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Transqueer Negotiations and Decolonial Space-Making in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Abstract: This article intervenes in the long critical reception of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* as a postcolonial feminist novel by using a decolonial framework—one that is attuned to the history of how the cisgender heterosexual gender binary constructs patriarchy—to propose a transqueer reading of the novel. A transqueer hermeneutic serves two functions in this article: first, it foregrounds the centrality of movement in the prefix "trans"; and, second, it emphasizes how this movement queerly manipulates gender and sexual normativity. A transqueer reading of Dangarembga's novel points to gendered and sexual subversions of the colonial gender binary by arguing that the protagonist, Tambu, queerly reorients herself to and transly negotiates with the physical spaces in which she is placed instead of simply escaping them. Thus, *Nervous Conditions* quietly delinks from the colonial cisgender heterosexual binary. Overall, I examine the relation between colonial physical space and Tambu's transqueer subversions by showing how she moves, however fleetingly, within and through decolonial and liminal spaces of refusal.

Keywords: trans, queer, decolonial, colonial gender binary, space

"The river, the trees, the fruit and the fields" (Dangarembga 3). This is where Tambu's story begins in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous* Conditions, amongst the expansiveness of outdoor, natural spaces, where she works on large plots of land with her grandmother, where she swims in the depths of the Nyamarira river, where she stretches her body in rage and

pounces on her brother with little care for the space she takes up. Yet her story ends in an apartheid-like convent dorm room that "certainly was not large enough for the six beds that stood in it, three along one wall and three along the other, all of necessity so closely arranged that there was barely space to walk between them" (194). From the expansiveness of her homestead to the anti-Black social architecture of her convent, Tambu migrates and moves across colonial Rhodesia as she negotiates what Maria Lugones calls the "colonial/modern gender binary," a European system that imposes normative maleness/manhood and femaleness/womanhood as biological and social categories on Indigenous peoples ("Heterosexualism"). Although *Nervous Conditions* initially frames Tambu's movement from her rural homestead to the urban mission house as an escape, her description of this movement—from expansive scenery to the room in the convent, where it is difficult to walk—shows how the novel refuses to portray Tambu's movement as one of linear feminist progress. In this article I explore how, as Tambu migrates from her homestead to the coloniality of her uncle's mission house, where he acts as the white minority rule's mimic man, she lingers within white cisheteropatriachal coloniality in order to quietly and queerly thwart colonial norms of the gender binary.

This article examines how Tambu's decolonial subversions of space and corporeality in *Nervous Conditions* expose the gender and sexual politics of cisheteropatriarchal landscapes. Writing against the standard estimation of the novel as a postcolonial cisgender feminist escape novel,[1] I suggest that Tambu queerly reorients herself to, and transly negotiates with, the domestic spaces in which she is placed, instead of escaping from or rebelling against them. Even though the novel begins and ends with the idea of escape, a movement from rural poverty to urban colonial education, it is paradoxically the novel's supposed progress narrative that problematizes notions of feminist escape by exposing the strictures of the spaces that Tambu moves to. The plot of the novel embodies the limitations that Tambu faces; it suggests how coloniality necessitates a certain kind of movement toward apartheid education while at the same time exposing the colonial violence present in Tambu's

escape and asking readers to question their desire to consume feminist escape stories.

Using a decolonial feminist (rather than postcolonial or liberal feminist) framework, I argue that Tambu reorients herself in the novel's colonial spaces—specifically her uncle's mission house and the convent—by engaging in queer intimacy and trans self-preservation through dissociation. A decolonial framework—one that is attuned to the history of how coloniality continually constructs a cisgender heterosexual gender binary—helps me perform a transqueer reading of the novel. My term "transqueer" gestures at the close connections between "trans" and "queer" and suggests that heteronormativity is often closely tied to gender nonconformity. The term "transqueer" has been used by artists like J Mase III and Jari Jones to self-identify as simultaneously and intersectionally queer and trans. "Transqueer" responds to the erasure of transness from queer theories, and the refusal of gender nonconforming trans people to be subsumed into heteronormativity.[2] Recognizing the shared urgencies and genealogies of queer of color and trans of color critique, I echo Kai M. Green's speculative argument that trans "is the queer" and "the colored" (67). I also employ the term "transqueer" to suggest a new way of understanding homophobic and sexist violence. What is construed as homophobia and sexism often stems from colonial trans-antagonism: a deep fear and hatred of stepping outside the colonial gender binary. Therefore, "transqueer" as an analytic (rather than an identity) points to gendered and sexual subversions of the colonial gender binary. Tambu, I contend, is governed not merely by the intersections of colonialism and sexism but also by the colonial gender system, which is inherently a binary cisgender and heterosexual system.

Finally, I also combine the terms "trans" and "queer" in the formulation "transqueer" to bring together ideas of spatial beyondness and sexual/gender non-normativity. The etymology of "trans" suggests, in this context, the movement (whether forced, coerced, or voluntary) present in histories of colonialism.[3] The word "trans" comes from the Latin *trans*, meaning "across," "on the other side," or "beyond." The prefix "trans-" signifies moving from one side of a border or boundary to the other.

Trans-as-movement captures the migrations and displacements that are part of Tambu's life. The centrality of movement and space to the prefix trans- shows how decolonial un-/trans-/re-gendering takes place across various conceptual spaces and borders, while queerness suggests the subversions of gendered and sexual normativity. Combining the two terms denotes how transqueer, as an analytic, disturbs heteronormativity and cisnormativity simultaneously through spatial negotiations and manipulations. My framework examines the relation between colonial physical space and transqueer subversions in the novel by showing how Tambu creates decolonial liminal spaces of refusal.

I. Postcolonial Feminism to Decolonial Transqueering

The decolonial turn in the humanities has had two important political functions: first, to reveal how modernity—along with its onto-epistemology—is configured by and through coloniality and its accompanying racializations and, second, to urge scholars to take seriously knowledge production from Indigenous cosmologies and ways of knowing, being, and feeling. Even though postcolonial and decolonial studies share a common political history rooted in the Bandung era,[4] these two fields emerge from different geographies and center different concepts. For example, postcolonial studies has been dominated by upper-caste South Asian scholars, who often focus on ideas of hybridity, nationalism, and fragmentation at the expense of exploring Indigenous and Dalit claims to land and life.[5] Decolonial theory, on the other hand, centers concepts, like the coloniality of power, which delink from Enlightenment-based epistemes and create pluriversal ways of knowing that center non-European cosmologies.[6] However, I recognize the dangers of generalizing about two heterogenous fields of study (that have many internal debates and frictions). In addition, the border between these two fields is porous (if not fictional) because many scholars committed to decolonization, such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, and those invested in examining colonial biopolitics, such as Achille Mbembe, have immense influence in both fields.

While I am not invested in demarcating a border between postcolonial and decolonial feminisms, I am interested in how the two schools

of thought provide different frameworks with which to analyze gender formations. Both postcolonial and decolonial feminisms draw on Black feminism and third world and woman of color critiques of white feminism to argue against the universality of the category of womanhood.[7] But there are differences, too. One of the main figures in postcolonial feminism, Gayatri Spivak, draws on Western postmodernist and deconstructionist theory to theorize the condition of the subaltern woman while also defining the subaltern woman through the colonial Brahminical lens of the gender binary. Spivak, along with many other postcolonial feminists, does not question the presence of the gender system for subalternized peoples. The biological and social categories of femaleness/womanhood, and the subjugation they lead to, are givens in many postcolonial feminist theories.

Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmi asks a compelling question that challenges the framework used by postcolonial feminism: "Why gender? To what extent does a gender analysis reveal or occlude other forms of oppression?" ("Conceptualizing" 1). Oyěwùmi not only points to the gendered oppression that colonized African women face but also disrupts "womanhood" and "gender" by revealing how these constructs were invented by coloniality.[8] In her essay on African epistemologies of gender, Oyěwùmi references *Nervous Conditions* as a novel that showcases how Shona gender norms function very differently from Euro-American ones: for example, Tambu's older aunt, Tete, holds patriarchal status and is therefore exempt from women's work, despite her assigned femaleness. Drawing on Oyěwùmi, Lugones argues that gender as a concept and taxonomical category is a colonial imposition on Indigenous peoples. Gender, therefore, is an essential part of modern ontology. The gender binary is essential to defining what Sylvia Wynter calls Man2, which denotes how biocentric white bourgeois cisgender heterosexual manhood is overrepresented as the condition for being human. According to Lugones, "gender is irrevocably white, European, and modern[,] and . . . the modern/colonial capitalist gender system necessarily denies gender to the colonized and enslaved" ("Gender" 45). In Lugones' decolonial formulation, the focus is less on giving voice and agency to the "subaltern woman" and more on uprooting the colonial seed of what

subalternizes certain racialized and Indigenous women: the modern/colonial gender system.

According to Lugones, decolonial feminism theorizes the possibility of overcoming the coloniality of gender. Lugones argues that under coloniality, "sexual dimorphism became the grounding for the dichotomous understanding of gender" ("Towards" 744). Colonial Christianity infused this gender binary with strict sexual norms. Furthermore, Christian ethics and the Manichean division between light and darkness strengthened this gender and sexual binary (Lugones, "Heterosexualism" 744). Those on the "light" side of this binary, or those who were allowed access into the category of the Human, had to abide by this Manichean division. The ones on the "dark" side, on the other hand, which included Indigenous and enslaved African peoples, were animalized, and were therefore robbed of any gender formation; they were, in Hortense Spillers' word, "ungendered" (68). Even though Lugones does not have trans and queer politics in mind, she suggests something relevant for them: that dismantling the coloniality of gender offers us possibilities outside the heterosexual and cisnormative matrix of power that impacts both the light and dark side of the gender binary. Hence, decolonial feminism offers us queer and trans possibilities.

Nervous Conditions has often been read through a postcolonial feminist framework as a novel that appropriates a European form to relate a story about how colonial ideas are force-fed to the colonized Black peoples of Southern Africa through patriarchy.[9] In many ways, the novel lends itself to postcolonial feminist readings. In a fictional world in which Indigenous Shona culture is being destroyed through colonial education and racial capitalism and in which our protagonist Tambu is seeking a place within the colonial space of so-called progress, it is easy to read the novel simply as a story of postcolonial feminist escape, even if that escape ends up being a continually evolving critique of whiteness. However, reading the novel through a decolonial lens challenges us not only to consider the marginalized condition of the colonized woman but to focus on how cisgender womanhood is constructed through coloniality's gender binary. A decolonial reading of this novel pushes us to take

seriously the quiet and subtle moments of transqueer decolonial space-making that Tambu engages in, even as she seems to be caged within coloniality. Transqueer space-making, for Tambu, includes delinking from the spaces demarcated for her by the colonial gender binary.[10] Her interiority suggests possibilities for decolonial space-making even though she is constantly weighed down by coloniality.

Nervous Conditions begins at Tambu's rural homestead, where the intersections of poverty and patriarchy prevent her from receiving an education while her older brother goes to school. After her brother dies, Tambu is invited by her wealthy uncle, Babamukuru, to move into his mission house and attend an urban colonial school. By examining how the protagonist's growth is influenced not just by large-scale migrations from rural to urban landscapes but also by her negotiations of domestic and quotidian spaces, I propose a transqueer politics of resilience and lingering rather than one of resistance and protest. This is a decolonial approach because it delinks from the binary of colonial/anti-colonial and focuses instead on how girls create their own private spaces outside the sexual and gender norms of the colonial gender binary.

Like most coming-of-age novels, *Nervous Conditions* follows a linear plot. However, the novel disrupts a liberal feminist teleology because Tambu's quiet negotiations with spatiality fracture and re-work the conventional European realist form. Tambu's negotiations with the domestic, private space of the bedroom suggest new ways of thinking about decolonial feminist—and therefore transqueer—reorientations. In my explorations of the reconfigurations of domestic spaces in *Nervous Conditions*, I am not interested in how Tambu transforms the space of the bedroom into a singular, stable, queer place. Rather, I am interested in how her process of transqueer signification remains in flux and interacts with the policing and control that takes place in that space. When Tambu first enters her uncle Babamukuru's mission house, the building acts on her, shaping her perceptions of herself in relation to Babamukuru and his family. In the next section, I outline Tambu's initial encounter with her uncle's mission house and then explicate her transqueer negotiations and reconfigurations of her bedroom within this mission house.

II. Interrupting Mission House Coloniality

Denied an education by her parents because of her gender, Tambu desires to take her brother Nhamo's place. After Nhamo's death, when Tambu gains the opportunity to move out of the homestead and into her uncle's house, she is heady with joy because she romanticizes Babamukuru's upward mobility. But this joy disintegrates when she forms an intimate bond with her cousin Nyasha, Babamukuru's daughter, who is critical of the white supremacist physical and social structures of colonial Rhodesia. It is because of this bond that Tambu can create decolonial transqueer spaces that help her delink from coloniality.

When Tambu first arrives at the Mission house, she compares it to her rural homestead: "The grounds were very large, as large as our yard at home" (Dangarembga 61). Her reference to the singularity of the large buildings foreshadows her impending deification of Babamukuru and contrasts with her understanding of the homestead as a collective and communal space. For the young Tambu, the building becomes a heaven-like place whose qualities are more imagined than real. She also emphasizes the jarring whiteness and cleanliness of the house's interior. The house evokes in Tambu "clinical, antiseptic" feelings (71). These feelings suggest not only the sexual sterility of the house derived from Babamukuru's Christian colonial ethics but also the colonial promise of spiritual salvation and natives-turning-pure. Moreover, while Tambu's initial memory of her homestead encompasses many bodies (such as her mother's and her sisters') and objects (such as the bed, mattress, and sofa), her impression of Babamukuru's house imagines an expansive space with Babamukuru as the sole inhabitant: "the grounds were very large. . . . [I]n them stood a single building, Babamukuru's house" (61). The fact that Tambu refers to this "single building" as "Babamukuru's house" connotes his distinctiveness in her mind. It is also noteworthy that she refers to the mission constantly as "Babamukuru's house" (61) or "my uncle's very own" house (62) but never refers to the homestead as her father's house but as "our home" (61) even though that place is also monitored by the patriarch. She sees Babamukuru as an individualistic, godlike figure. At this point, Tambu's worldview reflects her desire for individualism and assimilation into the light side of coloniality.

The shift in her perspective commences when her queer intimacy with Nyasha deepens, which allows her to trans her spaces.

Tambu's queer growth takes place in her bedroom, which is usually shielded from Babamukuru's gaze. When Tambu enters the bedroom she shares with Nyasha, she promises earnestly to mimic Babamukuru and perform the role that he has prescribed: to remain "straight as an arrow, as steely and true" (88). It is not surprising, therefore, that her later subversion of the gender binary is a result of breaking the covenant of remaining "straight as an arrow." Stephanie M. Selvick, one of the very few critics who presents a queer reading of Tambu and Nyasha's relationship, illuminates how the girls queer the roles that imperial goods like "books, clothing, tampons and music play in Tambu and Nyasha's evolving, intimate relationship" (2). Selvick's reading illustrates how Tambu and Nyasha appropriate colonial commodities, which whiten the house, for their own intimate play and pleasure. Tambu's subversion of power at the mission stems from her relationship with Nyasha in the private mini-space of the bedroom, where they venture beyond the cisheteronormative codes of the mission. Nyasha is Tambu's source not only of intellectual learning but also of education about her body. Nyasha's playful flirting evokes feelings of corporeal excitement in Tambu for the first time: "I was flattered by everything she said and did, the examination, the approval, the teasing" (Dangarembga 91). The "intimacy" that permeates the room when Tambu first finds herself alone with Nyasha makes her "heady" (78). Even in retrospect, the narrator describes her friendship with Nyasha as "more than friendship," involving conversations "that lovers have under the influence of the novelty and uniqueness of their love" (78).

Although the girls playfully reconfigure the bedroom, the space is still laden with codes of control. After Nyasha and Tambu return from a party and Babamukuru finds out that Nyasha has been socializing with boys, he enters the girls' bedroom without knocking. The patriarch's invasion of the bedroom sexualizes the girls' bodies as both Tambu and Nyasha worry about their clothes and decorum in the presence of Babamukuru. "Condemning Nyasha to whoredom" (115), Babamukuru hits her twice until she falls on the bed, "her miniscule skirt riding up her bottom" (114). The violence perpetrated by Babamukuru as he slaps

and pushes Nyasha onto her bed stems from his anger at Nyasha's perceived masculine rebellion. His colonial morals are disturbed not only by Nyasha's violation of the rules of Christian womanhood but also by her performance of manhood when she strikes him back. It is Nyasha's transgression of the colonial gender binary that provokes him to exclaim that "we cannot have two men in the house" (115). It is possible that Babamukuru's violence stems from his fear of his children being shoved into the dark side of the colonial gender binary, where they would be forcibly un/trans gendered. His solution is to forcibly keep them cisgender because he believes one must assimilate into the colonial gender binary and its corresponding heterosexual matrix. However, despite Babamukuru's violence in the bedroom, the bond between the girls allows them to reclaim their private space and forge a third option: one that neither accepts one's animalization nor seeks to assimilate into the binarily gendered colonial human.

The queer experience of sleeping next to each other is therapeutic for both girls the night Babamukuru hits Nyasha. The girls share their experiences of marginalization as they lie in bed in the dark, with Tambu remarking:

> I talked on and on about many things, talking into the darkness, not knowing whether she was listening or not. . . . She sobbed up great lumps of pain. I understood that she was grieving for whatever she had lost when she struck her father so I left her for a while, then climbed into her bed, where we cuddled up to each other and fell asleep. Maiguru [Nyasha's mother] was not very pleased the next morning when she found us in bed together, but she could not mind that Nyasha was beginning to feel better and so nothing was said. (119)

Their bond remakes an oppressively cisheteropatriarchal space into one of queer love and support. Tambu's action of climbing into Nyasha's bed is one of the first she initiates at the mission; previously, all her navigations of the house had been at the behest of others. The fact that Maiguru frowns upon the proximity of the girls in Nyasha's bed shows that their act of sleeping together lies outside the acceptable heteropatriarchal

codes crafted by Babamukuru that allow him access to the light side of the colonial cisgender binary. While Babamukuru's violent act of hitting Nyasha until she falls on the bed allows him to shame her verbally and physically, Tambu's wrapping of her body around Nyasha's leads to a form of intimacy. Slut-shaming depends on Western notions of individuality and sexual entitlement; the girls refuse to be shamed in this way by becoming physically one. With no space between them and with their bodies "cuddled up to each other" (119), the girls create a bed-space that indirectly defies the colonial heterosexual matrix without explicitly sexualizing the bed: they form a queer bond that breaks Babamukuru's plan of raising Tambu into a "good woman" who will embody the light side of the cisgender binary.

Tambu's relationship with Nyasha transforms the bedroom in which she has been placed from an asexual place of study and docility to a space of speculative possibilities of queer play and exploration. Elleke Boehmer draws on Eve Sedgwick's readings of queerness to define the concept of queer as something that "may be discovered in the experimental and not in the normative, in the contextual rather than the transhistorical, in truculent, wayward, or even unfixed varieties of female-female passion rather than in the conventional plot of lesbian identity uncovered or repatriated" (Boehmer 139). Seen through this lens, Tambu and Nyasha's relationship is a "female-female relationship in which a woman achieves subjecthood, or gains access to knowledge, through the interaction with another" (139). Nyasha represents for Tambu "alternatives and possibilities" (Dangarembga 76) that threaten the straight path of Babamukuru that Tambu initially wants to mimic. While Boehmer's observations of intimacy suggest the queer erotics underpinning Tambu's relationship with Nyasha, she does not challenge the colonial system of gender, even in this seemingly subversive "female-female" bonding. While I agree with Boehmer and Selvick's queer reading of the text, a decolonial feminist reading demands that we pay close attention to how the girls manipulate their assigned colonial cisgender femaleness to delink from the heterosexual matrix. While the girls' assigned sex and gender plays a huge role in catalyzing their queer intimacy, we must also remember that their queer bond is a direct result of Babamukuru's

trans-antagonism. Babamukuru is threatened by Nyasha's perceived act of trans-ing her assigned gender. What is often read as sexist and patriarchal pivots on how fiercely he wants to cling to cisgender binary scripts and how threatening he finds acts like stepping outside of the light side of the colonial gender system.

The queering of the bedroom is closely intertwined with the threat of the girls' transmasculinity and transboyhood in the novel. Although neither Nyasha nor Tambu identify as transgender, their transitions and trajectories play with and disturb the gender binary as drawn for them by Babamukuru's colonial ideology. Tambu initially experiences a strong gender envy while thinking about her brother Nhamo and yearns to corporeally replace him, which she does end up doing after his death. In a way, Tambu desires to become her brother. While Nyasha does not demonstrate an explicit trans desire, her father's rage at her stems from the threat of her transmasculinity. When Babamukuru hits her because "we cannot have two men in the house," his abuse connotes not only patriarchy and heterosexism but also cissexism—he fears that his masculine power will get replaced by hers and also panics over her loss of cisgender femininity that is meant to uphold colonial Christian ideals of docility and virginity. When Tambu and Nyasha attune their bodies to each other in their bed, it is not necessarily the power of the female body that erupts during this intimate moment but rather the power of the bodies that Tambu and Nyasha have themselves trans-/un-/re-gendered through a collective queer intimacy.

It is such a decolonial trans orientation—one that challenges the assignment of cisgender rules—that enables my queer reading of this novel. While Tambu does not directly challenge Babamukuru the way Nyasha does, she subverts the space organized by his cisheteropatriarchy and develops quietly into someone who crafts ephemeral decolonial spaces of refusal. By becoming a queer space, the bed becomes a curative space of transqueer lingering.

III. Refusing the Colonial Gender Binary

In addition to queering the bedroom through moments of transqueer intimacy, Tambu's bodily rejection of her parents' wedding shows her

quiet refusal of the colonial gender binary that writes the script for the heterosexual matrix by institutionalizing the nuclear family. Even though Tambu's parents live a heterosexual life, Babamukuru's insistence that they get married according to the rites of Christianity demonstrates how he imposes a colonial cisgender heteronormative ethic of the nuclear family. Oyěwùmí reminds us that the heterosexual nuclear family is a Euro-American form, one that continues to remain alien in many parts of Africa ("Conceptualizing" 2). This Euro-American form defines a woman as wife. For Babamukuru, imposing the template of a nuclear Christian family on Tambu's parents means assimilating Tambu's mother into the cisgender and heterosexual notion of this wife figure. Queer theory scholars who analyze the intersections of queerness and heteronormativity with colonialism and white supremacy demonstrate how a heteronormative order was inherent to colonial rule and how European colonizers used heteronormativity as a colonizing tactic.[11] Tambu's refusal to attend the white-washed Christian wedding ceremony is a refusal of the colonial gender binary. It manifests not as an act of rebellion but rather as spiritual and psychological dissociation that can be read as a form of active dysphoria.

On the day of the wedding, Tambu tries to get ready, but her body refuses to act according to Babamukuru's commands to happily participate in this Christian wedding ceremony, which would assimilate Tambu's family into the light side of the colonial gender binary. She subconsciously chooses paralysis over active rebellion:

> The next morning, the morning of the wedding, I found I could not get out of bed. I tried several times but my muscles simply refused to obey the half-hearted commands I was issuing to them. Nyasha was worried. She thought I was ill, but I knew better. I knew I could not get out of bed because I did not want to. . . . She tried to coax me out of bed, but I was slipping further and further away from her, until in the end I appeared to have slipped out of my body and was standing somewhere near the foot of the bed, watching her efforts to persuade me to get up and myself ignoring her. I ob-

> served with interest and wondered what would happen next. (Dangarembga 166)

Here, Tambu creates a protective boundary between her internal self and her body. In a moment of profound action, her body trans-differentiates from her spirit in order to refuse the demands of the colonial gender binary. Tambu being "out of [her] body" suggests a kind of chosen dysphoria, where she delinks from her refusing body and moves to "somewhere near the foot of the bed" (166). Throughout her stay at the mission, she is observed by an authority figure. Now, even her private space, where she can engage in transqueer intimacy, is invaded by the patriarch who wants to impose the colonial gender binary on Tambu's family. Therefore, this momentary dysphoria acts as Tambu's refuge from assimilating into the gender and sexual meanings assigned to her by coloniality.

In this scene, Tambu's passivity is not imposed. Even while she is separating her body from her internal self and assigning the blame of rebellion to her body rather than her interiority, we witness a moment in which Tambu reveals that her muscles are refusing to "get out of bed because *I did not want to*" (166; emphasis added). Her subconscious interiority is the site of a quiet resolve in terms of language, gesture, and movement. Her lack of action is not inaction. Her lack of material action includes the movement of her internal self as she is "slipping further and further" away from her body without being noticed by the external colonial gaze. Tambu's refusal to speak during this lack of action does not signify external or public resistance. Instead, it shifts our focus from feminist or anti-colonial rebellion like Nyasha's to Tambu's opaque and complex interiority. Instead of witnessing resistance, we witness Tambu's interior quietly slipping, drifting, wandering, even as her body remains still.

The power of Tambu's quiet but opaque interiority echoes Kevin Quashie's meditations on the sovereignty of quiet. As Quashie delineates, the readerly romance with realist representations in Black art rigidly affixes Blackness only as public protest, robbing representations of Black people of the interior workings of humanness. Resisting this limit on representation, Quashie shifts our attention from outward resistance

in Black art to the drama of inner life as, according to Quashie, "the quiet subject finds agency in the capacity to surrender to his or her inner life. If there is a fearlessness in this surrender it is because of the freedom of falling into what cannot be known entirely. . . . Quiet, then, is a call to give up the need to be sure, to give up the willfulness of being a resistant public subject, and to embrace surrender" (129). Taking my cue from Quashie, I read Tambu's active internal self during her material stillness on the bed as a pivotal moment that shifts our attention and expectations from the realist form—from the reader's expectation to understand the real world of the colonized woman—to her queerly opaque, yet rich, inner life, which is unruly and complex, contradictory and quiet, refusing compliance yet also rejecting protest. Tambu's disassociation from her bodily movement and speech is certainly a trauma response, but it is also a way to surrender to her own self. It is in this spiritual and psychological trans-movement that the sovereignty of her quietude emerges.

Although the scene connotes spatial constriction, Tambu's lack of voice and movement is a conscious non-act. Tambu has certainly been silent in Babamukuru's presence before; in fact, Babamukuru often uses Tambu's silence as an example of feminine decorum when he is chastising Nyasha. However, Tambu's silence in the living room, where Babamukuru holds the reigns, bespeaks her anguish—her voice is forbidden and therefore cannot take up space—where, as a quasi-feudal subject, she has no choice but to force herself to feel gratitude. In the bedroom, however, Tambu trans-es her internal self by using the very silence imposed on her to respond to Babamukuru's authority. Although E. Kim Stone argues that Tambu emerges "as a heroine whose attributes lie outside the logic of Western concepts of the hero" (115), she also contends that Tambu's dissociation simultaneously allows Tambu to become the "embodied reiteration of the paralyzing norm of the dutiful daughter" (120) as well as an emerging storyteller who controls her narrative. In the bedroom paralysis scene, I do not read Tambu's lack of voice as passivity. Tambu's emergence as a storyteller depends upon a strategy of distancing her interiority from Babamukuru's colonial cisgender heteronormative policing. Her "observation" of and

"wondering" about not only her guardians but also Nyasha, while they cannot observe her, are quiet acts of delinking herself from the coloniality of gender and its corresponding heteronormative matrix, not silent acts of performing the patriarchal script of the "good girl." Tambu's interior movement therefore defies the stagnancy of her body.

When Babamukuru enters the bedroom "without knocking," Tambu's body "didn't even twitch" while "the mobile, alert me, the one at the foot of the bed, smiled smugly, thinking that I had gone somewhere where he could not reach me" (Dangarembga 166). By rejecting the need to remain servile and grateful, Tambu's internal self attains a form of sovereignty through its movement to "somewhere where he could not reach me"; it reacts against Babamukuru's plans for the wedding, disrupting the patriarchal Christian order simply by existing and lingering as a body on the bed, while also trans-ing the affective self from the material body as an instinct of self-preservation. Although she cannot pounce on Babamukuru the way she pounced on her brother during her childhood, she nevertheless refuses to respond to his heteronormative demand for a Christian wedding for Tambu's parents. Despite her body's stillness, she embraces a quiet and opaque movement away from the colonial heterosexual gender binary that seeks to regulate her family. This affective movement is embodied through Tambu's embrace of dissociation, which allows her to reorient to her external space.

Examining the various meanings of "orientations"—in relation to colonialism (the Orient), sexuality (sexual orientation), and phenomenology (embodied consciousness oriented toward objects)—Sara Ahmed maintains that socially constructed orientations follow lines that have been formed already, or, as she puts it, "paths well trodden" (16). Hence, orientation encompasses behavior that is learned or interpellated without resistance. When one fails to conform, one becomes disoriented. According to Ahmed, "orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space," and "disorientation occurs when that extension fails" (11). In Ahmed's formulation, disorientation creates a disconnect between one's body and the external space, transforming the world into an unlivable place. She reads these moments of disorientation as queer. Ahmed is interested in what such

moments of queer disorientation—of spatial-sexual ungrounding—can do. Moments of disorientation, in her formulation, can offer the hope of new directions, new ways of imagining and inhabiting space, and new ways of (re)orienting. In her bodily paralysis, Tambu reorients her body inward while spiritually and psychologically moving away from the norm. Tambu's cognitive dissonance within the uncle's mission is what Ahmed would call "queer disorientation" (160). Her body's quiet act of refusing to move can be understood as reorientation within her own social space of the margin.

While Ahmed focuses on sexuality, disorientation is also a central part of what the medical-industrial complex calls gender dysphoria. When trans activists argue that they "were not born in the wrong body, but in the wrong world,"[12] they allude not only to bodily dysphoria but to bodily displacement, to being out of place. We can extend Ahmed's conception of orientation to understand Tambu's various transqueer orientations in *Nervous Conditions.* In the bed scenes with Nyasha, Tambu orients her body towards Nyasha to delink from the colonial gender system. Here, in the moment of bodily paralysis, Tambu orients inward and chooses a moment of internal disorientation, or dysphoria, to refuse colonial cisheteropatriarchy. Conceptualizing this as a moment of dysphoria also helps us subvert white Anglocentric Western trans narratives of home and belonging: Tambu's affective and spiritual slippage away from her body allows her to refuse colonial cisheteropatriarchy from within a space of liminality and unbelonging.[13]

IV. Decolonial Ruptures within Colonial Forms

By giving us transqueer glimpses of the bedroom space, Dangarembga creates decolonial ruptures in an otherwise colonial form. She inserts moments of speculative space-making in a Black realist novel. Although the book begins with the idea of Tambu's "escape," it is noteworthy that Tambu's dormitory at the convent, where Tambu resides after leaving her uncle's mission house, is a racially segregated and physically constricting space that is accorded to Tambu by coloniality. When Tambu first enters the convent, she is overwhelmed by its spaciousness. She describes its grounds as "majestically spacious" and the dormitories as

"bright and shimmering, *white* in the clear summer sun" (Dangarembga 192; emphasis added). However, she is immediately disappointed by her racial conspicuousness here, where she "looked and looked and searched carefully . . . but could not find a single black face" (194). Despite inhabiting the physical convent, Tambu understands that she belongs, albeit unwillingly, to a marginal social space of Black students. Dangaremba demonstrates her occupation of the margin within the larger framework of the convent education that has been benevolently awarded to her by the missionaries through the spatial confinement of Tambu's dormitory room, which "certainly was not large enough for the six beds that stood in it, three along one wall and three along the other, all of necessity so closely arranged that there was barely space to walk between them" (194). If one compares this narrow space to the expansive fluid space of Nyamarira or the space of natural vegetation at the beginning of the novel, where Tambu's body could roll with rage while fighting her brother, her final escape does not seem liberating. In the narrow room of the "African students," a space segregated from the whiter rooms of the white students, Tambu has no room to express outrage. In this colonial space, there is no space for movement or transness.

Tambu's disidentification with the dominant space of the convent reflects the novel's disidentificatory relationship with realism and naturalism. On the surface, *Nervous Conditions* employs the social realism often present in European coming-of-age novels. For example, the novel historicizes Tambu's quiet negotiation of space by situating her affective and intellectual responses within historical chronotopes. Tambu's and Nyasha's different conclusions stem from their varying social positionalities within their colonial landscape: Tambu's only respite from poverty lies in racist institutions, while the more class-privileged Nyasha remains stuck in the interstitial space between modernity and her decolonial critiques. It is no surprise to the reader that in the end Tambu ends up in the convent and Nyasha remains sick with her disordered eating as she tries to purge the internalized colonization by throwing up food. These catastrophes, however, are constituted within the historical reality of colonial Rhodesia. Here, the novel adopts elements of social realism by showing how Tambu is unable to escape colonial and racist segregation

and how Nyasha is unable to fully heal from her anorexia and bulimia because of the extreme violence embedded within external spaces that offer no escape from coloniality. Despite this overall commitment to realist form, Dangarembga does still rupture the realist novel on occasion (such as in the bedroom disassociation scene) to expose decolonial space-making.

Ironically, it is because Dangarembga uses realism that she is able to quietly move or trans away from the coloniality of realism's ideological orientations that pivot on individualist, linear progress. While most of the novel follows the generic conventions of realism, the affective power of the text constantly slips away from the focus of the European bildungsroman on individual development. While Dangarembga's feminist politics necessitate Tambu's "escape" from her homestead and uncle's house, the narrative does not celebrate this escape but rather marks Tambu's constriction within a racially segregated colonial space. The novel reveals the totality of coloniality by presenting Tambu's "escape" as real rather than ideal. This ending exposes the impossibility of linear feminist progress. The decolonial feminist politics of the novel lie not in a linear progression from rural to urban to colonial but rather in the affective and quotidian transqueer reconfiguring of given spaces and places. Through Tambu's refusals, Dangarembga constructs decolonial ephemeral spaces where Tambu can partake in a multiplicity of negotiations and movements rather than perform a single moment of protest or escape. The decolonial feminist politics of multiplicity in the novel can be seen in Tambu's quiet refusal, intimacy, and queer connections rather than in her large-scale migrations and resistances.

Although Tambu is unable to physically resist colonial structures, she forms, by the end of the novel, an intellectual and internal decolonial space of radically open possibilities. Even while residing in the anti-Black convent, Tambu reconciles her conflicting mental voices and forms her own intellectual space of cultural critique: "Quietly, unobtrusively, and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed. . . . [I]t was a long and painful process for me, the process of expansion" (204). This suggests the beginning of a process of intellectual delinking from colonial logic. Despite

the efforts of Babamukuru to assimilate Tambu into the light side of the colonial gender binary, Tambu learns from the racist nuns that her position in this "light" side will always be conditional and marginal. Therefore, Tambu's quiet survival at the mission house transforms into a quiet questioning of the colonial gender system present in the convent's education. The unease and anguish of simultaneously living within and contesting the convent education is Tambu's final "process of expansion." This painful process lies outside the binary logic of assimilation or rejection of colonial space. Tambu's final "expansion" can be read as her reorientation to an always already disoriented phenomenology. Ahmed contends that it is important to have hope "because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering in time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow but instead create wrinkles in the earth" (179). Tambu's process of expansion articulates the making of transqueer lines. Her imaginative and quiet refusal to become "straight as an arrow" creates trans wrinkles in her social space.

Decolonial movements away from violent cisheteropatriarchal spaces emerge despite (and in some cases because of) the novel's realist mode that encompasses a linear/modern/ colonial narrative of movement and migration. Ironically, it is the novel's vehement insistence on mimetically representing colonial patriarchal ideology that allows it to hint at the quiet refusals that rupture and delink from coloniality. By historicizing and contextualizing Tambu's subjectivity, the novel shows how the young Tambu can transqueerly create ephemeral decolonial spaces even within the normative colonial structures of her built environment.

Notes

1 For more on readings of the novel as postcolonial feminist escape, see Bahri's "Disembodying the Corpus," Uwakweh's "Debunking Patriarchy," Aegerter's "Dialectic of Autonomy and Community," and Gorle's "Fighting the Good Fight." It is not my intention to disavow the older criticism of the novel; rather, I offer an alternative reading of the novel that focuses on Tambu's act of staying or lingering in oppressive spaces by centering moments of internal freedom rather than material escape. I also move away from a cis feminist framework and towards a queer and trans analysis of the novel.

2 For more on the elision of gender in queer studies, see Namaste.
3 Here I am drawing on Sharpe's conception of the trans asterisk in *In The Wake* as an expansive concept that can encompass configurations like transatlantic, transnational, translation, transgender, etc.
4 I am referring to the Bandung Conference of 1955, also known as the Afro-Asian Conference. This conference marked an important historical moment of Afro-Asian alliance and collective demand for decolonization.
5 The scholars I am referring to here include Spivak, Bhabha, Chakraborty, and Guha. Said stands out as one of the founders of postcolonial theory who does center Palestinian Indigenous claims to land (in *The Question of Palestine*).
6 Scholars who have addressed these concepts include Quijano (coloniality of power), Lugones (coloniality of gender), Mignolo (delinking), and Escobar (pluriversality).
7 For more on postcolonial and third world feminisms, see Mohanty and Shohat. For an explanation of decolonial feminisms, see Lugones, Oyěwùmí, and Anzaldúa. For more on postcolonial and decolonial approaches in the humanities, see Gallien. For more on the relationship between postcolonial and decolonial feminisms, see *Feminist Studies*' special issue from 2017 (vol. 43, no. 3).
8 See Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women* for a sociological examination of how gender was not an organizing principle in Yorubaland prior to European colonization.
9 For an analysis of the novel's postcolonial or third-world feminism, see McWilliams, Uwakweh, Saliba, Patchay, and Shaw; for a specific focus on women's postcolonial pathology, see Thomas, Bahri, and Nair.
10 For more on delinking, see Mignolo.
11 For example, Smith explores the heteronormative violence encoded within European settler colonialism in the Americas and the threat that non-European, non-white sexuality represented to the colonizers.
12 For example, see Vaid-Menon's video "I Was Born in the Wrong World."
13 For more on the critiques of trans narratives of home and belonging, see Bhanji.

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