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Small Flowerings of Unhu: the Survival of Community in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Novels

Dana Rine

University of South Florida, drine@mail.usf.edu

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Small Flowerings of *Unhu*: the Survival of Community in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Novels

by

Dana Rine

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Major Professor: Hunt Hawkins, Ph.D.
Sheila M. Diecidue, Ph.D.
Phillip Sipiora, Ph.D.

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Dedication

I dedicate my thesis to Mama, Markus, Nana, and Pa. They are my north, my south, my east, and my west. Their love and encouragement helped me on this path.

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A number of professors deserve my sincere gratitude. I thank Dr. Hunt Hawkins for teaching an enlightening course on Postcolonial African literature, which sparked my interest in Tsitsi Dangarembga's work, and for kindly agreeing to direct my thesis. I also wish to extend my gratitude to Dr. Regina Hewitt, a model scholarly professional, for her prompt, insightful thesis proposal feedback that guided me to helpful research materials. Since I was a shy freshman in college, Dr. Sheila Diecidue has mentored me with personal kindness and professional generosity that have helped to shape my teaching vision. I also must thank Dr. Phillip Sipiora for signing onto this project in the eleventh hour. These professors, each of whom exhibits elements of instruction that I hope I've adopted, exemplify the "I see you" component of *unhu*, for which I am very grateful.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the presence of *unhu*, a process of becoming and remaining human through community ties, in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. Dangarembga interrogates corrupt versions of community by creating positive examples of *unhu* that alternatively foster community building. Utilizing ecocritical, utopian, and postcolonial methodologies, this thesis postulates that these novels stress the importance of retaining a traditional concept like *unhu* while also acknowledging the need to adjust it over time to ensure its vitality. Both novels depict the creativity and resilience of *unhu* amid toxic surroundings.

Introduction

In 1988, after her first novel was soundly rejected by four publishing houses in Zimbabwe, unknown African author Tsitsi Dangarembga inked a contract with a London publisher named The Women's Press. As a result, the story of a brutally honest and exceptionally observant female Shona narrator named Tambudzai (or Tambu) finally made its way onto bookshelves, squeezed between the works of established Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta. Tambu's account of her origins in Rhodesia during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a peasant girl determined to escape poverty and claim her right to an education, has since captivated readers across the globe. She and her four female relatives, whose stories are also related, confront patriarchal and colonial ideologies on their life journeys. A moral compass to her cousin and a victim of the kind of "nervous condition" Jean-Paul Sartre attributed to colonized peoples, an anorexic, loving Nyasha constantly reminds Tambu to remember her roots lest she become brainwashed by the colonizers at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, to which Tambu earns a highly coveted scholarship at the end of the novel.

Since the late 1980s, *Nervous Conditions* has risen to literary stardom and become a staple of postcolonial literature courses. As the first published black woman novelist in Zimbabwe, Dangarembga set the stage for a woman writer like Yvonne Vera, whose lyrical novels appeared on the scene in the eighteen-year gap between *Nervous*

Conditions and Dangarembga's promised sequel. Scholarship on *Nervous Conditions* flourished while readers anxiously speculated about the outcome of Tambu's journey; this critical acclaim has secured *Nervous Conditions* a place among the most highly regarded African novels.

Despite the hype surrounding the sequel, *The Book of Not* has yet to find "so many friends in so many places around the planet" (Appiah xi). Ranka Primorac, the most vocal detractor of *The Book of Not*, dubs it "Mugabeist nationalist narrative," likening the more linear storytelling of the sequel to the view of progress long-time Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe endorses ("Southern States" 225).¹ Christine Matzke initially admires Dangarembga's display of writing talent in *The Book of Not* and rightly cautions scholars against judging the sequel exclusively on the qualities of its predecessor. Ultimately, however, Matzke hopes Dangarembga will discard the planned third novel and direct her talents elsewhere (239). These frank appraisals, while too dismissive of the second installment in my opinion, nevertheless offer springboards for critical analyses. Unfortunately, with fewer than a dozen articles and book chapters written on *The Book of Not* and even fewer articles whose authors directly reference extant scholarship on the sequel, the critical conversation has been surprisingly quiet since the sequel was published in 2006.

This thesis aims to compensate for this dearth of scholarship responding to *The Book of Not* by setting the first and second novels in dialogue with each another. These two works are philosophically linked by *unhu*, a Pan-African approach to life corresponding to community. To my knowledge, no one to date has engaged with *unhu*'s unspoken presence in *Nervous Conditions*. In analyzing *The Book of Not*, scholars have

focused on the breakdown of *unhu*, but no one has undertaken the task of determining whether it exists even in small amounts and, if so, asked what the significance might be of its presence. Such an undertaking for both novels is precisely my aim in this thesis.

In order to enhance my thesis's central focus on community, I enlist the assistance of ecocritical and utopian methodologies, which share a vested interest in community building. Despite the "reciprocal indifference or mistrust" (Nixon 716) traditionally thwarting interdisciplinary alliances between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, they actually work well together. For example, ecocritic Karl Kroeber's directive for scholars to identify and pursue the implications of human interdependence complements this thesis's focus on *unhu*, which likewise emphasizes human inter-relations. Further, ecocriticism's emphasis on the study of place informs my organizational structure.

In my inclusion of a utopian methodology, I reference Lucy Sargisson's theoretical statement regarding transgressive utopianism, which challenges the idea of utopia as perfection. Her conceptualization of utopias offers insight into Dangarembga's refashioning of *unhu*, and I note affinities between the two throughout the thesis. Postcolonialism and utopianism share the view that people on the margins have valuable insights to share with the center. It is possible to read Dangarembga's novels through the lenses of utopianism and ecocriticism without imputing such ideas onto the author herself. In offering readings of her novels through these two lenses, rarely applied to postcolonial works, I seek to demonstrate how the complexity of Dangarembga's body of work lends itself to multiple theoretical analyses.

My overarching argument is that Dangarembga reshapes the traditional philosophy of *unhu* for contemporary times and, in the process, demonstrates its

creativity and resilience despite emotionally lethal environments. Chapter 1 delineates this complex mode of being in significant detail, outlining its underlying principles and explaining its connections to Shona religion. Chapter 2 argues for the presence of *unhu* in *Nervous Conditions* by examining female camaraderie on the homestead and in its surrounding landscape. Female characters challenge patriarchal superiority complexes through fellowship with one another, and this subversion need not necessarily conflict with *unhu*. Chapter 3 focuses on Sacred Heart in *The Book of Not*. Reading the school as a failed intentional community, I find only one saving grace in the form of Sister Catherine. Chapter 4 concentrates on Maiguru's garden, the strongest example of a utopian place displaying *unhu* in action in *The Book of Not*. This thesis is first and foremost a study of Dangarembga's novels, but I also intersperse examples from her engagements with drama and film. Far from intending to create diversions from my main points, I incorporate these examples to support my interpretations of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* and to engage with Dangarembga's larger and continually growing oeuvre.

Chapter 1: The Significance of *Unhu*

Good afternoon.
Good afternoon.
Have you spent the day well?
I have spent the day well if you have spent the day well.
I have spent the day well.
Then I have spent the day well. (Lessing 195)

On a return visit to her former home country of Zimbabwe in 1988, Doris Lessing witnessed the exchange of greetings noted above between her British friend Jack and his Shona pupils with a sense of awe: “The Shona patterns of greeting at once melt you in admiration, and in apology for our gracelessness. Nothing like ‘How are you?’ or ‘Hello!’” (195). Lessing located the conversation’s elegance in its movement away from what she characterized as an impersonal greeting in Western culture to a deeper kind reliant on a more empathetic interconnection between the speakers. Her praise invites examination of the cultural stimuli that have contributed to the nature and intention of such a greeting.

Caroline Rooney’s book *Decolonising Gender* supplies a connection between the kind of salutation Lessing observed and the Shona philosophy of *unhu* through their mutual concern with the “non-teleological call-and-response rhythms of collective spirit” (120). Such a greeting, then, represents a verbal enunciation of *unhu*, an African mode of being worthy of delineation. In this chapter, I contextualize the philosophy of *unhu* to express its complexity and importance in African culture generally and then specifically

within Shona culture. Acquaintance with the socio-cultural framework from which Tsitsi Dangarembga crafted her novels, and to which *unhu* contributes substantially, enhances a meaningful study of her works.

Community is the approximate English equivalent of *unhu*, but the absence of a direct translation of this Shona word conveys how deeply embedded it is within African culture.² To fully conceptualize *unhu*, a complex approach to *being* and *belonging*, is challenging without having lived in Africa, but a working knowledge of *unhu* improves our understanding of the forces that shape the author's and novels' cultural milieu and informs my subsequent argument that Dangarembga critically engages with contemporary social applications of *unhu*. Those of us who lack the "cultural feel" (Rooney 130) of lived experience in Africa requisite for a full understanding of *unhu* can transform a potential obstacle into an advantage by approaching the study of *unhu* with sensitivity and a cautious awareness of the impossibility of creating an exhaustive account of *unhu*. Scholars equipped with those two investigative tools can report their findings of *unhu*'s various underpinnings more accurately and thoughtfully.

Generally speaking, *unhu* represents a philosophical or moral/ethical approach to living that creates social harmony within the community, encompassing all aspects of life within its massive scope. More specifically, it is a personal ability connected to concepts like reason and personhood. Everyone must express concern for each other in order to be fully human and to validate the personhood of other members of the community (Azodo 120). A person with *unhu* must avoid selfish behavior and contribute to the betterment of the entire community. Nkonko Kamwangmalu's article on *ubuntu*, the South African version of *unhu*, enumerates the qualities a person with *unhu* displays, including respect

for another human, a commitment to collective sharing, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, and communalism (“Ubuntu in South Africa”). Because thesis-length scope limits the number of qualities to which I can devote attention, this thesis concentrates on social responsiveness and sympathy/concern for members of the community. Concrete examples from African literature offer an effective departure point to set the *unhu* philosophy into relief.

The insistence on community spans the entire African continent, but, as David Rubadiri underscored in his critique of the Négritude Movement, grouping all people of African origin homogeneously dampens the creative energy of African culture, especially artistically (41). Striking a balance between cultural uniqueness and the more general emphasis on community, Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta stresses community while spotlighting a unique cultural feature during Nnu Ego’s suicide attempt in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nwawkusor recognizes Nnu Ego in Lagos when she overpowers a man seeking to prevent her death leap from a bridge into a lagoon. Her mastery of self-defense enables Nwawkusor to identify her as an Igbo woman rather than a Yoruba woman and, additionally, as someone from his native village, where women learn to wrestle. The distinctive cultural marker leads Nwawkusor to act on a broader cultural impulse to rescue this woman who threatens the well-being of society.³ Nwawkusor thwarts Nnu Ego’s attempted suicide to avoid a stain on the community, particularly since the two were raised in the same village and share a connection deeper than that of two strangers. He fulfills his obligation begrudgingly but certainly answers his moral call to duty. *Unhu*, according to Fawzia Mustafa, is a “categorical imperative” in African culture (401).

Obligations to the community extend even beyond one's own native village. Two men who do not know Nnu Ego attempt to save her before Nwakusor rescues her because "[n]o one wanted to start the day with such an incident upon their conscience...you are simply not allowed to commit suicide in peace, because everyone is responsible for the other person" (60). Nwakusor, "[a]cting instinctively," (61) and the two men behave with an attitude reflecting the social responsiveness crucial to *unhu*. Although Lagos residents criticize Nnu Ego immediately after her suicide plan fails, they replace harsh rebukes with gentle consolation upon learning of her baby's sudden death, the catalyst for her suicide attempt. The woman who slaps Nnu Ego for trying to kill herself suddenly begins to comfort her with encouraging words after hearing of the young mother's unexpected and heartbreaking loss of her first child. Such sympathetic nurturing constitutes another important aspect of *unhu*. This scenario raises the additional element of fine-tuning oneself according to the needs of others, an ethos leaning toward the reciprocal quality of *unhu*.

One must avoid selfish behavior in order to reach this ideal level of reciprocity. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu counsels his nephew, who considers only his own affliction as a man condemned to seven years of exile: "Do you know that men are sometimes banished for life?...Do you know how many children I have buried--children I begot in my youth and strength? Twenty-two...If you think you are the greatest sufferer in the world, ask my daughter Akueni how many twins she has borne and thrown away" (95). Uchendu urges Oknokwo to express concern for his family members by actively sympathizing with them. In expressing this sympathy, Okonkwo can validate the struggles of his kinsfolk and, in return, draw emotional strength from his

mother's relatives during a difficult period in his life. Uchendu believes his nephew compromises the intricate web of interconnections among people through his self-absorption and refusal of the comforts his mother's people offer him.

In a recent interview, Dangarembga echoed Uchendu's remarks when referring to her conviction that an individual must contribute to the needs of the community:

What we have are certain sets of conditions, in which people have to act to do the best for themselves and the group. For me this is very important. And it's an aspect of my Shona and African heritage that I will not discard no matter what. You do the best for yourself AND the group. It can't just be the one or the other, it's got to be balanced. ("How can you be balanced")

Unhu well describes the philosophy she referenced during the interview, implicitly included in *Nervous Conditions*, and explicitly utilized as an organizing principle in her second novel *The Book of Not*. Since *unhu* figures prominently in these novels, Anne Donadey's suggestion that critics broaden their knowledge of Shona culture to create more nuanced interpretations of Dangarembga's works gains even more credence (32).

Donadey's advice applies to the study of any author's writings but proves especially relevant when a structural component of the literary work(s) requires careful delineation, beginning with word derivation. In the Shona language, Dangarembga explains, the stem *hu* refers to any particular thing or essence of a thing. Because this stem is quite broad, the word's prefix further characterizes the thing itself in either general or specific terms. *Chinhu*, for instance, refers to a thing in general, whereas *kanhu* describes a small thing. *Munhu*, meaning the remarkable being who is a person, exists

only if the person has *unhu*, the abstract form of *munhu*. *Unhu* is the excellent quality that *munhu* possesses (Rooney Interview 61). Put differently, *unhu* determines one's existence as a person. If *unhu* affords personhood, then questions arise regarding how one obtains this oxygen for the soul and then lives purposefully.

In the Shona religion, spirit elders (or *vadzimu*) bequeath *unhu* to their living relatives (Gelfand 140). Children can expect to disappoint their parents and the *vadzimu*, who are closest to God in the Shona spiritual hierarchy, if they fail to exhibit *unhu* in their daily dealings. Although dead, the elders continue to participate actively in the community (Menkiti 326). The *vadzimu* exact a powerful force over their relatives to the extent that showing respect for these elders—through conversations with them via spirit mediums, ritual prayers of thanks, and offerings of meat and beer—is thought to keep a family safe from harm and to solidify family loyalty.⁴ Despite the certain disappointment and anger felt by elders if their mortal descendants fail to carry out *unhu*, the *vadzimu*'s willingness to forgive members of their clan for making mistakes reflects their commitment to ensuring misguided tribe members' ultimate adherence to the principles of *unhu* (Gelfand 137).

Although the elders' gifting of *unhu* to their living relatives is an important mystical component of Shona culture, a practical reality of those living relatives learning *unhu* remains. Members of the Shona clan must cultivate this bequeathed quality. Even for the less reverent of believers, or those Shona people who have converted to Christianity, *unhu* still can play a crucial role in their dealings. There is a possibility of forging a "middle path where certain ethical principles [like *unhu*] are seen as derived from religion, without having to subsume all ethics under religion" (Chitando 46).

Parents teach *unhu* to their children, often through modeling and oral traditions like myths, stories, and songs (Kamwangamalu, Gelfand 57). In *The Book of Not*, Tambu, for instance, recalls her earliest acquaintance with it as a child on her mother's back through modeling:

Tiripo, kana makadini wo! I am well if you are all right too! That was the greeting we gave to each other, first heard on Mai's back when it was nothing more than a great buzzing booming confusion of utterance. That greeting went round the land like a blanket that covered and kept warm, a fabulous protection from fate. Everything was reciprocal and so were we; we all knew it, so said it every day in our greetings. This meant that what people saw you as being was a large part of what you were! (65)

This inculcation marks the beginning of Tambu's socialization into a kinship group, the first step in acquiring *unhu*. During the initialization process, a child observes the importance of maintaining connections to the community (Wiredu 17). These teachings lay the foundation for the future generation's collective identity, where respect for fellow human beings and life as a whole reigns supreme (Mugo 24).

Greetings along the lines of "I am well if you are well!" symbolize the tie to one's community and differ from many Western approaches to *being* by emphasizing the community rather than the individual.⁵ Despite the temptation to draw comparisons between Western team sports and *unhu*, Rooney discourages the analogy because the goal of team sports involves winning (one team defeating another), whereas *unhu*'s purpose is not to overpower others but to relate to and become synchronized with them. She distinguishes between *unhu* and Immanuel Kant's directive to treat others how we

wish to be treated. *Unhu* instead obliges humans to treat people in the manner those individuals would like to be treated (Rooney 130).

Someone who displays *unhu* perceptively discerns the needs of others and tries whole-heartedly to accommodate friends and neighbors as well as strangers. A Shona person practicing *unhu* may donate his or her time to work in a neighbor's fields, lend a helping hand at a funeral, brew beer for the chief, or accommodate guests in his or her homes by offering food and blankets (Gelfand 57). The key to these kind acts is that someone with *unhu* performs them without being asked. *Unhu* guarantees that people will not be erased from view, for someone else not only sees them but recognizes their struggles as well as joys and whole-heartedly strives to help them. This assistance may appear in the form of a *sawhira*, someone who publicly pleads the case of a mistreated person and deeply understands his or her feelings (*Book of Not* 164). This intuitive quality leads Rooney to emphasize the spiritual side of *unhu*, likening it to Taoism and Buddhism. Rooney further notes, "Thus, there are no laws for this ethos for it depends on the ever-ready and responsive fine-tuning of yourself to the changing states of others. That is its dialectical agility" (130). *Unhu* loosely parallels moments prior to the beginning of an orchestra concert. The string musicians adjust the flatness or sharpness of the sounds their instruments make to match the first chair violinist's sound with the ultimate goal of creating a harmonious and cohesive musical performance. Similar adaptive behavior contributes to the success of *unhu*.

Despite the idealism of this approach to being and remaining human, applied *unhu* can be manipulated and misused as a result of both the extended colonial encounter in Zimbabwe and oppressive, chauvinistic attitudes belonging both to the colonizer and

Shona culture. Rather than arguing that *Nervous Conditions* contains no remnants of *unhu* in the manner of Ranka Primorac, I suggest that Dangarembga interrogates corrupt versions of community by gesturing toward alternative versions of *unhu* that foster community building. Holding onto the crucial tenets of the philosophy, Dangarembga performs an insider's critique of social applications of *unhu* within her novels, rejecting interpretations that are misguided or corrupt while also creating positive, authentic examples in the form of small flowerings.⁶

Commonalities between Dangarembga's approach and Lucy Sargisson's notion of transgressive utopianism will be explored in this thesis. Rather than suggesting that utopias work outside of society with the ultimate goal of creating a world devoid of human error, Sargisson recalculates utopianism's motives in *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* to argue that transgressive utopias or "bodies," either of people or thought, have the potential not only to challenge but also to effect change from within the political systems they criticize by pointing toward a more sustainable, holistic lifestyle (2-3). Similarly, Dangarembga subtly criticizes her patriarchal culture, the colonizers, and the present-day turmoil in Zimbabwe from within by offering small flowerings that gesture toward an alternative and more loving existence, evident in the close friendship between Tambu and Nyasha and in Maiguru's community garden, to cite two examples. Comparisons between *unhu* and transgressive utopianism yield many similarities, namely their shared creative energy.

Dangarembga's earlier quotation strongly conveys her determination to avoid discarding the idea of *unhu*, but she recognizes the concept's need to evolve over time into something viable for future generations. Like Dangarembga, postcolonial scholars

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin express interest in community building. Their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* calls for extended attention to the historical circumstances that inform the ways some human groups have positioned themselves in connection to other human and non-human groups. This first step facilitates human liberation, but it cannot succeed without also “imagining new ways in which these societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed” (Huggan and Tiffin 22). In the following chapters, I identify and analyze the small flowerings of *unhu* in Dangarembga’s novels, relating these flowerings to my reading of *unhu* as a spiritual garden, an ecologically-linked community similar to the one Huggan and Tiffin describe.

Chapter 2: Female Solidarity on the Homestead in *Nervous Conditions*

Female writing comes from the consciousness of being a woman
and the problems that arise as a result of that, but then again,
good female writing captures that in a larger context.

(Dangarembga “Women Write” 29)

In her book *African Orature and Human Rights in Gikuyu, Shona and Ndebele Zamani Cultures*, Micere Mugo focuses on the condition of women and children in past *zamani* times and contemporary patriarchal African culture to measure the respect the tribes have for human rights, and in turn *unhu*, by examining the treatment of these people on the margins. Tsitsi Dangarembga offers a similarly de-centered approach in *Nervous Conditions* through the creation of a Shona young woman for her narrator, who declares matter-of-factly, “The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not a priority or even legitimate” (12). Tambu’s comment immediately alerts readers to a state of imbalance between men and women within her family circle and a privileging of men’s sensibilities over women’s during Tambu’s childhood and teen years, primarily the 1960s and early 1970s. The patriarchal attitudes of Tambu’s male relatives morph into chauvinism throughout *Nervous Conditions*, oppressing female characters and corrupting *unhu* in the process.

While implicating people who dismiss African patriarchal culture as wholeheartedly oppressive, Mugo also acknowledges, “[T]he struggle against patriarchal cultural oppression in Africa has been long and protracted” (11). Overall, *Nervous*

Conditions has been embraced at home and abroad since its appearance on the literary landscape in 1988, but some patriarchal opposition still lingers. As recently as 2007, Dangarembga discussed the way government-controlled Zimbabwean newspapers *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* were condemning her for having feminist sympathies. She identified these detractors as combatants in a “patriarchal battle” whose closed minded attitudes unfortunately have blocked positive discussions about whether feminism and *unhu* can operate simultaneously (Rooney Interview 61). Rooney speculates, “[F]eminism might be considered divisive in that kind of ethos” (61) valuing the collective group. I undertake Dangarembga’s challenge to pursue this line of thought, proposing that there is not necessarily a conflict between the two modes of thinking when feminist acts seek to correct the balance gender injustice disrupts. This is the kind of equilibrium desired in the practice of *unhu* as well as in ecosystems, to which humans make vital contributions.

Despite the flaws of patriarchal cultures, Mugo does not think improvement in conditions for women in African culture will occur by completely erasing the patriarchal framework and starting afresh. Instead, both Mugo and Dangarembga, who draws inspiration from Mugo’s works, endorse the idea of transforming from within the established structure:

Rebels and resisters have used the cracks within patriarchal systemic injustice, purposefully entering them in order to change their oppressive conditions. The ability to force these cracks open and then occupy spaces thus liberated in order to transform/create new human conditions remain our challenges to day [sic]. (Mugo 11)

The ideal outcome is a remolded version of an imperfect system that utilizes *unhu* to offer human rights to all members of the group, even those people on the margins. For instance, Mugo's study of *zamani* patriarchal Shona culture finds that married women, although entrapped in arranged marriages with little recourse for reporting physical abuse, were entitled to a piece of land for cultivation purposes. This allotment served as a stepping stone for women to later campaign for title deeds, a movement toward gender equality in Zimbabwe (43). Indeed, Dangarembga's 1993 film story *Neria* promotes every woman's right to own land and property in Zimbabwe.

Like Mugo's book, Dangarembga's debut novel exposes patriarchal social injustices harming the female characters. Numerous male characters, for instance, disrespect female characters, routinely denying them—Tambu, Mai, Maiguru, Nyasha, and Lucia—the role of agent in their own lives, an important human right. On a few rare occasions, Mai convinces Jeremiah to let Tambu grow mealies, and Maiguru convinces Babamukuru to send Tambu to the convent school; overall, however, women are routinely denied participation in the decision making. Mai, for instance, plays no part in the choices to send away Nhamo and later Tambu to the mission school, decisions that devastate her. This refusal to legitimate women's needs in the majority of cases places *unhu* in a critical condition because *unhu* requires acknowledgment of all group members. The colonial encounter, which Ranka Primorac references in her definition of *unhu* as a form of “pre-colonial reciprocal subjectivity,” (“Southern States” 250) exacerbates this problem; I will return to this topic later in the chapter. Whereas Primorac claims *unhu* is “entirely absent” (250) in the novel, I alternatively make a case for its existence. The word itself does not appear in the text, but, as Lily Mabura notes, “one

may infer reference to it as an ideology” (109). Indeed, acknowledging the presence of *unhu* in the form of small flowerings in *Nervous Conditions* constitutes an important part of my argument for this chapter.

Christopher Okonkwo’s article “Space Matters” explores the symbiotic relationship between *Nervous Conditions*’ form, “organic components that work not alone but cooperatively,” and content, Dangarembga’s endorsement of balance and growth (53). Her construction of this novel according to the principles of *unhu*, as I believe Okonkwo’s argument illustrates, proves her commitment to preserving this mode of existence and showcasing its extraordinary survival skills amid turbulent circumstances. In addition to making a case for the existence of *unhu* in *Nervous Conditions*, my second purpose is to prove that denying the presence of *unhu* in the form of female camaraderie overlooks two crucial aspects of the philosophy’s makeup—its resilience and creativity amid toxic surroundings.

One reason for the endangerment of *unhu* on the homestead is the lack of steady, strong leadership like that of Tambu’s great-grandfather to ensure cooperation between everyone. The ineffectual Jeremiah enjoys his power as head of the homestead but evades all responsibility for his family, literally neglecting to keep a sturdy roof over their heads. The fact that Jeremiah claims credit for Tambu’s and Lucia’s roof repair is indicative of his lack of integrity. His inertia helps to account for the squalor of his nuclear family’s living conditions. In December of 1969, Tambu observes the worsening condition of the homestead: “Great holes gaped in the crumbling mud-brick walls of the *tsapi*, and the *hozi* was no more than a remainder of a shelter” (125). The once well-constructed latrine, maintained by Tambu before she left for the mission, has become contaminated and

infested with bottle-blue flies. The dilapidated state of the property may be read as an outward expression of the critical condition of *unhu*.

Living in accordance with *unhu*'s tenets requires truly seeing people, and Jeremiah never acknowledges the needs of anyone other than himself. He disregards his daughter's earnest wish to attend school and betrays his brother's trust when he spends the money Babamukuru mails for Tambu's tuition. Even after Tambu raises the money to replenish the fund through the help of Mr. Matimba, whose dubious strategy for obtaining the money does not entirely align with *unhu*, Jeremiah attempts to have her school principal release the pre-paid tuition on the grounds that his daughter's education will profit her husband's family rather than his own. She is merely a disposable part of the family in his eyes; this viewpoint absolutely runs counter-intuitive to *unhu*, where everyone matters.

Nhamo adopts his father's perspective about women's irrelevance but commits the greater offense of abusing his sisters verbally and physically. Tambu seeks solidarity with her elder brother regarding her return to school, but Nhamo rebuffs her request with a snarky comment about his superiority as a boy. Although frustrated with her brother's incessant taunting, Tambu is more infuriated by his laziness toward work on the homestead, flagrant disregard for the struggles of their family, and lack of humanity. She relates this anger in the stories of his whipping their younger sister Netsai to frighten her into fetching his luggage from the bus station and giving away the mealies Tambu intends to sell to raise money for her school fees. The laziness and selfishness of father and son, as well as the chauvinistic mindset they epitomize, are the antithesis of *unhu*'s valuing of

the collective group, including the happiness or “wellness” of all of its members, as well as their needs.

Female characters in *Nervous Conditions* gesture toward alternatives to the patriarchal system in their own interactions, consciously strategizing and/or subconsciously criticizing the established system from within its walls. This approach to critiquing culture displays the kind of transgressive spirit political theorist Lucy Sargisson elucidates in her book *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*. A determination to challenge the system in which one has been raised or willingness to gesture toward alternatives qualifies as transgressive, according to Sargisson (9). Like Mugo, Sargisson examines “bodies of people” on the margins, intentional utopian communities in her case, to learn how these groups can enrich mainstream thought by challenging it. Sargisson asserts, “Textual utopias create mental space that permits an estranged viewpoint to exist” (154). The parallels between the ideas of Mugo and Sargisson enable a fusion of purpose between *unhu* and utopian strategizing.

When describing feminism’s interest in studying issues of power and identity, Sargisson also raises the significance of feminism’s utopian potential, which is “rooted in dissatisfaction with the present” (25). This utopian strategizing appears several times in *Nervous Conditions* in the form of female camaraderie on the homestead, a place with close ties to the environment that enhance female camaraderie and community building in turn. These attempts do not always result in the success through liberation that Lucia enjoys, but they demonstrate the women’s willingness to confront, or at least acknowledge, the injustice of their current mode of existence. Then, they can subvert it

by gesturing toward an alternative characterized by a state of interconnectedness more in line with *unhu*.

Unhu enters the foreground on the homestead when female characters adopt considerate attitudes toward one another and see their actions reciprocated. One of the first instances of *unhu* in the novel involves Tambu recounting a story in which her grandmother narrated the history of their family's earliest days on the homestead: "Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land...At last the people came upon the grey, sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it. There they built a home" (18). The primary "wizard" or white settler was Cecil Rhodes, who seized lands belonging to the Shona and Ndebele tribes as a colony for Britain in 1899. Rhodes's mindset of entitlement was far removed from the reciprocal nature of *unhu*, which advocates an orientation of stewardship toward fellow human beings as well as the land.

Doris Lessing's *African Laughter* captures his arrogant perception of land ownership in an excerpted passage from D.C. De Waal's *With Rhodes in Mashonaland*, in which he mentions land in terms of divisible slices, sources of economic profit rather than spiritual enlightenment or vital components of an interdependent ecosystem. As a welcome antidote to Rhodes's conceptualization of the world, Okonkwo encourages readers to examine the spaces in *Nervous Conditions*, as Biman Basu has explored previously, but then also combine and enrich that analysis with consideration of the formal elements of character, plot, action, and narrative (54). His conclusion that Dangarembga "succeeds remarkably in making that serious message [of balance and

growth] and the narrative instruments that convey it work not separately but cooperatively,” (72) aligns nicely with my approach in this chapter.

In contrast to Rhodes, Tambu’s grandmother Mbuya embodies an attitude of stewardship toward the land and her granddaughter, a mindset allied with *unhu*. Despite the essentially unworkable nature of the soil on the homestead, Tambu’s grandmother salvaged what she could from the soil’s meek offerings to become “an inexorable cultivator of land, sower of seeds and reaper of rich harvests” (17). She survived the hardships of her life, including being abandoned by her husband and displaced from her home, and transmits her story of survival to Tambu through orature. Even though she could have worked faster without her young granddaughter at her feet, Mbuya instead permitted Tambu to work alongside her in the fields and weeded extra strips of land so that Tambu would believe the two could work at the same speed. Her considerate mindset allowed her to validate young Tambu’s need for attention, instill in her valuable life lessons about fortitude, and enjoy some company in return. Mbuya even creatively used her storytelling as an incentive for working: ““More work, my child, before you hear more story,”” she encouraged Tambu (17). In these senses, Mbuya played an integral role in societal growth as a “community orature artist” (Mugo 27). All generations benefit from this cyclical contribution gifted by wisdom-sharing elders.

Mbuya’s anecdote serves a practical narratorial purpose for Dangarembga in explaining how Tambu’s family was forced from their original home to a desolate plot of land. In addition, Mbuya’s tale implicitly answers Mugo’s call for the renewal of respect shown to elderly Shona women in *zamani* times as “orature artists, educators and storehouses of cultural knowledge as well as gatekeepers of ethical codes of conduct”

(43). Dangarembga has explained that the absence of a grandmother figure in her own life reinforced her wish to create a character like Mbuya who could preserve history through storytelling in *Nervous Conditions* (George and Scott Interview 312-13).⁷

In addition to the artistry role Mbuya fulfills in the novel, she regales Tambu with history lessons “that could not be found in textbooks” (17). Mabura’s article “Black Women Walking Zimbabwe” briefly discusses Mbuya’s provision of a historical perspective to Tambu by discussing the former land inhabited by the Sigaukes (95). I would add that these lessons supply an important alternative to those offered by the colonizer’s history textbook that Nyasha violently gnashes at the end of the novel during her mental breakdown. Lamenting colonialism’s nearly irreversible damage, Nyasha ponders, “Why do they do it, Tambu? They’ve deprived you of him, him of him, ourselves of each other” (204-05). “They” refers to the colonizers who frame history according to their own perceptions of the world. This renders the colonized person, in this case Babamukuru, lacking the subjective position crucial to *unhu*; he must please his white employers, whatever the personal cost. Kerstin Bolzt has explored Dangarembga’s acknowledgement that men as well as women are victims of the colonial system. Such an approach, Bolzt continues, helps Dangarembga avoid making her male characters stereotypical even though she admires the remarkable fortitude of her female characters (148). Indeed, it could be argued that Nyasha’s forgiveness of Babamukuru for beating her and understanding of his struggle to make sense of colonialism’s damaging effects, even though she cannot respect him, signal her deep understanding of *unhu* despite the absence of a grandmother figure in her life.

The powerful impact of the bonding between Tambu and Mbuya is evident when Tambu sends her “adoring, reverent prayers” (17) for a good crop of mealies. Without any financial or moral support from her living relatives to grow the mealies in order to raise school funds, eight-year-old Tambu imagines the spirit of the elderly woman, who worked the land near the homestead until her last breath and who understood her young granddaughter’s needs, can honor her request from beyond the mortal realm. Her hope for intervention from a spirit elder remains consistent with the Shona belief in the spirit elders’ active roles among the living even after their deaths; specifically, a “paternal grandmother’s is a powerful spirit” (*Book of Not* 194). By invoking her grandmother’s spirit through prayer, she hopes to gain an ally on an otherwise individual quest.

Despite the lack of parental support and societal odds stacked against her, Tambu optimistically pursues her goal, inherent in her prayers and her added chore of cultivating the mealies every day. This wish to return to school relates to Nichole Pohl’s work on country house poems in *Women, Space and Utopia, 1600-1800*. As its title states, the monograph focuses on seventeenth and eighteenth century literature, but Pohl’s sense of utopian strategizing may be applied to later periods. Her work builds on Sargisson’s, similarly discouraging the construction of binaries, especially that of the public/private. By virtue of their location, privately owned country houses or poems featuring these locales could be considered parts of the private domain. Pohl counters such assertions, characterizing country-house literature as “fundamentally public, a literature that is concerned with social transformation and change” (53). Tambu’s determination to grow mealies near the homestead so that she can resume her education, an opportunity

normally reserved for male children, represents an interest in the kind of remapping of public/private boundaries to which Pohl refers.

Yet, feelings of exclusion resurface when Jeremiah and Nhamo travel to greet Babamukuru and his family at the airport, leaving Tambu behind at the homestead. She realizes that this same form of exclusion prevented her return to Rutivi school because only one child's tuition could be paid, and Nhamo, the eldest male child, was the preferred student. Rather than admit defeat, Tambu declares, "I did not want my life to be predicted by such improper relations. I decided I would just have to make up my mind not to let it happen" (38). Instead of storing up her anger, she releases it by going to the kitchen and hurling a log onto the fire. Tambu's decision to eat a piece of meat falling out of the pot is a politically transgressive act in that she challenges the patriarchal hierarchy at the party that rewards meat to women and children only if enough is left after the appetites of Jeremiah's family members, who are celebrating Babamukuru's return from Britain, have been satisfied. With few people to admire her efforts, Tambu finds life as a peasant on the homestead frustrating, but the place holds redemptive value in the small flowerings of female camaraderie and connections to the environment.

A mother/daughter dynamic also offers much potential for a reciprocal relationship—something integral to the growth of *unhu*. A daughter's first exposure to the expression *Tiripo, kana makadini wo* (If it is well with you, it is well with me, too) may be when on her mother's back, as it is for Tambu (*Book of Not* 65). In contrast to Jeremiah, Tambu recognizes her mother's plight and pities her for it: "The thought of my mother working so hard, so alone, always distressed me..." (10). To alleviate her mother's burden, Tambu helps with the chores and plans ahead, preparing dinner to spare

her mother from additional work. Mai reciprocates by taking Tambu into her confidence, confessing to her daughter the disappointment she feels when Nhamo refuses to speak in Shona when he begrudgingly visits the homestead. Struggling to acclimate herself to life at Babamukuru's house, Tambu experiences guilt: "Then I reprimanded myself for this self-indulgence by thinking of my mother, who suffered from being female and poor and uneducated and black so stoically that I was ashamed of my weakness in succumbing so flabbily to the strangeness of my new circumstances" (91). Tambu draws strength from recalling her mother's resilience, even though, as a driven youth, she paradoxically considers her uneducated mother an obstacle on her path to success.

Tambu's modeling of this *unhu*-inspired relationship with her mother in *Nervous Conditions* influences Netsai, who takes pains to help her sister whenever she can. For example, she obtains water from the river so that Tambu need not make the trips herself. Tambu praises Netsai's initiative and the two exchange smiles. This small but considerate reflection of *unhu* between struggling sisters carries even greater weight when compared to the overall blindness to women and their needs on the homestead as well as the mission. Conversely, the ever-responsible Babamukuru provides both for his nuclear and extended family but rules at home with an iron fist, not a manner contributing to the harmony within the domestic environment that both strengthens and results from *unhu*.

While a conscious desire to be educated offers her hope for the future, Tambu finds immediate solace at Babamukuru's homecoming bash through female camaraderie. She distracts herself from the frustration of exclusion by partaking in housework. Her female relatives lift her spirits by complimenting her efforts in the kitchen: "They were pleased with me when they came to prepare supper. 'You are quite a little worker,' they

said. ‘All that is left is to prepare the *sadza*.’ Their praise made me feel better. It made me feel good. My confidence returned...” (39). One could argue that Tambu’s sense of superiority over Nyasha, who behaves in an anti-social manner at the party, eradicates any sense of *unhu* between Tambu and her relatives; however, I would refute such a contention because of the way Tambu adjusts her attitude after enjoying the fellowship among the women and young children: “Chatting to my aunts and cousins as we waited for the *sadza* to thicken, pouring in more mealie-meal when it had, I stopped feeling excluded, and since I no longer had need of them, my feelings of superiority disappeared as well” (39). The female amity, individual attention, and validation Tambu receives for her cooking eliminate the need for thoughts of superiority over her cousin. This kind of adaptive behavior is crucial to the cultivation of *unhu*.

More broadly, the “camaraderie of cooking” (40) erases thoughts of superfluity that invade Tambu’s daily existence. These ruminations cause her to feel like “an unfortunate byproduct of some inexorable natural process” that intended to make a boy but made a mistake and created a girl (40). Such thoughts emanate from the kind of meeting reserved for patriarchal relatives, primarily men only, at the homecoming celebration. At this meeting, Nhamo is declared the hope for Jeremiah’s branch of the family with no reference to Tambu’s success at school. Alternatively, the group cooking experience enables her to “occupy the corner that that same natural process had carved out for me. It was comfortable to recognize myself as solid, utilitarian me” (40). These women affirm Tambu’s value through praise.

Like *Nervous Conditions*, *Neria* emphasizes the theme of female solidarity. A caring mother who additionally works outside the home as a clothing designer, Neria

balances contemporary expectations with modern views about the working woman. Her co-workers, all of whom are women, “form a genuine supportive community that is contrasted with the false sense of tradition represented by Phineas in the village” (Bolzt 179). Neria’s best friend Cornelia, who is also a colleague, loans her \$100 for her daughter’s school fees and uplifts her through song and encouragement throughout the film. Significantly, she convinces Neria to fight for control of her children and her property rather than allow her brother-in-law, Phineas, to confiscate everything after her husband, Patrick, dies in a bicycle accident. Neria’s mother-in-law, who remains critical of Neria throughout the film, even calling her a “witch,” finally embraces Neria at the end of the film. She even promises to honor the tribal custom of the father’s family caring for his widow and child. Mbuya admires the sacrifices Neria makes for her children as well as the respect and support her daughter-in-law has earned from her female colleagues.

The Christmas holiday reunion on the homestead in *Nervous Conditions* offers another strong example of female bonding. As the senior wife in possession of the food for the holiday, Maiguru is expected to meet the seemingly daunting challenge of cleaning as well as cooking three times per day for a family of 24 over the course of two weeks. Maiguru resents working like a servant at family gatherings. She informs her husband, ““But what I object to is the way everybody expects me to spend all my time cooking for them. When you provide so much food, then I end up slaving for everybody”” (124). Babamukuru discounts her protest, pointing to Tambu and Nyasha as prospective assistants. He fails to see Maiguru’s larger resentment toward cooking for a family that has not acknowledged her master’s degree and her anger toward him for

withholding her teaching salary in order to pay for the food at such gatherings. Unlike Babamukuru, Tambu observes, “During that holiday I realized that some things were not as they should have been in our family, though I call it a holiday when actually it was not” (135). Okonkwo appreciates Tambu’s willingness to entertain alternative voices, calling her the “human antithesis” to the suffocating inflexibility at Babamukuru’s home at the mission (56). Indeed, Tambu recognizes the unjust system under which her aunt toils on holidays and endeavors to support her as much as possible.

A sense of understanding informs the female characters’ team effort to feed and clean for the family that Christmas. Out of this imperfect situation of unending chores, Tambu, Nyasha, and Maiguru’s three helpers carve out some enjoyment. The homestead’s rural location offers many opportunities to commune with nature, and Tambu and the other young women find solace in their time outdoors, which offers a “de-silencing of women through landscape and a finding of womanist spaces of refuge in it” (Mabura 88). The girls derive happiness from walking to the River Nyamarira even though the purpose of obtaining water is to continue washing and cooking. Mabura convincingly argues that the British enhancement project of Zimbabwean land “often alienated black women from their often traditional liminal and rejuvenating spaces, like rivers, where they could position themselves to effectively resist or overcome what were often predominately patriarchal and racist societies” (91). Given the broad scope of her article, however, Mabura does not follow through as she might in discussing how female characters in *Nervous Conditions* collectively experience the physical features of the landscape.

The girls convert an otherwise monotonous task into a salubrious jaunt on foot during which they benefit from the communal sharing of fruit while enjoying peaches, guavas, and mulberries from neighbors on adjacent homesteads. This joyful communing is at the heart of *unhu*, the bedrock of community building. “Although the tasks themselves were tiring,” (136) Tambu owns, the spirit of friendship among them as they lounge on rocks and tease one another in a carefree manner lightens the heavy burden of womanhood about which her mother previously warns Tambu.

Lucia similarly shows a utopian spirit of *unhu* toward her ailing sister Mai by forcing her to walk to the river for rejuvenation. Mai laments the loss of Nhamo during the Christmas holiday, and Lucia assures Mai, “We do not deny you your grief, but let the anger be over” (143). Later, when Mai becomes so devastated regarding Tambu’s acceptance to the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart that she ceases to eat or feed her baby, Dambudzo, Lucia again takes a firm yet sympathetic approach when comforting her sister. Tambu’s reference to Lucia’s forcing of Mai to take responsibility for her son as a kind of “shock treatment” (188) at first appears negative. Yet, Lucia’s plan to situate Dambudzo on a rock and threaten Mai to let him drown is intended as loving, effective shock therapy and is followed with rejuvenating sun-bathing on a rock and conversations with affable local women who exchange playful banter.

This support network of women is the very kind Martha, the main character of Dangarembga’s play *She No Longer Weeps*, lacks when she becomes pregnant with a child out of wedlock. Despite the absence of communal support from Freddy, who is the baby’s father, or her own family, she survives and even thrives professionally. Unfortunately, the experience hardens her heart forever, especially when Freddy removes

their daughter from her able care. Carolyn Shaw has noted how the play “shows that a woman must pay consequences for sexual liberation and for claiming sole responsibility for herself within a patriarchal society. One of the consequences is living on the borderland of society, no matter how accomplished the woman is” (20). Consequently, Martha refuses to be the spokeswoman for a women’s support group wanting to tout her success story when this organization did not help her. Martha’s unwillingness to assist this group demonstrates Dangarembga’s preference for the genuine female camaraderie evidenced in *Nervous Conditions* versus the formulaic, misguided kind the women’s group concocts. “I want to be left alone to live my life,” Martha declares (133). Just prior to the conclusion, Martha inquires after her daughter, of whom she no longer has custody. Freddy replies, “I...I...she...she is well,” to which Martha rejoins, “But I am not well” (139). Dangarembga depicts the breakdown of community in this inversion of the standard *unhu* greeting before the electrifying conclusion involving Martha stabbing Freddy, a symbolic act conveying the ramifications of neglecting a member of the community. Martha’s fate might have been quite different if someone like Lucia had offered her moral support.

In her article “Rewriting the Hysteric as Anorexic in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*,” Sue Thomas aptly notes the homeopathic nature of Lucia’s approach as juxtaposed to the doctors’ treatment plan for Nyasha involving the anti-psychotic drug Largactil (195). *The Book of Not* features the damaging effects of these anti-psychotic drugs in Nyasha’s trance-like mode of existence; the drugs conspire to silence her, resulting in her regrettable absence from the pages of the sequel. Conversely, the spoonfuls of community Lucia administers are “very good medicine” (189) and

guarantee the continuation not only of Mai's life but also Dambudzo's, symbolizing the community focus of her good deed. Lucia reinforces this societal re-entry plan for Mai, who preferred death to watching Tambu leave for Sacred Heart, with a night of sisterly conversation and "rich and sustaining" porridge with milk the following morning (189). The contrasting treatment plans suggest the author's sympathies rest with Lucia and her tactics. Throughout *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga features these small flowerings of *unhu* in pockets of genuine female solidarity that offer validation to the female characters at the individual level and stimulate community growth at the broadest level.

Chapter 3: Sacred Heart as a Failed Intentional Community and Sister Catherine as a
Utopian Body in *The Book of Not*

Nyasha accurately perceived that all this affluence [at Sacred Heart] was dazzling me. “Excuse me,” she murmured in cultured tones, “but are you sure this is the right place?”
(*Nervous Conditions* 197)

In this chapter, as part of my ecocritical goal of building community within the academic sphere, I initiate a conversation among scholars who have analyzed this novel and examine Dangarembga’s depiction of community or *unhu*. This approach to studying human relationships, whether in the academic forum or on the pages of a literary text, may seem disparate since the chapters framing this one concentrate directly on the environment’s involvement in both *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*; however, ecocriticism is not confined to discussions of the physical landscape. Indeed, in *Beyond Nature Writing*, Karla Arbruster and Kathleen Wallace encourage ecocritically aware readers to direct their attention to human interactions within nature as well as culture (Hewitt para. 2).

The minimal scholarship focused on *The Book of Not* reflects a sustained interest in the forces weakening *unhu*. Situating myself within this discourse of *unhu*’s collapse, I concentrate on the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart, a place greatly impacting Tambu’s perceptions of herself and the people around her. The role of this school and the various near-allegorical characters walking its halls cannot be underestimated in light of Tambu’s retrospective observation, “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 my *unhu* at all, only my own calamities, since those contested days at the convent” (246). Surprisingly, this important setting has escaped critical attention with only a few notable exceptions.

Countering Ranka Primorac’s aversion to *The Book of Not*, historian of Zimbabwe Terence Ranger praises the book, especially Dangarembga’s depiction of Sacred Heart. He writes:

A most intensely felt and remembered book which reproduces the feel, sight, sound, and emotion of an African convent boarding school a quarter of a century ago...The guerilla war is raging outside, bringing random and appalling violence. The violence Tambudzai experiences is better intentioned and less brutal. But it is the emotional violence of a racism which demands that she perform better than a ‘native’ and then denies her the credit for having done so. (qtd. on reverse cover *Book of Not*)

Ranger’s provocative reading of Sacred Heart delineates the psychologically destructive experience Tambu endures at the elite all girls private school. She greatly anticipates the joys of student life at Sacred Heart, but, as a black student, she never gains full membership to the convent school, which shields students from the war raging between Ian Smith’s forces and the Zimbabwean “terrorists” or “Freedom Fighters” but offers black students no protection from the “wounds of cultural colonialism” (Ranger). Caroline Rooney echoes Ranger’s comments: “There may be senses in which Sacred Heart is indeed at the heart of it all” (135). While Dangarembga does not veil her central theme of war’s ravages, depicted by the *morari* and the relation of Ntobmi’s heartrending

loss of her family to terrorists or Freedom Fighters, she presents another theme worth probing in the mental abuse and negative reinforcement of academic excellence Tambu suffers at the hands of the well-intentioned but nonetheless racist colonizers at Sacred Heart.

Developing Rooney's comment, I make my first of two points that Sacred Heart can be interpreted as a failed intentional community. For the purposes of this paper, an intentional community may be defined as "groups of people who have chosen to live and sometimes work together for a common purpose beyond relationship or families" (Sargisson and Sargent xiv). Sacred Heart's mission is to offer "the most prestigious education to young women in the country [Rhodesia]" (27) and to "nurture well-rounded human beings" (155) in a Christian framework. Yet, the school's racist practices culminate in a colonization of Tambu's mind that obscures her sense of self or *unhu*, thus discouraging rather than fostering community. Gugu Hlongwane, who has penned the only article to date offering an extended look at Sacred Heart, articulates this point through her recognition that Tambu's "spirit is soiled in the act of putting on the oppressor's uniform" more than her blazers are dirtied (455). The school uniform also reflects the homogeneous manner of thinking encouraged at Sacred Heart. Such a lackluster environment overall denies the creativity so vital to Lucy Sargisson's conceptualization of utopias, which offer "inspiration, energy, and a refreshing creativity. Also, they speak to the necessity of finding a new way forward" (*Utopian Bodies* 154). Rather than promoting creativity, Sacred Heart stifles creativity, encouraging rote memorization over emotional engagement with literary texts, to cite an example.

Research cataloguing the breakdown of *unhu* in *The Book of Not* is vital to scholarship on the novel, a point I wish to emphasize by offering my own contribution to this area. In her main argument for *The Book of Not*, Rooney asserts, “[T]he ethics of the colonized may differ from an ethics of the colonizer” (*Decolonising Gender* 126). By using the word “may,” Rooney leaves the door open for potential comparisons between the two ethical positions, but she concentrates on the book’s representation of the differences at Sacred Heart and in Harare, concluding, “Creativity and *unhu* are immobilized, paralysed, suffocated” because “they just cannot function in such a situation” (140). This trend of describing *unhu*’s collapse has enriched studies on this novel while also neglecting the manner in which Sister Catherine gestures toward a more peaceful and loving existence along the lines of *unhu*. She does not resemble Tambu’s grandmother physically, but she shares her generosity of spirit. While the environment at Sacred Heart is bleak for black students, Tambu’s Latin teacher, Sister Catherine, shows kindness to them in the form of Christian charity. Although she is not Shona, her behavior is analogous to actions and values central to the *unhu* philosophy. As the only Sacred Heart authority figure who treats these young girls with kindness, Sister Catherine is the small flowering of *unhu* facilitating at least some degree of community at the school.

My work both develops out of and extends the arguments of Hlongwane and Rooney by offering a new lens through which to view the dynamics at Sacred Heart. Whereas they ground their individual arguments in theories frequently related to postcolonial novels, such as those connected to gender and Frantz Fanon, I locate my argument for this chapter within the theoretical context of *Living in Utopia* by Sargisson

and Lyman Sargent for two reasons. First, this study from the field of social science involves an empirical study of place, specifically intentional communities in New Zealand, which inform my discussion of this fictional failed intentional community. *Living in Utopia's* study of sustained intentional communities “offers transferrable lessons in community, cooperation and social change” (xv). Similarly, Dangarembga offers her readers such lessons through the failures at Sacred Heart.⁸ More generally, analyzing the novel through these chosen perspectives allows me to argue that, due to its complexity, *The Book of Not* lends itself to a variety of theoretical applications.

Sargisson and Sargent categorize religious and spiritual intentional communities in New Zealand according to each group's primary aims—contemplation, social change, and personal growth (54). Sacred Heart seeks to promote social change as well as personal growth: although the nuns encourage outreach, seen when they send students to knit garments for Ian Smith's forces during the Zimbabwean war for independence, they primarily seek to accomplish their goals by offering a first-class education from within the space of the college. The intended result is the betterment of society through the female students' selected careers after graduation. Sacred Heart avoids the social change groups' common pitfall of failing to balance outreach with the group's community building within the convent by working on both efforts from within their walls (Sargisson and Sargent 69). As a boarding school, Sacred Heart relates to personal growth communities, considered the most intense of all three kinds, in its degree of separation from the outside world to accomplish its mission of religious/spiritual improvement (73).

Despite Sacred Heart's establishment as an intentional Christian community, the school neglects to fulfill its promise to “nurture well-rounded human beings” (*Book of*

Not 155) due to the ineffective management of all three forms of conflict relating to principles, domesticity, and relationships that Sargisson and Sargent reference (146). Sargisson and Sargent counter the conceptualization of conflict in purely negative terms, remarking on the inevitability of conflict and its ability to strengthen the group if managed effectively. Ensuring that conflict does not fester and then erupt, which is what occurs at Sacred Heart, is crucial.

Rather than resolve conflict, Sister Emmanuel, the school's headmistress, inflicts the kind of emotional violence to which Ranger refers. She displays a hypocritical attitude that sets the tone for the school's atmosphere. A dictatorial person "who even in praise erased you," (111) she enforces wider Rhodesian racist practices, dividing the predominantly white population of female students from the black students. Even though she acknowledges the un-Christian quality of enforcing segregation and following the Ministry of Education's dictates during a meeting with Tambu and her roommates, she prefers to hold fast to these practices: "That is why, even as things are changing, we feel it is realistic to continue to enforce some of our old regulations that might make it appear we are not moving with the times" (73). As a result of bowing to this broader cultural attitude, Sister Emmanuel fails to offer a utopian space that could imagine an alternative to the "old regulations"; her failure to reject this perspective creates a conflict of principle between the Christian tenet *Love thy Neighbor as Thyself* and the disrespectful treatment shown to Tambu and the five other black pupils. As *The Book of Not* illustrates, a conflict of principle poses the most challenging obstacles in an intentional community (Sargisson and Sargent 147).

From an ecocritical perspective, the school fails to offer Tambu and her five roommates hospitality, the crucial ethical obligation of a host to secure the comfort of all guests so that they feel not only welcome but cared for as a vital part of the community. Mehemmid, the main character of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, refers to the comfort he derives from the sense of belonging in his home village: "I feel that I am important, that I am continuous and integral" (5). Quite the opposite is true for the black students at Sacred Heart, who are relegated to the cramped "African dormitory" with accommodations unequal to those of the white students. In *Nervous Conditions*, Babamukuru notices only four wardrobes for six girls in Tambu's dormitory. The unnamed nun speaking to Tambu's uncle quickly dismisses his objection, describing the inequality as an "inconvenience," (198) a euphemism for the far more emotionally harmful reality that Tambu has been "reduced to an intruder" (Hlongwane 443).

Tambu returns to this topic in *The Book of Not*, explaining that sharing a wardrobe with Ntombi is "a necessity arising from charity...as the nuns' compassion toward us caused them to wish to educate as many of us as possible, there were now six of us at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, housed in this four-person room on St. Ignatius's corridor" (57-58). Since a retrospective Tambu tells the story, one might wonder whether she explains the school's justification of racism sarcastically or earnestly. Tambu's recollections tend to include phrases such as "What I piece together now" (119, my emphasis) and, since the above quotation contains no such signal word, I interpret this quotation as Tambu's understanding of the cramped quarters while still a student there. Her reasoning demonstrates how the colonizer's logic has invaded the naïve teenager's thought process.

This mental incursion resurfaces yet again during Sister Emmanuel's request for student volunteers to knit garments for Rhodesian soldiers: "The troops are mounting a great exercise,' she stresses, 'to enable us to continue with our mission to educate you in a Christian way. I think it would be appropriate to show our appreciation'" (132). Tambu's mental dialogue with herself reveals her inner struggle:

Put up your hand. Don't put up your hand. Do the right thing. If you do, the terrorists might find you. The impossibility of it, of the putting up of four fingers, of the stretching up of a hand on an arm, and then the impossibility of everything else after that moment of raising up, impossible because legs and other limbs you know of tangled in heaps as they fell, trampled through my thoughts like a too heavily armed force. Meanwhile ahead, on each side, and behind, along the form lines, beige sleeves fell back from young white arms, fingers waved and more and more arms ascended....Mine was amongst the arms that were raised. (132)

Dangarembga speaks sympathetically about Tambu's decision to knit: "I would say yes, there always is a strong impulse towards hybridisation just so that one has the sense of some kind of community" (Rooney Interview 62). Unfortunately, Tambu does not even find a sense of community during these knitting sessions because no one speaks to her.

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o offers insight into this complex process of mental colonization that prompted him to switch from writing in English to his mother tongue of Gikuyu. In this landmark work, he observes, "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" (16). Sacred Heart facilitates this

process by prohibiting the use of Shona, which is not only a form of communication but also an important “carrier of culture” (13) in Southern Africa. While Tambu’s roommates frequently break this rule to preserve their sense of community at a school that excludes them from extra-curricular activities, Tambu obeys it for fear of obtaining a dreaded black mark on the “wall of shame” that will prevent her from achieving the honor roll, another distinction routinely denied to black students.

Tambu’s choice to discard her native language alienates her from the community of young black women at Sacred Heart, played out when Ntombi becomes infuriated with Tambu for refusing to speak in Shona to a member of the dining hall staff, which in turn separates her from herself and her *unhu*. For instance, after Tambu’s final fight with Ntombi over her decision to knit for the security forces, Tambu explains, “My roommate communicated with me even less after that day our cupboards were checked and Ntombi waved my green yarn and grey knitting needles. I was concerned not so much because I missed communion with the other girls but because their avoidance resulted in a decrease in my quota of *unhu*” (144). Tambu misunderstands in this moment *unhu*’s reliance on the interconnectedness of human beings: merely sharing the same physical space of a dorm-room at Sacred Heart does not ensure *unhu*. The dystopia-like atmosphere at Sacred Heart helps to account for Tambu’s distorted perception of community.

Sister Emmanuel conceptualizes her educating mission in entirely positive terms without realizing or caring about the harm inflicted on Tambu and her fellow black African classmates when she embarrasses them. For instance, at a school assembly, Sister Emmanuel scolds Tambu and her dorm-mates about the clogging of the school’s sewage system with feminine hygiene pads. Her reprimand is inconsistent with the nature of the

offense. This example of domestic conflict, which Sargisson and Sargent discuss, occurs when someone instigates a dispute about a minor problem, perhaps relating to another person who neglected to wash the dishes (148). The person's outpouring of anger over this small incident actually suggests that a larger issue needs to be addressed, in this case Sister Emmanuel's resentment and perhaps hatred toward the black students and their participation in her school, but she instead concentrates on the particular episode in question.

Sister Emmanuel uses this opportunity to exercise, even abuse her power. Using her "scalpel gaze" (63) that reflects cruelty rather than kindness, she chastises them in front of their peers: "I am aware the girls in the African dormitory may not be cognizant of the reasons why such articles should not be deposited in toilet bowls, but this is one of the reasons you are brought here. I am sure, young ladies, you are aware you are brought here to polish your behavior!" (63). Particularly abhorrent about Sister Emmanuel's accusation is her unspoken awareness that she has not supplied Tambu and company with incinerators to burn their hygiene products; they have been left with no choice but to dispose of them down the toilet (Hlongwane 454). Her insults regarding their intelligence are entirely unfounded, and I implicate her for such thoughtless upbraiding and the humiliation it visits on teens who struggle to fit in but who cannot.

Sister Emmanuel's poor treatment of the black students becomes even more alarming because it appears in the middle of a prayer, which by definition constitutes "requests to God or a god to bless and protect someone; (hence) sincere good wishes" (*OED* def. 1c.). In concluding her comments about the girls' ignorance regarding disposal procedures for hygiene products by remarking, "I am extremely annoyed. In the name of

the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen” (63), she perverts the benevolent purpose of a prayer. This further problematizes the conflict of principle previously referenced. According to Sargisson and Sargent, “[R]eligious utopianism looks to divine sources of inspiration and evokes supra-human authority for its programme of change. This, as we shall see, has mixed outcomes” (49). Sister Emmanuel’s emotionally abusive reprimand of the girls at the assembly in question is at least the second instance she has scolded them, marking a “routinisation of abusive practices,” one negative outcome of religious intentional communities (49). By embarrassing them publicly, Sister Emmanuel condones such treatment in her school if “reasons” are found to justify it.

Such slander from an authority figure mortifies Tambu, Ntobmi, Benhilda, Anatasia, Patience and Cynthia. Regarding the assembly, Tambu admits, “How all of us pined and yearned during that assembly not to be ourselves, but someone else!” (63). This dehumanizing treatment especially harms Tambu, who is more vulnerable to Sister Emmanuel’s eviscerating words than her roommates because of her eagerness to please. Tambu becomes so indoctrinated in the ways of the convent school that, by the time of the awards ceremony, she aspires to become a woman like the headmistress, who “emanated power and accomplishment from every pore...if I put my head down and simply continued, I too would turn into such an authoritative and potent woman” (161). Sadly, Tambu wishes to model herself on someone who does not value all human beings equally. As she learns a few moments later when Tracey receives the O-level trophy that is rightfully hers, hard work does not always guarantee recognition.

One might counter such a harsh reading of Sister Emmanuel on the grounds of presentism, judging the past based on contemporary expectations, and remark that her behavior was merely characteristic of headmistresses and headmasters of that time. For instance, in the film *Nowhere in Africa*, based on a novel about a Jewish family (Jettel, Walter, and their daughter Regina) who flee from Germany to Africa just prior to the Holocaust, Regina attends a British-run school in Kenya. The school's headmaster is curious about her academic success, betraying his belief that the Jewish students attending his school lack the same level of intelligence as the predominantly Christian student body. The headmistress's attitude symbolizes the more general colonial attitude reflected in Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," which encourages people to embark on a task of "civilizing" colonized peoples.

Rather than merely insulting the black students, Sister Emmanuel is cruel and, as Hlongwane notes, reinforces racist stereotypes, upholding "the structuring of the world into dichotomies that necessitated segregationist policies designed to keep the Other in his or her place, and from contaminating so-called civilized white spaces" (454). This point connects to Hlongwane's more general argument about how these divisions at Sacred Heart contribute to Tambu's confused identity. I would add that Sister Catherine challenges the stereotypes Sister Emmanuel projects onto the black pupils, a point to which I will return later in this chapter. Dangarembga's characterization of Sister Catherine offers a more viable alternative for cooperative living and, in my opinion, provides a basis of contrast with Sister Emmanuel that invites readers to find fault with the headmistress's behavior to a greater extent.

Another reason to find fault with Sister Emmanuel is the emotional havoc the school wreaks on Tambu's sense of self-worth. Her overwhelming fear of being worthless replaces the confident mindset that compelled her to refuse to attend her parents' belated Christian wedding in *Nervous Conditions* and accordingly receive fifteen lashes as a punishment. Although Dangarembga seems ambivalent about the Freedom Fighters or terrorists in *The Book of Not* because of war's strong tendency to create divisions among people, she also understands their drive and motivation to escape this ingrained ideology of the inferior African self inflicted by the white minority governmental group in power. Dangarembga articulates the need for this escape in Nyasha's admiration for the Freedom Fighters. After reciting one of their songs by heart, Nyasha exclaims, "Imagine, Tambu! Just imagine it. Can you? Imagine living in Zimbabwe" (94).

Nervous Conditions displays several examples of female solidarity among black Zimbabwean women, but that support system is less evident in *The Book of Not*, which features more of a struggle between Tambu and her roommates, namely Ntombi. Instead of finding an ally or even the kind of sisterhood in each other that Nyasha and Tambu valued in *Nervous Conditions*, these two young ladies perceive one another as enemies in most instances; Tambu fears creating connections with the non-white reflections of herself. Ngugi explains that this kind of fear emanates from the negative image of African people, an attitude perpetuated at Sacred Heart, and infects the colonized person's rapport (18), evident in the dynamic between Tambu and Ntombi.

On the same night Sister Emmanuel calls Tambu and her roommates into her office, as a consequence of Tambu entering a segregated white bathroom on the school

premises, Tambu and Ntombi engage in a fist fight. The immediate cause is Tambu's lack of respect for the hierarchy among the girls in the dormitory, but another reason stems from their meeting with Sister Emmanuel, during the course of which she threatens the girls with her power to dismiss black students if she wishes, joking, "nobody's going to be cut in half," (72) referring to the horrors of the war raging beyond Sacred Heart. Tambu admits, "But how angry I was with Sister, talking to us like that, making jokes about our flesh and how some people thought it was divisible" (74). Instead of being permitted to vent her frustration, Tambu is not allowed to verbalize this anger. "To make it worse," Tambu explains, "she did not ask for our view on the subject beyond the end of audience formality" (74). Consequently, Tambu internalizes this anger and directs it toward Ntombi when they engage in a fist fight later that night.

Successful intentional communities, such as the Tui Community in New Zealand and the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, conduct weekly "heart business" or "sharing" to allow everyone's voice to be heard. These meetings are "statements of feeling" with specific rules: the purpose of the exercise is not to "attribute feelings to others, but rather to acknowledge your own feelings and responses" (Sargisson and Sargent 151). Accusatory "you" statements like those in Sister Emmanuel's tirade during the assembly are unacceptable; instead, "I" statements are encouraged so that frustrations can be aired in a healthier manner more conducive to personal and communal growth. Conversely, Sister Emmanuel and Miss Plato broadcast criticism rather than lending a desperately needed sympathetic ear to tune into Tambu, in the manner of Mr. Matimba in *Nervous Conditions*, or her roommates. The two are oblivious to the pain of Tambu and her

roommates, all of whom grapple with the war raging both outside and within their own hearts.

Sargisson and Sargent believe conflict can result in a better sense of community because other members will observe trouble quickly and offer support (151). Miss Plato observes the fight between Ntombi and Tambu but walks away in disgust rather than approaching them with concern, marking a breakdown in community. The only character who provides moral support and sympathy to the black pupils is Sister Catherine, who leads me to the second part of my argument.

In a vein similar to Christopher Okonkwo's juxtapositions of characters and particular spaces in *Nervous Conditions*, I would argue that Sister Catherine may be seen as an "internally subversive" (Sargisson 2) utopian body within this failed intentional community. She challenges the dictates of the Rhodesian government as well as Sister Emmanuel's heavy-handed disciplinary methods. Scholars have ignored Sister Catherine's important role in the book, and I want to make a case for her relevance because she figures prominently in what Dangarembga has described as a "very strong anti-war message in the whole novel" (Rooney Interview 59). I do not intend to valorize Sister Catherine; rather, I see her "affording a glimpse of a place in which people are in a process that seeks peace with Self and Others" (Sargisson 151). This process is ongoing.

Sister Catherine's melodious voice symbolizes an inner harmony and peace that she shares with her fellow human beings, regardless of race. On a literal level, she regularly loans her guitar to Benhilda, who cannot afford one. These qualities bear a striking resemblance to *unhu*, which correlates with the *Love thy neighbor as thyself* tenet of the Christian faith largely absent from the school. This guideline, according to Tambu,

represents “a general rule known to all human beings everywhere!” (166). As Tambu and Ntombi come to realize, the philosophy of seeing people and honoring them is practiced less frequently than would benefit the planet.

Unlike Sister Emmanuel, Sister Catherine acts as a peacemaker, someone who cannot be well as long as things are anything but well for the African student population at Sacred Heart. When a conflict between roommates Ntombi and Tambu escalates into violence, Sister Catherine defuses the fight. For the second time, she abandons the rule forbidding different skin colors to touch and assesses Tambu’s chin wound and Ntombi’s eye wound with concern, “bending all over the place with distress” (78). For this aware woman, a human being in pain supersedes strict racial laws that relegate black people to a lower status.

Because she has earned their respect, the girls seem particularly embarrassed that she has witnessed their bad behavior: “She made you feel ashamed instead of belligerent” (78). Her disappointment for them proves a more powerful expression of displeasure than unadulterated anger, which Miss Plato expresses after witnessing a fight later in the book, leaving the young women feeling only “half ashamed” (141). The pupils more seriously reflect on the negativity of their actions when a genuinely concerned adult figure interposes. Sister Catherine personifies the positive role model adults can and should offer to youths. Tambu’s, Ntombi’s, and Sister Catherine’s collective nearness to tears shows a mutual disheartening that *unhu* was lost during the evening fight in the dormitory. The nun’s disappointment *for* the girls is not limited to how their behavior will reflect upon her, as seems the case with Miss Plato, but rather how they are harming one another. Sister Catherine’s unspoken warning implicit in her words ““Straight

after...well, after everything, after you've had to speak up for yourselves. This very evening” (78) communicates her understanding that these young women have too many external adversaries like Sister Emmanuel and the broader cultural attitudes she represents to battle among themselves. Although Sister Catherine never directly challenges Sister Emmanuel's authority, her indirect comment referring to the girls' meeting with the headmistress implies her awareness of their unfair treatment. It also helps to explain her dedication to cultivating a sympathetic teaching and disciplinary approach.

Sister Catherine acts reciprocally again by noting on Tambu's progress report her concern for Tambu, who has been overexerting herself academically. Roseanne Kennedy comments on Tambu's lack of a *sawhira*, “someone you were related to not by blood but by absolute respect, liking and understanding—to go forward to the authorities in order to present your case” (*Book of Not* 164). I disagree because Sister Catherine functions in this capacity to the extent she can. This gesture backfires on Tambu when Babamukuru misinterprets the comment, but Sister Catherine's remark indicates she has observed the physical and emotional toll such intense study exacts on Tambu. Her kind intervention is much more sympathetic than Sister Emmanuel's cruel remarks about Tambu's inability to find her niche at Sacred Heart.

When Sister Catherine distinguishes herself from the other nuns at Sacred Heart by trying to pronounce Tambu's name in Shona, she exemplifies *unhu* in a thoughtful act attempted by no other teacher at the school. Tambu admits to subscribing to the teenage fondness for eye rolling, but she recalls, “I only rolled them a little bit, as I liked the way she tried to express the tonality correctly, and how she looked with a warm brown gaze at

whomever she spoke to, including me. That smile didn't question either: it covered me" (29). Read in conjunction with Tambu's description of the *unhu* greeting, which "went round the land that covered and kept warm, a fabulous protection from fate" (65), I see Dangarembga incorporating the commonalities between European and African value systems in her narrative rather than solely revealing the divisions, the latter of which Rooney and Hlongwane stress.

Offering a detailed textual analysis of *The Book of Not* through the lens of trauma theory, Kennedy rightly notes how Dangarembga strategically avoids "recourse to simplistic black/white oppositions, without positioning some groups as victims and other as perpetrators, and without creating a stereotype of African cultures as unified, less tainted, and more spiritual than Western culture" (104). Kennedy supports her assessment of Dangarembga's undermining of binary oppositions with reference to the flaws of each character and Tambu's struggle to maintain relationships with both black and white characters. Like Chinua Achebe, whose seminal African novel *Things Fall Apart* depicts inter-tribal struggles, including the father/son rift between Okonkwo and Nwoye, as well as white characters who do not all behave aggressively toward the Igbo tribe, Dangarembga recognizes that race relations are much more complicated than simplistic binary oppositions suggest.⁹

Relating Sargisson's discussion of Self/Other relations helps to explicate further Dangarembga's undermining of binaries. Early in *The Book of Not*, Miss Plato becomes angry when Tambu grasps tightly to her bed sheets because she ought to be dressing for school, a struggle representing a more figurative ontological tug-of-war. Miss Plato wants to determine Tambu's *being* in the world whereas her resistance to Miss Plato's ordering

her to release the bed sheets reflects her need to be her own person. Miss Plato's attitude reflects that of the Self which is not only different from but superior to the Other.

Miss Plato's anger sharply contrasts to Sister Catherine's gently repeated pleas for Tambu to desist from squeezing the nun's hand too hard during a post-traumatic stress attack in the classroom. Sister Catherine's attitude "breaks with 'normal' and taken-for-granted patterns of behavior," constituting a transgressive act (Sargisson 145). Sister Catherine's kindness in helping Tambu escape inner turmoil helps her to release the tears trapped in her soul from attending the *morari*. Sister Catherine does not abandon her student after she claims to have recovered within the particular moment; as Tambu remembers, "She kept standing beside me hopefully" (33). This optimism that Tambu would find the emotional strength to join the class activity and contribute her knowledge, a benefit to the group, relates directly to *unhu*. Sargisson thinks a reconfiguration of Self/Other relations is necessary to subvert dualistic thinking: "Letting go of the desire to possess the Other is a utopian and transgressive approach to the world" (145). Instead of wishing to possess Tambu's mind, Sister Catherine seeks to help her. By remaining at Tambu's side, Sister Catherine provides needed moral support to an emotionally shaken young woman and models kindness to a classroom of impressionable students.

Similar to Sister Catherine, Tambu's cousin Nyasha, whose own emotional and physical battles prevent her from being all she could to herself and Tambu because "an indispensable part of her spirit was running down" (93), is the only relative who sees the truth about Tambu. She cries out in defense of her cousin and friend that "Life" (185) happened to Tambu, who fails her A-level exams, much to Babamukuru's dismay. In an unspoken sign of solidarity, Nyasha holds Tambu's hand under the table while

Babamukuru voices his displeasure about Tambu's "failures." A casualty of colonialism in her own right, Nyasha feels her cousin's pain because life, the forces conspiring to thwart the colonized person's most valiant efforts to retain a sense of self, happens to her also. Ntombi expresses similar compassion when she sits with Tambu in a dark bathroom the night Tambu loses the O-level trophy to the less qualified Tracey Stevenson. *Unhu* survives in the mutual loving empathy among humans despite the forces threatening its existence.

This chapter has offered a glimpse into Sacred Heart as a failed intentional community due to the prevalence of various types of conflict outlined. Through the unequal treatment of students at Sacred Heart, the school fails to offer a nurturing atmosphere, denying Tambu her sense of self and community. The contradiction between Christian values and backward racist practices enforced at Sacred Heart disables an important component of religious intentional communities' visions—creating a "better world guided by spiritual and religious values" (Sargisson and Sargent 69). Ultimately, Sister Catherine lacks the power to overhaul the failed intentional community at Sacred Heart, nor does it ever seem she tries to do so on a large scale; however, her presence in the book avoids the construction of a binary between oppressor/victim as warring factions purport because she does not fit the mold of a dominating colonizer. Further, she demonstrates the significance of small acts of kindness and their powerful impact.

To make a sweeping literary comparison, I point to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Even after Dorothea Brooke's large-scale plan for a village of workshops and comfortable housing for laborers crumbles under financial constraints, the narrator comments, "[t]he effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for

the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully..." (838). Like Dorothea's strong sense of humanity, Sister Catherine's positive energy offers a brief glimpse of an alternative to the standard operating procedures at Sacred Heart, a space exhibiting the disharmony characteristic of a dystopia rather than a utopia.

Chapter 4: Maiguru's Garden as a Utopian Place for Community Building in

The Book of Not

As the previous chapters have shown, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* chart Tambu's development through a number of toxic environments, such as the homestead and Sacred Heart, providing only small glimmers but nevertheless meaningful reflections of *unhu* in female camaraderie on the homestead and in the caring nature of Sister Catherine. Outside the imposing gates of Sacred Heart in *The Book of Not*, Tambu spends her holiday breaks at Babamukuru's mission house, where tensions run high as family grievances resulting from the *morari* and Babamukuru's preference for Tambu over his daughter Nyasha flare up on a regular basis. To complicate matters, Ian Smith's security forces patrol the grounds of the mission, enforcing a strict curfew each night. Tambu and Maiguru watch impatiently for Babamukuru to make his daily walk home from the mission school, anxiously holding their collective breath, which exemplifies an attitude of apprehension pervasive throughout the novel. Because contentment is quite rare for these characters, against the backdrop of war and all that it brings and takes, any place affording a sense of peace invites careful examination.

One such place where people can breathe freely is in Maiguru's garden at the mission. Tambu's first description of the appealing plot is memorable:

Maiguru's garden stretched out to the side of the house, beyond the dining and sitting room windows, and it was like a lake with bed upon bed of iridescent flowers shining and glowing upon it. Phlox, nasturtiums, marigolds, pansies, African violets, roses, bunny snaps, dahlias and roses cascaded like a burst chest of treasure over the section of earth...Maiguru loved that earth as though it were hers and passersby stopped to gaze on their way up the main mission road, whatever the errand...Doof! Doof! Doof! You heard mortars going increasingly off at school. The garden was still there. (95-96)

Tambu, well deserving of the "aesthetic gaze" of nature with which Lily Mabura credits her (92), appreciates the endurance of the garden, especially in light of the juxtaposed atrocities of war occurring beyond the mission that irrevocably change people's lives, a fact readers witness in the novel's opening scene of Netsai losing a leg to a landmine. Conversely, in the small space of the garden, where some control is possible, Tambu identifies the importance of Maiguru's conscious cultivation of a relationship with nature. This "greening" task Maiguru assumes enables community building with those passing by the mission. The community aspect of her garden constitutes the most important part of my analysis here. My main purpose in this chapter is to posit a reading of Maiguru's garden as a utopian place and concurrently the novel's strongest example of *unhu* in action; the parallels between the serene garden and *unhu* have yet to be adequately explored in scholarly discussions.

In her book on utopian strategizing, Nichole Pohl explains why space and place are so vital to utopian studies: "When utopian thinkers portray an ideal community or

society, they design a physical setting to establish and strengthen its existence” (2). I suggest Maiguru’s garden functions similarly in *The Book of Not*: the garden serves the immediate function of supplying produce and flowers in a time of war in a controlled environment. Sociologists Gibson Burrell and Karen Dale appreciate the management of a garden for organizational purposes but also value the simultaneous co-existence of uncontained spirituality evident in gardens (109). This spiritual element exists in Maiguru’s garden because her plot oxygenates the soul of the community, an outcome personifying *unhu*. In this sense, the garden functions as a “critical intervention of utopia” that “reaches out for alternative visions of society and community through both preserving and reconceptualizing the status quo” (Pohl 6). Dangarembga arguably establishes the garden’s advocacy of community as part of her critique of the divisive nature of war, whether between armies and/or within families.

Despite the absence of extended scholarly attention to Maiguru’s garden in *The Book of Not*, Dangarembga’s incorporation of the landscape into her novels already has sparked critical interest. Mabura, for example, recently penned an insightful, environmentally-oriented article titled “Black Women Walking Zimbabwe,” in which she notes the disappearance of rejuvenating environmental spaces for women in *The Book of Not*, namely the River Nyamarira. Generally, I concur with Mabura’s assessment and her prediction of a scenario in which “the river as a trope and liminal location continues to be inaccessible” in *The River Running Dry*, the working title of the conclusion to the Tambu trilogy (101); however, since this thesis concerns itself with small flowerings of *unhu*, I wish to offer a slightly different reading by pointing to Tambu’s likening of the garden to a lake in the above quotation, linking the two spaces in importance.

Although focusing only briefly on Maiguru's garden, Mabura comments on Maiguru's positioning in the garden as "signifying upon a precolonial era where women had access to land and thus could contribute to the economic base of their societies and families" (96). Maiguru's connection to the earth by working in the garden, rather than serving in a supervisory role, recalls Tambu's grandmother in *Nervous Conditions*, an association Mabura also observes (95). Doris Lessing describes a similar garden project from her 1988 visit to Zimbabwe, recounted in *African Laughter*. A group of black women began a co-operative garden project resulting in a two thousand dollar profit, an enormous sum to women who were raised in abject poverty. As a result of this money earned, the women gained some economic strength that allowed them to purchase shoes for their children or a kerosene lamp for their children to study into the night (260-61). The project instilled confidence in the gardeners themselves, which then radiated to the entire community due to the ways in which they spent the money.

In addition to this important reference to women's sense of economic agency in the pre-colonial era, one also must consider Dangarembga's emphasis on the lack of profit obtained from Maiguru's garden. As Tambu notes, "I lay on the *bonde*, wondering about Maiguru, the lushness she cajoled out of the earth, the eggs and vegetables she sold at prices so low it was as if she was running a charity, controlled by a law of giving" (183). This altruism relates directly to *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," (103) which figures prominently in the garden through the humble personalities of Sylvester the gardener and Maiguru. When praised for the

garden's beauty, Maiguru always deflects the compliments. She and Sylvester value the benevolent purpose of the garden above the praise they receive for its excellent upkeep.

Tambu frequently spends time in the garden for rejuvenation, notably after her A-level exams leave her mentally and physically exhausted. Mabura argues that Tambu's inertia derives from the fact that "frequent retreats to quiet, sunny locations on the school grounds are hardly equal to her liminal bathing spots on the River Nyamarira, and it is little wonder she fails her A-level exams" (101). This conclusion is puzzling and leans toward a deification of nature. Certainly, Tambu would have benefitted from any meaningful respite from the suffocating atmosphere at Sacred Heart, but even with a reprieve, she would have failed her exams because she could not attend classes at a government-run high school that prohibited black students. Only a paradigm shift in human consciousness from systemic racism to at least tolerance could have enabled her to pass her A-level exams.

Conversely, the pleasant human interaction in the garden permits Tambu to envision such a shift: "I imagined the jeeps sometimes, when everything was too much for their drivers and they came to the mission in daylight—because I could see the people in the jeeps when I thought about it—I imagined the jeeps too stopped sometimes to admire Maiguru's garden" (96). Visualizing Ian Smith's security forces in the garden during daylight hours bridges the dichotomy between day, when she and fellow black Zimbabweans commune in the garden, and night, when security forces routinely patrol the mission for unusual activity. This utopian garden space infuses Dangarembga's critique of war with creativity, even though it is of the imagined sort (Sargisson 116). For instance, through Tambu's imagination, she organizes blacks and whites into an all-

encompassing community appreciating the garden, a different conceptualization from the divide between blacks and whites during the apartheid-like atmosphere in Rhodesia after the passage of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, which denied civil rights to six million Africans. The security forces' appreciation of her aunt's beautiful plot in Tambu's imagination is not unlike the elusive admiration she seeks from Sister Emmanuel for her academic achievements.

Whereas Sacred Heart excludes black students, Maiguru's garden promotes inclusion and offers Tambu an oasis from the struggles of school and war. A sense of lethargy characterizes Tambu's behavior when she first arrives on the mission after her A-level exams, but lingering in the garden lifts her spirits because "[i]t was good to talk to people, to pass the time of day in this way, to end the conversation by smiling, knowing they were to receive a fine surprise, 'For now, go and see *Mukoma* Sylvester,' I instructed my questioners happily" (182). In the garden, Tambu converses with people who visit to purchase produce; through these interactions, not the space alone, Tambu finds renewal. It is the fellowship among human beings working and visiting the garden that transforms this "space" into a "place" full of pleasant memories. A sense of reciprocation is ubiquitous in the garden through greetings exchanged and the respite enjoyed by those who are sharing fresh produce almost for free as well as the recipients of such generosity.

Savoring the camaraderie among the human and non-human community in the garden re-energizes Tambu, inspiring her to "help Sylvester in the garden that perfumed the atmosphere ever more fragrantly with the scent of healing" (183). Tambu memorably picks up a garden hoe in the same manner as her grandmother once did while she was

alive and renews her connection to the earth that was lost the day she parted from Nyamarira, her “flowing, tumbling, musical playground” (*Nervous Conditions* 59). Again, Dangarembga creates a connection between a body of water and the garden through the musicality Tambu appreciates as bees buzz inside the snapdragons.

According to some ways of thinking, this bond with the earth and its creatures is crucial in the blossoming of one’s *unhu*. For example, Munyaradzi Murove’s article “An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation” hopes *ubuntu*, also known as *unhu*, will serve as the guiding ethical principle for coping with environmental destruction in Africa. William Bienart cautions scholars against characterizing pre-colonial agricultural practices as those having perfect concord with the natural world (Caminero-Santangelo 703). Such an approach would be akin to saying that pre-colonial practices form a blueprint for a perfect society, which is the kind of utopian perspective a growing number of scholars acknowledge to be static and unhelpful to societal growth and renewal. Significantly, Murove avoids idealizing *unhu*, postulating, “If this were *developed* as an ethic appropriate to the modern world we would have an environmental ethic that could help inspire use to combat the contemporary threats of pollution and environmental degradation” (196, my emphasis). Like Dangarembga, Murove recognizes the significance of reworking the traditional ethic of *unhu* into a model that serves the contemporary world.

This model is not without tension. Even as she basks in the charms of the garden, Tambu concomitantly suspects Maiguru harbors resentment toward her for Babamukuru’s *morari* beating, a consequence of being the principal of a mission school but also of sending his niece to a European-style school.¹⁰ Transgressive utopian spaces

remain imperfect because they are part of an ever-evolving process (Sargisson 129) of striving for self, and, by extension, community. Dangarembga's creation of a fictional utopian place in the form of a garden, which requires constant tending and relies on the seasons, further underscores the effort required to maintain *unhu* in one's life regularly despite the difficulties and changes of daily life.

After re-affirming an environmental connection, Tambu provides assistance to Sylvester; this gesture enables her to contribute positively to a co-operative effort, symbolizing her re-initiation into a community from which she is distanced at Sacred Heart. Helping Sylvester with his tasks in the garden also serves as a form of reciprocation between the two characters because he quietly assisted Tambu with two weeks of household chores assigned to her as punishment in *Nervous Conditions* for refusing to attend her parents' wedding. Tambu notes:

On the second day of my punishment, when the previous day's disorder had made it clear that life would be uncomfortable under the new system, I woke to find Sylvester cleaning the living-room. He set the table for me too, and when I came back from school the breakfast dishes were clean, the meal ready, the table freshly laid. (*Nervous Conditions* 172)

No words passed between them; readers are left to assume he noticed her struggle to complete all of the chores assigned and intervened, in the manner of *unhu*, to help her. The key to this philosophy of life that demands seeing and attending to the needs of others is reciprocity (*Book of Not* 119).

In addition to envisioning Maiguru's peaceful, nurturing garden as contrasted to the violent destruction of war we learn of through the murders of the Swanepoel twins'

and Ntombi's relatives, Dangarembga also exposes inter-familial tension in the ideological differences between Maiguru's garden and Mai's. Unlike Maiguru, Mai sells vegetables from her garden to poor people for a large profit. Learning of this matter mortifies Tambu, who writes with shame of the way her mother "measures her achievement by the number of tomatoes she sold at inflated prices to impoverished neighbors" (229). Such an act would seem at least greedy to most, but in Africa, it is morally heinous because *unhu* should govern relations between people and ought to assist not just individuals but the entire group. Gugu Hlongwane admits Mai has a "destructive force" in the novel, since she is endowed with the power to arrange for Babamukuru's beating, but nevertheless cites her as an example of Dangarembga's preference for the kind of traditional voice that "can potentially heal the rifts created by colonialism" (457); however, the positive energy emanating from Maiguru's garden guides readers toward a negative interpretation of not only Mai's plot but also her outlook on life.

Further, Mai's disdain for Babamukuru qualifies as intense anger incompatible with *unhu*, which "did not accommodate furious emotions of any sort" (119). One of Dangarembga's talents as a writer is her ability to extend sympathy to all of her characters; despite Tambu's strong dislike of her mother in the second book, *Nervous Conditions*' exploration of Mai's plight and burden of womanhood still resonates in the sequel. Tambu's embarrassment is understandable as perhaps is Mai's need for the money she earns from selling the vegetables at inflated prices. Additionally, Mai's skepticism surrounding her children's departure from the homestead to obtain an advanced education proves "sociologically accurate and politically and diagnostically astute" (Mustafa 196). Despite Dangarembga's sympathy for Mai's position, the

unadulterated ecstasy she derives from watching Babamukuru's beating at the *morari* cannot merit an endorsement from Dangarembga.

Ultimately, Maiguru's garden ceases to be a physical location of refuge for Tambu. Babamukuru's discarding of her for failing her A-level exams forces Tambu to leave the mission house permanently. Her uncle cannot see past his own scars, which he reveals to his niece, to validate her emotional pain despite Nyasha's insightful explanation that "life" has happened to her cousin. In contrast to the obvious physical wounds are the more subtle if not hidden but perhaps equally painful, emotional wounds, Nyasha insists.

Along with life's pains, Tambu carries a memory from the garden and the spiritual component of *unhu* on the next part of her journey. This small flowering blooms when Tambu's optimism as a teacher is renewed after her students begin to achieve. She compares their success to Maiguru's flowers: "Just as they [the students] now had hope of passing, my own hope in life's potential returned, like one of Maiguru's perennials during the rainy season" (196). In this sense, the garden functions as a "movement of hope" (Fournier 192), a kind of spiritual locale. As Mabura and Azodo have noted, there are myriad instances in *The Book of Not* where we can declare, "That is not *unhu*." Of far fewer places, the most compelling of which, in *The Book of Not*, is Maiguru's garden, readers may assert confidently, "That is *unhu*."

Conclusion

Both novels analyzed in this thesis afford insight into the philosophy of *unhu*, an imperative approach to being and becoming human in African culture. Various spaces and places throughout the novels threaten its existence, but I have argued for *unhu*'s fortitude even in the difficult scenarios Tambu faces on the homestead and at Sacred Heart. On the homestead, Tambu and the four women she loves find strength and communal support primarily from one another; this fellowship is especially noteworthy when they commune in outdoor environments. The combined restorative powers of nature and camaraderie among the women, even when they are not getting along perfectly, helps to compensate for the woeful absence of *unhu* in Jeremiah's dealings, to take an example.

At Sacred Heart, Tambu's options for success are again circumscribed in *The Book of Not*. Despite her academic efforts, the school's adoption of racist practices in Rhodesia prevents her from obtaining the O-level trophy or even a well-deserved spot on the honor roll. Sister Catherine challenges the dominant attitudes at this school, a failed intentional community devoid of a unified student body; her kindness gestures toward the alternative idea of community Dangarembga values.

The author more fully explores her vision for a co-operative community in Maiguru's flower and vegetable garden, arguably the most poignant illustration of *unhu* in *The Book of Not*. Tambu finds refuge in this utopian place that serves a number of

purposes, of which I single out two. The array of flowers springing from the earth creates a pleasant atmosphere in which to seek relief from the trials of life. More significantly, the greetings and conversations exchanged between passersby and those working or resting in the garden generate a positive energy or spirituality that reacquaints Tambu with the significance of human interdependence, the crux of *unhu*.

I have focused extensively on Tambu's journey not solely because she narrates the story. Her admirable recoveries exemplify the resilience of *unhu* itself even though she loses sight of it in *The Book of Not*, a fact she acknowledges. Describing her lead character, Dangarembga explains:

In *The Book of Not*, Tambudzai unravels as a human being, but what I admire about her is that she can tell that story of her unraveling. How many people would be able to stand up and say *Look, I did this, I did this*—knowing that people are going to judge it negatively—and say *I'm telling you this; this story needs to be known so that we can maybe interrogate what makes us behave in those ways*. (“Talking about Strong”)

There are myriad instances throughout both novels where anyone else might have admitted defeat, but Tambu continues to move forward into her future. These first two novels in a planned trilogy have demonstrated that, without adaptability, flexibility, and creativity, *unhu* will be on the brink of extinction. Its fate in *The River Running Dry*, like Tambu's, hangs in the balance.

Notes

1. For more insight regarding Mugabe's patriotic history, refer to Terence Ranger's "Rule by Historiography: the Struggle over the Past in Contemporary Zimbabwe" in the essay collection *Versions of Zimbabwe*.
2. *Unhu* is the Shona word for this Pan-African philosophy, though *ubuntu*, the South African form of the word among the Xhosa and Ndebele, is the popularized version. While the name of the philosophy varies from tribe to tribe, the power of the concept among African people is similar. Other names include *umunthu* among the Chewa, *umundu* among the Yawo, *bunhu* for the Tsonga, *botho* among the Sotho or Tswana, *umuntu* among the Zulu, and *vhutu* among the Venda (Azodo 120).
3. An element of obedience also plays a role since Nnu Ego is the daughter of Agbadi, the chief of their village; however, the other two men attempt to save her even though they are not aware of her high rank in Ibuza, her native village.
4. These offerings of thanks are forms of reverence rather than worship. It is important to clarify this difference, Kwasi Wiredu stresses, so that it does not imply that mortals hope to become deities upon their death (Menkiti 327).
5. While Western thought tends to emphasize the importance of the individual, there certainly have been powerful movements in the West that opposed individualism and advocated collective identity, such as Communism, Nazism, Fascism, and

branches of Socialism and Conservatism. On the whole, however, Western thought is more individualistic than that of much of the world.

6. This reference to “flowerings” echoes Roseanne Kennedy’s mention of a “recent flowering of Zimbabwean women’s writing” (87). My thesis develops this reference to flowerings on both literal and figurative levels.
7. The memory of Dangarembga’s grandmother, Nyera, survives today in her film company of the same name. In addition to the sentimental value of naming her film company for her grandmother, although it also means “contemplate” in Shona, Dangarembga explained her deliberate selection of her grandmother’s name in order to “promote different dimensions in films, not this linear storytelling that you have in Hollywood, where you don’t have to think” (“Desperately Seeking” 141).
8. In this sense, my analysis differs from the work of Sargisson and Sargent because I am interested in the dangers inherent in a failed intentional community that remains operational—essentially, the challenges Tambu faces as a result of living in a dystopia.
9. Notably, Mr. Brown earns the respect of the Igbo clan.
10. Caroline Rooney astutely comments that the terrorists’ insecurity regarding their minimal education also provokes them to beat Babamukuru, a college-educated school principal. She supports her claim with a reference to Freedom Nyamubya’s short story “That Special Place,” in which an illiterate male soldier rapes a formally educated female soldier in a military camp during the 1970s liberation war (127).

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