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Remembering the short stories of Yvonne Vera: A postcolonial and feminist reading of *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals?*

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The Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera is one of the most important writers to emerge from the African continent over the last two decades. Although she has received widespread critical acclaim as well as academic scrutiny, analyses of her work have mostly focused on her novels. This article attempts to redress this scholarly imbalance by offering a close textual analysis of *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals?* through a critical lens of postcolonial and feminist theory. In these stories Vera articulates the internal thoughts of her characters in order to explore the way that oppressed people negotiate the fact of their oppression. It is particularly the female characters' reflections that reveal the complexity of the position occupied by colonised women and the sophistication of their attempts to address the layered marginalisation to which they are subjected. Vera shows that, for them, an unproblematic participation in the nationalist movement for liberating Zimbabwe from colonial oppression is simply not an option. The article explores the specifically gendered expectations and obstacles that shape the female characters' struggles in the Zimbabwean context. **Key words:** Feminism, marginalisation, national liberation, postcolonial, Yvonne Vera, Zimbabwean writing.

With the publication of her first collection of short stories,¹ *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals?* in 1992, the Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera's work began receiving significant attention and acclaim, both within Africa and internationally.² While her novels³ have been subjected to a great deal of academic scrutiny, her short stories have not received similar consideration. This article attempts to redress this scholarly imbalance by offering a close textual analysis of *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals?* through a critical lens of postcolonial and feminist theory. In this short story anthology, Vera begins her literary project of articulating the experiences of Zimbabwe's formerly colonised people in general, and of Zimbabwean women in particular. In her attempt to voice these experiences, Vera seems to recognise the potential of the literary text to function as an "important means of appropriating, inverting [and] challenging dominant means of representation and colonial ideologies" (Loomba 1998: 70). The representational strategies and ideologies that Vera is questioning are, however, not limited to those of colonialism. She is also very much concerned with subverting the representational strategies that are applied to women, as well as the prevailing

ideologies of gender. The “designations ‘lyrical’ and ‘poetic’” (Primorac 2001: 77) are often applied in descriptions of Vera’s work. Although such a description would certainly be valid for *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals* (hereafter *Animals* in the citations), her writing style, as well as her use of radically imaginative metaphors, is much more tentative in this short story anthology than in her subsequent novels. In these stories by a writer who is clearly still in the process of developing her literary voice, the reader can already identify the themes of, inter alia, boundaries, repression and exile that continue to be thematic concerns in the rest of this author’s oeuvre.

In the anthology’s opening story “Crossing boundaries”, Vera seems to be echoing the sentiments of Aimé Césaire concerning the nature of the interaction between the coloniser and the colonised. Césaire argues that, between the coloniser and the colonised, there is an “infinite distance” (1994: 173) that does not allow space for any “human contact” (1994: 177). This is reflected in the “irresolvable territorial struggle” (*Animals*, 1) between Nora, the white wife of the farm owner, and James, a black man working on the farm. When James asks himself why it is “necessary for him to be humble, to beg” (1992: 1), it is clear that he has been subjected to the colonial strategy of teaching “millions of men [...] to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair and behave like flunkies” (Césaire 1994: 178). He ponders that Nora is “responsible for [the] fear” (*Animals*, 1) that has “cunningly [been] instilled” (Césaire 1994: 178) in him by the coloniser. Throughout this story Vera uses nature imagery to alert the reader to the violence simmering just beneath the surface of coloniser/colonised interactions. The thunder is likened to a “whip cracked above” (*Animals*, 1) while the “rain hit violently against the asbestos roof” (3). The “membrane of bitterness [that] formed around [James’s] soul” (2) conjures up Frantz Fanon’s notion of the colonised as a person in whom “the settler keeps alive [...] an anger which he deprives of outlet” (1965: 42). The repeated references to the bush war confirm Fanon’s contention that decolonisation is a “violent phenomenon” (27). This has certainly been the case in the Zimbabwean context.

The character of Charles also supports Fanon’s reflections on the nature of the coloniser. Charles is a man who is “full of demands” (*Animals*, 21) as he admonishes Nora for letting “the natives get cheeky” (21) with her. He dismisses James from Nora’s presence with a casual order to “[g]o on” (20) as if he was speaking to a bothersome child, and he insists that he will not allow the “natives” to “shape [their] history” (21). His decision to give James the plot of land he requests but also to remind him that the land “still belongs to [him]” (21) casts Charles in the role of coloniser as “exhibitionist” (Fanon 1965: 42). His “preoccupation with security” (42) and dominance prompts him to decide that he “would buy arms to protect his land, and also himself” (*Animals*, 16). His concern with “his security” (11) also extends to the way he treats

Nora. When he “warn[s] her desperately” (10) not to let the “natives” see her undressing, Nora realises that his words of caution stem from his need to maintain “his unquestioned domination of the native” (11). He is very much a man who needs to “remind the native out loud that there he alone is master” (Fanon 1965: 42). Charles’s fear that the “natives” should see Nora’s body stems from the “age-old equation of female chastity with male honour [that has been] reinscribed within the language of the colonial civilizing mission” (Sharpe 1994: 225). From the depiction of the relationship between Nora and Charles, the reader gets the sense that his warning does not result from a caring, protective feeling for Nora. She has become, like Adela in *A Passage to India*, a “mere cipher for a battle between men” (Sharpe 1994: 225) where a black man’s gaze on a white woman’s body is regarded as a breach of the coloniser’s authority.

As in all her later novels Vera avoids slotting her characters into an unambiguous position in a rigid perpetrator/victim binary. The incestuous rapist Muroyiwa in *Under the Tongue* and the rapist, murderer and mutilator Sibaso in *The Stone Virgins* are never portrayed as perpetrators in a simplistic or unproblematic way. The same can be said of her treatment of Charles. Despite the appearance of power, Charles is as caught up in the self-defeating discourse of colonialism as all the other inhabitants of Zimbabwe. Stuart Hall has described “identity as an invention ‘which is never complete, always in process’” (cited in Parry 1996: 87). As a colonial subject Charles is clearly, to use Hall’s terminology again, “the product of multiple constitutions [and] of the contradictions and overdeterminations of postcolonial ideological positions” (87). Although many Zimbabwean authors writing in the two decades after independence do focus on the dehumanising effect of war on all those affected by it, the level of empathy Vera allows for the perpetrators of human rights abuses remains rare.⁴ In Alexander Kanengoni’s *Echoing Silences*, for instance, a man who has been brutalised by his involvement in war is described by his wife as someone who “had become [...] a monster” (1997: 129).

In the treatment of her characters Vera seems to move from the Fanonian notion that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the coloniser and the colonised to the more sophisticated position that they are all constituted by the ideology of colonialism that shapes the lives of both groups. In his essay “Signs taken for Wonders” Homi Bhabha argues that there is “ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority [that] enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty” (1995: 35). The “hybridization” (34) that is an inevitable part of colonial discourse precludes any “neat binary opposition between the coloniser and the colonised [as] both are caught up in a complex reciprocity” (Lomba 1998: 232). When Charles argues that, “[i]f given the land, the natives would not even know how to use it” (*Animals*, 12) he betrays the extent to which he has internalised the racist colonial discourse that uses the postulated incompetence of the “native” as a justification of the “civilising mission”

of colonialism. James and Charles cannot but be affected by such a belief system, which was all but ubiquitous in the colonised countries. While this discourse humiliates and disempowers James, it traps Charles as he cannot be an honourable man without fulfilling his colonising mission even though it is a system that was, according to Bhabha, doomed from the start. Another interesting example of the colonised's reappropriation of colonial assumptions and the subsequent subversive use of those racist presuppositions can be found in J. Nozipo Maraire's novel *Zenzele: A Letter for my Daughter*, where one of the characters, Tinawo, argues that their "greatest weapon in the struggle has been [their] presumed stupidity" (1996: 139). The "collected scientific data" (139) of the Europeans that designated the "native African" as incapable of "rational thought" or "any sort of military or political strategy" (139) enables Tinawo to act as a spy and collect valuable information while the commander for whom she works as a servant insists that she makes a "perfect house girl" (149) because she possesses not "one whit of intelligence" (149).

Through her exploration of Charles's situation, Vera makes it clear that male agency in a colonial context cannot be seen as unproblematic or absolute. The fact that Charles's "eyes were brimming with hostile tears" (*Animals*, 21) after discussing the land issue with Nora belies the certainty of his earlier contention that they had "[d]ominated" the land and "[c]laimed" (16) it. Even as he asserts that his ancestors had "tamed" the land, he "recognize[s] [Nora's fear] as his own" (16). When Charles looks at the picture on the wall he sees "a clear recognition in it that the perfect moment could not be eternalized" (17). As with the painting, the colonial discourse that granted Charles his power "could not be sustained" and Charles will be relegated to being "a witness to the collapse of an ideal" (17). The painting depicts a flying fish with a man "playing a violin" (17) on its belly. Charles's admiration of the picture seems to reflect his own insistent belief that nature can be tamed and utilised for the amusement of man. Nature at its freest, symbolised in the painting by the fish which "had wings and flew joyfully in a blue mist", is shown to be subjugated by the European culture, as symbolised by the violin. Nature is thus made to serve the Western cliché of entertaining the lovers who sat "along the bank" of the river with a violin serenade.

In most of James's day-to-day experiences, it is Nora who has come to embody the role of coloniser. In the familiar colonising strategy of naming the "other", Nora "had named James" (*Animals*, 13). Nora seems very much aware of the capacity of naming to serve as a "primary colonising process because it appropriates, defines, captures the place in language" (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 391). In her naming of him she made sure that he was constantly "reminded [...] of a relationship in which he was subservient" (*Animals*, 14).

The central role that Nora plays in James's humiliation and oppression further serves to alert the reader to the porous nature of the perpetrator/victim divide. Even though Nora exercises such immense power over James that he considers himself to

have been “recreated” (14) by her, this power does not extend to other parts of her life. In her marriage she is consigned to the subservient role in the oppressor/oppressed binary. She is, much like the Anglo-Indian woman described by Jenny Sharpe, caught up in “woman’s double positioning in colonial discourse- as the inferior sex but superior race” (Sharpe 1994: 225). In Nora and Charles’s relationship, she “expected that he would be cruel to her” and she “could not forget that he could be unkind to her” (15). Nora thinks “with terror of her life [in Zimbabwe]” (12) but she is powerless to change her location as Charles refuses to acquiesce to her suggestions of moving from the farm. He did not wish to give Nora that kind of “power over himself” in the same way that he could not be seen to “run away from a native” (16). In his eyes, Nora and the “natives” constitute an inferior group who should never be allowed to glimpse any cracks in his “unquestioned domination” (11) of them.

In this regard, Nora’s disempowerment in marriage is a continuation of her own mother’s position. Her mother “had abhorred the relentlessly hot African climate” but, like Charles, Nora’s father refused to relocate as he “heard only his own voice, trusted only his own beliefs” (10). In her marriage Nora’s mother had been comprehensively silenced and this is the legacy that she bequeathed her daughter. In an attempt to secure her own “self-preservation” Nora’s mother adopted the patriarchal strategy, traditionally utilised by men, in which they project their notions of landscape onto the bodies of women. She “made a little England out of Nora” (11) by ensuring that “her daughter learnt ballet, listened to classical music, and read poetry”. In her adult life, Nora tries in vain to “exclude [...] the native” (3) from her life in Africa by running her fingers “rapidly over the black and white keys” of the piano. In order to deal with the silencing inflicted on her by her husband, Nora’s mother thus contributed to her own daughter’s alienation by raising her to be even less suitable to adjust to life in Africa. Her mother had “kept the Africans away from [Nora]” (14) and Nora, who is as powerless to change her location as her mother was, now clings to this inculcated “distrust of Africans” in an attempt to “maintain her sense of difference” (14) on a continent “that she could not love” (18). Vera’s obvious concern with highlighting the extent to which perpetrators have also been victimised, is reminiscent of the reflections of another prominent Zimbabwean author. In Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel *Nervous Conditions*, the character Thambu comes to the conclusion that she has “seen enough to know that blame does not come in neatly packaged parcels” (1988: 12).

The patriarchal oppression that Nora and her mother endured is echoed in the experiences of the black women living on the farm. While waiting for their daughters to return from school, MaSibanda tells her friend how her “father did not allow any of [his daughters] to go to school” (*Animals*, 5) as he could not see why he should “waste money on a girl”. When resources were scarce, it was the obvious choice for the father to send “the boys to school”. The theme of boys being sent to school rather than girls is one that recurs in many Zimbabwean novels. In *The Legacy* by Tsitsi

Himunyanga-Phiri, the narrator is pressured into an arranged marriage so that the lobola “could pay school fees for [her] two brothers” (1992: 9). Similarly in *Shadows*, Chenjerai Hove writes that girls did not go to school because what “little money there was would be spent on the boys” (1991: 21). As James’s father reflects on the pain of being forced off their land, his sense of disempowerment is augmented by his realisation that he was “powerless to affect what [the women] thought” (6). When his granddaughters return from school “beaming with excitement and pride” over their good report cards, the old man “felt a confusing anger” as he realised that he “had lost the children” and “lost the fight” (7).

It seems as if James’s father is hankering back to a time when African men had both possession of land and power over women. The nature of gender relations in pre-colonial Africa continues to be the topic of a great deal of scholarly debate. Some authors choose to depict Africa before the coloniser came as a kind of pre-lapsarian paradise of equality. In a very explicit endorsement of this view, Tafara in *Stains on the Wall* reflects on how his ancestors “walked the country-side in almost romantic innocence” (Mungoshi 1992: 15). Susan Arndt argues that, even before colonialism in Africa, “there was a gender hierarchy that privileged men and subordinated women” (2002: 56). In a public speech delivered at the first Zimbabwe Women’s Seminar, Robert Mugabe describes women’s position in pre-colonial society as “despicable” (1983: 72) although he does go on to point out that “there were definite recognisable features of an area of her limited dominance” (72).⁵

MaMoyo wants to relocate to town where there are better teachers as she believes that a good education will allow her daughter to have a different life. In her marriage she is, however, as powerless to negotiate a change of place as Nora is and as Nora’s mother had been before them. When discussing the issue with James, MaMoyo “knew that she spoke only to the wind, because he would not listen” (*Animals*, 24). This insistence of men to cling to the land while women yearn to escape from it is a theme that Vera returns to in her later novel *Without a Name*. Here Nyenyedzi “preferred the histories of his people” (*Name*, 39) in much the same way that James “valued the past over the present” (*Animals*, 25). In “Crossing boundaries” James remains “immobile” (*Animals*, 25) and in *Without a Name* Mazvita’s “passion for escape” (*Name*, 37) propels her to the city while Nyenyedzi remains on the farm. MaMoyo realises that James is “not an active man, and she pitie[s] him” (*Animals*, 25) for it. In Vera’s work it is the female characters who take the active, often very courageous, steps to improve their lives as well as the lives of their children.

Although it is possible to draw parallels between the types of patriarchal pressure that Nora and MaMoyo experience, their situations are clearly vastly different. The fact that Nora is oppressed within marriage does not negate the role she plays as a colonial agent. Both women are aware of this as Nora is “sure James’s wife disliked her” while MaMoyo regards Nora as a “stranger” whose “unkind feet” have claimed

land that does not rightfully belong to them. It is very clear that no easy sisterhood can be possible between these two women. The question of inter-racial solidarity between women is particularly contentious in formerly colonised environments. Oyeronke Oyewumi (2003: 4) is just one of the feminist theorists who have problematised the issue of female allegiances where white women have “exercised their race and class privileges on the backs of non-white women”. In her poem “Sisterhood” Nkiru Nzegwu describes a woman whose “new found sister/ had ordered [her] to be / on knees [...] to scrub the floor clean / for sisterarchy” (2003: viii). Although MaMoyo “swore she would never work on the farm” (*Animals*, 9), her race and class position designates manual labour as the proper work for her while Nora is cast in the role of the white lady issuing orders.

While “Crossing boundaries” highlights the way in which the coloniser and colonised as well as men and women are negotiating their lives against the backdrop of the ubiquitous “bush war” (14), “It is over” explores the very specific difficulties confronting a woman after the war. Although this is never explicitly stated, Chido seems to be one of the female soldiers who have now returned home after the hostilities. She is said to have “arrived home from the war” (94) without any further indication of the exact nature of the role she played in the war. These roles women played during the war have, by all accounts, been varied. They ranged from women working as nurses or caretakers to women being part of “forced relationships” (Kriger 2003: 182) with the male “comrades” in the camps. Norma Kriger (1992: 192) has warned that a “misleading picture of the extent to which women participated as fighters in the guerrilla army” can be created by “conflating women who were full-time fighters with those who did some military training in the camps but were primarily engaged in agricultural work, education or other tasks”.

Women who engaged in conflict were still not freed from the double burden that have always characterised women’s labour. In praising the women who fought in the struggle, Mugabe mentions that they not only “feed the front by carrying war material to it from the rear, but they also fight on the front and become exposed to the enemy’s bullets in the same way as men” (1983: 78). In this statement Mugabe reinforces the assumption that women will take care of the nurturing and caring work in addition to their other responsibilities. He also perpetuates the erroneous notion that wars can be divided into fronts and rears. The myth of “valiant men fighting at the battlefield defending the honour of their wives and protecting the family back home” (Afshar 2003: 181) has long been used to mobilise men to fight. Haleh Afshar (2003: 181) argues that such a myth cannot be sustained since wars are increasingly “fought on the home fronts”.⁶ This certainly bears out when one considers the characters in Vera’s work. In *Without a Name*, *The Stone Virgins* and *Under the Tongue*, the women who are brutalised

are not active participants in the front of the struggle. Rather, Mazvita, Thenjiwe, Nonceba and Zhizha are all civilians who are violated by men who have, in some way or another, been traumatised by the experience of war.

Ruth Weiss (1986: 106) contends, “1500 – 2000 trained women fighters returned from the war”. Accounts from women who joined the struggle continue to provide highly disparate accounts of gender relations amongst comrades. In Kanengoni’s *Echoing Silences*, a female fighter confesses that she was raped by a superior “for over a year” and her experiences have led her to “hate men” and “hate the war” (1997: 85). Charles Samupindi is another Zimbabwean author who recognises the precarious position of women in the struggle. After being raped by a soldier from the Rhodesian army and seeing her family murdered, Angela joins the liberation struggle. There, however, a commander is attracted to her but even his “light kiss on her cheek” makes her feel again a “sense of violation” (1992: 149). In *Pawns*, far from feeling empowered by her role in the war, Angela is left feeling “that if she was given the chance, she would weep forever” (1992: 149).

The experiences during her absence, which are never specified, have left Chido so comprehensively alienated that home cannot be a place of refuge for her. She has become a stranger to her mother who “had not recognized her” (*Animals*, 94) on her arrival and who could not understand her daughter’s unwillingness to talk about her experiences. This reluctance stems from Chido’s alienation from the self, as she “did not want to remember” because she “did not know who she had become, and she did not want to find out”.

The mother adds to Chido’s pain by telling her about an old friend who is now married with children and whose education enables her to consider “teaching in the city, with the white teachers” (95). This is not an option for Chido as her participation in the war did not allow her to “finish [her] education”. Vera is here noting a common problem that faced women in the aftermath of the war. In her research, Kriger has found that “[w]omen fighters were disadvantaged in the competition for jobs at least in part because of their generally lower levels of education” (2003: 181). In addition, women’s very participation in war made them unsuitable as marriage partners because Zimbabwean society regarded it as “unbecoming of a woman to fight [and] to kill” (Chiwome and Mguni 2004: 6) with the result that their “perceived vicious qualities made them too grotesque for marriage”.⁷ David Mungoshi also notes the problems of women who fought in the war in *Stains in the Wall* where “[g]irl comrades had a dubious reputation amongst the people. It was rumoured that they were man-crazy and would shoot their way into a man’s heart if necessary” (1992: 44). The awe and admiration evoked by the returning female comrades in Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* can thus not be seen as the universal experience of women after the war.

Chido’s mother seems to be oblivious to the obstacles confronting her daughter as she encourages her to get married. Quite apart from the societal prejudice discussed

above, Chido's wartime experiences have had the effect of her dreading even the possibility of her mother's touch. Her sense of alienation seems to extend to her body as her hope that "Mother would not touch her" left her feeling "very angry and confused" (*Animals*, 94). Chido is left with the overwhelming realisation that she "had nothing that she could claim as her own". In her case, there is not even a hint of the glory and triumph that the discourse of Zimbabwean nationalism promised to participants in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle.

In these stories Vera begins her exploration of the alienation and trauma that have come to affect all those involved in the processes of colonialism and the resultant wars aimed at dismantling this system. She is also careful to show that, even where women have some degree of power either as colonial agents or as participants in the liberation struggle, their agency is inevitably limited by the strictures applied to them because of their gender. These stories are clear about the oppression the female characters in particular endure and thus already signal Vera's intention of challenging prevailing notions of gender and the liberatory effect of the struggle for independence. It is, however, in her later novels that Vera will expose and confront the full horror of the violence that has been inflicted on Zimbabwe's female population.

In her attempt to dramatise the instability of postcolonial space, and hence the possibility of the formerly colonised people reclaiming that space, Vera's work is very conscious of the vantage point from which her characters perceive their worlds. I use the term "space" here in the broadest sense of the word, to encompass both physical and ideological space. Fanon has argued that, in a colonial context, the settler was not satisfied to merely "delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native" (1965: 32). Rather, "[a]s if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil" (Fanon 1965: 32). The process of decolonisation is thus marked by "a resistance to the notion of cartographic enclosure and to the imposed cultural limits that notion implies" (Huggan 1989: 116). Put more simply, decolonisation works to free the colonised from the physical space of the native township as well as from the ideological space that casts the native as intrinsically inferior to the European. As the earlier discussion of Bhabha's theory has shown, these spaces are unstable because of the inherently contradictory and self-defeating nature of colonial discourse.

Sara Mills (2003: 693) points out that "[c]olonial space has often been described in monolithic terms, since it is the dominant spatial representations of British male colonists which have been examined".⁸ Even when the colonised do articulate space, it tends to be in a way that privileges the male point of view while subordinating that of the women. In a radio broadcast on 16 April 1979, for example, Robert Mugabe uses the phrase "sons of the soil" (1983: 11) as a rallying cry to both men and women. This

is a particularly gendered appropriation of the concept of land that does not take into account the experiences of women like Mazvita in *Without a Name*, or those of MaMoyo in “Crossing boundaries” who do not share men’s oftentimes blind allegiance to the land. In her arguments negating the validity of such a limited view of space, Mills argues, “it is important to consider not simply that which is represented spatially, but also the position from which that representation is produced” (2003: 700).

In “The bordered road” Vera’s protagonist is acutely aware of the landscape she is negotiating as she walks from the township to her work in the city. Rose contends that, “in their writings, [women] tend to see landscapes in relation to their domestic spaces and their networks of interaction” (cited in Mills, 2003: 700). In *A Change of Tongue*, for example, the South African writer Antjie Krog sees the land of her childhood in terms of the recent death of her father. She senses “a quietness spreading through the veld” as she stands “forlornly [...] lost in a landscape in which [she] so often feel[s] [she] no longer belong[s]” (2003: 364). In *The Legacy* Mrs Mudenda goes against her society’s inheritance tradition to fight for her late husband’s property because it is “the place that the children grew up in and have considered home for the last fifteen years” (Himunyanga-Phiri 1992: 20). Vera’s work also sees her female characters focusing on their own well-being and that of their children when they need to decide whether to stay on the land or to leave for the city. This is the case with Mazvita and MaMoyo, while the male characters like James and Nyenyedzi are much more likely to insist that they “cannot leave the land and go to a strange unwelcoming place” (*Name*, 24). Men are more inclined to invest the land with value simply because it is land. Although Johana’s father realises that they are sometimes failed “in their dreams of [a] land of plenty”, he continues to equate the soil with “life” itself (Hove 1991: 62). Mazvita, on the other hand, “rose above the land and scorned its slow promises, its intermittent loyalties” (*Name*, 39).

In “The bordered road”, as the woman joins the throng of people walking towards the city, she makes a complex series of associations in order to situate herself and make sense of her own place in the bus drivers’ strike that has necessitated this walk. Her reflections on “the large pawpaw tree [that] had fallen” (*Animals*, 61) reveal the extent to which “[p]lace is also a palimpsest, a kind of parchment on which successive generations have inscribed and reinscribed the process of history” (Ashcroft et al 1995: 392). In *The Middle Passage*, V. S. Naipaul sees that there is “slavery in the vegetation” (1962: 61). As Vera’s character surveys the landscape around her, there are clear echoes of the colonial oppression that seems to be part and parcel of the land. The “roots pointing protestingly to the sky” (*Animals*, 61) invite the reader to consider the cause of the protest. The “meandering scar” that is the river, as well as the “broken” tree with its “soft fibrous core” exposed conjure a landscape that has itself become threatening. This menacing quality of the land is a theme Vera will return to later in her oeuvre, most notably in *Without a Name*, where Mazvita’s rapist “had grown from

the land" (*Name*, 31) and she came to realise that "the land had no fixed loyalties" (*Name*, 34). Where the white coloniser, such as Charles in "Crossing boundaries", views the colonial space as an entity to be conquered and the colonised man, such as Nyenyedzi in *Without a Name*, tends to deify the land as that which needs to be reclaimed in order to ensure liberation, the colonised woman's relationship with the land is much more layered and ambivalent. Even as this woman recognises the threatening potential of the land, she remembers it as the location of happy childhood memories when she used to sit with her "back against the thick sturdy trunk" (*Animals*, 61) of a tree to "bask in the sun". For her, this land is not some monolithic given, but a "set of superimposed spatial frameworks" (Mills, 2003: 396) or an entity in which "many social spaces [are] negotiated within one geographical place and time" (396). The land simultaneously represents the space of her past roots and that of her future hopes as a "sense of wonder and expectancy came over [her]" (*Animals*, 61).

In this short story Vera's close attention to a woman's observations on a seemingly uneventful walk into town reveals the complexity of the internal negotiations that take place in a character made up of a multitude of identities. As she reflects on her ambiguous relationship with the land, it is also clear that these are the reflections of a gendered subject. The vulnerability of the colonised land, as it is evoked by the image of the broken pawpaw tree, as well as the protagonist's connection to the land, as revealed by her fond childhood recollection, is, in the woman's mind, intertwined with an uncle's rebuke that "[g]irls are not supposed to climb trees" (*Animals*, 61). Vera's description of this character's focalised internal dialogue is a technique she also uses in her later work to articulate the particular experiences of her female characters. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson argues that this is a technique that is especially well suited to voice the "complex situatedness of the black woman" (1994: 259). This "internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity" (258), is a narrative technique that Vera employs to striking effect in voicing the experiences of Mazvita in *Without a Name* and of Zhizha in *Under the Tongue*.⁹

In addition to dealing with her own relationship to the land and her specific place as a woman, this character's internal musings also alert the reader to the continuous struggle against colonial oppression that has been present in all the stories preceding this one in the anthology. Although Vera's reference to the colonised's resistance is sometimes referred to explicitly and sometimes merely hinted at obliquely, it is always present just beneath the surface of her prose. Fanon says that, "[d]uring the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning" (1965: 40). In the same way that the quest for freedom pervades the dreams of the colonised subject, Vera posits it as a ubiquitous part of their everyday thoughts, whether this is conscious or not. The character's memory of the pawpaw breaking on her as a child carries clear political overtones

suggesting the immanence and inevitability of black rebellion against colonial oppression. The “overripe fruit” (*Animals*, 61) becomes a metaphor for the oppressed who live “in a state of permanent tension” (Fanon 1965: 41) and who will come to stand up against their oppression and effect their own liberation as inevitably and naturally as the “release[e] [of] a myriad round black seeds” from an “overripe fruit” (*Animals*, 61). It is this intrinsic belief that, where colonialism is concerned, “the centre cannot hold” (Yeats, 2002: 98), that enables the protagonist to feel “elation and a sense of release” (*Animals*, 63) in response to the “tired voice” of one of her fellow travellers.

The inevitability of the demise of colonialism echoes the theory of Homi Bhabha who argues that colonialism is inherently self-defeating. Bhabha argues that “[re]sistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention” (1994: 110). Rather, it is “the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power” (1994: 110).

The “tarred road” that the workers follow into the city becomes symbolic of the signs that the coloniser imposes on the colonised land. According to Bhabha, however, the colonised take up the signs that have been imposed on them and, in their negotiation with those signs, ascribe new meanings to the imposed signs. The result is a “hybridity” or “uncertainty that estranges the familiar symbol of English ‘national’ authority and emerges from its colonial appropriation as the sign of its difference” (Bhabha 1994: 112). For the coloniser the “tarred road” is part of the infrastructure that has long been pointed to in racist justifications of colonialism when it is argued that the European developed and civilised Africa. In *Nehanda*, for example, Mr Browning insists on the righteousness of colonialism’s civilising mission and expresses his determination to “introduce order and culture” in Zimbabwe and to “teach [the natives] the most gainful use of their time” (Vera 1993: 55). Similarly, in a speech Cecil John Rhodes gave in 1877, he explicitly stated his aim of “bringing the whole uncivilised world under British rule” and that it is the “duty” of the “Anglo-Saxon race” to seize “Africa [which] is still lying ready for [them]” (1877: 2). The workers participating in the bus strike eschew this emblem of Western development and determinedly “walk along that road, not on it but beside it” (*Animals*, 63). The colonised thus appropriates the symbol of the coloniser in an act of subversion.

It is also interesting to note the response to the workers’ subtle act of resistance. I use the term “resistance” here in the sense of the hybridisation of colonial signs. The “police and soldiers”, who are charged with enforcing the authority of the coloniser, react in an unmistakably paranoid manner. They “jumped out of their cars and prodded [the workers] with their guns” and, on finding that they are unarmed, “scolded [them] for harbouring big suspicious objects”. By turning the symbol of colonial superiority into “grounds of intervention” (Bhabha 1995: 35), the “discriminated subject [turns] into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid

classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority” (Bhabha 1994: 113).

The persistence of the colonised’s quest for freedom, which goes on in the psyche of people even while they are seemingly acquiescing to their oppression, is also very evident in “The Shoemaker”. The eponymous character, who has lost his home and relatives when his village was “raided and burnt down by the security forces” (*Animals*, 34), is shown, by his preference for red shoes, to retain a “commitment to life” (Martin Shaw 2002: 26). Vera often uses the colour red to signal that her characters cling to life even in the face of apparently insurmountable odds. In *Without a Name*, Mazvita refuses to give up on life even after a series of victimisations that has been so comprehensive that she is suffering from a kind of psychic disintegration. Her strength and tenacity are indicated when she boards a bus that was “so stunningly red it was living” (*Name*, 1) in order to bury the baby she killed in her home village. In Vera’s work, people who have been severely dispossessed and disempowered often turn inward and transform their most personal reflections into loci of resistance. In *Under the Tongue*, for instance, Zhizha’s grandmother argues that a “woman finds her sorrow in her dream and everywhere” (*Tongue*, 40). Even in their silences and dreams Zhizha, her mother and grandmother are able to find “the world where women gather” (41) and it is in these internal spaces where they find comfort and support. In this story the shoemaker and one of the girls, who are both preoccupied with their own thoughts, manage to ameliorate their sense of alienation by forming an unspoken bond.

All three characters in this story seem to be isolated, as if they have all retreated into their own minds in their attempts to deal with the war that is raging in Zimbabwe. The girl in the red dress, with her “[b]right metallic bangles” and “large triangular earrings” (*Animals*, 31) at first does not expose the pain that Vera hints at with her description of the “sad black dots” (32) on her dress. As she goads the shoemaker into conversation with her flippant remarks, however, her own memories come to the surface to betray that her light-hearted demeanour is merely a façade. Her eyes turn “vacant” (34) as she remembers her brother who left, “without even saying goodbye”. Her sense of loss is augmented by her own struggle to figure out her place in the liberation war. In her attempt to articulate the complexity of the choices facing this woman, Vera deftly makes use of a fleeting moment of ambiguity. The reader is told that the girl “wondered if she should leave too”. The initial assumption is that she is pondering the possibility of joining the liberation struggle, but in the next sentence Vera reveals that she is merely considering the more prosaic activity of going home to “prepare the evening meal”.

Ania Loomba (1998: 193) argues that the coloniser encouraged the colonised woman to “Europeanise” herself since “the colonial regime assumed that Westernised women would not be part of the resistance”. In Uganda, for example, there were “laws instituted during Amin’s regime banning women from wearing mini-skirts, wigs and trousers”

(Ogden 1996: 174) as this was regarded as an internalisation of, and capitulation to, Western norms. An emphasis on women's "style of dress and behaviour" makes all the more sense when one considers that it is women who "reproduce the nation biologically, culturally and symbolically" (Yuval-Davies and Stoetzler 2002: 334). In contemporary societies, such as France, it is often unclear whether the pressure on Muslim women to abandon the veil stems from a desire to facilitate their "liberation", or from the desire to neutralise them as a potential threat in a global conflict that is increasingly crystallising along Muslim/Christian lines. Vinay Bahl (1997: 6) has also reflected on the subtle ideological pressures informing women's dress. She found that, when she wore her "native clothes", she was "either seen as making a statement of [her] ethnicity or labelled as exotic" (Bahl 1997: 6) whereas, if she wore Western clothes, she "lose[s] the right to be an 'authentic Indian'". An inauthentic Indian, or African for that matter, would obviously be considered less of a threat to the imposition of the Western coloniser's values. Initially it seems that the girl in "The Shoemaker" has internalised such disempowering norms, but then she reveals the type of disillusionment that has driven many of her male contemporaries to take up arms. Her repeated remark that "[t]here is nothing to go back to" (*Animals*, 34), suggests that she has felt the effects of colonial oppression, as well as the impact of the subsequent war for liberation, as keenly as the shoemaker has.

Throughout this anthology Vera makes it clear that her female characters are as politically conscious as the male characters, even though they tend to express their resistance in different ways. In "Crossing boundaries", for example, James's wife hopes to secure a better future for her children by moving to the city and in "Ancestral Links" a woman defies gendered expectations by travelling to the countryside to organise the burial of her grandfather. In interviews, Vera has stated her desire to show how "Africa has erred in its memory" (1999: 2) when it comes to recognising the role that women played in Zimbabwe's liberation. There are some notable exceptions to this lack of recognition for women's roles. Irene Staunton, for example, compiled *Mothers of the Revolution* because she believes that "the story of the women, the wives and the mothers who remained behind, has not yet been told" (1990: xi).¹⁰ Vera has pointed out that, because they are gendered subjects, women "often have no platform for expressing their disapproval". Some women, like Chido in "It is over", did join men as combatants in the *chimurenga*. This, however, remains the exception to the rule and Vera makes sure to draw the reader's attention to the myriad other ways that women exercise resistance.

The particular roles women play in situations of conflict and war have been the subject of a great deal of feminist scholarship.¹¹ This includes both the way war impacts on women and the way women participate in war. In this anthology, as well as in

Vera's later novels, she makes it clear that women are as profoundly affected by war as men are, albeit in different ways. She also seems to endorse the view that "[w]omen's political activity can [...] be on a different spatial scale to that of men" (Walby 1996: 248). Sylvia Walby argues, "women's political activities are typically more local than those of men, and less nationalistic" (248).¹²

The localised political activity of women could partly be the result of women's problematic relationship with nationalism. Vera's articulation of women's experiences seems to demand recognition for their specific type of contributions, even when it differs from the conventional hero-making activities of the warrior soldier that tend to be glorified by nationalist rhetoric. Even a cursory glance at the speeches of Robert Mugabe reveals the ideological construction of men as heroes and women as potential victims who need to be protected. In a Sinoia Day speech he gave in 1978, the valorisation of the war hero is clear in his description of a "dour, gruelling and bloody battle against a massive enemy" where, having "run out of ammunition [,] our gallant seven fell. It was a heroes' death" (1983: 126). In another speech, entitled "A revolutionary never dies", he articulates that a "committed revolutionary fighter" is someone who is "brave, daring and unyielding" (1983: 146). Women, on the other hand, are depicted as in need of protection when, in preparation for a contested election, he reminds soldiers that they "should take great care to protect women and children during the next four days" (1983: 115).

The fact is that revolutionaries do die and it is often the women who have to assume the responsibility for the family that gets left behind. Mary Johnson Osirim's research indicates that 31% of households in Zimbabwe are headed by women and she points out that "[h]ouseholds tend to become female-headed in Zimbabwe when a male partner/spouse leaves a relationship, as opposed to situations in which a woman never marries" (2004: 4). This means that the destitute family often includes children. In "Shelling peanuts" Vera voices the internal recollections of a woman who was left to raise a baby on her own because the father "couldn't stay, as he had already made plans to leave" (*Animals*, 38). He had not considered "that their circumstances would change" and refuses to alter his plans when he learns that "a baby would be on the way" (38). The pressure of gender expectations, which tend to be reinforced by nationalist discourse, demands that women "purify the blood flowing on the land with fresh milk springing from [their] breasts" (45). It is seen as their "task as women and as mothers" to "fill the land with the innocence and joy of young ones" even as they know that their children will some day "take the places of those whose bodies lie without proper burial" (45). In these stories Vera dramatises the pressure placed on women to act as the "guardians of cradles and coffins" (Afshar, 2003: 183).

The issue of motherhood is imbued with heightened significance in times of conflict and war. Mothers become the "iconic representations of the nation" (Peteeet 1997: 110) and, due to the loss of life in extended periods of conflict, the mother comes

to “symbolise life-giving, or national generativity, loss and sacrifice”. In this anthology Vera introduces this problem in “Shelling peanuts” and explores its ideological dynamics further in the next story “It is hard to live alone”. Afshar (2003: 183) has pointed out that “[w]arring states and revolutionary leaders adopt a language that reifies motherhood and defines a woman’s worth in terms of her ability to have children”. Although the examples Afshar refers to are Khomeini’s Iran, Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, the glorification of motherhood in African society is no less common, as is encapsulated in the Nigerian proverb which states that “Mother is Gold” (cited in Chukukere 1995: 192).¹³

In “It is hard to live alone” it is clear that the women in the story have been exposed to this type of discourse on motherhood and also that they have comprehensively internalised its misogynist dictums. They regard a “barren” woman as “useless” and ponder “[h]ow you can claim to be a woman without knowing the joy and pain of childbirth” (*Animals*, 43). A “barren” woman is, in their opinion, “not a complete woman” who “must be ashamed of herself” (43). In *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha’s grandmother recalls the painful abuse that was heaped on her when she failed to conceive early in her marriage. Her husband told her that her womb was “rotten” and that he had “married a womb filled with termites” (*Tongue*, 62). When she later gives birth to a terminally ill baby, her husband’s unkind words and society’s pressures lead her to accept the blame as the “wrath of her ancestors” and she is left “pray[ing] to the departed for forgiveness” (*Tongue*, 62). Another Zimbabwean woman who falls foul of society’s demand for children is Marita in *Bones* by Hove. She remembers being called “you witch, you day-witch, you who ate the roots of your own womb” (1990: 14). Children are warned to “not talk too much with Marita” because “[t]he seed in her belly dries up and weeps to its death” (89). In all these cases women are severely victimised when they are unable to fulfil their gender role of bearing children.

In these stories Vera articulates the internal thoughts of her characters in order to explore the way that oppressed people negotiate the fact of their oppression. It is particularly the female characters’ reflections that reveal the complexity of the position occupied by the colonised woman and the sophistication of their attempt to address the layered marginalisation to which they are subjected. For them, an unproblematic participation in and endorsement of, the nationalist movement for liberating Zimbabwe from colonial oppression is simply not an option. When they do choose to join that movement, as was the case with Chido in “It is over”, Vera makes it clear that the cost to such a woman is significant. Always, in locating their own place in the struggle, these women are confronted with specifically gendered expectations and obstacles.

Notes

1. Another short story, "A woman is a child" was published in *Fiery Spirits: Canadian Writers of African Descent* (1994b: 48–54), a collection edited by Ayanna Black.
2. See for example *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*.
3. *Nehanda* (1993); *Without a Name* (1994); *Under the Tongue* (1996); *Butterfly Burning* (1998) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002).
4. For further examples of Zimbabwean novelists exploring the impact of war on the civilian population, as well as those who actively fought in the *chimurengas*, see also Kanengoni's *Effortless Tears*, Mungoshi's *Stains on the Wall*, Samupindi's *Pawns* and Hove's *Bones and Shadows*.
5. For a comprehensive discussion of women's position in pre-colonial Zimbabwe and the impact of colonialism on that position, see *Zimbabwean Women in Customary and Colonial Law* by May. See also *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War* by Kriger, specifically the chapter entitled "Inequalities and peasant grievances".
6. *Mothers of the Revolution*, compiled by Staunton, provides further accounts of civilian women being affected by war as well as the experiences of female combatants.
7. For a comprehensive account of the roles women played in Zimbabwe's liberation war, as well as their life chances after the war, see Chiwome and Mguni (2004).
8. For some of the best known examples of specifically male representations of colonial space, consider the work of H. Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.
9. Further examples of African women authors writing about the position of African women while recognising the complex ways in which the different factors of their oppression are interlinked can be found in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* as well as Unity Dow's *Far and Beyond* and *The Screaming of the Innocent*.
10. Another collection of first hand accounts of the lives of Zimbabwean women before and after the war is *Independence is Not only for One Sex*, edited by Bond-Stewart.
11. See Afshar and Eade's *Development, Women and War*; Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, Turksen and Twagiramaryia's *What Women do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa*, Enloe's *Does Khaki become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* and Vickers's *Women and War*.
12. Accounts of Zimbabwean women's grassroots political activity are provided in *Tomorrow is Built Today: Experiences of War, Colonialism and the Struggle for Collective Co-operatives in Zimbabwe* by Nyathi and *The Women of Zimbabwe* by Weiss.
13. Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* explores and subverts the impact of the discourse on motherhood on women. Also see Nwapa's *Efuru*.

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