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Tremblings in the Distinction Between Fiction and Testimony

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The work of the Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera complicates what can be considered as evidence. In this article I contend that her works can be read as examples of testimony: as texts which, though fictional, nevertheless provide testimonial evidence of the trauma experienced by the characters and by the broader Zimbabwean society. The nature of trauma complicates the articulation of traumatic experience, and fiction opens up possibilities for overcoming the representational difficulties posed by trauma. By reading these texts in conjunction with Derridean theory, I will show that, while it is possible for literary fiction to testify as a symptom of what Jacques Derrida refers to as "real experience" (92), fiction is much more central to the conceptualization of testimony. He postulates fiction as a crucial and necessary part of any testimony. The intertwined nature of fiction and testimony precludes the unproblematic placement of texts into these categories and the nature of trauma means that texts that testify to traumatic events further challenge such classifications. In my reading of Vera's work I wish to explore how a traumatized culture produces traumatized work that occupies a highly precarious and fluid position on a continuum that includes fiction and testimony.

The role that fiction can play in problematizing what counts as evidence is of urgent political and ethical importance. The articulation of traumatic experience can facilitate the process of developing recognition of the suffering of others and of incorporating that suffering into a cognitive framework that victims and witnesses can understand and deal with. Crucially, Vera's work articulates traumatic experience in a way that compels the reader, who functions as witness to the trauma to which her characters are testifying, to move beyond a simple Manichean identification with the innocence of the victim and to acknowledge the possibility of identification with the perpetrators of atrocities.[1] Readers are thus prompted to confront their complicity in the creation of a socio-political environment that is conducive to such abuses. Cathy Caruth argues "that history, like the trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (192). Caruth makes this point in reference to Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, in which he provides a

[1] The term "Manichean" is used here to refer to the specific conceptual manoeuvre of regarding self and other as dualities. This concept allows for an overly-stark division between self and other, or in this case the victim and the perpetrator.

"seeming fictionalization of the Jewish past" (182). However, rather than using this fictionalization as a reason to disregard the "historical and political status" (182) of Freud's text, Caruth explores how it can enable us "to rethink the possibility of history, as well as our ethical and political relation to it" (182). This article will show that, as readers of Vera's work, we become both implicated in and aware of our own complicity in the trauma of her characters.

Erik Falk makes the following comment about Vera's work: "With the constructions [of narratives of the past] come a number of exclusions and reductions, and Vera's fiction is concerned with tracing the borders, gaps, and silences that such identity building entails" (64). By its very nature, narratives of trauma involve gaps and silences and this article argues that Derrida's theory helps the reader to engage with these traumas. Michael Bernard-Donals contends that testimony, whether it takes the form of fiction or non-fiction, cannot serve as evidence. According to him,

> [w]e cannot view testimony as a window into the past; at its most extreme—in memories of trauma—testimony marks the absence of events, since they did not register on, let alone become integrated into, the victim's consciousness. A testimony may be effective, and it may allow a reader to glimpse a trauma (though perhaps not the one that purportedly lies at the testimony's source). But it alone does not provide evidence of that event. (1302)

Although I agree that testimony to trauma cannot be a window on the past, I do want to argue for the value of the "glimpse" of the trauma that such testimony can provide. This article is structured in a way that seeks to enable a kind of conversation between the texts of Derrida, Blanchot, and Vera and it is in the dynamics of this conversation that the potential, as well of the urgency, of literature as a vehicle for articulating testimonial evidence to, and memories of, trauma emerges. The interplay between these texts allows readers insight into important testimonial glimpses that trauma might otherwise have rendered inaccessible.

While Zimbabwe is no longer subject to white minority rule, the legacy of that rule and the violence that continues seemingly unabated raise ethical problems that are as challenging and immediate as colonialism was. Vera presents her readers with profound difficulties of interpretation. Although her works are classified as fiction,[2] they testify to the non-fictional abuses suffered by people in the society that serves as the setting for the novels. Her work clearly deals with the way in which practices such as incest and rape, and ideologies, such as patriarchy, nationalism and colonialism, have victimised the characters in her novels and short stories. Vera's texts are located in the space where fiction and testimony intersect and it is as a necessary hesitation

[2] When referring to Vera's work as fiction, I do so with recognition of Derrida's deconstruction of the categories of fiction and non-fiction. I continue to use the term "fiction" because this is the way Vera identifies it and the way it is marketed to the reading public. My consistent use of this terminology is meant to set up and clarify the very classification that Derrida's argument subverts.

before difficult and sensitive issues that they constitute a powerful testimony to atrocity.

Vera has entered a discursive field where literature attempts to respond to the "crisis of culture" (*Altered State? Writing and South Africa*) in which Zimbabwe finds itself after liberation from minority rule. After the demise of the Smith regime in Zimbabwe, a nation was constructed with people divided by "a chasm of engineered ignorance, misunderstanding, division, illusion, and hostility" (3). Njabulo Ndebele goes on to argue that the "crisis of culture" is a "crisis of transition, a process which should culminate in the emergence of something new. But seldom does the new in human history emerge so clearly as the emergence of the sun. Rather, the new is experienced as a process of becoming" (8). In this space of becoming, classifications and boundaries, such as those between fiction and testimony, self and other, personal and political become more difficult to maintain, and Vera's work exhibits a constant tension between aesthetics and politics as she uses literature to come to terms with the place of individuals in a public sphere that is in a constant state of flux.

As a theoretical starting point in my reading of Vera I turn to the work of Derrida who, in an engagement with Maurice Blanchot's fictional text *The Instant of My Death*, examines the implications of writing about an experience that either did not directly involve the author of the text, or that the author of the text does not wish to claim as a first hand experience. In *The Instant of My Death* a Nazi lieutenant orders a young man, his aunt, mother, sister and sister-in-law from their Château in France and lines them up in front of firing squad. In the distraction caused by the noise from a nearby battle, a Russian soldier tells the young man "to disappear" (5). After searching the Château and burning most of the surrounding farms, the Nazi lieutenant and his men leave. The story is set in 1944 and is only slightly longer than three pages. In his reading of Blanchot's text, Derrida focuses on the difficulties posed by testifying to the encounter with death. In my own analyses of Vera's writing, I consider how Derrida's theorization of the encounter with death speaks to the ways in which Vera's texts engage with trauma. The encounter with death shares many of the features of a traumatic experience that complicate the articulation of such experiences, for example, the fracturing of time, the flooding of the victim's cognitive structures, and the impossibility of keeping the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction intact. Derrida writes of Blanchot's text that he, Derrida, does "not know whether this text belongs, purely and properly and rigorously speaking, to the space of literature, whether it is a fiction or a testimony, and, above all, to what extent it calls these distinctions into question or causes them all to tremble" (*Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* 26).

In working through Derrida's argument about how Blanchot's text can be regarded as testimonial evidence, I want to show how Vera's fiction causes just such a trembling of any easy distinction between fiction and testimony and that her work can be read as evidence of the trauma suffered by the characters in her novels and also by the

Zimbabwean society that she depicts in her fiction. In Ato Quayson's terminology, I read her texts in a calibrated manner. Quayson explains this as follows: "When I speak of calibrations, I intend it to mean that situated procedure of attempting to wrest something from the aesthetic domain for the analysis and better understanding of the social" (xv). Just as Derrida reads Blanchot's text in a way that illuminates the socio-political environment of World War Two about which Blanchot writes, I read Vera's work as a comment on, and intervention in, the socio-political realities of contemporary Zimbabwe.[3]

In Blanchot's text there are three "I"s: the narrator, the young man whose story is being told, and Blanchot himself. It is impossible to say that these three "I"s are the same. This work can thus be described as a "fiction of a testimony more than a testimony in which the witness swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" (*Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* 72). Yet Derrida argues that it is precisely this possibility of fiction that enables truthful testimony. According to him "the possibility of literary fiction haunts so-called truthful, responsible, serious, real testimony as its proper possibility. . . The testimony testifies to nothing less than the instant of an interruption of time and history, a second of interruption in which fiction and testimony find their common resource" (73).
As in the case of the articulation of trauma, any semblance of a conventional temporal progression is destroyed by the cognitive and affective impact of the event. Whenever one testifies about a traumatic event, the problem of articulating an unexperienced experience will be there.[4] Such is the nature of trauma. Likewise, Derrida argues, when one deals with a false testimony, with a lie, or with literary fiction, the event that is being represented resides in this space of an unexperienced experience. The death, or the traumatic event, that the narrative describes, has taken place even if it "did not take place in what is commonly called reality" (92). In the death without the death that Blanchot describes, or the experience without comprehensive integration or cognisance of the experience that characterizes trauma, "the opposition between reality and fiction" (92) is flooded. The death

[3] In employing this reading strategy I do not claim that Blanchot's and Vera's texts are the same. Neither do I claim that either author's texts constitute testimony in the conventional sense. I am arguing that, by reading these texts together, new and important insights and meanings emerge.

[4] A number of theorists have informed my understanding of the nature of trauma. See for example Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005); Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992); Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (London: Cornell UP, 2001); Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Basic Books, 1992); Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000); Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2002); Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004).

that in *The Instant of My Death*, was experienced by the young man as something that "had already arrived, had already been decided, decreed" (52), even though the execution did not actually take place, is the traumatic event that shapes Blanchot's text. The young man was not killed by the soldiers, and thus the death did not take place in what is conventionally referred to as reality. However, the young man has still had an encounter with death. Standing against the execution wall, he is confronted with the imminence of death. Even when there is an "interruption of the death sentence," that which "will come, what is coming" at him, "this is what will already have taken place: death has already taken place" (50). Since this death that was bearing down on him has, in this sense of imminence, taken place, he is able to testify to it. It is in this way that the young man can testify to his own death as something that has taken place, even though it turns out to be something that was, in fact, never present.

In *Under the Tongue* Zhizha is a young girl who has been raped by her father. She is further traumatized when her mother is jailed for killing her husband and Zhizha is then sent to live with her maternal grandparents in the black township of Dangambvura. Her story takes place during Zimbabwe's second *Chimurenga*.[5] This struggle against the white minority rule of Ian Smith's government lasted from the 1960s to 1980 and mostly took the form of guerrilla warfare. The war became a civil war as much as a liberation war as both liberation fighters and the state used violence and intimidation to persuade civilians to join their sides.[6] Further ethnic-based hostilities existed between the two different strands of the liberation forces. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) each had their own military wings, namely ZANLA and ZIPRA. The former was primarily supported by Shonas while the latter tended to be composed of Ndebele people. The enmity between these two groups culminated in the bloody Matabeleland massacres of the 1980s when Robert Mugabe's Fifth Brigade attempted to neutralize the possibility of political competition from the Ndebele population.

After the rape, Zhizha is unable to speak until close to the end of the novel when she slowly and painstakingly starts to talk again. Vera provides various indications that the trauma to which Zhizha has been exposed constitutes a kind of death for the child. Zhizha herself is so uncertain and vulnerable that she seems unsure whether she is alive or has entered the world of the dead. She sounds surprised when she realizes that she has "woken up, survived" (108), and it is only then that she allows herself to think that maybe she "will live" (108). This

[5] *Chimurenga* is the Shona word for "struggle."

[6] For more detailed discussions of Zimbabwe's second *Chimurenga* see the two volumes by Ngwabi Bhebe and Terence Ranger (eds), *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (London, Portsmouth and Harare: Heinemann, 1995) and *Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (Oxford, Portsmouth and Harare: Heinemann, 1996), and especially Richard Werbner, "Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun: Postwars of the Dead, Memory and Reinscription in Zimbabwe," in Richard Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony. African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998).

optimism proves to be fleeting and is destroyed two paragraphs later when, once again, it "is night" (108). The rigidity of death is implied in the description that her tongue is "hard like stone" and the image of her hearing her "teeth fall" from her "mouth" (109) further serves to evoke the presence of death. Throughout Chapter 23 Zhizha seems to be waiting in the face of imminent death, as her reflections indicate:

> I will die from the pounding of my heart which does not allow me to bend or move my arm but turns me into stone, fills my mouth with dry leaves, covers me in decay. . . I cry in my sleep, this sleep of death. Tomorrow has departed never to return, death has entered my dreaming entered my growing turned it into mud, and now I cry in one small whimper, cry quietly into my memory saying, whispering, I am the opposite of life. (104)

Since I am reading Vera's work as testimony, closer scrutiny of the dynamics that are involved in testimony would be useful. I follow Derrida in distinguishing between being a witness and bearing witness. In an attempt to minimize terminological confusion in my use of concepts that tend to become very slippery, I will use the term "testifying" to mean "bearing witness." One can witness something without bearing witness or testifying to it, as testimony "is always to render public" (*Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* 30). This rendering public of testimony can involve the speaking of that testimony when at least one other person hears it, or the writing of the testimony where there is at least the implicit possibility of its being read. Derrida regards this issue of a potential audience as important enough to describe it as "an essence of testimony" (35). He argues that without "we" there "would be no testimony" (34).

Derrida notes that, when we are "inferring 'we'" (35), the question about the matter of proportion arises. If the hearer who takes on the responsibility of constituting part of the "we" can, in theory, disbelieve the testimony that is being offered, the question arises whether one can be sure that the hearer understands enough of the testimony. If the "we" implies a "sharing of the idiom and co-responsibility for linguistic competence" (35), the understanding that is required demands more than just simply speaking the same language as the testifier. This is all the more difficult when we are dealing with a testimony to trauma, as trauma resists and challenges representation in language. When reading a testimony to trauma, we are often confronted with a language that looks very different from conventional language. Vera's prose is a case in point. Despite these problems, Derrida reminds us that the hearer of testimony "would have to be certain of the distinction between a testimony and a fiction of testimony" (36). This is precisely what is at stake in Vera's work. I am arguing that her texts provide evidence of atrocities even though her testimony takes on the form of fiction. The possibility that no rigid lines can be drawn between these scenarios is, according to Derrida, "a possibility that is always open—and which must remain open for better and for worse" (36).

The term *demeurer* recurs throughout Derrida's argument, and its centrality is signalled in the title of his text. He is well aware of the particularity of this "rare word," which is "enigmatic and strictly

untranslatable" (77). The Latin root of the word, *demorari*, "signifies *to wait* and *to delay*" (78). The reprieve of the execution that enables the young man in Blanchot's text to experience death without being killed is embedded in this word. Derrida points out that there "is always the idea of a wait, a contretemps, a delay, or a reprieve in a *demeure* as there is in a moratorium" (78). *Demeurer* thus points to the fracturing of time that is characteristic of testimony to trauma. In his description of the young man's encounter with death Blanchot says that the "Germans stayed in order, prepared *to remain* thus in an immobility that arrested time" (*The Instant of My Death* 5) [emphasis added].

While acknowledging the usefulness of Elizabeth Rottenberg's translation of *demeure* as "abide," I would suggest that it might equally be translated as "demur." Demur is a term that encapsulates many of the connotations that are central to Derrida's argument while adding some new ones that can very fruitfully be employed in my reading of Vera's texts through the prism of Derrida's theory. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "abide" as "to wait; to pause" and "to face, sustain; to endure; to tolerate" (online edition). The term "demur," which is defined as "to hesitate; to delay or suspend action; to pause in uncertainty; to raise objection," is much more effective in evoking the notion of undecidability which is the very border at which the commonality of testimony and literary fiction emerges. It is necessary to hesitate or demur before the distinction between testimony and fiction precisely because the impossibility of making such a distinction is inherent to testimony as such. A further interesting derivation from "demur" is the legal concept "demurrer" which the OED defines as a "pleading which, admitting for the moment the facts as stated in the opponent's pleading, denies that he is legally entitled to relief." The Chambers dictionary notes that, in the case of a demurrer, "even if the opponent's facts are as he says, they yet do not support his case." This definition speaks directly to what can serve as evidence in a court of law. The notion of *demeure* in the sense of both hesitating and waiting is evident in Vera's texts.

In *Under the Tongue* Zhizha occupies a space of extreme uncertainty and Vera, who offers the reader no clarification, accepts the need to demur in this undecidability. Her work can be read as a kind of demurrer, where it provides evidence of the events she describes but where the evidence is such that it cannot be used to sustain a pleading in a court case. Zhizha's testimony with its lack of coherence to conventional notions of time, language, and reality would not be well received by a judge who needs to decide on the veracity of testimony presented. This, however, does not mean that Zhizha's testimony does not support, or provide evidence of what happened to her.

As the first-person narrator Zhizha is also dealing with layered trauma and this story is told in a language of trauma. The attempt to find the words to testify to the trauma is complicated by the fact that the victim is a traumatized child. The lack of conventional narrative progression, the uncertainty about the temporal position from which

Zhizha is narrating the story and the syntactical disintegration that is particularly acute in the sections where she talks of the incest, all contribute to a novel that is shaped by the necessity to demur in the face of trauma. In Vera's novel the hesitation before the difficulty of testifying to trauma does, in other words, play itself out syntactically and through narrative.

The acceptance of the need to demur does not, however, mean that Vera capitulates to the difficulties of testifying to trauma. Rather, she creates a work that is an exceptionally powerful testimony to atrocity. The affective impact of the novel can be read in terms of Derrida's contention that fiction is not only a structural component of testimony, but that it is, in fact, its truest possibility. The denial of testimonial status to works of fiction will thus in effect be a denial of the most powerful forms of testimony that are available.

Zhizha's encounter with the profound uncertainty of the unexperienced experience has left her unable to do much else than to abide or demur. One of the direct denotations of "to abide" is "to wait" and Vera makes frequent references to Zhizha's waiting. Zhizha responds to the conviction that death has arrived, by waiting: "I wait, in a purple sky" (104). At different moments in this short chapter the reader is told that Zhizha waits "beneath the shadow which pushes forward" (108) and, amidst the darkness, "thrusting forward, darkness" (110), Zhizha says "I lie still and wait" (110). The apparent adjournment of time as death arrives is also reflected in the suspension of Zhizha's "cry" which "waits" in her "stomach" and her "voice" which "waits to be remembered" (110).

The fictionalization of testimony is an inherently problematic manoeuvre because the notion of testimony is implicitly linked to an appeal to be believed. In this regard Derrida argues that when

> a testifying witness, whether or not he is explicitly under oath, without being able or obligated to prove anything, appeals to the faith of the other by engaging himself to tell the truth—no judge will accept that he should shirk his responsibility ironically by declaring or insinuating: what I am telling you here retains the status of literary fiction. (29)

The term testimony is used to denote something that claims to convey the truth and that can thus serve as evidence. Although the concepts of fiction, testimony and evidence seem incommensurable, Derrida argues that they are intrinsically linked.[7] As soon as testimony gains the status of certainty, it changes from being testimony to being proof. According to Derrida, testimony "will always *suffer* both having, undecidably, a connection to fiction, perjury, or lie and never being able or obligated—without ceasing to testify—to become a proof" (28). Before something achieves the status of proof, it contains the possibility that it may be a lie. For this reason Derrida argues that there

[7] The problem with linking these concepts arises from the fact that they belong to apparently incompatible cognitive systems. Fiction is associated with the imagination, testimony is linked to experience or observation, while evidence carries connotations of something that can rationally and scientifically serve to indicate the veracity of something.

is “no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury” (29). These possibilities of fiction and lies thus enable testimony. If these possibilities were absent, one would have proof and the term testimony would become superfluous. When there is proof, there is no need to appeal to be believed since the existence of proof of a statement means that the veracity of that statement has been established.
A further important aspect of Derrida’s analysis of Blanchot’s text is his recognition that the “signature of the narrator” is necessarily “dated” (65). When the narrator is testifying about an experience, whether it is his own experience or the experience of another, he is doing so in a different space and time from where the event took place. The “I” of whom Blanchot is speaking, is not the same person that is writing, regardless of whether that “I” is autobiographical or not. Blanchot cannot replace the young man of whom he speaks, he cannot “substitute himself for him, a condition that is nonetheless stipulated for any normal and non-fictional testimony. He can no longer relive what has been lived” (66). This argument, together with Derrida’s point that the one who testifies must necessarily have outlived the event, makes it clear that, for Derrida, it is only in posterity that testimony becomes possible.

The particularity of the event that Blanchot is describing lies in its traumatic nature. Whenever one attempts to represent trauma, the “event of reference” (91) has this structure of the unexperienced experience. When talking about something that has taken place without ever being present, such as the young man’s death, or something that is both experienced and unexperienced, such as any traumatic event, one has entered a space that “exceeds the opposition between real and unreal, actual and virtual, factual and fictional” (91). Derrida argues that it “is here that false testimony and literary fiction can in truth still testify, at least as symptom, from the moment that the possibility of fiction has structured—but with a fracture—what is called real experience. This constituting structure is a destructuring fracture” (92). This fracturing of experience and the appeal to the listener to believe the testifier’s unique version of an experience that has never been present characterize all testimony. In this respect it makes no difference whether the testimony is presented as fictional or non-fictional.

The embeddedness of the possibility of fiction in the structure of testimony in no way dilutes the importance of what happened to victims of atrocity in the space of conventional reality. The point here is also to insist on the importance of the experience that has no referent in this conventional reality or, in other words, the experience that has never been present even though it has already taken place. In order to read representations of trauma in a responsible and comprehensive way, the value of what occurs in the spaces between the real and the unreal, and between the factual and the fictional, must be acknowledged and treated with as much respect and consideration as the experiences that can unproblematically be slotted into the category of factual reality. The undecidability of the border that distinguishes

fiction from non-fiction "does not in the least invalidate the exigency of truthfulness, sincerity, or objectivity, any more than it authorizes confusion between good faith and false testimony. But the chaos remains" (92) and it is only from this that a "reference to truth emerges or arises" (92). In an apparently highly paradoxical move, one can only begin to understand the truth of what happened to the young man in Blanchot's text (or to any survivor of trauma) by hearing and recognising that part of the experience that can only be articulated in fiction. The reintegration of the fictional into testimony thus allows for the truth or the full reality of the encounter with death to be spoken. It is at this stage of the argument that the specificities of the Derridean conception of the term testimony start to become clearer. He argues that the testifier is always a survivor, since one can only testify if one has outlived the event to which one testifies. This element, according to Derrida, "belongs to the structure of testimony" (45). The challenge of testifying to the encounter with death can be read as an extreme version of the problems that arise when attempting to testify to any traumatic experience. Derrida argues that "I am the only one who can testify to my death—on the condition that I survive it. But at this instant, the same instant, good common sense reminds us: from the viewpoint of common sense, I certainly cannot testify to my death—by definition" (46).

Derrida comes to the conclusion that one is only able to testify to the imminence of one's own death, like the young man in Blanchot's text who could testify to the death that was coming at him. This brings us back to the notion of the unexperienced experience.[8] Even though the young man was not killed, he encountered death in its imminence and he could thus testify to his own death even though it was never present. The idea of testifying to one's own death and the concept of an unexperienced experience both present profound affronts to common sense. Derrida contends that those who insist that such experiences be articulated in a clear, temporally coherent and conventionally realistic way "rely on a naïve concept of testimony, requiring a narrative of common sense when its madness is put to the test of the impossible" (48).

The idea of the survivor that, for Derrida, is a structural component of testimony, is crucial to the reading of a testimony to trauma. Derrida argues that the survivor is a divided subject. In his discussion of *The Instant of My Death* Derrida says that "a division dissociates them within themselves starting from the event, that is, the event of death that happened to him, that happened to both of them –

[8] With this term I do not wish to imply that the experience is unexperienced in the literal sense. Rather, it is unexperienced to the extent that the subject is unable to process it comprehensively. This inability is related to the inadequacies of language and it is the attempt to speak this unexperienced experience that, at least in part, triggers the highly experimental prose style of Vera. Similarly, while the young man is confronting the possibility of a literal death, I argue for the applicability of the encounter with death to forms of atrocity where physical death is not a threat. In cases of, for example, rape and the systematic abuse of human rights, the subject is confronted with an assault on the self that resembles death in the way it eludes full comprehension and articulation.

for in a certain way both die – but also…to both of them plus one, to all three of them: Blanchot, the narrator, and the young man" (53). Derrida's emphasis on the survivor as a divided subject is another important feature that narrows down his conception of testimony. The testifying "I" is triangulated not simply between protagonist, narrator, and author, but much more specifically between a protagonist, narrator and author who have encountered death. The subject that is testifying has survived an experience that is powerful enough to have effected a disintegration of subjectivity. Once again, it is the trauma that makes the encounter with death so significant to this theorization. The characters that have been victimized in *Under the Tongue* all show symptoms of disintegration that manifest on a physical and mental level. The trauma to which they are exposed introduces the kind of fracturing that Derrida is talking about and these ruptures are both cognitive and embodied.

The importance that Derrida attaches to the encounter with death lies not in the death itself, which was, after all, never present. The central issue is the effect of the traumatic encounter with death, in particular the disintegration of the subject. The after-effects of a traumatic experience are undeniably present, and well documented in studies of post-traumatic stress disorder. Derrida articulates this crucial point as follows: "Death happened to him-them [the narrator, young man and author], it arrived *to* divide the subject of this story in some sense: it arrived at this division, but it did not arrive except insofar as it arrived (managed) thus to divide the subject" (54) [emphasis in original].

It is this division that, for Derrida, is the "true theme of a testimony that will testify, in sum, to an 'unexperienced experience'" (54). The divided nature of the testifier and the paradox inherent in the concept of the unexperienced experience make it all the more understandable that texts that testify to trauma can be "abyssal, elliptical, paradoxical, and, for that matter . . . undecidable" (53). This is certainly an apt description of Vera's work. By reading her work through the lens of Derrida's theorization of the unexperienced experience, I wish to show that her style is not only justified, but works to reflect the themes and content of her work in the structure of her writing.

Vera deals with the challenge in general, and the fracturing impact in particular, that trauma imposes on identity and the way in which any attempt at its articulation has to deal with the problems of language that resist its representation. In *Under the Tongue* Zhizha occupies multiple roles. She testifies to her own trauma and she also witnesses the trauma of others, particularly that suffered by her grandmother. The story of her own pain and the suffering of those around her repeatedly intersect. The inclusion of her father Moroyiwa's story makes it clear that the central perpetrator is himself a traumatized subject and this signals to the reader that any attempt to cast blame is fraught with difficulty. The different levels of trauma that afflict members of the Zimbabwean society are recognized in the observation that those "who stayed home were also afraid, but they were outside

the shell that contained those who fought, though this shell was thin like saliva" (48). Those "who stayed home" are contrasted to people who fought in Zimbabwe's liberation war and were thus exposed to more obvious kinds of trauma.

Vera uses terminological links to point the reader to connections between sections of her novel and to suggest possible links of causation. The word "saliva" and the images it conjures up are cases in point. The striking simile that likens the shell to saliva is used in the above mentioned quotation to explain why Moroyiwa joined the war sometime after his brother did. The next time "saliva" crops up in the text is after Zhizha mentions "Pushing, Pressing hard. He thrusts forward. Father . . ." (106). In a section of repeated references to a wetness between her legs she mentions a "trail of saliva." This can be read as Vera's attempt to indicate a connection between the war and the trauma it inflicted on all members of society, albeit at different levels, and the rape of Zhizha. After a few pages of highly fragmented text in which Zhizha tells of her father pushing "forward in a violent thrust" (108), Vera uses the image of a "tortoise" moving "slowly forward, carrying a broken shell" (109). It seems that the shell that was "thin like saliva" (48) has, in fact, been "broken" (109).
The saliva is so thin that it cannot constitute a boundary that protects those who did not join the war. This is an example of the way the text complicates notions of interiority and exteriority as well as the distinction between them. It is impossible to know whether Zhizha is narrating what is going on in the interior of her consciousness or in the exterior world. In the textual space of this novel all compartmentalization is resisted. Derrida's theorization of the hymen proves useful here. In *Dissemination* he writes that the hymen "merges with what it seems to be derived from" and that "it stands *between* the inside and the outside of a woman," thus being neither "future nor present, but between the two" (212). The penetration of Zhizha's hymen during the rape quite literally leaves her in a space where the categories of inside and outside have been rendered meaningless. For Zhizha the mental anguish is expressed in the body as much as the physical pain which results when a child's body is subjected to rape. The exteriorization of interior hurt in Zhizha's narrative is evident when she says that her "forehead grows with a painful throbbing, grows into his waiting hand, grows into a rounded shell which he breaks and breaks with a clenched fist" (109).

Vera's text suggests that when a subject is intensely traumatized, the face acquires a kind of blank expression. She provides the Zhizha's account of her experience of brutalization and vulnerability, whether this account presents objective reality or mental creations. The final section of this chapter reveals the effect of the experience on Zhizha's face:

> Father carries me in his hands, holds my head down with his fingers. Naked, I kick helplessly about. I cannot escape. I scrape the ground with weakening legs, with a dreadful torment, a feeble hope. I open my mouth to fight or cry but my face is numb, dead. It has been hammered with a rock. (109)

A face that is "numb, dead" is one that is without expression. The lack of expression on the face is not indicative of passivity or of a lack of feeling. This is clear in the case of Zhizha who is actively, albeit "helplessly," kicking her legs and experiencing both "torment" and "hope." The question now arises why these characters, who have clearly suffered great pain, only seem able to express their experience through a lack of expression. A closer consideration of the nature of trauma reveals that this last sentence is not as contradictory as it may appear to be at first glance.

Etymologically the term "expression" denotes the exteriorization of what is experienced in the subject's interior space. Expression is thus very much a manifestation of the relation between the interior and the exterior. In my earlier discussion of trauma, I tried to clarify how trauma is always an "unexperienced experience" in the sense that it constitutes such a profound assault on the cognitive framework of the victim that it can only be truly experienced retroactively. Simon Critchley's articulation of the effect of trauma is particularly illuminating. He argues that "under the deafening shock or the violence of trauma, the subject becomes an internally divided or split self" and that this results in "a scarred interiority inaccessible to consciousness and reflection" (194). The traumatized subject's interiority is scarred to such an extent that the subject's own interiority becomes a kind of foreign land. They cannot express what is going on inside them because they cannot know it. They cannot know it because they have not experienced it in the full sense of the word. This is why the interior of the traumatized subject is "non-self-coincidental." It does not coincide with the self because, as something that has not been fully experienced, it is not yet a part of the self. They have, in fact, only encountered it as an "unexperienced experience."

Like the hymen, the traumatic event is both inside and outside of the self, it is both already part of the self and not yet a part of the self. Vera uses the images of saliva and lack of expression in a way that allows a theorization of the hinge between the unexperienced experience and the text's account of the problematized subjectivity of characters who have encountered trauma. The image of a shadow is also employed to develop the idea that the traumatized subject occupies a space where inside and outside, presence and absence intersect. Zhizha reflects:

> It is night. I feel my eyelids fall while my tongue grows thick and heavy, pressed between my teeth. My tongue is hard like stone. I dare not cry or breathe. A shadow grows towards me. Father grows out of the shadow. I wait beneath the shadow which pushes forward in a violent thrust, crushing my legs.
>
> mucus and saliva…
> enters…
>
> It is night. (108)

The enclosure of this section by the two identical assertions that it "is night" conveys a kind of certainty that is totally undermined by the actual content of the text between the repeated sentences. Vera immediately introduces uncertainty with the statement that Zhizha's

"eyelids fall." This is an image of drowsiness and the reader cannot know whether this section relays something that is going on in the interior psychic world of Zhizha's dreams or in the reality exterior to her consciousness. This lack of certainty is further exacerbated by the equation of Father with a shadow. A shadow is an area of darkness or a shape that is formed when an object comes between light rays and a surface. The shadow provides evidence of the presence of an object, but it is not itself a physically present object. The shadow can only occupy the space from which the object to which it refers is absent. The insubstantiality of the shadow is thrown into doubt by the very real effect it has in "crushing" Zhizha's "legs". The shadow, which has become a metaphorical substitute for Father, thus has the effect of something that is present, even in its absence. It is the shadow that "enters" Zhizha and she experiences this ambiguous presence as "mucus and saliva." Mucus and saliva, with their membranous connotations, are themselves situated at the intersection between inside and outside. Mucus and saliva adhere to and become absorbed in the membrane that is the hymen and, as part of the hymen, it is both inside and outside Zhizha's body and neither inside nor outside that body. The division of the subjectivity of a person who has encountered death is very evident in this passage. It is important to recall that Derrida regards this "singular division" as "the true theme of a testimony that will testify, in sum, to an 'unexperienced experience'" (*Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* 54). The reader is presented here with a character that has experienced death even though she survived, for whom the only apt expression for what she is experiencing is a lack of expression, who has been penetrated by a shadow and who experiences her rape as mucus and saliva that are neither inside nor outside and both inside and outside of her body.

Like Derrida and Blanchot, Vera constantly emphasizes the uncertainty that attaches to time by making it impossible to know when Zhizha is asleep or awake. Zhizha seems to be in that space between being asleep and being awake where time is utterly elusive. She remarks that it has been a "night of sleep and wakefulness" (103) and seems to be unable to tell the two states apart. Time and again in this chapter Zhizha finds herself succumbing "to deceitful sleep" (104). The inability to get a solid grasp on time is central to Derrida's reading of Blanchot's text.

Vera links the inability to measure time that results from Zhizha's trauma directly to the traumatized condition of the broader Zimbabwean society. Chapter 24 opens with a reference to 1980, which saw Zimbabwe gain independence after the war that played such a crucial role in shaping Muroyiwa's identity and actions. The waiting that characterizes Zhizha's narrative is also a central part of the way other Zimbabweans live their lives. The reader is told that Zimbabweans came to believe that "waiting was reason enough to keep living" (111), that history "had become dazed and circular" (112), and that all that remained was "just hurt and living and waiting." The novel then ends with the statement that the people's "longing" was "almost forgotten – they had waited" (113). For Zhizha and the rest of

the Zimbabwean society, the encounter with death has fractured time and left them waiting, demurring and abiding in a space where time has lost its meaning.

Vera's work confronts the reader with versions of the elusiveness of blame and responsibility that also characterizes Blanchot's text. How does one assign blame when it is literally impossible to distinguish between perpetrators and victims? There is a very real sense that, even if one were able to identify perpetrators, one would simply be confronted with another level of trauma. The notion that assigning responsibility is complicated by the trauma of the perpetrators is a key concern in Vera's work. She repeatedly returns to the impact of colonialism as the original harbinger of trauma.[9] *Under the Tongue* can also be read as an attempt to provide some kind of account of why the atrocity occurred and to let words breathe healing into the death-pervaded spaces where her characters dwell. Vera attempts to achieve this in a novelistic form where the binary oppositions of testimony/fiction and knowledge/imagination are subject to continuous deconstruction.

Derrida acknowledges the potential problems with Blanchot using a fictional genre to tell of something that is "so obviously testimonial and autobiographical in appearance" (55). He is well aware that Blanchot may be suspected of "calculation" (55) or a kind of "abuse of fiction" in that he is offering testimony in the form of fiction when it is very easy to identify Blanchot with both the narrator and the protagonist of *The Instant of My Death.* Derrida further pushes this point by introducing biographical evidence into his reading of Blanchot's putatively-fictional text. He quotes a sentence from a letter Blanchot wrote to him that "testifies to the reality of the event that seems to form the referent of this literary narrative entitled *The Instant of My Death* and published as literary fiction" (52). In his analysis that argues that fiction and non-fiction are unavoidably intertwined, Derrida rhetorically keeps open the explicit possibility of a biographical reading of the text.

Although Derrida recognizes that Blanchot may well have had specific reasons for choosing fiction as the mode of his testimony, he insists that one's reading of his text must take into account that any such "a calculation may be extremely complex and differentiated"(56). In the first place, Derrida reminds us that "non-literary testimony is no more a proof than is testimony in the form of a literary fiction" (56). His justification for this contention has been explored earlier. In the

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[9] In *Without a Name* (1994) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002) the protagonists are raped by men who are or had been fighters in Zimbabwe's nationalist struggles against white rule. Vera makes it clear that these men had been traumatized by their exposure to the anti-colonial wars. In *Why Don't you Carve Other Animals* (1992), *Nehanda* (1993), and *Butterfly Burning* (1998), the Zimbabwean people's struggles against colonial oppression are repeatedly implicated in the trauma suffered by the characters. For a good synopsis of Vera's issues of concern see Liz Gunner and Neil ten Kortenaar, "Introduction: Yvonne Vera's Fictions and the Voice the Possible" in *Research in African Literatures* 38.2 (2007): 1-8. For more comprehensive critical engagement with Vera's oeuvre see Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga, *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* (Harare: Weaver, 2002).

second place, the author of a testimony, whether the testimony is presented as fiction or non-fiction, "may speak truly or falsely, speak truly here and falsely there, interweave a series of interpretations, implications, reflections, unverifiable effects around a woof or a warp objectively recognised and beyond suspicion" (56). Once again, we come up against the inherently paradoxical nature of testimony. These considerations, as well as the schisms in the resistance community that emerge in Blanchot's text, suggest that reading this text as Blanchot's attempt to cast his wartime activities in a positive light would be overly simplistic. As Derrida points out, some "of the soldiers who held the young man . . . at gunpoint were . . . Russian soldiers and not German soldiers" (74). In Blanchot's text an "act of the French Resistance has interrupted the process of execution and the Resistance has been taken over by a Russian who . . . has betrayed his commander and betrayed the betrayal of Vlassov" (75).[10] The Russian who saves the young man is, however, part of the Vlassov army which is responsible for the slaughter of the three young "sons of farmers—truly strangers to all combat, whose only fault was their youth" (*The Instant of My Death* 7). The fact that a "Nazi Lieutenant" speaks in "shamefully normal French" (3) also implies that the broader French society is not free from blame. Any semblance of a unified, collective resistance to Nazism and of a clear cut dichotomy of good/evil crumbles in Blanchot's text. These issues also come into play in my reading of Vera's representations of resistance to racial oppression. What started as a liberation war mutated into a civil war, in which the freedom fighters victimized the civilians they were supposedly struggling to liberate. Vera makes it clear that those who were victims of colonial oppression, like Zhizha's father, also had the potential to become perpetrators against other civilians.

The problematic assigning of blame is also important. The rupture of any rigid boundary between good and evil, and the internal fractures that characterize the communities of perpetrators and resisters mean that Blanchot's text becomes one that, in a sense, refuses blame. This is an issue that also appears throughout Vera's texts. She too seems very reluctant to apportion blame. In her work the shift from one subject position to another simply reveals another set of traumatic experiences.[11] This, in turn, has a profound effect on the reader of these texts. If the texts do not allow for a utopian community of resistance, the reader is unable to identify with such a community. Derrida argues that, when reading a text such as Blanchot's, it is crucial that one recognizes and acquiesces to this paradoxical nature of testimony. In reading such texts, we "will study the meshes of the net formed by the limits *between* fiction and testimony, which are also *interior* each to the other. The net's texture remains loose, unstable,

[10] Earlier in his analysis Derrida clarifies that Vlassov was a Russian general who betrayed the Russians and aligned his army with the German side (74).

[11] For an excellent analysis of the way in which Vera depicts the traumatic impact of war on the psyches of perpetrators see Annie Gagiano, "Reading 'The Stone Virgins' as Vera's Study of the Katabolism of War" in *Research in African Literatures* 38.2 (2007): 64-76.

permeable" (56) [emphasis in original]. I would argue that Derrida's metaphor of a net to conceptualize the interwoven nature of testimony and fiction is by no means accidental. It alerts us to the complexity of this theoretical model that he has developed and that is needed to "catch" the meanings of testimonial fiction in all its variety and elusiveness. A net is also something that has the capacity to ensnare and one would be well served to remember the dangers involved in analyses of this kind. When claiming that a work of fiction can serve as evidence to acts of atrocities, one's reading and analyses of texts invoke a responsibility to the people who have suffered these atrocities. This responsibility is all the more challenging when reading testimonies of trauma. The difficulties of articulating trauma, and the crucial role that the reader has in that articulation, bear heavily on the scholar who also assumes a role of witness to the testimony. Derrida's *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* displays his own sense of this burden by "saluting those who risk their lives, those who, driven by a certain unconditional imperative of literature and testimony, find themselves exposed to assassins because of this . . ." (22). This statement underscores the fact that the testimonial act is, particularly in a post-conflict society like Zimbabwe, a highly perilous endeavour. Derrida's terminology points towards the stakes involved in dealing with testimony. When describing the porosity of the "distinction between fiction and autobiography" (16) he notes that one "finds oneself in a *fatal* and double impossibility" [emphasis added]. He articulates this conundrum as the "impossibility of deciding, but the impossibility of *remaining* [demeurer] in the undecidable" (16) [emphasis in original]. It is in this impossible conjunction that one encounters the true nature of testimony. The paradoxical assertions in Derrida's theory of testimony reflect the profoundly contradictory space that testimony occupies. Testimony rests on the cusp between an unrepeatable experience and that which is, in so far as it claims to be believable, by definition reiterable. It is "both infinitely secret and infinitely public" (41) because the singular experience of the testifier "must be universalizable; this is the testimonial condition" (41). Straddling this border is the traumatized "I" who has, in the encounter with trauma, experienced "nothing less than the instant of an interruption of time and history, a second of interruption in which fiction and testimony find their common resource" (73).

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