Psychoanal Cult Soc
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-024-00470-4

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A thousand tiny theories: The colonized subject, postcolonial literature, and decolonial epistemologies

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Abstract Psychoanalysis has, from its origins, made a claim to superior interpretative knowledge of literature than literary studies itself, often using its knowledge of literature to affirm and reaffirm its own colonial logics. In this paper, I examine how this colonial epistemological position is reaffirmed in literary interpretations of postcolonial and decolonial writing, even as psychosocial studies works to decolonize the psy disciplines. Through discussion of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* trilogy, I argue instead that postcolonial writing offers its own autotheory of the colonized mind which opens a pathway to decolonizing the authority of the psy disciplines.

Keywords Decolonial psychoanalysis · Postcolonial literature · Tsitsi Dangarembga · Autotheory

Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a solution, you were a problem.
Toni Morrison, Beloved

Psychoanalytic theory continues to have a long afterlife in cultural and literary theory despite trenchant critiques from feminist, queer, and postcolonial scholars (Spivak, 1981; Fuss, 1995; Seshadri-Crooks, 2000; Khanna, 2003; Greedharry, 2008; Mukherjee, 2022). At the same time, psychosocial studies have taken postcolonial and decolonial critiques ever more seriously (Hook, 2012; Beshara, 2019; Vyrgioti, 2021), making concerted efforts to work through the colonial episteme and practices of psy discourses. A curious tension emerges then between

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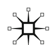
Published online: 02 October 2024



literary/cultural theory, which continues to breathe life into a psychoanalysis that still has not had a serious reckoning with its colonial history, and the psychosocial scholars and practitioners trying to produce a psychoanalysis that responds to colonized and racialized people. This tension deepens further when we also consider several postcolonial writers' attempts to articulate the disorders of colonialism in their own language, complicating or even eschewing psychoanalytic theory in favour of their own emergent epistemologies of colonial and postcolonial disease. The heart of the tension is an epistemological one; specifically, in what ways can we continue to work to bring about psychoanalysis's reckoning with its colonial logics, histories, and practices?

Much of this depends on the iteration of psychoanalysis in which we want to intervene as scholars. As a body of knowledge and practices that encompasses literary interpretation, cultural theory, philosophy of subject formation, and psychosocial clinical practice, but is also both contested by and entangled with psychology and psychiatry, it is difficult to characterize psychoanalysis. Here, my focus is on psychoanalytic theory in its encounter with literary studies. While this has implications for the deep colonial logics that structure psychoanalysis more broadly, the scope of this paper is an intervention into psychoanalysis as it used in literary studies. Focusing on this particular encounter illuminates how entrenched the colonial episteme is; recuperated in one part of the episteme, even as it is decolonized in another.

In order to contextualize this intervention, I begin with a necessarily schematic examination of the relationship between literary studies and psychoanalysis, which has a complex colonial history that cannot be easily unravelled within the pages of one article. Nevertheless, the disciplinary struggle between these two fields is important for thinking about how literary study can so easily become either the unconscious of psychoanalysis or a way of thinking that challenges psychoanalytic assumptions. It is not necessarily a well-known history, which is why I take some time to establish the ground upon which literature might make its intervention. In order to elaborate upon the particular possibilities of literary readings that challenge the colonial epistemology of psychoanalysis, I set that history beside the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's trilogy of novels beginning with *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and concluding with *This Mournable Body* (2020). The trilogy follows part of the life course of a young woman called Tambudzai Sigauke, beginning in Tambu's childhood and following her through her pursuit of "colonial success" into adulthood and the slow unravelling of her body-mind. Together, these novels establish a close description of what happens to a young African woman in a colonial and postcolonial state. It is notable for its general refusal to offer psychoanalytic or psychiatric readings of Tambu even as it describes the disintegration of her mind and body, which is one reason why I attend so closely to its attempt to think otherwise about the colonial subject. Finally, I reflect on how Dangarembga's novels speak back to psychoanalysis and what this might mean for an anticolonial, even decolonial, relationship between psychoanalysis and literary studies.

Between Literary Studies and Psychoanalysis

In his history of the emergence of English literary studies, Ian Hunter (1988) argues that in the 1920s, psychology and literary studies were in an epistemological contest, each with claims to be the definitive knowledge about how to form and manage a socially normal subject while borrowing elements from each other's disciplines. This left deep traces in the study of literature as "a hybrid technology combining therapeutic and ethical functions" (Hunter, 1988, p. 147). From our historical vantage point, we might reasonably say that literary studies has proved to be the loser in the battle because the psy disciplines are definitively established across the university while departments of literature, and the humanities more generally, are in a moment of steep decline. In its attempts to align itself with the epistemological intensification of Western science, literary studies has added scientific applications of literature in the form of bibliotherapy and narrative medicine to its longstanding association with psychoanalysis as a literary and cultural theory. Nevertheless, while the epistemological encounter between the psy disciplines and literature is interesting in terms of the overarching yet conflicted epistemic shift from arts to sciences, it is particularly important in terms of decolonizing Western knowledge systems. In its scramble to keep its place in the colonial order of knowledge, literary studies has continued to concede important aspects of its philosophically distinctive and counter-epistemological force to psychoanalysis even though literary studies, especially through the work of Edward Said (1978), inaugurated postcolonial critique in the Western academy.

Psychoanalysis's claims to provide a better knowledge of literary text, and by proxy human subjects, than literary studies, began with Freud himself. In her detailed analysis of Freud's strategies for establishing psychoanalysis as a master discipline, Sarah Winter (1999) notes that although his immediate competition was from the similarly emergent disciplines of anthropology and sociology, his project was founded upon the cultural authority, in Western Europe, of ancient Greek and Roman literature. Freud draws on that authority in order to establish that it is really only psychoanalysis that can make sense of what literature and literary critics describe, especially in the case of psychoanalysis's foundational literary interpretation: the truth of *Oedipus Rex*. For Freud, what literature scholars know about the tragedy of Oedipus is, in a strong sense, only secondary to what psychoanalysts know because "like the analyst in relation to the hysteric, psychoanalysis claims to know what tragedy only acts out" (Winter, 1999, p. 68). The literary critic is, thus, as much in the dark as both the writer and the literary text itself because all they grasp is the literary surface, waiting for the psychoanalyst and psychoanalytic theory to render things understandable in their proper depth and perspective (what the text "really"means). As Winter notes, Freud's overall strategy is not to dismiss *tout court* what other disciplines know, but to insist that they do not understand the overall and general significance of what they know because they lack psychoanalytic insight into humans and human culture itself.

Winter's description of Freud's epistemological strategy for asserting the authority of psychoanalysis, echoed in turn by Lacan, feminist psychoanalysis, and

psychoanalytic literary studies, employs some notably colonial tactics. Most evidently, there is psychoanalysis's claim to have a universal and universalizing truth about humans and human culture; belief in a hierarchy of knowledges (where science supersedes humanities); and the implied necessity of training and authorizing critics who know and interpret the world back to the human subject. In building the rationale for the discipline of psychoanalysis, Freud used literary texts primarily to reaffirm the authority and interpretations of psychoanalysis. Literary critics have followed suit, often without challenging the colonial logics of psychoanalytic theory itself or its bid for (Western) epistemological superiority. Very much in keeping with the strategies Freud established, psychoanalytic criticism of literary texts carried out by literary scholars almost always confirm that psychoanalysis is correct about its theories of both the subject and mental illness. This is by no means an obvious or inevitable trajectory, since literary texts could be understood as supplements to psychoanalysis rather than data that verifies its theories (see, for example, Mukherjee, 2022). By supplements, I mean that, following Derrida, one could read certain literary texts as texts that supply what is missing in psychoanalysis, where what is supplied also overwrites and corrects the original psychoanalytic theory. Literature, read this way, becomes a co-constituting theory of human subjects *with* psychoanalysis, rather than an archive of human dispositions and relations *for* psychoanalysis.

It is worth nothing that even in instances where psychoanalysis is drawn on as a counter-epistemology, for example in feminist criticism as a counter to masculinist logics or in postcolonial literary criticism as a counter to Western reason, it works to both reaffirm some of the colonial logics of psychoanalytic theory, as well as to reaffirm the authority of psychoanalysis as a better interpretative frame for literature than literary studies itself. A notable example in literary theory is the interpretation of Bertha Mason, the first wife of Mr Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's classic bildungsroman novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), as a madwoman. This reading was first offered by feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979). The interpretation is intended to give a feminist context to gendered representations of "madness" in the English novel tradition, but in doing so it does not, perhaps cannot, dislodge the colonial logic that understands the Caribbean Bertha as a disposable, animal body with no significant autonomy of her own. It takes both Dominican writer Jean Rhys's postcolonial rewriting of the novel in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), as well as criticism by scholars such as Spivak (1985) to remind us that the celebrated subject formation of Jane Eyre is achieved, materially, psychologically, and philosophically, at the expense of the colonized Bertha Mason achieving her fully human subject position.

Within the terms of Western epistemology, perhaps the most crucial intervention in both psychoanalytic theory and literary studies comes from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, who deliberately seek the possibility of literary interpretation as something that does more than fit literature to the needs of the psychoanalytic theory and, by extension, colonial-capitalist culture. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972/1977) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/1987) Deleuze and Guattari, instead, encourage us to understand literature itself as a form of knowing that creates its own language and structures for representing and reimagining the subject and its relationship to the

world. Most importantly, they reject the interpretative position that social analysis may be reduced, by analogy, to psychoanalytic concepts and schemas. In their work, just as in Derrida's, we find a moment where poststructuralist thought makes a strong counterclaim for the discipline of literary criticism, but it is a delicately balanced one because, at any point, as Deleuze and Guattari show, the literary critic may resort to explanations that reproduce and reaffirm the colonial-capitalist order of things. To remain open to what the literary text itself knows about the subject, mental illness, and society, is the epistemological challenge that we continue to face.

In light of this brief, but indicative epistemological history what could an anticolonial analysis of literature do to interrupt psychoanalysis's authority? How might we think about literary texts not even as psychoanalysis's supplement, but as theories of their own? And, consequently, could we think of literary studies too as a form of theoretical work that does not reaffirm the deep colonial logics of other disciplines but opens other pathways through Western knowledge? Given that women writers have been especially generative in writing work that charts the unravelling of the colonized body-mind, one possibility recently described by Lauren Fournier (2021) is to pay attention to their fiction and other creative works as a form of (auto)theory. Building on her work, I propose that we think of postcolonial writing as autotheories of the colonized mind, in which writers build their own accounts of how the social conditions of colonialism produce thinking-feeling subjects. Although Fournier's conceptualizations of autotheory have clear overlaps with Deleuze and Guattari's literary theory, there is good reason to turn towards the more deliberately feminist, queer, and postcolonial position articulated by Fournier. As critics sympathetic to Deleuze and Guattari's project have pointed out, notwithstanding their interest in literature as theory, their own work tends, nevertheless, to prioritize male European and American writers whose work has become canonical, such as Henry Miller, Herman Melville, Marcel Proust, D. H. Lawrence, and Lewis Carroll (Jardine, 1984; Grosz, 1993; for an important postcolonial reworking, see Hallward, 2001). Fournier's theory, instead, pays more attention to the economies of prestige, circulation, and citation that continue to produce some theory as "Theory" and other theories as fictions.

Fournier traces autotheory through its rhizomatic relations in feminist and queer art, theory, and literature to articulate what it has the capacity to do to Western epistemologies through its specific modes of theorizing. What counts as "theory," even within postcolonial and decolonial studies, is often made in the image of colonial understandings of rigor and logic, where knowledge of the master discourses, such as psychoanalytic theory, are required before skilful subversion of these discourses is judged to have taken place. Instead, by taking seriously the theorizing work of Black, Indigenous, and people of color artists and writers, autotheory begins from the conviction that alternatives to Western thought can be found in certain forms of creative work. In such work, as Fournier writes, autotheory provides:

> oblique and ambivalent forms of critique; unexpected ways of practising theory; new ways of being that can be understood as critical, and efficacious,

> intellectually and politically; satire and subversion that is more affirming than it is myopically destructive; forms of becoming and being with identity that in excess of certain delimiting categories and distinctions; and a way of understanding oneself in relation to others, where introspection tied to study and citation becomes a way of understanding both yourself and the world around you. (2021, p. 272)

The strategies that a work of literature or art may employ to produce its own epistemological inquiry into the master discourses of Western epistemology are not always or readily distinguishable in style and form from their epistemologically normative counterparts (consider, for example, that satire might work in both directions). Instead, what we might need to pay attention to is how the formal, stylistic, and narrative strategies of the writer stage their epistemological inquiries. In order to do this, we need methods and approaches taken from literary studies, but they need to be used with a deliberately anticolonial or decolonial purpose.

In order to explore this proposition in more detail, I turn to the work of Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga. Born in colonial Rhodesia and writing today in postcolonial Zimbabwe, Dangarembga's trilogy of novels, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), *The Book of Not* (2006), and *This Mournable Body* (2020) is instigated, in part, by what psychoanalytic theory and the psy disciplines have not been able to say about the colonized, Black, female subject and works towards building its own theory of the postcolonial subject in the place of that glaring absence. *Nervous Conditions* is a landmark novel in African postcolonial literatures in English because it was the first novel written by a Black Zimbabwean woman to be published (as late as 1988). Dangarembga was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the book has become a contemporary classic of Anglophone postcolonial literature, African literature, and women's literature. Dangarembga herself has become an important figure in the political and literary landscape of Zimbabwe, facing a spurious, politically motivated charge and arrest, and receiving a suspended sentence for peacefully protesting the actions of the government. Her novels offer an unflinching analysis of what coloniality and its aftermath does to the colonized subject that is built on both deep knowledge of the colonizer's discourses and deep commitment to decolonizing them.

Tsitsi Dangarembga and the *Nervous Conditions* Trilogy

Anticolonial and postcolonial literature offers a rich, untapped archive of thinking about subject formation and mental disorder, including work by writers such as Doris Lessing, Bessie Head, Jean Rhys, Tayeb Salih, and J. M. Coetzee. These authors offer a range of examinations of how mental illness is intimately connected with colonial rule, especially since such accounts almost always begin from the ground of how the colonized subject makes sense of relations of power, echoing Fanon's argument that only a sociogenic psychoanalysis can help us make sense of colonialism (Fanon, 1952/1967). A notable early example is (white) Rhodesian writer Doris Lessing's portrait of Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* (1950),

which is attentive to every slight shift in power between Mary, an insecure and anxious white woman, and her black servant, Moses. Through close description of how Mary and Moses react to each other, physically and psychologically, Lessing makes use of a colonial trope—the neurotic and paranoid white woman—to interrogate that trope as an expression of colonial power. Her almost claustrophobic description of the relationship confronts the implicit and explicit violence of subject formation—as a woman or man, as a white or black person—in colonial society. Dangarembga's trilogy, therefore, enters a literary terrain that is already well trodden in the sense that it wants to examine the relationship between colonialism and mental disorder. However, it is unusual in being one of the first books that takes seriously the formation and function of Black women's psyches, with full awareness that Western knowledge systems, especially psychoanalysis, have not been built upon an understanding that a Black woman is a fully, human subject in her own terms. In deliberately eschewing psychological, psychoanalytic, and psychiatric explanations for what happens to Tambu, Dangarembga compels us to rethink our assumptions.

The difficulty of theorizing Black women specifically, and colonized and racialized women generally, back into psychoanalysis is central to the problematic that I want to highlight here. Even anticolonial and postcolonial traditions of psychoanalysis, such as the work of Fanon, have often managed to address questions of race only by obscuring women of color from their analysis (for an important exception see Spillers 2003). As I have previously suggested a critical question for postcolonial scholarship is "what [does] our persistent inability to account for [the woman of color] in psychoanalysis, even analyses that have considered the colonial condition and race as central questions for subject formation, indicate about the logic of psychoanalysis?" (Greedharry, 2008, p. 145). Dangarembga's novels constitute a kind of reply to this question that persists in postcolonial scholarship about psychoanalysis. Her works form an autotheory of colonial disorder; one that interrogates and challenges the presumptions of psychoanalysis to capture universal processes of subject formation while remaining consistently unable to theorize Black women's subjectivities.

Before examining the novels in detail, it is worth noting that several themes in the trilogy could easily be read through a psychoanalytic lens since the protagonist Tambu's relationship to women, gender, and sexuality is central. A key relationship in the trilogy is Tambu's perception of her mother and an intense desire not to end up living the same kind of rural life organized around the family that her Mai does, without significant control over her own choices or even her own children's lives. Though Tambu emulates her paternal uncle, Babamukuru, who is a colonial "success" story at the start of the trilogy, she does so through her relationships with women, often as one of a pair of two (Tambu and her cousin Nyasha form an important dyad throughout the narratives), striving to have relationships with them, while finding her own way of being a Shona woman. Tambu's relationships with women all break down into competition and hostility as time goes on, which obviously lends itself well to psychoanalytic interpretation and theories of paranoia. Tambu also has a highly self-conscious relationship to her body that is carefully explored through the trilogy, including a fluctuating capacity to feel at all, a sense of

the (racialized and gendered) abjection of her own body, and the way that failure begins to manifest in her own perception of her bodily boundaries.

All of these themes, as well as the characterization of Tambu through her embodied experience, would seem to make a psychoanalytic interpretation not only obvious, but highly suitable. But to read the literature, and Dangarembga's theory of the colonized mind, in these terms is to continue to subordinate Dangarembga's autotheory to psychoanalysis's understanding of both literature and the colonial nervous condition. And, more importantly, to force Dangarembga's theory of the black, female, colonized mind through a psychoanalytic theory that never has imagined her Black women protagonists as anything other than "primitives." The argument I propose here is not that a psychoanalytic interpretation could not be made to work (see, for example, Thomas, 1992; Nair, 1995; Patchay, 2003; all of which explore the figure of the hysteric), but rather that such readings do not enable us to examine and amplify the autotheories postcolonial writers develop for thinking about the colonized subject. Throughout the *Nervous Conditions* trilogy, there are several ways in which Dangarembga signals her intention to think otherwise about psychoanalysis and the psy disciplines. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all of these strategies in meaningful detail so I contain my discussion here to describing three autotheoretical moves and their critical effects on psychoanalysis: citational practice, alternative theories of the subject, and the use of the second person narrative point of view.

Fournier notes that autotheory, unlike autobiography, necessarily makes use of citational practices. If autotheory is an attempt to rethink the master discourses of Western knowledge, then the writer or artist has to signal their understanding of those discourses in order to launch their critique of it. In some instances that might be a deliberate and detailed engagement with the discourse itself, such as Sara Suleri's play with poststructural philosophy in *Meatless Days* (1989), or, as in Dangarembga's novels, it might be that the author constructs another citational context for the reader that deliberately eclipses or deauthorizes the Western discourse that would normally be used to make sense of the phenomena under description. Dangarembga marks the first novel, *Nervous Conditions*, with a nod to the anticolonial tradition of psychoanalysis and the idea of the "nervous condition" itself. The title is an allusion to Jean-Paul Sartre's (1961/1968) preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he writes "the status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*" (p. 20). Dangarembga's use of this phrase not only situates her novel among other anticolonial psychoanalytic texts, but also signals her intention to critique even those texts, supplementing their examinations of colonized men with descriptions of colonized women (see also Rajan-Rankin and Greedharry, 2023). Since there is so little trace of the Black woman in psychoanalytic theory, the question of how Dangarembga can assemble a citational context for her novels is challenging and she must turn to other Black writers to flesh out what psychoanalysis cannot or does not say. The title of the third novel in the trilogy is a reference to Teju Cole's 2015 essay "Unmournable Bodies," which draws attention to the death of Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies who are never given the same sustained and literally spectacular attention as the death of white bodies. If

these bodies are a kind of unseen plural, Dangarembga's title signals the intention to pay close attention to a single body she will mourn properly: the black Zimbabwean woman whose subjectivity has been disordered by colonialism and its aftermath. In this sense, Dangarembga gives us a starting point and end point for the archive in which her novels are to be understood, the texts that theorized colonial violence, such as Fanon's, and those that are still obliged to theorize the postcolonial violence inflicted on racialized bodies, such as Cole's. It is a subtle, but persistent citational practice that gives the reader the context for how they should understand her discussion of subject formation in the colony.

The citations provide a framing device, pointing to other sources of knowledge about the psyches of Black people, but their full significance emerges when we read them as faint traces in the otherwise deafening silence of colonial psychoanalysis and psychiatry Dangarembga describes. Throughout the trilogy, Dangarembga notes the incapacity of colonial psy discourses to think of young Zimbabwean women as even needing mental health care, indeed of having the kind of interiority that is the basic ground of a psychoanalyzable subject. When Tambu's cousin Nyasha experiences a breakdown in the first novel the family eventually takes her to see a doctor, "but the psychiatrist said that Nyasha could not be ill, *that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described* [emphasis added]" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 206). Indeed, they are not even able to meet with a Black doctor since "there were no black psychiatrists" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 206) and it is literally the voice of colonial white medicine and mental health that tells Nyasha there is nothing it can do for her except to keep her on large doses of Largactil that, significantly, render her docile rather than whole. In the second and third novels, although both Tambu and Nyasha have further contact with psychoanalysis and psychiatry, the situation does not change significantly. In the third novel, Tambu has become a teacher; she suffers a breakdown and is hospitalized following an incident in which she beats one of her pupils so badly that the girl loses her hearing in one ear. Nevertheless, for Tambu, the hospital is the site of only deeper alienation from herself, which has grown more and more pronounced throughout the trilogy. Pointedly, the white (woman) doctor who is placed in charge of her case offers a plausible explanation for Tambu's breakdown, but she singularly fails to grasp the colonial aetiology of Tambu's condition. Dr Winton believes Tambu feels excessive guilt over her brother's death (the event that sets off the action in the first novel), something the reader knows is patently untrue because of the critique of gendered family life to which Tambu constantly returns. The citational practice in the trilogy is thus not only an indicator that we need other epistemological resources, such as novels and essays by Black writers, to make sense of "nervous conditions," but also that these resources, even now, exist as the smallest traces in the silence of psychoanalytic discourse.

The citational practice thus frames the need for an intervention in Western epistemology, but the substance of all three novels in the trilogy is in producing alternative theories of the subject. Dangarembga makes several experiments with the subject in her novels, such as focusing the first novel equally through two protagonists, but what I will focus on here is how Tambu is dramatized as a theorist of her own condition in order to explore Black female subjectivity under

colonialism. One of the most interesting explorations across the whole trilogy, but especially in the second novel, *The Book of Not*, is Tambu's struggle with the question of "the name." If we take psychoanalysis to be the authoritative Western discourse on how subjects learn to use the "I" and fully inhabit their specific self in their world, Dangarembga gives us a character who performs a detached analysis of just how this works for the colonized Black woman. One could easily read this detachment itself as a sign of predictable pathology emerging, a certain kind of protective disassociation from the Tambu who cannot succeed and be accepted in colonial, white society. This would even be confirmed by the third novel, where Tambu, at various points, almost totally vacates both her name and self. But, on the other hand, if we take Tambu seriously as a theorist of her own condition, and Dangarembga seriously as an autotheorist of colonial subjectivity, we see that she is quite coolly examining what it means to inhabit the "I" when the colonial masters cannot tell the difference between one "kaffir" and another. Here, it is unfortunately necessary to reproduce the use of derogatory language because it is part of the problem—there is no self to inhabit when there is no differentiation between you and the handful of other Black and Brown women the colonizer has in their sightlines.

In *The Book of Not* Tambu develops an ambition to see her name become a solid object that materializes her value once and for all; she longs to see her name engraved on a cup awarded for the best O-Level results in the school. The materialization of the name is an important part of the process of becoming a self, and, again, one could read this as an immature aspiration to make solid what is impermanent since as both the novels and colonial histories of the psy disciplines make clear, Africans were often and repeatedly characterized as infantile subjects. However, the intense and apparently overdetermined tone of Tambu's ambition is vindicated because despite clearly winning the prize, it *is* awarded to a white girl named Tracey whose name supplants hers. It supplants hers as an individual name and in the world of the novel this is clearly connected with material consequences. Tracey's success and validation in education, together with her racial position, gets her a job as an executive at the same agency where Tambu is employed as an entry-level copywriter. Tambu cannot inhabit her "self" because there is no space to inhabit even her own name in colonial Rhodesia. Tambu certainly has an affective investment in (colonial) success. However, Dangarembga's characterization of Tambu is also an analysis of what happens to the subject who is forbidden access to the space of the "I" insofar as she continues to pursue that through colonial systems and structures alone. The character herself ponders this as a serious philosophical problem: "I could not make up my mind what in this case constituted a proper personhood" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 43). Tambu's theory absorbs the reality that in the colony, the Black subjects only acquire a self when they do something violent or despicable. Even as she struggles to turn her name into something else (something approaching the way a white name can function, as a sign of a functioning self), she recognizes that "a person was a nanny, a cook, a boy gardener, boy messenger, boy driver, a member of the African dormitory until this nanny, cook, or boy became a terrorist. Then the person achieved a name" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 110). There is a conundrum here, then, which is why she ponders what

constitutes proper personhood: for the white subject to do so is successful, normative individuation; for the Black subject to do so is pathological differentiation from the namelessness of the tribe. Recognition of her own self is an exhausting and nearly impossible task for Tambu because the colonial world refuses to recognize her as a self who can be individuated in positive terms.

In a further sign that the trilogy is in search of other theories, Tambu searches for other theoretical traditions that might provide her with an answer to the problem of the self or *unhu*. It is important, for my purposes, to underline that here, too, Tambu is examining and theorizing. She does not know or have an instinctive understanding of Zimbabwean practices or traditions that would be an alternative to Western ones, and what understanding she has of South African philosophies is necessarily enmeshed with Western philosophy, which is her reference point as a colonized subject: "I became concerned with the existential question, and felt very superior to be so preoccupied, as the French existentialists had pondered similar matters" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 145). She recognizes that the theory of personhood offered to her by Western knowledge alone is insufficient, but she also has her critiques of how *unhu* can work in a colonized world.

Dangarembga consistently draws our attention through characterization to the understanding that Tambu cannot be separated from the colonial context in which she has to practice being a self. For example, she becomes preoccupied with whether even inanimate objects (such as a classmate's radio) could theoretically possess more *unhu* than she does. *Unhu* is a form of mutual subject-making in which "you said, I am well if you are too" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 145), but Tambu finds it difficult to relate to the other women and girls around her. She becomes worried that as a result of these difficulties relating to others her classmates do not want to interact with her, thereby diminishing her opportunities for establishing *unhu*. She stumbles about trying to work out how she can be well in a virtuous cycle of reciprocal well-being with other young women who, she is acutely aware, are her competition, and thus her ideas about acquiring *unhu* become ever more entangled with the colonial-capitalist competition from which she cannot theorize an escape. She thinks about the things that the white Rhodesian girls at the school can have because they have more pocket money and reasons it out:

> At this point I approached clarity. The white girls had fatter manila envelopes than we did residing in Miss Plato's cash box. The whole world wanted to reciprocate with them, so surely they possessed more unhu! Thus I wondered until it became apparent one path to unhu was material preponderance. I spent more and more time memorizing every word of every text, every strange scientific sign and symbol, the succession of British monarchs. (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 145)

Tambu's attempts to fashion herself fall back upon the logic of the colonial world, because, even using a theory of *unhu*, she cannot make the world respond to her and this, she reasons, must be because if she does not work hard enough, she will not make money and succeed as the white girls do.

As already noted, even having worked this out, Tambu finds that when she succeeds, she still does not succeed because the competition itself is rigged by white

supremacy in the colony. The exploration of *unhu*, then, is not incidental or cultural background either to the narrative or to Tambu's theorizing. She is exploring the limits of being a Shona-speaking, *unhu* practicing person in the colonized world and she finds that even this theory of personhood does not hold. In order to correct the wrong done to her and recover her balance in the world she would need a Black elder to speak up for her in the school: "*Unhu* required an elder aunt, or a *sahwira*—someone you were related to not by blood but by absolute respect, liking, and understanding—to go forward to the authorities in order to present your case" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 164). But of course, such an elder does not exist within the confines of the de facto apartheid school, and Tambu understands she cannot fight the system on her own. Instead, "what *unhu* prescribed for one who was moving against the larger current was to come to one's senses, realize the sovereignty of the group and work to make up for the disappointment. Then you would become somebody, as more *unhu* would accrue" (Dangarembga, 2006, p. 164). And the tragedy of these novels is that, for Tambu, this is just what she cannot do. The sovereignty of the colonized (group) society is the white colonizers' sovereignty and she is a black, Zimbabwean woman.

Dangarembga follows Tambu into the place where she really begins to examine the subject boundaries of being a colonized and racialized woman in the conclusion of the trilogy, *This Mournable Body,* which brings me to the final autotheoretical move I want to discuss: the narrative point of view. There is an important shift in the narrative style of the final novel, one that might lend itself to Freud's view that the literary text only acts out what psychoanalysis actually understands, but from the perspective of literary scholarship these questions of literary style, structure, and symbolism are forms of theorizing the world not simply representations of what is happening to Tambu (for example, becoming dissociated). It is in these literary features that Dangarembga pursues her attempts to work out a theory of how the colonized Black woman can achieve subjectivation in a racist world that cannot imagine or theorize her subjectivity. The third novel is filled with moments in which Tambu experiences herself as an animal or in very close proximity to animals (for example, fishes, hippopotamuses, hyenas) because it is the purpose of colonial racial logic to "rank people on the scale of animal to human with highly melanated people occupying the animal end" (Dangarembga, 2022, p. 139). In other words, Tambu is gradually becoming an ever more perfectly adapted colonial subject, in which she cannot locate or experience her own humanness and humanity but becomes animal. These experiences persist even after she has been hospitalized and treated for her illness, especially a sense she has post-breakdown that ants are crawling all over her as if she were a piece of meat. In another type of narrative these moments of seeing-as-animal could be signs of a kinship with other beings, such as one might find in indigenous understandings of human-animal relations. But in Dangarembga's novel there is a clear sense that Tambu's experience of herself as becoming animal, not in kinship with animals, is the logical end of her so-called "consent" to her nervous condition as a "highly melanated" person.

In the third novel the narrative voice shifts from the conventional "I" of a bildungsroman in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, to the unusual and unexpected second person. The reader is thus addressed directly and incorporated

into the novel *as* Tambu, which produces uncomfortable and discomforting effects. One of the most obvious effects is that we seem to be accused by the narrative because we have done the things that Tambu has done and are judged harshly for them: “You have failed to make anything at all of yourself” (Dangarembga, 2020, p. 45). But more significantly, thinking about how Western literature also functions as a dominant discourse of producing and elaborating ideas of the “I” and the “self,” the second-person narrative voice pushes us to reflect on where and how the “I” is formed, or indeed whether we can separate ourselves from the others in whom we are implicated. How has Tambu become this if not because we (the “you” the narrative is addressed to) have made her so? If the traditional aim of novel writing is to invite the reader to fully explore the interiority of a subject in order to understand and empathize with them—if only as a preliminary to psychologizing and psychoanalyzing them—Dangarembga’s choice of narrative voice here deliberately disturbs that tradition. In his study of Herman Melville’s silent characters, Yoshiaki Furui notes that the literary “desire to articulate the interiority of the other is tantamount to violence” (2019, p. 369), a violence that psychoanalytic interpretations often reaffirm when critics produce psychoanalyses of characters like Tambu. Dangarembga’s second person narrative allows us access to Tambu’s interiority, but it does so in such a way that the narrative point of view reveals the violence of wanting to see inside the subjectivity of those denied a subject position in the structures and epistemologies of the material, colonial world. Tambu’s mind and experience is not easily or familiarly consumed through an “I” narrative; it is staged somewhere between us and her, between our desire to make her speak as Western discourse understands a “self” should and her experience of never being able to become such a subject. This is perhaps one of the most important ways in which Dangarembga’s literary text creates an autotheory of Black Zimbabwean women’s lives instead of creating characters and representations which readers can sympathize with and practice their analyses, imagination, and empathy on. The Tambu we meet in the third novel of the trilogy is a person living as a subject that defies *both* psychoanalysis’s and literature’s ideas of what constitutes a person, a person who can be at the center of an analysis or a novel, because this is what colonialism and racism do to the people living under such regimes. Here, the literary text does not allow us to simply enter in and use that interiority as a reaffirmation of colonial theories of the self: it asks us to think again about whose subjectivity can become theory and whose subjectivity is confined to the margins of theory.

Decolonizing the Colonial Subject

In a recent collection of essays, *Black and Female* (2022), Dangarembga argues that in European settler colonies like Zimbabwe, the traditional terms of Marxist analysis must be reimagined because both capitalist modes of production and the superstructure that is needed to produce and reproduce relations of power between the classes in capitalist society must be imported into the colony. The result, she writes, was that “the subjective edifice of the colonial project thus became in itself a means of production … *where the product was the colonial subject* [emphasis

added]" (Dangarembga, 2022, pp. 112–113). The theories that we have for making sense of subjects, such as psychoanalysis, as well as the knowledges we have for producing accounts of the human and humane, such as literary studies, have both been central to the production of the colonial subject as anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial scholarship details. But in our continuing attempts to decolonize Western knowledge, we are not always able to relinquish the colonial idea of what a theory of subjectivity looks like, who produces that theory, and what form it takes.

In arguing that postcolonial literatures, especially those written by women, might be new kinds of theories of subjectivity, I want to underline that I am not suggesting that literary texts provide epistemological escape routes out of Western knowledge. Postcolonial literary studies has demonstrated that literature itself has had, and continues to have, colonizing functions, in terms of both its representations and how literary education has been used to assimilate (post)colonial populations. As discussed above, to suggest that literature is, after all, the real victor in the contest Freud initiated between psychoanalysis and literature would be to simply reaffirm *its* supremacy in the colonial order of knowledge. At the same time, literary interpretations that read postcolonial literature through psychoanalytic theory continue to reinforce the colonial authority of psychoanalysis to explain how subjects are constituted. The significant point, then, is not that novels such as Dangarembga's provide a superior knowledge based, for example, on the lived experience of the colonized subject, but rather that they are composing theories of that subject not easily adduced to the universals of psychoanalytic reason, as well as theories that speak critically back to the aporia of Black, Indigenous, and women of color's existence within colonial psychoanalytic logics.

Reading postcolonial texts like Dangarembga's novels as so many, tiny theories of colonial disorder is an undeniably erratic epistemological intervention. It does not produce a new, authoritative theory of the mind and subject in place of colonial psychoanalysis, nor does it work towards mutually productive relations with psychoanalysis as a field of regulated, disciplinary knowledge. Instead, a decolonizing autotheoretical reading obliges us to attend to different kinds of questions and problems. Instead of affirming the logics and theories of colonial knowledge, it asks us to consider how we might make space for other knowledges and other connections between texts as we saw in autotheoretical citational practice. Instead of accepting that the psy disciplines have already created the necessary language and conceptualization for describing what happens to the human psyche such as anorexia, hysteria, or paranoia, it creates its own, singular descriptions of how the colonized subject understands and analyzes their colonial condition. Instead of accepting that literature is simply a description of what psychoanalysis really understands, postcolonial criticism could make use of literary form to think its own thoughts about colonial disorder. These are by no means the only ways in which such readings might open up other pathways through Western epistemology; each novel is its own theory and plots its own trajectory through and beyond the episteme.

In a brief narrative thread in *This Mournable Body,* Nyasha, Tambu's cousin who has had her own serious mental breakdown as a girl but appears fully recovered as an adult, explains to Tambu that she spends her time running workshops for young,

Black, Zimbabwean women. In these workshops Nyasha teaches the young women "theory and practice of narrative" (Dangarembga, 2020, p. 175) so that they can learn to tell new kinds of stories, ones that "in the long run make us better than we've managed to be so far" (Dangarembga, 2020, p. 187). For Nyasha, teaching the women to tell stories themselves, not necessarily about their own lives but through their own narrative practices, is the key to keeping them from the mental and psychic disorder that both she and Tambu experience. It is a small moment within the novel that gestures towards a future in which women like Tambu will have the tools to create their own theories, instead of being subjected to the knowledges and theories of personhood whose function is to make them colonial subjects. Dangarembga's own writing is already doing this, but it is incumbent on us to give her autotheory its full voice and potential by reading it as theory.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interest.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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