

Homosocial Desire in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Everyone's Child*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the subtle explorations of homosocial desire in Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1996 film *Everyone's Child*. In her deft, though subtle, treatment of the social bonds among young males in the film, the filmmaker opens a space for queer readings. Societal inscriptions of gender and sexuality are also queried, as a teen engages in sex work to provide for herself and her orphaned siblings. While the film has been described as a film "about AIDS and orphans" (Lee, 2006, p.135), the paper proposes that *Everyone's Child* is so much more than this. The paper considers the work of Sommerville (2000) on queer theory in African American women's domestic novels of the 19th century and builds on the scholarship of Kennedy (2008), and the interviews of Lee (2006) and Thein (2013) among others.

Keywords: homosocial desire, queer theory, sex work, urban space, AIDS in Africa

Tsitsi Dangarembga was interviewed in 2006 by Christopher Joon-Hai Lee in *Transition* shortly after the release of her 30 minute short film *Mother's Day* and just before the release of her novel *The Book of Not*, sequel to her highly successful and critically acclaimed novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988). The context of the interview was Lee's query of Dangarembga to 'fill in the blanks' and inform her audience of just exactly what she had been doing since the 1988 release of *Nervous Conditions*. Dangarembga offered that she had entered film school in Berlin in 1989, worked on several projects for the Fund for Media Trust, including *Neria*, for which she wrote the screenplay, and *Everyone's Child*, which she directed. Explaining the context under which *Everyone's Child*, her "graduation film," was produced, Dangarembga (Lee, 2006, p. 135) noted how she had not been "able to raise money for the project I had in mind, but luckily the Media for Development Trust asked me to direct one of their productions. I was able to present that film as my graduation project, and I was pleased that I managed to graduate with distinction. That was *Everyone's Child*, about AIDS and orphans."

When Lee (2006, p.135) tells her that he had never seen *Everyone's Child*, Dangarembga quickly makes what might be described as a disclaimer:

CJL: I'm afraid I haven't seen it

TD: Please don't. It was really one of those NGO, "teach the people how to

behave" –type things, and I needed work, and I needed to graduate, so I did

it. But it's not the kind of thing I like to do (p. 135).

Despite the filmmaker's acknowledgment of the production constraints that she was under during the making of the film and, perhaps, also her modesty about her own early directorial gifts, I

would argue rather that in *Everyone's Child*, her first full-length film, Dangarembga presents insight into the image of dispossessed young males as Harare approaches the twenty-first century, even as she exposes the myth of the village as a site of community. Indeed, under Dangarembga's direction, the liminal space(s) of the film offer the spectator multiple diverse, though intertwined, readings of gender, race, class, and sexuality within the urban landscape of Harare, including what might be construed as a glimpse inside homosocial desire among its youths.

Based on the story by Shimmer Chinodya, with screenplay adaptation by John Riber, Andrew Whaley, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Everyone's Child* (1996) was commissioned by two European-based organizations: Media for Development Trust with support from the British Overseas Development Administration. It reflects director Tsitsi Dangarembga's very conscious juxtaposition of the complexities of a rural space that is simultaneously represented as the space of nature, tradition, family, and the earth as well as that of battery and abuse, disease, and social ostracism. Concurrently, in the urban space(s) of Harare, this juxtaposition is limned as that of 'the street,' where gang theft, aggravated violence, male prostitution, persistent hunger, and a code of survival "by any means necessary" exist. In this male-dominated, urban space, rendered through the eyes of the adolescent Itail Mapisa, we observe embedded within the text a particular form of homosocial desire that seems to thrive among these young, dispossessed males. By honing in on the life experiences of the two teenagers Tamari and her brother Itail Mapisa, the film underscores the tragic possibilities for young men as well as young women left to fend for themselves in a world that does not fathom that Tamari, Itail, and their two younger siblings are "everyone's child[ren]."

Arguably, *Everyone's Child* is most commonly discussed in terms of the film's subtle presentation of HIV/AIDS and its repre-

sentation(s) of village/rural and urban space(s). Throughout most of the film, Dangarembga reveals village space as dysfunctional alongside the fragmentation and disorientation of urban space. Save for the concluding scenes which occur in the local space of the village, a troubling vision of what could become twenty-first century Harare looms before the audience. Indeed, her fellow Zimbabwean and predecessor Dambuzo Marechera (1999) forewarned his readers of such a space in his novel *The Black Insider*. In this work, Marechera depicts an apocalyptic Harare in which a military state wages a final clamp down on socially conscious university students and other progressives at the end of that novel.

While homosocial desire is not seen in the space of the village, there is, nonetheless, a clear tension in Dangrembga's film between the space of the village versus the space of the city. This tension is poignantly articulated by Tamari when her lover Thabiso asks her to join him in metropolitan Harare while he tries to make it as a musician. To his entreaty, Tamari replies, "What will I do in the city?" (Dangarembga, 1996). Here Tamari reminds her lover as well as the audience of the boundaries that exist between village and urban spaces. As someone whose knowledge of the outside world does not extend beyond the village, Tamari is understandably leery about how she will be able to support herself as well as fit in Harare. More to the point, though, she refuses to abandon her two younger siblings behind in the village.

Tamari's brother Itail, however, sees more promising possibilities in Harare. After he goes to Harare, Itail comes to learn the differences between rural and city life. Itail observes how his new "friends" inhale cocaine so as not to feel their hunger. One of them, Charlie, who had come to his assistance earlier by inviting him into and showing him around the squatter "penthouse," assists him once again, this time consoling him with a thin white powder,

which in the local space of his village Itail would have known to avoid, perhaps owing to his strong family influences. But in the space of the city, where hunger pangs wrench his entrails and family gets reconfigured as a social bond, Itail succumbs to Charlie's offer, accepting the cocaine as a means to numb his hunger and heighten his senses. In the urban space of Harare into which Itail falls, the dream of making \$1,000 a month in a janitorial job proves to have been merely an illusion, sufficiently bright and dazzling enough to coax village boys from the known space of the village to the unknown one of the city. Rather, what Itail finds instead are the more bleak possibilities as echoed in the film's soundtrack. As the spectator observes Itail dodging police, oncoming traffic, etc., Laygwan Sharkey's (1996) hip hop track strategically positioned at this point in the film proclaims, "So, I'd rather be a gangster. Sell cocaine on the corner."

What does it mean for a young male teen in Harare to take on the mantra "I'd rather be a gangster. Sell cocaine on the corner" (Sharkey, 1996)? It would appear that Dangarembga, as director, has pointed to a concern common to western as well as African metropolises. The message of the film is clear: These young people are underserved by society, and since society has made little or no effort to serve them, they will attend to their own survival needs as best as they can and 'by any means necessary'. Sharkey deploys the words "gangster," "cocaine," and "corner" to receive greater stress, allowing the audience to pay clear notice to the very real threats that exist within the same underserved communities that can potentially permeate into those spaces outside of the city. Indeed, Thomas Mapfumo, one of the artists on the film's soundtrack, is known for suffusing into his music socially conscious lyrics that underscore the problematic of dispossessed people, youth in particular, in a twenty-and twenty-first century politically corrupt society. For example,

his acclaimed, though banned, hit “Corruption” (1989), has been seen by some as “prophetic,” given Zimbabwe’s social and political concerns that would follow in the ensuing decades.

The music in the film, moreover, serves as a kind of chorus, prompting the audience to see things in a particular way. For instance, while attempting to keep her younger siblings from starvation and to enable her sister Nora to attend school, Tamari must make the difficult decision about whether to engage in sex work. She exchanges sexual favors with Shaghi, the corrupt grocer, for money. Yet as the audience views the scene, the sound track blares “Character. I’m in love with your character, Ooh, Ooh” (1996), inviting the spectator to consider that a young woman who does whatever she must to hold her family together is, in fact, a woman of great character, thereby, silencing any other suggestion to the contrary. There are many other such examples in the film in which music, functioning as a Greek chorus, steers the viewer’s interpretation into alternate ways of looking at youths left struggling to survive.

Homosocial Filmic Desire in Harare

The necessity of survival can require the forging of bonds between those youth attempting to navigate the difficult space of the street. To this end, Itail seems to have formed such a bond with Charlie, the one member of the gang who is most sympathetic toward him as a newcomer to a life on the streets. It is Charlie who shares his space in a corner in the abandoned flat, and it is Charlie who is the first to give Itail drugs to appease his gnawing hunger. Toward the middle of the film, Charlie and Itail get high, and in the scene that follows, the two teens revealingly press their lips against the windshield of a car and blow out air onto it. The windshield scene is key on a number of levels. To be sure, the placement of a

given scene can be very important to the overall meaning of the text, and special attention is given to those events that occur in the center, or at the heart of the text. Significantly, Dangarembga situates the windshield scene roughly in the middle of the film (49.20 minutes of 90 minutes), just before the “cruising” scene, to be discussed later.

This windshield scene is intriguing to the spectator, particularly in light of the scene that follows-- the “cruising” scene in which Itail is picked up by a white Zimbabwean man driving a red sports car. Just before the man in the car stops for him, Itail throws up seemingly because his body is unaccustomed to the drugs that he has just inhaled with Charlie. The driver of the car asks him if he wants to earn some money. Impoverished during his life on the streets, Itail nods his head and gets into the car. Almost immediately, an enraged Zato, the leader of the gang, like a guardian angel appears just in time to stop the car, but it is actually Charlie who yanks Itail from it. Accosting Itail for getting in the car with the man in the first place, Zato bluntly asks, “Do you want to be screwed?” (1996). He then asks Itail whether he knows what he is doing, telling him that the man was “just cruising” (1996) the streets of Harare ‘for [young] brown flesh,’ aptly expressed by the voiceover in Isaac Julien’s film *Looking for Langston* (1989), describing the cruising of the streets of Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s.

Typically, this scene in *Everyone's Child* is viewed as an exposé on the exploitation of young street kids in which they are forced into prostitution. While this general assessment is true, I would argue that Dangarembga’s trenchant use of subtlety here lies in what could also be seen as a sub-text. For instance, some viewers may query whether there is some degree of silencing in the film, given that the potential sexual moment might have been considered taboo in the culture. What develops in the film as a sublimated erotic desire that

begins between two young male teens pressing and blowing their lips against a car window across from one another might also be read as repressed sexual desire that comes to an abrupt end in the potentially dangerous cruising scene with the man in the sports car. More specifically, the car windshield that Charlie and Itail press their lips against in the previous scene could be seen as functioning as a metaphoric ‘wall.’ In literature, the wall is typically a physical structure that traditionally forms a barrier between young forbidden lovers. Shakespeare (Bevington, 2009, p.175) parodies this wall in “A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe; very tragical mirth,” the play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Moreover, the visuals (phallic symbolism of the red sports car, presence of a white Zimbabwean man on the back streets of Harare) seem too stark for the spectator not to read some level of sexual innuendo into both the previous and the present scene.

Fast Cars and Escape

Although fast cars are often associated with escape as well as adventure, Dangarembga seems to deploy repetition with variation of this symbol in the film. A car is often seen in popular music and literature as a protagonist’s best chance of survival and of getting out of a presumably dire situation. But the young men in the film who line the streets of Harare after having left their homes to make it in the city seem only able to possess fast cars when they steal them. Consider, for instance, the incidents of car theft in episodes of the popular series *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* based on Zimbabwean Alexander McCall Smith’s novels (1998-2013). As noted in the previous section, in this scene Itail and Charlie have just inhaled cocaine to escape their present situation, but they both realize that this form of escape is only momentary and the means to that escape again will only lead them to addiction and, even more likely, to jail.

Perhaps, this is the moment that Dangarembga captures in this scene between the two males whose bond of friendship has been forged out of necessity. Indeed, the sub-utopian world of the street is replete with homo-social desire, in which the magnetic Zato commandeers the desire of the boys to become members of his group. At the end of the “cruising” scene, Itail begs Zato to allow him to be re-incorporated into the fold, pleading, “Zato, please, Zato” (1996), Itail’s acknowledgement that he feels that he has no other place to go in Harare. While Zato accepts Itail back into the group, he does so only on the condition that Itail assist with the theft of a well-dressed woman’s purse which ultimately lands Itail, inexperienced in thievery, into juvenile detention.

It is at this point in the film that the two young men with the strongest homosocial desire become separated; their relationship, perhaps, lost forever. Arguably, according to the filmic world view, it might appear that Itail is sent away to juvenile detention to silence the potential blossoming of his and Charlie’s bond of friendship, whether it be sexual or platonic in nature. However, related questions also arise. For instance, while in detention camp, Itail appears to emerge as the camp’s leading pugilist, perhaps as an outward reflection of his inner turmoil, or to offset the imagery of his vulnerability as a young man in the previous scenes on the streets of Harare. Again, Isaac Julien’s (1991) insight into the inner workings of sexual stereotyping are apposite. While discussing his film *Young Soul Rebels*, Julien (1991) states that he had purposefully cast the most “effeminate” looking black male to play the role of the straight male and the most “macho” looking male as that of the gay male. Julien’s directorial stance forces the spectator to think outside societal expectations, seeing the extent to which such conventions are acquired rather than innate. As a wiry, thin young man in the detention camp, Itail disrupts the view that body size determines the outcome of a physical encounter.

Itail's hyper-masculinity in the prison scenes may be a reflection of his deeply-seated anger, but as I have argued, it may also be a reflection of his need to assert himself as a man to his fellow juvenile inmates. Either way, the scenes in the detention center in which he appears obsessed with proving his masculinity physically when set against the lips-to-windshield episode with Charlie a few scenes earlier reveal a significant turn in the direction of Itail's male identity in Dangarembga's film.

Applying queer theory to the windshield and to the detention camp scenes of the film may shed some light on Itail's experiences in the gang and in the prison camp in Harare. Siobhan Somerville (2000) has argued that queer theory opens a space into which readings of gay and straight can be examined. As she puts it (Somerville, 2000, p.136), “[t]o ‘queer’ becomes a way to denaturalize categories such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ (not to mention identities that have worked to establish and police the line between the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ since the late nineteenth century.” As Somerville (2000, p.136) explains, “queer theory has tended not toward locating stable ‘queer’ subjects but rather toward understanding the very process of deviant subject formation that results from a refusal or ‘failure’ to adhere to the proscriptions of compulsory heterosexuality.”

In the liminality of the representation of sexuality in the film, Dangarembga creates a space in which some scenes in *Everyone's Child* are open to a “queer reading.” Itail’s windshield scene with Charlie can be interpreted as his “refusal or ‘failure’ to adhere to the proscriptions of compulsory heterosexuality.” Had the patriarch of the Mapisa family, Uncle Ozias, witnessed the scene, the viewer might wonder whether Uncle Ozias would have been as enraged by his nephew Itail’s behavior as he is by his niece Tamari’s when she

sleeps with morally corrupt grocer Shaghi to provide the means to take care of her two younger siblings. Subject to query also is how Uncle Ozias might have responded to what likely would have appeared to him as his nephew's "effeminate" behavior of blowing air bubbles onto windshields. Moreover, homosocial desire, prevalent among self-identified straight and gay communities, can be read here as a form of Somerville's definition of "deviant subject formation." For instance, Itail's membership in a gang, ostensibly at least, allows him to preclude initial scrutiny about his sexuality. How identities are formed, what authority prescribes the labels, and who adjudicates entrance into or rejection from groups help shape transgressive responses to texts. Seen this way, the spectator might ponder whether Itail joins the gang because of necessity and circumstance, after finding that "Uncle Jimmy," who had promised him a job, has absconded from Harare, or whether he does so because, as a villager, he feels compelled immediately to assert his masculinity by joining up with a gang.

Itail and Charlie's membership in the gang may blur the boundaries of how the spectator at first perceives their pressing their lips against and blowing bubbles onto the windshield as deviant—perhaps, as a rebellion against Zimbabwean society's "proscriptions of compulsory heterosexuality." If the pressing of lips against and blowing of bubbles onto the windshield, and the hyper-masculinity in the detention camp, for example, are read as deviant subject formation, then, Itail's activity in the detention camp may be viewed as a re-stating of his commitment to conform to societal rules governing sexual behavior. Seen this way, Itail's bravado in the prison camp can be read as his way of countering his perceived sense of vulnerability. The spectator is left to wonder whether he has learned this from his brief apprenticeship on the streets with Zato and his gang.

Nonetheless, is it the softer side of Itail's nature that the counselor for juvenile teens sees when, after several sessions, she recommends that he return to his home in the village to help take care of his family. Indeed, it is in the pivotal scenes at the detention camp (when Big Boy, the camp's gang leader, tells Itail that he thinks his mother gave him AIDS, etc.) that it is incontrovertibly clear to the viewer that Itail and his siblings' parents had died of AIDS, and that it is for this reason that most of his neighbors have distanced themselves from them.

As noted, it is the therapist's ability to reach Itail's inner person that leads her to conclude that he doesn't belong with the other adolescents in the camp who have become more hardened to life. Though toughened by his experiences on the streets of Harare, Itail has not lost the sense of family instilled in him by his parents, his sister Tamari, and by their 'true' neighbor Ambuya, the wise woman and spiritual center of the village. In this aspect, Dangarembga seems to offer the spectator hope—that a 'good kid' like Itail may stumble and may fall, but will not remain down: Out from the ashes of a tragedy, a community that has taken time to re-center can, indeed, re-unite.

Conclusion

Significantly, it is in the local spaces of the village that healing and transformation occur, but only in the final scenes of the film. The tragic death of Tamari and Itail's younger brother Nhamo ushers in a communal recognition of the truth that the film director as well as the film's producers would have the audience along with the characters grasp. That is, that each of us is connected. With a message that echoes the view of Martin Buber (1937) in his theory of "I/Thou," the film proffers the view that an orphaned child is not simply "someone's child," but rather, is as much a part of each of us as we are to ourselves.

Though clearly presented as a site of a flawed community, *Everyone's Child*, under the direction of Tsitsi Dangarembga, leaves us in the final scenes of the film with a village that is a site of wholeness. At the groundbreaking celebration of the Mapisa children's new home, all of the remaining siblings (Tamari, Itail, and Nora) are now reunited with their uncle Ozias.

To underscore the “welcome table” theme, the final scenes end with everyone partaking in a communal meal. This is a scene of communion; a special thanksgiving for the groundbreaking of their new home. Contrasting with the absence of visitors when the children's mother Ketiwe was gravely ill and dies earlier in the film, the entire community not only shows up, but also participates in the gathering at the end of the film. Here, Dangarembga demonstrates what she describes to Madeleine Thein in a 2013 interview in *Brick* as the concept of *ubuntu*, “I am because you are” (Thein, 2013, n.p.). God and/or Nature responds with a blessing of rain. The music blares: “Reach out to someone in need... It’s about trust. Faith. Trust. Love” (Dangarembga, DVD, 1996). The final frames show amazing splashes of rain on Tamari’s face as the credits to the film roll. Again the soundtrack echoes, “Faith, Trust, Love” as rain pellets fall first on the face of a smiling Tamari, then on faces of both Itail and Tamari, then freezes on an ecstatic Tamari as the final credits roll.

Recently, Dangarembga has stated that she believes film to be an important medium for telling a story (Thein, 2013, n.p.). In spite of her enigmatic and modest claim about the shortfalls of her directorial debut film, *Everyone's Child*, in her 2006 *Transition* interview, I would like to differ with her assessment here, in part, because of her subtle explorations of the complexities of the social bonds that exist among the voices of young males and young females in twenty-first century Harare, either in the space of the village or in

the urban space of the city. Whether Dangarembga directed the film that she wanted to create, in the liminal spaces of *Everyone's Child*, nonetheless, she created a film that may foster dialogue about the complexities of social/sexual bonding among young men and women in Harare.

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RESUME:

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