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**“A country with land but no habitat”: Women, Violent Accumulation and Negative-Value in Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins***

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**Abstract:** In the work of Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera, land is shown to be a complex and contested resource to which the typically abject fates of her female protagonists are inextricably bound. As she put it in a 2001 interview shortly before the publication of her final novel: “the connection between women and land in Zimbabwe is negative” (Primorac 2004, 161). This article situates Vera’s work in the context of debates over Zimbabwean land reform, and considers examples of how the “negative” connection between women and land is articulated in her fiction through contrasting leitmotifs of abjection and habitat, culminating in the cautiously redemptive conclusion of her last published novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002). The discussion draws on Silvia Federici’s (2004, 2010) work on women, the body and primitive accumulation and on Jason Moore’s (2015) theory of negative-value in the capitalist world-ecology, to account for why, in Vera’s work, the female body is invariably positioned, abjectly, at the nexus of colonial governance and what David Moore (2012) has described as Zimbabwe’s postcolonial regime of “violent accumulation”.

**Keywords:** Yvonne Vera; *The Stone Virgins*; Zimbabwe; land reform; women; abjection; violent accumulation; negative-value

In her tragically short yet remarkably productive career, Yvonne Vera did more than perhaps any other Southern African writer to challenge deeply entrenched taboos concerning women, their bodies and the politics of land. From her first novel, *Nehanda* (1993), which tells the story of the eponymous female spirit medium who galvanizes Shona and Ndebele ethnic groups in concerted resistance to the land grabs of the 1890s, to her last novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002), which relates Nonceba’s tentative recovery from devastating trauma in the aftermath of post-independence violence in Zimbabwe, Vera’s trademark lyricism is at once both deeply personal and trenchantly political. In *The Stone Virgins*, the fate of the novel’s female protagonists is folded into the political through a literary aesthetic that situates the

sexual, reproductive female body in an abject relationship with a postcolonial nationalism that has relentlessly exploited cultural and economic ties with the land as its primary political resource. This article considers Vera's work in the context of debates over Zimbabwean land reform, and explores examples of how what she described as the "negative" connection (Primorac 2004, 161) between women and land is articulated in her fiction through contrasting leitmotifs of abjection and habitat, culminating in *The Stone Virgin's* cautiously redemptive conclusion. I draw on Silvia Federici's (2004, 2010) pioneering enquiry into the historical relationship between women, the body and primitive accumulation, and on Jason Moore's (2015) theory of negative-value in the capitalist world-ecology, to account for why, in Vera's work, the female body is invariably positioned, abjectly, at the nexus of colonial governance and what David Moore (2012) has described as Zimbabwe's postcolonial regime of "violent accumulation".

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said famously argues that it is by virtue of its conflation of the material and the symbolic that land has proven to be the primary resource for anti-colonial resistance:

One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename and reinhabit the land. And with that came a whole set of further assertions, recoveries, identifications, all of them quite literally grounded in this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths and religions – these too are made possible by a sense of the land reappropriated by its people. (273)

Zimbabwe is the paradigmatic example of a postcolonial nation born of a culture of resistance that is, as Said puts it, “quite literally grounded in this poetically projected base” (273). Terence Ranger (1967) was the first to argue that resistance to colonial land grabbing in the 1890s was not fragmentary and uncoordinated, as had been argued in colonial histories up to that point, but was in fact a concerted uprising involving both Ndebele and Shona tribal factions. This mutual uprising was galvanized by a spirit medium who was revered in both communities, and who therefore sanctified diverse ancestral lands. The spirit medium was Nehanda, and this historic episode provided the subject of Vera’s first novel of the same name. Although it was principally spiritual commonality, and unifying religious leadership, rather than a shared class consciousness of expropriation that featured in Ranger’s original account of the events, the confluence between the two was, and to this day still is, manipulated into a powerful ideologeme: namely, that the 1896-1897 uprising, the first *chimurenga*, provided – to borrow from Said (1993) again – a “more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history” (273).

This narrative of uprising, *chimurenga*, was seized upon by the nationalist movement in the 1960s and 1970s to legitimize their claim for the restitution of stolen land and, with it, national sovereignty. The guerrilla war that ensued played out across the vast white-owned farmlands upon which the Rhodesian government depended for economic viability, but also the underdeveloped Tribal Trust Areas that provided their labour reserves: spaces where, as Jocelyn Alexander (2006) notes, customary authority and colonial governance were variously intertwined and contested (4). It was a second *chimurenga*, as its leaders described it, that finally led to independence in 1980. It is this tumultuous moment that the narrative of *The Stone Virgins* straddles. The novel’s publication, however, notably coincides with what is known to ZANU PF supporters as a third *chimurenga*: the takeover of white-owned farmland by War Veterans that morphed into the government’s “fast-track land reform programme”

(FTLRP) in the early 2000s. To this day the *chimurenga* is incorporated into a nationalist narrative continuum to justify elite resource grabbing in the context of “Africa’s land rush”; a new phase of accumulation, “motivated by projections of rising food prices, by growing demand for ‘green’ energy, and by the allure of cheap land and water rights” (Scoones et al. 2015, 1).

In Zimbabwe’s postcolonial literature, land is a contested resource of resistance that, for the rural Zimbabweans who people its novels, affords material subsistence but also a spiritual connection to the past (see Vambe 2005, 2011). For many communities it remains the font of collective memory and plays an integral role in customary affairs. Since the colonial period, however, land has been construed as much a symbolic as a material resource and has consequently accrued increasing political significance. No more so than with the ZANU PF’s FTLRP that commenced in 2000 – the “now” that Vera says *The Stone Virgins* addresses (Primorac 2004, 162) – through which “Zimbabwe’s rulers enunciated a new vision of Zimbabwe, based on an aggressive assertion of sovereignty against the forces of global capitalism, neo-colonialism and the internationally mediated demands of good governance” (Alexander 2006, 11).

For Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros (2005), the FTLRP is lauded as a vital stepping stone toward a “national democratic revolution” (166). For others, this so-called “new” vision of making good on liberation struggle promises regarding the return and redistribution of stolen lands is nothing more than an alibi for rampant resource grabbing and the consolidation of political hegemony in the hands of a small elite (see Laurie 2016). Moore (2012) describes these as “processes of violence and accumulation” that consist of “farm invasions, the diamond-curse, and the *Chipangano*” – the latter being a criminal network supposedly in the service of Robert Mugabe’s cronies – and points out that these “are not recent inventions [but] arise from a long history of conquest and struggles against it in which the link between

power and accumulation is forged by violence” (6). He also insists that this regime of “violent accumulation” was not initiated by the farm invasions in 2000 and subsequent deindustrialization of agriculture, but rather can be traced back to internecine conflict in the nationalist movement during the liberation war and the compromised independent agreement on which it ended. This is the scenario described in *The Stone Virgins* by Sibaso – a disaffected former guerrilla whose savage attack on two sisters frames the narrative – who claims that independence produced a new *species*, Zimbabweans, but not the *habitat* that might sustain it (Vera 2002, 82).

The Lancaster House Agreement, brokered as an independence deal in London in 1979 and policed for the next twenty years by the World Bank and IMF Structural Adjustment Programmes, gave political sovereignty to the black majority but left the most productive land under white ownership (see Scoones 2010). Having previously received criticism for offering an all-too-rosy view of Zimbabwean land reform in the post-2000 period, Ian Scoones (2015) has more recently sought to complicate the two dominant readings of land reform by suggesting that the FTLRP is neither the redistributive project ZANU PF claims it to be, nor a straightforward case of the return of primitive accumulation in neoliberal form. He argues instead that a new politics of land in Zimbabwe has emerged, influenced by the dollarization of the economy in 2009 and the failure of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party to gain traction amongst rural populations, which he describes as a contest between the “interests of new ‘middle farmer’ accumulators and politically connected elites and large scale capital” (3). For Scoones (2015), then, this new “middle” class of farmers holds the key to Zimbabwe’s future:

can a more democratic and accountable state be rebuilt from below, forged by the new alliances of farmers and workers, including women, youth and others, who are

prepared to vote for a party that delivers on the demands of a new resurgent agrarian class, and its allies? (13-14)

This is an important question and yet, as Scoones himself concedes, perhaps “naively optimistic” (14) given the extent to which agricultural capacity and the decolonial promise of “food sovereignty” was damaged in the early 2000s (see Trauger 2015). Moreover, the complex new class arrangements and alliances of this new politics of land fail to incorporate those at the nexus of the “violent accumulation” that Moore describes – namely, women. What such critiques fail to account for is how food sovereignty crisis, marked as it is by increasingly violent competition for resources (see Moore 2012), is inherently related to the violence perpetuated against women that Vera’s novels so vividly document. Nor, indeed, do they recognize that this is precisely because such naturalized violence compromises another source of unpaid reproductive labour on which both capitalist accumulation and communal subsistence depend.

Referring to the gendered violence and collective trauma voiced in *The Stone Virgins*, Stephen Chan (2005) describes the situation in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s as a “condition of abjection” (369), wherein “the goals of government policy [...] seem enigmatic and distant, and the interim means so brutal, that both the *polis* as a permitted plurality, and the individual as a free creature, have anchor neither in the present nor in the hopes for the future” (370; emphasis in original). The warped political rationale Chan describes here – in which, to paraphrase Moore (2012), the link between power and accumulation is forged by *gendered* violence – is key to understanding the persistent troping of abjection and habitat in Vera’s work. Equally, the literary refraction of these symptoms in Vera’s novel reveals an underlying gender dynamic to these processes that too often tends to be sidelined in discussions of the political economy of land (see Moore 2015).

### **Habitat, environment-making and Vera's socio-ecological aesthetic**

Much has been written about Vera's aestheticization of pain, trauma and the body (see, for example, Gagiano 2006; Rooney 2007; Kostelac 2010; Norridge 2012), but less attention has been paid to the socio-ecological imagery and leitmotifs that comprise this aesthetic. These derive, I suggest, from an intertwining of human and extra-human natures that is partly informed by Vera's investment in the animist spiritualism of traditional Zimbabwean cultures, and partly by a Foucauldian understanding of how power operates through the disciplining of bodies and discursive production of "nature" (Samuelson 2007, 23). The idea of "habitat" as an environment that is necessary for the survival of life, and not only of humans but of all the life-forms it harbours, provides a conceptual frame through which the complexity of intimate inter-personal relations and their imbrication in what Jason W. Moore (2015) describes as the "dialectical relation between human and extra-human natures in the web of life" (5). This, I contend, is vividly brought to life in *The Stone Virgins*. Vera's motifs and imagery evoke what Moore (2015) calls the *oikeios*: "the creative, generative, and multi-layered relation of species and environment" (33) with and within the capitalist world-ecology. From this perspective, human nature is dialectically intertwined with extra-human natures just as the production of nature with capitalist accumulation. Vera's aesthetic powerfully illustrates these uneven relations, even as her novels to re-imagine the ways in which, to paraphrase Moore, species make environments and environments make species.

*The Stone Virgins* opens with alternate chapters that provide impressionistic sketches of Rhodesia's second city, Bulawayo, and its nearby "rural enclave" (Vera 2002, 17), the village of Kezi in a Tribal Trust Area located in the Matapo hills in Mataberland. The narrative is focalized through the perspectives of several interrelated characters: two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, who live and work in Kezi; Thenjiwe's lover Cephas, who becomes

Nonceba's companion following the attack; and, their assailant Sibaso, the former guerrilla who hails from Bulawayo but who refuses to demob and harbours in the sacred hills at independence. These alternating perspectives give voice to the previously unspoken violence of the *Gukhurahundi*: the mass killings and destruction of property and place in Matabeleland – the heartland of Ndebele opposition to the Shona ZANU PF party – wrought by the government's Chinese-trained "Fifth Brigade" in the early 1980s (see Gagiano 2006).

In Vera's (2002) rendering of Thenjiwe's and Cephas's love affair, pre-independence Kezi is depicted as a socio-ecological space of potential unity – a tentative allegory of nationalist hopes for independence. The relationship is expressed through figurative language that intermingles human and extra-human natures, but is also encoded in tropes of economic exchange. Cephas "places his foot where she has left an imprint in the soil, wanting to possess, already, each part of her, her weight on the soft soil, her shape. He wants to preserve her in his own body, gathering her presence from the soil like perfume" (38). Thenjiwe dictates the relationship with Cephas, thinking of it as a kind of ethno-ecological exchange between their home landscapes. She wants to bear a child called "Mazhanje", named after a fruit from the predominantly Shona area of Chimanimani, and to reveal to Cephas the secrets of the "Marula" tree that is indigenous to Kezi:

She wants to discover the shape of its roots and show them to him till these roots are no longer under the ground but become lines planted on his palms, each stroke a path for their dreaming. She knows that if she finds the shape of these roots, at least, he would know a deep truth about her land, about Kezi, about the water buried beneath their feet. (46)

Cephas's desire to possess Thenjiwe is poetically conveyed, their relationship mediated through the social, ecological and political complexity of land. Thenjiwe's body is the key that links human and extra-human natures in a dialectical sphere of reproduction through and within the *oikeios*.

The landscapes Cephas and Thenjiwe are not only born into, but continue to inhabit socially, economically and ecologically, are ethnically specific sacred spaces that are implicitly gendered in nationalist ideology (see Boehmer 2009; Graham 2009). For Thenjiweto to make love to Cephas, for instance, is to make known "the deep truth about her land". However, their intimacy does not endure and the political dream of socio-ecological unification is foreclosed when independence finally arrives. A different kind of independence to that which was envisaged is initially glimpsed – and embodied – when the female freedom fighters return to Kezi and take shelter in the Thandabantu store during the ceasefire:

This veranda was their abode; they transformed it, and they became the ultimate embodiment of freedom. They made independence sudden and real, and the liberation war fought in the bush became as true as the presence of these soldiers. Freedom: a way of being, a voice, a body to behold. (130)

However, this habitat as well as the new "way of being" it enables do not last long. Violence returns as the new ZANU PF-led government declares war on the ZAPU guerrillas, but also commences a much wider campaign of violence and terror that ravages the heartland of the new government's opposition. The pre-independence social spaces of Kezi and the agricultural capacity of surrounding lands are all laid to waste in this violence. So, too, is any residual sacred connection to the land as a resource for creating habitat, just as Nonceba is left physically scarred and deeply traumatized by Sibaso's attack. In articulating this trauma

through lyrical poiesis, Vera's narrative draws parallels between the female body and the land, and the co-production – but also the abject sundering – of species and environment. In an earlier study I argued that Vera's poetic prose *literalizes* abjection, as it has been theorized by Julia Kristeva, in order to articulate the complexity of identity formation for her female protagonists (Graham 2009, 114): as Kristeva (1982) puts it, “refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3; emphasis in original). Hence, in relation to the *The Stone Virgins*, a Kristevan understanding of abjection seems even more relevant for understanding Vera's socio-ecological aesthetic.

In the second section of Vera's last novel, subtitled “1981-1986”, the narrative repeatedly returns to the originary traumatic moment: Sibaso's attack on the sisters, involving the decapitation of Thenjiwe and the rape and mutilation of Nonceba. Nonceba's perspective on this event is conveyed through imagery that aestheticizes the psychological damage as well as the physical violence of the attack. Rather than offering the reader a direct account of the attack, the narrative evokes the destruction of a habitat:

She is without shelter. Everything is changed. She has a desperate feeling that everything has already changed, gone, not to be recovered. Nothing can be the same. Her own arms have changed, her body. Kezi, the place of birth, is no longer her own. She remembers Kezi, surrounded by the hills. She has loved every particle of earth there, the people, the animals, the land. The sky above her is now different; the sky should carry dreams. (90)

If Nonceba works through the event using the socio-ecological language and imagery of habitat, her attacker, Sibaso, also speaks to Moore's concept of *oikeois* in describing his sense of alienation under the new dispensation in a section that segues through another description

of the attack. As Sibaso explains: “Independence, which took place three years ago, has proved us a tenuous species, a continent that has succumbed to a violent wind, a country with land but no habitat. We are out of bounds in our own reality” (82). That it is the *perpetrator* of such terrible violence who speaks this fundamental truth of Zimbabwe’s “condition of abjection” (Chan 2005, 369-370) is testament to the complexity of the collective trauma associated with the politics of land.

As its title suggests, *The Stone Virgins* is concerned with how a patriarchal obsession with women’s sexuality, and specifically control of their reproductive bodies, has been naturalized through the politicization of land and cultural memory in Zimbabwe’s history. The titular “stone virgins” are figures carved into the rocks of a cave system in the lands of Gulati – the shrine where Sibaso “steals shelter from the dead” after the war (Vera 2002, 104). Annie Gagiano (2006) has argued that Sibaso seeks to license his attack on Thenjiwe and Nonceba as being in continuum with the sacrifice of virgins depicted in a San cave painting, while Sue Kostelac (2010) suggests that Thenjiwe is sacrificed precisely because she “enjoys a feeling of connectedness with the land, without its associated obligations of fertility and nurturance”, arguing that, “in her autonomous attitude she embodies a form of female agency and self-knowledge that is painfully desired, but never fully realized by Mazvita or Phephelaphi” (80). Mazvita is the female protagonist of Vera’s 1994 novel, *Without a Name*, who performs an abortion on herself having been raped by a “freedom fighter” and, notably, both of these traumatic events are described in terms of her body being violated by the land itself (Graham 2009, 113). Mazvita’s fate is abject for precisely the same reason as Thenjiwe’s is in *The Stone Virgins*: her resistance to capitalist patriarchy is defined by a naturalized connection between land and the female body. Vera (1994) writes that:

She had loved the land, saw through passionate and intense moments of freedom, but for her the land had no fixed loyalties [...] If it yielded crop it could also free her, like the plants which grew upon it and let of their own blooms, their own scents, their own colour, while anchored in the land [...] She could grow anywhere. (40-41)

Both women and land enable economic production but also socio-ecological reproduction. The threat of losing control of either of these imperils patriarchal authority and capitalist accumulation, hence the conflation of the female body with land and their complicated relationship across capitalist world-history. Just as Mazvita attempted – yet ultimately failed – to redefine her connection to the land as a mobile affiliation in *Without a Name*, Nonceba has to move away from the land in order to break the “negative” connection and regain the autonomy we witnessed burgeoning in Thenjiwe prior to independence (and before her, in Vera’s other female protagonists).

In the novel’s final chapter, as Nonceba recovers in Cephas’s Bulawayo home, we see the return of such dreams and the modelling of a new kind of shared space where hospitality *is* habitat. *The Stone Virgins* marks a departure from the absolutely abject register of Vera’s previous narratives insofar as the surviving sister ends the novel on a tentative path to recovery from the terrible violence she has experienced. Nonceba is aided by Cephas, an archivist of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, who offers a “reconstructive gesture” (Samuelson 2007, 30) in the hospitality he provides, but also in the way it comes to inform his work. As Cephas says:

A new nation needs to restore the past. His focus, the beehive hut, to be installed at Lobengula’s ancient kraal, kwoBulawayo, the following year. His task is to learn to re-create the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet, and dry, the way the

grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool, liveable places within – deliverance. (Vera 2002, 184)

But there is also some doubt regarding the potential for the transformation of socio-ecological conditions that might deliver the longed-for habitat. Cephas anticipates the creation of a new, man-made environment in which Zimbabweans as a species might flourish. This resolution is prefaced, however, by him reading a doctor's report that reiterates the physical violence and remedial surgery that has left Nonceba permanently scarred: "He must retreat from Nonceba; perhaps he has become too involved in replicating histories" (184). That this admission comes before the final, allegorical evocation of habitat and deliverance at the end of the novel testifies to the terrible legacy of "violent accumulation" in Zimbabwe, whereby the female body remains the object through which the complexities of land and capital continue to be played out. This, I would argue, is why the female body and its "negative" connection with nature carries such a heavy symbolic burden in Vera's work. Independence, both personal and political, is circumscribed by an ideological regime that tethers women to their reproductive "nature" (see Boehmer 2009) in order to prop up postcolonial power and productivity through an increasingly intensive, if self-negating, mode of "violent accumulation".

### **Negative-value and the persecution of women**

*The Stone Virgins* was published in 2002 at the height of the state-endorsed invasion of white-owned farmland which, at that stage, was widely understood as the belated attempted to address the continued "land hunger" of the majority black population whilst buttressing the political authority of Mugabe's ZANU PF party. Once regarded as the "breadbasket of southern Africa" (Chikuhwa 2012, 41) Zimbabwe's agricultural productivity, following an

initial post-independence boom, declined through the 1990s as the government acceded to the Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the World Bank, “heralding a period of economic stagnation and contraction that badly damaged the promise of ‘development’” (Alexander 2006, 11). By the early 2000s the combined effects of drought, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the FTLRP saw “the intensification of non-commodified production in rural areas to cover social costs of production, including nutritional security and health care” (O’Laughlin 2013, 181). Rather than paving the way toward food sovereignty, on 30 April 2002 the Zimbabwean government acknowledged that the country was in “food crisis”, leading to an emergency international relief programme for an estimated 7.8 million people in need of food aid (Zvogbo 2009, 317).

The situation *The Stone Virgins* addresses is therefore an example of a world-historical moment that, according to Jason W. Moore (2014), marks the beginning of the end of “Cheap Food” (2) and precipitates the current crisis of neoliberal capitalism via the paradigm-shifting emergence of “negative-value” (5). Moore’s conception of negative-value gives name to the systemic patterns of economic and ecological exhaustion that occur, essentially, when capitalism eats itself – a latent tendency that has been suppressed since the emergence of the modern world-system through capitalism’s successive ecological revolutions. World-ecological revolutions occur with the opening of new commodity frontiers, typically through agricultural or technological revolution and/or colonial adventure, as soon as the exhaustion of existing socio-ecological relations and resources threatens to increase the cost of production to the extent that accumulation itself is imperilled. The end of “Cheap Food” is significant, Moore argues, because it signals that the “accumulation of negative-value, immanent but latent from the origins of capitalism, is now issuing a layer of contradictions that can no longer be ‘fixed’ by technical, organizational, or imperial restructuring” (5). The irrevocable planetary transformations of climate change are the most

obvious signal of this systemic shift but, in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), Moore is notably chary of the anthropocentrism that tends to frame discussions of climate change. Instead, the accumulation of negative-value is identified in a range of phenomena, from superweeds and antibiotic resistance to personal debt and mass unemployment. Moore's central point is that these examples disclose an underlying crisis of reproduction in the capitalist world-ecology, as opposed to the crises of production and productivity that attend cyclical phases of capitalist accumulation. However, despite prefacing his larger argument by noting that women's productive and reproductive labour is integral to the "free gifts" that are foundational for accumulation – a succinct quote from Maria Mies's *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) on how unpaid work/energy derives from "women, nature, and colonies" (77) is deemed sufficient here – when discussing negative-value in detail, women are typically lost from the equation.

In the pioneering work of Marie Mies (1986) and Sylvia Federici (2004), meanwhile, we find the history of women's relation to accumulation in colonial modernity described as not only one of domination, but resistance. Specifically, it is resistance to their "naturalization" and, indeed, demonization as unpaid reproducers of labour-power, productivity and ecological surpluses. Arguably, the characteristically abject fate of Vera's protagonists can similarly be read as a form of resistance – to patriarchy as such, but also, vis-à-vis the logic of negative-value, to accumulation. To describe the experience of these characters in terms of resistance might seem perverse, but this is exactly what is encapsulated in the image of the "*Amavimbandlebe* – a multitude of tiny insects, winged, blind, dashing themselves against each drop of rain" that Vera (2002) uses to evoke Thenjiwe's burgeoning independence – as well as the violence this exposes her to – in the moment before she is attacked by Sibaso (35). In the *Amavimbandlebe*, Thenjiwe sees "a multitude of insects rising like glory, ready to die in order to lose their wings, to be buried in rain. The greatest freedom

– to shed the possibility of flight” (35).

It is precisely because it confronts the complexity of resistance in this way that Vera’s 2002 novel has something very profound to say about women, land and the *gendered* violence of accumulation – not only in Zimbabwe’s modern history but, crucially, on a world-ecological scale. Just like the female protagonists in her earlier novels, such as Mazvita in *Without a Name* (1994) and Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning* (1998), Thenjiwe and Noceba search for autonomy and yet their quests invariably leave them abject – in relation to national history and communal lands, to their homes, families and lovers, to the work they do and even to their own bodies. Whatever independence they achieve is typically defined through resistance to patriarchal power, violence and accumulation, and remains bound to the politicized social ecology of land. In an interview that took place while she was writing *The Stone Virgins* in 2001, Vera reflected that: the “connection to the land for the women is that of the disturbance. Something negative” (quoted in Primorac 2004, 161). She elaborates upon this idea further in relation to the travails of Mazvita in *Without a Name*:

she is raped, and she sees it as something that has come, the land has come and physically [...] so she rejects it and the city is sort of landless for her. You know. It is these concrete buildings and whatever, so she is not connected to it in the way that the argument has been articulated by the men. (Vera, quoted in Primorac 2004, 161)

Just as the gendered violence and condition of abjection Mazvita experiences is directly associated with the transformation of her environment – or habitat – Vera makes the same observation in relation to Phephelaphi’s relationship with the land in *Butterfly Burning*:

She goes deep into it, with the sand and all that, and she uses it [when she self-

administers an abortion]. But it is the most extreme violation that she could make. It refuses to open up when she is trying to pick it. It refuses and refuses. So she does not feel that harmony which [her male lover] Fumbatha has been looking for and was born into and all that. For her, [land] is not a treasure. (161)

Primorac asks her if the situation for women remained the same in 2001; Vera's response is telling in a number of ways:

I have set a novel which I'm currently writing, in the "now". Perhaps this [*The Stone Virgins*] is my most brave novel, I don't know. But it is set in the time of 1980 to '86. You have heard about the violence against the people of Matabeleland? And there I had to . . . I wanted to talk about the Matopo [hills] – I don't know if you know them – the women painted on the rocks, and all these things, but in a way that is surrounded by this war, and the man interprets this very sexually, this language of the rocks. And the woman – in violence. And I'm trying there to again explore the differences in how these groups – the men, the women – relate to the land. And I think I made it less resolved in this new book. (161-162)

The "now" Vera addresses in *The Stone Virgins* is defined by an upsurge in political violence associated with the "farm invasions" that precipitated the FTLRP. But it is also a context defined by food scarcity and the government's waning ability to assert control over its increasingly unruly subjects, crops, yields and lands for which women – in continuation of an established trend in Zimbabwe, as well as in capitalist modernity more generally – are typically scapegoated. Lynette Jackson (1999) has observed how, in Zimbabwe, post-independence "public order" campaigns have specifically targeted single (and/or childless)

women, perpetuating a colonial discourse that associates “mobile African women, criminality and the spread of sexually transmitted disease” (147). Sorche Gunne’s (2014) work on neighbouring South Africa also suggests that such campaigns are symptomatic of a “masculine sociodicy” that naturalizes domination over everything that might nurture and reproduce life and/or growth. “Gendered violence is not exceptional”, writes Gunne: “The World Health Organisation reports that gendered violence ‘accounts for more death and disability among women aged 15-44 than cancer, malaria, traffic injuries and war combined’” (xii). In the work of Mies (1986) and Federici (2004), the history of such violence and specifically capitalism’s pathological obsession with controlling the sexual, reproductive body is shown to be closely tied to primitive accumulation. Observing an upsurge in “witch-hunts” across the global South in the 2000s, Federici (2010) argues that the phenomenon is “rooted in the intense social crisis that economic liberalization has produced in much of the world, to the extent that it has stripped entire populations of their means of subsistence, torn communities apart, deepened economic inequalities and forced people to compete for diminishing resources” (11).

This trend illustrates the extent to which the misogynist disciplining of women’s bodies is intertwined with what Jason Moore (2015) terms “landscape discipline” (60), and how this particular facet of accumulation is a fundamental yet overlooked aspect of capitalist modernity’s combined and uneven development across the world. In the Zimbabwean context, for women to realize autonomy – by rejecting motherhood and/or leaving partners, family and the land for the city – they must endure abjection and, with it, metabolic rupture from communal means of subsistence. This means being marginalized by the state at the very least, and at its most extreme being cast aside “to a dead past”, as with Thenjiwe’s decapitated body (Vera 2002, 72). Cephas’s symbolic project to deliver a national habitat that might free Nonceba and all she represents of this terrible legacy provides a model for co-

habitation based on sharing rather than possession. But just as Nonceba is left with an inescapable disfiguration that *he* is unable to come to terms with, the subsequent intensification rather than cessation of violent accumulation in the years since the publication of *The Stone Virgins* – sadly, but in my view tellingly – seems to have been anticipated in the ambiguous ending to the novel. Despite modelling an environment that might offer “deliverance” (Vera 2002, 184), Cephas remains trapped in a cyclical historical logic and given the novel’s elliptical ending, we are left to assume that, so too, do Vera’s women.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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