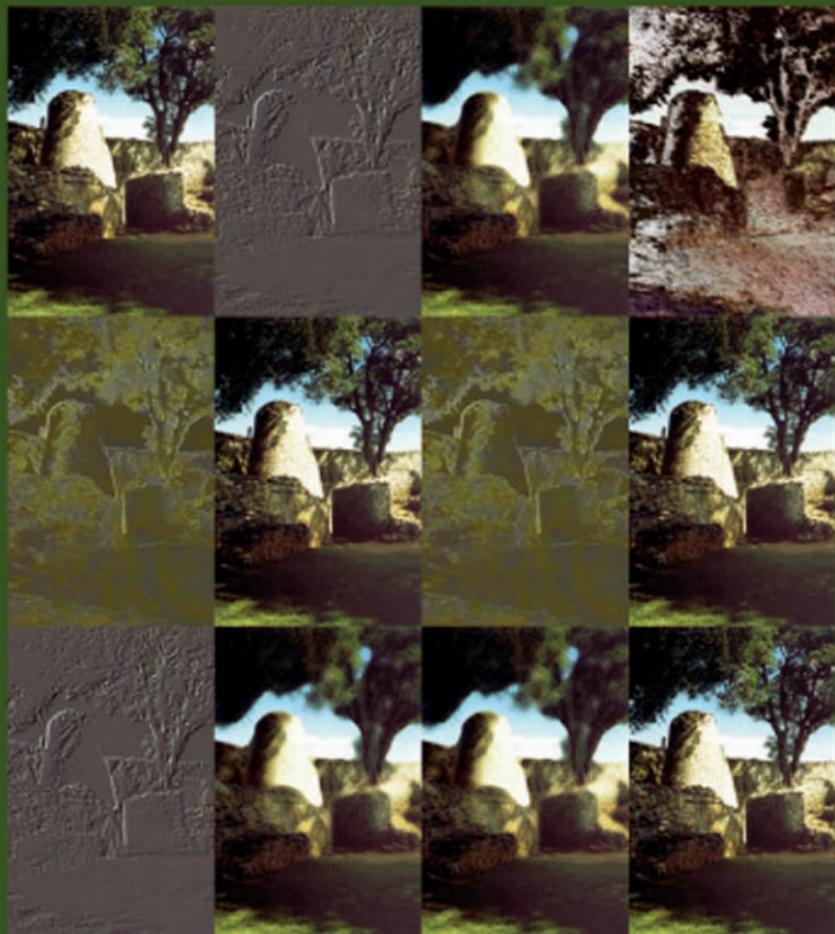


# Zimbabwean Transitions

Essays on Zimbabwean Literature in English,  
Ndebele and Shona



Edited by  
Mbongeni Z. Malaba and Geoffrey V. Davis

**Matatu**



# Zimbabwean Transitions

# Matatu

## Journal for African Culture and Society

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Amsterdam - New York, NY 2007

Matatu



Number 34

Cover design: Gordon Collier and Pier Post

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of “ISO 9706: 1994, Information and documentation - Paper for documents - Requirements for permanence”.

Le papier sur lequel le présent ouvrage est imprimé remplit les prescriptions de ‘ISO 9706: 1994, Information et documentation - Papier pour documents - Prescriptions pour la permanence’.

ISBN-13: 978-90-420-2376-5

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Printed in The Netherlands

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MBONGENI Z. MALABA

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## Introduction

**T**HIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS on Zimbabwean literature provides a valuable addition to the corpus of criticism on Zimbabwean writing. It brings together studies of both Rhodesian and Zimbabwean literature, spanning different languages and genres. The book charts the at times painful process of the evolution of Rhodesian/Zimbabwean identities that was shaped by precolonial, colonial and postcolonial realities. The hybrid nature of the society emerges as different writers endeavour to make sense of the world they inhabit or visit.

Anthony Chennells' essay distils the essence of white settlers' alienation from the Africa they purport to redeem, or civilize. The Rhodesian settler novels expended enormous energy on negating, or trying to negate, the historical achievements of the Africans as revealed by the magnificent structures found at Great Zimbabwe. The settlers focused on the ruined nature of the settlements and weaved self-serving myths of white, or Phoenician, origin, because the acknowledgement of black agency would warrant a reassessment of the racist treatment routinely meted out to blacks in Rhodesia. The texts he dissects reveal the delusional fixations of the racist mind-set that permeates the discourse of the "white man's burden" in imperial narratives.

John McAllister's essay develops the discussion of the sense of alienation found in colonial or settler discourse. The collapse of the white supremacists' dream when southern African countries gained political independence left

many settlers caught up in a profound identity crisis. Hence, “the anti-African monologue is a way of closing ranks around old colonial certitudes. Thus it is uniformly negative and closed, purporting to be an ‘objective’ analysis of Africans and of the consequences of majority rule, but revealing only the isolation and solipsism of the colonial gaze.” The essay explores the “strange contradiction” of “colonial discourse [which] presents itself as an inquiry into the Other, which is why its central tropes are exploration and discovery, but in reality, it is a discourse of power and *fears* knowing the Other.”

The complexities attendant on exploring one’s past and feeling one’s way towards a tolerable future are also revealed in Bevelyn Dube’s contribution on “Representing the Past in the Present: The Timelessness of the Ndebele Royal Praises,” which argues that the dynamic nature of praise-poetry can be exemplified by a study of the mutations that occurred in Ndebele praise-poetry, with reference to the two kings – Mzilikazi and Lobengula. It thus extends the arguments put forward by Leroy Vail and Landeg White, who also foreground the shifts in emphasis that took place as succeeding generations (re-)evaluated the significance of both monarchs. Dube demonstrates how Mzilikazi’s flight from Tshaka was celebrated as a tactically astute move by a ruler who possessed the talent of turning adversity to his advantage. The initially critical responses to his son were revised with the changing circumstances of the Ndebele community, after the British colonial power, symbolized by Cecil John Rhodes’ British South Africa Company, abolished the Ndebele monarchy. The rehabilitation of Lobengula served a cathartic role in redefining Ndebele identity.

Samukele Hadebe’s essay focuses on the preponderance of historical themes in Ndebele literature, particularly those pertaining to the formation of the Ndebele state, the succession crisis, and the fall of the Ndebele state. He homes in on the contested nature of Ndebele identity, pointing to the tendency to classify people in terms of their origin – for example, the “AbeZansi” group, which consisted of the original adherents who fled from Zululand with Mzilikazi; the “AbeNhla” group, made up of Sotho people; and the “Abelozwi,” who joined the kingdom once Mzilikazi settled in present-day Zimbabwe. The tensions were exacerbated by the tendency to appoint as chiefs only those of Nguni origin, a pattern that was reinforced by colonial governments. Interestingly, literary texts debate issues that are seldom spoken of. The appeal of historical themes stems from a widely held belief that the formal historical accounts have largely been written by outsiders, who, particularly in the colonial era, distorted the ‘history’, in order to justify the defeat of the Ndebele in terms of liberating the “lower caste” groups that constituted the majority of the Ndebele.

The contested nature of the ‘history’ is reflected in Alena Rettová’s sensitive exploration of the dilemma that lies at the heart of modern Ndebele identity, as revealed in a study of the attitude towards tradition in Ndebele theoretical writing. The essay sheds light on the “deep epistemological cleft in the people’s beliefs. What constituted the cognitive backbone of society in the past is only a collection of curiosities and superstitions today.” The theoreticians concede that cultural identity is not immutable and seek, not so much to bring back to life ancient traditions, as to alert the community to the changes that have occurred over time. The rallying cry is that the intellectuals should contribute to cultural regeneration and avoid essentialism, which obscures the real condition and needs of the people.

Tommy Matshakayile–Ndlovu’s contribution on “The Changing Roles of Women in siNdebele Literature” critiques the fossilized views on gender roles found in the works of leading Ndebele novelists, both female and male. Despite their significant contribution to the growth of Ndebele literature, S.O. Mlilo, Barbara Makhalisa and Ndabezinhle S. Sigogo insist on limiting women to domestic space, regardless of the disruption of traditional views that was a consequence of colonial penetration. The values they advocate are at odds with the socio-economic reality that pervades both the rural and the urban areas. Branding as “loose” or “prostitutes” those women who transgress against the authors’ cherished cultural values negates the important task of providing suitable role models for people who are caught in the flux of cultural change.

Mbongeni Malaba’s essay charts the predominantly negative view of women found in Nyamfukudza’s fiction. Although some portrayals are ambivalent, most reflect the negative stereotype of women as sexual objects whose principal role is to gratify men. The patriarchal nature of the society insists on submissive, dependent women, and marriage tends to confirm this status. Happy unions are the exception rather than the norm. The male protagonists’ views are conveyed in the degrading terminology (“bitches,” “tarts”) they use when referring to women. Despite the fact that many of his stories are narrated by women, the overwhelming impression gained by the reader is one of misogyny.

Patricia Alden’s article echoes some of the observations made above. It assesses the destabilization of masculine identities in postcolonial Zimbabwe and argues that the economic structural adjustment programme that was embarked on, after pressure from the IMF and World Bank, challenged the patriarchal norms of male-headed households. The identity crisis manifested itself in the rise of stories that depict “men losing control, becoming violent, and often directing their anger against women or becoming hopelessly paralyzed,

even self-destructive.” Alden also points out how few writers have addressed the burning question of HIV/AIDS, despite the havoc it is wreaking in the country. She also draws attention to the issue of homosexuality, which is largely ignored by most writers apart from Mungoshi, Nyamfukudza and Chinodya.

Charles Mungoshi’s complex vision of life and “reality” is evaluated in Rosemary Gray’s contribution. The tragic isolation of many of his protagonists in the collection of short stories *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World* exemplifies how Mungoshi’s vision is “more one of cosmic fracture than binary opposition.” The quest for meaning is illusory, as life is presented as “devoid of meaning and human reality is associated with unredeemed suffering.”

Owen Seda’s essay picks up this sombre note. He points out how Marechera’s drama, which has been generally overshadowed by his fiction, also projects his obsession with isolated, threatened individuals in “his all-too-familiar landscape of dirt, waste and ruin.” Marechera’s anarchic streak propelled him to write existentialist and expressionist plays whose hallmarks are deliberate discontinuity, open-endedness, and violence.

Emmanuel Chiwome’s review of the development of Shona writing stresses how “the subordination of modern Shona literature to orthographic concerns marked the first inherent contradictions in the birth of the literature; the literature was to be the handmaid of orthography and other concerns which had nothing to do with aesthetics. The fact that modern literature came about as a side show to the higher priorities of training Africans to be mentally and spiritually aligned to colonialism has remained a hallmark of the art.” The problematic role of the Southern Rhodesian Literature Bureau (which vetted manuscripts on ideological grounds) is assessed, as are the subtle shifts in what was/is deemed politically correct during the days of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the UDI and postcolonial periods. Thus it is not surprising to learn that, between the 1960s and the 1980s, most of the writers focused narrowly on domestic conflict. The works that appeared between 1980 and 1985 concentrated on the “celebration of independence through euphoric, nationalistic, triumphalist literature.” Hence the war of liberation was generally treated stereotypically. From the mid-1980s, more critical works appeared that questioned the elitist new dispensation which neglected the concerns of the poor.

Kennedy Chinyowa’s essay turns the spotlight on the development of Shona written drama since 1968, detailing the shift “From a ‘Puny Domesticity’ to Topical Commitment.” The dual legacy of the Central African Film Unit’s slapstick comedy, based on the ‘Jim comes to town’ motif, and the

Rhodesia Broadcasting Corporation's African Service's domestic melodramas, combined with the folktale tradition, led to the publication and performance of plays that were divorced from the realities of people's lives. The moralistic nature of the storytelling tradition, in conjunction with didactic tales favoured by the Catholic Mission Press, the forerunner of Mambo Press, plus the dictates of the Literature Bureau deadened the sensibility of most playwrights. Works that engaged with the colonial experience only emerged in the late 1970s. Some of the writers asserted that "the policy of reconciliation was not only a betrayal of the nationalistic revolution but also the beginning of neocolonialism." The endemic corruption and greed undermined the official policy of "scientific socialism" and the new plays foreground the "manifestation of a perverted moral order that flourishes under conditions of social injustice, economic inequality and political opportunism."

The book consists not only of the critical studies detailed above, but also incorporates book reviews and a most illuminating interview with Irene Staunton, the former publisher of Baobab Books and now of Weaver Press. Virginia Phiri, a Zimbabwean author who writes both fiction and non-fiction, in Ndebele and English, provides an overview of the rise and fall of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. From 1983, the Fair was run wholly by publishers, booksellers, and writers. It helped promote Zimbabwean literature and was at one point the premier Book Fair in Africa. Tragically, it also fell victim to the economic and political meltdown the country has suffered in recent years.





ANTHONY CHENNELLS

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## Great Zimbabwe in Rhodesian Fiction

### ABSTRACT

This essay discusses white settlers' alienation from the Africa they purport to redeem, or civilize. Rhodesian settler novels expended enormous energy on negating, or trying to negate, the historical achievements of the Africans as revealed by the magnificent structures found at Great Zimbabwe. For more than a century, despite the work of the archaeologists, many white Rhodesians chose to see Great Zimbabwe as a blank on which meanings could be imposed, and those meanings were preferred that justified colonialism or promoted the white Rhodesian nation. The texts analyzed reveal the delusional fixations of the racist mindset that permeates the discourse of the 'white man's burden' in imperial narratives.

**N**EARLY A CENTURY of professional archaeological work has reconstructed in some detail the history of Great Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup> The old city was not an outpost of some ancient and exotic empire but an African city, built by the Shona, who are still the dominant people of the

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this essay, in which I discussed only the nineteenth-century novels, was tabled for a panel at an Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies conference at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1995.

The professional archaeologists who before Zimbabwean independence wrote about Great Zimbabwe concluded that it was not exotic, and published their conclusions in monographs, including: D. Randall MacIver, *Mediaeval Rhodesia* (London: Macmillan, 1906); Gertrude Caton-Thompson, *The Zimbabwe Culture: Ruins and Reactions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931); Peter Garlake, *Great Zimbabwe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973).

southern Zambezi plateau, and depended on African economic networks, African polities, and African religion for its existence and status. Trade with foreigners on the coast was only incidental to its power and wealth. The earliest building dates to the eleventh century, when economic and religious authority began to be concentrated in the rulers of the southern plateau who had made Great Zimbabwe their capital. The power of the Zimbabwean state reached its peak in the early fifteenth century and there was a corresponding increase in the prestige building at Great Zimbabwe appropriate to so important a city. During the fifteenth century, political power shifted to the south-west and north of the plateau; in the north, by the early sixteenth century, immigrants from Great Zimbabwe had combined with local people to create the Mutapa state.<sup>2</sup> The fortunes of the new state were influenced in part by Portuguese traders, whose presence began to alter the economic life of the interior and who made the Zambezi their chief trade route. This shift in the location of political authority, the degeneration of the city's surroundings caused by agriculture, and the large numbers of cattle which the wealthy centre accumulated combined to hasten Great Zimbabwe's loss of viability and prestige. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese on the coast and the Zambezi knew of the city's existence only through rumour, and they were the first to speculate that it had been the capital of the biblical Ophir.

Several geographers over the next two centuries made connections between Ophir and the Sofala hinterland.<sup>3</sup> Europe validated south-east Africa by giving it a function in those Hebraic legends that Europe had made its own, and this impulse to deny sub-Saharan Africa its own achievements can be found in accounts of the architecture of Great Zimbabwe that stress its exoticism to the land. In de Barros's *Da Ásia*, the lovely dry-stone walls that curve in sympathy with the contours of valley and hill are transformed. His Great Zimbabwe is a "square fortress [...] built of stones of marvellous size" which the local people attribute to the devil, since "in comparison to their power and knowledge it does not seem possible to them that it should be the works of men."<sup>4</sup> Only by the mid-nineteenth century could Europe remove the mys-

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<sup>2</sup> Innocent Pikirayi, *The Archaeological Identity of the Mutapa State: Towards an Historical Archaeology of Northern Zimbabwe* (Uppsala: Societas Archaeologica Uppsaliensis, 1993); Gilbert Pwiti, "Peasants, Chiefs and Kings: A Model of the Development of Cultural Complexity in Northern Zimbabwe," *Zambezia* 23.1 (1996): 31–52.

<sup>3</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 3rd series, 8 (1865): 25–26, 142–43, summarizes previous and current opinions on the location of Ophir.

<sup>4</sup> J. De Barros, "Da Ásia," in *Records of South-Eastern Africa*, ed. G.M. Theal (Cape Town: Government of the Cape Colony, 1898–1903), vol. 7: 267.

teries of the lost city from European antiquarians and speculative geographers and could European travellers find out for themselves. In 1862, Alex Merensky, a Berlin Society missionary working in the Transvaal, tried to reach the ruins but was forced to turn back because of a smallpox epidemic raging north of the Limpopo. Mere lack of success did not deter him from supplying the South African colonial papers with a description of a place whose inspiration is Egypt rather than sub-Saharan Africa. Water flows from the carved head of an animal; “the larger town” must have been “several hours in circumference”; there were pyramids and sphinxes, “grand buildings, as well as marble halls full of hieroglyphics.” There is a half-mile-long underground passage, and a sliding stone door provides access to a large stone salon.<sup>5</sup>

In an age obsessed with lighting the continent which Europe wrote as dark, a description like that should have inspired other adventurers eager for the fame which attended successful journeys into parts of Africa as yet untravelled by Europeans. But in the age of imperialism fame was less important than gold. The possibility of uncovering Egyptian or Sabaean antiquities assumed less importance in travellers’ minds than the riches associated with Ophir. Broderick’s *To Ophir Direct: or, The South African Goldfields*, published in 1868, underscores in its sub-title the profitable possibilities of rediscovering the centre of an ancient civilization.<sup>6</sup>

The first European to publish an eyewitness account of Great Zimbabwe was Carl Mauch, who, in 1871, reached the old city. Mauch had made extensive prospecting journeys into the southern African interior and he was predisposed to link what he found to gold-seeking expeditions from the past. His account of the buildings is detailed and surprisingly accurate, but his more fanciful speculations obscure the absence in his description of any exotic architectural influence. In an account of his journeys published in Berlin in 1874, Mauch writes how one of his informants recalled sacrifices practised only forty years before in which Mauch discerns traces of Jewish ritual.<sup>7</sup> It is a small step from that to claiming that the hill ruin is “an imitation of the Solomonic Temple on Mount Moria” and the great elliptical building “a copy of that palace in which the Queen of Sheba dwelled during her visit to Solomon.”<sup>8</sup> Mauch’s prospecting trips had convinced him that there was abundant

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<sup>5</sup> *Cape and Natal News* (2 August 1865).

<sup>6</sup> Bamang-wato [M. Broderick], *To Ophir Direct: or The South African Goldfields* (London: Edward Stanford, 1868).

<sup>7</sup> *Karl Mauch, African Explorer: Journals, 1869–1972*, ed. & tr. F.O. Bernhard (Cape Town: G. Struik, 1971): 237.

<sup>8</sup> *Karl Mauch*, ed. Bernhard, 238.

gold on the plateau, and if Sheba employed Phoenician builders and peacocks are turned into ostriches, Great Zimbabwe's relationship to the Mediterranean was complete.<sup>9</sup> Mauch's discoveries were given wide publicity in South Africa, and Thomas Baines, the first European artist to paint the Zambesian landscape, knew about them. The preface to Baines's book *The Gold Regions of South Eastern Africa*, published posthumously in 1877, confidently asserts that the goldfields described by Baines are those of Ophir.<sup>10</sup> Bound into the book are prints of two of Baines's paintings. One shows Mauch's ceremony beneath the conical tower, conducted by a long-haired priest, and the other the hill ruin, a massive wall with ornate, oddly Celtic, monoliths thrusting from its side, set against a background of mountain and mist. Jewish rites and the gothic sublime both refuse Great Zimbabwe an African provenance.

To these texts inspired by greed and fantasy, Henry Rider Haggard added *King Solomon's Mines* in 1885.<sup>11</sup> Haggard was in the Transvaal when Baines's book was published, and we can be sceptical of his subsequent claim, made twenty years later, that when he was in South Africa he had never heard of the "great ruins of Zimbabwe, or that the ancients had carried on vast gold-mining enterprise in the part of Africa where it stands." In the significantly titled "The Real King Solomon's Mines," written in 1907, Haggard claimed that, in imagining the mines, he had been inspired by "that imagination which in some occult way so often seems to throw a shadow of the truth."<sup>12</sup> What Haggard certainly believed in 1885 was that although whites and specifically the English were superior to blacks, they had little right to a permanent place in Africa. The whole movement of Haggard's novel is against white settlement, for only a handful of Englishmen can comprehend the atavistic values of honour and spear which accords Ignosi, the rightful king of Kukuanaland, his savage dignity. When Ignosi announces at the end of the novel that traders, missionaries, and soldiers will be repulsed should they try to enter Kukuanaland, the reader applauds his stalwart independence. Sheba's palace and Solomon's mines as excuses for colonization still lie in the future.

*King Solomon's Mines* creates other oppositions between Africa and the ruined city that are to become formulaic in the settler perception of Great

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Mauch, ed. Bernhard, 239.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Baines, *The Goldfields of South Eastern Africa* (London: Edward Stanford, 1877): vi.

<sup>11</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (1885; London: Macdonald, 1956).

<sup>12</sup> H. Rider Haggard, "The Real King Solomon's Mines," *Cassell's Magazine* 44 (1907): 146.

Zimbabwe. Even while the novel celebrates Ignosi's contented primitivism, the technical sophistication that built the roads, temples, and mines contrasts with the people who dwell uncomprehendingly amidst their ruined splendour. The romantic impulse that valorizes the primitive and sees as laudable the repetitions of Kukuana life can as easily see them as contemptible beside the energetic progress and innovation which characterizes Europe's nineteenth century.

In *She*, published two years after *King Solomon's Mines*, a shift has already occurred in Haggard's ideology of the interior.<sup>13</sup> Kukuana land, like Great Zimbabwe, lies lost in the heart of the continent. The ruined wharf and canal in *She*, leading to the interior, remind the reader that for thousands of years exotic civilizations have tried in vain to penetrate Africa's savagery. There are no noble savages here living an ordered life amidst the splendid relics of a destroyed civilization. The temples and city of Kor over which Ayesha rules with the wisdom accumulated through the millennia are set apart from and are antithetical to the surrounding savagery. Part of Ayesha's wisdom is an occult technology which enables her to dominate and hold the local people as slaves. The containment of savagery is not the chief emphasis of the novel, however. When Ayesha lifts the veil from the rock which depicts the religion of the people of Kor, Holly and Vincey see an engraving that depicts Truth holding out her arms and weeping "because those that sought may not find her, nor look upon her face."<sup>14</sup> Ayesha explains that men, knowing that they will never find the truth, still persist in their search, and that their glory is in their persistence. For someone like Haggard who could speak of not believing in the divine right of kings but rather in "a divine right of a great civilising people – that is in their divine mission,"<sup>15</sup> *She* sometimes seems to bear on the subtle pessimism to which even the most ardent of imperialists were prone. Ayesha's wisdom has revealed nothing except that truth can never be attained; both she and truth are cruel and capricious, yet desirable beyond reason and sense. The impossibility of mastering her and possessing truth suggests the ultimate futility of all great human endeavours, even that of Empire itself.

This sense of futility often underlies Haggard's attempt to come to terms with Great Zimbabwe. In "The Real King Solomon's Mines," he writes of what the disappearance of a civilization implies. It is "almost terrifying to

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<sup>13</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *She: A History of Adventure* (London: Longmans, Green, 1887).

<sup>14</sup> Haggard, *She: A History of Adventure*, 265.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Rudyard Kipling to Rider Haggard: The Record of a Friendship*, ed. Morton Cohen (London: Hutchinson, 1965): 35.

think of [...] when for practical purposes except for some obscure traces of our blood, our particular race, the Anglo-Saxon, the Teutonic, the Gallic, whatever it may be has passed away and been forgotten. Imagine London, Paris, Berlin, Chicago, and those who built them forgotten.” But that moment of gloom passes as Haggard recalls the civilization which built Great Zimbabwe. He imagines a “long and fierce” struggle until the colonizers had broken the peoples’ spirit and they were “brought [...] under the yoke; forced to dig in dark mines for gold [and] build up the mighty immemorial mass of temple fortresses.”<sup>16</sup> This, then, is the only achievement that Empire can hope for: the creative task and the imposition of one’s will on a subject people. That it all ends in nothing is beside the point. Englishmen continue to strive, and that is their glory.

In 1885, when he wrote *King Solomon’s Mines*, Haggard could see no justification for white settlers in Africa. Leo Vincey in *She* has an ancestral right to rule Kor, but only because he is the direct descendant of a priest of Isis who was once a lover of Ayesha. In 1888, Haggard met Cecil Rhodes for the first time and although he privately hedged with qualifications and doubts his admiration for the Cape imperialist, for the rest of Rhodes’s life Haggard supported his ventures and shared his visions.<sup>17</sup> When they met, Rhodes’s agents were at the court of the Ndebele king seeking concessions to mine within the territory which once the rulers of Great Zimbabwe had controlled. In 1889, on the strength of the concession, which was of dubious legality, Rhodes obtained a royal charter, and launched his British South Africa Company to colonize the plateau which would soon bear his name.

Rhodes was quite aware of the financial advantages of floating a company which was to colonize Ophir, a name familiar to Victorians bred on the Bible, and in 1889 his company published a promotional book of appropriate articles from journals and newspapers.<sup>18</sup> Amidst praise for the health of the country, enthusiasm for its mineral wealth, and emphasis on the obvious benefits for it of a British administration, there are numerous references to the plateau’s ancient colonizers. One article mentions the ruins of the plateau, the largest of which was traditionally supposed to have been the Queen of Sheba’s palace.<sup>19</sup> If

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<sup>16</sup> Haggard, *She: A History of Adventure*, 148–49.

<sup>17</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *The Days of My Life: An Autobiography*, ed. Charles James Longman (London: Longmans, 1926), vol. 2: 116–18.

<sup>18</sup> British South Africa Company, *General Information of the Country and Press Notices* (London: The Company, 1889). The British Library copy is hand-paginated.

<sup>19</sup> “Extracts from Mr D.C. Moodie’s paper on the northern gold fields, read at the last meeting of the Philosophical Society, Cape Town,” British South Africa Company, *General*

that is too tentative, another is more assured: “Close to Lobengula lies the land of Ophir, rich beyond imagination with alluvial gold awaiting the expected rush of myriads of diggers.”<sup>20</sup> In 1891, the *Times* correspondent with the company’s forces described the triumph of Rhodes’s pioneers in establishing themselves on the plateau as a renewal of an old colonial endeavour: “Today [...] the Englishman is in the land of Ophir [...] opening afresh the treasure-house of antiquity, equipped with resources of which the deft Phoenician never dreamed.” Even if the English do not find the land to be as Haggard depicted it, what is certain is that “before many years are out, we may expect to see the image of Queen Victoria stamped on the gold with which King Solomon overlaid his ivory throne and wreathed the cedar pillars of his temple.”<sup>21</sup> As soon as the company had established Fort Salisbury, Rhodes hired Theodore Bent to excavate the ruins and commissioned Arthur Wilmot to search the archives and libraries of Europe for bibliographical proof that Great Zimbabwe’s builders had not originated in Africa.<sup>22</sup> Bent claimed that the builders were Semites, while Wilmot opted for Phoenicians. Both added to a growing body of literature arguing that the occupation of Mashonaland was the beginning of the redemption of an older civilization which had failed in its mission. The Phoenicians, Haggard writes in his introduction to Wilmot’s book, “were the English of the ancient world without the English honour,” and history has given to the British South Africa Company the task of lifting the veil which had fallen on Great Zimbabwe. “It is legitimate to hope,” he writes, “it seems probable even, that in centuries to come a town will nestle once more beneath those grey and ancient ruins, trading in gold as did that of the Phoenicians, but peopled by men of the Anglo-Saxon race.”<sup>23</sup>

In the same year that Rhodes received the charter for his company, Haggard published *Allan’s Wife*, which anticipates colonization of parts of Africa by British settlers.<sup>24</sup> An Englishman, Carson, and his daughter have settled north of the Limpopo in a town of domed marble buildings, which a long-

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*Information of the Country and Press Notices*, [19].

<sup>20</sup> “Painting the African map red,” from *Pall Mall Gazette* (29 May 1889), British South Africa Company, *General Information of the Country and Press Notices*, [44]

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in E.P. Mathers, *Zambesia: England’s El Dorado in Africa* (London: King, Sell & Railton, [1891]): 35.

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Bent, *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland: Being a Record of Excavation and Exploration in 1891* (1893; London: Longmans, Green, 1896); Alexander Wilmot, *Monomotapa (Rhodesia): Its Monuments, and Its History from the Most Ancient Times to the Present Century* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896).

<sup>23</sup> H. Rider Haggard, “Preface” to Wilmot, *Monomotapa*, xvii.

<sup>24</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *Allan’s Wife* (1889; London: Macdonald, 1951).

forgotten people quarried and built. No arcane wisdom keeps savages at bay on Carson's farm, nor indeed do savages live incomprehendingly amidst a foreign civilization's ruined splendour. Here there are "rich cultivated lands, the gold-speckled green of the orange trees, the flashing domes of the marble huts."<sup>25</sup> The Carsons have appropriated the land. As Carson explains to Allan,

"When [...] I wandered here by chance, [...] nothing was to be seen except the site, the domes of the marble huts, and the waterfalls. I took possession of the huts. I cleared the patch of garden land and planted the orange grove. I had only six natives then, but by degrees others joined me, now my tribe is a thousand strong."<sup>26</sup>

Carson's farm is a centre of order which gives form to the lives of those who have cast their lot with his. The farm has the prim stability of a model colony, but only constant vigilance and modern firearms will maintain its order against the surrounding people, who know only how to destroy what they cannot build. An insistent element in the mythopoeisis of Great Zimbabwe becomes apparent here. Civilization does not ensure its own survival, and although Englishmen of energy and imagination can restore and develop what once was there, they have constantly to be alert so that what they have built and re-built will not revert to savagery. If Rhodes and his settlers are to rebuild the ruined civilization, they must understand that they will be working amidst the immanent hostility of the continent and its people.

In other novels of the 1890s for which Great Zimbabwe was the inspiration, the cities are ruined or the decadent descendants of the once-vigorous colonizers inhabit them. This contrast between stasis or decadence and the energy and progress of Britain and her Empire captured the novelists' fancy. Anderson's and Wall's *A Romance of N'Shabe*, which was written while Rhodes's pioneers were trekking northwards, imagines a city colonized centuries before by the survivors of a pestilence-devastated Great Zimbabwe, or Saba, as it is called.<sup>27</sup> As in most of the novels, the architecture of the city owes more perhaps to Laurence Alma-Tadema than to that of Great Zimbabwe. Marble terraces, domes, and balconies linked by flights of ceremonial steps suggest a world of leisure and ritual and, in the end, aimless repetition. When the travellers reach N'shabe, however, cannibals beleaguer the city, kept at bay only thanks to the technological ingenuity of the French Prime

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<sup>25</sup> Haggard, *Allan's Wife*, 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Allan's Wife*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew A. Anderson & Alfred H. Wall, *A Romance of N'Shabe: Being a Record of Startling Adventures in South Central Africa* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1891).

Minister, who has arrived in N'shabe by balloon. As that detail suggests, the authors' flights of fancy are extreme; but it is also informative: however beautiful the city, it cannot survive without Europe's intervention. Over the centuries, the N'Shabeans have bred with Africans, which partly accounts for their lack of innovation. They also fail to appreciate the disgust which their mixed blood provokes in one of the travellers. N'Shabeans imprison him for failing to show proper respect for their queen, and in the fight that follows most of the city is destroyed; the cannibals, taking advantage of the confusion within the city, complete the destruction and massacre most of the remaining N'Shabeans.

The effects on N'shabe of the British and the cannibals are equally destructive. Both resent N'Shabean traditions: the cannibals because they are unthinking savages, the English because the hierarchies of N'Shabean society deny them the proper status which their racial purity requires. Picturesque queens of ancient lineage and mixed race must learn to acknowledge the social and racial pre-eminence of the new imperialists in the interior. Understanding comes when the few remaining N'Shabeans are shaken out of the apathy which descends on them and the British set them to work to rebuild their city. Amidst the narrative's moral confusion, only the energetic drive and creative power of British imperialism stands out. In the apathy of the N'Shabe, we see the decadence of a civilization content simply to exist amidst the glories of its past. Unlike the British, the N'Shabeans have no ambitions for greater power. Work, even if it is forced labour, will toughen moral fibre and strengthen intellect, as one of the English sententiously observes.<sup>28</sup> Such work is pointing the N'Shabeans towards their future in a British colony. If the great trading city of Saba is to be restored to its former greatness, London rather than Jerusalem will be the agent of that restoration.

Ernest Glanville's *The Fossicker*, published in 1891, also emphasizes the stasis of the ancient city.<sup>29</sup> Since Rhodes's advance into Mashonaland, Zambezia's remoteness no longer allowed legend and myth to dominate its narratives, and Glanville does not take the geographical liberties of most of the other Great Zimbabwean novelists. His city is in Gazaland, part of which, in the same year, had been included in the Company's territories through a concession obtained by Jameson. Rhodes may have brought the legendary country under British control through a royal charter, but in 1891 he and his pioneers were the heroes of a romance of empire. The forest surrounding

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<sup>28</sup> Anderson & Wall, *A Romance of N'Shabe*, 282.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest Glanville, *The Fossicker: A Romance of Mashonaland* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1891).

Glanville's ruined city becomes, in his prose, an enchanted forest, which makes it an appropriate goal of some high-romance quest, different from the squalid mining cities of Kimberley and Johannesburg where much of the novel is set. Glanville even overcomes the constraints of Great Zimbabwe's actual architecture, so that the city remains an object of European desire. There are no marble halls, but Great Zimbabwe's single conical tower is multiplied into an avenue of towers and within them are the mausoleums where the rulers of some forgotten people lie. On the walls of these vaults are murals, in one of which a woman is shown seated on a gold and ivory throne, with, approaching her, a procession of people bearing gold, ostrich feathers, and ivory. The enchanted forest, the silence, the naked people bringing wealth to their queen are held in stasis in the mural, but the moment is anticipated when life will be breathed back once again into the ancient city. It is easy to forget that the prince who will waken the sleeping beauty is the British South Africa Company, authorized by dubious concessions and considerably enriched by its manipulations of the Cape and London stock exchanges.

The detailed accounts of Great Zimbabwe which were available after 1890 failed to constrain some of the novelists, who needed architectural excess to render desirable their imagined cities. Edward Marwick's city in *The City of Gold* (1896) is even more elaborate than anything that his predecessors had conjured up.<sup>30</sup> The traveller in this book, Captain Vintcent, has been accompanying a band of Ndebele raiders, but when he sees the city, he realizes that it is his duty to desert his allies. If the city is merely a native town raised to peculiar stature by superstition, Vintcent feels no compunction in joining in its destruction. Amidst marble and tapestried halls with fountains and terraces beyond, Vintcent reflects that Ndebele victory "would indeed be the triumph of savagery over civilization."<sup>31</sup> A law of social evolution decrees that the "brute force of savagery, however vehemently flung against the citadel of civilisation, must recoil spent and defeated, so long as the intellectual and moral force of that civilisation remains unaffected by idleness and luxury."<sup>32</sup>

Vintcent is initially beguiled by the harmony he finds among the Tamim, as the citizens are called. Everyone works for the common good; children are raised in a state nursery; individual ambition and avarice are unknown; there are apparently no class distinctions. On the other hand, they have elevated "the female principle to the most exalted position in human estimation," a

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<sup>30</sup> Edward Marwick, *The City of Gold: A Tale of Sport, Travel and Adventure in the Heart of the Dark Continent* (London: Tower, 1896).

<sup>31</sup> Marwick, *The City of Gold*, 29.

<sup>32</sup> *The City of Gold*, 151.

notion that disturbs Vintcent, who realizes that it might have serious implications in the home.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, female power is an unexpected deviation from the finds of Great Zimbabwe's early plunderers, who designated as phallic symbols everything from the conical tower to the monoliths and the pestles that their diggings uncovered.<sup>34</sup>

Soon, however, Vintcent becomes aware of contradictions within the society. In the mines which are the economic base of the city, thousands of blacks labour as slaves: the Tamim's communism extends only to people of the ancient stock. Vintcent finds little to argue with in the employment of black slaves, but is shocked when he finds that the Tamim work only at what takes their fancy. More dangerously, the Tamim object to Britain's wealth and her imperial expansion. What the Tamim see as robbery and enslavement, Vintcent defends as "the advance of civilization":

Vice as well as virtue accompanieth our march, and the path of the victorious army is only too frequently marked by the wreck of things noble and good, and the success of things ignoble and mean. Yet, nevertheless, the steady, unshrinkable, inevitable advance of civilised and controlled force against the ill-regulated and untameable but not unconquerable, forces of savagery, is the most impressive spectacle the world affordeth to those that both see and understand.<sup>35</sup>

Some among the Tamim both see and understand. The matriarchal ruler of the city complains of the "stagnation of life" and, inspired by Vintcent's words, wishes to revive the Tamim's glory, grinding the blacks "to powder between my people and thy people"<sup>36</sup> – a revealing gloss on what is entailed in Vintcent's "impressive spectacle." The intelligent among the Tamim share their rulers' visions, eagerly await the changes brought by the people from across the sea. Those more wrapped in unthinking conservatism see Vintcent's arrival as auguring the collapse of their civilization. They remain unmoved even when Vintcent maintains that "the civilization which hath no power to expand and subject inferior races to its sway is foredoomed to extinction."<sup>37</sup>

Marwick's novel uses Great Zimbabwe to rebuke Little-Englanders. The Tamim rose to greatness when they subdued Central Africa from east to west. Vintcent resurrects Mandeville's formula of private vices and public virtues, arguing that it is out of the vices of "ambition, greed and lust for power" that

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<sup>33</sup> *The City of Gold*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Bent, *The Ruined Cities*, 184–95; Richard N. Hall & W.G. Neal, *The Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia: Monomotapae Imperium* (London: Methuen, 1904): 38–39, 141–44.

<sup>35</sup> Marwick, *The City of Gold*, 206.

<sup>36</sup> *The City of Gold*, 209.

<sup>37</sup> *The City of Gold*, 219.

energizing national virtues grow.<sup>38</sup> The conservatives, in the event, prove more powerful than either the matriarch or her progressive advisers, and the Ndebele destroy the city. By the end of the novel, the city has become another ruin like Great Zimbabwe, whose fate Vintcent uses as an awful precedent when he cautions the Tamim to throw in their lot with Britain.<sup>39</sup> Contemplating Great Zimbabwe, no Briton, any more than the Tamim themselves, can doubt that the only hope of national survival lies in a greater commitment to the British Empire.

In 1900, Haggard wrote “Elissa,” a novella, which is his only fiction actually set at the site which for so long had inspired many of his African romances.<sup>40</sup> It is also his first attempt to speculate not on “the dim beginnings of the ancient city” but “its still dimmer end.”<sup>41</sup> As his preface explains, the story of “Elissa” sets out to show that Great Zimbabwe “became weakened by luxury and the mixture of races, [so] that hordes of invading savages stamped it out beneath their bloodstained feet.”<sup>42</sup> Elissa herself represents the pure spirit of settler womanhood and, as the daughter of the governor, is happily placed to set an example to her weaker sisters. Despite this, the novella begins with a black rapist attacking her while she is praying outside the elliptical building, which, following the precedent set by Rhodesia’s settlers, Haggard calls “the Temple.” A Phoenician trader tries to rescue her but her assailant beats him down, and it is only when Prince Aziel, descendant of Solomon and the Pharaohs, intervenes that the man makes off. “Savages such as he,” explains Elissa, “haunt the outskirts of the city seeking to steal white women to be their wives.” Despite her ordeal, she is able to philosophize about it. The man is “a symbol of the evil and ignorance which are on the earth and that seek to drag down the beauty and wisdom of the earth to their own level.” The trader failed in his attempt to rescue her, because, as she ungratefully explains, “the spirit of Mammon cannot overcome the black powers of hell.” Prince Aziel, who has come to settle, build, and, despite the disadvantages of his ancestry, keep the race pure, succeeded. “It is,” Aziel remarks, “a parable.”<sup>43</sup>

When he wrote “Elissa,” Haggard was fully aware that there are no Mediterranean idioms in the architecture of Great Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, Prince

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<sup>38</sup> *The City of Gold*, 218–19.

<sup>39</sup> *The City of Gold*, 201.

<sup>40</sup> H. Rider Haggard, “Elissa: or, the Doom of Zimbabwe,” in *Black Heart, White Heart and Other Stories* (London: Longmans, 1900): 69–227.

<sup>41</sup> Haggard, “Elissa: or, the Doom of Zimbabwe,” 69.

<sup>42</sup> “Elissa: or, the Doom of Zimbabwe,” 69.

<sup>43</sup> “Elissa: or, the Doom of Zimbabwe,” 83–84.

Aziel is led into a vast pillared hall, as though it were necessary for Haggard's parable that something should have been built worth preserving in European eyes. Despite this conflation of cultural value with elaborate architecture, Haggard is as concerned as he is in *King Solomon's Mines* that wealth should not distract the builders of Empire from their higher ideals. Idle luxury has abused the wealth of the land, distracting Zimbabwe's rulers from the vigilance and idealism needed if they are to contain the savagery around them. An indifference to racial purity lays the city open to treachery from within its walls; luxury has made its people too effete to resist a savage onslaught. Great Zimbabwe's doom is sealed.

"Elissa" makes Great Zimbabwe's ruins into a cautionary tale. The ancient colony became decadent and the destruction of the city was the price the colonizers had to pay. All of the novels written after 1889 use the city's destruction to admonish, implicitly or explicitly, the new colonizers, and leisure competes with sex between the races as a signifier of decadence. Ozymandian ruins have always provided an occasion for meditating on the fleeting glories of life.<sup>44</sup> A shift, however, occurs between the mid-century, where ruins serve to emphasize the futility of human pride, and century's end. In 1869, the first novel to refer to Great Zimbabwe, Hugh Walmsley's *The Ruined Cities of Zululand*, shows a deserted city. "The old temples of a once glorious race [...] serve as a den for the beasts of prey; or a refuge for the hardly less savage kaffir."<sup>45</sup> Walmsley was inspired by the fanciful city Merensky's letters had described, and that passage consciously echoes Isaiah's vindictive delight over a fallen Babylon. In 1869, Great Zimbabwe was as dead as Babylon. It would take only twenty years before a British colony resurrected it.

Haggard wrote one further novel dealing with ancient colonizers in South-Central Africa. *Benita* was published in 1906 and is set shortly before the invasion of the Khumalo kingdom in 1893.<sup>46</sup> By 1906, Southern Rhodesia and the ruins had been described in some detail<sup>47</sup> and Haggard's romance formula did not easily accommodate geographical and historical fact. The ruins in *Benita* resemble more closely the smaller *zimbabwe* of the plateau than do the cities of Haggard's previous novels, perhaps because a Rhodesia of corru-

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<sup>44</sup> Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953; London: Thames & Hudson, 1966): 103 and *passim*.

<sup>45</sup> Hugh Mulleneux Walmsley, *The Ruined Cities of Zululand* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1869), vol. 1: 49.

<sup>46</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *Benita: An African Romance* (London: Cassell, 1906).

<sup>47</sup> The 1904 edition of Hall & Neal, *The Ancient Ruins*, described almost all the stone-walled sites on the plateau.

gated-iron towns confirmed that colonies did not require golden pillars and marble staircases to proclaim civilized values. Haggard overcomes the limitations that the contemporary imposes on romance by using the occult to achieve a necessary distancing. His heroine is both a contemporary woman and the reincarnation of a previous Benita of the Portuguese inland settlements which the Changamire Rozvi destroyed in the 1690s. She exists in the modern world as well as in the folk memory of the local Kalanga, who have no sense of change or progress. In a trance, she becomes the Benita who, with other Portuguese, sought refuge in the ancient ruined fortress built a thousand years before, where they buried a vast treasure in gold. They starved to death when the fortress was besieged, but the last inhabitant, the earlier Benita, before throwing herself to death from a cliff, swore that no black man would ever find the gold.

Racism informs the legend: white people's gold belongs to white people and the Kalanga have no other purpose in life than to guard the gold and wait for the return of the whites. This fidelity is only to be expected, since they are "tall spare men, light coloured, with refined mobile faces. Here was no Negro blood. [...] [Their] forefathers [...] perchance had stood in the courts of Pharaoh or of Solomon."<sup>48</sup> Haggard, following Bent, calls the Kalanga "the children of the sun,"<sup>49</sup> and although Hall recognized this as "an unwarranted imposition by travellers who knew Zulu,"<sup>50</sup> he too insists on the Semitic features and ceremonial of the Karanga around Great Zimbabwe.<sup>51</sup> Carl Peters had recently published an account of his journey from the Zambezi to Manicaland and, near the Zambezi, he imagined he had found Phoenician remains and Egyptian profiles among the local inhabitants.<sup>52</sup> Merensky's inventions inspired *The Ruined Cities of Zululand* and *King Solomon's Mines*; *Benita* draws inspiration from the new colony. The journey's end of Haggard's early travellers is England. In *Allan's Wife*, Allan Quatermain feels no moral obligation to stay in Carson's proto-colony; when he marries Carson's daughter, he takes her back to England, and the eponymous Elissa is the daughter of a governor. *Benita*, however, centres on white women as a permanent presence in the land. Rhodesia and its settlers and the ideology these affirm have replaced imperialism as the informing ideology of Haggard's

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<sup>48</sup> Haggard, *Benita*, 92.

<sup>49</sup> Bent, *The Ruined Cities*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Richard N. Hall, *Pre-Historic Rhodesia* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909): 386.

<sup>51</sup> Hall, *Pre-Historic Rhodesia*, 390–402.

<sup>52</sup> Carl Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients* (London: Arthur Pearson, 1902): 121–22, 124–28.

romances. They still proclaim heroic virtues, but heroism in *Benita* derives from the contingencies of the contemporary and the local rather than the atavistic. The ideological end of this romance quest is no longer England but Rhodesia itself. The amateur archaeology and ethnography of Bent, Hall, and Peters provided a scientific foundation for Haggard's claim that in bringing settlers to Mashonaland Rhodes was restoring an ancient settlement rather than initiating a new one. When Benita recovers the treasure, it is this claim that the narrative is satisfying. As the Kalanga understand, the gold belongs to her race; when Rhodes's company takes possession of the land, the Kalanga return to contented submission to white overlords, for whose return they have waited through the millennia.

Haggard's recognition of Rhodesia's permanence reflects the speed with which the settlers felt that they had a discrete identity which was neither British nor South African. The recovery of Solomon's Ophir ceased to be important as one of Rhodesia's founding myths; instead, at a very early date, novelists use Great Zimbabwe to register the first stirrings of a white Rhodesian nationalism. Iver McIver's *An Imperial Adventure* (1910) lifts Rhodesia above the fertile grazing land which the Trekboer sees or the second Rand which the British imagine.<sup>53</sup> Instead, the novel reminds us that the new colony is a substantiation of Rhodes's idealism; Great Zimbabwe serves to remind the reader that more sublime motives inspired the occupation of Mashonaland than another grab for land and gold. Sannie De Toit, the novel's heroine, has to clear from her mind "Chartered companies [...] Matabele savages [...] and] the effete civilization of Portugal and her ineffective colonies"<sup>54</sup> in order to dwell more intensely on the romance of Mashonaland. Someone remarks of a young man lost on a hunting expedition in the far north that "he went out and forgot to return" and Sannie thinks such distraction is appropriate to a land where Solomon built cities. She wonders whether Solomon's workers had also "forgotten to return [...] and lay] in those whispering ruins with Solomon's commands in their crumbled hands." And she asks herself whether "through the nameless centuries, did those who sought that enchanted land where the river sands were of gold, and where Sheba slept among her wealth, leave their useless bodies among her cities forgetful ever of returning?"<sup>55</sup> When Sannie, disguised (in the best romance tradition) as a boy, has travelled north with the pioneers and is lost in Mashonaland, she comforts herself that

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<sup>53</sup> Iver McIver [A.I. Pritchard], *An Imperial Adventure* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1910).

<sup>54</sup> McIver, *An Imperial Adventure*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> McIver, *An Imperial Adventure*, 7.

she has been worthy of her predecessors, who sought the land and died seeking it. She crawls into a *zimbabwe* and waits for death: “If I had it back again, I would do it again!”<sup>56</sup> she exclaims, for to die in one of Solomon’s temples is evidence that she has undertaken the quest and now belongs to the land. To forget to return is a trope of the transformation of a settler colony which looks to the metropole as centre into a new centre from which the beginnings of a new nation will emerge. McIver published his novel in the year of South African Union, when nation-building was in the air, and Sannie comforts herself that she “had gone forth with those who were building a new state.”<sup>57</sup> But the novel makes it clear that the new state is Rhodesia and not South Africa.

Until Doris Lessing published *The Grass is Singing* in 1950, Gertrude Page was the best-known Rhodesian writer, selling over two and a half million copies of her novels before her death in 1923. An ardent supporter of Responsible Government for Rhodesia, she energetically opposed the alternative proposition that when the British South Africa Company’s charter lapsed Rhodesia should become South Africa’s fifth province. In *The Rhodesian* (1912), she uses Great Zimbabwe to trace the genesis of a Rhodesian nationalism which at this date is content merely to distinguish between Rhodesians and South Africans.<sup>58</sup> The novel begins by invoking the mystery with which Rhodesia’s settlers delighted to surround Great Zimbabwe: “Grey walls [...] with a sublime, imperturbable indifference [...] baffle the ingenuity and ravish the curiosity of all who would read their story.” The mysteries of the past colonizers are unimportant, however, beside the sudden reawakening of the land. The grey walls have for thousands of years loomed above “rich plains left solely to the idle pleasure of a careless black people.” Now “the forerunners of today’s great civilizing army have marched into the valley [...] awake[ning] echoes that have been more or less silent to civilization for how many thousand years?”<sup>59</sup> Page is more interested in the awakening of the land than in the reasons why it has been held in a thrall of sleep for so long. It is sufficient for her that it has been left to careless, idle, black people, and these opening pages imply that not only are they inappropriate custodians of the land but that they will not enjoy their slothful pleasure for much longer. The news of Edward VII’s death has just reached the police camp at Great Zimbabwe, and Page draws parallels between the new Empire and its ancient and

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<sup>56</sup> *An Imperial Adventure*, 192.

<sup>57</sup> *An Imperial Adventure*, 193.

<sup>58</sup> Gertrude Page, *The Rhodesian* (London: Hurst & Blackett, [1909]).

<sup>59</sup> Page, *The Rhodesian*, 1–2.

forgotten predecessor. The death of a king forces loyal men and women to contemplate the passing glories of the world, and Carew, Page's hero, in a moment of pessimism asks "Was all, then, vanity, this building and striving?" and wonders whether three thousand years before another man had stood there mourning the death of his king. "And so soon [...] he also died, and the massive walls became ruins, and the dynasty, or empire, or era passed away into oblivion."<sup>60</sup> But Great Zimbabwe served no purpose if it merely provoked a sense of futility in Rhodesia's settlers. The lesson of the city is to give Rhodesians a fresh sense of purpose: Carew shifts his gaze from ruin to land, and it is the land itself "to which he had given so much [that] rose up to give in her turn the might of hope and renewing."<sup>61</sup> The land shows no sign of ruin, hopelessness, and decay. Instead, her beauty offers the hope of progress to those who possess her, and Page knows that the settlers own the land as no one has owned it for centuries.

The scale of Great Zimbabwe shows the ideals that Rhodesia's settlers should strive for if they are to be worthy successors to the ancient builders. Carew wonders whether the women of old were fair and the men brave and "mighty in stature to have evolved and achieved these wonderful defence works."<sup>62</sup> Page's novels are crowded with well-muscled, six-foot men and beautiful women, the stock characters of colonial love stories, but Great Zimbabwe allows her to aim at something more ambitious than veld eroticism; Carew becomes one with those men who throughout the ages have laid the foundations of a new civilization. Rhodesia's order is not of the metropole's making: the vision of the new country was Rhodes's and the settlers give form to his vision. Page, through Carew, questions the motives that brought both the ancient and the new settlers to the land. Did the men and women of old "love the fair land that fed them with a love of home and country, or were they but sojourners for a while amid unfriendly, cruel tribes that needed watchful eyes day and night?" Great Zimbabwe answers the question: like the new colonizers, the old were "faithful always to the worship of their race" and built "at infinite and incomprehensible pains those temples in an alien land."<sup>63</sup> The mourning of an emperor and the mention of race suggest that Page sees Rhodesia as uncomplicatedly British. By distinguishing between those who come casually to the land and those for whom the land becomes home, however, Page distinguishes between colonies and the new and independent domi-

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<sup>60</sup> Page, *The Rhodesian*, 11–12.

<sup>61</sup> *The Rhodesian*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> *The Rhodesian*, 81.

<sup>63</sup> *The Rhodesian*, 81.

nions of which South Africa was the most recent and among which she hoped Rhodesia would one day take its place. An incipient nationalism is present throughout *The Rhodesian* even if Rhodesia is to be a nation within the British Empire. Only someone who has come to see the alien land as home would exercise the ingenuity and undertake the labour of erecting Great Zimbabwe; an equivalent new energy is creating Rhodesia for Rhodesians.

In both *An Imperial Adventure* and *The Rhodesian*, Great Zimbabwe serves as inspiration to whites to build a new nation, rather than as a call to vigilance against possibly insurgent blacks. In the same year that Haggard published *Benita*, Randall MacIver published *Mediaeval Rhodesia*. MacIver was the first academically trained archaeologist to work at Great Zimbabwe and he recognized that no one beyond the plateau had influenced the building of Great Zimbabwe.<sup>64</sup> Although a few subsequent novels accepted MacIver's findings, Great Zimbabwe continued in most of the fiction, as well as in settler ideology, to serve a racist function. The Shona were incapable of building Great Zimbabwe because they had not yet reached the necessary stage of social and technological development to conceive, let alone organize, the elaborate society of which Great Zimbabwe was the centre. To accept Randall MacIver's conclusion that Great Zimbabwe was an African city did not necessarily mean that the settlers recognized it as an achievement that required them to modify their contempt for black Africa. The first novel to register Randall MacIver's work is John Buchan's *Prester John*, which is set in Scotland and the Transvaal.<sup>65</sup> Buchan's account of a new leader who draws authority from the black empires of Africa's past and who is determined to drive the whites from South Africa embodied the most fundamental fear of Rhodesia's settlers; not surprisingly, it was a fear that some of the Rhodesian novels address. Sometimes *zimbabwe* are sites of savagery – the eponymous policeman in L. Patrick Greene's *Dynamite Drury* blows up a *zimbabwe* when he discovers that it is responsible for the Kurtzian transformation that a local storekeeper undergoes.<sup>66</sup> his face becomes suffused with a bestial expression as if he is “revelling in the jungle's black mysteries.”<sup>67</sup> Drury explains to his Commanding Officer in Salisbury that “the place was too damned evil to let it stand.”<sup>68</sup> Wilfred Robertson's *The Black Planes* (1938) is partly inspired by Ethiopianism, the name that Southern African whites gave to any modern

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<sup>64</sup> MacIver, *Mediaeval Rhodesia*, 63.

<sup>65</sup> John Buchan, *Prester John* (London: Nelson, 1910).

<sup>66</sup> L. Patrick Greene, *Dynamite Drury* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1928).

<sup>67</sup> Greene, *Dynamite Drury*, 229.

<sup>68</sup> *Dynamite Drury*, 255.

African institution aspiring to exist independently of white authority.<sup>69</sup> An Abyssinian airman seizes control of a plane and lands it near the headquarters of a man who has tasked himself to drive the whites from Africa. Paul Mondoro has the title of Mambo, as he claims descent from “the Emperors of Monomotapa, whose capital was the Zimbabwe ruins in Rhodesia.” In this role, he seeks to recover a “free land of corn and crops and laughter where the black man can live his own life.”<sup>70</sup> A few months under the Mambo’s command convince most of his followers of the harshness of his rule: one remarks that a successful rising will “place a tyrant over us.”<sup>71</sup> The novel registers no hostility to Mondoro. Instead, he is “a tragic figure [...] a man who would put back the clock.”<sup>72</sup> Using Great Zimbabwe as an African accomplishment to inspire a non-European modernity has to be regression, since only Europe can be the agency pointing Africa towards true progress. MacIver, and by this date Caton Thompson, may well be right in recognizing Great Zimbabwe as indigenous, but the polity whose capital it was amounted to a cruel autocracy that nobody, black or white, should wish to see recovered.

Only in the 1950s when black nationalism became more militant and confronted settler rule, was Great Zimbabwe again invoked as evidence of a failure of will on the part of the colonizers. The first novel after the Second World War to employ Great Zimbabwe in this way was Elizabeth Fenton’s *Rhodesian Rhapsody* (1958).<sup>73</sup> A Soviet agent is agitating in the Reserves and attempts to involve a young Hungarian refugee, Ilonka Wayland, who has married a Rhodesian. She learns about Zimbabwe in the context of her newly acquired nationality. Ilonka’s husband explains that the ruins were very ancient and that “all records of them were lost until Theodore Bent, the well-known geologist, found them in 1867.”<sup>74</sup> The confusion of Bent with Mauch conveniently allows British initiative to be solely responsible for lifting the edge of the veil on Great Zimbabwe’s mysterious origins. Great Zimbabwe’s Egyptian builders, Ilonka is told, were “addicted to Phallus worship” – “It sounds fascinating,” says Ilonka – but “the Mashonas [...] have retained nothing of the civilisation they must have enjoyed.”<sup>75</sup> Instead, as their civilization collapsed the original builders “must have intermarried with the sur-

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<sup>69</sup> Wilfred Robertson, *The Black Planes* (London: Oxford UP, 1938).

<sup>70</sup> Robertson, *The Black Planes*, 83.

<sup>71</sup> *The Black Planes*, 111.

<sup>72</sup> *The Black Planes*, 196.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Fenton, *Rhodesian Rhapsody* (London: Robert Hale, 1958).

<sup>74</sup> Fenton, *Rhodesian Rhapsody*, 107.

<sup>75</sup> *Rhodesian Rhapsody*, 108–109.

rounding tribes, and so acquired a negroid appearance and negroid brains.”<sup>76</sup> The Pharaoh, whose followers were the original colonizers, died, we are told, because he tried to appease his Hittite enemies. Any compromise with African nationalism or Soviet expansion will mean the inevitable defeat of white Rhodesia. A willingness to fight and a refusal to compromise will create a heroic Rhodesia which future generations of Rhodesians will inherit. The novel is more concerned to trace the parallels between ancient and contemporary privilege than to show the heroism of embattled early colonists resurrected in modern Rhodesia. Falling into a trance at Great Zimbabwe, Ilonka sees the elliptical building covered with alabaster, its pavements tiled, while black slaves carry her on a litter hung with cloth of gold. Settler homes in the novel have an air of casual luxury, with servants everywhere. The main casualty of Soviet-instigated black insurgency will be the ease and racial privilege of the colonizers.

In 1958, Elizabeth Fenton could have been no more than faintly aware of the new determination of the nationalists to confront settler rule. When Wilbur Smith published *The Sunbird* in 1972, there had been several major incursions across the Zambezi and the willingness of blacks not only to organize but also to fight against the settler order was obvious.<sup>77</sup> *The Sunbird* is the most complete fictional exploration of an exotic Great Zimbabwe since Benita. It confirms that as the prospect of war loomed, white Rhodesians felt the same insecurity as they had in 1890s; and, as they had done in the 1890s, they turned to the ruined city for inspiration. Wilbur Smith, who was born in Zambia and briefly lived in Rhodesia, identifies with their vulnerability.

The archaeologist hero of *The Sunbird*, Benjamin Kazin, has written *Ophir*, which argues for the exotic origin of Great Zimbabwe against what he calls “the debunkers, the special pleaders, the politico-archaeologists, who would twist any evidence to fill the needs of their own beliefs.”<sup>78</sup> Such scholars turn archaeology into propaganda to convince people that Africans are indeed capable of the social organization that went into the building of Great Zimbabwe. On a site on the Rhodesia–Botswana border, Kazin uncovers the remains of a Carthaginian city destroyed, as his excavations show, when black hordes swept down the continent. In the ruins, Kazin finds a mural showing a white, red-haired king, enthroned in Great Zimbabwe and surrounded by helmeted and caparisoned elephants. Throughout *The Sunbird*, a parallel is drawn between the Carthaginian colonizers and the whites of

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<sup>76</sup> Fenton, *Rhodesian Rhapsody*, 110.

<sup>77</sup> Wilbur Smith, *The Sunbird* (1972; London: Pan, 1974).

<sup>78</sup> Smith, *The Sunbird*, 71.

Southern Africa, and the fate of the old city becomes the possible fate of the modern state. A second narrative makes the parallel explicit. All the major characters in the novel have their occult counterparts in the City of the Moon or Opet, whose history Kazin discovers written out on golden scrolls. The emperor of the old city becomes in his twentieth-century incarnation a ruthless Rand industrialist, while the bard of Opet becomes Kazin himself, a scientist and historian recalling people to their past as once the bard had done. The black king who sacks the City of the Moon becomes a Moscow-trained, Johannesburg-based academic who leads the guerrillas fighting in Rhodesia.

In *The Sunbird*, Africa is invoked as a continent whose unique brutality only Carthaginians or white Southern Africans can contain. The latest expression of Africa's savagery is Zimbabwe's liberation war, and guerrillas ambush Kazin and his party while they are driving to Bulawayo. When Kazin finally reaches the city and sees "the smiles on the faces around him he wonders why anybody should want to destroy this society – and if they succeeded with what they would replace it," and he immediately thinks of Opet, once a "great civilization, a nation which held dominion over an area the size of Europe." Nothing remains of it "except the few poor relics [they] had so laboriously gleaned." Africa is "fickle" in denying those who have built in Africa "even a place in her memory. A cruel land, a savage and merciless land."<sup>79</sup> So intent is Smith on detailing Africa's savagery and transforming it into a metaphysical cause that he fails to recognize that in the early 1970s the comparison between Opet and Bulawayo is profoundly subversive. South Africa had claimed apartheid as an eternal system and Ian Smith notoriously prophesied a thousand-year rule for an independent Rhodesia. In a fickle continent, all creativity is purposeless, whether by Carthaginians, white Rhodesians or Afrikaners. The novel's parallel narratives imply that the blacks who are slaves or serfs in the City of the Moon and its empire have as their counterparts the peasants and black proletarians of Rhodesia and South Africa. They are therefore hardly the "happy Africans" of Smith's account or the culturally whole people whom apartheid claimed to be creating.

*The Sunbird*, however, is no more concerned with black experiences of foreign empires than the earlier novels are. As the parallel characters in the old and the new hegemonies indicate, history repeats itself, and Africa's savagery is the only constant. Whites establish states, characterized by technological skill, a love of beauty, and the delights of leisured and civilized living – only to have them destroyed by savages unable to appreciate what superior civilization created. Blacks who rise against Rhodesia and South

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<sup>79</sup> Smith, *The Sunbird*, 231.

Africa, like their predecessors who razed Opet, have no more complex motive than to destroy. The ruins of Great Zimbabwe and the City of the Moon serve only to show the creativity of whites and the destructiveness of blacks.

But what were whites creating in Rhodesia? Frank Johnson, who led the pioneer column, recalls Rhodes's first impression of Salisbury when he visited it in 1891. "He had pictured some magnificent city but in its place there appeared a few corrugated-iron shacks and some wattle and daub huts." Only when Rhodes saw the foundations of the synagogue did he recover his temper. "My country's all right," he kept on explaining. "If the Jews come, my country's all right."<sup>80</sup> After the romances of Great Zimbabwe, the colonial city had perhaps to be bathetic. One cannot build synagogues everywhere. Bent, whose digs at Great Zimbabwe had confirmed Rhodes's most extravagant expectations of Great Zimbabwe's Mediterranean origins, understood the problem posed by Salisbury's singular lack of glamour. "The thirst for gold [...] created the hoary walls of Zimbabwe and the daub huts of Fort Salisbury, perhaps the oldest and the youngest buildings created for that purpose by mankind." But he comforts himself that this comparison will have only historical interest one day, "when [Salisbury] will have its railway, its town hall, and its cathedral."<sup>81</sup> In 1904, Hall and Neal, who destroyed much of the archaeological layers at Great Zimbabwe, open their account of their work by invoking Rhodesia as "The Land of Romance" and identifying Bulawayo as the atoning city. Bulawayo is "the metropolis of Rhodesia" and has displaced "cruelties and barbarism" with a "municipality and massive gold mayoral chain [...] churches, public library, hospital, park, cycle tracks, golf ground [...] [and] electricity."<sup>82</sup> If the failure of the early colonizers is to be atoned for, the agency of atonement will be the smug order of a provincial British town. The theme that connects all these readings of Great Zimbabwe is racism. The novels either set their cities, real or imagined, apart from Africa or use them to demonstrate Africa's savagery. The ruins serve to remind the reader of what can happen when Africa slips from Europe's control. The towns of the new colony proclaimed their difference from Africa by allowing blacks only limited access to them. By assuming Africa's hostility to the ancient colony and legislating the unfitness of blacks for the modern city, the settlers, both in fact and in fiction, wrote Africa as dystopic and Europe as the agency of

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<sup>80</sup> Frank Johnson, *Great Days: The Autobiography of an Empire Pioneer* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1940): 207.

<sup>81</sup> Bent, *The Ruined Cities*, 279.

<sup>82</sup> Hall & Neal, *The Ancient Ruins*, 1–2.

order. Colonial atonement consisted of re-creating a European-ordered space within Africa, a space in which, quite simply, whites control blacks.

All nationalism is a product of discourse, hence a site of ideological contestation. For more than a century, despite the work of the archaeologists, many white Rhodesians chose to see Great Zimbabwe as a blank on which meanings could be imposed, and those meanings were preferred which justified colonialism or promoted the white Rhodesian nation. Great Zimbabwe is now the central historical monument of an independent Zimbabwe, and the liberation movements that fought for independence used its name to demonstrate the continuity between precolonial polities and the nation that the armed struggle would create. Before independence, Stanlake Samkange's *Year of the Uprising* had translated into fiction Great Zimbabwe's place in black nationalist discourse.<sup>83</sup> In the novel, chiefs from both Matabeleland and Mashonaland are summoned to the ancient site in 1896 to hear a call for unity in the rising to drive the settlers from the land. Samkange knew that such a meeting never took place, but the significance of the city in nationalist discourse is more important than an accurate historical reconstruction. Because the Great Zimbabwe of the novel transcends ethnic or regional divisions, Samkange is able to make the old city a symbol of national achievement, national unity, and national potential.

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<sup>83</sup> Stanlake Samkange, *Year of the Rising* (London: Heinemann, 1978).

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Knowing Native, Going Native  
Travel Writing, Cognitive Borderlines  
and the Sense of Belonging in Doris Lessing's  
*African Laughter* and Dan Jacobson's  
*The Electronic Elephant*

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the contradiction between knowing and 'mastering' in colonial discourse by focusing on two accounts of travel in southern Africa in the 1980s and 1990s by "white Africans" returning home after long periods of exile. Doris Lessing's *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992) and Dan Jacobson's *The Electronic Elephant: A Southern African Journey* (1994) both attempt to address the ways in which Northern travel writing about Africa has been implicated in this contradiction. Lessing, more radically, disrupts the conventional linearity of African travelogue, undermining the distancing, commanding gaze of most (post)colonial travel writing. Jacobson ironizes his postcolonial journey by placing it in the context of colonial journeys along the same route, but otherwise largely reproduces the continuous, 'objective' narrative of colonial travel writing. The reductiveness and arrogance of most colonial travel writing is built into this structure. Thus Jacobson cannot entirely escape the alienating perspective of colonial discourse and its modern incarnations (Mary Louise Pratt's "Third Worldism"); Lessing's deconstructive approach is more successful but at some cost to the conventional pleasures readers expect from travel literature. As white Africans returning to former homes being transformed by African rule, both Lessing and Jacobson are fascinated with the dilemmas faced by the former colonial settler community. Both have to listen repeatedly.

© *Zimbabwean Transitions: Essays on Zimbabwean Literature in English, Ndebele and Shona*, ed. Mbongeni Z. Malaba & Geoffrey V. Davis (Matatu 34; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2007).

**B**OTH DORIS LESSING'S *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992) and Dan Jacobson's *The Electronic Elephant: A Southern African Journey* (1994)<sup>1</sup> are African travelogues that try to break the mould of conventional Northern travel writing on Africa by addressing the legacy of colonial discourse and the key role that travel writing has played in constructing and sustaining this discourse. Lessing and Jacobson are situated still further from the mainstream of Northern travel writing on Africa by another factor: their complicated personal relationships to colonial discourse. They both grew up in African settler communities, where colonial discourse was not simply a way of representing Africa but a way of living in it, a way of being 'at home' in Africa without relinquishing an attachment to the distant colonial power, even though this alienated the settler from the very land claimed as home. Returning home – but to homes transformed by majority rule (Lessing to Zimbabwe in the 1980s, Jacobson to South Africa in 1992) – they must also confront the alienation of the colonial gaze as an aspect of their own identities.

In both texts, this discourse is epitomized by similar anti-African jeremiads delivered by white settlers, which Lessing, in *African Laughter*, hears over and over again during her first return visit in 1982 and which Jacobson, in *The Electronic Elephant* ten years later, has to endure only once, but again in Zimbabwe. The most striking characteristic of these racist tirades is their alienation; they are defensive responses to finding oneself in a world turned upside down. In Zimbabwe in 1982, Lessing's relatives and friends are "in a state of shock, just as if there had been an accident or disaster,"<sup>2</sup> and ten years later, Jacobson finds at least one white farmer in Zimbabwe still living in a state of "acute [...] incredulity." Despite the years that have passed, "he was like a man who that very morning, on getting out of bed, had seen the sun rise in the west or water suddenly begin to flow uphill."<sup>3</sup> The anti-African monologue is a way of closing ranks around the old colonial certitudes. Thus, it is uniformly negative and closed, purporting to be an 'objective' analysis of Africans and of the consequences of majority rule, but revealing only the isolation and solipsism of the colonial gaze.

When Lessing reads aloud from some Zimbabwean African writers to test her brother's claim that he knows what Africans are thinking, "he listen[s] as

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Lessing, *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (London: HarperCollins, 1992); Dan Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant: A Southern African Journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant*, 296.

if to news from a foreign country,”<sup>4</sup> because, as she recognizes, colonialism defines knowledge essentially in terms of distance and mastery. Similarly, the white farmer Jacobson meets enjoyed, before 1980, “a village-like feeling of intimacy and familiarity” with “his” country, but now typifies the observation that “when *they* took over, it was as if we’d suddenly moved to a foreign country.”<sup>5</sup> The reason for this is the strange contradiction at the heart of the colonial gaze. Colonial discourse presents itself as an inquiry into the Other, which is why its central tropes are exploration and discovery, but, in reality, it is a discourse of power and *fears* knowing the Other. It depends on a myth of absolute difference between *them* and *us* and has to be continually on its guard against any kind of ‘familiarity’ that might collapse the mythical gap between colonizer and colonized. This contradiction is played out most intensely in settler communities, which are peculiarly well-placed to both know the native (in the masterly sense) and also to ‘go native’.

Both Lessing and Jacobson are acutely conscious of their position as former (if dissident) white settlers, and both are intensely concerned with their own fraught relationships to their former homes. As Northern travel writers who are also “white Africans” returning home, coming to terms with their own sense of identity requires finding an alternative way of imagining post-coloniality. The problem is that the colonial gaze is deeply woven in with the history of Northern travel writing; it is not something inserted into a narrative that would otherwise be ideologically neutral. The colonial gaze is inscribed in the structure of the narrative itself, in the continuous, goal-oriented journey of discovery and the single, controlling, ‘realistic’ perspective that surveys and assesses the Other with the “authority of a ubiquitous gaze.”<sup>6</sup> This narrative originated in the classic colonial explorer’s tales that constructed the image of Africa in European consciousness, but despite all the changes in the North’s relationship to Africa since colonial times, most postcolonial African travelogues continue to rely on the same narrative structures.

To appreciate what Lessing and Jacobson are up against, it is necessary to start from the fact that colonial discourse is not simply a way of *writing* about Africa but, more fundamentally, a way of seeing and knowing. Colonial discourse is, famously, a discourse about the Other, but this means that it cannot just be about *the Other*; it also, and more fundamentally, is about *knowing* the Other. It is a project of discovery. However, what colonial discourse discovers is mainly what it already knows – its own superiority and mastery. Its essen-

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<sup>4</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant*, 296; emphasis in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Maureen O’Malley, “Scenes from Cairo’s Camel Market,” *Inscriptions* 6 (1992).

tial goal is to take discursive possession – to command Africa into existence<sup>7</sup> – by objectifying, distancing, categorizing, and evaluating, and thereby to ‘prove’ that the Other has been intellectually appropriated and mastered. It is the discursive equivalent of laying claim to a territory. Thus, the most sweeping judgements are made without any apparent sense of either the complexities of human nature or the problematics of perception: the East African “can deduce nothing profitable from his perceptions”;<sup>8</sup> Africans “cannot realise consequences of any kind”;<sup>9</sup> “All White men to the native’s mind fear nothing,”<sup>10</sup> and so on, with monotonous self-assurance, in volume after volume of African colonial travels.

In a postcolonial world, such overtly racist statements are effectively unprintable. However, as Tim Youngs notes, colonial travel writing was important not just for what it said but also for the “structures of attitude and reference” it established.<sup>11</sup> Chief among these is a way of looking at the Other from a “monarch-of-all-I-survey” perspective.<sup>12</sup> This distancing, commanding gaze has persisted in postcolonial travel writing despite the submergence of explicit racism and imperialism. In most postcolonial travel texts, the all-seeing, all-knowing eye of the Northern traveller is still “up there,” looking down on the postcolonial scene, “commanding the view [and] assigning it value.”<sup>13</sup> The standard model of both colonial and postcolonial African travelogue, in which an epistemologically privileged male outsider moves purposefully and consecutively through space and time, observing and assessing the world of the Other from an ‘objective’ point of view, can hardly avoid reproducing what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “a priori relation of dominance and distance between describer and described”<sup>14</sup> – or the reductive and alienating view of Africa that follows from this. The standard model is a product of the

<sup>7</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994): 112.

<sup>8</sup> Richard F. Burton, *The Lakes Region of Central Africa: A Picture of Exploration* (1860; Sidgwick & Jackson, 1961), vol. 2: 387.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Lugard, *The Rise of Our East African Empire: Early Efforts in Nyasaland and Uganda* (1893; London: Frank Cass, 1968), vol. 1: 303.

<sup>10</sup> Cherry Kearton & James Barnes, *Through Central Africa from East to West* (London: Cassell, 1915): 103.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Youngs, *Travelers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850–1900* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994): 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992): 216–21.

<sup>13</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 220.

<sup>14</sup> *Imperial Eyes*, 222.

same “enunciative space”<sup>15</sup> that produced colonialism, and which now sustains neocolonialism.

Thus, both Lessing and Jacobson face the problem of writing an account of postcolonial travels that does not simply critique colonialist *ideas* but that also avoids unwittingly re-inscribing the colonial way of seeing in the narration itself. Lessing’s approach is the more radical one. She completely reworks the conventional form of travel writing and as a result is more successful than Jacobson in escaping the structures of colonial epistemology, though at some cost to the pleasures readers usually look for in travel literature. Jacobson is less adventurous; he adopts the strategy of retracing a colonial travel route and juxtaposing his own observations with colonial descriptions of the same places as a way of interrogating colonial discourse and its postcolonial legacies. However, this also means that he largely reproduces the single, continuous narrative structure and “monolithic voice”<sup>16</sup> of colonial travel writing.

Lessing’s strategy is to disrupt the standard model’s rationalist narrative trajectory and to substitute multiple perspectives for its single, totalizing gaze. Instead of one continuous goal-oriented journey, she offers four meandering visits. Each visit (even the last one, which is hardly more than an epilogue) is further split into sections of varying lengths and varying discursive modes (short stories, interviews, reminiscences, conversations, observations on history or geography, essays on community development, agricultural extension and rural sanitation, quotations from newspapers, school magazines, donor reports). These bits and pieces relate to one another in unpredictable, even disconcerting ways. Sometimes sections are connected conventionally (“The next night,” “On the road up to Vumba,” “Next morning,” “It is time to fly home”); sometimes ambiguously (“One night,” “One afternoon,” “It was a Saturday”); sometimes by thematic or other links that have no temporal reference. Sometimes there is no apparent connection at all. The reader’s sense of coherent time and space, crucial for creating the illusion of narrative authority in the standard model, is continually disrupted, and the conventional goal-oriented quest structure is displaced and ironized.

Rather than evincing the typical Northern traveller’s determination to reach his goal at all costs, Lessing keeps putting off her own version of the quest – the idea of revisiting the farm where she grew up, which haunts the first half of *African Laughter*. Afraid of what she may find at the end of the trail, afraid to spoil her writer’s “myth country,” increasingly questioning the

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<sup>15</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 237.

<sup>16</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 220.

validity of her own memories, she continually thinks about going back to the farm but without being able to act. She has already renounced this quest once before, as she is careful to point out: “In 1956, I could have gone [...], but I was driving the car and could not force myself to turn the wheel off the main road.”<sup>17</sup> Thirty-two years later, near the end of the second part of *African Laughter* and six years after her first visit, she finally decides it is “time to stop being childish.”<sup>18</sup>

The moment of return occupies the physical and emotional centre of *African Laughter*, but it is the antithesis of the climactic moment that conventional travel narratives typically make out of reaching their goal (when the traveller gazes down over the scene and takes imaginative possession of it through a triumphantly coherent, commanding gaze). Instead, what presents itself is a very normal sort of muddle: a mixed bag of attraction and repulsion, fulfilment and frustration, echoed narratologically by a blending of cogency and digression, present-time observations and memories of childhood. Experience refuses to be contained in any narrative convention, and it is appropriate that the episode ends inconclusively, with a meditation on the rather sad transformation of her childhood landscape that “development” has brought, followed by an unanswerable question: “This happened in Europe centuries ago. A continent does not have to be inhabited by its own indigenous animals, its original indigenous trees [...]. Well then? We are doing all right – aren’t we?”<sup>19</sup>

Memory and nostalgia are key elements in Lessing’s deconstruction of conventional travel writing, particularly in the first two parts of *African Laughter*, which are preoccupied with the need for postcolonials in Zimbabwe to overcome the alienating gaze of colonialism and to construct a way of belonging that does not depend on a myth of mastery and possession. Back “home” after twenty-five years, Lessing is continually disconcerted by the failure of her childhood memories – which she once laboured obsessively to “record” and fix<sup>20</sup> – to match up with what she now finds. This is particularly unsettling in two areas: reviewing childhood memories and re-viewing familiar landscapes. After failing at first to know her own brother – “a stout greying man I did not recognise”<sup>21</sup> – she soon realizes that their memories are not just different, but often contradictory. It is as if they passed their

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<sup>17</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> *African Laughter*, 301.

<sup>19</sup> *African Laughter*, 319.

<sup>20</sup> *African Laughter*, 19–20.

<sup>21</sup> *African Laughter*, 34.

childhoods in two different countries. Equally unsettling, key landscapes from childhood have changed:

A 'view' I had believed was fixed for ever, had disappeared. A coil of mountains was lower than I remembered. A peak had come forward and attracted itself to a lesser hill. A river had changed course.<sup>22</sup>

Lessing's return to the farm is the end of a process of disenchantment that started with her exile from Rhodesia thirty-two years earlier. Her preoccupation with memory, like the colonial gaze, desires closure and fixity but can only possess the illusion of these, and then at the cost of pandering to an "innate babyishness,"<sup>23</sup> an image that clearly echoes the terms Lessing has already used to characterize the "peevish [...] childish, spoiled, self-indulgent, spiteful"<sup>24</sup> nature of the settlers' monologue.

In trying – and failing – to "lay claim" to her own memories, Lessing discovers that the colonialist desire to use the imagination to possess, the desire to know by mastering, is not found only in overtly colonial discourse. There are innumerable other forms of *colonializing* discourse than that represented by the settlers' monologue. Much of the rest of *African Laughter*, juxtaposing and interrogating a more or less random assortment of these other discourses, from grandiose "development" theories to street rumours to literary gossip to community "empowerment" projects to the desire to fix and possess one's own memories and identity, continuously unsettles the reader's desire for a coherent, 'objective' perspective. As Lorna Sage argues, colonialism is for Lessing only the most flagrant instance of the falsification of reality and identity by "dead patterns" of thought.<sup>25</sup> The settlers' monologue, the conventions of African travel writing, the endless discourses of "development" and Lessing's own desire to repossess and fix her memories all reveal themselves as instances of *cultures of occupation*.<sup>26</sup>

Jacobson also grounds his journey on a desire to come to terms with childhood memories that have haunted him since leaving Africa. However, his goal is not to repossess but to make up for a missed opportunity by finally exploring the "secret territory"<sup>27</sup> lying beyond Kimberley, his provincial,

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<sup>22</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *African Laughter*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> *African Laughter*, 12, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Lorna Sage, *Doris Lessing* (London: Methuen, 1983): 11.

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Tiger, "Cultures of Occupation and the Canadian [Con] Script [ion]: 'Lessing Changed My Life'," in *In Pursuit of Doris Lessing*, ed. Sprague (London: Macmillan, 1990): 89.

<sup>27</sup> Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant*, 12.

Europeanized home town. As a boy in South Africa, Jacobson had feared this hinterland and “made only the briefest of forays”<sup>28</sup> into it. However, after leaving Africa he begins to dream about this territory. He does so “insistently” but fantastically, imagining a region of “elaborate towns, forests, farmlands, beautiful mountains, stately homes and ancient fortresses [...] quite unlike anything actually waiting for me there.”<sup>29</sup> Although Jacobson does not experience Lessing’s sense of being separated from her “own best self,”<sup>30</sup> his feelings are equally tied up with his own sense of identity:

In a perverse way, the fanciful inventiveness of my dreams [...] helped to make clearer to me the real nature of the hold the territory still had over my imagination. Ultimately my dreams seemed to express a dread or shame that there might be *nothing there*: nothing to be seen, nothing to be learned, no one to meet, no past to register, no future to care about.<sup>31</sup>

Jacobson’s dream territory also happens to be the famous Elephant Road or “road to the north,” a route with enormous historical significance for southern Africa, and particularly for Zimbabwe, as it was the route the original Rhodesian settlers followed. Jacobson attempts to engage the problematics of colonialism – and its relationship to postcolonial travel – by repeatedly juxtaposing his own narration with excerpts from colonial texts describing the same places. He ironizes his own postcolonial journey by placing it in the context of the dispossessions and disruptions that took place along the road to the north in colonial times, but essentially these earlier voices are there to complement Jacobson’s narration; they do not challenge his perspective or decentre his controlling voice. Thus, although he exposes the alienation and arrogance of colonial discourse, he also reproduces in his own narrative the two key features that underpin those qualities: the single controlling, commanding narrative perspective and the continuous, goal-oriented journey. As a result, *The Electronic Elephant* cannot entirely escape the alienating gaze of colonial discourse. Even though Jacobson himself is no imperialist, his narrative approach leads him into a way of seeing that is sometimes indistinguishable from contemporary “third worldism.”<sup>32</sup> The electronic elephant of the title, for instance, belongs to a familiar catalogue of African futility. It is a quirkier version of the standard images of rusting machinery, broken-down

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<sup>28</sup> Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> *The Electronic Elephant*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 220.

buses, and drugless clinics which in third worldism ‘prove’ that people in the South cannot really understand or cope with modernity.

The most striking example of Jacobson’s failure to escape from the consequences of the monarch-of-all-I-survey perspective is an encounter with child hawkers in the Zimbabwean countryside, which he describes with the “rhetoric of triviality, dehumanisation, and rejection” which, Pratt argues,<sup>33</sup> is central to the postcolonial version of this perspective:

No sooner does the sound of a car engine become audible [...] than out of this or that hut there bursts a little creature clutching in its hand [...] a string of beads, a wooden spoon, a two-inch head sculpted in clay. It races as fast as its skinny legs can carry it [...] hoping to get [to the road] [...] before the car does, so that it might hold out at arm’s length this twopenny item. In one of the afternoons we spent travelling [...] along such a road, we saw exactly one other car passing by; so how much trade can they hope to conduct, even if they get to the road before the vehicle has passed? [...]

To tell the truth, when you see this sight over and over again, it begins to fill you (me) with a kind of rage. It is the combination of desperation and futility [...] that is so infuriating. You feel like sticking your head out of the car window and shouting at them: “How can you *do* it? For God’s sake, how can you be so *stupid*?”<sup>34</sup>

This is the objectifying, distancing gaze of the standard model of colonial and postcolonial travel writing *par excellence*, and I would argue that it is an almost inevitable consequence of the ‘structure’ of that gaze. Like the settlers’ monologue, it is based on the assumption that the objectifying gaze of the North is capable of producing a uniquely authoritative knowledge of the Other and that certain Northern observers are capable of entering into the world of the Other and knowing without *being* known. They are capable, that is, of knowing native without going native. This is where white settler discourse derives both its strength and its fragility, since the settler is ideally placed to do both.

As this suggests, colonial discourse is not so stable as its surface consistency suggests. Though strikingly repetitive and self-assured, its “sheer knitted-together strength,” to borrow Said’s description of Orientalism,<sup>35</sup> has more dropped stitches than first meet the eye. The very assertiveness of colonialism’s style of seeing and evaluating – its totalizing, emphatic appetite for organizing, categorizing, delimiting and ‘flattening’, its horror of blurred

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<sup>33</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 219.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant*, 311.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978): 6.

boundaries and depth of field – suggests the presence of anxiety, of a desire to close off disruptive possibilities, to deny something which attracts but, like Jacobson’s secret territory, also terrifies. The colonial gaze is driven to explore and know the Other, but to know *and* master, it also needs to keep its distance. To go native is to lose the commanding, distancing perspective necessary for colonial power. It means crossing a cognitive borderline which, however, can never be precisely defined. This being the case, how could a settler be safe from the possibility of transgressing this borderline except by avoiding ‘familiarity’ with Africa altogether and substituting for any real knowledge of the Other the alienating certainties of the settlers’ monologue?

However, total cognitive avoidance is never truly possible, or only perhaps through the construction of some sort of pathology, a kind of cultural autism, as Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing* perhaps illustrates. Unlike the traveller or explorer, the settler *lives* in Africa after all, and the only realistic strategy therefore is to partition Africa into ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ cognitive areas. The safe areas include anything that can be subjected to an objectifying, scientizing gaze. The “bush” (first as the domain of the Great White Hunter, now as that of the conservationist) is one of the key safe areas – provided one does not become overly familiar (in both senses of the word) with the Africans that live in it. This is why Lessing’s brother reacts so defensively to her suggestion that his love for the bush ought to make it easier for him to understand Africans than to understand other whites. The suggestion is dangerous because it raises the spectre of going native. Her brother’s response tellingly avoids the implication that he really has more in common with Africans than with other whites and instead takes up a point which he thinks is easy to refute:

What do you mean, I won’t talk to [Africans]? When I was out in the bush as a boy with the cook’s son, what do you think we did? What about the builder at the school? [...]. We used to sit and jaw for hours and hours about life and everything. What about the chap who built this house with me?<sup>36</sup>

His defence reveals a contradiction that cannot be resolved within The Monologue, which holds as an article of faith that Africans are “inferior to us, and that’s all there is to it.”<sup>37</sup> Yet here are memories of relationships treasured as genuine friendships. Lessing’s brother is therefore in a bind. If these relationships did not transgress the cognitive boundaries of colonial discourse, they were not genuine friendships but only conventional exchanges between boss

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<sup>36</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*, 63.

<sup>37</sup> *African Laughter*, 43

and “boys.” But if they did transgress, then he has gone native and may as well abandon *The Monologue* altogether. However, this would mean accepting that the colonial discourse on which the settlers’ self-image is based has been nothing but a projection all along, and – even more radically – that belonging may actually *require* going native.

Consistent with her strategy of “unsettlement,”<sup>38</sup> Lessing offers no programme of how this postcolonial homecoming might happen. However, from time to time in *African Laughter* there is a vision, always contingent and somewhat obscure – but usually presented, appropriately enough, as a collapse of distance and ‘objectivity’ – of a condition of hybridity that enables a sense of belonging in Africa without the need for mastery. In one of these moments, Lessing uses the phrase *Africa thinking through us*. Significantly, this occurs in the context of a white settler pointing out a typical instance of (apparent) African futility. Lessing is visiting a white-owned farm and finds herself listening to what sounds all too much like the opening of another performance of *The Monologue*. The farmer remarks that “the blacks are not interested in our ideas about efficiency”<sup>39</sup> and then uses the workers’ bicycles as an example of this:

“There must be dozens of bicycles on the farm and not one of them has lights, not one has brakes that work. They ride the bikes everywhere, through the bush, up hills, along dongas. Slowly everything falls off, brakes, mudguards, handlebar grips, pedal rubbers, everything. [...] and nobody bothers to replace them.”<sup>40</sup>

Lessing’s response makes an interesting contrast to Jacobson’s alienated exasperation at the behaviour of the child hawkers:

We stand in the dark looking at the black shape of the low wide house, which is spilling out yellow light, and we are thinking, or Africa thinks through us, “What do you need lights for, when you know the tracks so well? You don’t really need brakes, you can always use a foot. Why grips on handlebars? All you need for a pedal is a bar for your foot. Why make life so complicated? The bike goes doesn’t it? It carries you from place to place? Well, then, what’s the fuss about?”<sup>41</sup>

However, the farmer does not respond by delivering *The Monologue*. He is himself an example of hybridity, sharing, as Lessing points out, the same view of the land and his family’s relationship to it as the black agricultural extension worker she previously introduced to typify the *African* attitude

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<sup>38</sup> Sage, *Doris Lessing*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*, 223.

<sup>40</sup> *African Laughter*, 224.

<sup>41</sup> *African Laughter*, 224.

towards farming. Yet, significantly, his sense of belonging remains contingent – “Well, all right, it’s their continent, but I hope they’ll let me use a few acres of it. I think they will.”<sup>42</sup> In other ways, he is, intriguingly, more like a pre-war settler than a new phenomenon, obsessed with the work of the farm, paternalistic and protective towards his African workers, and, in his moral absolutism about AIDS, reminding Lessing of her “Old-Testament-dominated” father.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the episode ends up representing for Lessing “a kind of continuity, I suppose,” between the colonial and postcolonial worlds. As usual, Lessing’s method refuses any stable or consistent perspective.

Ironically, it is Jacobson’s less radical approach that provides the more vivid glimpse of what a truly *postcolonial* sense of belonging might be like. Tellingly, this happens in the context of another rendition of *The Monologue*, which Jacobson is subjected to while visiting a white farmer whose roots in Zimbabwe go back to *before* the Pioneer Column. Ironically, it is the very depth of the farmer’s roots in Zimbabwe that makes him cling to *The Monologue* more than a decade after independence:

In some ways [...], his intimate connections with the country, the generations in it which he could trace behind him, made more acute his incredulity that it was no longer ‘his’; no longer ‘ours’ [...] Had it really happened? [...] How could such things take place?<sup>44</sup>

Jacobson and the farmer then visit the site of Thomas Thomas’s mission station at nearby Inyati and come across some old men repairing the cemetery wall. Jacobson describes the moment:

They are pleased to see us and engage in an animated conversation in Ndebele with our guide [the farmer] – who in this company and in that language suddenly reveals an affability and fluency hitherto hidden from us. It is as if only now, standing on the ground where the bones of several of his ancestors lie – [...] it is only now, speaking to the workmen and translating their words for us, that his relationship with the country, his sharing of it with them, appears to be a source of strength and comfort rather than of bewilderment and anger.<sup>45</sup>

Although this is the last we see or hear of this moment of belonging, it is a vivid and memorable glimpse – all the more striking because of Jacobson’s own failure to overcome the alienation of the colonial gaze – of a condition where hybridity is natural and accepted, and where a sense of belonging is

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<sup>42</sup> Lessing, *African Laughter*, 228.

<sup>43</sup> *African Laughter*, 229.

<sup>44</sup> Jacobson, *The Electronic Elephant*, 296.

<sup>45</sup> *The Electronic Elephant*, 299.

achieved simply through an acceptance of the reality of “shareable space”<sup>46</sup> which The Monologue denies.

Terry Eagleton is right to remind us that “the relations between North and South are not primarily about discourse, language or identity but about armaments, commodities, exploitation, migrant labour, debt and drugs.”<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, these relations could not be carried on without the underpinnings of assumptions, beliefs, concepts, categories, and expectations supplied by discourse. Like all discourse, the North’s on Africa “constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe [...] and [...] analyse”;<sup>48</sup> its reiterated images, characters, situations, scenes and stories both reflect colonial and postcolonial power-relations and also help to construct and sustain them. Strategies of discourse that can help deconstruct those relations are still hard to find, at least in mainstream writing about Africa. In attempting to offer alternatives to the colonialist gaze, Lessing and Jacobson create an important opening which future travellers in Africa would do well to build on.

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<sup>46</sup> Sage, *Doris Lessing*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> Terry Eagleton, “‘In the Gaudy Supermarket’: Review of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1999),” *London Review of Books* 21.10 (13 May 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978): 2.

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BEVELYN DUBE

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Representing the Past in the Present  
The Timelessness of the Ndebele Royal Praises

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the dynamic nature of praise-poetry can be exemplified by a study of the mutations that occurred in Ndebele praise-poetry, with reference to the two kings Mzilikazi and Lobengula. It demonstrates how Mzilikazi's flight from Shaka was celebrated as a tactically astute move by a ruler who possessed the talent of turning adversity to his advantage. The initially critical responses to his son were revised with the changing circumstances of the Ndebele community, after the British colonial power, symbolized by Cecil John Rhodes's British South Africa Company, abolished the Ndebele monarchy. The rehabilitation of Lobengula served a cathartic role in redefining Ndebele identity. The fact that the royal praises survived throughout the twentieth century suggests that they were recited to address a fundamental need among the Ndebele people. It is this need that the essay seeks to identify and discuss.



*Kuyofa abantu kusale izibongo  
Yizona eziyosala zibalilela emanxiweni.*

[People will die and their praises remain,  
It is these that will be left to mourn for them in their deserted homes]<sup>1</sup>

**D**INGANE'S PRAISE-POET WAS RIGHT. History has proved that one of the most enduring art forms in Southern Africa is *izibongo* (praise-poetry). While the historicity of *izibongo* is open to debate, it is worth noting that it has given historians an insight into how traditional societies handled issues of identity, power and nationhood. This contribution will, however, show that the tradition of *izibongo* is not fixated on the past. It is highly dynamic and adapts easily "to new contexts and environments."<sup>2</sup> The *imbongi* is not merely interested in evoking the past for historical purposes. As Liz Gunner says, the "praise poet is not directing his [...] poem to the past as history, 'but to the present in which elements of the past are embedded and can be reactivated'."<sup>3</sup>

This discussion will focus on the praises of Mzilikazi and Lobengula during the colonial era, to show how, despite their demise, *izimbongi* have continued to praise them to this day. What makes the study even more intriguing is the fact that the Ndebele monarchy came to an end in 1893 when King Lobengula, Mzilikazi's son, "died" at the hands of Cecil John Rhodes's British South Africa Company (B.S.A.C). It would be logical for one to conclude that the praises of the two kings died with them. However, this was not the case.

Throughout the twentieth century, the royal praises thrived both orally and in written form. Before colonialism, the king was a vital member of the audience because *izibongo* were meant to give him an insight into his people's opinions of his leadership skills. They also made him aware of the needs of his subjects. But even though there was no longer a king to be advised by *imbongi*, *izibongo* nevertheless survived. Their survival suggests that the royal praises were recited to address a fundamental need among the Ndebele people. It is this need that my essay seeks to identify and discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Lütge Coullie, "(Dis)Locating Selves: *Izibongo* and Narrative Autobiography in South Africa," in *Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa*, ed. Duncan Brown (Oxford: James Currey & Cape Town: David Philip, 1999): 61.

<sup>2</sup> Russell H. Kaschula, "Imbongi in Profile," *English in Africa* 20. 1 (May 1993): 66.

<sup>3</sup> Liz Gunner, "Remaking the Warrior? The Role of Orality in the Liberation Struggle and in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in *Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa*, ed. Brown, 54. The interpolated remark is attributed to Karin Barber.

The era immediately after the death of Lobengula saw the newly formed nation disintegrate at the hands of the colonial regime. The horror of what was happening to the Ndebele nation is captured in the petition written by Nyamanda, Lobengula's eldest son, to the colonial government, demanding the return of the Ndebele land:

The members of the late King's family, your petitioners, and several members of the tribe, are now scattered about on farms so parcelled out to white settlers, and are practically created a nomadic people living in scattered condition under a veiled form of slavery, they not being allowed individually to cross from one farm to another, or from place to place except under a system of permit or Pass, and are practically forced to do labour on these farms as a condition of their occupying land in Matebeleland.<sup>4</sup>

The once proud nation had been stripped of its dignity. The Ndebele had been dispossessed of their land and their wealth, appropriated by the B.S.A.C. for its own benefit.

With this shift in the power base in the land, the role of *izimbongi* changed profoundly. Whereas in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the *imbongi*'s major task was to ensure that the newly founded nation remained united and that Mzilikazi's right to kingship was legitimized, now his main role was to rebuild the nation and advocate the re-establishment of the monarchy. To bring together the diverse ethnic groups that had made up the original Ndebele state, the *imbongi* resorted to invoking the warrior figure of Mzilikazi. Mzilikazi had built the Ndebele nation against all odds and the *imbongi* was now using his achievements to evoke a similar spirit of nation-building among the defeated people. One cannot dispute the fact that the *imbongi* resorted to Mzilikazi's praises purely out of a sense of nostalgia for a lost kingdom which had reached the heights of its glory because of the prowess of the King. Embedded in the psyche of the *imbongi* and the people could be the belief that the resuscitation of the Ndebele nation was only possible through the agency of the monarchy.

However, to view the twentieth-century praises as merely expressing a sense of nostalgia for a lost kingdom would be to grossly underestimate the significance of the powerful voices of *izimbongi* to "negotiate relations of political power within the society."<sup>5</sup> Liz Gunner argues that "the warrior image may surface again in search of a different agenda and a different

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<sup>4</sup> Leroy Vail & Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia & London: James Currey, 1991): 103.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan Brown, "Poetry, History, Nation: The Praises of Shaka kaSenzangakhona," *English in Africa* 24.1 (May 1997): 17.

home.”<sup>6</sup> This means that *izibongo* can be adapted to suit whatever socio-political environment the *imbongi* is operating in. Mzilikazi’s and Lobengula’s praises, which served the needs of the nineteenth-century men, were now proving useful to modern men. One such praise is inscribed on the plaque of Mzilikazi’s grave. Several praises written by poets during the colonial era – Nondo, Khiyaza, and Mthombeni, to name but a few – are patterned on this one. Leroy Vail and Landeg White argue that while this was a twentieth-century poem, it is very possible that it was appropriated from Mzilikazi’s precolonial praises, as its images and historical references are similar to those of the earlier time.<sup>7</sup>

The poem serves as a reminder to the people of how Mzilikazi defied the odds, got the better of Shaka and Zwide, and built a nation. Both men were considered to be superior in arms and stature to Mzilikazi:

Our short one whose bunches of cats’ skins may not be trampled, and yet those of tall ones are trampled: those of tall ones are Shaka’s of Senzangakhona. Those of tall ones are Zwide’s of Langa.<sup>8</sup>

The reference to the heights of the three men, Mzilikazi being the shortest, is not meant merely to focus the reader on the physique of the men. It is possible that the *imbongi* is making reference to the fact that Shaka and Zwide were more powerful and formidable than Mzilikazi. In their day, these two leaders were viewed as almost invincible by their enemies. Yet, despite Mzilikazi’s “inferiority,” his “bunches of cats’ skins may not be trampled.” It is the “tall” ones who suffer this indignity. There is a likelihood that the *imbongi* is making reference to the manner in which both Zwide and Shaka died. Zwide was murdered by Shaka, while Shaka himself died at the hands of his brother Dingane. Mzilikazi was, however, not killed by mortal beings. He died of natural causes at a very advanced age. The poem could be implying that Mzilikazi is, in fact, superior to the other two.

The *imbongi* seems to be reminding the Ndebele that their national ancestor was truly a man to be proud of, a member of the league of history-makers in the region. Mzilikazi did not let the daunting figures of Shaka and Zwide stop him from founding a nation. Had Mzilikazi not taken the stand he did against Shaka, *Mthwakazi*, as the Ndebele nation is popularly known, would never have come into existence. This was an apt message for the Ndebele, who were, at the time when the poem was published, faced with a formidable opponent, the colonial government, which made their quest to establish their

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<sup>6</sup> Liz Gunner, “Remaking the Warrior?” 58.

<sup>7</sup> Vail & White, *Power and the Praise Poem*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> *Power and the Praise Poem*, 105.

own nation appear like an insurmountable task. The *imbongi* is thus foregrounding the fact that nation-building is only possible if there are men of Mzilikazi's calibre.

Mzilikazi's fearlessness is further captured in the manner in which he defeated his enemies, especially the Boers:

He plundered the cattle of the Amalala, he plundered those of Sidhahlomolo,  
those of Reverend Dausim. He plundered those of Malibaliba, plundering them  
through his young brother Beje, of the household, in charge of the Impi.<sup>9</sup>

The same praise is captured by a later poet, M.G.P. Khiyaza, in his poem "*Izibongo zikaMzilikazi kaMatshobana*."<sup>10</sup> In place of the word "plundered" he puts the word "*wadla*," meaning 'devoured', which suggests the annihilation of the enemy. The repetition of the word "plundered" or "devoured" gives the impression that Mzilikazi was unstoppable. The compelling rhythm of the lines helps reinforce the momentum and the dramatic manner in which Mzilikazi executed his military campaigns. The people defeated here were white people, who were supposed to be superior in arms and tactics to Mzilikazi, and yet he got the better of them. The message being relayed by the *imbongi* is that if Mzilikazi was not intimidated by the white men, why should his descendants be intimidated? This challenges the defeated people.

Several other poets of the time emphasized Mzilikazi's bravery in their works. Khiyaza describes Mzilikazi and his men as "*abaphos' umkhonto bewulandela*"<sup>11</sup> ['those who throw a spear and follow it']. Both the Ndebele and the Zulu considered it the height of cowardice for any men to come back from a battle without their spears. Following the spear suggests a determination to fight to the end. Legend has it that, to deter many from the cowardly behaviour of throwing their spears from a distance and retreating before conquering the enemy, Shaka introduced a short stabbing spear, which forced the fighter to get closer to his opponent; hence the stress was on person-to-person combat. Losing one's spear meant the loss of one's manhood.

The Reverend C. Nyoni, in his poem "*Izibongo Zobuqhawe bukaMzilikazi*," also highlights Mzilikazi's bravery. The title of the poem suggests that he is focusing on the heroic acts of Mzilikazi:

*Umahlab'eguqule njengesithole.*  
*Owadl' uMagodonga kaNzuze kabamlilela....*  
*Wadlu Sibindi, kaMdala, Wamuthi jelekeqe.*

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<sup>9</sup> Vail & White, *Power and the Praise Poem*, 105

<sup>10</sup> *Kusile Mbongi Zohlanga*, ed. P. Mpofu (Salisbury: Longman, 1969): 79.

<sup>11</sup> *Kusile Mbongi Zohlanga*, ed. Mpofu, 80.

[...]

*Wen' ongethuswa lutho, wen' ongehulwe  
Ozitha zakho ziwiswa yikwesab' udumo lwebizo lakho; Imikhonto yabantu bakh'  
ingakafiki.*<sup>12</sup>

[He who stabs while kneeling like a calf.  
The one who devoured Magodonga, son of Nzuze,  
And no one mourned for him.  
He devoured Sibindi, son of Mdala,  
And swallowed him whole.

[...]

You who are not scared of anything.  
You who cannot be defeated  
Your enemies collapse when they hear  
Your name before the spears of your people get there.]

Nyoni's tone is that of awe because of Mzilikazi's reputation. The king's formidable reputation precedes him, resulting in his enemies' fleeing before his arrival. Likening Mzilikazi to a 'calf' which stabs while kneeling is a reminder once again that Mzilikazi's opponents were superior to him in stature. However, this did not intimidate him. The simile also evokes a mental picture of a man who is determined to fight to the end despite the odds against him. Kneeling suggests that the individual is fixed to the spot and is therefore not planning to retreat or run away. His objective is to fight to the bitter end.

S.J. Nondo's praise-poem "*Izibongo zikaMzilikazi kaMatshobana*" also underlines Mzilikazi's bravery and fearlessness. Mzilikazi's historic and successful confrontation with Shaka is seen by *imbongi* as a prime example of this courage:

*Wena owalwa le Nkos' uTshaka Kwaze kwadam' elaphezulu.*<sup>13</sup>

[You who fought with the King Tshaka until the heavens thundered.]

This was a battle between titans, hence the heavenly thunder. Nondo's admiration lies in the fact that Mzilikazi did what seemed to matter at the time, to be impossible, even suicidal – challenging the 'invincible' Shaka.

Khiyaza also captures this extraordinary confrontation between Shaka and Mzilikazi:

*Untonga yabuy' ebusweni bukaTshaka. Wal'  
Ukudl' umlenze kwaBulawayo.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ndabezinhle S. Sigogo, *Imbongi Zalamhla Layizolo* (Salisbury: Longman, 1959): 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Kusile Mbongi Zohlanga*, ed. Mpofo, 24

[A knobkerrie which came before Tshaka's face.  
You refused to eat meat at Bulawayo.]

The poet expresses his awe of this man who dared provoke Shaka and live. Waving a knobkerrie in front of Shaka is like waving a red cloth at a bull; it is a highly provocative gesture. The implication is that Mzilikazi deliberately provoked Shaka, but there is also an element of cunning and craftiness in the manner in which he eludes Shaka. This praise arose from Mzilikazi's refusal to give Shaka the cattle he had plundered from Somnisi, the Sotho king. He also worsened the situation by cutting off the head-plumes of Shaka's messengers, an act that was taken as a declaration of war. Mzilikazi's act was a direct challenge to Shaka's manhood and authority.

The main role of the colonial *imbongi*, therefore, was to arouse in the Ndebele people the spirit of bravery which was necessary if they were to rid themselves of the colonial regime. The Ndebele lionize bravery; they detest cowards. This could explain why even Lobengula, who was considered a "tarnished hero"<sup>15</sup> by the Ndebele, was in the mid-twentieth century rehabilitated and revered as much as his father was. His controversial lineage, as well as the fact that he was the reigning monarch when the nation fell apart, did not endear him to most early twentieth-century Ndebeles.

One of the notorious praises given to Lobengula, "*ibhudlu elilamathe amunyu, umuntu odla amaduble*,"<sup>16</sup> expresses the contempt with which he was viewed by the people. The word "*bhudlu*" refers to the act of diving recklessly into a pool, suggesting an individual who 'dives' into situations without considering the consequences. The rest of the quotation means 'one with sour/bitter saliva who eats zebra meat'. This makes reference to Lobengula's habit of eating the flesh of zebras, which he hunted with white hunters who frequented his father's kingdom. This practice was considered behaviour unbecoming of a future king.

Another poem which depicted Lobengula as a great disappointment, not worthy of his position as king, was recorded by T.J. Hemans in 1971. Hemans claims that he was given these praises by Mtshede Ndlovu, who at the time of the recording was about 105 years old. Ndlovu is said to have been born while Mzilikazi was still alive. It is therefore most likely that the poem was performed even earlier than 1971. It seems to be the exact opposite of the praises of Mzilikazi that are inscribed on his grave. Whereas Mzilikazi is depicted as

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<sup>14</sup> *Kusile Mbongi Zohlanga*, ed. Mpofu, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Vail & White, *Power and the Praise Poem*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> T.J. Hemans, "Praises Given to the Kings of the Amandebele," *N.A.D.A.* 10.3 (1971): 96.

a great man in the latter, Ndlovu uses diminutive images to describe Lobengula. Instead of the usual powerful animals, such as lions and elephants, the *imbongi* likens Lobengula to “*utega kamkhonto kanganani lemkhomtweni angahlala*” [‘The small bird of the spear, so small it can sit on the spear’].<sup>17</sup> He is also described as “*Undlela zimazombezombe njengo bunyonyo*” [‘He whose path is winding like that of an ant’].<sup>18</sup> The images of a small bird and an ant reduce Lobengula’s stature in the eyes of the people. Besides, the poet’s claim that Lobengula’s path is winding, implies that he is unreliable. There is something sly about him.

The historian Julian Cobbing, cited by Vail and White, also notes that Ndlovu’s praises of Lobengula contain no positive achievement.<sup>19</sup> The *imbongi* does not mention any victories in battle, nor any contribution to the nation’s wealth. He refers to him contemptuously as a man who directed his anger at the commoners, instead of focusing his energy on men of stature as his father had done: “*Umtshenjele umqotwani ngoba wavalela izindlwana*” [‘Watch him, the destroyer, because he destroyed the commoners’].<sup>20</sup> While his father can boast of getting the better of powerful men such as Shaka and Dingane, Lobengula can only talk of destroying people who were considered to be of no consequence. Ndlovu seems to be saying that Lobengula contributed nothing of value to the nation, unlike his father, who created the nation’s wealth by plundering the cattle of his enemies.

Lobengula is also criticized for his lack of diplomacy in handling national affairs. He is described as

*Imbabala eyahlaba ngenzipho Konakala ematsheni.*<sup>21</sup>

[The bush buck that strikes with its hooves  
And damages the stones.]

The picture emerging is of a man who bulldozes his way through national affairs, without taking into consideration how his actions affect others. This again is in sharp contrast to Mzilikazi’s praises:

*Imbabala egxakaza ematsheni  
Yesaba inzipho zayo ukonakala.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hemans, “Praises Given to the Kings of the Amandebele,” 96.

<sup>18</sup> “Praises Given to the Kings of the Amandebele,” 96.

<sup>19</sup> Vail & White, *Power and the Praise Poem*, 106.

<sup>20</sup> Hemans, “Praises Given to the Kings of the Amandebele,” 96.

<sup>21</sup> “Praises Given to the Kings of the Amandebele,” 96.

<sup>22</sup> “Praises Given to the Kings of the Amandebele,” 95.

[The bush buck that steps carefully on the  
rocks. It is afraid of its claws being spoilt.]

This praise paints the picture of a man who is very cautious and considers carefully the implications of his every move. Unlike his son, he does not want to destroy his reputation by acting hastily. In the magazine *Mzilikazi*, one of the anonymous contributors says that whenever Mzilikazi met some form of resistance in his operations, he adopted a principle of operational subservience, which would enable him to study the techniques used by his opponents in combat. In that way, he was able to overcome his opponents easily.

However, despite the contempt for Lobengula revealed by the early *izimbongi*, the mid-twentieth-century praise-poets, writing during the nationalist and liberation war eras, rehabilitated Lobengula and endowed him with the characteristics that his father had. For example, while Mtshede Ndlovu upbraids Lobengula for his lack of diplomacy, “bush buck that strikes with its hooves / and damaged the stones.”<sup>23</sup> Mayford Sibanda, in his praises, describes Lobengula as a “bush buck that steps carefully on rocks/it’s afraid its hooves will be spoilt.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Lobengula’s escape from the white men, which was viewed by many Ndebele people as an abdication of duty, is treated as an epic event by D. Mthombeni. A later poet, Kaith Nkala, in his poem “Mzilikazi,” expresses his contempt for Lobengula in this way:

*Nang’ uLobengul’ eTshangane, Emtshiy’ etshatshalazin’ uMthwakazi,  
Into ongazang’ uyenze Khumalo.  
Bumehlul’ ubukhos’ umfana  
Umuntu kazizali ngoqobo.*<sup>25</sup>

[Here is Lobengula at Tshangane river,  
Leaving Mthwakazi in the open and unprotected.  
A thing that you never did Khumalo.  
The boy failed in his duties as king.  
It is true that a person can never bear a child like himself.]

To Nkala, Lobengula is a coward. One is struck by the derogatory reference to Lobengula as “umfana” (a boy)!

Yet Mthombeni describes Lobengula’s escape in a tone of awe and admiration. He likens him to “*Ndlov’ eyawel’ uTshangane kwazimpopoma*” [‘Elephant which crossed Tshangane river and caused floods’].<sup>26</sup> Lobengula’s

<sup>23</sup> Hemans, “Praises Given to the Kings of the Amandebele,” 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Inkundla yezimbongi*, ed. Ndabezinhle S. Sigogo (Gwelo: Mambo, 1979): 146.

<sup>25</sup> *Emdangweni Wezinkondlo*, ed. Literature Bureau (Gweru: Mambo, 1996): 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ugqozi Lwezimbongi*, ed. Mpofu (Gwelo: Mambo, 1973): 16.

crossing is couched in magical terms. There is a story among the Ndebele that, as soon as Lobengula crossed the river, it became flooded and the white men who were pursuing him were swept away.

It is also worth noting that in the same poem, which was written during the nationalist and liberation-war period, the animal images used to describe Lobengula changed significantly. Mthombeni describes him as “*ihlosi*” (a cheetah) and “*indlondlos*”<sup>27</sup> (a boomslang) to show how swift and lethal he was. Further, he describes him as a lion: “*silwane esabhodla sezwakala ko Mbiko*” [‘The lion that roared and was heard at Mbiko’s kraal’].<sup>28</sup> He is also likened to an elephant which caused floods at Tshangane river. All these animal references depict an awesome and formidable figure. This significant change in imagery could be because, for the modern *imbongi*, the main thrust of his praises was to seek powerful black heroes for people to emulate in order to topple the settler regime, whereas Mtshede Ndlovu, who described Lobengula in diminutive terms, lived through a different era when Lobengula’s weaknesses were more immediate to the people.

Siziba’s poem “*Lobengula KaMzillikazi*” concentrates on the fight between the white settlers and Lobengula’s forces at Gadade. Though the fight ended with humiliation and defeat for Lobengula and his men, Siziba chooses to describe the battle in epic terms, as if to say that Lobengula was not easy to defeat. He captures the battle-scene in these words:

*Lwathungq’ uthuli, kwaduma phansi,  
Kwanyikinyeka izihlahla, kwaphel’ utshani,  
Zem’ izifula, kwadana laye uTshangane [...]*

*wathula wonk’ umhlaba kwabus ilihlo lendlebe*<sup>29</sup>

[A lot of dust was raised, the ground roared,  
Trees shook, grass was finished.  
Rivers stopped flowing: even Tshangane river was saddened [...]]

The whole world became silent only the eye and the ear ruled.]

The rhythm of the poem captures the urgency of battle; the staccato description of events its ferocity. Lobengula’s army is depicted as a worthy opponent for the better-armed colonial army; his forces did not bow out of battle in disgrace. Even nature seems to have cowered before the ferocity of the fight.

<sup>27</sup> *Ugqozi Lwezimbongi*, ed. Mpofu, 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ugqozi Lwezimbongi*, ed. Mpofu, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ugqozi Lwezimbongi*, ed. Mpofu, 142–43.

The bravery of Lobengula's fighters is further captured in David Ndoda's poem "*Sibindi Bani?*" ['What manner of Bravery?']. Here he expresses amazement at the courage of the warriors at Gadade. Despite the fact that the settlers had superior arms, Lobengula's regiment, the *Imbizo*, fought to the last man:

*Sibindi bani leso  
Sandla val' umbhobho  
Sibindi bani sala kuhlehla?  
Sibindi bani sofela phakathi.*<sup>30</sup>

[What manner of bravery is this  
Hand closing barrel of the gun  
Bravery and no retreat  
What manner of bravery that chooses to die in a shower of bullets?]

The above shows a romanticized view of Lobengula's defeat. The warriors chose to close the barrel of the gun with their hands, rather than retreat.

Mayford Sibanda and other poets further elevate Lobengula to heroic stature by enveloping him in some of Mzilikazi's praises. In his poem, Sibanda describes Lobengula as

*Umbhengula wakithi' unjobo kazinyathelwa Bekunyathelwa ezikaTshaka kajama  
Bekunyathelwa ezika Zwide kaLanga.*<sup>31</sup>

[Lobengula, whose bunches of cats' skins may not be trampled;  
They used to step on Tshaka's of Jama. They used to step on Zwide's of Langa.]

As noted earlier, this is a eulogistic form used by many praise-poets to underline Mzilikazi's superiority over Shaka and Zwide. It is possible that, in Lobengula's case, the poet is arguing that this warrior, like his father Mzilikazi, did not die at the hands of his enemies. He simply disappeared, eluding the colonial forces, whereas Shaka and Zwide died at the hands of their enemies. It is also likely that Sibanda was simply following the tradition of borrowing praises from the king's ancestors so as to establish the king's legitimacy and ancestry.

The general picture one gets of Lobengula, after reading the pre-Independence praises of the mid-twentieth century (1950–80), is that of a highly impressive figure, who is worthy of his father Mzilikazi. Whereas the earlier poets were generally contemptuous of Lobengula, the later ones are inclined

<sup>30</sup> *Ugqozi Lwezimbongi*, ed. Mpofu, 65.

<sup>31</sup> *Inkundla Yezimbongi*, ed. Sigogo, 148.

to view him favourably. It is possible that the historical period during which these praises were written or recited demanded heroes who would inspire people to undertake revolutionary action. The period from 1950 to 1980 saw the intensification of struggles by nationalist movements all over Africa, including Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). These movements culminated in the war of liberation, which called on all people to be courageous like Lobengula and his *Imbizo* regiment. Vail and White concur with this argument:

To a people looking back from the humiliations of colonialism, to their settlement as farmers under Lobengula, and their earlier migration under Mzilikazi, the poetic expression of simple military virtues had an irresistible appeal.<sup>32</sup>

What this implies is that *izimbongi* might have re-created some of their heroes in order to make them an inspiration for a black population suffering under the yoke of colonialism. Lobengula was one of the only two kings in the Ndebele nation, and portraying him negatively would spoil the *imbongi*'s intention of showing the past of the Ndebele nation as 'glorious'. The Ndebele yearned for the return of the grandeur of the past, which they believed embodied the true virtues of their nation. Lobengula and Mzilikazi were part of that past, a "perfect past," which they hoped would motivate them to fight imperialism.

I would like to end by saying that *izimbongi* have always responded to "the stimulus situation in which [they were] placed,"<sup>33</sup> using their art to inspire the people to respond in certain ways to existing power-relations. The praise-poets of the first half of the twentieth century were no exception. Colonialism was a very humiliating experience for the Ndebele people and ways had to be found to motivate them to rise against the imperialist forces. A people so defeated and humbled by the repressive colonial machinery needed heroes they could look up to and emulate in their struggle. Thus the *izimbongi* endowed the two kings, Mzilikazi and Lobengula, with heroic qualities which could inspire their audiences. The dynamism of *izibongo* is even seen in the manner in which Lobengula's image evolved in the first half of the century. From an anti-hero looked down upon for his weaknesses, he rises to the position of a formidable leader who can inspire the people. This proves beyond any doubt that the significance of *izibongo* is never static. They are dynamic and they can be used in multiple discourses which a creative *imbongi* can exploit for the benefit of his audience.

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<sup>32</sup> Vail & White, *Power and the Praise Poem*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> E.N. Egudu, "Pictures of Pain: The Poetry of Dennis Brutus," in *Aspects of South African Literature*, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976): 132.

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ALENA RETTOVÁ

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*Inkos' uLobengula yasinyamalala*<sup>1</sup>

The Attitude to Tradition  
in Ndebele Theoretical Writing

ABSTRACT

Ndebele non-fictional literature is inspired in decisive measure by the historical events and statehood of the nineteenth-century Ndebele kingdom, which define what the Ndebele see as their 'traditional culture' or tradition. This essay demonstrates how Ndebele theoretical writing manifests this tradition in three moments: first, the consciousness of its absence and the ensuing distance from it; second, subjection of tradition to critical reflexive scrutiny; and third, revitalization under the new conditions and context of the present day. Ndebele writers' elaboration of the approach to the tradition constitutes part of a viable philosophy of culture that avoids the pitfalls both of essentialist reverence for the tradition and of unselective acceptance of foreign influences.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank H.E. Jaroslav Olša, Jr., for making Ndebele literature accessible in the Czech Republic. My great thanks go to Dr Samukele Hadebe for helping me with the Ndebele language, and to Dr Albert Kasanda Lumembu for his detailed comments on the first draft of this article.

The Ndebele half of the title of the article means "The King Lobengula disappeared to us." See the song in 2.1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are mine. Some of the translations quoted from Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, have been slightly adjusted. As Ndebele literature is still largely unknown and inaccessible to non-Ndebele speakers, I have provided extensive quotations from it so that readers may form their own opinion.

*La philosophie ne commence qu'avec la décision  
de soumettre l'héritage philosophique et culturel  
à une critique sans complaisance.*  
— Marcien Towa (1971)

## 1. Introduction: Ndebele Theoretical Writing

CONTEMPORARY NDEBELE LITERATURE abounds in specialized non-fiction writing. I have opted to call this type of literature “theoretical writing” and have isolated three disciplines within it: “historiography,” “ethnography,” and the “study of language and literature.”<sup>2</sup>

In the domain of historiography, one finds Pathisa Nyathi’s monumental trilogy. The first part, *Igugu likaMthwakazi: Imbali yamaNdebele 1820–1893* (The treasure of Mthwakazi):<sup>3</sup> The history of the Ndebele, 1820–1893), published in 1994, describes the way Mzilikazi forged the Ndebele nation and its kingdom in the nineteenth century, and his son Lobengula’s succession to the throne. The second part, *Uchuku olungelandiswe: Imbali yamaNdebele 1893–1895* (Untold cruelty: The history of the Ndebele, 1893–1895), published in 1996, deals with the disappearance of King Lobengula. The third part, *Madoda lolani incukuthu: Imbali yamaNdebele 1896* (Men, sharpen metal spikes: The history of the Ndebele, 1896), published in 1999, focuses on the Ndebele uprising of 1896.

Ethnographic literature is represented by the book *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele* (Traditions and culture of the Ndebele), which appeared in 1995 and was co-authored by three writers, Tommy Matshakayile Ndlovu, Doris Nomathemba Ndlovu, and Bekithemba Sodindwa Ncube. This complex account of traditional Ndebele culture includes detailed descriptions of the lifestyle of the Ndebele in former times and contrasts these with the modern way of life. The chapters of the book cover discussion of the national identity of the Ndebele and depictions of the way people in the traditional society married and started families, how children were brought up, what food people ate and what household utensils they used, what beliefs they held and how these

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<sup>2</sup> See Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard: A Small Anthology of Zimbabwean Ndebele Writing / Držíme se slova Ještěrky: Malá antologie zimbabweké ndebelské literatury* (ed. & tr. from Ndebele into English and Czech; Středokluky: Zdeněk Susa, 2004), and “Afrophone Philosophies: Reality and Challenge” (doctoral dissertation, Charles University, Prague, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The name used by the Ndebele people to describe their nation.

were connected to their surroundings and nature, how their law functioned, and how they reckoned time.

Ndebele authors have also produced works that concentrate on Ndebele language and oral literature. Samukele Hadebe is the chief editor of *Isichazamazwi sesiNdebele* (Dictionary of Ndebele, published in 2001), a voluminous (558 pages and 47 pages of introduction) unilingual dictionary. The dictionary introduces and consistently uses Ndebele grammatical terminology. N.P. Ndhlukula has published two books, *IsiNdebele esiphezulu* (Advanced Ndebele, first edition 1974), a comprehensive manual of the language, and *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele* (The original state and the Ndebele language, first edition 1980). The latter book focuses on Ndebele folklore, including several genres of oral literature. Ndhlukula classifies Ndebele folklore into the following categories: the myth of origin; tales (or ‘fireside stories’); praise-poetry of kings; invocation of ancestral spirits; riddles; proverbs and idiomatic expressions; witchcraft; and folksongs.

This non-fictional literature is inspired in decisive measure by the history of the Ndebele people in the nineteenth century. The historical events and the statehood of the nineteenth-century Ndebele kingdom define what the Ndebele see as their ‘traditional culture’, their tradition.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I will try to demonstrate how Ndebele theoretical writing relates to the tradition. I will identify three moments in which the tradition is manifested in Ndebele theoretical writing: following its historical disappearance, there comes, first, consciousness of its absence and the ensuing distance from it. Second, it is subjected to critical reflexive scrutiny; and third, it is brought back to life under new conditions and in the new context of the present times. In my conclusion, I will suggest that the Ndebele writers’ elaboration of the approach to the tradition is a project of a viable philosophy of culture that avoids the pitfalls

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<sup>4</sup> I am using the word ‘tradition’ in the singular in this article to refer to the traditional culture. In Ndebele theoretical writing – specifically, Tommy Matshakayile Ndlovu, Doris Ndlovu & Bekithemba S. Ncube, *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele* (Gweru: Mambo, 1995) – this would correspond to the word *isiNtu* (see 2.2.1). ‘Traditions’ in the plural is synonymous with ‘customs’. The latter is my rendering of the Ndebele word *imikhuba*. There is an obvious relationship between the two: ‘traditions’ or ‘customs’ are manifestations of ‘culture’ (see Ncube’s explication in the quotations in 2.4.1.), and the ‘tradition’ covers both within a historical perspective. This historical dimension is very clear in the way Ndlovu et al. use the word *isiNtu* and its derivatives, although it may not be so emphatic in the normal usage of the word. Hadebe’s definition of *isintu* is almost identical to Ncube’s definition of *imikhuba*: “*Isintu yindlela abantu abaqhuba ngayo isiko labo*” (*Isintu* is the way in which a people practise their culture); S. Hadebe, ed. *Isichazamazwi sesiNdebele* (Harare: College Press, 2001): 243.

both of essentialist reverence for the tradition and of unselective acceptance of foreign influences.

## 2. Phenomenology of Tradition

### 2.1. Disappearance and absence

*Kudala kwakungenje,  
Umhlab' uyaphenduka.  
Kwakubus' uMambo loMzilikazi.  
Sawel' uTshangane,  
Saguqa ngamadolo,  
Inkos' uLobengula yasinyamalala.  
Yasinyamalala.  
Kwase kusin' izulu,  
Yasinyamalala.*

[Long ago things were not like this;  
The world is changing.  
Mambo and Mzilikazi ruled.  
We crossed the river Shangani,  
We knelt down;  
The King Lobengula had disappeared from us.  
He had disappeared from us.  
It dawned and it was raining,  
He had disappeared from us.]

This song appears again and again in Ndebele theoretical writing.<sup>5</sup> As Ndlovu et al. state:

*Yikukhala kwamaNdebele lokhu. Imikhuba kaMambo lekaMzilikazi eyayihlanganiswe yikudaleka kwesizwe sikaMthwakazi kayisekho. Sekungani ukunyamalala kwenkosi uLobengula yikho okwadala ukunyamalala kwamasiko lemikhuba yamaNdebele.*<sup>6</sup>

[This is the cry of the Ndebele. The customs of Mambo and of Mzilikazi that were mixed together in the creation of the nation of Mthwakazi are no longer in

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<sup>5</sup> See Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 3–4, and Pathisa Nyathi, *Uchuku olungelandiswe: Imbali yamaNdebele 1893–1895* (Gweru: Mambo, 1996): 98, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 4; translation quoted from Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, 72.

existence. That is why the disappearance of the King Lobengula brought about the disappearance of the culture and the customs of the Ndebele.]

### 2.1.1. *Lobengula's death*

Lobengula was the second and last king of the Ndebele state. His son Nyamanda was formally elected the third Ndebele king in 1896 during the Ndebele uprising (the first *Umvukela*), but he was never recognized as such by a part of the Ndebele chiefs, who had another candidate for the post, and his rule was too short-lived for him to assert his claims.<sup>7</sup>

Lobengula's death has remained a mystery. A hundred years after Lobengula's instalment as king of the Ndebele, the materials concerning his death and burial were collected by C.K. Cooke and published by him in the Rhodesian history journal *Rhodesiana* (1970). These materials also appear translated into Ndebele in Nyathi's *Uchuku olungelandiswe: Imbali yamaNdebele 1893–1895* (1996). The large part of these are the records of what eye-witnesses said about Lobengula and the time of his death during the official discovery of the supposed grave of the king in 1943.

Several witnesses claimed that, following the military defeat of the Ndebele and the occupation of their territory by the armed forces of Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company in late 1893, Lobengula and his close assistant, Chief Magwegwe, drank poison from a bottle and died. Lobengula was then buried in a cave together with his possessions. Allegedly, these included a huge treasure of gold, diamonds, and money. The cave where he was buried was in the country of Chief Pashu, in a place called Malindi. The cave was disclosed officially in 1943 and it was declared a National Monument. Nevertheless, it had been entered prior to that.

What was found in the cave were several guns and other weapons, glass bottles of (European) medicaments for rheumatism and pain-killers, a silver mount for a pipe, beads, a cowrie shell, and sections of saddlery. There were two pieces of human bone (a clavicle and part of a tibia), but some witnesses mentioned having seen a large skull (Lobengula was a very tall and corpulent man). These findings, as Cooke concludes, indicate that the place might have been where Lobengula's belongings were stored, but there is no reliable evidence that it was also Lobengula's grave.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Robert S. Burrett, "Gweru and its environs: a glimpse of the Matabele uprising – First *Umvukela*, 1896," *Heritage of Zimbabwe* 15 (1996): 40.

<sup>8</sup> C.K. Cooke, "Lobengula: Second and Last King of the Amandabele," *Rhodesiana* 23 (1970): 50–51.

However, another story circulated concerning the king's actions following the defeat of the Ndebele in 1893. He is supposed to have crossed the Zambezi river and to have died there later. He was seen there by an unnamed European witness as late as 1894 or 1895. This witness took a photograph of him, but it was hushed up by the head of the British South Africa Company in Blantyre, Major Forbes, who was very perturbed at seeing the photo.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.1.2. *Lobengula's absence*

Whatever the historical truth may have been, the fact remains that King Lobengula left the Ndebele in 1893, and the gradual crumbling of the Ndebele state dates from that time, even if the final destruction and the onset of effective colonization may in fact have only come after the suppression of the Ndebele uprising in 1896.<sup>10</sup>

The termination of the Ndebele kingdom is seen by the Ndebele as the time when the traditional way of life started disappearing. The traditions, many of which were rooted in the organizational structure of the Ndebele kingdom, were discontinued. Today, there is the gap of nearly a century of alienation from these traditions, creating a distance that needs to be overcome if a new relationship to them is to be established.

## 2.2. Distance

### 2.2.1. *The symptoms of distance*

This distance is manifested in Ndebele theoretical writing. The three authors Tommy Matshakayile Ndlovu, Doris Nomathemba Ndlovu and Bekithemba Sodindwa Ncube devote their book *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele* (1995) to a meticulous description of the Ndebele traditional culture. The perspective in which their account is set is that of the changing nature of human living conditions: “*Njengoba impilo iguquka ukusa kwamalanga nje lendlela yokwenziwa kwezinto layo iyaguquka*” [Since life changes from day to day, so also the manner in which things are done changes].<sup>11</sup> The authors make explicit mention of the fact that what they describe is the past state of affairs “*Njengoba kutshiwo, impilo kayimi ndawonye. Izinto zonke lezi eziqanjwe lapha ezinye zakhona zivele seziguqukile. Lapha sibalisa ngendlela izinto ezazihanjiswa ngayo*” [As has been said, life does not stand in one place; all of these

<sup>9</sup> C.K. Cooke, “Lobengula: Second and Last King of the Amandabele,” 5.

<sup>10</sup> Burrett, “Gweru and its environs,” 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 33.

things that have been mentioned here and other things mentioned elsewhere have now changed; we describe here the way things used to be done].<sup>12</sup>

The distance that the authors perceive between the past and the present shows in the following markers in the text:

- the frequent usage of the past tense (more specifically the “remote past tense”<sup>13</sup>) when writing about traditions;
- the opposition of ‘yesterday’ (*izolo*; this period is also referred to as *kudala*, ‘in the old times’, *endulo*, ‘in ancient times’, or by the phrase *kusadliwa ngoludala*, ‘in ancient times’, etc.) and ‘today’ (*lamuhla*; also referred to as *khathesi*, ‘now’, or *kulezi insuku*, ‘these days’); *kudala*, ‘the old times’, is specified as the time when *ilizwe lisakhile*, ‘when the country was built’:<sup>14</sup> i.e. the times of Mzilikazi’s conquest and the formation of the Ndebele nation;
- the traditional culture is referred to as *isiNtu* and its reality is described by using derivations from this word, such as *inhlalo yesiNtu* (‘the traditional way of life’), *esiNtwini* (‘in the traditional way / culture / society’), *owesiNtu* (‘a person following the traditional way of life’), etc.; the traditional culture is delimited in this way both with respect to non-Ndebele cultures and to the modern style of living among the Ndebele;
- the use of words such as “*inguquko*” (‘changes’) when characterizing the world as such and specifically human life;
- explanations of words that describe the traditional way of life: these words are outdated and may be unknown to present-day people; these explanations appear in italics on the broad margins of the text;
- showing objects pertaining to the traditional way of life in pictures that were taken in a museum or from archives: this means that these objects are no longer used in present-day life;
- indication of the absence of a tradition in particular areas of human life and other intercultural comparisons, which imply stepping out of the traditional Ndebele outlook.

This distance can be observed in all areas of life. The authors contrast the manner in which things were done in traditional society with the manner in which they are done today, with respect to the differences in courtship and marriage, in the bearing and upbringing of children, in the guidance provided

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<sup>12</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. James & Pamela Pelling, *Lessons in Ndebele* (1974; Harare: Longman Zimbabwe / Literature Bureau, 1987): 152ff.

<sup>14</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 83.

to adolescent people, in people's food and household utensils, in the classification of domestic and wild animals and plants, in burial practices and beliefs concerning the beyond, in the reckoning of time, and in the system of law and the settling of disputes and wrongdoing.

I will demonstrate this with reference to three examples: changes regarding crime and offences; changes concerning the arrangements made to solve infertility, such as polygamy; and changes in beliefs. I have selected these examples because they not only relate to the technical organization and functioning of society but are, rather, connected with subtle changes in people's mentality and moral attitudes.

### 2.2.2. *The evidence of distance*

#### 2.2.2.1. Law and offences

The authors depict the traditional life of the Ndebele as very harmonious. Cattle were provided for poor people so that they could nourish their children. This was connected with the fact that cattle which were the loot taken from the peoples who were subjected during the king's expansions were considered *inkomo zenkosi* ('the king's cattle') and thus there was a sense of communal possession of these cattle. The general satisfaction of basic needs offered few reasons to commit crime:

*Lokhu-ke kwakusenza ukuthi enhlalweni yamaNdebele angabikhona umuntu oswelayo kakhulu ukuthi kungaze kuthiwe ubulawa yindlala. Ngaleyondlela abantu babengehlelwa yizilingo zokufuna ukweba impahla yabanye, ngakho amacala obusela ayengaziwa; yizinto ezivele muva ilizwe seliphethwe ngamakhwiwa. Lowo osiselwe inkomo kwakuthi kungabonakala ukuthi kasazigcini ngemfanelo lezonkomo azemukwe atshiyelwe zonalezo ayabe esevele waziphiwa kodwa lokhu kwakungandanga ngoba abantu babelobuntu ngalezo nsuku.*

*Wona amaNdebele ngabantu ababesazisa amasiko akibo njalo eginwa lawo masiko, lokhu lakho kuphathisa ekwikeleni ingxabano ezazingabakhona abantwini. Izintombi lamajaha babeziphatha kuhle kungaziwa ukuthi intombi ingangena lejaha engutsheni ingakendi. Lokhu kutsho ukuthi amacala apha-thelene lokoniwa kwezintombi ngamajaha ngamacala ayengaziwa kwelika-Mthwakazi kaNdaba. Kanti njalo ingxabano eziphathelene lobufebe kumbe ukuganga kowesilisa lowesifazana zazingaziwa. Kodwa-ke lokho kakutsho ukuthi lobububi babungaziwa kodwa kutsho ukuthi kwakungandanga. Uma kuthe kwavela udaba lwakhona lwaluphathwa ngobunono bekati lulungiswe luqedwe umphakathi uvele ungazi ukuthi kulodaba ulunjalo oluke lwenzeka.<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 126.

[This meant that in the life of the Ndebele there was no one who was so needy that he would be hungry. In that way, people did not feel tempted to steal the possessions of others, and therefore the crime of theft was unknown; those are things that appeared after the whites occupied the country. If it appeared that the one who had been given custody over cattle no longer took proper care of those cattle, he could have the cattle taken from him and he would remain with those that had been given to him, but this was very rare as people had good manners (literally, 'humanity' *ubuntu*; A.R.) in those days.

The Ndebele are people who spread their culture, and this culture was kept by them, and that also helped in the prevention of disputes that might occur among people. Girls and youths behaved well and it was unknown for a girl to sleep with a boy before marriage. This means that offences connected with unwanted pregnancies of girls by boys are offences that were unknown in the Mthwakazi of old (literally, 'of Ndaba'; A.R.). And disputes connected with adultery or immoral behaviour between men and women were also unknown. But this does not mean that this evil was unknown; it means that it was not common. Should such a case arise, it was handled with dexterity and solved privately without the general public ever knowing that such a matter ever arose.

Something that helped keep this order in society, so the authors believe, was the tendency not to spread news of the few criminal offences that might have occurred:

*Phela indaba ezimbi ezilulaza isimilo somuntu kwakuthiwa zona isizwe sonke uma kungaphonguhanjwa kukhulunywa ngazo nje indawana yonke. Kwakukholwa ukuthi uma ziphongukhulunywa mahlayana nje zibulala isizwe ngoba abanye labo bazasuka bakwenze sebekubone kwabanye. Kodwa nxa kungakhulunywa ngakho kwenza abantu bakuthathe njengento evele ingenziwa. Lokho kwenza baziphathe kuhle sibili.*

*Lamuhla izinto sezahluke. Inxabano zonke ezikhona ebantwini kukhulunywa ngazo yonke indawo, kubhalwe langazo kumaphephandaba, into elihlazo icine isisenziwa ubukhwa. Kuthi lalabo abebekhumbula ukuthi ilihlazo bayithathe njengento engasinto yalutho. Yilesi-ke isizatho esasibangela ukuthi ingxabano ezithe zabakhona phakathi kwabantu zilungiswe kungazange kubizwe abantu abanengi abangasuka bahambe bekhuluma ngengxabano lezo endaweni zonke kucine kululaza abantu lamasiko abo.<sup>16</sup>*

[Indeed, news of evil deeds that corrupt the human character spread in the whole nation if they were allowed to circulate and be told everywhere. It was believed that if they were simply told openly, they harmed the nation, because people would imitate what they had seen others doing. But if they were not talked about,

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<sup>16</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 126–27.

that caused people to see them as something that was not done. That made people behave really well.

Today things are different. All the disputes that occur among people are discussed everywhere; they are even written in newspapers; something disgraceful ends up being treated as if it was something to be proud of. Even those who know that it is a disgrace see it as something that is no problem. This was the reason why disputes that occurred among people were put right without there being many people who might talk about these disputes everywhere, which would then end up corrupting people and their culture.]

Eventually, the authors describe the traditional way of settling disputes and the hierarchy of men who tried to reconcile the two contending parties: the matter was first presented to the head of the family (*inhloko yomuzi*), and if he failed to appease the conflict, it was forwarded to the chief (*induna*) and his assistants (*abasekeli*). The chief passed final judgment; such disputes were not presented to the king (*inkosi*).

#### 2.2.2.2. Infertility and polygamy

The ability to settle things in secret was also helpful in the measures that people had recourse to in the traditional society in order to solve infertility – a big disgrace in the old days. If it was the wife who was infertile, her parents settled the issue, in that her husband married a second wife who was the first wife's younger sister or niece. She bore a child for the older sister or aunt and this child was then said to be the first wife's child; he or she also called the first wife his or her mother, whereas he or she only called his or her real mother *unina omncinyane* ('small mother'). The woman's infertility was kept a secret.

If it was the husband who was infertile, the man's family talked about the issue and his brother or his cousin impregnated his wife for him. The husband, who was kept ignorant of this, would be called on an errand and the chosen relative went to his house to sleep with the wife. This, too, was kept secret. These days, things are not as easy as that:

*Lamuhla indlela zonke lezi sezilukhuni ukuthi zisetshenziswe ngoba abantu bakhathesi isithembo kabasasifuni. Amakholwa kawavumelani laso.*

*Indlela le eyayisetshenziswa nxa kuyindoda elohlupho layo amakholwa kawayivumi. Okunye njalo yikuthi abalamuhla kabasakwazi ukugcina imfihlo njengabezolo. Indaba ingatshona isigcwele yonke indawo kubangele ukuchitheka kwemizi. Lamuhla ukungazali sekwande ukubangela ukuchitheka komendo ikakhulu nxa kungumfazi ongazaliyo.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 63.

[Today all of these ways are difficult to use, as people now refuse polygamy. The believers do not accept it.

The believers do not accept the way that was used when the problem was on the man's side, either. Another thing is that people of today no longer know how to keep a secret in the way people of yesterday did. Information immediately spreads everywhere and this causes the breaking-up of families. Today, infertility breaks up marriages more often, especially if it is the wife who is responsible for children not being conceived.]

The institution of polygamy served several political, social, and economic functions. The authors focus here on its role as a remedy for infertility: it secured progeny to the man and perpetuated his lineage, and it also enabled the incorporation of infertile women into families, in a society where unmarried, childless women often faced poverty and discrimination.

With the advent of Christianity and its strict insistence on monogamous marriages as the only form of sexual relationships, polygamy, as well as any temporary changes of sexual partners, stopped being a viable option in these cases. Additionally, as the authors lament, the new media of communication and the concomitant lack of discretion contribute to the quick spread of scandalous information and to the damage resulting from this.

#### 2.2.2.3. Beliefs

The authors include chapters on the invocation of ancestor spirits (*ukuthethela amadlozi*), on the traditional healers of the Ndebele (*abelaphi*), on warnings (*izixwayiso*), and on beliefs (*izinkolo*). Beliefs are divided into abstention beliefs (*amazilo*) and omens (*imihlolo*), the latter being subdivided into those foreshadowing events among people, those indicating rain, those that forebode fortune or misfortune, and those that are premonitions of death. It is important to note that, again, understanding and interpreting omens is a matter of the past:

*Okunye njalo okuqakathekileyo okuphathelene lezinkolo zakithi yilokhu esikubiza sithi yimihlolo. Kanengi lamhlanje imihlolo kayisatsho lutho, kodwa endulo ibiqakathekiswa imihlolo; abantu besazi ukuyihlahlula kahle, besazi njalo okumele kwenziwe uma kuthe kwavela umhlolo ethile.*<sup>18</sup>

[Another important thing that concerns our beliefs is what we have called *omens*. Omens mostly no longer mean anything today, but in the old times they were ascribed great importance; people knew how to interpret them well and they also knew what must be done if a certain omen appeared.]

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<sup>18</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 198; my emphases.

Omens were an integral part of the scheme of signs and their interpretation. This scheme supported the whole structure of temporal orientation among the traditional Ndebele: many categories of signs helped predict future events and prepare people to deal with those events. The authors discuss the importance of the interpretation of signs for the prediction of future time in detail in their chapter on the reckoning of time in the traditional society.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3. Reflection

As this last example shows, the distance from the past does not consist merely in the fact that certain social practices were abandoned or that in the past people were better-mannered than today. There is a deep epistemological cleft in people's beliefs; what constituted the cognitive backbone of the society in the past is a only collection of curiosities and superstitions today.

N.P. Ndhlukula, in the opening chapter of his book *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele* (first published in 1980), introduces a myth explaining the origin of man and of death:<sup>20</sup> Chameleon was to bring the message of eternal life from God, but he loitered on the way, and so God sent Lizard with the message that people would die. People accepted the message of Lizard, and when Chameleon eventually arrived, they said, "We hold on to the word of Lizard, we shall not listen to that of Chameleon anymore."

Ndhlukula goes on to analyze the wisdom of the myth. However, this analysis concerns the *content* and *meaning* of the myth. In a move reminiscent of Edmund Husserl's "phenomenological reduction,"<sup>21</sup> its *veracity* is declared irrelevant: "*Kakusiwo mlandu wethu ukuphikisa loba ukusekela indaba yemvelo, njengoba kungayisindaba yethu ukuthi isibili ubuthakathi bukhona loba kabukho*" [It is not our concern to argue against or support the story of the origin, just as it is not up to us to decide whether witchcraft really exists or

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<sup>19</sup> Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, 110–23; this entire chapter is translated into English in Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, 74–86.

<sup>20</sup> N.P. Ndhlukula, *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele* (1980; Gweru: Mambo / Literature Bureau, 1990): 3ff.; the major part of this chapter is translated in Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, 103–106. This myth is known in several versions to many Bantu ethnic groups, even beyond the Southern Bantu peoples. Cf. a Swahili version of it in Kyallo Wadi Wamitila, *Bina-Adamu!* (Nairobi: Phoenix, 2002): 26–27.

<sup>21</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993).

not.].<sup>22</sup> The tradition is thus no longer an uncritically accepted epistemological background to contemporary Ndebele authors. Rather, it is a body of beliefs and values that is open to critical analysis and creative development.

As Ndhlukula demonstrates, a critical approach to the tradition is seen as necessary, since the sources of information on the tradition sometimes produce conflicting claims. He distinguishes between the tradition as presented by *abadala*, ‘the elders’, and the tradition as the content of folklore, such as myths, tales, and proverbs. These two sources can contradict one another – for example, in their interpretation of polygamy:

*Into esuke ingezwakali kuhle yikuthi njengoba isithembu sasivele sixwaywa lakudala pho kungani silokhu sikhona lakhathesi, ikakhulu kulezi izinsuku zalamuhla abantu sebezibiza ngokuthi baphucukile. Abadala uba bekhuluma ngempilo yendulo baye bakwenze kukhanye sengathi isithembu sasisihle njalo sithandeka. Esikuthola izinganekwaneni kakuvumelani lesikutshelwa ngabadala. Isithembu kasizange sithandeka lasendulo aluba silandela esikutshelwa zinganekwane. Yiso esasiletha ubuthakathi, umona lokuzondana phakathi kwamakhosikazi omnumzana.*<sup>23</sup>

[Something that is not quite comprehensible, since polygamy was obviously avoided even in olden times, is how it is possible for it to be present even now, especially in these modern days (literally, ‘these days of today’; A.R.) when people call themselves civilized. When the elders talk about life in the ancient times, they make it appear as though polygamy was good and popular. But what we find in tales does not agree with what we are told by the elders. Polygamy was never popular in the past if we follow what tales tell us. It caused witchcraft, jealousy, and hatred between the wives of a husband.]

Within folklore itself, too, different genres need to be separated and treated differently, as they have different formal characteristics, mediators, and audiences, from all of which a different relevance and functions are derived. Thus Ndhlukula protests against the grouping-together of the myth of origin (*indaba yemvelo*)<sup>24</sup> and of tales (*izinganekwane* or *insimu*, ‘fireside stories’):

*Izinganekwane ziyizindatshana ezadabuka lomuntu, zindala njengaye umuntu. Ngenxa yalokhu, abalobi abanengi basuke bazihlanganise lendaba yemvelo yomuntu kube ludaba lunye, bakubize ngokuthi konke izinganekwane. Kodwa*

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<sup>22</sup> Ndhlukula, *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele*, 4; translation quoted from Rettová *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, 104.

<sup>23</sup> Ndhlukula, *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Literally, ‘the story of the origin’. It should be noted that the distinction between a myth and a simple narrative is absent in the Ndebele terminology. It is also not specified whether this ‘story’ is fact or fiction, *indaba* being used for both.

*lokhu kubonakala kuyisiphosiso. EsiNdebeleni imvelo yomuntu iyodwa, kanti izinganekwane lazo zizodwa.*

*Indaba yemvelo lezinganekwane kwehlukene ekuxoxweni kwakho. Indaba yemvelo iyalandwa njengokuthi:*

*Wathi ukuba uSomandla amdale umuntu wamthanda, ngakho wasethuma unwabu ukuba luyobatshele ukuthi kuthiwe bazakufa babuye bavuke njalo...*

*Inganekwane yethiwa kanje:*

*Kwakukhona, uMvundla loNteletsha. UNteletsha elemifecana yakhe emihle, njalo ekhala kamnandi. UMvundla uthe ekubona lokhu wangenwa ngumona wokubulala uNteletsha...*

*Injongo yokulanda indaba yemvelo yikufundisa lowo oxoxelwayo, ukuze akwazi ukuthi umuntu wavela ngaphi kanye lesisusa sokufa. Izinganekwane zingumdalo wokususa abantwana isizungu. Lanxa amaNdebele engavumi, kodwa ezinye izizwe ziyavuma aluba ugoto esetha insimu. Kukhanya ingani zonke izizwe ziyathula, zithaphe ngendlebe kuphela aluba umuntu omdala exoxa indaba yemvelo. Izinganekwane ngezabantwana lezalukazi, kodwa imvelo ikhehla yilo elijayele ukuyilanda. Mhlawumbe lokhu kwenziwa yikuthi indaba yemvelo isambali yezizwe. Izinganekwane ngezabesintwana, kube kanti imbali yemikhonto yesizwe ngeyabobaba.<sup>25</sup>*

[Tales are short stories that came into existence with man, and are as old as man himself. On account of this, many authors have simply put them together with the story of the origin of man and present these as one and the same thing. They categorize all of them under the name of tales. But this is an obvious error. In Ndebele culture, the origin of man is one thing, and tales are another thing.

The story of the origin and tales are distinct in the way they are narrated. The story of the origin is told like this:

*When God created man, he liked him, therefore he sent Chameleon to tell people that it had been said they would die and then come back to life again...*

A tale is told in the following manner:

*Once upon a time, there was Hare and Rock Rabbit. Rock Rabbit had beautiful cocoons and they made nice sounds when played. When Hare saw this, he wanted to kill Rock Rabbit out of envy...*

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<sup>25</sup> Ndhlukula, *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele*, 11; translation quoted from Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, 107.

The purpose of telling the story of the origin is to teach the listener so that he knows where man originated and the cause of death. Tales are entertainment for children to pass the time. Not among the Ndebele, but among other nations, it is usual that the listeners respond when the grandmother tells stories. On the other hand, when an old person narrates the story of origin, in all nations people keep quiet and listen attentively. Tales are a matter for children and old women, but only a senior man narrates the origin. This may be so because the story of origin deals with the history of nations. Tales belong to womenfolk, but the history of the nation's assegaais belongs to the fathers.]

Ndhlukula goes on to present a fine analysis of the Ndebele traditional heritage, focusing on a description and critical interpretation of Ndebele oral literature. Apart from the myth of the origin and tales, he devotes himself to praise-poetry (*izibongo zamakhosi*), folksongs (*izingoma zomdabuko*), and an explanation of riddles (*ukuphicana* or *ukulibhana*), proverbs (*izaga*) and idiomatic expressions (*izitsho*).<sup>26</sup>

It is not the tradition as a true representation of the world that motivates the Ndebele authors' occupation with it: its veracity is side-stepped. The tradition has different functions, and these account for its relevance today. The first task, then, is to establish the meaning of the tradition. Once it is clear what functions the tradition has to fulfil these days, this will enable a transformation of the tradition within the context of present-day life.

## 2.4. Revival

### 2.4.1. *The meaning of tradition: raison d'être, respect, and identity*

After excluding the claims about veracity, Ndhlukula explains his motivation in analyzing the tradition:

*Okungumlandu wethu yilokhu: UMthwakazi kumele awazi amasiko akhe, amasiko aboyisemkhulu ukuze laye ahlonitshwe ngezinye izizwe, ukuze athi aluba elolutho alwenzayo kwaziwe ukuthi ukwenzelani lokho. Ukuze isizwe sihlonitshwe ngezinye izizwe kumele sizihloniphe sona kuqala.*<sup>27</sup>

[What is our concern is this: Mthwakazi's people must know their culture, the culture of their great grandfathers, so that they, too, can be respected by other

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<sup>26</sup> See Rettová, "The Voice in the Mirror: Reflexion of Oral Literature in Modern Zimbabwean Ndebele Writing" (forthcoming). In this article I concentrate on Ndhlukula's analysis of proverbs and riddles and its relevance to the debate on the use of proverbs in African philosophy.

<sup>27</sup> Ndhlukula, *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele*, 4; translation quoted from Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, 104.

nations, so that when they do something, it may be known why they are doing it. In order that a nation be respected by other nations, it is necessary that it first respect itself.]

The tradition provides the *reasons why* things are done, and it leads to *respect* by other peoples. It is also a source of *identity*. This is explained in great detail in Ncube's preface to *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*: "*Bathi abaphambili: 'Isizwe yisizwe ngamasiko aso.' Yekelani mina ngengeze ngithi, 'Isizwe yisizwe ngamasiko lemikhuba yaso'*" [Our forefathers said: "A nation is a nation through its culture." Allow me to add to this: "A nation is a nation through its culture and traditions"].<sup>28</sup> Ncube goes on to specify the meaning of identity. Identity is an important element in a nation's differentiation of itself from other nations:

*Isizwe siyabaluleka kwezinye zonke izizwe ngendlela esiziphethe ngayo. Ubuhle lokukhwabitheka kwaso kuyabonakala kubani lobani, uzwe sebekhuluma abantu besithi endaweni eyikuthi, kuhlezi abantu abayikuthi. Ngenye indlela, kukhona okuthile okuyikho okusonta kumbe okusonga abantu labo ndawonye baze babaluleke ukuthi bayisizwe esiyikuthi, esehluka kwezinye ngendledlana ezithile.*<sup>29</sup>

[A nation is identified by all other nations in the way it behaves. Its beauty and attraction are visible to everybody; then you will hear people saying that at such and such a place resides such a people. In other words, there is something that ties or holds those people to one place so that they can be identified as a certain nation which differs from others in certain ways.]

The specific ways of behaviour are a people's customs. Ncube illustrates this by using the metaphor of a plant or a tree: its leaves and boughs are the distinguishing features, the leaves have a certain colour, size, etc. What distinguishes a people from other peoples are its customs:

*Uma sikhuluma ngemikhuba lamhlanje sikhuluma ngalokho okufana lamahlamvu esihlahla. Ngenye indlela, sikhuluma ngendlela abantu abaziphatha ngayo kumbe ingqubo yezinto ezithile ebantwini abathile. Abantu abamhlobo kumbe abasisizwe sinye balendledlana yabo ebalulekileyo yokwenza izinto ezithile ezenza beme bodwa bathi mpo, njengesizwe sinye esehluka kwezinye.*<sup>30</sup>

[If we talk about customs today, we talk about that which is like the leaves of a tree. In other words, we talk about the way people behave or about the procedure employed by certain people for doing certain things. People of common ancestry

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<sup>28</sup> B.S. Ncube, "Isingeniso," in Ndlovu et al., *Imikhuba lamasiko amaNdebele*, vii.

<sup>29</sup> Ncube, "Isingeniso," vii.

<sup>30</sup> "Isingeniso," vii.

or of a certain nation have their distinctive way of doing certain things that sets them apart as a nation that is different from others.]

We recognize a tree by its leaves and boughs, but it is the roots that “*ezigxilise isihlahla emhlabathini, ezipha leso sihlahla ukudla*” (hold the tree in the ground and provide this tree with food).<sup>31</sup> The roots are a nation’s culture:

*Uma sikhuluma ngamasiko, sikhuluma ngezimpande okuni kuzo uluntu oluyilo oludala imikhuba. Njengoba kungekho mahlamvu uma kungekho mpande, kakula mikhuba uma kungekho masiko. Njengomzekeliso, kulisiko lohlanga oluNsundu ukuthethela emadlozini, kodwa imikhuba iyatshiyana. AmaNdebele alomkhuba wawo wokuqhuba isiko lokuthethela, kube kanti njalo amaShona lawo aleyawo imikhuba yokuqhuba isiko lokuthethela emadlozini akibo. Ngalokho-ke, uma sikhuluma ngemikhuba siphawula yona ingqubo elandelwa yisizwe ekufezeni lokho okumele kwenziwe.*<sup>32</sup>

[If we talk about *culture*, we talk about the roots that support a part of humankind that gives rise to customs. Just as there are no leaves if there are no roots, there are no customs if there is no culture. As an example, there is the African *cultural element* of spirit invocation, but *the customs* differ. The Ndebele have their *custom* of practising the *cultural element* of spirit invocation, and the Shona also have their *customs* of practising the *cultural element* of spirit invocation in their land. In this regard, if we talk about *customs*, we focus on the procedure that is followed by a nation in implementing what must be done.]

It is thus the customs of a people that are used to differentiate that people from other peoples. But this distinction is only one aspect of a people’s identity. The other aspect is culture as that which breathes life and meaning into customs. Both culture and customs contribute to a people’s identity. Identity, with this double aspect, is a prerequisite of a nation’s existence:

*Ngithi-ke mina lapha: uMthwakazi unguMthwakazi ngamasiko lemikhuba yakhe. Ukulahleka kwemikhuba yakhe kutsho ukulahleka kobuzwe bakhe. Angema kanjani phakathi kwezinye izizwe yena engaselawo amasiko njalo engaselayo imikhuba? Angithi usengamane-nje aginywe ngezinye izizwe?*<sup>33</sup>

[I am saying here: Mthwakazi is Mthwakazi through its culture and customs. The loss of its customs means the loss of its nationhood. How can a nation that has no culture and that has no customs subsist among other nations? How can it prevent itself from being absorbed by other nations?]

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<sup>31</sup> B.S. Ncube, “Isingeniso,” vii.

<sup>32</sup> Ncube, “Isingeniso,” vii, emphases in the original.

<sup>33</sup> “Isingeniso,” vii.

So far, Ndebele identity has been defined with reference to the traditional culture: i.e. to the past. But how can a culture of the past make up the identity of a people in today's world?

#### 2.4.2. Tradition in the context of modern times

Ncube lays great emphasis on the adaptability of culture. Cultural identity is not immutable and the point is not to bring back to life ancient traditions; rather, it is necessary to be aware of the changes that are taking place in society in the course of history. Confronted with these challenges, cultural identity will be adapted to meet their demands:

*Akutshiwo lapha ukuthi uMthwakazi keme yedwa athi khwimilili, aqholoze ale ukunanza inguquko esikhona kunhlalo yalamhlanje. Hayi bo; kakunanze lokho uMthwakazi, kodwa makangalahlekelwa ngamasiko lemikhuba yakhe. Ulakho umuntu ukuwamukela amasiko lemikhuba yezinye izizwe, esikhathini kube khona inguquko kwawakhe. Kodwa phela, ngithi "inguquko", hatshi "ukulahleka". Isiqu esiyiso esisonge ubuzwe kasilahwa; kuyaguqukwa kancane kancane ukuze umuntu enelise ukuphila kumumo wenhlalo okhona lamhlanje kuphela. Ubuzwe ngokwabo kabulahlwa ngitsho.*<sup>34</sup>

[I do not mean to say here that Mthwakazi should stand stiffly and refuse with disrespect to take notice of the changes that are taking place in today's style of life. Not that; Mthwakazi's people should observe this process, but they should not lose their culture and customs. One may adopt the culture and customs of other peoples; sometimes changes occur in one's own culture. But I am really saying "change," not "loss." The centre that binds nationhood should not be forgotten; there are only gradual changes so that man can succeed in living in that kind of life-style that there is today. Nationhood as such is never forgotten.]

The adaptation takes place on the intellectual level: a new approach is necessary to the traditional culture, new ways to preserve and perpetuate knowledge about it, new possibilities for developing it. This project is a critical reconstruction of traditional culture, and is implemented in the theoretical writing of the Ndebele authors. N.P. Ndhlukula captures this vision in the metaphor of a cooking pot:

*Umlungu samchathekela kuphela, imbiza ingakithi. Njengoba imbiza le isilo-mnkenke nje, unlandu ngowakho Mthwakazi ukuba ubumbe enye ubuye*

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<sup>34</sup> B.S. Ncube, "Isingeniso," vii–viii, emphasis in the original.

*uyikhangule endala ingakaqhekezeki. Ingaze iqhekezeke entsha ingakakhangulwa, sekuphelile kithi. Kanje amafutha ayabuthwa nje?*<sup>35</sup>

[We only served the European (i.e. provided him with information; A.R.), but the pot is ours. As this pot is now cracked, the onus lies with you, Mthwakazi, to mould a new one and that you use the new vessel before the old one bursts. If it bursts before the new one is in use, it will be our end. For how can you put the grease together again?]

To participate in the identity created by the tradition does not mean to refuse to adapt to the demands of changing life-conditions. Nor is there any implication of indiscriminate acceptance of everything that there once was in the tradition. To live in identity with a tradition means that its possibilities, some of its values and visions, its ‘spirit’ are still within one. In this way, the vital continuity with it is preserved. For this to be possible, in a changing world, the tradition must be subjected to critical analysis and re-evaluation to see what it really contains and what in it is worth holding on to and developing.

The attitude towards the tradition in the theoretical writing of the Ndebele authors concurs largely with the way in which the Congolese philosopher Albert Kasanda Lumembu proposes to see tradition, as “critical memory”:

comme une ‘mémoire critique’ au sens où nous y voyons un ensemble ‘des possibilités créatrices et créatrices’. Il s’agit d’une mémoire qui, vivant dans le présent, est ancrée dans le passé et orientée vers l’avenir. Nous pensons à une mémoire qui, consciente des hauts et des bas de sa propre histoire, refuse tout attachement aveugle à ce qui lui est présenté comme allant de soi.<sup>36</sup>

He gives the example of the emphasis put on the spoken word (*parole*) in Africa and how this African tradition has been re-evaluated in modern Africa.<sup>37</sup> This is, then, how an intellectual critique of traditional cultural

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<sup>35</sup> Ndhlukula, *Imvelo lolimi lwesiNdebele*, 4; translation quoted from Rettová, *We Hold on to the Word of Lizard*, 104.

<sup>36</sup> A. Kasanda Lumembu, “Les traditions interculturelles en contexte africain,” in *Dominanz der Kulturen und Interkulturalität: Dokumentation des VI. Internationalen Kongresses für Interkulturelle Philosophie*, ed. Raul Fornet-Betancourt (Frankfurt am Main: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2006):190.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Jean-Godefroy Bidima, *La Palabre: Une juridiction de la parole* (Paris: Éditions Michalon, 1997); in this context, one may call to mind the *gacaca* tribunals, a traditional method of conflict resolution based on the *palabre*, employed in Rwanda after the genocide; see Kateřina Staňková, “Tribunály gacaca: cesta k národnímu usmíření ve Rwandě?” (The gacaca courts: a way to national reconciliation in Rwanda?), in *Afrika: dvojznačné jaro 1994* (Africa: The Ambiguous Spring of 1994), ed. Pavel Onderka (Prague: Aegyptus, 2004): 28–35.

elements may also bring practical applications and consequences into the political and social life of African people.

### 3. Conclusion: Transcending Horizons

Many African politicians have suggested a return to “African traditional culture” in response to Africa’s alienation, brought about by colonialism and neocolonialism.<sup>38</sup> African philosophers, for their part, often remain trapped in looking for “an ancient African philosophy,” defined as precolonial and “originally African,” untainted by foreign influences (including such imported religions as Christianity and Islam).<sup>39</sup>

These proposals have clashed with the valid criticism that Africa cannot return to the past; such utopian projects would be detrimental to Africa economically, politically, and socially. With respect to philosophy, the efforts to discover ancient philosophical traditions in Africa may be interesting historically, but they have little to do with philosophy as such. As the Cameroonian philosopher Marcien Towa stated baldly, “*Déterrer une philosophie, ce n’est pas encore philosopher.*”<sup>40</sup> Nor are these efforts innocent of ideological bias. At the heart of their backward-looking search for an ancient African philosophy lies an essentialist vision of Africa, a search for the “pure African” thought. Subsuming the essentialist ideologies under the term of “philosophies of origin,” the Tanzanian writer and philosopher Euphrase Kezilahabi has exposed the dangerous effects of these in African scholarship: essentialism focuses attention on mythic essences and obscures the real conditions and

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<sup>38</sup> For a penetrating analysis of how the concept of “African authenticity” has been used – and often abused – in African politics and political philosophy, see A. Kasanda Lumembu, “Leurres et leurs de la philosophie africaine,” in *Pour une pensée africaine émancipatrice: Points de vue du Sud*, ed. A. Kasanda Lumembu (Paris: Centre Tricontinental & L’Harmattan, 2003): 7–20.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (1987; Philadelphia PA: Temple UP, 1995); Sophie B. Oluwole, *Philosophy and Oral Tradition* (Ikeja, Lagos: African Research Konsultancy–ARK, 1999); H.O. Oruka, ed. *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Marcien Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l’Afrique actuelle* (Yaoundé: Éditions CLE, 1971): 29.

needs of people. It was an essentialist philosophy of culture that brought forth German Nazism.<sup>41</sup>

The alternative to the return to the tradition is often the simple rejection of African traditions and the adoption of Western culture and values. As the Nigerian philosopher Peter O. Bodunrin remarks,

A way of life which made it possible for our ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as totally glorious. [...] There is no country whose traditional ideology could cope with the demands of the modern world.<sup>42</sup>

Emphasizing the need for Africa “to get hold of the ‘secret’ of the West” (“s’emparer du ‘secret’ de l’Occident”)<sup>43</sup> in adopting Western scientific know-how, Marcien Towa advocates the extreme position of African self-denial and assimilation to the West: “En rompant ainsi avec son essence et son passé, le soi doit viser expressément à devenir comme l’autre, semblable à l’autre, et par là incolonisable par l’autre.”<sup>44</sup>

Obviously, this solution creates considerable tension, as traditions are seen as a valuable heritage and a source of identity. The extreme position as represented by Towa (1971)<sup>45</sup> and similar positions held by Hountondji (1977), Wiredu (1980), Bodunrin (1981) or Oruka (1981)<sup>46</sup> were a critical phase which was itself a reaction to the essentialist trend of “ethnophilosophy.”<sup>47</sup> After this wave of radical criticism, African ‘professional philosophers’ have increasingly started looking for ways to approach the traditional heritage and make it

<sup>41</sup> Euphrase Kezilahabi, “African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation” (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1985): 357–58.

<sup>42</sup> Peter O. Bodunrin, “Which kind of philosophy for Africa,” in *Symposium on “Philosophy in the Present Situation of Africa,”* Wednesday, August 30, 1978, ed. Alwin Diemer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1981): 14.

<sup>43</sup> M. Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l’Afrique actuelle*, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l’Afrique actuelle*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l’Afrique actuelle*.

<sup>46</sup> See Paulin J. Hountondji, *Sur la ‘philosophie africaine’: Critique de l’ethnophilosophie* (Paris: François Maspero, 1977); Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980); Peter O. Bodunrin, “Which kind of philosophy for Africa”; and H.O. Oruka, “Four Trends in Current African Philosophy.”

<sup>47</sup> For the classification, see H.O. Oruka, “Four Trends in Current African Philosophy,” in *Symposium on “Philosophy in the Present Situation of Africa,”* Wednesday, August 30, 1978, ed. Alwin Diemer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1981): 1–7. Oruka isolated four trends in African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, nationalist-ideological philosophy, philosophic sagacity, and professional philosophy.

fruitful philosophically,<sup>48</sup> sometimes going so far as to re-adopt essentialist positions with respect to ‘authentically African’ traditions of philosophy. Theoretical reflections on tradition in general and on its role in African philosophical discourse have also appeared.<sup>49</sup>

In this article I have traced the way in which Ndebele writers strive to reconcile the conflicting demands of respect for the tradition and the requirements of the changing world. Their project is a critical reappraisal of the tradition and its creative transformation in the context of modern life. In comparison with similar elaborations that can be found within europhone African philosophy, Ndebele theoretical writing has the significant advantage that the critique of tradition takes place in the same language medium as that tradition itself.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Kwasi Wiredu, “The concept of mind with particular reference to the language and thought of the Akans,” in *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, vol. 5: *African Philosophy*, ed. Guttorm Fløistad (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987): 153–80, also in *Readings in African Philosophy: An Akan Collection* ed. Safro Kwame (Lanham MD: UP of America 1995): 125–50; Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996); S. Oluwole, *Philosophy and Oral Tradition* (Ikeja, Lagos: African Research Konsultancy–ARK, 1999); H.O. Oruka, ed. *Sage Philosophy; Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*; K. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (1987; Philadelphia PA: Temple UP, 1995); *Readings in African Philosophy: An Akan Collection*, ed. Safro Kwame (Lanham MD: UP of America, 1995); Barry Hallen & J. Olubi Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (1986; Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1997); see also Barry Hallen, *The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful: Discourse About Values in Yoruba Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Especially K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the issue of using African languages in writing, see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

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SAMUKELE HADEBE

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## The Significance of Ndebele Historical Fiction

### ABSTRACT

There is a preponderance of historical themes in Ndebele literature, particularly those pertaining to the formation of the Ndebele state, the succession crisis, and the fall of the Ndebele state. The appeal of historical themes stems from a widely held belief that the formal historical accounts have largely been written by outsiders, who, particularly in the colonial era, distorted the 'history' in order to justify the defeat of the Ndebele in terms of liberating the "lower-caste" groups that constituted the majority. This essay attempts to show those aspects of Ndebele history that have been fictionalized and to explain why authors are drawn to specific themes. It reveals some of the reasons that make Ndebele historical fiction more appealing to its target audience than documented history. It concludes that Ndebele writers have tried to respond to the negative portrayal of the Ndebele past by highlighting the challenges that affect the community. In doing this, they have contributed to shaping the aspirations and ideals of the Ndebele-speaking people of Zimbabwe.

### Introduction

**T**HE FIRST TWO NDEBELE NOVELS, published in 1956 and 1957 respectively, are historical fiction. In the first Ndebele poetry anthology, *Imbongi Zalamhla Layizolo*, about a third of the poems are

praise-poems on historical figures.<sup>1</sup> Ten out of the twenty-five Ndebele books selected by the Zimbabwe International Book Fair's Best 75 Books Project (2004) are historical fiction. This prevalence of historical literature in Ndebele, be it novels, poetry or drama, deserves critical attention. The reasons are, first, that Ndebele history has been written largely by non-Ndebele historians and this documented history is often at variance with oral history that the majority believe; and secondly, that the historical events explored in the fiction are controversial episodes in Ndebele history, some of them even shunned or tabooed as topics for public discussion. It is, therefore, important to find out how creative writers deal with some of the debatable issues in Ndebele history.

Creative work is not expected or even supposed to be consistently factual, like history. As creative writers are not historians, no one expects them to be factual or faithful to the evidence. Nonetheless, the creative writers' versions of historical events are better known than the documented history. Unlike the historian, the artist has the license to twist facts deliberately and even create new characters in order to achieve the desired goals. It is the distortions, omissions, and additions made by the creative writer that are interesting to the literary critic; it is these modifications and distortions that usually reflect the author's intentions in writing a work. The fiction writer consciously appeals to the reader's emotions and chooses which events to highlight. It would seem that many Ndebele people identify with the fictionalized accounts rather than the documented history, which, in any case, was written by non-Ndebele people. In this essay I attempt to explain the prevalence of historical themes in Ndebele literature and why the creative writer may be perceived by some to have more appeal than the historian.

### Delimiting Ndebele Literature

It is not easy to define what is and what is not Ndebele literature. This dilemma is not peculiar to Ndebele literature alone. For example, there has been a contentious but inconclusive debate about whether literature written in English, French, Portuguese and the like constitutes African literature. If literature written in European languages by Africans is African literature, then, it may be argued, works on Africa by Europeans should be classified as African literature as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See Southern Rhodesia African Literature Bureau, *Imbongi Zalamhla Layizolo* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1959).

There are novels about the Ndebele written by non-Ndebele Zimbabweans – for instance, *On Trial for My Country*<sup>2</sup> by Stanlake Samkange. In my opinion, this is one of the best of the historical novels based on the fall of the precolonial Ndebele state. The Ndebele writers have not been keen on writing in English, but there are exceptions – for example, some Ndebele-speaking writers contributed to *Short Writings from Bulawayo*.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, debatable whether these works constitute Ndebele literature.

This essay discusses only those works originally written in Ndebele by Ndebele-speaking writers.

### A Brief History of the Origins of the Ndebele

According to Swanepoel, “The historicity of the work must be judged in relation to fictitious and mythological phenomena which are superimposed on the historical.”<sup>4</sup> He further states that “questions may be asked about the historical quality or authenticity of such work.”<sup>5</sup> A review of Ndebele historical fiction necessitates the understanding of the history on which it is based, hence the brief outline of the history of the Ndebele, as portrayed in history texts, given below.

The Ndebele are Bantu people found mainly in the western parts of Zimbabwe. Their language belongs to the Nguni sub-group of the Bantu language family. The history of the Ndebele people dates back to 1820, when the people who are today known as the Ndebele broke away from the then powerful Zulu kingdom (in the present-day KwaZulu–Natal province of South Africa). The original group that left Zululand was initially called the Khumalo, as their leader, Mzilikazi, was from the Khumalo clan. When and why the group was later renamed Ndebele is a subject that has been debated, without convincing conclusions, partly because the subject is full of half-truths and myths.

Mzilikazi and his group moved northwards from Zululand into Sotho territory (in the present-day Gauteng province of South Africa). Mzilikazi assimilated a number of Sotho people, either through persuasion or through coercion, or by employing both means. What can be ascertained now is that the Sotho people soon outnumbered the original Khumalos, who were of Nguni descent.

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<sup>2</sup> Stanlake Samkange, *On Trial for My Country* (London, Heinemann, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> *Short Writings from Bulawayo*, ed. Jane Morris (Bulawayo: amaBooks, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> C.F. Swanepoel, “Historicity and Mofolo’s Chaka: A Comparison of Text and Possible Sources,” *South African Journal of African Languages* 8.1 (1988): 23.

<sup>5</sup> Swanepoel, “Historicity and Mofolo’s Chaka,” 23.

In 1837, Mzilikazi's group, by then referred to as the Ndebele, entered what is today Zimbabwe, and settled in the western parts of the area that is today referred to as the Matabeleland provinces, as stated by R. Kent Rasmussen and J.D. Omer-Cooper.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that for the Ndebele this was the period of nation-building, achieved by incorporating the various groups they came into contact with and those they were able to subdue. It is in Zimbabwe that the Ndebele people assimilated by far the largest number of adherents. These included mainly the Shona groups, especially the Kalanga, and other related groups like the Nyubi, Nambya, and to some extent the Tonga. Most of these people were previously under the Rozwi empire, which had been destroyed by Nguni groups under Zwangendaba, Nxaba, and a woman leader, Nyamazana: "The Rozwi empire which had been established over the Karanga inhabitants of the old Mwene Mutapa [sic] kingdom had been shattered by the invasions of Zwangendaba and Nxaba."<sup>7</sup> The Rozwi rulers were known as the *Mambo* (Shona for 'king'); hence in Ndebele they were referred to either as *AbakaMambo* ('Mambo's people') or *AbeLozwi* ('the Rozwi').

The name 'Ndebele', therefore, did not refer to a single ethnic group but to a multi-ethnic nation. Terrence Ranger writes:

before 1893, I have argued, the Ndebele state was manifestly a "machine for multi-ethnic assimilation of peoples [...] There were not [any] ethnic 'Ndebele' but rather a conglomeration of peoples who were members of the Ndebele state."<sup>8</sup>

Within the newly founded Ndebele nation, which was then a kingdom, the Sotho outnumbered the Nguni, while *AbeLozwi* far outnumbered both the Nguni and the Sotho. It seems that the problem of identity within the nation was already felt at that early stage, especially as far as the distribution of political positions was concerned. The original Nguni group referred to itself as the *AbeZansi*, meaning 'those from the south', while the Sotho group was known as *AbeNhla*, meaning 'those from the north'; the rest of the majority were *AbeLozwi*. It is the existence of this large component of the Ndebele people that was not of Nguni origin that has been used by colonial and post-colonial historians to perpetuate myths about Ndebele social organization.

This researcher once wrote that "most of whatever is officially known about the Ndebele people, it could be their history, their arts or their politics,

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<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Rasmussen, *Migrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1978); J.D. Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath* (London: Longman, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> *The Zulu Aftermath*, 148.

are vague impressions [produced] by non-Ndebele writers.”<sup>9</sup> This is so because the history of the Ndebele people remains largely distorted, as the Ndebele themselves either lack interest in their own history or see no value in rewriting it. Non-Ndebele historians and anthropologists, especially those in colonial times, are infamous for concocting myths and negative versions of Ndebele history. One over-emphasized myth about precolonial Ndebele society is the alleged existence of a caste system. According to Lindgren,

In pre-colonial times, marriage between castes was strictly forbidden, and the marriage of a low-caste man to a high-caste woman was punishable by death. The Zanzi [sic] were aristocrats, who held positions as chiefs; the Lozwi were commoners, who performed the manual labour [...] Lozwi could not eat together with Zanzi or Enhla, and they was [sic] expected to have a subservient manner towards them.<sup>10</sup>

These claims cannot be substantiated from oral history or praise-poetry. If we are to believe that Mzilikazi left Zululand with a few soldiers, whose numbers must have diminished rapidly as a result of to the numerous wars he must have fought on his way to Zimbabwe, then it defies logic for such a group whose very survival was at stake to avoid inter-clan marriage. In any case, the same historians claim that one of the reasons for Mzilikazi’s numerous wars was the desire to replenish his group with women to bear more children.

### Three Fictionalized Historical Events in Ndebele

There are three main events in Ndebele history that have attracted the interest of historians and creative writers alike. The first is the formation of the Ndebele state after Mzilikazi left Zululand; the second is the succession to Mzilikazi; and the third is the downfall of the Ndebele state and the fate of its last king, Lobengula. Different historians in both the colonial and the postcolonial era have given conflicting versions of these major events.

The creative writers have also fictionalized these historical events. For example, the very first Ndebele novel, *Umvukela WamaNdebele* (The Ndebele Rebellion), by Ndabaningi Sithole,<sup>11</sup> takes its theme from the fall of the Nde-

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<sup>9</sup> Samukele Hadebe, “The Songs of Lovemore Majayivana and Ndebele Oral Literature,” in *African Oral Literature*, ed. Russell H. Kaschula (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2001): 16.

<sup>10</sup> Björn Lindgren, *The Politics of Ndebele Ethnicity: Origins, Nationality, and Gender in Southern Zimbabwe* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2002): 79.

<sup>11</sup> Ndabaningi Sithole, *Umvukela wamaNdebele* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1956).

bele state and the resultant war. The play *ULobengula kaMzilikazi kaMatshobane* by G.N.S. Khumalo<sup>12</sup> also deals with this theme. The second Ndebele novel to be published, *UMthwakazi* by Peter S. Mahlangu,<sup>13</sup> focuses on the formation of the Ndebele nation. *UMBiko kaMadlenya* by Mayford Sibanda<sup>14</sup> dwells on the problem of succession problem, which stemmed from the mistake of installing Nkulumane as king before the death of his father, Mzilikazi. The popular drama *Icala Lezinduna* by Simon J. Nondo<sup>15</sup> and the novel *Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni* by Bernard D. Ndlovu<sup>16</sup> are also based on this incident.

### The Social Organization of the Ndebele as a Theme

Ndebele social organization was referred to, briefly, in the outline of Ndebele history given above. Most historians, especially in colonial Zimbabwe, reiterated the theme of the alleged existence of a caste system within precolonial Ndebele society. In fact, it became clear eventually why the social organization of the Ndebele was of interest to colonialists – it was used as the pretext for the military subjugation of the Ndebele. The imperialist war against the Ndebele was justified in terms of the liberation of the oppressed ‘low caste slaves’.

In response to this recycled theme in colonial history, Ndebele creative writers have written extensively on the theme of the social organization of the Ndebele nation, pitting the so-called ‘amahole’ against ‘abeZansi’. The works that notably exploit this theme include *UMBiko kaMadlenya* and *Akusimlandu Wami*.<sup>17</sup> In explaining the eventual defeat of the war-hero Mbiko by Lobengula, who was generally despised for his lack of an impressive fighting record, the writer concentrates on the ethnic dimension of the conflict. Mbiko was not only a decorated war-hero, but he and his whole Zwangendaba regiment were exclusively Nguni. The Zwangendaba men were battle-hardened fighters who were feared and envied by other regiments. However, they were overpowered by the will of the majority, who were non-Nguni. Although the latter were not as experienced in warfare as Mbiko’s men, they won, and Lobengula was able to consolidate his position as king.

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<sup>12</sup> G.N.S. Khumalo, *ULobengula kaMzilikazi* (Harare: Longman, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Peter S. Mahlangu, *UMthwakazi* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1957).

<sup>14</sup> Mayford Sibanda, *UMBiko kaMadlenya* (Gweru: Mambo, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Simon J. Nondo, *Icala Lezinduna* (Harare: Books for Africa, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Bernard D. Ndlovu, *Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni* (Harare: College Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> James P. Ndebele, *Akusimlandu Wami* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1974).

James P. Ndebele, in *Akusimlandu Wami*, shows the negative impact of discriminating against people on the basis of ethnic origins within Ndebele society. Although this is not an historical novel, it is important because its theme derives from the problems associated with discrimination based on ethnic origin. One character, Tshuma, says: “Yiyona kanye inkolo engilayo leyo. Masehlukane ngemvelo, ngamasiko, langayo imisebenzi esiyenzayo” (That is what I believe in. Let us differ in origins, culture and the type of jobs we do).<sup>18</sup>

Ndebele has extended his condemnation of this divisive ethnic discrimination beyond the Nguni versus non-Nguni people within the Ndebele to include discrimination against people of Malawian origins by Zimbabweans in general. He also writes about the destructive nature of the ethnic chauvinism between the Ndebele and the Shona in his latest novel *Uthando Alulamgoqo*,<sup>19</sup> which depicts the challenges of cross-cultural marriages (Shona–Ndebele), and he generates debate on the viability of such marriages.

In a number of Ndebele creative works, one finds snippets of this ethnic issue. The use of certain surnames for characters depicted in a novel or play raises issues associated with ethnicity. For example, in Geshom Khiyaza’s *Ukuthunjwa kukaSukuzukuduma*<sup>20</sup> the name of one character, Sinyoro, is enough to tell readers that this person is not Ndebele. The use of the ‘r’ and the setting of the story in precolonial society show that the author wanted to indicate that this character belongs to another tribe. Actually, the replacement of the /r/ by the /l/ sound had until recently been a shibboleth among the Ndebele. How pervasive this discrimination was on the social level is difficult to ascertain; however, on the political level it is an established fact that chiefs were drawn mainly from Nguni people while the rest could only be sub-chiefs. This trend was perpetuated, if not exacerbated, by colonial rulers, and the government of independent Zimbabwe has not done anything to restore chieftainships to the non-Nguni people in Matabeleland.

## The Narratives

In *Umthwakazi*, Mahlangu portrays the formation and structure of the Ndebele nation. He narrates the circumstances that led to the breakaway of Mzilikazi from Shaka’s Zulu kingdom and the resulting emergence of a new nation

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<sup>18</sup> Ndebele, *Akusimlandu Wami*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> James P. Ndebele, *Uthando Alulamgoqo* (Harare: Longman, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Geshom Khiyaza, *Ukuthunjwa KukaSukuzukuduma* (Gweru: Mambo, 1978).

*Umthwakazi* ('Ndebele nation'). Mahlangu claims that the cause of the rift between Shaka and Mzilikazi was a dispute over a certain breed of cattle that Mzilikazi preferred to keep for himself rather than hand them over to Shaka as was expected: "Izinkomo ezasusa uthuli kwakuzinkomo ezimbili ezilubhidi" (the cattle that led to the conflict were two vari-coloured beasts).<sup>21</sup>

Neither historians nor creative writers explain the significance to precolonial Ndebele people of these cattle. Mahlangu, like other writers (Sithole, Nondo, Sibanda, and Khumalo), writes very positively about Mzilikazi's wisdom, bravery, character, good leadership, intelligence, and undoubted love for all his people. The same positive aspects are not always found in works featuring Lobengula. It is understandable that Mzilikazi, as the founder and first king of the Ndebele, should have received so much admiration and adoration from his people; he remains, for many Ndebele people, the greatest hero ever. Mahlangu writes:

*Ekuyiphetheni kwethu indaba kaMzilikazi kudingeka ukuthi sinanzelele ubuqhawe bukaMzilikazi, ngoba yena waye lomsebenzi omkhulu wokwakha isizwe njalo lokuhlahla indlela kwakungumsebenzi wokwenziwa liqhawe lamaqhawe, leli iqhawe kwakunguye uMzilikazi kaMatshobana.*

[In concluding our story about Mzilikazi we have to acknowledge Mzilikazi's heroism, because he had a very important task of nation-building. Also the burden of being a path-finder can only be borne by great heroes, and this great hero was Mzilikazi son of Matshobana]<sup>22</sup>

*Umthwakazi* presents the social, political, and military organization of the precolonial Ndebele state. He writes in a tone that seems to suggest that he was concerned with saying not only that the Ndebele had a history but that this history was one they could be proud. The book presents a very happy, glorious past in which the Ndebele were at their best.

While *Umthwakazi* celebrates the birth of the Ndebele nation, *Umvukela wamaNdebele* focuses on the fall of the Ndebele state and the war that followed. The latter novel also narrates the rise of the Ndebele nation and the prosperity of the people under their own rulers. In *Umvukela wamaNdebele*, Sithole gives an account of the causes of the Ndebele Uprising of 1896. It is interesting to note that, at the time Sithole's novel came out, the recorded history did not depict the Ndebele as having fought for their independence, but as having been motivated by hunger and loss of cattle due to the outbreak of rinderpest. Sithole's novel can therefore be seen as giving a broader inter-

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<sup>21</sup> Peter S. Mahlangu, *UMthwakazi*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Mahlangu, *UMthwakazi*, 54.

pretation of the historical causes of the war than that offered by historians of that period. Sithole uses his own fictitious characters as well as historical characters to weave together the events of the time.

As already mentioned, the formation of the Ndebele nation, the succession crisis, and the fall of the Ndebele state are the three topics covered by both the history and the fiction. The themes are woven around the lives of Mzilikazi (formation of nation), Lobengula (fall of the nation), and Nkulumane (succession crisis). Sibanda's *UMBiko kaMadlenya* treats the succession crises that led to a civil war, and is based on the unfortunate events that took place in the early years of the Ndebele nation. The then "migrant kingdom," as the Ndebele people were described by the historian Rasmussen, had to split into two groups on entering present-day Zimbabwe. The group that went with Mzilikazi lost contact with the main group, led by Gundwane, and many members of the latter group believed that Mzilikazi was dead. His son Nkulumane was installed as king in his place. But on his reunion with his people, Mzilikazi did not take the matter lightly; some chiefs were perceived as rebellious and were put to death.

What has not been established by recorded history is the fate of Nkulumane. It would seem that, on grounds of political expediency, Mzilikazi made his people believe that Nkulumane had been sent back to Zululand and would return to take the throne after his father's death. *UMBiko kaMadlenya* starts almost a year after the death of Mzilikazi, when a new king had to be installed. The whereabouts of Nkulumane complicated the succession issue. Some people did not want a repeat of the mistake made by Gundwane and his fellow chiefs, who installed Nkulumane without credible evidence that Mzilikazi was dead, since Mzilikazi had punished them by death. There was genuine fear that if Lobengula assumed the throne and Nkulumane returned, a similar crisis would take place. The main character is Mbiko, one of the distinguished heroes, and he claims to be on the side of Nkulumane. Actually, he has personal ambitions to be king himself but uses the Nkulumane affair as a political ploy.

In the play *Icala Lezinduna*, the author wants to draw his reader's / audience's attention to the moral dilemma concerning the trial and execution of Gundwane. He rightfully portrays Gundwane as a patriotic and loyal servant of the king. When he is convinced that Mzilikazi is no more, Gundwane acts in the best interests of the nation, as he sees it, by installing Mzilikazi's son as king. However, Mzilikazi chooses to regard Gundwane's behaviour as treacherous, and dismisses Nkulumane as a fool. In *Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni*, Mzilikazi is purported to have said,

*UGundwane uxhwalise igundwane elidla inselwa zomuntu lingazi-  
phiwe. Uzangibona umfokazana kaMayengwana [...] Ngangisithi uNkulumane  
yindoda kanti ngazala idela elehluleka ukuzicabangela.*<sup>23</sup>

[Gundwane has bad manners, he is like a mouse that eats someone's grain without permission. I will deal with this worthless son of Mayengwana [...] [as for Nkulumane] I used to pride myself that my son Nkulumane was a wise man, but now I realize that he is such a fool who cannot think for himself.]

The writer leaves the reader questioning the moral justification for the execution of Gundwane. The problems facing the Ndebele people of that period were complex issues that have remained unresolved to this day. The formation of the nation was beset by challenges, as were the succession within, and eventual downfall of, the Ndebele state.

### The Significance of Historical Themes

Writing on the role of historical themes in Ndebele literature, Jesta Masuku says: "The presentation of history in fiction form is an attractive and more effective technique of bringing that history closer to people."<sup>24</sup> True to this observation, those historical events and figures that have been fictionalized are better known by the general public than those that are not. There are statements, for example, that are attributed to certain historical figures which are in actual fact fictitious.

For the Ndebele writers, historical themes are partly taken up as a response to the negative stereotypes created and perpetuated by non-Ndebele historians and writers. Both the fiction and the history written by colonial writers portrayed the precolonial Ndebele people as savages – a negative image designed to justify the invasion and ultimate destruction of the Ndebele state, in spite of the tremendous effort that Lobengula made to avoid war with the British. Writers like Sithole and Mahlangu tried with some degree of success to portray the precolonial Ndebele state in a positive light. Sithole actually exploited the myth held by some Ndebele people that they were not defeated by the whites, because a proper defeat would have resulted in the arrest and probable execution of their king. Ndebele writers aim to reverse the negative stereotypes created and perpetuated by colonial writers. According to

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<sup>23</sup> Bernard .D. Ndlovu, *Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni* 55.

<sup>24</sup> Jesta M. Masuku, "A Study of History as Reflected in Ndebele Historical Fiction" (M.A. thesis, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1994): 8.

Emmanuel Obiechina, "The African writer has to correct the false impressions of African life contained in foreign writing on Africa."<sup>25</sup>

The historical themes in Ndebele fiction can be read as the writers' response to the negative images found in colonial literature and history. The historical fiction can be likened to a psychological war where the writers try to rekindle a sense of pride in the Ndebele. It can be argued that this devotion to their culture and history unconsciously traps writers into a preoccupation with a mythic romantic past at the expense of more pressing issues that could be addressed. One such accusation comes from T. Nkabinde:

In the end, this sub-nationalism, so pervasive by purpose, was given literary expression in the works of poets and novelists. The vigorous rebuilding of tribal identity, the nostalgic cry for black pride in what is totally African, was in fact, ironically, consonant with racist thinking.<sup>26</sup>

It is debatable whether the early works by Ndebele writers could have drawn their themes from sources other than traditional Ndebele culture and history. Thus Nkabinde's criticism is perhaps rather harsh, considering that it came about thirty to forty years after some of the texts were published. One should also consider the different political contexts in which they were being written.

Notwithstanding the criticism levelled against historical fiction, its value to specific cultures cannot be ignored. According to Bernth Lindfors, "Historical novels are visionary myths rather than historical chronicles [...] and only by properly understanding the past and present will Africans collectively be able to tackle the problems of the future."<sup>27</sup> This observation is pertinent to Ndebele historical fiction.

## Conclusion

It would seem that historical fiction still appeals to a Ndebele readership, to judge by the that such relatively recent publications as *Izigigaba Zempi Yenkululeko* (1991), *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba* (1992), *Sivela Kude* (1993), and

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<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Obiechina, *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975): 44.

<sup>26</sup> T. Nkabinde, "Ndebele Modern Poetry: Characteristics and Orientation" (M.Phil. thesis, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1990): 8.

<sup>27</sup> Bernth Lindfors, "Armah's Histories," *African Literature Today* 11 (1980): 37.

*Laphuma Elinye Lingakatshoni* (1999) all handle historical themes.<sup>28</sup> The focus of this essay has been on selected works that draw specifically on Ndebele history, and has attempted to show those aspects of, and themes in, Ndebele history that have been fictionalized. It has also revealed some of the reasons that make Ndebele historical fiction more appealing than documented history to its target audience. The indications are that historical fiction will continue to have great appeal as long as the generality of the Ndebele people perceives that their history has been distorted and marginalized. Historical fiction seems to quench the thirst for recognition and acknowledgement.

Ndebele writers of historical fiction have succeeded in keeping alive the oral history and legends of the Ndebele. They have tried to respond to the negative depiction of the Ndebele past by highlighting the challenges that affect the community. In doing so, they have contributed to shaping the aspirations and ideals of the Ndebele-speaking people of Zimbabwe.

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TOMMY MATSHAKAYILE–NDLOVU

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## The Changing Roles of Women in siNdebele Literature

### ABSTRACT

This article argues that while there have been many changes in the social sphere of women in Ndebele society, the writers of creative works in siNdebele seem not to have accommodated these changes. As a result of this failure by literary artists, the concerns of women are not being addressed by siNdebele fiction written by both female and male writers. It is demonstrated how these artists have failed to address the concerns of women through their inability to acknowledge the changing roles introduced by colonialism. Both colonial and postcolonial fiction written in siNdebele is examined, with special emphasis on the works of three writers, Barbara Makhalisa, S.O. Mlilo, and Ndabezinhle S.Sigogo, who have been chosen because their works typify the weaknesses found in this dimension of siNdebele fiction.

**T**HE PRESENT ARTICLE ARGUES that while there have been many changes in the social sphere of women in Ndebele society, the writers of creative works in siNdebele seem not to have accommodated these changes. As a result of this failure by literary artists, the concerns of women are not being addressed by siNdebele fiction written by both female and male writers. For example, when MaMpfu, a character in the novel

*Akulazulu Emhlabeni* (There is no heaven on Earth; 1971)<sup>1</sup> by Ndabezinhle Sigogo, complains about the frequent transfers of her husband by his employers, highlighting the fact that when they get to Bulawayo it is unlikely that she will get a job, the writer ridicules her by suggesting that her promiscuity is the cause of her reluctance to leave Gwelo, rather than any concern about failing to get employment in the new city they are going to. Yet during this period, the colonial era, it was not easy for married women to get jobs, although the economic pressure on the black families required that they, too, should be employed in order to supplement the meagre family income.

I shall endeavour to demonstrate how these artists have failed to address the concerns of women through their inability to acknowledge their changing roles introduced by colonialism. The advent of colonialism transformed the economic base of the African people, making them dependent on the white settlers for their survival. I wish to dwell on this important factor by looking at both the colonial and postcolonial fiction written in siNdebele – specifically, the works of three writers, two women (Barbara Makhalisa and S.O. Mlilo) and one man (Ndabezinhle S. Sigogo). These writers have been chosen because their works typify the weaknesses found in this dimension of siNdebele fiction, notwithstanding the fact that they have made tremendous contributions to the growth of fiction written in siNdebele.

When one talks of the changing roles of women, it is important to refer to both the past and the present in order to identify what their roles were once and what they are now. It should then be relatively easy to contrast reality with what is conveyed in the fictional world. This is done in the firm belief that the fictional world is a miniature version of the real world. That version is used by the writer in the manner that he or she feels is best for her or his needs; but the reader must be able to see the relationship between the fictional world and the real world.

In traditional Ndebele society, there was a clear division of roles between men and women. The duties of young men and those of young women were distinct. The duties of women in the Ndebele family were based in the kitchen, while those of men were outside it, encompassing herding cattle, hunting, and generally ensuring that there was food in the home that women would prepare for the family. The two sexes shared responsibilities in the cornfields when planting and harvesting grain as well as when processing it for storage. The married men were generally there for their wives; they were away only for a very limited period when they went out hunting. They were thus able to play their roles as husbands and fathers. The opportunity for

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<sup>1</sup> Ndabezinhle S. Sigogo, *Akulazulu Emhlabeni* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1971).

married men to run around with other women seldom arose. This is not to say that they could not marry a second or a third wife, but opportunities for extra-marital affairs were limited.

The young men and the young women, too, had ample time to interact and socialize in a manner that was approved by their community. There were clear rules and regulations for how young people were to conduct themselves in the presence of members of the opposite sex. The constant interaction between young women and young men satisfied emotional and social needs, thereby promoting a stable and balanced community.

As one looks at the changing roles of women portrayed in siNdebele literature of both the colonial and the postcolonial era, one expects to find that the writer “has been trying to give meaning to whatever changes that have taken place in his society; and [that] he / she continually attempted to inter-relate those changes with the socio-politico-economic needs of the masses of people in his society.”<sup>2</sup> After all, the central purpose of creative work is to try to understand human society.

The coming of colonialism upset the traditional set-up by driving men away from their families to the city, where they tried to find work in order to provide food for their families instead of labouring in the cornfields. The separation of men from their families was designed and implemented by the colonial rulers and not by the African men, as Barbara Makhalisa alleges in her novel *Umendo* (Marriage; 1977),<sup>3</sup> where she accuses men of deliberately confining their wives to the rural areas and allowing them to come to town only upon express permission by their mates. Colonialism also denied the black people access to adequate land and the opportunity to continue keeping a large herd of cattle to sustain their lives without having to work for the white settlers. This meant that young people, both female and male, could no longer rely on their parents to satisfy their material needs; instead, they had to fend for themselves by seeking employment from the colonial masters.

A third factor in colonialism that changed the clear division of roles in Ndebele society was the introduction of colonial education in order to prepare black people, both female and male, but mostly the latter, to serve the colonial government and the settler community well. Once educated, the Africans could not be expected to play the traditional roles in the same way that they had before the advent of colonial rule.

When we look at the literature of the colonial period we find that the writers fail to appreciate that women now have new roles created by the new

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<sup>2</sup> F.E.M.K. Senkoro, *The Prostitute in African Literature* (Dar es Salaam UP, 1982): 24.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Makhalisa, *Umendo* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1977): 23–24.

dispensation. In the novel *Lifile* (It has decayed; 1975), by S.O. Mlilo,<sup>4</sup> which is set in the communal areas of present day Kezi, the writer explains that this community was evicted from its original area of Sizinda near Bulawayo. She acknowledges that a good number of family men and young single men from this community now work in Bulawayo. She points out that a church school has been introduced in this community. From the description of what is happening here and the fact that this community was evicted from its original site, it is clear that the traditional way of life of this community has been disrupted.

It can be concluded that the economic needs of this community cannot be satisfied in the new environment; this is why married men and young single men now work in Bulawayo. This arrangement upsets the social order community members were used to; youth, in particular, are unable to interact meaningfully. Once the young men become permanent residents of the city, they come home only at Christmas or after two- or three-month intervals; thus the social order is disrupted.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the young women of Sizinda also desire to visit Bulawayo. They wish to see what the young men are enjoying there. The new situation here is that women are beginning to follow men to the place where the latter are fending for their families. This is a phenomenon that did not exist in traditional society, where men did not spend the whole year away from their families looking for food; women had no cause to follow their husbands on their hunting expeditions into the forests.

The community of Sizinda, in the novel *Lifile*, clearly does not understand why Balele, the father of Biziwe, allows her to go to Bulawayo. It does not understand the pressure exerted on Balele's daughter by the new environment now obtaining in Sizinda. Hence, its members accuse him of planting a witch weed, which will poison the whole community. The writer describes the community as failing to comprehend the impact of colonial rule on it, as its members cannot understand why men are working in town.

What is expressed here is the view of the community as seen by the writer. But throughout the novel one fails to hear another voice that highlights the forces prompting this behaviour among young women. One is thus forced to conclude that this is the view of the author, who does not appreciate the full significance of the changes that have taken place in this community, which make it easy now for women to go Bulawayo and seek employment. Consequently, the writer underrates the capacity of this community to understand its plight.

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<sup>4</sup> S.O. Mlilo, *Lifile* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1977): 23–24.

As the novel unfolds we are told that other young women, Lifile and Sifelani, have also gone to Bulawayo to look for work. The community is amazed by this: “a female child cannot look for employment like a male child.”<sup>5</sup> What the community fails to interrogate are the reasons for this. The blame is simply put on the young women, who are accused of being corrupt (“Bahwalile”). No explanation is given for the corrupting factors.

One must conclude that Mlilo fails to appreciate the changing roles of women in Sizinda. The resources of parents in this community have been depleted by the new dispensation, which has introduced a number of laws to regulate the economic base of the black people, their land, and their livestock. Consequently, parents can no longer meet the material needs of their adult children. Furthermore, although the three girls mentioned, Biziwe, Lifile and Sifelani, have not obtained any professional qualifications, it is clear that they attended the local school. The colonial school certainly instilled new values in these young women which can no longer be satisfied by what they find in Sizinda. It is logical, therefore, that they should leave Sizinda for Bulawayo – against the will of their parents and of the community – to try and fulfil their new aspirations.

The writer does not approve of their actions. She never gives them a chance to assume new roles and to look for employment once they get to Bulawayo; instead, she plunges them into prostitution, as if to say that that is what they sought in Bulawayo. The writer concludes that they should stay at home and wait for young men to return from the city to marry them, and should continue to adhere to their traditional role of working in their parents’ kitchens while waiting to get married. She does not acknowledge that the community no longer has the resources to sustain all its members. She does not realize the impact of colonial education on the members of the community – how it changed the way they dress, their eating habits, and even their perception of marriage. Her book, therefore, does not broaden the reader’s notions of how life can be lived in the colonial era.

In her last novel, *Bantu BeHadlana* (People of Hadlana; 1977),<sup>6</sup> Mlilo denies her central character, Bantwini, the opportunity to marry an educated woman, on the grounds that her family is not known to his family. What she is concerned with is to maintain the traditional way of life at the expense of changing roles. She wants Bantwini’s wife to be a traditional housewife who stays in the kitchen, but fails to realize that this new wife no longer has the resources to do so, unlike her traditional counterpart. This, then, is the result

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<sup>5</sup> Mlilo, *Lifile*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> S.O. Mlilo, *Bantu BeHadlana* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1977).

of her tragic failure to accept the changing roles of women in the new dispensation.

Mlilo tries to echo the call to return to the roots that has been made by other writers such as F.E.M.K. Senkoro,<sup>7</sup> as a way of finding solutions to the problems experienced by young women when they get to Bulawayo seeking employment. However, Mlilo gives the reader no clue to how this can be achieved, since her works do not see colonialism as the cause of the suffering of black people; instead, the blame for all the problems of Sizinda is put on the young people themselves. Yet how can one return to the past values in the colonial era? It becomes clear that Mlilo's works support the ideology of the ruling class of the colonial period, as Ngara notes: "In any epoch literature either supports the ideology of the ruling class or opposes it."<sup>8</sup>

Ndabezinhle S. Sigogo, in his works, has also tended to support the traditional view of seeing the roles of women as defined by custom. He, too, fails to realize that black people no longer have access to adequate resources that they can use to sustain their lives. His works do not give the reader the feeling that the writer appreciates why black people are employed by the colonial government and the white community. He sees being employed by the government or the settler community as the best thing that has happened to black people, instead of seeing it as a form of enslavement.

In Sigogo's first novel, *USethi Ebukhweni Bakhe* (Sethi at her place of betrothal; 1962),<sup>9</sup> Mathani and her brother Lizwi quarrel over Lizwi's decision to marry an uneducated girl. The bone of contention is not the new role that a modern wife is supposed to play but the fact that she cannot play her traditional role as a wife in a family of educated people. Mathani does not acknowledge that women now have a new role. She sees them as people who are still confined to the kitchen. Her depiction never touches on the economic problems that Lizwi might experience with an uneducated woman in a cash-driven economy. Instead, the narrative centres on the social embarrassment caused by a wife who cannot speak English, entertain educated people, and prepare English dishes.

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<sup>7</sup> "A call for the recognition and utilisation of one's own real identity: a call to return to the values which treated all men equally and which advocated their brotherhood"; Senkoro, *The Prostitute in African Literature*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Ngara, "The Role of the African Writer in National Liberation and Social Reconstruction," in *Criticism and Ideology*, ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988): 130.

<sup>9</sup> Sigogo, *Usethi Ebukhweni Bakhe* (Gwelo Mambo, 1962).

Throughout this novel, Sigogo harps on women playing their traditional roles. Finally, when Sethi, Lizwi's future wife, imagines herself married to Lizwi, who is a headmaster, she does not focus on living with Lizwi at the school or how she would spend her time while Lizwi is busy with his school duties. Nor does she consider what contribution she would be making to the family since there would be no field to till. Instead, she imagines herself attached to Lizwi's family as a traditional daughter-in-law. The new economic set-up is not adequately addressed by the writer.

In his subsequent novels, *Gudlindlu Mntanami* (Sneak around the house my child) (1967),<sup>10</sup> and *Akulazulu Emhlabeni* (There is no heaven on Earth; 1971), Sigogo appears finally to discern the new roles that some women are now beginning to play. We now have women who are no longer just ordinary housewives but professionals in their own right. They are teachers and nurses who are now making economic contributions to their families through their earning capacity, just like their male counterparts. It is therefore interesting to see how they balance their new roles with their traditional roles, because these are the demands of the new situation and the artist is expected to sensitize his readers to these new roles.

In *Gudlindlu Mntanami*, Sigogo seems to suggest that the two roles are incompatible. When MaSibanda, who is a teacher, marries, she finds that she cannot cope with the two roles; she agrees with her husband that she should resort to being a housewife in the traditional way. However, Sigogo does not refer to the economic pressure that the couple now faces with the loss of income from the wife. This seems to suggest that the new role is not needed. The central character of this novel, Gudlindlu, trains as a teacher and marries a trained teacher, but towards the end of the novel he leaves teaching and embarks on market gardening, becoming a successful businessman. The writer says nothing about his wife. We are not even told whether she continues teaching or not. This would confirm the writer's lack of interest in the new roles of women.

In *Akulazulu Emhlabeni*, Sigogo is openly hostile to the new roles of women. First, he fails to show any concern about the way colonial employers treated their married employees when they decided to transfer them to a new location. The employers never considered whether their employee's wife worked or could secure employment in the new location. Sigogo supports the view of the employers by making the reader believe that the reason why MaMpofu, Ndebele's wife, did not want to leave Gwelo was not that she was worried about losing her job and subsequently failing to secure a post in Bula-

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<sup>10</sup> Sigogo, *Gudlindlu Mntanami* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1967).

wayo. Instead, the writer says she was not happy because she was leaving her lover in Gwelo.

Secondly, Sigogo portrays MaMpfu as a terrible character, as if to condemn all professional women. In the end, the reader is encouraged to think that working women are not good wives. In fact, Sigogo is saying that women are not capable of balancing the contrasting demands of being wives, mothers, and employees. He seems comfortable only with women who are housewives. One is forced to conclude that the writer is not sensitive to the economic hardships experienced by blacks under colonial rule. He writes as if the colonized people are able to satisfy their economic aspirations through the efforts of men alone. Yet, although Ndebele has a high position in the company that he works for, he cannot afford a car. To reinforce the authorial position, when Ndebele remarries, he chooses a rural girl who has never progressed beyond learning to write her name.

Makhalisa is the second female writer analyzed here. She wrote two novels set in the colonial era and one in the postcolonial period. In her colonial novels, her major weakness is that she fails to appreciate adequately the new roles of women. As Lauretta Ngcobo says,

In the reality of Africa where fathers live away from home, working in the cities or are weakened by liquor in the stressful life of those cities, women often have to combine the roles of motherhood and fatherhood in bringing up the children. They themselves have to be strong to take on both roles, loving, protecting and counseling in turns.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of her first novel, *Qilindini* (You thought you were clever; 1974),<sup>12</sup> she has one housewife complain about the failure of city-based husbands to appreciate the fact that the wives at home have an even more difficult job looking after the home on their own. However, this important subject is never referred to again in the novel. Instead, the narrative concentrates on the transgressive killing of sheep in the community and on how the culprits are eventually caught, without exploring the reasons why the culprits chose this route to riches. In the end, the novel fails to address the predicament of a colonized people with limited access to land.

The novel also focuses on the problems experienced by Thenjiwe, a young girl who is raised by her aunt after her parents die when she is still small. Her aunt educates her up to grade seven. Meanwhile, her aunt's husband contem-

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<sup>11</sup> Lauretta Ngcobo, "African Motherhood: Myth and Reality," in *Criticism and Ideology*, 145.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Makhalisa, *Qilindini* (Gwelo: Mambo, 1974).

plates marrying her, but Thenjiwe is not amused by the thought of being a second wife. There is also a local chief who is interested in her, hoping that she might produce a child, since his two wives are barren; Thenjiwe does not like this idea, either.

Although Thenjiwe is maturing she entertains no vision whatsoever about how she can free herself from the dilemma of getting married to either the local chief or her uncle. The writer extricates her from this predicament by bringing into the area a detective who apprehends the criminals who were killing the sheep – in the process, the chief dies from a heart attack when he is told that a person he trusted is one of the criminals. The uncle is also implicated and goes to prison. The detective, who had already fallen in love with Thenjiwe, marries her – a happy-ever-after ending.

It is disturbing to see how Makhalisa allows Thenjiwe only one way out of her predicament: marriage. Given her limited education, she has to marry in order to survive economically. It cannot be said that she will play her traditional role as a housewife, because she no longer has the traditional resources at her disposal: land and all its produce and livestock. The new role that Thenjiwe will play as a housewife thus leaves her wholly dependent on her husband for her upkeep. Makhalisa does not sensitize her readers to the dangers of this new role.

In her second novel, *Umendo* (Marriage; 1977), Makhalisa tries to address the predicament of women who are married to wage-earners while they themselves do not work and who nonetheless live with their husbands. She does this through the main character, Gugu, who experiences hardships in her first marriage when her husband, who is working in Bulawayo, fails to support her financially. When she comes to live in Bulawayo with him, this does not help, because the man does not give her money. Gugu discovers that this is a problem faced by many wives who stay with their husbands in Bulawayo and are dependent on them for money. Gugu is driven to leave her irresponsible husband and seek employment. During this endeavour, she meets a new lover, who encourages her to pursue a career. She is eventually offered a place to train as a pre-school teacher. The novel closes with the death of her first husband and Gugu's preparations for remarriage. Now she has a career and can contribute to the upkeep of their new home.

While it is clear that Makhalisa is appealing, via the figure of Gugu, to young women to have a career before getting married so that they do not become slaves to their husbands who may not be that reliable, the author does not address the plight of women who may not acquire a career. The married women that Gugu met while she was visiting her children in hospital lament

their irresponsible husbands' conduct, but none of them suggests a way out of this condition.

Furthermore, Makhalisa also introduces a prostitute called Jenny, a woman who is condemned in the strongest terms possible. She is described as ruthless and evil, interested only in men's pockets. What the writer does not probe is why Jenny chooses this method of earning a living. Makhalisa is thus exposing herself to the criticism which is often levelled against male writers when they write about prostitution. As Lauretta Ngcobo notes, men are only concerned with the morality of the women:

Unfortunately, none of them is making the connection between the traditional pattern of behaviour and the pattern called upon by prostitution. Prostitution in broad terms in our setting is very different from the Western kind, it has a direct link with our behaviour in traditional society. In marriage we bring nothing but our physical service. We buy our security in marriage through our sex and we offer the product of our sex as the only offering in life, our children. The same women are moved by circumstance into cities, and when they get to the cities, for the first time in their life, their physical labour is unacceptable. Women in the African cities find that for the first time nobody really wants their labour. Especially outside South Africa you find that even domestic work is often done by men. Women leave the country situation hoping to find employment in the cities and live independently at last, but what they find is that nobody wants their labour. The only means of survival is that old offering, the only lesson they ever learned was to offer themselves.<sup>13</sup>

I quote at length here in order to highlight the limited portrayal of Jenny by Makhalisa, when one could reasonably expect a more sympathetic analysis from a female writer. Furthermore, Makhalisa's portrayal of the colonized people does not bring out the difficulties these people experience in accessing the resources in their own land. She writes as if anyone can get a job if he or she wants to work, just as anyone can get whatever education he or she wants; yet the truth is that these things were only available to a very small number of the black population.

In her postcolonial novel, *Impilo Yinkinga* (Life is a mystery; 1983),<sup>14</sup> whose setting covers both the colonial and the postcolonial period, Makhalisa looks at the married woman in her new urban environment. This urban housewife is different from those in *Umendo* (1977), in that the husband supports his wife financially and she has everything that she needs. Makhalisa creates a

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<sup>13</sup> Lauretta Ngcobo, in the discussion of the paper by Buchi Emecheta, "Feminism with a small f!" *Criticism and Ideology*, 182.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Makhalisa, *Impilo Yinkinga* (Longman Zimbabwe: Harare, 1983).

character, MaMsie, who marries Ngonyama, a schoolteacher who is eventually promoted to the level of headmaster. At the time of their marriage, MaMsie was working as a temporary school clerk. The couple stay in Phelandaba, a high-density suburb of Bulawayo. The main action of the story takes place twelve years into the marriage, when MaMsie is a housewife who is no longer working. At their house in Phelandaba, Ngonyama has employed a maid and a part-time gardener. MaMsie thus spends her time idling and visiting her friends.

When she is with her female friends she complains that her husband does not care for her, but her friends think that she is crazy – they admire Ngonyama as a loving man. MaMsie's main complaint against her husband is that he does not take her out. Ngonyama, on the other hand, claims that he comes home tired from work and needs rest; besides, he does not approve of the places that his wife wants to go to for entertainment. Eventually, MaMsie gets involved in an extra-marital affair and her whole attention is now focused on that relationship. Ngonyama discovers this, and after failing to divorce her he tries unsuccessfully to win her back.

She is involved in a road accident with the man she is having an affair with; after she recovers from the resulting injury, she finds that her boyfriend is no longer interested in her. She then quarrels with him and tries to poison him. In the ensuing fight, MaMsie tries to run away but is hit by a car and dies. When Ngonyama hears about this, his comment is that there is nothing he can do; she has brought about her own destruction.

Ngonyama has no regrets, because he is not made to feel that he has contributed to his wife's death. He has been a good husband, as confirmed by MaMsie's friends and members of his community. But when one looks at the whole MaMsie / Ngonyama scenario one is compelled to see its connection to the changing roles of married women in the urban environment. Is it enough to just pamper them with all the money and servants they need and allow them to sit and do nothing? It must be remembered that the space in the urban areas is very limited; the houses are tiny and there is no ground to work on, so that non-working women cannot keep themselves occupied. It is important, therefore, that there should be adequate debate on how to deal with the new situation. It is wrong for the writer to just condemn such women as promiscuous without assisting the reader to understand why they follow that route. Njabulo Ndebele makes this point very clearly when he foregrounds the limitations of protest literature, stating that the artist condemns the wrongdoer to

death without any self-enlightenment about the roots of his / her behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Makhalisa, in this novel, fails to make the reader understand MaMsie's motives. The knowledge so gained would enable both sides to identify problems and seek solutions. Society would also be sensitized to the new situation that women find themselves in, as created by urbanization and industrialization. The women are now exposed to new roles, and writers should acknowledge these through their art so that it can eventually affect, in a positive way, the psychology of urban dwellers.

While the female writers appear not to have done much to highlight critically the changing roles of women, the male writer, Sigogo, has been even more negative in his attitude towards women in his postcolonial works. He has written several novels in this period, but in all of them he articulates his animus against the new roles played by women in the urban areas.

First, we have Phikezelwe in his war novel, *Ngenziwa Ngumumo Welizwe* (I was influenced by the political situation; 1986).<sup>16</sup> Phikezelwe is a young professional woman who works as a bank teller in Bulawayo. She is a staunch supporter of the liberation war, while her fiancé, Lisho, who is a teacher, openly supports the colonial regime. This state of affairs causes tension in their relationship and as the war of liberation intensifies, so does the conflict between the two. The relationship collapses when Phikezelwe's fiancé decides to go for call-up in support of the regime, since he is now working for a commercial bank against the advice of Phikezelwe and his brother.

While Lisho is away on call-up, Phikezelwe is arrested and imprisoned for supporting the freedom fighters, but she manages to escape from prison and cross the border to join them. We meet the two former lovers when the war has just ended. At that time Phikezelwe's former fiancé has been confined to hospital after being severely assaulted by freedom fighters. When he is discharged from hospital he goes to her parents' house to look for her. He is shocked to find that Phikezelwe has a baby. Phikezelwe reminds him that it is over between them. The novel ends on that note.

What is of concern to the reader is that the writer does not elaborate on Phikezelwe's future. There is no mention of the father of Phikezelwe's child either, nor any mention of what she is doing now that the war is over. Bearing in mind that she is living with her parents, one assumes that she is a single mother who is perhaps also unemployed. Since all these issues are not raised, one is left to speculate that she has no position. What, then, does this mean in

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<sup>15</sup> Njabulo Ndebele, "Beyond 'Protest': New Directions in South African Literature," in *Criticism and Ideology*, 215.

<sup>16</sup> Sigogo, *Ngenziwa Ngumumo Welizwe* (Gweru: Mambo, 1986).

view of the effort she had invested in fighting the war? What about the new role that she had assumed during the struggle? Has it all been in vain?

It is true that Sigogo is portraying what he saw in 1980 when the fighters and their supporters returned from Zambia and Mozambique, but a writer is not like a mirror that simply reflects what is before it. A writer must go beyond what is seen by the ordinary eye. He or she must aesthetically represent the aspirations and fears of the society he or she is writing about. Sigogo's portrayal of Phikezelwe suggests that he is simply not interested in her plight – but as a writer he should be. As Njabulo Ndebele puts it, "Writing is an attempt to contribute to a human understanding of the tragic problems that are confronting us."<sup>17</sup>

In the novels that followed this one, such as *Etshabhini* (In a shebeen; 1990)<sup>18</sup> and *Iziga Zalintombi* (The strange behaviour of the young woman; 1997),<sup>19</sup> his main female characters are widowed, divorced, or single. Sigogo is openly hostile to these women from beginning to the end. He writes with the aim of making the reader detest them, without eliciting any understanding for their predicament. If the reader were to understand the position these women find themselves in, at least empathy would be made possible, if not solidarity.

MaKhuphe in *Etshabhini* is a widow who runs a shebeen (an unlicensed nightclub or beer-hall). She is implicated in the death of her husband; the reason for killing him is alleged to have been that he could not allow her to run such an establishment. In running her shebeen, MaKhuphe never considers the welfare of her neighbours, despite the fact that her clients are too noisy for the residents of Mzilikazi flats, where she resides. This gives rise to fights with some of the residents, until MaKhuphe eventually decides, with the assistance of her sister, to relocate to Magwegwe, another Bulawayo township.

The work does not explore why widows like MaKhuphe resort to running shebeens. Instead, the emphasis is on the morality of the women who operate these places. They are portrayed as prostitutes. MaKhuphe does not want anyone to refer to her as "granny," as is the custom when referring to people of her age. The reason is that she would like to have affairs with any available clients. Sigogo never sees the economic plight of these women as an issue.

Sigogo displays the same attitude to single women as he does to widows. MaNyathi in *Iziga Zalintombi* is single and likewise operates a shebeen. She

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<sup>17</sup> Ndebele, *Criticism and Ideology*, 218.

<sup>18</sup> Sigogo, *Etshabhini* (Harare: College Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Sigogo, *Iziga Zalintombi* (Gweru: Mambo, 1997).

is portrayed as having loose morals, as she has affairs with some of her clients. She even arranges for her brother's daughter, who is already pregnant by her boyfriend, who wants to marry her, to have an affair with one of her clients. The reason for this arrangement is to enable her niece to claim child maintenance from two men without their knowledge.

The reader is thus being influenced to see these women as evil people who have failed to secure marriage because of their obnoxious characters. The writer does not explore other reasons why these women are single or why they have resorted to operating shebeens. The writer does not refer to the fact that the new dispensation has created a situation that calls for new roles for women. Although polygamy is no longer being practised on a large scale and this could have made some women fail to get men to marry them, this is not considered at all, nor is the reality of lack of employment opportunities for women. Sigogo has narrow views on the socio-political and economic situation obtaining in Zimbabwe. The fact that these women may be seeing business opportunities by offering homely drinking environments that are not being offered by licensed nightclubs is not considered.

The concerns raised above point to the fact that Sigogo has not explored his subject-matter to provide his readers with a fuller picture of the situation. He can only condemn his female characters for trying to respond in the only way they can to the changing milieu that they find themselves in. Sigogo, like his female counterparts, Mlilo and Makhalisa, largely fails to see the inseparable link between the changing roles of women and the political environment. In view of such deficiencies of social awareness, it is important that literature written in siNdebele move away from confining women to traditional roles that no longer obtain. Instead, it must help to prepare them to deal with the new roles in a manner that will not impact negatively on women and society, for if, as the old adage goes, "when you educate a woman, you educate a nation," then if you destroy a woman, you destroy a nation.

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## The Portrayal of Women in Stanley Nyamfukudza's Works

### ABSTRACT

This essay evaluates the portrayal of women in Nyamfukudza's fiction. It highlights the remarkable consistency in his representation of women from the publication of his first book, *The Non-Believer's Journey*, in 1980 to the collection of short stories *If God Was a Woman*, in 1991. The predominantly negative views of women found in his works revolve around reductionist depictions of prostitutes, "bitches," fallen women, tempresses, and disillusioned wives. Male authority is underpinned by traditional norms that project men as heads of households and sexual predators. Despite the fact that many of the stories are ostensibly narrated by women, the overwhelming impression is misogynistic.

**S**TANLEY NYAMFUKUDZA'S FICTION provides an interesting insight into the stereotypical perceptions of women in black Zimbabwean society. The author often adopts an ambivalent outlook, which draws attention to the inner strength of some female characters, but the texts themselves overwhelmingly reinforce negative, reductive stereotypes of women as prostitutes or objects whose primary role is the sexual gratification of men. The monstrous self-absorption of his protagonists tends to shut out a more sympathetic delineation of the plight of women in this society, despite

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the fact that many of these stories are narrated, ostensibly, from the perspective of female characters.

It is instructive to note that in the twenty-one short stories published in *Aftermaths* and *If God Was a Woman*<sup>1</sup> only three can be said to unequivocally portray women in a favourable light. And, in *The Non-Believer's Journey*, Raina is the only major female character who is sympathetically depicted.<sup>2</sup> In the eleven years between the publication of his novel and the second collection of short stories, Nyamfukudza's vision of the roles of women has remained remarkably consistent.

Raina highlights the unenviable predicament semi-educated, rural women are caught up in:

She had been only ten years old and had just passed her Standard III exam when her mother was sent off back to her parents' home by her father. That was the end of school for her and from then on she became housekeeper and slave to a man who spent most of his time following drinking parties in the countryside. It must have been hard on a young girl, having to go out into the fields while every other child of her age went to school. She became mother to her three younger brothers and seemed to have coped so well people ceased to notice or talk about it. (46)

Deprived of a childhood by a feckless father, she nevertheless rises to the occasion and confounds a judgemental society. Her heroic potential is, however, undercut by her association with the anti-hero of the novel, Sam, who habitually patronizes her:

Poor Raina. For some reason he had always seen her that way without thinking overmuch about it. She had been the quiet, excellent-mannered sort of girl people tend not to notice, withdrawn and self-effacing, as if always listening to a continuous admonition going on within her, the sort of girl who could only have been bred in the countryside before the present troubles had stirred things up. She seemed to have changed, though, toughened up perhaps, and was no longer the patient, rural maiden, destined to be the loyal and obedient wife of an old man twice her age and to bear him a long queue of kids. The older men, especially, enjoyed contemplating such a girl growing into womanhood unchanged. "What a wonderful girl that daughter of yours is growing to be," they would say. What they meant, of course, was that you were breeding a boring, submissive doormat for some lucky country gent. As he watched her walk up with the cup of coffee,

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Nyamfukudza, *Aftermaths* (Harare: College Press, 1983); *If God Was a Woman* (Harare: College Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Nyamfukudza, *The Non-Believer's Journey* (1980; Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1983). Further references in the text are to this edition.

what he saw was a restless, restrained impatience. "She's gone to the bad," the old men would have said, and he liked that! (40–41)

The punch-line highlights Sam's self-centredness and undermines the satirical aspect of the above description of the 'ideal' rural girl. Raina's escape from domestic drudgery to the relative freedom of the dorp, Mrewa, potentially constitutes the first step of her emancipation. But this is undercut by the arrival of the predatory Sam, who exploits her innocence by spiking her drink in order to seduce her. Ironically, Raina, who emphatically refuses to go to the club, because she does not wish to be "looked at like a prostitute" (47), ends up being treated like one by Sam. He shows no real commitment to her and sees her as a "good time girl." Despite her intelligence and the broad range of her sympathies, she effectively drops out of the story after spending a day sleeping with Sam. Many of the other women in Mrewa are presented as 'tarts' who deprive commuters' families of food and money (51).

The girls whom Sam encounters in Harare do not fare any better. His social life revolves around competing for prostitutes in the township bars (37–38) and his derogatory view of them is revealed in his attitude towards Mercy, whom he grudgingly admires:

"Sam, you are my friend, OK?" She spoke breathlessly, as if she had been chased up the stairs, with that exaggerated earnestness of people who have had a bit too much to drink. A strong cloud of perfume settled around them as she sat down and leaned over the table towards him. The bitch was still rather beautiful, he observed, brutally examining the face she brought within a few inches of his.

Mercy was too loud and frivolous for his mood at present. They had grown up together and were indeed friends, if only by virtue of seeing each other every day over the years. They ran into each other in pubs and night clubs, borrowed money from each other even, but there was little affection on his part, only a grudging respect for her toughness and independence. She had avoided the general course of pregnancies, followed sometimes by marriage, which had been the common lot of most of their female contemporaries, although he hated to think of what would happen to her once her looks started to go. (9–10)

The impression is thus created that a woman's survival is predicated on her looks, as opposed to her being street-wise. Sam is often inclined to simultaneously praise and denigrate, as is seen when he is captivated by her legs: "The legs, too, were rather excellent, Sam couldn't help noticing, the bitch!" (11). In both instances the adverb "rather" is used to qualify the compliment. Calling women, particularly attractive ones, 'bitches' features prominently in Nyamfukudza's works.

In his second book, *Aftermaths*,<sup>3</sup> Nyamfukudza only presents women positively in two stories, “Lucia” and “Settlers.” In the first, Lucia is described as a tomboy who “was good at climbing trees and wrestling and even if she was a girl, you could not bully her because she always fought back if you tried to hit her” (30). The implication that relationships are predicated on power or control is thus established early on in the tale. This prepares us for the sub-theme of spousal abuse, which features prominently in this story, as her parents fight frequently and her mother is sent away, like Raina’s. Lucia’s stepmother routinely beats her, but Lucia’s spirit is revealed when she criticizes her step-mother, saying, “You are not my mother and you are always beating me” (30). Despite her poverty and the abuse she suffers, Lucia’s inherent generosity of spirit and dignity are underlined. The pathos hinges on the torment she is subjected to by the other children, who taunt her when her stomach swells. Isolated, she is left to the mercies of the archetypal wicked step-mother and a father who believes that she is suffering from “an African illness” (34), and thus she is not hospitalized. The powerlessness of children in a traditional African context is foregrounded by the marginalization of the narrator, who is her only friend, when Lucia dies. The story brings to the fore the vulnerability of the girl-child and Lucia witnesses her drunken father’s crude sexual overtures to his new wife.

In “Settlers,” the institution of marriage fares better. The subservient role of the woman is hinted at when we learn that the narrator’s wife “never directly complained of being taken away to a wild area where there were no neighbours or any other kind of people yet” (70). Although they argue a lot, the couple is held together by a close bond:

He smiled to himself, recalling some of the confrontations they had had when she compared him to other men, calling him funny, abnormal, reclusive. “I may be reclusive, but I’m sure stuck with you!” She had a sharp tongue alright.

He had been walking round along the foot of the hill, following the steep slope of the land. Suddenly, he was assailed by a need to be home, watching her by now faintly swollen belly as she moved about in the small, smoke-filled kitchen, preparing the evening meal. (70)

This sense of togetherness, of a strong bond that is yet elastic enough to tolerate difference and criticism, stands in sharp contrast to the frightful marriages one generally encounters in Nyamfukudza’s works – for example, that of the couple who lodge in Sam’s house in *The Non-Believer’s Journey*:

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Nyamfukudza, *Aftermaths* (Harare: College Press, 1983). All further references in the text are to this edition.

She was heavily pregnant with her second child and the husband, who normally tolerated no complaints, had gradually turned docile as the pregnancy progressed. She would even refuse for him Sam's invitations shouted through the door to come and drink when he got in late at night. "He's asleep! Please do not disturb us!" she would call back. In the morning, he would come round sheepishly to the front. "Women are difficult when they are like that," the man would say, embarrassed and strangely transformed from his usual domineering self when he would habitually beat his wife for such petty reasons as cooking a bad meal until she ran out to the neighbours screaming for help. Pity for her she couldn't be pregnant all the time, Sam thought maliciously. (5)

As seen in the instances of the marriages of Raina's and Lucia's parents, the men do not respect their wives, and one wonders why they married in the first place.

"Guilt and sorrow" is a moving story of a profoundly unsatisfactory union in which a characteristically nameless narrator reviews the sterility of her marriage to a self-centred nonentity. The couple no longer communicate, are virtual strangers:

The room always looked different from this chair, she thought. His chair. I don't really have a fixed vantage point. Always on the move, fetching and carrying. I wonder what I must look like to him. Will never know, never can know. (37)

Her dissatisfaction stems in part from boredom, the depression that often assails housewives. Her hopes, like those of many African women, had been pinned on marriage:

I was full of hope and expectancy once, she thought. Was it marriage she had looked forward to? But it was marriage, and poverty, which made her feel so weary and downtrodden. There was no fun in life at all. (38)

Marriage, which African women are socialized into believing is the crowning moment in life, brings not freedom but further bondage. Confined to the domestic space and childless, the narrator tries to break out of a deadening environment by taking a part-time job, which alarms her husband, who spends most evenings at a beer-hall anyway. He does not even enquire what the job is, is bitterly resentful that she is not there to serve him when he comes in from work, and, in eloquent testimony to his insecurity, fears that she is having an affair, as he confides in his friends:

"Monday to Friday, you listen at quarter to six, you'll hear her. I didn't believe it myself when she told me. I thought, hah! that's how women start bitching, going out at night and meeting strange men. Until I heard her, with my own ears. I ought to know my own wife's voice!" (41-42)

As with so many of Nyamfukudza's male characters, this man's ego stands in the way of establishing a meaningful relationship with his partner. His wife's misery and quest for fulfillment are not important to him. To account for her absence when friends call, he says she has gone to a funeral. Once she discovers that he had placed a bet on the veracity of her new-found fame, despite his earlier disapproval, she is amused: "Cunning bastard, she thought, he would make money out of it, would he? But she was happy, a cloud had lifted from her heart" (42). Her joy at this grudging recognition highlights the limited options open to her, and the impact of her socialization leads her to accept her lot in life, which stems from her cultural background and the perseverance inculcated in her by Christianity. Significantly, she is the product of female-headed households. Her grandfather had died early and his wife, who never recovered from the blow, lived on past memories of happier times. One is struck by the negative perception the narrator has of the influence absent men have on the home:

One felt an absence of something vital, a difference with other homes where a man was to be seen about the place. There was no dramatic desolation or neglect, just little things broken and left unattended, which, if one was really looking, added up to a disturbing sum total. Like an abandoned home weeks after people had left and only their shadows remained. Her grandmother had lived her remaining life almost entirely in the past, clinging to the memory of her dead husband.

So that was what happened when a young man died and left a young simple woman with children and nothing but her bare hands and a pious belief in God to sustain them. Her father had been very gentle, like his own mother. But it was all rather negative. You noticed it largely from the lack of any reproof for wrong doing. When he was pushed into giving you a talking to, you were aware of his reluctance, as if not even he could take the "don't this" and "don't that's" seriously. (35–36)

An unfortunate impression is created of a weak woman bringing up a weak, because gentle, son. This is reinforced by the presentation of the narrator's mother as the dominant personality in their home:

Her mother was the one who really got things moving, applied pressure when action was needed. He seemed to act out of deference to her restlessness and impatience. He would smile, pick himself up and proceed, like one who lived deep within some infinite reserve of patience and resignation. And only upon reflection was she moved to – well, hardly love. Pity, grief, a sense of loss, affection? For a memory. (36)

At the risk of succumbing to stereotypes oneself, it seems sinister to find these sentiments conveyed by a female narrator who disapproves of an assertive mother, yet equally disparages a weak grandmother. She looks down upon her father's wimpishness and effete nature; she specifically links her husband to these negative characters, then backtracks:

She was fed up with the cross he carried so obviously on his small shoulders. His children would have had to save him, the stuck-up little Jesus Christ. No balls, that was his problem. Like her father and his mother. Defeated by...

No. Her husband wasn't quite that bad. It wasn't entirely his fault. He was like countless other men his age. Never had a chance really, not with white people running things the way they had, everything for themselves. She relented and turned towards the door. (38)

Her dissatisfaction stems mainly from the fact that she cannot respect the man she has married, calling him "just a small man in messenger's uniform from Monday till Friday, for God's sake!" (37). Despite her deep-rooted frustration, she seems reluctant to face squarely the consequences of her contempt for him. His metaphorical castration might amount to more than that and account for their childlessness. Thus the excuses she marshals on his behalf appear self-serving.

The title of the story, "Guilt and sorrow," implies the need for expiation; hence there is an ironic resonance in the conclusion, which focuses on her return from church, uplifted by the sermon, though up to this point there has been little to suggest that she is religious. Her earlier dismissal of her grandmother's pious disposition seems unwarranted, given that she forgives her churlish husband and is charitably disposed towards his drunken friends:

She went into the kitchen and began to cook. They would want a solid meal, sadza and meat to hold their stomachs, drunk as they were and tomorrow being Monday. She hummed a hymn as she worked [...] she was happy, a cloud had lifted from her heart. (42)

Ironically, the story ends with her dissatisfaction dissipated and her located firmly in domestic space, despite the fact that, for much of the tale, the narrator has been exposing the hollowness at the heart of this marriage.

The story "A fresh start" also looks satirically at socially ascribed gender roles, with the 'enlightened' male teacher challenging the uncritical acceptance of "male and female tasks":

The girl started tidying up and the boy picked up a bucket and went off to fetch water from the well. He let them. Strange boy, though, he thought. Normally, that would be considered girls' work [...].

“There’s a really switched on man for you,” he said to the girl as he put the plates on the bare table. “Get married to him and he will help you with all the house work. That’s the attitude. There’s no woman’s work and men’s work nowadays, right?” They looked at him skeptically. “Didn’t I do the cooking?” he asked with mock sternness. (63–64)

However, Nyamfukudza seems content merely to broach the subject rather than explore it fully, as is also the case in “Other People,” where, when Rungano’s father “decided to cook (perhaps just to prove a point), the food was always much better than when Maidei or her mother did the cooking.”<sup>4</sup> In “A fresh start” Nyamfukudza also dances around the plight of the beautiful and, once again, nameless woman simply known as “Kabesa’s sister,” who no longer speaks after being brutalized during the war of liberation. The title suggests that the teacher, Mr Murambiwa, has fled city life to make a fresh start in the countryside. He is captivated by Kabesa’s sister, who is described as “a vaguely beautiful woman in a blue dress [... who had] the most beautiful clear brown eyes he had ever seen.”<sup>5</sup> (Regrettably, the story ends abruptly soon after the explanation that she was caught up in a contact during the war and “found wandering naked in the bush with cuts and bruises all over her body, a mute”; 67). Given that Murambiwa is relieved to have left his girlfriend in the city, the possibility of a romantic fresh start is present, but foreclosed. The author seems content to highlight the brutal victimization of women in war and leave it at that.

In “Aftermaths,” the women are largely presented as victims and the dominant image is that of prostitutes, as is highlighted in the title story, where we are introduced to Farai thus:

A woman came up, tall, strongly built, her straightened wild hair tousled, uncombed. I glanced up – surely I was bound to recognise somebody soon enough along the street? Traces of heavy make-up crouched under her big, red, somewhat debauched eyes. She ambled up, carelessly, hips swaying from side to side under a loose, flimsy and short dress. As we passed, a mild detonation swayed the airwaves between us. We both fumbled somewhat, snared in a swell of hesitation. In a flash, the moment passed and we settled back into our respective, private selves. (50)

The narrator recognizes her and recalls how, as a youth, he had contemplated raping her (50). Now she has graduated to being a common prostitute who

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Nyamfukudza, *If God Was a Woman* (Harare: College Press, 1991): 111. All further references in the text are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Nyamfukudza, *Aftermaths*, 65.

relishes being solicited in public, as is shown in the scene she creates at the shebeen:

“Aaah! Farai! Come here, come here, come here!” one of the young men called, holding his arms open. She wiggled her hips wildly and hung back, waiting for me to catch up, then put an arm round my waist, imposing a low form of chivalry on me. I steeled myself against any embarrassment – here, I didn’t mind her by my side, as long as my anonymity remained intact. They were all shabbily dressed – as I would normally be too, had I not escaped from the street – youngish, hard-drinking men just gone round the corner for a drink on a Sunday morning. (52)

Characteristically, the narrator is an egomaniac, who relishes being able to flaunt Farai before the rest of the township lads but is sufficiently self-conscious to crave anonymity:

The others had finally surrendered her and cut her out of their circle of conversation and suddenly I wondered what I had won and if I wanted her at all. I would have to find that out [...] I now, for a moment only, dreaded running into the wrong people – not like that after all the years – surely I owed to my fond memories a more upright and untainted reunion than this, hand in hand with a prostitute? We walked down a street that to me seemed baited with reproach and contempt in every opening doorway and window. (53)

The self-absorption is nauseating and the qualms of conscience are scarcely credible, since he is delighted when they reach her home:

“We should have brought some drinks,” I mumbled, looking around and feeling captured, a song of elation playing low at the bottom of my heart [...] Then she came to sit beside me, close. A song of joy ran through my veins like a shiver. (53–54)

So, after many years in exile, the narrator’s home-coming amounts to little more than a tempestuous reunion with one of his so-called “lost women” (52); so much for the fabled return to the source. The story ends by highlighting Farai’s fickleness, as she abandons her date in order to go out with her newly found lover, assuming that his wife is not waiting for him (55).

In “Dissident in the family,” polygamy is attacked by a father who believes that his son is “overpowered by the female sex” (72), since he has three wives and is angling for a fourth. And the fact that all but one of his grandchildren is a girl is regarded as a major flaw. His contemptuous attitude towards women is reflected in his assessment of the second wife:

He liked this one. She was tall and darkly smooth skinned, with a slim, supple body that reminded him obscurely of his departed wife in her youth. She had the

same quietly ironical sense of humour too. One time he had caught himself watching closely the up and down of her buttocks when she happened to be walking in front of him. He had felt a warm glow ease through his body and wondered idly if he still had the fire to melt a woman's loins. It puzzled him, what such a seemingly calm and collected woman had seen in a man like his son. Women are like children, he decided, easy to pull the wool over their eyes. (73)

In *Aftermaths*, if the women are not fickle "tarts," or ministerial girlfriends like the secretary in "Dissident in the family"(78); or boring, depressed housewives; or victims of male tyranny, then they are demented, like the vain mother, in "Crossing the River," who terrorizes her infant daughter and adolescent son by forcing them to cross a rickety foot-bridge during a raging storm, simply because she cannot face the thought of being laughed at by the other women in her village for boasting that she would spend Christmas in town. The fact that the boy longs for his father reinforces the perception that he is the sober, sensible parent (27).

In his third book, *If God Was a Woman*, Nyamfukudza provides us with variations on the same themes of women as domestic drudges, prostitutes, temptresses, and mistresses. If the plight of the single woman is grim, that of the unmarried mother is even worse. In "The Power of Speech," the nameless narrator has left home because of her five brothers' "never-ending demands of where was their food and when was the ironing going to be done."<sup>6</sup> She visits her father dutifully on Monday evenings but braces herself for the inevitable interrogation about when she will marry. When she cuts her loud boyfriend down to size, she feels guilty, as though creating a bit of room for herself to grow as a person were a sin. Significantly, the other girls in her block of flats are "gnarled prostitute[s]" (12). Though she is a sad figure, the fact that she has a job and a measure of independence raises her far above the status of her equally nameless fellow-narrator in the story "No Smoke, No Fire."

This tale deals with the ghastly prospects of a frustrated girl who did poorly in her O-Levels and is contemplating her severely limited options in a mine compound, where the young boys have little to look forward to in terms of employment apart from replacing their fathers when they are injured or retire. Whenever he is drunk, her father badgers her to get married; given the prevailing unemployment, she feels that the only, but wholly unattractive, prospect is to enter into a polygamous union, which is fraught with tension:

[if] one agreed to become the second wife of one of the boss boys [...] then [one] had to share two rooms with a viciously resentful older woman and all that was

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<sup>6</sup> Nyamfukudza, *If God Was a Woman*, 11.

really left was to give birth year after year to an endless queue of brats, which was hardly something to look forward to. (93)

Resolving to do “something reckless” (97), she seduces a young boy out of a desire to bring some excitement into her life. Her response to his inquiry about when he can see her again is cutting:

“It doesn’t matter,” she said after a while. “You can come whenever you’d like to. But only if you really want to see me. Go well, and be a good boy now.” She walked off and him left standing there. She didn’t want an on-going relationship with him at all. Anything might happen to spoil everything. He would go on to meet other people, form new relationships. Whatever the case, this one memory she wanted to stay a good one for him. (104)

She manipulates the gauche boy, then dumps him unceremoniously, but nevertheless assumes she has done him a favour. Her behaviour vindicates the boy’s sister’s hostility and resentment.

In “Other People,” the author records how female high-school drop-outs become, in the popular imagination, “bitches” whose main aim in life is to attract sugar daddies (105). The prevailing culture of conspicuous consumption drives weak girls into selling themselves in order to “shine” at movie theatres.

In “Eaten Promises,” the absence of female bonding is highlighted. As in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, the relationship between sisters-in-law is fraught with tension, given the unwarranted interference by the husband’s sister. The story deals with the seduction of a married woman, whose husband is due back from overseas in two months, by her colleague Mr Mwale, who plies her with drink at an office party and offers to give her a ride home, during which they indulge in “a desperate, furtive encounter [...] in the cramped front passenger’s seat” (23). Significantly, most of the leading characters in this drama are named, apart from the narrator, whose crisis of conscience we witness. Shamed by her demeaning encounter with a man she despises, the narrator is humiliated by the sudden recollection of a childhood incident when she walked in on her mother’s liaison with Mr Muti, a neighbour (23–24). Given the friction between the mother and daughter prior to the divorce, the narrator is downcast by her behaviour, which reduces her to her mother’s level.

This is compounded by her dismay that she has sunk as low as her sister-in-law Regina, who had been highly critical of her brother’s decision to leave “an unguarded wife” (28) when he went abroad. Regina

would have really liked to be appointed chaperone and brought along her trailer of bastard children to fill up the small garden flat. There was not much love lost

between Joel and herself because of her obviously unsuccessful method of trying to catch a husband by first getting pregnant and then trying to force herself into his (whoever's) home. All three attempts to date had ended with her crawling back to her father's house with the newest edition of her illicit progeny strapped to her back, starved or battered into submission. Joel's father seemed to take these reproductive escapades with surprising equanimity. (28)

The moral outrage captured in the tone of the above passage is clearly indicative of the narrator's approval of her husband's stance. When she passes on one of Joel's gifts of "a set of raunchy, red underwear" (29) to Regina, she is severely assaulted in public and laments that "she had allowed herself to descend to the same level as a promiscuous, semi-educated bitch" (31). The narrator is galled by having to initiate a reconciliation with Regina in order to extract a promise that her husband will not hear of the fight from his sister. The narrator abandons the moral high ground that had sustained her earlier, during the separation, and thinks only of keeping up appearances: "And that was what she needed to do with Joel, protect that image of her that he had loved and cherished enough to make her his wife. All else was unimportant" (32).

This raises questions about the nature of the marriage, since the odds are that he is bound to hear of the fight on his return, given that the spectacle had dragged his father from the pub, only to comment "*Ah, handingazvigone izvi*" ('This one I can't handle') (30). In the end, she chooses to remain silent and hope for the best:

Yet the more she thought of the various possibilities of explaining the tortuous details to Joel should there be a leak, the more it did seem to her that faults did make her a rather more interesting person than Joel would ever suspect or imagine. She knew of course that men preferred interesting and even somewhat wicked ladies, but only so long as they were not their wives. Wives were supposed to be boring, completely predictable and normal and the last thing one wanted from them was a surprise. (35)

This "what he doesn't know can't hurt him" stance does not augur well for her marriage. The story ends with a cynical dismissal of wedding vows:

Promises, she thought later... perhaps they ought never to be made, even to oneself, even implicitly, because, after all, all that was left was the breaking of them. Till death do us part and so on, those were very huge almost vacuous ideas, so inhumanely large and absolute. Better to take one's life in small packages and one's ambitions in small doses or else time became such an unforgiving paymaster, and life itself sometimes seemed hardly worth the living. Joel would come back, the

pieces would be picked up, life would continue and all the skeletons, she was sure, would stay firmly locked up in their cupboards. (38)

Lack of trust in marriages also features prominently in "Posters on the Wall," where a pseudo-socialist revolutionary, Taku, dreams up what he calls a perfect crime, which nevertheless lands him in prison for many years. He refuses to accept visitors, but nurses bitter resentment at the freedom being enjoyed by his wife, Noma, and he resolves to "fix her. The bitch" (88). He does not understand the meaning of commitment or faith: "His torment was that he had married a woman he could never trust. He suffered from the idea that he was not with her standing guard" (76). One is entitled to wonder why he married in the first place. Although he might, subconsciously, blame her desire for the good life for driving him to commit a crime, it is he himself who comes up with the idea, even though she is an enthusiastic accomplice. The pseudo-revolutionary language he uses to justify theft does not change its essential nature (83–84). There is clearly no justification for the vicious assault he unleashes on her after his release from prison.

His *Zambian* accomplice, Ambrose, is a sugar daddy who treats his mistress Mimi as a commodity, as Noma remarks: "Even the assurance with which he ignored his concubine seemed to suggest it was his set up, his rules, his money" (70–71). Mimi says she does not mind sharing him with his wife and children, but her initial hostility towards Noma highlights her vulnerability. Despite his arrogance, Ambrose is relatively decent when compared to the monstrously egotistical narrator in "Unkind Monologue," who feels no qualms about sleeping with his sister-in-law. When his wife discovers the betrayal, she understandably lashes out at her sister. His response to the predicament he created shows his callousness and irresponsibility:

I won't be waiting when my wife gets out of prison. They gave her two years for taking out her younger sister's left eye. The magistrate talked about extreme provocation and betrayal and that kind of thing. I wasn't really involved much because I had just gone out when they went for one another. I really don't know who was to blame. (72)

He is so caught up in himself that he shrugs off the misery he causes. When his sister-in-law comes out of the hospital, he sleeps with her ("a final, necessary ritual, we feverishly consummated our severance the way we had begun, silently"; 44) before throwing her out of the house. Significantly, neither of the women is consulted when he makes decisions about their future.

In "Days without Hope" we encounter another marriage built on shifting sand. Rev. Mutumwi only consults his wife over a problem after eighteen years of marriage. Not surprisingly, this request unleashes a stream of pent-up

fury until she realizes “that the way he was looking at her was not quite friendly” (53). Clearly, his idea of being the head of the household excludes any notions of partnership.

When their son, Christopher, impregnates a girlfriend while he is taking a teacher-training course, the mother persuades him to deny responsibility and thus thwarts the father’s endeavour to resolve the matter quietly. Mrs Mutumwi viciously denounces the girl as “a promiscuous tart” (60) and Christopher smugly disowns her: “Yes, he had tasted the forbidden fruit, but, he claimed, there had been many fellow-travellers. Why should he be the selected one, the one to carry the cross?” (65).

The parody of his father’s profession is ironic, but reveals his perception of women as temptresses, in the classical sense of Eve in one of the creation stories in *Genesis*. The girl’s mother abuses her both verbally and physically for bringing shame and dishonour to the family. No one during this crisis spares a thought for the anguish suffered by the young girl, who eventually commits suicide in Christopher’s room at the college. Like Zimbabwe’s leading novelist, Charles Mungoshi, Nyamfukudza critiques the notion of the family in Shona society. The myth of close-knit families that provide the moral anchor for their members and society at large is mercilessly deconstructed. The vulnerability of the girl-child is underlined in the demeaning fate she undergoes even after her death:

The Kwendas refused to have anything to do with the corpse of their daughter until two thousand dollars had been paid in lieu of *lobola*, it was a pagan custom called *Kuroora guva*, marrying the grave. This was obviously out of the question for a man of God, even if he had the money. So the corpse festered in the mortuary and members of the congregation tried without much joy to get the Kwendas to agree to a more Christian solution until finally, there was the threat from the police to give the girl a pauper’s burial. But the Kwendas held out for dollars for their kilograms of flesh. (142)

Both the traditional African customs and Christianity emerge badly bruised in this story, which foregrounds how human relationships are reduced to the cash nexus, with Mrs Mutumwi labelling the Kwendas as gold-diggers and the latter insisting on financial compensation.

The unenviable position of an unwed mother is also highlighted in “Having Been Someone,” where a desperate young woman is taken advantage of by an acting headmaster when she is looking for a secondary-school place for her brother. The man denies that he raped the girl – “she didn’t resist” (143) – and refuses to marry her: “I had to live a little before I got trapped in a marriage. I had to make myself into someone first” (147). While in-

sisting on his right to fulfilment, the man simply ignores the damage he has done to her chances of attaining fulfilment on her own terms. Thus, there is an element of poetic justice in the *n'anga's* diagnosis that the nightmares the ruthless man experiences much later on in life are due to the misery suffered by either the mother or the child. However, it is deeply ironic that the "solution" to this problem takes the form of "the very unAfrican idea of adopting a child, and a girl for that matter" (147–48). Moreover, his wife has to make the arrangements:

She could have understood it if he had wanted a son, but no, it was good to do, they had the money, so why not give some poor orphaned girl a good home, he had demanded. Then again he insisted that she should choose the particular child, you will have to do most of the bringing up, he had insisted. In the end she got over her puzzlement and mistrust and relented. Now there was no going back and she hardly wished for things to be different. (125)

The authoritarian language used here focuses on the subordinate position of women in this culture. And it seems particularly harsh that the chief burden of atoning for his earlier misdeeds should rest on his wife, notwithstanding the fact that she told him she did not wish to know anything about his dealings with *n'angas*; even though the text suggests that she is happy with the outcome.

The title story of *If God Was a Woman* crystallizes the predominantly negative views towards women found in Nyamfukudza's works. It recounts the seduction by a female colleague of a defrocked priest who, it seems, has a history of illicit affairs (115). Much is made of the fact that she is getting old:

She was no longer young. As she walked on briskly, she seemed to wiggle along like a fat worm just dug out of the ground. He realised that he was undressing her in his mind. [...] She wasn't young. She wasn't in any apparent way sexy. In fact her total visuals, aside from the benign collected smile on her smooth face tended to remind one of what generally went wrong with the female anatomy as it gradually aged. She was no chicken. Be that as it might, "Now," she said to him, "Isn't it uncanny how the Lord, in his infinite prescience, knows just who we are going to need?" (121–22)

Although he finds her physically unattractive, he is very excited that,

for now, copulation with the unattainable woman was increasingly, tantalisingly at hand. How awful then, how terrible that in these dementedly awry days, one caught the terminal, fatal virus right at the heart of where it all started, the cancerous, poisoned apple. The ultimate, terminal, deadly bite; so the fucking cunt had teeth after all? And was this the life then, born of twitches in the groin,

terminating of twitches sourced there, the final, end-game of orgasms? Yes. Yes yes yes... (122)

This hideously reductive, morbid fascination with sex brings to mind the story “Curious Cows,” where the salacious couple’s encounters are described in violent, reptilian terms. The fallen priest’s sexual fantasies highlight Nyamfukudza’s obsession (17–18).

What is striking is that a story whose title suggests, potentially, an alternative world-view actually reinforces the crudest sexual stereotypes. On a theological level, the story propounds the view that a female deity would have arranged things in a more humane manner:

He had recalled the words she had said about their meeting – the Lord God in his infinite prescience knew just who we were going to need next. It seemed like the same tired old argument about how a just and loving God could be reconciled with all the suffering and injustice of the undeserving. How was it all to be redeemed? Perhaps, if *he* had not been a man, perhaps had it been a woman, *she* would not have sent her only daughter to be so cruelly nailed upon the cross and raped and vandalised so that the suffering of man would be OK. Only a man could have such a tortured, wasteful, convoluted logic. It was a soldier’s vision, in which dictators could only be brought down by the sword and right needed might or else evil prospered and flowered. Love’s triumph then, was not a fear of death but an embrace of it, not to be meek but to be bold, valiant, defiant, even warlike. He felt warm, almost feverish, as if his mind carried a burden he could not bear for too long. He knew now, now that there was nothing to fear, his return to her would be a second awakening, a second coming. As he walked back, he wished for the first time in a long time that he would find woman there waiting for him. (127–28).

The apocalyptic language suggests a desire to comprehend the meaning of life. The erotic impulse, which the priest had earlier renounced, potentially has a redemptive value. Yet the overwhelmingly negative imagery associated with this woman in the text undercuts a simple reading of the conclusion. The man’s disenchantment with the creed that he had earlier embraced reinforces a desire to exact revenge by devouring the forbidden fruit. Nevertheless, the centrality of paradox in the Christian myth does not rule out an ironic inversion: that the root of man’s fall, in a literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, could be the source of his redemption. The theme or quest for redemption is a recurrent one in Nyamfukudza’s fiction, right from *The Non-Believer’s Journey* onwards. The characters who expend their energies in licentious activities are groping, in their own way, for meaning and significance. They are, in a sense, running away from an overwhelming sense of futility.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Stanley Nyamfukudza portrays women ambivalently in his works. While at times there are hints that he distances himself from the miserable status accorded to women in his society, a judicious assessment of his fiction reveals that he has not wholly shaken off the misogynistic perceptions of women as inherently corrupt, destructive and pernicious. The illustration on the cover of *If God Was a Woman* highlights lingerie that has been energetically cast off, reinforcing the predominant impression that women are objects of carnal delight. Furthermore, most of the (forbidden) apple has already been devoured.

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PATRICIA ALDEN

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Coming Unstuck  
Masculine Identities in Postcolonial  
Zimbabwean Fiction

ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that in the fiction of three Zimbabwean writers we find evidence of new strains in gender relations, particularly in the representation of male subjectivity, during the first two decades after independence. Traditional Shona gender roles had been deeply affected first by over a half-century of colonization, followed by a relatively late and long liberation struggle (1967–80), which gave birth to a period of rapid modernization and uneven economic transformation in the context of globalization. Not surprisingly, Shona people who saw themselves as the primary subjects and who sought to be the agents of this history felt wrenched from traditional practices and plunged into circumstances that disrupted core notions of identity, including ideas about gender. Given that men assumed it was their role to direct the public life of the nation, the challenges to masculine identity were particularly intense. I sketch in some of the salient aspects of this history and then review a number of common themes and preoccupations in three collections of short fiction: Stanley Nyamfukudza's *If God Was a Woman* (1991), Charles Mungoshi's *Walking Still* (1997), and Shimmer Chinodya's *Can We Talk & Other Stories* (1998). I conclude by focusing on two stories which offer especially subtle, anguished character studies of men coping with profound changes in and threats to their sense of their own manhood.

**Z**IMBABWE (FORMERLY RHODESIA) was colonized by the British in the late nineteenth century. In the first *chimurenga*, or war of resistance, in 1897–98, the Shona people were defeated. Rhodesia

© *Zimbabwean Transitions: Essays on Zimbabwean Literature in English, Ndebele and Shona*, ed. Mbongeni Z. Malaba & Geoffrey V. Davis (Matatu 34; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2007).

became a valued British settler colony with a government that overwhelmingly served the interests of whites. In the 1960s, as other African nations gained independence, white Rhodesians broke their colonial ties to Britain, unilaterally declaring their independence in 1965 in order to preserve the white-controlled state. The second *chimurenga* began in 1967 and continued to 1980. During this period, Rhodesia was regarded as a pariah state, comparable to South Africa; economic sanctions created an insulated, self-sustaining economy based on extraordinarily unequal participation by black Africans.

Despite the brutality of the long civil war, the democratic election of Robert Mugabe in 1980 appeared to inaugurate an era of peace, stability, and economic revitalization. His socialist-leaning party ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union), with its base in the rural population on whose behalf the second *chimurenga* had been waged, promised more equitable income distribution, return of land to black Africans, and substantial investment in education and health services. At the same time, the Lancaster House Agreement, which brought an end to the war, combined with the new government's intention to avoid "white flight," meant that economic conditions for white Zimbabweans remained advantageous. Initially, the economy grew, raising expectations in every sector and particularly among educated blacks, who eagerly anticipated new employment opportunities. By the late 1980s, however, the economy began foundering, unable to sustain commitments to social welfare while attempting to develop industry and agriculture to compete in global markets. In 1991 the government adopted an economic structural adjustment plan (ESAP) which entailed further market-based reforms and further erosion of the struggling industrial base and of social services. Inflation, wage reductions, and growing unemployment followed. Initiatives to indigenize businesses and promote gender equity were soon discredited. Ironically, the government's investment in education contributed to a growing unemployment problem, especially among the educated urban population, well-placed to see how the ruling elite was managing the economy in its own interests.<sup>1</sup> By 2000, with the Zimbabwean economy in dire straits and with the real possibility of losing political control, Mugabe orchestrated a flawed land redistribution programme, in an attempt to win back his rural base. Since then, the country has been in a vertiginous downward spiral.

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<sup>1</sup> Pádraig Carmody & Scott Taylor, "Industry and the Urban Sector in Zimbabwe's Political Economy," *African Studies Quarterly: The Online Journal for African Studies* 7.2-3 (Fall 2003): <http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2a3.htm>

The Zimbabwean experience is located within a larger global transformation which catapulted many people from an intentionally underdeveloped ‘traditional’ world, often through a violent interlude of civil strife, into a ‘modernity’ conditioned by newly intensified globalization. In their article “Men in the Third World: Postcolonial Perspectives on Masculinity,” Robert Morrell and Sandra Swart connect political and economic transformation to the forging of different notions of masculinity:

The decline of the national-state and the end of colonialism also marks the concomitant historical crisis of the values it represented, chiefly masculine authority founded and embodied in the patriarchal family, compulsory heterosexuality, and the exchange of women – all articulated in the crucible of imperial masculinity.<sup>2</sup>

Robert W. Connell proposes a “three-fold model of the structure of gender, distinguishing relations of (a) power, (b) production [and the division of labor] and (c) cathexis (emotional attachment).”<sup>3</sup> “Patterns of emotional attachment,” Connell writes, “although often felt to be the most intimate and personal of all social relationships, are also subject to reconstruction by large scale social forces.”<sup>4</sup> While other disciplines are well suited to analyzing changes in power and production as these bear on the construction of gender orders, I take fiction to provide a valuable register of cathexis, of “patterns of emotional attachment” in turmoil as gender, and in this case masculinity, is transformed by social and economic forces.

What happens to the gender order, in particular to notions of masculinity, in conditions like those faced in Zimbabwe?<sup>5</sup> The short stories that are the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Morrell & Sandra Swart, “Men in the Third World: Postcolonial Perspectives on Masculinity,” in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn & Robert W. Connell (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2005): 92.

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995): 73.

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Connell, “Globalization, Imperialism, and Masculinities,” in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn & Robert W. Connell (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2005): 79.

<sup>5</sup> One instructive analysis is Rob Pattman’s “‘The Beer Drinkers Say I Had a Nice Prostitute, but the Church Goers Talk about Things Spiritual’: Learning to be Men at a Teachers’ College in Zimbabwe,” a study of gender construction in a Zimbabwe teachers’ college in the early 1990s, one of the few ethnographic studies of contemporary Zimbabwean men. It is worth noting that at this one provincial college there were 40,000 applicants for 300 places; this underlines how intense was the interest of many Zimbabweans in advancement through education. Both male and female students came from rural, traditional homes and saw themselves aiming for the higher status and upward mobility offered by a teaching career. This aspiration towards modernity was, in the minds of male students,

focus of this essay<sup>6</sup> suggest a range of responses. In the traditional construction of Shona masculinity and in the colonial era, men were presumed to belong in the public realm, to be capable of coping with a money economy and with other aspects of modernity, and to be the providers for the family. Women belonged to domestic spaces and child-rearing, and were expected to uphold and sustain traditional values.<sup>7</sup> In post-Independence Zimbabwe, the uncertainty associated with a market-based, global economy becomes a source of great anxiety for men. The stories represent men who have lost their jobs or have withdrawn from a competitive, commercial arena and who have therefore lost their ability to play the critical role of bread-winner. Women, on the other hand, are sometimes represented as embracing new opportunities to enter the public realm. In these stories, work is essential for men to maintain their dignity and their position as “head” of the family. In the hitherto prevailing construction of gender identity, men were presumed to be rational and women irrational, men dominant and sometimes violent and women subordinate and passive. These stories show men losing control, becoming violent, and often directing their anger against women or becoming helplessly paralyzed, even self-destructive. By contrast, women often gain greater control and demonstrate ability to be comfortable in – even to take pleasure in and feel liberated by – modernity. Unsurprisingly, in these stories men are threatened by and even come to dread women’s power. Finally, just a few stories confront two markers (in the minds of the characters) of this troubling condition of modernity, AIDS and homosexuality. These issues are attended to not in their own right but as additional factors which undermine the traditional

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appropriate for themselves but inappropriate for their female counterparts. Pattman writes that “men experience the College education of women as a threat to male dominance – a threat manifested [in the discursive construction of] particular women students as ‘prostitutes’ and Western; [...] the term ‘prostitute’ connoted a woman violating her culture as well as her body” (227). “Men learn to be men by eroticizing and policing women students” (233) and this is true both for the men who were “church-going” and those who were “beer-drinking.” In short, while a range of behaviors was available to the male students, women were expected to remain “traditional,” and the male students’ sense of their own masculinity was “maintained through misogyny” (233).

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Nyamfukudza, *If God Was a Woman* (Harare: College Press, 1991); Charles Mungoshi, *Walking Still* (Harare: Baobab, 1997); Shimmer Chinodya, *Can We Talk & Other Stories* (Harare: Baobab, 1998). Page references to stories in these volumes are in the main text.

<sup>7</sup> Chenjerai Shire, “Men don’t go to the moon: Language, space and masculinities in Zimbabwe,” in *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, ed. Andrea Cornwall & Nancy Lindisfarne (London: Routledge, 1994): 147–58.

notion of masculinity. Of the thirty stories in these three collections, nineteen are centrally concerned with male identity in relationship to women; six of the stories concern boyhood identity; only five are irrelevant to the topic of this essay. This rough count suggests in itself the degree of concern about issues of masculinity in these collections. While male identity is not entirely a new concern in the work of Mungoshi, Nyamfukudza, and Chinodya, their fiction from the 1990s overwhelmingly features a new kind of male subjectivity, located in predominately urban settings, confronting economic vulnerability, and showing heightened amounts of violence towards women along with paralyzing feelings of dread and inadequacy. What follows is a survey of this new experience of masculinity as developed in all three collections.

The economic situation of a central male character is foregrounded in five of the stories. In Mungoshi's "The Hare," the protagonist Nhongo is disturbed by the loss of his accustomed role as provider for his family of four. He had worked as a manager in a textile company in Harare; "He was getting good money and he was a Party-card holder" (6) until the company goes into liquidation and he finds himself out of work and his wife becomes the breadwinner. In Mungoshi's "The Slave Trade," Marara and his wife dine with his new bosses, an expatriate couple. Ravi, his wife, responds with discomfort to the unfamiliar power-relationship disguised in this invitation to dinner; Marara's reaction is to get drunk, becoming defensive, aggressive and also lucidly articulate in exposing the purportedly new, egalitarian relationship between him and his hosts as another form of imperialism. In the face of the cool condescension of the hosts, Marara struggles, albeit drunkenly, to assert his version of history and his dignity as an educated African, but does so at the cost of losing his job.

In Nyamfukudza's "Posters on the Wall," the factory-worker husband Taku keeps a poster of Karl Marx on the wall, which his materially oriented wife surrounds with posters of Jimi Hendrix and Pele. She mocks him, "Taku don't kid yourself, bourgeois to the bottom of your soul, you just don't have any money" (74). Taku sees "that the only guys who were having it easy were the *chiefs* themselves, and their bosom friends in business" (74), and so plots to steal his boss's Jaguar, a political act which will incidentally gratify his wife's expensive tastes:

In his view that was the only genuinely revolutionary act one in his position could commit, to take from the capitalist thieves what the workers had created with their labour [...] To take for oneself what belongs to the people. That's what all the guys in government were doing. (76)

In another Nyamfukudza story, Reverend Mutumwi, who willingly embraces his calling to serve the poor, is out-manoeuvred at every turn by his status-conscious wife (“Days without hope”). In Chinodya’s “Play your Cards,” Timothy is “an emergent young black bureaucrat [who] endorsed the socialist ideology as long as it respected his position in the very structure whose destruction he preached” (55). He gambles and loses against a woman who is holding the winning cards as a European (i.e. white) and a doctor (of higher status).

In two of the stories, Mungoshi’s “The Empty House” and Chinodya’s “Can We Talk,” the husbands are unemployed artists who are disaffected with the surrounding commercial world. Gwizo’s father is a “self-made man,” an industrial magnate “as stiff and unyielding as a slab of concrete” (84), and he has nothing but contempt for his painter son. The narrator–writer of “Can we Talk” disparages his wife’s efforts to climb “the ladder of success, clutching and slipping [...] always trying to climb up. Climb up to where, my dear?” (96).

The male characters in all of these stories are anxious about their economic status and feel inadequate in this respect in relation to their wives. The setting is the urban world of Harare, where money is to be made by sharp businessmen, especially those with Party affiliation, and where there is considerable pressure to climb the ladder of commercial success. But it is also an economically tough world of failing companies, anxious status-seekers, where “one had almost to be a thief to be able to buy a house or a new car” (“Posters,” 73), and it is a world in which angry black men are obliged to accept that whites still wield considerable social and economic power and that, as black Zimbabweans, they are vulnerable to economic forces beyond their control.

The stories present a world filled with violence in several forms: men against women and children, men against themselves, and women against men. Given the traditional male role of patriarchal domination in Shona society, it is not surprising to find numerous instances of men who feel psychologically vulnerable directing violence against women and children. Nyamfukudza’s “Posters on the Wall” is the most extreme instance. After Taku and his wife Noma together steal his boss’s car, only Taku goes to prison for six years, during which time his socialist convictions are overwhelmingly displaced by hostility toward his wife: “He didn’t want to kill her, but he had to do something bad, something really mean, so that she would realize the intensity of his suffering” (88). His desire for revenge is fed by additional threats to his sense of manhood. He is both repelled and fascinated when other prisoners compel the new arrivals, whom they call “girls,” into homosexual

relations. Taku “wondered if it was like some kind of ritual, the playing of roles, which they did it for. When he persisted [in asking questions], he was invited to ‘be a girl’ and find out” (85, 87). Taku shuns any libidinal release in his waking hours, but his nightly masturbation is filled with “rich, detailed fantasies of how he would fix [Noma]”:

His dreams were now masterpieces of tantalized, baffled sex, as he seemed cured of any waking thoughts or yearnings about women, so satisfying and varied were his nocturnal dreams and nightmares. He became a hermaphrodite by day, thinking about how he would fix her. (88)

Taku’s sense of himself as a potent man is challenged by the homosexual activity around him, activity that he wishes were “more open”; as he becomes “a hermaphrodite by day,” his ambiguous sexual desires are channeled into his hatred for women, especially Noma. Released from prison, Taku returns home, “his hatred [...] burned clean, a pure blue flame, sharp as a stainless steel blade.” Noma greets him dressed in “some stupid flimsy dress” and he immediately attacks, yanking her by her hair and “smash[ing] his fist onto the startled, wide open mouth” (90). Having beaten her senseless, perhaps lifeless, he smashes the three posters over her body, as if to indicate she is to blame for the ideological confusion, class *ressentiment*, and the sexual ambivalence that burns at the heart of his being and has turned him into a weapon against woman.

Mungoshi’s “The Empty House” also focuses on a man whose feelings of emasculation lead him to assault his wife. Gwizo, an unknown artist, is “discovered” by a white American art dealer, Agatha, who succeeds in getting him critical attention and commercial success. Against his family’s wishes, they marry, and afterwards, Gwizo comes to feel in part as though he is “betraying his people” (85), and in part as though he were “another commercial item [Agatha had] picked up on [her] great romantic safari through Africa” (88). Initially, however, Agatha was his muse; he paints her as “an explosion of benevolent expletives in colour and form, an ecstatic dance eulogizing liberated, liberating woman” (89). As the title of the story implies, Gwizo becomes impotent in this marriage as artist and man; he “had inexplicably dried up after he got married” (92) and, despite their wishes, Agatha fails to become pregnant, to fill their “empty house.” Gwizo begins to drink heavily and stops even pretending to work in his studio.

He became aware of his growing fear of that blank canvas. It seemed to have acquired a life of its own, to be interrogating him. It looked like a black hole through which he would disappear forever – a yawning mouth, waiting to reveal the final truth. (97)

He contemplates suicide but can't think of a form of death where his body "was in full control of itself right to its very last breath," a death that would be like "a cocked fist into her throat" (100). Eventually, Agatha sleeps first with another budding artist-protégé, and then with Gwizo's hyper-masculine father, who recognizes in Agatha a smart businesswoman. She becomes pregnant, and in the final scene Gwizo believes the child is his father's even as Agatha insists it is simply "hers," dismissing the question of paternity. Completely emasculated, Gwizo can think of nothing to do but encircle his fingers around her neck, in the closing sentence of the story.

Five other stories involve fathers who beat their wives or children; verbally abusive, drunken fathers and brothers; a woman impregnated and then jilted by a man who is now marrying another; a man who is so filled with nausea and disgust that he abandons his fiancée when she confesses she has had an illegitimate child; and a man who is so psychotically apathetic that he sleeps with his wife's sister and then watches passively as his wife takes out her rival's eyeball (Nyamfukudza, "No smoke, no fire," "The power of speech," and "Unkind monologue"; Mungoshi, "Singer at the Wedding" and "Did You Have To Go That Far?"; Chinodya, "Brothers and Sisters," "Bramson," and "Strays").

In addition to instances of male violence directed against women, the stories abound with motifs of paralysis and self-destructive impulses in male characters. In "The Hare," the animal that Nhongo hits with his car becomes a symbol of the paralysis he feels and a momentary revelation of his suicidal impulse. Compulsive drinking accompanies feelings of worthlessness in Mungoshi's "The Empty House" and "The Slave Trade," and in Chinodya's "Can We Talk" and "Play Your Cards." Casual sex, used as an anodyne for pain, is a potential self-inflicted death sentence in the time of AIDS (Chinodya, "Can We Talk" and "Strays"; Nyamfukudza, "If God was a woman"). Gwizo contemplates suicide in "The Empty House" and a family house servant kills himself in Chinodya's "Bramson." Paternal violence contributes to Pamba's drowning / possible suicide in Mungoshi's "Did You Have to Go That Far?" In Nyamfukudza's "Unkind monologue," the husband experiences the paralysis of any moral or affective impulse. In Nyamfukudza's "Days without hope," Reverend Mutumwi is rendered ineffectual, unable to accomplish any of his good intentions, because of his wife's malevolence. His reflections could be those of most of these characters:

What was happening to him? Things, somehow, seemed to be slipping out of grip, the firm hold he ought to have had of them was no longer quite there, and the whole feeling of not knowing exactly where to turn next was exceedingly

unpleasant, like being dumped blindfolded in a strange town and being reluctant for shame to ask the name of where one was. (56)

Along with the many instances of male violence directed against women by vulnerable, psychologically damaged men, there are numerous instances in which women intimidate men, psychologically, sexually, and sometimes physically. In Nyamfukudza's "The power of speech," a young woman has spent her girlhood catering to the demands of an alcoholic father and several brothers. Reacting to the power that men have had over her life, she now discovers that she has extraordinary power to annihilate, to make her lover "as if he had never been":

She had gazed *penetratingly* at him, wondering at this manner of complete acceptance of whichever way she might respond; scream at him, spit at him or put a fist in his mouth, all were within her power [...]. So she had succumbed to *the temptation of his surrender*, allowing herself to view the act in the terms of his description, to hold him by the waist and to *stuff him into herself*, she would be *doing the doing*, so to speak, wielding the power. (7–8; my emphases)

The woman sees herself as the "penetrator," the active agent who does "the doing," who has the power to make this man "surrender," to "put a fist in his mouth," and even "to stuff him into herself," entirely controlling the sex-act. This reversal is represented as liberating for the woman, almost a castration for the unnamed man, who "desperately looked round, as if searching for something that belonged to him [...]. The haunted look in his eyes was deeply printed in her memory" (10).

In Chinodya's "The Waterfall," a cocky young businessman at a conference picks up two girls in a disco. After a night of drink and drugs, they fall asleep in his car, and in the morning the girls suggest having a bath in a waterfall. The setting is Nyanga, a place associated with supernatural events in Zimbabwe. Bathing in the water, the man suddenly notices "drops of blood on the rock":

[...] bloodied chicken feathers, and the remains of a dead fire [...] The next moment there was Martha towering behind us, naked, gleaming wet and spread-eagled, brandishing a green stick. She cut Saru quickly on the back, thrice, then hit me in the crotch. (50–51)

The man tries to stop this Maenad, and then, unwilling to be a sacrificial victim, races for his car: "Now I knew I could not stop her. I could not stop them and I could not stop it, whatever it was, and I started running for dear life" (52). The story shares with Nyamfukudza's "The power of speech" a fairy-tale quality in which the normal order of male dominance is inexplicably

inverted, putting the man into a looking-glass world of “witches” conjured up by male terror at female power (“The power of speech,” 7).

Chinodya’s “Play Your Cards” has a realistic setting and a more equal contest between two people who like to gamble: “He too was shrewd, only a tiny little bit less than she was. For her too cards were a game of life and death, a ferocious contest” (54). The players are Maria, a white doctor of a certain age, and Timothy, a black Zimbabwean civil servant who pretends to be widowed but is in fact married; he enjoys mooching off Maria while having an affair with her. When she discovers the truth and confronts him, he responds by attacking her, accusing her of using him to have his baby. He charges:

“You’d caught me in your python-like grip and were swallowing me smoothly, slowly,” and later he reflects that she “had a steely strength which he had never realized, never imagined. He was afraid to touch her – for the first time since he had known her, she terrified him [...] he felt clumsy and vulnerable, weak and helpless [...]. Something, the crooked root of his being, had been wrenched out and flung into the sun, discarded.” (60)

Although the woman has been victimized by this free-loader who has drunk her beer, entertained his friends in her home, and damaged her car, she nevertheless has the “winners” in her hand, being white, in a high-status profession, and smart. Now exposed, the once-insouciant Timothy feels almost as annihilated as the male in “The power of speech.” The vagina is represented as terrifyingly powerful, with a “python-like grip” that can swallow a man “smoothly” (“Play your Cards”), capable of “swallowing” the helpless male who is “stuffed” into it (“The power of speech”), or “a black hole through which he would disappear forever – a yawning mouth” (“The Empty House”).

These strong women, intentionally or not, make the men they interact with feel annihilated, castrated, powerless to effect their desires. But there are two stories in which female initiative, specifically in the sexual realm, is represented as beneficent. While Nyamfukudza describes the most extreme male violence against a woman (in “Posters on the wall”), here he imagines role reversals which salve and even redeem the masculine ego. In “No smoke, no fire,” the unnamed female narrator, disillusioned about what marriage is likely to offer, determines to seduce a younger boy who seems to her “innocent” (92): “She would help him do it for the first time,” she decides (98). While she clearly takes the first steps in getting the boy to meet her in a lonely spot, she does not try to control him:

she would help him only so far. She wanted him to go for whatever he might for himself, so that whatever she gave him was something that he had asked for

and really wanted [...] This one memory she wanted to stay a good one for him. (103–104).

This possibility of positive encounter with a woman in control is explored more fully in the title story of the Nyafukudza collection, “If God was a woman.” The narrator is a male school teacher who, hearing a rowdy class, has casually asked an older female teacher if “she could do with some help” (115). She responds warmly, saying “But not here. Would he come along with her.” Immediately he “felt helpless, trapped, self-betrayed, yet compelled to smile too” (115). She takes him to her apartment in a nearby building where he “found himself irresistibly carried along, unable to back off or back out”:

[...] He told himself it was not the unnatural thing or the unusual thing and sure enough it immediately felt natural. So he shrugged inwardly. It was OK. He was a prisoner, discovering that he did not really yearn to be free. (116)

The scene in her warm, attractively furnished apartment has a dreamlike quality for the man; without asking, she brings him his favourite drink and then undresses before him unselfconsciously, “smiling with barely restrained relish [...] Yet, in a way that he could not explain, he felt imperiled, entangled, unprotected” (120–21). She, on the other hand, is absolutely confident and comfortable: “Isn’t it uncanny, how the Lord, in his infinite prescience, knows just who we are going to need?” (121).

The male narrator is intensely drawn to her yet remains ambivalent. He feels like a “fruit” plucked “for others’ feeding”; their copulation is “an interminable freefall into a bottomless black pit of seething, steaming, corrupted anal flesh” (122). Yet this is a corruption that is also life-enhancing. The following morning the narrator ponders

the delicious, delicate immediacy of one’s newly lost freedom. It generated such a sense of vitality. Therein perhaps lay the paradox, to find oneself by the reluctant, damnably difficult letting-go of one’s individuality. Analogous to the religious instinct, perhaps. Only renounce yourself and you shall be free. What was love but a giving up, a renunciation, a surrender? (124–25)

“If God was a woman” suggests that the abandonment of control, the surrender to this middle-aged woman who is able to command him to satisfy her needs even as she restores him, is “analogous to the religious instinct,” “a renunciation” of individuality, of egoism, which brings a kind of rebirth of the self.

What adds to the narrator’s uncertainty about whether to return to this woman – and it is an element introduced in only a couple of other stories – is the factor of AIDS. This disease, on the African continent and elsewhere, is a

shameful secret, not to be spoken of or acknowledged. These collections suggest that its “undiscussible” nature lies, at least in part, in its reconfiguring of the most intimate experience of being male. In the time of AIDS, the sex-act, once associated with life and birth – and for males often with domination – is a likely death sentence. In the Nyamfukudza story, just at the moment in which “copulation with the unattainable woman was increasingly, tantalizingly at hand,” the narrator reflects, “how awful then, how terrible that in these dementedly awry days, one caught the terminal, fatal virus right at the heart of where it all started, the cancerous, poisoned apple. The ultimate, terminal, deadly bit; so the fucking cunt had teeth after all?” (122) Having copulated with this stranger, the narrator continues to be haunted by the notion of “hara-kiri love. I love you and want to fuck for love despite that possibility, that shadowy third one who now walks always beside us, neither man nor woman but we now know who” (125). The next morning as he wanders the city, he observes younger couples “seemingly in the prime of their tainted, doomed lives, strutting through the malls like peacocks, oblivious of the plague sweeping through their midst” (126). This prompts him to wonder whether, if God was a woman, she would have “sent her only daughter to be so cruelly nailed upon the cross and raped and vandalized so that the suffering of man would be OK. Only a man could have such tortured, wasteful, convoluted logic. It was a soldier’s vision” (127).

The conclusion of the story, which in many ways offers a positive vision of male surrender to female desire, is itself a kind of “convoluted logic.” The narrator returns to this mysterious woman:

Love’s triumph, then, was not a fear of death but an embrace of it, not to be meek but to be bold, valiant, defiant, even warlike [...] He knew now, now that there was nothing to fear, his return to her would be a second awakening, a second coming. (127–28)

What is convoluted here is not only his magical thinking that somehow he and the woman are immune to AIDS but also his shift into the masculine imagery he associated with a cruel male god with a “soldier’s vision.” Despite his reflection on the difference between a male and female deity, he ends the story feeling “bold, valiant, defiant, even warlike” – all as he hurries towards his goddess.

Given how rapidly AIDS spread in Zimbabwe between 1980 and 2000, it is noteworthy that the issue arises so infrequently in these collections. AIDS is alluded to in Mungoshi’s “Did You Have to Go That Far?” and the only other story in which AIDS is mentioned is Chinodya’s “Can We Talk.” Here, as in the Nyamfukudza story, fear of AIDS contributes to the male narrator’s

anxiety about his masculinity. These two stories, Nyamfukudza's and Chinodya's, are important in breaking the taboo surrounding AIDS and in foregrounding the even more deeply denied connection between the disease and male identity. Another taboo topic closely related to male identity is homosexuality, and this issue, like AIDS, is touched on only briefly in these collections, in Nyamfukudza's "Posters on the wall" (previously discussed), in Chinodya's "Can We Talk," where it is another strand in the narrator's ruthless interrogation of male identity, and in Mungoshi's "Of Lovers and Wives," where homosexuality forms the central theme. This story is narrated by a wife who, after eighteen years of marriage, is only now discovering that she has all along shared her husband Chasi with his best friend and lover Peter. The intimacy of the two men is represented as established, more marital than Chasi's relationship with his wife. Ostensibly the ending seems to 'police' homosexual desire by having Peter commit suicide. However, even while the point of view is contained within the outraged wife Shamiso, the reader is aware that her action brings about death and separation, destroying the tender intimacy that she has observed between the two men. The unique feature of this story is the representation of a different and, to the reader, non-threatening version of masculinity.

Thus far I have sought to show that these three collections of short stories reveal certain preoccupations about the situation of men in contemporary Zimbabwe, preoccupations relating to economic and psychological vulnerabilities, aggressive feelings directed against women who are perceived as threatening, fear of and sometimes awe for women who seem to have more power than they do. I conclude with sustained attention to two stories which offer particularly intense, critical examination of a central male character, stories in which all of these preoccupations are at play: Mungoshi's "The Hare" and Chinodya's "Can We Talk." The protagonists of both stories are married men and fathers at mid-life. Both are unemployed and see the rapid social and economic changes as troubling, not solely because of the impact on their earning power. They recall the traditional world of their childhood with its well-defined gender roles, but find no guidance there for their own situations. Their wives have found strength and independence in careers that are tied to the economic changes. In each story, the protagonist interrogates his sense of paralysis and struggles to understand what is happening to his marriage. What is admirable in these stories is not that the protagonists envision a different kind of masculinity (they don't), but the courage to refuse old roles and the will to continue the risky business of exploring their feelings. The title of the Mungoshi collection, *Walking Still*, registers the mixed tone of frustration and determination, of qualified agency, felt by the protagonists in these

two stories. On the one hand, there is forward motion, “walking,” and a sense of determination to push ahead conveyed by the adverb, as in “I am still walking.” On the other hand, positioning the adverb after the participle draws attention to the paradoxical yoking of motion (walking) and stasis (still), suggesting a slow-motion dream in which one is forever walking and yet forever in the same place.

In Mungoshi’s “The Hare,” the narrative is focalized through the central character Nhongo, who has lost his managerial job in a textile factory. He had been “getting good money and he was a Party-card holder [...] a careful, security-conscious family man [...] not one to take risks” (6). Having entered employment in an industry that had been protected from competition up to 1980, Nhongo loses his job due to economic forces of global competition that rendered the Zimbabwean textile industry moribund. Now, eighteen months on, he recalls his anxious concern at the skyrocketing prices for bread, the “suicidal amount of money” that he owes on his home and car, the shame of having to cut back on meat and to deny his children. Ironically, the same forces that put the textile factory into bankruptcy have fuelled the informal trade in secondhand clothing, an opportunity that his wife Sara has now seized upon. Nhongo sees that Sara “had become a new woman” (12): “He had wanted Sara to have a job, to do what she felt she wanted to do. It was, after all, only what every woman was doing these days. But deep down, Nhongo was still a traditionalist, a tribesman”; “He belonged to a proud tradition that said the hunting is done by the man of the house” (8, 13). While Sara “thrives,” Nhongo “became scared at the speed at which their life was traveling” (11). He worries about his wife’s safety in her travel to South Africa, but “Sara always returned radiant and bubbling with energy; she seemed almost unable to sit still, until she could make yet another trip over the border” (11). Nhongo is so intimidated by his wife’s new self-confidence and initiative that he starts noticing “the word ‘castration’ each time he picked up something to read [...] He would become aware of his whole body assuming a defensive posture – physically manifested by a slight forward stoop and his right hand dangling in front of his fly” (13–14).

At the opening of the story, Nhongo, having seen his wife off on yet another trip to Johannesburg, makes an impulsive decision to drive that night with his two daughters and the housemaid Ella to his parents’ rural home. Watching Sara depart from in front of the expensive downtown hotel, he feels that she “belong[ed] more to [her new] friends than to him,”

and he had had a sudden desire to taste *dovi* once more, sitting in his mother’s pole-and-*daga* hut. A strange irresistible nostalgia to revisit the scenes of his childhood had assailed him. (1)

This nostalgia is amplified as eighteen-year-old Ella emerges, in contrast to Sara, as everything that a traditional wife should be. Upon their arrival, she kneels to offer traditional greetings to Nhongo's parents. Indeed, she has become well-known to them, because Sara has sent her often with foodstuffs for her in-laws rather than making the long trip herself. Learning that Sara has gone again to Joburg, the parents are even more inclined to value Ella, who immediately sets about the wifely tasks of putting the children to bed and preparing chicken and *dovi*. There seems to be an understanding between the parents and Ella to get Nhongo to consider taking her as a second wife. His father insists that "the city was all right if you were still young and had a job. But [...] the blackman's wealth is a home out in the country, among his own people. But a home, a family, meant a good hard-working wife" (24). Late at night, Nhongo finds Ella bathing in his room, and the next morning, when he abruptly decides to leave, he asks his mother if she had encouraged Ella to come to his room, telling her firmly, "I love *Mai Sekai*" – that is, Sara, the mother of daughter Sekai (23). The text is silent about what, if anything, Nhongo and Ella did after he found her bathing in the middle of the night, and yet by morning Sekai is clearly acting out about what she considers Ella's usurpation of her mother's role.

As they prepare to depart, Nhongo finds in the trunk of the car the corpse of the hare that he had struck the night before. The scene is presented as an accident although Nhongo has "an instant of knife-like clarity" when he recognizes that "he had wished both to hit and to avoid the hare" (5). Wounding the hare (which is still alive when he first picks it up) is itself a challenge to his masculinity; he feels that "he had to do something. Something, at least, to show them [Ella and his daughters] that he still could" (5). A bit later he feels "vaguely" that "*it isn't my fault* [...]" Somewhere deep within his tangled unexamined feelings: it was all Sara's fault" (6). The hare is a challenge to Nhongo's sense of competence, but it also becomes a figure for his wounded self – blindsided by economic forces, paralyzed by the "speed" of modernity, incapable of determining what actions he should take. His indecisiveness when he "wished both to hit and to avoid the hare" permits the interpretation that he is similarly indecisive about his own existence.

The story ends ambiguously, with Nhongo's parents bidding Ella a farewell fit for a prospective daughter-in-law. Ella sits in the front seat, and Nhongo disciplines Sekai for insisting that Ella sit in the back, because the front is "Mama's seat" (25). After a few moments Sekai complains that Ella is wearing "Mama's perfume" and then, when she asserts, "I saw you walking out of Mama's room this morning," Nhongo almost loses control of the car: he "drove on as if someone were holding a gun to his head" (25). Seeing Ella

weeping, he puts his hand on her knee, and she bends to put her forehead on his hand. Sekai again challenges, “I saw your hand on Ella’s knee,” and finally Nhongo pulls over and slaps his daughter. Ella grabs his hand to prevent a second blow and “instinctively [Nhongo] quailed. Ella’s grip on his arm [...] was vice-like and so steady his own arm shook [...] Nhongo felt like pleading: *Please you are hurting me*” (26). Appalled at what she has done, Ella slips out of the car and walks down the road, soon followed by Sekai who is now calling “Mummy! Mummy!” Ella stops in the road “like a pillar of rock. And to [Nhongo] she seemed to grow taller and taller and he felt as if she was falling on top of him” (26). He slumps against the steering wheel. The story ends with Nhongo, Ella, and Sekai all completely confused about what relationship they have or want to have. This submissive eighteen-year-old housemaid, the very type of a traditional wife, is able to dominate Nhongo, to fall on top and crush him; he feels as unmanned by her as by Sara. In his imagination, his manhood is to be found neither in the country nor in the city, neither in tradition nor in modernity, for it lies small, crushed, and lifeless in the trunk of his car, a thing he can neither revive nor drive away from.

The final story to be considered is Chinodya’s “Can We Talk,” the most lacerating self-examination about masculinity to be found in these three volumes. It opens with what can only be termed duelling rants between husband and wife. He begins:

I hate the way you love medicines – the way you’ll stuff yourself with painkillers, lozenges, cough syrup, antibiotics, lemon, sodium bicarbonate, mouthwash and honey just for a common cold. The way for you every sneeze is an allergy, every itch an infection, every pimple a cancer and every twitch a stroke. Your incredible faith in doctors – no, *specialists*, the way you’ll let them feel you, pamper you, cut you up like a guinea pig, punch you with their metal pricks, while gloating over you and saying yes, you said so yourself, you look like raw beef [...] I hate your silence and submissiveness, for I know it is a volcano that will one day erupt on me. I should crucify you for your other sins – your thrift, your envy, I know at the heart of your softness and humility is a hard secret nut of Capricorn [sic] ambitiousness, your straggler’s distance is only a ploy to outpace yourself, to outpace me. (85–87)

The husband’s diatribe goes on for two pages, the tone ranging from irritability over petty issues, magnified in a long, unhappy marriage, through the violent image of her rape by a doctor wielding a “metal prick,” to the paranoid fear of her hidden capacity to “erupt” on him like a volcano and to beat him in the rat-race of modern life. Then, apparently, the wife speaks back:

And I hate the way you never scrub your back and splash the bathroom floors and the walls when you take a bath, the way you leave hair all over the sink, the way you sit for hours in the toilet, blasting away like a motorbike for all the visitors to hear [...] I hate the way you don't eat my food after I have spent the whole afternoon cooking and you stagger back home from your drinking spree and claw me with your ice-cold feet and then crash out into a snore [...]

I just hate the way you think you can contain me and my career, the way you think my life should be moulded to yours – the way you go on deluding yourself thinking I'm the same person I was ten years ago and that I will continue to put up with each of your emotional ambushes.

No *shaz*, I will not!" (87–88)

We quickly learn that the story is narrated entirely by the husband. "We don't talk any more," he says, "so I have decided to write this. I know it is going to be a one-sided conversation but I will go ahead and talk, anyway" (89). On the one hand, the male narrator, full of spite and voluminous rationalizations for his deplorable behaviour, controls all the words on the page and thus his wife's speech; on the other hand, his harsh, self-lacerating inquisition suggests that he is capable of entertaining her point of view, of seeing himself through her eyes. The couple is middle-class and well-educated, the man working independently as a writer and the wife successful in a career in business. They come from a rural world that, in his memory, seems simple, sensuous, and uncomplicated. With many others of their generation, they have chosen to move to the city and have aspired to upward mobility, choices that he now questions. He complains:

"I don't know you any more. I see you rushing off to work in the morning. You drive around in your new company car, wearing the expensive outfits paid for by your company [...] Your life is crowded and mine is empty [...] I have kicked down my ladders and deluded myself that I am in search of simplicity; but the vacuum is killing me. I feel sorry for you, craving sophistication and clutching the ladder of success." (96)

To the husband, the wife has become an artificial woman, stuffing herself with chemicals, lacquering her nails, fornicating with sterile "metal pricks," wearing high fashion and driving a new car, relentlessly climbing the "ladder of success." By contrast, he figures himself as a drunken wastrel, slovenly dressed, a gross, unkempt, and unclean mountain of flesh. In contrast to her agency and efficiency, he has "tried simplicity. I have done away with shoes, socks, ties, suits, jackets and god knows what else. I have done away with watches, calendars, diaries and appointments. I have done away with newspapers, radios, televisions and phones. I have done away with jobs, careers and hobbies" (95). He sees a marriage counsellor, who tells him, "You are

stressed. You are between jobs. You are going through your mid-life crisis” (92); these “readymade assurances” (92) offer neither insight nor direction. His wife, he says, merely wants him to be like a “regular man,” but he seeks a soul-mate who can “listen to my chaos” (90) and appreciate “my irony and open-endedness, my restless mind” (86). But this narrator also mocks his *Weltschmerz*: “I badly need somebody to impress” (97).

Where can the narrator turn for relief from his discontent? The two bitter opening verbal duels are followed by a brief lyrical recollection of his first visit to his wife’s rural home, the traditional foods and smells, bathing each other at night, their sexual bliss. This is the lost world of the rural past that the couple has intentionally moved away from. Now the narrator finds himself urban, educated, unemployed, ungrounded, directionless: “We thought we were beyond tradition, that we were educated and sophisticated, that we could manage our own conflicts. Now look where we are” (94). He fully recognizes that the past does not offer a useful model of a relationship:

We were both raised on the culture of not talking. Our parents talked and we listened. Our teachers talked and we listened. The Bible talked and we listened [...] Now without parents or Bibles or teachers to talk down to me I have truly come unstuck. I have no one, nothing to *listen to*. I have chosen to live with the terrible satisfaction that no one shall say unto me, “Thou shall not ....” I have become a law unto myself, despite even you. Only I can change myself. (92)

Writing this story is an attempt to communicate with his wife and to find a way out of his own “chaos”:

When I am away from this story I feel the conviction to go on with it, the confidence that I might pull this off and say something valuable, but I come back and I wane with the fear that you might not understand this [...] I wane with the fear that perhaps I am hopelessly lost, that I am indeed beyond salvage. But let me try again. (91)

Strange, but writing this is like having sex with you, my dear. Writing is a kind of sex. A ruthless, obsessive sex [...] Writing this story, I have switched out my life for weeks [...] I have eaten, drunk, slept just so that I could reach the terrible orgasm of completing this story. The orgasm of this story has eluded me many times. I now realize that perhaps this is not even an orgasmic story. (106)

It is an important insight. Perhaps he must abandon the familiar masculinist metaphors of sexual conquest to grasp a different way of being a man.

The story has no climax in any conventional way, nor even a conventional fictional structure. The first part, this ranting confession, ends on the following note of uncertainty about its own reception: “I wonder now when you read

this what you will think and what you will say to me, and whether we will talk. Will you forgive me for this?" (106). In the final section, the narrator turns from his marriage to what is really a meditation on sex, death, and love, set in a bar and grill in a Harare suburb overlooking a cemetery. His interlocutor is a childhood friend named Alice, willing to listen but not to be a sexual partner: "Graveyards. Death. Alice's sizzling pork and corpses rotting away in expensive coffins deep in the earth a stone's throw away. Rumba blasting" (109); the "walk out to where the earth mound lies waiting, the fresh, lipless hole gaping for the body" (111). The reduction of the narrator from modern, urban, middle-class man to a socially disconnected, slovenly drunk concludes with this anatomical image of the lipless hole that is his grave, an image that resonates, too, with the horrifying vaginas in other stories.

"Can We Talk" has, like other stories in these collections, a salient theme of gender conflict and a psychological portrait of a disturbed, bewildered, hostile, shameful male protagonist. What distinguishes this story is the risk-taking of narrator and author – risk-taking in tone, style, and structure, making this an especially challenging inquiry into masculine identity. First of all, the fiction repeatedly invites us to identify the unnamed narrator as the author, Shimmer Chinodya. At one point the narrator meets a young woman who likes his books and asks, "Why did Godi or Farai or Benjamin do this on page so-and-so?" (101) – all characters from Chinodya's fiction. He refers to his first novel *Dew in the Morning*. So we not only have a narrator dissecting his psyche, but also the author invites us to understand this as a real confession, perhaps even a real communication to his wife. The protection normally extended to a first-person narrator is deliberately set aside.

Secondly, the narrator/author, much more powerfully than Nyamfukudza, breaks silence about how AIDS is changing Africa:

"We are the AIDS generation. AIDS hit us where it hurts most. AIDS came to us and said, 'Now you can't eat ....' Timothy Stamps [onetime head of the Ministry of Health] rushed over and said, 'Wait, wait! Here are some condoms.' Condoms. Condoms. We are the condom generation. The plastic generation. For some it is no use. For some it is too late. We are dying like flies." (103)

He recognizes that the most urgent and basic relationship between the sexes has been changed utterly for his generation. Sex is linked with death, not life, with plastic, not human flesh.

Thirdly, the narrator/author touches, albeit lightly, on the still more forbidden matter in Zimbabwe of homosexuality, registering his own sexual complexity. His friends tell him, "You've watched too many films [...] There

is nothing like that in our culture. You've read too many books [...] Maybe you need other men," to which the narrator responds with a strong denial, "How dare you say that? I think women are more beautiful than men" (91–92). But then, startlingly, the narrative includes an imagined transgendered moment. He recalls how he used to love to shop for dresses for his wife (a way of controlling and defining her):

"I was the artist shaping you, painting you, exploring textures, fabrics and colours on you [...] I don't sneak any more into lady's shops to ask, 'Do you think this will fit my wife?' When I travel out of the country I don't squeeze my hairy clumsy body into trim lady's dresses and prance in front of hotel room mirrors, smirking to myself, 'This will definitely fit you. Wait till you see this!' There is *nobody* for me to squeeze into women's dresses for. There is *no body* for me to please." (96)

The authorial emphasis on "nobody," with the repetition "no body," conveys his psychic discomfort with his current masculine role, where all choices seem equally deathly. There is no body, not a female body penetrated by a metal speculum, not a male body covered with a plastic condom, that he can inhabit or feel connected to. His nausea at both genders spills out. His self-disgust extends to all males:

Early in life, we men begin by relishing our sins and proudly cataloguing our exploits but after a while we get bored of our deeds. We get bored, but we don't stop. Yes, we men are children. Yes, there is a polygamous streak in every one of us [...] Yes, we have girlfriends tucked away in high-density houses. Yes, we have secret children mothered by teenage girls. Yes, we can't feed ourselves. Yes, we don't care for the children that we spawn. Yes, we are irresponsible. Yes, we are rapists. Yes, we are wife-batterers. Yes, we spread AIDS. [...] So, I'm a sell out, aren't I? Blaming men. Writing this unthinkable story. Shaming myself like this.... It's cathartic. (102)

Chinodya takes big risks in this story to communicate the pain, disgust, and powerlessness he feels about his disordered masculine identity, which has "come unstuck," and his despair about male and female relationships in this time and in this place. He has taken risks with the shape of this story, searching futilely for a "climax," an "orgasm" to end this perhaps fruitless attempt to establish intercourse with his wife, truthfully confessing his shame and frustration, not knowing what the consequences of confession will be, either to his wife or to his readers. Of all the stories in these collections, "Can We Talk" offers the rawest psychological portrait of a male character struggling to define himself in a world far distant from the rural idyll of his past with its secure, albeit restrictive definitions of roles offered by parents, teachers, the

Bible. He directs verbal and imagined violence against an economically independent new woman and against himself. Alternative gender roles trouble his imagination; the role of adulterer is shameful, and in any case, every sexual relationship is haunted by the spectre of AIDS, “that shadowy third one who now walks always beside us” (“If God was a woman,” 125). At the end, facing “the fresh, lipless hole gaping for the body,” he is clear only that he must keep on talking: “Talking is the basis of self-understanding. It’s the basis of understanding others” (102).

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OWEN S. SEDA

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The Fourth Dimension  
Dambudzo Marechera as a Dramatist  
– An Analysis of Two Plays

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes theme and style in plays by Dambudzo Marechera. It is informed by a basic consideration that in spite of his versatility as a writer, Marechera has been viewed predominantly as novelist, short-story writer, and poet, but hardly as playwright. As a result, his dramatic output has remained largely unacknowledged. It is in this sense that Marechera's plays constitute his fourth dimension as a writer. Using two examples, the essay argues that Marechera's plays, like the rest of his writings, reveal strong modernist and postmodernist influences. In addition, these plays owe a substantial part of their success to their autobiographical nature, wherein the playwright is engaged in a constant process of dramatizing aspects of his own controversial life-style.

Introduction

**A**LTHOUGH THE LATE DAMBUDZO MARECHERA remains one of Zimbabwe's most celebrated writers, his works have not given rise to any substantial output in published critical analyses. While acknowledging the importance of Anthony Chennells' and Flora Veit-Wild's recent edited collection *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Mare-*

chera,<sup>1</sup> the present article hopes to contribute in its own small way to the (so far) limited body of criticism on Marechera's work.

The article is also informed by the observation that, despite his versatility as a writer, Marechera has been viewed predominantly as a novelist, short-story writer and poet but hardly as a playwright. As a result, his dramatic output (consisting of a series of plays collected in *Mindblast*, *The Black Insider*, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Sourcebook on His Life and Work*, and *Scrapiron Blues*) has remained largely unacknowledged. Yet Marechera's very own life and times have often been viewed by critics and members of the general public as one big drama. It is in this sense that Marechera's plays constitute his fourth dimension as a writer.

### Biography as Drama

The drama that was Marechera's life is borne out by an observation that most of his works owe their success to their autobiographical nature. In her sourcebook on Marechera's life and work,<sup>2</sup> Flora Veit-Wild chronicles Marechera's expulsion from the then University of Rhodesia, his solo walk down the then Salisbury's Second Street Extension in demonstration against Ian Smith's UDI, and his eccentric behaviour, leading to subsequent expulsion from New College, Oxford. She describes an incident when Marechera hurled dinner plates at chandeliers and at invited guests in London at a ceremony in honour of his receiving the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1979. She also chronicles Marechera's life and times as a writer-tramp in London, Wales, and Sheffield (1992). It was from real-life personal experiences such as these that Marechera the writer drew the bulk of his creative material. Musa Zimunya, a prominent Zimbabwean writer, critic and contemporary of Marechera, puts it succinctly: Marechera "lived as he wrote and wrote as he lived."<sup>3</sup>

As Veit-Wild states,

In his fiction [Marechera] relived the traumas of his life, and his life became his fiction. He constantly reinvented his own biography, revising, adding, deleting,

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<sup>1</sup> *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*, ed. Anthony Chennells & Flora Veit-Wild (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Flora Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on his Life and Work* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications; London: Hans Zell, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Musaemura Zimunya, quoted in *Dambudzo Marechera 1952-1987*, ed. Flora Veit-Wild & Ernst Schade (Harare: Baobab, 1988): 15.

magnifying scenes and sections according to his projected role. Thus for many his life was more significant than his books. The man became a living myth.<sup>4</sup>

Melissa Levin and Laurice Taitz make a similar observation when they write: “In his fiction, Marechera creates characters. However these characters are autobiographical in that they resemble the author himself, or a facet of the author’s identity.”<sup>5</sup>

### Marechera as a Playwright: Theme and Style

In analyzing Marechera as a playwright, the plays that come to mind are *The Skin of Time: Plays by Buddy*, a trilogy in *Mindblast*, an untitled extract from a play in *The Black Insider*, the *City Plays* in the posthumously published book *Scrapiron Blues*, and excerpts from a play entitled *The Stimulus of Scholarship*, first serialized in *Focus*, a University of Zimbabwe students’ magazine, and later published in Flora Veit–Wild’s source-book.

Marechera’s drama reveals a familiar characteristic shared with his other writings: it is imbued with a humorous (and sometimes serious) despair about life and the very essence of existence. Marechera’s plays are coloured with the author’s penchant to perceive nothing but stains, dirt, and ruin in human experience. In *Mindblast*, Marechera’s persona describes how, early in life, he developed a deep-seated dislike for “all notion of family, of extended family, of tribe, of nation, of the human race.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to his wholesale rejection of social convention, Marechera’s writings are a reflection of the societies in which he found himself at any given time. For example, the *Skin of Time* plays in *Mindblast* are a product of those heady days after independence as perceived through the eyes of a returning exile and iconoclast. These plays describe a society in transition, with the attendant questions of race and of nascent corruption among the new black leadership.

Thematically, the titles Marechera gives his plays display a consistent metaphoric resonance that is in keeping with his personal outlook on social existence. Titles such as *The Alley*,<sup>7</sup> *Alien to the People*,<sup>8</sup> and *The Breakdown*

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<sup>4</sup> Flora Veit–Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Melissa Levin & Laurice Taitz, “Fictional Autobiographies / Autobiographical Fictions?” in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*, ed. Anthony Chennells & Flora Veit–Wild, 165.

<sup>6</sup> Dambudzo Marechera, *Mindblast* (Harare: College Press, 1984): 130.

<sup>7</sup> Marechera, “The Alley,” in *Scrapiron Blues*, 32–47.

*Scrapiron Blues*<sup>9</sup> suggest an advanced state of social decay. They draw our attention to those aspects of life that complacency and social decorum have trained us not to see. In addition, Marechera's plays are anarchic rather than reformist. Nothing is coherent or linear. Characters' moods change capriciously. The individual remains isolated, threatened and extremely vulnerable in this whirlpool of forces. Marechera's works have a strong modernistic appeal, and evidence of Marechera's extensive familiarity with world literature and its critics is clearly discernible in his essay "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature."<sup>10</sup>

Sometime in 1985, Marechera granted an interview to the left-wing Parisian daily newspaper *Libération*. In this interview, Marechera reveals an obsession with individual liberty and the inalienable right of the individual to live as he or she chooses without social restraint. David Caute quotes Marechera's interview with the French newspaper as follows: "Before 1980 I wrote out of an indispensable need for intellectual evasion, to escape the surrounding horror by listening to my interior imagination [...] Now I am more pre-occupied by individual liberty than by national liberation."<sup>11</sup>

In a society that has been fragmented by the cumulative effects of colonial experience, for Marechera, communication ceases to be a two-way process. Characters in his plays may talk, but they do not necessarily communicate; the plays thus assume an existentialist dimension. Nothing is predictable. For Marechera the goal of art (and life) is to attack anybody or anything that would insist on an ordered life. Morality must be debunked by assaulting the reader's / viewer's sense of it. In a study of the social history of Zimbabwean literature, Flora Veit-Wild puts it succinctly:

Marechera smashes linguistic and narrative structures to get to the core of things, a new truth, a new humanity beyond any form of regimentation. His utter individualism implies a total negation of any outside constraint, his writing aims at undermining what people take for granted, he wants to "blow people's minds."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Marechera, *Alien to the People in Scrapiron Blues*, 85–95.

<sup>9</sup> Marechera, "The Breakdown Scrapiron Blues," in *Scrapiron Blues*, 48–60.

<sup>10</sup> Marechera, "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature," *Zambezia* 14. 2 (1987): 99–105.

<sup>11</sup> Marechera, quoted in David Caute, "Marechera in Black and White," in *Cultural Struggle and Development in Southern Africa*, ed. Preben Kaarsholm (Harare: Baobab & London: James Currey, 1991): 101.

<sup>12</sup> Flora Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers and Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare: Baobab & London: Hans Zell, 1992): 260.

As a modernist, Marechera is not concerned with describing the ordinary things in life. He aims to portray as natural that which society conveniently avoids and regards as sordid and immoral. Marechera's negation of ordered life also has a bearing on his narrative style. In his plays, events do not follow a chronological sequence. In his own words: "history is not a well-ordered path leading from cause to effect [...] it is rather a psychological condition in which our senses are constantly bombarded by unresolved or provisional images."<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Marechera's plays are open-ended. The conflicts remain unresolved at the end. With this deliberate discontinuity, Marechera ruptures the concept of the well-made play in order to destabilize that inherent human desire for an ordered life.

## Two Case Studies

### *The Gap*

*The Gap* is the second play in a trilogy entitled *The Skin of Time: Plays by Buddy*, published in *Mindblast*.<sup>14</sup> Whereas some critics might wish to read the three plays together as a continuum because we meet some of the characters in all three plays with some of the events intertwined, each play is, in fact, complete in itself. Moreover, to read the three plays as a continuum would in fact rob them of a very important aspect of meaning, which is that of open-endedness and discontinuity.

*The Gap* is a one-act three-hander whose storyline is based on the "dark days" (at least in the white Rhodesian psyche) following Zimbabwe's Independence when (former) white Rhodesians, uncertain of their future under black majority rule, were emigrating or taking the so-called "gap." South Africa, their main destination, was then regarded as the last bastion of institutionalized, white-supremacist rule. The three characters in the play are Spot Kenfield (Spotty), his mistress Arabella, and his son Dick.

In theory, *The Gap* adopts a linear plot, which Marechera manipulates in such a way that the action does not actually move. While the play retains its exposition and complication, the latter remains unresolved, becoming an extended climax. As a result, the linear plot structure is more apparent than real.

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<sup>13</sup> Marechera, "Soyinka, Dostoevsky: The Writer on Trial for his Time" *Zambezia* 14.2 (1987): 111.

<sup>14</sup> Marechera, *The Gap*, in *Mindblast or The Definitive Buddy* (Harare: College Press, 1984):19—26.

It is essentially a snapshot of the violent nature of existence, where the reader is immediately plunged into an abrupt climax even as the play opens. The snapshot metaphor is further accentuated by the fact that the play is very short and is not divided into scenes. Whereas in traditional linear plots, a play's inciting incident usually comes at the beginning, in *The Gap* it only comes later in the form of a flashback through a telephone conversation between Dick and his uncle. In *The Gap*, Marechera introduces the reader to something that turns out to be a familiar opening in most of his plays.

Marechera's plays open with a general state of disequilibrium. *The Gap* opens with the loud and protesting voices of Spotty and his son Dick coming from somewhere off-stage. From Dick's yell: "You're hurting me Daddy, DADDY!"<sup>15</sup> it is clear that Spotty is engaged in an act of physical child abuse, which act remains undisclosed, thereby heightening the play's suspense. Soon thereafter, Spotty appears on stage with an armload of hand grenades and detonating wire, with which he threatens to blow up everything and everybody around him, including himself. The telephone conversation between Dick and his uncle reveals that Spotty is frustrated by the new politics of Zimbabwe, which has just been turned over to black majority rule. Like some (former) white Rhodesians at the time, he has neither faith in nor respect for the indigenous people, whom he refers to derisively as "monkeys" and "kaffirs." As a result, Spotty is not sure whether to stay on or emigrate. In the play's linear plot structure, conflict operates on two levels. The first level of conflict involves Spotty at war with the politics of black majority rule, including his wife's refusal to take the "gap" along with him. The second level is represented in Spotty's mind: it is mental turmoil, frustration, and indecision that render him incommunicado and easily prone to violence.

It is only through Dick's telephone conversation with a maternal uncle that the reader realizes the source of Spotty's frustrations. He plays out his frustrations through violence, and these violent tendencies are more pronounced towards his wife, who has had to take the "gap" away from the marital home. Dick uses a chain of adjectives to describe the level of violence to which his mother has been subjected at the hands of Spotty. It is from Dick that we learn the truth:

He worked her over, beat the daylights out of her, whipped the soul outa her mind, battered her, smashed her, pulverized her, vetted her on the couch, mind-boggled her in the bedroom and came down for a glass of milk from the fridge.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marechera, "The Gap," in *The Skin of Time: Plays by Buddy*, in *Mindblast*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Marechera, "The Gap," 21–22.

The nature of physical and mental abuse as described by Dick immediately brings to the fore a number of issues concerning the treatment of violence in Marechera's plays. In the first instance, Marechera depicts violence as hierarchical. On finding the new political ethos disagreeable, Spotty vents his violent frustrations on a defenceless wife. Too weak to stand up to him, Jane decides to take the "gap," and in the absence of Jane, Spotty inflicts physical abuse on his son Dick. The hierarchical nature of violence in the play becomes symbolic of the crushing of the weak by the mighty. It also becomes one instance of authorial biography coming across as drama. Marechera does acknowledge that the subjection of the weak by the powerful constantly gave him a deep sense of paranoia in his own lifetime. In an interview with *Libération* in 1985, Marechera is quoted as having said:

Now I am more preoccupied by individual liberty than by national liberation, the defence of those who cannot defend themselves [...] because all the African revolutions have taken it out on [...] those sections of the population who have never had the capacity to defend themselves.<sup>17</sup>

It is violence, and the omnipresent threat of violence, that gives *The Gap* something of a perpetual climax.

Another feature of Marechera's treatment of violence in his plays is the rather easy-going coexistence that he creates between violence and peace. This explains why, after battering and "beating the daylights" out of his defenceless wife, Spotty casually "came down for a glass of milk from the fridge." Similarly, throughout the play Spotty carries an armload of hand grenades, which he threatens to detonate at any time. Thus the boundary between violence and peace, life and death remains extremely thin and elusive. Thirdly, violence is presented as having an infinite capacity to dehumanize, as shown by Spotty's inexorable descent into continually violating everything and everyone around him.

Fourthly, because social experience is essentially violent, man has ceased to engage in any meaningful communication with those around him. Social existence has become highly fragmented, and in this fragmentation there is no room for taboos. Because of this fragmentation and transgressiveness, Dick casually invites his father Spotty and Arabella to join him in a sexual orgy, in which, as he says, "Two is conventional – and three is exotic. You start with her and I will watch. Then I'll lay her and you will watch. Then I lay you and she watches. Then she sucks –."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Marechera, quoted in "Marechera in Black and White," 101.

<sup>18</sup> Marechera, "The Gap," 24.

Finally; confusion regarding a mattress, a bed, a bedpan, and castor oil signifies how, in Marechera's situations of social turmoil, characters may engage in dialogue without necessarily communicating. Whereas Spotty gives his son clear instructions, Dick twists everything out of recognition and meaning by accusing his father as follows: "But you said the bed under the Castor Oil by the bedpan. You did. He did, didn't he, Bibi? He did. You said the pan by the castor bed under the mattress —."<sup>19</sup>

While the confusion over castor oil and the bedpan signifies fragmentation and stalled communication, Spotty's constant constipation becomes a symbol of the play's lack of movement. It is in this arrested situation that the play ends where it began, in a perpetual state of social turmoil and disequilibrium.

### *The Alley*

*The Alley* is the first of the "City Plays" in *Scrapiron Blues*. For this play, Marechera adopts an allegorical title, in the sense that the country becomes the "alley" into which Marechera forces his reader to take a casual stroll. Metaphorically, it is the conveniently ignored alley into which Marechera always forces his reader to take a walk as soon as any of Marechera's works is opened.

*The Alley* is a short one-act play with only three scenes. It is a two-hander whose chief characters are Robin (white) and Rhodes (black). In this play Marechera employs an equally convoluted linear plot-structure that is more apparent than real. The play's action acquires a sense of immediacy and contemporaneity through the opening directions, which identify the play's events as taking place "Right now." *The Alley* is essentially a play about hopelessness in which Marechera depicts his all-too-familiar landscape of dirt, waste, and ruin. The opening stage direction leads us into the scene: there are snores coming from underneath a pile of dirt and old newspapers. This image portends the familiar state of disequilibrium that characterizes the opening of most of Marechera's plays.

In *The Alley*, Marechera plays around with plot and action. Although in theory the play is a one-act drama structured into three scenes, in practice the plot does not actually move. In real terms, what we see is a slice of life in which the action only happens in the minds of the play's characters through flashback and nightmares of the Rhodesian war; nothing actually 'happens' onstage. The situation of Rhodes and Robin is stagnant and abject. Since nothing happens, *The Alley* is essentially a dialogue play in which Marechera

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<sup>19</sup> Marechera, "The Gap," 26.

dramatizes the dehumanization wrought by contemporary social existence. The play's conflict is embodied in the individual's struggle to assert his liberty as he struggles against the fetters of social sanction and control. For Robin and Rhodes, the alley thus provides a most welcome refuge in which to enjoy unfettered bohemian freedoms; it provides escape from the world of ordered life. As Robin puts it, in the alley one does not have "to worry about wearing the right clothes, executing the right social graces."<sup>20</sup>

*The Alley* also passes as a good example of biography as drama. Although, in theory, every author affords his characters an independent existence within the realm of fiction, a sense of fictionalized biography comes across when Rhodes, the black tramp, confesses:

University was the best time of my life. Shit! It was all just a preparation for this.... But there's freedom here I never aspired to – I don't have to worry about wearing the right clothes, executing the right social graces.<sup>21</sup>

From the reader's knowledge of Marechera's life and times, it is clear that Rhodes represents the writer. Modernist influences allow Marechera an opportunity to create art out of personal real-life experience. As Nahma Sandrow writes, modernism demands that "every act of creation be absolutely personal, that creator and creation be one [...] that the conventional artificial distinction between art and life in the abstract be dissolved."<sup>22</sup>

Although it would appear that Robin and Rhodes have despaired at the nature of their existence, in truth their lives are one continuous celebration of unfettered freedom. This celebration is sustained by the ever-present bottle of wine and by a total and comforting ignorance of what tomorrow may bring. Scene Two, which carries the play's 'real' action, transports us back to the Rhodesian war. A particularly violent incident during the Rhodesian war is presented in a flashback whose action is played out in Robin's mind. Thus the action in Scene Two is virtual rather than real. In the flashback, the alley is suddenly transformed into a Rhodesian war office with Robin as a Rhodesian army officer. Behind him hangs a blood-splotched wall map of Rhodesia, which symbolizes the country.

The scene opens as Robin is interrogating a woman who has been accused of being a terrorist collaborator. (Rhodes doubles up as the woman here.) As in *The Gap*, this episode also demonstrates the hierarchical nature of violence

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<sup>20</sup> Marechera, "The Alley," in *The City Plays in Scrapiron Blues* (Harare: Baobab, 1994): 36.

<sup>21</sup> Marechera, "The Alley," 36.

<sup>22</sup> Nahma Sandrow, *Surrealism: Theatre, Arts, Ideas* (New York: Harper, 1972): 33.

in Marechera's writings. The Rhodesian war traumatizes the white army officer (Robin) and he responds by venting his frustrations violently on a helpless subject, the woman played by Rhodes. In this hierarchy of violence, the woman's sex becomes a symbol of the exploitative relations between black and white in colonial Rhodesia. This is demonstrated very clearly when Robin lashes out at the woman in a fit of rage:

Know what's that between your legs [Dramatically points at the map of Rhodesia]  
That's what's between your legs [...] I'm going to fuck it out of your mind [...]  
We don't need blacks with identity crises in their heads. We want zombies who  
know how to say "Yes, baas, No, baas."<sup>23</sup>

The violent episode comes to a shattering climax when Robin licks blood from the woman's face before he makes an attempt to rape her. In the ensuing struggle, the woman fights back, shooting Robin right between the eyes before she blows the wall map of Rhodesia to smithereens. On hearing the sound of gunfire, a group of Rhodesian soldiers rushes in from outside, "firing burst after burst" into the woman's body before the scene is blacked out.

After the shattering climax in Scene Two, Scene Three takes us back into the alley as we are transported back to the present. The scene opens as Robin is just coming round from the nightmare that forms the substance of Scene Two, and Rhodes soon enters carrying a few bottles of cheap wine. As the scene progresses, the reader is once again struck by a familiar feature of Marechera's plays: the easy-going coexistence between the ordinary and the sordid. As he munches away at a dry piece of bread, Rhodes speaks innocently: "Nobody talks about the war [...] Bayoneting children, ramming primed grenades into vaginas, bombing cattle and herdboys."<sup>24</sup>

Robin then complements this image by narrating a bizarre anecdote about naked inmates in hell doing headstands in a pool of human effluent. These narratives clearly indicate how the modernist writer celebrates his liberation from the fetters of socially sanctioned morals. According to Nahma Sandrow, "Angry at society, they [i.e. the modernists] were determined to make their lives instruments for flaunting society."<sup>25</sup> And they achieved this goal by dramatizing their very own lives through the medium of fiction.

The play closes with the two tramps mourning the capacity of their country to turn men into beasts. Like *The Gap*, *The Alley* ends where it began, as

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<sup>23</sup> Marechera, "The Alley," 41.

<sup>24</sup> "The Alley," 43.

<sup>25</sup> Nahma Sandrow, *Surrealism: Theatre, Arts, Ideas*, 27.

the two tramps resolve to find refuge in helpless inebriation as if to cocoon themselves from a violent, confusing, and unknowable world.

## Conclusion

This article has not endeavoured to analyze the full spectrum of Marechera's plays. Out of a complement of about eleven plays only two have been examined. However, these two are fairly representative of Marechera's work as a dramatist.

*The Gap* and *The Alley* clearly demonstrate Marechera's skills as a versatile and prolific writer. In both plays, he cleverly manipulates plot in such a way that his works become a form of revolt against order and ordinary realism. This lends an expressionist dimension to his work, which is in keeping with Hugh C. Holman's definition of expressionism as "a distortion of the objects of the outer world, and a violent dislocation of time, sequence and spatial logic in an effort to accurately but not representationally show the world as it appears to a troubled mind."<sup>26</sup>

By introducing his plays' action as taking place "right now," Marechera lends his drama a strong sense of immediacy which compels the reader / audience to reflect seriously on the thematic import of the dramatic action. In his drama, as much as in his prose and poetry, Marechera's characters are aliens within their own societies. Like their author, they are lonely individuals trapped in the vortex of a violent existence characterized by waste, dirt, and ruin. These plays confirm Marechera as a modern dramatist with a penchant for playing with language, who is engaged in a process of resolutely dramatizing his life.

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EMMANUEL M. CHIWOME

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## Modern Shona Literature as a Site of Struggle, 1956–2000

### ABSTRACT

This essay provides an overview of the development of modern Shona literature, whose genesis lay in Clement Doke's desire to standardize Shona orthography. The colonial authorities also wished to mould the outlook of Africans with access to formal education. The principal task of the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau was to vet the manuscripts submitted by Africans in order to ensure that no subversive texts were published. Cultural nationalists took advantage of the opportunity to defend their heritage in the midst of the entrenchment of white settler rule and missionaries wished to promote Christian values. The literature thus reflects the struggle between these competing agendas. During the Federation, some avenues for self-expression were opened, but the UDI era brought greater censorship, which in turn led to a narrow focus on domestic conflict. The literature is thus characterized by silences, even in the postcolonial period. The city is depicted as the site of moral and cultural decay, which led to the invention of traditions by some authors. The advent of Independence in 1980 gave rise to triumphalist literature, which glorified the guerrillas and presented the war of liberation in simplistic terms. Once disillusionment with the post-colonial government arose, some writers began to address the issues of unemployment, social displacement, and other factors like corruption that spawned deviance and crime.

**M**ODERN SHONA LITERATURE was born in 1956 in contradictory conditions. Until the introduction of writing by missionaries in the early twentieth century, Zimbabwe was an oral cul-

© *Zimbabwean Transitions: Essays on Zimbabwean Literature in English, Ndebele and Shona*, ed. Mbongeni Z. Malaba & Geoffrey V. Davis (Matatu 34; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2007).

ture in which verbal art was disseminated by using oral strategies. In the pre-colonial situation where culture evolved through its own internal dynamic, art, as a functional part of Shona culture, reflected the primacy of African cultural collective values, beliefs, and knowledge-systems. It consolidated pivotal aspects of the African heritage through exploratory creativity and supported the African family and community life as the fountainhead of Africanness (*unhu*).

Published literature came with print technology, which was geared towards facilitating the conversion of Africans to the Christian religion, and also towards equipping young Africans with basic literacy and numeracy skills that would make them useful in the colonial economy. After the standardization of the Shona writing system by Clement Doke in 1931, it was resolved that Africans should be encouraged to write literature on their culture, past and present, in order to provide a medium for the standardization of Shona orthography. The subordination of modern Shona literature to orthographic concerns marked the first inherent contradiction in the birth of the literature; the literature was to be a handmaid of orthography and other concerns that had nothing to do with aesthetics. The fact that modern literature came about as a side-show to the higher priorities of training Africans to be mentally and spiritually aligned to colonialism has remained a hallmark of the art.

The Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau, which was entrusted with the task of promoting 'good literature' for schoolchildren, was formed in 1954 under the auspices of the Native Affairs Department. The same Department is described by Ngwabi Bhebe, an historian, as the epitome of colonial oppression.<sup>1</sup> The Department was based in the Ministry of Information and its task was to ensure that colonialism was given a politically correct profile to make it acceptable to the potentially rebellious Africans. On behalf of the state, the Bureau conducted workshops for young writers, edited manuscripts and recommended some of them for publication. It is therefore a contradiction that novelistic practice, whose hallmark is innovation through exploration of reality, was to search for truth under the auspices of an intellectually and creatively oppressive propagandistic arm of government.

Nevertheless, cultural-nationalist Africans welcomed the formation of the Bureau as an opportunity to preserve their heritage through a modern medium. Ironically, some of the potential writers were influenced by missionaries who utilized their artistic sensibilities to suit their own evangelizing mission. The missionaries wanted literature that embodied the faith they preached.

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<sup>1</sup> Ngwabi Bhebe, *The ZAPU and ZANU Guerrilla Warfare and The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1999): 11.

Their vision often conflicted with cultural nationalism, which was a strategy to protect society from colonial influence. In this sense, modern literature became a site of struggle in which the goals of the state, the church, and traditional society often conflicted.

The first publications came through fiction and poetry written by Solomon Mutswairo and Herbert Chitepo respectively. Mutswairo's *Feso* (1956) was a successful experiment in political allegory celebrating freedom, courage, abundance of resources, and African dignity. The novel exploits the legendary and epic aspects of *pasichigare*, the golden age of the Shona people. In the same vein, Chitepo's *Soko Risina Musoro* (1956) draws on heroic images from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Shona legend and, through contrast, bemoans the colonial world, which is characterized by disempowerment, hunger, poverty, despair, and disease. The persona yearns for a past age in which social institutions helped in the struggle for survival. The nostalgia is toned down through the voice of a Shona chief who has become a Christian convert. He urges his subjects to surrender the ways of their ancestors and live in the hope that derives from the Christian faith.

These pioneering works by Chitepo and Mutswairo thus draw inspiration from heroic aspects of the African heritage that seek to restore a sense of respect, dignity, and courage to colonized Africans. The nostalgia reflects seminal aspects of modern African nationalism. Albeit obliquely, it conveys the fact that the African heritage is the natural point of departure for modern literature. In the pioneering literature, it appeared as if the interface between tradition and modernity had been forged without any serious conflict. The precolonial culture had seemingly found an alternative medium for self-perpetuation. However, adverse changes in the political climate meant that this impetus was not sustained.

The works mentioned were published during the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953–63), a political context that provided more creative latitude for writers than the subsequent Rhodesian era. While Mutswairo's novel had only one chapter on the land problem removed by the Bureau's editors, his subversive poem invoking the spirit of Nehanda to help colonized Africans was not perceived as subversive at the time. During this earlier period, Chitepo himself claimed that his poem was a light-hearted experiment in epic with little political significance. It can therefore be argued that pioneer writers saw possibilities for reclaiming their heritage to support or subvert modernity. The nationalist writers then believed that the Federation could transform colonialism into a stable multiracial society – a vision that is well articulated in Bernard Chidzero's *Nzvingamutsvairo* (1957).

Chidzero's narrator pleads with African youths to tone down their aversion to wage labour and to seek wage employment in colonial commercial ventures. Employment symbolizes cooperation, collaboration, and oneness, without which the country cannot develop. This early nationalist vision of multiracialism, skewed as it was in advocating partnership between unequal classes, nevertheless indicated that the Federation was not as abhorrent to Western-schooled Africans as subsequent political periods proved to be.

Subsequent to Chidzero's advocacy of the good governance of Africans by settlers as a condition for cooperation and social harmony, John Marangwanda writes about the tragic erosion of African values as a result of the rise of modern towns. Marangwanda's *Kumazivandadzoka* (1959) satirizes urbanization as a channel through which Africans gradually lose touch with their communities. The city is presented as a site of struggle between African collective values and Western individualism, and between good and bad social values.

Before the advent of colonial settlers, different African states had built settlements of urban proportions at Great Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, Naletale, Dlodlo, and Khami. The settlements sprouted organically out of inter-state and intra-state social dynamics. Modern cities started mushrooming around 1890 as forts to protect the small settler population from a hostile environment which had been earmarked for conquest. By the late 1950s, the city had been in existence for nearly half a century and was associated with social instability arising from labour migration, proletarianization, and trade unionism. Writers could therefore not ignore the impact of urbanization on the African population.

To Africans, colonial towns offered a new hope for subsistence on the one hand and danger on the other. The creativity around the city represents attempts to pin down this ambivalent reality. Marangwanda's double-pronged satire paints the African boy as rustic when it comes to the appreciation of Western material culture. The satirical presentation of the modernity-tradition dialectic links up with separate-development policies which depicted the city as the home of the colonials while the country was the home of the Africans. Saraoga's fate is depicted as a war between evil and good. Like Mutswareiro in *Murambiwa Goredema* (1957), Marangwanda narrowly delineates the African condition without highlighting the broader colonial economic scheme. The period in which he wrote coincides with the time at which the Federal government disseminated modern agricultural knowledge and skills through the Central African Film Unit (CAFU). The facile CAFU films created the illusion that the colony was keen to assist Africans who preferred to live permanently on the land, an impression that could not be sustained beyond the

Federation when the full impact of the Land Apportionment Act began to be felt.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the most incisive moralistic works on urbanization were published towards the end of the Federation. Chakaipa's *Garandichauya* (1963) critiques the moral condition of rural and urban men and women. The novelist shows how rural families become subjected to economic and social stresses as their members leave home for towns in search of alternative means of survival.

The harsh reality of the colonial town is captured in the image of Berina, Gatooma's African shanty town. As men and women clash fatally over scarce material resources, an attempt is made to link their behaviour with the socio-economic environment. The plot foregrounds the town as a stage on which opposing values are acted out to the detriment of the family. The eventual retreat to the country by survivors supports colonial segregation policies which frustrate the quest for freedom that young rural women, represented by Muchaneta, long for. The onslaught of colonialism on society sees men trying to protect their women from the hostile urban environment by restricting the former to the country. This ironically promotes colonial segregation policies which try to keep women out of towns in order to avoid the financial burden of providing African labourers with family accommodation.

A shift from efforts to link social behaviour with environmental forces came after 1965 when the settlers under Ian Smith made the Unilateral Declaration of Independence. UDI greatly reduced creative freedom in literature and journalism. The introduction of censorship laws, together with the formidable Law and Order Maintenance Act, which was enacted to safeguard the interests of the minority regime, narrowed the vision of both editors and writers. The Chief Publications Officer, a former official in the native administration department, regularly read the Act to the Bureau editors, who, in turn, never missed an opportunity to remind aspiring writers of the legal limits of their creativity.<sup>3</sup> This era saw the disappearance from bookshelves of the relatively harmless early works by Chitepo and Mutswairo and, inversely, the wider circulation of the 'politically correct' works of Chidzero.

Most of the works published from the late 1960s up to independence focused narrowly on domestic conflict. Examples of these themes are found in Kuimba's *Rurimi Inyoka* (1978), Mahanya's *Rufu Runobereka Rufu* (1976), Moyo's *Ziva Kwawakabva* (1977), Runyowa's *Mombe Dzamashanga* (1978),

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<sup>2</sup> Kedmon Hungwe, "Southern Rhodesia Propaganda and Education Films for Peasant Farmers, 1948–1955," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 2.3 (1991): 229–41.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel M. Chiwome, *A Social History of the Shona Novel* (Kadoma: Juta, 1996).

and Mukonoweshuro's *Ndakakutadzirei?* (1976). Even Mungoshi, the most acclaimed writer of the period, found his creative niche in psychological realism, in which morality is divorced from social processes. This resulted in the proliferation of decontextualized literature in which Christian morals are undermined by appearing to support colonial values. Quite often, the morality seems to derive from white middle-class values as part of the strategy of managing the colonized.

It would be an oversimplification of literary history to assume that writers always faithfully incorporated wholesale the views of literature editors who were the official enforcers of censorship law in the field of indigenous literatures. There is evidence of colonial counter-discourse in the fiction of the period. The domesticated vision is given plausible treatment in Mungoshi's *Ndiko Kupindana Kwamazuva* (1978), which says nothing about the war of liberation although it was published at the height of the struggle for independence. Mungoshi's novel reflects typical literary silences of the UDI era. The introspective novel captures the manner in which Salisbury township (as the city was called by blacks before independence) reduces the rhythm of African life to tedious episodes which tumble after, and in some instances, stumble over one another. It is premised on the interior monologue and on flashbacks which reveal a family that lives a dislocated life because of the influence which the city of Harare exerts on it. Mungoshi's contribution to the complexity of the behaviour of the colonized comes out through characters that search for causal links between apparently isolated events in their lives. Like characters in other novels of the period, Rex and his family finally retreat before unravelling the forces at work behind the city. Mungoshi shows how the city mediates the stresses that afflict the African cardinal family.

Through satire, Tsodzo's *Pafunge* (1972) gives the colonial towns more serious scrutiny. The title invites the reader to reflect carefully on the plot, in which Rudo, a young orphaned mission girl, journeys from her rural mission home via Gwelo to a boarding school. The trip concretizes Rudo's missionary foster-father's sermons, which are rendered in Judaeo-Christian symbolism. The hitherto alien symbols become real as she walks through Mutapa Township, a backward, God-forsaken place. The beer-hall, which is the centre of the dark city, is a haven for lost African youths. Its population is largely made up of child-mothers and unemployed deviant youths, who are weighed down by their broken dreams of attaining material success through schooling. Tsodzo gets close to the root causes of urban social pathology by allusively linking wider social forces to deviance and crime. Social disorders are linked with unemployment and social displacement. Tsodzo's satire was published at the height of UDI censorship. His portrayal of significant sociological detail

makes him an exception in a period dominated by narrow conformist sermonization. He feigned levity in order to convince the Bureau editors that his work was not critical of the government institutions.

Official and internalized censorship led writers to preach and teach fixed morality rather than interrogate reality. By ignoring the historical setting, the literature lost its realistic appeal. Apart from the few introspective and satirical works, most of the works delve into cultural nationalist issues in order to promote good written ChiShona. Other works escape into the precolonial past, where, out of a combination of colonialist myths and general ignorance of the African past, they ‘invent’ African customs. The return to their roots generates tension between content and form as writers strive to excel in language and style at the expense of other aspects of literature. This type of cultural nationalism is a reaction to foreign domination at a time when chiefdoms no longer represent unlimited zones of common culture. As a defence mechanism, cultural nationalism tries to counter attempts to replace what is African with what is Western.

From the early 1980s to the mid-1980s, independence was celebrated through euphoric, nationalist, triumphalist literature.<sup>4</sup> The excitement over the birth of a new nation created the illusion that the objectives of the revolution had been fulfilled and also that independence had one official definition and one official history. People believed that they were witnessing the creation of a social order which would do away with all forms of discrimination.<sup>5</sup> In fiction, this literature can be said to be represented by Nyawaranda’s *Mutunhu Une Mago* (1985), Matsikiti’s *Makara Asionane* (1985), and Pesanai’s *Gukurahundi* (1985). Most of the works appear to have arisen from sponsored competitions; they celebrate the history of a people that has suffered and died for independence. Freedom fighters are glorified as champions of freedom; their real inner motives for going to war are not explored. The reasons advanced for joining the war derive from the mass-mobilization psychology of the war period, foremost among which is patriotism. The works do not reflect the paranoia, power struggles, and absurdities of the war. Some of the latter included singing, dancing, and ululating as part of the process of killing alleged traitors, and branding as sell-outs those who reported that they had been raped or made pregnant by freedom fighters. The novelists in question tended to be cheerleaders rather than social critics. The rhapsodic tone dominates the uni-

<sup>4</sup> Brian Raftopoulos & Tsuneo Yoshikuni, “Introduction” to *Sites of Struggle: Essays in Zimbabwe’s Urban History*, ed. Raftopoulos & Yoshikuni.

<sup>5</sup> N. Bhebe, *The ZAPU and ZANU Guerrilla Warfare and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe*, 81.

dimensional heroic accounts of the freedom-fighters, which resemble ZANU (PF) songs by commissioned singers of the war and independence eras. Weapons of war are celebrated for helping to demystify the colonial system. The repressed feelings of the colonial period are vented in the convoluted poetic and prosaic discourse that characterizes the poetry of Mutswairo and Kumbirai in *Nduri DzeZimbabwe* (1983). The celebration of the fighter, the flag, and the legends and myths of the precolonial period helps people identify with the modern state. It turns literature away from pressing bread-and-butter issues and towards expression of satisfaction with the establishment, thus making the art somewhat irrelevant to people at the grassroots level.

Such literature is part of the larger project of creating national symbols, as it links the heroic Shona past with rhetorical claims about nationalist independence. Thus it legitimizes nationalism as the only correct background for political leadership. None of the works look at the war in a balanced sense, let alone as organized violence. The only works that allude to the violence in the war are Makari's *Zvaida Kushinga* (1985) and Msengezi's *Zvairwadza Vasara* (1985), which focus only on aspects of the Rhodesians' scorched-earth and torture tactics. Individual reasons for joining the war are not given. There is no reference to intra-party squabbles that sometimes impeded the progress of the struggle. Nor is the long-standing tension between nationalist politicians and guerrilla fighters alluded to. Like the literature of the UDI, the literature of the early years of independence is conveniently silent about crucial aspects of the history of the war. Its simplification of reality leads to stereotypical images of the war, with plots studded with heroes and villains. In a sense, the celebratory literature's attack-and-retaliation motif appears to extol violence. Revenge appears to be justified as an effective way of resolving political differences. Most of the works end with the guerrillas winning battles. The episodic plots make the war appear as an event rather than a process.

Triumphalist literature goes beyond creating symbols on which the modern nation-state can rely, and becomes a campaign tool of the government. It consolidates the *pungwe* or rally psychology where top-down monologue is equated with the traditional dialogic and consensual approaches of the *dare* council of elders. Its apparent obsession with only one perspective calls to mind colonialist literature. The works do not problematize the war as, for instance, Kanengoni does in *Echoing Silences* (1997), and Daneel in *Guerrilla Snuff* (1995). Further, they fail to separate rhetoric and romance from reality. They do not reflect the actual complex roles of women in the war. Nor do they differentiate between refugees, freedom fighters, and Rhodesian counter-insurgents: all those who cross the Zimbabwean border and enter Zambia and Mozambique are assumed to be freedom fighters.

Towards the end of the first decade of independence, a few works became critical of the manifestations of independence. In relation to this development, it is worth noting that, after independence, publishing became liberalized, to the extent that literary manuscripts could be submitted directly to publishers, some of whom had recently recruited young degree-holders. The editors, who had either a literature or journalistic background, were relatively free from the limitations of the Bureau tradition. Some of the works that reflect interesting innovation are a result of the initiatives taken by the young editors who were recruited and allowed to exercise their own judgement.

One of the fictional works that satirizes the betrayal of the goals of the war is Choto's *Vavariro* (1989). The novel highlights the demise of the alliance of the masses and the nationalist politicians. The wartime allies of the masses retreat into prestigious former white-owned suburbs while the peasants are evicted from farms they occupy and sent back to the overcrowded communal lands. The theme of betrayal is dealt with only in the last few chapters of the novel. Chimhundu's *Chakwasha* (1989), however, devotes its entire plot to the theme of betrayal. It focuses on how different representatives of post-Independence society distort the history of the war and their role in it in order to join the privileged class. Moses Marufu, one such villain, manages to join the class of *magora* (vultures), but falls as a result of the weight of the corruption within his new class.

Chimhundu is critical of the rise through expediency of the African nationalist bourgeoisie. The bitter tone underlying his vision suggests that deserving fighters were not rewarded, while the spoils went to the wrong people. This leaves the reader wondering whether the new nation would have averted neocolonialism if a minority with different principles had found its way to the top. This critique of post-Independence Zimbabwe is flawed by the centralization of a character who is a caricature of a traitor: namely, a deviant high-school student who became an informer at university and later a political refugee in England, and who returns home to become a nationalist politician. This portrayal is an exaggeration of the historical manifestations of the various levels of the betrayal of the masses during the war.

The poetry of the same period shifts from the celebratory and elegiac tones of the early years of independence towards satire. Chimsoro's collection *Dama Rokutanga* (1989) has two long satirical invectives on the initial manifestations of neocolonialism. His criticism asserts that the behaviour of individuals and groups who hold political positions hardly promotes freedom and development. However, he tends to hide his literary message in postmodernist eclecticism.

In the same year, Chirikure's first collection was published. Chirikure foregrounds verbal irony in his treatment of topical themes as a result of his affinity to oral performance. *Rukuvhute* (1989) exploits the Shona oral register to warn society about the need to monitor the direction of national development. He points out the danger of failing to develop the nation fully as a result of wrong policies and priorities. His poetry assumes the admonitory and authoritative tone of the voice of the community.

His second collection, *Chamupupuri* (1996), comes after the devastating effects of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme which was launched in 1991. By the time of publication, it has become clear that the admonitory tone of the early years of independence was ineffectual in advising those at the helm of the nation. The collective voice now conveys alarm, disillusionment, and anger. The gentle winds of change have turned into *chamupupuri*, a whirlwind that threatens to destroy the foundation of the independent nation. The national bourgeoisie offer human sacrifices to capitalist institutions, as evident in "Murume Nomweya Pagomo." The personae are bitter with the self-centred class as well as with the apathetic masses. The author remobilizes the masses in readiness for interventionist action in order to reverse the sedative effects of nationalist triumphalism.

Chirikure's third collection, *Hakurarwi*, (1999), is an even more serious exercise in invective than its predecessor. It urges people to intervene in the shaping of their national destiny; they themselves have to rectify the ills in their society. The title poem, "Hakurarwi" (We shall not sleep) reflects a shift from the assumption in early nationalist poetry that the destiny of the people lies safely in the hands of the leadership. The poem "Hatingaregi" (We will not sit and watch) reflects the growing disenchantment with political misrule that characterizes the second decade of independence. It has become apparent that the interests of the elite clash with those of the rank and file. The challenge at hand is to get the leadership to be accountable to the rest of society. Chirikure thus highlights class conflicts. Interestingly, by the time Chirikure published this collection, the Literature Bureau had been disbanded as part of the IMF–World Bank economic prescriptions for Zimbabwe. The disbanding of the Bureau is one of the rare cases in which IMF–World Bank attempts to rationalize the economy could be applauded.

The influence of the Bureau is not apparent in the latest publication by Mabasa, who takes Harare, the capital city of independent Zimbabwe, as a site of struggle. *Mapenzi* (1999) reflects urban Africans in different situations behaving as fools or people with mental disorders (*mapenzi*; a literal translation of the title). The spaces that are treated as specific sites of struggle include high-density suburbs, the highest institution of learning, downtown

Harare, emergency taxi pick-up points, as well as the cemetery. These significant sites stand out as chapters in the novel. Each site characterizes specific struggles that reflect the pathology of Zimbabwean society. The characters, who are united by their longing for peace of mind, act out their irreconcilable ambitions against the background of poverty, disease, and decadence, articulating their struggles in social registers determined by their condition.

The main character, Ticha Hamundigone, a prematurely retired high-school teacher and half-deranged ex-combatant, is the main commentator-critic. He visits his sisters in the city of Harare, where he comes face-to-face with a diseased society, including pick-pockets, street kids, unemployed youths, university students, drug-peddlers, and HIV/AIDS victims, as well as rich people. He is angered by the fact that his war efforts contributed to this post-Independence madness.

One of his sisters, Mai Jazz, a premature pensioner of the Rhodesian era, desperately defends her fortuitously acquired status of landlady in the depressed town of Chitungwiza. Hamundigone's widowed sister, who also, quite by chance, ends up as landlady, is cohabiting with Bunny, a tenant who, ironically, had fled from bad company in Highfield in search of a sober life. When the landlady dies of an HIV/AIDS-related illness, Bunny goes through a temporary depression. His fear leads to deep reflection on the invidious position of tenants in high-density areas.

The novel closes with Hamundigone agitating for a solution. He draws extensively from folklore to pillory the forces that create conditions of suffering. He deploys proverbial irony to underscore the need to trace contemporary problems to their historical roots, ending his critique on a note of careful optimism. He gives hope to those who have been relegated to the fringes of city life:

*Hamusi imba yakasara kumatongo  
Hamusi ndove yedhongi kumakura  
Kana kabhutsu kemwana kakasungirirwa mubhazi...*

*Imi muri nhekwe ine fodya  
Muri nzira ine vafambi  
Nhundu ine mago  
Mukuze une mazana. (162)*

[You are not a deserted homestead  
You are not donkey manure in the wasteland  
Or a booty that was forgotten in a bus.

You are snuff boxes full of snuff  
You are a path with travellers

A nest with wasps  
A swarm of bees full of honey.]

For Mabasa, the rich oral repositories of African wisdom, as well as the performed lyrics by contemporary Shona musicians, can salvage literature from the constraints imposed by colonialism and nationalism. The creative exploration of oral traditions has the potential to liberate art from the expressive constraints of the first four decades of Shona society. Chimsoro, Chirikure, and Mabasa join popular musicians like Mtukudzi, Mapfumo, Chimbetu, and Zhakata in attacking corruption, poverty and unemployment.

Apart from this avant-garde effort, most of the works continue along the trends established by the Literature Bureau, rather than dealing with new themes which could contribute to national development. A few revert to legends and myths that they could not freely write about before independence. Mutswairo, Mutasa, Matsikiti, and Kwaramba are some of the writers who appeal to the legendary Shona past to help strengthen the people's identification with the new nation.<sup>6</sup> This return to their roots cannot be celebrated uncritically, as focusing on the past deflects attention from the exploration of the present reality and future possibilities. Significantly, those at the grassroots level do not need to be urged to return to the source, as they were never alienated from their culture to the same extent as the educated elite. Besides, it is meaningless to uniformly celebrate culture in a society divided along class lines. In such a situation, to celebrate the past amounts to expressing confidence in the status quo.

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KENNEDY C. CHINYOWA

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From a “Puny Domesticity”  
to Topical Commitment  
Trends in the Development of Shona  
Written Drama Since 1968

ABSTRACT

This article examines the innovative literary strides taken by Shona dramatists since the publication of the first Shona play, *Ndakambokuyambira*, in 1968. Early Shona dramatic literature revealed a strong thematic preoccupation with emulating the *ngano* (folktale). These dramatists could not transcend the limitations of orature to address the hardships experienced by Africans under colonialism. But towards the close of the colonial period, dramatists began to grapple with the negative effects of colonial acculturation on urbanized Africans. The attainment of national independence in Zimbabwe in April 1980 was followed by a radical shift towards topical commitment. Post-Independence dramatists began to probe more deeply into the nature of nationalist politics. They were bold enough to expose the disillusionment and betrayal that accompanied what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has described as African “flag independence.” By bearing the stamp of history in artistic form, Shona written drama has made a significant contribution to Zimbabwean literature.

Introduction

**S**INCE THE PUBLICATION of Paul Chidyausiku’s pioneering play *Ndakambokuyambira* (I warned you before) in 1968, the development of Shona written drama has been characterized by qualitative strides, from an excessive preoccupation with domestic melodramas to a more topical

© *Zimbabwean Transitions: Essays on Zimbabwean Literature in English, Ndebele and Shona*, ed. Mbongeni Z. Malaba & Geoffrey V. Davis (Matatu 34; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2007).

commitment to the unfolding historical process. This trend can be attributed to the interplay of several historical factors that have had a considerable impact on the ideological vision of both pre- and post-Independence Shona playwrights.

This article will focus on thematic developments in published Shona drama. It seeks to argue that the artistic trends in this relatively new genre appear to be transforming Shona literature, thus making a significant contribution to contemporary Zimbabwean literature. It will be argued that pre-Independence Shona dramatists faced a crisis of consciousness which tended to inhibit their social and political commitment. The restrictive conditions of the colonial period seem to have led to the production of simplistic plays that dwelt on rather trivial domestic issues at the expense of addressing an oppressed people's hopes and aspirations for freedom, justice, and equality.

However, after the attainment of national Independence in April 1980, partly due to the consciousness created by the protracted liberation struggle and the experience of freedom from colonial oppression, Shona playwrights tended to become more objective and critical of the new socio-political dispensation. Instead of allowing themselves to be swept away by the euphoria of Independence, most post-Independence dramatists seem to demonstrate a considerable revolutionary commitment to the topical issues affecting the new nation-state. It is this innovative spirit in post-Independence Shona dramatists, their engagement with the social and political imperatives of their time, that sets them apart from their predecessors. As Edward Said has pointed out, texts should be judged in terms of their circumstantiality, or their implication in the historical moments in which they are located.<sup>1</sup>

## The Colonial Background

A cursory reading of most pre-Independence Shona plays shows a general tendency to simply emulate the folktale genre without making any conscious attempt to engage with the problems confronting Africans during the colonial experience. The nature of early Shona written drama should be understood within the context of the social and historical conditions affecting Shona writers under colonialism. It is this colonial background that Ranga Zinyemba seems to overlook when he asks: "why are the majority of [early] Shona plays [...] at worst melodramatic and artificial, and at best

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1983): 49.

farfical, puny and domestic?”<sup>2</sup> To answer Zinyemba’s question, one should begin by looking at the social and cultural situation that prevailed in the colonial era, especially as it affected the emergence of Shona drama.

When some members of the British South Africa Company’s Pioneer Column staged a performance of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* at Fort Salisbury in 1890, they were said to have introduced the first major theatrical event in the country.<sup>3</sup> At the time, Africans were regarded as a ‘non-cultured’ race with no tradition of drama and theatre, or, if any existed, it must have been copied from European art-forms.<sup>4</sup> According to the colonial historian C.T.C. Taylor, when European settlers arrived in the area beyond the Limpopo,

there were not more than half a million Bantu, [...] and the life they lived was primitive, both in its working methods and in the nature of its infrequent amusements. The pioneers, by contrast came [...] from environments, which [...] for their relaxation required entertainment of the standard civilised type – theatre, music, variety.<sup>5</sup>

It was against the background of such settler paternalism and ethnocentric thinking that colonial cultural policies were introduced. In Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o’s view, colonialism was geared to negate the African’s perception of himself by encouraging elements in African tradition which the colonizer regarded as conservative and quiescent.<sup>6</sup>

Colonialism also exposed Africans to propaganda films and radio dramas which were screened and broadcast country-wide. The agricultural and entertainment films produced by the Central African Film Unit (CAFU) under the then Ministry of Internal Affairs had the effect of making Africans laugh at their own ‘backwardness’. Films like *Benzi Goes to Town* and *Mataka Finds a New Life* depicted Sambo-like African characters who would go to the city, get perplexed by the glitter of modern life, jump in front of speeding cars, talk to telegraph wires, and fall prey to urban tricksters. Having been mesmerized

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<sup>2</sup> Ranga M. Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama: A Study of Shona and English Plays* (Gweru: Mambo, 1986): 15.

<sup>3</sup> C.T.C. Taylor, *The History of Rhodesian Entertainment, 1890–1930* (Salisbury: Longman, 1968): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Preben Kaarsholm, “Mental Colonisation or Catharsis? Theatre, Democracy and Cultural Struggle from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe,” in *Politics and Performance: Theatre, Poetry and Song in Southern Africa*, ed. Liz Gunter (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand UP, 1994): 225.

<sup>5</sup> C.T.C. Taylor, *The History of Rhodesian Entertainment 1890–1930*, 3, quoted in Preben Kaarsholm, “Mental Colonisation or Catharsis?” 247–48.

<sup>6</sup> Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986): 28.

by the sophistication of Western technology, Benzi and Mataka would go back to the rural areas apparently wiser than before. More or less similar images of the African clown were propagated through comic radio dramas. Comedians like Safirio Madzikatire, Ephraim Chamba, Job Jonhera, and Basil Chidyamatamba presented simple radio plays that portrayed naive African personalities who would end up ridiculing their own stupidity.<sup>7</sup>

Both the propaganda films and the radio dramas were a form of dramatic art that employed histrionic elements in their modes of signification. Hence, their ideological influences on early Shona dramatists cannot be underestimated. The films and plays tended to promote a paranoid mentality among early Shona dramatists which ultimately led them to depict fictional characters who failed to cope with the complexities of the colonial city, thereby affirming the colonial settler's belief in African 'primitivity'. In the words of Denys Brown, the scriptwriter for CAFU at the time, "by providing films showing a *better way of life* typified by the adventures and achievements of his own people, CAFU [...] hopes to play a great part in the *development and advancement* of the African."<sup>8</sup>

While the establishment of the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau in 1954 helped to promote indigenous literature, it also ensured that this literature remained, to a large extent, apolitical. As a government-sponsored institution, the Bureau played the role of policeman to protect colonial interests by preventing the publication of what was deemed as undesirable and pernicious literature. At a writers' workshop organized by the Bureau in 1964, potential African authors were encouraged to occupy themselves with "the creation of an African-language written literature which extolled the virtues of '*traditional*' life or bemoaned the tragedies of its *disintegration*."<sup>9</sup> Such policies tended to promote a dogmatic view of what came to be known as 'vernacular' literature. The same writers' workshop was also addressed by Adrian Stanley, a staunch advocate of the Western theatre tradition. Stanley lamented before the participants, who included veteran Shona novelist Patrick Chakaipa and the first Shona playwright Paul Chidyausiku, that "the country badly needs a comedy, a local comedy. I think *it's time we laughed at ourselves a*

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<sup>7</sup> Kennedy C. Chinyowa, "Innovation in Shona Written Drama with Special Reference to Post- Independence Plays" (M.Phil. thesis, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1994): 24.

<sup>8</sup> Denys Brown, quoted in Kedmon Hungwe, "Southern Rhodesia Propaganda and Educational Films for Peasant Farmers, 1948–1955," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 2.3 (1991): 231 (my emphases).

<sup>9</sup> Kaarsholm, "Mental Colonisation or Catharsis?" 250 (my emphases).

bit. We have got to do something about African drama.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to divorce Stanley’s words from stereotypical colonial notions of simplistic African peasants who ‘laugh’ at their own follies, as was the case with the propaganda films and radio dramas.

In a similar vein, the Roman Catholic Church-owned Mambo Press, operating in association with the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau, would not accept written works that were not morally edifying. In fact, the forerunner to Mambo Press, the Catholic Mission Press, had already taken the lead by publishing a translated version of a medieval Spanish morality play entitled *Mutambo Wapanyika* (The game of life) as early as 1957. The play’s attempt to reconcile Roman Catholic teachings with Shona moral philosophy led Zinyemba to conclude that “the values in the play would also be easy for a Shona audience to identify [with] – hierarchy, obedience, generosity and efficacy of judgement.”<sup>11</sup>

Since most early Shona playwrights were educated at mission-run schools, they were likely to be influenced not only by religious plays like *Mutambo Wapanyika* but also by many other Bible-based tracts such as *The Prodigal Son*, *The Good Samaritan*, *The Ten Virgins*, and *The Last Judgement*. Thus what began as enactments of miracles, parables, and other stories from the Bible was later secularized into simple didactic stories that exhorted people to abandon ‘sin’ and live morally upright lives.

Perhaps the most dominant inspiration for most pre-Independence Shona dramatists was the *ngano* (folktale) genre. This was probably because the folktale, as an oral narrative performance, offered greater theatrical possibilities for emulation than any other oral art form. The content was adapted from traditional folktales and blended with Western theatre forms to create a new literary syncretism. As Frantz Fanon explains, in the initial phase of a national literary culture, the colonized writer recalls “past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood [...] out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be brought up in the light of a borrowed aestheticism.”<sup>12</sup> To a large extent, therefore, pre-Independence Shona drama can be regarded as an emulation of an oral performance tradition mediated by colonial influences, censorship, Christianity, and Western education. The thematic frames and structures of folktales, which dwelt especially on stable family life and proper norms of

<sup>10</sup> *African Literature in Rhodesia*, ed. E.W. Krog (Gwelo, Mambo, 1966): 89. Quoted in Kaarsholm, 250. My emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Ranga M. Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967): 179.

behaviour, were readily adapted to give Shona written drama its initial identity.

### “Puny Domesticity”

One of the primary preoccupations of the traditional *sarungano* (storyteller) was to impart collective values about marriage and morality to successive generations. Through the use of animal and human metaphor, the *sarungano* would lure her audience to get involved in her storytelling sessions as she acted out the moral guidelines of the community while people were gathered around the evening fire. As an oral artist and the community’s source of entertainment, chronicler of events, and collective conscience, the *sarungano* embodies tradition. Because her stories helped to guide the hearts and minds of her audience from childhood to adulthood, Okot p’Bitek has aptly described her as *Artist the Ruler* (1986). In folktales like *Murume nomukadzi wake* (The man and his wife), *Murume mvangamakomwe* (The covetous and mischievous husband), *Tsuro nedzimwe mhuka* (The hare and other animals), and *Tsuro naGudo* (The hare and the baboon), the *sarungano* not only inculcated values of love and trust in marriage but also showed the price exacted by stupidity and callousness. Because the majority of pre-Independence Shona plays tend to incorporate similar folktale themes in their story-lines, the first generation of Shona dramatists may be viewed as modern equivalents of the traditional *sarungano*.

For instance, in *Ndakambokuyambira*, Paul Chidyausiku seeks to erect moral guidelines for family stability by exposing the unworthy behaviour of women in marriage. The pioneering playwright takes as his mimetic model the original folktale, *Murume nomukadzi wake*, but introduces some variations in the process of adapting the oral text into a written one. The protagonist, Dzikamai, wants to embark on a modern business venture. His *sekuru* (uncle) advises him to kill someone to use as a fetish if his business is to prosper. But the murder should never be revealed to anyone, even Dzikamai’s wife. Because Dzikamai has absolute love and faith in his wife, Mandionza, he strongly believes that she can be trusted with secrets. The *sekuru* prompts Dzikamai to test Mandionza’s trustworthiness. When Mandionza finally divulges the family secret at the chief’s court, the *sekuru* repeats his warning, *ndakambokuyambira* (I warned you before), which provides the title of the play. Chidyausiku’s point of view is thus that women cannot be trusted with secrets. This view echoes the words of the husband in the original folktale who told the *dare* (court) that “*Ndosaka vakuru vakati chawanzwa usaudze*

*mukadzi*” (That is why the elders advised us not to share a secret with a woman).<sup>13</sup>

Chidyausiku appears to have set the precedent for subsequent Shona playwrights like Davidson Mugabe in *Rugare Tange Nhamo* (Happiness comes after suffering, 1972) and Mordekai Hamutyinei in *Saka rega aroore* (So let him get married), in the anthology, *Sungai Mbabvu* (Tighten your ribs, 1973). Mugabe and Hamutyinei occupy themselves with the same love-and-marriage theme, but they prefer to use different folktales. In Mugabe’s play, Chikweva abandons his devoted wife, VaNyeyai, for a younger woman, Kesina. In Hamutyinei’s play, Muzvondiwa also divorces his obedient wife, Dzingesu, in favour of the young Serura. The reason given by both husbands is that their wives have failed to bear them *vanakomana* (sons). It turns out that Kesina is not in favour of marrying old men like Chikweva, despite her mother’s insistence. Like Chikweva, Muzvondiwa also ends up in distress when Serura is possessed by an evil spirit on the very day she elopes. Both men are close parallels of the character Gukura, alias Sungiraimatunzvi, meaning ‘protect your wives’, from the original folktale, *Murume Mvangamakomwe*. The moral is that neither protagonist can resist the sight of beautiful women.

While the moralistic inclinations in Chidyausiku, Mugabe, and Hamutyinei may be attributed to their cultural upbringing and missionary education, one cannot rule out the influence of colonial censorship. Works that were deemed fit for publication during this period were those that encouraged passivity in the face of colonial rule by dwelling on rather trivial themes like the untrustworthiness of women, and the whims and eccentricities of covetous husbands. At the same time, the writers experienced the falling-apart of traditional African morality due to the encroachment of Western values; hence they wanted to defend the existing African family institutions.

The other set of pre-Independence plays with an oral thematic frame are Juliana Lwanda’s *Mudyazvevamwe* (One who lives off others, 1976), Simbarashe Dzoro’s *Mukuwasha Aba Nyama* (The son-in-law has stolen some meat, 1978), and Hamutyinei’s *Mugapu renyama imheremhere* (The pot of meat is a source of problems), all of which were published in the anthology *Sungai Mbabvu*. These plays have been adapted from Shona trickster tales like “Tsuru nedzimwe mhuka” and also highlight the folktale motifs of greed and miserliness. In Lwanda’s play, the school-teacher, Mudyazvevamwe, is an eponymous character who, like the folkloric Hare, always wants to get the better of his adversaries through the use of clowning, deceit, jokes, gossip, and treachery. These trickster strategies enable Mudyazvevamwe to take ad-

<sup>13</sup> A.C. Hodza, *Ngano Dzamatambidzanwa* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1983): 66.

vantage of others and, in the process, to satisfy his insatiable appetite for money and meat. In the end, the once cunning trickster gets beaten at his own game when he is cheated out of all his money by city rogues in Mutare. Mudyazvevamwe's close parallels are Mheremhere in *Mugapu renyama imhere-mhere* and VaGumwemugapu in *Mukuwasha Aba Nyama*. Mheremhere and VaGumwemugapu behave according to their allegorical names and employ various tricks to get more meat from their wives. However, both end up regretting their greed when their selfishness and gluttony is finally exposed by their own children. The rather farcical dramatic situations in which the tricksters Mudyazvevamwe, Mheremhere, and VaGumwemugapu are involved tend to reduce the plays to domestic melodramas. There appears to have to be little need on the part of the early Shona dramatists to make a distinction between reality and the world of make-believe. The playwrights seem to be concerned more with fulfilling the exigencies of domestic morality than with addressing the prevailing colonial hardships. It is apparent that these dramatists did not find it necessary to transcend the marvellous mode of the folktale, or even to try and adapt it to suit their own circumstances.

Instead of trying to evade reality, Frantz Fanon suggests that the colonized writer "ought to use the past" with the intention of illuminating the present and the future.<sup>14</sup> To avoid colonial censorship and the risk of victimization, Albert Gérard proposes that the oppressed writer can resort to the weapons of the powerless, such as subdued irony and symbolic obliqueness, which the oppressor cannot easily perceive.<sup>15</sup> These subtle weapons appear to have been employed during the same period by those indigenous artists who managed to register their protest against colonialism – for example, writers like Solomon Mutswairo in his allegorical novel *Feso* (A double-pronged thorn, 1956), Herbert Chitepo in the epic poem *Soko Risina Musoro* (The tale without a head, 1957), Thompson Tsodzo in his satiric novel *Pafunge* (Come to think of it, 1972), and Thomas Mapfumo's *chimurenga* (revolutionary) music. Although Mutswairo's and Chitepo's works were published outside Rhodesia, they were smuggled into the country and even managed to inspire people engaged in the liberation struggle.

Chidyausiku, Mugabe, Hamutyinei, Lwanda, and Dzoro could have avoided the danger of indulging in a "puny domesticity" by going beyond the mere emulation of folktales. My argument is that they could have adapted their mimetic model, the *ngano*, to convey a sharper awareness of its potential to address the colonial condition, or to employ the symbolic obliqueness of

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<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 187.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Gérard, *African Language Literatures* (Harlow: Longman, 1981): 75.

their contemporaries. In the final analysis, one is inclined to agree with Rudo Gaidzanwa’s criticism that “any person reading the Shona and Ndebele (literature) written before 1980 would never guess that the events outlined [...] occur in a colonial state characterised by violence against blacks.”<sup>16</sup>

### Colonial Acculturation

At the close of the colonial period, Shona written drama experienced a phase of transition in which playwrights began to address the effects of the colonial experience on African lives. This change is marked by Thompson Tsodzo’s two plays, *Babamunini Francis* (Brother-in-law Francis, 1977) and *Tsano* (Brother-in-law, 1982), and Charles Mungoshi’s *Inongova Njakenjake* (Each one does his/her own thing, 1980). Although *Tsano* was published after Independence, it is set in the pre-Independence period. Preben Kaarsholm points out that at the height of the colonial period, more and more Africans were flocking to the city in search of employment owing to the pressures arising from taxation, rural overcrowding, and agricultural stagnation.<sup>17</sup> The apartheid-like conditions of the period, its increasing political tensions, social frictions, and economic repression were decisive in shaping the personalities, views, and visions of black writers.<sup>18</sup>

In both *Babamunini Francis* and *Tsano*, Tsodzo employs satiric humour to address the problem of family disintegration caused by colonial capitalism. He attempts to expose the adverse influences of such agents of social change as the cash economy, urbanization, industrialization, formal education, modern technology, and the mass media. The promiscuous behaviour of urban married women like Hilda and Eustacia in *Babamunini Francis* can be attributed to the fact that they now feel liberated from the moral checks and balances of the communal village because of the anonymity afforded them in the city. The urban space becomes a melting-pot in which ‘things fall apart’. As George Kahari says, “the city is the death-bed of the Shona people’s morals and decency.”<sup>19</sup> Thus Tsodzo explores the extent to which urban anomie, which Jim McGuigan defines as “a socially experienced [condition

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<sup>16</sup> Rudo B. Gaidzanwa, *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare: College Press, 1985): 95

<sup>17</sup> Flora Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (London: Hans Zell, 1992): 189.

<sup>18</sup> Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers*, 153.

<sup>19</sup> George P. Kahari, *Aspects of the Shona Novel and Other Related Genres* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986): 108.

of] normlessness and meaninglessness,"<sup>20</sup> induces deviant behaviour in married women, resulting in marital conflicts and tensions that are not conducive to family stability.

Zinyemba has described Tsodzo's *Babamunini Francis* as a moral farce because "everything in the play has been reduced to the status of a game."<sup>21</sup> However, one could argue that Tsodzo's characteristic trademark is to camouflage serious issues by representing them humorously. Even in *Tsano*, Tsodzo uses comedy to dramatize the alienation, vulnerability, and insecurity of Africans caught up in the toils of the urban jungle. The urban character Runesu is swallowed by "the creature without a mouth," to employ the metaphor for the city used by John Marangwanda in his novel *Kumazivandadzoka* (The place of no return, 1975). Runesu is part of the African migrant labour force that became subject to the vicissitudes of an oppressive and exploitative colonial political economy. He embodies the social evils that accompanied the African people's transformation from a communal to a capitalist mode of production. These include rampant unemployment, lack of housing, prostitution, robbery, alcoholism, and rampant individualism.

In his play *Inongova Njakenjake*, Mungoshi also grapples with the theme of family disintegration arising from the acculturation brought on by colonialism. The play's title reflects the proverbial dictum, 'each man for himself,' and reveals the sense of rupture, despair, frustration, and anxiety that the African suffers as a result of cultural alienation. Mungoshi portrays acculturated individuals like Sheila, Tafirei Gwaumbu's wife, their daughter, Lucy, and the been-to, Max Masunga, who are torn between the Old World of tradition and the New World of modernity. The modern life-style offers them a form of personal independence that is more appealing than conformity to traditional family obligations. Kwame Nkrumah asserts that the absence of self-restraint and the presence of *laissez-faire* free enterprise and a widespread belief in the dictum 'every man for himself' are typical expressions of the bourgeois conception of freedom.<sup>22</sup> In the end, Tafirei's family is torn apart when it eventually succumbs to what Zinyemba calls "the harsh race for pleasure, prestige and material acquisitions."<sup>23</sup>

Through their knowledge of the hardships experienced by Africans at the time, and their realistic portrayal of colonial life, Tsodzo and Mungoshi's plays seem to have set the precedent for an exploration of more topical

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<sup>20</sup> Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992): 207.

<sup>21</sup> Ranga M. Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa* (London: Panaf, 1970): 24.

<sup>23</sup> Zinyemba, *Zimbabwean Drama*, 73.

themes in subsequent Shona written drama. But by viewing the city, money, and education as sources of the African people's moral decadence and fractured identity, Tsodzo and Mungoshi tend to focus more on the symptoms than on the root cause of problems. There is a tendency to blame Africans for failing to adjust to rapid social change at the expense of criticizing the colonial capitalist system itself. As Herbert Chimhundu rightly observes, the victim of circumstances that drove the African out of the village is also blamed for the problems he encounters in the urban setting.<sup>24</sup>

### Topical Concerns

The euphoric atmosphere brought about by the attainment of national Independence in April 1980 gave rise to differing perceptions among post-Independence Shona writers. For Shona war novelists like Habbakuk Musengezi in *Zvairwadza Vasara* (It was painful for those left behind, 1984), Charles Makari in *Zvaida Kushinga* (It called for sacrifice, 1985), and Vitalis Nyawaranda in *Mutunhu Une Mago* (The place of trouble, 1985), as also for poets like Solomon Mutswareiro et al. in *Nduri DzeZimbabwe* (The poetics of Zimbabwe, 1983) and Musaemura Zimunya et al. in *Chakarira Chindunduma* (Echoes of the liberation struggle, 1985), the birth of the new era was enthusiastically celebrated. Vimbai Chivaura explains this rather partisan attitude as arising from the creation of "a sense of calm after a raging storm."<sup>25</sup> While the tendency to chronicle the heroic events of the liberation struggle could have been a result of the general euphoria gripping the new nation-state, there is an apparent false consciousness when writers become less objective and concentrate more on subjective recollections of history.

In contrast, post-Independence Shona dramatists, with a few exceptions, were not euphoric but seem to have derived their inspiration from an objective assessment of the new socio-political dispensation. They probably sought to grasp the new ideological imperatives first before they could commit themselves to writing. Their point of departure from their colonial predecessors lay in their ability to be more open-minded and critical of the unfolding historical process. Chinua Achebe castigates African writers who do not focus on the immediate human condition when he says "an African writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up

<sup>24</sup> H. Chimhundu, "An Assessment of the Achievement of Zimbabwean Writers in African Languages" (seminar paper, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1990): 13.

<sup>25</sup> V. Chivaura, "Where is the Literature for National Liberation and Class Consciousness in Zimbabwe?" (seminar paper, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1985): 4.

being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.”<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Achebe had previously warned that the idea is not for the African writer to beat the morning’s headlines in topicality but “to explore the depth of the human condition.”<sup>27</sup> Although the post-Independence Shona playwrights in question tend to overlook the deeper historical dynamics of the African predicament, they nonetheless try to probe quite boldly into the post-colonial Zimbabwean situation as it is being lived and experienced. This is reflected in their topical commitment to such ‘burning issues’ as the policy of national reconciliation, the betrayal of socialist transformation, and the scourge of corruption.

### The Policy of National Reconciliation

On the eve of Independence Day, 18 April 1980, the newly elected, first black Prime Minister, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, announced the adoption of a new policy of national reconciliation in a live broadcast to the nation:

Our new nation requires of every one of us to be a new man, with a new mind, a new heart and a new spirit! [...] Is it not folly therefore, that in these circumstances anybody should seek to revive the wounds and grievances of the past? The wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten. [...] We must now turn our swords into ploughshares.<sup>28</sup>

While the former colonial master might have derived much relief from this declaration of national reconciliation, the black majority who had sacrificed their lives for the sake of freedom, justice, and equality were reluctant to accept the “new mythology,”<sup>29</sup> as Victor de Waal describes the new reconciliatory policy. It was felt, in some quarters, that reconciliation was contrary to the radical revolutionary spirit that had guided the protracted armed struggle right up to the time of Independence. In fact, the policy seemed to encourage the creation of a kind of unholy alliance between the former colonial masters and the new African ruling class.

Post-Independence Shona dramatists give the impression that the policy of national reconciliation was not only a betrayal of the nationalist revolution but

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<sup>26</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet On Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975): 78.

<sup>27</sup> Chinua Achebe, “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation,” *Nigeria Magazine* (June 1964): 158.

<sup>28</sup> Robert G. Mugabe, in *The Herald* (18 April 1980): 1.

<sup>29</sup> Victor de Waal, *The Politics of Reconciliation* (London: Hurst, 1990): 52.

also the beginning of neocolonialism. Far from being a healing event for both blacks and whites, the policy simply assumed that the former colonizer would also reciprocate to the hand of forgiveness. Playwrights like Aaron Chiundura Moyo in *Kuridza Ngoma Nedemo* (Beating drums the wrong way, 1985), Thompson Tsodzo in *Shanduko* (Transformation, 1983), Robert Chakamba in *Nziramasanga* (The Crossroads, 1991), and Wiseman Magwa in *Njuzu* (Mermaid, 1991) try to show that, in the new socio-political dispensation, colonial structures have remained virtually intact despite the attainment of national political Independence.

In Moyo’s play *Kuridza Ngoma Nedemo*, the self-appointed peasant leaders Tinazvo and Vhoti urge their followers to redress colonial injustices over land by invading a white commercial farm. Their bid to mete out revenge against the former colonial master is quite contrary to the spirit of national reconciliation. The same hunger for revenge is demonstrated by the rural peasantry in Raymond Choto’s novel *Vavariro* (Objectives, 1990), in which the peasant leaders VaChimoto and Kanyuchi urge their followers to go and settle on Mr Derek’s farm. In both works, the peasants are finally forced by the police to leave the white farmers’ land and to respect the new black government’s policy of national reconciliation. In a way, Moyo and Choto are suggesting that while the former colonial masters had their property rights and economic privileges guaranteed under the Lancaster House Constitution, African peasants had to resort to ‘squatting’ on white commercial farmland to express their disillusionment with Independence.

In Chakamba’s play *Nziramasanga*, the policy of reconciliation seems to have created room for the rise of an indigenous petty bourgeois class bent on personal material gain. Black managers like Chamada and Tafa belong to a new African middle class that is more interested in promoting the interests of multinational companies like the Scottish-owned Brixton Corporation than in serving the needs of the African working class. In Tsodzo’s play *Shanduko*, the white employer, Johannes van der Gryp, confuses national reconciliation with political weakness on the part of the new black government. He buys the ruling party’s membership card to make it appear as if he has transformed. But, in reality, van der Gryp belongs to the fifth column of white conservatives who have infiltrated the ranks of the African national bourgeoisie. By camouflaging his colonialist identity, van der Gryp can continue exploiting his three domestic workers without any official reprisal.

In a way, Moyo, Tsodzo, Chakamba, and Magwa have shown that the policy of national reconciliation led to the betrayal of the promises of the liberation struggle. Although the African nationalist leadership had claimed to articulate and defend the aspirations and grievances of the majority, it had

proved to be easily susceptible to manipulation by the former colonial master, especially when it came to the protection and advancement of its own economic interests. Benedict Anderson reminds us that nationalism itself is a dubious ideology which tends to create ‘imagined communities’ rather than authentic national identities.<sup>30</sup> According to Canaan Banana, who was the first president of post-Independence Zimbabwe, “it [was] a miracle, for to conceive such a policy [was] one thing, let alone to apply it.”<sup>31</sup>

### The Betrayal of Socialist Transformation

At Independence, the new Zimbabwean government sought to create a new social and political order by adopting the Marxist–Leninist ideology of Scientific Socialism to replace the existing colonial capitalist system. Socialist ideology was believed to be better able to effect the necessary revolutionary changes expected by a people who were not only tired of colonial injustice but were also emerging from a protracted armed struggle. The new ideology was believed to be properly geared towards creating an equitable distribution of the means of production and consumption. It was also expected to eliminate the social and economic inequalities that were associated with colonial capitalism. It was hoped that a genuine commitment to socialist transformation would ultimately lead to the creation of an egalitarian or classless society based on Marxist–Leninist principles.<sup>32</sup> It is thus not surprising that the immediate post-Independence period was characterized by slogans castigating colonialism and imperialism, and hailing the new ideology of socialism, which became popularly known as the *gutsaruzhinji* (satisfaction for all) doctrine.

Perhaps the new black government was not fully aware of the hidden contradictions that were likely to affect the ideological direction of the newborn nation-state. A newly instituted socialist ideology, superimposed on an existing capitalist-driven economy, was likely to reveal contradictory tendencies. While colonialism had produced a stratified society in which race largely determined one’s socio-economic and political position, the new social order was likely to produce a comprador class of Western-educated indigenous bureaucrats and entrepreneurial intermediaries who were more inclined to

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<sup>30</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1983): 39.

<sup>31</sup> Canaan Banana, quoted in Victor de Waal, *The Politics of Reconciliation*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> H.I. Zakharov, *Philosophical Foundations of Scientific Socialism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985): 18.

uphold the interests of international monopoly capital than to implement socialist doctrines.

This is quite evident when senior government officials like Wisdom Tafirenyika in Tsodzo's *Shanduko*, and Members of Parliament like Shakespeare Pfende in Habbakuk Musengezi's play *The Honourable MP* (1984), Edward Matonisa in Willie Chigidi's play *Kwaingovawo Kuedza Mhanza* (It was a mere experiment, 1989), and Goredema in Robert Chakamba's *VaForo-mani* (Mr Foreman, 1996) indulge in capital accumulation and self-aggrandizement at the expense of the people who elected them to power. Wisdom Tafirenyika, a former freedom fighter now working as a social welfare officer in the new government, fails to solve the social and economic grievances of workers who come to complain at his office. It is not long before the workers realize that Wisdom has simply reduced socialist transformation to an empty slogan by preaching what he does not practise. Similarly, Shakespeare Pfende, Edward Matonisa, and Goredema are Members of Parliament who are obsessed with self-enrichment, opportunism, and conspicuous consumption. It is the height of socialist betrayal when ex-government ministers like Edward Matonisa can shamelessly declare themselves to be “rich socialists.”

The failure of socialism to effect a genuine decolonization programme in the new nation-state needs to be viewed within the context of nationalist ideology itself. Amilcar Cabral once described the African petty bourgeoisie who inherit the colonial state apparatus as a class that suffers from a revolutionary mythology: “the moment national liberation comes and the petty bourgeoisie takes power we enter, or rather we return to history, and thus the internal contradictions break out again.”<sup>33</sup> The ideals of socialist transformation could be easily compromised by the perpetuation of colonial capitalist structures. In an interview with Victor de Waal, Robert Mugabe admits that “although we stated that our principles derive from Marxism–Leninism, they also take into account our traditions, our own environment [...] Capitalism cannot be changed overnight [...] private enterprise will have to continue until circumstances are ripe for socialist change.”<sup>34</sup>

The inherited capitalist framework, therefore, seemed to provide the African ruling class with a sound material base for fulfilling its own economic aspirations, which it had been denied under colonialism. In view of these nationalist contradictions, it is inconceivable that true socialist transformation could have succeeded, especially when African peasants and workers, who

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<sup>33</sup> Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea: An African People's Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969): 55.

<sup>34</sup> Robert G. Mugabe, in Victor de Waal, *The Politics of Reconciliation*, 113

were the backbone of the liberation struggle, were excluded from playing a meaningful role in the historical process of political reconstruction.

### The Scourge of Corruption

The ideological contradictions of the postcolonial order appear also to have given rise to problems like corruption that have tended to tarnish the image of the new nation-state. Canaan Banana attributes the prevalence of corruption in the new social order to the influence of Western capitalism on the character of the African political and economic leadership. This view seems to concur with Chinua Achebe's assertion that "Nigerians are what they are because their leaders are *not* what *they* should be."<sup>35</sup> The profit motive rooted in capitalist philosophy also promotes corrupt tendencies like *chizivano* or 'chikamarism' (nepotism), *chikarabwino* (favouritism), *chiokomuhomwe* (bribery), *ukopokopo* (fraud), and other kinds of shady deals.

For instance, the government official Wisdom Tafirenyika in *Shanduko*, the two Members of Parliament Edward Matonisa in *Kwaingovawo Kuedza Mhanza* and Shakespeare Pfende in *The Honourable MP*, and the Company Director, Chamada, and Personnel Manager, Tafa, in *Nziramasanga* are leaders who have become obsessed with the cult of personality, abuse of responsibility, and shirking of duty. Instead of meeting the expectations of the people they are supposed to serve, they are more concerned about the personal material gain that comes with privilege and power. They all indulge in nepotism, favouritism, bribery, and other forms of graft. For instance, Chamada, as Managing Director of Brixton Corporation, denies a job to a highly qualified socialist cadre called Mpofu, in favour of his less qualified cousin, Tafa, because the latter has been educated in England like himself. Thus, in depicting the unbecoming behaviour of those in positions of power, post-Independence Shona dramatists have demonstrated that the scourge of corruption knows no bounds. It is a manifestation of a perverted moral order that flourishes under conditions of social injustice, economic inequality, and political opportunism.

### Conclusion

This essay has shown the thematic trends in Shona written drama which began with a rather trivial domesticity and developed into a more serious

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<sup>35</sup> Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1983): 10.

topicality. The qualitative literary strides that have been taken are a result of differing social and historical circumstances which have influenced the ideological visions of both the pre- and post-Independence playwrights. The dramatic literature was initially born out of the emulation of an oral narrative tradition mediated by colonial censorship, missionary Christianity, and westernization. In the process of blending oracy with literacy, the pioneering dramatists were unable to transcend the limitations of the folktale in their endeavour to address the hardships experienced by Africans during colonialism. Towards the close of the colonial period, however, there was a concerted attempt to discard the excessive preoccupation with domestic melodramas as more innovative dramatists began to grapple with the effects of colonial capitalism on African culture. However, these transitional dramatists only managed to expose the symptoms rather than the cause of the African people’s plight.

The climate of freedom ushered in by the attainment of national Independence in April 1980 introduced a refreshing topical content to Shona written drama. There was a radical shift in thematic thrust as dramatists began to engage more directly with the immediate postcolonial Zimbabwean experience. The ability to probe more boldly and soberly into sensitive topical issues like the futility of national reconciliation, land ‘grabbing’, the betrayal of socialism, and corruption has helped transform Shona written drama, thus making a significant contribution to contemporary Zimbabwean literature. Because most of the post-Independence Shona drama bears the stamp of history in aesthetic form, it has gone a long way towards fulfilling one of the imperatives of African literature, which, in the words of S.E. Ogude, is either to carry the burden of history or to influence the course of history.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> S.E. Ogude, “African Literature and the Burden of History: Some Reflections,” in *African Literature and African Historical Experience*, ed. Chidi Ikonné et al. (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1991): 8–9.

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ROSEMARY GRAY

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“Spirit of Place”  
Mungoshi’s Rolling World

ABSTRACT

This article is predicated upon Norman Morrissey’s haiku “Spirit of Place,” acknowledging the rhetorical ambivalence of Charles Mungoshi’s treatment of place in his short-story collection entitled *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World* ([1972] 1987). Rejecting the more conventional structuralist readings of this Zimbabwean author’s work, the article argues for a vision of cosmic fracture rather than one of binary opposition. Mungoshi’s spirit of place, like that of Morrissey, is Laurentian in its complexity – evocative of the incommensurable that determines the basic issue of cultural experience.

**S**PIRIT OF PLACE,” by the South African poet Norman Morrissey, from a collection entitled *Seasons*,<sup>1</sup> provides both the title and the point of departure for this discussion of Charles Mungoshi’s *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World*.<sup>2</sup>

The place misses them  
– the Bushmen who know this tint  
stroking the mountain.

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Morrissey, *Seasons* (Alice: Lovedale, 1999): 7.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Mungoshi, *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World* (1972; London: Heinemann, 1987).

One *could* begin by arguing that this single haiku encapsulates Africa, as a place where the mountain is a symbol of the rhetorical ambivalence that is Africa: crisis and opportunity, deprivation and abundance, threat and mystery, or alienation and identification. As the haiku suggests, it is a continent of intense loss coupled with the comforting knowledge of belonging.

In an attempt to relate these lines to the specificities of Zimbabwean literature, one *could* then argue that the poem's nostalgic tone reflects upon the protective mantle of the past in contrast to – or in collaboration with – the polemics of nationalist politics. One *could* suggest that these seventeen syllables succinctly evoke Mungoshi's Zimbabwean vision: declaring that his is an Achebean or Armahian world of extremes, in which the writer seeks a balance between – or recuperation via – “the setting sun” of the past and “the rolling world” of the present or future.

However, such interpretations would neglect the complexity of Mungoshi's writing; it would be to align one's critique instead with Christopher Hope's structuralist reading, in which he asserts that “the old, traditional values of rural life are contrasted with the chaos and moral corruption of the city and generations clash as the *past* vies with the *future*.”<sup>3</sup>

Dieter Riemenschneider endorses these polarities. Having identified alienation and the guerrilla war as two of the three central thematic concerns in Zimbabwean writing, he argues that “a second theme is not only characteristic of Zimbabwean short fiction, but of postcolonial writing generally; that is, the conflict between traditional and modern forces, views, and beliefs.”<sup>4</sup> Although these observations are neatly predicated upon the theme of “Scanning our future, reading our past,” they remain overly circumscribed, for here the past “is viewed from a particular standpoint in the present, that of a hard-won national unity that restores or evokes a womb-like, communal past.”<sup>5</sup> What this suggests is that built into the project is an idealist teleology that eliminates history as a contradictory, open-ended process by binding each indigenous present to its particular past. Each present unites its ‘own’ past, so that history as a global process evaporates. To mix metaphors: in the gospel of

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<sup>3</sup> See back cover of the Heinemann edition above. My emphases.

<sup>4</sup> Dieter Riemenschneider, “Short Fiction from Zimbabwe,” *Research in African Literatures* 20.3 (1989): 402.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Stewart Crehan, “African Literature and the Nation State” (MS of lecture held at the AUETSA conference in South Africa in 1994): 4. A revised version of this paper has been published as “African Literature and the Crisis of the African Nation State” in *Latitude 63° North: Proceedings of the 8th International Region and Nation Literature Conference, Mid-Sweden University College, Östersund, Sweden, 2–6 August 2000*, ed. David Bell (Östersund: Mid-Sweden University College Press, 2002): 333–47.

such Marxist ideologues, history is a facile dialectic: past conflicts have led to present unity, a unity expressed in literary works whose origin is authentically African. But, as Stuart Crehan sagely notes, “African national identity is not just a new birth but a rebirth. From history we glide into myth: deep inside the bud of radical change there lies a very conservative worm.”<sup>6</sup> Sikhumbuzo Mngadi elaborates:

Africanization [...] tends to assume that there is an “Africa” behind or underneath the “Europe” in which we presently live, to which [...] true Africans must *march*. And this Africa remains unexplained and distant, Eden-like, better known by its metaphors: full-bodied, glorious, intriguing, warm, with *ubuntu*.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, therefore, to Hope and Riemenschneider’s oppositional critiques, the argument of the present essay is that Mungoshi’s vision, like that of Morrissey, is more one of cosmic fracture than of binary opposition. It is a vision that penetrates deeply within – for the spirit that is wiser than the conscious self. Furthermore, Mungoshi’s themes are not limited to the three identified by Riemenschneider. Treating a broad range of themes such as autism, the generation-gap, and gender roles (“Shadows on the Wall”), violence and disability (“Who will Stop the Dark” and “The Mount of Moriah”), a parodic treatment of wealth and biblical sacrifice (“The Mount of Moriah”), traditional medicine, education (in “The Mountain” and the novel *Waiting for the Rain*),<sup>8</sup> wanton slaughter and profligacy (“The Crow”), the Adamastor myth (“The Mountain”),<sup>9</sup> betrayal and retribution (“The Flood”), and sterility (“The Day the Bread Van Didn’t Come”) *inter alia*, Mungoshi captures the essence of “a place where all certainty falls away and uncertainty becomes a kind of cocoon”<sup>10</sup> as he explores the complex dichotomies between old and new.

In his discussion of Mungoshi’s novel, George Kahari perceives this complexity when he acknowledges that

*Waiting for the Rain* is open ended: Mungoshi refuses to come down on either side of the culture debate. This has the effect of giving the reader power to negoti-

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<sup>6</sup> Stewart Crehan, “African Literature and the Nation State,” 4.

<sup>7</sup> Sikhumbuzo Mngadi, “‘Africanization,’ or, the New Exoticism,” *Scrutiny* 2.1 (1997): 18.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> The Portuguese sailor and poet, Luís Camões, coined the term to describe the sleeping spirit of the Cape that would one day rise to repossess Africa on behalf of an indigenous culture.

<sup>10</sup> Valerie Hurley, “An American and Two Africans: In the Mist of Lost Villages,” *Massachusetts Review* 35.1 (Spring 1994).

ate the possibilities which are present within the multiple cultures which make up Rhodesia [sic]. In many ways, *Waiting for the Rain* was made the more startling coming at a time while the Liberation War was being fought. The war, which was in part an affirmation of national values, polarised traditional and Western culture. Mungoshi's novel refused such a simple dichotomy. [...] Almost invariably, this is art which celebrates complexity.<sup>11</sup>

This acknowledgement of the sophistication of Mungoshi's writing challenges Kahari's earlier claim that "practically all the [Black Zimbabwean] novels in the medium of English are set and 'produced' in 'determinate conditions.' Thus 'Marxist criticism is to provide a materialist explanation of the bases of literary value'."<sup>12</sup>

The invocation of Terry Eagleton's Marxist literary theory<sup>13</sup> implicitly aligns Kahari with Hope and clearly polarizes and circumscribes his later insights, more especially when, in reference to Tsitsi Dangarembga's celebrated novel *Nervous Conditions*,<sup>14</sup> Kahari perceptively observes that "at first sight, she appears to be setting up a conflict between traditional and Western culture but if this comparison is made it is only in order to complicate the simple opposition."<sup>15</sup>

Prefiguring Dangarembga's polemic, Mungoshi's is the epic impulse versus the dusty, chaotic flux of the postcolonial and post-Independence Zimbabwean state. Consider, for example, the opening paragraph of the title story in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World*:

Old Musoni raised his dusty eyes from his hoe and the unchanging stony earth he had been tilling and peered into the sky. The white speck whose sound had disturbed his work and thoughts was far out at the edge of the yellow sky, near the horizon. Then it disappeared quickly over the southern rim of the sky and he shook his head. He looked to the west. Soon the sun would go down. He looked over the sunblasted land and saw the shadows creeping east, blear[i]er and taller with every moment that the sun shed each of its rays. Unconsciously wishing for

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<sup>11</sup> George Kahari, "Black Zimbabwean Literature in English," in *Postcolonialism: Culture and Identity in Africa*, ed. Pal Ahluwalia & Paul Nursey-Bray (Cormack NY: Nova Science, 1997): 53–54.

<sup>12</sup> George Kahari, "Black Zimbabwean Literature in English," 49.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (Thetford: Thetford Press, 1986): 162.

<sup>14</sup> Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (London: Women's Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> George Kahari, "Black Zimbabwean Literature in English," 54.

rain and relief, he bent down again to his work and did not see his son, Nhamo, approaching.<sup>16</sup>

Here, no line of separation is drawn between the life of nature and the experience of man. Both belong to the elemental. In other words, the material world, unexplained and inexplicable via contemporary political propaganda, retains and subsumes attributes more readily associated with the realm of the spirit. Mungoshi’s metaphor of the “stony earth” is compelling because it has about it the untranslatable and mysterious feel of the mythological: the stony earth as ancient, talismanic reminder of the sanctity of place.

In his short story simply titled “The Mountain,” the author captures a comparable sense of the spirit of place. Two youngsters, en route for school, take a short cut over the mountain before dawn and, in a mythic evocation of a Zimbabwean Adamastor, Chemai begins to talk about “the Spirit of the Mountain.”<sup>17</sup> With intuitive reverence, he explains to his at first unnamed and ostensibly sceptical companion, who is also the narrator, that this legendary spirit hoards the ancestors’ gold and denies access to the (colonial) newcomers. Although he rationalizes and rejects this explanation, the narrator – not without irony – describes the mysterious effect of the mountain that instills awe in the young, yet proclaims in them a searing identification:

The mountain lay directly in our path and was shaped like a question mark. I liked to think of our path as a question, marked by the mountain. It was a dangerous way [...]

We had crossed a sort of low hill and were dropping slightly but immediately we were climbing sharply towards the mountain. It loomed dark ahead of us like a sleeping animal. We could only see its jagged outline against the softening eastern sky. Chemai was walking so lightly that I constantly looked back to see if he was there.<sup>18</sup>

In Morrissey’s haiku, the poet likewise sees the soul of the mountain in its silhouette, with which he implicitly identifies himself. In both poem and short story, there is a kind of breathless apprehension – as if the writers have been ambushed by their own audacity in giving voice to the heretofore ‘unsayable’. Of course, it is easy to make too much of the comparison. Nonetheless, there is, here, evidence of a uniquely perceived African literary landscape; as if there has been a significant effort by both writers to search for authentic

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<sup>16</sup> Mungoshi, “The Setting Sun and the Rolling World,” in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World*, 98.

<sup>17</sup> Mungoshi, “The Mountain,” 42.

<sup>18</sup> “The Mountain,” 41.

assent to the land, to divine the spirit or spirits of its places; or, in the words of Léopold Sédar Senghor, to “listen to the beating of our dark blood, Listen / To the beating of the dark pulse of Africa in the mist of lost villages.”<sup>19</sup>

Even if one gainsays the overt *négritude* or black-consciousness ideology, this idea of spirit in the inanimate is perhaps a difficult hurdle for the more literal mind. Although the Mungoshian way of looking at life is not primarily through ideology, religion, philosophy, or science, but rather through the art of living in the world, Senghor’s “Night of Sine” is apposite. Instead of rationalization, there is a festival delight in poetic and imaginative thinking; instead of science, the consolation of the mystic and the mythological. Instead of emphasizing dualisms of spirit and matter, creator and created, animate and inanimate, human and non-human, ideal and natural, reactionary and revolutionary, Mungoshi focuses on one power permeating his universe – assuming a complex cosmic principle. He seeks a melding of spirit and matter, an inner reality; a dynamic fusion rather than delineation of opposites, as the closing lines of “The Flood” testify:

Mhondiwa stood up slowly, opened the door and went out.

The rain had stopped and the night was warmly-cool with a pleasant breeze from the river. He felt the sticky-warm knife in his hand and decided to wash it in a puddle.

Wisps of clouds. A rainbow-haloed misty moon, the best sound he had ever heard: rest now you are at home, at home, at home ...

In the distance the river purred.

Mhondiwa walked up the little rise to his house in the forest compound.

He felt at peace with the world.<sup>20</sup>

For those nurtured on the “damned spots” of Lady Macbeth’s conscience following the murder of Duncan, Mhondiwa’s calm following the murder of Chitauro is all but unconscionable, in spite of the mitigating circumstances. (Chitauro had impregnated Mhondiwa’s wife several months before the latter’s marriage.) But Mungoshi’s heroes are communities of men, women, and children who learn in loneliness, silence, and deprivation how truly to see where on the African earth they are: to see their specific places in such full and luminous detail that a radically native (as opposed to foreign or imported) art, a literature, rises from the shadows tracking them through life.

And his short story entitled “Shadows on the Wall” is no exception. Featuring the all but paradigmatic adolescent – this time effectively mother-

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<sup>19</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Night of Sine,” tr. Melvin Dixon in Senghor, *The Collected Poetry* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Mungoshi, “The Flood,” in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World*, 201–202.

less and autistic – this brief narrative unfolds through a sequence of images, memories, flashbacks, and interior monologues that conjoin, at once, to capture spirit of place, and to provide metafictional deliberations on the elusiveness of language in the process. Both aspects are evident in the following extract, which begins in a rural setting with the young boy, a shadow of his former self, observing his father’s shadow ‘playing’ on the wall:

Outside, the sun drops lower and other shadows start creeping into the hut. Father’s shadow grows vaguer and climbs further up the wall like a ghost going up to heaven. His shadow moves behind sharper wriggling shadows like the presence of a tired old woman in a room full of young people, or like the creepy nameless feeling in a house of mourning.

He has tried five times to talk to me but I don’t know what he wants [...] He is talking. I am not listening. He gives up.<sup>21</sup>

As Riemenschneider pertinently observes,

The elusiveness of the shadow is matched by the ambivalence of another observation, the gray stubble on the father’s chin which to his son looks “stiff as a porcupine’s [...] [but also] fleecy and soft like the down on a dove’s nestling.” This double nature of observed phenomena reflects the in-between stage the young narrator finds himself in, the pull between repulsion and attraction, of realization and lack of understanding. Having set the tone of his story, Mungoshi proceeds by letting the young boy remember incidents from the past that underline the essential ambivalence of life: the father’s rudeness to his mother, but also his softness and vulnerability; the mother’s quiet acceptance of her husband’s domineering nature, but also her rebellion and her final disappearance from his life; and finally, the father’s way of communicating with others either by ordering them around or by silently accepting his new wife’s “shrill strident voice like a cicada’s that jarred [the boy’s] nerves.” The overall effect of the ambivalent symbols of the story is the experience of loss.<sup>22</sup>

As if reflecting upon Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and anticipating J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*,<sup>23</sup> the story concludes where it begins by reiterating the problem of the young boy’s inability to communicate: “I cannot talk to him. I don’t know how I should talk to him. He has denied me the gift of language.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mungoshi, “Shadows on the Wall,” in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Riemenschneider, “Short Fiction from Zimbabwe,” 404. The passages quoted from Mungoshi are on pp. 2 and 5 of the 1987 edition.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719; New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), and J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Mungoshi, “Shadows on the Wall,” 6.

As with the South African poet Sydney Clouts, the language dilemma is axiomatic to Mungoshi's attempt to capture the spirit of place.<sup>25</sup> In a meta-narrative aphorism in the title story, for example, he points, at once, to the elusiveness of this spirit and to his own conscious artistry, when he quips: "Words are handles made to the smith's fancy and are liable to break under stress. They are too much fat on the hard unbreaking sinews of life."<sup>26</sup> Pointing to the dilemma (in this story) of the father striving both to acknowledge the wisdom of his son's argument for leaving the rural homestead for a life in the city which his education has afforded him and led him to expect, and to caution Nhamo, the author intrudes to elaborate self-reflexively on the inherent difficulties of language: "Mere thoughts. Mere words. And what are words? Trying to grow a fruit tree in the wilderness."<sup>27</sup>

That the author wishes to present life as devoid of meaning, and human reality as unredeemed suffering, is indicated in some measure by the fundamental disjunction between thought and word, and between the real and the ideal. Concerning this discrepancy, Olive Schreiner prefaces *The Story of an African Farm* thus:

Human life may be painted according to two methods. There is the stage method [...] [and there is] the method of the life we all lead. Here nothing can be prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away.

When the crisis comes the man who would fit it does not return. When the curtain falls no one is ready [...] Life may be painted according to either method; but the methods are different. The canons of criticism that bear upon the one cut cruelly upon the other.<sup>28</sup>

As here, so in Mungoshi's short fiction; the real and the ideal are presented as implacable opposites in story after story. For instance, in "Who Will Stop the Dark?" in writing of the young protagonist, unable to accept the story that his father's disability resulted from a fall from the roof, the author states: "But the boy didn't believe it. It worried him. He couldn't imagine it. [...] It made him

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<sup>25</sup> Sydney Clouts, "After the Poem," in *One Life* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1966): 13. "After the poem the coastline took / its place with a forward look / toughly disputing the right of the poem to possess it."

<sup>26</sup> Mungoshi, "The Setting Sun and the Rolling World," in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> Mungoshi, "The Setting Sun and the Rolling World," 101.

<sup>28</sup> Olive Schreiner, "Preface" to *The Story of an African Farm* (1883; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980): 27.

wonder about his mother. He felt that it wasn’t safe in their house.”<sup>29</sup> This disparity prefigures both the lethal lashing he gets from his mother for playing truant to learn about life from his grandfather, rather than her gratitude for the gift of roasted mice he has brought her, and his rejection of his mother and her emotional needs following the beating:

He let her hug him without moving but he didn’t let her hugging and crying get as far as the strop lashes. *That* was his own place. He just stopped her hugs and tears before they got *there*. And when he had had enough, he removed her arms from around him and stood up. His mother looked at him, surprised, empty hands that should have contained his body becoming emptier with the expression on her face.<sup>30</sup>

In this extract, the writer reveals an inner life rather than an exterior husk. He transforms the raw material of experience into the kind of spirit he reflects and inflects. This imaginative welding of spirit and matter itself becomes a direct and immediate revelation of the spirit of the people.

Although these characteristics of the spirit seem self-evident, their roots lie deeply buried in the early, timeless orientations of the different cultures. In *Ancient Myth and Modern Man*, Gerald Larue elucidates:

To know to whom one belongs, to sense poetically a heritage, to be linked emotionally and perhaps physically to a tradition rooted in antiquity and marked by beauty and suffering, joy and heartache is to acquire psychic strength to meet the trauma of existence and to answer the absurdity of the human dilemma of man existing briefly in endless time and space.<sup>31</sup>

This contiguity of spirit and place are not uniquely Mungoshian, as James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) and Lawrence Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60), for example, too readily testify. In fact, Durrell’s declared purpose in *The Alexandria Quartet* (in which he deploys the term) as well as in *The Avignon Quincunx* is particularly pertinent to this discussion of ‘spirit of place’, for he declares that he “tried to see people as a function of place.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, but in a bitterly satiric treatment of the imperial gaze and that of the

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<sup>29</sup> Mungoshi, “Who Will Stop the Dark?” in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Mungoshi, “Who Will Stop the Dark?” 25.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Larue, *Ancient Myth and Modern Man* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice–Hall, 1975): 201.

<sup>32</sup> *Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature*, ed. Marion Wynne–Davies (London: Bloomsbury, 1989): 476. A further discussion occurs in Frederick Turner, *Spirit of Place: The Making of and American Literary Landscape* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1943).

comprador bourgeoisie, Mungoshi's fellow Zimbabwean Dambudzo Marechera captures the very essence of this spirit in "The Trees of this City":

Trees too tired to carry the burden  
 Of leaf and bud, of bird and bough  
 Too harassed by the rigours of unemployment  
 The drought-glare of high rents  
 And the spiralling cost of water and mealie meal  
 Trees shriveled into abortion by the forest fires  
 Of dumped political policies  
 [...]  
 Trees under which, hungry and homeless,  
 I emerge from seed to drill a single root into the  
 Salt stone soil  
 The effort of a scream of despair.<sup>33</sup>

Writing such as this captures not that which is outside of power but, rather, that which signifies the power of the outside. Yet, although shot through with the same disillusionment, loneliness, and hunger, Mungoshi's depiction of the vicissitudes of quotidian reality – both present and past – is arguably more subtle, more complex, more speculative, less ideological, as my closing excerpt, from *Waiting for the Rain*, shows:

The air trembles with roaring thunder and the earth grumbles with earthquakes and shrieking lightning splits the darkness into quivering shreds of light and he is a lonely whirling little dot who has to hold his own to stay alive. Way, way ahead of him is a pinpoint flash which keeps on going farther and farther, but it's all right – the distance is always the same despite sensations of now being very far away and cold and lonely. And there is this nameless thing, a feeling, akin to hunger, but again you know that this passes too, just as so many things have passed without you doing anything about them. Or – does it pass? He is not sure. Sometimes he is certain that it doesn't pass. He wants it so much to pass that he thinks it's gone when it really is still there. Still there, under everything else – so many things happening at the same time – enough to make one's head snap and spin. It is under there, together with the feeling of being very near to, and involved in, the pulsing and flashing brilliant centre. This is the Old Man's drum.<sup>34</sup>

Here, the reader is exposed not to the Old Man's traditionalist ideology, but to the sounds of the cowhide drum<sup>35</sup> "from a nameless, placeless place some-

<sup>33</sup> Dambudzo Marechera, *Cemetery of Mind* (Harare: Baobab, 1992): 91.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain* (Harare: Baobab, 1997): 2.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (Johannesburg: Rostoner, 1971).

where in this darkness [...] the very rhythm of something disturbing the deep bowels of the earth.”<sup>36</sup>

In what, then, does the complexity of Mungoshi’s art inhere? It is, perhaps, his tacit recognition that the spirit of place is the intaglio of intangibles that embody the hopes and longings of people adumbrating a national culture. It is the spirit of the incommensurable that determines the basic issue of cultural experience. And, as Homi Bhabha puts it, albeit it in a different context,

The “locality” of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as “other” in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new “people” in relation to the body politic, generating new sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation.<sup>37</sup>

This does not mean that Mungoshi sets out deliberately to capture the spirit of place, although some of the comments may evince this; rather, that the spirit of place precludes the kind of speculation which seems most productive for his attempt to “grow a fruit tree in the wilderness” of his borderless, cosmic continent.

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<sup>36</sup> Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain*, 2.

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VIRGINIA PHIRI

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## The Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF)

**T**HIS ARTICLE IS MEANT to give readers and other interested parties an idea of how the Zimbabwe International Book Fair has helped make Zimbabwe one of the recognized centres for book publishing and marketing, as well as a suitable meeting-place for authors from different parts of the world.

The Zimbabwe International Book Fair is the best thing that ever happened to bring together all those involved in the book trade – authors, publishers, and readers. Publishers<sup>1</sup> and booksellers<sup>2</sup> initiated the formation of the organization. In the first few years, the Ministry of Information played a role in the running of the Fair. In 1983, however, the Fair was fully run by publishers, booksellers, and writers. They felt that it was not necessary to involve the Ministry, since the above-mentioned groups were ready to run the Fair.

Some of the key persons that were involved in the running of the Fair were Paul Brickhill, Tainie Mundondo, and Nda Dlodlo, publishers; Elliot Mugamu, a bookseller; and the authors Chenjerai Hove, Ray Choto, and Barbara Nkala.

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<sup>1</sup> Zimbabwe Book Publishers Association (ZBPA) and the African Book Publishers Network (APNET).

<sup>2</sup> The Booksellers Association of Zimbabwe (BAZ) and the Pan African Booksellers Association (PABA).

It was important to have the Zimbabwe International Book Fair secretariat in a centrally situated place. The City of Harare was approached and some space to build the secretariat was allocated, on lease, in the Harare Gardens, where the secretariat is still housed. This is one of the few fairs in Africa that takes place outdoors, thanks to the suitable climate. The stands set up in different parts of the Gardens are unique. Prior to this development, the Fair initially took place at Kingston's Bookshop, then it moved to the Harare Conference Centre, but the Harare Gardens venue has proved to be popular with both the general public and exhibitors.

As the Zimbabwe International Book Fair grew, it became necessary to have it registered, which occurred on 1 April 1996. Paul Brickhill, Nda Dlodlo, Elliot Mugamu, and Roger Stringer were the first trustees. According to the Zimbabwe International Book Fair Trust Deed,<sup>3</sup> its objectives are:

1. To reflect the highest level of publishing in Zimbabwe and to achieve the general standards expected and required at major international book fairs such as venue, design of exhibitions, stands, public participation local and international and media coverage.
2. To promote and advertise the publishing and licencing of books in Zimbabwe.
3. To promote the conduct of business including buying and selling items and distribution of rights and licences between participants, visitors and other interested parties.
4. To generate public awareness and knowledge of all aspects of publishing and publishing technology, including writing, book design, illustration, editing, printing, paper and distribution.
5. To generate the highest possible public awareness and interest in the book fair and books in general.
6. To maintain the international book fair as one of the major international book fairs in Africa and to generate the widest possible international and local participation in it.
7. To plan, co-ordinate, promote, encourage, facilitate the holding of any cultural event, function, conference, seminar, workshop or meeting of any individuals or organisation with an interest in the book fair and in the aims and objectives of the Trust with a view to developing and improving the awareness, knowledge, skills and ability of those individuals and organisations as related to the aims and objectives of the Trust.

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<sup>3</sup> The Deed of Trust was drafted by Gill, Godlonton and Gerrand's Legal Practitioners and signed on 1 April 1996.

8. To encourage regional communication and co-operation within the region and throughout Africa in publishing and book distribution.
9. To co-operate in anyway feasible with any other organisations which share similar aims and objectives to that of the Trust.
10. To co-operate with the Government and and state institutions in Zimbabwe to fulfil the aims and objectives of the Trust.

The Trust is donor-funded and is a non profit-making organization.

Under the Directorship of Mrs Trish Mbanga, a journalist by profession, the Fair flourished, and as a result the organization received a Prince Claus Fund<sup>4</sup> award in recognition of work the Zimbabwe International Book Fair had done to promote literature. Monies from the fund are used to purchase books that are distributed to libraries, institutions of learning, and communities. A draw is conducted during book fairs, where participating schools and libraries win books.

Like any other successful organization, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair has had its fair share of administrative problems, but these are now under control. However, for the past three years the book trade at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair has not been good. Exhibitors do not find the Zimbabwe Fair profitable. First, they have the dilemma of not being able to remit their sale proceeds to their respective countries owing to the Zimbabwe Reserve Bank Foreign Currency regulations.

The political situation in the country has also discouraged a good number of exhibitors from participating at the Fair. Zimbabwe has been classified by some as 'not a destination for either business or tourism'.

In the past, exhibitors and other participants at the Fair made a substantial contribution to the tourism industry. During their stay in Zimbabwe, most of them visited the Victoria Falls, Great Zimbabwe, Nyanga and other places of interest, resulting in a boosting of the foreign currency reserves.

Other book fairs in Africa – the Nigeria International Book Fair, the Kenya, Ghana, Dakar, Zambia Fairs, and the South African one (which has been on the cards for the past three years)<sup>5</sup> – are competing to replace the Zimbabwe International Book Fair as the continent's leading Book Fair. In order to maintain its profile, the ZIBF has participated at other fairs in the region and abroad in an effort to convince donors, exhibitors, and other

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<sup>4</sup> The Prince Claus Fund is a Dutch organisation that promotes the arts, cultural and literary activities.

<sup>5</sup> The Cape Town Book Fair was held for the first time in June 2006 [Eds.].

participants that the Zimbabwe International Book Fair is still one of the best places to trade in books in Africa, after the Cairo Book Fair, which also showcases books from the Arab world. These efforts have paid off, which explains why the Fair is still running.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the book-trade section, which hosts the buyers and sellers workshop involving rights and licences, events like the *Indaba*<sup>7</sup> and the Writers' Workshop<sup>8</sup> are highly rated by the academic world, authors, publishers, booksellers, librarians, and other related groups. Over the past few years, local authors have finally gained recognition, playing a major role in the Fairs by contributing ideas that have added value to events like the *Indaba* and the Writers' Workshop.

The current Board of Trustees is made up of academics, authors, publishers, booksellers, and literary critics. Librarians, who play a very important role in the book world, will also be represented in the Trust.

The secretariat is run by an Executive Director, a Deputy Director, an Events Co-Ordinator, and an Information and Publicity Officer, along with secretarial, accounting, and landscaping staff.

"The 100 African Best Books of the 20th Century," a project which was coordinated by the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, after Professor Ali Mazrui challenged the organization to take up the mammoth task of coming up with the 100 African Best Books, has earned the Fair respect from the literary world and other quarters. The books on the list have boosted sales for the publishers. Institutions of learning and other interested parties have run lectures, seminars, and conferences to promote these books, which now have a new lease on life.

In 2003, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair launched Zimbabwe's "75 Best Books of the 20th Century" project. This was the first time that Zimbabwean authors have been honoured at home. During the 2004 Book Fair, on 5

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<sup>6</sup> The ZIBF donors are HIVOS (*Humanistisch Instituut voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking* / Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation, NL), NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation), KOPINOR (The Reproduction Rights Association of Norway), NFF (Norwegian Association of Specialist Libraries), SIDA (Swedish Development Cooperation Agency) & the British Council

<sup>7</sup> The *Indaba* is a literary event during the Book Fair co-ordinated by academics and the ZIBF programmes department.

<sup>8</sup> The Writers' Workshop is a literary event during Book Fair co-ordinated by writers' organizations, such as the Zimbabwe Writers' Union (ZIWU), the Zimbabwe Women's Writers (ZWW), The Zimbabwe African Languages Writers' Association (ZALWA), the Budding Writers Association of Zimbabwe (BWAZ) and the Zimbabwe Academic and Non-Fiction Authors Association (ZANA) and the ZIBF programmes department.

August, the seventy-five books were announced at a gala function hosted at the Monomotapa Crown Plaza Hotel's Great Indaba Room. The selected books were works of fiction – twenty-five in English, twenty-five in Ndebele, and twenty-five in Shona. The idea of the project came as a result of the success of the Africa's 100 Best Books competition. The project was funded by the British Council. In recognition of the importance of academic works, the organization is planning to come up with "25 Best Academic Books of the 20th Century."

The proposed South African Book Fair<sup>9</sup> still remains a serious challenge to the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, given the unfavourable political and economic environment. Exhibitors and other participants are looking for alternative venues in Southern Africa.



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<sup>9</sup> See note 5 above.



## ANNELIE KLOTHER

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“You need to have the idea,  
the vision, and the passion”  
An Interview with Irene Staunton<sup>1</sup>

**A**NNELIE KLOTHER (AK): *You began your work for Weaver press in 1999. What were the main aims, you and your husband had for this new publishing house?*

**I**RENE STAUNTON (IS): Our objectives at Weaver were very similar to those Hugh Lewin and I had had for Baobab Books: to publish very good fiction out of Zimbabwe – literary fiction – and to publish good non-fiction, with a focus on history, politics, social studies, and gender issues, be the research done by academics within Zimbabwe or, as very often happens, by academics who are living elsewhere. Research on Zimbabwe often never reaches these shores. And if it does, it is usually so expensive that nobody can afford to buy it. So we work quite hard with sympathetic publishing houses such as James Currey, and we seek to find grants or subventions through the author to enable us to bring books published in the UK and USA into the country. And usually whoever is writing about Zimbabwe is extremely keen that their work is made available here, which makes it easier for us. In this way people can have access to ideas about or research on their own

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<sup>1</sup> This interview was held at Weaver Press in Harare in February 2006.

history, literature, or social studies and join the debate. I think this is very important.

*AK: Can you tell us something about the difficulties of book-selling in Zimbabwe? For very many people books are expensive. We saw that the bookshops are empty and nobody is buying books.*

IS: It seems a quite simple question, but it's one with a rather long and difficult answer. It is really hard to know where to begin. From one perspective whether we are generalizing about Rhodesia or Zimbabwe, the country has never had a book-buying population; and one must distinguish between a book-purchaser and a reader. If you give someone a book, they are almost certain to read it. Chenjerai Hove once commented that when someone in Europe buys a book, they read it and it goes on a shelf, but if you give someone a book in Zimbabwe, it is read until it falls apart. Publishing, however, depends to a large extent on people buying books, otherwise they cannot survive to publish more books. Zimbabwean culture is very social, and family is hugely important – doing things together as a family. So isolating yourself somewhere to read a book is not a very sociable thing to do. Sharing what has happened to you is more important than slipping away to read quietly by yourself. Thus even in middle-class households where books are – or were – affordable, many people would prefer to sit together and watch television than to hive off and read. In working-class households this anyway would be very difficult to do. How do you find solitude if you are living with seventeen other people in a four-roomed house?

*AK: In Zimbabwe books are not associated with leisure...*

IS: Another factor is that books are always bought for children. Books are bought for schools. So even teachers very often have very little access to a choice of books. Selection is done by the head teacher or the headmaster, and budgets are limited. So there are never ever enough books for everyone, except in the very best schools. Thus, children grow up, at worst, with one book per classroom, per subject. And the teacher has that one book. And, at best, there may be twenty books for thirty students. This means there is often punitive association around a book. If you lose it, or damage it, you can be punished. You can't take it home and make it your own, because it has to go back and be locked up very carefully so that next year's students can use it. And that school book is for an exam. And if you fail that exam, the book has let you down. So the idea of wandering into a bookshop, making your own choice of a book, having it as your own through school, having a library, having free reading sessions, being encouraged to read for pleasure as well as for academics is not something that happens very much. In addition, we have

a whole generation of teachers who never enjoyed the pleasures of reading or a library, either. Education is the only form of social mobility available for everybody – even though today many children have dropped out of school, because they can't afford it. Nonetheless, if you are poor your only road up is through education. So the pressure on you to pass your exams and not to play is huge. Books are not for leisure, they're for learning. None of the above will help to develop a book-buying culture or to see books as rich sources of pleasure.

*AK: In black culture there is a tradition of oral literature.*

IS: I think it is possible today to be rather romantic about oral literature. Of course, without doubt, traditionally stories were told around the fire and oral poetry was an important part of a traditional community. But now many, many children have lived in high-density areas for two or three generations. Their grandmother is in the rural area; their parents may leave for work at 4 a.m and only get back after nightfall; I doubt there are many homes today in which children are the recipients of oral folklore, oral wisdom. It would be nice if I were wrong.

*AK: The "Zimbabwe Women Writers" have tried to go to the rural areas and encourage women to write something, and so in the women's projects there are some who write poems; they do them when the projects meet.*

IS: Yes, there is a very great deal of poetry. Many people enjoy writing and declaiming it. It is an aspect of contemporary culture, but I am not sure that the poems are what one would call 'literature', which is not to diminish either. Performance poetry is a popular art-form with links to oral literature, to preaching and teaching, and of course there are several very good performance poets such as Chirikure, whose performances, like much of his work, are subtle, richly associative and dramatic.

*AK: So it doesn't encourage people to read?*

IS: From our experience of receiving manuscripts and publishing poetry I would say that one in ten people in Zimbabwe is writing poetry, and one in a hundred thousand is buying a book of poetry.

*AK: And you can't make any use of this interest in poetry?*

IS: I am not a teacher. If I was Minister of Culture or Minister of Education, I would say, "Libraries are one of the most important services in our society." Everybody needs to have access to books and material, not just from Zimbabwe, but also in the rest of Africa, and not just from Africa, but also in the rest of the world. We need to keep pace with ideas everywhere, we need to discuss, to debate, to refine our own ideas, to explore, discover or renew our

own identities by engaging with other cultures. People can't afford books, but we can have dynamic libraries. Everybody can belong to a library. In a dream world, I would put pots of money into libraries and I would have lots of activities in libraries, reading sessions, book-club sessions, writing sessions, authors' visits, etc. You could do a great deal around libraries. It would be exciting and good for the community, and you could make them very, very vibrant places. You could have computers there with the internet, you could do all sorts of things. But if you go to any library now, often the last books bought were bought before Independence. Libraries have no money.

*AK: So there is no interest?*

IS: There is no money. Yes. But money can be raised, money can be found. You just need the passion to do it. As the minister responsible, I would go to the German government and say: I want to have a library in every high-density area, in every small town, in every small community, and I am going to need x billion dollars to fill them with books – and the money would follow. You need to have the idea, the vision, and the passion. And it can happen. Sadly, books are just not high on our agenda. Over 95% of our education budget is spent on administration (including salaries) and less than 5 % for book purchases.

*AK: But you sell books nevertheless.*

IS: At Baobab we used to sell approximately eight hundred copies of a novel a year. It's not bad; it's about average. If, for example, I published an unknown writer for a small publishing house in England, I probably wouldn't expect more than eight hundred books a year. But currently we are only selling something like three hundred plus copies of a novel a year. It is about three hundred and fifty in Zimbabwe and one hundred, one hundred and fifty outside Zimbabwe. These are very general figures. It could vary a little bit from one title to another. We couldn't possibly survive unless we had grants. At the moment the fiction programme is supported by Hivos, a Dutch NGO, which has helped us to develop it. If Hivos wasn't there or hadn't helped us – well, I doubt we would have published much, if any, fiction. What happens when that grant comes to an end, I'm not sure.

When we first put the proposal forward in 1998, we said that in five years we would have a strong-enough backlist to be able to support the front list. However, in the present circumstances, with inflation – officially it's now about 1000% – people just can't afford books, and we can hardly afford them either. You know, a reprint should cost much less than the original publication, but reprints now are costing hundreds of times more than the original because of inflation.

AK: *What we've heard is that there is no longer a middle class in Zimbabwe.*

IS: No, I wouldn't say the middle class has vanished completely, but many people within it are finding it harder and harder to cope. And as a class it is much smaller than it was. So many professionals have left and others have been squeezed. The extremely rich, those with unimaginable wealth, are an elite that has grown. And the class of the extremely poor has grown hugely, *hugely*; people are suffering terribly.

AK: *So most people can't afford books, and those who can, are not really interested?*

IS: I think the majority of people who have the money to buy books are not very interested. Money buys all sorts of things – big houses, smart cars, video and DVD players, satellite dishes, swimming pools, tennis courts, status clothing, jewels, status symbols. I have a friend who supplies chemicals for tennis courts – her business has never been better.

AK: *With a book you can't impress anybody...*

IS: You know, fiction is of very great value. In my view it is as important as history. The truth is told about complex situations through fiction in a different way. History provides us with facts and theories. But how people actually survived in certain situations, the complexities, ambiguities, ambivalences, half-truths, and passions – in good fiction you can relate to or identify with, learn to appreciate and understand people in very different circumstances to your own or people who've behaved badly, made the wrong decisions, been failures. If you look at the literature we published on the Zimbabwean liberation war at Baobab Books – *Bones*, *Shadows*,<sup>2</sup> *Pawns*,<sup>3</sup> *Effortless Tears*, *Echoing Silences*,<sup>4</sup> *Without a Name*,<sup>5</sup> *Guerilla Snuff*,<sup>6</sup> *White Man Black War*,<sup>7</sup> *Kandaya*<sup>8</sup> – all these books together provide a multi-faceted perspective on the liberation struggle that doesn't come easily through a history text. This fiction provides a complex picture of right and wrong, compromise and fear and pain, which you don't feel in a history book. In the latter

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<sup>2</sup> *Bones* (1988) and *Shadows* (1991) are novels by Chenjerai Hove.

<sup>3</sup> The novel *Pawns* is by Charles Samupindi and was published in 1992.

<sup>4</sup> *Effortless Tears* (1993), a novel, and *Echoing Silences* (1997), a collection of short stories, are by Alexander Kanengoni.

<sup>5</sup> *Without a Name* is a novel by Yvonne Vera, published in 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Guerilla Snuff* is a novel by Mafurahunzi Gumbo, published in 1995.

<sup>7</sup> *White Man Black War* is an account of experiences in the Zimbabwean liberation war by Bruce Moore-King and was published in 1988.

<sup>8</sup> *Kandaya* is by Angus Shaw and was published in 1993.

they might tell us that ten thousand people died; in fiction you learn what it was like to be there when the bombs came raining down. Of course, I know historians would probably disagree with me, but it is a good debate. It is hugely important for a society and for the development of that society to have access to its fiction. If it is not published, it is lost. Even if it doesn't sell, a good book provides a singular record. If it is good enough, it will last. It will be there for posterity to show us what people lived through and how they felt about it at the time. So, to go back to your question: I think you *can* impress people through a knowledge of literature, and I think those who have this knowledge in Zimbabwe are greatly respected – our writers, teachers, reviewers. But in a strange way this does not seem to encourage people to read more, but, rather, everyone wants to be a writer.

*AK: Do you think literature can change people? Do you think it can change politics?*

IS: I think it does sometimes – but over an extended period. Good literature can open your mind to a perspective that you haven't understood before. If we had a well-written, sensitive book in which the heroine was a lesbian, Zimbabwean woman, it would alter some people's perspectives towards the gay community. It wouldn't *change* them, but it would maybe make them a little bit more sympathetic. Changing or altering perspectives takes time and it also depends on how you have been shown how to read literature. Traditionally, in Europe, it was a vehicle for explaining aspects of reality. I was brought up with lots of Victorian children's stories. There was the goody and the baddy: good little girls did this and this, and bad little girls did that and that. European literature has moved on a lot, from *Struwwelpeter* to *Pippi Longstocking*. In most cultures, fairy-tales were often used for more didactic purposes. Nonetheless, the better they were written, the less obvious this was. I still think that some people here read literature with an expectation that they are going to be given a homily and not ambivalence. So it also depends on how you have been taught to read and to see things. Certainly the majority of unsolicited manuscripts that we receive are by people using their work as a vehicle for preaching their ideas, and generally there are good people (often men), bad people (often women), and terrible people (thieves, murderers and corrupt politicians).

*AK: But you don't publish them?*

IS: We don't publish them. Poor writing and flat characters and a strong homiletic narrative voice often go together.

*AK: Does the present political situation make any difference? Do you have any problems? How does the government react to books like Writing Still<sup>9</sup> or don't they react at all? Do they try to interfere?*

IS: We don't have, and have never had, any problems. Our print-runs are small, never more than a thousand. This is nothing in a country of over ten million, even if over half of them are children. If I were to publish a contentious political pamphlet in an indigenous language in hundreds of thousands, then this would be a concern for the government. But an expensive book, hidden away in a bookshop? No, I don't think so.

*AK: They are not really interested?*

IS: No, they've got so much else to worry about. Sometimes I get anxious and think: "Oh, my goodness, somebody might not like this" – but that's on a bad day. Anxiety differs from fear: it has no object. So one has to ask how much a particular worry has to do with your own self and not with the objective situation.

*AK: At the moment I have the impression that there is real fear.*

IS: Yes, I think people are afraid. Everyone has different thresholds of fear, but many people feel that fear has become more tangible within our society at the moment. I really don't want to go into it.

#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

Books published by Weaver Press can be ordered from the African Books Collective at Unit 13, King's Meadow, Ferry Hinksey Road, Oxford, OX2 ODP, England.

email: [abc@africanbookscollective.com](mailto:abc@africanbookscollective.com).

The Zimbabwean contact details are:

Weaver Press, PO Box A1922, Avondale, Harare, Zimbabwe. Tel.: 263-4-308330 / 339631.



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<sup>9</sup> *Writing Still: New Stories from Zimbabwe*, ed. Irene Staunton (Harare: Weaver Press, 2003).



GEOFFREY V. DAVIS

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## Words of Praise for Yvonne Vera

On the Occasion of the Award of the LiBeratur Prize  
For Her Novel *Butterfly Burning*<sup>1</sup> in German Trans-  
lation Under the Title *Schmetterling in Flammen*<sup>2</sup>  
Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 6 October 2002<sup>3</sup>

### Preamble: The LiBeratur Prize

**T**HE LIBERATUR-PRIZE was founded in 1987 as an initiative of the Ecumenical Centre in Frankfurt, Germany, and is intended to support the work of women writers in the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The selection process involves two stages. In the first, readers throughout Germany by whom the prize is sponsored, about five hundred of them, receive a list of titles by women writers that have appeared in German translation during the previous year. On the basis of their votes, the top four to six works are adjudicated on by a jury. The prize-winner is invited to Germany to participate in the Frankfurt Book Fair and to give public readings in the *Literaturhaus* as well as elsewhere in the country. The winner also receives a

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (Harare: Baobab, 1998). Page references in the text are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Schmetterling in Flammen* (Munich: Marino bei Frederking & Thaler, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> This speech was originally written and given in German. What follows is my own translation.

small cash prize as a symbolic gesture. The award is made at a ceremony in Frankfurt the week before the annual Book Fair. Past winners have included Maryse Condé (1988) and Assia Djebar (1989). Yvonne Vera was only the third African writer to have won the award.

The award for 2002 was presented on 6 October that year. Only one week later the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (*Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels*) was bestowed on Chinua Achebe at a televised ceremony in the Frankfurt Paulskirche. The award of both prizes to African writers within a single week marked an unusual and, of course, a welcome if belated development in Germany. As Yvonne Vera herself remarked at the time, between them she and Achebe might be said to represent the whole span of African literature.

Yvonne Vera, who was born in Bulawayo (Zimbabwe) on 19 June 1964, died in Toronto on 7 April 2005.



At the “Time of the Writer” literary festival held in Durban, South Africa in 1998, Yvonne Vera was confronted with one of those frequently heard questions which readers and academics love to ask writers, but which writers probably do not particularly relish answering, namely: “who do you see yourself as writing for?”

While “hating to be selfish,” the writer replied, she is actually writing first of all “for herself,” since she so “absolutely enjoys” the process of writing. It is an activity “I feel [...] almost as a physical sensation,” she went on, “I try to tell the story in the most original way possible and usually the most lyrical way that I can”; “the story must first surprise me [...] I should be able to [...] feel a form of discovery in how I’ve written it.” She finds “terrible pleasure” in writing, because what you are primarily doing is “celebrating your own ability to achieve what you’re doing, you are celebrating your skill whenever you are writing.”<sup>4</sup>

“Celebrating” – writing as celebration – does not seem a bad term to serve as the leitmotif of this speech in praise of her work.

Yvonne Vera solved the problem of how to respond to the question “whom do you see yourself as writing for?” – to which there probably is no satisfactory answer – by turning the question on its head and adding: “I think that your audience sort of finds you.” No author would say, “I am writing for

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<sup>4</sup> Eva Hunter, “‘Shaping the Truth of the Struggle’: An Interview with Yvonne Vera,” *Current Writing* 10.1 (1998): 81.

the international community; I am writing for the students or professors at the university; I am writing for general readers.” Sometimes some publisher’s reader will say to her, “this is the kind of book that is only going to be bought by a particular group of people.” Whenever this occurs, she is always particularly pleased to encounter a waiter in a restaurant, or, as recently, a taxi-driver who tells her how much he has enjoyed reading her ostensibly difficult novel *Under the Tongue*<sup>5</sup> – which proves the publishers wrong again! She may come from the small town of Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, “but my readers always find me, from all over the world.” We who are gathered here today to acclaim the work of Yvonne Vera belong to that community of readers from all over the world who have “found” her work.

As you know, it is the purpose of the LiBeratur Prize to honour a work which has become available in German. The decision-making process of the readers and the jury thus reposes on a translation. Its function is to transform the work of a foreign author into a German work of equivalent excellence – by no means an easy task! If this does not succeed, there will be little hope of the work receiving a prize in a German-speaking country. The reputation of an author abroad depends quite essentially on the work of the translator.

I am particularly happy that the translator of *Butterfly Burning*, Thomas Brückner, is with us at the award ceremony today. He will be reading a number of extracts from the German translation during this ceremony. Since I am occasionally called upon to teach translation at German universities, I am in a position to assure you that Thomas has produced a truly excellent translation of a challenging text.

Yvonne Vera comes from Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, she attended school there, and went on to study Literature, Art and Film at York University in Toronto, where she also wrote her doctorate. Her first book – a collection of short stories entitled *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals* – appeared in Canada in 1992. She later spent some time as Writer in Residence at Trent University in Ontario. After her return to Zimbabwe she took up a position as director of the National Gallery in Bulawayo, an institution which she promptly set about transforming into a major cultural centre.

Yvonne Vera has already published a considerable number of literary works – most of them have recently been translated into German. Thus, *Without a Name*<sup>6</sup> has appeared under the title *Eine Frau ohne Namen* in a translation by Hilde Schruuff from both Frederking & Thaler in Munich and

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<sup>5</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab, 1994).

the Unionsverlag in Zurich;<sup>7</sup> *Nehanda*<sup>8</sup> has been translated by Maria von der Ahé and Kate Reiner and published by Coleba in Liechtenstein;<sup>9</sup> *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*<sup>10</sup> has also been translated by Hilde Schruuff and has been included in the series *Black Women* published by Lamuv in Göttingen under the title *Seelen im Exil*;<sup>11</sup> the same publishing house has recently brought out Vera's well-received anthology of contemporary short fiction by African women, *Opening Spaces*, originally published by Heinemann in London.<sup>12</sup>

This lively activity demonstrates that several publishers in German-speaking countries have already become involved in publishing Yvonne Vera's work in German, often with the active support of the Frankfurt-based Society for the Promotion of African, Asian, and Latin American Literature. These efforts have produced the gratifying – and rather rare – effect that almost the whole of the literary output of an African writer is now available in German and that German readers are thus enabled to follow the literary career of Yvonne Vera in their own language. This is all the more significant, of course, since Yvonne Vera is rightly regarded as one of the finest writers working in Africa today.

I should add that Vera's works are now available in nine European languages – including Catalan! Furthermore, the English-language original of the work that brings us here today, *Butterfly Burning*, has been published not only by Baobab in Harare, but also – as the first of her works to be so published – by the prestigious house of Farrar Straus & Giroux in New York.<sup>13</sup>

Yvonne Vera's work has achieved much recognition not only in Zimbabwe itself, but also overseas. Two of her novels – *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue* – have been awarded First Prize in the Zimbabwe Publishers' Literary Awards. *Under the Tongue* also won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Africa. In 1999 Yvonne Vera received the Swedish "Voice of Africa" Award. In the spring of 2002 Vera became the first recipient of the Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa, awarded for her most recent novel, *The*

<sup>7</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Eine Frau ohne Namen* (Munich: Marino, 1997; Zürich: Unionsverlag, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda* (Harare: Baobab, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda* (Triesen: Coleba, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (Harare: Baobab, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Seelen im Exil* (Göttingen: Lamuv, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Yvonne Vera, ed. *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* (London: Heinemann, 1999); German edition: Yvonne Vera, ed. *Black Women: Neue Literatur aus Afrika* (Göttingen: Lamuv, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000).

*Stone Virgins*.<sup>14</sup> The increasing number of scholarly articles devoted to her work bears witness to growing academic interest in this writer.

It is not my task today to attempt a general assessment of the work of this widely talented author, who over the last decade has attained such an impressive international reputation. We are today celebrating *Butterfly Burning*, the most recent of her works to be translated into German, and it is therefore my pleasant duty to focus our attention on one or two significant and interesting aspects of that novel and thus to demonstrate why readers and jury alike have concurred in awarding it this year's LiBeratur Prize. Perhaps I may also take this opportunity to say how honoured I feel to have been asked to give this speech in praise of a writer whose work I greatly esteem and who comes from a country whose future has long been, and remains, of great importance to me, as I know it is to many others of you who have gathered here today.

In an interview with the German Africanist Manfred Loimeier, Yvonne Vera described *Butterfly Burning* as "something new" in her work, since it is a novel which has little in common with the themes of her earlier novels, especially with regard to the prominence accorded the liberation struggle.<sup>15</sup> And, indeed, *Butterfly Burning* really does represent something new in the corpus of Yvonne Vera's work. It tells the story of the love of a young woman and a considerably older man, which finally ends in tragedy, since it is unable to withstand the desire of the young woman for new experience, her longing for meaningful activity, and her commitment to defining her place in the world, on the one hand, and the inability of her partner, on the other, to free himself, despite his devotion to her, from patriarchal constraints.

Although it is the development of this story that is foregrounded, the interest of the novel is more comprehensive, for Yvonne Vera is also concerned here with many aspects of the culture and history of her country. What, then, happens in the novel?

The couple whose story we follow, Fumbatha and Phephelaphi, meet at the Umguza River. This encounter – a case of love at first sight, if ever there was one – is described by Vera in a magical passage which not only tells us something of Phephelaphi's previous life but also makes us aware of the decisive effect which her appearance has on the enraptured Fumbatha:

He met Phephelaphi on the Umguza River in 1946 on an afternoon that followed a morning such as this, golden with noon rays edged like knives which hit the

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<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Vera, *The Stone Virgins* (Harare: Weaver Press & New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> The interview may be found in Manfred Loimeier, *Wortwechsel: Gespräche mit afrikanischen Autorinnen und Autoren* (Bad Honnef: Horlemann, 2002): 184–91.

surface of the river and left the water rippling, the water tossing gently wayward over the beaten bedrock. Since then, whenever he sees the sun near the river he knows it has sprung out of the water into the sky; it has risen from the river.

He had been sitting along the river for half the morning in the worst heat of the year, and it was nearly noon, his feet naked and if he bent his toes down he could dip them in the water and feel it move more swiftly past in warm waves. The rock he sat on was half submerged in the water. She emerged breathless and gasping for air beneath his feet and rose out of the river like a spirit. The water streamed down her face, sparkling rivulets. She wore a thin cloth which clung over her like skin. She placed her hands above the rock where it leaned into the water and dragged herself out.

Nothing bothered her, the wet hair, and the water which continued dripping down her back as they spoke. It was the brightest morning for Fumbatha, her eyes glittering like jewels before him, her arms the same colour as the rock on which she rested. Each of her motions carefully guided, and her voice rising drop by drop, toward him, smooth like the water before them. She was sunlight. Her beauty was more than this, not expressed in her appearance alone but in the strength that shone beneath each word, each motion of her body. It was as though she made a claim with each movement, each word spoken, but none of this was a burden to her, it was just how she was. What she had become in her growth. Phephelaphi was unaware of the manner in which she had, by her presence, transformed him. (20–21)

The lives of both partners to the relationship have been determined by the fates of their parents: Fumbatha is a construction worker whose father was one of the rebels in the first *chimurenga* (war of liberation) against the white settlers and who was hanged along with sixteen others (this harrowing scene is memorably described in the novel). Thus, Fumbatha has never known his father; as a 14-year-old, he visited the site of the execution at the insistence of his mother, who wished her son to gain some understanding of the past. Phephelaphi's mother has recently been shot dead out of jealousy – by a white policeman, as it later turns out.

With the boundless enthusiasm of youth, Phephelaphi soon longs for more than Fumbatha is able to offer her. She attempts to develop a different concept of her role as a woman and invests all her energy in the task of “finding herself” – as the text has it – unaware, as she is, of the possible consequences. She uses one of Fumbatha's many absences at work to go in search of the new culture represented by *kwela* music, and in so doing makes the acquaintance of the “shebeen queen,” Deliwe, who will later play such a decisive role in determining her tragic fate. Phephelaphi's schooling allows her to hope that she will be able to apply successfully for a position as a trainee nurse (she would thus be the first black woman in the country to have such an opportu-

nity – in 1948!). She does not tell Fumbatha of her acceptance, well knowing that he would never approve of such a step. When it becomes clear, after she becomes pregnant, that she will be unable to take on the position after all, she decides to abort the child, carrying out the “lonely ritual” in the thorn-bushes along the Umguza River not far from the place where Fumbatha’s father was executed. Fumbatha, who had desired to father a child with her, is desperately disappointed. The sense of alienation that descends upon their relationship when he discovers the deed but remains silent about it leads to his betraying her with Deliwe. After a dreadful confrontation in which – through revealing the circumstances of her birth to her – Fumbatha “shattered her entire core and she became nothing” (123), their relationship is ended. When Phephelaphi falls pregnant once again, she kills herself through self-immolation, thus becoming the “butterfly burning” of the title.

Vera traces the course of the relationship of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha with great skill, combining memorable scenes of emotional power such as the first meeting at the river or the self-induced abortion with passages of deep psychological insight into her characters’ minds. She follows with understanding the differing notions of happiness and fulfilment which drive her characters’ lives and the opposing claims that undermine and finally destroy relationships, movingly depicting in highly poetic language both the hopes of new love and the desolate, silent approach of separation.

The structure of this novel is complex; it calls for a creative reader prepared for the task of unravelling the strands of the non-chronological narration. Thus, the narrative oscillates between the past and the present: we hear first of the execution in 1896, then, somewhat later on, of Fumbatha’s visit to the site in 1910. There is then a time-gap until the year 1946, when the two lovers first meet. We follow their life together until 1948, with occasional scenes being interpolated to recount the fate of Gertrude, Phephelaphi’s supposed mother, in 1945.

The reader is often left in the dark about what is going on, finding herself thus in the position of Phephelaphi herself, who only discovers towards the end of the novel, when the various strands of the narrative are finally unraveled, who she really is. Only then does it become clear that Zandile and not Gertrude was Phephelaphi’s natural mother; that the unidentified “stranger” who shot Gertrude (28) was in fact the same policeman who returned her mother’s dress to Phephelaphi – and was also Gertrude’s lover. At this decisive point in the text the narrative perspective is changed for the only time: this is to enable Phephelaphi to formulate her reaction to her rejection by Fumbatha directly and in the first person – a highly effective narrative device, coming as it does just before her self-immolation. Only then, perhaps, in the

attempt to decode the complex train of events, do we recall that something of the sort had already been foreshadowed – wasn't there somewhere earlier on in the text an account of a young woman who had responded to rejection by a particularly horrible method of suicide? (76–77).

It is, of course, possible to interpret a work of such structural and thematic complexity from a number of perspectives. One such was indicated by Yvonne Vera herself, when she described what she was trying to do in this novel as follows: “[In writing *Butterfly Burning*] I was writing a book about my home town of Bulawayo.”<sup>16</sup> This goes some way to explaining why the plot of the novel is set mainly in 1948, the year the city of Bulawayo celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation. It was, of course, also the year the Nationalists came to power in neighbouring South Africa and set about institutionalizing apartheid.

At that time – and up until 1980! – Bulawayo was a colonial city, which observed strict racial segregation, much in the manner of apartheid.<sup>17</sup> This provides the background to Vera's story; she demonstrates how the colonial system imposed restrictions on every aspect of the lives of Africans and how that affected the lives of her characters. The lives of the African population of Bulawayo are determined by racist legislation: the pass laws require that Africans must at all times be in possession of a pass bearing their thumb-prints (81); Fumbatha and Phephelaphi have to live in a separate residential area – the township – and are not allowed to own land; everywhere there are signs announcing: “No BLACKS” or “WHITES ONLY” (6); Africans are allowed on sidewalks only in order to sweep them; job reservation is in force, so that in a railway city such as Bulawayo is, no blacks are allowed to drive locomotives even though, as Phephelaphi innocently puts it, Africans “know everything about the trains” (27).

In order to maintain this system, the police-force is ubiquitous: in town as in the township, police vans are constantly on patrol full of “white men with batons, ready to use them” (40 / 47). That they frequently do so is apparent from the fact that the men with whom Zandile sleeps bear the scars and blisters from beatings or the teeth-marks of police dogs (34). In such a system, efforts at reform remain tentative and inadequate: measures designed to pro-

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<sup>16</sup> Manfred Loimeier, *Wortwechsel*, 186.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Nuttall has recently devoted a useful but densely theorized article to the question of Vera's depiction of urban space in *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*. See Sarah Nuttall, “Inside the City: Reassembling the Township in Yvonne Vera's Fiction,” in *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005): 177–92.

mote business enterprise on the part of a black elite in Makokoba township (but not, of course, in Bulawayo itself) fail when Africans are conscripted for war service and on their return find they are just as dispossessed as when they left in 1942 – the ironically named *Success Store* now stands as a forlorn and incomplete monument to failed reform. Only Phephelaphi might have gained the opportunity of her life as a nurse, if events had not taken a different course.

In view of such conditions, one might ask whether there is no evidence of resistance to the system in the book. Although Vera has, of course, said that this novel is not concerned with the liberation struggle, it does contain a powerful description of the men of the first *chimurenga* executed in 1896 and a reference to the railway strike of 1945 (77).

As a colonial city, Bulawayo has separate residential areas for black and white, the story of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha taking place predominantly in the township of Makokoba, while the “white” city of Bulawayo hardly plays a role at all. Which is not, of course, to say that Africans are unfamiliar with it: the children watch whites driving along the tarmac past the township in their large cars; black workmen heave drunken white men who have fallen down in the street outside the bars and are unable to get up again into their cars; as domestic servants, black women commute back and to; as a construction worker, Fumbatha has done nothing for the past twenty years but build the city. As Vera writes, “Bulawayo is a city he understands closely, which he has held brick by brick, on his palm” (20) – although that does not give him the right to live there; he has to find space in the township and build a one-room dwelling for himself there. Vera’s portrayal of these segregated conditions is instructive: the city of Bulawayo is perceived from the outside, as it were, from the perspective of Makokoba or from that of those who stream into the city daily from the rural areas, arriving at the central station – trains occur frequently in the novel, because Bulawayo is one of the most important railway junctions in southern Africa. The scene which takes place at the main railway station, with its powerful evocation of the aspirations and frustrations of those who migrate to the city only to become “station dwellers,” is one of the narrative highlights of the novel:

The fascination which has propelled them to the city is not enough to secure their survival. However, regret, if there is any, lasts only a second before they are resigned to their situation. They curse and blame the trains, then cling even more to the city. The people have come from everywhere, and absorb and learn not only each other’s secrets, but each other’s enigmatic languages. Accent rubs against accent, word upon word, dialect upon dialect, till the restless sound clears like smoke, the collision of words, tones, rhythms and meanings more present than the

trains beating past. They laugh when meaning collapses under the weight of words, when word shuffles against word, but they know something precious has been discovered when a new sound is freed, and soothes the gaps between them.

[...]

The city is like the train. It too is churning smoke in every direction, and when looked at closely, it too is moving. There is something strange in that even if one has not dreamt of any kind of success in coming here, getting back on the trains in order to go back to an earlier safety feels like failure, like letting go. The past is sealed off no matter how purposeful it has been, even if the past is only yesterday. It cannot be consulted for comparison. There will be questions to be answered when one returns, simple questions such as what Bulawayo looks like. To answer adequately there is need to stay longer, to be part of it, to examine the pavements closely even if one stays safely away from them, to look through opaque windows and hurry right past to another destination where nothing urgent has to be attended, except waiting.

They are here to gather a story about the city. Upon returning, perhaps the story can be told by simply producing something one can clasp in the hand, something miraculous that will provide concrete evidence not only about the city but the bearer too.

[...]

The most congested place is the railway station, with its waiting-rooms, where people linger for months with nowhere to lodge. With no direction. They move from room to room and tuck their semi-precious belongings under the wooden benches, on the cement floors. The benches are wide and go round the three walls. The front wall is an open archway, with only a partial cover. A smaller arched opening without a door leads to the next waiting-room and another to the next in a straight line but it is not possible to walk through each door right to the end of the rooms. There are obstacles. Bodies lie in rows, raised from the ground, but there is not enough room so the floors are soon covered with bags and restless bodies. From waiting-room, to waiting. (44–45)

“They are here to gather a story about the city” (45) writes Vera – a sentence which might apply equally well to her own purpose in writing this novel.

One of the most successful aspects of this novel is undoubtedly the portrait of life in the African township. Here Vera stands in an important South African literary tradition which includes such great names as Peter Abrahams, Es’kia Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Don Mattera, Miriam Tlali, and many more.

When she was beginning the writing of this novel, Vera told an interviewer: “It begins with a street”<sup>18</sup> – that is, with Sidojiwe E2, whose many

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<sup>18</sup> Eva Hunter, “‘Shaping the Truth of the Struggle’: An Interview with Yvonne Vera,” 84.

attractions tempt Phephelaphi more and more by the day (38). The street is the very centre of township life, so much so that the novel abounds in street scenes. Vera describes the children playing amid the pollution; owning nothing, they use old tyres as toys, make flutes out of papaya reeds and guitars from oil canisters; empty bottles do service as musical instruments, a scratched and broken record becomes “a necessary diversion” (14). She offers us an inventory of the township store; she portrays the shimmering life of the back-street shebeens. She depicts living conditions in detail, particularly in the small room which serves Phephelaphi and Fumbatha as home, its thin asbestos walls covered with newspaper clippings no protection from the curiosity of neighbours.

The writing here is distinguished by the author’s gift of precise observation, the attention she devotes to the detail of everyday life, the sympathy she obviously feels for people whose lives are nothing but struggle. In a world where one is quite literally forced “to live within the cracks” (3), the word “survival” becomes a key term in the text.

As she has herself suggested, it is part of Vera’s purpose in this novel to celebrate various aspects of the cultural revival apparent in the townships after the Second World War. One of these is *kwela* music, to which I should like to turn briefly, since it plays such a varied and significant role in the novel.<sup>19</sup> The attempt to describe the function and effect of music in words is not particularly common, nor of course is it an easy task. Discovering how Yvonne Vera meets this challenge with imagination and the poetry of language is one of the considerable delights reading this book offers.

*Kwela* pervades the action of the novel like a much varied leitmotif, but what does this word, which is presumably unfamiliar to many of you, actually mean? At the beginning of the novel we are told that the word stands for “marvellous things” (3). Why that is so has to do, as the narrator informs us, with the curious etymology of the word, which designates not only the most popular form of music in the southern African townships of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but also – in the form *kwela-kwela* of township slang – ‘police van’. How it came about that the word carried both these meanings would provide the subject of a philological dissertation, which I shall spare you. It apparently results from the fact that in the Nguni languages *kwela* means

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<sup>19</sup> Lizzy Attree has much of interest to report on the development of *kwela* music and Vera’s incorporation of it into the narrative of *Butterfly Burning* in her recent article “Language, Kwela Music and Modernity in *Butterfly Burning*,” in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde & Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002): 63–80.

‘climb’ or ‘get in’. Vera puns on this ambivalence when she constructs phrases such as “Kwela. Climb on. Move” (5), or writes, “the word is pulled back from the police van” (5) – which would certainly be puzzling for anyone unfamiliar with the word’s origins, but which seems to suggest here that the word should be freed from its police connotations and musically appropriated as a sign of hope, of freedom, as part of a strategy of survival.

The role played by music in this novel is so varied that I can only point to a few examples here.

*Kwela* accompanies the working lives of the Africans. In those scenes where Vera describes heavy physical labour, the workmen have recourse to music as a means of overcoming alienation. The grass-cutting men of the opening scene accompany their dance-like movements with song, the rhythm of the work process being “patterned like a dance, spreading out, each sequence rises like hope enacted and set free” (2). When Fumbatha, too, is on a construction site, the workers sing to alleviate their labour: as they sing, “brick pounds from hand to hand to hand” (58). Music represents “a curing harmony” (3) – it exercises, as it later will for Phephelaphi as well, a “healing” power (56). In the text, *kwela* music is often associated with affirmative concepts such as understanding (4), hope (2), and freedom (2); but it also signifies revolt and resistance: in the face of violence and oppression, *Kwela* melodies are always to be heard (4).

In the lives of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha, the music reflects the fateful course of their relationship. Fumbatha, we learn early on, moves “from his own song into her astonishing melody” (29). When Phephelaphi feels drawn to *kwela*, she steals off to visit Deliwe at the shebeen. Here is Vera’s memorable description of how Phephelaphi experiences the music:

She is thoroughly unprepared. When the music tears into the room she almost falls to the floor with agony. It hits her like a hammer, a felled tree, even though the noise is far and low and way back beneath her eyes where it trickles away like a stream. Stunned, wounded, she holds on to the door while she listens to the stream grow into a river and shift every boulder, every firm rock in her body. It leaves a tunnel, an empty tunnel she fills with a far-flung desire. A yearning. She can swim, but she prefers to sink deep down and touch the bottom of the river with her naked body and her stretching arms.

She remains at the door but closes it gently, like a lid over a precious liquid. She watches as a man raises a shining instrument from his knees to his tongue. He rises lovingly and his shoulders smooth the air into the shape of his own body, and his jacket falls obediently behind him and cuts the bottom of his knees. Neatly. The cloth is like skin.

He prepares to play. His arms upward, His eyes closed. His twin elbows pushing every other thought away. And a hurricane of tender tones meets every ear,

escalating, on and on. The room goes quiet like a rainbow, all voices cease as though the man standing up is a sign, a command. If there is symmetry in his trim dress, there is absolute harmony in his song – his music is healing.

But it is *kwela* music that also foreshadows the end. When the relationship nears its tragic conclusion, it is the handmade bamboo flute Deliwe gave Fumbatha (122) which provides the incontrovertible evidence of his unfaithfulness, the splintering of the flute symbolizing the end of their relationship, his “rejection of both of them” (122).



Finally, I should like once again to express the great pleasure of all of us here that the LiBeratur Prize has this year been awarded to Yvonne Vera for her novel *Butterfly Burning* [*Schmetterling in Flammen*]. We owe our thanks to all those readers throughout Germany who in the run-up to the award read and recommended this book and to the members of the jury who accepted this recommendation.

When the well-known historian Terry Ranger, to whom the novel *Butterfly Burning* is dedicated, launched the book in Bulawayo in 1998, there was a big party, as there is here today. The hall, he tells us, was decorated with huge butterflies, and in the audience sat four venerable old men in white suits, who used to play *kwela* in the townships back in the 1940s.<sup>20</sup> Now that Thomas and I have come to the end of this celebration, we are delighted that here, too, in the company of our *kora*-player, Aziz Kuyateh, we shall be able to listen to African music and dance together – just as happens so frequently in this wonderful novel, which is so eminently worthy of the prize it has received.

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<sup>20</sup> Terrence O. Ranger, “The Fruits of the Baobab: Irene Staunton and the Zimbabwean Novel,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25.4 (December 1999): 695–701.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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Katrin Berndt, *Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction* (Bayreuth African Studies 73; Bayreuth: Thielmann & Breitingner, 2005). ISBN 3-927510-88-2, €29.95.

In *Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction*, Katrin Berndt undertakes a study of selected Zimbabwean novels through the lens of feminist postcolonial theory. Texts are selected on the basis of the space given to female characters and include Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Chenjerai Hove's *Bones*, Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*, Nozipho Maraire's *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter*, and Vivienne Ndlovu's *For Want of a Totem*. The book is divided into five chapters, followed by a summary conclusion. The first two chapters – "Socio-Historical and Literary Background" and "Female Identity Construction in Postcolonial Research" – contain introductory material, while the three analytic chapters that follow are organized according to novelistic genre: the *Bildungsroman*, the metahistorical novel, and the realistic / didactic novel.

The guiding concepts that inform this work are Homi Bhabha's notion of the "Knowing Subject" and Trinh T. Minh-ha's interrogation of a singular notion of 'truth', along with her concept of the "inappropriate other." Identity is here understood as being made up of various "identity layers," which characters then compose into an identity-"palimpsest." By "negotiating" their "diverse identity layers," the female characters analyzed here, it is claimed, locate themselves "beyond every dichotomy" (9). Characters, then, are ex-

© *Zimbabwean Transitions: Essays on Zimbabwean Literature in English, Ndebele and Shona*, ed. Mbongeni Z. Malaba & Geoffrey V. Davis (Matatu 34; Amsterdam & New York NY: Editions Rodopi, 2007).

plored in terms of their ability to “integrate” the various “identity layers” into a coherent “identity,” or as embodiments of different “identity layers.” “Flat” characters have only one “identity layer,” while “round” characters are composed of diverse “identity layers”; some characters, such as Hove’s Marita, are read as “interstices,” through whom other characters explore and negotiate their “identity layers.”

Black women, according to this study, suffer from a “double colonization,” yet the ways in which patriarchy performs colonizing practices is not clearly explicated, nor is it clear that this phrasing does indeed allow the author to move out of the Self/Other dichotomies that she declares are no longer sufficient to the task of understanding female identity in postcolonial contexts. Conceptually trapped between notions of Zimbabwean women’s “double colonization” and a theoretical insistence that “identity” is “negotiable,” the study does at times give way to platitudes. The repeated phrase “double colonization” is revealing also of the extent to which the study’s emphasis falls throughout on precolonial and colonial contexts. The general failure to engage extensively with the postcolonial contemporary is troubling in a study that takes contemporary fiction as its primary focus.

Problematic also, I felt, was the decision to extend the term “Zimbabwean literature” only to works authored by black writers (while this field is later opened to include the Irish-born white Zimbabwean Vivienne Kernohan, who writes under the names Violet Kala and Vivienne Ndlovu, the justification for doing so appeared to me somewhat obscure). An important new collection of essays on the same field of literature explored by Berndt, *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture* (ed. Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac; Harare: Weaver Press, 2005) is to my mind all the more successful for its decision to dispense with such crude divisions, which jar with Berndt’s stated attention of working against the binary logics of colonialism and patriarchy.

I found the introductory chapters to be the weakest aspect of the study, particularly the one that lays out the “Socio-Historical and Literary Background.” The socio-historical material, in particular, is selective, lacking nuance, and poorly substantiated in both detail and argument; it could easily have been dispensed with, in particular given the author’s later assertion that her study of literary texts does not intend to lead to conclusions about women’s “actual states of being in postcolonial Zimbabwe” (52). The literary background is similarly shaky and does not contribute much to the overarching argument of the book, and the theoretical introduction in the next chapter could more profitably have been integrated into the analyses of the later, work-oriented chapters. The introductory material is likely to see

readers losing attention and interest in the text; they may do well to simply skip it and move directly to the analyses of genre and text forming the focus of the book, which do make many useful contributions to studies of Zimbabwean literature and of postcolonial female identity studies in general. My experience of the book would certainly have been a more positive one had I begun my reading at the start of chapter three.

The strengths of the study lie in its attention to genre, which is often ignored or handled far less subtly in studies of African literature than in this work. The keen sense of genre does, however, get lost at moments in the analyses – for instance, when realist demands are made on texts identified as “metahistorical.” Nonetheless, the chapter on “metahistorical” fiction in particular, along with those on the *Bildungsroman* and realistic / didactic novels, often productively tease out previously unexplored aspects of the individual texts; I found parts of the analyses of *Bones* and *Butterfly Burning* to be the most compelling aspects of the book.

The study is compromised most by the fact that it is a pretty joyless read. The language is at times pedantic, the argument becomes repetitive and could have been organized into a tighter structure, and the governing concepts are occasionally applied with a heavy hand, numbing the reader’s pleasure in both the texts and their analysis and ironing out contradictory moments or nuances within texts. In general, it reads (still?) as a thesis rather than as a book that anticipates and cares for the interests of a broader readership.

While this book will make a useful addition to library collections on Zimbabwean literature, both general readers and specialists may be better served by two other studies of Zimbabwean fiction published – or in press – this year: the aforementioned *Versions of Zimbabwe*, and Ranka Primorac’s masterful analysis in *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Zimbabwe*, with its highly sophisticated attention to genre and encyclopaedic knowledge of the national literature.<sup>1</sup> Where *Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Literature* is most likely to find its niche market is among scholars seeking tools with which to explore female characterization in Zimbabwean, African, and other postcolonial fiction; such scholars will find much to engage with in this attempt to read identity negotiation through the generic specificity of texts.

MEG SAMUELSON

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<sup>1</sup> Ranka Primorac, *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Modern Zimbabwe* (London: Tauris Academic Studies & NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Tsitsi Dangarembga, *The Book of Not* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke, 2006). ISBN 0-9547023-7-9, 250 pp., £ 9.99.

Eighteen years after the publication of her highly acclaimed novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988), winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Africa Section in 1989, Tsitsi Dangarembga returns with a sequel to Tambu's tale. It is also her return to the novel genre. *The Book of Not* continues precisely where *Nervous Conditions* left off – yet it feels as if we had entered a different story. To recall: *Nervous Conditions* charted the development of the young black narrator, Tambudzai Sigauke, in 1960s Rhodesia, when the country was trying to break free from colonial rule. We followed Tambu from her childhood in a rural homestead to her education at the mission school where her paternal uncle, Babamukuru, was headmaster; and we left her as a new secondary-school student at Sacred Heart, a prestigious educational institution for whites, which promised unprecedented opportunities for her. Significantly, Tambu narrated not only her own story but also those of the women around her: her mother Mainini, entrapped in a life of drudgery; Mainini's younger sister Lucia, head-strong and independent; and highly educated Maiguru, wife of Babamukuru, who, despite her academic achievements and 'modern' ways, was caught equally between patriarchal and colonial oppression. Most importantly, however, the book was also the story of Tambu's cousin – bright, free-spirited, and irrepressible Nyasha, Maiguru's and Babamukuru's daughter – whose questions and struggles taught Tambu more about life than the lessons she received at the mission school. More than anything else in the novel, Nyasha's eating disorder tragically illustrated the 'nervous conditions' one can develop in situations of extreme personal and political conflict. The encounter with her suffering, however, helped Tambu grow in understanding; and it helped her find her voice for her own experience and that of her community.

Yet the voice of the maturing, progressively critical Tambu is not the voice of Tambudzai we encounter in the *Book of Not*. Transported into the secluded, almost exclusively white Rhodesian environment of Sacred Heart, Tambudzai's tale turns into a gradual succession of thwarted ambitions and other 'nots', while her previously multi-focal first-person narrative becomes increasingly self-absorbed and unreliable. (As Ranka Primorac has recently pointed out, "*Nervous Conditions* offers the narrative of how she [Tambu] became the person who was *later* in a position to narrate the story that has just

been told.”<sup>2</sup>) For the greatest part of *The Book of Not*, the narrator Tambudzai seems to have experienced less space-times beyond those she portrays, except for the occasional hint at some distant future in which some of the unresolved issues might be unravelled in the final volume of a Tambu trilogy. This, then, is the story of a young woman who, at the turn of Independence, cannot find a place among her peers, nor can she carve out a niche for herself in the newly emerging nation, Zimbabwe. Instead, Tambudzai battles with an increasing sense of injustice, failure, and alienation, culminating in her fear of a ‘nothingness’ that runs through the narrative like a leaden thread.

Taking up the narrative pattern of *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* starts – and startles – with the maiming of one of Tambudzai’s siblings. But whereas the death of her brother Nhamo had been liberating for the young Tambu, enabling her to take his place at the mission school, Tambudzai’s world breaks apart when her sister Netsai steps on a landmine during a political gathering organized by the guerrilla fighters. “Up, up, up, the leg spun. A piece of person, up there in the sky” (3) – a piece of person that gets unceremoniously caught in the branches of a tree, thereby unhinging the imagined security of Tambudzai’s cosmos. Traumatized by the incident but unable to confide in her teachers or friends, Tambudzai returns to school feeling “as if a vital part had been exploded away and in the absence that was left I was cracked and defective” (28). While compensating for the cracks with aggressive studiousness, school life cannot entirely protect her from the liberation war whose manifestations she is trying hard to efface: the haunting image of her sister-turned-disfigured-guerrilla fighter; relatives of her school-mates being murdered; Babamukuru being denounced as a colonial sell-out; her mother becoming an informer and turning against her own next of kin. It is her mother, now ‘Mai’ (mother), who in the course of the narrative grows into Tambudzai’s anti-role model of ‘nots’. Mai’s previous lethargy and resignation have turned into toxicity and “awful covetous emptiness” (9), which in her daughter’s view are “the nothingness upon which she stood as upon the summit of her life” (9). This is what Tambudzai is trying to avoid at all costs, but this is where she seems to be heading at the end of the novel.

If *Nervous Conditions* alludes to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, then it is his *Black Skin, White Masks* that reverberates most forcefully in Dangaremba’s sequel. In her attempt to avert ‘nothingness’, Tambudzai subjects herself to the universalized white norm at Sacred Heart and is increasingly alienated from herself and her few African schoolmates, without making

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<sup>2</sup> Ranka Primorac, *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Modern Zimbabwe* (London: Tauris Academic Studies & NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 107.

friends with the other pupils. Subliminal racism is encountered everywhere, and Tambudzai has clearly internalized some of the dominant perceptions. At the dinner-table, where the private food-supplies segregate the disadvantaged from the better-off majority, she worries about the edibility of powdered chocolate if touched by one of the African students. Queuing up at morning assembly regularly causes her agony for fear of accidentally touching the skin of a white girl. Yet, she is hell-bent on proving that she is the equal of, if not better than, her classroom peers. To achieve her academic goals, she buries herself in the library; to help fight the 'terrorists', she volunteers to knit balaclava helmets for the Rhodesian troops. Not surprisingly, this causes further isolation. And instead of being rewarded, white people reap the fruits of her labour, be it the prize for the best O-Level results or, in independent Zimbabwe, the credit for her work in a multi-racial company. There is no justice to be found for her, but Tambudzai is partly herself to blame, for she does not stand up for herself and avoids any open confrontation with the authorities. While feeling superior to her surroundings, she practises withdrawal and self-deprecation. What remains are contradictory feelings of hubris and inferiority, self-annihilation and dormant fury, which make it difficult for her to come to a sense of self.

It is the virtual absence of Nyasha and other memorable figures in *The Book of Not* that seems to cause an imbalance in both the fictional Tambudzai and the overall structure of the narrative. Readers who expect the full range of characters from *Nervous Conditions* will be in for a disappointment. Nyasha has turned into a cardboard figure whose regular intake of tranquilizers has dampened her rebellious spirit. With no one to be angry for her, Tambudzai loses her safety valve and turns her aggression inwards, occasionally also against the other black students with whom she shares a substandard dormitory. Lucia, Mai's unruly younger sister, is also missing, as is a host of minor characters that had given life to the homestead and the mission school. Though replaced by a host of nuns, matrons, and class-mates at Sacred Heart, the narrative remains one-dimensional and does not offer the skilful multiple perspectives that made *Nervous Condition* such a satisfying reading experience. Dangarembga's rendering of Tambudzai's inner turmoil might be vivid, as on the whole are her descriptions of boarding school life in colonial Rhodesia, but the overall structure of the novel remains uneven; and some narrative incidents are plainly forced. Much of the novel is taken up by Tambudzai's experience at Sacred Heart prior to getting her O-Levels; thereafter the story feels needlessly rushed: poor A-Level results, Babamukuru disowning her and sending her out to fend for herself; a string of disappointing jobs until she excels at being a copywriter for which she then fails to get credit. In the final

part of the novel, Dangarembga also hurriedly does away with some of the previous key players. Despite her drug-induced calm, Nyasha vanishes to England to take up a scholarship, while, somewhat incredibly, Babamukuru gets hit by a stray bullet during Independence celebrations, which leaves him paralyzed and wheelchair-bound.

After the startling success of *Nervous Conditions*, the sequel was bound to disappoint readers' expectations, particularly after a gestation period of almost twenty years. Perhaps we had better judge *The Book of Not* by its own merits rather than relentlessly reading it against its predecessor and thus turning it into a string of 'nots'. Dangarembga raises some important issues in her new novel, such as questions of race and collaboration in a nationalist struggle, war trauma, and the production of crippled colonial mentalities. Parts of the narrative are highly lyrical in quality, despite the author's penchant for gratuitous alliteration, and the opening chapter is powerfully disturbing. There is no doubt about Dangarembga's writing talent, but I wonder whether she should not abandon the idea of a trilogy and focus her creative energy on a different subject instead.

CHRISTINE MATZKE





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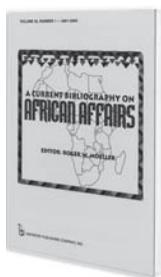
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## *Modernity, Culture, Critique*

Edited by Sudeep Dasgupta with the assistance of Esther Peeren



'In principle, it ought to be possible to construct the model of totality (and a totality that is itself a process) by beginning with any feature and eventually working our way through and around to all the others in a trajectory different from all the other possible ones and yet somehow still the same, or at least projecting and marking the contours of the same complex unrepresentable phenomenon.'

Fredric Jameson

*A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present*

In the wake of proliferating discourses around globalisation and culture, some central questions around cultural politics have acquired

a commonsensical and hegemonic character in contemporary intellectual discourse. The politics of difference, the possibilities of hybridity and the potential of multiple liminalities frame much discussion around the transnational dimensions of culture and post-identity politics. In this volume, the economic, political and social consequences of the focus on 'culture' in contemporary theories of globalization are analysed around the disparate fields of architecture, museum discourse, satellite television, dub poetry, carnival and sub-national theatre. The discourses of hybridity, diaspora, cultural difference minoritization are critically interrogated and engaged with through close analysis of cultural objects and practices. The essays thus intervene in the debate around modernity, globalization and cultural politics, and the volume as a whole provides a critical constellation through which the complexity of transnational culture can be framed. Thinking through the particular, the essays limn the absent universality of forms of capitalist globalization and the volume as a whole provides multiple perspectives from which to enter the singular modernity of our times in all its complexity.

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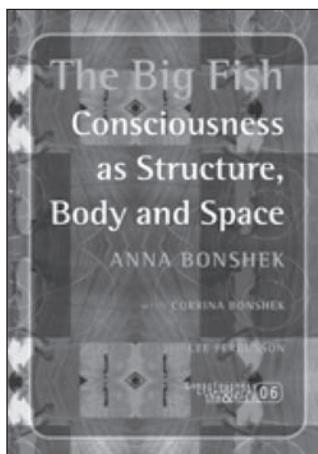
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# The Big Fish

## Consciousness as Structure, Body and Space

Anna Bonshek, with Corrina Bonshek and  
Lee Fergusson



Amsterdam/New York, NY, 2007 XX-396 pp.  
(Consciousness, Literature and the Arts 6)  
Bound € 83 / US\$ 112  
ISBN-13: 9789042021723

While debate continues in the fields of the sciences and humanities as to the nature of consciousness and the location of consciousness in the brain or as a field phenomenon, in the Vedic tradition, consciousness has been understood and continues to be articulated as an infinite field of intelligence at the basis of all forms of existence. This infinite field of intelligence is accessible to human awareness, being the very nature of the mind and the structuring dynamics of the physiology – from the DNA, to the cell, tissues, organs, and to the whole body and its sophisticated functioning.

This two-part volume, *The Big Fish: Consciousness as Structure, Body and Space*, considers in Part One the Vedic approach to consciousness, specifically referencing Maharishi Vedic Science, and discusses themes pertinent to the arts, including perception and cognition, memory as awareness, history and culture, artistic performance and social responsibility, observatory instruments as spaces and structures to enhance consciousness, and, beyond metaphor, architectural sites as multi-layered enclosures of the brain detailed in the *Shrimad Devi Bhagavatam* and, as cosmic habitat or *Vastu* aligned to the celestial bodies.

Presenting some more general consciousness-based readings, Part Two includes essays by various authors on Agnes Martin and her views on art, perfection and the “Classic”, unified field based education and freedom of expression versus censorship in art, prints from the Renaissance to the contemporary era as allegories of consciousness, the work of Australian artist Michael Kane Taylor as beyond a modern/postmodern dichotomy, the photographic series *The Ocean of Beauty* by Mark Paul Petrick referencing the Vedic text the *Saundarya-Lahari*, a Deleuzian analysis of the dual-screen multi-arts work *Reverie I*, and an account of the making of *Reverie II*, a single-screen video projection inspired by the idea of dynamics of awareness.

This book, therefore, presents a broad range of interests and reading while offering a unique, yet profoundly transformative perspective on consciousness.

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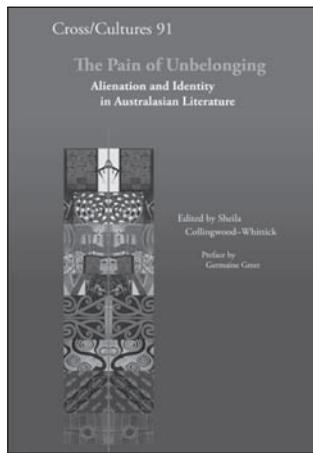
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# The Pain of Unbelonging

## *Alienation and Identity in Australasian Literature*

Edited by Sheila Collingwood-Whittick  
Preface by Germaine Greer



Beyond the obvious and enduring socio-economic ravages it unleashed on indigenous cultures, white settler colonization in Australasia also inflicted profound damage on the collective psyche of both of the communities that inhabited the contested space of the colonial world. The acute sense of alienation that colonization initially provoked in the colonized and colonizing populations of Australia and New Zealand has, recent studies indicate, developed into an endemic, existential pathology. Evidence of the psychological fallout from the trauma of geographical deracination, cultural

disorientation and ontological destabilization can be found not only in the state of anomie and self-destructive patterns of behaviour that now characterize the lives of indigenous Australian and Maori peoples, but also in the perpetually faltering identity-discourse and cultural rootlessness of the present descendants of the countries' Anglo-Celtic settlers. It is with the literary expression of this persistent condition of alienation that the essays gathered in the present volume are concerned. Covering a heterogeneous selection of contemporary Australasian literature, what these critical studies convincingly demonstrate is that, more than two hundred years after the process of colonisation was set in motion, the experience that Germaine Greer has dubbed 'the pain of unbelonging' continues unabated, constituting a dominant thematic concern in the writing produced today by Australian and New Zealand authors.

Amsterdam/New York, NY,  
2007 XLIII-210 pp.  
(Cross/Cultures 91)  
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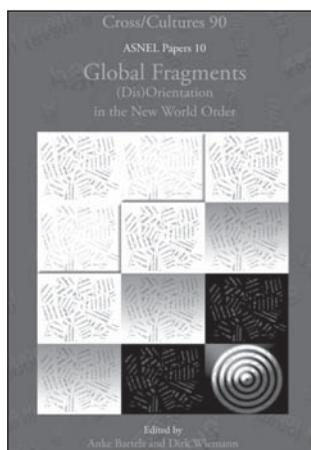
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# Global Fragments

*(Dis) Orientation in the  
New World Order*  
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Edited by Anke Bartels and  
Dirk Wiemann



While the world seems to be getting ever smaller and globalization has become the ubiquitous buzz-word, regionalism and fragmentation also abound. This might be due to the fact that, far from being the alleged production of cultural homogeneity, the global is constantly re-defined and altered through the local. This tension, pervading much of contemporary culture, has an obvious special relevance for the new varieties of English and the literature

published in English world-wide. Postcolonial literatures exist at the interface of English as a hegemonic medium and its many national, regional and local competitors that transform it in the new English literatures. Thus any exploration of a globalization of cultures has to take into account the fact that culture is a complex field characterized by hybridization, plurality, and difference. But while global or transnational cultures may allow for a new cosmopolitanism that produces ever-changing, fluid identities, they do not give rise to an egalitarian 'global village' — an asymmetry between centre and periphery remains largely intact, albeit along new parameters.

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# The Shock of the Other

## *Situating Alterities*

Edited by Silke Horstkotte and Esther Peeren



Alterity is not a mere synonym of difference; what it signifies is otherness, a distinction or separation that can entail similarity as well as difference. The articles collected here explore ways to define, situate and negotiate alterity in a manner that does not do away with the other through negation or neutralization but that instead engages alterity as a reconfiguring of identities that keeps them open to change, to a becoming without horizon. Alterity and its situated negotiations with identity are configured through the body, through the psyche and through translational politics. From

critical readings of angels, specters, grotesque bodies, online avatars, *Sex and the City*, pornography in French literature, Australian billboard art, Pina Bausch, Adrian Piper, Kashmiri poetry, contemporary German fiction, Jacques Brault and Northern-Irish poetry, there emerges a vision of identities as multi-faceted constructions that are continually being transformed by the various alterities with which they intersect and which they must actively engage in order to function effectively in the social, political, and aesthetic realm.

Amsterdam/New York, NY,  
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(Thamyris 15)  
Paper € 38 / US\$ 51  
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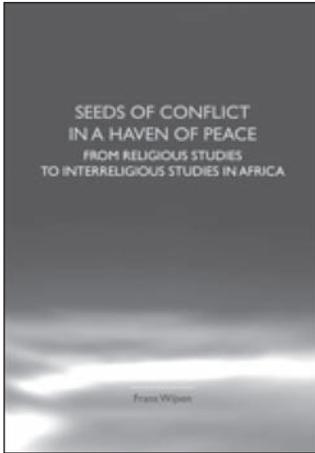
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# Seeds of Conflict in a Haven of peace

*From Religious Studies to Interreligious Studies in Africa*

Frans Wijzen



Amsterdam/New York, NY, 2007 300 pp.  
(Studies in World Christianity and  
Interreligious Relations 44)  
Paper €60 / US\$ 84  
ISBN: 9789042021884

"In this well-written book Frans Wijzen has explored the potential religious factors that might disrupt peace and stability in east Africa, especially in Kenya. This is a topic that deserves more attention now than has been the case in the past. The book can provide preliminary material for discussion, especially in theological colleges and departments of religious studies where pastors and teachers of religion are trained."

Professor Mugami

On 7 August 1998 the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were bombed and 200 people lost their lives. These bombings shattered the image of Africa's tradition of peaceful religious coexistence. Since then inter-religious dialogue has been high on the agendas of ecclesial and religious organisations, but not so much of faculties of theology and departments of religion in East Africa. This book investigates why this is so. How are interreligious relations dealt with in Africa, and more particularly, how are they and how should they be taught in institutions of higher learning? This book is based on fieldwork in Nairobi from 2001 onwards. It shows why Africa's tradition of peaceful co-existence is not going to help Africa in the 21st century, and recommends a shift in the education in inter-religious relations: from religions studies to inter-religious studies.

Frans Wijzen is Professor of World Christianity and Interreligious Relations in the Faculty of Religious Studies, Professor of Mission Studies in the Faculty of Theology and Director of the Institute for Mission Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He worked in Tanzania from 1984 till 1988. Since then has conducted periods of fieldwork in East Africa annually. Among others, he is author of "There is only one God" (Kampen 1993), co-author with Ralph Tanner of "Seeking a Good Life" (Nairobi 2000) and "I am just a Sukuma" (Amsterdam – New York 2002), and with Bernardin Mfumusa of "Seeds of Conflict" (Nairobi 2004). Since 2004 he has been visiting professor at Tangaza College, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.

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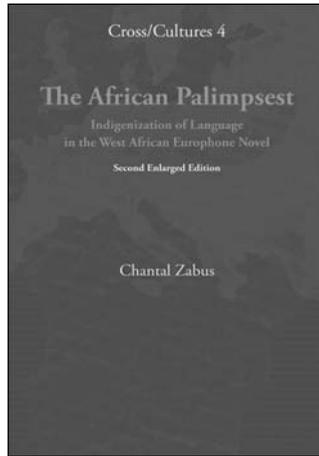
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Chantal Zabus



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*Stewart Brown, University of Birmingham*

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