



PROJECT MUSE®

Contingencies and Intersections: The Formation of
Pedagogical Canons

Susan V. Gallagher

Pedagogy, Volume 1, Issue 1, Winter 2001, pp. 53-67 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/26319>

Contingencies and Intersections: The Formation of Pedagogical Canons

Susan VanZanten Gallagher

Although most academic debates remain in-house, one discussion that has made its way into public conversation is that concerning the canon. Fueled by the controversy over Stanford's Western culture course in 1987, numerous periodicals and newspapers, pundits and media mavens, have pontificated upon the canonical issue. Should college or university literature courses include noncanonical or only canonical authors? How many classics should be sacrificed in order to incorporate new voices and perspectives into the curriculum? Should we cleave to, thoughtfully expand, or completely eliminate the canon? With traditionalists, such as William J. Bennett and Lynne V. Cheney, on the one hand, and multiculturalists, such as Thomas Sobol and Jane P. Tompkins, on the other, the discussion frequently takes on a militaristic either-or quality. James Atlas terms the fray "the battle of the books," while Gerald Graff calls us to move "beyond the cultural wars." Although what takes place in the classroom is at stake in these skirmishes, the grounds on which these battles are fought are usually ideological, with competing definitions of *common*, *value*, and *American* hotly contested, often by critics who have long since abandoned the day-to-day practices of pedagogy.

Following the lead of John Guillory in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, I would argue that such theoretical arguments characteristically concern an "imaginary canon"—imaginary in that there is no specifically defined body of works or authors that make up such a canon. Guillory (1993: 30) provides a useful distinction between the canon and the

syllabus, arguing that the canon itself is never the object of classroom study: “Where does it appear, then? It would be better to say that the canon is an *imaginary* totality of works. No one has access to the canon as a totality.” The imaginary canon consists of those works that scholars and critics have argued are “great” in one respect or other; it may occasionally take tangible form, such as the Modern Library’s recent list of the hundred best English-language novels of the twentieth century, but few instructors actually teach such a canon. “What does have a concrete location as a list, then, is not the canon but the syllabus,” Guillory continues, “the list of works one reads in a given class, or the curriculum, the list of works one reads in a program of study.” I will call such a concrete list the “pedagogical canon”: texts that are taught in college and university settings. Each instructor creates a personal pedagogical canon for each course by means of selecting a reading list. The wider pedagogical canon is made up of the most frequently taught texts, a list that is empirically verifiable.

This essay is concerned, then, with the nature of pedagogical canons: the intricacies of their evolution, their aesthetic and ideological freight, and their relationship to the imaginary canon. By examining the canonical progress of a specific text, I will demonstrate the way in which material conditions, accidental encounters, pragmatic needs, and ethical commitments all influence the formation of pedagogical canons. None of these components of change can be privileged over the others. Pedagogical aptness is not solely an intrinsic property of a text, but neither is it solely a property conferred by an external and arbitrary history. Better understanding the complex dynamics of pedagogical canons will provide new ways of thinking about the construction of our own classroom canons that move beyond simplistic appeals either to tradition or to innovation.

Guillory’s elaboration of the imaginary nature of the literary canon as opposed to the concrete character of pedagogical canons highlights the ways in which conservative arguments concerning “the canon” often fail to acknowledge that canon formation is an imprecise process. Although the biblical canon was intentionally formed in a series of church councils, it is a deceptive namesake for the literary canon, which never was systematically identified by any formal deliberation of dead (or live) white males. Rather, as numerous historical studies have demonstrated, the literary canon is a loose, baggy monster, a fluid movement of ebbs and flows, ins and outs—imaginary, therefore, as opposed to concrete. In his basic college handbook of literary terms, M. H. Abrams (1993: 20) notes: “The facts in this formative process are complex and disputed. It seems clear, however, that the process involves,

among other things, the wide concurrence of critics, scholars, and authors with diverse viewpoints and sensibilities; the persistent influence of, and reference to, an author in the work of other authors; the frequent reference to an author within the discourse of a cultural community; and the widespread assignment of an author or text in school and college curricula.” Abrams relegates the pedagogical appropriation of a text to the end of his list, but Guilory (1993: 28) calls more attention to the powerful role of syllabi and course construction. He claims, “An individual’s judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the *reproduction* of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers.” Even though critical attention may be what initially prompts classroom study, as a form of cultural capital the classroom study of literature has a higher stock value than critical attention.

Radical reflection on canons often has concerned itself with abolishing the imaginary canon in favor of a greater concern with the methodology by which texts are taught. Robert Scholes, for example, in his influential *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*, suggests that we shift our focus from a curriculum oriented to a literary canon to a curriculum concerned with the process of reading. In such a curriculum, students will learn how to avoid being taken in by the ideology of a text. “The pedagogy of textual power” consists of “the ways in which teachers can help students to recognize the power texts have over them and assist the same students in obtaining a measure of control over textual processes, a share of textual power for themselves” (Scholes 1985: 39). With such objectives, *what* one reads is immaterial; *how* one reads is preeminent (although we should note that Scholes’s own examples are from Hemingway, very much a member of the traditional imaginary canon). John Alberti (1995) acknowledges that college syllabi have undergone radical transformations in the past twenty years, with many women and minority writers now included, but he fears that these texts are often taught only by means of New Critical strategies of close reading, rather than from a critical perspective that highlights the way social, ethnic, and gender positions construct aesthetic and cultural value. If instructors continue to employ only a New Critical methodology, Alberti (1995: xv) claims, students will simply conclude of the new pedagogical canon (1) that many women and minorities write just as well as white men, and (2) that a particular text by a woman or minority is representative in some way—leading either to reductionism or tokenism. Consequently, Alberti, too, advocates the elimination of the canon and a movement toward more “democratic pedago-

gies,” such as those advocated by Paolo Freire. Once again, the pedagogical focus becomes process rather than content, with little consideration of the process of selecting texts.

If we accept Guillory’s claim that the imaginary canon emerges from the operations of pedagogical canons, radical arguments to abolish the canon make no sense; some kind of pedagogical canon will always exist, at the least within the confines of each classroom. Course syllabi will prescribe certain texts to be read and eliminate countless others. Even an innovative methodology such as that described by Anne L. Bower (1995), in which the thirty students in her “Introduction to American Literature” choose the particular texts (from a given anthology) that the class as a whole would read, is not so much an exercise in the eradication as in the creation of a canon. “Changing the syllabus,” Guillory (1993: 31) says, “cannot mean in any historical context overthrowing the canon, because the very construction of a syllabus institutes once again the process of canon formation.” As long as we continue to teach literature, pedagogical canons will exist, and as they change, so will the imaginary canon. Part of our pedagogy, then, includes our contribution to the ongoing construction of the imaginary canon.

Martha J. Cutter (1995: 133) tells of one student at the University of Connecticut who complained, “Everyone keeps telling me that Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a noncanonical writer, but so far this is the third course in which I’ve read ‘The Yellow Wallpaper!’” One of the unintended ironies of the canon wars has been the reformation of the imaginary canon. Gilman may not yet be part of the imaginary canon as defined by the likes of George Will, but her recent critical and pedagogical popularity certainly makes her a viable candidate, and many might argue that she has indeed “made it.” Cutter admits, “Our most radical substitutions eventually become our canon,” but continues, “I am not sure how we can escape this institutionalization of what we teach as the ‘canon,’ except to keep shifting what we teach and emphasizing that our choices are based on thematic usefulness and our own peculiar interests and idiosyncrasies, rather than on some inherent, transcendent, value-neutral standard.” I will return to her notion of “thematic usefulness” below, but I don’t see much point in continually changing what we teach just for the sake of contesting the notion of a canon. The more important question, from a pedagogical point of view, is how we decide what goes into the construction of our syllabi.

Temporarily setting aside the issue of critical methodology, let us look more closely at the ways in which pedagogical canons are formed. A case study in a relatively new field—African literature—may more clearly highlight

the different components of influence. First, I will consider the material conditions that make a text potentially available for inclusion in a pedagogical canon. Even these material conditions, however, are influenced by ideological and aesthetic judgments, as we shall see. When a manuscript becomes a text—when it is published—professional structures and accidental encounters function to bring it to an instructor’s attention. Once on an instructor’s radar screen, a work may be adopted for a variety of reasons, including its ideology and aesthetics, or the “thematic usefulness” that makes a text “teachable.” Such choices made by numerous instructors may eventually nudge the text into the imaginary canon.

It is obvious that (with a few possible exceptions) a work must become a material object by means of publication before it becomes a candidate for a pedagogical canon. When it comes to African texts, the means of production are especially decisive. Christopher Miller (1990: 285) has noted the way in which the African literary canon is more crucially linked to the material conditions governing publication than the American canon. Due to economic and educational scarcities, there is little to no market of general readers in Africa, so publication is even more closely linked to pedagogy than in the United States. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992: 55) says, “One cannot too strongly stress the importance of the fact that what we discuss under the rubric of modern African writing [in the United States] is largely what is taught in high schools around the [African] continent.” The choice of what is taught is made, for the most part, by the editors of the powerful Heinemann African Writers series, which, according to Appiah, “constitutes in the most concrete sense the pedagogical canon of anglophone African writing.” And if a novel appears in the Heinemann series, chances are good that it will also become an assigned text in American or British educational institutions. By virtue of its size and influence, Heinemann might be seen as the great African canon maker.

The novel that I will discuss, however, reveals that the powerful economic forces represented by Heinemann are not completely determinative. First published in 1988 by the London-based Women’s Press, *Nervous Conditions*, by Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga, demonstrates how even the initial material production of a text has both ideological and accidental components. The publishing history of *Nervous Conditions* reveals the importance of chance encounters, dogged persistence, and ethical commitments, as well as the tremendous power of the American market. Dangarembga first submitted her manuscript to a Zimbabwean publishing house, which kept it for several months, “dilly-dallying” over it, as she said in a 1989 interview. “So eventually I asked if I could have it back and then they said they

didn't think they were going to publish it anyway" (Dangarembga 1992: 197). Dangarembga wondered whether the publishers' diffidence was prompted by a negative assessment of her writing abilities or by the fact that an editor was afraid of the controversial issues the novel raised regarding the role of women in African society. Was her opportunity to be considered for the pedagogical and imaginary canon a matter of aesthetics or ideology? Fearing the latter, Dangarembga decided to submit the manuscript to a feminist publishing house. Having recently read and enjoyed Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in a Women's Press edition, she sent *Nervous Conditions* to their London office. "I think about eight months after sending it to them I had to come here on business and I popped round to the office and asked if they'd read it," she explains in a British interview, "and they said 'No, we get so many manuscripts, but we will read it' and they did!" (Dangarembga 1992: 197). The unsolicited manuscript might not ever have received even an initial reading were it not for Dangarembga's personal advocacy. Another boost might have come from the fact that the director of the Women's Press at that time was Ros de Lanerolle, an expatriate South African who wanted to publish more works by African women.

Nervous Conditions moved across the Atlantic when the editors at Seal Press, a small Seattle company with a commitment to "introduce the new words and ideas of women writers," read the Women's Press edition soon after it was published, thought it was "incredible"—in the words of Seal publisher Faith Conlon—and quickly moved to obtain the American rights. Having previously published several books by women in translation, Seal initially aimed the novel at the trade market without any thought about course adoptions. "The word-of-mouth on this novel was amazing," Conlon told me in a telephone interview on 19 November 1996. "It took off very quickly, and almost all the sales were to the academic market. A few schools adopted it as a core text for freshman literature programs, and we received orders of four hundred at a time." With over fifty thousand copies in circulation, *Nervous Conditions* is now one of Seal's top three best sellers and was reissued in 1996 with a new jacket. Seal was lucky when it came to Dangarembga. More recently, the press attempted to get the rights to another unknown African woman writer, but Heinemann outbid them. "The floodgates haven't opened," Conlon said. "The number of African women who produce fiction is very small. It's hard to find us, and not that many writers have." Following its British and American success, *Nervous Conditions* was finally published in Zimbabwe.

Dangarembga's initial rejection, her offhand decision to submit the

novel to the Women's Press, her serendipitous visit to the London offices, and Seal Press's editorial insight all made possible the inclusion of *Nervous Conditions* in the pedagogical canon of African literature. A number of contingencies worked together to make the novel materially accessible. But as Conlon's remarks suggest, the various kinds of information exchanges that occur in the American educational system also were significant. Many professional structures—such as conferences, journal publications, book exhibits, and lectures—are factors in the construction of syllabi, especially for newer courses that can not easily access even an imaginary canon as a possible syllabus source. Chance encounters at conferences play an especially important role. Although many instructors may never bother to read a journal essay on an unknown author, it is far more likely that we would attend a conference session to hear a paper about a familiar text and then, by the coincidences of programming, accidentally hear a paper about an unfamiliar text that prompts us to read it. My own discovery of *Nervous Conditions* was even more haphazard. I was at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention browsing in the book exhibits, when I began to talk with a man who was from an African university. I had just begun to teach a course in African literature and was eager for assistance. During the course of our conversation, I asked him if there were any African novelists he thought were important but overlooked by the American literary and academic establishment. He immediately replied, "Tsitsi Dangarembga, without question. She's written a wonderful novel called *Nervous Conditions*." He wrote the unfamiliar name down for me, and I went home and ordered the book. And that's the beginning of the way in which *Nervous Conditions* became part of my personal pedagogical canon.

Those of us who teach in relatively new fields often rely on such word-of-mouth information in making choices for our syllabi. Since I began teaching *Nervous Conditions*, I've recommended it to numerous colleagues teaching newly developed courses in African or postcolonial literature. In 1996, I presented a paper about the novel's canonical fortunes at the MLA, and the most frequent comment I heard after the session was, "I'm going right down to the book exhibit to see if I can find a copy." At least one of my former students assigns *Nervous Conditions* in the high school AP English course she teaches. In a post on the H-NET list for African literature and cinema, Professor Eugene Baer asked for suggestions for works to include in a new undergraduate course in the African novel. Just about every response included *Nervous Conditions* as one of the recommended texts.

Such networking, mentoring, and advocacy has conveyed *Nervous Conditions* into the pedagogical canon in less than one decade of its publica-

tion. When I was in South Africa three years ago, I conducted an informal survey of South African academics and found that Dangarembga is probably even better known in South Africa than in the United States. Geographic proximity obviously plays a role here, but so do other significant issues in terms of the themes and style of *Nervous Conditions*, to which I will return. In 1992, Bernth Lindfors (1996) conducted a more formal survey, examining which African authors and books were prescribed reading in English courses taught at South African universities. Dangarembga was nineteenth on his survey, which was heavily dominated by South African authors, but *Nervous Conditions* was sixth on the list of novels by non-South Africans that were most frequently taught (after such standards as *Things Fall Apart*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Petals of Blood*, and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*). Without the contingencies of both publication and networking, *Nervous Conditions* would never have achieved such success. If a Zimbabwean publishing house had initially accepted it, the novel might have existed solely in a few hundred copies languishing in a warehouse in Harare. Or, perhaps, the word-of-mouth phenomenon might have simply begun its progress from a different site, extending its ripple effect to the publication of this very essay in the inaugural issue of a journal devoted to pedagogy. The unusual publishing history of *Nervous Conditions* demonstrates in somewhat exaggerated terms the complex relationship among material conditions, accidental encounters, disciplinary practices, and value-laden choices.

The material production of a text is a necessary but not sufficient guarantee of its place in the pedagogical canon. Texts may be published many years after they are written; out-of-print texts may be revived due to critical attention and pedagogical demand; texts published by small presses may eventually make their way into the mainstream. In the United States, with its vast publication, marketing, and distribution system, there is a huge numerical difference between the corpus (what is printed) and the canon, both imaginary and pedagogical. Consequently, works and authors must slug it out on the critical battlefield before they are admitted to any canon. The large pool of texts results in critical assessment playing an especially important role. In recent years, the attention of talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, joined with the potent commercial power of Starbuck's literary campaign, has propelled several virtually unknown works and writers into the best-seller lists. A contemporary text that received neither popular approval (as indicated by its sales figures) nor critical attention (by means of book reviews and then scholarly assessments) would soon vanish off the screen of pedagogical awareness. At the same time, the pedagogical canon can affect the material production of a

text. Forgotten or out-of-print works that receive renewed critical discussion — such as Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Chopin’s *The Awakening*, or Dickinson’s poetry — will find publishers eager to revive their material existence. A particularly good example of the complex operations of critical attention and pedagogical appropriation occurs with Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her foreword to a new edition of the novel, Mary Helen Washington (1990: x) describes the “underground phenomenon” of interest in Hurston’s novel in the early seventies that concluded in a petition being circulated at the 1975 MLA convention to get the novel back into print. Critical reassessments and academic pressure such as this can prompt publishers to revive out-of-print texts, and such revivals, in a further extension of the constantly evolving process, make possible more serious scholarship and course adoptions.

These critical conversations involve complex value-based decisions. The fact that a work is in print does not in and of itself guarantee inclusion in a pedagogical canon. “The construction of a syllabus begins with selection,” Guillory (1993: 33) insists; “it does not begin with a ‘process of elimination.’” Yet how are such selections made? Why do scholars write on one text over another? Why do critics recommend a particular text? When an instructor encounters an unknown text for the first time, what prompts her or him to adopt it for a course? We’ve all had the experience of working with a text that we find “unteachable,” for a variety of reasons. And, similarly, literature instructors frequently speak of those works that “just teach themselves,” regardless of our pedagogical strategies. Teachers search out such works and add them to their syllabi. To what extent do ideology, aesthetics, and issues of representation enter into these decisions? Once again the story of *Nervous Conditions* demonstrates the complexity of such influential factors. The content of the text itself is extremely important. Put most simply, *Nervous Conditions* is highly teachable. Put most skeptically, it is politically correct.

Nervous Conditions is a first-person retrospective account narrated by a character named Tambudzai, more familiarly called Tambu. Her story juxtaposes her own growth and development with that of her cousin, Nyasha, and, in turn, their generation’s story with that of their mothers’. Tambu lives in a rural African homestead until her brother’s untimely death provides her with the opportunity to receive a Western education. Consequently, at the age of fourteen, she leaves her traditional family to attend a mission school run by her uncle, Babamukuru — a Westernized, modernized, Christianized African. Here she encounters her British-raised cousin, Nyasha, who battles against her father’s embrace of colonialism and her mother’s apparent acqui-

escence to a life of submission. The novel examines some of the implications of feminism and colonialism for two African women from very different backgrounds.

Faith Conlon, the publisher of Seal Press, believes that the novel achieved its initial success in course adoptions for an ideological reason: the rising popularity of multicultural studies in the early nineties. And since *Nervous Conditions* addresses both gender and cultural issues, it conveniently complements the contemporary cultural and institutional criteria governing what is taught on American university campuses. Yet, Conlon continues, it also seemed to be a particularly appropriate book for college freshmen, since it deals with “themes relevant to young people.” Besides, she adds, “it is really well written.” While instructors may have been looking for a text to “represent” African and/or women’s voices and perspectives, according to Conlon, they were also concerned with the thematic usefulness of the book for the common reader and the extent to which the text achieved some kind of aesthetic effect. Conlon thus identifies three factors in the novel’s meteoric rise in the pedagogical canon: its treatment of multicultural issues, its universal themes, and its aesthetic excellence.

With its multivoiced treatment of issues of concern for women and for postcolonial people, *Nervous Conditions* provides much fodder for current educational and critical trends. Most, if not all, of the critical essays published on the novel or delivered at conferences discuss it from a feminist perspective. Australian critic and postcolonial theorist Gareth Griffiths notes in a personal e-mail from 9 May 1996 that, in his experience, *Nervous Conditions* is a popular text for graduate students working in feminist criticism. He then goes on to protest, “These modern texts like Dangarembga’s deserve to be read not just through one discourse and practice (contemporary feminism) but as a site for the intersection of numerous discourses, themes, and generic practices.” Such intense ideological focus on the novel’s feminist themes, Griffiths suggests, is misplaced. Although I’m willing to grant that many a graduate student may choose to write about *Nervous Conditions* because of its feminist themes, that alone does not explain its widespread pedagogical success. The new focus on multicultural literature in the American academy has prompted increasing numbers of African texts to be added to pedagogical canons. But neither feminist nor multicultural themes in and of themselves would insure that the text is “teachable.”

In order for a text to be widely adopted as part of the pedagogical canon, it must hold a certain amount of attraction for what Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose, following Samuel Johnson, call *the common reader*. Canon

construction and reformation, Kaplan and Rose (1990: 14) argue, depend to a great extent on “the oscillation between the needs and desires of the common reader and the ideological interests of a cultural/academic elite.” While Joyce’s *Ulysses* may be on the syllabus of a graduate seminar in postmodernism and thus part of the imaginary canon, few undergraduate general education courses would assign it. Graduate students may want to teach Dangarembga for feminist reasons, but only a few first-year students taking “Introduction to Literature” will want to read it for this reason. According to a study cited by Richard Ohmann, the common reader looks to novels for “personal meaning, for some kind of map to the moral landscape,” out of a need to “reinforce or to celebrate beliefs already held, or when shaken by events, to provide support in some personal crisis” (qtd. in Kaplan and Rose 1990: 73). Kaplan and Rose add, “Margaret Drabble has said it more succinctly: ‘Most of us read books with this question in our mind: What does this say about my life?’”

Examined from this perspective, *Nervous Conditions* has much to say to a first-year American college student in its story of a young person leaving home to obtain an education, a person who is eager to abandon her old life and develop a new self, a person who simultaneously finds herself homesick, nervous, awestruck, and skeptical upon entering a strange place. The transformation that Tambu envisions herself undergoing when she leaves home is not unlike the intellectual and physical liberation anticipated by many American college students. Tambu remembers,

When I stepped into Babamukuru’s car I was a peasant. You could see that at a glance in my tight, faded frock that immodestly defined my budding breasts, and in my broad-toed feet that had grown thick-skinned through daily contact with the ground in all weathers. . . . It was evident from the corrugated black callouses on my knees, the scales on my skin that were due to lack of oil, the short, dull tufts of malnourished hair. This was the person I was leaving behind. At Babamukuru’s I expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead. At Babamukuru’s I would have the leisure, be encouraged to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, the creation of consciousness, rather than mere sustenance of the body. (Dangarembga 1989: 58–59)

The details of Tambu’s physical transformation graphically depict the realities of African rural life, but the conjunction of a new intellectual identity with a transformed physical body is similarly enacted by American first-year students who pierce parts of their body and dye their hair various vivid hues. Tambu’s struggle to define herself in terms of both her family and her education, her traditional upbringing and the new world opened up by education,

makes her accessible to American college students, even while many of the cultural practices and assumptions that she describes remain unremittingly different, foreign, or other.

Kaplan and Rose's approval of the way that the common reader's needs and desires have affected the canon is not shared by all critics. And we can be sure that Kaplan and Rose would be less likely to encourage common readers' preferences when such readers embrace overtly racist or sexist texts. Some teachers seek not so much to "reinforce or celebrate beliefs already held" as to challenge their students' assumptions and commitments. Along these lines, Griffiths warns in the same e-mail, "Picking African texts for undergraduate courses because they mirror our students' concerns or have 'appeal' is a potentially dangerous exercise. In many ways the act of confronting a text which is resistant, intangible and even difficult is what the process of teaching cultural difference is all about." Still, if difficult difference is all that readers ever encounter, the wall of otherness will remain intransigent. Rather than concentrate almost exclusively on the degree to which cultures are distinct, unique, and incommensurable, a rich pedagogical canon will unflinchingly address questions of both cultural similarities and cultural differences. As Satya Mohanty (1995: 112) argues, an exclusive focus on difference means that "there is simply no need to worry about the other culture's views; they provide no reason to make us question our own views or principles." Mohanty continues, "We can understand both differences and commonalities adequately only when we approach particular cross-cultural disputes in an open-ended way. . . . Where, notwithstanding differences in language or conceptual framework, there is at least a partial overlap; however, there exists the possibility of genuine dialogue based on a critical understanding" (114).

The existence of many such "partial overlaps" in *Nervous Conditions* is the primary reason for its pedagogical success among both American and African students, graduates and undergraduates. Tambu's and Nyasha's stories bring readers into both familiar and unfamiliar worlds, thus "teaching students to imaginatively transgress their own social positions," a pedagogical objective articulated by Bruce Goebel (1995: 66). "They must know their own collective value systems in the context of other value systems, if they are to make comparative judgments. However, in order to acquire such knowledge, they must be able to distance themselves from themselves by imagining what it would be like to be different from what they are." I believe that *Nervous Conditions* succeeds especially well in negotiating this difficult dance of an instructor's ethical concerns with the needs and desires of different kinds of student

readers. It is a novel that facilitates readings negotiating between a simplistic orientalism that deems the African as exotically other and an equally simplistic overuniversalizing tendency to view the African, from the American student's perspective, as just like me.

The novel's formal and aesthetic qualities enable such complex negotiations. Its singular linguistic and literary form constructs a rich, multifarious site of discourses, themes, and practices. Formally, the novel is constructed in such a way as to facilitate both American and African readers' entering into its discourse. Dangarembga's use of dual protagonists is especially effective. With her almost equal emphasis on Tambu's story and Nyasha's story, Dangarembga gives voice to aspects of what we might simplistically name the self and the other (depending on our own perspectives). The Western, or Westernized, reader more readily identifies with Nyasha, because of her British education, her distaste for the lack of cleanliness and privacy on the homestead, and her very typical—to us—teenage rebellion against her father. But Nyasha's voice is brought into dialogue with that of Tambu, who is shocked at Nyasha's lack of respect for her parents and her disregard for the values of the communal home, even while she greatly admires the mission's abundant food, modern plumbing, and freedom of thought. Tambu's challenge is to negotiate independence and success without losing her language, her communal ties, and her love of place—to become a syncretic, postcolonial African who can celebrate and draw on the resources of both the urban and the rural, the individual and the community, reason and tradition. During the brief time that I spent at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, I saw how Tambu's experiences are especially evocative for the current generation of black students now entering South African universities for the first time.

Its singular textual qualities embody a thematic richness, with multiple levels of political, historical, psychological, and ethical themes. Because *Nervous Conditions* raises issues concerned with the development of identity, colonial rebellion and collaboration, psychological therapy and Africans, individualism and communalism, the strengths and weaknesses of mission-school education, teenage rebellion, and the private and public roles of women—among others—it is teachable in a variety of contexts. Consequently, it has what Derek Attridge (1999: 23) calls “a more-than-casual relation to the contingencies that surround it and that will influence its fate.” Texts that are capable of performing such multivalent tasks are more likely to find a place in the pedagogical canon since, as Guillory (1993: 34) notes, “a principle of specious unity is implicit in the construction of any syllabus.” And as instructors choose texts to present in relationship to other texts, thematically rich texts

are more capable of fitting into a number of different constructions of unity, to function in a variety of intertextual contexts.

Works that are repeatedly incorporated into pedagogical canons eventually become a part of the imaginary canon, as we have seen, and one additional component of pedagogical canon selection consists of the notion of “the field” and “coverage.” The imaginary canon plays a more important role in the construction of pedagogical canons when it comes to upper-division undergraduate courses in which the instructor may want to expose the English major to some of the most frequently cited or discussed texts in a field. An upper-division course in African literature might well include *Nervous Conditions* out of a sense of obligatory (imaginary) canonical coverage, thus completing the circuit of canon construction. In the case of newer courses and syllabi, we can then clearly see the way in which pedagogy often begins the canonical process rather than existing only as a product of that process. These dynamics, along with Guillory’s analysis, raise crucial issues about the long-term fate of the imaginary canon. As increasing numbers of students from a wide variety of socioeconomic and culturally diverse backgrounds enter the academy, “teachability” to the common reader becomes more of an issue. What will the impact be on the imaginary canon? Will untaught texts eventually disappear from the imaginary canon? Can a text be canonical if no one teaches it?

When it comes to pedagogy, decisions concerning what to teach are equally as important as decisions concerning how to teach. After acknowledging the imaginary character of the traditional canon, we are faced still with the complexities of constructing our pedagogical canons. A number of pragmatic issues related to the material conditions of publication and distribution play a key role, which should remind us that there may be numerous works existing in some material void that have a potential intrinsic value that remains unrealized. Material contingencies alone, however, are not enough. Critical assessments and public responses, along with accidental encounters facilitated by our professional system and institutional structures, play equally important roles. Realizing this, instructors should deliberately avail themselves of opportunities to learn about the possibilities offered by new texts. Finally, we need to be cognizant of and careful about the way the competing interests of our ethical commitments, aesthetic concerns, need for teachability, desire to expose our students to cultural differences, and the nature of the imaginary canon all contribute to each pedagogical canon that we dare to bring into being.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. 1993. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Alberti, John, ed. 1995. *The Canon in the Classroom: The Pedagogical Implications of Canon Revision in American Literature*. Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History, and Culture, vol. 3. New York: Garland.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 1992. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Attridge, Derek. 1999. "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other." *PMLA* 114:20–31.
- Bower, Anne L. 1995. "Sharing Responsibility for American Lit: 'A Spectacular and Dangerous World of Choice.'" In Alberti 1995, 221–40.
- Cutter, Martha J. 1995. "If It's Monday This Must Be Melville: A 'Canon, Anticanon' Approach to Redefining the American Literature Survey." In Alberti 1995, 119–207.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. 1989. *Nervous Conditions*. Seattle: Seal Press.
- _____. 1992. Interview by Jane Wilkinson. In *Talking with African Writers*, ed. Jane Wilkinson, 188–98. London: James Currey.
- Goebel, Bruce A. 1995. "Imagining Difference: *Textual Power* and the Transgression of the Self." In Alberti 1995, 57–71.
- Guillory, John. 1993. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kaplan, Carey, and Ellen Cronan Rose. 1990. *The Canon and the Common Reader*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Lindfors, Bernth. 1996. "African Literature Teaching in South African University English Departments." *Alternation* 3:5–14.
- Miller, Christopher. 1990. *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mohanty, Satya P. 1995. "Colonial Legacies, Multicultural Futures: Relativism, Objectivity, and the Challenge of Otherness." *PMLA* 110:108–18.
- Scholes, Robert. 1985. *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Washington, Mary Helen. 1990. Foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Harper and Row.