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## THE ABOLITION OF THE UNIVERSITY

# Epistemology and Kinship: Reading Resistance Literature on Westernised Education

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This article compares narrative encounters with Westernised education from a variety of contexts. In particular, I highlight how the authors Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o develop an epistemological critique of Westernised education. They do this partly by depicting the way such schooling breaks the bonds between individuals and their kinship groups and by describing different ways of knowing. This article makes a contribution by considering narratives written in the period following national liberation struggles, which are also referred to as resistance literature, in the context of contemporary debates around higher education. This article stimulates thinking on how an imperial education and colonial epistemologies impact individuals and their kinship groups.

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I knew in my heart that Victoria College had irreversibly severed my links with my old life [...] we all felt that we were inferiors pitted against a wounded colonial power that was dangerous and capable of inflicting harm on us, even as we seemed compelled to study its language and its culture as the dominant one in Egypt.

Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999: 186)

Edward Said experienced the full range of an elite, imperial British and US education: at Gezira Preparatory School, Victoria College ('the Eton of the East'), Mount Hermon Preparation School, and Princeton University. In his biography, he suggests, '[w]ith so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place' (Said, 1999: 295). Said's biography, while conveying his warmth and intellectual generosity, also reveals an emotional and intellectual asceticism, evidently connected to educational disciplining: 'I have no concept of leisure or relaxation, and more particularly, no sense of cumulative achievement. Every day for me is like the beginning of a new term at school, with a vast and empty summer behind it, and an uncertain tomorrow before it' (Said, 1999: 12). To what extent did Said's Westernised education contribute to his sense of being an outsider?

This article compares narrative encounters with Westernised education from a variety of contexts, including the works of Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. In 1987, Barbara Harlow wrote *Resistance Literature*, a study of 'literature that has emerged significantly as part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East' (Harlow, 1987: xvii). Harlow writes:

This literature, like the resistance and national liberation movements which it reflects and in which it can be said to participate, not only demands recognition of its independent status and existence as literary production,

but as such also presents a serious challenge to the codes and canons of both the theory and the practice of literature and its criticism as these have been developed in the west. (Harlow, 1987: xvi)

She addressed an absence in the Western literary curriculum at the time, but also acknowledged the potential inability of Western critical theory to elucidate the contribution of resistance literature: 'Can they [Western theoretical paradigms] be deployed in analyzing the literary output of geopolitical areas which stand in opposition to the very social and political organization within which the theories are located and to which they respond?' (Harlow, 1987: xvi) In particular, Harlow notes that narrative 'unlike poetry perhaps, provides a more developed historical analysis of the circumstances of economic, political, and cultural domination and repression and through that analysis raises a systematic and concerted challenge to the imposed chronology of what Frederic Jameson has called "master narratives", ideological paradigms which contain within their plots a predetermined ending' (Harlow, 1987: 78). Furthermore, resistance narratives 'go further still in analyzing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation. Where symbols and images often fail to elucidate the implicit power structures of a given historical conjuncture, the discourse of narrative is capable of exposing these structures, even, eventually, of realigning them, of redressing the balance' (1987: 85). On the subject of resistance literature and education, Harlow writes, '[e]ducation requires the resistance struggle no less than it is necessary for the resistance movement to include education as crucial to its agenda of liberation' (Harlow, 1987: 59). My intention here is to honour Harlow's analysis, noting the power of resistance literature to analyse power relations, which sustain a system of domination; and also to identify strands of critique, which will assist the analysis of the perceived demise of Westernised education (Readings, 1997; Docherty, 2015). To this end, I recall the writings of Achebe, Beti, Dangarembga, Kane, and Ngũgĩ and specifically their epistemological critique of Westernised education. They develop these critical positions partly by depicting the way Westernised education breaks the bonds

between individual subjects and their kinship groups and by describing different ways of knowing.

Educational theory reveals the process of breaking bonds as one of the key ways in which elite schools reinforce privilege and thus perpetuate the class divide and inequality in society. From Cookson and Persell's study in the US in 1985, elite schools put students through a 'rite of passage' that 'stripped them of their sense of self and through which they developed loyalties to other members of the elite' (Howard, Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010: 2). To what extent does Westernised education dismantle the individual subject's connections to their communities and kinship groups in order to assimilate them into other constellations of power? The answer to this question has extensively occupied theorists and philosophers towards the larger point of the place and function of educational institutions, i.e. schools and universities, as ideological state apparatuses, and I will add, as imperial apparatuses (Althusser, 1994).

This discussion is relevant to current debates in higher education. First, it highlights and challenges the mono-epistemic trajectory of Westernised education: the presentation of Eurocentric knowledge as if it were global, and the marginalisation of other knowledge systems (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Alvares & Faruqi, 2012; Grosfoguel, 2013; de Sousa Santos, 2014). Second, it urges further consideration of how Westernised education influences kinship bonds and communal solidarity (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014). Relevant to this discussion is the dominance of liberal individualism as part of Western epistemology, identified by the Frankfurt School and beyond, and the rise of neoliberal reform of Westernised educational institutions (Readings, 1996; Giroux, 2014; Brown, 2015). What the authors discussed in this article is a critique of the impact of Western education and epistemology on psychological, emotional, and community relationships. In returning to resistance literature, its analysis of education, and its connection to empowerment and liberation, I want to reflect on the implications for Westernised education today. How have the epistemological concerns highlighted by these authors changed with respect to Westernised education, in the contexts these texts were written, but also further afield? On re-reading these texts can we further reflect on a Westernised

education, 'social mobility', individual versus community empowerment, elitism in higher education, the privileging of knowledge systems and the annihilation of others?

### **Westernised education and the fragmentation of kinship bonds**

In *Dreams in a Time of War* (2010), Ngũgĩ recalls an early memory of attending a sports festival. He was permitted to wear his new school uniform, but his brother had not yet started school so he did not have a uniform. As the boys are walking around the festival grounds, Ngũgĩ sees some students approaching and becomes aware of his brother's ordinary clothes:

The embarrassment that had been seeping into my consciousness of the world around me since I first wore new clothes to school came back intensely. Panic seized me. I did the only thing that I thought would save the situation. I asked my brother whether we could take two different paths around the field and see who would get to the other side first. (Ngũgĩ, 2010: 73)

His remorse for parting ways with his brother to save face spoiled the rest of the day. He recalls that he may have coped with the situation better, had he spoken about his behaviour with his brother, but he remained silent. Looking back and reflecting, Ngũgĩ realises 'that education and lifestyle could influence judgement in a negative way and separate people' (Ngũgĩ, 2010: 74). The first point of interest here is the differentiation and the instigation of hierarchical feelings of superiority and inferiority, which are based on difference. The second point relates to the isolation and shame experienced as a result of imposing difference; Ngũgĩ cannot speak to his brother about the experience. Thirdly, the author raises the issue of self-esteem:

The problem, I came to realize, was not in my brother or the other boys but in me. It was inside me. I had lost touch with who I was and where I came from. Belief in yourself is more important than endless worries of what

others think of you. Value yourself and others will value you. Validation is best that comes from within. (Ngũgĩ, 2010: 74)

The themes of kinship division, individual isolation, and the loss of self-esteem, explored by all authors in this article, are overtly or latently related to Westernised education.

Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) was written two years after *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Published on the eve of Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, the narrative eviscerates the benefits of a Westernised education within the colonial/postcolonial context, exploring the drama between the educated individual and their community and kinship ties. The protagonist of *No Longer At Ease* is Obi Okonkwo, grandson of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* who met his demise in confrontation with British colonialism in Nigeria. Obi's village supports his efforts to attain a British education and a job in the Nigerian colonial civil service. With the same sense of grim inevitability that pervades *Things Fall Apart*, Obi succumbs to his destiny by accepting a bribe and bringing shame on his village. With skill and precision, Achebe illustrates exactly how a man of 'education and brilliant promise could have done this' (2010: 2).

The structure of the novel allows the drama of community expectations and individual alienation to play out. From the beginning, the reader understands that Obi's journey to being educated led to (or at least did not prevent) his demise: 'We have bought him Western education. But what use is it to him' (Achebe, 2010: 3)? The clan's fateful position in sending him to this educational institution is also clear. On the one hand: 'The importance of having one of our sons in the vanguard of this march of progress is nothing short of axiomatic' (Achebe, 2010: 25). But in his heart, Obi understands the blighted complexity of sending him, commenting on how it would welcome the English to Umuofia: 'Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live' (Achebe, 2010: 40).

The clan and Obi are seemingly trapped within the logic of individual advancement towards community advancement. But Achebe concisely deconstructs and

deflates this assumption, whilst remaining aware of its inevitability. When facing the raft of individuals who attack the civil service for favours advancing their education:

Obi felt very sorry for her. She was obviously an intelligent girl who had set her mind, like so many other young Nigerians, on university education. And who could blame them? Certainly not Obi. It was rather sheer hypocrisy to ask if a scholarship was as important as all that or if university education was worth it. Every Nigerian knew the answer. It was yes. (Achebe, 2010: 73)

But Achebe clarifies that within the colonial order, the only option for advancement is guided by imperial logic, that of hierarchical individual advancement, beyond the community: 'A university degree was like the philosopher's stone. ... To occupy a "European post" was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the elite' (Achebe, 2010: 73).

Achebe still goes further, demonstrating that the colonial regime and its logic is so rotten that it cannot even diagnose or comprehend the system it has created. As the white civil servant, Mr Green makes clear:

I think the government is making a terrible mistake in making it so easy for people like that to have so-called university education. Education for what? To get as much as they can for themselves and their family. Not the least bit interested in the millions of their countrymen who die everyday from hunger and disease. (Achebe, 2010: 93)

What remains constant and unwavering is the devastating clarity of Achebe's own philosophical rendering of the problem at hand. The final paragraph is delivered with cold and ironic clarity, having just skilfully demonstrated that there is absolutely no ambiguity as to why the situation evolved as it did:

Everyone wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we

must presume that, in spite of his certitude, Mr Green did not know either.  
(Achebe, 2010: 135)

The context and conditions of Obi's participation in colonial education make it impossible for him to 'succeed'. Equally inevitable, argues Achebe, is the fragmentation of Obi's relationship with his tribe. Achebe leaves us with a clinical impression of the drama surrounding education, community, and colonial power. In *Mission to Kala*, Beti takes us further into a study of the human cost of this predicament.

Mongo Beti was expelled from a missionary school in Mbalmayo, Cameroon, for being outspoken about topics such as religion and national independence. In 1945, he entered the Lycée Leclerc (an elite French school) in Yaoundé, before continuing his higher education in literature, first at Aix-en-Provence, then at the Sorbonne. *Mission to Kala* was first published in 1957. It is a comic novel born of 'obsessive' reflection on the author's formative years. The prologue and epilogue alert readers to the autobiographical nature of the novel:

All my other memories, exposed to the scorching light of maturity, break up, melt, and blur into nothing, like a block of ice left out in the sun. But this adolescent adventure refuses to vanish. With lonely and heroic obstinacy it sticks to my mind, filling the gaps left by my lost youth. It has become an all-possessive obsession. (Beti, 1964: i)

Common throughout these texts is a productive ambiguity between the biographical and the fictional, 'truth' and metaphor. In *Mission to Kala*, Beti reframes the archetypal colonial adventure narrative; it is re-enacted by a young, educated boy, Medza, who is sent back to his ancestral village to resolve a family dispute. Due to his 'special thunder' – 'Your certificates, your learning, your knowledge of white's men's secrets' – he is sent to retrieve a lost wife in a metaphorical retelling of colonial conquest (Beti, 1964: 15). His juvenile adventurism is displayed as he sets off for Kala:

Early the next morning I mounted my splendid machine (described by the manufacturers as "an aristocrat among bicycles") and pedalled off with all the vigour proper to a Conquistador, even if only a would-be-one. (Beti, 1964: 19)

When Medza gets to Kala, Beti invokes Marlow's encounter with the natives in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in Medza's first meeting with his cousin Zambo, he feels 'instinctive fear and repugnance at the very sight of him': 'I found it hard to convince myself that this monster was really my cousin' (Beti, 1964: 23–4). However, the imperiousness instilled by his schooling – and the connection between rhetoric and militarism – is quickly reduced by his relatives and their community:

Suddenly I discovered, in the arsenals of my Cartesian dialectic, an argument which seemed absolutely unanswerable, and which I thought, would win me a victory over even so ferocious an opposition as this. It would be like the exploding cartridge that knocks out a wild beast ... feigned hesitation, suspense, irony, the whole gamut of theatrical rhetoric. (Beti, 1964: 13)

Although the villagers are keen to discuss Medza's newfound knowledge, they seem largely unreceptive to his proposed innovations. From the village elders, he begins to learn about the kinship ties that form the bedrock of the village's knowledge systems: 'For [the elder] it represented the keystone of all science, the ultimate word in every mystery, the foundation of his universal theory, his Euclidean hypothesis, his Fourth Dimension. Others might have invented relativity, the Quantum theory, and heaven knows what besides; but he had discovered, in blood-kinship, a whole unique cosmology, irreplaceable, undeniable' (Beti, 1964: 89). The novel goes on to demonstrate that Medza's imperial education separates him from the knowledge system of his kin.

Medza's mother points out his increasing alienation, from himself and those around him: 'You're simply *not yourself*; it's as though you were another boy altogether who happened to be your physical double –' (Beti, 1964: 171; emphasis in original). Medza's life progresses detached from any sort of community, instead he engages in, 'endless wandering: different people, changing ideas, from country to country and place to place' (Beti, 1964: 180). Beti leaves the reader in no doubt as to the driving forces behind Medza's final alienation and estrangement:

Fathers used to take their children to school as they might lead sheep to a slaughter-house. Tiny tots would turn up from backwood villages thirty or

forty miles up-country, shepherded by their parents, to be put on the books of some school, it didn't matter which. They formed a miserable floating population, these kids: lodged with distant relations who happened to live near the school, underfed, scrawny, bullied all day by ignorant monitors. The books in front of them presented a universe which had nothing in common with the one they knew: they battled endlessly with the unknown, astonished and desperate and terrified.

We were those children – it is not easy to forget – and it was our parents who forced this torment on us.

We were catechized, confirmed, herded to Communion like a gaggle of holy-minded ducklings ... we were militarized, shown off proudly to every national and international commission.

*That was us. Remember?* (Beti. 1964: 165; emphasis in original)

His tale seems to mourn the loss of the self and community despite the seeming irreverence of its construction. As Beti suggests: 'This unshakeable stoicism in the face of all life's accidents and vicissitudes is probably the townsman's greatest loss, when he abandons village, tribe and local culture. We who choose the city have lost this ancient wisdom: irritable, ambitious, hotheaded, fed on illusion, we have become the world's eternal dupes' (Beti, 1964: 145). Despite the critique offered, there is the overt impression that Beti is trapped within the logic he seeks to evade: he is mourning a loss within himself. The epilogue confirms: 'I have reached a point at which I have no alternative but to write it down. It obsesses me so completely that at times I even fear I may never find any other theme as long as I live' (Beti, 1964: 183).

Tsitsi Dangarembga offers a different approach to Beti in describing the influence of Westernised education on the fracturing of kinship bonds. In doing so, she narrates her story in a way that challenges the foundations of imperial knowledge and schooling. In her first novel, *Nervous Conditions*, published in 1988, Dangarembga stresses that this story fundamentally is one of a community, not an individual; it is a tale of 'four women whom I loved, and our men' (Dangarembga, 1988: 204). It is

a story invested in and holding on to the collective by narration. It is the story of a clan and kinship group torn apart by anti-colonial war, but also one of kinship bonds altered by the false promise of elite education. *The Book of Not*, published in 2006, is the second novel in Dangarembga's semi-autobiographical series, recounting the story of the protagonist Tambu's journey through an elite European Catholic school in Zimbabwe. At the end of the second novel, Tambu is alone and estranged:

There was no longer a place for me with my relatives at the mission. I could not go back to the homestead where Netsai hopped unspeakably on a single limb, and where Mai would laugh at me daily. I had forgotten all the promises made to myself and providence while I was young concerning carrying forward with me the good and human, the *unhu* of my life. As it was, I had not considered *unhu* at all, only my own calamities, since the contested days at the convent. So this evening I walked emptily to the room I would soon vacate, wondering what future there was for me, a new Zimbabwean. (Dangarembga, 2006: 246)

Tambu's loneliness and her family's loss is a consequence of her supplanting *unhu* – a Southern African philosophical and epistemological system – and focusing on the self; a focus encouraged by her education. The Sacred Heart School systematically breaks down the relationships of burdening solidarity between the Black students to enforce independent study, discipline, and also ultimately white supremacy.

There are obvious pitfalls when recounting the contours of the self – transforming through education – in the style of a Bildungsroman, if the aim is also a simultaneous narration of the transformation of a community. Therefore, Dangarembga subverts the autobiographical dynamic in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. No character is uncritically heroic or redemptive; Tambu is positively unlikeable at times. Whilst showing bravery and innovation to get out of the homestead and into education, she is also compliant, mulish, and lacking empathy at times. Tambu's cousin Nyasha is a pivotal and transformational character, however, on page one of *Nervous Conditions* it is clear that her 'rebellion may not in

the end have been successful' (Dangarembga, 1988: 1). Tambu's learned ambition is to transcend her community:

I was on a direct route to a future so bright it – or I in those tomorrows – would light up more than my community; probably, I imagined, the whole universe. (Dangarembga, 2006: 82)

Yet, she is crushingly brought back down to earth, estranged and alone, but longing for human contact with her cousin and her aunt. 'It was harrowing to be part of such undistinguished humanity' (Dangarembga, 2006: 211). The individualistic ambition that Tambu has developed at Sacred Heart cannot survive in the teleology of Dangarembga's novels.

### **An epistemological analysis of the impact of Westernised education**

The authors discussed here develop an epistemological dimension to their critique of Westernised education. This literary tract connects to philosophical critiques of Western epistemology and the use of education in various contexts to ensure the hegemonic implementation of particular ideas. Walter Mignolo (2011), amongst others (Dussell, 1995; Lugones, 2007), has described how Western epistemology divided different knowledge systems and privileged certain systems and ways of knowing above others. For example, Mignolo notes the privileging of knowledge derived from the individual over community knowledge.

In this account of modern/continental/colonial philosophy, the centrality of René Descartes is critically examined. Grosfoguel (2013) argues that Descartes' famous philosophical statement, popularly rendered as 'I think therefore I am', displaces Christendom's authority over knowledge and replaces it with a secular foundation. Descartes' 'I' replaces God as the new basis of truth derived by the reasoning of man alone. To achieve this, Grosfoguel notes, Descartes makes one ontological and one epistemological argument. Ontological dualism separated the mind from the body and privileged the former as a source of insight. Epistemological solipsism derived certitude through internal monologue. The production of knowledge

is therefore internalised, made asocial, and un-situated. From Cartesian logic, we divide science from non-science, subject and object, neutrality and bias, 'the idea of knowledge as produced through an internal monologue without links with other human beings and universality understood as beyond any particularity are still the criteria for valid knowledge and science used in the disciplines of the Westernized university' (Grosfoguel, 2010: 76). Westernised schools, of course, also follow this trajectory.

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, published in 1961, one year after Senegal declared independence from the French, is an extended reflection on knowledge systems and kinship. The first president of Senegal was Léopold Sédar Senghor, who, like Kane, was a poet and philosopher, educated in both Senegal and France. *Ambiguous Adventure* is a poetic and philosophical treatise about the complexities and tragedy of colonialism, which critiques Western epistemological premises as part of this process.

One of the recurring metaphors in *Ambiguous Adventure* is the pursuit of substance. The novel opens with the Diallobé clan debating about sending their members to foreign schools. The teacher ponders on the pros and cons of colonial education:

The question is disturbing nevertheless. We reject the foreign school in order to remain ourselves, and to preserve God the place He holds in our hearts. But have we still enough force to resist the school, and enough substance to remain ourselves? (Kane, 2012: 9)

The question of substance is one of inner strength, esteem, and resilience, but it is also asked of the collective. As to the spiritual intent of these people in this time and place, we learn more from Samba, influenced by Sufi Islam, who 'desired nobility, to be sure, but a nobility more discreet, more authentic: not something acquired without effort, but hard-won, and more spiritual than material' (Kane, 2012: 15). As the debate about schooling continues, the Chief is aware that, 'The Diallobé wanted more substance' (Kane, 2012: 29). What this proves to be is both material and spiritual:

If I do not tell the Diallobé to go to the new school, they will not go. Their houses will fall into ruins, their children will die or be reduced to slavery. Extreme poverty will be entrenched among them, and their hearts will be filled with resentment ... Extreme poverty is, down here, the principal enemy of God. (Kane, 2012: 31)

The Diallobé recognise that education and survival depend on both material and spiritual sustenance: knowledge in service of material and spiritual weight. The seemingly inevitable decision is made to send the sons of Diallobé to foreign schools. Samba attends school in Paris and as he sits at his friend's home talking about politics, he is accused of talking too much and not eating enough; he replies, '[w]e are empty of substance, and our head devours us' (Kane, 2012: 139). Samba is disaffected and impotent. His journey to be educated in France has left him as an empty vessel, hollowed out and estranged. Again, it is notable that he speaks in a collective tense, not solely for himself, but also for his kin.

The process of emptying out, as much as replacing substance with new or different ideas, is also a process of forgetting. As the Chief describes: 'But, learning, they would also forget. Would what they would learn be worth as much as what they would forget? I should like to ask you: can one learn *this* without forgetting *that*, and is what one learns worth what one forgets?' (Kane, 2012: 30; emphasis in original). What is forgotten, Kane, establishes, is the connection to each other:

The school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care. Perhaps the very memory of us will die in them. When they return from school, there may be those who will not recognize us. What I am proposing is that we should agree to die in our children's hearts and that the foreigners who have defeated us should fill the place, wholly, which we shall have left free. (Kane, 2012: 42)

We learn that 'the school bewitches the soul', and with its magnetic quality it heralds the 'upheaval of the life of man within this new order is similar to the overturn of

certain physical laws in a magnetic field. Men are seen to be composing themselves, conquered, along the lines of invisible and imperious forces. Disorder is organized, rebellion is appeased, the mornings of resentment resound with songs of a universal thanksgiving' (Kane, 2012: 44–5). The idea that schooling encourages men to *compose themselves*, and in so doing are conquered, is a powerful one.

Particularly in his conversations with Paul Lacroix, Samba's father, The Knight, reveals the epistemological dynamics of this war aided by education. The Knight offers the knowledge and position of the Diallobé and Lacroix defends Western epistemology, in particular, scientific rationalism. In response to Lacroix's contention that the pursuit of scientific rationalism will save the world from ignorance and darkness, The Knight comments: 'Man has never been so unhappy as at this moment when he is accumulating so much' (Kane, 2012: 92). The Knight's diagnosis covers the relationship between imperiousness and knowledge, and the egoism involved in the process of domination (intellectual, emotional, or physical):

There must be balance. But the West is possessed by its own compulsion, and the world is becoming westernized. Far from men's resisting the madness of the West at the time when they ought to do so, in order to pick and choose, assimilate or reject, we see them, on the contrary, in all latitudes, a-quiver with covetousness, then metamorphosing themselves in the space of one generation, under the action of this new egotism which the West is scattering abroad. (Kane, 2012: 63)

The inevitability of Samba's demise is evident from his father's analysis. He is alone in France, disconnected from his community, and therefore he does not have the substance to resist. He descends into self-reflection and egoism. On the issues affecting the clan he states: 'What have their problems to do with me? I have the right to do as this old man has done: to withdraw from the arena of their confused desires, their weaknesses, their flesh, to retire within myself. After all, I am only myself. I have only me' (Kane, 2012: 112). His final demise, is as inevitable as it is tragic: 'I no longer burn at the heart of people and things' (Kane, 2012: 145).

### **Clashing epistemological systems and the breakdown of kinship bonds**

As has been noted, Dangarembga's critique of imperial epistemologies runs throughout the series, but *The Book of Not* offers a sustained account of a clash of epistemologies. Tambu is torn by the competing demands of *unhu* or *ubuntu*, the philosophy and worldview common in Southern Africa, and the demands of her Western liberal/imperial education. Tambu's struggle between these competing epistemologies offers a fascinating insight into education as a form of hegemonic control.

During the period of decolonisation, *unhu* or *ubuntu* was used as a term for a specifically African (or Southern African) kind of socialism or humanism, in the context of the transition to black majority rule in Zimbabwe and South Africa (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Of particular importance in this context is the idea that *unhu* asserts that society, not a transcendent being, gives human beings their humanity. Michael Eze elaborates:

A person is a person through other people strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an "other" in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the "other" becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The "I am" is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance. (Eze, 2010: 190–1)

The substantive difference between *unhu* and Cartesian rationalism regarding the position of the individual in society, concerning modes of sociability, but also in terms of ways of being and ways of knowing, is quite clear. Tambu's expe-

riences detail the intellectual and emotional disfigurement at the hands of her liberal/imperial schooling. Through her characterisation, Dangarembga illustrates a dynamic instance of what Grosfoguel would describe as 'epistemicides' of Western epistemology (2013: 73), which combined with political, economic, and military power negate and destroy indigenous knowledge systems.

Detached from her community at Sacred Heart boarding school, and one of just five black students, Tambu is unable to learn by practising *unhu*. Her understanding of the concept and practice is eroded by this isolation:

"Tambu, I am well if you are well too!" – the essence of *unhu*, of being a person. ... *Unhu*, that profound knowledge of being, quietly and not flamboyantly; the grasp of life and of how to preserve and accentuate life's eternal interweavings that we southern Africans are famed for, what others call *ubuntu*, demanded that I console myself, that I be well so that others could be well also. (Dangarembga, 2006: 103)

Her knowledge of *unhu* becomes confused within the racist context of her elite education, and derailed through her own psychic and emotional oppression. The schooling system perpetuates and reinforces racist and patriarchal norms. For example, white and black students use different bathrooms, and when Tambu uses the white bathroom in an emergency she provokes anger and outrage, which leads her to conclude: 'The situation was this: I was in two aspects a biologically blasphemous person' (Dangarembga, 2006: 64). She concludes that she is sinful because she is a black woman. She internalises this racism and sexism and applies *unhu* in a misguided way to reinforce and maintain this order:

With this *unhu* I reflected, scrubbing my back and lathered my underarms very copiously and meticulously, I would be able to meet the challenges at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart courageously, and so advance in due course to a useful job, one that brought all the comforts of occupations that are valued by one's community. Comfort and

useful, a contradiction? Not at all, if you were one with the community.  
(Dangarembga, 2006: 103)

This passage also reveals the imposition of liberal individualism and individual material gain, existing comfortably beside communitarianism, which is a facet of Western imperial/capitalist presumptions. Through the intruding authorial voice, Dangarembga reflects on the place of the philosophy of *unhu* in a colonial and patriarchal context:

*Unhu* did not accommodate furious emotions of any sort. *Unhu*, as we knew it, required containing, and even negotiating and renegotiating passion. So, little could be done in a situation where negotiation was not practicable. Then you came up against a pane, as of glass, through which you saw *unhu* was dysfunctional. There was a reason for this dysfunctionality, obscure to me then, which was the key to the philosophy itself. In a phrase, this was the principle of reciprocity. *Unhu* did not function unless the other person was practicing *unhu* also. Without reciprocation, *unhu* could not be *unhu*. The practice of it assumed that *unhu* was given. We believed, as had been the case over the months, years, ages, of the concept's development, that we were all together in extolling its excellence, and in wanting nothing but the practice of *unhu*. (Dangarembga, 2006: 119)

The clashing of different epistemological systems exacts an increasing emotional toll on Tambu. This is compounded by the violence of the colonial war – her uncle Babamukuru is assaulted by revolutionaries, who accuse him of assimilation for sending Tambu to the white European school – which further alienates her from her family and the community. As she comes under increasing pressure, the encroachment of liberal individualism becomes more evident: 'Was it the *unhu* you possessed that earned you your possessions, or did you acquire *unhu* once you possessed them? If you did not have *unhu* in the first place, then you were doomed, for how could you reciprocate with people? ... Thus I wondered until it became apparent one path to *unhu* was the way of material preponderance' (Dangarembga, 2006: 145).

As a further example of the malfunction of *unhu* in an enduringly oppressive context, Tambu reflects on Nyasha's enforced passivity. Tambu finds her cousin's medicated condition difficult to endure: 'It was hard now for me to see Nyasha exhibiting less anger than she had done, speaking with increasing enervation, the tamed flatness, even in strong emotion, of women whose genitals have been carved into and mutilated. ... this suppression was the basis of her *unhu*' (Dangarembga, 2006: 119–120). Tambu begins to read the privileging, or necessity, of passivity into her practice of *unhu*. But rather than being rooted in the pursuit of communal solidarity, this is about deference to liberal/imperial power.

Tambu's isolation at the end of the story comes to symbolise the destruction of *unhu* literally and metaphorically, but Dangarembga ensures that readers understand that, despite her failings, individual culpability is beyond consideration in this context. She reminds readers that 'a girl is not as wide as the sky', thus Tambu cannot practice *unhu* alone and she cannot survive the clashing prerogatives of different knowledge systems from the position she is in (Dangarembga, 2006: 138).

## Conclusion

I advance a number of points in this article. First, it is worth returning to resistance literature in the context of contemporary debates on Westernised education, particularly narratives written in the context of national liberation struggles. The potential here is for renewed attention to how education functions both as a conduit and enabler for imperial control and the destruction of indigenous knowledge systems and the communities that were held together by those systems. Westernised education, particularly the Westernised university, has become a primary servant and driving force of (supra)national economies in the context of globalisation. This form of education is increasingly linked to the expansionist logic of private and personal enrichment as the force behind 'progress' and modernity (Docherty, 2015). Under these conditions, we can derive important lessons about the pursuit of individual advancement through education and imperial control (be it through government or capital) from the writings of Achebe, Beti, Dangarembga, Kane, and Ngũgĩ. Beti chides his readers: 'We were catechized, confirmed ... we were militarized, shown off proudly to every national and international commission. *That was us. Remember*'

(1964: 165; emphasis in original)? In an age of education in service of the labour market, the advance of militarised science and the humanities in decline, *irrespective of the context*, how do we feel about our own entanglement?

Second, the article foregrounds contested epistemologies in education, most acutely rendered by Kane and Dangarembga: their protagonists, Samba and Tambu respectively, bowed under the weight of conflicting systems of knowledge. What does the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which began in Cape Town and reached as far as Oxford, suggest about the extent to which the imperial curriculum is still in place? Kane and Dangarembga both point to the equal importance of contextually appropriate spiritual and material sustenance to counter the damaging effects of Westernised education. Where is it possible to find such sustenance in education? Fourth – and related – the article notes the practical implications of liberal individualism’s assault on forms of communality, at the level of knowledge, language, and culture. Achebe, Beti and Kane give us excellent psychological, emotional, and practical insight into the evisceration of their communities through the pursuit of individual educational advancement. Dangarembga illustrates systems in collision, and in collusion, but in doing so, shows us the potential of liberation through education, towards communality and solidarity.

In 2008 (after the global financial crisis), Boaventura de Sousa Santos extended Aimé Césaire’s claim from 1950 that the logic of the West – capitalist and colonial – is not just indefensible, but also moribund. De Sousa Santos’ polemic focused on epistemology and education. He called for a diversification of both, claiming the mono-epistemic trajectory of Western intellectuals in Westernised institutions could no longer claim supremacy (or even comprehension) of the state of the world. Such ideas have been explored comprehensively in the literature foregrounded here: Achebe, Beti, Dangarembga, Kane, and Ngũgĩ. What these writers develop is a critique of the impact of Western education and epistemology on psychological, emotional, and community cohesion and solidarity. If we choose to revisit and accept the continuing relevance of their narratives with an eye on our current participation in Westernised educational systems, what compels us: the comic ambivalence of Beti, the sharp diagnostics of Achebe and Ngũgĩ, or the winding path ahead suggested by Kane and Dangarembga?

## Note

This contribution is based on a chapter of my PhD in Comparative and English Literature at the University of Glasgow.

## Competing Interest

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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