

Remembering the Nation's Aching Spots: Yvonne Vera's Authorial Position of Witness and Healer¹

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The Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera (1964–2005) left behind a literary legacy focusing on the violence-shaded past of her country and the marginalized stories of women. Vera's iterative return to the past bespeaks her commitment to render visible painful issues in the nation's recent history. It also suggests that, by voicing silenced memories, the author adopts a specific role in relation to her community: Vera's authorial position can be understood through the tropes of witnessing and healing. As a contribution to the undertaking of "coming to terms with the past,"² Vera's writing articulates an ethical gesture towards a better future for the community. In Zimbabwe, where the government has aspired to seize the past to suit its own purposes, Vera's counter-discursive revision is vital. In her texts, silence represents a problematic way of dealing with the past; the only possibility for viable communality is to create an atmosphere in which painful issues can be voiced. Hence, Vera's work inspires ethical guidelines for postcolonial memory. Her novels *Without a Name* and *The Stone Virgins* offer particularly interesting insights into issues of trauma and memory in the context of decolonization and nation-building. Moreover, their approaches are distinct: while *Without a Name* turns to a poetics of despair and focuses on the traumatized condition, *The Stone Virgins* adopts a more hopeful tone by emphasizing the recovery process. Both novels also lend themselves to a discussion on the matters of community and the private/public axis. In the African literary context, Vera connects to the tradition of women writers criticizing nation-building for its male-centred character (see Stratton 10). Besides the critical edge, Vera, like some other African women writers,³ is interested in exploring the possibility of "[r]eshap[ing] national cultures in a way more hospitable to women's presence" (Boehmer 12).

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² Theodor Adorno's formulation (115–129).

³ For instance, Grace Ogot and Buchi Emecheta can be seen to engage in "rewriting nationalism" by creating female national subjects (Stratton 124).

The notion of commitment emerges frequently in discussions on the role of literature in the African context; many critics maintain that African literatures are unavoidably political and have a social function. This understanding stems from the historical counter-discursive position that African literatures hold, in addition to the idea that artists should act as guides and critics in their societies (Olaniyan et al. 101). Femi Ojo-Ade summarizes the “duty” of the African writer as follows:

The artist serves the community and mirrors the life of the people. The essentials of his [sic] art are commitment to the culture and responsibility within society. From his vantage point, the writer chooses to depict reality as he would like it to be or to paint a picture of present pollution, thus challenging the public to seek solutions to the problem. (53)

Of course, the notion of commitment has been conceived in different ways, including understandings with nationalist overtones. From a postcolonial viewpoint, nationalist connotations of writerly commitment seem somewhat outdated. Instead, given the many crisis-ridden situations on the African continent, it might be more fruitful to see literature’s ideal commitment as envisioning the future (Anyidoho, Busia, and Adams 4). At the same time, the past leaves an inevitable legacy. Hence, the present formulation of commitment is inspired by Leela Gandhi’s conception of postcolonial theory as a therapeutic critical practice that rejects postcolonial amnesia in favour of postindependence aspiration for a “new beginning” (4–8). What should be added to Gandhi’s concept of postcolonial amnesia is that the will to forget does not only concern the colonial past but can also be extended to cover the uneasy relation that an independent post-colonial nation may have towards its recent history. Alfred J. López’s outlook on the scope of the postcolonial is illustrative in this respect:

[W]e might think of the postcolonial as a period of struggle not only against colonialism per se, but against its lingering effects in the postindependence state and against the state’s own struggles to achieve an appropriate vision of itself—and its people, in all their difference—as a nation. (22)

As mentioned, besides the past, another relevant temporal dimension in the notion of commitment that I argue for here is the future. López’s understanding of the term postcolonialism as an embodiment of the temporal two-way orientation is inspiring:

It is not that the word “postcolonialism” has ceased to designate a movement away from, and is thus grown out of, colonialism, but rather that it no longer occupies the space of a mere substitution or replacement; “postcolonial” defines rather the movement of a freedom, a *liberation*—one which, although in [sic] its infancy, can already be seen as effacing the originary supervening of its “root” while simultaneously pointing toward a future already visible. (41; original emphasis)

Thus, postcolonial criticism can be seen as an ethical enterprise, “an ethics of becoming” requiring “[a] rigorous attention to the details of the object

under scrutiny to discern the aspects within it that speak to an imagined better future” (Goldberg and Quayson xiii). Consequently, the notion of commitment can be brought up to date by revising it as a *postcolonial attitude*. This is to underline the need to dialogue with the past and to imply an engagement to a future yet to come: a vision of a truly postcolonial future (López 36, 67). With this concept of commitment in mind, Vera’s work can be read as a site where an ethical engagement is taken in order to imagine a better future (see Derrida 38).

As the notion of commitment implies, writing always takes place in, and is conditioned by a social context (Ngugi 4). However, literary generations of social change are not straightforward. It is true, for instance, that Vera’s writing creates spaces in which the truths of the heroic nationalist discourse can be challenged rather freely. Further, Vera has argued that in the African context, spoken word still belongs to a masculine sphere that women cannot easily access, and that writing can provide women with a space for intervention (Preface 3). Jacques Derrida, on the other hand, claims that as an institution, literature is allowed to say everything and anything while remaining fairly safe from several forms of censorship—at least in democratic societies. However, this special power of *tout dire* is under constant threat of being “neutralized” as mere fiction (36–38). Equally sceptical about literature’s possibilities to contribute to social change in some straightforward way, Vera has stated that “As a writer, I can say something—it won’t change anything” (Place 170). While literature cannot be conceived as an unproblematic means to further the ends of some political program, I follow Derek Attridge’s understanding of the literary as a site that invites people to see differently and which therefore generates transformative potential (1–34).

The notion of community is closely connected to the concept of nation. Discussions of nationhood frequently draw on Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined community, which describes nations as products of active construction (4–7). The concept of nation is characteristically twofold: it is marked by the co-existence of both communal and authoritarian aspects (Brennan 45). This dualistic character is portrayed in Homi Bhabha’s account of how nations are founded on contradictory discourses generated by “[m]inorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference” (212). Bhabha draws a line between two simultaneously existing modes of narrating a nation, namely the pedagogic and the performative: the former stands for the official story and uses people as historical objects in order to tell what the nation is supposed to be about, whereas the latter refers to the transformations and negotiations to which the pedagogic is constantly subjected by the everyday actions of the people (208–209). That the performative has the power to drive the pedagogic into crisis is not to say that the notion of nation should or could be spurned altogether; rather, the pedagogic embodies the potential of imagining nations anew. The process of nation-building is marked by violence, and the problem of remembering and

forgetting become central. For the sake of an alleged national unity, some things are to be officially remembered and others are passed into oblivion (Renan 11). Glorifying memories are kept alive in the public sphere, representing the pedagogic mode of narrating the nation. By exposing the violence and the mechanisms of exclusion inherent to the nation-building process, Vera's work gives attention to less heroic counter-memories that disturb the pedagogic. It has to be emphasized that despite the critique and the deconstructive efforts to which the notion of nation has been subjected in contemporary cultural theories, the empirical existence of nations continually shapes people's realities. Moreover, according to Imre Szeman, the concept of nation continues to haunt the problematics of the postcolonial: "[W]hile we may believe that we are ready to think and feel beyond the nation, the issues and problems that circle around this concept in [...] postcolonial [...] literatures are not ones that we have gone beyond" (60). Szeman reformulates the concept of nation as a space for the politics of collectivity rather than a pre-given political structure of the nation-state (20). This formulation is useful in reading Vera's works, which both critique the failures of the Zimbabwean nation and convey aspiration to imagine the nation anew in terms of viable communality.

Why then, in this context, is it so important to recall the wrongdoings of the past? To answer this fundamental question, Paul Ricoeur has argued that the ethico-political level of remembrance generates a duty to remember (*devoir de mémoire*). According to Ricoeur, "[the] basic reason for cherishing the duty to remember is to keep alive the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors," and that there is a need for a history of victimization in order to evolve "[a] culture of just memory" (10). In a similar vein, Theodor Adorno has made a call for a serious commitment to memory work in order to "come to terms with the past": "Enlightenment about what happened in the past must work [...] against a forgetfulness that too easily goes along with and justifies what is forgotten" (125). Barnor Hesse has brought the notion of just memory into the postcolonial context, formulating the ethics of postcolonial memory work as follows: "The ethics of postcolonial memory concerns itself less with the historical 'wrongs' [sic] of the colonial question than with interrupted and incomplete forms of decolonization and their relation to contemporary social constructions of injustice/justice" (165). For the purposes of this essay, Hesse's formulation is useful as it highlights the necessity to revisit the post-colonial past in addition to the colonial past. It must be emphasized that the focus on postindependence injustices does not mean downplaying the trauma of colonialism. Indeed, as the idea of the postcolonial that I outlined earlier suggests, the colonial legacy is an inevitable aspect of the postcolonial: for instance, struggles for independence and nation-building can be read as direct counter-narratives to colonialism. Given this complicity, colonialism is never really absent from the postcolonial. Although Vera's emphasis is on decolonization and

the postindependence era,⁴ colonialism manifests its oppressive, constant presence in the margins of her narrative. It is the motivating force behind the war, and the one setting limits to women's mobility and possibilities in the urban space. While acknowledging the brutalities of the Rhodesian settler colony, the focus of the present essay is, nevertheless, on its postindependence *sequels*: on the violent and always-gendered process of nation-building. It is necessary to emphasize that while discourses of decolonization have played an important role in resisting colonialism, they can, to quote Tejumola Olaniyan, "[b]e no less repressive, politically and epistemologically, than the Western grand narratives they oppose" (44); this statement certainly holds true for Zimbabwean nationalism. Further, given the central role that nationalist discourses hold in the Zimbabwe crisis, a shift of focus from colonial wrongdoings seems rather urgent.

Adorno's formulation of "coming to terms with the past" implies that the relation to the past is pathological when traumatic memories are actively pushed into the unconscious. As Barbara Misztal has stated, besides the individual psyche, traumas can also affect communities; silence and will to forget are common reactions to both individual and collective traumas (Misztal 141). This is where the notion of "working through" becomes central: in order to get over the traumatic experience, both individuals and communities must engage in a process of mourning. Voicing the trauma and accepting it as an undeniable part of the past is the only way out of the paralyzing suffering. This means that traumatic experiences in a nation's history should not be banished into the private realm, but rather, should be guaranteed space in the public sphere where they can be voiced (Misztal 140–42). The act of voicing a traumatic experience is empowering for the victims, because it facilitates their reintegration into the community (Brison 40).

Vera's work represents the side of nation that disturbs the pedagogical narrative, asking—as Vera herself has put it—"What is happening to the women while we are creating these heroes?" ("Shaping" 80). Vera generates this "disturbance" through the experiences of individual women and argues: "[I] prefer to look at the particular because it makes me question the grand, the bigger, the larger thing" ("Shaping" 80). Vera says that she is interested in how "[t]he isolated individual [is] connected to everything else" and that her novels can be read as "[b]iographies of unknown women" (Interview 223). Vera's women are outsiders in the imagined community of nation. However, through the close intertwining of the women's stories into the different moments of the national history, Vera's work transgresses the boundary between the private and the public. Gayatri Spivak has observed the inevitable intermingling of these allegedly separate spheres. She argues: "For if the

⁴ In *Nehanda*, a novel that re-narrates the legend of a female spirit medium who leads the insurgencies against the colonial invasion in the late 1890s, Vera addresses the colonial question most explicitly. The novel challenges *both* colonialist and indigenous, masculinist, nationalist appropriations of history.

fabric of the so-called public sector is woven of the so-called private, the definition of the private is marked by a public potential, since it *is* the weave, or texture, of public activity” (103; original emphasis). That some experiences are defined as private should not be a reason to dismiss or trivialize them; quite the contrary, their being labelled as such reveals a discourse of power at work. Definition of gendered violence as a private problem deprives it of public attention, consigning it to silence in the company of other “[s]keletons in the nation’s cupboard” (Muchemwa 197). In this sense, it is problematic that some critics have interpreted Vera’s last novel about the Matabeleland genocide, entitled *The Stone Virgins*, as a move towards “a more historically accurate” approach. According to Terence Ranger, “[*The Stone Virgins*] is not a book in which narratives are compressed into a *private tragedy*. It is a book about people caught up in and destroyed by a *public disaster*” (206; emphasis added). The binary between private/public echoes in Stephen Chan’s words, claiming that it was not until *The Stone Virgins* that Vera started to deal with “[p]olitical themes” and to “[g]o beyond the *merely poetic*” (374; emphasis added). Again, according to Lene Bull-Christiansen, *The Stone Virgins* and *Nehanda* “[s]tand out in Vera’s writings by engaging the *nation’s history more directly* than her other novels” (106; emphasis added). It is true that in *Under the Tongue*, *Without a Name*, and *Butterfly Burning* the viewpoint of an individual woman is more prominent than in *The Stone Virgins*. However, the juxtaposition of the private and the public expressed in the above critiques pushes the experiences of “individual women” on the fringes of the nation’s past, detaching gendered violence from its context. An ethical re-narration of the nation has to take into account women’s experiences of violence. Women’s violated bodies can be understood as disturbing scars on the texture of the nation, a trope that captures their ambiguous position of simultaneous belonging and not-belonging to the nation (Toivanen 13).

In Vera’s work, women often end up as “incidental” casualties of decolonization and nation-building; they are raped and murdered by somewhat questionable war heroes. The way Vera represents this violence emphasizes the individual point of view, as if there were no other reality outside the victim’s embodied experience. This is a perspective that seems to “[r]ender [...] national history [...] almost unrecognizable” (Gunner and Kortenaar 2). According to Anne Gagiano, Vera “[c]onfronts her readers with material that will not be recorded in the history books; doing what historical accounts cannot do: immersing us in the horrors of individual experiences of war” (67). Indeed, Vera’s way of including marginalized experiences in the national narrative answers Richard Werbner’s call for a more profound reflection on the official/unofficial and personal/social dimensions of postcolonial memory and the introduction of “private” experiences of violence to the public sphere (1–2). Further, as Robert J.C. Young argues, since women’s struggles often take place outside nationalist politics, it is not even possible to tell or understand their past in the same way as hegemonic histories are told and

understood (361). This is where literary representation can adopt an important role.

The events of the novel *Without a Name* are set in the period of freedom struggle in the late 1970s. The protagonist of the novel is Mazvita, a young peasant woman who, after being raped by a freedom-fighter, gets pregnant and ends up breaking the neck of her unwanted newly born baby. The novel can be read as a trauma narrative in which no obvious healing process is in sight. *Without a Name* is shaded by the weight of consecutive traumatic events—rape, killing of the family, and later infanticide—that the protagonist wishes to banish to oblivion. The narrative structure is such that the reasons behind the protagonist's suffering are unmasked little by little. For instance, the depiction of the strangling of the baby is placed among the last chapters, generating a sense that the narrative is burdened with the weight of a secret.

Escaping her painful memories, Mazvita tries to find a new beginning in the city. In this brave new start, Mazvita mistakes silence for remedy: "The silence was not a forgetting, but a beginning. She would grow from the silence he had brought to her" (35). Oblivion brings about a spurious sense of freedom, but Mazvita is still in a constant struggle with the past: "Though she had told herself this was freedom, it was not easy to forget where she had come from" (59). For a while, she seems to have succeeded in leaving the past behind, until she realizes that she is carrying the rapist's child. Through the pregnancy the past that has been voluntarily forgotten refuses to ease its stranglehold, and the baby comes to represent an embodiment of the silence that conceals the traumatic memory. During the pregnancy, Mazvita tries to "[b]ury the child inside her body" (73), in an effort to put the past aside instead of dealing with it. Later, when she has given birth to the child, she is represented as having "[b]uried the baby on her back" (49). Yet again, her willingness to cling to oblivion manifests in an attempt to put the past aside. Because she is unable to deal with the traumatic past, Mazvita refuses to give the child a name: "The child grew in a silence with no name. Mazvita could not name the silence" (85). Despite the protagonist's insistence on forgetting and going on with her life, *Without a Name* suggests that to sink the losses caused by a traumatic event into silence is not the way to deal with the problem. As the narrator claims, it is necessary to be able to voice the traumatic memories: "A cry, her own cry, would have been a release of all the things she had lost" (36). Because she is unable to voice the hurt, the traumatic memory ultimately transforms into a silence that evades language and representation: "Mazvita wished for an emotion as perfectly shaped as hate, harmful as sorrow, but she had not seen the man's face. She could not find his face, bring it close enough to attach this emotion to it" (36).

In her agony, Mazvita is deprived of support from her community. The traumatic memory that cannot be shared suffocates her slowly: "She had died silently with the thoughts she kept to herself" (82). Despite her consistent clinging to forgetting, there are moments when Mazvita realizes the vitality to fight the silence, and bursts into tears: "She lingered in her

remembrance. The cry was a divine healing in which she stood alone, and whole” (69). Illustrative of this tension between silence and speech, Mazvita also occasionally feels an urgent need to share her burden with someone, for instance with a woman from whom she buys an apron: “Her fingers trembled, not yet sure whether to confess or escape” (16). Later, on the bus, on her way to her home village to bury the baby, she regrets remaining silent: “She should have talked to the woman who sold her the white apron. She was sure the woman would have listened” (102). Mazvita’s isolation and need for community is also articulated in a chapter which is, exceptionally, in the form of a first person narrative: “Where can I go and remain whole? Who will help me carry this pain? Where will I speak this tale, with which mouth, for I have no mouth left” (98). Interestingly enough, this very short monologue ends with a stylistic means used rather economically by Vera, that is, three points; this suggests that Mazvita’s desperate request for help slides into silence. Mazvita’s isolation finds its cruellest expression in the way she carries the corpse of the baby on her back like a burden that is as much unshareable as unbearable: “She dipped a sole finger into her mouth then passed it gently over the child. She rested her finger shakingly 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 motion of rejection”(23).

The end of *Without a Name* does not suggest any easy triumph over silence. Indeed, the possibility of recovery remains ambiguous. The last chapter of the novel depicts Mazvita’s return to her home village to bury the baby. It is a journey to the past, and there is evidence here to suggest that this time Mazvita is going to deal with the traumatic memory. For instance, the phrase “It is yesterday” (114, 115, 116) is repeated several times. The narrator also states that “She will carry the voices that she remembers from this place, from the burning grass. She has not forgotten the voices” (116). On the other hand, it is obvious that Mazvita’s struggle with the past is extremely hard and that she still wonders whether there is a possibility for a new start:

If she had no fear, she could begin here, without a name. It is cumbersome to have a name. It is an anchor. It brings figures to her memory. [...] She wishes to forget the names that call her own name, then the hills would name her afresh. She would have liked to begin without a name, soundlessly and without pain. (115)

The novel concludes: “The silence is deep, hollow, and lonely” (116); the suggestion that the stranglehold of silence might still keep reminds the reader that Mazvita is truly alone with her pain. There are no guarantees of Mazvita’s recovery, but at least the necessity of breaking the silence around the traumatic memory is made evident; a better future can only be faced if the problems of the past have been worked through: “Success could only be measured by holding the past against the future” (66). In an interview, Vera has pondered Mazvita’s need to deal with the past and the necessity to share her painful experiences with her community: “She still

has to address [...] the truth of what has happened to her so she can maybe narrate it to the people in her land” (Shaping 84). Unfortunately, as the last sentence of the novel implies, there seems to be no one to listen to her story.

Although I disagree with the notion that Vera’s production could be divided into stories about individual women (private) and stories about the nation’s history (public), it has to be admitted that her last novel, *The Stone Virgins*, marks a change in scope. Issues of communality are addressed more explicitly than before. It is also noteworthy that in this novel, victimhood is not portrayed uniquely from a female point of view and that the perpetrators are represented, in a complex manner, as sufferers as well (Gagiano 65, 71)—an important reconciliatory gesture. The novel discusses state-organized atrocities that took place under the Mugabe regime in the 1980s, addressing therefore a collective traumatic memory that has not yet been dealt with in the public sphere. The silence around the Matabeleland genocide or the *Gukurahundi* is recognized in the novel: “There would be no memory desired of it” (133); it is a memory “[n]ow buried, not there, destroyed and gone” (145). It is in this novel that Vera’s agenda of coming to terms with the past finds its most transparent manifestation.

The narrative structuring of the events in *The Stone Virgins* differs from *Without a Name* in that the traumatic memory is exposed at an early stage of the novel. This structure shifts the focus from the act of violence towards the process of recovery. The story of recovery is narrated from the viewpoint of a female character named Nonceba. She has been raped and has had her lips mutilated by a combatant called Sibaso, in addition to which she has eye-witnessed her sister’s decapitation, at the hands of the same man. Once again, Vera invites the reader to be present in the suffering and to bear witness to the traumatizing violence to which her characters are subjected. The violence is portrayed as the inescapable reality of the protagonist. She is at the mercy of the perpetrator, confined to the present moment, waiting for him to act: “I am waiting. I am alive, now, a companion to his every thought. I am breathing. My temples, beating. She closes her eyes and her body listens as his movements pursue each of her thoughts. She breathes. Harm. [...] Has she lived before this moment of urgency and despair?” (68–69).

What characterizes this novel is the fact that from early on, the narrator expresses an engagement in healing by challenging the stranglehold of silence. At the hospital, Nonceba hears the screaming of another victim of the atrocities: “She is getting rid of something. Only light and sound can cleanse the mind, not touch. She is cleansing her mind” (87). This is where the importance of not giving up to the silence is realized: “She will restore her own mind, healing it in segments, in sound. [...] She would like to know the language of all wounded beings” (91). As in *Without a Name*, verbalizing the trauma proves to be problematic, as it escapes language: “She is mute. A voice dying. Unable to shape words into language” (90); “There are no words to this lack” (139). Once again,

the victim is in a challenging struggle against the silence, a struggle in which remaining quiet about the violence would signify the triumph of the perpetrator: “I cannot hear, and tremble, lost and blind to everything except his version of events, his persistent pursuit of what has happened here” (114). By cutting off Nonceba’s lips, the perpetrator insists on absolute silence and marks Nonceba’s body with the violence, making of it a part of his version of the past. Later on, Nonceba has to undergo painful operations in order to have her lips reshaped and cured, which, besides symbolizing the hardships of the recovery process, also highlights the fact that “Only the skin heals” (95).

In any case, the only way to challenge the violator’s version of what has taken place is to have the possibility to voice it. This is not to say that remembering would be any easier in this novel than elsewhere in Vera’s production, but as a victim Nonceba has the strength to fight the temptation of forgetting: “[S]he must remember it all” (137). Indeed, Nonceba actively engages in recalling the events and is desperate to share her experiences with other people: “I want to describe him, each word he spoke, each strand of hair, his violent contempt of living. I want to speak” (114). Nonceba accepts her loss, and this distinguishes her from Vera’s other heroines. The novel also makes a statement that although a loss is accepted, it does not mean that it has not marked the person who has been subjected to it: “It would be too much to ask her to be entire. It would be impossible” (176). Words heal, but do not restore losses.

The Stone Virgins emphasizes the importance of community’s support for the victim in the process of recovery. During her healing, Nonceba is supported by her relatives and by a man named Cephas, who, unbeknownst to Nonceba, was the lover of her perished sister. Moreover, Cephas is a historian. By highlighting the man’s occupation the novel suggests that injustices are more efficiently treated by coming to terms with the past than by simply aspiring to punish the perpetrators. This shines through in a scene in which Nonceba wonders why the unknown man (Cephas) has come to meet her at the hospital: “Who is he? [...] Is he a policeman, perhaps? Someone who can understand crime and criminal minds and the right punishment to mete out to a deceased past, her past; a man who can uphold what is left of the law?” (149). Cephas works for the archives of the National Museum and has found a newspaper article that depicts the atrocities that the two sisters have faced. His finding blurs the boundary between personal and professional motives, that is, the private and the public:

He had no business cutting out the particular notice in the newspaper, or filing it away, as he stated to her then. They both know this. He should have simply told her that he had been reading the paper like anybody else. He must have sounded very suspicious to her, a year ago, to link his discovery of her and her sister to his work. His discovery sounded official. (182)

Cephas has also archived Nonceba’s hospital card in his files. Her story, as it is narrated in medical language, evades embodied experiences of

suffering, depicting the whole incident from an outsider's token objectivity: "There is a staccato narration: '... inflicted as by a sharp object ... could be a blade ... victim did not see the instrument ... grievous harm ... lips cut off ... urgent surgery required ... skin graft'" (183–184). Like journalism or medical discourse, history writing's adherence to "objectivity" does not allow for the complexity of lived experience. Here, Nonceba repudiates Cephas's historian's official conception of what she has gone through:

"After what has happened here, you should be afraid. It would be wise to be afraid," he insists. *Here*, he says. *Here*. Does he know exactly on which patch of ground she, Nonceba, experienced her loss? [...] *Here*, he says, as though he knows exactly what happened here. He knows nothing about the here of it. The feel of that here. The sight of it. The moment so full of here. He has no memory of her here in which her sister died [...]. (156; original emphasis)

What the novel suggests is that discourses pursuing "objectivity" and "truth" alone cannot generate a just representation of the past. Nana Wilson-Tagoe states that as a narrative practice, history writing strives towards continuity and closure, whereas in fiction there is room for multiple voices and conflicting meanings (156–157).⁵ Hence, the suitable site for a future-oriented ethics to take place is the realm of the literary. Only creative modes of narration can establish a space in which lived suffering can be voiced and remembered in its complexity, although it must be acknowledged that suffering repudiates comprehensive appropriation and representation. Hence, when the narrator states that "A new nation needs to restore the past" (184), it is important to understand that this restoration should not be uniquely the task of history writing, but also that of creative representational practices. Further, the relationship between Nonceba and Cephas raises ethical questions concerning the appropriation of embodied experiences of suffering into a truth-claim-oriented "official" narrative. Nonceba feels that Cephas is "[t]elling her about all her hurt" and that the man "[j]ust walked in and made himself at home" in what she has experienced (161). When dealing with the hurting past—always lived by an embodied subject—room for "[a]n imprecise distance" (172) should be allowed.

Vera has stated that "As a writer, you don't want to suppress the history, you want to be one of the people liberating stories, setting them off" (Interview 226). Vera's work has, indeed, dealt with the issue of coming to terms with the past by giving voice to stories that might otherwise be silenced. Her work emphasizes the importance and possibility of breaking the silence around disturbing memories, and in so doing, answers Bhabha's call for political responsibility in the work of a critic—why not also that of a writer—who "[m]ust attempt to [...] take responsibility for [...] the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the

⁵ While history writing has its own distinctive methodologies, it still is a narrative practice that "reaches" the past through discursive documents.

historical present” (18). In this sense, Vera links up with the current tendency in English-written Zimbabwean fiction that “[c]ontest[s] official narratives of the past in order to open new spaces for the re-creation of cultural memory, revisions of the past and re-inscriptions of identity” (Muchemwa 195). Vera’s work stands for a strenuous criticism of the authoritarian nationalist discourse which tries to secure its own validity by silencing certain memories and by imposing a one-sided narration of the past. Given the current crisis-situation in Zimbabwe and the ways in which the narrative of “the Third Chimurenga” leans on a patriotic representation of the past, this sort of a counter-discursive re-evaluation is absolutely vital (see Primorac and Muponde xiii–xv).

It is important to emphasize that the notion of nation can remain relevant and empowering for its aspects of communality. In Postcolonial Studies, scholars often focus on questions of identity and subjectivity and thereby neglect communal issues (Szeman 18–19). Vera’s concern with communality can be read in her authorial statements: “I believe in the equality of men, women and children, and in their strengths [...] to come together as communities and live in a situation of non-aggression, dignity and a graceful kindness” (Musandireve 22). When Vera is asked how she would like to be remembered, her answer reflects what she sees to be her writerly commitment toward her community: “I would like to be remembered as a writer who has no fear for words and who had an intense love of her nation” (“Yvonne” n.p.). This statement crystallizes Vera’s authorial agenda of witnessing and healing—through her undertaking to deal with hard social issues and by creating a space for discussing them, she signals her engagement in a more ethical future.

In this essay, I have discussed Vera’s authorial politics from the viewpoint of memory and national community. Vera’s work represents an effort to voice the aching spots of the national narrative by revealing the violent and gendered aspects of the nation-building process. Along with this critical approach to national narrative, Vera’s work inspires guidelines for a postcolonial ethics of memory according to which the aching spots from the nation’s past must be articulated and worked through. By intertwining stories of “individual” women with the national narrative, Vera seeks to transgress the boundary between the private and the public. Women’s marginalized stories are an equal part of the national community’s past. Ultimately, the author can be viewed as having committed to re-narrating the nation for the sake of a viable community.

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