Chapter 12

Helping American Students Find a Productive Positionality in the Study of Africa

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Introduction

Coming of age during the crest of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and as members of educational institutions in which DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) were standard watchwords, it stands to reason that many of the current students at American universities would be eager to participate in an anticolonial study of Africa. To be sure, the contours of the US's – and American academe's – treatment of African Americans and Africans differs, but they arguably both stem from a white imperialist logic (Goyal, 2014) that has become a key target of opposition on American campuses. Moreover, the mainstreaming of antiracist pedagogy in higher education is often framed by both researchers and the institutions themselves, as a response to student demands (Ebbinghaus & Huang, 2023). It appears that American undergraduates don't want to be deemed 'colonisers' any more than they want to be labelled 'racists.' But it would be a mistake to assume that just because students seem to have anticolonial, antiracist intentions that they have found, or know how to find, the most productive place for themselves in efforts to reframe the study of Africa and Africans. Students who are aware of their privileged position vis-à-vis those that they study and who are committed to 'checking' that privilege might focus more on liberating

themselves from guilt than contributing to the empowerment of their subjects. Many American students hold misconceptions not only about Africa, but also about how to be an effective ally in promoting Africans' interests.

This chapter is the result of my experiences in teaching Political Science classes at two prestigious, highly selective American colleges. I found that most students who claimed to want to learn about Africa in a way that affirms the dignity of the continent's peoples had trouble, on their own, putting this goal into practice. More concerningly, they were often unaware that their efforts at resisting colonial, Western, and racist biases did more to improve their status amongst their likeminded peers than to raise the status of Africans within their estimations and broader discourses. Simply put, many students were (unwittingly) using the study of Africa to appear to be individually anticolonial rather than to further the global cause of anticolonialism. What many students seemed to want to obtain from their lessons wasn't knowledge or understanding of Africa, but reassurance that they would be seen as treating Africa the 'right' way.

As their professor, I am not blameless in the matter. Instead, I will analyse how my choice of educational texts served to either encourage or discourage the superficiality of student engagement with anticolonial learning. In particular, I will compare students' reactions to two texts about contemporary Africa: Jeffrey Herbst's 1990 *International Security* article, *War and the State in Africa*, and Tsitsi Dangarembga's 2018 fictional novel, *This Mournable Body*. Herbst and Dangarembga occupy quite different positions when it comes to their relationship to Africa (the former is an American and the latter is a Zimbabwean), the social scientific study of Africa (Herbst was an assistant professor at Princeton University when his piece was published, while Dangarembga was a filmmaker, playwright, and novelist), and international scales of social status and power (he is a white man; she is a black woman). Moreover, the voice that the two authors adopt in their work stands in stark contrast. He writes in the first-person style of an academic, endeavouring to convince readers of the soundness of his reasoning, while she

uses the second-person style of an omniscient narrator to *tell* the audience or her protagonist how they feel as they live the protagonist's story.

Indeed, I will argue that it is primarily the differences in the positionality of the authors and their texts that served to lead students away from, or towards, a more productive position within anticolonial education. Herbst's positionality encouraged my students to stop at self-satisfied, superficial 'allyship' with Africa; Dangarembga's pushed my students towards an anticolonial understanding of the lives of some Africans. Herbst's piece seemed to activate students' awareness of their privileged positionality vis-à-vis Africa and their concomitant desire to atone for this privilege. As a result, many emphasised misperceptions of African victimhood and retreated into the role of the self-appointed 'protector' of Africa from outside judgement. Dangarembga's positionality and the positionality that she imposes on the readers unsettled their expectations. My students could no longer shield 'Africa' from colonialist bias when Dangarembga's second-person narration made them into a black Zimbabwean woman living under a neocolonialist mindset. Consequently, many students began to appreciate that their place in the anticolonial study of Africa is to learn from Africans about Africa. They also began to grasp how they are also disempowered by global forces of neoliberal capitalism, sexism, and racism. Africa isn't just a prop that they can use to project an ideal image of themselves; it can be a tool in their educational journey towards understanding themselves and the world.

Before I proceed with a detailed discussion of my experience teaching Herbst's and Dangarembga's work, I will first review the concepts of anticolonial pedagogy and positionality and my understanding of them. While it lacks a settled definition, I define anticolonial as the opposition to the colonial impulse and imperative to centre economic, political, and social relations on the needs of certain places and populations: those in the so-called 'mother' countries or 'core' areas. This suggests that an anticolonial study of Africa cannot serve the needs of those in the core areas only, nor can

it serve to reaffirm the power of non-Africans over Africans. I also use an expansive conception of positionality in relating it to the learning experience, looking not only at where students stand in relation to the subjects of their study, but also where they stand in relation to the authors of the work that they use to study their subjects. Educators, I argue, must think critically about how students' reaction to the positionality of the authors of their educational texts shapes their learning experience.

Aspiring for Anticolonialism

It may seem counterintuitive to speak of an anticolonial study of 'Africa,' as such a study seems to fail the most basic plea of anticolonial activists: to stop regarding the continent as if it were one undifferentiated, backwards 'country.' Indeed, ignorance of the African continent and Africans, especially in the Global North, is pervasive. Those who do take an interest in the continent nevertheless often share the same sentiment as those who don't – that it is a place of nearly universal failure (Williams, 2009). The image of African 'suffering' feeds much of the (limited) Western interest in the continent, but it also calls for a blindness to nuance, complexity – and success. In the common Western (mis)conception of Africa, it makes little sense to talk of countries or individuals but rather of general, freighted types: guerrillas, dictators, starving people, etc.

To counter this inaccurate conception of 'Africa,' we should ideally aspire to an anticolonial study of Namibia, or better, to an anticolonial study of Nama women in Namibia. But I will retain the use of 'Africa' in this chapter not to suggest that the continent and its peoples are monolithic, but as a reminder of what an anticolonial pedagogy is seeking to resist. An anticolonial approach to Africa isn't simply opposed to colonialism, but also opposed to the mythic, essentialised 'Africa.' I also contend that it is very difficult to proceed to an anticolonial study of a specific African country or group without first engaging in an anticolonial study of 'Africa,' as the need for specificity and nuance only becomes clear once the image of Africa as one poor, uncivilised 'country' is pierced.

As suggested, opposition lies at the heart of my conception of anticolonial pedagogy, regardless of whether Africa is the specific subject of study. There is considerable debate amongst scholars as to meanings and relative merits of the interconnected concepts of decolonisation, anticolonialism, and postcolonialism (Bhambra, 2014; Childs & Williams, 1997; Elam, 2017), so I will focus on their common core, the colonial. But I use the prefix 'anti' to signal a clear and active rejection of the colonial. I also prefer to describe my ideal pedagogy as anticolonial rather than decolonised, as the latter suggests a sort of intellectual cleansing of a contaminated source, whereas the former points to building something new from fresh ideas and sources.

Colonial education isn't confined to merely what was practiced by colonial authorities in the colony or mother country; it can be pursued in a postcolonial setting as well (Oyedemi, 2021). In one sense, a colonial education is born of Eurocentrism and Western chauvinism. It is the study of Africa that looks at the continent through "the lens defined by the institutions of colonial power," rather than focusing on "the indigenous origins of African societies and the patterns of thought that these embodied, and how these have in turn been influenced by the impact of colonial rule and incorporation into a global system … of Northern dominance" (Clapham, 2020:138–139). It is part and parcel of modernisation theory, which regards Africa, especially now that it has been shorn of colonial rule, as simply 'behind' in a universal process of development. Such an approach ignores indigenous contributions to knowledge about Africa – and the world – because it expects that Western scholars, in their more 'advanced' universities and disciplines, are closer to capturing and understanding the 'truth.'

But most scholars conceptualise a colonial education as having a much more explicit political purpose, such that it doesn't simply reflect colonial domination as much as actively reinforce it. Quijano's (2007) theory of coloniality would categorise an educational approach as colonial if it is a manifestation of the constructions of race, Eurocentrism, and capitalism – in other words, if it entrenches and legitimises

the processes and ideologies that supported the political, economic, and social relations of colonialism. In particular, a colonial education privileges ways of seeing the world and forms of knowledge that *justify* unequal and exploitative relationships between the colonised and the coloniser. Subaltern epistemologies, and indeed any contributions from subaltern individuals, are unwelcome in colonial education, as they call into question the basis of the subaltern's position; the subaltern is supposed to be subaltern in part because he has little to contribute to the knowledge of the world. Instead, misconceptions of Africa's backwardness and helplessness reign supreme in the colonial imagination of the continent.

Whether or not one believes that the colonial study of Africa deliberatively intends to further Western domination, what is clear is that this approach decentres the experiences and needs of indigenous Africans despite its purported intention to understand them. As with the economic, political, and social relationships between the colonisers and the colonised, the former are always at the core of colonial study and the latter are always at the periphery. A colonial study of Africa is about satisfying the "white appetite for stories of victimage" (Syed & Ali, 2011:352) more than it is about countering African victimhood; it is about giving Westerners a sense that they can make a difference in the world (Cornwall, 2020) more than understanding and implementing differences that would help Africans. An anticolonial study of Africa, then, refuses to foreground the needs of non-Africans. It is one in which "the continent holds a central place, and which defines the questions to be asked and the answers to be sought in terms that are clearly rooted in Africa itself" (Clapham, 2020:139). But it also isn't a study of a "place apart" that can play no role in "the generation of ideas and theoretical insights that have widespread and general relevance for the world" (Abrahamsen, 2017:129), as that simply reproduces the constructed peripherality of the continent.

Productive Positionality

An educational approach that focuses on relocating Africa within the academe and the world will need to interrogate positionality in all aspects. As a concept, scholars tend to apply positionality at the level of the individual. In its most spare definition, individuals' positionality refers to their social location, or their place within a web of relationships in a social setting (Acevedo et al., 2015; Nelson, 2023). It chiefly derives from socially constructed identities like race, gender, and social class, which are themselves dependent on context and not wholly immutable (Cooks, 2003; Rodriguez & Navarro-Camacho, 2023).

The salience of positionality in an anticolonial pedagogic approach to Africa is multi-fold. Such an approach is fundamentally about resisting the inferior social positioning imposed by colonialism and its legacies on indigenous Africans by recentring them in the study of the continent. It is also about recognising how the positionings of Africa's interlocutors affect their epistemologies and viewpoints, the chief application of positionality theory (Takacs, 2003). To use accounts of Africa produced by non-indigenous Africans not only risks reinforcing the inferior standing of indigenous Africans in the world order, but it may also introduce 'facts' about Africa that give justification for their diminished social standing. At the very least, those who study Africa without reflecting on their positionality might end up asking the wrong questions and looking for answers in the wrong places, as one's social positioning trains one's eye primarily on what matters personally.

In addition, an anticolonial pedagogy will ask students and their teachers to reflect on their own positionality. This is the key application of positionality theory within the literature on pedagogy (Acevedo et al., 2018; Takacs, 2003). Much of the focus is on how incorporating awareness of the positionality of students and teachers can create a more inclusive classroom, where students are more engaged in their studies as they can become co-creators of their education (Acevedo et al., 2018; Nelson, 2023; Rodriguez & Navarro-Camancho, 2023).

The classroom experiences I detail in this chapter suggest that American students' awareness of their positionalities has the potential to be both productive and counterproductive to anticolonial pedagogic goals regarding the study of Africa. On the one hand, it can make students more receptive to indigenous knowledge about the continent as they recognise how their social positioning has functioned to make Africa a literal heart of darkness – a place that they aren't allowed to see. On the other, American students who are aware of their privileged positioning vis-à-vis Africans may use it to indulge in misconceptions about Africa's victimhood and Americans' role as their appointed 'saviours.' Indeed, I found that most students, when given the chance, were inclined to reframe the study of Africa so that it served to vault them into a special class of 'enlightened' Westerners who appreciated African suffering and refused to blame Africans for problems imposed upon them. Learning about Africa became an opportunity to criticise *other* Americans for their colonial viewpoints. This is in line with Acevedo et al.'s (2018) warning that excessive emphasis on the function of students' positionalities can foster a narcissistic approach to education (Montuori, 2006) that devolves into anti-intellectualism and uncritical naval gazing. The key to ensuring that focusing on positionality doesn't reinforce misconceptions of African victimhood, I argue, is not to constantly remind Western students that they are privileged, but instead to ask students to position African voices at the centre of their study of the continent.

This points to the important role of the professor in ushering students towards a productive positionality in the anticolonial study of Africa. Here I use positionality to refer to the place that American college students occupy in the processes of understanding Africa and disseminating information about it. The most productive place for such students is one that is deferential and receptive to the knowledge, needs, and experiences of indigenous Africans. Students who occupy this social location encourage other Americans to be similarly respectful and receptive; they do not use it to prove their superiority to other Westerners. I argue that the choice of

educational texts, especially as they relate to the positionality of their authors, can play an important part in guiding students to this location. Not all authorial positionalities will provoke productive student positionalities.

In what follows, I reflect on my experiences teaching Jeffrey Herbst's (1990) *War and the State in Africa* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's (2018) *This Mournable Body*. I used them both at two highly selective American colleges but in different Political Science courses within each college: Herbst's text in introductory comparative politics courses and Dangarembga's in intermediate-level courses on the Global South and women's empowerment. Each course enrolled approximately thirty students per semester, the overwhelming majority of whom were white and/or had been educated in American high schools. In total, I taught Herbst's text ten times to approximately 300 students and Dangarembga's eight times to approximately 250 students. For each text, I asked students to write a short, pre-class online discussion board post reflecting on their initial reactions. We then spent seventy-five minutes in class discussing the text together. I later assigned the students a formal essay on Dangarembga's novel, but for the purposes of comparison, I will only focus on students' reactions in the pre-class online discussion boards and in-class discussions.

Provoking a Performative Allyship: Herbst's "War and the State in Africa"

Jeffrey Herbst's 1990 article in the top-ranked journal *International Security,* 'War and the State in Africa,' was the first expression of arguments that he further developed and refined in his award-winning book, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, published a decade later. In the article, Herbst argues that the development and consolidation of African states "has been stunted by the very problems that war helped European countries to solve" (Herbst, 1990:119), chiefly centralised and efficient institutions of taxation and a unifying nationalism that could legitimise the state. He dismisses intrastate conflict as insufficient to foster

these developments, as they don't put national survival on the line in the way that international wars over borders do. African leaders, and the world at large, have honoured the artificially drawn system of states that resulted from the European scramble for the continent, and he argues that as a result, African states are weak but remarkably stable.

This chapter need not review the scholarly assessment of Herbst's article; what matters instead is how it fits into an anticolonial study of Africa. Herbst is no Joseph Conrad, so loathed by Chinua Achebe (2009) for bringing the European to Africa to explore the question of the basic humanity of Africans. Rather, he has brought European models of state development to Africa to assess their universality, using the assumption of African humanity to question whether European ideas explain the entire world. Therefore, the article questions the centrality of the European state in the scholarly study of state development. On the other hand, the article shades into what Hountondji (2002) calls the "extraversion" of Africa – the use of Africa to test theories generated elsewhere, to satisfy the need of outsiders to confirm their theories – and it ultimately concludes that Western political scientists were right in what they discerned from their study of Europe – that "war made the state" (Tilly, 1975:42). Indeed, while Herbst cites several other prominent Western scholars of Africa, he incorporates almost no voices from the continent itself. Instead, the article follows the colonial tendency of Westerners talking to other Westerners about what to make of, and what to do about 'Africa.'

Students have been quick to pick up on this colonial gloss of Herbst's work. But I found that most of them, by themselves, stopped short of moving towards a productive position within the anticolonial study of Africa. Instead, many of them took cues from Herbst's positionality to adopt a sort of performative allyship with Africans. Their goal became to prove that while they are positioned like Herbst vis-à-vis Africa, they were *not* like him in their approach to the continent. Yet their approach was revealed to be fundamentally incurious about learning about and from Africa and instead steeped in uncritical acceptance of the continent's misperceived 'troubles.'

Like most of my students, Herbst is a white American. When he published his article as a professor at Princeton University (Herbst, 1990:117), his social milieu was also defined by the rarefied walls of elite American educational institutions. Learning this seemed to activate many students' worry that they would fall victim to the same blindness and biases that Herbst might carry. Common reactions to Herbst's article included such comments as:

> "We White people need to stop thinking we understand Africa."
>
> "I've been on a safari in Kenya, but you don't see me trying to tell Africa what to do."
>
> "Of course he thinks war will help Africa. Our [Americans'] history shows that we don't care about the suffering of people in the Third World, especially when it serves our interests."
>
> "Just like how we like to forget about slavery in America, we like to forget about colonisation in the rest of the world."

Although students were using the words "we" and "I" to acknowledge that their positionality in the world was similar to the place occupied by Herbst, they were using the *awareness* of their positionality to suggest that they had transcended its pernicious effects. This is in line with what Cooks (2003) witnessed when she taught white students about whiteness; some of them claimed that while they were white, it was *other* white people who carried the white subjectivity. Herbst reminded my students of themselves, and the goal became to remind themselves, and others, that they were 'better,' and more 'enlightened' than Herbst. Suddenly, the misperceptions that needed to be remedied were not about Africa, but that *all* Americans had colonial mindsets.

This became very clear in students' posts in our online discussion board. They were overwhelmingly focussed on Herbst's "typical" (their words) American / white / Western / privileged disregard for Africans. But amid agreeing with

one another on Herbst's failings, students also seemed to be engaged in a game to prove their knowledge of the atrocities that have befallen Africa. The following were mentioned in students' responses: colonisation, ethnic cleansing, genocide, extreme poverty, famine, civil war, ethnic conflict, warlords, despotism, child soldiers, HIV/AIDS, blood diamonds, climate change, missionaries, the slave trade, the looting of indigenous art, and cultural appropriation. There was virtually no mention of positive outcomes on the continent.

These reactions play into colonial stereotypes. While I expected that students would want to question Herbst's starting assumption about the weakness of the 'African' state, I found that they not only accepted this blanket assessment, but that they quickly surpassed it with their characterisations of the 'troubled' continent. Herbst was right about Africa in general, they decided, but like many fellow Americans, he was insufficiently educated or wilfully blind about how *much* Africans were suffering. Knowing that Herbst was a white American, they fell back on what they knew about other white Americans, and what they wanted to avoid themselves – callous disregard for what is/was happening on the continent.

It makes sense that the students would think that what is transpiring in Africa transcends state weakness. The laundry list of atrocities gripping the continent points to how Westerners have been 'educated' about Africa. Campaigns like #Kony 2012, #BringBackOurGirls (Dewey, 2014), and Live Aid (Ray, 2025) have all rested on the premise that the best thing for a Westerner to do regarding Africa is to know and care about its problems (Davis, 2010; Faloyin, 2022; Goyal, 2014; Williams, 2009). The song *Do They Know It's Christmas?* (Geldof & Ure, 1984) written in response to the 1984 famine in Ethiopia and still in regular rotation in the US today, carries a more pointed implicit question for its listeners than solely what is in its title: Do *you* (Westerners) know Africa is, as the lyrics state, a "place of dread and fear"? (Faloyin, 2022:92). Students' reactions to Herbst's article seemed to suggest that they wanted it to be known that unlike other Americans, their answer to such a question would be 'yes.'

Students would invariably start with colonisation in their narrations of Africa's victimhood. This is a further sign that students were using Herbst's article to position themselves as the 'good' Westerners. Goyal (2014) has noted a distinct American fascination with 'war in Africa.' He suggests that there is comfort in studying Africans killing Africans because it is unambiguously a story of *African* atrocity; it opens possibilities for Americans to serve as sympathetic, third-party humanitarians. The colonisation of Africa, I contend, has similar dynamics, as it was a project of the *non-American* Western world. For American students to point to colonisation as the wellspring of African problems is to indict *other* Westerners. It serves as a way of reminding themselves, and the world, that Americans are different from others of a similar global positionality. Americans should feel guilty if they don't help Africans now, but they don't have to shoulder the burden of atoning for what their compatriots did to Africans in the past. (My students tended to view slavery as American mistreatment of black people in the US and not conceptualise it as American mistreatment of Africans in Africa.)

Indeed, it was difficult to tell if some students' incredulity that Herbst, an American, did not focus on the colonisation of Africa was rooted in their disbelief that he wasn't using European colonisation to acquit himself of charges of Western privilege. I suspect that was the case for far too many of my students, as their recourse to cry 'colonisation' seemed reflexive and perfunctory, showing little more than that they knew that it had happened and they knew it was bad. In their minds, recognising the evil of colonisation – meaning its form but not necessarily its content – seemed to be the unimpeachable, normatively 'right' position for someone like them to take. Yet that is the minimal requirement for anyone; a student of Africa, especially an anti-colonialist student of Africa, will insist on knowing more.

For example, they will want to know how colonisation not only impeded African state-building, but also furthered Western state-building. This is part of the anticolonial approach to Africa, which sees the continent as generative of knowledge

about the world outside its borders. Without my prompting, few students made the intellectual effort to connect African colonisation with European state-building. I expected them to counter Herbst's suggestion that border wars could be as productive of state-building in Africa as it had been in Europe by pointing out how fundamental European colonisation of distant lands had been to the development of European states and economies. Instead, students brought up colonisation because, like war, it brings death and destruction. This thin understanding of colonisation isn't something that seems to require further input, especially from those, like indigenous Africans, who are living with colonisation's legacies.

Thus, what I found particularly troubling about my students' reaction to the Herbst reading is that it forecloses learning more about Africa or learning from Africans. To prove that they were better than Herbst, despite sharing a similar positionality, students had to adopt a posture of *already* being sufficiently informed about Africa. To learn information about Africa, or about state development in general from Herbst, would make them no better than the average ignorant American. While Herbst was a scholar, he was first and foremost a white American man, and it was that positionality that students didn't want to match – or worse, to fall below. One student commented that white men have been "saying whatever they want about Africa forever and getting away with it," the implication being that if they were to engage with Herbst's academic articles, they would be enabling Herbst to "get away with it" as well. The student was certainly not wrong about the impunity that white men have enjoyed regarding their 'knowledge' about Africa, but an anticolonial study of the continent would not stop short at saying that white men are wrong about Africa. To do so still centres the enterprise on the biases, needs, and (lack of) knowledge of white men.

In fact, I found that I needed to bring up the prospect of seeing what *Africans* had to say about state weakness, its causes, and the potential relationship between war and state-building; it was not the natural inclination of students to want to counter Herbst's knowledge with indigenous African

knowledge. While initially puzzling, it fits with the idealised positionality that has been constructed for Americans vis-à-vis Africans. Americans shouldn't be 'colonisers' coming in and telling Africans what to do; they should be 'allies' who save Africans from *other* Westerners who are trying to come in and tell Africans what to do. Many students seemed to worry that seeking African responses to Herbst would be an insult to Africans' intelligence and dignity. The vast majority of Africans, my students concurred, would agree that war would be detrimental to the continent. After everything that Africans have suffered at the hands of the outside world, they should not have to also entertain a wrong and dangerous argument. This suggests that students had decided that the best positionality available to them was to be a sort of "white saviour" (Faloyin, 2022), shielding Africans from harmful ideas and stereotypes. But while it seems to meet the needs of Africans to protect them from having to answer misguided and harmful stereotypes, in the words of Chinua Achebe (2009:89), Africans "are not really served" by the outsider's "compassion'; instead, "they ask for one thing alone – to be seen for what they are: human beings." In the academe, to be seen as a human being means being both a 'worthy' subject of study *and* a worthy producer of knowledge. Students seemed to assume that the only knowledge that they could obtain from African sources was what they already knew: that Herbst was wrong about Africa. Again, the focus shifted back to the positionality of students in relation to Herbst, but in the process, students were also pushing Africans to an inferior position when it comes to the global production of knowledge.

When I first put Herbst's piece in my syllabus, I expected it to generate discussion about what Africa could teach the world about state-building and curiosity about how colonialism shaped state-society relations. Perhaps naively, I didn't expect that most students would use it to rehearse their social-justice bona fides and to turn away from engagement with indigenous African scholarship. However, students were clearly using the positionality of the author as a cue to focus on their positionality, which they then attempted to renegotiate. Having an author who was so close to their positionality, addressing

them in ways that they were familiar with, gave them that opportunity. But it also encouraged them to indulge in lazy misconceptions of 'Africa' and its need for outside 'help.' Encountering an author with such a different positionality – and expectations of the positionality of her audience – provided them with no such space.

Forcing Students out of their (Comfort) Zone: Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*

I considered Tsitsi Dangarembga's 2018 novel *This Mournable Body* a core supplemental text in my classes on politics in the Global South and women's empowerment. This oxymoronic designation of 'core supplemental' reflects the fact that it was both central to my pedagogic goals and yet also meant to complement the traditional scholarly work I had students read – the scholarly work that the discipline would consider requisite for such courses. But I found the liminal status of the novel within the courses and the standard political science canon only enhances its ability to unsettle the type of reflexive, unreflective positionality that Herbst's piece inspired in my students.

This Mournable Body is Dangarembga's final novel in a decades-long trilogy concerning the fictional character Tambudzai (Tambu) Sigauke, the black female Zimbabwean protagonist of 1988's *Nervous Conditions* and 2006's *The Book of Not*. Critically acclaimed, the winner of the 2021 Pen Pinter Prize, and shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize (Graywolf, n.d.) the novel finds Tambu in Harare, struggling to fully achieve 'success,' which she understands as leaving her 'Africanness' – her 'village' – behind and becoming wealthy and Westernised. Dangarembga is unflinching in her representation of the "neoliberal hold on subjectivity" (Niemi, 2021:870), allowing Tambu to become an unlikable character, willing to betray anyone, but especially other Zimbabwean women, to advance her interests. After a series of devastating choices that Niemi (2021:871) describes as "cross[ing] all the possible moral lines and humiliat[ing] herself and others," Tambu finally awakens to the error of her ways, although Dangarembga leaves it

unclear whether such a realisation and subsequent redemption would have come had Tambu's schemes for wealth and prestige been successful. The novel is a complex tale of the colonisation of African minds but also what those colonised minds can do to other Africans. Neoliberalism is the ultimate antagonist, but it isn't a wholly imported or imposed ideology; it is also something that Africans have made their own.

At first, it seemed that my students did not have an instinctive, immediate reaction to *This Mournable Body* like their peers had to Herbst's article. There was no rush to criticism or praise when I solicited their initial reactions to the novel. However, with some probing, it became clear that most students first disliked the novel. The problem was that they feared that voicing their dislike would signal to their classmates, and me, that they had an incorrect (meaning negative) view of Africans and Africa. The thoughts and actions of the protagonist, Tambu, are frequently despicable – in the first pages of the novel alone, she finds enjoyment in participating in mob violence against an innocent hostel mate – but my students were reticent to admit that they were repulsed by her. One student ventured that disliking Tambu was simply a "gut reaction," the implication being that she had decided that her judgement of the character and the book needed conscious, careful deliberation. Here, other students agreed: disliking African characters was an "unthinking" stance, something that had been ingrained in the Western psyche. It was something that they were committed to transcending, and were transcending, by ignoring their moral and ethical judgements of the character.

But why couldn't a careful consideration of Tambu's actions also conclude that she was acting reprehensibly at points? Why was applying moral and ethical scrutiny to an African character an "unthinking" reaction? Could it also be a "gut reaction" to avoid a negative judgement of an African character? Were students transcending a colonialist bias towards Africans when they treated Africans as a 'test' of their transcendence? Were they learning anything from Africans about Africa, or about the world, in thinking so much about how

they didn't want to appear to be *unthinking* in their reception of the book?

When I pressed students with these questions, it became clear to all of us how much the students were letting their awareness of the positionality of Tambu and Dangarembga dictate their engagement with the novel. As they had done with Herbst, they were taking cues from the social location of the author and her protagonist to decide what they were to obtain from the text. And once again, what they wanted to gain from the text wasn't knowledge or understanding of Africa, but a reassurance that they would be seen as treating Africa the 'right' way. Dangarembga and Tambu are both black African women. That meant, several students (correctly) explained, that their social location, on multiple dimensions, was one of intersecting and compounded marginalisation. My students clearly knew that in terms of global prestige and power, these two women were below them. They also knew that the inferiority of black African women was unjust and needed to be remedied, and expressed that their job, as those unfairly positioned above them, was to remedy that injustice. As one student wrote in her discussion board post, she was sure that I had assigned the book so that students could recognise that black African women were producing "award-winning" literature. This student hoped that we would further discuss the novel's sophisticated literary techniques so that we would be better equipped to defend African writers against those who deem their work inferior.

Yet students knew that they were in political science courses, and so it felt "strange," as another student put it, that most were concentrating on the literary qualities of the novel in their initial discussion board posts. To focus on Dangarembga as purely a skilled *writer* seemed incongruous when thus far, our class had been about interrogating the *ideas* of our authors. In other words, students could feel themselves twisting to try to fulfil what they thought were their prescribed roles based on their privileged positionality. For the students who had read Herbst, it had been easy; their job as 'enlightened' or 'good' Americans was to call out the benighted and biased amongst their compatriots. The inverse of that role should have been to

champion indigenous African voices. But how could students praise Dangarembga when she painted such a damning portrait of contemporary Africa – and suggested that Africans were playing an active role in its woes? Should they applaud someone who was playing into stereotypes of immoral Africans by giving the world such a troubling figure of African womanhood in her protagonist? If they joined in Dangarembga's implied criticism of her protagonist, how could they convince others that their reprobation wasn't part of a racist, sexist, and colonial mindset?

As Goyal (2014) reminds us, the African protagonists that Americans are used to encountering are victims, like the former child soldiers in popular novels like Beah's *Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Beah, 2008) and Eggers' *What Is the What* (Eggers, 2007). I agree with scholars like MacDonald (2008) who argue that African women are even more likely to figure into the imagination of "humanitarian" Americans solely as victims. While much of the insistence on only seeing African women as victims can be traced to racism and sexism, I contend that it can also result from a performative hyperawareness of African women's positionality. Most of the students in my political science classes at academically rigorous liberal arts colleges had at least a cursory understanding of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). They knew that black African women, because of the intersection of their race, nationality, and gender, were triply marginalised. As a result, they were convinced that they should only see black African women, like the character of Tambu, as a victim. They needed a figure who occupied a position of unambiguous, unearned marginalisation: someone who was a 'Black African Woman' but no more than a 'Black African Woman.' The 'Black African Woman' was who they could point to in order to prove that the world was unjust. Reading her story and empathising with her was how they knew how to contribute to the fight against injustice. Dangarembga, however, did not give them that option.

This opened the door for us to discuss how their version of 'justice' only reified black African women's marginalisation, as it amounted to little more than convincing themselves and others that black African women were oppressed. The same

conceptualisation of 'justice' for Africans was at play with the students who read Herbst, but Dangarembga's positionality as a black African gave the lie to its emancipatory effects. The self-centeredness of the argument that the author didn't make Africans 'pitiable' enough became clear once it was an African author – one who presumably knew what Africans' interests were – who was resisting the construction of the continent and its peoples as helpless victims.

This was how I was able to get my students to truly engage with the issue of what Africans want for themselves and Africa, beyond the facile conclusion that they didn't want war or poverty. One very perceptive student remarked that she was only able to appreciate the novel once she realised that it wasn't written for her approval. We then discussed how that might mean more than simply that Dangarembga didn't write the novel to please Westerners; instead, she didn't write it *for* Western audiences at all. In fact, Dangarembga has been clear quite in her comments on the novel that it is meant to help Zimbabweans diagnose and imagine solutions to their nation's crises (Shringarpure, 2019). Tambu is both part of the problem of what Dangarembga has called the "crisis of personhood" (Shringarpure, 2019) and part of its solution. When students said that they didn't like the character that Dangarembga has given them, I asked them to consider if what they actually objected to was the positionality that Dangarembga has imposed on them – the outside observer who is helpless to do anything but bear witness to the stories of others.

Indeed, while popular culture has made some important strides in a different direction (Faloyin, 2022), Americans are used to stories of Africa that reinforce Americans' privileged positionality, treating them as potential rescuers of a troubled continent. Even those stories that attempt to illuminate the shared humanity of the 'African' and the 'Westerner' assume that this humanity inheres in the Westerner; the message is that the African is no different from the Westerner, not that the Westerner is no different from the African. But Dangarembga's choice of narrative style places the African at the centre and forces *Westerner* readers to adopt a subaltern positionality. She

writes the novel in the second person, addressing the reader and Tambu as 'you.' Thus, readers have effectively no say in what they think or do but are rather given a subjectivity by the author. This is the colonial encounter turned on its head. The African Other is no longer everything that the Westerner does not wish to be; instead, the African Other is the Self: the total of everything that the Westerner is. As the neoliberal ethos stresses self-actualisation, most Western readers would balk at being told who they are. It is especially jarring, however, for them to be told that they occupy the social positionality – the black African woman – that, my 'enlightened' students would tell you, is afforded very little chance at self-actualisation. Again, my students were forced to recognise that simply being aware of a marginalised positionality and lamenting its injustice does little to combat that marginalisation. My students spoke of wanting to put down the novel, of wanting to escape from its/their story. None of them would be content with simply being acknowledged and pitied for weathering the hardship that was Tambu's story in *This Mournable Body*. That, in turn, made them question whether they were truly serving Africans' interests by merely bearing witness to their suffering.

Nor does Dangarembga provide much respite for readers who try to disassociate from the novel's imposed subjectivity. She rather shows that it is precisely when Tambu disassociates from herself that she commits the most cruelty towards others. That is not to suggest that students who try to disassociate themselves from their colonialist compatriots are somehow on par with those who colonised Africa, but to argue that the position that they are prone to adopting isn't productive of an anticolonial relationship between Africa and the West. What is particularly valuable about Dangarembga's use of second-person narration is that it forces students to consider how their minds might have *also* been colonised by such global forces as neoliberal capitalism, sexism, racism, classism, and the ideology of 'development.' My students have recounted that over time, it became expeditious and less exhausting for them to stop mentally resisting identification with Tambu and just accept her 'you' as their 'I.' From that observation, we could then discuss

the specifics of how colonisation affects the colonised. Students could then see that the African mind and psyche illuminated the *human* mind and psyche. The reason that we teach American students about Africa shouldn't be so they can claim an 'enlightened' social position; it should be so that they can move towards enlightenment about the human condition.

Conclusion: Meeting Well-Meaning Students Where They Are

There is an inherent risk in teaching American undergraduates about Africa as a white American woman. Even if I'm not the repellent 'white coloniser,' students could easily regard me as their competition for the most 'aware' amongst the 'good ones,' turning their time in my classroom into an effort to prove themselves rather than an opportunity to learn about Africa. While I will not claim to have the perfect solution to this possibility, I do contend that educators must be better prepared for the complex ways in which students' awareness and negotiations over their positionality vis-à-vis the subjects of their studies and authors of their educational texts affect our anticolonial pedagogic goals. In the BLM and #MeToo era, we shouldn't assume that students are blind to issues of identity, but we also shouldn't assume that students who are steeped in awareness of identity know how to find a productive position for themselves in the study of Africa. As my classroom experiences demonstrate, American students can get caught in the web of performing the 'proper' positionality, transforming what should be learning from and with Africans into an exercise in signalling virtue to other Americans.

The standard recommendation for any anticolonial or decolonial education project is to focus on the voices of the subaltern. That should only be the beginning; we can't expect that students, especially those who have been socialised in the Western classroom, know how to hear these voices. Some students, because of unexamined bias, will dismiss them as less authoritative or reliable. Of those who are aware of their privileged positionality vis-à-vis the texts and authors that

they read, more attention has been paid to those who view the contributions of subaltern voices as meritless 'diversity,' and how that can invite student backlash (Nelson, 2023). I argue that we should also consider students who know that subaltern voices have value and want to honour that value, but who nonetheless end up centring themselves and their Western peers in the process.

That means challenging students to move beyond simply being aware of their positionality and that of the people and authors whom they study, to recognising how that awareness can become an end in and of itself. It means asking students to reflect on whether focusing on their privilege allows them to accept lazy misconceptions of African 'suffering.' Texts like Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* are useful because they unsettle students' expectations of their positionality in the anticolonial study of Africa. They do not provide easy ways for students to be white saviours or humanitarian allies. They do this by providing unapologetically nuanced images of Africans. They don't seek to convince the readers – who can then feel good about themselves for 'accepting' Africans' arguments – but rather expect the reader to be already convinced. Or even better, they don't address the Western reader at all, but are self-consciously targeted to other Africans.

Scholarly texts by Western academics like Herbst can be used, but as educators, we can't allow students to treat them as mere props in their effort to prove their 'anticolonial' bona fides. If students are going to use their reception of an article to prove that they are anticolonial, then we must ask them to prove it by pointing out what new information they learned about the needs and interests of Africans from their criticism. If we can't help them to move in that direction, then we owe it to them, and to Africa, to rethink our approach.

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