



INTRODUCTION

The Transnational Girl in the Text

Transnationalism Redefined?

Ann Smith

If transnationalism, in the literal sense, has to do with the ways in which borders between nation-states are becoming less rigid and more porous rather than impermeable, I want to begin by suggesting that the term can function, too, as a way of describing a weakening of cultural and other ethnic imperatives. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions: A Novel* (1988) seems to me to have illustrated this kind of transnationalism three decades ago, long before this notion became a topic of general interest. This work of fiction, set in what was then Rhodesia before the war of liberation, is about a young girl, Tambudzai, known as Tambu, who is given the opportunity to go to school, at the age of thirteen, only because her brother, Nhamo, has died. African girls were then (and many still are) caught up in a kind of nationalism that is fostered by, and demonstrated in, the historically and culturally held belief that African girls, particularly rural ones, are not to be educated; only boys are. It is worth quoting from the opening paragraphs at some length because here we see, at once, that Tambu, writing as a young woman years later, rejected this aspect of African nationalism even as a girl.

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling ... Therefore I shall not apologise but

begin by recalling the facts as I remember them ... that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape ... about my mother's ... entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion – Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful. (Dangarembga 1988: 1)

Nyasha, Tambu's cousin and friend, serves as foil to the protagonist. Strictly speaking, as mentioned above, transnationalism suggests that borders between nation-states have become (or are becoming) less stringent, uncompromising, and, even, weakened. We can see this in the ways in which temporary migration puts pressure on migrants to adopt and display the values of the host nation and become assimilated into it so, when Nyasha's father, Babamakuru, the headmaster of the mission school, sent by the missionaries to study in England for five years to earn a degree, took Nyasha and her brother, Chido, with him, Nyasha did this so well that she was unable to cope with the requirements of her return to rural Africa. Unlike those who emigrate and form or join ethnic transnational communities in which their own values are espoused along with some of those of the host nation, Nyasha succumbed to what Tambu's mother, Mainini Ma'Shingayi, calls "the Englishness" (202) evident even at the mission, a far-flung outpost of England itself. In a sense Nyasha becomes an English national in her eschewing of all things African. But, because the borders, as it were, between Rhodesia and England are not in any way porous for her, when she returns to rural Africa she cannot assimilate back into her family and community. She reads *Lady Chatterley's Lover* despite her mother's objection that "books like that ... are no good for you" (75) until her father confiscates it, contravenes African custom by eating before her father has finished his meal and talking back to him, and smokes cigarettes. However, Tambu copes with the border-crossing between her rural African village and the relatively sophisticated milieu of the English mission school and back again for school holidays although not, it is true, without some difficulty. At the mission she discover[s] that using a knife and fork was not as easy as it looked" and realises with great embarrassment that her "place [at the table] looked as though a small and angry child had been fed there" (82). Back at home for Christmas, she eats the breakfast "hunks of bread cut thick, spread with margarine and taken with tea poured out of a huge enamel kettle ... in which the milk and water were boiled up together ... [although] she would have preferred egg and bacon" (134), the quintessential English breakfast. She cannot clean the latrine that has fallen into a state of unhealthy filth

well enough so she “[goes] back into the bushes as [she] had done before the latrine was built” (123). For Tambu these borders between what is acceptable in England and Africa and what is unacceptable are permeable; she accommodates the differences.

Given that the “nervous conditions” of Dangarembga’s title refer to Jean-Paul Sartre’s recognition, in his Preface to Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, that “the status of the native is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent” (1963: 20), we watch Nyasha’s loss of the freedom she experienced in England manifest itself as an eating disorder representative of such a nervous condition. For Dangarembga, this eating disorder of the adolescent Nyasha is not related to her compliance to normative standards of female beauty and attractiveness but serves as a metaphor for the inappropriateness of her response to such nationalist oppression in its unstrategic excessiveness. “Exerting control over what one eats is not the answer to the patriarchal control of [girls’] access to learning and education in Southern Africa; to fade away is to give up” (Smith 2000: 252) and it is this recognition that empowers Tambu to pursue her education. Nyasha, the (English) nationalist becomes seriously undernourished and fades from the text as Tambu, the African transnationalist, chooses to return to school instead of staying behind in the village to help look after her.

In this novel, Tambu’s adolescence itself “becomes metonymic of a developing political and feminist consciousness” (Smith and Mitchell 2001: 291). She struggles to deal with the appeal of the elite privilege of education, endorsed by patriarchy, yet recognizes that this is the only way out of poverty available to her; this benevolent patriarchy both empowers and oppresses her. For Tambu, the transnationalist, education is the impermeable border between poverty and achievement. For Nyasha, the nationalist who relished this privilege, education is her undoing.

We see Tambu dealing with the overwhelming sense of her own worthlessness as a poor black girl, but, as Roberta Trites reminds us, if we are to read fiction we need an “understanding of the subjunctive ... [the] ability to understand possibility and potential” (2016: viii), so we are not surprised by the concluding sentences.

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fearfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. In was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. (1988: 203)

Introducing the Chapters in this Volume

There are many different ways of introducing authors and their chapters to the readers of a book. Since these chapters first appeared as articles in *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10(3) in 2017 (with the exception of “Using Fiction, Autoethnography, and Girls’ Lived Experience in Preparation for Playwriting” by Genna Gardini because we could not finalize it in time), I have chosen to use the abstracts that were published in the journal to introduce the work of these writers. I have also used the abstract that was part of Gardini’s original submission but have no way of referencing this use except by mentioning it here.

In her chapter, “Naughtiest Girls, Go Girls, and Glitterbombs: Exploding Schoolgirl Fictions,” Linda McKnight considers “the struggles, denials, and ambivalences that produce and are produced by reading the schoolgirl. In her creative article with its glitterbomb “incendiary fragments of memory and media” detonating, as it were, on the pages she discusses the “postfeminist entanglement in the ongoing re-configuration of the schoolgirl, with [its] implications for policy and practice in education and for cultural and girlhood studies” (McKnight 2017: 7).

In ““This Is My Story’: The Reclaiming of Girls’ Education Discourses in Malala Yousafzai’s Autobiography,” Rosie Walters discusses the implications of how “young women’s and girls’ education activists represent themselves” in relation to “the way in which Yousafzai negotiates and challenges discourses around young women, Pakistan, and Islam.” Walters concludes that “a truly emancipatory understanding of girls’ rights would look not to the words and policies of powerful organizations but, rather, to young women themselves” (Walters 2017: 23).

Fiona Nelson, in “The Girl: Dead,” expresses her concern with what she calls the “dead girl genre of Young Adult (YA) literature”—books that she describes as being “artifacts of a culture that allows little to no sexual agency or subjectivity for (living) teenaged girls and young women.” She observes “that *dead* has come to be promoted as a viable sexual subject position for young women” and worries that these novels “might actually nurture a culture of bullying and suicide” (Nelson 2017: 39).

In her chapter, “Girl Constructed in Two Nonfiction Texts: Sexual Subject? Desired Object?” Mary Ann Harlan investigates the ways in which two popular nonfiction texts, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers* (2016) by Nancy Jo Sales and Peggy Orenstein’s *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (2016) construct girls “as sexual

subjects and desired objects.” She points to the dissonance between what these two authors say about girls and what girls themselves have to say about how they “navigate society’s expectations and constructions of them as sexual subjects” (Harlan 2017: 54).

Wendy L. Rouse, in “Perfect Love in a Better World: Same-Sex Attraction between Girls,” explores the “impact of shifting cultural norms” on the lives of lesbian girls in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Given the “growing anxiety about the potential sexual undertones of female friendships” as sexologists began to focus on homosexuality as pathology, the literature being produced and consumed by adults led to “tragic consequences for [girls] who resisted efforts to conform to heteronormative expectations regarding their future” (Rouse 2017: 71).

Tehmina Pirzada, in “Narrating Muslim Girlhood in the Pakistani Cityscape of Graphic Narratives” focuses on two graphic novels, *Gogi* (1970–the present) by Nigar Nazar and *Burka Avenger* (2013–the present) by Haroon Rashid, to examine “the empowering portrayal of Muslim girlhood that these works offer in addition to advocating for the rights of Muslim girls.” She is interested in how they rework the “western superhero trope to foreground [the] everyday heroism of these protagonists” (Pirzada 2017: 88).

In “Confronting Girl-bullying and Gaining Voice in Two Novels by Nicholasa Mohr,” whom she describes as “an important but critically overlooked author of the Puerto Rican Diaspora,” Barbara Roche Rico examines the representation of bullying in two novels by Mohr. She explores “the emergence of the female subject from behind her self-definition as a victim of girl-bullying” and shows how the protagonist’s “involvement with art enables her to move from the role of object to that of subject” and how this “brings [her] to a deeper understanding of her culture and herself” (Roche Rico 2017: 105).

Roxanne Harde’s chapter, “‘Like Alice, I was Brave’: The Girl in the Text in Olemaun’s Residential School Narratives” traces the journey of the eponymous Indigenous girl who wanted to become a student in a residential school so that she could acquire the literacy that would enable her to read *Alice in Wonderland*. Through her “determination, courage, and resilience ... [she] draws on ... her culture” and [on this] British novel [in order to find] her own methods of resisting colonial oppressions and asserting Indigenous agency” (Harde 2017: 121).

Ana Puchau de Lecea’s focus in “Girl, Interrupted and Continued: Rethinking the Influence of Elena Fortún’s *Celia*” is on “the ways in which Fortún, through her shifting characterization of Celia as increasingly sub-

versive presented herself as a female author offering alternative models of femininity to her readers through the character Celia and the social context of the series.” She is interested in how “Fortún’s ideological influence on female writers” (Puchau de Lecea 2017: 137) helped ensure the narrative continuity of Spanish literature after the Civil War.

Michele Meek’s point of departure in “Lolita Speaks: Disrupting Nabokov’s ‘Aesthetic Bliss’” is that “a contemporary analytical shift from valuing the aesthetics to a consideration of the ethics of [*Lolita*] has led to restricted critical readings” of this novel. Her concern is with Lolita’s victimization that, for her, disrupts Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss.” Meek looks at three revisionary texts, all written by female authors, that “give voice to the girl in the text” in acknowledgement of [her] “sexual desire and agency” (Meek 2017:152).

In “Hope Chest: Demythologizing Girlhood in Kate Bernheimer’s Trilogy,” Catriona McAra, “invoking and explaining the relevance of literary theories related to caskets,” uses the metaphor of the hope chest “as both a toy and a cultural repository” that she locates “at the heart of a trilogy of fairy tale novels.” She uses the hope chest to discuss the social transition in these novels of the “child-woman—a hinge-like cultural figure whom Bernheimer represents metaphorically through boxes of accoutrements containing memories and prophecies” (McAra 2017: 168).

Akane Kanai, in “The Girl in the GIF: Reading the Self into Girlfriendship,” explores “the practice of reading as a form of social participation in girlhood in digital spaces.” For her, “readers’ aesthetic and social participation” in the circulation of blogs that “use GIFs (looping, animated images) and captions to articulate feelings and reactions relating to everyday situations ... is key to the formation of digital publics in which readers come to recognize themselves as girls through calls to common feeling” (Kanai 2017: 184).

In “Girls’ Perspectives on (Mis)Representations of Girlhood in Hegemonic Media Texts,” Paula MacDowell notes that “media texts are constantly projecting ... conflicting and influential messages” about and at girls. She discusses her analysis with “10 girl co-researchers (aged between 10 and 13)” of these “taken-for-granted meanings that need to be understood, questioned, interrupted, and transformed.” She reports on the production by these girls of a “Public Service Announcement (PSA) to represent how girls and girlhood are (mis)represented in well-established and hegemonic media discourses” (MacDowell 2017: 201).

Genna Gardini explores Sheila Kohler’s *Cracks* (1999) in “Using Fiction, Autoethnography, and Girls’ Lived Experience in Preparation for Playwriting”

to unpack her “personal experience of being educated in a heteronormative, anglicized South African boarding school.” Gardini “tracks [her] attempts to use and problematize some of Kohler’s ideas in an autoethnographic research process with a group of young women to explore the genesis of [her] play, *Handsome Devil*.” She explores “the use of discussion and journaling as a way of integrating and documenting [the] findings [of the group].”

Chapters Speaking to Chapters

The contributors to this inaugural volume of our new series, *Transnational Girlhoods*, present us with a range of perspectives on girlhood as evoked by their understanding of how the girl in the text works not only in terms of geographic location but also in relation to their positionality. The girl is presented as central to liberating pedagogical practice and educational activism in British Australian Lucinda McKnight’s taking on of neoliberalism in curricula that affect girls in Australia and this chapter speaks to Rosie Walters’s work on Malala Yousafzai’s autobiography in which she (Yousafzai) reclaims the discourses about education and girls and young women in Pakistan and Islam. The girl is implicated in adult-created forms of (often very dangerous) determinism as Fiona Nelson, Wendy L. Rouse, and Mary Ann Harlan point out. Nelson’s interest is in the genre of contemporary Young Adult literature in the US that focuses on dead girls and might well encourage suicide, and this is in conversation across time with Wendy L. Rouse’s chapter on how the writings of early twentieth-century British, Austrian, and German-Austrian sexologists blighted the lives of lesbian girls and young women in the US so severely that some saw suicide as the only way out. Harlan’s description of how two non-fiction US texts construct girls as both sexual subjects and objects (as does the dead girl genre and the writings of the sexologists) and her point about how the authors do not listen to what girls have to say about themselves underly, theoretically if not chronologically, what concerns both Nelson and Rouse.

Girls in texts are presented as fictional heroes who empower themselves and others with lasting effect in Pakistan in Tehmina Pirzada’s chapter, in Barbara Roche Rico’s in Puerto Rico, in a Canadian Residential School in Roxanne Harde’s chapter, and in Spain for Ana Pucheu de Lecea. All four authors, in being concerned about the ways in which the reconstruction of the girl relies on her own initiative and on her assuming agency have much to say to each other and to the authors mentioned above.

Representations of the child-woman evoke discussions of the relationship between desire and ethics for Michele Meek and a consideration of how the child moves into womanhood in a trilogy of US fairy tales for Catriona MacAra. Meek's exploration of the notion of sexual consent in *Lolita* (1955) by Russian-born American Swiss Nabokov (1955) as well as her concern with the act of giving voice to girls addresses Harlan's use in her chapter of the words spoken by girls themselves along with MacDowell's insistence on privileging the words of her girl coresearchers. MacAra's investigation of Kate Bernheimer's (2001, 2006, 2011) use of her own transition from child into woman during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the US in her fairy tales resonates with Roxanne Harde's description of how Margaret (Olemaun) Pokiak-Fenton and her daughter-in-law Christy Jordan-Fenton narrated Pokiak-Fenton's own experiences in the 1940s as a student in a Residential School in Canada. Both these chapters are in conversation with Barbara Roche Rico's examination of the ways in which author Nicholasa Mohr's own experience is evident in that of her girl protagonist, Felita, and with Genna Gardini's autoethnographic approach in working with a group of young women whose collective written and spoken responses to their own experience of girlhood influenced her writing of the play, *Handsome Devil*, about what it might mean to be a girl in a South African school. In turn, this chapter can be seen to be in conversation with many other chapters whose emphasis is on the voices of girls.

The participation of the girl in digital and media texts is explored in relation to different publics. For Akane Kanai, writing from Australia, reading can be an act of social participation in digital spaces when bloggers and their readers, whom they call girlfriends, share similar experiences of particular feelings. These girlfriends would find much in common with Paula McDowell's coresearchers—a different public of 10 girls from 3 elementary schools in Vancouver, Canada—who created a PSA in response to how girls are misrepresented and constructed in media texts.

Understanding a Different Kind of Transnationalism

I want, now, to suggest how my notion of the kind of analogous transnationalism and nationalism that I put forward in relation to Tambu and Nyasha in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) might work in other ways in these chapters. This might prove useful as we consider the implications of transnational girlhood studies and transnational girlhoods.

Ana Puchau de Lecea's chapter on the influence of Elena Fortún's series, "Celia and Her World" on later women writers demonstrates beautifully my suggested re-defining of transnationalism to include the process of weakening borders other than those between nation-states. Thanks to Fortún as (re-defined) transnationalist, the seemingly impermeable border surrounding the depiction of girls in Spanish fiction as necessarily subservient and marginalized was ruptured and this led to the creation of what were known as weird girls in Spanish literature; the girl was reconstructed as a non-conforming independent rebel.

If McKnight's suggestion that we can refigure the schoolgirl through liberating pedagogical practice suggests that the rigid boundaries that surround her are weakening, the action of some Melbourne parents in the 1990s who withdrew their daughters, but not their sons, from private schools because they could no longer afford the fees, as McKnight reminds us, might stop us in our tracks. Seeing this feminist re-figuration as analogous to transnationalism in the face of the nationalism of such conservative parental discrimination would allow us to see the schoolgirl as she is and not as these parents see her. Similarly, just as Dangarembga's (1988) fictional Tambu did in Rhodesia, Malala Yousafzai, as Rosie Walters points out, worked against what we might think of as the nationalist policy of her birthplace, Pakistan, that sees girls as unworthy of being educated, even before she was shot. What could be described as Yousafzai's transnationalist insistence on troubling these borders imposed by authoritarian discourses of control over girls allows them to speak for themselves.

Three of the contributors whose chapters deal with fictional texts, Fiona Nelson, Tehmina Pirzada, and Barbara Roche Rico, offer other interesting ways in which this re-defined transnationalism can be seen to operate in relation to girlhood studies. I would like to suggest that Fiona Nelson points to the construction by Young Adult literature authors and publishers of an alarming border that separates the desirable dead from the less desirable living. If we agree that nationalism is about preserving borders Nelson's worries that these novels might lead to bullying and suicide are indeed well-founded. If girlhood studies sees itself as transnationalist in the sense that I am proposing, this border needs not to be weakened so much as smashed to bits. That there are no books about dead boys—and I am not suggesting that there should be—makes this imperative even more urgent because popularity is associated with being dead if you are a girl. In relation to Tehmina Pirzada's chapter my suggested analogy appears to hold up: these cartoons that we could describe as transnationalist serve to create great gaps in the

border between nationalist traditional and stereotypical portrayals of Muslim girls and their representation in these novels as super-heroic. Barbara Roche Rico considers the fictional representation of a Puerto Rican girl, Felita, who self-defines as an object—a victim of bullying—until her story-telling grandmother helps her to move away from hatred and the desire for revenge. Felita learns to exercise agency as an artist and finds her own subjectivity. This, in turn, leads to her coming to understand herself and appreciate her culture. There are echoes here of Tambu's ability to make permeable that seemingly impermeable border between seeing herself as object unworthy of being educated and as agentic subject in search of an education. Both girls exercise a kind of transnationalism.

Roxane Harde offers us an account of a cultural border-crossing that calls Dangarembga's (1988) novel to mind. Olemaun, an Indigenous Canadian girl, returns home from her Residential School after an absence of two years. She struggles to re-assimilate into her Inuvialuit culture because, in part, she cannot speak her own language and she cannot eat the food she grew up on. Countering the kinds of colonial benevolent patriarchy that led to the predicament shared by Nyasha and Olemaun requires a kind of transnationalist border-crossing with which both girls struggle and that neither of them appears able to manage.

Michele Meek's examination of the ways in which revisionary texts reposition Nabokov's *Lolita* as an incest victim and also as a girl with sexual desire makes it clear that the border between sexual consent and non-consent is extremely shaky. The issue of consent as a non-negotiable border between all girls and women and their potential sexual partners must be taken up by transnational girlhood studies.

Catriona MacAra's consideration of how the hope chest, as symbol for Bernheimer, in being both conservative and transgressive, challenges the conventional societal expectation of girls and girlhood. Perhaps this could serve to make less impermeable that border between so-called good or conservative girlhood and so-called bad or transgressive girlhood?

Reading Wendy L. Rouse's chapter might show how easy (and how convenient for my argument) it is to imagine an uncrossable border between the experiences of lesbian girls and what the sexologists were saying at the turn of the nineteenth century and early into the next one. If we replace those sexologists with contemporary homophobes the border is no different and the need for a transnational sundering of it is obvious.

For Genna Gardini the border between idealized girlhood and the experience of real lived girlhood needs to be broken down if girls are to be

believed, taken seriously, and have their voices heard and respected. This also involves breaching the border between fictional romantic idealized notions of girls' boarding schools and the reality of these institutions.

As we read Akane Kanai's chapter and Paula McDowell's we are reminded of the rigid border (known as the digital divide) between those girls who have access to computers and other devices that link them to the internet and those who do not. Kanai reminds us of another border—that between the active participation of girls and their need (as perceived by themselves and others) to be girlishly non-threatening. While the weakening of the digital divide border may be beyond the ability of transnational girlhood studies to remedy, the second must be attended to. MacDowell's chapter responds to this in her attempt to breach the border between how girls are misrepresented in the media and how they see themselves by having her co-researchers—10- to 13-year-olds drawn from a larger group of 30 Caucasian, Chinese, East Indian, Greek, Japanese, Jewish, Romanian, Spanish, Thai, and Turkish girls—create a media text that narrates their own stories and do just this in presenting themselves as they wish to be seen.

If we agree with my extending the definition of transnationalism to include the breaking of conceptual ethnic and cultural borders or, at least, making them permeable, we can open up possibilities for transnational girlhood studies to make a huge difference in the lives of girls around the world and even more so if this includes the actualization of the notion of transnational girlhood that would involve girls interacting with each other, perhaps as activists or perhaps as colleagues and friends, across borders—geographical, cultural, ethnic, economic—to form virtual neighborhoods.

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