The Voice of Cloth in Yvonne Vera's Fiction

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Ph.D.
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2005



Declaration

I declare that all material presented is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person(s).

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Abstract

Documentation of the presence and purpose of cloth as metaphor, structure and object in Yvonne Vera's fiction illuminates the innovations present in the author's published fiction. Vera's confrontation of the often silenced experiences of rape, incest, abortion and infanticide explain the author's commitment to the exploration of alternative narrative strategies. The structure of the thesis finds inspiration in the embroidery sampler, a piece of stitched cloth onto which many different styles of stitches are tested but is nonetheless whole. In this research the production and consumption of cloth is understood to represent a domestic graphology, a term coined by Vera in her own Ph.D. which refers to communication that goes unnoticed by conventional discourse because of the domestic and therefore seemingly inconsequential materials appropriated to convey information. After contextualizing Vera's fiction through brief comparisons to Dambudzo Marechera, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Chenjerai Hove, research turns to the skin and hair of characters and observes that it is treated much like cloth in order to expose the extent of alienation caused by racism. The inverse of this idea, the notion that clothing is in fact a "second skin" reveals the economic hardships of Vera's settings and the hopeless optimism offered by the opportunity to purchase or exchange one skin for another. Characters relate to the spaces they inhabit with a fragmented sense of the world around them. This fragmentation can be understood through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of smooth space (felted cloth) and striated space (woven cloth) and is helpful in understanding the extent of the damage caused by mental and physical pain. Finally Vera's texts contain fragments of an unassembled quilt which rejects the possibility of repair due to the nature of the crimes recorded upon the various remnants of cloth scattered throughout the texts. Apparent throughout Vera's fiction is a theme of empowering violence which results in a systematic rejection of motherhood for her female characters. Motherhood as a creative act is replaced by a heightened awareness of the creative value of cloth. Throughout the texts, textiles assist in the process of exposure, mourning, and recovery from the damning experiences Vera's characters endure.

Introduction

Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera's fiction is systematic in its confrontation of violence against the female body. *Nehanda* (1993) retells the life and death of a female spirit medium, *Without a Name* (1994) is a story of infanticide, *Under the Tongue* (1996) examines the subject of incest, *Butterfly Burning* (1998) depicts the main character's self-induced abortion and *The Stone Virgins* (2002) tells of violent rape and mutilation of sisters. Vera's brave confrontation of crimes that have long been considered too intimate or difficult to discuss presents us with a desperately needed step towards breaking the culturally and individually imposed silence that so often smothers discussion of such topics. The voices Vera constructs articulate the depths and complexities of these topics. As author, Vera demands new strengths and powers from the written word and denies writing a static role by forcing it into dynamic, if unconventional, positions.

In this research, the voice of the cloth plays a substantial role in uncovering topics that, both in Zimbabwe and around the world, have long been shrouded in silence. The voice of cloth in literature first came to my attention a decade ago when, in the midst of studying for a BFA in textile design, I began to notice the presence of textiles in the literature I was reading. Rather than accept it as coincidence, I began to consider why textiles are a recurring presence in literature. The presence of textiles in literature is not confined to a certain era or geography, nor for that matter does it function with a single purpose in fiction. I came to the conclusion that textiles offer the writer an incredible breadth of tools to deploy within a piece of fiction, just as they function in life as objects with a multiplicity of functions. Most importantly, I began to realize that it was my own education, not in literature, or even the history or anthropology of textiles, but in the very making of textiles, that inspired and informed this method of reading.

In this research my knowledge of textiles structures my own writing, just as I suggest it does in Vera's fiction. Structurally my thesis was inspired by the image of an embroidery sampler, a piece of stitched cloth that contains different styles of stitches. It is important that the fabric is ultimately a whole cloth, but that it is made up of stitches of different colours, threads and techniques. When complete, the embroidery sampler acts as a record of these experiments, a dictionary of sorts, which one can return to time and again to be reminded of the tools at one's disposal.

While Vera's fiction can be approached with an attention to political or historical readings, the purpose of this research is to suggest an embroidery sampler that contains new ways of *reading* her fiction which are as creative as her own approach to the *writing* of fiction. In her preface to *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary Women's Writing*, Vera writes, "A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones" (Vera 1999: 1). My reading of the voice of cloth in Vera's fiction is also the result of an imagination committed to an approach to research that is thoroughly interdisciplinary in nature. While I do not intend to deny the political and historical value of Vera's fiction, my interest and the emphasis of this research is not to deploy existing strategies of reading but to suggest that alternative methods of reading are possible, in particular for readers who may posses a "fluency" of sorts in alternative forms of narration. Needless to say, my own prior education and personal experience mean that it is the textile that provides the alternative language for this research.

This thesis pays particular attention to the manner in which Vera addresses crimes against the female body in her fiction. These crimes, while often set in the context of national or cultural upheaval, are none the less rendered by the author as entirely individual experiences unique to each woman who endures them. This approach offers a sense of specificity, and with it a vital sense of respect, for the victims of crimes that are too horrifying in their intimacy to risk grouping together under generalized descriptions. To treat

the experiences of rape, incest, abortion or infanticide as anything less than utterly individual would reveal a painful level of ignorance which Vera effectively combats in the painstaking constructions of honour and beauty that she renders in her depictions of rape, incest, abortion and infanticide. The experience of rape, abortion or the act of infanticide is shocking precisely because of its specificity. Thus the beginning of a dialogue about these experiences remains, in this research, at the level of the individual (rather than community, nation or culture) in order to respect that the very nature of these horrific experiences mean that they should never be generalized.

Vera was educated in Canada and wrote fiction in English. Each of her published works of fiction is set in either colonial Rhodesia or the independent nation of Zimbabwe. Vera's writing disrupts the conventional form of the novel through the rejection of linear plot structures, any sense of consistent application of symbols or conventional resolutions to the narrative crisis. This reworking of the novel form has caused the editors of a collection of essays on her fiction, Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga, to entitle the collection *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Vera's innovative relationship to the written word is poetic fiction, all the more so when one realizes the beauty and sensitivity she brings to the contentious topics she has chosen to tackle. Not just in southern Africa, but across the world, rape, infanticide, abortion and incest are uneasy subjects to broach in any context. Furthermore, the denial and silence with which these themes have been handled for so long requires new approaches and new voices to be developed that are possibly free from the legacies of silence and, even worse yet, denial.

The textile is in an ideal position to begin such articulations. Commonly associated with the realm of the domestic, which has consumed the energies of women's lives in Africa and around the world, the textile is in keeping with the female focus of Vera's fiction. As a postcolonial author Vera appropriates structures and metaphors useful to her writing, such as the novel and the textile, while feeling equally at ease with the rejection of the previous ways

in which such structures or metaphors have been handled. In her preface to *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* Vera writes, "A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones" (1). Vera's use of the textile in her fiction does just this, it is equally as imaginative as it is selective in its construction of a literary voice worthy of the burdens she asks her fiction to carry.

Before turning to the role of the textile in Vera's fiction, it is necessary to briefly outline the narratives of each of her main works. Due to the consistent appearance of the textile across her fiction and because Vera's fiction presents narratives that often share overlapping themes, I approach her fiction as one large body of work, rather than handling each text in isolation. I believe this approach is appropriate for this body of fiction because it echoes the very structuring Vera has created in the individual narratives, a structuring that puts little credence in the power of linear chronology and instead encourages a fluid and shifting understanding of the weight of the written word. As a result, this research is organized thematically rather than chronologically or by individual texts.

After the publication of a collection of short stories entitled *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* in 1992 Vera published *Nehanda* the following year. *Nehanda* retells the life and death of the female spirit medium, borrowing from oral myth and inserting new fictional elements. *Nehanda* is an example of a postcolonial narrative which takes the myth of the female spirit medium of Nehanda and reworks the story through Vera's own distinctive relationship to language and history. Oral tradition tells us that along with Kaguvi, a male leader and warrior, the female spirit medium of Nehanda inspired an uprising against British colonial rule in what was at the time Rhodesia. Her execution by the British is perhaps the place where the parting of fact and belief is captured most obviously in Vera's fiction. While it is accepted that the British were successful in their execution of both the bodies of Nehanda and Kaguvi, myth purports that the female spirit medium of Nehanda overcame her execution

by departing from her human body before the moment of corporeal death. This notion of death as a form of empowerment, or at least metaphor rather than final ending, is a theme that recurs throughout Vera's writing.

In 1994 Vera published *Without a Name*, a story set in 1977 that cycles between the rural landscape of Mubaira and the urban setting of Harari. *Without a Name*'s main character, Mazvita, is both economically and emotionally unable to raise her infant child alone and commits infanticide. Her decision is motivated by several factors. Joel, her partner at the time of her pregnancy, rejects the pregnancy on the basis that the short time he has spent with her indicates that she is pregnant with another man's child. This rejection, along with the difficulties she has experienced finding work in Harari leave her with little economic independence. The child's father, Nyenyedzi, remains on the rural tobacco farm where he works, unaware of Mazvita's pregnancy. While Mazvita's departure from Nyenyedzi is described as a search for the opportunities she believes Harari offers her future, her ambition to move to the city is also motivated by her experience of rape described early in the narrative. Mazvita does not reveal this violation to Nyenyedzi or Joel, but the experience causes her to distrust the land and, in particular, the inequality of men and women on the land. *Without a Name* is organized so that the chapters shift between the rural and urban settings, fragmenting narrative sequence and space to reveal the act of infanticide only after the reader has been made aware of the circumstances under which Mazvita is living.

Under the Tongue, published in 1996, tackles the equally difficult topic of incest. Like *Without a Name* before it, the story is set in the late 1970s before Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. The narrative traces Zhizha's struggle to find a voice capable of expressing the incest she has endured from Muroyiwa, her father and perpetrator of the crime. His wife, Runyararo, is jailed for his murder, a crime she commits when learning of the violation he has committed against their daughter. While Runyararo is jailed, Zhizha lives with her maternal grandparents and learns of the burdens and sorrows her Grandmother has also

endured. As occurs in *Without a Name,* the experience of incest is not clearly revealed until the end of the narrative, although references to the act are made throughout. Zhizha's story is perhaps Vera's most overt narrative centred on a search for a voice capable of exposing the horrors Zhizha has experienced.

Butterfly Burning addresses the self-induced abortion by the main character, Phephelaphi, and, in the closing moments of the narrative, her suicide. Published in 1998, the story also develops around an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy, although in this case the man with whom Phephelaphi is living is the father of the child and does not support her decision to terminate the pregnancy. Set in Makokoba in the late 1940s, Phephelaphi's ambitions lead her to demand that her future does not repeat her past or that of her mother's and fuels her ambition to be a nurse, a future she knows will be taken from her when she realizes that she is pregnant. Phephelaphi's own life is the result of an accidental and unwanted pregnancy. The character that she understands to be her mother, Gertrude, is in fact her mother's friend, a woman who takes the child and raises it as her own. She spends her childhood living with Zandile after her "mother" is murdered, only later learning that Zandile was in fact her biological mother. Phephelaphi's relationship with Fumbatha, a man much older than herself, fulfils Fumbatha but leaves Phephelaphi craving more from life. After aborting her pregnancy, she falls pregnant a second time, and in the final moments of the book immolates herself.

Vera's last work of fiction was published in 2002. *The Stone Virgins* is divided into two sections, the first dated 1950-1980 and the second 1981-1986. The latter section constitutes the focus of the text and sets the work apart from Vera's previous projects as the first post-independence setting to be explored in her fiction. Two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, are raped and mutilated by Sibaso, a member of the government's ruthlessly violent Fifth Brigade who is capable of enacting violence without reason. Thenjiwe does not survive the attack and the bulk of the narrative follows Nonceba's painful recovery with the

assistance of Cephas, a man who had enjoyed a brief but intense love affair with her sister. Cephas learns of the attack on the sisters in a newspaper article and realizes that he has lost Thenjiwe. His generosity towards Nonceba is inevitably a partial attempt to recover the woman he has lost, although he kindness is also written as a genuine attempt to comprehend and recover from the loss he too has suffered. The sheer senselessness of the violence Vera addresses in the text is a reminder that Zimbabwe's struggles were far from resolved by their long fought independence and that tragedy and violence are daily and brutal realities.

In each of these narratives, textiles assist in the development of important narrative details. As Sue Rowley writes, "The authority of History challenged, histories are understood now to be partial, constructed narratives [. . .] objects and belongings have acquired a complex and tangible presence as vehicles of memory and the means by which past experience is conveyed and mediated in the present" (1999: 6). History with a capital letter is, as Rowley points out, under increasing scrutiny and criticism for the biased and partial manner in which events have been recorded and understood as valid and legitimate versions of truth. Histories (rather than histories) are recorded by those in positions of power to support and continue their positions of economic, political or social dominance. In an effort to recover the unrecorded or incorrectly recorded histories and make space for voices and versions other than those sanctioned by dominant systems of power, alternative ways of seeing and hearing are needed. According to Martin Hall's succinct analysis, "creative disciplines are not those that fence themselves into exclusive compounds, but are rather those sets of practices which are always open to the possibilities of syncretism, that celebrate transgressions of their boundaries" (131). This notion of transgressing the boundary is evident in Vera's fiction and is largely responsible for the power her fiction commands. Rather than maintaining the status quo or relying on conventional modes of story telling, Vera presents us with narratives that explore alternatives to the familiar. In a similar way, the

interdisciplinary nature of this research intends to explore alternatives to familiar modes of reading.

Terence Ranger suggests that *Butterfly Burning* "is written in the pauses of the historian's narrative [. . . Vera's] genius is to reveal people living their lives within the constraints of a system which denies them full expression" (1999b: 697). Ranger's observation is particularly poignant coming as it does from the foremost scholar of Zimbabwean history. Vera, in effect, fills the pauses in Ranger's own work as a historian. She succeeds through her commitment to the creative process, stepping outside of familiar narrative structures to tackle unspoken subject matter. Ranger's suggestion that a system of constraint throws a shadow over Vera's writing also suggests another reason for Vera's use of the textile as metaphor and symbol in particular. As I suggest in the conclusion, the textile quite literally veils abuses the nation would prefer not to confront or discuss.

Vera explains her commitment to write outside the official notion of history as a response to the observation that history has been at the service of the colony and nation rather than individual. In reference to her first book length work of fiction, *Nehanda*, Vera explains in an interview with Jane Bryce:

> By history, I simply mean a record. I felt I had an internal, intimate knowledge of our ancestors, and how they impact on our relationship to ourselves, to death, to life, to time, to sky, to rock...I had just become aware that I understood this, but that somehow it wasn't anywhere in a book where I could read it, and I didn't know why, except maybe the *knowledge had become discredited by other ways of seeing*. History begins in 1896 when the Europeans came here, and it continues like this: the spirit medium Nehanda did this, in such and such a year, in such and such a year she was hanged on 27 April. . . And I realized, No, no, no! Our oral history does not even accept that she was hanged, even though the photographs are there to show it, because she refused that, she surpassed that moment when they took her body, and when they

> put a noose upon it, she had already departed. Her refusal and her utterances are what we believe to be history. What was the nature of that departure, and why we believe in it so much as a nation, when the history books say something else, were questions which were very important to me. I wrote it in a very emotional state of clarity and understanding that there *are* alternatives to 'history' and that in fact we *had* constructed it very differently in our lives, in our discussions, in our beliefs [. . .] Because, as Africans, our history is there to serve us, not us to serve it. (220-221, first italics added)

Vera addresses other ways of seeing and arguably other ways, also, of recording history. Rather than fact, Vera celebrates the power and purpose of ways of knowing based on belief. In her rejection of the colonial frame of reference as an authoritative understanding of Zimbabwe's experience, Vera also suggests the possibility of empowerment though a commitment to desires rather than concrete facts. This way of seeing and knowing is most certainly at odds with empirical knowledge. Its great strength is that it recognizes forces beyond our control as well as forces that are unrealistic to believe we can ever control, such as, the stories, however tragic, which refuse to leave the collective conscious.

Craft theory and its attention to alternative languages conveyed by objects offers a useful background for some of this analysis. In the past decade the textile has experienced increasingly critical inquiry and scrutiny in Australian, European and North American scholarship. Scholar and textile practitioner Janis Jefferies has warned that textile theory need not rush too quickly towards "predetermined nomenclature" (2001: 4). This warning is particularly apt in relation to Vera's fiction, which makes great efforts to narrate alternative chronologies, voices and spaces in which intimate and individual struggles are written. Sarat Maharaj in his introduction to *Selvedges* writes of Jefferies' language for the textile:

> It has no ready-made, off-the-peg language to fall back on. It has no already-there script to mime and mouth off. It has to knock together a lingo even as it speaks about

> developments in contemporary textile practice and tries to make sense of them. This is unlike the academic voice which has to explicate from within the confines of a stock of approved pre-given sources, authorities and canons – which makes for rigour of argument but at the price of being a death-kiss. (2000: 8)

The textile is a useful tool for Vera's fiction because, as Rowley notes, "If meaning does not inhere objects but is invested in them by those who handle them, and if that meaning is likely to be formed narratively and in relation to contexts then this suggests an open-ended quality to our perception of things" (1997: 83). An open-ended perception is vital to Vera's fiction, which loosens the previously static nature of the written word and presents the narrative, and the tragedies it tells, as ultimately open-ended and capable of revision. Vera's pronouncement that history is here to serve us, rather than us to serve it, also rings a similar bell to Jefferies' desire to avoid predetermined nomenclature and write of new things in new ways. Thus there is a shared desire to communicate outside existing techniques and structures by both Vera and contemporary textile theorists.

From a critical standpoint, Jefferies, too, writes in favour of the invention of new modes of inquiry and the banishment of ineffectual, tired ones. This is of particular importance to the textile and the difficult topics of violence against the female body that Vera confronts. In both cases such histories have largely gone unnoticed and unrecorded due to the predominance of patriarchal interests. In many ways, Vera's rejection of conventional historical record exemplifies Jefferies' warning that textile theory must make every effort to avoid "predetermined nomenclature." Both speak to a search for language that is intimate and appropriate, not to the existing cannons, but to the often unspoken truth of the subject at hand.

Peter Dormer, in his keynote lecture at the conference *The Context for Critical Studies in the Crafts* entitled "Why the Crafts need more than literary criticism", questions the capabilities and pertinence of the theorist to work within a craft field in which they have no

personal knowledge. Dormer states, "In short I wonder about the ease with which theory parts company with practice. Practice is another country, one that some theorists refuse to visit or if they visit they do so in the way in which the worst colonialists visit other lands – they stay in compounds with their own values and sneer at those who go native" (1995: 20). Dormer's approach to theory lies in his regard for the haptic knowledge of the craftsperson. He sets this knowledge not only outside, but beyond, the need for language and argues that the critic who crafts words about crafts whose making is foreign is doomed to do less than justice to the crafts practice. Similarly Noris Ioannou in his introduction to *Craft in Society* notes that "The 'dominant rhetoric' of the visual arts, including French and literary theory, rather than clarifying and promoting open-ended exploration, tended to obfuscate meaning in craft and draw its meaning from traditional, hierarchical values" (11). Dormer expressed particular reluctance in his writings to literary theory: "More and more debate about design has turned into a debate analogous to literary criticism; we ask ourselves 'what does a design mean' and not 'what does it do'. And in concentrating on meaning we lose ourselves in words; the actual object is left behind, and it escapes a proper audit on matters such as how well it wears, what it feels like, even how safe it is" (1990: 146).

Dormer's sweeping statement is not without pertinence, but when the object exists in the novel and analysis seeks to investigate the purpose and powers of the object's presence within the narrative, then it most certainly once again must undergo "a proper audit on matters such as how well it wears, what it feels like [to the characters that use it within the life of the novel] and even how safe it is." The challenge of interdisciplinary research is in the setting together of otherwise discrete fields in an effort to acknowledge the benefits of breaking rather than upholding boundaries. While the textile and its theorists may be reluctant to embrace the modes and methods of literary theory and analysis of the object, the textile's identity in literature must address and even enjoy the purpose of interdisciplinary critique. Dormer notes, "The political debate is diverse and subtle, but it is in part a debate about how

to get taken seriously those things with which women have by tradition been associated – the everyday concerns of the home and 'home arts'" (1993: 190). In the context of postcolonial literature from Africa written by a female author, a focus on characters and objects whose roles are unavoidably domestic confronts prejudice that is exhaustingly diverse. Nonetheless, the shared experience of marginalisation that the textile and Vera's female characters share makes the textile a consistent and appropriate vehicle of agency and empowerment.

The Text and Textile: A Comparison of Structure

While the considerable role textiles play in Vera's narratives are not a culturally specific phenomenon, the role of textiles in fiction does find precedent in Vera's own PhD thesis. In "The Prison of Colonial Space: Narratives of Resistance" she discusses the use of sewing in *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law* by Ruth First. First writes:

> My wall calendar had been left behind at Marshall Square; in Pretoria my calendar was behind the lapel of my dressing-gown. Here, with my needle and thread, I stitched one stroke for each day passed. I sewed seven upright strokes, then a horizontal stitch through them to mark a week. Every now and then I would examine the stitching and decide that the sewing was not neat enough and the strokes could be more deadly exact in size; I'd pull the thread out and re-make the calendar from the beginning. This gave me a feeling that I was pushing time on, creating days, weeks, and even months. Sometimes I surprised myself and did not sew a stitch at the end of the day. I would wait for three days and the give myself a wonderful thrill knocking three days off the ninety. (74)

Vera's analysis of the passage reads, "First's connection of consciousness to the domestic and therefore non-official realm is apparent in the manner she invites the act of sewing to

challenge confinement" (1995: 203). The non-official discourse, the avoidance of predetermined nomenclature and discredited ways of knowing discussed earlier, play an important role in the fiction Vera was subsequently to write. Histories otherwise disregarded or pushed outside official record are the subjects upon which she dwells. In the case of Ruth First's experience in isolation, anything that could be seen as outside authority and speaking beyond the sanctioned voice and the sanctioned speaker was unseen by official discourse and remained uncensored. This space where the control of the prison system could not penetrate was vital to her sanity. Vera also links the stitch to the forbidden text which First is denied in isolation:

> If the stitches measure time, they also achieve recordation. First writes her experience on her dressing gown, which is close to writing her experience on the body. Writing is a pre-occupation for First throughout her prison ordeal and clearly the stitches she sews are a form of writing for her, of certifying and recording her memory of confinement. The importance of writing is to invoke an official discourse that legitimises experience, even though that writing is produced as a "domestic graphology." (203)

The notion of a domestic graphology is central to my research of the textile in Vera's fiction and represents, in many cases, the voice of cloth. Graphology is commonly understood to be the study of handwriting, often for the purpose of assessing an individual's personality. Thus a domestic graphology can be understood to be any other similar process that the hand engages with and that reveals vital details about an individual. These details may simply be unspoken or consciously concealed or even denied. Many objects may be able to function in this role but, in keeping with Vera's own reading of First's work, my research suggests that it is cloth that reveals such details about characters experiences that would otherwise be denied by "official" discourse.

As well as Vera's reading of the textile as a type of text, there are several other connections to be made between the text and the textile. The noun *text* comes from the Latin verb *textere* meaning to construct or weave. Roland Barthes compares the text and textile when he writes:

> *Text* means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web). (1975: 64)

Barthes' evocative connection of the making of the text to that of a tissue or weaving is, at first glance, a powerful image in the linking of textual and textile production. Text and textile join and accumulate in a similar manner. Words and threads assemble in patterns and rhythms to eventually form cloth and texts. But as Nancy Miller points out, "when a theory of the text called 'hyphology' chooses the spider's *web* over the spider [. . .] the productive agency of the subject is self-consciously erased by a model of text production which acts to foreclose the question of identity itself" (271). Miller goes on to observe that the concealment of a gendered subjectivity is uncanny in its similarity to Freud's notion that weaving somehow corresponds to the woman's pubic hair in the way it acts as a form of compensation for female inadequacy (271). Thus Barthes' assertion that the text is a tissue offers a useful beginning, but only in so far as it addresses the structural similarities at play.

Cultural theorist Paul Sharrad voices a similar concern for the complications and misreading which analysis of textiles within texts can create:

> It is not just a matter of avoiding mixed metaphors, but of attending to specific meanings, social histories and differences of value. Decolonising literatures is/are a complex enough phenomenon; if we bring in other heuristic devices to help us more clearly understand, we had best be as sure as possible we're not clouding the project even more. (2)

Sharrad's warning that the introduction of textile readings to the text can confuse rather than elucidate meaning is important. Useful too are Ranka Primorac's comments regarding her own research on southern African literatures, expressing a wish to distance herself from "prescriptively-minded debates striving to subordinate literary worlds ontologically to 'real' ones – then wondering whether they are sufficiently 'African', or live up to other criteria of what constitutes the realness of 'reality'" (2001: 78). My attention to the textile in Vera's narratives makes every effort to achieve specificity, in an effort to clarify rather than complicate matters. The textiles discussed are not read as objects to be extracted from the narrative and compared to their concrete counterparts but instead exist purely as narrative constructions.

An ironic tale of the care that must be taken when reading textiles in texts is told by historian Elizabeth Wayland Barber who notes that one of the earliest examples of textiles and text working to narrate together – Penelope's daily practice of weaving and unweaving in Homer's Greek myth – has been largely misunderstood. Barber writes:

> Penelope's famous cloth, which she wove by day and unwove at night to fool her suitors, was almost certainly a story cloth. Because we are told that it was for her father-in-law's funeral, most people interpret the phrase *funerary cloth* (used by Homer when he tells the story in Book 2 of the *Odyssey*) as a shroud or winding sheet. But she could have woven that in a couple of weeks and wouldn't have come close to fooling her suitors for three years. Homer's audience would have known that only the weaving of a nonrepetitious pattern such as a story is so very time-consuming, but we

who no longer weave or regularly watch others weave are more easily misled. (153-154)

This example of mistaken narration due to a mistaken interpretation of the textile is an important warning for all manner of interdisciplinary research.

Some scholars have even suggested that the woman's first text was in fact found in the textile and that confidence and familiarity with the textile eventually developed into a literary voice. Narration through cloth and the influence of textile production on early texts written by women has been noted in several areas of the world. Carol Cavanaugh's research of Japan's Heian textiles and literature notes:

> [I]f the Heian woman's first text was textile, female authority in the one culturally important activity may have sponsored authorship in the other. Rich in pattern, image, form and semiotic potential, Heian clothing is as literary as the poetry and prose that strives to appropriate its psychological power through continual citation. Women's participation in the textile arts and in the production of texts, the cultural importance of clothing and writing, the architectonic expertise required for the production of court clothing and literary narrative, and women's authority over both these forms of expression weave connections between texts and textiles in female experience. (612)

While Cavanaugh suggests that the textile led the Heian woman to the text, I am suggesting that the opposite is equally true in Vera's fiction. If narration is understood as the empowerment of a form of expression and voice, then Vera's characters find this through a return, within the text, to the textile.

Kathryn Sullivan Kruger's *Weaving the Word*[1] addresses the relationship between textual and textile production in early literature and art ranging from Greek myth to William Blake's *The Four Zoas* and Pre-Raphaelite Art. Kruger observes, "By carrying the words and symbols integral to a culture's social beliefs, cloth conveys meaning. [. . .] From this

[1] My review of this text was published in *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*. eds. Pennina Barnett, Janis Jefferies and Doran Ross. Oxford: Berg. Vol. 1 issue 1 (Spring 2003): 107-108.

standpoint, we begin to observe that if one of the main functions of the textile is to bear meaning, then the traditional distinctions we make between text and textile begin to fade" (12). While there do exist pockets of thinking which consider the crafts theoretically impenetrable because of their foundation in tactile rather than intellectual knowledge, interdisciplinary research such as Kruger's pays increased attention to the comparative opportunities textiles offer. Kruger frames her study by arguing that the communicative role textiles have long played warrants their addition to the literary lexicon as examples of some of the earliest "texts". She believes that initially story telling and weaving were analogous acts. Albeit not on the African continent, the variety of early sources Kruger draws upon does support her assertion that textiles have carried the honour, and burden, of story telling long before woman or man put pen to paper.

Elaine Showalter in "Piecing and Writing" traces the rise of the American short story written by female authors and the North American quilting tradition, to conclude that the fragments of time women were able to snatch from their daily lives decided the format of the short story rather than the novel and the piece by piece assemblage required of quilting. Both the short story and the quilt lend themselves to short bursts of attention and do not demand the luxury of hours of peace and quiet, extensive resources or space in which to work. Showalter notes, "the process of making a patchwork quilt involves three separate stages of artistic composition, with analogies to language use first on the level of the sentence, then in terms of the structure of a story or novel, and finally the images, motifs, or symbols [. . .] that unify a fictional work" (1986: 223). She explains that in North America, from the 1850s, when the popularity of books meant that popular female authors published sketches in book bound volumes the album quilt, an intricate design of individual squares assembled as a whole by one quilter, simultaneously became popular (230). By the 1880s Showalter sees the random patterns of the crazy quilt coinciding with "stories that represent women's culture as sour and embittering, and that frequently end in tragedy and defeat. Their quilts are crazy

quilts, moving away from the comforting design traditions of the past and unsure of their coherence, structure and form" (238).

Thus the relationship between the textile and the text is an ancient and varied one. It is impossible to consistently privilege one form of communication over the other as in different cultures, at different moments in time, the text informed the textile and vice versa. What can be understood is that the relationship between the two is intimate and longstanding, as evidenced in the diverse examples discussed above.

Silence and Pain

Silence is a contentious issue in postcolonial literature. Long used to explain the disempowerment that colonial rule brought about, silence is now being questioned as a possible lack of listening on the part of the reader as much as it is a lack of voice from the speaking subject. Penny Ludicke writes of *Nehanda* and *Without a Name*, "The author [Vera] neatly reverses the usual inherited colonial legacy of silence which is imposed on the colonised and women in particular, and allows the two Zimbabwean women to improvise 'speech' in order to communicate an anguish, an experience and finally a voice often unheard or unrecognisable in the larger world" (67). Vera's narratives have been celebrated as the first to confront problems such as infanticide and incest within the Zimbabwean nation. The textile comes to represent many of the abuses which Vera tackles, often without resorting to static definitions and limiting labels. But as scholars such as Barber have noted, a familiarity and eye for the textile and its intricacies are necessary for the full impact of their narrative purpose to be uncovered.

A further element which undermines the power of language and can be read as a type of silence in Vera's fiction is the relentless presence of pain. Mental or physical, imagined or real, pain rules and determines many of the characters lives and choices. Elaine Scarry notes

in *The Body in Pain* that the pain of another is "vaguely alarming, yet unreal, laden with consequence yet evaporating before the mind because not available to sensory confirmation" (4). Scarry continues, "Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through resistance to language (4). While the author creates the language through which characters articulate themselves, Vera's writing of pain has interfered little in the way in which pain operates during communication. Rather than mediating and explaining a voice for pain, Vera has instead brought into her texts the gasps and silences that are heard. Scarry also observes:

> To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself. (6)

In Vera's narratives of pain there are moments, albeit coded or disguised, where the birth of language is present. Scarry's observation that "it is not surprising that the language of pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak *on behalf of* those who are" (6) is where Vera's voice as author resides. But in her case interference is pared to a minimum and the narrative, which speaks on behalf of those in pain, records the wordlessness that Scarry notes is the result of pain. Because taboos rule over much of the material that Vera attempts to bring into open discussion, pain rarely finds voice through the conduit of another character. The intimate, often violent, transgressions that are central to each narrative are confronted and exposed through the character whose body is in pain. Feelings of betrayal, guilt and blame are recorded and manifest their own versions of

intense pains in Vera's fiction.[2] Once again, it is the textile that records and communications when conventional language fails.

Emerging Voices: The Weya Appliqué Project of Zimbabwe[3]

Before turning to the role of textiles in Vera's fiction, I will briefly discuss the textile history of the region and then give examples of contemporary textiles that present the inverse of reading textiles in texts, that is textiles that incorporate text into their material surfaces. I will outline the complex history of the textiles made by the Weya Community Training Centre, first within the context of Zimbabwe's textile tradition and then within a history of text appearing on textiles, before proposing a critical reading of the Weya appliqués. It should be noted that detailed readings of individual examples from the Weya Project have been undertaken in several studies already, namely Philippa Curling's Master of Fine Art dissertation "Representations of Women: A Study of Imagery Created by Selected Zimbabwean Women Artists" (1992), Ilse Noy's *The Art of the Weya Women* (1992) and Dr. Brenda Schmahmann's *Material Matters* (2000). Here the Weya appliqués will be taken as examples of material culture that project, like Vera's fiction, otherwise unvoiced women's opinions into the world.

Existing research into the history of textile production in Zimbabwe is limited. The evidence that has been uncovered points to the existence of spinning and weaving industries. Objects thought to be spindle whorls, used to weight and wind fibre as it is spun into thread, have been excavated from archaeological digs across the country (Schaedler 19). The hard

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[2] Scarry's observations are directed specifically at physical pain which she feels stands outside language. Mental anguish, she argues, has long been a preoccupation of the arts. Here I would suggest that while Vera's characters are often haunted by mental anguish, the causes can be traced to an initial physical pain.

[3] An earlier version of this paper was presented under the title "Text on Textiles: The Weya Appliqués of Zimbabwe" at the *Fabric(ations) of the Postcolonial* conference at the University of Wollongong, Australia (December 2002) and is published in *Reinventing Textiles Volume Three: Postcolonialism and Creativity*. Telos Art Publishing: Winchester, 2004.

materials used to fashion spindle whorls typically outlive the more fragile elements of cloth and explain in part the presence of textile tools in a region where there is a conspicuous absence of archaeological textile finds. Aviton Ruwitah supports such thinking, even suggesting that the area was in fact once a hotbed of textile-related activity:

> The huge concentration on the Zimbabwean plateau of archaeological context spindle-whorls, when compared with their thin presence on the ground in the countries which border Zimbabwe, suggest that Zimbabwe could have been the single most important hub of the traditional cotton industry in southern Africa during the Late Iron Age. (4)

In the fifteenth century it is believed that what is now the archaeological ruin of Great Zimbabwe was a technologically sophisticated settlement with a considerable "level of technological achievement [. . .] reflected in finds of ceremonial iron tools, copper ornaments, and traces of weaving" (Fagan: 85). In the region that is now Zimbabwe, woven cloth has also been observed:

> Their blankets they make of bark and dye them, and they are very warm and strong [. . .] from bark too, they make their bags or sacks for carrying grain, their hunting nets and baskets. Their mats are usually made of a beautiful yellow reed; but in the southeast people make baskets and mats out of thin, broad strips of wood and they are both useful and ornamental. (Arnold: 32)

Marjorie Locke's research into the traditions of off-loom weaving and twining for the purpose of basket and mat making in Zimbabwe explains that the traditional mats are "woven flat without the use of any sort of loom [. . . and] are technically difficult to make" (81).

By the twentieth century the displacement of traditional textile production in southeast Africa was nearly complete. The influx of industrial cloth from India and Europe in the early twentieth century is generally considered responsible for the demise of traditional production. Historians Patricia Davison and Patrick Harries write:

> In spite of the greater durability of African cloths, they were unable to compete with the cheap calico and coloured prints from India [. . .] in many cases colonialism meant a transfer of labour from cloth production to forced or migrant labour for the colonial economy. The effect on local weaving was not only the diversion of labour but also the greater availability of cash for the purchase of imported cloth. (189)

Despite this displacement, Ruwitah considers that pockets of production remained intact until as recently as twenty years ago. Citing oral reports from the Dande area that refer to woven textiles for ceremonial use still in production in the 1980s, he concludes:

> This general picture of the Dande, characteristic of a period thirty-three years after colonization of Zimbabwe and the effective introduction of European and Asian *machira* (cloths) not only says something about the resilience of the traditional cotton industry in the area, but also the inability of the imported textiles to satisfy local demand. (20)

Ruwitah also notes that in some areas weaving was only disrupted during the second war for liberation in the late 1970s and simply not re-established after that time (33).

Nonetheless, twentieth-century accounts show that little remains of traditional textile production in Zimbabwe. Locke's study of basket makers observes that this disruption led to a dramatic decline in understanding of the crafts by the next generation: "Today, young basketmakers [sic] frequently repeat and copy traditional patterns without having any idea of their meaning" (12). In fairness to contemporary craftspeople, it should be noted that this decline of traditional patterns is not an entirely negative trend as it is also responsible for the "development of new designs free from tribal restrictions" (12). For Locke this made her life's work and "the task of comprehensive documentation an on-going exercise" (12). The presence of new designs may be seen as the sacrifice of authenticity, but can also be read as evidence of adaptation and survival of the craft in the contemporary world. Modern demands inevitably establish economic pressures and the remaining examples of non-industrialized

textile work in the region, such as the Weya appliqués, appear in the context of economic development schemes. Inevitably this work is heavily influenced by the values of foreign aid workers whose decisions are largely determined by pressure to create economic success for both the project and the individuals involved. As Angharad Thomas observed of the Kusona Kwemadzimai embroidery groups based in the high-density suburbs of Harare, "The importance of the embroidery work as a source of income cannot be overemphasised, given the lack of other sources of income and the limited employment alternatives" (208).

Weya is a communal area, previously known as Tribal Trust Land, and inhabited by a Shona-speaking population. As is typical of communal lands, resources are scarce and poverty is high, "the communal areas are alarmingly overpopulated and overgrazed by skinny cattle and goats. The land is prey to rapid soil erosion because of the people's need for firewood [. . .] the main income generating activity in the rural areas is agriculture and it has become much more risky" (Noy 9). Many of the married men in the region have left to find work in the cities, leaving the women alone with the burden of the daily chores which include subsistence farming, child care, cooking and cleaning (Schmahmann 2). The Weya Community Training Centre was established in 1982 with the financial support of the German *Weldtfriendensdienst* (WFD). The Training Centre offered classes in skills such as carpentry and sewing with the goal that these would lead to the development of small businesses capable of providing income to supplement the subsistence farming in the region (Noy 16).

Courses at the Training Centre were divided between those attended by men and those for women. Initially a single course in garment making was offered to the women of the area (Schmahmann 3). This early course in machine sewing was considered a failure when it became apparent that the chances of the women earning enough money to purchase their own sewing machines after finishing the course were not realistic. A hand-sewing course that followed turned out to be further disappointment. Without sewing machines, hand sewing

became a tool to repair and mend family clothes but did not offer a chance of income drawn from the sale of hand-sewn clothing (Noy 16). Additionally, industrially produced and second-hand garments flood the country and the poverty of the Weya community dictated that few people owned superfluous clothing.[4]

Eager to recover from the disappointment of the first two projects, the project director, Ilse Noy, initiated the appliqué project with the hope of producing embroidered and quilted textile wall hangings for sale to Zimbabwe's then strong tourism industry. As it happened, her previous employment at the Cold Comfort Weaving Co-operative near Harare was also textile related. While the suggestion of an appliqué course in Weya was met with initial scepticism, the project (along with others such as painting) was successful and eventually expanded beyond initial expectations. Noy observed of the art curriculum she established that, "In the first five years young women had actually come from town to Weya, thereby reversing, on a small scale, the hopeless trend of movement from the rural areas to town." (51). Later, however, enticed by the prospect of greater sales, the appliqué work drew women away from the Weya Community Training Centre and out on their own, in hopes of greater profits. In the climate of political uncertainty the Weya Community Training Centre closed in January of 2000 (Schmahmann 150).

The textiles produced as part of the appliqué classes between 1987 and 1991 were made from brightly coloured cotton. As Schmahmann and others have noted, many of the works were not in fact assembled using an appliqué technique. Appliqué is commonly defined by individual pieces of cloth sewn onto one main background material. The techniques explored by the Weya women include *trupunto*, the stuffing of isolated pockets of cloth to bring sections into three-dimensional relief, and piece work, which does not begin with a single backing cloth but is assembled in sections. For the sake of consistency these

[4] For an interesting study of the second-hand clothing trade in neighboring Zambia see Karen Tranberg Hansen's "Other People's Clothes? The International Second-hand Clothing Trade and Dress Practices in Zambia." *Fashion Theory*. ed. Valerie Steele. Vol. 4, issue 3 (Sept. 2000): 245-274.

definitions will be overlooked and the work referred to by the term that the Weya women and Ilse Noy used. The appliqués were developed around themes, with the result being that several works of art on cloth, as well as those in painting and drawing classes which Noy also taught, fell into the same categories such as "women's work" and "village life." The works of greatest interest to this research were developed from individual squares that create a narrative emphasis and include hand written notes slipped into specifically designed pockets of the textile surface. The idea was that women would be able to work on the individual parts as time permitted and then assemble a whole more quickly than if each individual undertook a large-scale project alone. This, of course, offered promise of quicker cash returns. Single panel works typically measure forty to sixty centimetres square. Very large works such as the forty-five section appliqué entitled *AIDS the Killer* (1996) measures two hundred and seventy-eight by one hundred and fifty-three centimetres.

The power of textiles to communicate and convey content beyond the aesthetic has been observed in cultures across both time and space. Many scholars have noted the role cloth can play as a form of communication because the "broad possibilities of construction, color, and patterning give cloth an almost limitless potential for communication" (Weiner and Schneider 1). This communication is taken to a literal level in examples of textiles that incorporate text into their surfaces. Many of the Weya appliqués convey a substantial narrative content, which on close reading reveals many of the prejudices and oppressions now being unravelled from historical textiles elsewhere: a lack of genuine empowerment rendered though disregard for female intelligence and skill and the dominance of patriarchal structures both at home and in the workplace. As Philippa Curling notes, "The women who make the art in the Weya Communal Area are still subject to the restrictions and discrimination which are the results of the collusion in the past between African men and colonists to keep the women in a state of subjugation" (3).

Responsibility also lies with the numerous economic development schemes of recent years that have perpetuated a new style of cultural imperialism. Many development projects, while attempting to assist local communities by introducing skills to produce marketable craft objects, consciously or unconsciously bring many of their own cultural ideals along with them. Long before these economic development schemes, missionaries operated in a similar manner. Of particular pertinence here is the tendency of missionaries and development schemes to link the textile arts with undervalued women's work. Anitra Nettleton argues that before contact men and women in southern Africa shared textile skills:

> If I can thus extrapolate a male/female collectivity in the production of items which involved needlework amongst most Southern African indigenous peoples as having existed prior to the introduction of glass trade beads, and prior to the introduction of sewing classes by missionaries in various mission stations in the nineteenth century, I would also like to postulate that needlework became largely gendered as female, or at least as feminine, only after missionary influence on these two forms. (32)

As a result of this continued belief in the usefulness of gender specific roles in the workplace, existing economic imbalances in communities such as Weya continued to be stark and less than amenable to correction. While economic success was an undeniable priority, Thomas also notes that for women "The involvement in the groups must have a beneficial effect on the quality of life of the members, acting as they do as a social focus, a time to meet other mothers and to take part in craft fairs and sometimes celebrations" (208). The textile classes at Weya offered both positive and negative results from the imposed gender divisions. In short, while the economic opportunities for the women were made available they came with complex assumptions about the type of work available. Nettleton notes that the notion that textile-related skills are somehow inherently "women's work" is a historical inaccuracy for this region. Similarly, Ruwitah remarks of his research that "All [historical] stories or accounts advanced had only featured male spinners and weavers [. . .] traditional cotton

spinning and weaving in other areas of the Zambezi Valley [. . .] had been represented as exclusively male crafts and dominions" (17). Schemes such as the Weya Project attempt to redress this economic imbalance but invariably replaced one form of exclusion with another. As Nettleton observes, "contemporary needlework in Africa is gendered as exclusively female only in collectives, which aim their products at an external market and at the social and economic upliftment [sic] of their members" (20-21).

While the decline of men in the textile crafts of Zimbabwe has left openings for contemporary women, the women involved with the Weya Training Centre did face enormous challenges, the largest of which being the burden of their existing workload (Schmahmann 2). Joan Gumbo writes that "Despite the burden of a subsistence level economy in the rural areas and the considerable share of the work which falls on the women, it is the women who have preserved and continued most strongly the ancient traditions and crafts" (70). One might add that with ancient traditions lost to history women continue to take on the burden of learning new and foreign crafts as well. The contrast with the intentionally time-consuming work taken up by idle Victorian women (the model behind many missionary rationales for teaching textile skills) could not be greater.

Despite access to new craft techniques and the opportunity to work within the cash economy, the Project did perpetuate gender inequality. Many cultures throughout time have gendered work according to materials, often with hard materials remaining the domain of men and soft materials that of women (Nettleton 21). Zimbabwe's Stone Sculpture Movement is dominated by male artisans and has established a thriving economic value for itself far greater than any the Weya project ever achieved. The two crafts, although distinctly different in method and form, share one similarity. The history of the Stone Sculpture Movement in Zimbabwe is no more than fifty years old and has no precedent. Frank McEwen refers to the movement as "new art" and indeed it most literally is (8). While the Weya story is similarly rootless, the Stone Sculpture Movement has achieved economic validation on a

scale that far exceeds the modest economic triumphs earned by the women involved with textile production through the Weya Project.

Where the Weya Project is seen to have had a far greater success is in the airing of voices and opinions by a group of women silenced by their economic poverty, lack of opportunity and the determination of their identities by a traditional culture that favours male intellect. Margo Mensing observes of the presence of texts on textiles in general that:

> Words on fabric are usually declarative – records of names, dates, and places. But they may also be argumentative, containing a message underpinning moral, religious, or political intent. Writing, whether it is ill- or well-crafted script or stitching, is a physical expression of the maker's education and beliefs. History is made visual. (4)

In Zimbabwe, aspects of contemporary history that are considered taboo receive little attention outside local and informal contexts. Subjects such as domestic violence, child abuse and baby dumping are often ignored or vilify only the woman. It is in alternative forms of expression such as sewing and weaving that silenced concerns are made visual and can find voice. In the context of Zimbabwe, child abuse[5], unwanted pregnancy[6] and baby dumping[7] are contemporary realities made visual by the Weya appliqués.

Overcoming silence caused by physical or mental abuse, overt oppression or the simple lack of freedom to speak one's mind, has been intimately linked to the textile arts. Rozika Parker's seminal study of embroidery entitled *The Subversive Stitch* concludes, "Paradoxically, while embroidery was employed to inculcate femininity in women, it also enabled them to negotiate the constraints of femininity" (11). The Weya appliqué project and

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[5] For example, the explanatory note for this work read: "The first picture shows the girl and her step mother who is very cruel with them. She is being beaten early in the morning because she is eating her breakfast without doing work first. 3. [sic] The other day she is beaten again while she is sweeping the yard. 2. The girls have now thought of going away from their home to be streetkids." From photocopy of original supplied by Dr. Brenda Schmahmann.

[6] The explanatory note for this work reads: "1. Sugar daddy and a young lady are going home to enjoy. 2. They are now squandering money in drinking beer that pint after pint. 3. The girl is telling the man that she is now carrying his baby in her womb and hoping to be welcomed by the man. 4. The man is not willing to entertain such nonsense and is now chasing the girl from his home with a wip" (Schmahmann 16).

[7] Regrettably the explanatory text for this work has been lost (Schmahmann 11).

its combination of text and textile offered a similarly contradictory escape. Text on textiles finds perhaps one of its most obvious and early examples in the tradition of samplers which inspires the structure of this thesis. Samplers taught young girls grammar and spelling through the embroidery of alphabets, words and phrases onto cloth. The rote learning that samplers required offered little in the way of the development of personal expression or even aesthetic creativity, valuing instead neatness, consistency and a peaceful mind absorbed in what was considered appropriate work. Parker explains, "In the seventeenth century samplers had been employed to inculcate obedience, submission, passivity and piety. Parental authority and the primacy of the marriage bond were dominant issues in all pictorial figurative embroidery" (128). But slipped in between parental authority and the bonds of marriage, the sampler was a key to literacy, literacy a key to the world of books that led to empowerment through the knowledge of other worlds and other values.

While in the European sampler the "text and the material are depersonalised" (Mensing 5), on the African continent the use of text on textiles takes on a far more intimate role. *Kanga* cloths, worn by women throughout East Africa, draw on the strong tradition of proverbs in the region and send distinct messages to the world. These messages "touch on important spheres of life: social and ethical norms, sex, religion and politics" (Mensing 5) and often expose issues that are emotionally sensitive or awkward. Proverbs about affairs, jealousy and second-wife rivalry abound. For instance, "I do not want to be liked superficially like a sugar coating" and "Do not love me hastily only to discard me afterwards" (Linnebuhr 138). Here the motto or text is considered of greater importance than the colour and design.

The Akan, a subgroup of the Anyi of eastern Côte d'Ivoire, also use proverb cloths. In this case the text itself is not present on the surface of the industrially printed fabric; instead the proverb is made known through the names given to each printed pattern. Here as well, the proverb-name of the cloth often takes on the burden of communication that would otherwise

be considered inappropriate or confrontational. Susan Domowitz describes such communication as a "lively example of the oblique or veiled style of communication that characterizes the oral traditions of the Akan and other West African societies" (82). Domowitz also notes, "Communicating by means of cloth offers an additional advantage. Unlike spoken or drummed communications, which are limited in duration, proverb cloths are like billboards whose message is repeated and reinforced as long as the cloths are seen and decoded" (84). Typically, decoding is not as complex as it may seem to an outsider because the printed names are common knowledge and "both men and women are familiar with the proverb names and can decode the messages sent by particular cloths in this widespread strategy of discourse" (82). Again, the unspoken discourse often tackles topics that are uncomfortable or embarrassing with names such as "I am afraid to sleep alone", "I am not afraid of my rival's eye" or "If you are going to get married, find out what it is like". Domowitz concludes, "Proverb cloths offer an accessible public voice to those who are constrained to silence. As might be expected, this voice seems to be most used by women, since their opportunities to speak out are limited" (83, 85).

These West African textiles are not irrelevant to South African textile art, since the Weya appliqués and their hand-written explanations are inspired by work from Dahomey, present-day Benin. As Noy explains: "By chance I had come across a publication on the traditional appliqués from Dahomey/Benin. The hand-sewing skills of the Weya women were the ideal technical basis for production of appliqué wall hangings" (18). Thus Noy adopted Dahomey appliqué techniques only as a substitute for the lost textile traditions of Zimbabwe (18). The Dahomey textiles have a long and vibrant history in the courts of the country. Typically bright in colour and made from cotton, the appliqués developed a system of symbolic communication that often included surprisingly violent images. Thelma Newman explains the history of the Dahomey textiles: "Appliqué came later and evolved as a simpler form than the original weaving of symbols on cloth. Most of the stories told were of wartime

exploits, complete with decapitations, hangings, etc." (97). Like the proverb cloths, Dahomey appliqué work is also appreciated for its narrative content rather than aesthetic appeal. Monni Adams explains:

> [O]ne of the most consistently well-distributed and popular tourist arts [. . .] Neither the material – cheaply made cotton cloth – nor the method – simple appliqué of silhouette figures – has immediate appeal [. . .] The strongest attraction of these cloths lies in their subject matter: varied and fascinating images of objects, animals and people. (28)

While the regal history of the Dahomey textiles has faded, their presence in the tourist trade has not. Nevertheless, the distinction between adaptive community-based work and 'airport art' does need to be made. Adams writes of the surviving Fon appliqués (from Dahomey) sold in the tourist trade as being made by:

> [N]o more than a small group of specialized craftsmen who are catering to a specialized international market of tourists and other foreign buyers for whom *art is a harmless thing*, and who want an art of powerlessness, cheerful and intriguing for idle moments. The bright arbitrary colors of the appliqués continue to catch the eye, but the pressure of this new market takes its toll on the motifs. There has been a gradual loss of violent subjects. (41)

Locke's study of basketry patterns notes a similar pressure to adapt to commercial tastes as she notes, "In response to the urban and tourist markets, craftswomen today are shifting from traditional design formulas in order to make objects that are attractive to the European eye" (98). Similarly, Frank McEwen sees the Stone Sculpture Movement reduced to second-rate imitations willingly exploited by foreign agents (11).

In many cases, however, while the tourist trade generates a dilution of skills and loss of sacred meaning for objects, the market also acts as a stimulus to continue production. In this arena of conflicting values objects such as the Weya appliqués emerge. Weiner and

Schneider note, "Despite these shifts in emphasis and the worldwide expansion of capitalist manufacturing and fashion, ancient cloths and traditions of making them continue to remerge with political – indeed often subversive – intent, above all in societies emerging from colonial domination" (4). Noy reports that "Conventional taboos that restricted women from talking about certain things in public or when men were around were not valid any more for appliqué…the new media allowed them to show even the private parts of men and women in detail, if there was a story to justify it" (21). In embroidery projects elsewhere in the country, difficult topics are also confronted. Thomas discusses the embroideries of the Kusona Kwemadzimai embroidery group in Harare and notes the presence of "some pieces that show life in its harder aspects – sometimes the children are shown in their wheelchairs and a recent piece showed a thief being chased through the streets" (208).

While the appliqués tackle uncomfortable subject matter, the information is conveyed in a collective and generalized manner. One of the unnamed artists interviewed by Noy sees this as a question of audience taste: "Actual stories of individual life? Will the people who are buying these things be interested? I think they will be bored…I don't want to tell all the people what my life is" (161). The subversive intent of the Weya appliqués in revealing problems such widowhood and HIV/AIDS is apparent, but it would be mistaken to read it as free from all censorship, or in fact even as overtly intentional. Weya appliqués seem less based on protesting violence than an overriding sense of pragmatism as Noy explains, "All of the Weya women interviewed wanted a secondary education for their children, followed by white collar jobs as teachers, nurses, accountants, etc." (170).

However, while the appliqués may not divulge personal stories of abuse and oppression or engage in overt politics, they do voice collective concerns. A review of the exhibition *Material Matters,* organized by Schmahmann and based on the Weya appliqués, reveals, even in its praise, the underlying prejudice the Weya women face on a daily basis:

> Needlework has provided poverty-stricken women with not only an income but also a 'voice': *Normally silent females* have found in needlework a means of expressing their aspirations and anxieties. Appliquéd wall hangings made by the women of Weya include stories that focus on customs and norms in Shona communities and speak of how these affect women's lives. Far from being solemn, the stories are represented with humour and often dramatic irony. Likewise, South African works in fabric demonstrate not only the technical proficiency of the women who make them but also their imaginative and creative capacities. (*Art News From Kwazulu-natal*, italics added)

Undoubtedly the economic success of the Weya appliqué project, albeit modest, empowered the "normally silent females" working on the project. But the appreciable economic gains did not generate either the security or kudos offered by other professions such as secretarial work or nursing. The project did not lead to consistent income or provide any formal education. This, ironically, left women in the restricted space generally conceded to textile art the world over. Schmahmann finds that the appliqués "raise questions about needlework – questions that not only encourage one to identify the kinds of values and ideas that have underpinned a tendency to denigrate images made through a needle and thread, but also to interrogate and challenge them" (10).

While crimes relating to the female body are tackled with surprising pragmatism, there are silences that even the Weya appliqués continue to convey. Skin colour, an element that is arguably of great importance considering the problems of racism in Zimbabwe, is not conveyed through cloth colour. Curling notes, "In most of the Weya appliqués the choice of colour for flesh is arbitrary. Characters who appear throughout a narrative [. . .] change colour each time they appear" (72). Of course, it is likely that the availability of cloth colours was limited and determined some of these decisions. Curling also notes that the "pungency of the Weya women's statements is sometimes masked by the sensuous visual presentation"

(102). This observation is in keeping with Parker's conclusion that embroidery both enabled women to react against oppressive conventions and restricted the nature of their protest.

One topic that the Weya appliqués do not attempt to tackle is Zimbabwe's brutal second *chimurenga* or war for independence. Noy notes specifically of her painting class, "Paintings about the *Chimurenga* are hardly accepted in the official glorious version, not to mention the horrible personal experiences the women endured during the war. Not one of them has ever tried to show her experiences during the war in her work" (141). Interestingly, similar textiles are produced on the other side of the world in Chile which do acknowledge the untold lives sacrificed during General Pinochet's ruthless reign. Fashioned from scraps of fabric on burlap, Chilean *arpilleras* drew together women whose husbands, sons and fathers became part of the countless who simply disappeared. The works were often embroidered with the phrase "*Donde Están*?" ('Where are they?'). Through church organizations, the textiles are exhibited and sold overseas and offer a public voice which begins to expose the scale of tragedy occurring inside the country (Agosin 85). But despite the initial similarities, the absence of the second *chimurenga* from the Weya appliqués represents a significant limitation in political reach. Apparently, some subjects are still not open for discussion.

One means of extending the social critique of the appliqués is the hand-written notes that accompany the textiles. Opinion is divided as to the helpfulness of these notes, both in clarity of message and added economic value. Thomas mentions of the Kusona Kwemadzimai embroidery organization that, "The maker is encouraged to attach a short explanation of the picture to it [the cloth] and this personal touch is a strong selling point" (208). The explanatory notes may also find their roots in the Fon works, as it has been noted that the Fon appliqués now sold to the tourist market also include explanatory notes (Adams 37). Noy, as the project's director, elected not to intervene and edit the notes and Schmahmann, in reproducing many of the notes for publication in her book, also chose not only to omit editing but also to avoid flagging these mistakes (Schmahmann 10). While these

decisions are ultimately made out of respect for the women and their voices, the opportunity for education and an increased level of literacy was not taken up. Equally mixed results can be traced from the buyer's perspective: the grammatical and spelling mistakes were indeed a strong selling point as a sign of authenticity, but I believe their presence makes it easier to respond only to the naiveté of the work and may even have confused meaning.

Literacy, in particular in a second language, is undoubtedly a luxury in many parts of the world. But it does strike one as ironic that, with all the talk and desire for empowerment both through economic means and through a freedom to step across taboos and air real concerns in the daily lives of the community, further education did not occur within the Weya community. The Victorian samplers, so stifling and tedious in the minds of young girls who wanted to stretch their legs and raise their voices, did at least help to teach women to read and write. The Weya appliqués, while caught in many of the same contradictions that Parker observes of the early European embroidery tradition, sadly fail to achieve the same level of empowerment through literacy. "The appliqués do not of course literally 'reflect' social conditions in rural Zimbabwe, but they have enabled women to express opinions, desires and fears that they would normally leave unspoken" (Schmahmann 60). Instead they remain complex, even contradictory objects that offer a partial voice to the women of the Weya community.

The Textile in Yvonne Vera's Fiction

Returning to Vera's fiction, analysis of the textile in Vera's fiction is understood very much to exist as a construct within the narrative and is investigated as a narrative technique. Vera's descriptions of textiles will not be validated through a comparison to similar objects found in museum collections or used in contemporary culture. Instead, the focus of this

investigation is the life of the textile within the text and the role it plays in assisting and clarifying the difficult narratives Vera puts to paper.

Chapter One "The Rhythms of Making" traces instances in which textiles present a domestic graphology, a term borrowed from Vera's response to Ruth First's use of sewing to record time while in solitary confinement. The section opens with a comparison of *Nehanda* to the technique of ravelled yarns. Ravelled yarns are threads pulled from an existing fabric and used to supplement another weaving. Vera's rewriting of traditional myth mirrors this process, drawing threads from oral story telling and reweaving them into a novella. The remainder of the chapter is divided into various textile structures, moving from the complex to the most simplified: weaving, crochet and knitting, sewing and finally the knot. In each section the literal depictions of making and mending textiles in Vera's fiction are investigated. Symmetrical structures are contrasted with dysfunctional and inadequate structures as a way to explore the possible empowerment or release that the rhythms of making can offer characters. Crochet and knitting are noted in particular for their arrival with the missionaries and are matched with the inadequate and flimsy relations that develop around their undervalued exchange. The simultaneous mending and piercing required of sewing and its unconventional use in Vera's fiction is considered not as a site where disparate elements are drawn together, but rather as a site where things are torn apart. Sewing is one of several ways that Vera disrupts and inverts existing metaphors to express the violence and pain the characters attempt to name. Finally the knot, in all its simplicity, is noted as a gesture associated with ordering and controlling events that invade the characters lives.

Chapter Two "The Body and Cloth: Skin and Hair" investigates the relationship of the body to cloth through skin and hair and is read through Mary Douglas's writings on bodily boundaries. The chapter discusses Vera's *"Ambi generation"* and the tradition of skin bleaching in relation to racism. Understanding that many fibres are spun from animal hair, human hair is also addressed as a type of thread, stitch and possible suture.

Chapter Three "Proximal Relations" investigates the role of fashion and its satellite industries. Analysis is informed by anthropologist Elizabeth Wilson's writings on fashion and explores fashionable dress, uniforms, the soap industry, photography and gift giving. The conspicuous consumption of the fashion industry is compared to the poverty of the environments Vera writes about, as well as the economic and cultural power invested in clothing, especially policed forms of dress such as uniforms. The history of soap, both to clean the body and for cleaning clothes is related to dress, as is photography. Finally, gifts of clothing are read in Vera's narratives as exchanges saturated with the memories, some desired and some rejected, that clothing often contains.

Chapter Four, "Smooth and Striated Space", looks at space and time through the textile, an object saturated with information that can help read both space and time in Vera's writings. Henri Lefebvre's notion of socially constructed space informs much of this reading. After discussing the contradictory ways in which time is established in the non-chronological narratives, the chapter turns to the manner in which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of smooth and striated space can be applied to Vera's fiction to assist in our understanding of the characters' fragmented relationships to space.

Chapter Five "How all Life is Lived, in Patches" returns once more to the concrete reading with which the research began and suggests that the cloth fragments found throughout Vera's fiction exemplify her relationship to the written word, a relationship that denies closure or stasis. Like words, the possibility of a fragmented quilt existing in Vera's writings presents a reading in which pain has rendered the quilt impossible to assemble. Similarly, individual words remain outside any static definitions of terms. "Grandmother's Silenced Narrative" suggests that Grandmother's winnowing basket in *Under the Tongue* acts like a quilt in its ability to record family memories and can be read as yet another domestic graphology. Both the novel and the quilt metaphor command power through familiarity. Vera

draws upon these strengths, but continually reworks and reassembles material in a new and innovative voice that does not allow itself to rest on previous familiarities.

The trajectory of this research begins with the most concrete and tangible readings of the textile as an object and a way of making, then explores greater abstractions at the centre of the research and finally returns to the tangible and concrete in conclusion. The notion of a domestic graphology is apparent throughout, but is discussed specifically in the first chapter and the conclusion of the final chapter.

Chapter One

The Rhythms of Making[8]

"If not freedom then rhythm." (*Butterfly Burning* 5)

Textiles are constructed in a variety of structures, from the complexities of the warp and weft of woven fabric to the single strand of yarn used to knit or crochet, the needle and thread of the stitch and finally the efficient simplicity of the knot. In Vera's fiction, I want to suggest that an analysis of the textile structures produced in the narratives reveals a relationship between these structures and the social interactions that occur in their presence. Through their diverse structures textiles chart and map the unspoken interactions that occur near them, between them, because of them and in spite of them.

Along with the structural insights textiles can offer about the personal relationships contained in Vera's fiction, this chapter will also explore the process of textile production. Textile production is typically rhythmic in nature. The soothing motions of production offer the maker a sense of comfort in situations where little else brings pleasure and are seen as an escape, at least temporarily, from the troubled relationships that occur in the textile's presence. Thus textile production offers the possibility of increased self worth for the maker through the satisfaction the creative process brings. But this benefit must be read against the backdrop of economic hardship where textile production takes place. The economic role of the textile as an object of trade reveals the unsatisfactory relationships that its trade fosters. More often than not the textile as an object and, as a direct result, the maker are systematically undervalued because of the object's lack of economic value.

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[8] An earlier version of this chapter was presented under the title "Woven Voices and Silent Symbols: The Role of Cloth in the Writings of Yvonne Vera" at the 11th Annual Postcolonial Studies and Commonwealth Literature Conference, Savannah, USA. Feb. 2002 and published under the title "The Voice of Cloth: Interior Dialogues and Exterior Skins" in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga. Weaver Press: Harare, 2000. 57-62.

The idea that the physical structure of the textile reveals important details regarding broader but often unspoken structures that exist in its presence is a method of reading inspired by Vera's own PhD thesis, "The Prison of Colonial Space: Narratives of Resistance". Vera coins the term "domestic graphology" to discuss the stitches Ruth First describes stitching in secret in *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law*. First sews a secret calendar inside her clothing during a gruelling period of solitary confinement in several South Africa prisons, an effort by the apartheid government to silence her voice against the injustices of the system. First's calendar allowed her to count out the days of her confinement and resist the sense of disorientation and depression her prison sentence was intended to induce. For the majority of First's time in prison, books, writing materials and even conversation were banned. Her sewn calendar gave her strength and a sense of control over a situation that was intended to break her spirit and mind and instil a sense of hopelessness and futility.

When applied to Vera's fiction, the concept of a domestic graphology can be used to refer to an alternative form of communication that offers solace and a sense of control where little else seems to exist. The textile uses its undervalued position as a domestic concern to record and communicate details that are unnoticed by conventional discourse precisely because of the domestic materials with which they are recorded. Both First and Vera use this oversight as an advantage. While First managed to plot the passage of time, a vital record to keep her spirits up during the empty days of mind numbing solitary confinement, in Vera's fiction it is violations against the female body that can be more clearly understood through their reading as domestic graphologies.

Appropriated Words, Appropriated Threads: *Nehanda* and the Ravelled Yarn Textile

In the following sections, textile structures are read as domestic graphologies that reveal emotions and relationships otherwise unnamed and unspoken. In this first section, Vera's early work of fiction, *Nehanda*, will be compared to ravelled yarn textiles. The term "ravelled yarn" refers to threads that have been unpicked from a piece of woven cloth and rewoven into another. I propose that *Nehanda* can be read as a narrative structure created by ravelled words instead of ravelled yarns, facts unpicked from historical account and oral myths and rewoven into an entirely new fabric of Vera's own making. This reading assists our understanding of the creative process Vera asserts in the writing of *Nehanda* and offers a visual diagram of the way *Nehanda* came to be written. The spirit medium Nehanda is a central figure in the mythic beliefs of Shona culture and is understood to be a *mhondoro,* or spirit of the ancestors. Nehanda played an important role in Rhodesia's first *chimurenga* or struggle against colonial occupation in 1896 and is seen as an important figure of resistance in Rhodesia's struggle for independence. Historian Terence Ranger writes, "The leaders of the rising [the first *chimurenga*] had in the end surrendered unconditionally and in 1898 many of them were brought to trial and hanged, including the mediums of Kagubi and Nehanda spirits who had been the chief religious leaders of the Shona rising" (1).

While history tells us the 1896 revolt was not successful and that the colonial authorities executed the physical body of a woman named Chargwe which the spirit medium of Nehanda occupied, mythic belief does not define this as the death of the spirit medium. Vera's rewriting of this important figure in oral history does not simply recount the historical facts surrounding her life and death, nor does she attempt to put to paper what oral culture has kept alive. Instead she reworks the myth in a creative process that, as historian Terence Ranger notes, intentionally leaves out the so-called facts of history in favour of a reconstruction of the values which mythic rather than empirical knowledge supports. Ranger

was, "astonished by Vera's obviously deliberate refusal to draw upon works of history or anthropology [. . .] *Nehanda* was an extraordinary feat of imagination [. . .] more powerful and plausible than those recorded by anthropologists [and it] sprang entirely from Vera's mind" (2002: 203). What Ranger notes as Vera's strength of imagination can be understood as a weaving together of old and new, separating out the existing strands of the Nehanda myth told by colonial historians, as well as oral myth, and retelling them in a written fabric of her own making. Discussing *Nehanda* with Jane Bryce, Vera explains:

> *Nehanda* (published in 1993) was my first novel, and it came out of me almost like a dream. It has the feeling of a dream when I look at it now. And that suited it, because it concerned a myth, a legend. It was a story of spirituality, of ancestors, a mystic consciousness of being African, as though I were myself a spirit medium, and I was just transferring or conveying these feelings, symbols and images of that. I wrote it at a time when I could write it, the way one might write a folk-song. Today I would probably spoil it. I wrote it from remembrance, as a witness to my own spirituality. (2002: 220)

Vera's ability to select threads unpicked from other sources and reweave them into her own fabric gives her the space to write of both the death and then the birth of Nehanda within the first chapters of the text. Her death is written as both the reality her execution and, with the text's almost immediate return to her birth, the knowledge that this form of death was in fact understood to be an impossible reality for a spirit medium. In a similar manner Vera appropriates the form of the novel to tell us the story, but leaves little of the conventional structure of the novel intact. Chronology is dismantled and the fluid nature of oral story telling, rather than a concrete and static voice, very much in evidence.

Vera's reweaving of the story of Nehanda is not a denial of the original, but neither does it desire to replicate existing narrative structures. Penny Ludicke draws upon a language similar to the structure of ravelled yarns to discuss *Nehanda* when she writes, "Vera has a

very definite and well handled lyrical method which manages to *keep all wandering threads together* and initiates the reader into a narrative that is almost a dramatic ritual" (67, italics added). This freedom of creative expression is very much like that of a weaver of ravelled yarns, in which the whole cloth, like the myth, is not understood to be a static object. Threads and words are taken apart and reassembled – a tribute, as Ranger points out, to the vitality of Vera's creative process.

The recovery of threads from existing fabrics to incorporate into cloths has examples from around the globe. These examples may not feel immediately pertinent to the discussion of *Nehanda* but I trust that the images of undoing and reusing that appear in these examples will help to clarify the images of reweaving narrative threads that I suggest form the structure of *Nehanda*. Judith Wilson's research into black American beauty rites notes that slave women and girls in the southern United States are thought to have unwound threads from their owners' discarded stockings and fabric remnants so that they could use the thread to stylishly wrap around their own hair (13). Like the postcolonial narrative, the discarded and unnoticed are returned to favour. And like the domestic graphology, it is because of their domestic nature that these materials go unnoticed by the official oppressive powers.

On the African continent, reference to ravelled yarns appeared as early as 1730 when a Danish envoy wrote, "The artists unravelled them [fabrics] so that they obtained large quantities of woolen [sic] and silk threads which they mixed with their cotton and got many colours" (qtd. in Ross 151). In 1817 a British envoy wrote of chiefs "in a general blaze of splendor" who "wore Ashantee [sic] cloths, of extravagant price from the costly foreign silks which has been unravelled to weave them in all the varieties of colour, as well as pattern" (qtd. in Ross 152). In *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa* it is written that the Moors, "since they do not know how to dye, or because they do not have dyes, they take blue painted cloths from Cambay, unravel them and gather the thread into a

ball and, with their white weave and with the other they make them painted, from which they obtain a great sum of gold" (359).

In many cases the value of the thread is determined by rarity of the fibre or the colour. But in other cases a literal value is at stake, such as the real gold thread brocade (songket) of the Palembang in Sumatra. The economic value of the gold thread demands that it be recycled over and over again. When the weavings eventually become threadbare they are sold by weight, taken apart and the gold thread incorporated into new pieces. The result of this continuous system of recycling is a dearth of old songkets, for the valuable thread is always being removed and used again (Kerlogue). Across the globe, in the Virginia of 1800s, it has also been documented that, for reasons of economy, damaged fabrics were unpicked and rewoven. Gloria Seaman Allen writes of her research in the region, "Fiber was too valuable to be discarded. The only solution was to unravel the web of yarn goods" (31). Allen's research offers an insight into the monotony of the work at hand. Quoting from the *Forman Diaries,* a woman employed to unwind the damaged fabric remarks, "Monday we finished winding the fine piece that Mr. Vace had spoiled for us, a very tedious job, this is the second piece I have wound, and I think if I keep my sense it will be the last, it kept five women a week to wind it" (qtd. in Allen 31).

Vera's reworking of the story of the spirit medium *Nehanda* is much more than an attempt to recycle oral myth. Vera is selective in her story telling, pulling threads from myth and reworking these elements within the narrative structure of her making. Perhaps the most obvious reweaving that Vera undertakes in her telling of *Nehanda* is the introduction of several relatively generic colonial figures, a colonial administrator named Browning and a similar figure named Smith, to the myth. This intertwining of historical fact and mythic belief is one of the ways in which the structure of the narrative is remarkably similar to that of a ravelled yarn textile. As Ranka Primorac has noted of the text, "[w]ithin the flashback [which constitutes the entire text], a rhythm of intertwining subplots can be discerned: chapters

relating to Nehanda's life – her birth, youth, possession, capture, and death – alternate at irregular intervals with sections narrating the African experiences of Mr. Browning, the colonial official whose task it is to hunt her down, and with sections outlining (while focusing on other characters) the course of the rebellion" (2001: 79). Colonial record and mythic tradition are reassembled in a combination that reworks the two into a new single whole.

The oral form through which the myth has commonly been conveyed is invoked early on. While waiting for the birth of Nehanda, the village women sit and discuss matters. The dynamic dialogue between the women, the questioning of truth and lie, the constant changes to the story caused by the interjections of the women are a reminder of the fluid nature of oral tradition from which the myth hails. Vera counters the static nature of the written word by depicting a shifting conversation which, in oral telling, would be altered in real time with details that respond to the audience reaction. Comments such as, "Do not hide your words, like ripe fruit in a tree. Tell us your true meaning", banter back and forth between the women (NH 7).

Nehanda is described as carrying a pouch of words that can be understood to represent Vera's task as a writer, selecting words from the past and words from the present, assembling them in a new formation that, like the ravelled yarn textile, borrows from both worlds. "Nehanda carries a bag of words in a pouch that lies tied around her waist. She wears some along her arms. Words and bones. Words fall into dreaming, into night. She hears bones fall into silence" (NH 1). In its fabric of words, *Nehanda* in fact offers us an image of the ravelled yarn textile as seen in a mirror. Instead of foreign elements being incorporated into the familiar woven pattern, here selected elements of the familiar myth are woven into a new structure. Vera's writing strives to depart from the structures and techniques known to the novel and European literary traditions. The grid on which the story is strung is new, but within this newness, familiar threads can be found. Like the life of a textile, language and words are not granted unquestionable strength. Instead words are not always to be trusted as

"some trickery is in the blindness rendered through words. Beware of blinding words!" (NH 37). Departing from the literary conventions of the novel with a plot organized around a rising tension and resolution, Vera writes backwards, refusing to grant the text ultimate power. The structure of the written text is under Vera's constant scrutiny and is contrasted and influenced by elements of oral tradition.

Vera also takes the sacred nature of myth and makes it her own, refashioning and reordering material in a way which steps over accepted ways of handling mythic knowledge often considered too precious or sacred to be available as material for reworking or altering. Common knowledge makes Nahanda's death inevitable, the description of her birth presupposes knowledge of the important figure she will become and reflects the anachronisms Vera allows herself to construct within her writing. The women gathered for the birth ramble in conversation, discussing the settlers who have recently appeared in the region and their graceless customs. Words are often blamed for the destructive and unfathomable patterns of the settlers' language and manners. But like the elements that contribute to the production of a textile, Nehanda refuses to isolate her voice, explaining, "You too have chosen to tell this story, to accompany the story-teller on the journey which may not be embarked upon alone. The story-teller needs an accompanying tongue" (NH 60).

Vera elects not to anguish over Nehanda's murder. Instead she writes Nehanda's death as a birth, which is in keeping with the spiritual belief that Nehanda could not be taken from the people, that her execution was ultimately futile because as a spirit medium she embodied more than flesh and blood. The death/birth of Nehanda's influence is combined with the arrival of a new language. "Her death, which is also birth, will weigh on those lives remaining to be lived. In the valley, where they have prayed all night for rain, is heard the beginning of a new language and a new speech" (NH 112). The threat of Nehanda's death is tied to the wind, a "legend-creating wind [that] gives new tongues with which to praise it, and new languages with which to cross the boundaries of time. Out of it evolve patterns of new

growth" (112-113). Like the ravelled yarn textile, Vera's writing of the myth of *Nehanda* represents a pattern of new growth, an acceptance of new languages hand-in-hand with the voices of old.

There are varied ways in which colonized cultures choose to assimilate and reject the cultural artefacts and values that are forced upon them. With reference to ravelled textiles, several scholars have noted that by the colonial era the Bùnú unravelled red wool from colonial hospital blankets to acquire the thread needed for their distinctive designs (Renne 1992: 66 and 1995: 146). Textile historians John Picton and John Mack write "In Ghana, the difficulties of producing a good red dye, however, lead to the unravelling of imported red cotton cloths by Ashanti and Ewe weavers, and in parts of Nigeria red hospital blankets have been unravelled in order to re-weave the yarn thus obtained" (32). The unravelling and reweaving of the red hospital blankets of Nigeria exemplify a covert system of rejection of imposed colonial values. A further example that follows this theme comes from the Maori of New Zealand. In a short article published in the *Archaeological Textiles Newsletter,* analysis of a dried Maori head complete with woven headband suggests that the fabric was not indigenous to the region. The author surmises from the age, fibre content and twist that the thread of the headbands may in fact have been unpicked from the Union Jack flags Captain Cook is known to have left on the island when exploring the region (Ryder 14-15).

The beauty in the images of resistance is very much in keeping with the postcolonial narrative such as *Nehanda*. Objects and ideologies forced upon the Shona and Ndebele populations are not taken at face value. They are unpicked. There is a powerful process at work as weavers methodically unpick the foreign flags or blankets of the colonizers, appropriating these threads into their own indigenous weaving styles. This action renders the original blanket, flag, or uniform wholly useless, even unrecognisable. Such textiles are eloquent, if hard earned, examples of ingenuity and adaptation.

A similar process appears in contemporary postcolonial literature where narratives draw threads from the past into their fabric. *Nehanda* borrows from myth, but applies these borrowings to a new base. It is a structure that does not follow traditional notions of chronology or regard for the doctrines of history. As with language, there is little point in throwing away the benefits of contact, or in a more contemporary context, denying the reality of globalisation. The threads are not discarded. They are separated and added to the greater fabric of language and narrative. History is reused, appropriated, but under the terms and conditions – the woven structures and patterns – of the maker rather than the uninvited colonizer. Unlike Barthes' spider, which is eventually lost in the secretions of its own web, the weavers of text and textile here remake themselves.

Late in Vera's narrative the spirit mediums Nehanda and the male spirit medium Kaguvi are forced into hiding. From there, "[f]orced to live in the margin of sight they devise elaborate languages to locate their young in the swarming sound-filled roof of the cavern where they wait" (109). Nehanda's death is impending, known to us both through historical account, and the description of her death which opens Vera's telling of the tale. "Hope for the nation is born out of the intensity of newly created memory" (111). A newly created memory is like a textile made of ravelled yarns, burdened with anachronisms. Memory by definition implies the past rather than the future; it is less a creation than an occurrence. Hope, grasping for new words and new structures, must be both fabricated from scratch and established as "memory", an inheritance.

In her analysis of Australian artist Louiseann Zahra's work which involves the deconstruction and unravelling of embroidery, Jazmina Cininas concludes:

> In the act of preservation and devotion she embarks upon a technique of deconstruction, she worked around the original embroidery, living through the making process in reverse. Pulling vertical threads, stripping the piece back to its essence.

> This time the consuming process forges intimate relationships with the primary maker. (N.pag.)

The primary maker of Nehanda is both lost to anonymity and resurrected for the world in Vera's retelling of the tale. Vera's act of preservation in rewriting the myth of Nehanda is a similarly consuming process, shown in her sense of wisdom and fatigue at the end of the project, which ultimately forges an intimate relationship with Nehanda's primary maker, cultural memory. *Nehanda* and the ravelled yarn textile are the first of many stitches I will sew in my embroidery sampler of approaches to Vera's fiction. In the following section the act of weaving is considered as a way to chart the personal relations that occur near the fabric and expose tragic distortions of the family structure.

Woven Symmetry in *Under the Tongue*

Under the Tongue describes the ritual of weaving early each morning and again with the setting sun by Runyararo, the mother of the young female protagonist Zhizha. The action of her weaving frames each day, setting Runyararo's actions to a methodical rhythm very different from the distorted relations that occur within her family. While these distortions will occur in the future, unbeknownst to the young husband and wife at the time the weaving is depicted, they are, due to Vera's non-chronological style, set late in the chapter sequence and arguably function as both foreshadowing and catharsis for the tragic events which the narrative unfolds. Due to Vera's nonlinear presentation of facts I am concerned less with the sequence in which these events take place in *Under the Tongue* and more with the opportunity of foreshadowing and cathartic repair that the rhythm of the making offers the weaver.

The terrible distortion of the family unit is due to the actions of a single person, Runyararo's husband, Muroyiwa, who violates their daughter, Zhizha. The presence of incest

within the family disrupts the balance of every relationship within the family and leaves Zhizha, her mother and grandmother with a knowledge none know how to name. Incest destroys all sense of balance and natural rhythm within the family. The relationships between husband and wife, mother-in-law and son-in-law, mother and daughter and, most decisively, daughter and father, are dismantled and emptied of definition.

For Runyararo, weaving is an opportunity to create symmetry and balance absent from life. "Pass[ing] the wet thread between her lips to soften it and recover memory" the couple sit "quiet with no words spoken" while Runyararo weaves into her mats all that is painfully absent from her own family (UT 92). While these creations by no means compensate for or repair what has come between her husband and daughter, they do offer a structure that Runyararo alone has the power to shape and control. The symmetrical weavings are very different from the distorted family structure she was born into, the man she married, and the daughter she bore. Runyararo's mother explains her own pain to Zhizha, "Grandmother tells me of her son, of her hidden word [. . .] I had been given the gift of death and my method had been to feel scorned and humiliated in the company of my husband [. . .] His relatives whispered that the child's existence was evidence of my talent for untold evils" (UT 70-71). Grandmother's deformed child, Tonderayi, is considered to be only Grandmother's problem: "The child was my own mistake and I had to clear it up in my own woman way, with the help of my own kin" (UT 71). It is possible to read the birth defects of this child as yet another symbol of incest which Grandmother, like granddaughter, has experienced. But even without this reading, the women of *Under the Tongue* all share in Zhizha's burden of violation, required to bear sole responsibility for actions that are not of their own making.

In a similar way to Grandmother's child Tonderayi, the character of Muroyiwa is constructed as a mistake. Muroyiwa "had died at birth then awakened the following morning, so they named him Muroyiwa" (UT 7). His father "VaGomba had courage: Muroyiwa had

sight" (UT 28). "Tachiveyi had courage, Muroyiwa had stayed behind. Tachiveyi was the first-born; Muroyiwa was the last. Being born last, it was Muroyiwa who had stolen the light from their father VaGomba. Tachiveyi had created the milk which they had both received from their mother, Muroyiwa had dried it. Tachiveyi was at the beginning of things, and Muroyiwa existed somehow at the end" (UT 93-94).

It is not until the final chapters of *Under the Tongue* that the family tree is clearly revealed, possibly because the presence of incest has stripped such identities as "father", "mother" and "daughter" of meaning. Incest is written as an aberration in keeping with the aberration that allowed Muroyiwa's mistaken life to exist in the first place. Runyararo describes a list of euphemisms for the act of incest, all of which refer to the disruption of natural rhythms and natural progress:

> Like a hen chasing its own shadow he has left footprints which cover the homestead but lead nowhere. He has stolen the light of the moon and its promises of birth. [. . .] Have you seen the sun forgetting its direction which it has known for many years, turning, in mid-noon, to go back and set where it began at dawn? Have you seen shadows repeat themselves, grow once more where they already grew in the early morning? Are these the unmentionable sights you have seen? (UT 31)

A similar use of language is present in an early short story by Vera entitled "A Woman Is a Child". The story tells a much more ambiguous story of incestuous relations, this time with responsibility and blame placed on the daughter rather than the father. "Words are not for forgetting. She has learned a new language with which she tries to forget her loss, words that would free her. She has claimed her body. She has become separate from him. They have parted in a ritual of disbelief" (53). The consummation of incest is ambiguous, "What has she spoken, standing naked, in front of her father? She has shown him her naked body. A challenge, a taboo" (49). Along with the narrative's discussion of the disappointment the birth of a daughter, rather than a son, brings to the family, there is also mention of a

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transgression that is somehow the daughter's responsibility. "My daughter has made me see her mother in her. This is not a thing to be talked about" (53). The short story is difficult to come to terms with, but in many ways it offers an early inversion of what will become Zhizha's experience in *Under the Tongue*, a narrative that makes no attempt to bring guilt to Zhizha's character, although at times her father is portrayed in a manner that makes his actions if not excusable, perhaps inevitable.

In contrast to these dysfunctional rhythms, the patient rhythm of weaving is a purposeful and functional action which allows for the release of physical and emotional tension for Runyararo. Unlike the torn fabric of her family, weaving offers an order she can pick apart and repair:

> In the evenings Muroyiwa would watch Runyararo creating her mats [. . .] he would watch the perfect symmetry of her mats, the confident movement of her arms, of her wet fingers, of her lips. The symmetry of mats between her fingers gently folding, caressing every thread. [. . .] She would twist the thread of the reed between her second finger and her thumb, rolling it over and over till it was thin and taut and sharpened, then pass it through the thick braids of the mat she had prepared, and hold the braid close to the place she had linked it to, her thumb pointing toward her chest, and the mat held secure near her breast like something precious so she could examine her thread, what she had created; the symmetry of her mats. She would spread the mat on the ground and flatten it, her eyes moving devotedly over the cloth, she would touch every part, *searching, removing loose threads, pressing away at the unevenness*. She would touch the mat with a particular satisfaction, then look up to the dying sun. (UT 92-93, italics added)[9]

[9] While it may seem strange that Vera never discusses the loom or device upon which Runyararo weaves, this omission is in keeping with the traditions of the region. Textiles were not woven on looms but instead constructed through the technique of twining. Marjorie Locke explains, "Twining in basketry is comparable to the technique used in weaving textiles. The textile term 'woven' is used loosely and interchangeably with the term 'twined' to describe process" (20).

The large flat symmetrical mats have every loose thread carefully picked free, every flaw pulled out of sight. Runyararo's woven mats offer her a place where she has the power to conceal the frayed and disconnected threads that peek through the surface, aberrations that disrupt unity. Through weaving the mats Runyararo constructs a semblance of symmetry and logic that is absent from the relations her immediate family will inflict and endure. While it is beyond her control to press away the unevenness of the family unit without unravelling the entire structure, the production of mats is admired by husband and wife alike and offers a sense of logic and control painfully absent from what will become of their own identities. Runyararo's final actions against her husband make the chance of repair impossible. With his murder the family is dismantled, the "flaw" that Muroyiwa represents irrevocably banished.

But long before his murder, Muroyiwa's joy in watching his wife weave reveals undeveloped aspects of his own identity. His admiration of his wife's embodiment of rhythm and disciplined, purposeful work are attributes sorely absent from his own troubled existence. Muroyiwa's own trade is, ironically, to work in the mines where the light of his life is taken from him with every shift that he works below the earth. His work under the cloak of darkness is a reminder of the troubled relationship he has with his own father whose blindness is a point of curiosity for Muroyiwa as a child, but also an embarrassing reminder of his own lack of productivity and laziness as an adult. In contrast, his father, despite the injury which has caused him blindness, spends each day working in the fields, "For healing he [VaGomba] sought a rhythm of light" (UT 36). At what one can only think is great cost to his own pride and comfort, his father rises each morning and feels his way down to the fields to work. The blindness of his father also leaves a space for his later action to occur "unseen". Without his father's sight, Muroyiwa is a young man without guidance from his elders, his actions in some way invisible to the family conscience. Meg Samuelson observes:

> Although Runyararo weaves mats, we can gather from the division of labour within the home that Muroyiwa's work as a miner is more highly valued than Runyararo's

> creative and productive work. The novel manages to overturn this devaluation by placing an extraordinary amount of lyrical emphasis on the act of mat making, which in turn elevates Runyararo's productive work. (97)

Samuelson notes the dichotomy between the narrative value of Runyararo's work and the economic history of such production. This, in part, may explain why the weaving of mats is of great importance to Runyararo's identity but is not a knowledge that is ever passed on to her daughter Zhizha. Once again, it is Vera's firm commitment to the power of the creative process and her extraordinary ability to evoke beauty that allows Runyararo's weaving to be read as a positive and life affirming act.

In contrast, the possibility of lyrical emphasis overturning economic realities is not present in Vera's short story "Crossing Boundaries":

> They picked cotton on some of the plantations, and were paid by the bag at a miserly rate. The old man was about ten then, and had thought it fun at first to pick the delicate cotton buds, which would be turned eventually into cloth. Soon he realized the work was tiring, and that the few shillings they were given at the end of the day were not enough to cover their expenses. [. . .] They lived precariously along the fringes of the land, their souls barren of hope, and their vitality sapped by alienating labour. (CB 7-8)

Ilse Noy, Brenda Schmahmann and others have noted the considerable workload many Zimbabwean women take on with minimal support from husbands, brothers or fathers. Vera evokes this inequality in the image of a young boy, innocent enough to think that soft cotton cloth must come from soft cotton buds, rather than the back and skin breaking work the harvest is in reality. Furthermore, the planting of cotton as a cash crop was a colonial scheme which sent many families far from their homes to be relocated on barren land, severing ties with the customs of ancestor worship which held communities together.

Similarly, Vera reveals that Runyararo rises early each morning to weave while her husband continues to sleep. In the light of the early morning, her actions are a reminder of "her mother who had taught her about making mats. Her mother lived not too far from her, only a few streets away" (UT 90). While the traditional material for making the mats is of importance, Runyararo's mother insists that it is their creation, the fact that they are still being made, that is of greatest importance. "She said the mats could be made out of anything, even the plastic bags they found scattered in the township. It was the making of the mats which was important, the symmetry of mats, not their material" (UT 68). The healing rhythms of making are possibly of even greater importance than the object that is produced. The fact that the materials used are often a far cry from the mat's origins is regretful but does not justify an end to the craft. Regardless of material, the weavings as domestic graphologies convey not only a logic absent from the family structure but also an unspoken distortion which must be revealed before the possibility of Zhizha's recovery can become a reality.

The continued production of the mats is due in part to the makers' ability to adapt to a new landscape now littered with plastic. Nonetheless, the reeds used to weave the mats before the landscape was littered with plastic are significant. The original materials contain the memory of past weavings, of the women before them who sat and wove the mats with the same technique. The original materials are, when available, the cause of great joy, a reminder of easier times long gone. The narrator recalls, "But sometimes Runyararo and her mother found the true material for making mats, and this was a treasure to them. Then their fingers folded into the substance of memories. They bathed in the scent of an original place, a place away from the tight houses of Dangambvura where neighbours could hear each other snore, fight and dream" (UT 68). The original threads evoke a time of different values, before the cramped poverty in which the mats are now produced. Weaving allows Runyararo to escape, for a short time, the harsh realities she faces each day. While she weaves the fabric falls around her body like a cocoon:

> [T]he mat was like a heavy cloth that spread from her waist where she held it, over her thighs and legs, and nearly touched her feet. Her feet were bare. Her legs were curled modestly beneath the heavy cloth, the mat which was brown like the earth somewhere, *not here where the earth was black clay and closely held like a secret.* (UT 65, italics added)

Acting as a cocoon, the fabric releases a hidden, unspoken secret from her body. The rhythm of her work sinks into her body, to "release the something which had folded under her arms and upon her shoulders, a certain cloying tension. She felt her legs pull underneath the mat and she raised the mat and shook it away from her. It smelt like *something old, something not easily forgotten*" (UT 68, italics added). Wrapped in the protection of her own creation, an unspoken tension that haunts the family is, at least for the time that she is engaged with making, released. This unspoken secret is the history and future of abuse that her daughter endures. Despite the fact that Runyararo seems to have been spared the violation of incestuous abuse, the subject envelops her identity as mother and wife and violates both mother and daughter.

After weaving, Runyararo walks through town, determined to sell one mat in the morning. The journey through the dirt of the village is purposeful. Selling her mats, and protecting them in the meantime from the dirt of the pathways, is her sole intention:

> She walked through Dangambvura selling her mats which she had rolled and tied together. She would sell at least one of them, before the end of the morning. She walked carefully between the houses and darted among the children who were throwing mud at each other. She saw that mud had not fallen on her mat, and walked on. (UT 74)

It becomes apparent to her while walking through town that small changes are occurring in the world around her:

> Sometimes there was a new detail added to a house Runyararo had knocked on before on a day when she had been again selling her mats. This transformation was an attempt at restoring something lost and no longer recognizable. She saw stones placed in a straight row to surround a growing peach tree. She saw that a hedge had been cut, trimmed to evenness. (UT 75-76)

What Runyararo notices are the attempts, like her weaving, of others to control their own lives in whatever small way is available. The rearranged stones and the trimmed hedges are not simply mechanical acts of tidiness. Runyararo reads them as something far greater, she reads them with the same eyes that search the surface of the mats she has woven, a "transformation", an "attempt at restoring something lost and no longer recognizable" (UT 76).

Within the community of Dangambvura, women everywhere are expected to create and repair with meagre resources. Runyararo's efforts to sell her work are far from solitary. On land that has little to offer, livelihood is hard to come by. Other women work, "Their feet [. . .] swollen through hours of factory work, their fingers blistered, their waistlines frail to forgetting. There was nothing down here on this firm clay except a trickling desire caught between the tattered skirts of women who held large torn baskets over their heads and sold what they could, lived what they could" (UT 66). The firm clay, good for planting and harvesting little, is an indication that the lives described here are being eked out of miserly resources.

Wilson Harris suggests that, due to its rarity as a naturally occurring phenomenon, "symmetry may appear universal – may seek to pre-empt infinity – though they [examples of symmetry] may actually be no more than useful, sometimes brilliant, extensions and inversions of a binding prejudice or loyalty" (1983: 17). Such a reading of symmetry may help to explain the difficult sympathetic reading of Zhizha's father present in the text as a sense of early loyalty present in the marriage which is later tested to the point of breaking.

Runyararo's dedication to the tidying of unevenness and reordering of disorder may suggest a loyalty to her husband that was eventually broken when she came to understand the extent of his ability to disrupt the family. Runyararo protests to her own mother, "Did he not teach me silence, this husband, that a woman is not a man? I am silent. Just silence to speak my silence against the husband who is not a man but a lizard with a rotting stomach" (UT 31). This conversation occurs after Runyararo has taken matters into her own hands and killed her husband and will be imprisoned as punishment for the crime.

Zhizha does not learn a skill where material symmetry can be constructed, a knowledge that allows her mother a small section of life where control and order can be imposed. She has little time to consider the weaving of mats, consumed as she is by her experience of violation and her search for a word to expose her experience. Instead Zhizha's energies are directed to weaving a word, the right word said with enough conviction to communicate to the world her violation. As the very concept of domestic graphology reveals, this word may not represent naming in the conventional sense of communication but instead leaves open the possibility for alternative as yet unknown communications to be revealed. She explains, "I touch the wound on my knee: my scar, my hidden world. I bend my knee and my scar widens and curls beneath my knee. I pass my thumb gently over my scar. I hide the word I have woven" (UT 61). Weaving mats is Runyararo's solace; weaving words which expose in a new manner the name of the violation Zhizha has endured is the tradition she must inherit.

Textile theorist Janis Jefferies notes that cloth "invokes skin and memories of the tactile but it can also hide a wound" (2001: 3). Here Zhizha's wound is transferred from the site of rape to a less intimate region, the knee.[10] Vera's reworking of tradition accepts the less important position traditional crafts will play in the future and instead returns to the project of communication; the construction of a voice strong enough to bear the weight of what must be

[10] Admittedly, it is conceivable that her "broken knee" is yet another wound of her rape.

told. Here weaving offers a cathartic rhythm for Runyararo, the mother of daughter violated by her own husband. The future, for *Under the Tongue* at least, lies in the weaving of words. Zhizha observes, "the best words are those that are shared and embraced, those that give birth to other words more fruitful than themselves, stronger than themselves" (UT 16). I will return to this discussion of the need to share words in the fifth chapter through Grandmother's winnowing basket. In this section weaving as a structure for language as well as cloth offers Runyararo and Zhizha a map which assists in processes of recovery from the violations against the young girl's body. The fact that "incest" or "rape" are not terms that Vera ever uses within the text suggest that a single word, with all its connotations and preconceptions is not what either character are in search of. In an interview with Eva Hunter, Vera explains, "I always avoid certain vocabulary [. . .] voiding certain vocabularies forces me to find more suggestive language, or a more rhythmic, more lyrical tone, rather than simply a word to solve my problem. I try not to use one word that condenses the entire thing because it then limits all the nuances and subtleties of the moment or the thing, and those really are what I'm looking for, those intangibles" (84). For Zhizha recovery will arrive through a more complex expression, one which may in fact heal the victim without the knowledge of conventional sites of power even understanding its utterance. Methods of survival and healing such as First's domestic graphology do not always seek a voice that is universal but can, in moments such as these, find strength in the intimate and encoded types of expression which those sensitive to the pain are able to hear.

The Woven Vessel as Cradle and Grave: *Butterfly Burning*

The central character of *Butterfly Burning,* a young woman named Phephelaphi, has an unplanned pregnancy which, like Mazvita's in *Without a Name,* discussed at the end of this chapter, is the cause for violent action against her own body when she elects to reject her

body's creation and performs her own abortion. It is with a fibre of thorns rather than thread that the contradictions surrounding Phephelaphi's culminating actions in *Butterfly Burning* are charted through weaving. As Samuelson has noted in regards to Runyararo's weavings, the lyrical emphasis Vera uses to describe the abortion does much to dismantle common prejudices surrounding Phephelaphi's actions. Vera explains in an interview with Jane Bryce, speaking of the abortion scene in *Butterfly Burning*, "I want you to be *there*, I don't want you to hear about it, I want you to be a witness, which means taking part in what is happening each moment, as it happens. But I want to do it without crudity, with a certain elegance, so you feel you can still endure it and see beauty in it. And this beauty can only be in the language, I don't see where else it can lie" (222-223).

Phephelaphi's actions reject the assumption that the female body is subservient to its own fertility. The woven vessel Phephelaphi offers her unborn child is the embodiment of all the contradictions that saturate her actions:

> The thorns and the red petals wait together. She is standing on shaky legs near the bush weaving a cradle out of thorn. Her fingers bleed as she breaks each small branch, each tiny wing of shrub. The skin on her hands tears. She leaves the delicate blooms intact. She weaves a nest, a coarse cradle of thorn which she offers to the ground near her feet where a smooth agony flows. The cradle holds her flowing blood like a sieve. The grey and smooth sharpness of each thorn locks bravely into another and rests beneath her body, a tight nest, above it is the stretch of her body and its shiver toward light, beneath her the child, not yet, is released. (BB 103)

The structure Phephelaphi creates before ending her pregnancy acts as both a cradle and a grave for the life she terminates. The thorns and petals of the stems she weaves together offer a similar contradiction of beauty and pain existing on a single stem.

The contradictory functions of the vessel both as a container and an object that resolutely refuses to act as a container mirrors her own body, her ability to conceive and abort

the reality of her pregnancy. As textile practitioner and historian Kay Lawrence observes, "vessels that leak, like the sieve, can play on our anxieties about the dissolution of identity and suggest the impossibility of maintaining a permanently fixed and stable sense of self" (qtd. in Conroy 116). Phephelaphi's weaving subverts any notion of traditional maternal instinct as well as the feminine, passive connotations associated with the female production of cloth. Here the textile is constructed as a memorial. Unlike mending or making do, this particular weaving is an emblem of destruction. Rather than a domestic tool for family use, the thorn vessel is an object that celebrates Phephelaphi's existence as an individual capable of confronting harsh realities in order to preserve her identity as an individual. Phephelaphi believes the prospect of a career in nursing is part of her future. The termination of the life her body creates is an emboldened attempt to create a life for herself: a career which will offer economic independence and purpose outside the poverty she currently faces. Hence her destructive act is driven by a desire for progress. As Meg Samuelson notes, "The blood that pours over Phephelaphi's blank page is not the creative menstrual blood of *écriture feminine* but the deadly aftermath of a tortuous abortion; an abortion necessitated by androgynous society's control over women's fertility and demarcation of it in the realm of separate to other self-fulfilling practices. The only way that Phephelaphi, placed in the either/or dilemma of biological or creative fertility, can write herself onto this page is through the self-performed abortion, the closest she ever gets to the nursing career of which she dreams" (2002: 21).

Rather than the natural fibres of the land, Phephelaphi's synthetic petticoat stands out against the land, against the rhythms of decay and growth natural to the land. The pretty pink frills glisten but do not absorb or conceal the membrane of the aborted foetus. The nylon of her petticoat is an impenetrable, foreign import to both the land and her body. While a glimpse of petticoat lace peeking from beneath a woman's skirt is a generic and commonplace symbol of femininity, when it is smeared with "something viscous and impolite" it becomes a petticoat that refuses to function (BB 105).

> She reaches down and tucks the nylon petticoat between her thighs. [. . .] She receives each motion of her body and the liquid spreads over her arm, over the sliding nylon in her fingers, and the unborn child too small to be a child, just mingling within the nylon, something viscous and impolite amid the lace spreading along the hem, and the elastic gathering the nylon into pretty pink frills that glisten, shimmer, cupped in her hand. She closes her hand secretly. (BB 104-105)

Rather than conceal the body in modest privacy the petticoat is asked to absorb an act of intimate violence. The cloth rejects the task.[11] The sheer and impermeable petticoat offers nothing more than an attempt at impossible politeness. Instead, the glistening pink frills reveal the horror of Phephelaphi's reality.

In spite of the petticoat's dysfunction, clothing does not always betray Phephelaphi. In fact the cloth of her skirt, crushed under the weight of her pained body, offers her a sense of stability. After selecting the longest and strongest of thorns she can find, but before dropping to the ground, Phephelaphi removes some of her clothing. Undressing protects the cloth against telltale stains of sweat and blood, but also cushions her prostrate figure once the pain she knows to expect eventually washes over her body.

> [I]mmediately, she understands that this crushed cloth, though a hardness that has brought a continuous ache to her side, has become an anchor. An anchoring ache. She holds this unravelling cloth across her body as she attempts to rise from the ground with the petticoat and the warmth wedged securely between her legs. (BB 104)

Phephelaphi's woven vessel and her petticoat are textiles that resolutely refuse to function in the manner expected of them. Their lack of function foreshadows the futility of Phephelaphi's actions when her brutal attempt to secure an independent future for herself is foiled by her body's second pregnancy. The devastating reality of a second unwanted pregnancy causes Phephelaphi to finally take her own life along with her unborn child's in

[11] In contrast, *The Stone Virgins* depicts natural fibres that record life: "After the rain, the top layer of wet, partly decomposed thatch is the softest scent of living things that there is – it is life itself" (SV 15).

the closing chapters of *Butterfly Burning*. But as Robert Fraser suggests, Phephelaphi's final image in *Butterfly Burning* "is as if Phephelaphi has at least created from herself an aesthetic phenomenon worthy of her aspirations, the true expression of her colourful transience" (50).

Like Runyararo's weavings, Phephelaphi's response to her situation is manifest as a desire for order, for control over a body she believes has betrayed her hopes and aspirations. But while her actions are an effort to return order to her life, her clothes, split and torn form her body during the violent act, signal a continued sense of disorder. Like Zhizha's scarred "knee", Phephelaphi's torn and bleeding fingers reflect the torn and bleeding womb punctured inside her. The unravelling cloth warns of the failure her ambitious actions will eventually reveal. Fumbatha senses but is not told of her abortion and rejects her desire for independence. This knowledge is fatal to the relationship and possibly adds fuel to the fire of Phephelaphi's even more drastic actions against her own body when she learns of her second pregnancy. Confronted with Fumbatha's rejection, Phephelaphi decides to take her own life along with the second pregnancy in a suicide by immolation which is arguably also steeped in such lyrical language that empowerment and autonomy, rather than termination and death, are emphasised.

Inadequate Structures: Crochet and Knitting

Crochet and knitting both create web-like structures, the former with a centre that reaches out through space, the latter with a single thread that loops back on itself to create a fabric. In their analysis of fabric, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari observe the presence of a dialogue between the centre and the periphery of fabric as well as broader structures when they write that "crochet draws an open space in all directions, a space that is prolongable in all directions – but still has a centre" (476). In the context of Zimbabwe, both knitting and crochet are decidedly foreign textile techniques brought from the European "centre" to

southern Africa with early missionaries. In her study of various visual art forms in Zimbabwe Betty La Duke writes:

> The missionary legacy in Zimbabwe is twofold: In addition to the cross, the other visible but seldom discussed tool is the crochet hook. This tool has become a subtle means of encouraging women's passive creativity as they produced endless yarns of intricately designed white tablecloths and doilies for upper-class White and Black Africans and tourists. (117)

While Runyararo's weavings continue a traditional craft by adopting new, if less desirable materials, knitting and crochet are unequivocally missionary imports to Zimbabwe's craft tradition. This information assists to clarify Vera's use of two techniques which evoke, in her narratives, objects of questionable function and value.

The short story "An Unyielding Circle" in Vera's earliest collection of stories *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* describes a group of women as they crochet and knit:

> "You have your maize cobs," the woman said, resignedly. "And I have my knitted bedcovers."[12] It sounded simple, matter-of-fact, but the other woman felt the salty tears sting her eyes [. . .] "My knitted bedcovers," the woman laughed, and again the crochet rose mockingly to her face. "What can I cover with them?" she asked. "What can I hide with them?" But she heard no answer from her companion. Her fingers and her needles were caught in the holes of her crochet. The men were talking about the women they had thrown out of their homes. The men's boasts frightened the women, and they glanced at each other in understanding and sympathy for each other. [. . .]
>
> "At least you make money, when someone buys your covers. Is that not enough?" (UC 77)

[12] While knitting and crochet are not identical structures, they are conflated in Vera's text and will remain so for the purposes of my analysis. The structures are more similar than any others discussed and, perhaps more importantly, both have foreign roots and are imported into Zimbabwe's craft tradition.

The women who sell their produce in the local market, above the heads of the men in the nearby café, knit and crochet a meagre existence. "Behind the men and slightly over their heads, on a wire that runs round the market shed, crocheted bedcovers and tablecloths are spread like spider's webs" (UC 76). The placement of the women's fabric offered for sale frames the men eating maize and places the women's produce above that of male consumption. The passage offers a similar instance to that noted by Samuelson in regard to *Under the Tongue* and discussed in the first section of this chapter; the textile production is handled with great lyrical value, if not substantiated by economic value. As the title reflects, the solidarity present among the men who "are sitting in a circle passing a calabash of home-brewed beer, and singing loudly" presents an impenetrable circle of male power that is difficult to challenge with the yielding structures the women produce (UC 75).

Here the futility of the fragile forms hanging high in the air presents a domestic graphology of the degrading social movements back and forth between the male customers and the women serving maize and beer. If the structure of cloth, as Carole Cavanaugh notes, can suggest the transactions and exchanges that occur on its behalf, then these are transactions devoid of substance and function; interactions woven out of the same fragile inadequacy found in the tablecloths themselves (599). The women are acutely aware of the limited function of their own creations, and the meagre sums they earn selling their creations fail to justify the abuse they endure.

The domestic graphology of the tablecloths and bedcovers produced in an "Unyielding Circle" represents the women's limited opportunities. The textiles' value, or more precisely their lack of value in the market place, symbolically undermines the object's function. They are not appreciated for their lacy intricacy, but condemned for their lack of substance. The women work to create textiles in an environment that insists that their gender makes both them and their work valueless. The disregard with which the men treat them seeps from the buyer, the man with money and power, through the creator of the object and

into the very value of the object itself. Art critic Mireilla Perron warns, "the conflation of textile practices with infantile female sexuality (read: innocent and submissive) is an extremely resistant male metaphor" (123). Riddled with insubstantial connections, the gaps of the crochet pattern represent the abuses that occur in the textile's presence, the boasts of the men which place the women in their lives in precarious positions of little worth and under constant threat of exchange. The material function, economic value and the social relationships which occur as a result, all leave too much unprotected and uncovered in the loose intertwining of the pattern.

Compulsive Production[13]

In Vera's fiction, descriptions of textiles also undermine dominant discourses that associate cloth with sensible, albeit tedious, women's work. In *Butterfly Burning* a woman, identified only by the address of her house, rather than her name, turns from her husband's abuse to compulsive knitting:

> Zandile turned left into Thandanani Street and walked quickly past No. 62 Thandanani where she knew a woman whose husband sold her to another man for the value of a bicycle wheel but she refused to leave and instead, stood on that asbestos roof with no clothes at all to cover her own body and announced loud and clear that she preferred two bicycle wheels to one, and if anyone had two bicycle wheels to give her husband then she would leave not only the roof top but the house and foolishness of her husband. This No. 62 Thandanani woman could be seen outside her house any

[13] For an interesting example of a character's compulsive knitting that rails against traditional domestic associations in another short story from southern Africa, see Floss M. Jay's "Knitting Gloves". Depictions of graphic sexual encounters, a fantasy regarding her husband's castration and disgust of her child are framed by an odd dedication to the production of knitted cloth, which dismantles the conventional reading of textile production as a necessarily soothing or contemplative act that numbs the mind.

time of the day, knitting whatever she could, a full candle burning beside her whether it was morning or night. (BB 78)

The "No. 62 Thandanani" woman's knitting is unquestionably a response to her husband's abuse. Her refusal to be traded as part of the demeaning arrangement between two men turns into a public rejection of her husband's ownership and his misguided perception of his wife as a possession to be traded with another man. Demanding that she be bought for two bicycle wheels rather than one is a surreal assertion of her own worth, desperately worked out in the compulsive production of knitted cloth that she takes to knitting day and night. Her presence outside the house makes her actions visible to the whole community, although it is doubtful that she would have anywhere to go even if she wished to leave. Her relentless knitting reads as a desperate attempt to justify her value as a human being. As no children are mentioned in the scene, it can be assumed that the woman, either barren or married to an impotent man, has been blamed for her lack of "womanly" creation, her lack of child.

Art critic Robyn Daw points out:

> Through the repetition of a gesture a certain 'emptying out' of meaning occurs. No longer the isolated gesture, an indexical notion of artistic expression, it becomes one of many, demoted in importance, subservient to the object (which could not exist without them). When the object itself is repeated, another 'emptying out' occurs, the authentic object is questioned, its meaning doubled in terms of making, halved in terms of authenticity. Which one was first? Is the other a copy? (N.pag.)

The rhythms of knitting that occupy No. 62 Thandanani's time are a desperate attempt to justify her self-worth, but ironically undermine purpose in the compulsive extent of her repetitive gestures. In the final event the function and meaning are "emptied out" of the knitting through the exhaustive repetition of gesture. No. 62 Thandanani woman's actions also mark empty time, linking textile production to the time that is passing over an

unappreciated life. Vera's character marks the passage of time, rote production counting off the minutes and weeks of an unappreciated life.

In this environment the patches the full candle burning day and night is a symbol of flagrant waste, unnecessary to No. 62 Thandanani's daytime work. Furthermore she knit "whatever she could" (BB 78), not what was needed or what could be sold, but with everything and anything she can acquire. One imagines the woman knitting a piecemeal pattern of every fragment she can gather, the strings and threads scattered around her home, mixing the rotten with the clean, refuse from the street mixed with the threads she recycles from nearby objects to create an unending record of empty time. But rather than her compulsive and unwanted production it is her unclothed statement from the rooftop of her home that signals her insanity. This exhibition of nudity, one assumes, undermines her husband's offer to sell her to another man, as her physical body is no longer the intimate knowledge of her husband, but exposed to the entire community.

Visual artist Elaine Reichek explores themes of knitting and the body in a similar manner. Reichek reworks historical photographs of tribesmen by knitting giant suits in the colours of the traditional body paints shown in archival photographs, recreating scenes depicted in ethnographers' photographs with men wearing weird knitted outfits. The conflation of knitting with photography addresses the idea of translation and of different forms of communication. Reichek "translates" the ethnographer's photograph and, in doing so, highlights the manipulations and assumptions made by the original photographer by exaggerating the tradition of photography and the recording the ethnic "other" without naming or attributing. Jo Anna Isaak writes of Reichek's work:

> There is a flagrant and funny feminism weaving in and around Reichek's reworking of ethnographic, anthropological and museum practices. It is manifest most overtly in the female-identified medium of knitting, which she uses to reproduce documentary photographs of native peoples and their dwellings. Knitting is an "inappropriate" tool

> for this purpose – so unscientific, one of those typical feminine misunderstandings, as if some dotty old woman had gone on an anthropological expedition equipped with wool and knitting needles instead of a camera and notebook [. . .] it is as if she has taken literally Barthes' metaphor of the textuality of the text. (140)

The woman of No. 62 Thandanani, like the ethnographer's studies, is not important enough to name with anything more than the specimen-like number. Instead she is described by her location in space alone and embarks on a desperate desire to attain personal worth through knitting. As Isaak notes the work is entirely inappropriate: its quantity unnecessary, its materials lacking in function.

Here the rhythms of making are in a state of deterioration, but like Runyararo in *Under the Tongue*, Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning* and the women who crochet in "An Unyielding Circle", the rhythms of making are called upon to heal in an environment of pain and disregard. Healing is offered, in part, through the domestic graphologies that the structures of woven, crocheted and knitted textiles plot for their makers. The imported rhythms of making present in knitted and crocheted textiles are marginal in the economic value they command, or dysfunctional in the excessive quantities in which they are produced. In both instances the domestic graphologies they represent map the inadequacies of the social relations that occur in their presence.

The Subversive Stitch

Sewing, like the textile structures discussed previously, draws threads together. While weaving, crochet and knitting create cloth, sewing accumulates and assembles cloth. It can patch tears, bind fraying edges and assemble fabric into functional objects. Because of its connective function, sewing is often associated with security. It binds together scattered parts. Without it things fall apart at the seams. Feminist scholars have turned the

representation of sewing as a metaphor for security and unity inside out. Precisely because the act lends itself to notions of repair and construction, its absence or disruption presents a powerful image of disorder and weakness. Mireilla Perron writes, "[s]ewing becomes a feminist metaphor for editing in which the subversive stitch can be viewed as a motif that disrupts, or as a motivation to disrupt" (130). Perron's observation picks up the paradox revealed by Rozsika Parker's study of Victorian embroidery, *The Subversive Stitch,* in which Parker concludes that embroidery offered Victorian women an outlet to display creativity and skill, but also perpetuated the image of women as simple minded souls, content with hours of tedious activity: "What women depicted in thread became determined by notions of femininity, and the resulting femininity of embroidery defined and constructed its practitioners in its own image" (215).

The stitch is bound by qualities that both subvert and affirm its identity as women's work. Close beneath the action of repair is an intimate connection with its reverse: the motions of deconstruction and disrepair. On literal and metaphoric levels the stitch both mends and punctures a surface. Similarly, the sewing needle presents a contradiction. As Peter Hobbs observes, the sewing needle both "penetrates and is penetrated" (49). In order to pierce the fabric a strand of thread must first pierce the needle. In order to mend or bind an edge of fabric it first must puncture the surface, causing minute ruptures along the course it works to secure.

Pennina Barnett observes linguistic contradictions inherent in the words "stitch" and "embroider" because embroider is not only "to make splendid", but also "to besmear with dirt or blood" (11). Stitch means "to fasten together [. . .] by sewing" but also "a sharp sudden pain" (11). The damaged body, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, is intimately connected to alternative definitions of the terms. C.P. Jones makes the connection between stitch and stigma remarking, "[t]he Greek verb *stizein* [. . .] means 'to prick', and is related to the English *sting, stitch*, to the German *stechen* ('prick'), *sticken*

('embroider') [. . .] We can therefore safely understand the word *stigma* to refer to what we call tattooing" (4-5). Matthew Benedict in "Tattoo/Embroidery" similarly notes that, "[b]oth of these techniques, embroidery and tattoo, are executed with a needle which repeatedly punctures or breaks the "skin" or surface (when a piece of embroidery is being made, it is generally stretched taut, like skin, on some kind of frame), leaving behind it a track or trail in the form of a semi-permanent drawing which in neither case merely rests on the surface but is instead directly embedded in the structure" (N.pag.). In a similar way, Janis Jefferies notes that the term "selvedge" is seemingly composed of two words: the self and the edge. From this dichotomy Jeffries determines the selvedge to be both boundary and seam, a location of simultaneous connection and disconnection, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority (11). But as is noted by Daw:

> Seams/seems presents a paradox. Sounded aloud, it repeats itself, a rhythm of discrete phonemes that converge where the plural of one meets its illusion. As a title it plays with what we know: seam, a physical meeting point, a join, a juncture, a connection; and seem, an appearance, an apparent situation. (N.pag.)

Such observations embrace both the common, securing elements of sewing and its disruptive, subversive connotations. As a result, the metaphor of thread and stitch has come to be associated in equal parts with repair and with damage.

In Vera's fiction the metaphor of sewing binds, as its traditional function would assume, but, is eventually disrupted and unravelled. In *Butterfly Burning* an unnamed character is driven to suicide by the rejection of her lover. Her chosen method of death is to swallow a sewing needle, complete with the thread still threaded through the eye of the needle:

> A man she cared for had not smiled back when she did, not touched her wrist on the pulsing wanting spot she asked him to, not come back home one night, and the many nights that followed [. . .] It was known by her best friend that she had swallowed a

sewing needle before going to bed, all two inches of it, and followed it with water. She had left the thread on the needle hanging out of her mouth. Those who viewed the corpse said it would have been a better sight to tuck this piece of unfortunate thread under the woman's dead lips before the body was buried. (BB 76-77)

The suicidal puncture damages an unknown interior cavity in the woman's body to cause a deadly wound. Just as Hobbs notes that the needle is at one and the same time a tool used to puncture and a hole that must be penetrated, the woman's mouth acts as the eye of the needle as it ingests the needle and thread, but is also punctured internally by a fatal stitch.

The telltale thread still dangling from the woman's mouth acts as a reminder of the physical cause of her death, the needle deep inside her body. The clipped thread, dangling without purpose is symbolic of this woman's failure to secure her relationship with the man she desired. Furthermore, the conspicuous thread stands for all the words her absent suicide note did not explain. The onlookers' desire to tuck away this final whisper of her voice would have ensured that her silence lived on. Like Zhizha's search for a woven language to express her violation, the unspoken burden of pain is conveyed through the thread. Without the telltale thread, the dead woman's voice would have gone unheard forever. Instead the thread allows us to witness the cause of her insurmountable pain, her tragic lack of connection with the man she loved.

Zandile, the local prostitute, remembers and retells the story as a piece of gossip and is haunted by the image of the dangling thread. She offers no explanation for the suicide either, as though the manner in which the woman ended her life and the telltale thread speaks for itself. Along with the thread of the suicide note, the flesh of the body also appears to Zandile as a fabric stitched with the traces of pain. Observing the bodies of the black men she chooses to sleep with at night after working as a prostitute for white men during the day, she sees the pain of her night-time lovers inscribed on their skin:

> Zandile brings her head down to the armpit and gathers what she can of the histories of her men [. . .] Close to the ribbon of seared skin she seeks the story with her eyes and lets it be, but wonders about the missing flesh, where it has fallen to and how. Further down are deep tooth marks buried behind the legs. Police dogs and chains. The ankles are blistered, the wrists embroidered with the shame of constant struggle. (BB 34)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word suture as "a joining of a wound or the like by stitching or some similar process". Further definitions include "a seam formed by sewing" and "to unite". But rather than a suture or a mend, the scars that line the men's bodies signify absence. The ribbons and chains of scars trace absent flesh. The tears and holes of skin eventually bind with scar tissue to close the skin back together. What Zandile observes is not embroidery that "makes splendid" but rather a skin "besmeared with dirt and blood", linguistic contradiction that Barnett notes as inherent in the term. The embroidered wrists are the joining of wounds caused by an utter disregard for the sanctity of a human life.

Zandile's observations offer little hope for the future because her survival is determined by living from one moment to the next. In contrast, Phephelaphi desires something more than mere survival from her life. When she discovers that she has fallen pregnant she makes a desperate attempt to return her life, and her body, to the path she was originally seeking. The ambiguous vessel she weaves to hold the foetus, discussed in the first section of this chapter, embodies the contradictory nature of her actions. Several threads frame the act and signify hope. As she undresses before performing the abortion, "a black button falls. A memory falls" (BB 101). She is "naked except for the weight of her own suffering, the weight of courage" (BB 101). Phephelaphi describes her actions as the "willed loss of her child. Willed, not unexpected. Expected, not unwilled" (BB 107). Connections have come undone. Zips are broken. Seams are torn. Buttons are missing. But repair is still possible. Phephelaphi sees her abortion as constructive action: "The remaining thread hangs

on the fabric where the button had been secured. Already she plans to move the last button on the blouse to the top of the garment. This action will change how she feels, now, in the midst of her confusion" (BB 108). Phephelaphi recognizes in the empty thread and missing button the opportunity, in some small way, for recovery. These sentiments are also reflected in her dishevelled appearance that she plans to tidy later. "The material is wrinkled. This too she remembers. The mess and untidy chaos. This whole action had been about tidying up. Ordering the disorder" (BB 108). At the moment when her every movement is saturated with a desire to unravel the unintended consequences of her previous actions, the loose thread gestures towards the future. The fact that she can focus on such a detail and plan its repair is an acknowledgement that hope and recovery are still within her grasp.

In these examples the conspicuous absence of function that the stitch embodies offers an explanation for the lives that have come undone in its presence. Without the telltale thread still visible from the suicide victim's mouth no explanation for her actions would be available. The embroidered flesh of the men Zandile sleeps with similarly acts as maps of the pains they have endured. Finally, Phephelaphi's missing button and dangling thread not only represent the unravelling of an unwanted pregnancy but also signal the chance of recovery and hope for the future. Phephelaphi's ability to make note of small sites of damage and plot their repair suggests her belief that her abortion was a constructive rather than destructive act. Again, the domestic graphology is present. Loose, unconnected and damaged threads chart the loose, unconnected and damaged lives around them. Lives whose problems go unnoticed or ignored by the male characters, but are charted and recorded between women.

The Stitch of Motherhood in *Without a Name*

Without a Name tells, in reverse chronology, of Mazvita's act of infanticide. Mazvita's decision to destroy the life her body has created is driven by several factors.

Perhaps most important is her total lack of economic independence, which severely limits the options available to her. She is financially, as well as emotionally, unable to support the life her body has created. While her arrival in Harari is motivated by a desire to experience new freedoms for herself, she finds that reality offers her little more than a constant struggle to find any manner of paid work. The relationship she begins with Joel is initially refreshing in its lack of commitment and formality but it also turns, with stifling similarity, into a situation in which she commands very little power. Learning of her pregnancy, Joel calculates that he is not the father and is adamant in his rejection of both her and her child. Finally Mazvita's experience of rape by a freedom fighter, described early in the narrative, causes her to question the loyalties of the land on which her violation occurred. While this transfer of blame from an individual to the more general concept of land may read as a form of escapism from the carnal reality of her violation, this transfer expresses her utter distrust of the world around her and the "liberation" her country is fighting to attain. She is acutely aware that the soil of the nation she inhabits has, and will, offer her and her child little chance of survival.

Mazvita's child is not specifically described as the product of rape but is instead suggested to be the child of Nyenyedzi, a farm worker who sees his own identity as inextricably linked to the land, even if it is land that he does not own. Nonetheless the destructive ramifications of Mazvita's violation cannot be underestimated in light of her later actions. The rapist is described as stealing rather than offering life, a position she herself will elect when confronted with the burden of raising the child alone. The rapist is described as, "whisper[ing] as though he offered her life, in gentle murmuring tones, unhurried, but she felt his arms linger too long over her thighs, linger searchingly and cruelly, and she knew that if there was life offered between them, it was from herself to him – not offered but taken" (WN 28). Unable to remember the face of her violator, Mazvita "transferred the hate to the moment itself, to the morning, to the land, to the dew-covered grass that she had felt graze tenderly against her naked elbow in that horrible moment of his approach" (WN 30). While

she concedes to hating the man and the "longing in the breathing" above her, she believes that "mostly, she hated the land that pressed beneath her back as the man moved impatiently above her, into her, past her" (30). Thus, Mazvita turns her anger to the land that literally supported her rape, the land that witnessed but did not protect her from the violation.

While Mazvita never mentions her rape to either Nyenyedzi or Joel, the experience causes her to consider the land in a fundamentally different manner to Nyenyedzi, who is unable to leave the land despite the compromised position he assumes, working in employment which offers him little in return for the hours of labour he performs. In an interview with Eva Hunter Vera explains, "Mazvita is raped by a freedom fighter, and this goes against the narrative of heroism of those who are going to liberate everybody. If anything the rapist denies her what is essential to her, which is her body and herself and her own particular search" (1998: 79-80). It is only after Mazvita leaves Nyenyedzi and follows her "own particular search" to the city that she learns she is pregnant. Like Phephelaphi, Mazvita is unprepared for motherhood, an identity that stands in direct contrast to the aspirations she has for her life in the city. But unlike Phephelaphi, Mazvita's unplanned pregnancy leaves her burdened with a child her partner at the time suspects and refuses to accept. After Mazvita decides to end her child's life, she carries the corpse bound to her back. The cloth she purchases for this role is a stiff white fabric that hangs in the breeze. The cloth is "opened very wide, and the wind blew on one side of it, and it curved inward as though in anticipation of the baby" (WN 9). The landscape, from Mazvita's expectant body to the wind blowing the cloth into a cradling billow, waits to embrace the child she has with her. For a woman in Mazvita's situation, the purchase is a genuine expense. "She had regretfully unfolded four lonely silver coins from a dirty handkerchief held in a crumpled lump between her fingers" (WN 11). The fact that these actions occur "in the middle of a busy and indifferent street" mirrors the lack of support her partner in the city, Joel, has offered her and the hopelessness that motivates her actions (WN 11).

Mazvita makes her purchase with care, choosing an apron "made of strong cotton material. In this matter, Mazvita was not going to take any chances" (WN 11). While the term apron is commonly associated with a fabric that absorbs stains and deflects them from the surfaces of more important clothing worn underneath, this apron secures and binds the child's corpse closer to Mazvita's own skin. Rather than acting as a barrier, the apron acts as a splint for Mazvita's misshapen body which is discussed in the following section on knots. What is important here is the apron itself, the underside of which is "heavily stitched turning it into a firmly padded support. The back was starched, cracked like bark" (WN 9). Here the textile must compensate for the failures of the flesh and blood body. When the body has borne more than it can bear, as is Mazvita's case, cloth is introduced both as compensation and explanation for the failures of the body.

The stitched thread at the edge of the apron cloth reveals part of what has brought Mazvita to her current situation:

> Somewhere the white thread had run out and the tailor had employed a black thread. This black thread ran frantically through the borders of the white apron, zig-zagging. It was meant to be endearing, but the suddenness of the contrasting thread held the eyes in a furrowed gaze. It was truly surprising. (WN 9)

The mismatched stitching of the seam is a blatant act of carelessness. Reminiscent of the "busy and indifferent street" where Mazvita purchased the cloth, the mismatched thread is a reminder of the hasty work that likely went into making the apron. Like Phephelaphi's intention to repair the lost button on her blouse, the care with which Mazvita chooses the tough fabric of the apron is indicative of her desire to repair the wound she carries.

But the apron's hasty replacement of white thread with black reveals a contradictory gesture of thrift and carelessness. The thread's colours, black and white, implicate the racial tension many Rhodesians were forced to endure and the accompanying economic

inequality.[14] When Mazvita eventually places her child's body in the cloth she has purchased she accepts with much dismay the presence of the careless seam: "The baby lay encased within the embroidered stitching. The baby was sewn up there. She could not do much about the wild stitching though her heart rose against it" (WN 18). Mazvita's heart rises against more than a simple flaw or oversight. The shoddy workmanship, bought at great expense to her, signifies the extent of her disempowerment through poverty. The play between the black and white thread also alludes to the colour of her skin in a world ruled by discrimination and thus one of the reasons for her poverty.[15]

The sewing machine that carelessly added the black thread to the edge of Mazvita's white apron is an important tool that allows sewing to become swift and economical. Ranger, writing of punishment meted out to youth who committed crimes during the guerrilla war years leading up to Zimbabwe's independence writes, "in one instance the parents of a youth who had abducted and raped a young girl were forced by the Zapu committee to pay her parents a sewing machine compensation" (2000: 165). Small compensation by today's standards, but the gesture points to the value of the machine as a source of the owner's livelihood. In *Under the Tongue* Grandmother's sewing machine is an important source of pride, even though the tool often refuses to serve in the manner intended:

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[14] Penny Ludicke offers a similar reading of the black thread and white apron. She writes, "It is the child in the novel who is 'without a name', who is born and remains in silence, carried firmly in a white apron symbolic of the colonial regime which has tied and sewn up the children of the indigenous peoples into a constricted silence. The only individual characteristics allowed are represented by the erratic black zigzag stitching on the apron which signifies a people divorced from their heritage and traditions of language, custom and land" (72).

[15] Carolyn Martin Shaw in "The Habit of Assigning Meaning: Signs of Yvonne Vera's World" in *Sign and Taboo* analyses the presence of black and white throughout Vera's fiction and concludes that, "White, the colour of beauty, of light, is often associated with butterflies, which share some of the same characteristics. [. . .] White can mean purity, though not purity in the sense of chastity and virginity, rather purity as in symmetry of form, without impediment. [. . .] 'Black' is harder to track in Vera's works for she seldom uses the term. She writes of black people, people of the soil, and of the dark soil itself, lyrically, but without romanticism. [. . .] In *Nehanda* the opposition of white colonialists and black indigenes is starkly captured in Vera's use of two different styles of writing. Descriptions of whites have a linear clarity seldom found in Vera's works. The thoughts and actions of whites appear purposeful, instrumental and superficial, whereas blacks are inscrutable: each action has double meanings or more, and people speak in parables. The destinies of black people are not controlled by the desires of whites nor by the will of blacks, but are beyond the rational world. In the structural opposition of black and white, black stands for oppressed life and white for repressed sexuality. In her later works, where the white world of work represents escape and self-fulfillment, Vera creates no white characters and expands the category of black that is no longer marked in opposition to white" (28).

> On the table sits the rusty sewing machine. Grandmother oils it, dabs margarine over it, polishes it with a small cloth held tightly between her fingers. She makes it run a few stitches, then the thread sulks and breaks. She mends an old dress. Often she just threads the needle. The thread moves through many different hooks before reaching the needle. Grandmother is very careful tracing the path. She bites off the end of the thread, smoothes it with her tongue, rolls it gently between her fingers, then holds it quietly through the needle. She tries twice, tries three times. (UT 24-25)

The sewing machine dates both Grandmother and the narrative, the ease with which Grandmother follows the path of the thread and cares for the well-oiled cogs is knowledge specific to an aging generation. Her difficulty in threading the needle and her intimate knowledge of the complicated path the thread must travel from bobbin to needle assert her knowledge and control of the machine, while acknowledging her own and the machine's decline due to age.

Like the sewing machine, the zigzagging black thread of Mazvita's apron is personified; thread "sulks" before breaking, then "turns frenziedly when the machine is moving" (UT 24 – 25). It is not simply rotten or cheap thread, it is sulky thread. It is disruptive thread, unable to function as desired. The fact that Grandmother often threads the needle of the machine but nothing more is symbolic of her effort to be productive in an environment that offers her limited opportunities. Zhizha, the granddaughter, is both curious and respectful of the machine. She investigates the object carefully, but sewing and weaving are not skills passed onto Zhizha. Instead she chants the brand name of the sewing machine, "Singer", like a child intrigued with a new word rolling from her tongue. "Across the bottom of the large black handle, in gold: S i n g e r. Sometimes I remove the cover very cautiously, my heart beating rapidly: S i n g e r. I run outside" (UT 25). Zhizha's scattered movements away from the object reveal her own limited knowledge of the craft. Submerged in her own

private struggle, Zhizha makes words rather than cloth in an effort to describe the physical damage she has endured.

Finally, in *The Stone Virgins,* loose threads signify terrible damage caused by physical mutilation. *The Stone Virgins* is a story of survival and the horrors of violence. Divided between pre and post-independence Zimbabwe into sections dated "1950-1980" and "1981-1986", the narrative tells the story of two sisters, Nonceba and Thenjiwe and their brutal attack and rape. Their attacker, Sibaso, is likely a former nationalist guerrilla who, along with many others who were dissatisfied with the results of independence, terrorized the inhabitants of rural Matabeleland in the 1980s. Thenjiwe does not survive the attack. Her sister Nonceba's lips are cut off, but she does survive the attack, leaving the rest of the narrative to chart her journey to a semblance of physical and psychological recovery. This recovery is assisted in part by Cephas, a man who introduces himself to Nonceba as her sister's lover. During the attack, Sibaso, "tears the sleeve off her dress and it falls to her elbow and hangs uselessly, white threads dangle from her shoulder and fall inside her elbow" (SV 64). Knowing the physical brutality of the attacker, these white threads read like sinews as much as threads; strings of the body's muscles and tendons torn apart in a terrible violence against her body. The threads, the connections of the body, are torn apart with such cruelty that repair becomes a distant doubtful reality. From the Bulawayo hospital where Nonceba has miraculously held onto life, she awakes from a stupor of pain and medication. "I move my arms, murmuring, my mouth stiff, as though sewn up, stitched like a hem of a dress, folded; heavy with numbness [. . .] My mouth has no words, shrivelled. The thread going in and out of me will eventually fall off" (SV 113 - 114). Alongside the torn muscles and tendons which reveal threads of their own, threads that the original *usaru* suture was invented to mend, are further threads of sutures, the threads that bravely attempt to reconstruct Nonceba's body and that will dissolve in time, when their task is complete. Historically, spinning in Zimbabwe developed first as a way to make thread for sutures. The Shona word *usaru*, meaning thread,

was used medically for the stitching of wounds (Ruwitah 32). As a result there is a relationship between thread and suture, skin and cloth, torn and stitched cloth and skin. The "in and out" of threading and weaving, are spoken of again when Nonceba bravely begins her life outside the hospital. Dressing in her dead sister's clothes Nonceba notices the "wool threaded together, in and out" of her sister's dress (SV 126). Two lives, which have cruelly been torn apart, can never entirely be separated. Nonceba's closeness to the threat of her own death as well as the reality of her sister's and her own subsequent relationship with Cephas run like threads connecting the memories of the two women together.

Here the stitch is graphically required to piece together, to construct anew and repair. Rather than any subversive intent, the stitch marks the terrible damage to skin and muscle that must be reassembled by the body. This recovery is closely linked to Nonceba's mental recovery and her ability to move beyond the loss of her sister.[16] Hence the thread that moves in and out of Nonceba and the clothes she borrows from her dead sister link their experience of violence as a component to Nonceba's physical as well as psychological recovery. Vera draws on metaphors of thread and stitch to represent the absence rather than presence of connections. Here the rhythms of making are torn apart and disconnection and isolation triumph. It is through the use of a commonly connective metaphor that Vera is able to convey the tragic weight of the disconnected, isolated and ruptured lives of her characters.

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[16] Mary Lou Emery, interpreting a similar imagery within the writings of Wilson Harris, notes: "As Penelope [Harris's resurrected Penelope] states, 'The coat never quite fits. Always a sleeve or a fluid stitch that's out of joint.' Saying this she lifts her arm to reveal 'the faint but indelible colour of bruises on the soft, bright flesh.'" Emery interprets Penelope's "flawed and out of joint pattern" as a representation of violation. (100, 102)

Knots

> She [Mazvita] knew nothing of arrivals, only departures. She knew about departures because she had mistaken them for beginnings. [. . .] A part of her said there were beginnings, in both directions. (WN 42)

The knot is the simplest structure used to connect fabric together. More immediate and less permanent than the weave or stitch, knots are equally as quick to secure as they are to undo. Textile historians Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt note, "For women, the meaning of sewing and knotting is 'connecting' – connecting the parts of one's life, and connecting to other women – creating a sense of community and wholeness" (5). In contrast, in Vera's narratives the function of the knot is like that of the stitch, the inversion of its commonly associated role. While its place and purpose is to bind together, the presence of the knot seems to refer more to its opposite, the desire to untie and undo. Perhaps it is the impermanence of the structure which creates this tension. A knot can casually bind a shopping bag or scarf closed but is easily undone when it is no longer needed. When understood as a domestic graphology, the knot represents a site of tension, a location where a battle between chaos and order takes places.

In *Butterfly Burning,* the local shabeen is run by Deliwe, a woman whose headscarf is tied by a knot that keeps her plans in place. As a character Deliwe is ruthless, lacking in compassion and unlikely to conform to what is expected of her. She is out to take care of herself. But while her bold, outspoken actions present us with a woman who doubts nothing, the small detail at the nape of her neck embodies her own personal struggle to keep things intact:

> A red scarf was always tied over her hair, not because she was modest enough to cover her white hairs. No. She had no white hairs. She had to keep her head covered

because she was busy. The knot at the back of her head kept all her plans together. (BB 51)

In a world where women have little opportunity to live independently, Deliwe's knot signifies ambition rather than vanity. Her covered hair and the bundle at the back of her neck are held in place because she cannot afford to let her thoughts and actions go astray. The knot at the nape of her neck is a site where chaos is ordered. The uncontrollable and inexplicable are brought under control and bound away tidily in one swift gesture.

Tim Porges notes that hair "becomes a paradigm for all our discoveries of inattention; for remembering" (26). Hair will be discussed in fuller detail in the following chapter, but with regard to knots that bind hair, it is enough for the moment to note that hair is alive, always attempting to escape the confines in which it is captured. The knots in Deliwe's hair in *Butterfly Burning* and Grandmother's hair in *Under the Tongue* tie loose ends together and secure the small living parts of life that are within each character's reach. Hildi Hendrickson observes: "While the tying of clothing is metaphorically linked with marriage and reproduction and with the initiation of relationships and social statuses, untying speaks of relationships severed and death, when the deceased's clothes are given away" (9-10). In *Under the Tongue* Zhizha describes her Grandmother's head as "frighteningly bare" (UT 29). Grandmother's hair is knotted and scraped back from the edges of her face to keep the strain and emotion of her life away from the surface of her face and voice. "She has thick black hair held together by white thread in tight knots that pull the hair from her forehead, drawing at her eyebrows. The white thread twists through her head. Her voice is knotted, unable to breath" (UT 29). Both hair and voice are choked, unable to let a breath or the breeze brush through their strands.

Grandmother's voice is choked with the knowledge of incest her granddaughter has endured and the murder her own daughter has committed as punishment for her husband's crimes. Grandmother's own marriage is not based on kindness or compassion. Her knotted

head is, like Runyararo's weavings, a valiant attempt to pull a sense of order back into place. Her knots constrict her breath and her tongue from speaking of the pain she has both experienced personally and witnessed in other women. Later a "black scarf falls from her head to her shoulders and she knots it again in one quick motion back across her forehead", each gesture a swift motion that pins the escaping strands back in an order that is within her reach (UT 44).

In *Butterfly Burning,* Zandile, a prostitute, places her own body in the constricting loop of a corset. The corset pulls her aging back upright and returns her image to one of beauty and order. Despite her circumstances, Zandile is the figure of control, chaos tamed: "Everything is where it is expected. No tear on the blouse, and the wide figure of the belt is observed sitting neatly, cutting along the waist. Underneath the clothing a corset does what it can to hold and keep the back straight" (BB 33). Zandile's exterior image is important not only to her profession as a prostitute, but also represents her own battle to impose order where disorder reigns, as she chooses to confront her painful existence.

In *Without a Name* Mazvita's unplanned pregnancy leaves her burdened with the child fathered by Nyenyedzi, the man she left behind for life in the city. Joel, her partner at the time she learns she is pregnant, reacts with indifference to her pregnancy, a rejection that signals to Mazvita the precariousness of her situation. The stitching of the apron in which she carries the child's corpse, mentioned in the previous section, reflects the poverty caused by racial discrimination. The manner in which she elects to kill her child can be understood as yet another effort to order disorder. Recreating the "first knot" noted by Giorgia Volpe and Mariette Bouillet as the umbilical cord (37), Mazvita uses knots to prevent her child from seeing. Later, a knot is looped into a noose around the child's small neck and then used to bind the apron she has purchased across her own empty belly and breast. But, before discussing any further Mazvita's use of the "first knot", it is necessary to understand the

structure of her body. Once this has been established, I hope it will be clear why Mazvita's use of the knot is an attempt to reconnect with her child.

Research published by the Southern African Research and Education Trust has shown that when investigating crimes of infanticide, abortion, baby dumping and attempted suicide in Zimbabwe, culpability and blame rest squarely on the shoulders of the female involved, regardless of circumstances. The acknowledgment of rape, incest, mental abuse and the financial or psychological pressure of widowhood are systematically ignored by the courts when the verdicts of such cases are determined.[17] As a result, the female body is legally determined, regardless of circumstance, to be "in the wrong".[18] The simple presence of the female body determines and assures guilt.

In *Without a Name* Mazvita's act of infanticide[19] is a depiction, through the language of fiction, of the very statistical facts published by the Southern African Research and Education Trust. Mazvita's body is a physical site of crisis, a structure on the brink of collapse, unable to support its own skeleton and therefore unable to nurture the life of another. Rape and an unplanned pregnancy aggravate Mazvita's fractured sense of the world. Scarry's concept of pain remaining outside language determines, at least in part, the formation of Mazvita's "whole silent body" (WN 4). Philosopher Cathryn Vasseleu addresses the complicated legal matter of mother and foetal rights when she writes:

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[17] Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust conclude that: "These are crimes that are motivated in many cases by adverse socioeconomic conditions and by lack of appropriate education and knowledge [. . .] Women's sexuality is a resource that they must be able to control and not have it arbitrarily controlled through a centralized process of attempted regulation and ex post facto criminalization" (154).

[18] Again, Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Trust conclude, "draconian rules against pregnant women pursuing education create the climate for abortion and infanticide" (16).

[19] Rino Zhuwarara, in his survey *Introduction to Zimbabwean Literature in English,* analyzes the short story from Vera's *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* entitled "Whose Baby Is It?" Zhuwarara makes every effort to read the short story outside popular legal discourse. He writes, "The implication here, and this is the main point of the story, is that women do not simply rush to dump their babies as a result of moral indifference and carelessness on their part as is often portrayed in newspapers and magazines. The latter, together with society, often rush to condemn baby dumping and criminalize those who do it without pausing to reflect on why such situations arise in the first place. Consequently, the story, while not condoning baby dumping, is inviting readers to think more about the nature of a society in which such horrific incidents occur and the underlying causes" (276).

> Maternal subjectivity as opposed to ethical responsibility is based on being *held hostage in the paradigm of responsible motherhood.* Any deviation from the paradigm slides into an adversarial relationship in which the humanity of the infant is pitted against feminine autonomy. This construction of the maternal relation is perhaps most apparent in legal issues, which consider the relation in terms of the designation of autonomy and responsibility. For example, in instances where women have been found culpable of damaging their unborn children, the foetuses have been effectively construed as innocent victims, held as hostages rather than accommodated in their (hostile) mothers' wombs. (103, italics added)

Mazvita's actions disrupt the notion that the female body must remain hostage to a paradigm of responsible motherhood. Assumptions that the female identity is always fertile, protective and instinctively nurturing are challenged. While infanticide is an act of violence against another body, a child's, it is for Mazvita also the death of her own identity as mother. In this way the action can be seen as suicide rather than murder, the killing of a version of herself she could not afford to keep alive.

Margrit Shildrick notes of the "normal" body:

> The so-called normal and natural body is then an achievement, a model of the proper where everything is in its place and the chaotic aspects of the natural are banished. It is a body that requires unceasing maintenance and/or modification to hold off the constant threat of disruption [. . .] the normal body is materialized through a set of reiterative practices that speak to the instability of the singular standard. (80)

The concept of a normal body is a standard used to patrol and coordinate identity but it is ultimately a constructed rather than natural occurrence. Mazvita's body in particular is unable to sustain the singular standard of expected normality:

> Her neck was twisted. A bone at the bottom of her neck told her that her neck had been turned and turned till it could no longer find a resting place. Her neck had been

broken. She felt a violent piercing like shattered glass, on her tongue she carried fragments of her being [. . .] The lump lay between her ear and her shoulder. She felt it growing there in repeated outward pushes. She had no doubt that all her body was moving slowly into that lump, that she would eventually turn to find her whole being had abandoned her, rushed into that space beside her neck, for she heard voices there. (WN 3-4)

The lump on Mazvita's throat symbolizes several things. The fact that she feels herself choking on her own saliva, unable to take breath or swallow, indicates her inability to communicate her position to others. Her broken neck, throbbing cyst and inability to stand upright represent the mental pain of her actions as well as the physical pains of her unwanted pregnancy. Her own pained body is also an indication of the pains her infant felt as it was being murdered, giving us, through Mazvita, a sense of her child's pain as well as her own.

The burden of mental anguish and physical pain is left outside language. Instead the body becomes a projection of these sensations, both for Mazvita and her child. Because the lump on Mazvita's neck and the growth of her pregnancy bear an uncanny resemblance, the pulsing growth of disease and the contractions of her unwanted pregnancy are easily conflated. The lump on her neck, something diseased and unwanted, is a reminder of her own pregnant belly, an image which remains conspicuously absent throughout the narrative. This transfer of descriptive evidence away from the literal site on the body to another site illuminates the powerlessness Mazvita experiences because of her rape and, later, her unplanned pregnancy.

Away from the sanitised, anaesthetised, institutionalised norms of so-called developed nations, mental and bodily deformity take on a far more public part of life. It may be more comfortable and thus accessible to read Mazvita's body through the idea of a symbol, making her an object onto which the pains and trials of her life have been inscribed. The difference between a symbolic and a literal reading may matter little in the final event as a mixture of

both can occur without loosing narrative impact. As Vasseleu explains, "Neither subject nor object, but implicated in both, flesh is itself that which offers its body to biology as a thematizable object, or to art as an aesthesiological consciousness" (28). Vasseleu's joining of art and biology appears in Mazvita's physical description, where her mental condition appears on her physical self. It is important to note that Mazvita's condition is only spoken through the narrator's voice, unnoticed by those around her. Mazvita's body, the vessel in which cysts and splinters reside, is the product of a world that cares little for her body in life or death. The absence of any concern expressed by those around her reveals Mazvita's condition to be a projection of unspeakable pain which becomes unbearable precisely because of her sense of isolation.

Mazvita's failure to articulate her experience outside her body is also described as a loss of centre. Such an image is part of the quintessential post-modern, postcolonial identity; uprooted and torn from the past, edited out of the future, pushed to the margins or boundaries of the present. For Mazvita it also relates to her unwanted pregnancy, an experience commonly associated with an incumbent sense of purpose and value associated with the centred, maternal self:

> Whatever she swallowed moved to one side of her body. She had lost her centre, the centre in which her thoughts had found anchor. She was amazed at how quickly the past vanished.
>
> The lump had swallowed her thoughts, she decided. She blamed this lump on her inability to think clear thoughts. (WN 3)

Shildrick addresses bodily deformity when she writes, "It is the corporeal ambiguity and fluidity, the troublesome lack of fixed definition, the refusal to be either one thing or the other that marks the monstrous as a site of disruption" (78). In Mazvita's case, the corporeal monstrosity occurs in its refusal to be named as fertile or diseased, self-inflicted or innocently conceived. This refusal is due in part to the fact that the voice which commands the power to

name is not the voice of first hand experience but rather the predominantly male voice of arenas such as politics, medicine and, as a result, economic empowerment.

Mazvita's inability to communicate the tragedy of her pregnancy and the rape she has endured appears as fragments on her tongue. Her inability to articulate her experience is revealed as a somatic record on her body. Mazvita's inability to swallow, to draw moisture down her throat means that she is choked by her own silence and offers a further reading for the substance of the lump that haunts her side. Rather than a symbol of the pregnant belly which remains outside the reader's view, the lump on the side of her neck could be saliva rather than disease or foetus. This choked communication has allowed her voice to circulate on a closed pathway inside herself. Instead of ingesting air, breathing out words, swallowing to soothe the throat and begin again, Mazvita's system of circulation had become blocked by its own nourishment, drowning in the saliva that is sent to moisten and facilitate the act of speaking. A final example of Mazvita's damaged self is her apparent loss of vision:

> She walked. She walked sideways, because her left shoulder leaned forward. It was her broken side. Her bones spread in splintered fragments, across her back. She leaned farther sideways and felt, once more, her bones fall against each other. Her bones built a mountain on her back.
>
> Mazvita. Her back was broken. [. . .] She had surrendered her sight when she heard the violent breaking on her back. She had relieved herself of sight because it would be easier to be blind and still journey forward [. . .] The ritual was fulfilling and complete.
>
> After all she had injured herself irreparably, she could not hurt beyond the hurting so hurtful. (WN 35)

Mazvita's irreparable injury is in reality the injury she inflicts on her child's body rather than her own. The murder of her child symbolizes an irreparable damage to her psyche which the birth has caused:

> She felt the baby fall in a lump into her hands. Mazvita tightened her eyes. The moment was rich, it filled her arms. The baby fell from her back and rested across her stomach, its legs spread rigidly around her waist [. . .]
>
> She rested her finger shaking on the child and remembered. The past came to her in rapid waves that made her heave the child forward, away from her, in a deep and uncontrollable movement of rejection. (WN 17)

Mazvita's uncontrollable movement of rejection is at one and the same time the birth and the death of her child. Her pregnancy, left without description apart from her mental anguish, appears here in the contractions of birth that are the body's instinct to give birth as well as this mother's visceral rejection of her body's unplanned and undesired creation.

In reaction to her desire to reject, Mazvita turns to a piece of cloth to bind the child's corpse to her own back. Even before birth, Mazvita is described as burying the child within her, thinking "She would keep the child inside her body, not give birth to it. Joel must not discover that her body had betrayed them like this" (WN 64). Unwanted pregnancies are a common sight in southern Africa as well as much of the rest of the world. Access to effective contraception continues to be an ongoing problem, reaching terrible heights with the horrors surrounding the Depo-Provera scandal along with ingrained male controlled prejudice which views the female body as an object for male ownership, consumption and disposal.[20] As Vera explains, "It was nothing to see a woman with a blind stare on her face, with a baby fixed spidery on her back" (WN 36).

Mazvita's reaction is to turn to a piece of cloth to mend and bind. The white apron, or wrapper, can with its striking black and white stitch, be read in this context as a second skin.

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[20] See Amy Kaler, "A Threat to the Nation and a Threat to the Men: the Banning of Depo-Provera in Zimbabwe, 1981" in *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 24, No. 2 (June 1998). See also the Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Education Trust: "The TARSC report makes the pertinent observation that abortion and infanticide, and we might add the concealment of birth, reflect the failures of fertility regulation. The corollary to this observation is that a more effective fertility regulation regime will lead to fewer cases of abortion and infanticide" (41-42).

Anthropologist Elisha Renne interprets the tradition of binding children to women's backs in the Bùnú culture, when she writes:

> The physical act of backing, with mother and child tied together with cloth, is projected out into the social world in broader, metaphorical ways. In these cases, the image of backing with cloth is used to represent ideas about protection and support, about gratitude and obligation, and about affection. (1995: 194)

The corpse of Mazvita's child strapped to her back brings the child as close to her skin as possible after death. "The white apron spread across her back like a skinned animal. The baby rested within it, its head folded down" (WN 40). Mazvita desires to stifle the moment when her body must separate into two. Her skin is both that of the apron and corpse she has bound to her back. Later she regrets her inability to make conversation with the woman who sold her the cloth. "She should have talked to the woman who sold her the white apron. She was sure the woman would have listened" (WN 90). The regret relates to the reading that the damage recorded on her body is, at least in part, caused by her inability to articulate her situation to anyone around her and, equally, the lack of concern displayed by those around her.

Mazvita's actions, though enacted alone, are motivated by the response of the man she lives with. After being told by Joel that she must leave, Mazvita's "decision came to her slowly. When it did come, she was not sure that the decision had been entirely her own" (WN 83). The act is framed by two distinct pieces of cloth and a single knot:

> Mazvita sought her freedom in slender and fragile movements, finely executed [. . .] Mazvita took a soft thin cloth and wrapped it over the child's eyes. The cloth smelt of milk. She had used the cloth to wipe the curdled milk from the side of the baby's mouth. The cloth fitted across the child's head, and she was able to tie it at the back. She made the knot very softly, whispering to the child to keep still. She made a soft painless knot that kept the child free from harm [. . .] The cloth was damp with water

from her forehead. Mazvita noticed the dampness and felt an intense loneliness meet her in that silent room. (WN 94-95)

The soft knot of cloth obscures the child's vision in a gesture filled with tenderness. The cloth is not the harsh white linen of the apron she buys in the market, nor is it the tie borrowed from Joel. This soft thin cloth has absorbed the milk Mazvita has tried to feed to her dead child. It is nurturing and maternal, an attempt to soften and conceal her actions. It is a painless knot meant to help rather than hinder her child's passing.

In contrast, the cloth that Mazvita knots around her child's neck is a symbol of patriarchal power and capitalist values stolen from Joel. The tie implicates Joel in the child's death and exposes one of the reasons Mazvita elects to commit infanticide: Joel's refusal to financially or emotionally support Mazvita and her child. In a world dominated by men's actions and decisions, Mazvita needs to be accepted by Joel in order to sleep and eat herself, let alone support a child. Her efforts at finding work in Harari have been limited in part because of her race, but they are also significantly limited because of her gender. In fact the only work she can secure is precisely the identity she rejects, the care of children for wealthy families living far from the side of the city she and Joel can afford to inhabit. Thus, Joel's necktie symbolizes economies and opportunities outside Mazvita's grasp. Furthermore the European tie is an imported tradition to the Zimbabwean landscape and thus symbolizes European influence of capitalist values as well as the dominance of a man's world.

Mazvita perceives her movements as a determined and maternal response to her predicament:

> She drew the bottom end of the tie across the baby's neck [. . .] It was bold, this pulling of the cloth and she held on till there was no cloth to pull because the cloth had formed one tight circle the smallest circle there was, and so there was no longer any use to her boldness. [. . .] She had managed a constricting knot from which the child could not survive. She felt the neck break and fall over her wrist. She felt the

bone at the bottom of that neck tell her that the child had died. The bone broke softly. [. . .] Still, she held the knot firmly between her fingers, for a while longer. She released the knot. (WN 96)

Ending her child's life with a necktie, Mazvita recognizes that Joel as much as herself is responsible for the act she has chosen. His absent role in the child's life, his refusal to acknowledge or accept the child, is expressed through this patriarchal knot.

The structure of *Without a Name* reveals numerous knots in the narrative before we learn of the final fatal knot of infanticide. The knot and necktie stand in direct contrast to the knot Mazvita uses to protect her child's vision before she sets the noose. The bandage over the child's eyes possesses all the gentleness she believes is appropriate to her role as a mother. After "[s]he kept the cloth over the child's eyes and placed the child back on the bed, where she had begun" (WN 97), the tie is dropped on the bed for Joel to discover. Mazvita leaves the patriarchal symbol behind. Rather than confronting Joel, Mazvita instead regrets the distance she built between the woman selling the apron cloth and herself. Unlike Joel, Mazvita senses that the woman who sold her the apron was an ally, aware of the struggles women must face:

> Mazvita spoke about the tie she had left on the bed. Joel must not miss his tie [. . .] Perhaps she had brought the tie with her? Where was the tie if she had brought it with her? She should have talked to the woman who sold her the white apron [. . .] The woman folded the apron slowly and carefully, as though she acknowledged the long distance Mazvita had to travel before unfolding it again [. . .] She saw her child within every fold of that apron, as it fell open towards the ground. (WN 89-90)

Fretting over her possibly subconscious implication of Joel in her actions, Mazvita returns to the apron for a time. The cloth compensates for the death of Mazvita's child by allowing her to bind the body to her own back until she has come to terms with her loss.

In contrast to the knots that bind her child's body, the knots that Mazvita uses to tie the apron around her own body are severe and attempt to compensate for her own decentred self. The straps she ties around her body constrict her belly, the site where the unborn child once nestled:

> She tied the bands together. She made a tight knot that threatened to sever her across the middle. She tore hard into her breasts with the apron bands.
>
> The apron pulled hard at her neck, strangled her last breath. She continued to tighten the knot, though the bands were already shortened, and no further movement could be secured [. . .] The cloth tore at her skin, into her palm. She did not protest the pain. She preferred that continuous strangling. It kept her awake, the suffocation, it kept her alive and desperate. She tightened the firm bands, and recovered herself from the debris, from the shelter and secrecy. (WN 20)

The apron that binds the baby to her back is tied and retied, as though in her heart Mazvita recognises the futility of this arrangement. Read as a domestic graphology, the knot is not secure or permanent enough to reconnect her own body with that of her child:

> She had gathered the endless lengths of stitched apron bands and tied them firmly. She had tied the bands to fight the weight of the child. Mazvita buried the baby on her back.
>
> Mazvita repeatedly formed an incredibly tight knot, then a short while later she would untie the bands, and start all over again, convinced the knot was not firm enough, that the baby might fall out, that someone might pause long enough to look into her secret. [. . .] Mazvita was in a fierce and protracted battle with the apron, tying it, untying it, tying it. (WN 41)

Mazvita's protracted battle with the knot that secures her baby to her back is another example of an attempt to impose order on an experience that challenges reason.

After buying the sturdy cloth, Mazvita's journey is homeward by bus, to bury her child's corpse with those of her ancestors. The trip is a stressful one, for at every moment Mazvita fears that someone will discover the creation of death strapped to her. Dozing off in the heat of the bus, Mazvita imagines that another woman on the bus is attempting to untie the careful knots that hold her baby in place:

> The untying was difficult for the woman and she cursed as she struggled with the thick cloth. Mazvita was determined not to help the woman and held her fingers tightly over the knots. Mazvita closed her eyes again and felt the stranger free the child. The child fell from her back onto the seat and this woman with dust on her face this woman she thought was herself told her to hold onto the child [. . .] Then the cry exploded in her again and Mazvita opened her eyes and found her fingers clasping the tied ends of the apron. The apron was still tied to her back. The knot held firmly above her breast. (WN 91-92)

Mazvita's nightmare exposes another side of her emotions: the burden of guilt surrounding her actions. Finally Mazvita discards the apron. But the action of loosening the knot, which has acted to hold the whole project in place, also symbolises the end of her illusion. She sees that, "[h]er fingers had mastered an unimaginable dexterity, proportionate to her suffering" (WN 44). Bathed in desperation her actions take on a new weight. "How was she to undo that knot but to lie down, and die" (WN 44).

In this analysis of arguably the simplest of all textile structures, the knot represents a site where attempts are made to order chaos. But the temporary nature of the knot reveals that the ordering of chaos tends to be an illusion and slips as easily from the characters as the knots they tie slip out of place. In the final event, the temporary nature of the knot's structure cannot contain the wholly permanent nature of Mazvita's actions. As a domestic graphology the knot charts unsanctioned actions for Mazvita's role as a mother. Without condoning her decision, the knot does confirm the utter finality of Mazvita's actions in contrast to the

wholly temporary nature of the structure Mazvita seeks as a method of repair. The failure of this knot to continue its function reveals the permanence of Mazvita's actions.

The rhythms of making communicate a variety of structures through which Vera's characters attempt to cope with the pains of life. When read as domestic graphologies, the textile structures discussed in this chapter record events and voices that stand outside or beyond conventional or accepted discourse. Weaving offers a symmetrical structure that acts as both catharsis and foreshadowing for the disrupted family unit of Runyararo's family in *Under the Tongue*. In *Butterfly Burning,* weaving exposes the contradictions of Phephelaphi's decision to abort her unplanned pregnancy. In contrast to traditional mat making, crochet and knitting are undeniably products of missionary influence and associated, often unhelpfully, with passive female roles. In "An Unyielding Circle", the flimsy structure of crochet represents the compromised position of the women making the cloth. The lack of function in the objects they create indicates the devalued position the women themselves inhabit and, as the title points out, their struggles to overcome the "unyielding circle" of male dominance. Sewing represents rupture rather than repair in Vera's fiction. The final and most simple of textile structures, the knot, acts in a similar way to the symmetry of weaving, as a place where undesired and unordered events can temporarily be brought under control. While order is possible, its presence, like the knot, is always temporary. In each of these examples cloth exposes the true nature of the unspoken social relations that occur in its presence and, as a result, presents us with domestic graphologies through which we can further our understanding of the narratives.

Chapter Two

The Body and Cloth: Skin and Hair

> No, I don't hate being black. I'm just tired of saying it's beautiful. No, I don't hate myself. I'm just tired of people bruising their knuckles on my jaw. I'm tired of racking my brains in the doorway. I don't know. Nothing turns out exactly as intended. (Dambudzo Marechera, "House of Hunger" 45)

In the previous chapter, the structure of textiles were read as examples of domestic graphologies capable of charting unspoken social and economic structures that occur in their presence. This chapter takes a more visceral approach to reading the textile in Vera's fiction and investigates the role of skin and hair as a type of garment or accessory. The inversion of this idea, the more common reading of clothing as a "second skin", will be discussed in the following chapter. Anthropologist Mary Douglas offers an explanation for the charged and exchangeable roles of cloth and skin when she writes:

> All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise especially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind [. . .] *the mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins*. (121, italics added)

Douglas's presentation of the vulnerability of margins of the body and the margins of ideas as one and the same offers a useful method of reading skin and hair in Vera's fiction. Fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson alludes to Douglas's sense of the corporeal margin when she writes, "If the body with its open orifices is itself dangerously ambiguous, then dress, which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not

only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two. Dress is the frontier between the self and the not self" (3). Thus, the self and the not self, the interior and exterior, the public and private negotiate difference at the place where skin and cloth touch. In Vera's fiction this margin is the site of prejudice and violation, a place where racist judgements are made and sexual violation occurs. In both cases marginal identities (black, female) record damage at the margins of the self.

The similarities between cloth and skin, predominately for the purpose of analysing cloth in relation to skin, have been noted by many. Renée Baert notes, "Clothing is in fact a second skin, a membrane that separates and joins, that surrounds and divides. Like skin, clothing is a border" (21). Ann Hamlyn writes, "The textile is always, it seems, a surrogate skin, a body at one remove, placed at a comfortable distance, even a given without a corpse" (42). Wilson also remarks, "A part of the strangeness of dress is that it links the biological body to the social being, and public to private" (2). While a close resemblance of cloth to skin has been observed by many, this chapter proposes that the opposite is equally true, the resemblance of skin to cloth. Anthropologists Joanne Eicher and Barbara Sumberg offer an inclusive definition of dress which supports this reading. Dress can be understood to include:

> [M]odifications of the body and/or supplements to the body includ[ing] obvious items placed on the body (the supplements) such as garments, jewellery and accessories, and also *changes in colour, texture, smell, and shape made to the body directly*. (1995: 298, italics added)

If the textile is a second or surrogate skin, then Eicher's definition allows for skin to be read as a form of dress; the first and original textile to cover the body. Skin and hair, Douglas's bodily margins, are versions of cloth and thread that project a desired public image to the world. Throughout this chapter, skin and hair are conspicuous in the relentless transformations both undergo. The concealment of the natural colour and texture of both skin and hair reveals the extent of the uneasiness with which Vera's characters relate to their own

physical identities. I suggest that an attention to cloth (skin) and thread (hair) reveals the depth and extent of pain caused by racism in Vera's narratives. In addition to this, skin also acts as a record keeper of unnamed violence against the body.

Altered Surfaces: the "Ambi generation"[21]

> It was 1977, freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalising [. . .] Freedom left one with black-skinned ears. A mask. A carnival. Reality had found a double, turbulent and final. (WN 26)

Without a Name and *Butterfly Burning* both discuss the use of skin bleaching creams. The "Ambi generation", as *Without a Name* coins it, refers to the licensed trademark for a commercial brand of skin care that contains chemicals that remove the skin's natural pigmentation. A contemporary Internet advertisement for the product promises:

> AMBI believes that when you look better, you will feel better. With a full range of skin care products for your various needs, you too will discover 'Skin Care That's More Than Skin Deep' with AMBI Products. (www.texasbeautysupplies.com)

As a prefix, *ambi-* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as meaning "both, on both sides." It appears in words such as ambiguous which is defined as, "Of persons: Wavering or uncertain as to course or conduct; hesitating, doubtful" and "Of things: Wavering or uncertain in direction or tendency; of doubtful or uncertain issue". Ambivalence is defined as "the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love or hatred) towards a person or thing." Hence, "ambi" refers to a sense of doubling or multiplicity both on a physical and a psychological level.

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[21] An earlier version of this chapter was presented at "Versions and Subversions: African Literatures" conference in Berlin, May 2002, and will be published in the forthcoming book *Body, Sexuality and Gender* edited by Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski.

Creams that bleach the skin remove natural pigmentation. The process is one of reduction rather than addition, an act that destroys existing pigmentation and disrupts the body's creation of further pigmentation. The erasure is permanent and as promised by the cosmetics company cited above, it is certainly more than skin deep. In contrast, cosmetics act as additives and alter the colour or texture of the body's surface with creams and powders that are applied to the surface of the skin. Traditional cosmetics remain on the surface of the skin and conceal rather than permanently alter the surfaces on which they are applied. Reductive processes on the other hand, such as creams that contain hydroquinone, penetrate the porous surface of the skin and physically alter pigmentation at a cellular level. While both additive and reductive cosmetics seek the same exterior result, the psychological motivations behind the use of each differ greatly.

While the fundamental difference between the two actions may not be discernable to the general public viewing the surface of the skin, the two embody fundamentally different mindsets. One seeks permanent and irreversible change, while the other is content to allow two layers, one temporary and one permanent, to coexist. One is an act of erasure, the other an act of decoration and ornamentation. Erasure, permanent and irreversible change represents a need to not only be perceived as another, but to embody that other. Frantz Fanon defines the "epidermal schema" as responsible for the "internalisation – or, better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority" (11). Francette Pacteau notes that Fanon's term embodies "the reduction of another identity to its corporeal surface" (137). The epidermal schema recognizes that it is upon the skin, the margin between public and private, that all manner of cowardice, greed, deceit and laziness are projected. It is also upon the surface that humanity's weaknesses are, with the help of ignorance and prejudice, manifest as self-loathing.

Skin bleaching attends to the exterior of the body and treats it as no more than a surface. The process attends to the surface rather than the substance of skin and becomes, like

cloth, an elected identity to adopt and present to the outside world. In the context of Vera's narratives, my reading of skin as a form of dress was initially inspired by several passages that depict the body's flaying as a type of undressing. The following passages contain varied reasons for skin being shed in a manner similar to cloth, some of which extend beyond the racism which is the focus of this section to include senseless acts of violence without racial motivation. Nonetheless, I believe it is helpful to read the passages side by side as they confirm a handling of skin in Vera's fiction which closely resembles that of clothing. Nehanda's death is described as follows:

> The skin tears further away from her, and she knows that the damage to herself is now irreversible. Nothing will save her from this final crimson of death; it is too much like her inner self. (NH 2)

Without a Name describes skin, in place of cloth, as it falls from Mazvita's excoriated body[22]:

> Her skin peeled off, parting from her body. She had suffered so much that her skin threatened to fall pitilessly to the ground. It hung from below her neck, from her arms, from her whole silent body. (WN 4)

Similarly, in *Butterfly Burning* Phephelaphi eventually chooses to burn to death, causing her skin to shed as easily as a cloth:

> The flames wrap the human form, arms, knees that are herself, a woman holding her pain like a torn blanket. [. . .] just her skin peeling off like rind as the fire buzzes unforbidden over her body [. . .] Vanishing: the sound of her breathing swallowed by the flame, skin sliding off thin as a promise. (BB 128-129)

The Stone Virgins retells a horrific scene of murder described through the flayed skin. Independence has not brought the peace the nation hoped for. Instead, rural

[22] Pauline Dodgson similarly observes that, "Mazvita's bodily disintegration is matched by the peeling away of skin as people in a state of false consciousness literally attempt to buy white masks" (99).

Matabeleland is torn apart with attacks against the population which often targeted local shops. Unusual for Vera's fiction, attention is drawn to the male body of the shopkeeper:

> Those who claim to know inch by inch what happened to Mahlathini say that plastic bags of Roller ground meal were lit, and let drop bit by bit over him till his skin peeled off from his knees to his hair, till his mind collapsed, peeled off, and he died of the pain in his own voice. [. . .] It was when he was on the floor that they tore off his clothes and lit the plastic bags. They sliced and emptied container bags of maize meal from the store and used those to separate him from his skin [. . .] When the sound died, his skin was already perforated like lace. (SV 121, 123)

The narrator explains the storekeeper's perceived value by his attackers, "Who was Mahlathini? He was only a store keeper whom they could skin alive and discard" (SV 122). The horrendous brutality of this attack leads one to believe that it was taken out by the Fifth Brigade[23], who unlike the loan attacker of Thenjewi and Nonceba terrorized the landscape in organized groups of men under Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's direct command. Ranger describes a "grotesquely violent campaign" carried out by the group between January 1983 and late 1984 (2000: 192). In explanation of whom the group targeted Ranger, again, explains, "Other groups such as former guerrillas, former Rhodesian soldiers, migrant labourers and refugees were also sought out and often killed by the Fifth Brigade. Many killings, however, seemed indiscriminate – victims included people met on patrol who could not speak Shona,

[23] Ranger writes, "The Fifth Brigade was the product of an agreement signed with the North Koreans by Prime Minister Mugabe in October 1980, though plans for the brigade were only announced in August 1981. The brigade was unlike any other unit of the ZNA. It answered directly to the Prime Minister, and not to the normal military chain of command. It was specifically intended for what were termed 'internal defence purposes.' Its North Korean training was both military and political; its communications systems were not compatible with other brigades; the brigade's soldiers wore a different uniform and used AK-47s rather than NATO issue assault rifles. The Fifth Brigade was intended to be unquestioningly loyal and thus recruitment and leadership positions were dominated by former Zanla guerrillas." (2000: 191)

mothers who could not account for the whereabouts of a son, individuals who did not answer questions quickly enough" (2000: 220). Further details which would lead one to believe that Mahlathini, owner of a community store, was killed by the Fifth Brigade are also supplied by Ranger who explains, "In the first months of 1984 there was a curfew and a food embargo; drought relief was stopped [. . .] those few stores which were allowed briefly to open were not allowed to stock food" (1999: 247).

In each of the passages cited, skin separates from the body as easily as a garment is removed. In Vera's fiction it is overwhelmingly black skin that is under attack, although *Nehanda* is the only story where this violence is white against black. In both *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning* the violence is self-inflicted and in *The Stone Virgins* it is perpetrated by black skin on other black skin.

While the above examples of skin falling like cloth reflect the brutality of the world in which Vera's characters must attempt to survive, the "Ambi generation" enacts a self-willed mutilation:

> The people had been efficient accomplices to the skinning of their faces, to the unusual ritual of their disinheritance. [. . .] They had lain in rows in the searing sun while their skin fell from their faces, pulled and pulled away. (WN 27)

Conscious alteration of the skin's surface can be read as an attempt to control or redirect the identity which the world judges and then celebrates or discriminates against. Skin that has undergone bleaching projects two selves into the public world: the fabricated and the natural.

It is my reading that the descriptions of skin bleaching in Vera's fiction can be further understood through the metaphor of cloth because the manners in which skin and cloth are handled are so similar. Thus it seems appropriate, but is in no way meant to dilute the severity of the topic, to draw from a text entitled *Color and Fiber*. Written as a guide to dyeing textiles, Patricia Lambert introduces the topic with the following thoughts:

> The phenomenon of color depends on four factors: the presence of light; colorants (pigments and dyes) contained in substances; the quality of surfaces and structures that may or may not contain colorants; and the mechanism of color perception contained in the viewer's eye and brain. (11)

In the communities depicted in *Butterfly Burning* the "presence [and absence] of light" reflects a nation divided by race, both in the book's 1940s setting and, sadly, still today. It is a space where one can find, "NO BLACKS signs, WHITES ONLY signs and CLOSED signs which say OPEN on the flip side and dangle CLOSED from ornate door handles" (BB 6). Space is controlled through the restriction of movement determined by discrimination. Life is lived in the presence of white light, freedom and opportunity, or smothered by darkness, oppression and division.

> Pacteau notes the way in which colour encodes racial discrimination:
> Western discourse construes blackness as palpable, entirely visible, and yet empty, null – the presence of an absence. It opposes the reflective 'power' of white – black does not reflect – to the absorptive property of black. Blackness, thus defined in a parasitic role, feeds off light, ever threatening its luminosity with total absorption and extinction. (124)

The murder of Gertrude in *Butterfly Burning* occurs under the cloak of darkness. Unable to reflect the innocence or value available to the white subject Gertrude is murdered in the middle of the night:

> [T]he knock on the wooden door in the middle of the night [. . .] the intense darkness outside. She [Phephelaphi] saw her mother standing with her arm resting on the other side of the doorway. A darker screen from the darkness beyond [. . .] She could not see who it was, so she watched her mother, a tall erect shadow, her head touching the top of the doorway. [. . .] When she went

to her mother, there was no obvious sign of harm. She was not even sure she was dead. [. . .] It seemed a long time before the blood rose to the top. (BB 27)

This "dark" crime is concealed both by the time at which it occurred and, as Pacteau notes, the race of the victim, which is perceived by her white lover as both a threat and a measure of the disposable value of her life. But the murder is framed by an equally parasitic image of whiteness. The scene opens with the perpetrator, a "white policeman who shot at her when he found her talking to another man at her door when he called on her after midnight" (BB 122). The episode closes with another, or possibly the same, guilty "white policeman" who returns her mother's bloodstained and mislabelled dress days later (BB 28). Pacteau's notion of the "presence of absence" is played out in the utter disregard, or guilty knowing, the authorities have for the identity of the murdered woman. "The policeman had not even bothered to ask her name, even when he collected her mother's body, and not even now when he brought her a dress from a woman he named Emelda" (BB 28). As Phephelaphi takes her life in the closing lines of *Butterfly Burning,* she considers once again the absence of light recalling, "Gertrude who had the foolishness to trust a man knocking on her door. At midnight" (BB 130). Along with Phephelaphi's disbelief that any woman would trust a man knocking on her door in the middle of the night is the implication that Gertrude's foolishness is heightened by the contrast between her race and that of her visitor.

During daylight umbrellas appropriated from the bus station cast shadows that attempt to shield the daylight movements of Makokoba's inhabitants:

> The people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned. It is difficult but they manage to crawl to their destination hidden by umbrellas and sunhats which are handed down to them for exactly this purpose, or which they discover, abandoned, at bus stations. (BB 4)

Again blackness is depicted as the presence of absence. "The idea is to live within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable [. . .] to walk without making the shadow more pronounced than

the body or the body clearer than the shadow" (BB 3-4). Here both night *and* day are ruled by prejudice. A person of colour must conceal their presence with hats and umbrellas and cast shadows no longer or wider than absolutely necessary. Darkness becomes the oppressive cloak where murders, if witnessed, are not questioned.

The second point in the discussion of the phenomenon of colour in *Color and Fiber* is the presence of pigments and dyes. Fanon relates the experience of racism to a mordant, a substance used to fix a dye permanently to cloth during the dye process. He writes, "But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye" (109). The gestures of discrimination fix the subject's identity on the surface and allow for nothing deeper to be understood. To circumvent this fixity the "Ambi generation" purchases change. The act is tinged with the face of reality for "[n]ewspaper headings covered the dark alley, promised no freedom to agitated people. But there were ample signs of the freedom the people had already claimed for themselves – empty shells of Ambi, green and red. The world promised a lighter skin, greater freedom" (WN 26). The ironic and "unusual ritual of their disinheritance" purports to offer a way out of the cycle of discrimination and oppression generated by racism (WN 27).

Fanon writes on the subject of a serum for "degentrification" with a similar sense of irony:

> For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for "degentrification"; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction. (111)

Fanon and Vera, through very different styles of writing, expose the thorough penetration of racism, the total, unavoidable manner in which prejudice affects self-

worth. In *Butterfly Burning,* Zandile's day job is to sell skin lightening creams, the reality of Fanon's serum:

> Zandile now worked in a shop on Lobengula Street where she sold skin-lightening creams. [. . .] Zandile was a marvel in Makokoba, a pioneer advocate of a certain form of beauty; she was regarded with suspicion and admiration. She would bring some of the plastic bottles and tubes to Makokoba and sell them to the women in the different streets. The skin on her own face was a soft yellow like egg yolk, smooth with a transparent glow, but she could not afford to purchase enough of the creams to rub along her arms. No one noticed that sort of omission; there were other consuming distractions. Zandile offered the feel and texture of desire. (BB 80)

Zandile's unbleached arms represent a mask worn with pride rather than shame, the beginning of an incomplete process of transformation. Dambudzo Marechera's short story "Black Skin What Mask" similarly brings up issues of mimicry in a pun on Fanon's text *Black Skins, White Masks*. Marechera, opening his very brief story, touches on many of the issues which will be discussed in the next two chapters:

> He was always washing himself – at least three baths every day. And he had all sorts of lotions and deodorants to appease the thing that had taken hold of him. He did not so much wash as scrub himself until he bled. [. . .]
>
> He did things to his hair, things which the good lord never intended any man to do to his hair.
>
> He bought clothes, whole shops of them. If clothes make the man, then certainly he was a man. [. . .]
>
> But still he was dissatisfied. (93)

Marechera goes on to write, "Appearances alone – however expensive – are doubtful climbing-boots when one hazards the slippery slopes of social adventure" (94). With a more

cynical irony, that is also heard in Vera's work, Marechera is poking fun at the rituals of grooming and dress deployed in hopes of reinventing one's racial identity.

The thirty years that pass between the setting of *Butterfly Burning* and *Without a Name* do little to change the values of the "Ambi generation". The narrator explains, "freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalising" (WN 26). In the absence of genuine freedoms, concrete opportunities and tangible advancements, "[f]reedom squeezed out of a tube was better than nothing, freedom was, after all, purchasable" (WN 26). "Passing" defined as "the movement of a person who is legally or socially designated as Black into a White racial category or White social identity" is mocked by Vera's white skinned masks[24] (Byrd 27). Vera allows no chance of total change to occur and in fact mocks the possibility of total transformation. Instead her characters are masked and partial versions of change.

Medical anthropologist Spencer Lee Rogers notes two determining factors in his study of "Induced Pigment Modifications". The first is fashion, the second, "a desire or assumed necessity for obscuring the personal identity of the individual" (33). In the case of the "Ambi generation", fashion and a desire to redress racial prejudice are combined. The result is a complex message of fact and fiction, the brutal realities of racial discrimination played off against the whims of fashion. The two constantly intersect, charging innocent gestures of fashion with weightier issues of race. For instance, alongside the erasure of natural pigmentation is the addition of other colorants such as makeup:

> Red mud was spread beneath dreaming eyes. The carnival was barefaced and unbelievable, full of mimicry and death [. . .] The women picked their colours from a burning sun, from the lips of white women, then offered their bodies as a ransom for their land, their departed men, their corrupted rituals of birth. (WN 62-63)

[24] Thadious M. Davis' introduction to African-American author Nella Larsen's book *Passing* explains, "The women's different perspectives on passing are connected in a web of attitudes toward race as arbitrary, skin color as a commodity, and identity as expressible within social roles, especially wife and mother" (xiii).

Red lipstick and orange nail varnish, copied from the imported fashion magazines of Europe and America, represent more than decorative surfaces when associated with mimicry. Fashion historian Ben Arogundade writes, "The culture of ethnicity-altering cosmetology carried within it the notion that people of color had to overcome their blackness in order to be successful" (156).

In Vera's fiction the assumed necessity for altering one's identity, discussed by Roger, is linked to the colonial history of white rule in Rhodesia and the continued presence of power struggles determined by race. Homi Bhabha notes that the "discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (86). Here *ambi-* appears as a doubling, a "*double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (88). Skin bleaching both upholds the desirability of whiteness and acts as an empowering gesture against oppression. Bhabha's sense of slippage is captured in the "black-skinned ears" of the "Ambi generation" whose desire for opportunity, progress and the realization of ambition produces a slippage in which self-worth and personal identity are threatened if not fully concealed (WN 26).

In many ways the "Ambi generation's" treatment of skin as a cloth, as opposed to the more common approach to treating clothing as a second skin, enacts a carnival-like reversal noted in the opening passage of *Without a Name*. The "Ambi generation" is reminiscent of Wilson Harris's concept of the "carnival visage of pigmentation" (1999: 74). Andrew Bundy, in his introduction to Harris's *Selected Essays,* explains that the term *carnival* is from the Latin *carnis* + *levare,* to lighten (alleviate) flesh (74). Bundy extends this linguistic observation to explain Harris's term as "to lighten the flesh or to de-pigment" (74). Harris's use of the lightening of pigmentation as a symbol of carnivalesque reversals is similar to Vera's, it is both theatrical and disproportionate, as much as it is grounded and determined by the limitations of everyday life. Skin, in its altered and distorted state, does more than conceal

the original colour; it illuminates a core that cannot be concealed, a place where racism has successfully penetrated and disrupted self-worth.

The third factor described in *Color and Fiber* is "the quality of surfaces and structures that may or may not contain colorants". Dye and bleach are absorbed into cloth at different rates. Changes in colour are dependant on the properties of the material: weight, fibre, density of weave as well as the nature of the dye or bleach, temperature, concentration and length of time the fabric is submerged in the dye bath. "In this one case of the *Ambi Generation* at least one received a permanent mark for the exchange, an elaborate transformation" (WN 27). Skin is not designed in a manner that easily adapts to alterations of its original structure and substance. Like cloth, the structure of skin is irrevocably weakened through bleaching. Ambi, and products of a similar nature, produce a variety of results other than the desired lightening of skin. "Permanent damage to the skin including infected cysts, dark blotches and stubborn acne" has been reported (Shota). The BBC reports that "bleaching can cause skin cancer and the poorest people are most at risk, because the cheaper the product, the more dangerous it is" (Baxter). The increased risk of skin cancer is one of the more perverse results of skin bleaching. The disease is otherwise nonexistent in heavily pigmented skin because the purpose of pigmentation is to act as a natural protection against sun damage. Arogundade notes, "In 1980 excessive usage [of skin lightening creams] led to an outbreak of poisoning by Hydroquinone, the cream's bleaching ingredient that works by inhibiting the production of melanin (the natural substance that determines skin-tone and protects against ultra-violet rays and cancer)" (104).

While creams that contain more than two percent hydroquinone have been outlawed, a black market still exists with products manufactured in the UK, Taiwan, India and many other countries today. The *Sunday Times* of Zimbabwe reports, "British companies sell their creams to agents in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Zaire, Botswana and Kenya. The agents employ syndicates to smuggle them into South Africa – hidden between goods on trucks, on

the top of buses, in car boots and in suitcases" (Shota). Alongside the devastating outbreaks of otherwise unheard of skin diseases, including cancer, in southern Africa there is a bizarre, carnival-like reversal, in the presence of these diseases appearing on the skin of Africans decades after European missionaries and colonialists succumbed to cancers and diseases of the skin due to an over exposure to sunlight so foreign to their homelands. The statistical evidence that a large portion of the chemicals are produced in Great Britain is a carnival-like inversion of the old colonial trade routes. Admittedly, one could also argue that the former colonial powers have, in fact, a long and established tradition of importing disease, and now genetically modified and non-sustainable food, trial medicines and an array of destructive rather than constructive trade into former colonies.

The final element in the definition of dye variables in *Color and Fiber* is the "mechanism of color perception contained in the viewer's eye and brain". In this analysis, perception of colour can be read as the presence or absence of racism in the observer's mind. Vera writes:

> Was it a surprise then that they could not recognize one another? Ancestors dared not recognize them [. . .] On the other side of the streets their skins burnt an ill and silenced song. The streets smelt of burning skin. *Nyore. Nyore*. It was like that in 1977. (WN 27)

Set just a few years before Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, Vera constructs late 1970s Rhodesia in *Without a Name* as a time of unchecked hope and possibility. Cloth, be it textile or skin, acts as a litmus paper for physical and physiological pain. As Zandile in *Butterfly Burning* explains: "There was an acceptance of what was placed on the body and what belonged to it; the illusion was flexible. The act of reversal spontaneous" (BB 81). Regrettably, in the case of skin bleaching reversal is not spontaneous, nor is it flexible. Ambi is correct when it advertises itself as "Skin Care That's More Than Skin Deep"; it is far more sinister and serious than a superficial change. If, as Wilson notes, "[f]ashion, then, is essential

to the world of modernity, the world of spectacle and mass-communication. It is a kind of connective tissue of our cultural organism" (12), then the fashion of skin bleaching is evidence of a diseased connective tissue in the cultural organism. Treating one's skin as a garment to be exchanged or altered in order to make the world see you through different eyes is a troubling notion. Vera's somewhat ironic handling of the subject nonetheless suggests the dangers that occur when, in an effort to escape present hardship, individuals attempt to rework their racial identity.

Intimate Threads: Hair[25]

"Imperfect Sutures"

Mend the quiet rupture carefully
With the intent of a surgeon repairing
The severed trachea of her own child
Don't look up once to see or think about
The crowds closing in, like ambulance chasers
Hoping to get a glimpse of what you're up to
Tend the quiet rupture patiently, insistently.

[25] There are many instances of textile terms being applied to the qualities of African and African-American hair. Byrd and Tharps write, "Many White people went so far as to insist that Blacks did not have real hair, preferring to classify it in a derogatory manner as "wool" (14). Arogundade notes the use of the term "weave" in many African and African-American cultures to describe a composite of natural hair and synthetic extensions: "The wearing of false hair in varying colors is one of the oldest forms of black adornment, dating back to Ancient Africa, 1000 BC. Wigs were worn by the Egyptians and the Nubians over shaved heads or short 'naturals' as sun protectors, as well as for social and ceremonial occasions. [. . .] The wig became the catalyst for the 'stay-on-hair', commonly known as the weave, which is currently so popular among women of color" (159). Byrd and Tharps also write that for lack of alternatives carding combs, used to detangle sheep's wool before spinning into thread, were used by West African slaves in North America (13).

No one will see the subversive mend

The thread clipped meticulously

From her luxuriant head

-- Sally Alatalo and Anne Wilson

Perhaps the most intimate of threads is that found on our bodies in the form of hair.[26] Even more than skin, hair has been the source of considerable manipulation. Very few of us can deny that its cutting, dying and styling are an effort to groom ourselves into a desired image for the public to see. But like skin, hair experiences the scrutiny of prejudice and, in the case of African hair practices in particular, can be read as a site where racism is projected. Like skin pigmentation, the texture and colour of a person's hair has a specific purpose linked to the climate of the region where ancestors lived. For example Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps note the texture and weight of African hair, like the pigmentation of dark skin, "insulates the head from the brutal intensity of the sun's rays" (1). But, like efforts to conceal or remove skin pigmentation, African hair has become a site that speaks of far more than climate or inherited genes. Writing from the context of North America, Byrd and Tharps quote the hair historian Noliew M. Rooks who writes of African American beauty trends:

> Advertisements for skin lighteners and hair straighteners marketed by White companies suggest to Blacks that only through changing physical features will persons of African descent be afforded class mobility within African-American communities and social acceptance in the dominant culture. The products being sold, like arsenic wafers for lightening the skin and lye for straightening the hair, were often dangerous chemical concoctions that not only failed to perform miracles but could also prove deadly. (23)

[26] The hair of various animals becomes the fibre of many types of protein-based threads: wool, cashmere, alpaca, etc.

Like skin bleaching, the desire to adopt the appearance of another race comes at serious cost. In Vera's fiction, attention to the hair of her characters "stitches" together the experiences of violation and racism that determine identity. Racism, judgement by another of one's worth as determined by the colour and texture of bodily margins, is responsible for the decisions many of Vera's characters make. As a result, a cycle of violence is kept alive through the decision to enact self-inflicted violence against themselves. This violence can be seen in small measures such as skin bleaching, as well as the terminal violence that Mazvita enacts through infanticide and Phephelaphi chooses in her eventual suicide.

Barbara Miller proposes that hair can be "conceptualised from three angles: individually experienced hair, socially symbolic hair, and political hair" (281). In addition, hair commands curiously powerful connotations of intimacy. For women, its care often takes place in what Zimitri Erasmus notes as a "gendered cultural space of intimacy" (386), such as a kitchen or salon where the absence of men allows women's conversation to reveal more private experiences than they may otherwise find the space to express.

The trimming, shaving, bleaching, and waxing of hair are maintained with fastidious attention in many cultures. Its appearance in the wrong place or absence from the right place can be enough to provoke enormous anxieties and elaborate efforts at transferral or removal. Tim Porges, writing of the hair embroidered table linens made by fibre artist and co-author of the poem "Imperfect Sutures" Anne Wilson comments that hair, "becomes a paradigm for all our discoveries of inattention; for remembering. There is an obvious logic to the Victorian lockets with twists of hair in them, a logic that extends from this daily experience for forgetting and remembering" (22). Porges touches on at least some of the intimacy associated with hair. Hair reveals an attention or inattention to the passage of time. The corporeal body overtakes the intellectual and can come to represent a form of personal betrayal.

Contact with another person's hair signifies intimacy and as a result signals an environment of trust. In *Under the Tongue,* Zhizha's relationship with her grandmother and

her mother are represented through the intimate ritual of allowing another person to comb their hair:

> She takes the comb from my fingers and digs it abruptly into the hair on the right side.
>
> Tiny black hairs fall against the towel as I comb, parts of her falling off. There are parts of her trapped in the comb. I pull these soft dying parts out and place them in the pocket of my dress, to secure memory. I have trouble remembering my mother so I work extra hard at it, alert to pick the parts of her which fall in my direction. Between my fingers I feel her hair, this hair which is part of me and of Grandmother. I touch the roots of her hair and at the bottom the hair is shiny and dark. (UT 98)

Zhizha's grooming of her mother's hair contains gestures of intimacy as well as miscommunication. Her mother's harshness towards her own body, indicated when she aggressively thrusts the comb into her own scalp, is in contrast to her daughter's desperate desire to collect and protect the fragments as they fall from her head. Zhizha's gesture to collect pieces of her mother's hair into her cloth pocket creates a type of Victorian locket which, as Porges notes, acts as a reminder of a loved one. Zhizha's desire to capture a memory of her mother is explained in part by her admission that she finds it difficult to remember her absent mother, jailed for the murder of her father and violator.

Zhizha's collection in her pocket creates a cloth relic of human threads that act as a reminder of her absent mother. What Zhizha celebrates and collects is the memory of maternal intimacy. It is interesting to note that in Zhizha's case the harvested hairs are merely placed in her cloth pocket. As discussed in Chapter One, Zhizha does not learn to weave from her mother, as her mother learnt from her own mother. Nor does she sew, in spite of her interest in the mechanics of her Grandmother's sewing machine. Zhizha's own self-made relic is hasty and stealthily collected, assembled as though she knows that she must collect these fragments of her mother to remember her by before her mother notices the distance

between them. It is a rushed and undisclosed collection, unlikely to be later crafted into an ornament for public display. Nonetheless, the threads of hair act as a reminder and effort at connection with her absent mother.

As the passage closes, Zhizha's mother accuses her of breaking too many pieces of her hair – the same hair that, ironically, her mother harshly thrusts her comb through in the opening passage:

> Zhizha, my mother calls, stop pulling at my hair.
>
> With that she removes the towel from her shoulders and looks at the many pieces of broken hair, very closely, then slowly she proclaims. . .
>
> You have broken my hair Zhizha.
>
> Mother, she calls, Mother. (UT 99)

In the intimate setting of a daughter brushing her mother's hair, the complex dynamic between the three generations of women are revealed. The second generation turns to the first to blame her daughter for her own actions. The immature voice of Zhizha's mother signals the disruption of her adult identity in light of the abuses her husband has visited upon the family. The incest all three women struggle to comprehend and articulate projects its own distortion onto this innocent act of brushing hair. The protective, nurturing role synonymous with motherhood has been damaged by the actions of Muroyiwa, now outside the circle of these three women. Runyararo's infantile gestures, calling to her own mother when she thinks her daughter has damaged her hair, are full of anger as she grabs the sharp comb from her daughter's nurturing hands and inflicts a guilty self punishment on her own head. Such actions expose her disrupted identity in the face of incest. Her sense of failure as a mother and wife, unable to protect her daughter from a violation that occurred within the home, renders her identity child-like. The private space noted by Erasmus, where women's conversation occurs without the presence of men, is here still insufficient as each woman struggles to find a form of communication in which they can truly open.

The socially symbolic hair discussed by Barbara Miller is apparent in Grandmother's head of greying hair. Her hair reveals her age, but perhaps more importantly the hardships life has required of her. "Grandmother says her hair used to be black but the world has entered her too much and her hair has turned white" (UT 98). Here the colour white refers to age and worry so commonly associated with "going grey" but also white with the salt of the long dried tears she has wept over the state of her family. Finally, white is also the colour of ash, remnants of the pain that have seared her body:

> Her [Grandmother's] eyes turn yellow with tears, and the skin falls from her face and dries up, all at once, like lemon peels left all day in the hot sun.[27] I see her forehead spread into the edges of her face, as though something pulls at her from behind her ears. I see white hair framing her forehead, twisted, full of salt. Then I see her lower lip shiver, with tears. I hope never to see my grandmother look like that again. I am frightened. [. . .] The salt has left Grandmother's hair. It traces the top of my lower lip [. . .] I feel the salt falling. (UT 60)

It is unclear whether Grandmother's knowledge of incest is limited to Zhizha's abuse or if it has also been her own experience. In either event hair becomes part of a process of recording and remembering which Tim Porges associates with the "daily experience of forgetting and remembering." Grandmother's hair, saturated with the white salt of the tears she has cried, records both the anguish of the present and presumably the years of salty tears that have accumulated to turn her hair white. The fact that Grandmother's white hair is pulled back fiercely against her face is explained in the first chapter as an effort to control and organize a place where disorganization and disillusion surface. The pain of social as well as intimate rejection is recorded in Grandmother's hair and in her discomfort in her own skin, lightened,

[27] Ben Arogundade explains that rubbing lemons into the skin was a precursor to skin bleaching with chemicals. He writes, "And let us not forget that as early as the 1920s Josephine Baker rubbed fresh lemons into her face each morning to lighten her skin" (165).

possibly as a younger woman, with lemon juice. Thus, the pain of social as well as intimate rejection is recorded in Grandmother's hair and skin even when it is not spoken by her voice.

In a final example of the ways in which hair represents Porges' "discoveries for our inattention", Grandmother's hair is unintentionally revealed when her scarf slips from her head. The slippage, like the slippage of the white skinned masks, is accidental, as her hair is often carefully guarded. The unwanted exhibition of hair is as disconcerting to her as the unplanned exposure of skin could be[28]:

> The black scarf falls from her head to her shoulders and she knots it again in one quick motion back across her forehead. The top of her head remains bare. An arrogant patch of white hair, exposed, turns her into a spirit which says so you want to see the things which are me, which have entered into my growing and being? I have been burnt and destroyed and turned to ash but I have lived, even in my sleep.
>
> Her hair is white with the things of the world [. . .] She cries about being a woman. (UT 44)

Grandmother's remaining "arrogant" hair displays, despite the pain she has endured as a black woman, the strength of her character and survival of spirit. It is similar to the "hair [that] stood in proud and independent strands" on the head of the impoverished and emaciated child whose purpose in life is little more than that of a stake in the ground from which the apron, purchased in Mazvita in *Without a Name* is displayed (WN 10). Despite the fact that he is described as having "not eaten for days, months, maybe years – he competed with the metre for thinness" his hair, like Grandmother's, is able to rise above his suffering as a form of exuberant personal expression (WN 10).

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[28] Byrd and Tharps note that in several West African cultures unkempt hair was a "signal that something was wrong. The woman was either bereaved, depressed, or 'habitually dirty' [. . .] unkempt, 'neglected,' or 'messy' hair implied that a woman had loose morals or was insane" (4).

White and black hair, and their associations with wisdom and age (white) or youthful vitality (black) also appear in *The Stone Virgins*. The inevitably of death on this landscape is also bound in aging hair:

> His hair, cemetery flowers. That is what Thenjiwe said about hair like this, white and black and mingling together, intertwined. The black hair, youth, the white in celebration of death [. . .] They were meant to laugh when Thenjiwe said that, to accept the inevitable, the ending of all beginnings, the dying of the wise who have seen the sun set and rise so many times that the smoke from its flame has turned their hair white [. . .] Those who pluck a sliver of hair like a root, knowing full well the sound of their own feet moving like a slow hallucination to the grave [. . .] They had such hair.
>
> Here was a man with just such hair. (SV 70-1)

The man with a salt and pepper mixture of hair that embodies both life and death is Sibaso, the attacker of Thenjiwe and Nonceba and murderer of Thenjiwe. As Dorothy Driver and Meg Samuelson note, at this point in the narrative of *The Stone Virgins* Vera complicates the identities of Sibaso, rapist and murder, and Cephas, Thenjiwe's lover and later friend to Nonceba. Driver and Samuelson write, "Therefore, when the perpetrator of Nonceba's rape and Thenjiwe's murder remains unnamed in the first scene depicting these brutalities, the third person pronoun 'he' is provisionally and terrifyingly embodied as Cephas himself" (188). The intermingling of contrasts between age and youth, peace and violence, purity and evil, is also apparent in the description of Sibaso's hair. As in the case of Runyararo's husband in *Under the Tongue,* the perpetrator of these horrific crimes is cast with a shimmer of sympathy, the embodiment and evidence of a world turned upside down.

In *Butterfly Burning,* Zandile asks a friend to assist her in the pursuit of physical perfection. The gesture is not the result of intimacy between the two women but rather

Zandile's concept of her place and value in society which is derived from her outward appearance:

> Looking. Zandile asks a friend to hold another long mirror to the back and search through the mirror held to the front to see if there is anything which has been missed, something not smoothed, some dent, some sorrowful patch, but the hair at the back is a royal black and lying down pat, having been pulled straight down the scalp with a hot metal comb. Everything is where it is expected. (BB 32-33)

Zandile's obvious concern for her outward appearance can be read as a gesture of empowerment. She is a woman who knows her own beauty. Beauty is necessary to her work as a prostitute and she is acutely aware of the unavoidable fact that this is where her value and her identity are situated. Any dent or sorrowful patch in her hair may reveal relations she has had with another man, making her less desirable to the following client. But more importantly, Zandile is a builder. She has constructed her own façade and its maintenance and upkeep define her. In the environment that is crumbling before her from a lack of attention, a lack of energy and finance to stay on top of the dirt and decay, Zandile finds pride in the fact that she is in control and has the time and energy to attend to every detail of her personal appearance.

Zandile's intimate grooming ritual is also a political one, as Miller suggests. Zandile's hair can be read on one level as an empowered thread stitching together an identity that earns its living off the superficial exchanges of the world. Zandile's hot metal comb is nearly as severe a rejection of her racial identity as the "Ambi generation's" rejection of their inherited skin colour. It straightens hair to an unnatural style, a style which emulates western notions of beauty and damages the hair follicles in the process. Miller, writing about hair in Asian cultures, asks, "The question arises as to the relationship between a nation's economic and political autonomy and its reactions to Western fashions and hair style [. . .] Is the decision by a Nepali upper-caste women to adopt a Parisian hair style testimony to her individuality and

agency or does it mean she is simply a structural victim of Western stylistic hegemony?" (285) The question is also pertinent in the Zimbabwean context. Whilst Zandile's fastidious desire to rise above the image of those around her can be read as self-actualisation, it is full of the pitfalls of mimicry. Zandile's chosen form of realization is defined through an imitation of the West which, as discussed in relation to the use of Ambi, offers very little in the way of long term solutions. On a physical level, the mimicry of another brutally damages the follicles and skin; the attributes Zandile is born with. On an emotional level her actions reveal deep insecurities about identity and a desire to erase the past. As Ben Arogundade explains, "The definitions of 'beautiful' and 'ugly' have always been central cogs within the ideology of racism" (158).

The narrator of *Without a Name* turns to the media to express the political dimension that hair and skin command:

> Magazines showed former slaves with a new gospel of truth and freedom. But here they had not inherited the blood of foraging white masters and therefore worked extra hard to achieve that fine Afro hair. Men heated metal, close-toothed Afro combs and lifted their hair from the scalp, the women, who already knew freedom was purchasable walked into glittering *Ambi* shops and bought their prepared Afro wigs. Thus clad, they asserted an inchoate independence. Independence was memory and style. Black had never been as beautiful as when it married slavery with freedom. (WN 47)

Without a Name, set in 1977, refers to American magazines that "showed former slaves with a new gospel of truth and freedom" (WN 47). The seventies was the end of the Civil Rights movement in America; a hard won battle that saw some fundamental changes to the law put into effect, if not fully absorbed by the national ideology. The inherited blood of foraging white masters could refer to the countless children conceived by slave owners who raped their own slaves, both because they could and as a means to increase their work force. The

children of these relations, mulattos, fell under laws that understood human worth to be a mathematical equation based on the percentage of genes that an individual inherited. One can read Vera's harsh criticism of Africans and African Americans "passing"; aspiring to look closer to white than black in American culture in these passages.

Stains and Scars

In the previous two sections, skin and hair are read as the material sites of racism. The treatment of skin and hair as a type of cloth and thread respectively reflects the pervasive attitude that white skin and straight hair are desirable and any deviation from this norm can be controlled through elected changes to both surfaces. In this final section, skin is considered not as a vehicle for racism but as a record keeper of acts of senseless violence. As I have argued in the previous section, skin can be read as a type of dress that is subject to damage and permanent alterations. This section looks at the damaged skin of Zhizha in *Under the Tongue* and Nonceba in *The Stone Virgins* and notes how both characters seek recovery in the sutures and bandages of textiles. In both cases the characters must contend with the experience of terrible violence against their bodies. The textile is called upon to assist in the literal and metaphorical recovery of wounded bodies. In both of these instances the wounded body is female, the wounds a result of sexual violation and violent attack. If, as art historian Jenni Sorkin writes, "stains are the sores of cloth", then scars are their sutures, the seams of recovery that record the past and indicate an ability to recover without amnesia (78-79). Hattie Gordon captures the nature of the wound and its repair when she notes, "With every stitch that binds a strand, voids and tears are nurtured" (42).

In *Without a Name*, Mazvita's attempt at reconnection, discussed in the previous chapter, is ultimately futile. But in *Under the Tongue,* the presence of scars represents the process of repair and recovery. As a surface and boundary the scar tissue develops a different

texture from the surface around it. Discoloured, shiny, loose, the scar is the body's seam, the place of repair that reminds one of both injury and recovery. Textile theorist Janis Jefferies discusses the seam, the scar of cloth, in relation to the self and the other:

> Self plus edge. An *edge* denotes a border, verge, boundary, frontier, margin, brink or limit [. . .] or ridge where surfaces meet [. . .] The cut edges of some fabrics are particularly prone to fraying, thus running the risk of causing a falling apart at the seams or at points of intricacy in the making up of cloth. The same can be said of selves, or of other identities for which boundaries serve both to protect and form allegiances. (2000:11)

Thus the selvedge, like the scar, is a site that represents the possibility of both incision and repair.

In *Under the Tongue,* Zhizha's description of the violations she endures are described as the woven word drawing together the need to suture and mend the results of her physical and psychological violation. Zhizha's wound is unable to heal until she reaches a point where an expression of her experience is available to her. As mentioned earlier, in Vera's writing the site of violence on the body is often transferred to a more neutral location, making the topic accessible through the language available. In Zhizha's case her physical repair and recovery of communication are one and the same.

> Grandmother says I fell before I learnt to remember [. . .] After I learnt to remember I fell down again, and my scars taught me to forget. Scars are our hidden worlds, our places of forgetting. (UT 61)

There is a contradiction inherent in the idea that scars "taught her to forget" as scars typically act as a reminder of both damage and recovery. The notion of the visible scars of Zhizha's body absenting the abuse of her intimate self recognizes that to teach someone to forget can be an elected decision. On some level it acknowledges and supports growth out of damage:

> Roots grow from my knee, from my scar. I fold my knee and cover it with my hand and bury the secrets of my growing. The roots grow from deep inside my leg, from my bones. My scar grows wide. I listen to roots breaking softly in my bones. I listen to the softness in the silence. I remember my scar. [. . .] I hear the door close. I do not want to think about this nothing which my arms remember, which has spread itself inside me, this something which hides. I fold my hand over my knee grown ripe with new wounds. (UT 21)

The tension between needing to remember and wanting to forget asserts itself as a reminder of the palpable presence of what has been "forgotten".

As Sorkin points out, "Fresh stains are the sores of fabric, raw wounds that map an event. Aged, they are the scars of retrospection. They function as both remainder and reminder of what has come to pass: both evidence and memory" (78). In *The Stone Virgins* the attack against Nonceba and Thenjiwe leaves a litany of stains, sweaty, bloody as well as stigmatised, that the surviving sister, Nonceba, must bear. The attacker's description is mundane and apart from the "blue patches remaining on his shirt here and there, dry, the rest is soaked, pasted against his body like skin" (SV 65). Otherwise, "[h]e is an ordinary man, wearing a blue shirt with buttons not white, not black. Gray. Short sleeves. Khaki trousers. A safe attire. *A shirt you can trust with buttons you can trust*" (SV 65, italics added). Driver and Samuelson discuss the problem of Sibaso's identity concluding that he is, "named neither as a dissident nor as a member of the state military (the Fifth Brigade)". They go on to note that this ambiguity is an intentional decision on Vera's part: "Given Vera's apparent interest in the generalised contamination of war, not naming Sibaso's political affiliation may be as textually significant as in the case of the rapist in *Without a Name* whom Vera called a freedom fighter in one interview [with Eva Hunter in 1998] whose group affiliation she later denied to specify" (203). What can be understood from a reading of Sibaso's dress is that our

inability to define his loyalties is confirmed by his dress, which neither denies nor reveals his affiliations or loyalties.

As we come to learn, there is in fact nothing about Sibaso that should be trusted. The scene that ensues soaks both his "trustworthy" shirt and the sisters' unsuspecting clothing with the stains of horrific violence. "The body is his, pulse and motion. He pulls the arms back, only the arms, and this brings the chest forward, the breasts outward, pushing against that thin cotton cloth of blood" (SV 68). "My arms rest against his shirt. My blouse is pulled up where he holds me tight against himself. I feel the cloth slide down my thighs. His shirt, with the blood soaked in it, is so close I can smell it" (SV 100). After the attack Nonceba confronts her sister's battered body when, "she turns Thenjiwe's body over, and pulls the blouse down to cover the wet breast. Wordless. She slides her fingers under the red cloth. Her touch is warm and longs for life, this lingering heat in the flesh, this threshold. Wordless" (SV 72).

Even with the prospect of eventual physical recovery, stains continue to haunt the cloth that has assisted in Nonceba's bodily repair. "The bandage is light, spoiled; it peels off like a protecting net. He [Cephas] closes his eyes to recover the last layer which clings to skin. She has endured the worst. He replaces the dressing, following carefully the doctor's instructions the nurse has provided him with" (SV 164). These bandages are not the bandages and burial of the war-torn land where "[t]he yellow grass is wrapped over your body, the odour severe like a carcass, dead things" (SV 94), but a cocoon for Nonceba against the violence which continued in Matabeleland after independence. The bandage goes "round and round and round [. . .] She can feel the cloth pressing down, the smell of medicated ointment. Her mouth slightly open, under the cloth" (SV 81). Under the cloth's layers, Nonceba's lips, sliced off during the attack, must heal. The process leaves her mouth partially open, concealed from public view under the bandaged, but healing in the hope that her voice may one day overcome the terrible violence she has borne to speak again.

In conclusion, Douglas's observation that the distortion of margins alters fundamental experience is observed in the changes to the colour and texture of the body's margins in Vera's fiction. These changes made through skin bleaching are driven by a desire to remove the source of racist discrimination. In other instances, skin offers a tragic record of violence against the body which will not be forgotten, or, in the case of the post-independence violence that *The Stone Virgins* records, continues to define the nation. The following chapter will address the more conventional reading of dress as a second skin and propose that in many cases an awareness of the clothing Vera's characters wear can offer explanations for the difficult decisions they elect to make.

Chapter Three

Proximal Relations

> Cloth and clothing fundamentally derive power, whether sacred or sentimental, from a proximal relation – from the skin they touch. (Cavanaugh 606)

Clothing, as noted in the previous chapter, is often understood as a "second skin". As a projection of both conscious and unconscious information regarding the wearer's identity, clothing functions as a powerful form of communication. Aside from individual taste, dress also contains historical references, evidence of cultural exchange and appropriation and information about the wearer's economic or social standing. Dress historian Lou Taylor, discussing the importance of depictions of dress in literature for the dress historian notes, "an analysis of the use of clothing by novelists can deepen our cultural understanding of the past through its coded signalling of gender, culture, politics and social stratum" (91).

By the end of nineteenth century in southern Africa, dress embodied a complex history based on the circuitous route along which textiles travelled to reach what is now the region of Zimbabwe. Throughout Africa, but of particular importance to Zimbabwe because the region has few other traditions to draw upon, textiles typically considered to be ethnic or traditional were, and to some extent continue to be, produced in industrial cities in England (such as Manchester) or India and imported back to the African continent. Furthermore, many of the supposedly "ethnic" designs produced overseas were not in fact indigenous to the region in the first place but new techniques appropriated from foreign textile traditions. Thus, while an analysis of dress certainly reveals details regarding the wearer's identity, these details, in the context of southern Africa, are incredibly complex.

This chapter proposes that the complex historical, cultural and economic messages communicated through dress derive their power from a proximal relation to the skin of the

wearer. Alongside the dictates of fashion are more overtly policed forms of dress, such as the uniform, which, in various guises, are the focus of section two. The remaining sections concern themselves with peripheral values and industries that accumulate around fashion: the soap industry and the care of clothing, and photography, a discipline at the heart of the conspicuous consumption that drives the fashion industry. In the closing section of this chapter gift giving, specifically centred on gifts of clothing, will be explored.

I would propose that an attention to fashion and the complex details it conveys help *explain* Vera's characters, their identities and, as a result, their actions. This chapter, and the project as a whole, continues to be organized thematically rather than chronologically. While this may seem unusual, considering the manner in which fashion relentlessly dates a previous season's clothes and celebrates the newest trend, I would argue here that, while fashions certainly change from the 1940s to the 1980s (the span of time that the books in this section cover), fashion as a system of communication and *explanation* is constant in this purpose, regardless of the season.

British born Nigerian visual artist Yinka Shonibare has produced a series of works that magnify the circuitous references contained in the wax resist textiles commonly known as batik. Shonibare's work takes up many of the preoccupations of postcolonial theory and reworks them in cloth.[29] In today's atmosphere of ever increasing globalisation – through positive agents such as communication networks as well as negative ones such as the refugee crisis – the national and cultural identities projected by dress embrace increasingly complex influences. Dress is an area of growing involvement for contemporary artists working in fibre and, I would argue, is employed in an attempt to negotiate the conflicts between language, culture and history that face the postcolonial world today.

Shonibare appropriates the complex history of wax resist cloth to expose the numerous, but often unnoticed, identities dress conveys. In his 1999 work, "Gay Victorians",

[29] My analysis of Shonibare's work and several other contemporary fibre artists "Hybrid Sources: Depictions of Garments in Postcolonial Fibre Art" is published in *FiberArts* magazine (March/April 2004).

Shonibare alludes to both joy and homosexuality, suggesting that the Victorian image was not always quite as it seemed. The bustle-style dress popular in the late 1800s and used by Shonibare refers not simply to fashion, but also to the female African body that was mocked and ridiculed in the tragic story of the Sarah Bartmann, who was taken from South Africa, caged and put on display in France as an object rather than a person because of her pronounced buttocks. After her death Bartmann was dissected and used as a scientific specimen. Bartmann's remains were only recently returned to South Africa, in April 2002, for a respectful burial.

In Shonibare's "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without Their Heads" (1998), the artist restages the famous Gainsborough painting "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews". Conspicuously absent from Shonibare's restaged version is the backdrop of affluent grounds as well as Mr. and Mrs. Andrew's heads. Coined "postcolonial revenge" the work presents an image of landed gentry literally stripped of their land and, as a consequence, their identity. Shonibare's sculptures respond to the powerful position dress and fashion inhabit as a vital site of negotiation between individual and national identity, a negotiation which remains unresolved for many. In the postcolonial context, dress reveals that on both a national and individual level there continues to be a need to search for a balance between the burden of the past and the demands of an increasingly hybrid present.

It is interesting to note that the Zimbabwean author Damdudzo Marechera, in his many recorded instances of masquerade and carnival dressing in his personal life, could arguably be considered, during his lifetime, a living version of Shonibare's later sculptural investigations. Marechera will be discussed at greater length in the conclusion, but for now it is interesting to note that his adoption of dress codes diametrically opposed to the physical place he inhabited at the time are far more complex signifiers than they may first appear. Anthony Chennells writes, "Flora Veit-Wild's *Dambudzo Marechera* has a photograph of Marechera dressed to receive his half of the Guardian Fiction Prize at London's Theatre

Royal in November 1979. He is wearing a sombrero and poncho which in the black and white photograph looks like a Lesotho blanket. After Marechera returned to Zimbabwe I once encountered him in a university corridor. He was dressed in a pink jacket, white stock and riding breeches with black knee-high boots, the uniform of English upper-class men when they are fox hunting. These sartorial signifiers operate ironically. [. . .] His choice of clothes denies that he can be reduced to a self constituted by race and place. His protean selves affirm identity as a process and therefore inherently unstable" (43). Another work by Shonibare, "Hound" (2000), presents black headless mannequins in traditional British hunting dress tailored from batik cloth. Marechera seems, during his lifetime, to have acted as the embodiment, even an anachronistic muse, for the later sculptures by Shonibare.

The prevalence of Indonesian batik or wax resist fabrics is one of the most well known examples of this trend of appropriation and distortion of authenticity. Doris Lessing also notes the seeming incongruity of the "histories" contained in fabric when she writes of the garments she remembers being worn in Rhodesia during her childhood in the country:

> The patterns look Indonesian. The cloth was manufactured in Manchester along with kenti [sic] cloth for North Africa and the kangas of Kenya. The great bales from England arrived in ships, were put onto trains, and the rolls of cloth, smelling of dye, found themselves on the shelves of hundreds of 'kaffir truck' shops. It was beautiful material, strong, good quality. The women looked beautiful. This cloth could not be worn by the poor women now, for it is associated with the shameful past. Meanwhile, it is made up into luxury items for boutiques in the big cities of The Republic, and bought by fashionable white women and fashionable black women who have never known its history. In Zimbabwe I saw it covering sofas and chairs in a farmhouse, and as curtains in Harare. *Unwritten social history*: in this case probably in the records of the great cotton manufacturers of the Midlands. (125-126, italics added)

Lessing highlights the conflicted position many ethnic textiles inhabit today. While the textile undeniably represents an unwritten social history, discussed in my introduction, the irony here is that the unwritten history is more likely to belong to Manchester than Harare, more likely Indonesian (in the case of wax resist cloth) than Rhodesian. This type of distortion is at the heart of Marechera's explanation of his fragmented and troubled self. As David Pattison notes, "It is interesting that in Chris Austin's film "House of Hunger", shot for Channel 4, Marechera appears in the London scenes wearing a kurta, which he changed for a sober three-piece suit when filming in Harare, being African in Europe and European in Africa" (104-105). While on one level this technique symbolizes Marechera's sense of never quite assimilating and belonging to either culture, the irony is that arguably neither style of dress represents an "original" representation of identity.

Several scholars have noted examples of the hybrid histories that create national and ethnic dress. Rayda Becker presents another example of the circuitous origins of dress: "Billowing boubous, embroidered robes that are recognised all over the world as being traditionally West African, are far from authentic, if authentic is defined in terms of location and origin. This Arab style spread with Islamic conversion from the eighteenth century and is now at the pinnacle of dress in Islamic societies. The cloth is imported from Europe and Asia" (20). Similarly, Hudita Nura Mustafa writes, "In another irony of what stands for African in South Africa, 'traditional' dresses may well be the results of colonial encounters. Herero dress in Namibia is nineteenth century German dress and Xhosa dress is remarkably similar. Zulu dress is still grounded in pre-colonial styles of leather skirts and headdresses" (41).

Perani and Wolff note that appropriated traditions are also subject to further adaptations and reflect the constantly changing tastes of fashion: "The indigo blue of *Adire* appealed to traditional Yoruba taste, while the motifs reflected contemporary concerns [. . .] Of the indigenous Yoruba cloth of the early colonial period, only *adire*, which blended old

and new in response to the changing cultural milieu, could compete in the expanding world of fashion" (166). What Perani and Wolff observe is that, by its very nature, fashion is driven by a desire for constant and unrelenting change. In the case of the Yoruba, and one could assume elsewhere, it is the fabrics that have continued to assimilate new influences that have remained in general use. Kirsten Ruether notes the influence of a migrant workforce in southern Africa and writes, "Labour migrancy to Kimberly and the mining towns of the eastern Transvaal made European clothing available to a growing, if limited, section of the African population and resulted in occasional friction on the mission stations. It became easier to satisfy cravings for the modern and the exotic, with young men of the community bringing back clothing items and materials from town stores [. . .] gradually, almost everywhere, a mixture of old styles, amendments and innovation characterised the evolution of new clothing patterns" (371).

The diverse cultures and histories that come to reside in dress are in part the result of trade routes along which early cultural exchange has occurred for centuries, and continues apace today. Anne Hamlyn offers a sobering reminder of the creative possibilities of this influence when she writes, "To focus on and be captivated by the surface qualities of the textile is to forget that cloth is first and foremost a commodity" (41). As a commodity, dress not only embodies diverse historical influences which the wearer intentionally and unintentionally projects into the world, but also conveys information regarding the economic status of the wearer. The changing mores of Western fashion, which much of the world watches with either admiration or curiosity, mean that styles of dress are often quickly dated and relegated to the label of unfashionable.

Like unkempt hair, discussed in the previous chapter, unkempt dress, whether fashionable or not, reflects lifestyle and economic status. As Perani and Wolff note, "Putting on cloth involves intent; the individual enters the social arena dressed to achieve certain perceived goals. In the quest to express one's personal worth, an individual can draw upon a

rich vocabulary of cloth and clothing to express prestige, proclaim group membership or challenge tradition" (29). I believe Ruether would agree with this argument, but she also notes, in the context of southern Africa in the 1800s, "The desire to be included in social and economic advancement expressed itself in dress, *especially as most of the other paths to claim equality remained closed*" (366, italics added). In this chapter, the economic and cultural details reflected in the dress of Vera's characters, particularly when "most other paths to claim equality remained closed" will be analysed.

Returning briefly to Marechera once more, in his "House of Hunger" he describes the limited opportunities for work available to women and this could easily be read as illustrating Mazvita's experience with the limited and gendered work in *Without a Name,* which she realizes is the only option available to her in Harari. Marechera writes:

> But the young woman's life is not at all an easy one; the black young woman's. She is bombarded daily by a TV network that assumes that black women are not only ugly but also they do not exist unless they take in laundry, scrub lavatories, polish staircases, and drudge around in a nanny's uniform. She is mugged every day by magazines that pressure her into buying European beauty; and the advice columns have such nuggets like 'Understanding is the best thing in the world, therefore be more cheerful when he comes home black as thunder.' And the only time the "Herald" mentioned her is when she has – as in 1896/7 – led an uprising against the State and been safely cheered by the firing squad [Nehanda] or when she is caught for the umpteenth time soliciting in the Vice Mile. [Deliwe]" (50).

Marechera paints a bleak but realistic picture of the pressures he believes women face, both through their aspiration to Western models of beauty and their toil as a domestic workforce, in order to establish a value for themselves in the eyes of others.

Fashion

Elizabeth Wilson explains:

> Fashion parodies itself. In elevating the ephemeral to cult status it ultimately mocks many of the moral pretensions of the dominant culture, which, in turn, has denounced it for its surface frivolity while perhaps secretly stung by the way in which fashion pricks the whole moral balloon. At the same time fashion *is* taken at face value and dismissed as trivial, in an attempt to deflect the sting of its true seriousness, its surreptitious unmasking of hypocrisy. (10, italics in original)

Fashion's hypocrisy, noted by Wilson, is apparent in Vera's handling of the topic, which she imbues with a sense of contradiction in *Without a Name*:

> The city was a place which hid its old. Perhaps no one ever lived here long enough to be toothless [. . .] Feet moved in whirls of free flowing cloth. Men and women wore trousers. REVOLUTION – a small tag along the waist, in black and white. The widened bottom of the trousers turned and turned [. . .] You had to wear your own freedom to be sure it had arrived. 1977. That is how it was expressed. People walked into shops and bought revolutions. If your revolution was white, and wide, then you had circled your dream [. . .] Clad into an expanding silhouette, you died in the streets, and it did not matter. (WN 46-47)

Like the freedom purchased by the "Ambi generation", bell bottom trousers with the ironic brand name "revolution" unmask the hypocrisy lived out by those who bought rather than fought in Zimbabwe's second *chimurenga*.

Homi Bhabha notes "in the ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white', on the margins of metropolitan desire, the founding objects of the Western world became the erratic, eccentric, accidental objets trouvés of the colonial discourse – the part-objects of presence" (92). These part-objects of presence appear in the long list of imported items for sale the

Baloos Store in *Butterfly Burning.* The list begins with a dress and then becomes a litany of fire sale items sold by the desperate owner leaving under rushed circumstances:

> An orange dress. A dress bought at Baloos Stores one new year's day just across the road when the shop-owner has to leave suddenly and sells every item for two pence: dresses and khaki shorts, shoe-laces, candy cakes, Eat One Nows, Afro combs, folded Swiss knives, Lion matches, Andrew's Silver Salts. (BB 37)

The timing of the purchase brings together a year of new hope for the owner of the object and assumed destitution in the coming year for the shop owner. But it is the animal-like actions of the buyers and loiterers which ensue, over a scrimmage for a bag of Red Seal Roller Meal, and the flagrant waste which results that everyone comes to regret:

> It is the incident of the Red Seal Roller Meal which everyone repeats with regret [. . .] The loss is shared. There is joy in destroying a gift. On their arms is the touch of their bodies. Beneath the balcony is a multitude of broken butterfly wings[30] finely crushed. (BB 37-38)

Discussing the floods of people who have moved, without plans, from the rural areas into the cities, *Butterfly Burning*, set in the 1940s, explains:

> All they can claim is being here first. So to prove it, they describe the city in detail: the heels of black women clicking red shoes against the pavement and holding matching bags close to their bodies clad in tight slacks; the smoothness of transparent silk blouses swishing against black skin, bras and ultra-sheen pantyhose; black women's faces turned white and soft like milk, smooth. (BB 47)

The city has fostered unreal and impractical identities. Black women turned white. High heels supported by the concrete jungle. The same fashion glides across the city pavements several

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[30] The broken butterfly wings are a recurring image in *Butterfly Burning*. When Phephelaphi dresses carefully in her best clothes she starches her skirt with mealie meal so that it hangs like a giant hoop, like a loop of enveloping wings about her waist. In the final passages of *Butterfly Burning* Phephelaphi is reincarnated as a phoenix falling rather than rising, a giant bird with gossamer wings singed into a final act of emancipation.

decades later in *Without a Name*, where women "swing arms covered in plastic bangles. Women's legs are nylon and high. Heels do not touch the ground. Handbags swing across arms, cross the streets" (WN 52). Artifice is the key to fashion. All that is natural must be replaced with purchasable realities that offer compensation for the pain of the present.

Needless to say, these accessories come at great cost in an economy where opportunities to spend money far out weigh opportunities to earn money. Poverty peeps out of every corner and is impossible to conceal. "A woman tugs a short skirt downward to cover her knees. Her pantyhose laddered nylon all the way to the heels, but who is checking in this kind of half-dark, half-love, she just wants the feeling of pantyhose, if nothing else. She moves her waist, and the nylon stretches from her waist all the way to her toes" (SV 7-8). One of the key ingredients to fashion is its scorn of function. Ruether writes of the turn of the century missionary influence, "Fashionable items such as hats, waistcoats and umbrellas, in particular, came under attack because people wore them for their appearance and for what they symbolised rather than for their utility. Missionaries tried to show that African's conspicuous appearance voiced only empty, superficial claims to civilisation" (374). Ironically these superficial claims find their origins in the fashion capitals of the world where impracticality is a manifestation of excess discretionary income.

The realities of fashion are couched in a harsher world in Vera's fiction. For example, Zandile, the prostitute in *Butterfly Burning,* "does what is obvious and ordinary, she raises the hem of her skirt even higher and wears high heels and hides her own tender soles from harm. Tucked safely within her low bodice are monogrammed handkerchiefs which she has retrieved from the pockets of white men. She withdraws one of them fancifully and shakes the memory of a bitter encounter off it and waves down a passing love"[31] (BB 31).

[31] To extend this admittedly nonlinear analysis, Zandile's "bitter encounters" are now contributors to the tragic HIV/AIDS epidemic that has reached such staggering proportions on the African continent.

Nina Fleshin in *Empty Dress: Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art* writes that "artists today represent clothing as *abstracted* from the body, in order to investigate issues of identity"(1994: 7) and suggests that the empty dress symbolises the body as discourse as opposed to biological entity (1994: 11). Fleshin is writing of the visual arts, but her observations are also applicable here. "Many of the artists who employ empty clothing do so as a way of resisting self-images that have been imposed on them – resisting objectification by those who have the power to objectify them" (1995: 23). *Without a Name* displays empty dresses on store mannequins in the shop windows:

> The City.
>
> Clothes hung on wooden figures, on women still, thin and unmoving. The figures offered no names, no memory. The past had vanished. Perhaps they offered beginnings, from the outside in. One could begin with a flattering garment, work inwards to the soul. It was better to begin in sections, not with everything completed and whole. It led to such disasters, such unreasoned ambition. So the dresses hung limp on the women, offering tangible illusions, clothed realities. (WN 81)

If, as Wilson explains, "dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self" then the fashion mannequin, used to sell clothing to the public, has to be the most extreme example of this fabricated frontier (3). As the quintessential embodiment of all that has become fractured and emptied out in the face of pain and disillusion, Vera's mannequins, like many of her characters, no longer aspire to wholeness. Vera constructs the fashion mannequin as a curiously self-defeating part prostitute, part eunuch with offspring of doubtful purpose:

> These glassed and protected women had long brown hair and red lips and arms stretched, offering a purchasable kind of salvation. The figures had a rare insight into bodies, with no breasts, yet their children stood with them in equal poses of divinity. The children held plastic arms towards their mothers. The children wore lace. They wore bright red ribbons. It was difficult to understand the exchange the children

> offered because it was so clear that they had not begun to live, that their parents, standing holier above them, had at least some form of pretence – long smooth necks held out to the day, heads bent slightly inward, as though they served tea. It was like that with the figures, an austere reality, fixed, with handbags held across arms stiff and long. Silent eyes fixed on passers-by. The eyes saw and spoke nothing. The eyes were voiceless. They burrowed, ate their own bodies. (WN 81)

Anorexia nervosa, a trend of Western fashion, appears in the thin forms and the *eyes* that ate their own bodies, a peculiar self-defeating cycle of supposed beauty based on a distorted sense of self-perception.[32] As Wilson explains, fashion not only parodies itself, but also reveals its own self-perpetuating hypocrisy. The fragmented self, captured in the fashion mannequins, represents the economic, cultural and perhaps most importantly, emotional reality of the postcolonial experience *Without a Name* is on the brink of discovering. Divide and conquer the sections of the self and address them in their fragmented state, just as the colonial conquest maps of the past have done. Unity, wholeness, completeness, these are an impossibility. Completeness and fulfilment are an "unreasoned ambition" considering the history on which the present rests. But, with "no names, no memory" to haunt the present, Vera may be suggesting that the past is perhaps possible to overcome. The *image* of being carefree is accessible even if the reality is not.

The fashion mannequins in *Without a Name* are of indeterminate race, but with long brown hair they are unlikely to be black Africans. *The Stone Virgins* updates the image of the store mannequin with the depiction of supposed progress through the introduction of black models: "Edgars is the first large shop in Bulawayo to use black mannequins on its windows soon after independence. Three years later, every passer-by still looks through the windows at the black faces with arms stretched out as though supporting layers and layers of cobwebs" (SV 149). The image of cobwebs, or at least insubstantiality, is at odds with the sense of

[32] For further exploration of eating disorders in Zimbabwean fiction see Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*.

"progress" supposedly represented by the black models. This is not a busy store front with regular traffic and sales, but an uncanny example of Wilson's "atrophy of the body" on which empty garments rest (1).

Fashion flaunts notions of modesty and practicality in order to celebrate excess. But in many cases life in the townships that cling to the edges of urban life can do little more than support excesses of a modest kind. For instance, Phephelaphi's surrogate mother in *Butterfly Burning* is described as, "Gertrude, who had a dress for going to town and a dress for staying home, and who made this distinction important enough that the dress for going to town was always on a metal hanger and placed on a peg near the open window so that it got some full time air" (BB 65). With two garments to her name and nothing more, Gertrude still finds it import to make the distinction, and effort, to dress up for town and down for everyday wear. Furthermore, the airing that the dress receives while in the window conveniently allows the garment to be on display even in the absence of Gertrude's body.

In the case of the store mannequins, the absence of proximal relations projects a bizarre and unnerving public display of what is sold as beauty. These examples of fashion reveal the extent to which fashion, as Wilson notes, becomes a parody of itself. In the following section the uniform, a highly regulated and policed version of dress, will be analysed. While parody continues to play a role, the uniform is also an inescapable projection of power, which, depending on the type of uniform, either commands or withholds power from the wearer.

Uniforms: White

Wilson notes that the uniform is "contradictory in that, intended to quench individuality, it may sometimes enhance it" (40). A dream sequence in *Butterfly Burning*

describes the starched whiteness of a nurses' uniform. When imaged on Phephelaphi's black body the uniform heightens rather than conceals Phephelaphi's imagined presence:

> A young black woman was seen walking slowly down Sidojiwe E2. She wore a starched and pure white dress and a white cap on her head. The cotton fabric of the dress had been repeatedly ironed. Not a single crinkle in it. Flat brown shoes. A brown handbag. Her head held up. She walked steadily. She looked important. Pins held the cap down into her smoothed hair. Poised. Clean. Purposeful. Her skin luminescent from creams. Her lips moistened with a gentle finger-tip of Vaseline [. . .]
>
> The hospital had accepted its first black nurse. There would be more. (BB 84)

Phephelaphi sees herself as the nurse she will never become. Every element of her imagined career establishes an identity of control and reason that her second unwanted pregnancy will deny her. The garment receives a considerable amount of attention to its care and is repeatedly ironed so that not a trace of wrinkled fabric remains. Phephelaphi's stance is much like that of a fashion model, unhurried, erect, self possessed. Her imagined employment has granted her the means to purchase luxuries such as lotions and lip gloss. Her lifestyle allows time for the application and enjoyment of such products. Hair is combed flat in, what one may surmise, is a time-consuming process with hot comb and oil, and then tidily pinned down under her hat. Similarly, her matching shoes and handbag express quality rather than the mismatched second-hand cast offs or exchanges far more typical of her reality. Function and practicality are on display rather than the frivolity and excess.

Stefano Tonchi notes, "The dualism intrinsic to the uniform reflects the dualism implied by the idea of fashion itself, aimed simultaneously at conformity and distinction, at celebrating the past and the security of tradition while continuously adapting to new technologies of the future" (155). The white uniform that Phephelaphi dreams of wearing heightens her racial identity and ironically is the reason (apart from her pregnancy) for why the passage remains no more than an illusion. As Ranka Primorac has noted, Vera presents an

anachronism in *Butterfly Burning.* Given that it is set during the 1940s, no black nurses could in fact have been working in Rhodesia during Phephelaphi's lifetime. Primorac writes, "the novels' narrators [do not] ever find it unreasonable that Phephelaphi wants to be a nurse at a time when it is impossible for black women to do so" (2001: 91).

While Phephelaphi's identity as the first black nurse is ultimately an illusion rather than a reality, another description of a white uniform worn by women is far from illusory:

> Bell-shaped petals carpet the street scene where veiled brides and their maids suddenly appear from the magistrate's court at Tredgold Building and drive a few blocks down to Centenary Park, they emerge out of polished cars, in twirling gowns and fingers of white silk clutching bouquets of pink carnations. They circle the fountain, and the groom. Their poses are measured and delicate. The groom wears a tailcoat, a pleated shirt, a grey cummerbund, and a single white buttonhole rose. The photographer bends and shifts and shields his lens from the glare, from spray, but not from the blooms. (SV 4)

The first page and a half of *The Stone Virgins* describes flower blossoms and colours which read like a toss of confetti that covers the opening wedding scene of the narrative. The formal white European wedding may initially read as incongruous, more of an illusion than even Phephelaphi's ambition to be a black nurse in 1940s Rhodesia, but art historian Brenda Schmahmann explains the presence of such imagery in the Weya appliqués discussed in the introduction. "The trappings of a Western Christian marriage are not as foreign to rural Zimbabwe society as it may seem. The glamour of the wedding gown and satin-bedecked bridesmaids has caught the imagination of young women, and colourful 'well-dressed' weddings have become commonplace" (84). Combining both Christian missionary influence

and European ideals, the white wedding, for all its apparent incongruities, represents the hybrid influences that fashion absorbs.[33]

Over one hundred years earlier the hybrid influences embodied by fashion were already apparent in South Africa, as Ruethers writes of Botshabelo in 1891:

> It had become common practice that young men worked in the mining centres for two to three months in order to buy a wedding suit and the materials for a wedding dress. This was approved of. Yet Berlin missionaries hoped to restrain bridal couples from wearing 'Paris fashion' and announced an upper price limit on the material [. . .] Dresses had to be sewn on the mission station under the missionary wife's supervision. Thus, they tried to encourage *outdated European styles* rather than the fancy modern fashions young people preferred. (375-6, italics added)

Nathan Joseph offers some clarification for why outdated styles were encouraged when he writes, "the dress of servants is deliberately made anachronistic to clarify their position vis-à-vis their masters" (39). Hence Ruether's example represents intentional control, establishing a critical distance between those who consider themselves closer to the origins of the tradition and those newly able to purchase and enjoy such identities, but at some cost.

Perani and Wollf note other contemporary adaptations of wedding dress traditions. "In southern Africa, the Ndebele took advantage of new materials to develop a modern form of the woman's beaded wedding apron [. . .] In recent years beads have been sewn onto canvas instead of leather. Some women have even abandoned beading altogether, using plastic as a

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[33] Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* also depicts a traditional white wedding: "The material was bought in a single afternoon – peach georgette for the bridesmaids and pale amber for the flower-girls, as well as yards of white satin lace for the bride. We bought a lot of material and took it to the dressmaker, where Nyasha decided that the old patterns we had chosen weren't right for the cloth and thoroughly enjoyed herself, instructing the dressmaker most artistically which sleeves to put on which bodice to put on which skirt in order to create the desired garment. We fetched the dresses a week before the wedding and they were beautiful. [. . .] Nyasha was delighted, with the dresses, with the whole effect I created when I put mine on, with the whole idea of the wedding" (162). The irony that Dangarembga presents in this wedding scene is that the couple to be married are the narrator's parents and have long lived in a traditional marriage and had children. Under pressure from their "civilized" relatives, the couple put themselves through the pomp and circumstance of a traditional white Christian wedding. The prospect of this hollow ceremony disturbs the narrator so much that in the final event she refuses to attend the ceremony, which she sees as a humiliation of her parents and herself.

backing for patterns made from colored electrical tape, plastic, rickrack and lace. Thus, the plastic wedding apron can be viewed as a pragmatic adaptation by women to a changed society" (47). Perani and Wollf's example presents another extreme, but nonetheless supports the observation that fashion is subject to constant and relentless negotiation and change, at times overt, at others subtle.

White uniforms worn by both nurses and brides embody historical and economic values. But in the case of the uniform, departures and adaptations from the norm are even more overt. The unofficial sumptuary laws are controlled today not only by the expense of cloth, but also by the inescapable time lag between the fashion runways of the economically dominant world and the developing nations. This time lag ruthlessly dates and ultimately undermines fashionable styles and leaves those beyond the world's fashion centres at an insurmountable fashion disadvantage. As Christopher Breward notes:

> The immigrant communities whose presence was also an important feature of the modern fashion city, and those who resided at one remove from the centre in the colonies of European empires, were generally exploited in sweatshops, or co-opted as sources of inspiration for the latest lucrative trends. Similarly, local and seasonal patterns of migration and exchange from surrounding rural areas ensured that cities retained a reputation as magnetic centres, attracting labour, wealth, and creativity, and thus generating fashion. (69-70)

Uniforms: Brown

While Joseph notes, "A basic relationship read into clothing is that of power, or 'who controls whom' in the realm of clothing", fashion, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, presents a complex blend of historical reference, cultural appropriation and economic details (39). In *The Stone Virgins,* camouflage fatigues worn by women during Zimbabwe's second

chimurenga continue to be worn after the war ends. In sharp contrast to the various white uniforms previously discussed.

> [T]hese women wear their camouflage long past the ceasefire, walking through Kezi with their heavy bound boots, their clothing a motif of rock and tree, and their long sleeves folded up along the wrist. They wear black berets, sit on the ledge of Thandabantu Store and throw their arms across folded knees [. . .] They close their eyes and tuck their berets into the pockets along their legs, and button them up, and forget them. (SV 50)

After the ceasefire, the camouflage uniform that has signified equality during wartime becomes a misnomer and anachronism in peacetime. The women assume their uniforms will elicit the same pride and respect from the civilian community as it did from their comrades during war. They treat the women who have not shared their experience with a mild scorn. The harsh reality depicted in films such as "Flame" is that there is no place for their independent identities once the war has ended.[34] During Rhodesia's second *chimurenga*, women joined the forces and many rose to positions of leadership unheard of in the villages they left. The female combatants at the end of the war were left in the unenviable position of returning to the patriarchal prejudices and limitations of society. The end of the war has left many without the patterns that had determined their daily lives. While the female combatants have experienced some sense of gender equality while at war, the country after independence has returned to the restrictive gender roles of the past.

Vera leaves these uniformed women at a loss as to what to do with themselves other than note their difference and sense the curious presence they create within the community. The description of the combat uniform could not be further from Phephelaphi's imagined

[34] The film "Flame" tells the story of two female comrades meeting years after the war. One has assimilated into the culture of city life and gained an independent identity for herself, the other, broken by the war, wants only to revisit the days of glory, as her life since the war ended has offered none of the freedoms and equality she experienced as a combatant.

white nurse's uniform. Boots are heavy and masculine, the camouflage cloth blends into the natural landscape, rather than the sanitized stark white of the modern hospital environment. The reluctance to discard the combat uniform is an indication that the women are looking back rather than looking forward. Their presence in the war is history, as opposed to Phephelaphi's imaginings which will never occur for her character and do not occur in Zimbabwe for years to come.

In contrast to the army fatigues that proudly display themselves on the bodies of survivors after the ceasefire, there are fragments of camouflage left on the corpses of those that have not been so lucky. The character of Sibaso, the attacker of Thenjiwe and Nonceba is described as yet another "casuality" of the war. He explains:

> I am among the dead voices. I discover a whole side of a trouser leg which is intact. It has been burnt all around the edges, mapped. No loose threads, the fabric is heavy. Camouflage. No hem. No waist. The cloth starts halfway down the thigh. He was a tall man. A pocket on it. Intact. (SV 97)

The fragmented identity, discussed up until this point on a largely psychological level, confronts the harsh reality of physical fragmentation in this image of war. Furthermore, Sibaso's identity as a post-independence dissident signals that, while his efforts in the guerrilla war have come to fruition, post-independence Zimbabwe has not realized his hopes and has driven him back to a life of violence. Sibaso can, on an individual level, be understood as a continuation of the male violence portrayed throughout Vera's fiction (Zhizha's father Muroyiwa in *Without a Name* and the Mazvita's unnamed rapist in *Under the Tongue*). He, like the others, is man who has witnessed too many atrocities and is no longer able to feel the difference between good and bad, right and wrong.

In contrast to functional fatigues or an imagined nursing career, a woman working for the government as a recruitment officer attempts to bring uniforms for young boys to the countryside. Her citified image sinks with every step taken on the soft soil:

> The caps have been distributed to them free of charge by the tall woman who arrives from the city in a brightly coloured van: she wears a red pencil skirt, and high heels that sink into the river soil so that she has to lean forward to walk, and sun glasses so dark that they never get to see her eyes [. . .] The clothes rest on metal hangers held on hooks pinned on the walls. The folds on them persist, pleats across the sleeves, stiff, with extra starch. The boys consider these shirts with scorn, and a mild curiosity. (SV 18)

The high heels and dark glasses of the delivery woman create a tortured stance on the rural land. Her posture tips forward, nearly out of control. Eyes, which could convey her honesty or good intent, are concealed under sunglasses. Fashion has paralysed her forward motion. "She deposits khaki uniforms for the boys six to fourteen at the store, for sale" (SV 18). The delivery of the uniforms is a reminder of another pervasive system of indoctrination for young boys, the Boy Scouts. Tammy Proctor notes, "Uniforms established a standard of 'civility' and 'smartness' that youth in each new country had to strive to imitate, while simultaneously inscribing difference on the young bodies" (127). Uniforms heighten difference through contrast or disempower through lack of individuality. In both cases the identity of the wearer is controlled and explained through dress.

Soap, Starch, Iron

An early but equally contradictory influence on the fashions of southern Africa arrived with the missionaries. Early missionaries brought with them new notions of hygiene and modesty, largely unhelpful in the context of the Zimbabwean landscape and its cultural norms. Along with the cumbersome and impractical introduction of dress in impractical fashions for Sunday church attendance, soap was yet another foreign introduction. Anne McClintock suggests that soap, like the anonymous textiles of the domestic sphere, "has no

social history. Since it purportedly belongs in the female realm of domesticity, soap is figured as beyond history and beyond politics proper" (209). McClintock goes on to suggest that "To begin a social history of soap, then, is to refuse, in part, to accept the erasure of women's domestic value under imperial capitalism" (209). In many ways an attention to soap operates in a similar manner to an attention to the textiles that exist around the home, objects that record histories and lives that have long been absent from more conventional forms of documentation of the female experience. Soap's intimate relationship to cloth, of course, also links the two, as does the considerable amounts of time women around the world have spent washing textiles by hand, both before and after the introduction of soap. Eicher's inclusive definition of fashion, discussed in the previous chapter, includes the surface of skin and its alterations as a form of dress. Similarly, the sale of soap can be seen as an aspect of the fashion industry.

Before the introduction of modern clothing in Zimbabwe, inhabitants of the region of southern Africa traditionally smeared their bodies with grease and wax-like substances to provide insulation. Timothy Burke explains that in the region of present day Zimbabwe the tradition of smearing was desirable for several reasons. "The most basic and regionally universal of these bodily regimens was "smearing," the regular use of a mixture of soil and some kind of oil or fat to coat most or all of the body" (191). Smearing "made the body free from dirt and other menaces in the environment" and also functioned as a moisturiser which, in addition to cleaning and providing insulation, was considered aesthetically pleasing (192). The tradition stood in direct conflict with the notion of daily washing with soap and water, especially in regions where a water source may be far away and temperatures low enough to make the use of water a compromise to heath. The indoctrination into the use of soap was successful, in spite of the harsh chemicals that often dried the skin, and established a contradictory cycle of washing with soap followed by the reapplication of grease or wax to replace the moisture lost by washing with harsh detergents. As Burke explains, "European

hygienic practices were defined as the essence of "civilization", coinciding with the cementing of intensive and social cleanliness as normative in English social life" (193).

The daily ritual of washing with soap, initially introduced with the missionaries, turned into a financial opportunity for soap companies fuelled by aggressive advertising campaigns. Burke's research reveals that "African women were the most exaggerated subjects of such campaigns. Images of hygienic practice and mannerly, 'civilized' bodily habits were aimed at women largely through the intensive promotion of domesticity. In many ways, the imagined body of the colonial subject in Zimbabwe was first black but also crucially female, especially with regard to hygiene" (195). As an extension of the conspicuous consumption that defines fashion, female notions of beauty were the focus of these advertisements. The ideology permeates even the poorest of settings of Vera's fiction.[35] For example, *Under the Tongue* describes the strong scent of harsh soaps and the highly perfumed body lotions while walking through the townships:

> [I]n the early morning the smell of cheap soap saturating the air, thrown out into the yard in the used water, the stinging smell of Lifebuoy and Sunlight which provided a penetrating welcome [. . .] A tiny piece of green soap lay safely above it, to dry [. . .] There was the rich smell of cheap lotions, green and thick and unapologetically present, with names like Girlfriend, Black Beauty and Dawn. It was overwhelming, the smell of cheap lotion. (UT 74-75)

Burke notes an intentional inefficiency of the products, remarking that the "poorly made cheap bar soaps [. . .] were known to shrivel as they dried, losing most of their substance", thus requiring the frequent purchase of more soap[36] (201).

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[35] While Burke does not specifically mention Vera's fiction, he does note the mention of soap and hygiene in several contemporary Zimbabwean novels, Chinjerai Hove's *Bones*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and the work of Dambudzo Marechera.

[36] Binwell Sinyangwe's *A Cowrie of Hope* mentions the absence of soap as an indication of extreme poverty, "The harvest was not good. [. . .] Then the agent came and collected everything of value from the farm: livestock, furniture, crops everything. And that was it, the beginning of the farm's slow death and suffering. Now, they had nothing, not even a *ngwee* with which to buy soap. It was true. Nasula had eyes to see. Chiswebe

The Stone Virgins describes the important and long awaited arrival of gifts sent by family members in the city. Unloaded from the bus are "parcels of nylon stockings and skirts made of crushed silk, then red berets, then bangles. Bottles of Shield deodorant and Tomesei Shampoo. And Ponds. And lip-balm scented with lemon [. . .] Cocoa-butter and plastic tubes of Camphor cream" (SV: 23). These luxuries offer a rare experience of moisture on the parched land. But consumption sits less comfortably with the female freedom fighters. "The only sign they give of disapproval is to shake their heads sideways and look long and well as the young women walk into Thandabantu Store in their petticoats or with broken umbrellas to purchase some cream, some Vaseline, wearing leather sandals or with bare feet" (SV 51).

Burke remarks that, "Lifebuoy and Sunlight worked off hygienic imagery linked to working-class bodies, bodies within the sphere of Christian morality, labor and domesticity, while Lux mined another vein of ideology about manners and bodies, the thread that dealt with "modern living" and "civilized fashion" (202). In contrast to Burke's research, Vera presents a romantic image of cleanliness in the men who have fought and trained as guerrillas and, spurning such commercial and feminine products, are romantically described as washing their hair with mint. "Their arms, their hair, are washed with leaves of mint. They refuse neat portions of Lifebuoy and Lux soap bought especially for them from Thandabantu Store and wash their bodies with herbs from the hills, from the river, like modest beings" (SV 47). This ideal of mint does not tally with Burke's observation that soap sales became gendered. He writes:

> Print advertisements for Lever Brothers soaps like Lifebuoy, Sunlight, and Lux from the 1950s and 1960s provide some good examples of southern African advertising's appropriation of colonial hygienic training. Lifebuoy was presented by the company in southern African markets primarily as a "strong" soap suited for washing particularly dirty bodies. As a consequence, the advertised image of Lifebuoy

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had become a man who washed without soap. His once shiny, soap-smoothed skin was coarsened and dull. His appearance had changed greatly and he had aged" (29-30).

ultimately drifted inexorably toward both masculinity and blackness. With the disinfectant carbolic added to it, Lifebuoy has a distinctive, unforgettable odor. (200)

Burke separates the consumption of soap from moisturizers, remarking that "[s]oap, while having been seen as a fundamental need by most Africans since at least the 1950s, has been closely tied to the visions of clean bodies promoted first by missions and the state and later powerfully and massively reproduced in post-war advertising. Vaseline and other face and body creams, by contrast, were purchased and used in large amounts in the postwar era without any significant initiatives by manufacturers" (205). Vaseline and creams can be seen to continue the long historical tradition of smearing while soap was a new introduction, previously entirely unnecessary.

References to the cleanliness of clothing as well as skin in Vera's fiction can be read as a desire to rise above the poverty and squalor of difficult living conditions as much as any long term missionary influence.[37] In addition to clean skin and clothing, clean, ironed clothes are also described in detail.[38] In *Without a Name,* Mazvita, in spite of her desire to experience independence for herself in the city, finds herself "iron[ing] Joel's white shirts till they shone" (WN 51). Phephelaphi is also pictured in a carefully ironed garment. "On the day she has chosen to visit Deliwe's house, she dresses in her best clothing and walks carefully along Sidojiwe E2 [. . .] She is wearing a flaring white skirt underneath which is a stiff petticoat which she has dipped in a bowl of warm water thickened with sugar and then ironed it hot till it dried. A white butterfly, her waist a tight loop" (BB 54). The ironed and starched butterfly hoop is both an example of a homemade crinoline skirt that wreaked havoc a century earlier because missionaries were determined to keep up appearances, regardless of fire hazards or practicality. More importantly, it foreshadows Phephelaphi's future immolation. Ruether

[37] Even Lessing recalls a memory of herself in which she realizes how ludicrous her Marxist preaching in Rhodesia must have seemed to her audience when she remembers the details of her appearance. "I can see myself, an attractive but above all self-assured young woman, in a clean and perfectly ironed dress – which in itself was a luxury for people living in crammed and shabby rooms" (51).

[38] It is also realistic to remember that ironing is often used to kill the larvae of parasites that hatch on cotton clothes and can burrow into the wearer's skin.

notes, "There was a distinctive aspect to the crinoline incident, in that the clothes-burning was directed against the behaviour of women" (360). This connects to Phephelaphi's self-inflicted punishment for the betrayal of her body, a betrayal one could imagine a century earlier would have been enacted by the hands of others. Thus it is possible to suggest that Phephelaphi's impossible identity within the narrative can be traced back to instances like the crinoline skirts of the missionaries a century earlier. Her life is the result of an unplanned pregnancy; she attempts to transcend her origins by aborting her own unplanned pregnancy, only to confront traditional and patriarchal prejudices about her decision, which was an effort toward aspiration, hope and the determination to secure a better future. As a result, Phephelaphi is left with an insurmountable contradiction: progress and equality are pronounced and offered, but in truth not yet available.

Photography

The fashion industry in many ways magnifies the fragmented and contradictory ideals of the colonized identity. This doubling is visually affirmed in the photograph, an object that both represents truth and, as Susan Sontag notes, inevitably leaves something behind: "to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude" (46). By its very nature the photograph both captures and innocently or not so innocently, edits. Roland Barthes notes not the editing which the photograph is always able to deploy, but the façade that the photograph adopts. "Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask." (1981: 34) It is precisely this mask that the fashion photographer celebrates, and that appears on the magazine pages turned by Joel, sitting "on the small bed on weekends in a crisp shirt and paged through *Scope* magazine" where "[n]aked white women graced the covers [. . .] in tight bikinis" (WN: 51). Similarly, in the modest room where Fumbatha and Phephelaphi live in *Butterfly Burning,* Fumbatha reads a magazine:

> Together Fumbatha and Phephelaphi have placed pictures on the walls, mostly from torn old magazines [. . .] carefully selected some pictures to *making their living valid*, pasted on the wall in this darkness with no possibility of vision [. . .] A group of girls in short skirts and Afro wigs and identical red-rimmed sunglasses stare at the camera, each with the same wry smile and same knowing gaze and absolutely no doubt in their eyes, just tight tops and sparkling silver necklaces dangling a message of stunned wonder into the hidden crevices of their blouses. (BB 71-72, italics added)

The magazine photographs that paper the room are one of the ideals sought by the "Ambi generation". Fashion photography inculcates value in the white image of beauty, light skin, straight hair, and impractical clothes that change with the fashion seasons. These ideas present impossible ideals both physically and economically for most of the world. Anne Hollander explains the synchronisation of fashion photography and reality when she writes, "Bodily movement – especially conscious movement but also unconscious action – must have always tended, as it still does, to conform to mental self-images; and these must have been at least partly conceived with the help of external images" (314). In Phephelaphi and Fumbatha's room these external images that "mak[e] their living valid" are pinned to the walls in darkness. But the synchronisation of external image and self image leave an impossible gap to bridge between image and reality.

The synchronisation of image and movement appears in the photo studio of *The Stone Virgins* where, with the help of a mirror and film, two people emerge for the cost of one photo. "She wants to go to Kay's Photo Studio on Jameson Street where they give you a small mirror for one hand, and a wine glass in the other [. . .] two selves emerge out of every picture so you get your money's worth, for sure, a backdrop of sailing ships shows that you are not as landlocked in this city as everywhere else in the country" (SV 12 - 13). This doubling is reminiscent of the doubling that occurs with the "Ambi generation", surface

reflections of the doubling and fragmentation that capture Bhabha's not quite/not white identity. A similar technique is also evident in Marechera's "House of Hunger":

> Solomon the township photographer is now a rich man. His studio at the back of the grocer's is papered from floor to ceiling with photographs of Africans in European wigs, Africans in mini-skirts, Africans who pierce the focusing lens with a gaze of paranoia. The background of each photo is the same: waves breaking upon a virgin beach and a lone eagle swivelling like glass fracturing light towards the potent spaces of the universe. A cruel yearning that can only be realized in crude photography. The squalor of the city was obliterated in an explosion of flashbulbs and afterwards one could say 'That's me, man – me! In the city.' (11)

As Sontag notes, the problem with the photograph is that, in the process of framing and capturing, it inevitably, and here intentionally, excludes reality from the whole picture.

Gift Giving[39]

It is my reading that dress acts as a locus for explaining the fragmented concept of self that confronts Vera's characters. Uneasy relationships with the past and with the newly acceptable sense of ambition and hope for the future trouble boundaries previously considered static. As the narrator of *Butterfly Burning* explains, "The distinctions always unclear, the boundaries perpetually widening" (BB 4). Phephelaphi is introduced swimming in the Umguza River outside the polluted township. Seemingly cleansed by the waters of the river, Phephelaphi is introduced in the narrative with precious little in the way of an identity. She wears a "thin cloth" soaked with river water that clings "over her like skin"(BB 20). In these opening

[39] An earlier version of this paper was presented under the title "The Unwanted Gift: Clothing in the Writings of Yvonne Vera" at the Annual Comparative Literature Conference at University of California, Long Beach, USA, March 2002.

scenes Phephelaphi is observed by an older man, Fumbatha. After introducing herself to him she explains that her name is as negotiable as any other aspect of herself. She remarks, "I do not mind being renamed if it makes the present clearer" (BB 24). Her name fits no better or worse than another, just as the clothing she wears in the river water is indistinguishable from her own skin. Neither name nor dress are capable of defining her person. Instead, Phephelaphi's identity is determined by her ambiguous relationship to the past. She has witnessed the murder of a woman she believes to be her mother and is living with Zandile, a woman she believes to be her mother's best friend. When she meets Fumbatha by the Umguza River, she explains to him that it is Gertrude's murder which has erased her own identity.

Instead, Phephelaphi's identity is determined by her ambiguous relationship to the past. She has witnessed the murder of a woman she believes to be her mother and is living with Zandile, whom she believes to be her mother's best friend. When she meets Fumbatha by the Umguza River she explains to him that Gertrude's murder has erased her own identity:

> 'I feel like a thief,' she said. 'Everything I own I have stolen. The time I spent with my mother was something I had taken. *It was not a gift.* I stole everything, then time, and event, stole the rest that had been given.' (BB 25, italics added)

With no one and nothing to lay claim to, Phephelaphi finds it simple to leave Zandile and embark on a new life with Fumbatha.

Until the day of her departure, Phephelaphi has little to take with her. On this day Zandile presents her with a gift. The skirt she offers Phephelaphi is "the first clothing she [Zandile] ever bought when she arrived in the city those many years back, and she had kept it because it was her only link with the past, and with Gertrude" (BB 25). Phephelaphi sees the skirt as a repository for memory, a memory she does not wish to wear or carry with her.

The very fabric of the skirt is constructed in a way that mirrors her identity. The thick pleat reveals a single opening, a single site of vulnerability, falling open to expose the

wearer's one modest knee. The skirt represents European fashion, a city accessory purchased by a younger Zandile to celebrate her arrival and new identity in the city. The fact that the style is now dated, that she no longer wears the skirt herself, gestures to the expendable values nurtured by the city and the wide-eyed enthusiasm long gone from the older and wiser inhabitants. Perhaps more importantly, the garment is vested with a former spirit. Elsewhere on the African continent it is believed "[a] spirit's clothes can be used as a channel through which communication with the spirit can be effected in private, domestic contexts. By borrowing specific clothes, one may unknowingly inherit a spirit that is associated with them" (Hendrickson 9). Phephelaphi's rejection of Zandile's gift is driven by the fact that she sees it as yet another substitute. Zandile is the simulacra of a mother, a superficial replica of the woman Phephelaphi has lost. The skirt, bought by the women when they were younger, represents a memory that Phephelaphi does not see as hers to share. She returns the gift remarking "she ha[s] no time for any other woman's priceless memories" (BB 26). Phephelaphi's desire to discard all memories that do not fit easily with her own is a reaction against the murder of her mother and an ambition to begin a life for herself, free from her unfortunate past. As Douglas explains in her introduction to Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*, "the whole idea of a free gift is based on misunderstanding [. . .] A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction" (vii). Vera's textile gifts are not intended to enhance solidarity, even if that is the superficial explanation. Instead, in each case Vera writes into her characters an instinctive understanding of the gift's contradictory function, which leads to the systematic rejection of gifts in her narratives.

Anne Hamlyn writes, "The textile is always, it seems, a surrogate skin, a body at one remove, placed at a comfortable distance, even a given without a corpse" (42). Like Zandile's relic of the past, Phephelaphi's memory of the murder is captured and recorded on the dress her mother wore. But unlike the skirt Zandile offers as a gift, Gertrude's dress is literally inscribed with the memory of her death. Sorkin observes that stains "denot[e] the passage of

time" (78-79). The blood stains from the bullet that killed Phephelaphi's mother record the reality that Phephelaphi must face. Gertrude now lives only in the past, a memory recorded on cloth, a given without a corpse. With the innocence of a child, Phephelaphi does not understand the reality of the fateful night until the moment she sees the blood staining the fabric of her mother's dress. Later, the dress is returned by the police wrapped in a plastic bag. Despite the name "Emelda" scrawled in red pen across the plastic, the dress is undeniably her mother's:

> Then the dress in which her mother had died was brought back to her by a white policeman [. . .] The police were such a careful lot to remember to return the dress to her. The dress came in a bag. The bag was inscribed in red ink – Emelda. (BB 28)

In place of a gesture of compassion or respect, the act of misnaming represents Gertrude's unvalued identity. The false name offers her daughter an oblique warning of the news she will eventually learn: that Zandile is her biological mother and that the murdered woman for whom she has grieved was in fact Zandile's friend, who raised the unwanted child as her own.

In response to the misnaming of the garment, Phephelaphi signs the police documents in her mother's name rather than her own. Her action adopts an identity as fictitious as that of the mother she believes she has lost. By penning her mother's name, Phephelaphi feels that she has "separated herself from the event. Her mother placing her own name on the papers, for a woman named Emelda" (BB 28). In reality, the gesture helps to further rupture Phephelaphi's sense of self-worth. Her carefree proposal to rename herself which she offered to Fumbatha signals her absence of secure identity.

While the red marker stains the plastic forensic bag with an inky blood of its own, the material of the dress holds further information regarding the cause of the murder. Gertrude had been having an affair with a police officer. The night of the murder she woke and stumbled to the door, thinking she would find him. The dark night conceals the arrival of her

murderer. Literally green with envy, the dress records a violent act driven by what can be assumed to be jealousy. By describing Gertrude's dress in such detail, cloth once again exists in proximal relation to the body of the wearer, a text upon which the day-to-day existence of its owner is recorded:

> A pale green dress faded under the armpit but looked all the more delightful for its ageing parts, it had circles spreading from under her arms and she let it be. The seam loosening. The thread ready to tear. A large hem, limp, dangling past her knees like ripe things, the stitching on it so carelessly sewn it showed even though it was the same enviable green as the fabric. (BB 65)

Gertrude's dress exists in proximal relation to its owner's body and absorbs the wound which has caused her death. But even before the blood stains of death, the cloth has diligently recorded other stains and scars. Perspiration has discoloured the armpits and fatigue has distorted its shape. As Jefferies sees, "When fabric is used in life it becomes vulnerable, exposed, damaged just like our body, like the tissue of our skin, susceptible to destruction. But when it is involved in action, it becomes a source of sound and of agitation. Tearing, stretching may become violent and disturbing" (2000: 29). The stitches along the hem, that have loosened with age, act as a reminder of the sutures along Zandile's stomach that record her caesarean scar. Phephelaphi's birth had not been an easy one and Zandile decides that she does "not want either this child who refused to be born or the bold magnificent scar left falling below her navel which ruined the mood of her every subsequent encounter with each man" (BB 124). Despite the fact that Gertrude is gone, the life of her dress reads as a description of how her daughter relates to her mother's aging body. Comfortable, easy, careless familiarity imbues the dress with the image of her mother's presence.

But before the white policeman who returns the dress has even left the room, Phephelaphi sets light to the dress. It is an action that she questions later, but at the time she is resolute in her decision, "she had enough to consider without wearing a woman's wound"

(BB 65). Later, she realizes the dress could have offered a connection to her mother's memory, but also concedes that the dress brings with it a life and an end that need not be the same as her own. By destroying the object she attempts to control the independence of her own future identity. Gertrude survives as a character in the narrative through these contradictory fragments of her memory which are all centred and recorded on the garment she wore on the night of her death.

In the closing chapters of *Butterfly Burning,* cloth not only records the past but also portends the future. Dressing for a night in the township's shebeen – a bootleg style bar – Phephelaphi wears a skirt strikingly similar to that of her final identity as a white butterfly. Her fateful journey to the shebeen seals her friendship with the owner Deliwe. While the contraband alcohol and kwela music kindle in Phephelaphi a sense of her sexual attractiveness, her association with Deliwe eventually leads to Fumbatha's betrayal. The affair spells the end of Fumbatha and Phephelaphi's already troubled relationship. When she falls pregnant a second time with Fumbatha's child the horror of his knowledge of her previous abortion erases all her hope for the future. Phephelaphi sees her identity dissolve into nothingness. The image of the white butterfly walking to the shebeen acts is her final identity and, of course, the book's title. Like a phoenix falling, Phephelaphi sets herself on fire in an inversion of hope and life. As Margaret Higonnet notes, "Women's voluntary deaths are even more difficult to read than men's because women's very autonomy is in question and their intentions are therefore opaque" (68). Higonnet goes on to observe, "both in fact and in literature women perceive their own suicides in ways that could be described as visionary rather than violent" (78). Told through Vera's lyrical rather than damning language, Phephelaphi's suicide is certainly written as a visionary act, although the violence is rendered beautiful rather than denied.

Just before Phephelaphi's decision to commit suicide she relies, once again, on cloth to express the identity she has been unable to secure in the space of the township:

> She was nothing under the sky. In her mind she saw a cloth tossing and swaying. Even though this was all in her mind she felt the same cool breeze that was blowing the cloth touch her face. She was much less than a thin fabric tearing in the wind. What was she? She did nothing but remain mute and peaceful and could not be absorbed by this thin fabric which knew so much more than she did because it had witnessed each of her actions before she performed them. (BB 95)

In this passage cloth moves from a proximal relation and recorder of the wearer's experience to a layer of the self with powers of premonition. This shift suggests that the importance of cloth has grown steadily throughout the narrative for the purpose, and burden, of this final role.

In *Under the Tongue,* Zhizha experiences a fraught relationship with her mother who has been jailed for murdering her father in retribution for the incest Zhizha has endured. Zhizha's own emerging, albeit violated, sexual identity appears in her mother's evocative red dress:

> From one dress into another she [Runyararo] seeks her profile in the mirror and smiles gently at me. I watch her beauty and her grace and her glowing long legs and bare arms and long smooth neck. [. . .] A tear falls onto my forehead and I stop turning, surprised, but she has returned quickly to the mirror mirroring us and puts on a red-red dress which she says she would never wear if there was lightning in the sky for she would die so suddenly there would be no moment for remorse or forgiveness and with that threat she leaves the room, calling to her own mother, and I am forgotten, for now. (UT 88)

Her mother and her red dress operate much like the imaginative doubling of the photograph and are in fact a dream Zhizha sees while her mother is in jail. The sexy red dress can be understood as a stage in Zhizha's recovery. She now regards her mother as a woman as well as a mother and awaits similar changes in her own body. Vera's description of Zhizha's flat

chest has, one can only hope, bought her time. If she not yet reached puberty then her father's violations offer no threat of pregnancy, and the possibility of the cycle of incest further widening. At the same time there is a woman she must come to learn and understand, not only her own mother, but the woman she will become:

> Alone. I try hard to remember everything that has been because that is my gift to my mother. I move toward the mirror and pick the discarded garment from the floor raising it to my shoulders holding it against my flat chest and seeking my mother in me, wondering, about being a woman. I put the dress over my head and it falls over my body, folds around my feet. I stand, looking at the mirror and my mother comes and stands behind me. (UT 88-89)

Zhizha's exploration of her mother's dress explains, as proposed in the introduction, that recovery is available to the character and that her future may not be as burdened with the past as her Grandmother's has been.

In *The Stone Virgins,* the gift of a garment once worn by her murdered sister gives comfort to Nonceba in her process of physical recovery. Nonceba dresses in preparation for her tentative steps into the outside world of Kezi. Her dressing offers reason and control situated in the knot discussed in the first chapter. "She rises. [. . .] She must order her thoughts. She pulls down a cotton dress. Calico. Sleeveless. She ties the loose bands over her waist" (SV 125). Then she searches for a sweater:

> In the suitcase, a blue jersey. Thenjiwe's jersey. The arms are too long for her. She slides her arms in next to Thenjiwe's arms, close to her, feeling the warmth gathering to her fingers, like touch, like breathing. Blue wool, a nice pattern on the front, the wool threaded together, in and out. Nonceba moves her fingers over the soft wool. She brings the collar towards her body and breathes in, inhales, gathering light: lightness. She folds the extra length over her wrists. She slowly buttons the jersey, slowly, each movement makes her stronger. (SV 126)

The imperfect fit of the garment marks it as Thenjiwe's second skin rather than Nonceba's own. As Peter Stallybrass explains, "when our parents, our friends, our lovers die, the clothes in their closets still hang there, holding their gestures, both reassuring and terrifying, touching the living with the dead" (36). Stallybrass recognises the tragic emptiness found in the well-worn fit of clothing that belongs to those now deceased. The garment offers Nonceba strength and possibly even contains, as I suggest of the cloth in *Butterfly Burning,* that the cloth understands, within the reality of the narrative, all that has occurred to its previous owner, as well as the fear and pain that Nonceba faces. This understanding is an important solace, for Nonceba's violent attack escapes the comprehension of anyone not physically involved in the event.

Stallybrass notes, "As it [cloth] changes hands, it binds people in networks of obligation. The particular power of cloth to affect these networks is closely associated with two almost contradictory aspects of its materiality: its ability to be permeated and transformed by maker and wearer alike; its ability to endure over time [. . .] cloth *is* a kind of memory" (38). Chapter One discussed Vera's notion of a domestic graphology present in the production of cloth and argued that the structures of textiles act as diagrams of the lives of their makers. Thenjiwe's clothing contains, like Gertrude's green dress, traces of the wearer that have transformed the garment: pushed out elbows and strained seams, patches of wear that document life. While Phephelaphi rejects the memories that her mother's green dress and Zandile's skirt contain, Nonceba desires contact with the memories her sister's clothes offer her. Nonceba's recovery is dependent on her ability to construct and keep alive a memory of her deceased sister that heals a portion of her own overwhelming sense of isolation and loss. It is because of her inability to articulate the pains she has experienced, and the desire of those around her to respect and not disturb this silence, that cloth's role as record and solace is so important.

The power that clothing commands exists in proximal relation, noted by Cavanaugh, to the wearer's body. Acting as a second skin, clothing records the fatigue and pain felt by the body. As a result, an attention to clothing reveals much unspoken information regarding characters' emotions and states of mind. But clothing also brings with it tremendous historical and cultural information, often far more complex and contradictory than a first glance would reveal. These complexities and contradictions are at the heart of Vera's characters and their struggles to attain an independent sense of their own identity. The internal struggles her characters face are at times revealed on the surfaces of their clothing and skin, a theme explored in the past two chapters. In the following chapter, the results of pain are seen in the distorted sense of space created to cope with the burden of pain.

Chapter Four

Smooth and Striated Space

In Vera's fiction the textile, among its many roles, is an object capable of recording both time and space. As a result, attention to the time/space details that cloth contains can assist our understanding of Vera's nonlinear narratives. Vera's unconventional use of time places greater emphasis on space than chronology as keeper of history. But, before analysing depictions of space in Vera's writing, I first want to establish the nature of time represented in Vera's fiction. I will then turn to space, in particular a sense of socially constructed space put forth by Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre and others have noted the disjunction between space which can only be experienced simultaneously and written depictions of space which, due to the static and sequential nature of the written word, are forced to develop a linear progression of information. Edward Soja, in his introduction to *Postmodern Geographies,* draws from Lefebvre and observes, "What one sees when one looks at geographies is stubbornly simultaneous, but language dictates a sequential succession, a linear flow of sentential statements bound by that most spatial of earthly constraints, the impossibility of two objects (or words) occupying the same precise place (as on a page)" (2). As Vera's writing demonstrates, it takes considerable creative force to disentangle narrative from this tendency to linearity.

Lefebvre suggests:

> The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it. From the analytic standpoint, the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space. (38)

The challenge of rendering space and time in literature is arguably of even greater importance for the postcolonial narrative, where real space, the space of the colony or former colony, is

far more than a fictional stage set. Instead, space often exists as a loaded political platform from which a fictional, often in some sense didactic, narrative is set. Here space will be read through the textile, for its presence in Vera's narratives has the ability to communicate outside the inhibitions and taboos of speech, but nonetheless takes on a burden of communication similar to that of speech.

The Zimbabwean historian Terence Ranger has noted the intentional skewing of historical dates found throughout Vera's fiction. He writes, "I was astonished by Vera's obviously deliberate refusal to draw upon works of history or anthropology [. . .] Vera's refusal to be bound by the 'facts' struck me as sublime [. . .] Time and time again she speaks of academic History as a burden or as an obstacle" (203-204). Vera's writing steps outside the burden of official history and official records and establishes an ambivalent relationship with the importance and value of time. On one level, this ambivalence is in keeping with the Shona oral tradition of narration, which can be partially understood as responsible for her lyrical written voice. But on another level it can be understood as a reaction to historical record, records that are taken as fact by the outside world, unaware of the liberties that are taken when retelling and reconstructing the past. In Vera's fiction, an ambivalent relationship to time is also intimately tied to the terrible pains many of her characters struggle to endure. Great pain occupies the mind, takes over the senses and reorders memory in its own way. On an individual, and at times even collective level, pain clouds recollection of precise events so as to reorder and shift emphasis to the previously ignored or overlooked.

When looking at colonial Rhodesia and independent Zimbabwe, time carries further implications. Paula Gunn Allen writes of the American Indian in North America:

> I am suggesting that there is some sort of connection between colonization and chronological time. There is a connection between factories and clocks, and there is a connection between colonial imperialism and factories. There is also a connection

between telling Indian tales in chronological sequences and the American tendency to fit Indians into the slots they have prepared for us. (151)

Gunn Allen suggests an inherent inappropriateness of conventional chronology for certain ways of knowing. Applied to Zimbabwe, the unconventional relationship Vera's narratives establish with chronology and the refusal to submit to an accepted record of history is born out of historical pressures and insights rather than ignorance. In manipulating the categories of fact and fiction, Vera explores the possibility of alternative methods of recording the passage of time as well as the historical record. Her manipulation of time can be explained, to a large extent, as a result of the painful lives Vera's characters lead.

Irene Staunton, in her introduction to *Mothers of the Revolution*, a collection of interviews that document the war experiences of thirty women, writes in her introduction:

> Time was not something measured in weeks or months, but by the impact of violence or grief or need; and by the rhythms of the seasons or of motherhood. *Mothers of the Revolution*, therefore, contains few dates. It is not a conventional history in which women's words have been analysed, sifted or put into some other framework. (xi)

Staunton's introduction realizes a certain futility in the use of dates to signify anything in a world where violence and pain rule. Thus the absence of significant historical dates and the fragmentation of time apparent in Vera's narratives is yet another way to communicate the damage and disorientation wreaked by mental and physical pain. For Vera, time becomes the moment of the utterance. Space returns to the intimate and lived experience rather than the official maps and arbitrary boundary lines of colonialism and conflicted national history.

In *Without a Name*'s pre-independence setting, time is ignored, manipulated and celebrated. The inhabitants of the city are described as living "as though they had no pasts or futures" (WN 50). The city is described as challenging "the demarcations between day and night, offering distances from time, for part of being here was the forgetting of boundaries to days, of challenging futures" (WN 55). But time is also "precious" (WN 56), and Mazvita

proclaims that she does not want "to endure the suspension of time" (WN 34), a time when war has the ability to override more normal ways of knowing and being. Throughout the narrative, time is rendered inconsequential in one instant and an unbearable burden that marks an acute absence of progress in the next.

In *Under the Tongue,* VaGomba, Muroyiwa's father, blinded in a farming accident, seeks to "heal time, not sight. It was time that had been wounded when he lost his sight, not sight" (UT 36). Here time is equated with vitality and, tragically for a blind man, freedom. VaGomba's injury takes time away from him. It truncates his days to a dependence on the rising sun when he can make out enough shadows to walk to the fields and work. The productivity of his days must now end at dusk, when the light of day sets. Hence his injury has taken time from him, and has shortened each productive day with boundaries of light and dark.[40] Muroyiwa is troubled by his absence from the war effort, his impotent waiting while his brother is presumed to be fighting in the mountains.

Space surfaces as the realm in which the recording and recoding of history and memory occur with greater constancy than within the realm of time. The textile is a ubiquitous presence within the spaces Vera constructs in her narratives. The nature of the textile's structure and surface, its ability to absorb signs of wear and decay, and the lifespan of the material mean that the textile is literally inscribed with the details of socially constructed space. Anne Hamlyn writes that textiles are "a powerful metaphor of a lived time into which death has been re-implicated and perhaps also a metaphor for the poetic processes itself" (42). The life span and imminent decay of the textile signify a type of time to which the human body is also subject. But it also resonates strongly with the creative act of writing fiction, with artistry and the power available to fiction to move outside official histories and create alternative spaces and forms of communication.

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[40] The productivity of VaGomba, as discussed in Chapter One, is perhaps a further humiliation in Muroyiwa's purposeless life.

> Writing of Vera's *Nehanda* and *Without a Name,* Nana Wilson-Tagoe notes:
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> It seems that their representation in the two narratives necessitates a reconceptualization of spatial and temporal landscapes, and physical space in both novels is thus a combination of various levels of defamiliarization. [. . .] A defamiliarized landscape always signals an erosion of the conventional character of things. (167-168)

In Vera's fiction the defamiliarized landscape is on one level the result of colonization, but central to her fiction is the sense of defamiliarization that occurs from pain. Vera explores this pain intimately, creating specific characters and situations in which the implications of pain are explored. In this movement away from the expected and the commonplace, the land can offer some explanation of the social structures that brought such pains into existence.

The "intermittent marriages of plastic and grass" which the men of *Without a Name* use to patch the holes in the roofs of their shelters blend the plastic tobacco bags of industry with the grasses of the natural landscape (WN 37). The thatching of plastic and grass is witness to the intermittent consummations of marriage which occur under the shelter of the rooftops as well as the "intermittent loyalties" Mazvita uses to describe her experience of rape (WN 39). In the poverty of such meagre housing, the inhabitants make intimate and individual efforts to reconcile the contradictions before them. The values of countryside, the rhythms of organic growth and decay, as discussed in Chapter One, are intertwined with the cement and lights the townships live by.

This intertwining of plastic and grass may best be exemplified in Mazvita's relationship with Nyenyedzi early in *Without a Name*. The couple in many ways embodies a marriage of opposites between plastic and grass. Nyenyedzi's way of life, his values and sense of identity are buried in the countryside. But Mazvita wants to see beyond a land that

has supported and borne witness to her rape and moves her hope to the city. Nyenyedzi sees the land as belonging to the departed ancestors and he even asks, "That is why we can work on the land while strangers believe it can belong only to them. How can something so vast and mysterious belong to anybody?" (WN 32). In contrast, Mazvita sees the land as stolen and divided. She believes, "We do not own the land. The land is enclosed in barbed wire fences, and we sleep amid the thorn bushes, in the barren part of the land" (WN 33). For Mazvita it is impossible to ignore the reality that the land available to them has been stripped of its resources and beauty and now belongs to others. Mazvita's comprehension of time is particularly conflicted and will be discussed later in this section. For much of the narrative she experiences spatial progress as a greater and more tangible reality than temporal progress.

With a broken neck and the creation of death strapped to her back, Mazvita's decentred journey is a search for balance and recovery. The soil of the land on which she was raped supports a tree that has bark "wound in stiff tightening circles spiralling to the base, disappearing in a mound of weaving roots that swirled angrily from the ground" (WN 6). Under the "lush greenness" and "thickly veined leaves" is a system of roots that has wound itself into the blood and soil of violence the trees have witnessed (WN 5). But in Mazvita's eyes "[t]he land had allowed the man to grow from itself into her body" (WN 31). Her rape is an abuse of the land that "defines our unities" (WN 33). Extracting herself from what she perceives to be the betrayal of the rural landscape, Mazvita leaves Nyenyedzi for the rootless sensibility of Harari. She "rose above the land and scorned its slow promises" to arrive in a city of even greater disillusionment (WN 39). No longer tied to the angry swirling roots of a landscape at war, the city offers no roots at all. "Rituals were not liveable in Harari, so they forgot about them and created empty spaces in which they wandered aimlessly" (WN 50). In Harari, these empty spaces are the socially produced sites of living filled with emptiness, that Mazvita slowly learns are the only connections available to her, or anyone

else for that matter. But it is her unplanned pregnancy which foils her ambitions in the city and reveals the truly precarious nature of her attempts at independence during this time.

Within the architecture of *Under the Tongue*, a fissure appears which is remarkably similar to Mazvita's bodily deformities discussed in the first chapter: "The township was a crumbling place with no edifice to it, no foundation but necessity itself [. . .] the houses were slanting with no backbone to them" (UT 67). The missing backbone of the township is at once an architectural flaw and, in keeping with Lefebvre's space, a socially constructed one. The houses "fell towards the setting sun [. . .] tilted forward and spilt some long kept hate out of them" (UT 67). The land shifts and stalls under the strain of social interactions responsible for their construction. *Under the Tongue* is a story of incest. Zhizha's experience reveals the spineless slanting houses to be the very structure, the very body of her own father. The hate projected from these homes comes from the walls, the blankets and shell of a family forced to deal with this intimate violation.

In a similar personification of the landscape, *Butterfly Burning* opens with the scene of a harvest:

> Their supple but unwilling arms turn, loop and merge with the shiny tassels of the golden grass whose stem is green, like new-born things, and held firmly to the earth. The movement of their arms is like weaving, as their arms thread through each thicket, and withdraw [. . .] each sequence rises in hope enacted and set free. (BB 2)

Weaving themselves back into a land stripped from them, the workers recreate secure seams to the land, re-stitched along edges frayed by disillusion and abuse:

> Rocking and touching, each man holds on to the word the other has offered and raises the moment. The birth of a word, violent, mute. They are pitched against an opposite world so they plunge and pull. Each utterance is purposeful, each silence true like absent desire. Impotent with unspoken words, they weave forward, and bend. They lean backward, and bend. (BB 62)

Picking their way back and forth between the fabric of the land and the skins of their being, the supple unwilling arms mirror the supple unwilling roots of the harvest. The resistance of harvest and harvester alike are a reminder that the land's bounty is not for the benefit of the workers or their families. Along with its reluctance to relinquish the crops it has grown, the land is also littered with pain. The ground of *Butterfly Burning* contains "broken needles [that] fall from rusted sewing machines and abandoned razors" (BB 73). The cropland is described similarly, when "bare soles grate against the stubble now dotting the ground, raised like needles" (BB 2). Reality is a space where pain is the soil's harvest. Each step, each gesture on this ground is weighed against the encroaching hurt.

Without speaking, without arguing, the harvesters maintain their visceral connection to a land whose produce is not theirs to consume. Socially constructed space cannot prevent the pains that occur within it. These pains damage space in much the same way as the body is damaged. The following section explores this damage from the perspective of the mind's eye, the ways in which space is understood and negotiated by the mind after the infliction of unspeakable pains.

Alternative Constructions of Space: Layers and Telescoping

If space is socially constructed, and the narrative as printed text can only unfold with a sequence that is difficult to separate from the passage of time, then alternative ways of experiencing space and time are necessary when exploring sites of traumatic intensity. In the previous section space bore the marks of damage that characters incurred in the space. A second way to read space is the way in which the mind perceives space, rather than the physical reality of that space. At times, events render the mind incapable of synchronising space and time. At other moments, time and space present too great a burden of recollection

and space and time must be experienced as less than whole in order to make the information they contain bearable for the mind.

The Stone Virgins differs from Vera's previously published fiction in its setting in post-independence Zimbabwe. Vera's attention to violence in the post-independence nation affirms that the nation's independence does not overcome or erase the damage of prior violence, nor, in the case of the setting of *The Stone Virgins* in rural Matabeleland, even herald a time of peace. As a result, *The Stone Virgins* constructs two types of alternative space to communicate the mental and physical results of violence. In Ranger's discussion of *The Stone Virgins,* he explains the unimaginable proportions of violence in the area after independence:

> I have tried [. . .] to combine a historian's account of what happened in the 1980s with the way in which Vera's novel reflects these events. I have sought to do this because readers outside Zimbabwe – and perhaps even some inside it – may be ignorant of the events of what took place in Matabeleland and imagine that she has exaggerated real events into melodrama [. . .] Indeed, her choice of a beheading and mutilation, and the destruction of a store, shows great restraint. She could have remained true to 'real' History and yet chosen much more extreme atrocities. (2002: 208)

The violence present during the 1980s in Matabeleland reached tragic proportions of cruelty as well as senselessness. In this section, the way in which individual minds attempt to come to terms and recover from such horrors is understood through the way in which space and time and fragment into discrete portions.

In *The Stone Virgins,* space is written through several distinct types of imagery. The first is a type of space created by layering, and appears in the form of shadows and footprints; the second operates as a telescope, and trains the eye on minute details. The purpose and relationship between these two constructions is clarified when read through Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari's concept of the smooth and the striated space. The disciplines Deleuze and Guattari draw upon to explore the possibilities of smooth and striated space are tremendously broad. Here, the focus will be on smooth and striated space in relation to textiles, the authors' first example. Secondly, the notion that "the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space in constantly being translated, transverse into a striated space; striated space in constantly being reversed, returned to smooth space" will be explored (474). This mixing is also acknowledged in Henri Lefebvre's work when he describes social space as "embracing as it does individual entities and peculiarities, relatively fixed points, movements, and flows and waves – some interpenetrating, others in conflict, and so on" (88). In a sense similar to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of smooth and striated space, Lefebvre remarks that social spaces are "not simply juxtaposed: they may be intercalated, combined, superimposed – they may even sometimes collide" (88). I propose that an understanding of space as smooth or striated is undertaken by the mind in an effort to limit painful memories to proportions that do not overwhelm or undermine characters chances of recovery.

The fact that the two must eventually return to a combined state, noted by Lefebvre and Deleuze and Guattari, suggests that recovery from pain is possible. That is to say, in spite of what read like irrecoverable experiences of violence, the body's instinct to repair will eventually lead to the reintegration of fragmented space and return the character's experience of space to a unified and coherent whole. Admittedly, Vera's writing of Phephelaphi's suicide in *Butterfly Burning* and Mazvita's murdered child in *Without a Name* are places where recovery seems impossible. But I would suggest that even in these cases Vera creates the possibility of reading these actions as something less than terminal. Instead, these moments become metaphors for the death of one, but not every, version of the future available. Because of this, it can be argued that Vera's handling of pain is inherently optimistic. Although recovery is at times left beyond the space of the narrative, it is nonetheless a possibility.

Deleuze and Guattari define smooth space as a "vector, a direction and not a dimension" (478). As a textile, smooth space is felt rather than woven fabric, "an aggregate of intrication… [that] is in no way homogenous" (475). Smooth space is a place in which "one 'distributes' oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings" (481). Smooth space relates to felt as "a supple solid product [. . . which] implies no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibres obtained by fulling" (475). Drawing on these properties, Vera's construction of spaces that are made from layers can be examined.

Early in *The Stone Virgins*, Thenjiwe meets Cephas and allows him to follow her home. The narrator explains, "What he does next is spectacular and welcome: he follows her home like a shadow [. . .] collects her shadow and places it right back in her body as though it were a missing part of herself" (SV: 33). The distribution of oneself in an open space can be read to include the assembling of lost shadows. Only by a vector or journey passing through the layers of silhouettes and shadows can multiple versions be observed. The shadow projected from Thenjiwe's body, captured by Cephas, who is in turn another shadow of sorts, does not exist as a dimension. Rather, shadow and silhouette come together and combine in a manner similar to that of a felted construction. Amongst the accumulation of boundaries which allow vectors rather than points to emerge, is a heterogeneity composed of Thenjiwe's shadow, her own body, the form of her expectant suitor and his shadow. Shadow and body are capable of reuniting because they occur in a smooth space that allows Thenjiwe to be followed and her shadow, even before she fears it is lost, to be returned to her.

Thenjiwe's footprints, the impact of her journey, represent a similar horizontal layering of space. Vera writes, "In any case, he places his foot where she has left the imprint on the soil, wanting to possess, already, each part of her, her weight of soft soil, her shape" (SV 33). The laying of one footprint upon another exists in smooth space because it is created through movement – a trajectory – rather than a point. By stepping into the imprints she has

left and tracing the places she has occupied, a layered space records the journey of the man following her. Like thumbprints, no footprint slips perfectly into the shape of the one before it. The second imprint, the sandwiching of one piece of space on top of another, is not made of the clear angles that striated space captures, but represents a felted mass of superimposed moments. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, "The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form" (478). Similarly, Thenjiwe's body exists in a smooth space. Cephas concludes:

> [I]f you died and I could save only one part of your body, I would save this bone. I would carry it with me everywhere, and it would be as though you were alive. Death is when every part of us vanishes, especially the most precious part. We are here. You are in this bone and it is my most precious memory. When you move, its motion tells me something intimate about your mind [. . .] If you die in my absence and I find that you have already been buried, I will dig your body up to the moonlight, so that I can touch this beautiful bone. Touch it touch it touch it, till you are alive. (SV 39)

In the passage above Thenjiwe inhabits the "space of affects, more than one of properties. It is *haptic* rather than the optical perception" (479). In smooth space the celebrated bone, although separated from the person, is capable of connecting the living and the dead. After death, Cephas does not desire to see Thenjiwe (optic), he desires to touch her (haptic), to dig up the very bones of her being from their new home under the earth and return them to the world above. This type of haptic knowledge reappears with the motif of the footprint. Cephas remembers:

> He takes the first turn out of her room and recalls each of her footprints on that same ground on which he once followed her, his foot encased in her footprint and he is already loving her as he always would, or would want to, or would never be able to teach himself not to. (SV 42-43)

In its existence as layers, the doomed relationship initially occupies smooth space, a "supple solid"[41] determined by the "continuous development of form" (475, 478).

In contrast, striated space is the space of woven fabric and made of "parallel elements [. . .] with different functions; one is fixed, the other mobile" (475). In this space the telescope operates. Vera's use of myopic vision connects the eye of the viewer at one fixed point to an object or memory at a second point. The second unfixed point allows the eye or visual memory to jump from one object or thought to the next. What distinguishes this from smooth space is the idea that the journey is not involved. The distance or time between the eye or mind and the image or memory does not occur in striated space, only the two end points. The journey, in contrast, is determined to be the realm of smooth space, while the two isolated points create striated space. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, "In smooth space, one 'distributes' oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings [. . .] In striated space, one closes off a surface and 'allocates' it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks" (481).

The incongruities created by striated space appear in its attention to points that lack journeys. For example the dialogue between urban and rural space in *The Stone Virgins* is depicted as follows:

> Having sought the telephone cord that would link them to the city centre, with Bulawayo or even Salisbury, with Gwelo or Gatooma, and found none [. . .] Not Kezi, not their Kezi, just this tantalising contraption left in their midst to mock their lack, to rouse their want.
>
> The delay is part of the signature of their lives, in Kezi. (SV 20)

[41] Deleuze and Guattari borrow the term "supple solid" from André Leroi-Gourhan's *L'homme et la matière* (244ff), in which it is applied to basketry and weaving rather than felt.

Similarly:

> And even though the water is still being carried all the way from the river or borehole by each and every household, a man not only brings a metal doorframe, he also carries silver taps. Just in case.[42] (SV 24)

In both cases the object exists divorced from function. The telephone cord and set of silver taps reach out to nothing; they are mere points in space unable to convey a far away voice or the gush of water. This "allocating" of space is produced by the telescopic effect seen in details divorced from a larger whole.

The cause of these fragmented notions of time and space is the violent attack on the two sisters. The brutality of the attack against the sisters can be understood as occuring in striated space. The carnage is described as follows:

> His [Sibaso's] head is behind Thenjiwe's, where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body, he is in her body [. . .] Thenjiwe's body remains upright while this man's head emerges behind hers, inside it, replacing each of her moments, taking her position in the azure sky. He is absorbing Thenjiwe's motions into his own body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied. Then Thenjiwe vanishes and he is affixed in her place, before Nonceba's eyes, sudden and unmistakable like a storm. This moment is his. Irrevocable. His own.
>
> How did a man slice off a woman's head while a bucket was carried above it? How did a man slice a woman's throat and survive? (SV 66-67)

The brutality of the attack makes space for Nonceba, the survivor, an overwhelming reminder of pain. Possibly, Vera's message is that such an act can only occur when an individual separates space, when the mind resolutely refuses integration and, as a result, responsibility.

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[42] A further example of this is offered by *Butterfly Burning*, when, "[t]hey took turns to lick one-penny stamps till the stickiness was gone, then they pasted the stamp on to the top right-hand corner of the envelope but the stamp slid down [. . .] till, of its own mysterious will it dried halfway at the bottom of the envelope, just next to the address written in a close, neat hand. They closed that envelope and threw it underneath the pillow cases to be posted or else forgotten" (41).

After the attack, striated space surrounds the surviving sister, Nonceba. During the time she spends in hospital recovering from the attack, Nonceba slips from the institutionalised space of the hospital that offers a reality too painful to confront, and gazes at the flowers she can see from her window:

> Now she is afraid to look away from the red flowers outside the window, she is grateful for their presence, a shape, a form, for her mind to absorb, to memorise. An object, distinct, for her senses, with colour and no sound. (SV 83)

By isolating the flower with her eye, Nonceba is able to construct a space she can inhabit with a greater sense of control than smooth space would require. Smooth space would demand that the journey be investigated; the vector that led her to the hospital bed as well as the vector that desires to lead her mind away again. As she determines, "It is better to look at the flowers than to let a thought shape, settle, find a comfortable spot in her mind" (SV 83). In striated space she need not address the past nor the future; instead she can exist as one fixed point, the flower she views through the windows as another.

Nonetheless, only her eye constitutes a fixed point, the warp regulated by a constant tension of the loom. The second point necessary to create Deleuze and Guattari's striated space is the unfixed weft that moves under and over the fixed tension of the warp. Her meditation on the hibiscus bush is disrupted when a figure enters the striation:

> A man is approaching from behind the hibiscus bush. He removes his hat as he reaches the ramp [. . .] Nonceba continues staring at the empty space the man has occupied. She can see him again without closing her eyes, his hand moves to his hat, he removes it, folds it just when he has gone past the hibiscus bush [. . .] She keeps his face there, among the petals, his head bowed, the arm reaching for the hat, then coming down. (SV 83)

Deleuze and Guattari explain, "The striated is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms" (478). Nonceba observes a

succession of distinct forms as her mind's eye jumps from the hibiscus, to the man, to the empty space recently occupied by the man, to the memory of his presence in that same space.

When the man, who we later learn is her deceased sister's lover, Cephas, enters her hospital room, the space maintains its striations. Optic rather than haptic knowledge draws Nonceba's attention back to the red hibiscus flowers:

> The voice is near, nearer than the petals she has to turn to [. . .] She had watched him through the window, and now, he has grown out of her mind into the space next to her bed, speaking to her [. . .] A shape. A man outside the window [. . .] She watches the hibiscus all afternoon. If she turns her head from the hibiscus, she encounters the man. His job, perhaps, is to sit and watch her. Nonceba opens her eyes and looks steadily at the hibiscus. (SV 84)

The incredible trauma Nonceba has endured provokes this fragmentation of space. In these early moments of her recovery, elements can only survive if they remain in isolation. Joining smooth and striated space, the journey and the points, asks too much of her at this time. "She is hazy, befuddled, dazed, from medication. She sees two shapes out of every object. A dark part of the shadow, and a lighter part. Her world is superimposed. When she hears the woman's voice in the corridor, she hears her own voice beside it" (SV 81-82). Nonetheless, as I proposed in the introduction, the inevitable integration of these forms of space signals the possibility of eventual recovery. But for the moment, the space of the hospital room can be experienced only if it exists as single details: man, flower, man, flower, man, flower.

Even after Nonceba has been released from the hospital, her relationship to the world remains fragmented. Cephas, the figure that visited the hospital room, travels to her family's village in a second attempt to introduce himself. Once again, Nonceba can absorb only points:

> The man is walking past her eyes into that place far from here so that he is in two places all at once and her mind whirls with its impossible thought [. . .] He is here

> walking towards her but at the same time she is removing him from her eyes and placing him safely away into that far-away room where he is watching her and not letting go, a room at the back of her own mind upon which she has drawn a dark and heavy curtain. (SV 133, 135)

At the prospect of the second moving point in striated space passing uncomfortably close to her own reality, Nonceba relocates the point. The fact that this occurs in her mind's eye does not dilute its presence as a type of space. The space of Nonceba's mind uses such distortions to aid her healing. The "bits of her memory which now lay in fragments in her mind because that is how she lives now, with her insides all broken up so he [Cephas] too has come together from that pile of things that are broken up in her head and could be mismatched" illustrate Nonceba's internalised experience of striation (SV 135). "She can hear his jacket making a soft sound, of fabric sliding over fabric, the cloth of his trousers when he places one leg above another, and changes shape. Otherwise he says nothing else. He does not come near her again" (SV 84). The reference to mismatched bits can in fact be read as a small sign of recovery. Nonceba recalls from some depth that this man is not a total stranger. His visit to the hospital has been lodged somewhere in her healing mind. Although it offers a point rather than the realization of the journey that brought the information to her, it does signify the return of Nonceba's ability to remember events that have occurred since the attack that fragmented her being.

Another example of striated space conceived from a fabric of points returns to the courtship of Thenjiwe and Cephas. Cephas brings Thenjiwe a seed "stuck to the bottom of his pocket then plant[s] it in her mouth like a gift" (SV 34). The seed is a transplant from a place that Thenjiwe cannot visualize. Because the fixed point of the seed's origin is unimaginable to Thenjiwe, she bombards Cephas with questions about this second point in striated space, the home which he belongs to. "Barely two months [into their relationship] and now all she wants to know is the name of the fruit caught between her teeth. Just that and

nothing more" (SV 36). The passage hints at a bitterness the relationship is nurturing, spurred by Thenjiwe's interest in a point in striated space rather than a journey in smooth space the couple could travel together. "She wants to discover the shape of its [the seed tree's] roots and show them to him till these roots are no longer under the ground but become the lines planted on his palms" (SV 40). Exchanging the tree roots for the lines covering Cephas's hands can only occur in the presence of a mixture of smooth and striated space. The roots and the lines on his hands are points in space, a fabric made of interlocking elements. But to draw the two together also requires the presence of a journey, a supple solid or felted construction that simultaneously acknowledges the points of a woven fabric.

In fact, Deleuze and Guattari do argue that smooth and striated space exist only as a mixture (474). While the two spaces need to mix before Thenjiwe can discover the roots of her lover's palm, the two have already mixed in several other passages. The relationship between Thenjiwe and her sister and, even more literally the physical space of the city grid, offer us two specific examples. In both instances the two types of space remain clearly discernable rather than a mixture which results in homogeneity. Deleuze and Guattari warn, "No sooner do we notice the simple opposition between two kinds of space than we must indicate a much more complex difference by virtue of which the successive terms of the opposition fail to coincide entirely" (474). In preserving the attributes of the two spaces it should also be noted that the mix does not produce a set of polarized opposites.

The inability to set smooth and striated space in direct opposition is one of the reasons the two forms relate to Vera's use of telescoped and layered space. In both cases the contrasts between the pairs are substantial but not entire. The space of the sisters includes the mental relationship between the two, the physical memory of their bodies and the present reality of a single body in mourning:

> Sisters, two sides, but not quite opposite: connected. Their birth, and a life shared; linked. The trace of one voice is in the other, the gesture of one, in the other, the easy

joy, the shape of a nail, of a bone, especially the voice: oneness. They exist in each other, and where one life ended; so did the other. (SV 158)

This combination of smooth and striated space is determined by points (the shape of a nail, of a bone) and vectors (a life shared, the gesture of one, in the other). The sisters are points, their relationship to one another both in life and death is a vector. They are both fabric and felt, related, but not opposite.

Bulawayo of the 1950s, introduced early in the narrative, is a city where the smooth and the striated meet at the orthogonal. Physical space is rendered as a fabric of points. Those who attempt to journey within the city's grid inhabit smooth, haptic space. Striated space is described as follows:

> The city is built on a grid. Where Selborne meets Main Street, the building there forms a sharp turn, the same angle is repeated over and over again, street to street, all the way down [. . .] The city revolves around sharp edges, roads cut at right angles. At noon shadows are sharp and elongated [. . .] In this city the edge of a building is a profile, a corner. . .*ekoneni.* The word is pronounced with pursed lips and lyrical minds, with arms pulsing, with a memory begging for time. *Ekoneni*, they say, begging for ease, for understanding. (SV 9-10)

Consequently, the people that navigate the city encounter smooth space:

> The corner of a building is felt with the fingers, rough, chipped cement. You approach a corner, you make a turn. This movement defines the body, shapes it in a sudden and miraculous way. (SV 10)

Ekoneni is the Ndebele word for "corner".[43] This orthogonal framework marries points and vectors, a journey disclosed by a specific point. It is important to note that the energy of the city is situated here at the intersection of smooth and striated space. Smooth space, haptic

[43] I am grateful to Robert Muponde for his translation of this term.

space, is tangible at the corner of the building. Striated space, optic space, exists in the sharp edges determined by the grid of the city:

> *Ekoneni* is a rendezvous, a place to meet. You cannot meet inside any of the buildings because this city is divided, entry is forbidden to black men and women, you meet outside the buildings, not at doorways, entries, foyers, not beneath arched windows, not under graceful colonnades, balustrades or cornices, but *ekoneni.* (SV 10)

The corners of the city escape the apartheid policy that divides the city space.[44] A couple meeting on a corner can look as though they are moving somewhere rather than loitering. Resting in these orthogonal moments is a space that apartheid fails to divide.

The construction of alternative spaces, such as those created through layering and telescoping, exposes the results of physical and mental pain. *The Stone Virgins* expresses fragmentation from two ends of the spectrum: the survival of the mental space of the individual and the survival of the physical sites in which the violated exist. They are modest spaces, born of a myopic vision that allows details to emerge without engaging in the overwhelming whole. Or they are shadows and footprints, memories that exist at one remove from the pains of reality. Both spatial techniques constitute a way of seeing and feeling in the space that emerge from traumatic events. Rather than lacking in reality, they are the palpable beginnings of recovery; detail and shadow command real space. They are proof of survivors in the face of senseless violence.

Mazvita's Smooth and Striated Space in *Without a Name*

Two discrete types of space in *Without a Name* can also be read as smooth and striated space and are used to express Mazvita's pain. In Harari, the alleyway where Mazvita

[44] This description of the city occurs in the section of *The Stone Virgins* dated 1950 – 1980.

moves the corpse of her child to the apron she has purchased is representative of a striated space. The bus Mazvita rides back to the countryside to bury the child with her ancestors displays the attributes of smooth space. Significant physical and mental journeys occur in the two spaces. The space of the alley and the bus, while existing as clear physical locations, are also present as powerful mental constructions for Mazvita. Often the physical spaces do not coincide with the mental constructions. Here the reality of Mazvita's tormented mind imprints one notion of space over the physical reality. It is the mixture of smooth and striated within one site that produces reality, although the dialogue is disjointed because the two "fail to coincide entirely" and "do not communicate with each other in the same way" (474-475). Deleuze and Guattari warn when defining smooth and striated space, "what distinguishes the two kinds of voyages is neither a measurable quantity of movement, nor something that would be only in the mind, but the mode of spatialization, the manner of being in space, of being for space" (482). In this section I attempt to uncover the modes of spatialization that occur in the alleyway and the bus of *Without a Name* in order to understand their significance in light of the pain Mazvita attempts to bear.

The bus in which Mazvita travels from the city to the countryside is an example of smooth space, in contrast to the striated space of Harari, the city she is leaving. But as "nothing completely coincides, and everything intermingles, or crosses over" these definitions overlap (482). Returning to the textile analogy developed by Deleuze and Guattari, it is perhaps useful to consider a type of fabric called nuno felt. The nuno textile is a single entity composed of areas of fulling where fibre tangles organically and areas of warp and weft geometries. When the agitation and temperature changes needed to create felt are applied to the mixture of loose fibres and woven cloth, the felt tangles on, and more importantly *through*, the woven grid of warp and weft. The space of the bus in *Without a Name* fits this analogy, for the bus as a smooth felted space drives over and parks itself on striated space. The result is like that of a nuno fabric, a layer of smooth space residing on and

pressing through layers of striated space. But unlike the nuno fabric, the bus is in motion, dragging its smooth attributes across striated space. At times it parks on striated space and the smooth and the striated exist in direct tension. At other moments its presence is fleeting, the bus passes across the striated space and in doing so simply imprints its presence on space as tyre tracks and discarded litter.

In Harari's alleyway, Mazvita's "manner of being in space" is striated (482). Space is experienced through the subordination of lines and trajectories to points (478). Mazvita seeks refuge in a "welcoming alley between two towering brick buildings [. . .] narrow and cramped" (WN 15) in order to move her dead baby into the apron she has purchased for its transport. Both her mental condition and the physical space in which she moves exist only as moments, disjointed fragments that show the subordination of the trajectory to its points. The space of the alleyway is laid on the city grid that encourages her already tunnel vision to see the alley as an empty space capped at both ends. In this striated space points appear and disappear in the short fleeting fragments Mazvita's mind is capable of registering and responding to. For example: "She witnessed people walk past each end of the alley. The people only lasted two quick steps before they disappeared on either side" (WN 16). Movement and the opportunity for human contact are reduced to tiny particles of information that are less threatening than constant contact or the prospect of a crowd. Later, as she moves her child into the apron, "[s]he searched the end of the alley and again saw the people pass by, in rapid dots, in specks of memory" (WN 17). Mazvita's mind separates people from space to lessen the threat of her guilt being observed by others. This is humorously evident when "[s]he thought she saw an umbrella walk by" (WN 16) – a decapitated object strolling the city alone.

From the striated space of the alleyway, Mazvita moves to the smooth space of the bus depot introduced on the first page of *Without a Name*. Inside this space Mazvita's "manner of being in space" shifts from the optical points that determined the striated space of

the alley to an ambush of haptic details surrounding and inside the bus (482). The space of the bus is "occupied by intensities: wind, noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities" (479). Deleuze and Guattari determine a fundamental difference between haptic vision and optic vision in relation to smooth and striated space. Here haptic rather than optic vision is at work in the sense that haptic vision "invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfil this nonoptical function" (492). Instead of the vision of a person there is "the shape that was the conductor" (2). Audible conversation becomes a "murmuring like boiling water" as "voices swirled like a flood to one end of the bus where there was space" (2). The air temperature is turned into a noise as "[h]eat thundered beneath her feet" (1). In the space of the bus, sensory perception dominates Mazvita's reality with little regard for reality or plausibility. Or, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, "smooth materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them" as opposed to striated forms which "organize matter" (479).

The bus exists as an "interval that is substance" a moment both suspended and laden with the details of smooth space and remain that way once the journey begins (478). Mazvita "'distributes' [herself] in an open space" by travelling as a capsule that contains smooth space (481). But, as the image of nuno fabric reveals, this smooth space is in constant contact with striated qualities. There are moments of overlap, moments where borders abut, and moments when the two mingle as one. Deleuze and Guattari note, "Voyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a difficult, uncertain becoming at that" (482). Mazvita's uncertainty is apparent when the narrator notes that she "did not know if she was going to Mubaira or Kadoma. Both destinations seemed necessary and certain. She had arrived here. She had arrived there" (WN 42). The destination, the point, the definable location on the grid is a place where Mazvita exists because she "arrived here" *and* "arrived there." The end point of the journey is an occurrence, but the action of travel, even in Mazvita's condition, is of more concern than the destination. The trajectory attributed to smooth space is a celebration of movement without concern for the destination. It prevails when "the destination was only another place in her

journey" (WN 42). It is the infinite journey of the vector, the gesture of movement in a specific direction at a certain rate. Mazvita is less concerned with the result than the movement itself for "a part of her said there were beginnings, in both directions" (WN 42). The complexity of the bus as a space lies in its own movement. While the space inside the bus displays the attributes of smooth space, the bus journeys across and parks itself on sites of striation. Again, the penetration of one form of space into another is problematic because the two "do not communicate with each other in the same way" (475).

The disjunction observed by Deleuze and Guattari is used to articulate the trauma of Mazvita's experience. The tension is apparent when Mazvita "fear[s] that her world might enter the bus and leave her out of it. She has this wretched feeling of following her world around, with her eyes" (WN 68). The world Mazvita has experienced most recently before boarding the bus is that of the alleyway, discussed earlier, where striations dominate. This separation of space and body recalls the hospital scenes in *The Stone Virgins* where Nonceba isolates hibiscus flowers in her mind's eye rather than confront the reality of the hospital and her unexpected visitor, Cephas. For Mazvita, the act of infanticide, rather than the violent attack Nonceba has survived, is both protective and liberating. Within the space her mind has created, the alleyway is made up of fragmented images: the umbrella walking alone, the speck of a distant person and the litter. The smooth space of the bus requires that moments join. Separation cannot thrive in this type of space.

The further the bus journeys, the greater the separation between Mazvita's mental space and the space of the bus. Reality dissolves into a dream sequence in which the trajectory of the journey is disrupted by the haunting belief that the women on the bus are aware of her secret burden. Mazvita's conscience "longed to be discovered, to be punished, to be thrown out of the bus" (WN 91) and, as discussed in the first chapter, this guilt causes Mazvita to attempt to reorder chaos through the nervous tightening of the knot that holds the baby and apron on her back. If Mazvita was "discovered" and thrown from the bus, her

experience would pull her from the smooth space of the journey and return her to a space that exists as a collection of points: conception, murder, the burden and shame of her child's corpse. For Mazvita, birth and the prospect of motherhood "had not been a beginning, but a newer kind of departure, an entrapment rare and nullifying" (WN 42). Striated space does not demand that any two moments be considered at the same time and allows Mazvita to separate the causes of her pain and grief.

Mazvita enters smooth space again when she "[finds] herself on the bus, not yet resolved on her destination, but ready to go somewhere. The bus stood still" (WN 67). The fact that the bus is not moving does not negate the presence of smooth space, instead smooth space is apparent in Mazvita's "manner of being in space" (482). Within the bus Mazvita constructs additional layers of smooth space through a dream sequence that occupies intensities rather than optical confirmation. Here the bus becomes covered in a stifling layer of red dust accompanied by laughter Mazvita does not understand. "It was as though the laughing had moved from inside her into the bus, into the mouths of strangers. She had preferred the laughter when it was silent, and completely hers" (WN 88). This dream sequence complicates space because it appropriates the bus as a setting but exists entirely in Mazvita's imagination, a place that finds striated space easier to occupy.

Once the bus embarks upon its trip, another attribute of smooth space is encountered that operates in a very different manner. Smooth space is also determined to be the "space in which the war machine develops as opposed to the space instituted by the State apparatus" (474). The guerrilla war raging around the space of the bus disrupts the vector of its journey with the threatening point of a "State apparatus" roadblock. The bus is emptied of the travellers and their belongings and striated space reappears:

> They searched the opaque windows, and saw through the dust the lines of [the] police vehicle [. . .] The heads were missing from shoulders, the arms chopped off. The

windows thick with dust. The people searched fearfully behind the sheltering glass in a temporary refuge for their fear. (WN 77)

Deleuze and Guattari write, "The war machine was perhaps the first thing to be striated, to produce an abstract labor-time whose results could be multiplied and operations divided. That is where free action in smooth space must have been conquered" (490). Stepping outside the smooth space of the journey "the soldiers rummage furiously through the goods, tossed garments in every direction, whispered endless prophecies, asked women to stand on one side of the road, with the children" (WN 78). War in many ways aligns itself with a reading of striated space when considered as an organized machine, dividing and reordering the land. But when the war is fought as a guerrilla war, with the resulting chaos, the war project is less one of striation and control and more an infiltration of violence in sweeping movements. One could read the actions of guerrilla war as the barbs of the woollen fibre fulling and catching on the fabric of social life. The impact is inescapable, although the actions do not rely on the organized grid of the conventional war machine.

Arriving at the purpose of her journey, Mazvita finds that fire has made the organized space of her village community into a felted mass of ashes. In the closing chapter of *Without a Name,* the narrator's voice recalls, "It is yesterday. The village has disappeared. Mazvita can smell the burnt grass, though most of it has been washed away by the rain [. . .] The broken huts are dark with the smoke and the mist falls gently over the empty walls" (WN 102). Violence has prepared her child's grave in advance of her life. The development of two types of space with distinct operations in Mazvita's mind separate empowerment from murder, hope from tragedy and the guilt of her actions from her sincere belief that the death of her child was her only option.

The space of the war machine where, "perhaps the first thing to be striated, to produce an abstract labour-time whose results could be manipulated and operations divided [. . .] where free action in smooth space must have been conquered" (490) is also apparent in

Under the Tongue. Here the smooth space of guerrilla war is hidden in the mountains and forests, places Vera's characters do not penetrate, but constantly look towards and weigh against their own existences. Muroyiwa, the troubled father who commits incest against his daughter, is described as a mistake, a manifestation of death, permitted to live only by chance:

> His birth haunted him while he permitted himself to live. Permission, willed and visible, this living, because often he had to pause and think about his mother, being born, about the calabash [. . .] His mother spoke of retrieving him from a calabash. (UT 6)

Muroyiwa's relationship with life contributes to his unsteady grip on reality. In the narrator's explanation of his later actions, "Muroyiwa failed to make tangible the distinction between any two emotions so he pretended the confusion did not matter" (UT 6). From Muroyiwa's disturbed mind comes an aching desire to move towards a form of space different from his present. "This he considered during the war when he allowed himself to be haunted by beauty and loving and the symmetry of mats, then he forgot the war, or least he fought its encroachment" (UT 7).

The symmetrical mats that his wife Runyararo weaves exist most literally as a striated space. They are woven fabric. They are striation and separation. This basic image relieves him from the tormenting reality of the war occurring in the smooth space of the mountains. But striated space is also responsible for his act of incest, for it is in striated space that Muroyiwa is able to jump for image and desire to action without confronting the journey of his actions, the forward movement of the trajectory that would show his ruined daughter's body and the disintegration of the family unit. Instead, the act of incest is like Mazvita's rapid dots and specks of memory and Nonceba's hibiscus flowers. Fragments are broken free from a chain of events and set apart like disconnected experiences devoid of a future, unable to move forward at a specified rate in a specified direction.

Muroyiwa's sense of reality is the result of his less than fortunate birth, at which he was discarded for dead and later recovered. Also significant is his father, VaGomba, who is injured late in his life while working in the fields. Blinded, VaGomba's way of seeing and being intrigues and later consumes Muroyiwa. The vision of Muroyiwa's father exists in smooth space, for the literal absence of the optic senses demand that he rely on a way of haptic knowing. VaGomba "found the shape of the absence of light; light travelling through water, on motionless lakes and rivers, and there was a sound to that light, through winds and the sound of that, light in the smoke above huts, and there was a sound to that too" (UT 18-19). Blindness, while relying on haptic ways of knowing, in fact operates in a world of striations. Cathryn Vasseleu notes, "Tactility is an essential aspect of light's texture, where texture refers not only to the feeling of a fabric to the touch, or the grasping of qualities, but also to the hinges or points of contact which constitute the interweaving of the material and ideal strands of the field of vision" (12). Muroyiwa grows up in his father's absence of light and uses it, "calmly willing his own blindness, his fingers discovering the hidden edges of things; the soft recesses of sleep, the sharp edges of hunger, and the rounded curves of water held in a calabash which reminded him of death" (UT 27). There is something unnatural about Muroyiwa's desire to inhabit only a single type of space, a texture without light. It is in part provoked by a constant incredulity with regard to his own life, the reality of his own existence and, by extension, his responsibility for his own actions. In the smooth space that is both the war machine and blindness, Muroyiwa indulges himself with the act of incest.

Father and son occupy different versions of space in their literal and metaphorical blindness. Ironically, from Muroyiwa's childhood dreams of blindness he later goes to work in the mines where, "[h]e hated that darkness he entered with his entire body and which stole from him, descending, unable to breath" (UT 93). Working in the mines as an adult allows the married Muroyiwa and his family a higher standard of living and affords them a room of their own instead of a space shared with many families. But Muroyiwa is still a man wracked

by inferiority and guilt. He believes himself responsible for his father's injury and to be the weaker half of his parents' children. The narrator explains, "He existed as an opposite to his brother, the war was an axis which kept a balance between them. Tachiveyi had courage, Muroyiwa had stayed behind. Tachiveyi was the first born; Muroyiwa was the last. Being born last, it was Muroyiwa who had stolen the light from their father VaGomba" (UT 93-94). It is difficult to connect this perceived theft of light from his father as a justification for stealing the light from his daughter's childhood. The act of incest is described as an absence of light:

> Have you seen the sun forgetting its direction which it has known for many years, turning, in mid-noon, to go back and set where it began at dawn? Have you seen shadows repeat themselves, grow once more where they already grew in the early morning? (UT 31)

This absence of light develops a sense of a distorted layering of space similar to that inhabited by Nonceba and Thenjiwe in *The Stone Virgins*. Operating within the cultural idioms available, incest is spoken of through a fragmentation of space and time, a violation so enormous that the very rising and setting of the sun cease their normal rhythms. On a biological level, conception that results from incest is a distortion of time, a disruption of sequential lineage. On an emotional level, the violation is brought about by friend rather than foe, thus rendering the world senseless and untrustworthy to those who have experienced violation.

Muroyiwa does not live long enough for us to consider the implications of his recovery through a return to integrated space because he wife murders him, but one would suspect that, as for Sibaso in *The Stone Virgins,* there are some for whom space is never integrated and whole. Both men's actions reveal the atrocities that can occur near war and remind us that a loss of belief in the sanctity of life can occur beyond, as well as inside, a war zone, in times of supposed peace, as well as of violence. In addition, Sibaso's loss of regard

for life occurs in post-independence Zimbabwe and makes us aware of the fact that the tragic distortions that occur before independence are not resolved or erased in the independent nation. I would argue that, as a character, Muroyiwa never experiences integrated whole space and that this disconnection can be understood through his distorted birth ritual, which in retrospect can be read as a metaphor for the life he will live. As a father, his life has contributed to the creation of his daughter, but it is also responsible for damaging that life. It can be suggested that this lack of full existence, this life that exists on the edges of combat, is responsible, at least in part, for Muroyiwa's actions against his daughter.

Smooth and Striated: The Maritime Model

Deleuze and Guattari write that the maritime model is perhaps the clearest example of smooth and striated space: "For the sea is a smooth space par excellence, and yet was the first to encounter the demands of an increasingly strict striation [. . .] the striation of the sea was a result of navigation on the open water" (479). Once navigational lines were imposed upon the sea the ocean came to exist as a manifestation of a striated and smooth space. Deleuze and Guattari conclude, "This is undoubtedly why the sea, the archetype of smooth space, was also the archetype of all striations of smooth space: the striation of the desert, the air, the stratosphere" (480). In *Butterfly Burning,* the haunting scene of the murder of Fumbatha's father, along with sixteen other men, during Rhodesia's first *chimurenga* in 1896 presents a similar drawing over of the smooth by the striated. The murders are calculated to silence "resistance to settlers" (BB 8). Lines are imposed across the smooth space of magical liquid air:

> The drowned die in whispers. They die in infinite solitude. The air leaves their bodies in a liquid breeze. First they sink as far as the weight of their bodies will allow, then they float. They touch the surface with their faces, not their arms, with their lips [. . .]

> Their gift is to see through every particle of water. They breathe in water [. . .] A body floats to shore. (BB 7)

The space in which the scene occurs is an ocean of mist in which the smooth space of air masquerades as water. "Mist ascends like luxurious tears and claims the men. They are swimmers, in the mist pulling up and then down the tree, like floating wood [. . .] Floating and forever dipping down" (BB 7). The reversal of air for water creates a sense of weightlessness used in a second evocative image that describes the men as dancers:

> Toes are turned down to the ground as though the body would leap to safety. The foot curls like a fist, facing down. The feet of dancers who have left the ground. Caught. Surprised by something in the air which they thought free. (BB 7)

Despite the deathly reality, the points of the men's bodies are subordinated to the fantastical trajectories of an imagined dance. In a further description, the reality of the lynching is replaced by the trajectory of an innocent wind that caused the "seventeen male bodies [to be] blown into the branches by a ruthless wind" (BB 7). The swimmers, the dancers and the wind are described through haptic details of smooth space, and – a device deployed successfully by Vera throughout her fiction – death is rewritten with beauty in the face of horror.

The magical liquid terra firma is striated by seventeen literal lines in the form of "empty ropes [. . .] endless circles of heavy and solid rope, seventeen circles in all, dangling down" (BB 9). Like "the map, which intertwines meridians and parallels, longitudes and latitudes, plotting regions known and unknown on the grid", the ropes which hang the men are woven cables that impose seventeen marks of striation upon the smooth space of mist, dance and wind (479). Thus the smooth space is written over with the striated nooses like warp threads drawn taught with the weight of each body.

As already mentioned, Deleuze and Guattari warn that the two forms of space exist only as a mixture. Here, at one indistinct point, the two spaces merge. It is difficult to

determine if the flesh of each man's neck rotted the ropes from which they hung, or if the rotting ropes release the men's bodies to the ground:

> The men remain there till the ropes holding them up are weakened by decaying flesh, and succumb like all things softened and decayed; or is it that the neck has softened before the rope, and the dead bodies swoop down and lie unheeded? (BB 8)

At the meeting of flesh and rope it is impossible to discern which form of space eventually triumphs. Do the lines of striation eventually break through the bodies of the men, or do the secretions from the necks of each man eventually cause the ropes to decompose, breaking the fierce and violent striations imposed on their flesh?

Fourteen years after the lynching, Fumbatha's mother takes him to the site where the lynching took place. Fumbatha "looks everywhere. There is no sign of death [. . .] His father has vanished. A liquid that has sunk into the ground" (BB 10). It is not merely the absence of death that returns the site to smooth space, but the return of water. In the same area, when the Umguza river floods:

> Children drown because they understand nothing of rivers which are in flood and step into the water as though it were a glittering layer of stone and when the water does not resist, their timid feet are charmed. They leap in and their bodies race down the river like wood. Water swirls round the trunk of the tree on which the men have died. (BB 11)

A child's death, impossible to weigh with the same sense of intent or premeditation as Phephelaphi's immolation, is instead recorded as a magical aberration. The land has charmed the young inhabitants and allowed death to become something grossly beautiful. The smooth space of water encounters real striations in the flooded tree trunks which physically mark out part of the mapped grid of longitude and latitude that Deleuze and Guattari read as the striations of the sea. Here, once again, the isolated attributes of smooth and striated space –

water masquerades as stone while experiencing the diverting presence of striation – are used to represent a space tormented by a history of violence and a present full of hardship.

The same children that attempt to walk on water live in the shantytowns near the Umguza River. Of such spaces of poverty Deleuze and Guattari write:

> The smooth spaces arising from the city are not only those of world-wide organization, but also of a counterattack combining the smooth and the holey and turning back against the town: sprawling, temporary, shifting shantytowns of nomads and cave dwellers, scrap metal and fabric, patchwork, to which the striations of money, work, or housing are no longer even relevant. (481)

The nullifying poverty in which the children live has the power to deny all possibility of hope for the future by remaining outside the striated systems of exchange necessary for opportunities: conventional education, material wealth, financial power. But money, work, and housing find their truest disregard in the space of the child's vision; the fleeting, momentary observations that, unlike all the previous examples, are not the result of pain, but rather the skipping, distracted joy of children's play. The shantytown of Makokoba "is a place where each child has a story which stuns by its detail" (BB 36). In the space of the children's reality, "[w]hatever is not known must be without shape and therefore above every reality they have already witnessed" (BB 14).

Here the distortion of space is in fact a celebration of a child's vision. The "red and blue paint flakes" and the "skeleton of a broken old umbrella" that give such joy to the children are framed by a road that carries cars that stare and speed past (BB 12). The road, a tarred "narrow strip, the edges a cover of dust" embodies the striated values of city (BB 13). The children "hold their eyes against the tight brightness of the sun reflected on metal and read the number plates on the cars, with awe, constantly astonished by the sight of white men with lingering gazes and hasty waves" (BB 12). The failure of the two spaces to coincide is indicative of the strict separations policed in social spaces. Neither inhabitant desires to move

from the space they inhabit into the other's space. The wealthy white men, secure in their comfort and privilege, can barely acknowledge the poverty they drive by each day, even Vera's writing of their hasty waves seems to be written with an irony that makes the gesture hard to believe. The drivers one assumes to be black Zimbabweans who have managed to secure work from the wealthy white men; they are the only characters that actually move between the two spaces, swerving the cars of the wealthy white men who cannot bear to witness or wave at the children any longer than necessary, back and forth along the edge of the highway where the poverty of the children and the shanty towns seeps onto the new wealth of the tarmac road. At the boundary of their playground, "[c]ars, carrying inquiring stares from their drivers, continue to break the silence [. . .] the drivers threaten the children by moving off the road towards the abandoned drums, swerving, swearing, skidding" (BB 13). Lefebvre notes the brutalizing nature of the motorway in relation to the land concluding that the road, "slice[s] through space like a great knife" (165). He uses the motorway as an example of space which is "invariably the realization of a master's project [. . .] usually closed, sterilized, emptied out" (165). Here the sterilized tarmac landscape stands in stark contrast to the creative vision which the children are able to live through.

Vera uses smooth and striated space to articulate trauma. In particular, because the spaces always exist simultaneously but never perfectly coincide, the two forms reveal disjunctions between lived experience and mental space. In this way, smooth and striated space function in a manner similar to that of the space carved out by the "Ambi generation", racial identities that never perfectly match up, but continue to exist side by side. Through various spatial techniques that include shadows, myopia, fragmentation and the grid, a world is constructed in a manner that does much towards explaining the internal damage caused by traumatic events of infanticide, incest, murder and poverty. While I propose that the inevitable return to integration of smooth and striated space can be understood as an unavoidable faith in the recovery of Vera's characters, recovery does not return the individual

to the person they were before the fracturing of space. The failure of the two spaces to coincide entirely means that the individual will forever bear the impact of their violation and can never return to a relationship with space that is as integrated or as whole as it was before pain split understanding into smooth and striated regions.

Chapter Five

How all Life is Lived, in Patches[45]

> One hundred years ago, at the Berlin Conference, the colonial powers that ruled Africa met to divvy up their interests into states, lumping various people and tribes together in some places, or slicing them apart in others like some demented tailor who paid no attention to the fabric, colour or pattern of the quilt he was patching together. (Wole Soyinka, "The Bloodsoaked Quilt of Africa")

While quilting is undeniably a European and North American tradition, its place in women's fiction written in the English language is considerable. As I noted in the introduction, quilting may not have deep historical roots in Zimbabwe, but projects such as the Weya Appliqués prove its presence and function as an adopted structure in Zimbabwe's landscape. It is for this reason, rather than any intentional privileging of euro-centric metaphors, that I want to suggest a reading of Vera's fiction that acknowledges the existence of an unassembled patchwork of fabrics in her writings.

The relationship between quilting and women's writing has been the subject of considerable academic inquiry. Much has been written of the quilt in relation to literature, the similarities in the structure of quilting patterns to those found in narratives, as well as the narrative capabilities of the quilt. Elaine Showalter notes, "Piecing is thus an art of making do and eking out, an art of ingenuity, conservation. It reflects the fragmentation of women's time, the scrappiness and uncertainty of women's creative or solitary moments" (1991: 149). And bell hooks writes of her mother's quilting:

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[45] An earlier version of this chapter appears under the title "How all Life is Lived, in Patches": Quilting Metaphors in the Fiction of Yvonne Vera" published in *The End of Unheard Narratives: Contemporary Perspectives on Southern African Literatures,* ed. Bettina Weiss. kalliope paperbacks, 2004: 235 – 250.

> Although she did not make story quilts, Baba believed that each quilt has its own narrative – a story that began from the moment she considered making a particular quilt. The story was rooted in the quilt's history, why it was made, why a particular pattern was chosen [. . .] to her mind these quilts were maps charting the course of our lives. They were history as life lived. (120-121)

Showalter has written about the similarities between quilting patterns and the rise of the short story written by women and suggests that the quilt informed the short story tradition of American literature and that "a knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate and ingenious design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women's writing" (227). Showalter goes onto note that the "relationship between piecing and writing has not been static, but has changed from one generation to another, along with changes in American women's culture" (228). Showalter connects the rise of the short story with that of the quilt seeing both structures as a response to the fragmentation and thrift demanded of women's creative lives in light of enormous domestic responsibilities (229).

In African American literature the presence of the quilt is often a sign of triumph, the creation of beauty in the face of hardship, assembling and producing usefulness from waste. In the collection and assemblage of scraps from worn clothing, torn bed linen and, on rare occasions, the scraps left from new cloth, beauty appears from adversity. But even in literature from North America, the value of the quilt within narratives is often contested. For example, in her short story "Everyday Use", Alice Walker describes two sisters to whom the family heirloom of quilts represent differing values. For one, the value of the quilts as decorative emblems of a heritage she is interested in superficially displaying means that she considers them above everyday use. In contrast, the other sister, who knows how to make the quilts, believes she is not worthy of inheriting the quilts. But when her mother sees the value she places in using the quilts on a daily basis, she makes sure that it is this daughter who is

the recipient of the finest quilts in the collection. The function of the quilt, not only as family memento but also as integral to the domestic life of the house, is a vital aspect of the quilt's value and something the mother wants to preserve more than the fabric of the quilt itself.

In her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* Sunny Falling-rain convincingly traces the structure of the crazy quilt in Morrison's work and notes that these observations may only be apparent to a reader conversant with the methods and structures of quilting:

> Morrison *literarily* created a patchwork crazy quilt. Every component of the crazy quilt has a counterpart in the novel. The range of literary techniques used to develop the novel as a crazy quilt includes direct statements about quilts, colors, fabrics, and quilting, and their meaning in the lives of the characters. But the author also created very subtle techniques to imitate quilting structures, techniques which I believe could only have been noticed by someone knowledgeable about quilting – someone looking for structures reminiscent of the crazy quilt. (112)

Here first-hand familiarity with the textile, something I believe is also important when reading Vera's fiction, is called upon to fully appreciate the narrative. Falling-rain surmises, "The novel as quilt enables the author [Morrison] to lay to rest an otherwise unspeakable story about an incident and a period of American history that does not rest well" (137). Here the textile is hinged to a fabric fragment that appears throughout the text: a fragment of red ribbon found floating in a river by the character Stamp Paid which he carries in his pocket for years to come. From this fragment, Falling-rain notes the presence of various fabrics which act as reminders of lives lived within the narrative. The crazy quilt, made of odd sized remnants, records and remembers the lives lived around it. "Barren, 124 [Bluestone Road] serves as the blank foundation upon which Morrison patches the fragments of the shattered lives of her characters back together again" (124). Falling-rain concludes that, while Morrison repeats throughout *Beloved* that the stain of infanticide "was not a story to pass on", the quilt as an object is very much an heirloom. The shred of red ribbon that provoked this

text/textile reading comes from the scalp of the dead child. Falling-rain concludes, "By making a quilt, 'It' can finally be put to rest – 'It' being that ghost baby of the novel, Beloved, and the historical baby, all the other ghost babies, and all the unnamed, unknown lost men, women and children from the period of slavery. All can be laid to rest, put to rest, but not forgotten" (136).

This reading of the quilted structure inspired my own reading of Vera's works as an unassembled quilt. While I argue that the quilt remains unassembled in Vera's writings due to the traumatic record it would reveal if ever assembled, it cannot be denied that Morrison deals with equally violent and tragic topics that, as in Vera's work, often directed at the female body. I would suggest that Vera's unassembled quilt mirrors her "unassembled" writing style and is an example of the experimental manner in which she attempts to tackle topics that have otherwise remained silenced. If the squares of patterned, stained and worn fabric that litter Vera's fiction are understood to remain stubbornly unassembled, then they act as indications that not all can triumph under adversity. Nonetheless, acknowledgement of their existence, even in an unassembled state, once again recognizes the power of the textile to act as a powerful form of communication.

Textiles and the Domestic Space

"A fragment is also a life; it is how all life is lived, in patches." (BB 93)

The presence of textiles within domestic spaces are as ubiquitous as those appearing on or near the body. Scholars have noted the possibility of reading the home as a further layer of the body, established first with skin, then clothing and finally the architectural space. The celebrated textile designer Anni Albers commented, "If we think of clothing as a secondary skin we might enlarge on this thought and realize that the enclosure of walls in a way is a

third covering, that our habitation is another 'habitat'" (23). Anne Hollander, in her study of dress and drapery depicted in Fine Art, has put forward the idea that perhaps, "[c]lothing might be thought to claim the more serious kind of attention given to architecture, if its materials had comparable permanence and the size of its examples more command over the eye" (xiv), yet again connecting the monumental outer cover to the garment and skin of the body.

Covered in dust; stained with food and fluid; torn and frayed with use, the textile within the domestic space records the environment around it. In *The Stone Virgins,* where dust chokes the air throughout the entire narrative, "[b]right colourful carpets to cover the cold township cement" are observed with "[n]o anxiety even though in a week or less these new carpets will be choked with dust, and they [the city's new inhabitants] have available to them nothing more than grass brooms with which to raise the dust off, let it settle, and raise it again" (SV 6). Among other things, the textile records a daily battle against dirt. Often fabrics are handed down through a series of tasks. The dirtier and more threadbare they become, the lower the task set before them. Sorkin notes that cloth also records evidence of more intimate and damaging dirt and stains. She writes, "Cloth holds the sometimes unbearable gift of memory. And its memory is exacting; it does not forget even the benign scars of accident: red wine on a white tablecloth, water on a silk blouse, dark patches beneath arms on a humid summer day" (77).

An example of this hand-me-down system at work is certainly found in the quilt. Quilts are typically assembled from scraps of older fabrics and remnants of earlier projects. Avid quilt makers often own a basket of remnants where they store cloth that is trimmed, torn and separated from more substantial pieces. Often, each fragment can be connected to its original whole; a child's christening dress, a winter coat, ribbon from a fraying trim. Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher write that "[t]he patchwork quilt is an immediate feminine point of reference, and with it is implied the real or imaginary gift of creative power in the face of

adversity" (3). Elaine Hedges observes, "Our response to quilts as an art form rooted in both meaningful work and in cultural oppression will therefore inevitably be complex; a combination of admiration and awe at limitation overcome and of sorrow and anger at the limitations imposed" (19).

Deleuze and Guattari also discuss the quilt in relation to smooth and striated space. They determine that the quilt has evolved from one form of striated space generated by plain quilting and an emphasis on embroidery, to a smooth space in which a patchwork of pieced or appliquéd elements dominate:

> The first settlers in the seventeenth century brought with them plain quilts, embroidered and striated spaces of extreme beauty. But toward the end of the century patchwork technique was developed more and more, at first due to the scarcity of textiles (leftover fabric, pieces salvaged from used clothes, remnants taken from the "scrap bag"), and later due to the popularity of Indian chintz. It is as though a smooth space emanated, sprang from a striated space, but not without a correlation between the two, a recapitulation of one in the other, a furtherance of one through the other. Yet the complex difference persists. Patchwork, in conformity with migration, whose degree of affinity with nomadism it shares, is not only named after trajectories, but "represents" trajectories, becomes inseparable from speed or movement in an open space. (477)

What is helpful here in Deleuze and Guattari's observations are the relationships of quilting to movement and migration. Like the examples of trauma discussed in the previous chapter, the quilt, the intersection of smooth and striated space, is left as an unassembled patchwork. I propose that it is possible to see remnants of fragments of a quilt embedded in Vera's fiction, but such fragments record traces of lives that the family quilt would rather edit than record.

While quilting is an "art of scarcity, ingenuity, conservation, and order" (Showalter 128) the squares of patterned, stained, worn and recycled fabric that litter Vera's texts remain

unassembled, indications that not all can triumph under adversity. Here the fragments left unassembled are a "map charting the course of our lives" that may be too painful to read (hooks 120-121). But while the quilt remains unmade throughout Vera's narratives, the fragments and scraps are undeniably present and can be read as a painful map of lives ruled by trauma. Many of these unassembled fragments are fraying at the edges, as though their absence from a larger pattern of existence has slowly eroded their edges. In other examples, thrift and the recycling of material appear in a manner similar to the recycling in early quilts and expose the true extent of poverty. Finally, in a few scraps, seamed edges stand out in sharp contrast to the frayed and age-worn cloth. Sewn and bound at the edges, these remnants come to represent unwelcome and self-contained fragments bearing traces of unmentionable acts. One of the many incarnations of the cloth fragments is that of a silent witness. The burden of this witness is evident in the materials themselves: faded, soiled, frayed and bound.

For example, in Vera's short story "A Thunderstorm", a piece of cloth is placed next to the sink and is used for all manner of mopping up:

> The curtain had had many lives. As it stood right next to the sink, they all used it to wipe their hands. Tsitsi picked up the frail cloth. Silently she withdrew the wire that went through the hemmed top edge of the material, found a spot against the wall to let it rest, then folded the curtain away. (TS 52)

The curtain, now soiled by its use as a hand towel rather than a window covering, is removed from its first job and folded to perform lesser tasks. Eventually this cloth will grow threadbare and either fall to pieces, or be torn into ever decreasing scraps. Eventually the scraps will be all that remains of the whole cloth. Those that contain perhaps a pattern or piece of embroidery, or are stronger than the rest, will be placed aside as useful remnants for mending or patching. According to Perini and Wolff, "Like all cultural artefacts, cloth has a life history. Depending upon the particular life history phase, the cultural value of cloth at any specific moment may lie primarily in either an aesthetic, social or economic function"

(10). As can be seen in cloth fragments, these lives often occur in a descending order of cleanliness, from pride of place to the worn out rag. The quilt as an object of beauty and usefulness ironically represents one of the last stages of a cloth's life, when the fragments that remain are mixed with snippets of new cloth too small for any other task and preserved under the stitching and backing in their final incarnation.

The many fragments of cloth that can be read throughout Vera's narratives witness unspeakable atrocities that occur in their presence. In particular, bedding links the material presence of the cloth to the role of witness to sexual violation. Fleshin notes, "Sleeping and dreaming, conception and birth, lovemaking, illness, and finally death keep most of us in bed for much of our lives. As a staging ground for the life cycle, the bed is a psychologically charged piece of furniture that can evoke countless associations and complex feelings of fear, dread, desire, vulnerability, pain, passion, nurturing, and loss" (1996: 7). Fleshin goes on to observe that "[w]hile the empty bed can signal the possibility of loss, loneliness, and even death, it can suggest that it is not the individual or psychological construction of the human subject. The decontextualized bed [such as Zhizha's], therefore, serves as a reflection of cultural values and as a repository of collective experience, rather than simply a site of personal narrative" (8).

In Vera's narratives the bed as a site of rest and protection is distorted. For example, in *Without a Name* the bed is a site of unwanted sexual advances. Mazvita's partner Joel makes, "movements [that] were erratic as he sought her between the torn covers. A thin light sifted through the worn curtains [. . .] Through the mist Mazvita smelt the stale grey blankets, the worn out mattress [. . .] She remained quiet to accommodate him" (WN 59-60). While Mazvita has chosen to live with her partner, the rape she has endured earlier in the narrative and her unwanted pregnancy are unspoken barriers to their relations.

For the remainder of *Without a Name,* the fabric fragments that appear are soiled with the act of infanticide. Unlike the frayed and unravelling fragments that will be observed in

Under the Tongue, these cloths are already bound at the edges. The soft cloth used "to wipe the curdled milk from the side of the baby's mouth" would have fitted well into a quilt of remembrance but the milk is sour, not nourishing, and the mother has committed infanticide in exchange for motherhood (WN 94). Similarly Joel's "black tie from a rack in the corner of the room" becomes a tool for murder rather than remembrance (WN 95). Instead of keeping the cloth as a memento, Mazvita is concerned with its return: "It was his child. She left the tie on the bed, for Joel. The tie belonged to Joel. He must not miss it" (WN 98). While it is Joel's inability to accept or support the pregnancy that is a contributing factor in Mazvita's decision to end the child's life, Mazvita, as already discussed in Chapter One, implicates him in the murder by using a tie borrowed from his wardrobe. Rather than continue to carry this evidence with her, she is eager to return the fabric to Joel's possession. In a small way, the black tie left spread on the bed offers Joel an explanation of what Mazvita has done to the child. Finally, the "dramatic white" apron that is used to bind the corpse to Mazvita's back is a cloth fragment that is not available for repair or reuse because it bears the traces of an unnatural and tragic deaths.

Cloth also plays a dominant role in "Sorting it Out", a short story published by Vera in 2003 which also deals with the subject of infanticide. Frame at beginning and end by remarks about a woman forgiving her "husband's infidelity" (237, 242) one wonders if in this case infanticide is desired by Zanele, the narrator's sister who has given birth to twins which she refuses to breast feed, as an attempt to punish an unfaithful husband. In what could also be read as post-partum depression, Zanele's refusal to acknowledge her babies causes her husband to threaten to "leave her at Ingutsheni Hospital" a mental institution where every "patient is wrapped in a grey blanket and then placed in an appropriate ward" (241). Ntombehle, the narrator fears "Zanele will be placed in a blanket if she is not careful" (241). Blankets are also used by the sister's mother who is know to take to her bed "at the first sign of lightening and covers her body with a thick blanket" (238). Thus the image of the blanket

is both threatening and comforting. The threat of the mental institution suggests that its patients are there because they need more protection; each and every case requires the second skin of a blanket to help shield them from the world that brought them to the institution. But at the same time, the hospital, whose name "refers to a blanket" is a far from desirable place (241). Thus, the need for the added protection of such an institution is also stifling, muffling – a threat to freedom – and yet another piece of family history unlikely to be recorded in the scraps of a family quilt.

In the final paragraph of the short story we learn that the sister's beloved Grandmother is rumoured to have "drowned her day-old infant in a bucket of water" (242). Ntombenhle tries to impress upon her sister the ramifications of this terminal act by pointing out that, "if Gogo had also drowned our mother, the two of us would not have been on this earth" (242). This is obviously not the case, and the story relies on snapshots of family events to piece together a memory of their times together: Victoria Falls 1995 (239), Zanele's wedding day (240) as well as their father's departure because "two girl's are enough" (240). These events are an attempt to assemble a sense of family history in an effort to show the beleaguered sister, Zanele, that life must go on, and perhaps more importantly that forgiveness must occur. Vera concludes, "A woman must forgive the infidelity of her husband in order to save her own children" (242). In this short story infanticide seems less to be an act driven by a lack of options, but rather another example of the systematic rejection of motherhood that Vera's character's so often enact.

Butterfly Burning offers a setting divided by equally poignant textile imagery, coupling the skins of daily dress with those of the couple's evening meal. A wire divides the space diagonally and is hung with clothes to partition the room. At mealtimes the couple, "slid the clothes to one end of the room away from the bed and suspended them high. Then they sliced meat into narrow strips and hung it on the wire" (BB 39). The meat of their evening meals and the skins of their clothing move back and forth upon the fragile division of

domestic space, intermingling the meat of animals with the skins of clothing. There is a palpable tension between the degrading environment in which they live, which accords them little more comfort and privacy than animals, and the possibility that their clothing, if new and freshly pressed, can raise their identities above the squalor of their living space and accord them greater respect, possibly even admiration, in the social exchanges which occur outside the home.

Bryan Turner explains that meat is "located mid-way between nature and society, between nature and culture, between the living and the dead" (xiii). The meat of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha's evening meals establishes a dialogue with all forms of consumption that occur in the space. It questions the supposed culture of city life by reminding one of the corporeal realities of everyday life needed to sustain the body, as well as the culture of material consumption introduced by the values of the city. Turner also relates flesh to communication noting "[w]e appropriate the world through the mouth, as our original social link with our mothers, as an organ of speech and articulation, as an organ of consumption and animal violence" (xiii). Hence speech, identity and consumption are all bound together on the shifting division of the couple's living space. Their intimate connections reveal the interdependent relationships the three assume and, in this case, expose the futility in isolating one aspiration without the availability of the other two. To exist in the space of the city, one must engage in the endless cycles of consumption that fuel the urban economy. In spite of a veneer of culture, these cycles can often be seen as exchanges of the most basic nature, prostitution pays for food, unwanted abortions protect employment opportunities, and sexual favours replace an education never available to the individual. Again, the fragments of flesh and cloth that record these transactions are inappropriate reminders of a brutal, rather than celebrated, existence.

In *Butterfly Burning* the bed acts as a makeshift shelter for the horrifying presence of an unplanned pregnancy. The poverty, which envelops nearly all of the characters in the

narrative, makes the prospect of an unwanted pregnancy more than an unexpected inconvenience. Pregnancy could bring about destitution, or heighten the strained circumstances in which all of the family members already exist. In Phephelaphi's case her pregnancy is a death knell for the future she has imagined for herself as an independent individual. The prospect of work, let alone the nursing school she dreams of attending, is quashed the day she admits that her body has conceived. The narrator explains, "She slid downward into the centre of the bed and raised the coarse grey blanket over her breasts. She held the blanket against her chin" (BB 91). Hiding under the rough cover of the bed she can see a "bold red seam along the edges" of the blanket that signals the closure of this cloth fragment (BB 91). Instead of taking solace in a quilt made by generations of women before her, an object that may have been able to remind her of the adversities generations of women in her family have endured, Phephelaphi is instead covered by a generic cloth that is not even soft or warm. Furthermore, the red thread that is sewn along the edge acts as an unwelcome reminder of the changes occurring inside her body. Distraught with the thought of her own pregnancy, the coarse blankets of the bed she shares with her boyfriend, Fumbatha, only act as a remind her of her predicament:

> She brought the blanket closer to her face and over her mouth. She could smell the rough fabric and held it even closer to her face. The touch and the smell of the material repelled her. She brought the blanket closer. Her eyelids closing. Nearer. She tightened her grip over the edge of the blanket. The thread showed like streaks of blood between her fingers. (BB 92)

In her bedridden depression Phephelaphi accepts the reality of a pregnancy that haunts the very fibre of her covering. Streaks of the menstrual blood she has missed for months, cells instead growing into the child inside her body, are inscribed in the social spaces of her life. The blanket both acts as a futile skin that she attempts to use to dress her own fears, and inspires a repulsion of smell and touch, which through the myopia of her vision, mirrors her

own interior. The network of her own corporal vessels acts as a reminder of the covering she and Fumbatha have shared. As Ranka Primorac postulates, "The crucial spatial borderline in Vera's novel is therefore not between town and country, or white and black parts of town, or even spaces marked by male and female domains of activity, but between the inside and outside of a woman's body" (107).

In contrast to this bed, Fumbatha works on building sites far from home where the cost of the daily commute would exhaust his meagre earnings. Instead he sleeps with "empty khaki bags of cement for a pillow, and a small grey blanket under his body" (BB 18). For warmth he uses the "velvet blanket of night" and when that is not enough and it becomes too cold, he sleeps under a lorry at the work site (BB 18). Far from the domestic space ,"he might creep under the lorry and the safety of its large wheels. Perhaps pull a plastic bag and cover his body with it" (BB 18). Come morning, these fragments will be noticed and required for other projects: the patchwork of a harder nature, the city made from the mixing of cement and the building of walls. Primorac notes another fragment that acts as a division between interior and exterior when she writes, "a stone thrown in a street quarrel nearly kills her [Phephelaphi] when it shatters the thin membrane between public and private spaces and crashes into the room through the closed window" (105). Here it could also be argued that the window pane belongs to a quilt of sorts, assembled not just of textiles, but of the rough elements Fumbatha experiences at the building site. Scraps of colour also appear to Zandile, the mother who rejects the arrival of her daughter Phephelaphi because "she was determined to find its [the city's] flamboyant edges, its colour and light, and above all else if she could, then a man to call her own. She needed lightness. [. . .] Not the burden of becoming a mother" (BB 124).

The cloth hanging just above the burning candles that is used to cover the windows of Deliwe's shebeen, where she brews illegal alcohol and harbours prostitution, suggests an illegal business under constant threat of destruction. Despite the fact that the space is often

used as a brothel, the bed is conspicuously absent. Instead, "[f]our candles burnt from four sides of the room, and Deliwe was always warning customers not to burn down her curtains with candles. This referred to a thin torn cloth which was kept down all day" (BB 52). The cloth is used as a cover to conceal her illegal activities. Now and then "[s]he tossed the cloth up to see if there was lightning in the streets so that she could quickly hide her liquor"(BB 52). Rather than living as a criminal in the space, Deliwe is well aware of the corrupt system which she works around. She retrieves fragments of this system in the "monogrammed handkerchiefs which she has retrieved from the pockets of white men" (BB 31) and uses her curtains as a warning system that projects the shadows of "policemen moving past" (BB 33).

Fleeting patchworks of light and colour are assembled inside the shebeen where, "jackets fall onto the floor where the candles burn four neat circles on each of them. She sees the colour soar; the luminous green suit, the turquoise blue, the violent red. The white suit has stolen every ounce of magic from the moon" (BB 56). In contrast to the patchwork of colours at the shebeen are the similar patterns across the roofs of the shantytown in *Under the Tongue*: "Red roofs, yellow roofs, blue roofs. It was a release, the bright colours the people spread repeatedly over these squatting shelters" (UT 65). Like the fragments assembled for the African American quilts by slave women, "[i]t was a wonder where the paint came from, how it was purchased or stolen" (UT 65).

Without a Name also opens with a patchwork of colour:

> The bus was a fierce red. Skin turned a violent mauve [. . .] The large black wheels were yellow with gathered dust [. . .] Thick layers of brown earth covered windows [. . .] but the bus still shone red. It was that red. It was so stunningly red it was living. (WN 1)

Similarly, in *The Stone Virgins*:

> They remove bright scarves from their heads and toss them like butterfly wings. They greet the air in red, blue, and green cloth intertwined. The cloth twists under the arms

raised, and fingers searching. Their hair is young even if it has turned white with waiting. For years they have only learnt to wave their voices, from door to mirror, with no hope of release, and now, they can dance in the clouds. (SV 46)

The fragments of cloth throughout Vera's narratives reveal thrift. A "crumpled cloth" stops the neck of a bottle (UT 78). A pillow is "held inside a torn black blouse" (UT 84). A "crumpled old cloth" is wedged in the cracks of a wall to block out unwanted sunlight (BB 71). But thrift and desire stop short of envy. *The Stone Virgins* describes fragments from the rich, fragments that do not even bother to evoke envy or desire. Of a white members-only club the narrator explains, "To be honest there is nothing they actually wish to enjoy, up there, not all that velvet on the chairs, all that ribbon on the curtain, and all that frill on all that curtain . . . they have no wish to acquire that" (SV 9). The unassembled quilt sources scraps from the accessible world, the world available to the characters rather than the dreams of unattainable affluence.

While the unassembled quilt does not draw on fragments from inaccessible worlds, the spaces where the fragments do appear are brutal reminders of the character's unspoken realities. In *Under the Tongue* a "short fraying curtain" patterned with "large blue stars" is meant to function as a room divider in the small room Runyararo and Muroyiwa share with their daughter Zhizha (UT 83). The cloth is a "faded and torn" witness of the abuse Zhizha has endured (UT 83). In place of the saturated, joyful colours of a child's bedroom – shooting stars and whimsy – the fragment suspended across the space reveals the inability of the family members to keep up the appearance of innocence. Zhizha sleeps in a room "created by the curtain with fading blue stars. In this tight space their lives would change completely while the war was fought and anticipations conjured" (UT 102). Runyararo uses the war as an excuse, a further reason to doubt the validity of his life and strength as a man. Like his own life, the shooting stars that decorate the space are worn out and can offer nothing to dream on, no way of escape. Perani and Wolff note, "Cloth's ability to indicate boundedness is evident

in its function to separate private and public space in the built environment and to emphasize ritual spaces" (45). This power is deconstructed in Vera's writing of cloth, where insufficiency and inadequacy prevail.

The design of the space furthers this feeling of entrapment with "no window on this side of the short red curtain with the fading blue stars. Nothing separated the two spaces but the hint of separation, an attempt alone" (UT 84). In contrast to the faded blue stars of the curtain, another piece of cloth lays on the floor. "A small brown mat had been spread on the floor near the bed, and it was new. It was very neatly made, with pale cream stripes along the border, and deep brown circles at the centre" (UT 84). Unlike the curtain that has failed in its role to divide the space, the mat on the floor is hand made by Runyararo. It is ironic that this fragment is new, not worn out at all, but clean and precise. Zhizha's mother is a mat maker and the piece is her own craftsmanship rather than a costly purchase. But again, the mat's purpose is questionable, for the shadow it casts is able to, "split the room much more than the curtain. The shadow was broad. It cut the room diagonally" (UT 84). The mat is laid to stop unwanted dirt being tracked across the house and acts as a boundary; a point of deposit, a surface upon which unwanted things accumulate. It is this square, rather than the faded and torn cloth printed with stars, that casts a strong, albeit ineffectual, division across the space of the room. Both materials are soiled with the history they have witnessed, with the knowledge of incest and the breakdown of the family unit.

It is little surprise then that fragments such as these do not find their way into an assembled quilt. The appearance of the faded blue print textile, or the unused mat that should have caught so much filth, are not parts of life a family would want to remember. They do not constitute childhood dresses worn bare through play, or the comfort of flannel sheets. They are too soiled with the knowledge of the violence that has occurred within the space to join a public display of family history. The sorrowful "stars falling off the curtain" bear little in the way of pretence (UT 85).

Instead the insufficient room divider is only heavy enough to pull and distort the string of its backbone. Dividing the room in two, the "hard string ran through a seam at the top of the cloth" like an architectural backbone "collapsed at the centre where it carried most of the weight of the cloth" (UT 83). Like Mazvita's fractured spine in *Without a Name*, the spinal column of Runyararo and Muroyiwa's room sags under the weight of the futile connections it attempts to support. Also contained in the room is a bed covered with fabrics that reveal unsanctioned intimacies. The "prettiness of the cream cover mixed uncomfortably with the coarseness, it hugged it tightly" (UT 83). The personification of the bed, too similar to the sexual abuse the "pretty" daughter endures from her "coarse" father in his tight and unwanted embraces, is yet another remnant that cannot be welcomed into a larger record of family history. The cream crochet cover reveals, through its holes, the heavy grey blanket beneath. The contrasting materials symbolize the relations that occur beneath the covers; a marriage of husband and wife, and the incest a father forces his own daughter to endure.

Later, when Zhizha goes to live with her grandparents in a space that is both a refuge and an extension of the silence she suffers under, the falling stars of the curtain reappear. "[T]he sky is inside Grandmother and it is filled with voiceless stars. The stars fall like rain from Grandmother's waiting arms which fold slowly over my shoulders like something heavy, sorrowful" (UT 41). Grandmother bears the knowledge of the incest her granddaughter has experienced alongside a history of her own broken dreams. Zhizha's new bed is contained in a makeshift space of protection with proportions that read like those of a bizarre doll house:

> It is a small room. Most of the family furniture is stored here; a large table made of wood. The table fills half the room [. . .] In the morning I fold my blankets neatly, walk carefully around the table, and place them in Grandmother's room. I am shorter than the table. When I have woken under the table, I think the house has shrunk even

further. I crawl out and fold the blankets into a small heap. I sit on the blankets waiting for my grandmother. (UT 24)

The space of Grandmother's house offers some semblance of protection for Zhizha, but the knowledge of her abuse haunts the environment. Here too a frayed curtain appears. Rather than a childhood lost, this curtain acts as a symbol of Grandmother's lost hopes. "The curtain is frayed around the edges. Old, almost transparent, it captures shadows moving across the hedge, on the road" (UT 25). Like Grandmother, the curtain absorbs the movements of those around it. It has born witness to abuse that has shattered the family and as a result its function, energies and substance have been sapped.

Of frayed fabrics Janis Jeffries writes, "The cut edges of some fabrics are particularly prone to fraying, thus running the risk of causing a falling apart at the seam or at points of intricacy in the making up of cloth" (2000: 11). Jefferies connects this fraying to the individual and suggests that the "same can be said of selves, or of other identities for which boundaries serve both to protect and form allegiances" (2000: 11). Here both Grandmother and the quilt fragment bear fraying edges. The life both women have been asked do endure "run[s] the risk of falling apart [. . .] at the points of intricacy in the making up of cloth" (2000: 11). Grandmother's burden of knowledge allows death to hover as an escape from these unmentionable transgressions: "It is true there is a word sweetened by death, lit by a fire and gathered from a falling star" (UT 42).

Grandmother's creative life involves a futile relationship with a Singer sewing machine that works with such frustrating inconsistency that she cleans the machine, almost worships it, but does not make useful objects or engage in the soothing and contemplative type of work that her daughter is shown to experience while weaving. Grandmother's one act of making is to take a pair of scissors and unhesitatingly cut the ragged edge of the window curtain, "Snap…snap…a sharp trimming round the edges. The scissors have an orange handle. That looks better, Grandmother says, to the curtain. The curtain leaves the bottom

part of the window bare" (UT 25). The gesture displays no hint of repair or reconciliation. The harsh reality of the family's situation means that Grandmother cuts and cleans, but cannot mend or construct anew. The fragments of cloth that are found in her home and that of her daughter are soiled with a history of abuse.

The fragments of cloth that appear throughout Vera's fiction can be understood as a distinct aspect of Vera's textual style, a style that does not shy away from the fragmented realities her characters endure. The notion of an unassembled quilt embedded in Vera's unassembled narrative structures reflects more than the fragmentation of women's time. Also reflected are the contradictions inherent in the postcolonial voice and the new structures Vera has developed to tackle silence. Vera's writing does not fall into the trap that Elaine Showalter warns against when she writes, "In closing off our critical pieces we may miss some of the ragged edges that are a more accurate image of our literary history" (245). Instead, Vera dwells at these ragged edges and on these ragged fragments, refusing the temptation to tidy them into a contrived experience of wholeness. Vera links her own writing style of fragments, nonchronological order, and contradiction to the unassembled textile. The gesture is in keeping with her desire to write beyond and outside preconceived structures and ways of knowing discussed in the introduction. Through the fragments of cloth Vera speaks through a different voice, just as her narratives speak through unfamiliar patterns.

Grandmother's Silenced Narrative

Deleuze and Guattari invoke the form of the basket as an example of a striated space. In striated space two elements intertwine. These elements "have different functions; one fixed, the other mobile" (475). Space of this nature is "delimited, closed on at least one side" and "seems necessarily to have a top and bottom" (475). The three main attributes of this space are helpful in reading the character of the maternal Grandmother in *Under the Tongue.*

Grandmother could be read as a quintessential quilting character of Vera's fiction. In *Under the Tongue* she owns a similar but far more culturally appropriate object to record and contain the family history: a winnowing basket, traditionally constructed and used in the daily life of the region as the quilt would have been on the cold prairies of North America. The presence of a woven basket within the narrative is intimately tied to the act of naming and the possession of language which all three generations of women in *Under the Tongue* struggle to articulate, a similar role to that played by the quilt in fiction elsewhere. The communication conveyed through the winnowing basket is both fixed and mobile, just as Grandmother seeks language to express her sadness while rejecting words as an inadequate explanation of the pain she has witnessed. Metaphorically Deleuze and Guattari's attributes assist in the reading of Grandmother's relationship to the basket in which she carries her words. In each attribute, striated space is demarcated, cleanly defined, with orientation of top, bottom and sides and an observable function.

Grandmother's lack of creative activity and her absent role as recorder of memory for the family is contrasted with the presence of a winnowing basket that hangs on the wall high above her granddaughter Zhizha's reach:

> I raise my head up from the ground and from my feet, very carefully, and find the roof which seems so far away. My eyes fill with patches of soot. I search the wall's deep black, clotted with smoke. A flat winnowing basket is suspended against the wall. A frayed rope, once white, dangles over the basket and swings softly upward when I look. Behind the basket is the grey tail of a lizard. The tail is large and points downward, almost dead, like the rope. (UT 13)

The winnowing basket, rather than the quilt, is an appropriate object for the Zimbabwean narrative in so far as the object has a history of production and daily use in the region. Marjorie Locke writes in her extensive study of basketry patterns in Zimbabwe:

> The craft of basket making has been traditionally confined to women, except for a few special baskets that men made from roots. The grandmothers or aunts, often with more time to spare than the mothers, had instructed their young relatives in basket making, thus handing down the heritage of the people and retaining a link with the past. (15)

Thus in Zimbabwe basket making is largely a female activity, with the knowledge passed through the generations on the female side of the family just as quilting is taught to women in other parts of the world.

The presence of a woven basket within the narrative is intimately tied to the act of naming and the possession of language which all three generations of women in *Under the Tongue* struggle to articulate. As Zhizha focuses on the structure of the woven basket her attention is drawn to her grandmother. Language grows increasingly imprecise as granddaughter and grandmother struggle to regain the power and strength to name thoughts:

> I ask Grandmother why she has fallen like that and she says she has forgotten where she was going, where she is, the places of her wisdom. My arms are empty, she says. My arms do not remember what they were carrying. She opens her arms and looks slowly downward to the ground as though she will recover something fallen there, as though she will pick a dream from the ground and place it back in her arms, nestle it where it has fallen from, in the warm crevices of her arms. (UT 15)

Grandmother's search for her unspoken loss culminates in her physical search for a tangible expression of communication, possibly a domestic graphology capable of recording her sorrows. Along with the impact of Zhizha's incest, Grandmother carries other painful burdens from the past. She gave birth to a son that did not live past infancy. The child's death was caused by a watery swelling on the head which enlarged grotesquely as she tried to keep him alive. The child "would never grow, only his head would grow" (UT 70). Rather than bury him alive as advised by her husband's family, Grandmother makes an attempt to save the

child, even thinking, "I should have kept him safe, inside of me" (UT 70). The birth defect is considered her failure and her problem alone. She explains, "I had been given the gift of death and my method had been to feel scorned and humiliated in the company of my husband [. . .] The child was my own mistake and I had to clear it up in my woman way, with the help of my own kin" (UT 71). The results of this tragedy are etched into the house Grandmother and her husband continue to inhabit when her granddaughter Zhizha comes to live with them after the murder of her father and incarceration of her mother. The house bears the traces of tainted memories:

> The house has swallowed death. It has swallowed the suffering of the world.
>
> Green decay spreads through the walls. Curls of paint fall to the floor. Grandmother sweeps the floor with a tight grass broom. Rain creeps through the crevices. In the kitchen, the green has long disappeared, buried in the smoke. Grandmother cleans the house but the decay clings to it and spreads a gloom that descends into the air. (UT 49)

Just as individual fragments of cloth are carefully examined, sorted and discarded, the basket hanging on the wall inside the house is a silent witness to the movements which occur within the room, collecting pieces of speech and thoughts which make up the social interactions that occur in the house:

> Only the basket on the wall is waiting perhaps with words to be shelled and tossed, waiting with words to be chosen, cast aside, separated, dismissed. I look at the basket and know that the best words are those that are shared and embraced, those that give birth to other words more fruitful than themselves, stronger than themselves. (UT 16)

Grandmother's search reads very much like a search for the individual elements of a quilt; the scraps and fragments collected through a lifetime that record, remember and remind one of family members both present and absent. The basket resembles a scrap bag of quilt fragments waiting to be assembled into the family narrative. Zhizha embraces the concept of the quilted

narrative when she notes that words are stronger when shared and brought together. Like the quilt made of disparate fragments, the individual word gains strength and purpose when assembled with others.

Throughout the passage Zhizha struggles to establish a connection with her own limbs, and a sense of her physical presence. She hears a noise which she believes to be a form of death occurring inside her grandmother and, overwhelmed by the prospect of this knowledge, is stunned. Zhizha explains, "I do not move. I watch my toes dissolve. I watch my feet which are no longer my feet. They are large, not quite there, not quite part of me" (UT 12). This distorted sense of self is repaired when Zhizha manages to pull the basket from the wall by the long rope attached to it:

> I carry the basket across the silent room. I notice that my feet are my feet and I have also found my arms. I give the basket to Grandmother. I place it safely under her embrace. She touches my arms with a hopeful caress.
>
> She moves her right hand inside the basket to gather something she has recently discovered, something she has lost while gathering words. (UT 16)

With the return of Zhizha's senses to her body, Grandmother's wisdom is returned to her. But the passage resolutely refuses to place the word above all else. Grandmother's wisdom, captured and maintained within the basket where words are sorted and shelled, is far from an answer. In fact, the word itself is denied full force and value in the closing lines when it is revealed that what Zhizha has been able to return to Grandmother "something that she lost while gathering words" (UT 16). The force of a single word is denied and instead the source of sorrow and recovery remain ambiguous. While the desire to articulate violation and loss are central to the narrative, their value, if unquestioned, can lead to losses of another nature. "Grandmother says we choose words, not silence. We choose words to bury our grief. A woman cannot say the heaviness of her life, just like that, without madness" (UT 10). Striated space, which conceivably organizes and determines clarity, is established in the winnowing

basket where its contents are delimited and awarded specific functions. But while one function is fixed, the second mobile function is constantly at work, redefining and altering specificities. As a result, the communication contained within the winnowing basket is both fixed and mobile, just as Grandmother seeks language to express her sadness and discards language as an inadequate explanation for the pain she has endured.

Recognition of the numerous fragments of cloth that appear in Vera's fiction is yet another indication of the way textiles assist in the narration of Vera's fiction. Each fragment contains a message, contains a story, but resists a tidy or overly edited conclusion. These fragments operate much like the written word for Vera, they reveal information but deny total closure or conclusion. This resistance to closure or ultimate conclusion is due to the painful subjects Vera discusses, the experiences and atrocities that in most cases escape any hope of complete explanation, or for that matter, total recovery.

Conclusion

> I would not write if I weren't in search of beauty, if I was doing it only to advance a cause. I care deeply about my subjects, but I want to be consumed by figures of beauty, by story and character. It must be about perfection. Like a basket-maker or a weaver or a hair-plaiter [sic], you are aware of what you are trying to accomplish from the first sentence. (Vera interview "Survival is in the Mouth", 224)

Apparent throughout Vera's fiction is an attention to the female body, specifically the violated female body. Crimes against the female body are often portrayed as a form of empowerment kept alive by characters' elected decisions to perform further self-inflicted violations against the transgressed body. While this empowering through violence may initially read as problematic, I would suggest that Vera's writing of life and death needs to be read symbolically as well as literally. That is not to suggest that the violence she writes about did not occur, for regrettably that is far from the case. In fact Ranger writes of the "restraint" Vera shows when depicting the violence Zimbabwe has witnessed (2002: 208). But in these fictions, death is no more absolute than life, and can often be understood as the death of a portion of the self, or the death of a dream as well as a carnal reality. That said, Vera's confrontation of the realities that lead her characters to end the lives of those around them or their own lives is also a brutal reminder of the absence of real options for many individuals, as well as the mental damage which gratuitous violence wreaks. While Vera's fiction renders female fertility problematic, something if not to be avoided then at least to be controlled by any measure available, her fiction also negotiates a space in which undesired, albeit assumed, social memberships, such as motherhood, are exchanged for new, if unsanctioned, ceremonies that reject future life in favour of present survival.

My interdisciplinary reading of Vera's fiction focuses on the textile as a vehicle of communication. An attention to cloth is necessary for a more complete understanding of the narratives and reveals a voice available to characters who are often limited in the ways they can speak and the things they can say. I believe that my ability to read Vera's fiction in this way is largely informed by my own education as a textile designer. I hope that it may offer others a useful example of the benefits that interdisciplinary research can offer. In Chapter One, "The Rhythms of Making", the production and consumption of the textile within Vera's fiction is read as a representation of the relationships that occur in its presence. As a postcolonial writer, Vera selects and discards existing structural and thematic material to suit her own narrative development. As a result, I suggest that *Nehanda* can be read as a fabric of ravelled yarns, a narrative that takes an existing story and unpicks the narrative, replacing old for new threads from other fabrics where needed, in a manner that follows the way ravelled yarn textiles are created. The voice of cloth can also be understood to operate, as Vera writes in her own PhD, as a domestic graphology. As domestic graphology, the textile provides a form of communication and record for characters whose experiences, and the pain resulting from those experiences make other forms of communication unavailable, undesirable or unsuccessful. For instance, in *Under the Tongue,* Runyararo's weaving of mats stands in great contrast to the distorted family unit, torn apart by Muroyiwa's incestuous rape of his daughter, Zhizha. Runyararo's considerable attention to the symmetry and order of her weavings reflects all that is unspoken, but undeniably missing, from her family. Phephelaphi's woven construction in *Butterfly Burning* is produced moments before she aborts her pregnancy, and represents all the contradictions her own fertile body, and her rejection of pregnancy, contains. Rather than a symmetrical weaving like Runyararo, Phephelaphi's weaving is a vessel, like her own womb, that refuses to act as a container.

The structures of crochet and knitting operate somewhat differently from weaving, in part because they too are traditions imported to Zimbabwe. The insubstantial structures that

crochet and knitting offer in Vera's texts are emblematic of the insufficient relationships, on both economic and emotional levels, that exist around the cloth's production. The women of "An Unyielding Circle" crochet and knit cloth that cannot offer enough economic empowerment to break through the unyielding circle of male dominance. The unnamed character of *Butterfly Burning* similarly produces lengths of knitted cloth that record but cannot compensate for her husband's belief that his wife is an object available for sale. As with weaving, these structures can be read as domestic graphologies that record the troubled but often unspoken relations that occur in the textiles' presence.

While sewing is a process which mends and binds, Vera appropriates this metaphor and turns it inside out to note that rupture is also part of the process of stitching. *Butterfly Burning* tells of a woman who commits suicide by swallowing a needle, heartbroken at her inability to connect with the man she loves. In the same text Phephelaphi notes the missing buttons and dangling threads that hang from her clothes after she has deconstructed her body's creation, but her desire to reattach and mend these ruptures can be read as a domestic graphology showing us that she wishes and has the strength to rewrite and repair the future. While Mazvita in *Without a Name* is unable to change the black and white stitching on the apron she buys to bind her child's corpse to her own body, it nonetheless reads as an explanation for her situation. With few opportunities for work because of her gender and her race, infanticide is an act of survival rather than selfishness. Rather than showing the production of the textile, *The Stone Virgins* shows us textiles that attempt to repair skin. Here the sewn skin of Nonceba, the surviving sister, is set in contrast to the clothes she borrows from her dead sister. Both surfaces reveal the threaded movement of the stitch moving above and below the surface. In Nonceba's case this movement charts her own damage and acts as a reminder that the extent of her damage goes far deeper than simply the physical wounds she must heal.

Unlike the woven, knitted, crocheted and stitched structures, the knot acts as a far more temporary connection. As a result, knots in Vera's writing read as sites of organization that must be secured again and again. The knots Mazvita uses to murder her child and bind her child's corpse to the apron on her back exemplify this gesture of attempted reordering and control. Here one could argue that the domestic graphology constantly requires its own rewriting, a necessary process of re-inscription due to the precarious and insecure structures it reveals.

While the production and consumption of cloth are obvious roles for the textile, Chapter Two, "The Body and Cloth", suggests that skin and hair can be understood as versions of cloth and thread. These margins of the body are, as Mary Douglas has noted, physically and conceptually vulnerable. Skin bleaching in *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning* uncovers the complex relationship to racial identity that the "Ambi generation" embodies. Analysis here borrows its structure from a text entitled *Color and Fiber* that suggests that colour (in cloth) depends on four factors. These factors can be applied to Vera's discussion of skin bleaching, for they assist in revealing the physical and mental manifestations of racism. In addition to the psychological unease that skin bleaching highlights, terrible medical conditions can result. These conditions, which include cancer of the skin, are more prevalent in skin that is lacking pigmentation, as the pigmentation that skin bleaching destroys is responsible for the protection of the body against diseases triggered by lengthy exposure to strong sunlight. As an intimate thread, human hair appears in Vera's fiction as another place of dissatisfaction with identity, largely brought about through the influence of advertising from Europe and North America and the associated lack of economic opportunity linked to race. Here hair also records, like Mazvita's distorted body, the great disappointments and pains of life that are endured by Vera's characters but often remain unspoken. Finally, scarred skin and stained cloth are read as another record maker of sorts. Jenni Sorkin's observation that "stains are the sores of cloth" connects the way in which the

body's skin and clothing both record violence against it. Zhizha speaks of her unnamed violation (incest) through the metaphor of a scar which is transferred away from the intimate site of violation and instead rests on her knee. This scar can thus be read as an innocent childhood play wound as well as the far more intimate violation she has endured and is learning to communicate to others.

Chapter Three, "Proximal Relations", returns to the more conventional reading of cloth as a second skin and investigates fashion and its satellite industries as a way to further our understanding of characters' actions. Carole Cavanaugh suggests that the power of clothing is drawn from the proximity it enjoys to the body of the wearer. Once some of the static and oversimplified associations of dress are understood (such as the convoluted association of Indonesian wax resist fabrics as an "authentic" representation of African dress), the complex information contained in dress can be better appreciated. In Vera's case fashion perhaps most poignantly appears in the descriptions of fashion mannequins in *Without a Name* and *The Stone Virgins*. The impracticality of fashion does little to disentangle dress from the loaded information it conveys. Uniforms are a particularly coded type of dress and often reveal that the wearer's body is subject to the control of another. Further satellites from the fashion industry are the industries of soap, both for washing the body and for care of clothes. The history of soap, much like the domestic textile, is noted by Anne McClintock to have been written out of history due to the domestic and often female nature of its consumption. Photography, the medium through which the majority of the world consumes the fashions it cannot otherwise afford, is also examined. Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes have both observed the manner in which the photograph edits or conceals. The surface the photograph is capable of capturing functions much like skin bleaching and high fashion clothing. Finally the exchange of clothing is examined and the innocence of gift giving disrupted. Rather than a gesture motivated by generosity, gift giving is understood to be a gesture of reciprocity, always motivated by the expectation of something in return. In

Vera's fiction I focus on the attempts to make gifts of clothes. Phephelaphi rejects the gift of a skirt from Zandile, as well her murdered mother's returned dress, because she does not want to take on, or wear, the burdens of the lives already lived in these pieces of clothing. In contrast, Zhizha and Nonceba do put on the clothes of their absent mother and sister respectively, in an effort to connect with them. In this final section the power of the textile lies once again with its ability to record and remember, offering modest opportunities to remember absent individuals.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of smooth and striated space informs Chapter Four, in which a reading of space in Vera's fiction is seen to reveal the fragmented vision of space experienced by many of Vera's characters. Among others, Deleuze and Guattari explain smooth and striated space to be similar to that of felted (smooth) and woven (striated) fabric. Time is seen to hold little consistency in Vera's writing. Instead her characters, understanding and relationship to space reveal the impact pain brings to bear on the inability to form a complete or whole existence in space. In *The Stone Virgins* post-independence violence is understood through Nonceba's understanding of the layered space created by shadows, or a telescoping vision of the world which shifts between points of minutiae without making substantial connections to the trajectories that link such details. This understanding of the world allows Nonceba to begin the process of recovery: by taking the space apart she learns to confront and examine the world in the portions that her traumatized mind and body are capable of dealing with without becoming overwhelmed. Similarly, Mazvita's troubled mental and physical state in *Without a Name* causes her to understand the space around her, a landscape of the pre-independence violence of the 1970s. Finally, smooth and striated space are applied to the scene in which Fumbatha's father is murdered at the turn of previous century in *Butterfly Burning,* in order to understand the fragmentation that such executions created for later generations of survivors. On a more optimistic note, such space is then observed to occur in the space of children at play. Smooth and striated space is

experienced by Vera's characters in the colony of 1940s Rhodesia in *Butterfly Burning* and revisited in the 1970s in *Without a Name,* as well as the 1980s post-independence setting of *The Stone Virgins*. Thus the fragmentation of space is here consistent with the experience of pain, pain that by no means disappears or is resolved with the nation's long sought independence.

Metaphors of quilting and piecing appear in literature from around the world. Chapter Five suggests that the unassembled fragments of cloth that appear throughout Vera's fiction can be read as an unassembled quilt of sorts. These fragments contain considerable narrative detail, but just as Vera's writing style denies the single written word any final authority, the cloth fragments resist closure. This resistance is in keeping with Vera's approach to topics such as abortion, infanticide, rape, incest and suicide, which in their own right are such complex and painful topics for discussion that resolution and closure are an equally inappropriate resolution. Importantly, *Under the Tongue* presents us with another object that functions in much the same way as the metaphor of quilting elsewhere in the world. I suggest that Grandmother's winnowing basket is a more culturally specific structure, albeit less familiar than the quilt, through which Grandmother's attempts to construct a domestic graphology can once again be read.

The voice of cloth in Vera's fiction is the sole focus of this thesis because I believe the consistent appearance of the textile throughout all the fiction she wrote during her short life, as well as the sheer variety of functions given to the textile in her fiction, are unique to this author. In conclusion, I will compare Vera's work to the work of three other Zimbabwean authors: Dambudzo Marechera's "*House of Hunger* (1978), Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* (1988) and *Shadows* (1991), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) to illustrate that while the themes and style of Vera's fiction are echoed in other work from Zimbabwe, her use of the textile contains a breadth and sophistication that is not apparent elsewhere. I will defend my research of Vera's fiction in isolation on the basis that, while the

textile features in literature from around the world, I have found Vera's fiction to be the richest and most sophisticated example of the textile functioning as symbol, structure, metaphor and object to assist narrative development. In the closing paragraphs of my conclusion I speculate on why this might be the case.

Tragically, Yvonne Vera passed away during the course of this research. As a result the project has shifted from a study of her published fiction to date, to a study (barring posthumous publication of the novel she was working on at the time of her death) of her entire artistic output – one which I believe relies heavily on the textile to assist the process of narration. Until her death Yvonne Vera had been heralded by some as the next Dambudzo Marechera, a Zimbabwean author equally aggressive in his search for a narrative voice that did not conform to expectation and who instead boldly sought new forms of narration, although at times at the expense of narrative clarity. Marechera, too, died tragically young, although in his case his death was the end of a lengthy battle with alcohol and drug addiction and followed a litany of what could be called missed opportunities and indulgent behaviour. Like Vera, Marechera had the opportunity to study overseas. After his expulsion from the University of Rhodesia for taking part in political demonstrations against the Smith government in 1973, he was offered a place at New College, Oxford and arrived there in 1974. (Pattison 2001: 7)

But, the two authors perhaps differ more than they resemble each other in their personal lives and in the conditions under which their fiction has been written and published. While Vera completed her PhD at the University of York in Canada in 1995, and subsequently became the Director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Marechera was unable to settle to life at New College, Oxford and managed to finish very few of the works he started to write in the following years. His death in 1987 of AIDS-related pneumonia, brought a tragic end to his literary output and leaves us few finished works. Vera, on the other hand, published a collection of short stories, *Why don't You Carve Other Animals* while

a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto, Canada and then returned to Zimbabwe where she worked and wrote consistently, publishing *Without a Name* in 1994, *Under the Tongue* in 1996, *Butterfly Burning* in 1998, and finally *The Stone Virgins* in 2002. She died in 2005.

"House of Hunger"

House of Hunger, published in 1978, pre-dates Vera's published fiction as well as Zimbabwe's independence. The piece was also written outside rather than inside the country, an important distinction to make when drawing comparisons with Vera's fiction. With the exception of *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* the rest of her fiction was written, barring short writer's retreats, while Vera was resident in Zimbabwe. While both authors confront violence against the individual's body as well as against the nation, their approaches are dramatically different. Where Vera's has the uncanny ability to write violence as beauty, even as empowerment, Marechera makes no such effort. His writing is shockingly raw rather than shockingly beautiful. Abrupt changes in setting and chronology appear in both authors' work, although in Marechera's case some events can be attributed to bouts of drunkenness, a subject Vera does not draw upon to explain narrative fragmentation or the disorientation her characters experience. That said, Marechera writes of drunkenness as a desperate escape, not something enjoyable but something beyond control, a state which often brings reminders of other further nightmares and pains from the past.

Marechera also differs from Vera in the writing process and his attitude to publishing. In an interview with Eva Hunter, Vera explains her passion for the process and craft of writing and the joy and intensity she experiences during the process of creating fiction:

> I hate to be selfish and say that I am writing for myself though I think if you look at it one is really doing that, because you are celebrating your own ability to achieve what

you are doing, you are celebrating your skill whenever you are writing. And you feel it almost as a physical sensation. I mean I enjoy writing, right, so that is my primary motivation; it is something I absolutely enjoy and find terrible pleasure in doing. (81)

In contrast, in the short story "House of Hunger" in a collection of the same title, Marechera's narrator refers on several occasions to the publication of "stitches", as though the process of publishing fiction was both a wound and a catharsis, but certainly not a "terrible pleasure" for the author:

> My thoughts chalked themselves on the black page of a dreamless sleep. In the morning there was not a single space left on that page: the story was complete. As I read it every single word erased itself into my mind. Afterwards they came to take out the stitches from the wound of it. And I was whole again. The stitches were published. The reviewers made obscene noises. It is now out of print.
>
> But those stitches, those poems . . . (39)

Stitching is a predominant metaphor throughout "House of Hunger" and can be read in a similar way to the stitches in Vera's work discussed in Chapter One. Hand in hand with stitching, Marechera repeatedly draws on the metaphor of staining, discussed in relation to Vera's work in Chapter Two. But while Marechera's use of the textile metaphors of stitching and staining is undeniably important, I believe that stitches and stains in Marechera's writing operate in only one way, as metaphor, and are isolated to one text, "House of Hunger." As a result he uses of the textile to assist in the narration of mental and physical pain, but does not offer the breadth or scope of examples that research into Vera's use of the textile in her fiction has confirmed.

Marechera does not refer to stitches simply to express the pain of publishing; they also resemble the pains which burden his identity and can be understood as the anger and conflict behind the stories he tells. Several pages after "the reviewers made obscene noises" the narrator recounts that the "stitches run like a great dyke across the country. A little blood

seeps through; it is like red ink on a child's teeth" (40). Marechera's internal conflicts regarding his identity and language tend to shift from the level of the individual to that of the nation. For instance, a stitch can be both a suture on his body and the colonial railroad tracks across the land. I believe Vera is less easy to read in this way. While the stories she tells are the experiences of Zimbabwe's men and women, I believe she avoids allowing any one experience such as rape, abortion, infanticide, or incest to be read as affecting a nation at large because in many ways that would demean the horror and specificity of each woman's individual and private violation.

Marechera's education and relationship to the English language is also much more conflicted than that of Vera's. In response to Eva Hunter's question regarding her use of the English language, Vera explains:

> It is useful because it also crosses international boundaries and it is our official language. Yes, it arrived in my country as an act of violence in that it was enforced, as it was in many other countries. But English is a very adaptable language, flexible and embracing. Perhaps that's why it was such a successful language for colonizing people. But it can also absorb such different worlds. (82)

In contrast, Marechera's narrator in the "House of Hunger" has an utterly conflicted relationship with the English language, one that I think is fair to extend to the author's own personal relationship to the language:

> It was something like this: English is my second language, Shona my first. When I talked it was in the form of an interminable argument, one side of which was always expressed in English and the other side always in Shona. At the same time I would be aware of myself as something indistinct but separate from both cultures. I felt gagged by this absurd contest between Shona and English [. . .] The fights completely muzzled me. The conversation, the arguments and pleas steadily asserted their own

independence; and I wandered about drugged to the hilt by tranquillisers and feeling literally robbed of words. (30)

Vera sees the English language as a functional tool that, while burdened with a difficult past in her country, is nonetheless an effective and adaptable language with a breadth of international usefulness that outweighs the damage done by its forced introduction to Rhodesia. In contrast, Marechera only sees English as the language of the colonizer and the formal education system, in direct conflict with his mother tongue and sense of personal identity.

Throughout the above comparisons, Vera as a voice during interview has been contrasted to the narrator of "House of Hunger" – a fictional character inside a work of fiction rather than an interview with the author himself. This conflation is not accidental, for another considerable difference between the two authors is the level of autobiography that their fiction can fairly be understood to contain. First novels often tend to be autographical on some level. In Marechera's case, his limited output of fiction after the "House of Hunger" means that he may not, as an artist, have been able to move beyond this stage of the writing process. Anthony Chennells and Flora Veit-Wild note "[n]early all of Marechera's writing appears as autobiographical, although this in itself presents problems as Marechera, even when he was affecting the truth of hindsight, was always reinventing his own life story" (xvi). At the Versions and Subversions Conference on African Literatures held in Berlin in 2002, Vera was asked if she too had experienced the events that she writes about and her response was a joking "yes, how could I, I would have died a thousand deaths?" If we are to understand her comments in relation to Marechera, Vera's writing cannot be read as autobiographical.

While Vera has been praised for engaging with the spirit medium Nehanda in order to write her short story of the same name, Marechera is understood by some to have been possessed by an unwanted and uninvited spirit. Ranger writes of the inspiration he sees in

Vera's writing of *Nehanda,* "It seemed too, that as a young urban woman she had had no direct experience of the rituals of possession by a senior ancestoral spirit. *Nehanda* was an extraordinary feat of imagination. Vera had set out to imagine from the ground up and from the sky down what it would mean for a girl to make herself open to the ancestors so as to re-establish communication between them and the living." (203) Vera herself expresses a sense of exhaustion at the conclusion of writing *Nehanda*. "After I had written the book I remember feeling very exhausted and my exhaustion was really spiritual." (Hunter 75) "I felt a fierce sense of responsibility to tell this story, and to do so, I had to co-exist with this Nehanda spirit. It really gave me a lot of strength as a woman" (Bryce 222).

In contrast, David Pattison notes that Marechera is thought to have been haunted by an unwanted spirit which was passed from mother to son by an *n'anga,* or traditional healer. The story is told that his mother was advised that the only way to "get rid of her madness [was] by passing it on to one of her children, she had chosen Dambudzo (the seventeen year old) as the recipient" (2). Several years after this transfer the school which Marechera was attending in 1971 notes "severe psychological disturbance [. .] He began to suffer from delusions and attacks of extreme paranoia, conditions that persisted throughout his adult life" (2). Thus Marechera and Vera arguably possessed thoroughly different relationships to the spirit world, the one embracing and encouraging a connection, the latter burdened with a supposed transfer of a mad spirit from his own mother to himself.

The two authors meet most closely in Marechera's "House of Huger" during the few moments cloth is given the power to act as a domestic graphology for the mind of the narrator. While Marechera deals less with the domestic role of cloth, he nonetheless draws on the textile to confirm the dire condition of his character's state of mind. Early in the "House of Hunger" the narrator is faced with his friend Harry's comment that, "You literary chaps are our only hope". "Then, we are sunk" is the narrator's response (16). The comment is a cynical one as it transpires that Harry has fewer moral qualms than anyone else, working for

the government and betraying his own friends at the conclusion of the story. Whether one reads the narrator of the "House of Hunger" as the author himself or an entirely fictional character, Marechera refers to cloth for its fragile, tenuous qualities, its ability to cover and contain but also absorb and tear, like Marechera's own sanity, at a moment's notice. As we have seen throughout Vera's fiction, cloth has a physical life. Its decline over time mirrors that of our own bodies and minds and as a result provides a useful image in relation to mental or physical weakness or decline. But, under the gaze of the barman whom Harry is sure is looking on in admiration at the narrator/author character, the narrator looks up. "As I did so the old cloth of my former self seemed to stretch and tear once more [. . .] (What shall I see when the cloth rips completely, laying everything bare? It is as if a crack should appear in the shell of the sky" (17). Like Vera, Marechera uses the image of cloth to reveal the character's true state of mind, despite projecting, at times, an image to the outside world which is coherent. Later, under police interrogation that apparently also occurred in the author's life while attending the Zimbabwe Book Fair, "a foot kicking me tore through the faded cloth of my sanity" (57).

Flashbacks and daydreams pepper the entire short story and one can assume that the consumption of drink as well as paranoia and pain are responsible, both within the narrative and beyond it, for the jagged and jumpy narrative. The narrator, much like Marechera himself, is a conflicted individual torn between his love for education and reading books – also as a form of escapism – and the violence of pre-independence Zimbabwe. But unlike Vera, who can, until *The Stone Virgins* at least, be accused of paying little attention to the development of male or white characters, Marechera tars both man and woman, black and white with the same brush of cruelty. Everyone in his eyes is capable of inflicting, and enduring, terrible violence:

'Politics is shit,' Doug said thoughtfully.

I agreed.

'White people are shit,' Doug added with closed eyes.

I agreed.

'And black people are shit,' Doug blew cinders and ash from his shirtfront.

Before I could agree again Philip interrupted:

'Everybody human shits, that's the trouble.'

I nodded, watching my mind explode deliciously. (67)

While Marechera addresses a breadth of characters that are equally condemned for violence against each other, he does, like Vera, describe women in particular as survivors of male brutality. In the opening pages the narrator's elder brother Peter is beating his girlfriend, Immaculate. The narrator's relationship to Immaculate is described with some irony as "disinterested intervention" and has, in fact, made the narrator, rather than Peter, the father of her child. Immaculate's capacity for survival in the face of such violence is written as something more than normal strength. "And though he finally beat her until she was just a red stain I could still glimpse the pulses of her raw courage in her wide animal-like eyes" (4). This courage in the face of untold pain is certainly a theme that Vera investigates at length. Marechera also speaks of domestic violence between married couples:

> The older generation too was learning. It still believed that if one did not beat up one's wife it meant that one did not love her at all. These beatings (not entirely one-sided, because the man next door tried it and was smashed into the Africans Only hospital by his up to then submissive wife) [. . .] The most lively of them ended with the husband actually fucking – raping – his wife right there in the thick of the excited crowd. He was cursing all woman to hell as he did so [. . .] when at last he pulled his penis out of her raw thing and stuffed it back into his trousers, I think she seemed to move a finger, which made us all wonder how she could have survived such as determined assault. (50)

The narrator continues on the following page, "Later when I asked her if she had thought of suicide she almost bit my head off. 'Suicide!' she scoffed. 'That's for educated lunatics like you'" (51). Marechera's characters are all far from sane, but it is women in particular that have a mental determination which goes beyond normal strength. It is a strength that Vera also acknowledges in her interview with Jane Bryce. "I am fascinated with the individual, especially the woman, especially the woman in Africa, and how they are forced to endure without having a nervous breakdown – because they cannot afford it. But they collapse inside, and I'm keen to capture that collapse" (223). The major difference between the two authors is that Vera strives to capture this collapse through beauty while Marechera captures it through rawness. It may be that in searching for beauty in the face of pain the textile is a more useful and adaptable tool to Vera than the pragmatic violence of Marechera's writing.

One of the first places that stitches appear in the "House of Hunger" is in reference to the title itself. By the end of the narrative one comes to learn that the house of hunger is both a physical location and a state of mind which cannot be escaped, regardless of location. Arguably it is the narrator's home, the narrator's nation, as well as his state of internal conflict that cannot be escaped regardless of his physical location. In a flashback to his years in boarding school, the narrator recalls returning to consciousness after some sort of physical collapse:

> My head seemed encased in a fiendish ice-hold; but when I explored with my hand, ripping off the bandages and feeling around the wet stinging wound, it was only the cold cold stitches they had used on the gash. Stitches enough to weave webs from the one wall of my mind to the wall of the House of Hunger. (37)

Here Marechera evokes the stitch for its connective qualities but, like Vera, turns expectations around to reveal that those connections can also be a type of entrapment, connections that bind and limit rather than secure and support.

Later, the narrator retells the story of a horrific fight which occurs at boarding school between Stephen and Edmund. Stephen not only accuses Edmund's mother of being a prostitute but brags of having slept with her himself, suggesting that some of his money contributed to Edmund's school fees. Edmund demands an apology in front of the dormitory and when it is not given the two boys arrange a fight. The results are disastrous for Edmund. "They wired his jaw. They used a lot of stitches to save something of that crushed-in face. Yards of stitches." (66) Edmund's damaged face allows the narrator to recognize his photograph in a newspaper years later, one freedom fighter who has survived among a mass who have been killed. Marechera's message seems to be that Edmund had something to fight for and accepted the sacrifices needed in order to contribute to that fight. But, like several of the female characters mentioned earlier, Edmund also represents survival against the odds. The stitches that hold Edmund together are traces, witness to prior violence. As much as mend they mend, they also act as record keepers and in fact strengthen his resolve.

In a similar way Marechera uses stains in the text as record keepers of violence. By the end of the fight between Stephen and Edmund "[t]here was blood on his shirt; a rather large stain which seemed in outline to be a map of Rhodesia" (65). If Marechera is suggesting that we should read Edmund on one level as the nation, battered but not defeated, he also deploys stains elsewhere to evoke something far more tainted. Recounting a childhood ritual of following prostitutes to the back of the township to watch their work, he remarks, "There was nothing particularly interesting about her. It's just that we could see on the gravel road splotches and stains of semen that were dripping down her as she walked. Years later I was to write a story using her as a symbol of Rhodesia." (49) If the nation is battered, the nation is also raped, certainly not an original reading, but one which the brutality of Marechera's writing does not evoke lightly. Instead he gnaws at the physical details of such an experience, making them real and unavoidable to the reader in an entirely different way from Vera's writing.

Returning to the burden of public approval and publication, Marechera also uses stains to refer to the text. "Stains! Love or even hate or the desire for revenge are just so many stains on a sheet, on a wall, *on a page even*" (55, italics added). Finally the death of his own father makes him yet another stain, "beneath the wheels of the twentieth century. There was nothing left but stains, bloodstains and fragments of flesh, when the whole length of it was through with eating him" (45). The colonial project of laying railroad tracks, so often referred to as "scars" across the landscape, is certainly being evoked here. But Marechera's use of stains and stitches in "House of Hunger" also evoke the bodily violence on which the text so intimately and gruesomely dwells.

Noting what could be understood as a cathartic drive in Marechera's work Laurice Taitz notes:

> Marechera also uses the image of stitches to convey narrative discontinuity. Stitches serve to connect that which was previously unconnected, while at the same time leaving traces of a suture, a seam formed after stitching: stitches occur at moments of intersection. Furthermore the use of stitches creates analogies between the practice of medicine and that of writing. In this context, both are concerned with interpretation and healing of the "body" (text). Interpretation is the primary activity of clinical medicine, where the physician, like the literary critic, diagnoses and interprets symptoms, signs, and signifiers of a particular condition. The body serves as a text that needs to be interpreted in order to be understood. The text, like the body, is a cultural artefact. (28)

On the subject of stitches, there is also a Shona myth that understands the land as a stitched fabric. It is difficult to discern the impact such beliefs may have had on either Vera or Merechera, but if it is a coincidence it is nonetheless an interesting one. Terence Ranger recounts the Shona myth which places "the creation of water" in the Matopos and explains that a messenger from God by the name of Mudzanapabwe was provided with bows, arrows

and a red needle from God. The red needle which she shot is attributed with "sew[ing] together the large rocks and the land in which Mudzanapabwe now lived" and, as Ranger explains, "[t]he rocks remained 'stitched' to the land, but where 'the needle has made a seam, rivers formed'" (1999: 19-20). Another myth "tells how Mwali took pity on creation, 'and then the sky became pregnant by the clouds and God's voice came like a needle which sewed up the earth, and a stone began to speak'" (1999: 21). The extent of the impact of this myth is difficult to ascertain. But it is interesting to note that, for some at least, the land itself is a stitched fabric with the stitch acting, as in Vera's fiction, as both tool which mends (binds the rocks to the land) and undoes (seams creating rivers). Marechera's use of the stitching metaphor in "House of Hunger" is undeniably the strongest example of the use of the textile to assist in narration found in the work of Vera's Zimbabwean contemporaries. But it is not applied with the breadth seen in Vera's work and it is not apparent elsewhere in Marechera's work. Thus the consistency with which Vera turns and returns to the textile is shown to be unique to her own writing, albeit far from entirely absent elsewhere.

Bones and *Shadows*

"I am a poet in my bones." Chenjerai Hove (*Shebeen Tales* 13)

Zimbabwean Chenjerai Hove presents us with yet another relationship to language which differs from that of Vera and Merechera. Hove writes plays for radio and stage, novels and short stories as well as articles and, as he explains, "I write both in Shona, my mother tongue, and in English. You relate to and experience the world through language. I also speak Ndebele and continue to experience how existence is seen and dreamed from the point of view of this language. For me languages are schools of life." (13) In contrast to Vera's celebration of the flexibility specifically of the English language and Marechera's depiction

of internal torment over language experienced by the narrator of the "House of Hunger", Hove comes across as a figure who is comfortable, even relishes, the perspective of moving through several languages and styles of writing.

Bones (1988) and *Shadows* (1991) are written in a lyrical voice which bears a striking resemblance to that of Vera's. Hove also writes in a nonlinear style, often narrating events out of sequence with numerous flashbacks, and develops a narrative voice that switches between characters without clear introduction of change to create a mixture of voices which seem to want to tell their stories simultaneously. His explanation of this technique could well be applied to that of Vera's work. "Memories do not well up chronologically, they are associative. Memories cut right across linear time and colour events and facts from the point of view of various imaginative and emotional palettes, depending on the emotion of the moment. Facts do not exist, only different stories." (14) Hove's remark that facts do not exist is remarkably similar to Vera's response that noting her "historical inaccuracies" Terence Ranger "gave me permission to distort and I have gone on distorting" (2002: 203).

Hove begins *Bones* with the following dedication:

For the women whose children did not return
sons and daughters
those who gave their bones
to the making of a new conscience,
a conscience of bones, blood
and footsteps
dreaming of coming home some day
in vain

Bones presumably draws its title, among other references, from the spirit medium Nehanda's promise that "my bones will rise." Less than halfway through the book, Chapter Seven is entitled "1897 My Bones Will Fall" and the following chapter "My Bones Rise and Fall".

Nehanda's "execution" if one dares call it that after Vera's resurrection of the tale, occurs during Rhodesia's first *chimurenga*. It is tempting to link Zimbabwe's struggles, especially for women today, as well as those before independence, back to this moment which *Bones* revisits in the centre of the narrative. It is from this historical moment onwards that Hove most frequently evokes the symbol of bones:

> Arise all the bones of the land. Arise all the bones of the dying cattle. Arise all the bones of the locusts. Wield the power of the many bones scattered across the land and fight so that the land of the ancestors is not defiled by strange feet and strange hands [. . .] Sing all the tunes of the land so that any stranger will know that this land is the land of rising bones. (47-48)

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera's last piece of fiction, bones – one bone in particular – also play a central role in the narrative. The soil of Kezi is described as the colour of a "buried bone" (41). This description is far from poetic license as Ranger notes "[p]eople had been forced to settle 'on sandy and desert areas like Kezi' and *then* asked to be 'conservation conscious'" (1999: 282). In *The Stone Virgins* bones come to suggest both the countless lives lost that the landscape has witnessed and absorbed into its very makeup, as well as an ultimate symbol for intimacy. To possess one's very bones is a connection which can be understood as taking from the very core of another human being. For Cephas and Thenjewi, this intimacy can be understood as Cephas's craving for the very interior of Thenjewi's mortality. It also acts as a tragic foreshadowing of her death later in the novel:

> Does she know that bone is the driest substance of being, like all substantial forms which give form, which support wet things such as flesh and water and blood. Bone: the only material in us which cracks, which fractures, which can hurt our entire being, which breaks while we are still living. This he loves, this bone in her, as it is the deepest part of her, the most prevailing of her being, beyond death, a fossil before dying. (32)

Thenjewi's bones, her fossil before dying, illustrate the nearness and constant threat of death which Cephas and the community feel in Matabeleland during the massacres of the 1980s. Even though they are young he speaks of her death, planning his survival tactic long before his is confronted with implementing it. Cephas promises Thenjewi:

> 'If you died and I could only save one part of your body, I would save this bone. I would carry it with me everywhere, and it would be as though you were alive. Death is when every part of us vanishes, especially the most precious part. We are here. You are in this bone and it is my most precious memory. When you move, its motion tells me something intimate about your mind. I am inside you. If you die in my absence and I find that you have already been buried, I will dig your body up to the moonlight, so that I can touch this beautiful bone. Touch it touch it touch it, till you are alive. Then I will let you rest. (39)

For Vera the use of bones throughout *The Stone Virgins* reflects the imminence of death in the landscape of post-independence Matabeleland. But it also gives us clues into Cephas and his desire to posses Thenjewi in a way that, as Meg Samuelson and Dorothy Driver have pointed out, reads initially as an alarming conflation of the narrative's two male characters, Cephas and Sibaso. Samuelson and Driver recognize that while "Cephas is Sibaso's obverse [. . .] [t]he novel forges a sharp distinction between the two male characters, yet invites us to confuse them at a crucial point in the narrative, thus establishing the ontological precariousness of the contrast between them" (188). Cephas and his desire to own and possess the very inner structure of Thenjewi, the material that keeps her upright and gives her body form, is not dissimilar from the brutal "possession" Sibaso enacts on the two sisters. Sibaso is further complicated by his need to be "held by her [Nonceba]" (65). After enacting his brutality, "[h]e cradles her like a wounded child. Nonceba almost believes him, in him, almost removes him and his lullaby from this scene, almost. He offers words that could heal.

He closes his eyes and moves his lips against her neck [. . .] He could heal her, shield her with his body. He just could." (65)

In comparison, *Bones* is the story of Marita, a mother searching for her son who has left their village to train as a freedom fighter in neighbouring Mozambique. The story opens with Marita's request to Janifa, a childhood friend of her son's, to read to her once again the one childhood love letter her son wrote to Janifa. Janifa explains to the reader, "Yes, I have a letter even though I know that I would never marry him. How can I marry a terrorist, do they not say a terrorist eats people without roasting them [. . .] I cannot marry a terrorist, a killer who kills his own mother." (4) But Marita pleads with Janifa, explaining that the boy is her own son and that the letter is her only connection to him now, "the only thing that can tell me a little about him" (4). Marita's loss is compounded by the fact that her son is her only child, born after many years of failing to conceive. In response to Janifa reading her the letter yet again, Marita begins to tell her of her family but stops herself short, remarking, "The world is still large for you, too many unspoken words, too many unheard voices, so no need for me to fill your head with rags of stories" (7). Rags of stories are old, tattered, vehicles of memories that are either unimportant or too painful to retell. As in Marechera's work, it seems that the use of the textile for Hove in this passage is its temporary, transient nature. The textile acts as a record keeper, but the records it contains are not necessarily ones one would want to revisit.

Like Marechera and Vera, Hove writes of women as wounds with untold strengths. Marita explains, "Many wounds have healed on this chest of mine. Many wounds. Many scars. Most of us women are one big scar as big as the Chenhoro dam from which farmer Manyepo waters his crops, vast, never drying. I will say this to you, I am one big wound, my child. One big wound without medicines or herbs." (8) The wounds and scars Marita tells of are also recorded, in a technique similar to Vera's but used far less frequently, on the cloth which covers her body. "The cloth on her head is torn and soiled with mud. She has carried the water-pot from the well for a long time. The cloth helps her head not to crack. There are

other things she still has to carry. Things she does not know because they are things of the heart. She will carry them silently as she has done before, resolute." (9) Her references to elected, resolute silence, make the torn and soiled textile that covers her head all the more important. Life has not been easy, even if she refuses to let herself say so. Life is a burden and a hard one at that, a burden which the textile tells us of despite her silence.

At the beginning of Chapter Two we are told, long before an explanation has been given, that Marita has died. This type of narrative structure is not dissimilar to Vera's approach to the narrative, which abandons linearity in favour of exploring more effective ways to convey narrative. But while Vera often conceals the death of her characters until after we have had time to grow sympathetic to their plights, Hove presents us with this information before explaining any of the detail behind Marita's death. This reverse structure is perhaps the clearest in Vera's *Under the Tongue*, where we have to witness Zhizha's abuse only after we have come to learn of all her family members and maybe even feel some element of sympathy for her father's actions. *Bones* also confronts the subject of incest and, much like Vera's work, describes incest as an act "like the hen which ate its own eggs" (11). But here Hove writes of incest as an aberration the city is capable of supporting and tells of a father who "flowed with the desires of the city, sleeping with every women who said 'yes'" (11). The city and its distorted sense of life and death is also the place where we learn that Marita dies, after travelling by bus to search for her son's name on the list of those who have died in Mozambique (26). Thus Hove writes of the "unnatural" act occurring in an "unnatural" landscape, rather than a rural setting turned upside down by the violence it has witnessed throughout the second *chimurenga*.

Both Hove and Vera grant the power of the word conflicting values. At times, for both authors, the word is capable of bearing the burden of pain, while at other moments it is utterly insufficient. Like Vera, who in *Under the Tongue* questions the power of the word to effectively name the violation of incest Zhizha has endured, Hove writes of the insufficiency

of a single word. Describing Marita's death in the city he writes, "Words are weak, Marita. Very weak. They fly in the wind like feathers. Feathers falling from a bird high up in the clouds." (59) But like Vera, who still writes of Zhizha's search for a word to name her experience, even if this word may ultimately be insufficient, Hove also invokes the strength and power of the word:

> Words have weight Marita. Words from a child's mouth are like feathers, real feathers. They fall on the lips and are blown away by the wind. Words with strength do not suffer the night's dew [. . .] Let your words be like mountains which I found the same age when I was born and still they are full of power, standing there all the time doing the same things [. . .] That is what strong words are about Marita. (33)

This shifting relationship to the word, searching for a voice which has the strength to do justice to Marita's cruel death or Zhizha's abuse, is expressed by both authors in much the same way: as a necessary search but one which uncovers the inability of a single word to really do justice to such atrocious acts of violence.

Hove introduces a white character in *Bones* who, while not developed fully, is someone to whom Marita is able to show forgiveness even after the freedom fighters arrive to ask her if he is responsible for any crimes which they should punish:

> 'Right, mother. Let us talk about more useful things which will take us up to sunset properly. How is the white farmer you are working for? Does he do bad things to you and other workers? Say it if he is evil and we will bring you his corpse in a short time.' (62)

Marita's response is that, "[h]is badness is just like any other person [. . .] It does not deserve to earn him death" (62-63). Thus Hove calls into question any hatred held on racial grounds when Marita is adamant that the white man's crimes are only the crimes of a man, not the result of his race. Marechera too writes of everyone's guilt and culpability rather than one race being inherently capable of more harm than another. Vera, on the other hand, spends

little time developing references to any white characters in her fiction and thus gives us little interaction between characters across racial boundaries.

Despite the fact that Hove is a male author, his subject matter, in particular the strengths women must command, is in many ways similar to that of Vera. While he gives his male characters more attention and dimension than Vera, they are still drawn as weak, demanding comfort and care while offering little in return. In both *Bones* and *Shadows* Hove also creates central male characters who betray the efforts of the freedom fighters and dissidents respectively, painting a picture of spinelessness, insecurity and self-interest which Vera touches on but does not take the time to develop fully in her own male characters. Arguably this begins to change in her final work, *The Stone Virgins*. In *Bones* the "unknown woman" who feels she has come to know Marita through the conversation they share on the bus journey to the city tries to obtain her body from the morgue when she reads of her death in the newspaper:

> She knows she has passed the stage of talking and quarrelling, but she will wait for an answer which she has come for, from the place where fighters were wiped off the face of the land because her husband had sold out on them. Innocent fighters, but she has only known that it was her husband who did it long after they had died, long after they had buried him too. (76)

But in addition to men acting as sell-outs and violators of their own children, Hove also points to a lack of solidarity between women. When Janifa is raped by the farm's cook, Chisaga, the same man Marita sleeps with to earn the money that allows her to travel to the city in search of her son, her mother defends not her daughter but Chisaga. "The police came and took me to their camp, but my mother said, 'The man who did it is the child's friend. We like him so do not put him in jail." (93) Deserted by her mother, Janifa, "sit[s] here alone with the wounds flowing all the time, hurting my inside as I think of the day they brought you, Marita, worn out with abuse, worn out like an old piece of cloth, torn inside, torn like a

worthless thing that nobody cares about." (93) This particular passage may be Hove's most evocative use of the textile, describing it as a devalued domestic symbol that also becomes a symbol for the devalued, overused and abused woman's body. But it is also a harsh image of a lack of female solidarity. Fathers may at times abuse their daughters, but at other moments mothers are aware of violation and support not their own daughters, but the perpetrator of the crime.

But overall Hove's use of the textile, the focus of this research, is minimal. There are occasions when he uses cloth to expose the internal, psychological damage Marita endures under the police interrogation. When she is eventually brought back from her police interrogation she is like "a piece of torn cloth", violated and raped by the police (58). And later, as I have mentioned, when she has died alone in the city and a woman she met on the bus journey to the city tries to negotiate for the release of her body from the morgue, the attendants "brought [her] worn out like an old piece of cloth, torn inside, torn like a worthless things that nobody cares about" (93). But instead of textiles, it is bones which act as the recurring symbol throughout this text, littering the text much like Hove writes of bones littering the landscape. "Clouds of bones rose from the scenes of many battles [. . .] there were so many bones I could not count them [. . .] They shot into the hearts of the bones [. . .] They did not see the bones scattered on the battle field" (49). Hove's use of the recurring imagery of bones links the violence of pre-independence Rhodesia and its second *chimurenga* to the first *chimurenga* at the end of the previous century. This violence is explained by the freedom fighters as an attempt to conquer poverty: "You can stop war through talking. You can't stop poverty through talking. So we must fight with all we have so that our people cannot continue to be buried in this ant-hill of poverty." (72)

By the end of the narrative Janifa is "in the house where people with bad heads are kept" (108). Presumably, the trauma of her rape by Chisaga the cook and her mother's betrayal are too much for Janifa's mind to handle. But Hove's final chapter suggests *Bones* is

a love story, for Janifa's childhood sweetheart returns from his time as a freedom fighter to find her in the asylum. Whether this moment is a dream or a reality is written ambiguously. What is clear is that by the end of the narrative Janifa's empowerment must occur through the rejection of her own mother:

> 'Mother, is Chisaga still alive?' I ask with a hidden fury.
>
> 'Yes,' she says tearfully.
>
> 'Then go and live with him,' I say without hiding my eyes from talking with her eyes. (112)

Vera certainly does not create female characters who are free from guilt, but Hove's writing on the sins of Janifa's mother, and her recovery only through the rejection of her own mother, levels blame against both genders in a way that differs from Vera's more feminist protection of women at the hand of male violence. It also bears similarities to the approach taken by Marechera, who levels blame against everyone and writes of both men and women as capable of inflicting and enduring violence.

In *Shadows* Hove also tackles the notion of death as empowerment, and writes of an elected death with beauty rather than scorn. In much the same way Vera suggests that death can be elected and can be an act of terrible beauty as well as a termination. In his acknowledgements Hove introduces *Shadows* as a story "born many years ago when I saw two young people, lovers, opt for death instead of life". In both *Bones* and *Shadows* Hove has written what could be seen as essentially love stories, something that Vera starts to develop in her writing but then undermines before the end of each narrative. But as in Vera's work, for hove death is elected and beautiful rather than final and tragic. For example in *Shadows* Hove writes, "Oh, how strong the two were, to choose their own way of death, to do it themselves without tears on their faces, without tears in their hearts. We will die like them if we can get the strength [. . .] They mocked death." (29-30)

Ranka Primorac, in her review of *The Stone Virgins,* notes that while it and *Shadows* are both set in post-independence Zimbabwe, "Hove's novel [. . .] highlights the plight of rural peasants who, after all the hardships and violence of the war of independence, find themselves at the mercy of further, dissident-inflicted violence. In as much as it does not analyse the political causes of Sibaso's discontent, but concentrates instead on the harm he causes to civilians, Vera's novel is written in Hove's wake" (995). While *Shadows* is set in post-independence Zimbabwe, the story of Johana and Marko's suicide occurs far earlier in time, when "Marko and Johana died of their own choice. That was many years ago, when the war against the white man was rumours from the mouths of drunks and strangers." (83) But the narration comes from a post-independence Zimbabwe: "We came back from the bush, they said, because now people of our own blood rule this land" (88). But the post-independence violence that Vera depicts in *The Stone Virgins* is similarly written here. The violence which continues to haunt the landscape is wreaked both by dissatisfied freedom fighters and by government sanctioned forces such as the Fifth Brigade. The violence is senseless as Hove shows us when he writes, "Johana's father was confused. Many of those he thought gave wise words were also confused. They did not know what to do. The children went in many ways, joining whoever came to ask them to join, carrying guns to fight for many more things than what the first fighters said they would fight for. [. . .] This new rain of guns, they did not know how to shield themselves from it." (88-89)

Eventually we learn that Johana's brothers also die young. "Some called them the ones who did not know that times had changed. Others called them sell-outs." (89) Johanna's father is also killed. "They did not say who they were, but they said they wanted to kill all sell-outs" (93). The night Johana's father was killed they "took him away, dragging him like a rag" (93). His body is left in the woods with a note: "Sell-outs should not be buried, Signed DIZDENTS" (106). The backlash of dissident violence is explained as coming from, "men who were treated badly after the war to free the land from the hands of the colonizers [. . .]

So the young men went away into the bush to find the guns they had hidden when they were freedom fighters in the bush. They took the guns and remained in the bush, killing anyone whom they thought was eating from the same pot as the new rulers" (97). The misspelling of "dissidents"[46] at the very end of Hove's novel comes back full circle to an opening comment he makes about illiteracy. For while Marechera and Dengarembga write of the prejudice from family members against students who enjoyed and excelled in formal education, Hove introduces his main character Johana herding cattle. She explains of her work, "That is the way those of us who do not go to school will end" (10). He also refers to the illiteracy of the rural population who bore the brunt of post-independence dissident violence, saying "This is their tale. One day they will read it, or hear rumours of it. They cannot read. They will never read. The world of written words is hidden away from them." (9)

Johana's love story begins long before this time, with the boy with the "civet cat of a mouth" (15) from the nearby farm who does not return her love, and Marko, "a mere boy, Marko, the one who was learning many things from her, the one whose father did not have a farm to call his own" (13). Marko and Johana's tragic deaths drive Johana's father to the city where he hopes he can escape the guilt of Marko's death as well as retribution for being a sell-out. (28) But he is a broken man, returned to his wife by the police, a "groaning man who wears tattered rags, greasy and torn as if the man had been picked up from the rubbish pit.

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[46] Terence Ranger explains of the dissidents associated with post-independence violence, "The former Zipra guerrillas who became dissidents saw themselves as persecuted victims in a war in which tribalism has replaced nationalist ideology, but also saw themselves as perpetuating Zipra's struggle" (2000: 8). "The reasons behind Zipra guerrillas' return to the bush have remained unclear [. . .] Dissidents had neither political leaders nor political support, but the majority nonetheless maintained their loyalty to Zapu and tenaciously clung to their liberation war identity as Zipra guerrillas" (2000:181). Dorothy Driver and Meg Samuelson give an explanation of the history of dissident violence: "Those named as 'dissidents' were Zipra combatants who cached arms during and after the cease-fire. Alexander et al argue that they did so in response to "distrust within and then repression by the newly formed Zimbabwe National Army", rather than as part of a plot to overthrow the Zanu-PF government, as the latter claimed when unleashing their punitive campaign upon not only so-called 'dissidents' but, more often, civilians living in Matabeleland (Alexander et al: 181). In broad terms, ethnic division was used to explain most oppositional social and political relations in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, Shona ethnicity being associated with ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Progressive Front) and Ndebele with ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union). These were the two largest parties in the country's first democratic elections, and their two guerrilla armies, fighting in common cause although not together, were ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) and ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army). (2004: 202)

She gazes at the torn man" (27). Once again the textile, the focus of this research, plays a role, but makes very limited appearances in *Shadows*. Describing Johana's father as a torn man dressed in tattered clothes reflects, once again, how dress can be used to record internal mental damage which may not be spoken of or described literally. If we are in any doubt as to his state of mind or the conditions he has been living under, his clothing confirms the worst. The textile also appears when Marko and Johana first meet. "Johana's long skirt gave away more than she usually allowed it to", hinting at the first sexual relations the two will share together which result in Johana's pregnancy. (18) Finally, Johana's mother is seen in the closing pages of the book, after her husband and children have died: "At the farmers' association, the place where they told Johana's mother to go for help, they look at her torn dress. She stands there in tears, wondering what the young man in front of her thinks about her. She is ashamed to be so poorly dressed. She feels her presence insult the man in front of her." (106) Unlike the female characters in *Butterfly Burning* who attempt to reorder and restore their clothing in the face of great losses, Johana's mother is shown as a woman who no longer commands the energy to reorder and repair; her losses at this point are too great for recovery to be hoped for.

The land which Johana's family farms is part of a resettlement scheme to move farmers off over-farmed areas (well intentioned) as well as to clear land for national parks (less well intentioned). It is perhaps the most obvious role of the textile in *Shadows,* for the farmers are encouraged to stop growing the subsistence level crops that they have farmed for generations and plant cotton as a cash crop. "It was not easy for Johana's father. How can a man say the crops which the ancestors left him should not be grown on the farm?" (61) The cotton crop is foreign to their values, a distant product for "the cotton bolls which bloomed with white fluffy wool [were] taken away to give comfort to people who did not even know what the cotton plant looked like" (13). Needless to say, the cotton crop requires that the farmers purchase seed for the crop and pesticides. In a terrible narrative twist, Johana "with

the spray pump on her back, like a hunchback" later drinks the pesticide she is tasked with spraying on the cotton crops, in order to commit suicide (85). It is important that Marko and Johana's deaths occur on lands that are foreign, they are not the lands in which their ancestors are buried and represent a distinct break with traditional ways of living and dying.

Nervous Conditions

Finally, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a work that is much longer and more conventional in style than that of Vera, Hove or Marechera. It also happens to be the only novel which Dangarembga has published. Set in 1960s Rhodesia, *Nervous Conditions* tells the story of two cousins and their coming of age. While the two girls are younger than the majority of the characters Vera writes about, the notion of a disrupted coming of age, a search for adult maturity and empowerment that is foiled and disrupted, shows parallels to Vera's stories of women searching for self-actualization but often succeeding only through self-inflicted violence and death. The latter is perhaps where Dangarembga and Vera meet most closely on a thematic level, as Nyasha's battle with bulimia can be understood as a form of slow death. The very opening page of the novel alludes to Nyasha's death when she is described as "Nyasha, far-minded and isolated [. . .] whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful" (1). In her interview with Eva Hunter, Vera explains that the image which inspired the character of Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning* was a photograph of a woman who set fire to herself. She explains, "Her anger fascinates me more in fact than if the husband did it, because I want to know what forces of passion can lead to that self-inflicted violence" (85). Nyasha's bulimia in *Nervous Conditions* falls into the same sort of category, self-inflicted violence that is willed rather than inflicted by another. Certainly Nyasha's bulimia and breakdown are the result of "forces of passion" as the narrator witnesses:

> Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth ('Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.'), breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot. 'They've trapped us. They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl. I won't be trapped' [. . .] 'There's a whole lot more,' she said. 'I've tried to keep it in but it's powerful. It ought to be. There's nearly a century of it,' she added, with a shadow of her wry grin. (201)

While the violence Nyasha inflicts on herself is less overt than the act of suicide or infanticide, her eating disorder is written as something which is not a response to judgements of those around her, but a self-willed desire to control and change herself from the inside, even if she feels in the final event that her only option, like Vera's characters, is to elect and embrace death over life. One could argue that Nyasha is the victim of a medical condition and that she could recover from if she would want to, but one could also argue that of Mazvita's infanticide or Phephelaphi's suicide. In the space of the narrative at least, these are not acts to be understood as aberrations or mistakes by the characters but decisions made on both intellectual and emotional levels whose final results do not come as any surprise to the characters.

Nyasha's cousin, Tambu, narrates the story of their friendship, education and her cousin's illness in a voice far more mature and sophisticated than her years would suggest. The book opens with Tambu's direct refusal to the reader to apologise for her brother's death, "I was not sorry when he died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness as you may define it, my lack of feeling." (1) This retrospective clarity is absent in particular from Vera and Marechera's work, which tends instead to try and capture the inner turmoil and conflict of the moment as well as the turmoil and conflict that looking reflection evokes, rather than the wisdom which survival can offer. So too is the confrontational tone with which the narrator

seems to be eyeing and addressing the reader, demanding that we do not flinch, and accusing us of already having done so. While Vera very much demands that same sort of strength for her reader – to hear the story before making our judgements – her style is far less acknowledging of the role of the reader in hearing and listening to her story, as though it is a story she would write and tell without us if needs be.

Nyasha returns to Rhodesia with her family after her early years are spent with them in England. As a result, her return to Rhodesia causes an identity crisis not dissimilar to that described by Marechera. She prefers to speak English rather than Shona; in fact her first language is something she has largely forgotten. Her choice of dress and eating preferences are anglicized as well. But it is her sense of independence and outspokenness which causes her the most cultural conflict within the family. Here too women bear the brunt of the unequal division of labour, as well as prejudice against their gender. The narrator, Tambu, must use all her energy and conniving to earn the school fees which her father has found for her brother but not for herself. Even when she manages to earn them herself by planting, harvesting and, most importantly, selling corn cobs in town, she has to fight tooth and nail for the money to remain her own. Tambu narrates in a voice that reflects wisdom older than her at the time of the sale. But this span of time does not reflect a change in her mindset, "In those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it, which I could not help but do often since children are always talking about their age. Thinking about it, feeling the injustice of it, this is how I came to dislike my brother, and not only my brother: my father, my mother – in fact everybody." (12) Certainly Vera's female characters feel the injustice of their situations on a daily basis too, but injustice is a word she paints through actions rather than spells out. Her reluctance to spell things out is explained in her interview with Eva Hunter when she states, "Voiding certain vocabularies forces me to find more suggestive language, or a more rhythmic, more lyrical tone, rather than simply a word to solve my problem. I try not to use one word that condenses the entire thing because it then

limits all the nuances and subtleties of the moment or the thing, and those really are what I'm looking for, those intangibles" (84). Dangarembga seems much less concerned with the avoidance of vocabulary which too narrowly captures an event, and as a result, the narrative style seems more conventional.

But while Dangarembga writes from quite a different style, her narrator's sense of disbelief in her lack of opportunities as a woman is similar to the courage Vera gives her female characters. Tambu's mother warns her, "This business of womanhood is a heavy burden [. . .] And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other" (16). But Tambu manages to see the world differently; she embodies a hope not dissimilar to Phephelaphi's dreams of becoming a nurse or Mazvita's search for freedom in the city. Tambu is defiant in her own optimism:

> I could not follow the sense of my mother's words. My mother said being black was a burden because it made you poor, but Babamukuru was not poor. My mother said being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband. But I did not think this was true [. . .] I decided to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood. (16)

Maiguru is Tambu's aunt, mother to Nyasha and, as the novel later reveals, not as empowered or anywhere near as happy as Tambu believes. But what Tambu resents is the unequal position her gender creates. "What I didn't like was the way all conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness." (116) Nonetheless, her determination that life does not require you bear children and look after them along with your husband is a sentiment reflected in many of the actions of Vera's characters. Procreation is not a requirement, nor are loyalty and faith to one man, as Phephelaphi and Mazvita in *Butterfly Burning* and *Without a Name* confirm. Nor are fathers or uncles always honourable men looking out for the good of their children, nieces and nephews, as Zhizha in *Under the Tongue* learns. For that matter, nor are mothers, as Janifa learns in *Bones*.

Tambu's passion and commitment to her education are similar to those of Marechera's narrator in the "House of Hunger". Tambu explains of her troubled relationship with her father: "He did not like to see me over-absorbed in intellectual pursuits. He became very agitated after he had found me several times reading the sheet of newspaper in which the bread from *magrosa* had been wrapped as I waited for the *sadza* to thicken. He thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living." (34) Marechera, while writing of a male character brings up a similar prejudice against the impracticality of formal education. The narrator's brother Peter refers to him as "bookshit" (4) and "Shakespeare" (5). The narrator's mother remarks:

> "I sent you to University," she said. 'There must be big jobs waiting for you out there.'
>
> 'Tell that to Ian Smith,' Peter butted in maliciously. 'All you did was starve yourself to send this shit to school while Smith made sure that the kind of education he got was exactly what had made him like this.' (9)

While Dangarembga writes of an earlier missionary influence over education, the sentiment is similar: education is impractical, a waste of a time in a land where survival already requires too much of everyone's energies. The results of education, fluency in the English language in particular, have already been discussed in relation to Marechera's narrator and his tormented confusion between Shona and English. Similarly, Dangarembga writes of Tambu's brother, a student at boarding school before his death who "had forgotten to speak Shona. A few words escaped haltingly, ungrammatically and strangely accented when he spoke to my mother, but he did not speak to her very often any more [. . .] She did not want him to be educated, she confided in me, but even more, she wanted to talk to him." (52-53) Education, in the eyes of the mothers of "House of Hunger" and *Nervous Conditions,* is simply a wedge that drives distance between themselves and their children.

While themes of women's search for empowerment and a voice which is their own are certainly apparent in Vera's fiction, Dangarembga does not deploy the textile in her writing to assist with her narrative either structurally or metaphorically. In this way her work, while published around the same time as Vera's, offers little comparative material regarding the role of textiles in narration. Tanbu's reluctance and eventual refusal to attend her parents' church wedding ceremony and to dress as an overblown bridesmaid next to what she sees as her mother's equally ridiculous costume is discussed in Chapter Three in connection with the use of uniforms to police or uphold personal identity. The other moment which can be discussed in relation to the textile is possibly Nyasha's interest in ceramics, another form of craft production which can be made by hand and which, in this case, is superfluous to need. Nyasha's pottery takes on a much more contemporary tone of hobby or pastime rather than requirement or skill as Tanbu critically explains:

> As far as I was concerned, people only made clay pots when they were very young and playing at being grown up, or when they were grown up because they had to have pots for storing water and *mahewu* and the like. But we used two- and five-gallon drums for water these days and I had never seen anybody make a proper *hari* although we had several in the house. So those pots were definitely Nyasha's craze, not mine, and while she was very concerned about making sure that they did not crack, while she was meticulous in scratching her designs, they did not matter much one way or the other to me, serving only to pass time. (150)

Tambu's descriptions of Nyasha's efforts at craft production are ideas that plague the crafts today. In fact, Nyasha could as easily be knitting or embroidering in this scene, as working with ceramics. Tambu's dismissal of the work as a mere pastime is very much in keeping with the image of textiles as craft rather than industry today and contributes to the image of hand production as hobby rather than tradition with function. It is also arguably a relationship to hand production which is fostered by developed rather than developing nations. Thus

Nyasha's interest in pottery can be seen as yet another value influenced by her time in Britain. In contrast Tambu sees the craft as a waste of time, even an indulgence of sorts, a hobby that to her looks more like a waste of materials and time than a productive enterprise.

But as an attention to textiles within Vera's fiction shows, the production of hand crafted objects in fact embody far more than simply the opportunity to pass time. In the case of Vera's fiction, textiles can be read as objects which secure narratives that otherwise float and jump. By tracing them, holding firmly to the threads they offer, Vera's loose narrative style becomes more solid and her questions find concrete answers that, without the textiles, are left unspoken. When read beside Marechera, Hove and Dangarembga, some similarities are apparent. There are similarities of style with Hove, of theme with Dangarembga and arguably versions of both with Marechera. But the textile does not make a broad or consistent appearance to assist the narratives of Marechera, Hove or Dangarembga. Nor does it appear on the numerous levels (structural, metaphorical, symbolic, material, political) that it occupies within Vera's fiction. It is certainly not absent, and in one story, Marechera's "House of Hunger" is arguably of great importance. But in none of Vera's contemporaries does the textile make such a consistent and sophisticated contribution to the narrative as I hope I have shown in her own writing.

In the closing lines of Vera's last published work, *The Stone Virgins*, Cephas concludes:

> He must retreat from Nonceba, perhaps he has become too involved in replicating histories. He should stick to restorations of ancient kingdoms, circular structures, bee hive huts, stone knives, broken pottery, herringbone walls, the vanished pillars in an old world. A new nation needs to restore the past. His focus, the beehive hut, to be installed at Lobengula's ancient kraal in kwoBulawayo the following year. His task is to learn to recreate the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet, and dry,

the way grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool liveable places within; deliverance. (SV 165)

The conclusion of *The Stone Virgins* is a celebration of the recovery of history and memory, placing the need to recover and restore the physical before the healing of emotional wounds. Here the male character, unable to sustain hope in the possibility of a romantic relationship with Nonceba, nonetheless he finds himself with an instinctive and historical reaction to build protective structures, to recover a history to be proud of. Maternal production is, for complex reasons in Vera's fiction, deconstructed. Nonetheless, creative production remains alive. Here Vera introduces the importance of making for a male character, foregrounding the value of the textile in the process of recording and remembering.

Why this is the case is open to speculation. Vera's career at the National Gallery in Bulawayo certainly reveals something about her visual interests. In an interview with Jane Bryce she explains, "I've always been visually oriented, and before I worked at the National Gallery perhaps my larger influence was film, and how images are prepared, constructed and made to move. I also have a strong leaning towards photography. When I am writing I start with a moment [. . .] visual, mental – that I can *see*, and I place it on my table, as though it were a photograph." (219) The image-driven nature of her creative process certainly offers some explanation of how the textile could become such a vital aspect of her fiction, for the textile is an object rich in textural and chromatic possibilities.

Ranger explains the title of his text *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* sayaing, "I do not mean the objective messages that scientists have wrung from the rocks by geological or archaeological study in the Matapos. I refer rather to the idea that the rocks themselves speak and I also refer to the speech of men and women who live among them" (1999: 3). My interest in the presence of the textile in Vera's fiction is much the same. Attention to the textile in Vera's fiction allows one to hear voices that emanate from it and occur near it. These voices are not the analysis of

anthropology or even an art historical perspective. They are simply an acknowledgement that, in organizing her fiction, Vera has drawn heavily on a recurring object – the textile – and that consistent attention to it deepens our understanding of her narratives. Ranger concludes his introduction to *Voices from the Rocks* with the comment: "Even after 1902 there were African voices from the rocks, though few Europeans heard them" (1999: 32). I would suggest that the same is true of the voice of cloth, not just in Vera's fiction, and not just by Europeans readers, but in alternative narrative strategies from world literature that deploy the textile to assist with the processes of narration.

Vera has been celebrated for her breaking of taboos. As I mention in the introduction, a collection of critical essays on her fiction is aptly entitled *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* and she has said when interviewed, "I've had so much response that I think I'm expected to break another taboo in my next book [. . .] it's not something I resist because finally I think, 'Okay, that's good because it's part of activism.' But then it pressures me." (85) But in confronting social and cultural taboos, Vera's material could be exposing itself to the threat of censorship. It is difficult to determine just how much of a threat this was in the author's mind, but her use of metaphors to tell of crimes against the female body may in part be encouraged by this pressure. The wordpress.org website notes, "So far, her [Vera's] reliance on poetic devices to make serious social comments has kept her out of trouble. Others seeking to address the troubles Zimbabwean women face haven't been so lucky. In 1997, Ingrid Sinclair's film, *Flame,* which treated the same topics as *The Stone Virgins*, was banned in Zimbabwe; though it went on to win international accolades." (Soros) Jan Kees van de Werk writes in his introduction to Chenjerai Hove's *Shebeen Tales: Messages from Harare* of a "cynical irony to Zimbabwe's book trade" that makes books too expensive for the majority to purchase (16). He to alludes to the threat of censorship when he writes, "Beneath the double layer of irony, indirect censorship lies in wait for writing which examines the current yawning social gap between rich and poor and which as a result will

never see the light of day" (17). It is possible that censorship, whether outwardly or inwardly imposed, may have impacted Vera's narrative style, though not her content, and made the textile all the more useful to her writing.

In Yvonne Vera's fiction the textile, so often associated with the domestic realm and the task of nurturing, has been released from the confines of these limiting roles and speaks of tragic realities that have long remained unspoken. Whether the textile offered Vera a veil under which she could shield her writing from censorship, or a symbolic vehicle through which she could bring beauty to scenes of brutality, the voice of cloth in Yvonne Vera's fiction assists in the articulation of unspoken realities and releases her female characters, albeit through a process of torturous self-discovery, to find new identities suited to the individual.

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