.
 34. Grant Lilford, 'Transformations of a Manfish: Changing Allegories for the Njuzu in Shona Literature', *Journal des Africanistes*, 69:1 (1999) 199–219, p. 200.
 35. Lilford, 'Traces of Tradition', p. 286; Lilford, 'Transformations of a Manfish', p. 200.
 36. Lilford, 'Transformations of a Manfish', p. 200.
 37. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 6.
 38. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 101 (my emphasis).
 39. David Lan, *Guns & Rain: Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* ([1985]; Oxford: James Currey, 1999), pp. 35–6.
 40. Lan, *Guns & Rain*, p. 36.
 41. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 101.
 42. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 149.
 43. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 83 (my emphasis).
 44. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, pp. 94–8.
 45. Lan, *Guns & Rain*, pp. 35–6.
 46. Lilford, 'Traces of Tradition', p. 286.
 47. Lan, *Guns & Rain*, p. 36.
 48. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 199.
 49. Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, eds, Jean Khalifa and Robert J.C. Young (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 654.

50. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 87.
51. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, pp. 94, 97.
52. Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, p. 208.
53. Amy Rushton, "'Who's Responsible – You Fucking Are'": Contesting Narratives of the Ongoing "Mental Health Crisis" in the UK', *Key Words*, 17 (2019) 87-108, p. 104.
54. Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p. 284.
55. Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C.Young, 'General Introduction', in Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, p. 5.
56. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 237.