Trauma and the Desiring Subject: The Spatial and Temporal Poetics of Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins*

Reading is the name of the practice that has the power of producing shifts in desire; and desire does not produce “fantasy” but reality itself.

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*Room for Maneuver*

In *The Stone Virgins* (2002), Yvonne Vera presents colonial, anti-colonial, and national violence as practices that mediate the experiences of time and space — the everyday experiences of identity, gender, and citizenship. Violence structures the novel — a violence represented in streets named after men associated with colonial conquest, in avenues that reorganize African landscapes, in plaques that memorialize European settlement rather than African resistance, in buildings that segregate whites from blacks. The very architecture, ethos, and aesthetics of “[t]he city revolves in sharp edges; [. . . ] cut[s] at right angles” (Vera 2002, 11). The novel begins in the heart of the colonial city, a space waiting for independence, a space of disrupted Black desire. In the post-independence space of the novel, Vera stages traumatic experiences of betrayal that constitute Zimbabwe as a postcolonial nation. If, as Vera writes, the greatest hurt takes a lifetime to heal, how long would it take to heal lifetimes of waiting that end in betrayal (2002, 36)? The question of the possibility of healing haunts the violent acts represented in the novel, positioning the reader to ask, What now? In response, Vera presents the convalescent subject — the re-membered subject in recovery — the postcolonial subject whose performance is invested in the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic project of nation, but with a difference. The novel creates a space of reflection and re-membering that functions to change the object of the reader’s desire in order to create a postcolonial nation in line with its original hopes.

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera looks deeply at the issue of trauma and the healing necessary for the survival of the Zimbabwean postcolonial subject through her narration of the lives of two sisters, Nanceba and Thenjiwe, from 1950 to 1986 — the period from the birth of the Zimbabwean national independence struggle to independence and the violence of the Gukurahundi, or the Matabeleland Genocide — an intense period of covert post-independence violence perpetrated against citizens primarily in the Matabeleland region of rural Zimbabwe (Christiansen 2004, 6). Temporally, the text is divided into two sections: 1950 to 1980 and 1981 to 1986. This division mirrors the colonial/postcolonial divide and also creates a divided space where clean divisions are problematized. The figures of the sisters serve as mirrored objects— “Sisters, two sides, but not quite opposite: connected” (176). The novel begins from the perspective of Thenjiwe, who is making love to a man in Kezi, Matabeleland. The novel ends in Bulawayo, Matabeleland, with Nanceba living in friendship with the same man. Spatially, Matabeleland serves as a mirrored/mirroring site in the novel. In the two sections, it localizes the mirrored structures of violence that underwrite both the white colonial and black anti-colonial national projects. In addition, the first section of the novel evokes Ndebele history in Matabeleland and the second section invokes its erasure through the Matabeleland Genocide.

The two parts of the novel map onto the historical time of Ian Smith’s colonial Rhodesia and the independent postcolonial nation of Zimbabwe. Traditional postcolonial theory — such as the seminal work of Franz Fanon — casts the postcolonial nation as the exact opposite of the colonial nation, creating a conceptual structure of oppression versus freedom — coerced
dependence versus self-willed independence. The structure of Vera’s novel offers a meditation on mirroring, foregrounding the theme of reflection. This reflective structure suggests a mirroring relationship between the colonial and the postcolonial nations, rather than their opposition, because traumatic acts of violence constitute both. Vera reveals the sublated relation of trauma to nation — the way that trauma resides in the very fabric of nation, and, therefore, the way that nation must work as a form of forgetfulness, the way in which nation calls us to forget. From displacing the violence of European dispossession by the renaming of African space to abandoning nation as a call to an inclusive black citizenship through an exclusionary othering that culminates in massacre, the Zimbabwean nation is structured through “the burying of memory,” through forgetting (65).

Vera acknowledges how the mechanisms of colonial modernity — modernity achieved through the material practices of imperialism and colonialism — constitute nation temporally and spatially. Vera’s foregrounding of violence and nation is not new. In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon envisions independence through nation as a traumatic process: “National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (1963, 35). However, by focusing on the significance of this violence, Vera shifts the meaning of nation. For Vera, nation is not synonymous with decolonization. The traumatic fabric of nation destabilizes a central tenet of colonial modernity: that nation is the space of realization of universal freedom, progress, rationality — liberation.

Vera enacts this shift in the reader’s understanding and relation to nation through the trope of reflection in both its sense as a counterpart and a mode of careful consideration. Vera reveals twinned aspects through the architecture of mirroring: in the division of the book into
two parts, and in the main characters Thenjiwe and Nonceba — “Nonceba, who though different, is also she Thenjiwe” (2002, 48). Thenjiwe is desirous, desiring, impulsive. Nonceba is “patient like a mantis, who has no sudden impulses, slow and careful in everything” (48). Thenjiwe is positioned as impetuous national desire while Nonceba is Vera’s reflecting, recovering postcolonial subject, which I will name the convalescent subject — the subject who is working through the trauma of the postcolonial nation and in the process re-working what she desires—in the process of achieving liberated consciousness.

By placing the bodies of women at the emotional center of her novel, Vera shifts the conception of the postcolonial nation from a focus on male-centered desire. For example, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes, “Supply a single answer and the color problem would be stripped of all its importance. What does a man want? What does a Black man want?” (1952, 10). However, Vera is not in simple opposition to Fanon; instead, her stark representations of the violence of anti-colonial struggle and postcolonial nationalism illuminate other(ing) aspects of Fanon’s conception of nation-making violence. Vera foregrounds how the issues of gender traverse anti-colonial national violence in order to trouble Fanon’s unequivocal embrace of “decolonization [as] the veritable creation of a new man” (1963, 36).

Vera’s representations of anti-colonial violence from the perspective of two women add depth to Fanon’s project of understanding decolonization and the postcolonial nation. Fanon writes: “Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature” (36). Here decolonization is represented as a struggle between settler and native — a struggle that has one homogeneous point of opposition. Instead, Vera shows how anti-colonial nationalism reflects rather than opposes colonial nationalism. Through the structure of reflection, Vera destabilizes Fanon’s conception of decolonization as “a complete calling into question of
the colonial situation (1963, 28),” multiplying points of contact and contestation by questioning national subjectivity, which is haunted by categories and desires created in colonial modernity, such as sovereignty. As a mode of modernity, nation partakes in the same practices of subjection in both its colonial and postcolonial modes. These practices work through the production of desire. As such, Vera represents the tensions that lie in modernity itself: the multiple points of subjection in modernity, the diverse unfulfilled and open desires that traverse postcolonial subjectivity. The tone that infuses her representations of nation and national subjectivity is not celebratory; its register does serve as a wake-up call — a call to remember — to realize the present of nation as a view of both the future and the past, to realize nation as “a kinship of desire” (177).

The discourses of liberation of both Vera and Fanon explore the central relation of desire and identity. While Fanon privileges race (whiteness and blackness) as the main locus of subjection and desire, Vera represents the multiple discourses of subjection in modernity — gender, class, military service, colonized status, location (city or bush). Both authors focus on the psycho-affective processes of subjection — on the kinds of subjects created in the process of postcolonial nation making. But Vera’s convalescent subject complicates Fanon’s assertion that “the native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms” (1963, 21). However, the specter of traumatic violence in Vera’s novel does not negate nation; instead, its presence suggests that while armed struggle may be necessary, it is not sufficient in achieving liberation. Individual and social transformation must be concomitant with violent revolutionary struggle and national independence, and such transformation requires spaces of reflection. Vera privileges the need to reflect on and remember the desires that nation was meant to fulfill: liberation and full citizenship for Blacks. Internalized reflection is the fundamental
ground that allows for experiences of liberation, which are displaced in the traumatic process of nation making. By structuring her novel through the trope of mirroring, Vera positions 21st-century readers to reflect on national liberation — its structure and its effects. By centering violence, Vera invites readings that trouble the celebratory models of official historical narratives, and in doing so, she fosters the conditions necessary to constitute oppositional national subjects.

The reader is invited into an oppositional reading of national history through an affective connection with the protagonist Nonceba. In the first half of the novel, Nonceba witnesses her sister’s murder and is then raped by the murderer. In the second half of the novel, Nonceba tries to recover from this trauma which coincides with the moment of national independence. Nonceba emerges as a convalescent subject out of the narrative’s reflective structure figured through the violence in both the colonial and postcolonial spaces of the novel. Nonceba’s journey transforms the violent spaces of the novel into spaces of generative reflection. Vera’s convalescent subject is an oppositional subject in Ross Chambers’ sense of opposition as a tactic that does not challenge the power in place, but makes use of circumstances set up by that power for purposes the power may ignore or deny. It contrasts, then, with revolution, which is a mode of resistance to forms of power it regards as illegitimate, that is, as a force that needs to be opposed by a counterforce. But revolutionary materialism tends to undervalue the power of words […] , it fails to see that in the universe of discourse, which is that of human “reality”, oppositional behavior has a particular potential to change states of affairs, by changing people’s “mentalities” (their ideas, attitudes, values, and feelings, which I take to be ultimately manifestations of desire) a potential that is
not available to “other” forms of oppositional practice. This potential derives from the mysterious phenomenon of authority, whereby anyone, given the opportunity to speak, may so use words as to change situations” (1991, 1).

Chambers’ distinction between resistance and opposition is fundamental to understanding the ethos of Vera’s project. Vera does not suggest the illegitimacy of Zimbabwe as an independent nation; instead, through the authority of her narrative voice, she invites opposition in order to better align Zimbabwe with the lived experience of liberation for all of its citizens.

The effects of trauma represented in the novel displace the liberatory aspects of nation. French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes articulates the concept of displacement as a repositioning of philosophical notions of truth. In A Lover’s Discourse, Barthes writes: “Displacement: it is not the truth which is true, but the relation to the lure which becomes true. […] [T]ruth is what […] must be delayed but not denied, […] what I do not cease wanting to know once before dying […] (1977, 230). For Barthes, truth is figured primarily by desire. As such, subjects are discursively constructed through relations of power and desire. U.S. philosopher and literary critic Martha Nussbaum relates subjectivity to the power of narrative, where liberatory consciousness becomes living “as good characters in a good story” (1992, 3). Such a formulation acknowledges the epistemological claims that literature makes and positions narrative address as a voice of authority. Such an emphasis on the epistemological weight of literary texts positions subjectivity as a process of identification and, therefore, foregrounds the significance of reading as a practice of connection. Such a privileging of reading, which is born out of an understanding of the ethical sense of texts, positions art, and the humanist philosophico-aesthetic project more generally, as generative rather than as palliative as it is positioned in a modernity produced through the practices and institutions of the European
Enlightenment. The assumptions that undergird projects of redemption are derived from colonial modernity’s teleological desire for progress, mastery, and knowledge. This teleological impulse is itself driven by a sense of narrativity — though narrated as a rational, organizing drive, it is imbricated both in the desires and the civilizing practices of colonial modernity through which imperial desire is embodied. Through Vera’s re-positioning of reading against a background of violence, a project of creation rather than redemption begins to emerge.

Given the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and imperialism, an effect of the very ambivalence of modernity itself, Vera makes a powerful intervention by suggesting a mirrored relationship between colonial modernity and the postcolonial subject. Given how the postcolonial nation reflects the project of colonial modernity, the postcolonial subject ends up opposing the subject positions available in colonial modernity without rejecting its institutions, techniques, and practices of subjection. The structural coherence of institutions of colonial modernity locates the desire and fascination that fuel postcolonial subjects within the very discourses of modernity. In his essay “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality” (2001), literary scholar Simon Gikandi challenges postcoloniality as a discourse to rethink its positioning as a radical critique of colonial modernity by attending more critically to the actual desires of real postcolonial subjects. He asks, “Where do we locate postcoloniality — in the spaces between and across cultures and traditions or in national states, which, in spite of a certain crisis of legitimacy, still continue to demand affiliation from citizens and subjects” (628). Locating what Gikandi calls “this other desire”— the desire for an identity outside of colonialism but within “the very logic of Enlightenment” through practices of subjection spatially organized by nation —positions postcoloniality, through its power of self-conscious reflection, as an ambivalent project that both reflects and subverts colonial desire (630). Postcoloniality not only
dwell within colonial modernity’s fascinations with improvement and sovereignty but also reworks colonial modernity’s economies of desire (630). In The Stone Virgins, Vera reveals how trauma is sublated in the very fabric of nation and posits the convalescent subject not as a palliative to nation but rather as the postcolonial subject that is able to uses spaces of reflection to generate a liberatory consciousness out of the trauma of nation making.

The dominant narrative of Zimbabwean national identity, and the concept of national identity more generally, is one of unity and the reification of national values. Vera exposes how narratives of unity and reification are founded in loss—in structures of forgetting and political suppression, as well as in bodily violation and political repression. In the novel, the representations of the effects of the violence on Nonceba work together with the multiple figurations of stone to critically query how gender and Zimbabwean nationalism coarticulate to constitute the gendering effects of postcolonial subjection. The sacrifices of the stone “virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king” are revered (2002, 103) However, the returning female liberation fighters —“their clothing a motif of rock and tree” — are treated as pariahs (2002, 56-57). Rather than embracing these flesh and blood women in the same way they do images on cave walls, the men of Bulawayo are gathering the shape of these women into a treasurable memory [ . . . ]; to owe a woman a destiny is more than their minds can deal with [ . . . ] To owe desire, that would be quick and easy, but life, its patterns and progress, this they quickly banish and return their minds to examining the burnished, glossy, dark skin of these undisturbed women whose charity is equal to their capacity for harm. (2002, 61)
Vera’s aesthetics stage Bhabha’s theory of national unity, which outlines how “the nation as a narrative strategy works by calling on the nation’s people to ‘remember and forget’ the nation’s history in order to maintain national unity” (1994, 62). Vera’s main trope of convalescence works against official imperatives to forget. Ultimately, Vera’s novel exposes the intersection of multiple discourses (such as urbanization, neoliberalism, development, gender, nation, class, blackness, whiteness) that represent political, social, and economic relationships of power and sites of subjection—in other words, sites of belonging, as well as of contestation.

Vera also articulates how the figure of the postcolonial subject is driven by desire in its will toward nation. In this way, Vera recenters what “rationalism has always marginalized, namely, desire and agency” (Smith 1988, 86). Vera’s postcolonial subject shares humanist impulses for self-improvement, the fulfillment of desire through knowledge, and the will to locate liberation in the nation state. Finally, through the use of literature, Vera adopts a humanist positioning of reading as a “mode through which community is constituted, where community refers to the forms of connectedness available” (Chambers 1999, 81). Vera’s novel suggests that the postcolonial subject can only be understood against the background and desires of colonial modernity and its deployment of humanist concepts. Her novel invites the reader to pose the basic humanist question: How should I live? Yet, the commitments embodied in Vera’s aesthetics query postcolonial citizenship in a way that invites readers to answer differently—in a way that opposes colonial modernity even as it takes up Enlightenment concepts that undergird its economy and logic. *The Stone Virgins* positions postcoloniality and colonial modernity not as opposites but as connected, and positions critical readings of Anglophone African texts as central to literary criticism in English so that we can come to a fuller, rather than Eurocentric, understanding of our literary heritage.
Works Cited


