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Chapter 4

"I Enter Into Its Burning": Yvonne Vera's Beautiful Cauldron of Violence

John C. Hawley



Commentators inevitably remark upon Yvonne Vera's prose and upon its startling application to the violent episodes she recounts. Some find it inappropriate, self-conscious, more suited to poetry than to prose. Others (and sometimes the same folks) describe it as by far her strongest suit, wherein descriptive powers overtake narration and plot becomes inevitably amorphous – but lovely. In this essay I wish to analyze why this conflicted response would not have concerned the author and why, in fact, she would have sought to discomfort the reader while bringing pleasure. Many writers before Vera have struggled over the applicability of art to horror (e.g. writing novels about the Holocaust; playing in orchestras in concentration camps, etc.), and some have refused to transmogrify suffering into a thing that brings delight – so this aspect of the criticism that Vera has faced is not new. She was one of the most accomplished, though, in walking an ephemeral line between sadomasochism and social criticism and in frequently confusing her readers regarding their role or complicity in the creation. I will focus principally on *The Stone Virgins*, her final novel, and seek to discover the results of trauma and how their presentation offers daunting challenges to an author. This will be set against a larger backdrop of African literature that has been understandably fixated on violence – a fact that strikes home when any number of African novels are read along with postcolonial literature from many other parts of the world, regions that have

suffered in their colonial days and later, but that seem less indelibly marked by that violence in the literature that has come to represent their new nation. I will also make reference to generic questions that arise in discussions of *testimonio* as a literary form, and will also ask about the role of women in the confrontation with violence, and possible consequences of a “gendered” narrative.

With her body fighting the human immunodeficiency virus for several years, and finally succumbing to AIDS-related meningitis at the age of 40, Vera must have seen in this hidden assault a powerful metaphor for the many other assaults that faced her protagonists. “When I asked Vera’s husband if he thought Yvonne was writing about AIDS in her late works,” writes Charles Larson, “his response surprised me. He implied that that was what she was always writing about. ‘Perhaps the most interesting question is whether the decision to *begin* writing was influenced by her “death sentence” – her discovery in 1989 that she was HIV positive” (2008, 4). This was one year before she completed her bachelor’s degree, and two years after her marriage. She completed her doctorate in 1995, and returned to Zimbabwe, without her husband, that same year. Still today there is remarkably little fiction and poetry coming out of southern Africa that directly tackles AIDS as a topic in its own right, but contemporary readers predictably speculate that those writers who are living with the disease find mortality, if not invasion, occupation, and lack of control of one’s body (in fact, the betrayal of self by the body), especially compelling themes. Vera’s writing, though ultimately centered on political events, surely embodies the physical struggle that such writers face. This in itself suggests an analogical interpretation of the severe bodily violence in *The Stone Virgins* that might offer an intuitive opening onto a personal investment in the topic that would call for an implicit merging of history, *testimonio*, and psychological fantasy – in service of the production of a particularly poetic language to en flesh horrific inhumanity while attempting to salvage psychologically dismembered humans.

Thus, the form of Vera’s writing is as significant as its topics. In 1997 she wrote that “the best writing comes from the boundaries, the ungendered spaces between male and female. I am talking of writing itself, not the story or theme. Knowing a story is one thing, writing it quite another” (Vera 2007, 558). Thus, for her the actual process of writing is on the margins, if it is done correctly; it is not, in her view, a gendered activity – though we might instead call it a queer activity, one that chooses its subjects principally because they will destabilize the reader and the reader’s notion of genre. “When I have discovered that unmarked and fearless territory then I am free to write” (558), she says. Her mind is preoccupied in that brief essay with the confluence of painting and writing, with light used literally and metaphorically, and with a particular artist. “For me writing is light,” she says, “a radiance that captures everything in a fine profile [...] Within it I do not hide. I travel bravely beyond that light, into the shadows that this

light creates, and in that darkness it is also possible to be free, to write, to be a woman" (558). If this seems to contradict her earlier assertion that writing comes from ungendered spaces, perhaps she is simply laying a claim to the muse equal to the claim made by any male writer: she is, after all, a woman and therefore writes as one; she, too, lays claim to writing as a marginal activity – not the mainline entertainment, the production of domestic romances, that calms the waters of literate society. She, like Virginia Woolf, seeks a room of her own. She is especially drawn to Vincent van Gogh – surely a troubled artist – and to his apparently simple painting of shoes, which compels her engagement: "You feel the absence of light in these pictures and that really draws your head closer and your emotion and you really want to look and you feel heavy with a new delight" (558). "Heavy with a new delight" seems a typically Vera-esque phrase, a commingling of joy and sorrow, and demonstrates her motivation in creating a "cool" medium that demands the reader's engagement. She looks again at the canvas and finds it to be "a large evocative canvas, thrilling in its sadness. I knew this had been written not without light but beyond light" (559) – a painting "written," and, again, strangely "thrilling" in its sadness. As she noted, she is not driven away by the light as she pursues it into the shadows. She turns her attention to van Gogh's "The Potato Eaters" and again responds with complex and seemingly incompatible emotions: "There was a lantern of some kind hanging above the group but its presence created shadows, not warmth or recognition. The picture was very imposing in its emotion, but beautiful, harmful" (559).

As her essay continues, it becomes still more troubling in its bipolarity. At six, she writes, she:

discovered the magic of my own body as a writing surface [...] The skin over my legs would be dry, taut, even heavy. It carried the cold of our winter. Using the edges of my fingernails or pieces of dry grass broken from my grandmother's broom I would start to write on my legs. I would write on my small thighs but this surface was soft and the words would vanish and not stay for long, but it felt different to write there, a sharp and ticklish sensation which made us laugh and feel as though we had placed the words in a hidden place. (559)

The implication of something like an incipient sexual pleasure coupled with self-mutilation echoes various images from her novels, and certainly informs the violence at the heart of *The Stone Virgins*. Farther down the leg:

here we wrote near the bone and spread the words all the way to the ankles. We wrote deep into the skin and under skin where the words could not escape. Here, the skin was thirsty, it seemed, and we liked it. The words formed light grey intermingling paths that meant

something to our imagination and freed us and made us forget the missing laughter of our mothers. We felt the words in gradual bursts of pain, the first words we had written would become less felt, the pain of that scratching now faded, and the last words where we had dug too deep would be pulsating still, unable to be quiet. (559)

Words=light=pain=the audible – thus closing the circle, as if writing itself is both light and scream. If Thoreau before her thought that life near the bone was sweetest, one suspects (and perhaps hopes) that the whole thing is (only) a metaphor for Vera in these passages,¹ yet she continues apace, and the specificity suggests she is either completely factual in her reminiscence, or intent on keeping us, as it were, in the dark. “It was possible,” she writes,

when you had used a small piece of dry bark for your pen, to be bleeding in small dots. Such words could never depart or be forgotten. This was bleeding, not writing. It was important to write. Then, before running indoors to my grandmother who would have been distressed at the changed shades of our bodies, we would use handfuls of saliva to wipe our bodies clean. This saliva spread a warm and calming feeling over us. (550)

A warm and calming feeling, coming after the masochistic pleasure of writing/scarring one's body – suggesting some version of *écriture féminine*, had we not been warned off such comparisons by her initial remarks (see Conboy et al. 1997). Whether such activity is intended to represent a gender, or simply a very particular individual, Vera wishes the act of writing to be seen, felt, carried in one's body, recognized as an expression of that singularity and yet communally shared as a definition not only of oneself but also of one's placement, one's “here,” as compellingly described in *The Stone Virgins* (Vera 2002, 156-157). If, as we shall see, *The Stone Virgins* calls into question the vitality of the newly independent Zimbabwe, Vera's description of the act of writing, as strong as that of any other advocate before her, shows the place of the artist as at least as literally grounding, as foundational, as that of the revolutionary soldier and the negotiating diplomat:

I learned to write if not on the body then on the ground. We would spread the loamy soil into a smooth surface with the palm of our hands using loving and careful motions, then we would write with

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1. She told an interviewer in 2001, while working on *The Stone Virgins*, the following: Often people believe these things have happened to me. And then I say to them, look, I couldn't have been the victim of incest, killed my child, had an abortion, been a spirit medium, committed suicide, and still be talking to you. (Primorac 2004, 160)

the tips of our fingers. Bending over that earth, touching it with our noses, we would learn to write large words which led us into another realm of feeling and of understanding our place in the world. Proud of our accomplishment we would then stand back to see what we had written. We had burrowed the earth like certain kinds of beetles and we were immensely satisfied. We left these letters there, on the ground, and ran off to do our chores. I always liked writing after the rains when the soil held to our naked feet and claimed us entirely. Then we drew shapes on the ground which could be seen for distances. Our bodies and our earth, the smell of rain, beetles and our noses, this was writing. (Vera 2007, 559-560)

This, at any rate, was *Vera's* purpose in writing: making marks in one's flesh, in the soil, perhaps in one's nation? – that "could be seen for distances." Even in her unfinished novel, *Obedience*, she is not explicit about AIDS, speaking instead of the disease of politics that is afflicting Zimbabwe. But as Larson conjectures, "after Vera returned to her beloved Bulawayo in 1995, she must have been in a state of shock, watching the double curse – AIDS and Mugabe's megalomania – destroy her homeland" (2008, 3). With her body dying along with the country's, her writing in *Obedience* apparently deteriorates from one chapter to the next and she finds herself, in Larson's words, in "the archetypal Vera situation: woman's entrapment because of her body" (3).

THE STONE VIRGINS AND HISTORY

The first third of the novel deals with the colonial period, 1950-1980, and the second two-thirds focus on the early years of independence, 1981-1986. The latter period saw the culmination of the long internal struggle that had been ongoing between two halves of the rebel forces during the resistance to colonial rule: the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU and its military wing, ZANLA), led by Robert Mugabe, and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU, and its military wing, ZIPRA), led by Joshua Nkomo. ZANU drew mainly from Shona speakers; ZAPU drew mainly from Ndebele speakers. Of particular symbolic importance in their internecine competition were the Matabeleland massacres, centered on the Antelope concentration camp near Bulawayo; much of the blame has been laid at the doorstep of the Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwean army, a special unit reporting to Robert Mugabe, trained by North Korea, and made up of former ZANLA soldiers.² According to the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and The Legal Resources Foundation, approximately 20,000 Zimbabweans (some say

2. See *The Matabeleland Testimonies*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCdVLOmQFxl>. Accessed: 31 December 2010.

as high as 35,000) were killed in these years, often in quite horrible ways. The dissidents in ZIPRA also carried out attacks not only on ZANU officials but also against civilians. Their atrocities numbered in the several hundreds, but the Fifth Brigade was by far the greater perpetrator of civilian murder.

The Stone Virgins is a confabulation of some of these historical incidents, emphasizing those following independence in Zimbabwe, and therefore dwelling insistently on black-on-black violence with all its symbolic suicidal ramifications. Terence Ranger (with Alexander et al.) published his historical analysis of Matabeleland while Vera was writing this novel, and he concludes that:

Some dissident murders introduced a new level of sadistic cruelty. In an infamous Lupane case, a headmaster's wife was forced to cut off her husband's head. In another instance, a son was forced to kill his father after the latter was accused of informing on a dissident. In a widely cited Nkayi case, a second wife was forced to cut off the hands of her husband. Civilians also testified to two cases of mutilation by cutting off lips or ears. (Alexander et al. 2000, 213)

Those familiar with *The Stone Virgins* will recognize Vera's only-slightly modified version of these same sadistic events, and so conclude that the novel is historically grounded – though how consistently so grounded is a question we will consider below.

First, though, a consideration of the novel's place in Vera's oeuvre. Marlene De la Cruz-Guzman makes a very good case for *The Stone Virgins* as “a counter-narrative to her overtly pro-nationalist novel, *Nehanda*” (2008, 177). Vera decided, in De la Cruz-Guzman's opinion, “to take back all the support she had given nationalism in writing *Nehanda* [...] and to expose in *The Stone Virgins* the horrors of a twice traumatized people who were betrayed after independence by the very trusted nationalists who were supposed to unite them in the quest for a more egalitarian Zimbabwe” (187). For De la Cruz-Guzman, the sisters Nonceba and Thenjiwe are doubly traumatized, first by colonization, and then by the nationalists, and they have direct antecedents in *Nehanda*: “Thenjiwe is used to represent *Nehanda* and her ancestral spirit since she is closely associated with bones in the later novel” (198), and following her decapitation, “the violence turns toward Nonceba, who arguably represents the people of Zimbabwe. She is one of the sisters who is massacred in the indigenous village in *Nehanda*, but in *The Stone Virgins* she is left only half dead so that Vera can propose the notion of post-traumatic healing and deliverance for a nation that has been twice-traumatized” (200-201). So this novel can be read as an aria da capo with its repeated first section, averting complete despair by returning the reader to status quo ante bellum in the hope that time will still offer some hope for healing for the citizenry of the new and deeply flawed nation.

FICTION VERSUS THE *TESTIMONIO* IN THE PROTAGONIST'S SEARCH FOR WORDS

Truth is elusive; they settle for the evident; their own hearts, beating
[...] Fear makes their hearts pound like drums. (Vera 2002, 28; 30)

Though *The Stone Virgins* should not be read as a *testimonio* in its purest form, its basis in the historical events that Vera generalizes in imagined characters who tell their own stories takes on testimonial aspects, and implicates the telling, at the same time, in some of the questions frequently heard in criticisms of actual *testimonios*. She is trying to find a form most fitting for the expression of her people's recent traumatized histories – though they would not be understood as a personal confession. A comparison with Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* and its troubled reception history may be helpful in silhouetting what Vera's choices have accomplished, and what they have left undone.

Vera says that African women cannot afford to have nervous breakdowns, "but they collapse inside, and I'm keen to capture that collapse" (Norridge 2008, 170). In an interview conducted in 2001 when she was working on this novel, therefore, she notes that she does not intend to explore women's character through anything resembling romanticism; instead, she begins "with accepting the violence that accompanies their existence":

That's what I've done differently. And to have understood the intimate complexity of their mental worlds, and their emotions, and to have explored those moments of tragedy without, you know, withdrawing from them; without covering up. To go into the moment of the abortion, and say it; and moment-by-moment of a woman's feeling of tenderness towards herself, and violence towards herself: both those things. (Primorac 2004, 166)

So she is seeking realism in the expression of her characters, fictional though they may be. And, as we shall discuss, although she is interested in the male mind as well, her principal focus is on the women of her country and, in particular, on "the contradictions in their minds, the experiences which are, you know, kept down, which are in their minds [...] are not articulated" because their minds are "full of termites" (162). An interesting image, suggestive, perhaps, of the need to get things down in writing quickly, as a record, before the memory disappears forever. Thus, in *The Stone Virgins*, which she calls her "most brave novel" (161), Vera "dares to discuss openly pains that the victims of violence themselves may feel unable to articulate" as Zoe Norridge observes (2008, 163). And, "unlike more seamlessly 'factual' accounts of the past, Vera's novel encourages us to observe the mediate nature of her text [...] Vera's acts of imagination invite the

reader to join her in the living reconstruction of a past that is no longer accessible" (163). In effect, Vera is testifying to an event of which she was not a part but, as Norridge also notes, "most of the available testimonial accounts of these years of violence in Matabeleland are mediated by a third party" (162).

Such mediation can produce questions of authorship and agency, as in the case of the *testimonio* of Rigoberta Menchú, mediated by the Latin American anthropologist, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (wife of noted Marxist, Régis Debray). The fifth sentence of the narrative is as follows: "I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people" (Burgos-Debray 1983, 1), perhaps giving fair warning from the start that she, too, is mediating other voices. Nonetheless, as Arturo Arias chronicles, Nobel Prize winner Menchú raised the hackles of many critics when it was revealed that not every incident recounted in her *testimonio* to the atrocities in her native Guatemala was completely factual, or attributed to the correct person (2001). David Stoll writes that:

there is no doubt about the most important points: that a dictatorship massacred thousands of indigenous peasants, that the victims included half of Rigoberta's immediate family, that she fled to Mexico to save her life, and that she joined a revolutionary movement to liberate her country. (1999, viii)

Stoll goes on to suggest that exactitude may not be important, since she "won the peace prize on the five hundredth anniversary of the European colonization of the Americas" and she has acknowledged having won the award "not for her own accomplishments but because she stands for a wider group of people who deserve international support" (ix). A friend of Stoll's, urging him not to besmirch the *testimonio* with quibbles, brought up all the questions that arise in other trauma-based writing, and we might raise analogous questions in our consideration of Vera's work:

Maybe it's the fault of the French anthropologist who edited her testimony. Maybe the accuracy of her memory was impaired by trauma. Maybe Mayan oral tradition is not grounded in the same definition of fact as a Western journalist's [...] Maybe she was tired, maybe there were communications problems, maybe she was just doing what advocates always do – exaggerating a little. (ix)

But Stoll attempts to cast his investigation into a larger interrogation of the truth, suggesting that "she drastically revised the prewar experience of her village to suit the needs of the revolutionary organization she had joined. In her telling, a tragic convergence of military moves and local vendettas became a popular

movement that, at least in her area, probably never existed" (x).³ The point of his book, he writes, is to demonstrate that "a valuable symbol can also be misleading" (x), that "sooner or later, in one form or another, what the legend conceals will force its way back to our attention" (xi),⁴ and that "especially now that many academics are eager to deconstruct any claim to settled truth, Rigoberta's story should have been compared with others" (xiv).

The reader's expectations are central to this discussion. In discussing Antjie Krog, another southern African writer, Judith Coullie asks a question pertinent to our consideration of Vera's works. "Does generic classification matter?" she asks, and answers as follows:

Quite simply, yes. As has often been noted, genre shapes our expectations; each genre speaks to us differently and asks us to respond differently [...] If [Krog's] *A Change of Tongue* is read as fiction, then its documentary worth as a record of the minutiae of South Africa's transition to democracy and – far more tellingly – its exploration of its authorial narrator's personal growth are compromised [...] One obvious solution is to eschew either/or classifications and, rather, to see the text as multi-modal – and partly fictionalized – life-writing. (2009, 388-389)

One might argue, of course, that if Thenjiwe, Nonceba, and the other characters didn't "really" exist, and the reader knows this from the start, perhaps these questions are impertinent. Yet readers do not read *The Stone Virgins* as pure fantasy, without historic grounding in the Matabeleland massacres, and therefore, to the extent that they discern particular events suspended in the poetic writing, they are themselves looking for clues to the border between "fact" and imagination, wondering what the author's purpose in writing such a book might be.

In order to situate Vera's novel in the constellation of such books, let us briefly consider a related novel that, while more obviously fictional in its characterization and locale (not even naming the country in question), deals with

3. Further complicating this particular document is Menchú's statement, following a confrontation with Stoll's findings, to the effect that: "That is not my book. It is a book by Elisabeth Burgos [the *testimonio*'s editor]. It is not my work; it is a work that does not belong to me morally, politically, or economically. Anyone who has doubts about the work should go to Ms. Burgos" (Menchú 1997).
4. "Not at issue," Stoll writes, "is Rigoberta's choice as a Nobel laureate or the larger truth she told about the violence" (1999, xi), but he argues that the book's editor may have had an ax to grind: "the internecine disputes dividing Rigoberta's neighbors dropped out of the story, making armed struggle sound like an inevitable reaction to oppression [...] and the book] became a way to mobilize foreign support for a wounded, retreating insurgency" (xiii).

similar theoretical questions and more generic forms of horror. Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* joins the list of recent novels dealing with child soldiers (it is estimated such "soldiers" number around 300,000); others are: China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life*, Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Soza Boy*, and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Home*.⁵ Iweala's dystopic *Bildungsroman* charts the negative progress of a young "recruit" forced from his happy school days and plans for college into a drug-sustained descent into killing that is almost-but-never-completely mindless, as in his first murder:

I am hearing laughing all around me even as I am watching him trying to hold his head together. He is annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down and up and down hearing KPWUDA KPWUDA every time and seeing just pink while I am hearing the laughing KEHI, KEHI, KEHI all around me [...] The enemy's body is having deep red cut everywhere and his forehead is looking just crushed so his whole face is not even looking like face because his head is broken everywhere and there is just blood, blood, blood. I am vomiting everywhere. I cannot be stopping myself. Commandant is saying it is like falling in love [...] I am growing hard between my leg. Is this like falling in love? (2005, 21-22)

A younger and, perhaps, more optimistic writer than Vera, Iweala nonetheless graphically portrays an imagined horror that instantiates the horror that readers know actually exists in at least 300,000 lives – as well, of course, as in those of the countless victims. It seems important to Iweala, though, that readers not despair of such pirated lives: his protagonist, having lost his family and friends and, in fact, everyone he knew, ultimately finds comfort and some hope with a psychiatrist. We had seen his promise ("I am knowing now that to be a soldier is only to be weak and not strong, and to have no food to eat and not to eat whatever you want, and also to have people making you do thing that you are not wanting to do" (31)), but we had seen it fade away under the influence of trauma and the "gun juice" that had taken the place of love ("I am feeling in my body something like electricity and I am starting to think: Yes it is good to fight. I am liking how the gun is shooting and the knife is chopping. I am liking to see

5. Possibly situated somewhere between Menchú and Vera on the spectrum of factual/imagined would be Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* (2004), a novel about the Hutu/Tutsi conflict that echoes aspects of its author's life. To the left of Menchú and closest to absolutely factual is something like Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (1999), the author's own encounters, along with mediated accounts from those involved in the war.

people running from me and people screaming for me when I am killing them and taking their blood. I am liking to kill" (45)). We recognize the dissociation that may provide some protection of his ego ("But I am standing outside myself and I am watching it all happening" (48)), but are nonetheless left wondering about the young man's prospects at story's end:

I am saying to her [his therapist] sometimes, I am not saying many thing because I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to you. I am seeing more terrible thing than ten thousand men and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men. So, if I am saying these thing, then it will be making me to sadding too much and you to sadding too much in this life. I am wanting to be happy in this life because of everything I am seeing. I am just wanting to be happy. (141)

This seems much closer to a traditional novel than does *The Stone Virgins*, which makes less sense if one knows nothing of Zimbabwe's recent history and its traditional myths that inform Vera's characterization.⁶

Wondering whether one is to suspend not only disbelief, but also belief, may be a key narrative device in Vera's use of poetic language, typifying the difficulties in trust and self-expression among trauma victims, as well as what might be described as subaltern narrative strategies. Rigoberta Menchú, for example, ends her *testimonio* with a caveat: "I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets" (1997, 247). Similarly, though not as self-consciously, narrators in Toni Morrison's novels obscure the facts, because they themselves have not faced (or have faced but quickly suppressed) memories of what "actually" happened, as Sam Durrant writes: "because the cycle of (self-)abuse and violation is still playing itself out in black communities across the United States, the narratives are unable to offer closure [...] memories lodge themselves in the body precisely because they cannot be verbalized" (2004, 83; 87). Norridge writes that:

The greatest point in common between all these pain accounts is perhaps the sense that narrative can represent some of what is experienced, but that there are other very personal aspects of experience that might lie beyond communication. It is this "excess," the suggestion that not everything can be represented and comprehended by the listener or reader, that allows for the arbitrariness of alterity even within a constructed narrative. (2008, 169)

6. On the mythic parallels, see Samuelson 2007, De la Cruz-Guzman 2008, Gagiano 2007.

As Jessica Murray has observed, “all testimonies [...] begin with a victim attempting to articulate something that has not yet been fully experienced [...] the event is available to the victim only as an ‘overwhelming shock’ [quoting Dori Laub 1992, 57] or something that exceeds her frame of reference” (2009, 3).

It is not only Vera’s characters who struggle to speak while carefully avoiding not revealing too much: one might conclude that Vera understands that dilemma as the creator of such traumatized characters. She shares with other writers the agonistic task of bringing into being words that fight against expression, but seems to endure that experience in a particularly painful way:

People forget that writing is not just about issues [...] Writing is also a fulfilling search for expression [...] My first commitment is to the act of writing. Especially finding a voice for a particular story. And once I have it, I’m so liberated and excited that I’m not considering the audience. I’m considering the characters, the story, the voice I found, the language I found [...] I always feel, with each paragraph I write, I have to be at a new threshold [...] Paragraph by paragraph, I feel transformed. And I always feel at the end of the day, when I manage to write, I panic, my heart beats, and I think, if I had not written today, I would not be where I am right now, *right now*, this moment. But people don’t know that, you know. They just read, sometimes, and they just know the theme, they think everything is [decided] in advance, you know, of the act [of writing] ... But it isn’t. (Primorac 2004, 160-165 : emphasis in original)

TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT ON NARRATIVE

You’re not healing the way you thought you would. You start thinking, I wish they’d cut my leg off. You think maybe I was supposed to die.

[Returning Iraqi War veteran] (Corbett 2004, 43).

Robert Eaglestone makes the argument that:

the whole range of African literature in the second half of the twentieth century is traumatic, from Achebe’s description of the colonial encounter, to Fanon’s case studies from the Algerian War, to Ngugi’s political propaganda in *Matigari* and *A Grain of Wheat*, to Bessie Head’s agonized prose in *A Question of Power*. (2008, 76)

At least, one might agree that the preponderance of African literature that the west pays attention to deals with violence. Some of it deals more specifically with the impact of that violence on the novel’s central characters, and the nar-

rative techniques of those novels are variously effected by the author's interest in actually putting before his or her reader a shattered individual who has been rendered speechless. Eaglestone notes that the analysis of these texts according to the norms established by so-called "Holocaust Theory" is still relatively rare, and controversial.⁷ But he notes several characteristics of such writing among African fiction that help situate *The Stone Virgins*. They use "historical, diverse and complex narrative framing devices, moments of epiphany, and confused time schemes" (79), and these seem to describe Vera's novel. On the other hand, some characteristics of the genre as Eaglestone describes them are arguably inappropriate descriptions of *The Stone Virgins*:

like many Holocaust texts, they are all diasporic; they are written by Africans or Americans resident in the West. This is clear not only from the language but also in the very nature of the authorship itself. As trauma literature, with differing forms of authorship, attention is taken from the aesthetic, strictly understood, and from the assumed historical positivism of a documentary account and is drawn instead to the affectivity of exposure to a trauma narrative [...] they are fascinating and upsetting but not pleasurable to read. Like Holocaust testimony, they make up a new genre. (78-79)

Following his lead, several commentators have carried out an analogous reading of Vera's work, noting how clearly it parallels clinical accounts of trauma. Undergirding such analysis is Abram Kardiner's list of the symptoms common to post-traumatic stress disorder:

Terrifying repetitive nightmares connected to the war, often of an annihilating or sadistic nature, or hallucinatory reenactments of the traumatic situation; motor disturbances, including tremors and convulsions or motor paralyses, such as loss of speech; sensory deficits, such as hysterical blindness and other anesthetics; fainting spells or fits of unconsciousness resembling epileptic fits; irritability, includ-

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7. Eaglestone writes that, though there is no clear "Holocaust Theory," if there were one it would have to deal with:

debates over the relationship between representation, fiction, memoir, history, and the events of the past; over genre and form (from realism, through postmodernism and what Michael Rothberg names "traumatic realism," to second-generation postmodern writers and thinkers); over writing and how we might understand truth; over ethics and responsibility and the relation of these to textuality; over the concept of "working through" (including its failure); over the "right to write" and the public sphere more generally; and over issues often summed up in the term "trauma" or "trauma culture." (2008, 74)

ing startled reactions to sudden noise and other stimuli; uncontrollable aggressive outbursts; intense fear and anxiety; disturbances of the autonomic system; and amnesia for the traumatic event. Above all [...] a profound mental “paralysis.” (Leys 1996, 48)

Many of these symptoms figure in De la Cruz-Guzman analysis of *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins* which, she notes, demonstrate the two stages of the traumatization of Zimbabweans. *Nehanda* deals with the effects of colonization, “evident in their daily lives as intrusive memories and flashbacks, emotional numbing, avoidance, and an exaggerated startled response to stimuli which betrays the individual’s mental health disorder” (2008, 181). *The Stone Virgins*, on the other hand, demonstrates the second stage, a “betrayal trauma”:

in this narrative context, avoidance, amnesia, and pathological dissociative responses that help the individual to keep threatening information from awareness are triggered by the betrayal. Furthermore, there is a loss of volume control and traumatic reenactment which compels the victim to repeat the action without knowing that he or she is repeating it because it is his or her way of remembering. (181)

This might also suggest why Vera describes each day’s writing process as a wrestling match that results in a great sense of new liberation: as De la Cruz-Guzman notes, for example, in writing *The Stone Virgins* Vera “provides the words Nonceba strives to find at the end of the novel” (182). Vera has said that she tries “to enter the role of the character” (Primorac 2004, 160), and though one should not over-interpret the remark, one might nonetheless mark the success of that inhabitation by the complex narration in *The Stone Virgins* – a number of voices that manage to deal with rape, decapitation, burning alive, and other atrocities in words that are disturbingly beautiful. If we can agree that “traumatized individual and collective identities [...] pose particular challenges to representation” (Murray 2009, 1), and can agree that “the temporal elusiveness and the overflow of cognitive structures that characterize trauma mean that trauma presents a radical challenge to both history as happening and narrative as telling” (5), then it is a small step to further conclude, first, that “this challenge can only be overcome by a dialogic interaction between the two” and second, that “the resulting synthesis between history and narrative is testimony” (5).⁸

Thus, in *The Stone Virgins* Yvonne Vera consciously “channels” several traumatized voices, with a resultant genre that suits its purpose well. The shopkeeper Mahlathini, for example, might be seen to stand for a communal sense of nationalist hope, but he is burned to death by mindless nationalist soldiers. Nonetheless, his “trust in a nationalist agenda is absolute, and even when con-

8. And cf. Felman and Laub 1992, 105.

fronted with the betrayal, he chooses denial over acknowledgement of such a personal traumatization. Denial and disassociation are valid responses because the horror of his own death in the context of betrayal" are not psychologically acceptable possibilities, as Vera understands this character (De la Cruz-Guzman 2008, 198). But she also stands outside her characters with an ironic knowledge that reminds readers that Vera is shaping the amount of knowledge that her traumatized characters can yet acknowledge. She writes: "she has no idea now, or ever, that some of the harm she has to forget is in the future, not in the past, and that she would not have enough time in the future to forget any of the hurt" (Vera 2002, 36). This is difficult to disentangle, suggesting, perhaps, a future in which the necessary suppression of suffering will not be at hand – and that the victim of trauma must eventually relive the event in order to move on. Vera, after all, is not interested in having her characters wallow in their pain, but seeks ways to implicate healing in a possible future for them.

Several critics have noted how this is true as much for the victimizer (Sibaso) as for either of the victimized sisters or the storekeeper. Annie Gagliano, for example, points out that Sibaso would have been about 18 when the war started, and is about 32 at the time of this novel. That's a long time in which to have one's ideals corrupted, and one's identity overrun by events. As she puts it, "his contaminated and contorted humanity is agonizingly present whenever his thoughts are evoked" (2007, 68). De la Cruz-Guzman also remarks on Sibaso as victimized (2008, 202-203), and Gagliano writes of this "gesture towards the need to heal harm by including those who deal in it (and not only its victims) in their diagnostic, compassionate gaze" (2006, 58). Chapter Nine of *The Stone Virgins* is Sibaso's soliloquy, and it exposes his consciousness of what he has done: "I am a man who is set free, Sibaso, one who remembers harm. They remember nothing" (Vera 2002, 96). But Vera shows how unhinged the man has become:

The mind is perishable. Memory lingers, somewhere, in fragments. Such rocks; something happened; this is memory. You are alive; this, too, is memory. You allow sleep to cleanse your body like warm water, like that clarity of Simude. You laugh in your dream; you rest. A cleavage in this rock. You are safe. Now. The yellow grass is wrapped over your body, the odor severe, like a carcass, dead things [...] The women float, moving away from the stone [...] They are the virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king. They die untouched. Their ecstasy is in the afterlife. Is this a suicide or a sacrifice, or both? Suicide, a willing, but surely a private matter? [...] The soil is chaos and ash. I enter into its burning [...] In the bush, I discover once more that I have no other authority above me but the naked sky. The cocoon on my fingers: death. Under my

soles, ash. Nothing survives fire, not the voices of the dead. Nothing survives fire but rock. (102-105, 141)

His preoccupation with rocks and stones is interesting, given Vera's comment in 2001, while she was working on this novel, that "the connection to the land for the women is that of disturbance. Something negative [...] The place of the woman for me is the place of the imagination" (Primorac 2004, 161-162). And so, even if Vera hopes to hold out at least some empathy for the sorry state to which soldiers like Sibaso have been brought, it is perhaps inevitable that suicide is his fate, and that at least one of the sisters is preserved for a possibly better future.⁹

Female characters recognize the impact that the years of violence have had on the men, and remain stymied in bringing about a change in them:

They want to know an absolute joy with men who carry that lost look in their eyes; the men who walk awkward like, lost like, as though the earth is shaking under their feet, not at all like what the women imagine heroes to be; these men who have a hard time looking straight at a woman for a whole two minutes without closing their own eyes or looking away [...] This man seems to say he has not killed anyone [...] At the start of each new day, the question is on her lips, unspoken. Did he? (Vera 2002, 54-55)

And the female soldiers, though somewhat less damaged, nonetheless have been rendered solitary, deadened, suspicious, perhaps ungendered: "The women who return from the bush arrive with a superior claim of their own. They define the world differently [...] they forget that they are male or female but know that they are wounded beings, with searching eyes" (56, 58).

Following such haunting quotes, it may seem jarring to conclude with a query about the role of aesthetics in the portrayal of pain. On one side of the argument

9. Though Gagliano writes that:

one aspect of the complex "stone virgin" symbol casts Sibaso [...] as resembling the sacrificed San maidens of ancient times that he sees painted on the walls of the cave where he lurks. Even though male, the consequences of his war role – especially his exclusion from and permanent unfitness for domestic, familial or civilian life – equate him to the presumably adolescent maidens whose lives Sibaso believes were curtailed to glorify a dead "king" (95) [...] he decides that their end was suicide, so indicating a subtle but essential distinction between an honourable, dedicated, life-affirming, chosen death and a leap into death that is a form of servitude, hence humiliating and wasteful of life [...] We seem to be given a pointer here as to how and why Sibaso ends his life – as an act implicitly rejecting the "servitude" to which war had reduced him. (2007, 68-9)

(though not sharing this view himself), Eaglestone notes that "a harsh critic might easily accuse [such novels] of offering a voyeuristic opportunity or of colonizing atrocity [...]. The same harsh critic might also suggest that the focus on the personal reduces a wider engagement with the political and global issues" (2008, 84). On the other side, Jessica Murray writes that, "precisely because these horrors are represented as fiction, the reader is able to provide the 'empathic' audience the victim needs" (2009, 12). Early in the novel Vera writes that "the women want to take the day into their own arms and embrace it, but how? [...] to take the time or resignation, of throbbing fears, and declare this to a vanished day, but how? And take the memory of departed sons, and bury it. But how?" (51). She ends the novel on a similar note, with Cephas Dube incapable of bringing about the healing he desires for Nonceba. "His task," writes Vera, "is to learn to re-create the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet, and dry, the way grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool, livable places within – deliverance" (184). The beautiful but elusive nature of this closing rings true and echoes the many testimonies of trauma victims, who need time to heal. Time was not something that Yvonne Vera herself had much of, and her shortened life is as telling as her words: they are both suspended in time, demanding a response.

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