

Zimbabwean Literature since 1980: Irrealist Style and Capitalist Modernization

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Abstract

Zimbabwean Literature since 1980: Irrealist Style and Capitalist Modernization

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This dissertation analyzes the works of three Zimbabwean writers since 1980—Dambudzo Marechera, Yvonne Vera and NoViolet Bulawayo—using the lenses of the world-systems theory of combined and uneven development and irrealist aesthetics. It draws upon the Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC’s) definition of “irrealism” as a literary style that incorporates experimental and non-representational techniques, sometimes alongside realist techniques. Marechera, Vera and Bulawayo use irrealism to engage with political economy, more specifically the uneven nature of capitalist modernization. The Marxian theory of “combined and uneven development” is based on the contributions of Lenin and Trotsky to understanding world-systems. Lenin observed transnational unevenness, specifically between the core national powers and the peripheral countries they dominate. Trotsky observed that during transitional periods, archaic and modern social formations often combined in unpredictable ways. Trotsky also emphasized that the capitalist system had become hegemonic across the globe. Following these contributions, Deckard et al argue that capitalist development “does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course” (12).

Modernity is composed of inconsistencies between the archaic and the contemporary and conflict between core and various layered peripheries.

Marechera, Vera and Bulawayo deploy irrealist techniques to “show us what it feels like to live on a given ground” within the systemic crises of postcoloniality, civil war, post-independence authoritarianism and economic failure, as indicators of world-system combined unevenness (Lazarus 133-134). Marechera developed a Menippean satirical project that manifested in both writing and performance, to respond to power hierarchies as embedded within opposition groups and revolutionary politics both in Zimbabwe and in the UK. Vera wrote feminist revisionist historiographical fiction as a response to the layered peripheralization of certain groups—women, the poor, and Ndebele communities in Matabeleland. Bulawayo has exhibited less interest in specifying the historical context for her work than either of her predecessors. Although she deploys irrealist techniques, Bulawayo’s creative choices are imbricated in the literary market particular to the US, a core market in the world-literary system.

DEDICATION

For Jasmine, whose dreams afford me mine.

And for Virginia, from whom I inherit all I know.

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INTRODUCTION

Irrealism as a Critique of Combined and Uneven Development

In their recent book publication, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015), the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) makes a strong case for revising understandings of “world” or “global” literature. The authors of *Combined and Uneven Development*, researchers from the departments of English and comparative studies at Warwick University, are Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Macdonald, Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro. Deckard et al suggest that several comparativist theorists, including David Damrosch, Gayatri Spivak and Emily Apter, propagate overly optimistic glossings of “world literature” as an “even playing field” that enables the best cutting-edge creative production in the era of globalization (22-23). The WReC theorists define world literature from a historical materialist perspective, as a system of cultural production that reflects the dynamics and hierarchies of the broader economic world-system. World literature, they contend, is “the literature of the world-system” (8). They wish to connect creative choices to historical time and place, more specifically to the kinds of combined, uneven, under- or un- development occurring in that time and place (Deckard et al 26).

As a conjunction to this move to contextualize literary production within the particularities of local history and the workings of the capitalist world-system, Deckard et al resist an overly facile, antinomial understanding of realist versus modernist style. They understand “Modernism” as a particular cultural formation that developed in response to capitalist modernization in the US and Europe, rather than a style antagonistic to and/or revolutionary of “Realism.” “Modernism” in this historically located sense responded to the particular vagaries of capitalist modernization as experienced during and after the European and American Industrial Revolution. But modernist *techniques* can feature in literature and other

cultural production at any time as a response to the ongoing processes and inequities of world-system modernity, which are not confined to the specifics of capitalist modernization in that particular time and place. In this way Deckard et al redefine modernist elements, or simply elements of literary style that move beyond the real/ist/ic, as cultural responses to historical developments. For Deckard et al, realist and modernist techniques can and often do exist in the same work.

Thus this approach avoids reading contemporary literary works, written outside the Anglo-American core and deploying modernist techniques, as anachronistic or backwards in a Eurocentric teleology of literary development. Modernity, Deckard et al argue, is not an objective now achieved in some places, but rather the ongoing combined and uneven state of the world-system. Thus Deckard et al show the illogic of comparing “modernist” features in contemporary third-world literature to Modernist style in European and American literature from the early twentieth century. Instead, the question becomes how such literatures cluster into locally specific cultural formations responding to particular events and situations of the capitalist world-system on the local level. How do these works respond stylistically to “the *dialectics of core and periphery* that underpin all cultural production in the modern era” (Deckard et al 51)? The WReC’s conception of core-peripheral dialectics follows Lenin’s glossing of development as “the struggle of opposites” (“On the Question of Dialectics,” 1915). The “single whole” consists of “contradictory parts”—core capitalist nations and peripheral nations—, which are always dynamically engaged in a struggle for power (Lenin, “On the Question of Dialectics”). These tensions are also evident at the national and local level, where certain individuals and groups attempt to wrest power within the broader system by disenfranchising other individuals and groups. Cultural production often reflects and/or responds to this combined unevenness as

manifest in socioeconomics and politics, especially in sites where capitalist modernization has resulted in crisis situations such as economic disaster or civil war. Cultural production itself also occurs as part of the world-system economy (here, “world literature”), and is thus interconnected with its socioeconomic dimensions. Some cultural workers comment on the combined unevenness of cultural markets as well. For this reason, the lens of combined and uneven development aids in interpreting such works.

I find this argument both convincing and applicable to the case of African literatures. Rather than placing these literatures on a teleological continuum established by the developments of the capitalist world-system in core metropolises, the theory of combined and uneven development calls for analyzing these literatures as both reflective of and responsive to core-peripheral conflict. The WReC refers to features often associated with “modernism” as “irrealist.” This opens up the study of such features so they can be productively decoupled from the assumption that they represent a particular phase of literary development. It allows for the recognition that irrealism thrives in the modern literary world in varying places and times as a response to the inconsistencies of capitalist modernization. It also highlights the futility of dividing “national” literatures from “world” literatures, since literature in the peripheries often responds to world-system dynamics as they manifest in national politics and local inequities. Both national and global contexts helpfully inform readings of particular works.

This dissertation takes the notion of irrealism as a response to combined and uneven development and applies it to the case of the works of three Zimbabwean authors since Independence in 1980: Dambudzo Marechera, Yvonne Vera and NoViolet Bulawayo. This application to literature from Zimbabwe’s post-independence history enables an analysis of the creative choices of the three authors as reflective of and responsive to the material and political

realities of that particular era and place. It enables a fruitful exploration of how literary analysis techniques from an area studies/national literatures framework and from a comparativist/transnationalist framework might be helpfully combined in practice. It allows for a holistic investigation of the texts, as material objects produced and circulating within economic markets; containers of contextual political/cultural information and value systems from writer to reader; and archives of particular political and historical developments from peripheralized and re-peripheralized perspectives. This case study focuses on the Zimbabwean postcolony as a space at the periphery of the periphery of the world-system.

I have chosen Marechera, Vera and Bulawayo because they have all achieved transnational circulation, making for an interesting consideration of how they are producers within a cultural market that has a core and periphery of its own. Each of these authors comes out of and responds to a different moment in postcolonial Zimbabwean history, and each author also deals with the reality of writing in diaspora while dealing in some fashion with national concerns. These three authors, as the winners of various Pan-African and transnational literary prizes and the featured authors of publishing houses in the US and the UK, are widely considered a part of the canon of contemporary Zimbabwean and, more broadly, African literature. Placing these three authors into conversation enables an exploration of differing responses to combined and uneven development as manifest in the particularities of Zimbabwean political history, the relationship of that history to the broader world-system, and how these dynamics play out in the circulation of Zimbabwean literary texts worldwide.

Marechera developed a Menippean satirical project that manifested in both writing and performance. He deployed irrealist techniques to respond to power hierarchies as embedded within opposition groups and revolutionary politics both in Zimbabwe and in the UK. Vera wrote

feminist revisionist historiographical fiction as a response to the layered peripheralization of certain groups—women, the poor, and Ndebele communities in Matabeleland—within the already peripheralized space of the Zimbabwean postcolony. Bulawayo has exhibited less interest in specifying the historical context for her work than either of her predecessors. Although she deploys irrealist techniques, these work in service of the creation of a strong affective connection between the reader and her sympathetic first-person protagonist and narrator. This style of narration is largely absent from the works of Marechera and Vera. Bulawayo's creative choices are imbricated in the literary market particular to the US, a core market in the world-literary system. I will substantiate these claims about the novels in the chapters below. The remainder of the introduction will provide background on the theory of combined and uneven development, the world-literary system as understood using this theory, and the style of irrealism as a response to capitalist modernization.

Theoretical Background

The theory of combined and uneven development originated in the field of historical materialism. Marx explained, in his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), that during transitional phases of capitalist modernization a “progressive” mode of production and a “backwards” mode of production are *combined*, leading to the *uneven* development of capitalist market forces and bureaucracy (19-23; see also Howard and King 230-231). Although Marx did not focus on this complication to the broader trajectory of capitalist development, the concept became salient again in the context of tsarist Russia. Early Russian Marxists recognized unevenness in capitalist development in their own prerevolutionary society. Plekhanov and Ryazanov both suggested that capitalist modernization occurred in Russia through the

combination of tsarism with modern economic and social structures, rather than the smooth replacement of the former by the latter (Howard and King 230). However, this suggestion would not be fully theorized until the later works of Lenin and, most definitively, Trotsky. In *Imperialism* (1916), Lenin made a general observation that “The uneven and spasmodic development of individual enterprises, individual branches of industry and individual countries is inevitable under the capitalist system” (679). Lenin described two transnational aspects of this unevenness: competition among the dominant national (core) powers, and those powers’ struggle for dominance over both “the colonies themselves” and “the diverse forms of dependent countries which politically are formally independent but in fact, are enmeshed in the net of financial and diplomatic dependence” (*Imperialism* 723-724; see also Davidson 19). However, Lenin did not apply the concept of unevenness clearly within the national context.

Trotsky’s first theoretical innovation on the concept of unevenness was the incorporation of the Marxian concept of “combined development” as a causal factor at the national level. Trotsky insisted, against the descriptions of Lenin and others that Russia was primarily a “backwards” social formation, that it was instead unbalanced to the extreme, having developed “economic structures which are simultaneously the most modern and the most retarded in Europe” (Howard and King 228). Further, these structures functioned to advance capitalist development in certain sectors (namely, industry) through the exploitation and underdevelopment—moving further “backwards”—of others (namely, agriculture) (Howard and King 227-228). In Trotsky’s words, “From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which for want of a better name, we may call the law of combined development—by which we mean a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (27-28). This combined development was

inherently unstable; tensions between the archaic and the modern made conflict both inevitable and unpredictable (Davidson 22).

For Trotsky this combined and uneven development was a national phenomenon, a specific manifestation of the general, permeating unevenness Lenin observed. The nation-state itself, under these circumstances, is a combined social formation (Davidson 23). Trotsky also noted that the nation-states most likely to develop in this combined and uneven manner were those that had formed through the processes of colonization. Imperial policies prevented these nation-states from developing the fully functioning economic, social and political institutions of modern capitalism (Davidson 21). However, Trotsky recognized that development was also uneven in the advanced countries, which were not necessarily void of combined formations (Howard and King 234). Trotsky's second important theoretical innovation was his emphasis on the pervasiveness and hegemony of capitalism as a world-system: "Marxism takes its starting point from world economy, not as a sum of national parts but as a mighty and independent reality which has been created by the international division of labour and the world market and which in our epoch imperiously dominates the national markets. The productive forces of capitalist society have long ago outgrown the national boundaries" (22). In emphasizing capitalism as the modern world-system, Trotsky implied that combined and uneven development was the defining feature of the modern world everywhere.

Therefore, these two important theoretical innovations are easily conflated, resulting in a different interpretation of combined and uneven development than Trotsky originally intended. "Combined" development could also be construed to refer to the interpenetration of societies, so that the conditions of development of one affect the conditions of development of the rest. Although Trotsky associated combined and uneven development with national social formations,

he recognized the transnational unevenness of capitalist production and modernization as manifest in systems of domination and primitive accumulation. Thus development in all societies is “combined” under the totality of this one uneven world-system (Barker 77). This interpretation of “combined and uneven development” is an offshoot of Trotsky’s original formulation that incorporates Lenin’s observation of transnational unevenness, specifically between the core national powers and the peripheral countries they dominate. It is in this sense that Deckard et al describe one combined modernity in which capitalist development “does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course. Combined *and* uneven” (12). Deckard et al show that this one combined modernity features not only development of modern capitalist systems but also “underdevelopment, maldevelopment and dependent development” (13). They make clear that “The idea of some sort of ‘achieved’ modernity, in which unevenness would have been superseded, harmonised, vanquished or ironed out is radically unhistorical” (Deckard et al 13). This one combined modernity is composed of inconsistencies between the archaic and the contemporary and conflict between core and periphery. As all places in all situations of “development” are subject to the dynamics of that world-system, so are all markets for production, including cultural production.

World Literature in the World-System

Although the term “world literature” dates back at least to Goethe (Jameson 68), the use of the term by most critics today is as “an extension of comparative literature,” more specifically “*the remaking of comparative literature after the multicultural debates and the disciplinary critique of Eurocentrism*” (Deckard et al 4). Despite this “remaking,” critiques of “world literature” as a comparativist approach remain. The theory of combined and uneven development

can be helpfully applied to the theory of world literature because, as David Damrosch has admitted, there is a need for refinement: “The three intertwined problems are that the study of world literature can very readily become culturally deracinated, philologically bankrupt, and ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of global capitalism. Other than that, we’re in good shape” (Damrosch and Spivak 456). These problems are due to the fact that world literature is a market of cultural production within the world-system, and therefore subject to combined and uneven development that creates a core of literary privilege and a periphery of literary disadvantage. The “third world,” or the peripheries, are “all in various distinct ways locked in a life-or-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism—a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization” (Jameson 68). The study of world literature can end up reiterating rather than disrupting the privilege attached to core languages, media, forms and styles.

The process of the canonization of African literatures illustrates this problematic. African writers in peripheralized postcolonial nations tend to have less access to opportunities for funding, publication and marketing (see Larson; Zell). Such nations might be “politically [and] formally independent but in fact, are enmeshed in the net of financial and diplomatic dependence” (Lenin, *Imperialism* 723-724). Writers in these spaces often need to create literary work that is marketable to metropolitan readers in the literary core. They are thus subject to critical standards emanating from that core and consolidating its position of privilege. For example, Damrosch must contend with the accusation that North American anthologies have largely defined the field of “world literature.” The literary prize system centered in New York and London has been instrumental in establishing the reputations for many African authors

writing in English. Pascale Casanova argues that the British practice of awarding literary prizes to Commonwealth authors from former colonies “was a curious yet clever way of incorporating as part of official British literary history works that to one degree or another were written *against* it” (121). Olabode Ibrionke argues that Heinemann’s African Writers Series (AWS) had the silent purpose of “first and foremost the securing of the global triumph of the English language, the aid it gave to the fostering of the British Commonwealth project and the cultural dominance of Englishness, which in return afforded the writers international recognition” (4). Graham Huggan, James Gibbs and Rand Bishop describe European and American critical standards as the dominant measures of value for African works of literature.

Neil Lazarus has provided “cosmopolitanism” as an example of a world literary critical standard. He argues that this standard “often looks suspiciously like an edict” in application and therefore “has been critiqued as complicit with imperialism” (119-120). Frantz Fanon, for example, claims that the expectation for cosmopolitanism “of a colonial type” places African and other postcolonial writers in a position that skews “uncritically toward Europe” (Lazarus 120). Graham Huggan describes another “colonial type” standard in his work on the “palatable exotic.” If the market for world literature requires African writers to deny local particularities and conform to the production standards of the literary core in order to gain entrance, it is open to critique for being “ideologically complicit” with “global capitalism” as a neo-imperial system (Damrosch and Spivak 456). The other problems Damrosch notes, that studying world literature can become “culturally deracinated” and “philologically bankrupt,” relate to the issue of cultural and linguistic translation. The cultural significance of African works of literature may be lost on American and European readers and critics. Lazarus argues that these works “are too often abstracted from their particular contexts” (131). Comparativist approaches to world literature, in

his view, too frequently assimilate works that have locally specific meanings into “globally dispersed aesthetic mode[s]” defined by previous European and American literary movements—usually, defined in relationship to “Modernism” (131-132). Damrosch confirms a recent tendency in comparative studies to focus on form and language, “close reading” as opposed to historical context. Linguistic translation may also “bankrupt” the text of the richness of local meaning (Damrosch and Spivak 456).

Scholars theorizing world literature are concerned with these issues. Damrosch remains committed to comparativism and concludes that by forging “divergent approaches” comparativists can “reframe comparative study in a global context, using it to spread the study of language and culture and to push back at every possible stage against the vagaries of the global capital market” (Damrosch and Spivak 464). Other scholars are skeptical that a critical mindset is sufficient and call for new disciplinary frameworks altogether. Casanova’s project in *The World Republic of Letters* is to propose “a new tool for the reading and interpretation of literary texts that may be at once, and without any contradiction, internal (textual) and external (historical),” a tool that combines the “French critical tradition” on which “close reading” is founded with “postcolonial critique” (xii-xiii). Lazarus and his colleagues in the WReC wish to both emphasize “the local specificity of selfhoods and social logics” as expressed in works of “world literature” and locate those works as the “literatures of global modernity” (Lazarus 121). Thus the WReC defines world literature as “*the literature of the (capitalist) world system*” in attempts to develop a new approach that addresses the imbrication of cultural production in the systemic combined and uneven development (Lazarus 122; see also Deckard et al 8).

Defining world literature in this way opens up literary analysis of African texts by suggesting that textual innovation involves local cultural traditions and historical particularities

combined with the *unevenness* of the world-system. World literature responds to the materializations of combined and uneven development in local social formations and political tensions. But it is also the literature of the capitalist world-system in the sense of, as suggested above, its own structure as a transnational market and social formation subject to the dynamics of that world-system. The authors studied in this dissertation must navigate the structures and relationships of power in both periphery and core in order to achieve circulation among local and transnational readerships. Their creative decisions need to be set within that context in order to be clearly understood.

Casanova terms this world literary market “the world republic of letters,” following Braudel’s term, “economy-world,” and Bourdieu’s concept of a “field” (xii). She points out that this “literature-world” involves its own system of “literary domination,” dependent upon both financial and “symbolic” capital (Casanova xii; see Bourdieu). The geography of the world republic of letters “is based on the opposition between a capital, on the one hand, and peripheral dependencies whose relationship to this center is defined by their aesthetic distance from it” (Casanova 12). Literary value itself is a form of capital that is circulated and traded (Casanova 13). In Casanova’s glossing, “Not every writer proceeds in the same way, but all writers attempt to enter the same race, and all of them struggle, albeit with unequal advantages, to attain the same goal: literary legitimacy” (40). World literature is “combined” in the sense of being one shared system. Thus this “literature-world” functions through the dynamics of combined and uneven development: greater development in some places depends upon underdevelopment in others. On the peripheries combined development occurs through the conjoining of traditional cultural systems with modern cultural systems. Writers respond to tension between these cultural systems as well as the incommensurabilities of capitalist modernization more generally.

Casanova offers a helpful explanation of the expression of core versus peripheral power in the world-literary system. She notes that occupying a core position depends on the age of a literature, because nations with a longer history of written literature in English have a larger and more impressive pantheon of canonical texts and “national classics” (14-15). Occupying a core position also depends on the full development of the bureaucratic institutions of literary capitalism, such as established publishing houses, respected critics, venues for marketing events, a stable of well-funded and renowned talent, and a readership of literary elites (Casanova 15). As with the world-system more broadly, core institutions and practices tend to consolidate their own position at the core. The “national classics” of the nations at the literary core, in the case of English the US and the UK, become the standard by which literariness is measured (Casanova 15). In this way nations and also languages are hierarchized in the world republic of letters (Casanova 17). Thus the decision of many writers in Anglophone Africa to write in English has both practical (more readers, more “publishers, editors, critics, and especially translators”) and political implications (Casanova 20-21).

Casanova also helpfully notes that the relationship between core and peripheral literary spaces is not a “simple binary opposition” but a “continuum” (Casanova 83). Still, she offers only two possible methods by which peripheral literatures can achieve success: “On the one hand there is *assimilation*, or integration within a dominant literary space through a dilution or erasing of original differences; on the other, *differentiation*, which is to say the assertion of difference, typically on the basis of a claim to national identity” (Casanova 179). In this way her approach is limited; she does not appear to leave space for efforts that incorporate both dominant forms (such as the novel) and national or local attributes. Casanova sees national and political concerns as antithetical to “literariness,” which in its purest form is autonomous from such concerns (15).

While much of *The World Republic of Letters* is descriptive, on this particular point Casanova suggests a prescription for literary production that reiterates a teleology based on progress towards a European-style experimentalism. She insists that “Literature is invented through a gradual separation from political obligations: forced at first to place their art in the service of the national purposes of the state, writers little by little achieved artistic freedom” (Casanova 45-46), becoming “independent from the nation” (37). For Casanova, this is not just a neutral observation; she repeatedly describes the movement towards “autonomy” from political concerns as progressive. This progress is towards freedom “from political domination” to assert “a measure of independence;” literature that remains tied to “the political nation” remains “the most conservative of the arts” (86). She describes, in oppositional terms, a “rivalry” between “national” and “international” writers, where the “international” writers have moved further along the path towards autonomy (108). This language contradicts her concern to reveal rather than reiterate the workings of the literary world-system that privilege core understandings of literariness over peripheral ones.

Further, Casanova correlates the opposition between “national” and “international” writers with an opposition between “realism” and “experimentalism,” describing a “genuine hegemony of realism [...] in the most impoverished (which is to say the most politicized) literary spaces,” which “makes literary production a function of politics” (Casanova 197). Casanova contrasts this “hegemony of realism” with “the autonomy enjoyed by the most literary countries,” which “is marked chiefly by the depoliticization of literature” and the advent of “pure” writing characterized by “formal experimentation” (199-200). Such writing, she suggests, is also somehow unconstrained by commercial interests (200); that is, it escapes the world-system of combined and uneven development. This argument rests on several problematic

assumptions, including that all nationalisms and all realisms are composed and function the same way; that national and transnational aspects and concerns are diametrically opposed; that political and economic autonomy is the end objective of a literary teleology; and that autonomy of either kind is even possible. The helpfulness of Casanova's theoretical framework, the "world republic of letters," diminishes if it implies that a work of literature that conscripts any realist techniques or positions itself politically sinks backwards into the "hegemony of realism" and the burden of "political purpose." The fact that some stylistic features seem more prevalent in peripheral spaces and some in core spaces does not prove any developmental teleology. On the contrary, these variations are indicators of the different ways writers respond to their differing situations of combined and uneven development. Further, one literary work could incorporate both experimental or modernist elements and realist elements as a valid response to the contradictions of capitalist modernization. No cultural production of any style is exempt from its historical or political context within this one, unequal modernity.

For this reason Deckard et al find it useful to depart from Casanova's framework. Their concern is that she "seems to us to abstract too strongly from the world of politics: she tends to treat the 'literature-world' and the 'everyday world' a little too much as parallel universes, with the result that questions concerning their *intersection*—questions as to the terms of their *relationship*—find themselves being deferred in her study" (Deckard et al 9). Deckard et al agree with the principle that the world literary system is "one, and unequal" (10), but wish to acknowledge the imbrication of that system within the broader system of combined and uneven development. They recognize that no cultural production can be "autonomous" from either political or economic concerns. Rather than foreclosing the possibility for coexistence of local/national and global/transnational aspects in particular texts, they wish to analyze them

simultaneously. They also wish to analyze stylistic elements of realism alongside stylistic elements that move beyond the real/ist/ic, rather than defining them as antitheses in a teleology that should be located within a particular literary episteme rather than universalized. Thus, following a footnote in Jameson's essay on "Third-World Literature," Deckard et al develop "a new type of literary comparativism" that is not about the comparison of individual texts but instead about understanding "the concrete situations from which such texts spring and to which they constitute direct responses" (22). Instead of opposing modernism and realism as distinct periods, they propose to discuss "forms that are brought into being (and often into collision with other, pre-existing forms) through the long waves of the capitalisation of the world," so that their focus is not on "*modernism*" or "*modernisms*" but rather "*the dialectics of core and periphery that underpin all cultural production in the modern era*" (50-51).

I am most interested in the potential of these theoretical principles in application to African, and specifically Zimbabwean, texts. The framework of combined and uneven development in application to these literatures celebrates "the writer's ability to show us what it feels like to live on a given ground," to open access to the experience of living within a historically located social formation and/or structure of feeling, to enable "readers imaginatively to 'inhabit' these spaces" (Lazarus 133-134). This theory also has the advantage of suggesting that "not only is there no necessary contradiction between the ideas of the 'universal' and the 'local' or the national', but that, on the contrary, there are *only* local universalisms (and, for that matter, only 'local cosmopolitanisms', [...] which it becomes our task as readers to situate as completely as we can" (Lazarus 133-134). This dissertation attempts to situate these intersections of the local and the global as they occur in specific Zimbabwean texts.

Irrealist Style and Capitalist Modernization

The WReC posits that writers in peripheral situations respond to local crises caused by combined and uneven development by incorporating stylistic devices that move beyond the real/ist/ic (66). Such texts are “likely to be sensitive to absurdity and contradiction, disturbance and disruption, conflict and resistance” (Deckard et al 82). The concern with contradiction and conflict manifests in the texts in “a catalogue of effects or motifs at the level of narrative form: discrepant encounters, alienation effects, surreal cross-linkages, unidentified freakish objects, unlikely likenesses across barriers of language, period, territory [...]. These are, in essence, dialectical images of combined unevenness” (Deckard et al 17). Irrealism includes devices “typically addressed under the name of ‘modernism’ including anti-linearity, disruptions in narrative flow, contradictions in perspective, undeveloped characters and elements of the fantastical (Deckard et al 51). Writers often deploy these devices in conjunction with devices associated with realism, such as reliable narration, fully rounded characters and archives of quotidian life among the lower classes (67). Writers also often deploy these devices in conjunction with “adjacent forms” relevant within the local cultural context. These forms might include archaic—in this case, precolonial—features or content (Deckard et al 72), and might include “non-literary” forms (51), such as performance.

This dissertation considers particular situations of crisis at specific moments in Zimbabwean postcolonial history as conveyed by Marechera, Vera and Bulawayo. Specifically, these authors “show us what it feels like to live on a given ground” within the systemic crises of postcoloniality, civil war, post-independence authoritarianism and economic failure, as indicators of world-system combined unevenness (Lazarus 133-134). Deckard et al are careful to note that there are core and peripheral variations at the local level within the dynamics of core and

periphery at the world-system level (55). The novels analyzed below use irrealist techniques to open up the experience of living at the periphery of the periphery.¹

Zimbabwean Irrealism: The Novels

This dissertation shows how the theory of irrealism as a response to combined and uneven development can be fruitfully applied to postcolonial literature in Africa. Further, while Deckard et al emphasize the comparativist use of this theory in identifying affinities between literatures springing from different places, I apply this theory in order to illuminate a particular “national literature.” Application of this theory to Zimbabwean literature over several decades, as it is shaped by transitional periods in combined and uneven development, reveals: 1. How these literatures manifest national sensibilities and concerns simultaneously with and in varying relationship to transnational sensibilities and concerns; 2. How writers respond to shifting, unpredictable, and often harrowing political and material circumstances in the national arena as reflective of the tension between national and world-system power through time; and 3. How a “national literature” is inevitably defined in part and sometimes in majority by world-system (world literary market) forces. Marechera, Vera and Bulawayo respond to the shifts, inconsistencies and contradictions of the Zimbabwean political and economic landscape at the time of and since independence. They work within and/or deal with the peripheral space of the postcolony, one of “the diverse forms of dependent countries which politically are formally

¹ A note on terminology: Lenin and Trotsky defined “peripheral” societies as those in which capitalist institutions and bureaucracy were completely absent, such as the Native American tribes. They believed that such societies would ultimately be completely eviscerated by dominant societies. They used the term “semi-periphery” to represent the combined capitalist development in places such as Russia, where premodern and modern forms were amalgamated (see Howard and King). This distinction was helpful for their purposes. However, for my purposes I wish to distinguish the doubly and triply peripheralized situations depicted in these novels from the “Second World” situations that were the focus of these theorists. For that reason I will use the term “peripheral” in application to postcolonial situations as well as marginalized spaces and communities within core situations.

independent but in fact, are enmeshed in the net of financial and diplomatic dependence” (Lenin, *Imperialism* 723-724).

In peripheral situations characterized by a history of colonialism, writers contend with that history as imbricated in the broader world-system history of primitive accumulation. As Deckard et al explain, “The appearance and growth of fictitious capital, the most virtual or immaterial form of capitalisation, and primitive accumulation, the most bloody and material, are interlinked. The two forms depend on each other. One cannot separate the history of credit from the wider history of capitalist imperialism” (70). The basic inconsistency between the abstract nature of capital and the embodied experience of violent domination as the tool of capitalism informs irrealist techniques, which mix the “imaginary” with the “factual” in order to illuminate the material effects of world-system finance on people’s lives in the periphery (70). Given Zimbabwe’s history of brutal settler colonialism, the protracted war for liberation, the relative lateness of independence and the present-day crisis in governance, this situation is a particularly salient one in which to investigate the relationship between national and world-system dynamics.

Zimbabwe has the distinction of a history of subjection to both economic and political colonial rule. As such, as a test case Zimbabwe offers an exploration of these dynamics in a context different from Anglophone East Africa but alike to other countries in southern Africa. South African literature is perhaps better-known worldwide than Zimbabwean literature due to South Africa’s status as the economic core of southern Africa. This status results in the perception that South Africa is also the cultural core of the region. I have chosen to focus on Zimbabwe in part because Zimbabwean literature deals with combined and uneven development in local, national, regional and international layers by necessity. Zimbabwean literary history is culturally rich, and economically peripheralized and re-peripheralized. In the context of the post-

2000 crisis, extreme upheavals caused by these layers of unevenness in capitalist modernization are visible. All three authors deal with not only these local crises but also the processes of exile and diaspora, thus providing another layer of world-system processes worthy of investigation. The novels this dissertation explores have varying degrees of affinity with Michael Löwy's "critical irrealism," which is "founded on a logic of the imagination, of the marvellous, of the mystery or the dream" (194, quoted in Deckard et al 83).

Chapter 1: Irrealism, Performance and Absurdity: Marechera's Black Sunlight and Mindblast

This chapter explores two of Marechera's novels, which together represent his efforts to critique the core-peripheral power struggles through irrealist techniques and Menippean satire. It argues that *Black Sunlight* (1980) satirizes the infiltration of opposition groups and revolutionary poetics by social hierarchy and economic self-interest, and *Mindblast* (1984) proffers and also satirizes the alternative of radical individualism. Marechera's life in the peripheries of Oxford and London, exiled from his home nation, contributed to the development of the irrealist aesthetic in his work and its spillage over into his public persona as well as his personal life. The absurdities of living in poverty in a community of mostly white anarchist squatters, as a black African award-winning novelist, were reflected in absurdity and other irrealist devices in *Black Sunlight*. Upon his return to Zimbabwe in 1982, Marechera became disillusioned with the policies of the ZANU-PF regime, including the banning of *Black Sunlight*. He became increasingly poor and at the end of his short life lived homeless in the streets of Harare. The latter novel is a formal experimentation into the extremes of Menippean style and shows the author's self-destruction in a gesture of existentialism that denies the possibility of escape from the world-system. This formal experimentation is an example of the irrealist device of

“estranging estrangement,” where a work uses and then questions the usefulness of experimentalism (Deckard et al 67).

I place these two novels into conversation with concurrent events in Marechera’s life when he disrupted and satirized certain social formations, both in European metropolitan spaces and Zimbabwean spaces. This pairing shows that Marechera viewed his “life-poetry” as a satirical performance. The results of his iconoclastic writing and behavior were mixed, and unfortunately these more radical works and performances are much less celebrated than his first novel, *The House of Hunger* (1978). His subversive behavior and writing led to restrictions on his movements and limitations on his livelihood. They also resulted in his role as *l’enfant terrible* both in the transnational literary community and in local circles upon his return to Zimbabwe.

Chapter 2: History and Irrealism: Vera’s Nehanda and The Stone Virgins

While both Marechera and Vera deploy irrealist techniques, Vera does not make use of satire. The fantastical in her novels appears in numinous narrative rather than absurdity and grotesquerie. Also, Vera is more historicist than Marechera; although she takes “the present social order” as the object of analysis, she revises national historiography to that purpose (Deckard et al 72). She reinserts the experiences of women and poor Ndebele communities into history in order to recover “both the specific history of the present and the alternative histories that might have been” (Deckard et al 72). This historiographical work illuminates the ways combined and uneven development shapes life on the periphery of the periphery. In contrast to Marechera’s explosive iconoclasm and existentialist conclusion, Vera builds a humanistic mythological vision that reanimates iconic figures.

This chapter explores *Nehanda* (1994), Vera's version of the myth of a foundational national heroine, and *The Stone Virgins* (2002), which depicts the state-sponsored violence wreaked on minority populations in the decade after independence. *Nehanda* corporealizes the feminine history of the iconic revolutionary spirit medium in order to critique both the lingering continued influence of the domineering world-system on national policy and culture, and the exploitation of the name and myth of Nehanda in government propaganda and national consciousness. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera critiques exclusionary accounts of history that obscure civil war and state-sponsored violence in minority areas. In both works Vera exposes the female body as the site where economic peripheralization and the exigencies of core-peripheral power struggles play out. Nehanda's emphasis on the embodied experience of violence refuses the maintenance of silence and replaces the female body at the center of national history. Reviewers have sometimes claimed that *The Stone Virgins* corrects the overt nationalism of *Nehanda*, because it condemns the activities of the nationalist party ZANU-PF once it came to power. However, this reading misses the commonalities in irrealist style that provide the foundation for both works. In denying a linear "objective" understanding of historical events, Vera gives these events greater possibility for transhistorical and humanistic meaning. By infusing history with myth, Vera offers an optimistic possibility for the role of narrative. These texts are rich with meaning in their local and national context while also traveling well regionally and abroad.

Chapter 3: Irrealism and Transnationalism: NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names

Unlike either of her predecessors, Bulawayo devotes half of her first novel, *We Need New Names*, to the experience of life as an immigrant in America from the perspective of a reliable, developed and sympathetic narrator. However, Bulawayo does deploy several irrealist techniques

including some disruptions in narrative perspective and chronology, forays into the oneiric and elements of the grotesque and pastiche. In this sense her novel conjoins realist and irrealist techniques in a way that perhaps “refines” realism (Deckard et al 70).

The locus of Bulawayo’s critique of combined and uneven development shifts to the US in the center of the novel. While Bulawayo has stated on several occasions that she aimed to “transcend” the particularities of the nation of Zimbabwe and to achieve a transnational universalism, the novel tells a specifically American story of unhappy immigration (quoted in Harding). This emphasis lends Bulawayo’s work an affinity to an established stream of American literature interrogating the nationalist concept of the “nation of immigrants.” Bulawayo writes primarily for an American audience, as opposed to the pronounced desire of both *Marechera* and *Vera* to be read in Zimbabwe. Bulawayo’s forays into irrealism help her to achieve literary legitimacy, given the “pronounced tendency [for American postcolonial studies] to privilege writings that reject narratives of nation and nationalism and that stylistically inscribe the techniques of hybridity, pastiche, irony and defamiliarisation” (Deckard et al 67). Although Bulawayo does “reject” markers of national specificity in the sequences of the novel that are set in Zimbabwe, in ascribing to the particularly American narrative of unhappy immigration she does not “transcend” national concerns, but relocates them within a core nation.

CHAPTER 1

Irrealism, Performance and Absurdity: Marechera's *Black Sunlight* and *Mindblast*

From time to time, one comes across an unfinished artistic work—be it in music, painting or structure (a bridge for instance)—which appears to dictate its own genre, as if it derives its authority from a special, unique aesthetique of incompleteness, owing no fidelity to rules that govern more rounded, polished and even more accomplished work. Literature is not different. Such works appear to provide a rare insight into the process of creativity itself, inducting the consumer into a privileged state of the artiste's own sensibility (Soyinka 251).

Dambudzo Marechera's first novel, *The House of Hunger* (1978), a semi-autobiographical and harrowing account of life in the African townships outside Rusape, Rhodesia, was co-awardee of the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1979.² At the time of its publication, Marechera was living as a political exile in London. He was expelled from the University of Rhodesia in 1973 for political protests against the Ian Smith regime; he then immigrated to Oxford on a student visa, only to be expelled from New College in 1976. Marechera's personal life was defined by periods of bodily exclusion from various spaces: his family was evicted from their home when he was fourteen due to their inability to pay rent after the death of his father; he was barred from two universities; he was imprisoned in Germany for traveling on an expired visa; and he lived much of his life in marginalized communities and spaces due to extreme poverty and homelessness. Marechera was thus brutally aware of forcible peripheralization under various manifestations of combined and uneven development, in Rhodesia, in Europe, and in post-independence Zimbabwe upon his return in 1982. The ZANU-PF government's censorship board banned Marechera's second novel, *Black Sunlight* (1980) in 1981. Marechera interpreted this silencing of his work as both a personal attack and evidence of the broader failures of revolutionary politics in postcolonial Zimbabwe. For an award-winning author and public figure

² All of my historical information about Marechera's life and work is taken from Flora Veit-Wild's *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on His Life and Work*.

with a literary cult following to die a starving vagrant on the streets of Harare, at the age of thirty-five, seems especially absurd.

Neither *Black Sunlight* nor Marechera's last novel, *Mindblast* (1984), received as much attention as the first novel *The House of Hunger*. Some readings of the later novels are dismissive. These readings include the interpretation of *Black Sunlight* as expressive of a disordered nihilism,³ or relatedly a "disturbing, but ultimately formless, document of personal anguish" (James Lasdun, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 217). Charles Mungoshi, who was a close friend to Marechera, wrote upon his rejection of *Mindblast* for publication by Zimbabwe Publishing House that the work was illegible and commercially unviable (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 338). Marechera both on paper and in public expressed a "tortured quality" that offended some audiences and could easily be interpreted as pathological (Harvey 235). Dan Wylie suggests that Marechera was schizophrenic (153); David Pattison concludes that Marechera exhibited "deteriorating behaviour" and "fragile mental health" (22); and Brendon Nicholls interprets his work as reflective of narcissism. These criticisms at times express an unfortunate paternalism, as when Pattison describes *The House of Hunger* as "hastily worked fragments" and suggests that complimentary responses from James Currey and Doris Lessing contributed to Marechera's delusions of grandeur (14).⁴ Several commentators have echoed the view that various pathologies prevented Marechera from finishing what he could have accomplished.⁵

³ See, for example, Mark Stein, Pattison 21, and comments from Pantheon publishing house (quoted in Pattison 23).

⁴ Pattison claims that Currey, at the time head of Marechera's publisher in London, Heinemann, and Lessing, who served as a reader for Heinemann gave Marechera an "inflated view of his status as a writer" (14-15). He quotes Lessing's responsive comments as a reader for Currey, both the critical and the perhaps fawning, at length (15).

⁵ In addition to Wylie and Pattison, Owen Kibel has suggested that Marechera had Tourette's (169). Kibel is a psychologist but did not diagnose or treat Marechera. The other two commentators are literary scholars who do not have pathological expertise.

These responses overlook Marechera's careful positioning of his work within a European irrealist literary tradition and disregard his writerly agency and design. Reading both his writing and his public stunts as efforts in service of irrealist satire provides a counterweight to such attitudes. While some commentators have referenced the satirical elements that provide the center of my analysis,⁶ none to my knowledge have connected Marechera's public behavior to his role as a satirist. I argue that the "unfinished" character of Marechera's life and work can be seen together to constitute a *performance* that does indeed "dictate its own genre" and "provide a rare insight into the process of creativity itself" (Soyinka 251). Marechera described this performance as "life-poetry," a purposeful aesthetic and political choice (*Mindblast* 61). In this satirical life-poetry he commented on his position as a marginalized outsider to the many manifestations of core power he encountered as black African colonial subject, black African immigrant in Europe, and black African writer in the literary world-system. This chapter places the two later novels, *Black Sunlight* and *Mindblast*, into conversation with concurrent events in Marechera's life when he disrupted public life, both in European metropolitan spaces and Zimbabwean spaces. As a holistic performance, his irrealist satire mixed literary and non-literary genres that deployed absurdity and grotesquerie.

In response to the incommensurabilities and hypocrisies he saw as integral to the world-system of capitalist modernization, Marechera adopted Menippean satire as an irrealist technique. He illustrated several strategies Deckard et al include in their description of irrealism, such as the juxtaposition of "unrelated narrative registers" that move "between the mundane and the fantastic" and "the legible and the oneiric" (95). Marechera used the disconcerting effect of unexpected shifts between genres as "abstracts" of these incommensurabilities while satirizing the hypocritical attitudes that enable domination. *Black Sunlight*, a surreal journey of a

⁶ See Gaylard and Ashcroft.

caricatured narrator and his doppelgangers into the hellish underground headquarters of the revolutionary Black Sunlight Organisation (BSO), satirizes organized, collective politics. *Mindblast*, a carnivalesque collection of plays and verse, stories within stories, and a journal, complements the earlier novel by satirizing radical individualism as an alternative to participation in opposition groups. In both works Marechera struggles to imagine a world outside the world-system. In *Black Sunlight* he reveals how the quest for power and gain penetrates revolutionary politics; in *Mindblast* he reveals how world-system patterns penetrate the self through ideology and economic need. In this way the world-system is inescapable: as Deckard et al state, we all live within a modern unequal totality. The human individual cannot stand outside systemic inequity.

Historical Background: 1960-1987

Marechera witnessed combined and uneven development as it manifested at the local level under the large-scale struggle between core capitalist and semi-peripheral Communist power during the Cold War. This struggle shaped the policy of decolonization, in turn determining the relationship between core and peripheral power in the colonies and postcolonies. The politics of anti-Communism as practiced in the UK and the US often overran ethical and ideological priorities such as establishing democracy and majority rule in the colonial periphery (see Berger; Coggins). The prioritization of anti-Communism over democracy and human rights resulted in Britain's equivocal policies towards the racist white rule of Rhodesia's settler government after it seceded from the Central African Federation in 1963 and declared unilateral independence (UDI) in 1965. In post-UDI Rhodesia, anti-Communist politics joined forces with right-wing extremism and white supremacy (Coggins). The failure of British intervention

enabled the Rhodesian government's continuation of colonial economic policies that caused maldevelopment in the African Reserves and townships and sustained political disenfranchisement for African populations.

The increasing strength of right-wing elements in British politics in the 1970s and 1980s also shaped Marechera's experiences in the UK. The Thatcher-led government cut social services after 1979, further peripheralizing poor populations. The historical forces of combined and uneven development also shaped the way the post-independence government of Zimbabwe failed to enact liberatory and progressive policies. The ZANU-PF regime became increasingly authoritarian, partly in response to the IMF's economic coercion through a structural adjustment program and the lack of British political or financial support for the nationalization of land. These policies fostered the perception that Zimbabwe's national sovereignty was under threat. In both pre-independent Zimbabwe and the UK Marechera was subjected to systemic racism, whether transparent and vitriolic or more covert. Marechera considered various authoritarianisms and the marginalizing of certain groups to be linked manifestations of the hegemony of the world-system. Throughout his life Marechera was the consummate outsider, living on the periphery of the periphery.

Rusape Townships and University of Rhodesia, 1960-1973

The conflict between core and peripheral power, specifically between the white settler government in Rhodesia and the British home government, which favored decolonization, played out in the African Locations of Marechera's childhood. The pervasive Cold War atmosphere contributed to paranoia about the spread of Communism among both policy-makers and the white Rhodesian public (see Berger 171-172). This atmosphere provided a justification for

strategies to maintain control over the black populace. From the 1950s on, politics in Southern Rhodesia underwent a steady rightwards shift in response to various threats to the white settler government's control, including the recently independent neighbors Zambia and Malawi and the strengthening of black political parties (Coggins). The right-wing, anti-black Rhodesian Front (RF) party won the 1962 election. In 1964 then deputy Ian Smith replaced Winston Field after Field failed to secure concessions from the British government (Coggins). Ian Smith's foreign policy was isolationist and his domestic policy involved campaigns of vitriolic racist and anti-Communist rhetoric as well as media censorship (Coggins). His stance on race relations was unabashedly white supremacist; he promised a "whiter, brighter Rhodesia" and declared that the chance for black majority rule was "Never in a thousand years" ("News and Views"). A "master" of appearing to make legal concessions to the black majority, Smith maintained racist colonial policies allowing white landlords to refuse housing to blacks in order to sustain segregation in the towns ("News and Views"). He used the tools of capitalism to foreclose black African access to social services such as health care and education by simply pricing them out ("News and Views"). In 1964 his regime banned all nationalist parties and restricted African newspapers including *The Daily News* and *Home News*. Rhodesia separated from the Commonwealth in the Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 11 November 1965.

The UK had threatened severe diplomatic and economic sanctions in the case of UDI. However, in its declining economic state post-WWII Britain depended heavily on colonial investments in South Africa and in the Zambian copper mines (Coggins). The concern that military intervention and strict sanctions could negatively affect these investments made support for such punitive measures difficult. The measured oil embargo the UK enacted was unenforceable (Coggins). The decision to limit military action in favor of such toothless

sanctions was evidence of the weakening Labour party's need to prioritize Realpolitik over the ideological objective to achieve multi-racial democracy during decolonization (Coggins). This inability to enact democratic change because of the financial pressures of the world-system was a diplomatic failure that foreclosed a peaceful resolution between black nationalists and the white regime.

The inconsistencies of the ideological and economic concerns of the UK had material effects on black civilians in both rural and urban Rhodesia. Increasing unrest, riots and uprisings during this period were direct responses to the unevenness of economic development.⁷ Colonial land policies in the Reserves, especially The Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and the policy of Land Husbandry, had already undermined African agency over ancestral land and underdeveloped local agriculture. The Land Apportionment Act gave half the country including prime arable land to whites. The Land Husbandry policy of contouring required intensive digging, performed by black agricultural workers, ostensibly to prevent erosion. But the policy of contouring did not take into account the sandiness of the local soil and thus failed to increase production or conserve the land. In the end, these policies to increase production on the Reserves largely failed because of flaws in the underlying agricultural philosophy that applied "universal" blueprints about land conservation without considering local context (Alexander et al 77). In the rural areas people felt that contours "started the war" for liberation (Alexander et al 125).

Property markets in the towns excluded Africans from owning land, exiling them to the Locations where infrastructure and basic services were deplorable (Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning*). Marechera saw these townships as the periphery of the periphery where poor black Africans

⁷ Historical information in this paragraph is taken from Hammar et al's *Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis*; Alexander et al's *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the "Dark Forests" of Matabeleland*; and Alexander's *The Unsettled Land: State-making & the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe, 1893-2003*.

suffered as a result of the power struggles innate to combined and uneven development and the contradictions innate to capitalist modernization. He grew up in the Locations outside the town of Rusape and cites these “ghettos” as primary influences on his work (Lansu, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 2). The houses in Vengere Location were two-room with no water or sanitation. Communal toilets were unsanitary and had no electricity. The experience of using them was the source of Marechera’s lifelong fear of toilets (Lansu, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 7). This preoccupation clearly influenced his works, many of which deal with scatology and one of which (*Mindblast*) features a toilet as a character. Marechera describes prostitution and domestic violence as primary features of life in the Locations (Lansu, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 12). Uneven development led to terrible living conditions in these spaces.

The power structure of the world-system also infiltrated these communities in the form of social hierarchy. In an interview with Alle Lansu, Marechera describes the “society of Rusape.” He groups together authority figures such as “the few owners of grocery stores” and “priests;” figures living further on the fringes such as “leaders of fringe/esoteric religions,” “pick-pockets” and “pimps;” and finally the most peripheralized groups of women and children: “demoralized widows,” “whores,” “mothers of nine or more children,” “hungry but soon-to-be-pregnant schoolgirls” and “hungry but earnest schoolboys” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 1). Marechera identifies this stratified and peripheralized society as the “normal condition” of his childhood, “which later drove most of my fellows into Mozambique to become freedom fighters and I to become a writer” (Lansu, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 2). Although his interest in the further peripheralization of women and children here and in *The House of Hunger*

is not a major theme in Marechera's later novels, this theme would become formative for Yvonne Vera's work.

Sociologist Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and historian Terence Ranger have interpreted urban uprisings in Rhodesia during this era as "workerist" episodes directly motivated by the underdevelopment of African communities under the world-system of capitalism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 26; see also Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning*). The Ian Smith regime repressed trade unions alongside nationalist parties (Ranger, *Bulawayo* 244). Black Africans in both rural and urban areas joined the struggle to wrest power from the white colonial regime, which was itself struggling to consolidate power against the imperial core of the world-system. Black Africans formed nationalist parties, rioted, and eventually joined nationalist militias in the War of Liberation. This struggle had disproportionate effects on communities of black African civilians. For example, during the Zhii riots of July 1960 the police protected the white city and allowed rioters free reign in the townships, while blocking Africans from fleeing (Ranger, *Bulawayo* 228). In 1966 ZAPU guerrillas from Zambia, led by Fineas Dapona, launched an incursion into Matabeleland and made connections with villages in Pupu. The state responded with a brutal campaign targeting civilians in Lupane until the guerrillas had been imprisoned, tortured, and/or killed (Alexander et al 123). During the Liberation War, in which approximately 30,000 black Rhodesians were killed, the RF used brutal tactics against civilians, such as poisoning wells, spreading anthrax among cattle to cause famine and spreading cholera in rural areas ("News and Views;" Martinez). In another example of anti-Communist politics taking precedence over democratic ideology, US mercenaries participated in the War of Liberation on the side of the RF (Berger).

Marechera enrolled at the University of Rhodesia in 1972. At that time the magazine *Property and Finance* was targeting the University as a filthy breeding ground for distasteful and subversive elements (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 122). Rhodesian Front MP Rodney Simmonds stated that the University had an “unsavoury social climate” and suggested the withdrawal of public funds unless the University expelled its “troublemakers” (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 122). Along with many other black students, Marechera joined a nationalist group. After Ian Smith publicly referred to these protestors as “Baboons” and excoriated them to “Go climb the mountain” (“News and Views”), Marechera was involved in a campus riot which damaged property. He was expelled along with several other students and exiled to the UK.

Oxford and London, 1974-1983

Marechera arrived at Oxford in 1974 on a scholarship funded by white students who wanted to support the education of political refugees from the Third World (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 155). In this position he became increasingly repulsed by the role he was expected to inhabit as the beneficiary of white liberal charity. He came to see the dynamic of white generosity to blacks as another manifestation of the power differential between the privileged classes in the core and peripheralized groups. In an interview with Fiona Lloyd Marechera explains, “I discovered that they [at Oxford] were trying to make me into an intellectual Uncle Tom. I was being mentally raped” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 152). He also decried the class segregation he saw at Oxford and likened it to the intersectional racial and class segregation he had observed in the Rhodesian townships. He was shocked to find that colleges assigned servants to students and felt that the residential areas of the

poor whites and West Indian blacks were “totally cut off from the university, and so you have the same kind of segregation as at Rusape. And if you tried to cross the boundaries, if you as a student tried to drink in pubs where the workers drink, you would get beaten up. I got beaten up myself when I got tired of the student pubs and wanted to drink in pubs where there were some other black people” (Lansu, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 24). He was increasingly restive against the expectations of his white fellow students and servants alike, as he was apparently excluded from belonging in either group. After earning a reputation for “general disorderliness,” Marechera’s scholarship was canceled (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 159). He was expelled from New College in 1976.

Over the next six years Marechera wrote three novels and a great deal of poetry while living in various friends’ houses mostly in and around London. He eventually settled in a squat community of anarchists and hippie misfits at Tolmers Square, a historic site of protest against gentrification and the housing crisis under the governance of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party. He lived at Tolmers Square while he wrote *Black Sunlight*. His experiences in this community reinforced his critical perspective on “development” in the core as dependent on underdevelopment and maldevelopment in the peripheries. Many residents of his community at Tolmers Square professed intellectual anarchism in response to the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of capitalist modernization. Marechera explored that position in *Black Sunlight* (interview with Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 218). However, he felt further peripheralized within this peripheral group as “the only black person” in the community (Lansu, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 29).

Harare, 1984-1987

Upon his return to Zimbabwe in 1982, Marechera quickly became disillusioned with the evidence of the continued struggle between core and peripheral power and the failure of revolutionary politics. The Zimbabwean censorship board banned *Black Sunlight* as an “undesirable publication” under the Censorship and Entertainments Control Act, because of offensive language and its imitation of the techniques of “modern” writers (Censorship Board, quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 291). Marechera’s disappointment with the repression of his work by his home nation’s independent government was severe: “I thought that I was coming to a new and vigorous Zimbabwe and yet the first thing I hear on arrival is that my book has been declared undesirable. It was a bombshell and you do not understand the crisis of expectation of people in exile unless you have been one of them” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 290). He incisively critiqued elements of the post-independence regime, including what he viewed as a failure of revolutionary politics to achieve liberation, in *Mindblast*. Marechera came to see his own life, as an award-winning but poor and homeless writer, as exemplary of the brutal absurdity of combined and uneven development.

Menippean Satire and Performance as Irrealist Devices

In his 1987 essay in *Zambezia*, “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature,” Marechera positions himself as a writer within the broader dynamics of the literary world-system. The essay identifies an irrealist stream of the European literary tradition as most exciting for “the African writer.” He also critiques the narrow definition of non-realist writing as “Modernist,” and therefore necessarily connected to a particular era in European history. Marechera aligns himself most closely with European writers who use “Modernist” techniques

while pointing out that this term is often used pejoratively. In particular, he references that Zimbabwe's censorship board leveled the "accusation" of Modernism at him in their justification for banning *Black Sunlight* in 1980 ("The African Writer's Experience" 190). Such an accusation makes his 1980s writing an anachronism, one that derives from earlier European literature produced in response to industrialization. In Marechera's case the accusation also has the connotation that his writing, as derivative of European forms, is neither original nor authentically African, that it sells out to the world-system that privileges the English language and white writers and is therefore accommodationist to imperialism and neo-imperialism.

Marechera offers other terms in this essay for this stream of writing in attempts to avoid the problems he associates with the term "Modernism." He also aims to draw stylistic and philosophical connections between writers in different places and different times in order to transcend Eurocentrism. He notes that "fantastic realism fits into this stream, as well as 'absurdism' and the 'menippean manner'" ("The African Writer's Experience" 191). Deckard et al's term "irrealism" is particularly helpful as an umbrella term for these various styles. At a philosophical level, Marechera identifies with this stream of irrealist writing because he recognizes it as a response to core-peripheral configurations. This stream of writing offers the perspective of the peripheries within societies, highlighting the unevenness of capitalistic development, and exposes the terror and violence the world-systemic power struggle inflicts disproportionately upon these peripheralized populations. He comments, "I have been an outsider in my own biography, in my country's history, in the world's terrifying possibilities. It is, therefore, quite natural for me to respond with the pleasure of familiar horror to that section of European literature which reflects this. The inquisitor who resides in the human heart and refuses to believe in God on humanitarian grounds is familiar to all who have experienced warfare"

(“The African Writer’s Experience” 188). The interrogation of traditional social structures, including religious authority, is a facet of “Modernism.” But here Marechera suggests that this interrogative impulse continues to have salience in a world-system defined by the conflicts of capitalist modernization—colonial, post-colonial, and Cold War. Modernity is not a completed achievement in the most developed parts of the globe, but rather the state of the world-system that is both combined and uneven.

In this way Marechera, without using the term “irrealism,” aligns himself with irrealist philosophy and style. He is particularly interested in Menippean satire and the Menippean novel as irrealist devices. He draws on Neil McEwan’s commentary on African writing in *Africa and the Novel*, which is a glossing of Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of carnival:

The world of such novels, says McEwan, is complex, unstable, comic, satirical, fantastic, poetical and committed to the pursuit of truth. The hero can travel anywhere in this world and beyond. Fantasy and symbolism are combined with low-life naturalism. Odd vantage points offer changes of scale. Heaven and hell are close and may be visited. Madness, dreams and day-dreams, abnormal states of mind and all kinds of erratic inclinations are explored. Scandalous and eccentric behaviour disrupts ‘the seemly course of human affairs’ and provides a new view of ‘the integrity of the world’. Society is unpredictable; roles can quickly change. Current affairs are treated with a satirical, journalistic interest. Genres are mixed. Stories, speeches, dramatic sketches, poetry and parody exist side by side. This category of the novel is called menippean. It is no longer necessary to speak of the African novel or the European novel: there is only the menippean novel. (“The African Writer’s Experience” 188)

In this passage Marechera describes innovations within the Menippean vein of literature that spans from Aristophanes through Rabelais, Swift, Dostoevsky, and later the American beats (188; 191). Yet he is not only descriptive; he also clearly aligns himself with this vein. He ends the essay by remarking that Allen Ginsberg’s words (in *Howl*) about “starving naked hysterical” “madness” and “looking for an angry fix” were “echoing in my ears when I was writing *The House of Hunger*” (191). Given his experience living in the “starving naked hysterical”

peripheries of the world-system in the townships of Rusape, in London and in Harare, Marechera finds this stream of literature most stimulating.

Menippean satire, which grew out of the lost works of Menippus and his disciple Varro, is distinct from the two other classical streams, Horatian and Juvenalian, because it attacks attitudes rather than individuals or institutions, and because it takes prose form (Frye 309). However Northrup Frye (1970) notes that the form appears to have developed as an offshoot of verse satire, and that frequently Menippean prose is interrupted by “incidental verse” (309). Innovations in Menippean satire include the trans-genre, carnivalesque Menippean novel, as defined most famously by Bakhtin in *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984, 110-119). In his comprehensive review of Menippean satire through history, Howard Weinbrot (2005) defines Menippean satire as “a form that uses at least two other genres, languages, cultures, or changes of voice to oppose a dangerous, false, or specious and threatening orthodoxy” (6). Thus the later understanding of Menippean satire connects to the original derivation of the word “satire:” the Latin phrase *lanx satura*, which translates literally “a full dish of various kinds of fruits” or more roughly “miscellany or medley” (Kharpertian 25-27).⁸

The primary device threading through this “miscellany” to oppose the “dangerous, false, or specious and threatening orthodoxy” is satirical writing that deploys language ironically, to highlight the gap between representation and reality, rather than constatively, for the purpose of accurate representation. In this vein, Marechera deploys absurd language, the grotesque, non-linear narrative and fantastical or surreal settings. Such satirical writing cannot be measured according to its representational accuracy; it moves beyond the real/ist/ic by definition. Satire is

⁸ The assumption, prevalent through the Renaissance period, that the word “satire” derived from the Greek *satyr* was corrected by the philologist Isaac Casaubon in the 17th century. Before correction this etymological error led to more savage and wicked interpretations of the satirical form. The association with the drunken and lewd companion to Dionysus has proven difficult to uproot and could be argued to have influenced Marechera’s satire. See Szabari for more on the history of the term.

“militant irony” founded on a “combination of fantasy and morality” where the absurd and the grotesque are measured against clear moral standards (Frye 223, 310). The satirist, from the ancient classical period on, has used these non-representational devices to critique and ridicule.⁹ Marechera describes the Menippean literary tradition as “the ‘daemonic’ tradition” (quoted in Stein 66): anti-normative, iconoclastic, and wickedly impudent enough to fulfill the (erroneous) association of satire with the satyr.

Marechera’s “life-poetry” was a performance that combined irrealist writing with irrealist gestures in interviews and public events. In this way he conscripted his corporeal body as well as his body of work into his satirical project. Marechera’s focus on the stream of European writing that is most concerned with the peripheries where the violence and upheaval of capitalist modernization hit the hardest is a way of “insult[ing]” the more vanilla—white, bourgeois, aesthetically palatable—core of literature in English (“The African Writer’s Experience” 186). Marechera lists the following criteria, which apply to his own public life, to define this style: “Madness, dreams and day-dreams, abnormal states of mind and all kinds of erratic inclinations are explored. Scandalous and eccentric behaviour disrupts ‘the seemly course of human affairs’ and provides a new view of ‘the integrity of the world’. Society is unpredictable; roles can quickly change” (“The African Writer’s Experience” 188). Marechera’s life was a performance of these ideas. While commentators, as noted above, have frequently associated Marechera with various mental illnesses, scrutiny of his manifesto essay suggests instead that he actively sought out “madness,” “dreams,” and “abnormal states of mind” in order to “experience the world from that quality in us which is the source of dreams” (“The African Writer’s Experience” 186).

Marechera’s “scandalous and eccentric behaviour” succeeded in disrupting public events and disturbing, in Harvey’s words, “polite company” (165). He earned a reputation for drunk and

⁹ See Cannan and Pollard for brief histories of satire.

disorderly conduct and a propensity for physical altercations. Significantly, Marechera emphasized that these incidents had conscious artistic design behind them: “I personally try to disturb everybody out of complacency. That’s why I do all these performances now and then” (quoted in Stein 66). In this way Marechera defined his public stunts as discomfiting performance. In this chapter I draw on Richard Schechner’s conception of the “broad spectrum” of performance, in which “everything and anything can be studied ‘as’ performance” (“Points of Contact between Anthropological and Theatrical Thought” 158; *Performed Imaginaries* 6). According to Schechner, performance enables the performer to “remake the worlds they not merely inhabit but are always already in the habit of reconstructing” (*Performed Imaginaries* 7). In several examples Marechera purposefully transgressed the boundaries between core and periphery; the privileged bourgeois and the peripheralized poor; and the privileged white and the peripheralized black. These interventions drew on elements of the absurd, the grotesque and the surreal in order to jolt his audience out of “the seemly course of human affairs,” a state that acquiesces to systemic dynamics.

As noted above, one advantage of seeing Marechera’s life-poetry as performance is that it enables a fuller understanding of the agency and creative design at work behind it. Immediately after dismissing Marechera’s work as that of a “schizophrenic,” Dan Wylie complains that the lack of subversive satire coming out of Zimbabwe is “mystifying” (154). It is puzzling that he emphasizes Marechera’s “insanity” and not his satire, an error that misreads Marechera’s work. As Frye comments, satire “makes for violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative,” which can be easily mistaken for poor control of language and form. This mistake is often due to “the carelessness of the reader,” perhaps better understood as a readerly expectation of narrative linearity (310). Marechera describes in the poem “Throne of Bayonets” his frustration with the

constant “question of my / sanity or insanity. No time but such talk / With semantic digression disputing the way / I should walk” (*Mindblast* 100). Rather than symptoms of psychological pathology, his challenging fiction, disturbing public persona, and disorderly social conduct were manifestations of his Menippean satirical project, which follows the example of the classical satirists who examined life by “peeling off skin after skin” until reaching “the rotten heart of it” (Cannan 22).

Black Sunlight: Satirizing Oppositional Politics

Marechera’s experiences living at the periphery of the periphery taught him that the “rotten heart” of the world-system, the truth that the development of some sites depends upon the underdevelopment and maldevelopment of others, shapes all communities. He saw the struggle for power dictate transactions and relationships down to the most peripheral spaces. In *Black Sunlight*, Marechera explores how communities that define themselves in opposition to authoritarian governance remain hypocritically complicit with the very power structures and hierarchies they ostensibly oppose. The novel deals with the revolutionary Black Sunlight Organisation (BSO), a group defined as “the Opposition” (*Black Sunlight* 59) with the purpose of “transforming inequalities” and “extending to the available limit the freedoms that exist” (69). Marechera does not clearly delineate or contextualize either the regime this group opposes or the specific kind of opposition the BSO represents. The BSO could be representative of either the black nationalist parties and militias that fought against the Ian Smith regime or the anarchist squatter community at Tolmers Square, among other possible interpretations. The indeterminacy of the historical context for opposition broadens Marechera’s satirical critique so that it applies to oppositional politics in general.

I argue that this novel is a satirical chronicle of Marechera's progressive loss of faith in both the organized anti-colonial resistance of the nationalist parties and in the philosophical resistance of intellectual anarchism against hierarchical governance in general. The object to be opposed is purposefully vague in *Black Sunlight* because Marechera wished to show that in different kinds of oppositional formations, in different historical contexts, the "rotten heart" of the world-system underlies human interaction and activity. Inside these groups, leadership reiterates world-system disparity by peripheralizing other individuals within the group. In the end, these groups fail to enact revolutionary social change despite their nominal commitment to revolutionary philosophies and politics. Thus Marechera's irrealist Menippean satire exposes the hypocrisies of both revolutionary anti-colonial nationalism and British hippie-style anarchism in this novel. He peels away the layers to reveal how even in communities that have an ostensibly liberatory purpose the "intellect" can be "used to control human beings" (Marechera, quoted in Stein 66). Marechera reflects and responds to that central inconsistency with an irrealist style that aims to "baffle and transcend consciousness" (Cannan 23). This style deploys caricatured characters and a non-linear narrative structure in order to satirize the limitations of collective oppositional politics to transform social order.

The editors at Pantheon, the US publisher of *The House of Hunger*, defended the decision not to publish *Black Sunlight* by stating, "This novel is an exercise in self-destruction. As it progresses...there is less and less of a focus for the narrator until we are fully assaulted by a relentless barrage of images and associations cut loose from the outer world and adrift in a void without inherent structure or constraint" (quoted in Pattison 23). These and other commentators who have found this text confounding, such as Pattison and Stein, have missed Marechera's close attention to Menippean satire. According to Frye, Menippean critique deploys dissociative

colloquy, in which identifiable characters are less important than the debate at the level of ideas, often appearing as “purely fanciful or moral discussions” (310) without grounding in recognizable settings or events. These debates are “cut loose from the outer world and adrift in a void” *by design*. Similarly, the “relentless barrage of images and associations” by which the Pantheon readers felt “assaulted” is a Menippean device whereby an author compiles an “enormous mass of erudition” and “an avalanche” of the jargon he wishes to target (Frye 311).

Caricatured Characters and Doppelgangers

In *Black Sunlight* Marechera follows the irrealist style of his predecessors, in particular Dostoevsky and the Beat writers, whom he identified in “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature.” As with these authors, Marechera interrupts his prose with “incidental verse,” and features surrealist dialogue. Marechera caricatures his characters, satirizing in particular the blind faith that oppositional politics can create lasting social change. Halfway through *Black Sunlight*, the narrator Christian enters “Devils End,” the BSO’s underground camp. As he descends into its depths he meets several doppelgangers and engages in literary and political discussions in increasingly surreal tableaux linked by increasingly labyrinthine setting shifts. These tableaux offer the opportunity for fanciful intellectual debates in which Marechera emphasizes inner consciousness and abstract ideas, rather than realistically-drawn characters. The characters are merely devices to enable these debates.

Pattison predictably comments that the presence of doppelgangers is evidence for Marechera’s fragmented sense of self (28). Marechera’s use of the doppelganger is not a representation of his mental or literary confusion, but rather a device of the absurd and the surreal, typical of the Menippean project. In *Black Sunlight* the doppelganger characters include

Chris, who has an fetish for ladies' dirty panties and ends up in a "madhouse" (12); the "replicas of myself" Christian dodges in various scenes (17); Sordid Joe, who, like Marechera, "amassed a series of convictions for being drunk and disorderly, drunk and incapable, drunk and this and that" and who "seemed to be aggressively acting out a course of self-destruction" (34); and Nick the poet, whose lines "But only note/ how heavy my eyelids grow" (35) are unabashedly plagiarized by Christian when he remarks, "I could only note how heavy my eyelids grew" (23). Christian the narrator and his doppelgangers are Menippean caricatures: their features are "stylized rather than naturalistic" so that they are "mouthpieces of the ideas they represent" (Frye 309-310). As Marechera's narrator complains, "wherever I went I did not find people but caricatures of people who insisted on being taken seriously as people" (*Black Sunlight* 4). Marechera critiques these caricatures' faith in the revolutionary potential of opposition groups.

For example, Nick enables Marechera's critique of revolutionary poetics. Marechera introduces him as "Nick the poet" and deprives him of any realist/ic character development because he enters the novel posthumously, through the reductive descriptions of other characters. Christian describes Nick as "an intense and earnest young man who took everything seriously," which "was a mistake" (27). Nick's naïve earnestness (the opposite of satirical irony) is his downfall, because such earnestness cannot be sustained in the face of the disappointing truth that all opposition groups operate under the rules of combined and uneven development. The revolutionary cause is purposefully left vague; in the end the cause loses substance because the opposition group is always and already poisoned by the struggle to establish and coalesce power. True revolution—world-system revolution—is not possible through the path of, for example, mass nationalist parties in colonial Rhodesia.

Therefore, Nick cannot sustain that earnestness, and continuing to write in service of revolutionary politics in the BSO becomes hypocritical. Marechera kills Nick off unceremoniously in a riot without attributing his death to a particular cause or giving him burial or commemoration. The narrator wonders “whether Nick is still lying there in the gutter by the phone booth in Third Avenue, as serious as everything was to him. I like to think that he is still there, dead but there, as if he was a line from his own poetry. A paragraph from his own shrieking pamphlets. A hollowly ringing sound from the crypt of his own fictions” (28). The hypocrisy of trying to write for a cause the writer can no longer believe in results only in hollow fictions that seal the writer in a crypt of his own making. Marechera fleshes this idea out in “The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature.” He suggests, following the Russian writer Sinyavsky, that “A writer who is a fanatic can be a great writer. There are many examples of fine writers who have written within the framework of a state ideology or religion [...]. But their greatness comes not from the fact that they served an ideology but from the fact that they believed in it. If a writer has lost that faith, then he will not be able to produce real art by trying to adapt himself in service of the state. That is where freedom becomes absolutely essential” (190). Nick’s mistake, for which he suffers such satirical torture and death, is to continue to align his work with the revolutionary ideology of the BSO even though he no longer believes in it and therefore can no longer “produce real art.” Nick’s last words are “Rather trashy but then all last words are like that. They screen from view diseases that have no esteem” (Marechera, *Black Sunlight* 36). Marechera wants to avoid the grotesque disease of hypocrisy by accepting that he is the kind of writer “who can only write while [he is] free to develop [his] own personality, to be true to [himself]” (“The African Writer’s Experience” 190). However, the question that remains

to be explored in *Mindblast* is whether any writer can truly be autonomous from the “rotten heart” of the world-system.

Christian the narrator is also a caricature. Christian has few notable characteristics other than his profession as a “photographer chronicler” (Marechera, *Black Sunlight* 44). He devotes himself wholeheartedly to the purpose of accurately representing riots and violence between the state and activists. Although he is the protagonist as well as the narrator, he is neither sympathetic nor capable of growth. His flatness is an example of the “disappearance of the heroic,” a central theme in satire (Frye 228). Through Christian Marechera suggests that an ability to accurately represent violent conflicts between core and peripheral power is not enough to be make one truly revolutionary. To emphasize his naïve faith in empirical representation, and consciousness-raising, as revolutionary practices, Marechera names the publication for Christian’s photographs *Precision*. Christian mistakenly believes that his faithful documentation of revolutionary violence will “blow their minds”: “They were going to be my best work, those pictures. I could feel it” (Marechera, *Black Sunlight* 27). Marechera satirically suggests that accurate representation—and participation in—one specific struggle between core and peripheral power is insufficient because it does nothing to change or overthrow the world-system as a whole. Such efforts could contribute to power changing hands, but do not alter the central dynamic at work. In incorporating Christian’s realist/ic techniques into his satirical project, Marechera offers irrealism as a potential alternative.

Through Christian Marechera chronicles his own loss of faith in oppositional politics. In an absurd twist, Christian is later involved in a scandal about the accuracy and authenticity of *Precision*. He assists in the journalistic investigation of the doctor Sordid Joe, a friend whose drinking problem interferes with his surgical capacities. Christian illustrates articles condemning

Sordid Joe for slipping with the scalpel with “grimly realistic photographs,” thereby ruining the doctor’s reputation and sealing his fate as an itinerant unemployed drunk (34). Christian eventually conducts his own investigation into the story about Sordid Joe and discovers that the evidence against him was “faked” (34). Sordid Joe, whose reputation bears striking resemblance to Marechera’s, is a casualty of corruption among *Precision*’s leadership. Christian is devastated by his new awareness of the exploitative practices of a group that opposes exploitation and his own complicity with it. He makes a scene at the editor’s office and resigns.

After this crisis, Christian continues to work on his own. Marechera continues to satirize his preoccupation with accurate photographic representation, which the author suggests is insufficient in both compassion and imagination. Marechera contrasts Christian’s voice with Susan’s, the voice of explosive disorder that most closely aligns with Marechera’s voice. Susan is one of many female characters in *Black Sunlight* who occupy the role of bully. These characters serve to establish Christian as the anti-heroic “Omphale archetype, the man bullied or dominated by women” (Frye 228-229). Susan’s mockery is the sharpest. She toys with Christian mercilessly, teasing him, shocking him, tantalizing him, screwing him, and putting him in his place. She is a radical individualist who opposes any and all authoritarianism regardless of the source; she is particularly concerned to show the systematic nature of authoritarianism. She berates Christian’s failure to “feel anything about all the institutionalized violence out there” (44). Christian has “no feelings at all” about such violence, “because I am merely its photographic chronicler” (43).

Christian tries to censor Susan by yelling “SHUT UP” (Marechera, *Black Sunlight* 48). Marechera responds in Susan’s voice, which tells Christian to apologize to “the bastard” in the mirror (48). She says, “Nobody can shut me up. When you said SHUT UP you were irritated by

your own ignorance. You were hiding from yourself, your own ignorance. You were insulting your own intelligence. So you should apologize to yourself. I refuse to sit in the same car with a motherfucker who has no self-respect” (48). Her diatribe against Christian echoes the commentary on Nick, who died alongside the “hollowly ringing sound from the crypt of his own fictions” (28). An artist, whether photographer or writer, can no longer produce “real art” in service of a cause after his disillusionment with that cause. Such an artist is not being “true to [himself]” (Marechera, “The African Writer’s Experience 190). Christian’s failure to dissociate himself from the opposition ideology of *Precision* and the BSO makes his final contribution, like Nick’s, “rather trashy.”

Before concluding that Marechera is solely critiquing African nationalist groups and artists, however: Marechera also satirizes the mental attitudes of anarchist squatters at Tolmers Square in London. Although the name “Black Sunlight” could be interpreted as having racial significance, the characters that appear in the fictional camp Marechera calls “Devils End” also carry the markers of a British hippie culture. For example, they wear “denims and cotton with bare toes and beads (*Black Sunlight* 57). Marechera specifies neither the national setting nor the race of the characters. In this way Marechera broadens the scope of his critique, which is applicable to any group defined by a politics (and poetics) of opposition. He describes the common limitations of these groups: “They are not fighting for new needs, new ideas, new wants, but for what such people have always fought for. And lost. They are not really fighting. It is merely the whole society writhing as it were with indigestion or perhaps malnutrition. All they want is for the lioness to relent a little, give them a bit more rope. What they should do is kill her. But of course they always stop short of that” (69). In her battle against “institutionalized violence,” Susan comes the closest to recognizing that the problem is systemic rather than

specific, at the level of the world-system rather than the particularities of time or place (44). Marechera critiques opposition groups for “stopping short” of enacting true revolution, for failing to “transform [...] the nature of available reality at all” (69). This sounds like an anarchistic position, but Marechera is equally frustrated with the failures of nationalist and anarchist groups to bring about revolution.

Marechera presents and refutes the solution of violence as a strategy of opposition that could truly remake the world. Some parts of the underground BSO are devoted to such violence (although he leaves the specific nature of how violence should be deployed purposefully vague, so that it is never clear whether the strategy includes military or terroristic violence or both); but Marechera concludes that this strategy too will fail. The conclusion *Black Sunlight* offers is that such groups and all their strategies contain within themselves the seeds of their own destruction. In the end the position of intellectual anarchism, whether expressed by militants or philosophers, fails because of the paradox at its heart: it seeks to organize people for the goal of disorder, and thus depends upon hierarchized social formations in the quest to destroy hierarchized social formations. This dependency makes imagining a world outside “the nature of available reality” impossible. It is worth noting that the symbol of the “black sun” is similarly compromised. While Veit-Wild has found “black sunlight” to be a powerful paradox and a carnivalesque metaphor (“Carnival”), the original “Black Sun Organization” was a secret cell of reputedly esoteric and mystic elements within the SS in Nazi Germany. This paradox is beyond what Veit-Wild finds compelling about the title of the novel: in choosing this particular symbol Marechera reveals that peeling away the layer of a particular politics of opposition, such as Zimbabwean nationalism, reveals naked imperial domination and white supremacy at its “rotten heart.” At the end of *Black Sunlight*, the “blind sky bleached white the intellect of human bone [...] And the

mirror reveals me, a naked and vulnerable fact” (117). The “blind sky” of the world-system “bleaches white” human intellect so that core power as expressed in racism and class privilege underlie oppositional positions, down to the bone. Marechera suggests with the trope of the mirror that the “rotten heart” is inside the “naked and vulnerable fact” of the self also. Marechera will develop this idea, that a human being living under oppressive conditions cannot escape the desire to reserve power or to replicate the struggle between core and periphery, in *Mindblast*.

The Grotesque

Jane Bryce comments that Marechera deploys “narrative strategies designed to unsettle and defamiliarize” including obscenity, blasphemy, perversity, and scatology, with the aim of establishing “a sense of boundlessness and possibility” (“Inside/out” 223). Locating Marechera’s use of the grotesque enables a fuller understanding of his particular brand of irrationalism. In *Black Sunlight*, the grotesque, including both scatology and sexual perversion, satirizes the attitudes of authoritarian leaders. Marechera associates people in power with perversity and shit to critique their hypocrisy and corruption. As already indicated, the authoritarian characters in the novel are not assigned the particularities of time, place, institution, or even consistent race. Subjecting authoritarian leadership in general to the attacks of Menippean satire opens up “possibility” by refusing to simply supplant one particular leader with another. Marechera aims his critique is at all authoritarian leadership, which he views as an expression of core-peripheral inequity. Eliciting a visceral disgust with leadership is a way for Marechera to dissociate himself and perhaps his readers from the particularly hypocritical, repulsive workings of power within politically radical groups.

Marechera's conception of Menippean satire follows Bakhtin's in its close relationship to the carnivalesque. Carnival conscripts the grotesque body, scatology, and a general wallowing in filth and orifices into a front of resistance against what Jean Bayart called "the politics of the belly,"¹⁰ or what is termed more colloquially in many African communities "Big Man" or "fat cat" politics. This theory links power and consumption in a cyclical, co-dependent relationship, similarly to Deckard et al's conception of irrealism as a response to the dependency of development and prosperity in some sectors on the underdevelopment and maldevelopment of others. Marechera's disgustingly obese Chief in *Black Sunlight* is a generalized representation of Big Man authoritarian leadership in the politics of the belly. He could be either part of the colonial establishment or a black nationalist politician; the title "Chief" could be an epithet for either a white or black figure. Big Man/Chief's formidable corpulence and vast capacity to ingest is both source and evidence of power. Works of literature and art that expose, caricaturize, and satirize the "belly" of this kind of politics often do so using the carnivalesque, where the preoccupation with the mouth, swallowing, and the belly are both echoed and reversed in the preoccupation with the entrails, the anus, and excretion, which is of course the end result of the ingestion. For example, the Chief in *Black Sunlight* eats "huge meals" and wears "a necklace made of human fingerbones" (6), exaggerating and deforming consumption into cannibalism.

The same Chief punishes Christian by sending him down the "pitlatrine" and hanging him by his heels over a pile of "chickenshit," thus moving the corporeal locus from the mouth to the anus. In a further carnivalesque and also particularly Marecherean development, the Chief also asks Christian to fellate him: the genitals become a particular focus in the version and perversion of the carnivalesque that shapes Marechera's Menippean satire (1-2). As we have

¹⁰ In *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*.

already seen, Christian is himself a caricature. The artist who works in service of an ideology that he has seen to be empty is only capable of fellating the authorities.

Self-Referentiality and Prefiguring

The devices explicated above also provide the opportunity for a self-referential commentary on the production of literature and the problem of misreading that plagues the satirist. The doppelganger figures provide an eerie sense of déjà vu. Texts within Marechera's texts act as doppelgangers also; these offer a commentary on how capitalist development also shapes literary markets and publication practices. For example, in *Black Sunlight* Marechera refers to that novel's origination: *The Black Insider*, which was rejected for publication by Heinemann, returns uncannily disguised as *Black Sunlight*. Christian comments on Marechera's publication problems: "I had money but no job to return to unless another disguised *Precision* emerged out of the shambles" (Marechera, *Black Sunlight* 13). Christian reiterates this sense of déjà vu is reiterated: "What monstrous time had I encountered all this before? What wine was it that had made the moon so haunted?" (65). The haunting of Christian by other versions of himself and the haunting of the text by other texts contributes to a non-linear temporality. It also underscores Marechera's sense that hypocrisy and corruption in a black nationalist group resembles the hypocrisy and corruption of anarchist squatters in 1980s London. This suggests that the writer cannot escape the world-system, which structures publication and marketing, and thus shapes Marechera's livelihood and possibility for success.

This haunting and déjà vu also inflect *Mindblast*. In places in *Black Sunlight* Marechera prefigures what he will do in *Mindblast* more directly. The narrator of *Black Sunlight* discusses the strategies the narrators of *Mindblast* will more literally perform. For example, as he is

“crucified upside-down by my heels” in the chicken yard as punishment from the Chief, the narrator references trans-genre writing (3). He explains he will, like Penelope, “weav[e] words” in “Tales, songs, poems, dramas, parables, ribaldry, bawdy and last but not least they shake out my thoughts by my heels” (7). This prefigures the Menippean structure of *Mindblast*. It also refers to the Odyssey and the spinning of tales, the weaving of words not for realist purposes but as a method of resistance. Christian identifies with Penelope rather than Odysseus, in another gesture that undermines the masculine heroic. At the end of *Black Sunlight* Marechera writes, “That is the whole point of these many words. I am as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh” (115). This suggests that satirizing the self will become a prevalent theme in the next work.

Irrealism in Practice: Absurdist Autobiographical Embellishment

Marechera mixed realist/ic representation with irony and the absurd when relating his biography in interviews, making his own life into a Menippean performance. His frequent embellishment and alteration of autobiographical events reflects his faithlessness to linear chronology. Flora Veit-Wild has spent a great deal of time and energy trying to verify the facts of his life and validate the versions of them he told.¹¹ He generally confused chronology, offsetting events by a few years. It is possible to read his insistence upon being born later than records say (1955 according to his book jackets, 1952 according to the state)¹² as a gesture of self-aggrandizement—this would make his accomplishments even more impressive given his extreme youth.¹³ It is also possible to read this alteration as evidence for his poor memory, due to

¹¹ See the footnotes in *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on his Life and Work*.

¹² Marechera admitted to having been born in 1952 in an interview with Alle Lansu in 1986 in Harare (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 5). Most book jackets since his death have been revised with the correct date.

¹³ He claims to have been 13-14 in Form 3, when he was 15-16 (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 18). His teachers gave him Joyce, Lawrence, and Orwell and he published his first story at this age, he claims. For more on this possible interpretation, see Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 19; this self-aggrandizement reading could also be

alcohol abuse and/or mental illness (this would be Pattison's reading). However, the consistency of the three-year alteration seems to belie that idea. Instead, I read this chronological faithlessness as a purposefully absurd gesture, as it serves no rational purpose and often self-contradicts. I also read it as a purposefully anti-linear gesture. Relocating this autobiographical embellishment to Marechera's satirical project is a helpful way of reconciling his misrepresentation of the facts to his identity as an irrealist writer. His revision and embellishment of his own life, and his insistence on pointing out the fissures in that autobiography, were a way of satirizing the role of the writer in public life, a role dictated by the forces of combined and uneven development.

Several scholars writing on linguistic performativity (what J. L. Austin called "speech acts")¹⁴ have identified the absurd statement as a fundamental violation of the constative—descriptive—function of language, where a statement is evaluable according to empirical verifiability.¹⁵ Because an assertion implies commitment to belief, a statement such as Moore's paradox—"the cat is on the mat but I do not believe that it is"—transgresses the rule that assertion and belief must align for language to "work" properly (Loxley 48). For this reason, the absurd is a device central to the "militant irony" of satire. Marechera includes the "Cretan" version of Moore's paradox in *Mindblast*: "All Cretans are liars,' said the Cretan" (166). If the Cretan is a liar, then the statement must be false; but of course it cannot be if it is true that the Cretan is a liar. This paradox is an excellent metaphor for the role of the Menippean satirist in identifying inconsistencies and hypocrisies from which he himself cannot escape. Moments of

seen as a way to satirize the rags-to-riches *bildungsroman* development of the "African writer" from poor slum boy to wealthy and enlightened metropolitan expat.

¹⁴ See *How to Do Things with Words* 3. The connection to realist epistemologies is clear here: like critics who measure the value of literature on its ability to "realistically" portray social and political problems, positivist approaches encourage evaluation based on accurate representation of facts.

¹⁵ See Searle, Derrida.

the absurd point out the systematic nature of language and its own relationship to the literary world-system, while also emphasizing that language, like development, self-subverts.¹⁶ Such moments inspired Cynthia Chase to describe language as “the exploding machine...A machine for exploding, a machine that explodes” (9, quoted in Loxley 97).¹⁷ Thus Marechera’s absurdist autobiographical embellishment responds to the impossibility of communication outside of the machine of, in this case, colonial language, while also attacking the rules that govern that system.

Marechera often contradicts himself in order to highlight the self-subverting potential of language. Hence he does not hesitate to tell the same story differently *in the same interview*.¹⁸ This is not due to dementia or shiftiness, but a way of living irrealism out in practice. The story that he uses most often for this gesture is the story of his father’s death. According to various researchers, prominently Veit-Wild, Isaac Marechera was killed in a hit-and-run accident while walking home from work in Vengere township in February 1966, when Dambudzo was thirteen and away at secondary school.¹⁹ Uncannily, his body was taken to the morgue where he himself had recently presided as mortician. This story would seem dramatic enough, but Dambudzo Marechera fictionalizes it repeatedly in both interviews and fiction. He consistently recounts his father’s death as happening earlier than it did. Most often he tells the story as having happened when he was eleven, which would be almost consistent with his three-year birth gap—though not quite, yet again disrupting cohesive chronology. Sometimes he sets the story much earlier, when he was a little boy. Marechera also collapses time around the event of his father’s death. He

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida has elaborated on the self-subverting nature of language through a reworking of the ideas of Austin and his student John Searle in *Limited Inc*. His focus is primarily on the iterability and artifice of all language.

¹⁷ See *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*.

¹⁸ For example, in an interview with Alle Lansu he claimed to have been in the township when his father died, but later in the same interview he describes being away at school when it happened.

¹⁹ See Veit-Wild’s *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on his Life and Work*, the most extensively documented resource on his biography.

describes the eviction of his family from their home as occurring immediately after his father's death, "even before the funeral" (Lansu 16). However, they were not actually evicted until 1969.

In his most blatant revision Marechera insists in several interviews that his father was shot or stabbed. He also tells this version in *The House of Hunger*. Usually Marechera accuses colonial officials (the "Rhodesian Light Infantry") of killing his father.²⁰ The variation between versions of this event draws attention to their fictionality. This particular iteration allows Marechera to place the blame on the "institutional violence"—in this case of colonial rule, the systematic exploitation of Africans and their restriction to the townships—that Susan decries and Christian ignores in *Black Sunlight*. Another version, appearing in the poem "The Coin of Moonshine," recounts the event more accurately, but still layers its implications by collapsing the generations affected by the event: "The fast expensive imported cars / Leave in their wake mangled workers / Deranged peasants and crazed radical intellectuals" (*Mindblast* 126).

Marechera has also described seeing his father's body in the morgue. In Marechera's telling, this was a central trauma in his early life: "My two older brothers were away and so mother took me alone. It was really horrible in the mortuary; you could see that he had been riddled with bullets, the heavy automatic bullets which had almost cut off a part of his body, because they had sewn it back, you could see the stitches" (interview with Lansu 11). Here Marechera emphasizes the traumatic nature of this event by claiming that he was the only child there (his brother Michael claims to also have been in attendance), and, of course, by describing the body as being "riddled with bullets." The attention to "stitches" here is a theme in *The House of Hunger*, in which stitches appear as a metaphor for the seams of linguistic representation, in which words sew meaning together while also leaving gaps. Marechera uses those stitches in both his fiction and his autobiography.

²⁰ See interview with Veit-Wild in *Dambudzo Marechera*.

He often attributes his speech impediment to this traumatic moment, though sources agree his stammer began much earlier in his childhood. This biographical revision allows him to emphasize his new awareness of the layered and formidable restraints placed on his voice, his mind, and perhaps his soul as a colonial subject: “I was learning to distrust language, a distrust necessary for a writer, especially one writing in a foreign language” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 3). Locating the origin of his struggle to speak in this moment, alongside the insistence that his father was murdered by colonial officials, reveals those restraints as created by the “institutionalized violence” of colonial Rhodesia. To further add to the disabilities of Marechera’s mouth, he was also missing his front teeth. He wore a denture for most of his life, that was forever getting broken, disfigured, and lost in barroom brawls and assaults on his person. Marechera told several different stories about where and when he first lost his teeth. In some versions his father knocked them out; in *The House of Hunger* he attributes this violence to his older brother; and in other versions he attributes it to the “Colonel,” a Zimbabwean military official who beat him up in a toilet in the Holiday Inn in Harare in 1982.²¹ These embellishments, as absurd statements that call attention to their own absurdity, are Menippean satirical gestures. They enable Marechera to identify the layers of power differentials.

Marechera also altered several major incidents that occurred later in his life. He told varying, uncorroborated, and quite dramatic versions of his escape and exile from Rhodesia in 1973, when he was expelled from the University of Rhodesia and threatened with arrest due to his participation in a student protest action. He often played up his position as a political refugee. In an interview with Alle Lansu Marechera describes being hidden by the Ford brothers, white Rhodesians who had taken up right-wing personae as a cover for underground radical activism. Marechera claimed that the Fords disguised Marechera as their servant to avoid detection (Veit-

²¹ See Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 234.

Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 22). Jeremy Ford had no memory of dressing him as a servant (22). Marechera seems to have added this as a dramatic flourish. He further encouraged such a reading in his false description of his student visa in the UK as a “political asylum permit.” These embellishments offer a satirical commentary on European metropolitan ignorance about African immigrants. Often Marechera’s ironies went unrecognized, operating at the expense of their audience.

In a similar example, in 1979 Marechera unapologetically played to a crowd at a cultural festival in Berlin by establishing himself as Zimbabwe’s guerrilla writer and ingratiating himself with the local left-wing antiapartheid contingent. He proclaimed himself a “Marxist” and a “supporter of Mugabe,” sentiments that were very clearly inconsistent with, for example, his violent heckling of Mugabe when he spoke at the University of London in 1978 (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 269; 240). When he recounted the death of his father in the discussion after his Berlin reading, he attributed it to the detonation of a land mine, and suggested that as the son of a Liberation fighter he would be arrested if he were ever deported to Zimbabwe. In this way he played upon and satirized the assumption on the part of his audience that he was an African nationalist and anticolonial refugee.

Marechera also embellished two different, and contradictory, myths about his expulsion from Oxford. In one version, he claimed that he was found guilty of attempting to burn the college down and therefore was expelled. In another, he claimed that he was offered a choice between being admitted into a psychiatric hospital or expulsion, and he chose expulsion. The “objective” truth, according to Veit-Wild, is somewhere in the middle: Marechera had threatened several people and to burn the college down; the College responded by requesting him to seek counseling; after some time when he did not do so, they felt obligated to expel him (*Dambudzo*

Marechera 160). Marechera encouraged both the above myths, however. He did actually set a small fire, though it did not (nor was it really designed to) burn the college down. He also reiterated the latter myth in interviews. This mythmaking is his way of creating satire out of his own life. He follows the “erratic impulse” to set the College ablaze in order to “disrupt ‘the seemingly course of human affairs.’” In exaggerating his own misbehavior and the conservatism of the response of the people at New College, he treats them both with irony. In this way his satirical aesthetic surfaces not only in his written fiction but also in accounts of his biography.

Irrealism Corporealized: Absurd Costume and Misbehavior

Marechera’s deployment of costume and misbehavior were corporeal, satirical expressions of the absurd. Marechera frequently dressed in ridiculous and memorable costumes in public spaces and at events. When *The House of Hunger* won the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1979, along with Neil Jordan’s *Night in Tunisia*, Marechera dressed in a sombrero and poncho for the award ceremony. In the same year, he attended the Zimbabwe independence celebrations at the Africa Centre in London dressed in a full English foxhunting outfit, including jodhpurs and knee-high boots. Each costume was inappropriate in a many-layered manner because it disrupted several sets of expectations about Marechera’s societal position and role. He also chose particularly inappropriate public spaces and occasions for these performances. His attire caricatured cultural identities and enacted the Menippean principle that “society is unpredictable; roles can quickly change” (“The African Writer’s Experience” 188). The costumes were exaggerated to the point of disfigurement, to critique attitudes about the public comportment of the African writer. In addition to wearing costumes, Marechera infused these events with the surreal by behaving in an absurd and disorderly manner and destroying property for no apparent

reason. I argue that these instances were satirical theatrical performances. Such performances can happen anywhere and at any time: “the theatrical space is *generated* as a communicative space through the performance” (Larsen 61). Performance studies scholars such as Erica Fischer-Lichte describe the “eventness” of performance, its status as ephemeral and *hic et nunc*, “experienced as present in a particularly intense way” (124). Because the experience of such performances seems so “real,” their design as performances is often overlooked.

The poncho and sombrero combination Marechera chose for the Guardian Fiction Prize Award Ceremony in 1979 received quite a bit of notice. Some commentators thought it was ridiculous, others offensive (see Veit-Wild, Dambudzo Marechera; Chennells, “Unstable Identities”). The award ceremony was generally a black-tie affair, held at the swanky Theatre Royal in London and attracting attendees from the literary and general upper crust. Neil Jordan came in a suit. In donning the poncho and sombrero Marechera literally dressed his body in absurdity. The imperfection of the disguise—the gap between the representation and the “real”—gave the costume a satirical lean. Marechera could not convincingly appear to be a Latin American peasant because of his well-known face, as the guest of honor, as well as his skin color. Thus the costume was self-parodic, self-subverting, and absurd. This performance raises questions about who belongs to which identities and to which spaces such identities have access. Can a black African identify as Latin American? Does a peasant belong at an upper class literary ceremony in London?

The poncho Marechera chose bears visual resemblance to a Lesotho blanket, layering these questions further. Because of this similarity one possible interpretation of the performance is that it satirized European understandings of the identities of “African” and “African writer.” The shoddiness of the disguise and the somewhat pastiche nature of its elements prevented the

smooth performing of roles through costume and ceremony. As Fischer-Lichte argues, in such performance events “oppositions collapse” and “dichotomies dissolve,” causing a “crisis” where spectators are alienated from the conventional way of understanding the world (136-137). In Marechera’s words, these performances disrupt “the seemly course of human affairs” and offer “a new view of ‘the integrity of the world’” (“The African Writer’s Experience” 188). The experience of the spectator is “a pleasure as well as a torment” (Fischer-Lichte 137). Marechera was escorted out of the ceremony after repeatedly throwing the china at the extremely expensive chandelier and in general having a fit (alcohol was involved).²² Pattison and others have interpreted this episode as continued evidence for Marechera’s mental instability and addiction.²³ However, the lens of performance enables an interpretation of the incident as an example of embodied irrealism, in which costume and behavior are devices of satire. I interpret this episode as exemplary of his iconoclastic and transgressive impulses. Marechera may not always have known where these impulses would lead. However, he was intentional in choosing to give those tendencies free reign so that “all kinds of erratic inclinations are explored” and “scandalous and eccentric behaviour disrupts ‘the seemly course of human affairs.’”

A year later Marechera donned another absurd costume for a public event. In April 1980, the Africa Centre on King Street celebrated Zimbabwe’s Independence with a dance. Most attendees felt inspired to wear “ethnic” African costumes, but Marechera came dressed as an English gentleman on a fox hunt. His outfit was “complete with jodhpurs, black jacket, boots and a bowler hat” (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 240). This performance ridiculed both the assumed identity of the English gentleman and the earnestness with which Marechera’s fellow Africans were celebrating independence. As above, the discomfort caused by this shoddy

²² See the article “Red Faces and Red Wine” in *West Africa* for a detailed description of this event.

²³ See Pattison and Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera*.

disguise was layered: an English (colonialist) gentleman did not belong at such a celebration, and of course Marechera could not convincingly play the English gentleman given his skin and his well-known face. The pairing of colonized subject and colonizer's costume was absurd. The effect was to undermine the seriousness of and raise questions about the independence ceremonies as a whole. The forcible entry of a representation of core power into the midst of a celebration of the victory of peripheral power was a reminder that the consolidation of power always involves peripheralizing others.

Anthony Chennells offers a useful reading of these costumes: "The successful London author proclaims himself as belonging to the Third World, whether it is Central America or southern Africa. The returned Zimbabwean refuses an essentialist national identity by appropriating at least the dress of a race and a class to which white Rhodesia insisted he had no right" ("Unstable Identities" 43). Chennells notes that these costumes are "ironic" but does not connect them with Marechera's broader satirical project. Marechera regularly sported absurd costumes in his everyday life, such as "dread-locks and pin-striped suit, with trousers thrust into Wellington boots" (Chennells, "Unstable Identities" 44). He frequently wore absurd costumes to the Heinemann offices to ask for advances. These absurd costumes, which conjoin unexpected elements, are performed iterations of Moore's paradox. In asserting contradictory claims about their wearer's identity, they self-subvert, attacking complacency about established social formations that delineate identities and assign roles to them. Marechera demonstrated how textual absurdity as performed through and on the written word and social absurdity as performed through and on the body can be paired in a holistic irrealist aesthetic.

Marechera also famously misbehaved at a lecture he delivered at the University of Zimbabwe in 1982, soon after his return to Zimbabwe and the banning of *Black Sunlight*. At the

lecture he incorporated Menippean practices to critique the censorship of the post-independence regime that he now saw as repressive. According to spectator David Caute, Marechera deployed grotesque sexual perversion, and carnivalesque anal orifice: He took out a wineglass, pronounced it a “white arse” and repeatedly and suggestively inserted his finger into it. He then erected a diatribe against writing in vernacular languages, which had recently been officially encouraged by the state (Caute 12). He called them “ShitShona” and “ShitNdebele” and suggested that the only people who wanted Zimbabweans to write in these languages were the “imperialists” (Caute 11-12). He ridiculed the Liberation War memorial Heroes’ Acre, saying “half the heroes are buried alive!” (Caute 13). When his audience finally began to heckle him and call for his departure, Marechera produced a cardboard suitcase and said, “I am. Tonight.” He then proceeded to get into a taxi, performing a parody of his own hurried departure (Caute 13-14). In this irrealist performance Marechera conscripted both language and the body to bastardize symbols of nationalist pride.

Mindblast: Satirizing Independence, Satirizing Autonomy

Marechera’s last novel, *Mindblast*, interrogates the ideologies of freedom as attached to Zimbabwe’s independence and to the philosophical position of radical individualism as an alternative to oppositional politics. He uses the absurd, the grotesque, and doppelgangers to depict “monstrously everything that has grown rank and disproportionate” in postcolonial life in Harare (Cannan 11-12). His targets include the hypocritical pretense that Zimbabwe’s 1980 Independence actually enacted liberation for Zimbabwean citizens; the immorality that enables government corruption and nepotism to occur with impunity; and the fetishization of the “povo” as the pet, mascot, and mandate for the bourgeoisie and the civil servant class. For Marechera

this post-independence situation is a particularly ironic example of the “disproportionate” nature of capitalist development. Despite the rhetoric and objective of revolutionary black nationalism, once the black nationalists came to power they only reiterated the unevenness of combined and uneven development by enacting policies that were increasingly exclusionary of certain groups including the poor and minority communities such as the Ndebele. Ultimately, Marechera shows that they remained subservient to core metropolitan funding and interests.

In *Black Sunlight* Marechera depicted his loss of faith in the kind of political activism in which he had participated at the University of Rhodesia in the 1970s. *Black Sunlight* chronicled Marechera’s journey into disillusionment with the liberatory potential of opposition groups of various stripes by demonstrating the infiltration of social hierarchies into the most “revolutionary” organizations. In *Mindblast* Marechera explores the liberatory potential of radical individualism as an attempt to achieve autonomy from the insidious encroachment of the world-system into all kinds of communities. In this way he aims for the complete freedom that he describes as necessary to writers in the irrealist tradition (Marechera, “The African Writer’s Experience” 190). He attempts to enact the “daemoniac” tradition of literature, where “the intellect” that “has mostly been used to control human beings” can achieve the radical liberation of the mind (quoted in Stein 66). As a satirist, his goal is “to purge, to scour his own and all men’s minds and make them fit for art and the freer exercise in life of the divine power of imagination” (Cannan 11-12). In this way he blasts the mind. As in the real-life examples previously mentioned, Marechera performed this exploration as well as writing it. During this time he lived poor and mostly homeless on the streets of Harare, in radical isolation from social formations and institutions.

Like *Black Sunlight*, *Mindblast* creates a world that is “unstable, comic, satirical, fantastic, poetical and committed to the pursuit of truth.” While Marechera interspersed prose with “incidental verse” in *Black Sunlight*, in *Mindblast* he uses a greater multiplicity of distinct genres and narratives in an atmosphere of carnival and *lanx satura*. He emphasizes generic diversity at the formal level by providing separate sections for drama, short story, verse, and memoir. However, each section features metatextual commentary and crossover, so that the distinct narratives and genres commingle and weave together. The writer and narrator figure and his doppelgangers freely travel throughout this world, unfettered. The full title of the work is *Mindblast, Or, The Definitive Buddy*. Buddy is also identified as the “author” of the three plays that make up Part One, “The Skin of Time.” Part Two, “Grimknife Jr’s Story,” is a story within a story where the first narrator Buddy and the second narrator Grimknife meet and Grimknife kills Buddy. Part Three, “Blackrain Timewhite & other poems,” is a verse section dealing with similar themes to Part One. Part Four, “Appendix,” is a self-referentially autobiographical passage taken from what Marechera calls the “Park Bench Journal.”

Moments of unexpected dialogue between the disparate narratives suggest that no narrative “voice” or style can speak in solitude or be easily confined in a textual order; instead the work expresses a carnivalesque polyphony. In this way *Mindblast* is a formal innovation in a hyper-Menippean style, in which “Genres are mixed. Stories, speeches, dramatic sketches, poetry and parody exist side by side” (“The African Writer’s Experience” 188). Also, this polyglot style contradicts the central political philosophy explored in the Park Bench Journal section of the novel, radical individualism. Marechera treats that philosophy with irony by performing the impossibility of autonomy at the level of form and style. These strategies become self-referential to the point that the work as a whole acts as an absurd, self-satirizing and self-subverting text. In

the Park Bench Journal Marechera expresses his inability to separate his solitary inner journey from his social position. He complains repeatedly about misinterpretations of his work, assumptions made about him based on his race and class, and what he sees as a dearth of support for creative endeavors. His own skepticism about the potential of the “mindblast” to enact liberation is also expressed in the self-subverting trope of the death of the writer, a focus of the novel. In his own words, “It takes only an instant to become a person without titles, without a label, to become the raw person, the point at which low-life naturalism meets its *doppelganger*, the existentialist” (Marechera, “The African Writer’s Experience” 190). This novel ultimately presents an existentialist crisis, as Marechera finds that radical individualism is a flawed strategy for liberating the mind.

Plays and Verse: Menippean Satire Critiquing the Zimbabwean State

Parts One and Four, the three plays “by Buddy” and “Blackrain Timewhite & other poems,” target post-independence nationalisms and the failures of the ZANU-PF state. As in *Black Sunlight*, the characters in the plays are caricatures, vehicles for intellectual stances. The first play, “The Coup,” introduces the set of characters for all four plays. “The Coup” mocks the overthrow of white rule in Rhodesia; “The Gap” chronicles the aftermath of the coup in the family of the overthrown Manager; and “Blitzkrieg” depicts a party of elites and “povo” after “independence” (*Mindblast* 34). Each play is one act only; the first takes place in an office; the second in a sitting room, and the third, in a gesture of the grotesque, at a toilet. These plays follow the tradition of irrealist drama Marechera identifies as typified in the work of Samuel Beckett (“The African Writer’s Experience” 190). Beckett-inspired surreal style and post-apocalyptic tone inflect Marechera’s plays. That tone crosses over into the Park Bench Journal in

repeated allusions to Beckett's absurd statement, "I can't go on, I'll go on," in the refrain "It goes. But it is not going" (for example, 153). In Marechera's hands the absurdity becomes even less optimistic; Beckett's statement ends with the movement forward implied by "I'll go on," whereas Marechera's ends with the passive and negative "it is not going." Like the dustbins that provide homes for characters in Beckett's play *Endgame*, the toilet is a significant feature of Marechera's play "Blitzkrieg." However, Marechera's toilet is actually a character, a personification of the grotesque with its own quite audible voice: "*because it is not working properly, [it] gives a weird mind-jamming gaga flush*" (*Mindblast* 29). At the end of the play, a bodiless voice from the toilet offers a version of Moore's paradox: "Analyse the sentence 'I do not shit, said the shitter'" (44). Indeed, the toilet has the final joke: "Toilet make joke on whole country!" (47). In these ways Marechera innovates on Beckett's irrealist drama, borrowing and expanding on tropes Beckett introduced.

Marechera associates that post-apocalyptic tone with the historical era of post-independence Zimbabwe. Throughout *Mindblast*, he deploys the tools of irrealism, such as grotesquerie, to critique nationalist ideology. He repeatedly associates political discourse with scatology, rot, and imprisonment. For example, he writes, "Political ideologies were quietly sneering at the back of my mind. I turned to them only to find them equally shit. Talk of organising human beings always reminds me of jail" (*Mindblast* 148). This last statement is reminiscent of Marechera's exposure of the inability of opposition groups to escape social hierarchization in *Black Sunlight*. In the drama section of *Mindblast* Marechera locates "The rotting minced meat underneath the tablecloth of political slogans" in the hypocrisies of the post-independence state (178). He represents the failure of revolutionary change at Independence by the whiteness of the fictional leaders both before and after "The Coup." His language denotes the

leaders as political in some examples (such as “the coup”) and commercial in others (such as the character called the “Manager”). In this way he critiques the infiltration of economic interests into national governance. He references his own experience of censorship as evidence of the failure of revolution when the new white leader remarks, “These young men are getting too fresh nowadays. They think freedom means what it says” (31). He deploys incest as a trope to represent the cronyism that taints governance. The characters are intermarried and sleep with each other’s wives, daughters and mistresses. Mrs. Nzuzu rationalizes her extramarital affair with the new leader Drake by saying, “Then we won’t be doing anything wrong. We would just be keeping it all within the family” (37).

Marechera mocks these same attitudes in his verse section. In the context of the novel as a whole, the conversation between poems becomes a clearly satirical critique. For example, the dripping irony in the poem “Angling” sets the context for reading a later poem, “The Voice of Watercolour Reeds,” through a satirical lens. “Angling” sets up a poetics of defiance against “the flowerdecked fortress of Folly / Where harlequins mimick and mime / The nation’s progress” (117). Art that glorifies and parrots “the nation’s progress” is the work of “harlequins.” The exaggerated pomposity of “The Voice of Watercolour Reeds,” especially coupled with “Angling,” lends itself to a parodic interpretation:

And O Th’astoundingly clear sunset
 Hues more than rainbow-marvellous
 Which greet the returning Freedom Fighter
 Echoing unstintingly more than his badge of courage
 With colours nature-hewn more brutally bright
 Than the splendour of Zambezi Gorge. (119)

This poem parodies the kind of revolutionary poetry that Nick wrote in *Black Sunlight*. Unlike in the earlier work, here Marechera does not place this kind of poetry into the voice of a character in a cohesive narrative. Instead, he devotes a whole section to verse without incorporating it into

the overarching diegesis. In this way *Mindblast* is formally distinct from *Black Sunlight* and Marechera's other previous works. He does not justify the carnivalesque generic miscellany through narrative connection. Instead, he interweaves the different sections at the thematic and metanarrative levels. All the sections provide an irrealist critique of combined and uneven development, whether manifest in national politics or individual identity. The "authors" of some sections show up as characters in others (a feature explored below). Marechera makes the "stitches" that sew together genres and construct characters even more evident than in previous works.

The characters in the plays, like those in *Black Sunlight*, are stereotypes. In *Mindblast*, however, Marechera highlights the self-reflexivity of the writing process in the self-commentary characters provide. The characters frequently comment on themselves as purely stereotypical constructs. Several of the characters in "Blitzkrieg" are simply called 1st Man, 2nd Man, etc. Spotty represents "the lean spotty silent majority" that "becomes the compost heap upon which criminal tyranny flourishes" (9). As a satirized character Spotty encourages criticism of the view that scholarship and philosophy are "un-African" pursuits. When asked by his son, Dick, "Do you really think about thinking?" Spotty replies, "This is not Europe, Dick. This is Africa" (25). When Dick presses him, "There is no place for thought in Africa?" Spotty says, "There isn't, if you want to get things done" (25). Dick asks, "What things have you got done?" and Spotty "*Looks round, desperately*" (25). The whole exchange is rendered even more ridiculous and absurd by the pun on spotted dick.

This self-reflexivity is also evident in Marechera's treatment of race in *Mindblast*. The racial identity of characters is not an emphasis of *The House of Hunger* or *Black Sunlight*, despite its clear historical importance for the content of both works. As already noted above,

both the Manager and Drake, the national/corporate leaders before and after “The Coup,” are white. Marechera draws attention to racial attributes by deploying obvious racial stereotypes that contribute to the overall absurdity of the dramatic atmosphere in the plays. These include two minor black characters, called Mahogani and Raven, and Shogun, a deferential personal assistant with Karate skills whose defining characteristic is his “Oriental” identity (for example, 31). These tropes of race become increasingly hyperbolic and mixed in a way that prevents any clear understanding of an ordered racial social formation. Instead, Marechera deploys these tropes in the overall self-reflexivity of the work, and perhaps to air his frustration about the expectation that his work should express a racial politics.

In the final vignette of “Blitzkrieg” Shogun nearly defeats six men, who attack him apparently out of bigotry. In a bizarre confusion of racial histories, Marechera self-consciously and repeatedly refers to the losing battle of the lone “Oriental” Martial arts expert against these men as the “struggle” (45), an obvious reference to Zimbabwe’s Liberation War. Another character, Alfie, represents varying stereotypes attached to blackness in varying times and places. In some moments he slips into an exaggerated accent that could be associated with the West Indian communities Marechera came across outside Oxford (32). Marechera places a clear critique of the system of combined and uneven development as it works through racial peripheralization into Alfie’s voice: “I was discovering that there are many shades of black but the only true one is that of the have-nots. Don’t mean to sound bitter—yes, I do mean to sound bitter, but it seems to me for all our ideals our independence is supposed to represent, it’s still the same old ox-wagon of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. There’s even an attempt to make poverty a holy and acceptable condition” (40). However, Marechera renders this critique less convincing through an absurd twist in which Alfie turns out to be working in

government surveillance. In this way even the clearest voice in opposition to the system is still conscripted into its service.

Marechera plays with all of the above devices of irrationalism at the level of language throughout the drama section. The characters describe corruption, violent and perverse sex and other elements of grotesquerie in orations marked by overflowing erudition and jargon, a convention of Menippean satire since Varro (Frye 311). Before he deposes the Manager in “The Coup,” Drake insists that the two opponents are “friends, buddies, cronies, colleagues, confidants, fellow travellers, peas in a pod, partners, accomplices” (Marechera, *Mindblast* 10) and describes the Manager’s wife Jane as “The only mother sister, wife, mistress I have got. She is the only real friend, buddy, crony, partner, accomplice, pea in a pod, colleague I have got” (11). In “The Gap,” Dick describes his father Spotty’s beating of his mother Jane: “I said he hit her. You know like in the films, he worked her over, beat the daylights out of her, smashed her, pulverized her, vetted her on the couch, mindboggled her in the bedroom and came down for a glass of milk from the fridge” (20). The text is rich with absurd linguistic puns: “Sorry, split of the tongue. I mean slip. As in Gymslip” (22). Moore’s paradox resurfaces here. One of the unnamed men says, “Christ, he’s got diarrhea and philosophy” (44), and a bodiless voice from the toilet responds, “You said it man. I’ll give one example. Analyse the sentence “I do not shit, said the shitter” (44). One of the unnamed men comments, “If this toilet could talk, what strange conversations it would reveal; what nasty goings on, what stinking truths about everyone, what moral meals constantly defecated within it” (39). Before the “struggle” to beat Shogun, the men waiting in line for the toilet are struggling with incontinence. The satirical tone here is perhaps best summed up by Drake’s ironic statement, “When I say a thing it means exactly what I want it

to mean, no more and no less” (13). Marechera’s language takes on non-realist and non-representative functions throughout.

Grimknife Jr and Buddy: The Failure of Radical Individualism

In the short stories and the Park Bench Journal, Marechera proffers the alternative of radical individualism as a solution to the hypocrisy and corruption of the “criminal tyranny” featured in the plays and verse. Yet by the end of the novel this alternative self-subverts. In the short stories in Part Two, the doppelganger theme from *Black Sunlight* returns, but with heightened textual self-reflexivity. This time two narrators swap in and out of a story within a story (within the larger novel). Eventually both narrators end up as characters in the same story and one kills the other. Here the narrative itself becomes a gesture of the absurd, a manifestation of Moore’s paradox. “Grimknife Jr’s Story” starts with a Prologue in which Grimknife Jr is kept as a prisoner of Rix the Giant Cat (in an obvious reference to fat cat politics), who is responsible for Grimknife’s “reeducation.” Rix, the “Reorientation Officer,” is the “head of this establishment” with a “Hero’s Medal pinned to his massive chest” (51). Grimknife Jr is the “mental delinquent” (51). His crimes are “not having done anything” and “using obscene language” (52), in a clear allusion to Marechera’s experience of censorship. Rix tries to reeducate Grimknife through the logic of mathematics, explaining that one plus one is two, etc., but Grimknife insists on misusing logic as a jumping off point for fantasy and imagination. He insists, “I prefer it to be anything I choose. [...] Like one plus one is a pregnant girl who lived in Moscow at the time of Ivan the Terrible” (54). And again, “Two plus two is being thrown out of a house because you do not have the money to pay for the rent [...] I am trying to find your four but it is not there in my heart” (54-55). Grimknife persists in leaping from the accepted rules of

“objective” mathematics to the poignant subjectivity of narrative. Significantly, those narratives highlight the problems caused by combined and uneven development in various peripheries and historical moments. In this vignette Marechera satirizes fat cat politics and reiterates his inability to believe in the logic of such politics in his “heart.”

In answer to Rix’s attempts to repress, Grimknife Jr begins to “weave words”: Three plus three is a story,’ Grimknife began. Tiny firepools twinkled in his eyes, following the trail of his tongue. He continued ‘And I will tell it to you” (57). This storytelling capacity enables the freedom of Grimknife’s imagination. It fans the flame of inspiration and resistance: “When Grimknife opened his mouth to speak, a tiny blue flame leapt from his suddenly crimson tongue. It leapt upwards, shimmering like an eerie firefly in the brighter than bright moonlight. It spurted forwards on a sizzling yellow tail. It was heading straight for the heart of the moon” (57). Here Grimknife Jr blasts off from mathematical logic into autonomous storytelling, indicating the explosive and liberatory power of such writing.

However, in the story Grimknife Jr narrates the liberatory potential of literary autonomy self-subverts, because it is the story of the writer’s existentialist demise. Grimknife tells a story about Buddy, who is the writer of the plays and the “definitive Buddy” of the title of the work. Buddy “was a poet, though nobody thought so” (59). Like Marechera, Buddy struggles to find an audience that understands his work: “He considered his life-poetry simple and direct. He could not understand how any discerning human being could fail to ... but they always did” (61). Grimknife covertly stabs Buddy in the side, and in the aftermath of this violence Buddy begins to talk about “the Grimknife character” (65). Then Grimknife comes and sits and has a beer with Buddy. The two wonder, “Why does every revolution result in the alienation of its artists?” (67). In the end, Buddy the poet dies in a toilet, and “Grimknife, banging the door outside, calling to

him, heard the loud sickening thud of the poet's fall" (85). As Marechera describes, "Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer's task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it. [...] The writer is no longer a person: he has to die in order to become a writer" ("The African Writer's Experience" 190). In this way the absurd and the broader satirical project are connected to the "ritual of suicide" (*Mindblast* 159).

The Park Bench Journal: "Rugged Individualism" and Self-Satire

In the final section of *Mindblast*, satire gives way to a meditation on the inner world and what Soyinka describes as "a rare insight into the process of creativity itself, inducting the consumer into a privileged state of the artiste's own sensibility" (251). The journal is increasingly self-referential about the creative process. For example, Marechera writes, "I am right now on a park bench typing this story and I am out there in the story" (139). And again, "I do not know where this story is going" [...] I do not know where I am going. That is the whole matter of this story" (141-142). In this passage the inner workings of the mind are spilled out onto the page as if the story and the thought is one. Yet Marechera is not able to achieve autonomy. His "inner journey" and radical individualism are compromised by prolific musings on the dependency of the writer on the sectors of the world-system that structure the lives and work of creative producers. For example, he writes, "I wanted to talk to the whole world but as soon as I opened my lips I would *know* how utterly useless it all was. Rare are the ears trained and tuned to the inner spirit. There was always this fog of misunderstanding, deliberate or unconscious—as if the listener wanted to confirm his own assumptions about supposed chinks in my character" (*Mindblast* 135). Racial attributes and physical markers of poverty restrict his

literary career: “It was a complete misunderstanding that people when they looked at him saw, not the poems, but his dirty dreadlocked physical presence” (61).

This self-referentiality becomes a satire of the self: “I had become a figure of fun. Yet there was a bitter truth in my laughter” (139). This is the end result of the satirical project: “Driven to despair [...] the unhappy poet is only saved by the discovery of laughter. Though he be never so pressed, yet he can laugh at himself, at his own misery, at his own aspiration, at the lives and the misery and the aspirations of all men. Everything he will measure by his untried vision, and everything he will find small and fit only for derision” (Cannan 11-12). Menippus, after all, was a cynic. Marechera asks “How to split the atom of the story and in the mindblast survive the theme psychological holocaust” (166). The response is the derisive and destructive laughter of Menippean satire, laughter “like crockery crushing into a wall [...] like boots banging the flimsy door of reality in the early hours of the morning” [...] nothing like the sun” [...] “like a contralto fart slowly issuing from the mountainous buttocks of a very fat woman” (165). The repeated references to suicide undermine the possibility of radical individualism, as the end result of such a philosophy is the annihilation of the self: “After all the way I write each book is a form, a ritual of suicide” (159). He died soon after *Mindblast* was published, in a final irony about the destructive facets of radical individualism and the impossibility of literary autonomy.

L’enfant Terrible: Violence on Bodies, Violence on Words

Marechera had clear foresight into the ways his iconoclasm would enact violence on his reputation, his credibility as an author, and his physical body. For this reason, perhaps, he changed his name from Charles back to his mother’s nickname for him, Dambudzo (“the one who brings trouble,” “the troubled one”). The satirist, according to Cannan, is commonly

“parlously out of luck” (7). Marechera struggled as a writer—he experienced difficulties in getting his work published after the first novel *The House of Hunger*, even more so following the ban placed on *Black Sunlight*. These struggles are mirrored by his personal struggles— persistent poverty, recurring homelessness, and health problems stemming from poor nourishment, exposure, addiction and HIV, culminating in his premature death. Landeg White wrote, “It is obviously going to be very much more comfortable for us all having Marechera dead and his works issued under the benign editorship of Flora Veit-Wild than Marechera alive and kicking” (quoted in Pattison 28-29). Marechera was notorious as African literature’s mad, drunk and disorderly *enfant terrible*. He succeeded in discomfiting many friends, readers, and literary figures with both his writing and behavior.

Responses to *Mindblast* were mixed. Oliver Nyika wrote in *Mahogany* magazine that “Mindblast is mind-boggling, [...] prophetic, and horrifyingly honest” (quoted in Pattison 34). However, Marechera had difficulty finding a publisher. Charles Mungoshi at Zimbabwe Publishing House felt Marechera was not “communicating with the people” in this work (quoted in Veit-Wild 338). The College Press finally published *Mindblast* in 1984. Marechera wrote in a letter to James Currey that his work was accused of “élitism, irrelevance to ‘the struggle’, etc. [...]. For ten months I have burnt my fingers on these charges” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 207). Marechera felt failed by the literary industry in addition to puritanical censorship practices at the end of his life. He believed his work was misunderstood because “in terms of technique and style and use of language in *The House of Hunger* and *Black Sunlight* and especially in *Mindblast* I try to sabotage the very language I am using. [...] There is this contradiction that through destroying the English language I actually achieve higher levels of meaning through the same language” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 312).

Marechera wrote that he must make “experimental use of English, standing it on its head, brutalising it into a more malleable shape for my own purposes” (quoted in Gaylard 82). His Menippean satirical project involved “developing torture chambers of irony and sarcasm, gas ovens of limitless black resonance. For me this is the impossible, the exciting, the voluptuous blackening image that commits me totally to writing” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 4).

Violence on language, for Marechera, was inseparable from violence on the body. In this way the textual corpus was inseparable from the physical corpus. As he says, “It was as easy to lose your teeth as to compose the beautiful first line of a poem” (*Mindblast* 59). The absurd paradox of actively seeking linguistic and social apocalypse is that both corpuses are casualties of such blasts. Understanding this (not particularly optimistic) vision helps do justice to Marechera’s project and to recognize his contribution to irrealism. Peter Harvey may describe Marechera’s efforts best. In a lecture Marechera gave on Shakespeare, “He seemed to have abandoned conventional notions about developing ideas”; it was “as if by some momentous effort, he could rip the heart of Shakespeare from those antique texts, and put it pulsing and comprehensible on the table in front of us. He kept failing, and trying again, his face sometimes screwed up with the effort” (quoted in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 237). Peeling away the layers to get to the heart is an apt metaphor for his satirical methodology.

Throughout his later works, Marechera deployed the irrealist device of Menippean satire to critique combined and uneven development and the attendant struggles for power. In *Black Sunlight* he shows unevenness and conflict to be inherent not only to dominant groups and authoritarian states but also to activist collectives engaging in opposition politics. In *Mindblast* he reveals these dynamics to be inherent to the self, making liberation through radical

individualism impossible. Writing offers the most potential for autonomy; the flamed tongue of the storyteller seems a powerful escape from the confines of logic and “reeducation.” Yet Marechera makes clear in the “ritual of suicide” in which one narrator/writer figure kills the other that the writer identity presents an existentialist crisis. In the *Park Bench Journal* Marechera’s search for autonomous writing “is not going”: instead he entraps his prose in circles of depression about the world-system economics that plague the market for literature as surely as any other market. Marechera’s life-poetry illustrates the dependence of any author on what Casanova calls literary capital, “when his name has acquired value” based on reputation (16). It is “what he believes himself to have, what others believe him to have, and consequently the power to which it is agreed he is entitled” (Casanova 16-17). The frustration of Marechera’s desire for literary capital illustrates both the restrictions the world-literary system places on certain styles and forms at certain times, and the inescapability of subjection to world-system dynamics, even through writing.

CHAPTER 2

Irrealism and History: Vera's *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins*

The legend, the history, is created in the mouth, and therefore survival is in the mouth.

-Yvonne Vera
(Bryce, "Interview" 221)

Yvonne Vera began writing in the late 1980s and published most of her books in the 1990s and early 2000s. She was Shona by birth but strongly identified with the Ndebele communities with which she grew up in villages in Matabeleland and in Bulawayo. Her sense of the dynamics of combined and uneven development surfaces in her treatment of national history and her focus on further peripheralized communities within that history, most noticeably ethnic minorities and women. Vera reinserts the embodied experiences and ancestral lineages of women into national Zimbabwean history. Her work reveals a desire to uncover women's bodies as the sites where conflicts between core and peripheral power during capitalist modernization play out. In her ecology women's bodies are abused by the struggle for power and the unevenness of world-system "development;" yet they are also a source of physical, communal and spiritual strength. Her irrealist style features disruptions of linear chronology, disjunctures in narration, the presence of the divine, and dense, hallucinatory prose. These devices represent and respond to the contradictions of world-system modernization, as they occur in the postcolonial periphery.

Commentators on Vera's work have often focused on her "lyrical language" and the complexity of her prose, which "deflect most critical tools" (Gunner and Kortenaar 3). Some critics have found her work challenging enough to be "off-putting, slightly repetitive" or even "almost incomprehensible" (Ludicke 67). Others have noted that the iterative and sonic nature of her prose seems reflective of the "cadences" of Shona "tradition" (Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo xxii-xxiii) and its "oral delivery," thus carving out space for local tradition to shape English

literature, “Africanizing” it (Ogunyemi 262). This chapter offers Deckard et al’s theory that irrealist literature reflects and responds to combined and uneven development as a helpful critical tool for accessing and interpreting Vera’s work, in particular her first and last published novels, *Nehanda* (1994) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). These works doubtlessly draw from Shona cultural traditions. However, Deckard et al contextualize such local influences within a world literary and economic framework that enables a more definitive argument about Vera’s political and historiographical project. According to Deckard et al, irrealist literature registers the violent inconsistencies of capitalist “development” and modernization. Vera’s work offers a gendered account of these inconsistencies. She focuses both on the material experiences of women’s bodies (such as labor, sexuality, hunger, rape and violence) and the symbolic value of female figures as sources of knowledge and empowerment. Her work explores the congruence and conflict of corporeal and canonized femininity.

As Vera has said in an interview, “Survival is in the mouth” (Bryce, “Interview” 221). A woman survives through the material functions of that organ as well as the communicative function it provides as the gateway of the voice, which carries political implications. A community survives when its tongue is free to tell its history and when it has access to the moving river’s mouth of ancestral wisdom and strength. Vera’s exploration reweaves women’s bodies into the fabric of Zimbabwean history in order to free their mouths from the many forces of combined and uneven development that would silence them. Her *Nehanda* and her *Nonceba* are not to be sterile, sacrificial “stone virgins,” but sensual bodies moving, shaping history through voice and agency.

Historical Background: 1980-2000

The interpenetration of core and peripheral power shaped developments in Zimbabwe during the 1980s and 1990s. World-system unevenness manifested specifically in the struggle of the new ZANU-PF government to consolidate political and economic control while foreign powers and international governmental organizations (IGOs) continued to interfere.²⁴ National sovereignty and global capitalism battled for control over Zimbabwe's economic policy, coupled with violent civil strife that was driven in part by foreign intervention. In Zimbabwe the inextricability of foreign investment from the legacy of colonialism is particularly evident: independence from minority-white government was not accompanied by the redistribution of the ownership and control of land and finance to black African leadership.

From independence in 1980, onward, world-system control encroached on national sovereignty. The Lancaster House Constitution was composed and signed in a room in London that included a delegation of 22 British dignitaries and military personnel. Its provisions prevented the economic agenda of ZANU-PF for nationalization and redistribution of majority-white-owned land from coming to fruition ("Report of the Constitutional Conference"). Instead of codifying the land policy agenda of the black nationalist parties, post-independence law entrenched private property rights and allowed land redistribution only with a "willing-seller, willing-buyer" approach (Hammar et al 4). The policy of "national development" the Constitution effected was "aimed at convincing a sceptical international community—given Mugabe's explicit Marxist predilections—of the sufficiently liberal-democratic (or at least modernising) credentials of the new government, in order to generate much-needed financial support" (Hammar et al 24-25). Thus the Zimbabwean state, from its inception, was subjected to

²⁴ Historical information in this section comes largely from Hammar et al's *Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis* and Alexander et al's *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the "Dark Forests" of Matabeleland*.

world-system economic coercion. Notably, no women, Zimbabwean or otherwise, were present at the Lancaster House talks (Charumbira and Christiansen-Ruffman 87-88).

These and other encroachments by the world-system into the governance and economy of the newly independent nation motivated increasingly authoritarian responses from the ZANU-PF state. The impotency state representatives experienced at the policy level contributed to intolerance for perceived threats to state control from within the national sphere. In the atmosphere of disempowerment created by foreign intervention, state officials and policymakers including PM Mugabe became increasingly paranoid and severe in crushing real or perceived dissidence. Any movement that was hostile or resistant to ZANU-PF policies was conflated with anti-national and/or neo-imperialist influence and involvement. When disorganized bands of former ZIPRA combatants began to flee to the bush to avoid conflict and exclusionary practices in the new Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) and subpar conditions at official Assembly Points (APs), Mugabe viewed them as a severe threat. The involvement of the South African military in attempting to destabilize Zimbabwe by deploying the covert “Super Zapu” guerrilla brigade and helping to conscript bush “dissidents” compounded the conflict (Alexander et al 196). The ZANU-PF regime perceived regional interventionism as especially threatening because of the well-known economic alliance between the South African apartheid regime and the US.²⁵

The ZANU-PF state responded brutally to what its representatives interpreted as sabotage. In the early 1980s Mugabe unleashed the Korean-trained Fifth Brigade on minority populations, mostly Ndebele and mostly poor, in Matabeleland and the Midlands, perceiving these territories to be politically supportive of and ethnically bound to both ex-ZIPRA

²⁵ See, for example, Richard Goldstone’s report that “The association of the black liberation movement with communism shaped US policy: diplomats were more concerned with containing communism (and protecting US economic interests) than with ending apartheid” (814). President Reagan, for example, provided South Africa a \$1.1 billion loan and refused to use sanctions or maintain a strict arms embargo (817).

combatants as well as opposition ZAPU leadership. The Fifth Brigade enacted extrajudicial violence against thousands of civilians in a campaign of arrests, torture, rape and homicide. Soldiers plundered and destroyed property and burned whole villages. Throughout the 1980s, civilians in these areas were caught in between bush dissidents and government troops, both wreaking havoc and suffering.

The hope that infused national consciousness at independence was violently shattered by this state-sponsored violence. Subsequent state-enforced silence about the death, destruction and suffering in these areas, by denying citizen access to mass graves and excluding accounts of state-sponsored violence from history books, compounded the sense of injustice. This enforced silence sustained the pretense in the international community that Zimbabwe was still the “great hope” of southern Africa. This accommodationist stance persisted until circa 1997, when the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace issued a human rights report on the issue, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1988*. Even after this report was leaked to the public in the South African *Weekly Mail* and the *Mail and Guardian*, government officials including President Mugabe largely ignored it. Additionally, neither the above report nor the publications of international governing organizations such as the IMF and World Bank acknowledged the clear connections between world-system infringement on national sovereignty and ZANU-PF’s increasing authoritarianism. In this way the lived experience of many everyday Zimbabweans was deeply inconsistent with not only the rhetoric of the Zimbabwean state but also the assumptions of core players in the systems of international policy and economics, which had contributed to lowering the local standard of living and motivating and enabling state-sponsored violence.

Economic coercion continued through the 1990s, with the redesigning of Zimbabwe's Economic and Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), which had originally been cast as a "home grown" policy (Hammar et al 4). After the drought of 1991-92 reduced the state's financial capacities, the IMF took greater control and initiated more orthodox measures that contracted state services (Hammar et al 5-6). For example, the state could no longer commit to free universal health care; charges were reintroduced at clinics in 1993 and became increasingly unaffordable (Alexander et al 248). Hammar et al chronicle the results:

The negative effects of ESAP were both immediate and sustained. They included unprecedented increases in interest rates and inflation, a 65 per cent fall in the stock market, deindustrialisation precipitating a 40 per cent decline in manufacturing causing company closures and massive job cuts, and a substantial decline in real wages and overall standards of living. Increased levels of poverty followed, exacerbating the effects of an already rapid growth in HIV/AIDS. A government Poverty Assessment Survey conducted in the mid-1990s noted the extensive prevalence of poverty in Zimbabwe, concluding that 'about 61 per cent of the population [lived] in households with income per person below a level sufficient to provide basic needs', with 45 per cent living below the Food Poverty Line (FPL). The majority of these were concentrated in the communal areas and among female-headed households. (6)

The World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) found in a report issued in 2012 that, indeed, "the program did not reduce poverty and unemployment as its architects had hoped," in contrast to the previous ZANU-PF policy of national development, which had improved social indicators particularly in health and education.

The continued struggle between core and peripheral control contributed to the development of ZANU-PF's increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary nationalistic rhetoric since the 1990s. This rhetoric draws on the perception of neo-imperialistic international policy to define "new, essentialised categories of authenticity, attachment, loyalty and entitlement" based on displays of political loyalty and "war liberation credentials" (Hammar and Raftopoulos 25-26; see also Primorac, "The Poetics of State Terror" 437). The party-state conscripted history into

the efforts to coalesce power, making historiography a particularly partisan and controversial field in Zimbabwe. Mugabe has been celebrated as a historian in state media (Ranger, “Rule by Historiography” 225), while Ali Mazrui, one of Africa’s leading historians, has been condemned as a foreign element (228). Jonathan Moyo, former Minister of Information and Publicity, orchestrated a media campaign of “patriotic history,” which omits the history of Matabeleland during the 1980s (Ranger, “Rule by Historiography” 241). An important aim of this “patriotic history” is the appearance of the incorporation of ZAPU, ZIPRA, and even the ex-dissidents of the 1980s into a ZANU-PF-centric interpretation of events. Joshua Nkomo is now frequently referred to as “Father Zimbabwe” on Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) (Ranger, “Rule by Historiography” 224).

“Patriotic history” is an “invented tradition,” following Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, which disseminates ideology by establishing “continuity with a suitable historical past” (1). Moyo and other proponents of this version of Zimbabwean history draw a line between the British South African Company’s (BSAC’s) conquest of Shona and Ndebele territories in the 1890s, through the brutal settler colonial rule of the Ian Smith regime from 1965-1980, to neo-imperialist influences in the 1990s and beyond. Such a version of history conflates conflicts from different historical periods, and also associates the activities of the post-independence regime with the activities of black nationalist parties and militias during the Liberation War as well as the activities of rebel uprisings against the BSAC in the 1890s. In this vision, the 1890s uprisings represent the “First Chimurenga,” the Liberation War the “Second Chimurenga,” and land redistribution post-1990 the “Third Chimurenga” (see Mugabe; Ranger, “Rule by Historiography”). Sociologist Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni applies Marx’s claim that in periods of crisis leaders “conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names,

battle-cries and costumes” to ZANU-PF’s use of the term *Chimurenga*—and the name *Nehanda* (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* 12; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 1).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni also notes that Ranger, in his early works from the period of his own nationalist activism, was imbricated in the politicizing of history. For example, in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* Ranger connects what he calls the “primary resistance” of 1896-1897 to the modern mass nationalism of the 1960s, implying a primordial reading of nationalism (see also David Beach, “Review of *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*”). Ndlovu-Gatsheni comments that texts including Ranger’s *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* “were easily appropriated by the Harare regime because they celebrated nationalism, painting a false impression of nationalist actors as heroic figures and selfless people who genuinely worked and ‘died’ for the masses,” and further that they glossed over or romanticized the essentiality of sometimes brutal and often factional violence to the nationalist project (10). In the 1990s the ZANU-PF regime built youth militia camps—the National Youth Training Service—to teach “patriotic history” and serve as the pool for compulsory military service. The regime also launched a compulsory course in colleges, called National Strategic Studies, and a television program called *National Ethos*, with the same purpose of inculcating patriotism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 30).

As a result of the propagation of “patriotic history,” many scholars and some political actors saw the creation of an alternative historiography as central to correcting the errors and failures of Mugabe’s nationalist project and building a more solid state and nation. For example, Dumiso Dabengwa, former ZIPRA intelligence leader and former cabinet minister under Mugabe (and recent announcer of a revived ZAPU), stated in a speech,

Conditions should be created in Zimbabwe wherein a new breed of social scientist... can emerge. This class of scholars should be capable of withstanding threats and intimidation and will rise above those racial, ethnic and tribal considerations [and] oppose the suppression of any information. ... A complex history of the struggle for national

liberation is a long way from being produced and will only be achieved when chroniclers of the struggle are no longer afraid to confront the truth head-on and openly, and have rid themselves of biases resulting from our recent political past—a past which saw the brutal killing of innocent people in the name of unity, peace, stability and progress. Unless our scholars can rise above the fear of being isolated and even victimised for telling the truth we shall continue to hold half-truths, or outright lies which will not help unite our nation. ...Anything short of a tradition of selfless inquiry and exposure of the truth will certainly lead to a nation of sycophants and robots who do not possess the power of independent thought which we should all cherish. (quoted in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 56-57)

Although Vera was not a social scientist or a historian, she answered this call to action. She believed that reanimating the female figures from history through a fictional portrayal of their embodied experiences could contribute to the project of revising historiography.

In Deckard et al's description, irrealism reflects and responds to the contradictory effects of combined and uneven development (88). These contradictions, and Vera's sense of the ways the clash between peripheral (in this case, Zimbabwean national) and core (metropolitan) power took its toll on black Zimbabwean bodies, especially those of black Zimbabwean women, provide the backdrop for the irrealist revisions of national history that she composed. Her novels revise both national and international understandings of Zimbabwean history. In *Nehanda* she corporealizes the feminine history of the iconic revolutionary spirit medium Mbuya Nehanda, popularly viewed as grandmother of the nation. The novel develops a dual critique, of the exclusionary nationalist exploitation of Nehanda on the one hand, and of the lingering influence of the domineering world-system on the other. In *The Stone Virgins*, a similar irrealist modality interrogates exclusionary accounts of "patriotic history," in particular in rural Matabeleland.

Feminist Irrealist Historiography

The numinous narratives of Vera's *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins* may seem to obscure rather than reveal material truths about postcolonial life in Zimbabwe. This has most frequently

been the reading of her first novel *Nehanda*, which not only establishes Vera's non-linear and poetic style but also takes the period of "primary resistance" in the 1890s as its topic, so that the connection between the novel and contemporary (1990s) Zimbabwean life can be missed. It is through irrealism, rather than social realism, that these novels enable the reader to empathize with the historical realities that shaped life in contemporary Zimbabwe. More specifically, both *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins* encourage reinsertion of women's bodies into Zimbabwean political and economic history, showing how the interpenetration of core and peripheral power play out on these doubly- and triply-peripheralized sites. I categorize these two novels as works of irrealist historiography, because they offer alternative histories of periods that are considered foundational to Zimbabwean national consciousness. Irrealist historiography is fiction that is historically grounded and aims to illuminate certain historical eras and events. It moves beyond fiction into the realm of historiography because it interrogates concepts guiding the production of history itself. Both works comment on the elision of not only the female body but also whole communities from certain brands of nationalism, including in the "patriotic history" propagated by the ZANU-PF state and its appendages in the 1990s and beyond.

Nehanda and *The Stone Virgins* are exemplary of Deckard et al's description of irrealism as "mysterious and secretive" but simultaneously "overtly political [...], replete with specific cultural materials and long-ranging historical resonances, and born of a consciousness of the ubiquitous ramifications of capitalism throughout the world" (83). I suggest that her irrealist mode expresses a feminist-nationalism grounded in the female body, its material sensual presence and its symbolic value within Zimbabwean history. Vera identifies women's bodies as integral to understandings of the Zimbabwean nation in two seemingly paradoxical ways: these bodies are the material sites where the contradictions of capitalist modernization and the struggle

between national sovereignty and world-system power play out in violence and suffering; they are also spiritually powerful as mediums of ancestral strength, militarily powerful as female combatants in the War of Liberation, and symbolically powerful as the pillars of community and national resistance.

Reanimating *Nehanda*

Vera's use of irrealism accommodates foundational national history simultaneously with numinous narrative. Coupling historicism with fictive writing that moves beyond the real/ist/ic makes sense in a retelling of the Nehanda story, because Nehanda is both a historical personage and a divine figure. Both these aspects contribute to her canonization as a national icon. As "the single most important person in the modern history of Zimbabwe" (Snowden), Nehanda is the subject of an extensive body of creative and scholarly work (Lan 6).²⁶ Accounts of her story in epic poetry and fiction describe her as a "national muse" (Mkwesha-Manyonga 42); the "finder of the nation;" and the "heroine" and "prophet" who "stand[s] for the nation" (Mutunhu 68; Ncube 456-457). These accounts, most notably Solomon Mutswairo's praise poem *Mbuya Nehanda Nyakasikana*, from his novel *Feso* (1956), were inspirational to anti-colonial activists, nationalists and ZANU military personnel in the 1960s and 1970s (Vambe, "Postcolonial Shona Fiction" 9; Mkwesha-Manyonga 44-45; Lan 6). Another medium of the Nehanda *mhondoro*, a woman named Kanzaruwa, was involved in the liberation struggle, although her role seems to have been mostly symbolic (Mkwesha-Manyonga 43; see also Raftopoulos 122). In post-

²⁶ Sources recounting the story include works of history, anthropology, epic poetry and historical fiction. For example: David Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe 900-1850* (1980); David Lan, *Guns and Rain*, (1985); Terence Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7: A Study in African Resistance* (1967), Tendai Mutunhu, "Nehanda of Zimbabwe" (1976); David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe* (1981); P. C. Mazikana et al (eds.) *Zimbabwe Epic*, (1982); Solomon Mutswairo, *Maondera, Soldier of Zimbabwe* (1983); Charles Samupindi, *Death Throes: The Trial of Mbuya Nehanda* (1990), M. H. Tredgold, *The First Ones: Nehanda and Chaminuka* (2001).

independence Zimbabwe several roads, schools, and a maternity hospital have been named for Nehanda (Lewis 33; Beach, “An Innocent Woman” 27). Her inspirational potency has both nationalist and religious aspects.

However, Nehanda Charwe was also a historical personage, and historians have debated her alleged involvement in the uprisings of Shona and Ndebele groups against the British South African Company in 1896-1897 (see Dawson). Some historians take exception to Ranger’s ready embrace of spirit mediumship as central to military strategy and the unification of diverse rebel groups in his account of “primary resistance.” Diana Jeater (196) and David Beach (“An Innocent Woman” 52) both claim that Nehanda was less integral to the rebellions than Ranger claimed in *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*. Julian Cobbing has argued that these early revolts were secular. These scholars find the present-day recruitment of Nehanda into the purposes of the ZANU-PF state to be suspect. Her name and image has graced ceremonies where the party consolidated power (such as the independence celebrations), government institutions such as the Parliament building, and partisan speeches and propaganda as the heroine of the “First Chimurenga” (Charumbira, “Gender, Nehanda and the Myth of Nationhood” 215; Lewis 33; Mugabe 93). Thus Beach describes Nehanda herself as a “symbol of intransigence” in the “nationalist gospel” (“An Innocent Woman” 52). These historians have deployed historical fact-checking to expose the inaccuracies in accounts of the Nehanda mythology, with an emphasis on the political bias they perceive in Ranger’s work because of his politics.

The technique of fact-checking, especially in scholarly historical work that does not recruit a public audience, does little to change the belief of everyday Zimbabweans in the spiritual and symbolic significance of Nehanda. At the independence celebrations, Nehanda’s likeness hovering over Mugabe’s mirrored the popular “Nehanda” print on headscarves many

attendees wore (Lan 6). Vera acknowledges the misuse of Nehanda's story in service of the state while reanimating that story with its liberatory potential and acknowledging the richness of its cultural and spiritual potency. She eschews the controversy that consumes many critics of *Nehanda* who are concerned to place the work either *within* (Vambe, "Spirit Possession;" Bull-Christiansen 60) or *in opposition to* nationalist ideology (Lewis 31; Mkwesha-Manyonga). Vera's irrealism escapes this debate; it conveys rather than resolves the contradictions of combined and uneven development and the diverse kinds of nationalism that have developed in response. Vera's numinous narrative thus explores spirit mediumship in an original way that is not simplistically "nationalist" or "anti-nationalist." Instead, Vera's interest in Nehanda's contribution to national consciousness motivates her feminist intervention to reinsert women's experiences into national history.

Vera embraced the controversial term "feminist" (Larson 84-85) because she observed that the "grand narrative of heroism" had become "patriarchal" (Vera, quoted in Hunter 78-79). Revising the history of the 1890s had gendered significance because "absolutely the first person to lead any kind of resistance against the Europeans, was a woman" (Vera, quoted in Hunter 78). Further, "Nehanda is really at the centre of our spiritual belief as a whole nation, and to write about her was very daring. It transformed me [...] I felt in the end it came out of a state of possession. [...] I felt a fierce sense of responsibility to tell this story, and to do so, I had to co-exist with this Nehanda spirit. It really gave me a lot of strength as a woman" (Vera, quoted in Bryce, "Interview" 222). The challenge is to "tell this story" in a way that does justice to the relationship with Nehanda that gave Vera "strength as a woman" rather than further exploiting and disenfranchising women in "patriotic history." To meet this challenge Vera uses irrealist

techniques to access that “state of possession” whereby the author—and by extension, the reader—can “co-exist with this Nehanda spirit.”

These irrealist techniques include episodic rather than linear form; a cyclical rather than teleological approach to historiography; numinous narrative manifest in a “whirlwind” conception of space and time and a focus on women’s embodied experiences of the divine. Through these techniques Vera aims to provide empathic access to the history of “primary resistance” in the 1890s from Nehanda and other village women. She illuminates the connectivity between the material and the divine achieved through the conjoining of body and spirit in mediumship. Further, Vera links the process of mediumship to the material and spiritual meaning of the land as both source of nourishment for the body and foundation of national consciousness. Like Marechera, Vera favors a cyclical conception of history in order to capture the unevenness of development, in particular in periods of primitive accumulation, and to reflect the experience of societal and cultural fragmentation. Yet unlike Marechera, her episodic, numinous narrative encourages a more optimistic and humanistic vision.

Irrealist Episodic Form

Vera conveys Nehanda’s story through a series of episodes without explicit transition between times, places or perspectives. These episodes include: Nehanda’s experience of her own death, which is both the first and last scene of the novel (1-2; 117-118); Mother’s experience of Nehanda’s possession by the *mhondoro*, which appears as a “whirlwind” at “the first time [Nehanda] walked” (2-3); the experiences of the midwife, the laboring Mother, and other village women during Nehanda’s birth (3-13); fearful dreams Mother has about her daughter’s fate (19); Mother’s memory of Nehanda’s naming ceremony (20-21); several formative moments in

Nehanda's childhood where she observes her Mother's physical labor and learns about her relationship to spirit and land (14, 22; 25); Nehanda's experience of possession (31-37); the community's recognition of Nehanda's ancestral significance and status as rebel leader (58); incidents when Nehanda provided military and spiritual guidance (63; 68; 79); her flight from colonial officials in the bush (91-93); and her surrender and imprisonment (114-116). Vera gives equal weight to the quotidian details of Nehanda's life in the village—in an incorporation of a realist focus on everyday life—to the intervention of the divine and the oneiric, and to important historical events such as Nehanda's hanging. Vera's historiographical methodology, therefore, is a three-pronged approach elevating the fantastical (i.e., the religious and mythical significance of Nehanda), and the socioeconomic (mundane activities in peripheralized situations), to the same status as the historical. The episodes predominantly focus on the perspectives of women, most frequently Nehanda and Mother. Vera's choice to leave out both explanatory context and transitions provides a raw experience of these events rather than an interpretation. In this way Vera resists incorporating the story into a partisan narrative.

As Deckard et al describe, irrealist works disrupt linear narrative by exploiting discrepancies between the historical and the textual sequence of events (84). Vera's order of events is not chronological. Instead her account of spirit mediumship "refuses diachronic historical time," and "celebrates the myth of eternal return and regeneration" (Vambe, "Spirit Possession" 127). Nehanda's death frames the narrative as both origin and ending; yet Vera relates her death in the language of resurrection: the *mhondoro* "is always in a state of creation, and of being born" (*Nehanda* 113). It crosses the "boundaries of time" through "new languages" and "evolves new patterns of growth" (*Nehanda* 113). The episodes are out of chronological time: Nehanda dies first, then undergoes possession, then birth. Additionally, Vera relates these

episodes in a layered temporality through the irrealist devices of dream and remembrance. These dreams and remembrances come from the perspectives of varying characters, most often Nehanda, Mother and other village women, but also those of men, including the spirit medium Kaguvi and the colonial official Mr Browning.

Vera's disruptions to linearity reflect crises in combined and uneven development, such as the capitalist penetration of the British South African Company (BSAC) into southern Africa during the 1890s. As Deckard et al argue, capitalist development in the core countries in the nineteenth century led directly to imperialism. The formation of financial markets required an influx of capital from land conquest and colonial labor exploitation (Deckard et al 70). The BSAC had the express purpose of exploiting Mashonaland and other territories for mineral wealth.²⁷ Cecil Rhodes also wished to secure political control over the region to consolidate Britain's status as a core imperial power in the Central and Southern African Region. The BSAC, motivated by competition between core powers in the capitalist world-system, including Germany, forcibly removed Africans from their ancestral lands, destroyed agriculture through campaigns of crop-burning, and relocated whole communities to the Reserves. They met strong and sustained guerrilla resistance especially in the Matopos Hills, which they attempted to defuse through widespread use of the Maxim machine gun. Their policies disrupted agricultural processes, resulting in maldevelopment and famine among the native populations. These exploitative processes led to the uprisings of 1893 and 1896-1897, also grounded in the Matopos. Vera represents the violent unevenness of capitalist development in temporal disjunctures that mar the idea of a smooth teleology towards a "developed" condition.

²⁷ Historical information in this section comes largely from Alexander's *The Unsettled Land: State-making & the Politics of Land in Zimbabwe*; Hammar et al's *Zimbabwe's Unfinished Business: Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis*; Alexander et al's *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the "Dark Forests" of Matabeleland*; and Ranger's *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* and *Voices from the Rocks*.

Vera's non-linear narrative illuminates the cyclicity of history. Events from the "past," such as "primary resistance," return uncannily to haunt the present and shape the future. Her narrative style also presents historical events during these crises from the perspectives of various social and political positions. The arrogance and unapologetic racism of Mr Browning illustrate his complacency in his position as representative of core imperial power. His inability to see the unevenness of the broader system of capitalist modernization renders him ridiculous in contrast to Nehanda, whose prescience, which "guides [the rebels] into the distances from which their future is told," is grounded in knowledge of historical forces (59). Because of the already established connection between the "First Chimurenga" of the 1890s and the "Second Chimurenga"—the Liberation War of the 1960s and 1970s—Vera's representation of these contrasting perspectives suggests that the core-peripheral power dynamics might also shape interpretations of more recent events. Thus she signals that both the 1890s and the 1970s should be placed within the wider frame of combined and uneven development. Further, her episodic narrative signals the disjuncture between exclusionary accounts of history, such as "patriotic history," with the lived experience of historical events.

Numinous Narrative: The Whirlwind

Specifying Vera's non-linear, cyclical narrative style further reveals how her irrealist innovations shed light on Zimbabwean history in *Nehanda*. The narrative arc, as shown above, is circular. Following Vera's description of spirit mediumship itself, I describe her narrative style, which spins strands of time together in a wild and dynamic textual practice and jumps from place to place, as "whirlwind narrative." Nehanda's advent into Charwe's life is represented by a whirlwind:

Arrogant in its own conception, it challenged the familiar categories of birth and death. It moved at once in opposite directions, with time and against time, collapsing all time within its perturbed interior. [...] The whirlwind measured time in swift motions, effacing distances as it dug the ground with its insatiable belly. [...] The child watched the wind come toward them. A voice rose from beneath the earth. She saw birth and death, and the presence of her ancestors. The wind was full of the sun. She heard it call to her with its song which emanated from within her: the spirits had presided over her birth. (*Nehanda* 3)

This whirlwind narrative collapses time so that past, present and future exist simultaneously in one “trembling voice” that incorporates the “distant past,” moves through the present “intersection of time” and “throws them into the future” to “recognize their future selves” (62; 113). Although the pronoun “them” in this passage refers to the rebels in the 1896-1987 uprising, its vagueness suggests that it could apply to other groups in different times and places; the “future selves” include both black nationalists in colonial Rhodesia and Zimbabwean nationals post-independence. Thus the question “Is this how it happened?” is inextricable from the question, “Will it be such a future?” (58). Given *Nehanda*’s significance to national history, from “primary resistance” through her involvement in the Liberation War and her conscription into ZANU-PF rhetoric, these questions carry the connotation that interpretations of the past help define national identity and determine the nation’s future. Vera captures the potential for this collapsing of time in national consciousness to cause damage, on the one hand, and offer strength and empowerment on the other.

This whirlwind narrative enables the discussion of different moments in Zimbabwean history simultaneously. Thus *Nehanda*’s description of “a timeless cloud of dust that will blind us all” refers to the conscription of peripheries into service of the core interests in the world-system through history (Vera, *Nehanda* 65). The BSAC’s land conquest “blinded” the Zambezi communities by divorcing them from their ancestral lands; settler colonialism in Southern Rhodesia and Rhodesia “blinded” the colonized by divorcing them from precolonial cultural

forms and systems of social organization; dependency on world-system support “blinded” Zimbabwean nationalists to neo-colonial economic coercion at independence. In this way the “cloud of dust” is “timeless,” and “we shall never recover from it” (65). All these plagues of blindness have occurred because of crises in combined and uneven development and the havoc these crises have wreaked on native communities. Thus Nehanda is able to predict not only the brutality of settler colonialism in Rhodesia but also the conflicts between black Zimbabweans that will shape the 1980s and beyond: she suggests that the “future selves” will fight “one another” (36). In this way Vera suggests that her version of the 1890s uprising reflects a trans-ethnic coalition across Shona and Ndebele groups²⁸ that sharply contrasts with the ethnic dimension of the conflicts in Matabeleland and the Midlands in the 1980s. Vera prefigures her concern, in *The Stone Virgins*, to reinsert the experience of state-sponsored and internecine violence in Ndebele communities into national history.

Vera’s vision is not fully understood without attention to its status as not only part of a national literature but also part of “world” literature. As such the novel not only critiques the frequent exclusion of women, and women’s bodies in particular, from nationalist historiography, but also emphasizes the inextricability of the problematics of nationalisms from the problematics of combined and uneven development at the global level. Rematerializing the myth also allows Vera to reconnect the historical moment of “primary resistance” to the contemporary historical moment of the early 1990s in productive rather than propagandist ways. More specifically, it allows her analysis to draw attention to the ways the increasingly authoritarian nationalism of the ZANU-PF state is connected to the struggle between state sovereignty and the intervention of

²⁸ See Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, for a historical account that emphasizes trans-ethnic unity across Shona and Ndebele communities. See Beach, “Revolt in Southern Rhodesia” and Cobbing for voices of dissent that argue that the historical evidence for organized unity, as opposed to coincidental or loose correlation, is insufficient.

IGOs and core metropolitan nations on the level of world-system economics. The voice of Vera's Nehanda presciently warns,

Do not take anything that belongs to the stranger. [...] Take only the guns. If you touch anything else that belongs to him, even the spirits shall be offended. The spirits will abandon you for such a travesty. Take only the things that will also protect you, not the things that will destroy you. The stranger can only bring ruin and evil among us. Do not covet anything of his. Approach the stranger with a single eye, the other should be blind. It is the envying eye that will destroy us, that will change us entirely. We can become stronger and whole if we believe in our own traditions. [...] The tradition of the stranger shall destroy us. (*Nehanda* 79-81)

This caveat can be interpreted as a prediction that accepting “things that will destroy” Zimbabwean leadership, such as IMF money, from the “stranger” will cause the ancestors and spirits to “abandon you.” In other words, Nehanda warns against being conscripted into the world-system through economic formations of combined development.

The necessity of reinserting the perspectives of further peripheralized groups within this peripheral situation illustrates how narratives that collapse time can aid in the development of exclusionary nationalisms. Such interpretations of national history work in service of the party-state's consolidation of power and reflect that state's own struggle against core power. Vera shows that while “patriotic history” draws on the rhetoric of connectivity to the past through the three *Zvimurenga* and the continued blessing of Nehanda, it is not truly connected to the land, the past or the ancestors. In *Nehanda* Vera intervenes to reconstruct that connection through a gendered revision of history. Vera suggests that Zimbabweans need “more than our physical strength, we needed our old selves and clarity” (*Nehanda* 64). Her whirlwind narrative collapses time, but productively, in order to reanimate the divine significance of the land and the ancestors rather than to provide a partisan interpretation of the past.

Vera revises the “grand heroic narrative” with her whirlwind narrative, which reinserts the feminine into contemporary conceptions of the Zimbabwean nation. She reclaims the

centrality of Nehanda to anti-colonial resistance in order to open the discussion about the contributions of women to the Liberation War and empower women in contemporary Zimbabwe:

In fact it is a contemporary novel in terms of the issues. I wanted ordinary women in Zimbabwe to know there was nothing new in what they were attempting to do. At that time (early 80s), women were coming back from the armed struggle and people were not even recognizing that they had gone. But a woman *had* led the first rebellion, not just physically but spiritually, which in fact was the basis of our entire armed struggle that followed—the Second Chimurenga. It's based on a spiritual belief arising from her words: 'My bones will rise.' It wasn't that we had arms or anything else, but we believed she would protect us. People had an absolute belief they wouldn't die, that they were bullet-proof. But there's this duplicity—people came back, and all the heroes are men all of a sudden. (Bryce, "Interview" 222)

Here Vera highlights the “duplicity” of nationalist narratives that collapse time in order to consolidate the power of certain groups over others, so that “all the heroes are men all of a sudden.” Yet she also highlights the collapsing of time that allows the story of Nehanda to empower women of contemporary times.

This optimistic view of the possibilities of revisionist history surfaces in Vera's denial of the opposition of death and birth. The whirlwind narrative challenges these “familiar categories,” moving “at once in opposite directions, with time and against time, collapsing all time within its perturbed interior” (Vera, *Nehanda* 3). Spirit mediumship is a process of reincarnation whereby a present-day woman takes on the power of the feminine *mhondoro*; thus death in this narrative always contains resurrection. In this whirlwind narrative, “Her death, which is also birth, will weigh on those lives remaining to be lived” (112). It is through words, through the telling of the story in the *sarungano*'s mouth, that the dead are resurrected in the mouths of the living (117). When Nehanda dies at the end of the novel, “The chasm between the living and the dead is broken,” and “The wind covers the earth with joyful celebration” (118). The novel thus ends on a hopeful note. It suggests that the Nehanda's death in this historical moment enables her narrative

resurrection. Retelling the story from Nehanda's perspective reanimates the *mhondoro* and begins to restore the connection between national consciousness and the ancestors.

In each episode of *Nehanda*, Vera offers this layered and cyclical whirlwind narrative.

Near the end of the novel Vera explains the significance of this narrative style to national consciousness. Nehanda

has travelled long distances through time to meet this vision of the future. She knows that her own death is inevitable, but sees its significance to the future of her people. In the future, the whirling centre of the wind, which is also herself, has collapsed, but that is only the beginning of another dimension of time. The collapse of the wind, which is also her own death, is also a part of the beginning, and from the spiralling centre of the wind's superimposed circles another wind rises, larger and stronger. Hope for the nation is born out of the intensity of newly created memory. (*Nehanda* 111).

Such a narrative can draw in diverse stylistic registers, such as the analytical tone here and the more linear prose offered in the passages dealing with colonial officials. The whirlwind narrative frequently spins off into iterations and reiterations of Nehanda's divine knowledge, which is at times reminiscent of Marechera's satirical version of overflowing erudition. Yet in Vera's hands that wildness is a graceful meditation on the iterative cyclicity of history and the possibilities inherent to its unpredictability. This whirlwind narrative also "effac[es] distances." Outside of the regular workings of ordered time, Nehanda is able to be in two places at once, both in bed in the hut and in attendance at the communal fire (Vera, *Nehanda* 33). The whirlwind inspires awe, suggests both destruction and creation, and has an air of miraculous intervention. This revision of national history through whirlwind narrative comes out of "some sacred territory" (113). Thus the cyclicity and wildness of the whirlwind narrative, unlike the cycles of disillusion that entrap Marechera's narrators, offers hope.

Nehanda "walks in circular paths through the forest, in a ritual of another birth. She goes into the cave and banishes her own shadow. In the cave is her second birth. [...] In the darkness

with the flickering fire that keeps her warm through the night, she closes her eyes and calls back her long death-defying journeys through the forest. In each circle that she has woven, she sees the completion of something definite and unconquerable” (93). The circular paths Nehanda walks are, in a material and historical sense, a strategy of evasion from her colonial pursuers, to temporarily protect her body from capture and harm. These circles also represent Vera’s non-linear response to the incommensurability of combined and uneven development as it has impacted the lives of black Zimbabwean women through history, explicitly causing the death of Nehanda Charwe. Simultaneously, the collapsibility of time and space represented by the circle gives Nehanda the powers of prescience and resurrection. In containing these many layers, Vera’s whirlwind narrative provides a “tender bridge” between material history and the divine. It expresses the structural limitations on bodies and lives under combined and uneven development and also recruits ancestral feminine strength to revise that history (Ranger, *Revolt* 18).

Numinous Narrative: Embodied Divinity

Vera intersperses the sweeping, spinning motion of the whirlwind narrative with another irrealist narrative technique: “direct access” to the embodied experiences of women both in mundane labor and extreme suffering (Gunner and Kortenaar 3). In Vera’s numinous narrative, the material functions and tangible effects of stimuli on the body provide a point of access to a meditative state where time is collapsed, and the divine infuses the everyday. Thus, contrary to Gunner and Kortenaar’s claim, Vera’s style allows for “direct access” to women’s embodied experiences *without* “refusing” symbolic meaning (3). The focus on embodied experience allows Vera to avoid appropriating Nehanda as “muse,” instead accessing her as “medium” (Mkwesha-Manyonga 45). Thus the material body of the historical woman named Charwe, and the divine

ancestral strength of the feminine *mhondoro* are reanimated in a similar gesture to spirit mediumship itself. But as the spirit medium Nehanda is fundamentally both body and spirit, Vera explores her symbolic meaning as attached to her material form rather than forgoing symbolic meaning altogether.

As her *sarungano* (storyteller), Vera invited the Nehanda spirit to possess her, which fundamentally involves body and spirit “co-exist[ing].” The irrealist style enables this seemingly contradictory pairing of the material and spiritual significance of the female body, which renders those bodies “more than material” (Toivanen, 187). Some critics, unable to decipher whether the novel prioritizes embodied experience or nationalistic allegory, consider the work “oddly hybrid” or too “romantic” to do justice to the diversity of black Zimbabwean women (Chennells, “Rhodesian Discourse;” Vambe, “Spirit Possession” 128). However, reading Vera through the lens of irrealism reveals that the synthesis of the spiritual and material illustrates the contradictory experience of living in a female body that can be tortured, abused, and victimized by the contradictions of capitalist modernization while also possessing spiritual power for generations of women across time (see Toivanen 165-166). In all of these episodes Vera highlights the corporeal and spiritual experiences of Nehanda and other women, as well as the spiritual connection between the body of Nehanda and the land. In this way Vera provides an experience of true connection to the land, in contrast to both the exploitation of that land and hypernationalist rhetorics of land justice.

Vera infuses the minutiae of embodied experience and activity with the divine: “Nehanda’s eyes are held tightly as she rocks back and forth, listening to the song within. Her legs are folded beneath her body, and her hands are spread over her knees. Reaching to her left, she drinks from a small clay pot holding water from the river. She pours some of the water into

her cupped hand and spreads it over her body. Through her back she feels the warmth of the rock against which she rests. Around her, circling voices rise” (Vera, *Nehanda* 78). Here, Vera couples the precise position and movement of the body with the “song within” and the “circling voices” rising, so that the purity of these small moments is inseparable from the presence of divinity within and around. The empirical experience of the material presence of the body in the present moment brings the awareness of the miraculous collapsibility of time into focus. Thus Vera’s version of *Nehanda* repeatedly offers the woman’s embodied experiences to encourage that meditative clarity, describing her sweat, her “tongue wetting her dry lower lip,” the “air bursting out of her body” when she runs (90), her “bare back” against the cold, rough mud walls of the prison (115). The black female body is the “tender bridge” between that present moment and all the power of feminine bodies and ancestors through history (Ranger, *Revolt* 18).

Chan and Primorac comment that the “fetishization” of land that occurs in “patriotic history” “not only provides for a static discourse but also an exclusive one that forgets principles to do with human and political rights” (74). Vera reworks the concept of the “son of the soil,” inserting the female body into that “grand heroic narrative” in order to establish a true connection to the land and its ancestral significance and to reestablish a humanistic vision. *Nehanda*, as a foundational figure of national consciousness and a “national guardian spirit” indelibly connected to the land and the land’s fertility, is fundamentally a child of the soil. After she is born, her body is metaphorically merged with the land in a ritual, in which she swallows drops of water mixed with earth (20). Through this ritual when *Nehanda* imbibes the land, Vera makes the material body and soil inseparable from their symbolic connotations of nation and liberation. The ritual in which *Nehanda*’s father “combined her with the soil” reverses the gendering of the phrase “son of the soil,” finally rendering it transcendental of gender categories:

“May you be an offspring of the earth,’ [her father] muttered” (Vera, *Nehanda* 20). This literal grounding of the body in the earth is simultaneously an act rich with historical, symbolic and spiritual meaning. Vera bequeaths Nehanda the symbolic title of “son of the soil” that is usually reserved for male nationalist heroes such as Liberation War veterans, thus reasserting her agency and the agency of women more broadly in national history and myth. At the same time the “combining” of Nehanda’s body with the soil is a religious ritual that beckons the divine power of the ancestors and *mhondoro* into her “more than material” body.

The layering of Nehanda’s corporeal body with the land, the nation, and national history and myth echoes throughout the novel, most explicitly in the scene of her death. The suffering of Nehanda’s body in death reestablishes the “tender bridge” between body, spirit, nation and land, infusing her embodied experience of material pain with meaning that is “more than material” (Ranger, *Revolt* 18; Toivanen): “Pain sears the lines on her palms, and she turns her eyes to her hands in wonder. Rivers and trees cover her palms; the trees are lifeless and the rivers dry” (Vera, *Nehanda* 1). Minute attention to the embodied experience of suffering is the point of access to the “wonder” of seeing that her body holds historical and sacred power in its combining with the land. Nehanda’s suffering is correlated to the suffering of the land itself through drought, her death a parallel to the demise of that land through cycles of exploitative use. Vera pairs bodily suffering with the presence of the divine. As “the earth pulses freely beneath her fingers,” Nehanda’s “body begins to feel cramped, and cold attacks her feet” (17). In this way Nehanda’s sacrifice is made corporeal and the presence of the suffering female body at the heart of the nation is restored. Nehanda “feels that gaping wound everywhere” (1-2), the historical wound that calls on the power of the black female body to make and maintain nations. Like the land, this body has suffered and been exploited to serve the interests of authoritarianism both as

it manifests in exclusionary nationalisms of the 1990s and world-system primitive accumulation during the colonial period.

The connection between the suffering of the black female body and the divine also surfaces in Vera's intimate attention to the laboring body of Mother. At Nehanda's birth, Mother sweats, moans and suffers in physical labor that suspends time and infuses the scene with divine significance. Other episodes emphasize the physical labor necessary for Mother to provide materially for herself and her daughter. She must maintain the construction of their shelter (Vera, *Nehanda* 19), harvest (27) and process their food (34), all tasks that require great strength and in Vera's description become works of artistic beauty, ritual significance and historical and divine meaning. The rhythm of Mother's hands at work on the mud walls of the homestead are a poem: "Her hands reach into the wooden bowl, and the thin consistency runs between her cupped fingers, leaving a curious trail along her arms. Her arms move slowly along the wall. She breathes the green cattle smell" (19). She, like her daughter, is combined with the earth, a daughter of the soil.

A similar rhythmic sense infuses her harvesting of groundnut plants as she meditates on the rain-bearing spirits of the nation: "As she speaks [about the *mudzimu* and *mhondoro*], Mother forces the roots out by sliding a closed hand down the small stem of the groundnut plant. Her motions are quick and practised. She throws the groundnuts into the basket without even looking up" (27). Vera's emphasis on the sensory and corporeal experience of the labor—the "green cattle smell," the feel of the stem within the hand, the speed and efficiency of the body's movement—both provide access to Mother's embodied experience and render that body "more than material" by connecting it to other black female bodies, the formation of the nation, and the strength of the ancestral community. This rhythm continues to manifest in the act of pounding

maize: “The ground thuds with the sound of her effort. Mother, grown far beyond the age where she could lift the heavy pestle with ease, now pounds the grain with slow ponderous motions. Her movements are so slow that she could say all the praise names of her lineage within the time it took her to raise the pestle and then bring it into the mortar” (34). In each of these examples, Vera invokes the embodied experience of Mother as a laborer. This is also an invocation of the divine, which shapes the world of the living through ancestral spirits and lineage. Again, the suffering and fatigue of the female body are “more than material”: they are the path to spiritual power. These episodes elevate the embodied experience of laboring at the everyday tasks of managing a female-headed household to their rightful place as the sites where national consciousness is formed and the ancestors enter. Significantly, Nehanda’s father is only present in the one scene where he “combines” Nehanda with the soil by giving her earth dissolved in water to drink (20). His contribution, while important, does not carry the weight of material labor and thus does not access the deeper lifeblood of the divine power of the *mhondoro*.

In these vignettes, Vera represents the black female body’s status as “more than material” by pairing the duress of the body and the entrance of the divine. Lene Bull-Christiansen claims that Vera’s works “often offer traditional spirituality as the escape from a meaningless and hurtful existence” (26), an argument that misses Vera’s use of the irrealist technique of juxtaposition, in this case of beauty and divinity with suffering and violence. Far from showing existence to be “meaningless” and using spirituality as an “escape,” Vera wants to capture the contradictions of combined and uneven development as they play out on women’s bodies and minds. Vera wishes to celebrate ordinary black Zimbabwean women, but to do so she begins by “accepting the violence that accompanies their existence” (quoted in Hawley 69). Thus these women’s bodies must, to do justice to history, undergo violence. But material violence on

women's bodies is also the center of numinous narrative that is a resource for empowering women and connecting them with ancestral strength. Vera echoes this idea in her suggestion that writing can only achieve transhistorical meaning through physical pain; writing words into her own skin meant that "Such words could never depart or be forgotten. This was bleeding, not writing" ("Writing Near the Bone" 559). Thus bodies in all of Vera's novels move through ecologies where violence and beauty, pain and power, and destruction and sensuality or (re)production coexist and are dependent on each other. As Ranger has written, "Vera has the extraordinary ability to write about terrible moments with a prose that in its lucidity and tenderness reveals them as something much more than terrible" ("The Fruits of the Baobab" 698). In reanimating history and myth through these women's bodies, Vera reclaims for them both the material toll combined and uneven development has taken on women's bodies in Zimbabwe's history and also the power of these feminine forms as vessels of empowerment, ancestral strength and communal courage.

The intensity and power of the connection between the embodied experience of labor and pain and the divine is a specifically feminine connection. The male figures of the novel are less central, and although their bodies are expressive of spiritual guidance and liberatory action, bodily suffering is not always required of them. For example, Kaguvi's body is also "more than material," but he has the privilege of empowering the masses without that bodily suffering that is so intimately related in Nehanda's—as well as Vera's—case. He achieves this empowerment through dancing "until the strength of the lion is in their limbs" (Vera, *Nehanda* 72). Vera maintains the association of physical exertion and spiritual fortification, but provides intimate access to neither his embodied experience of the dance nor his pain at death. Vera does not render the details of his death, which occurred by hanging in 1898 a few days before Nehanda's

execution. Vera stays with Nehanda's perspective, reinforcing the suggestion that her embodied experiences are more integral to ancestral strength across time. Thus Vera hopes to illuminate the "contradictions in [women's] minds, the experiences which are, you know, kept down" (Vera, quoted in Primorac, "The Place of the Woman" 380). This is both to expand the concept of the nation to be inclusive of women's experiences and because without being able to accept and discuss these contradictions, the result is a woman "whose mind is full of termites" (Vera, quoted in Primorac, "The Place of the Woman" 380).

The novel is as intimately personal as these embodied experiences, while also as connected to the sweeps of history and myth as Nehanda's story. In writing it Vera wished "to enter that mythic consciousness to really be part of it, to share it and to claim it as my own history and my own identity" (Hunter 78). In this way Vera's feminist-nationalist ethos emphasizes the interconnectivity between the personal experience of an individual claim on a nation and the broader community that shares national consciousness; in material terms, the sensual experience of an individual's body ("my bones") and the broader shared experience of belonging to (or being excluded from) a body politic. The personal and political, as they manifest both at the level of the ideal and the level of the material, are linked by historiography, or put another way, by storytelling.

The Divine Ecology of National Consciousness

Because the rain-bearing *mhondoro* are "national guardian spirits" that are indelibly connected to the land and the nation, the exploration of the embodied and spiritual experience of spirit mediumship also reanimates Nehanda as national and territorial icon (Vambe, *African Oral Story-Telling* 71; Musanga and Mutekwa 82; Mutunhu; Ranger, *Revolt* 18). Vera's Nehanda is

simultaneously the female revolutionary whose military exploits in the Matopos Hills earned her the label “witch;”²⁹ the divine *mhondoro* who cannot be killed (Mutunhu 67) but whose “bones will one day rise and wage a thunderous war to reclaim their heritage!” (Samupindi 37); and the mother of the nation whose bones are seen to have risen in the Liberation War. Vera also reestablishes the connection to the land by focusing frequently on other creatures within the landscape. She affords insects epic size and significance by giving them moments of intensive narrative attention. Additionally, these insects have free access to all layers of time, a distinct advantage. For example, “The beetle creeps along the dead river bed in silence, rolling the past before it, and survives” (33-34); grasshoppers “wave their antennae in search of their future selves” (77); “The spider weaves silence out of patience. Sending spindly legs into the future, it weaves all of time into its hungering belly” (89). Vera’s preoccupation with these creatures prioritizes divinity as vested in nature over the rhetoric of divinity as professed by the mouths of politicians.

The colonial officer Mr Smith captures insects, kills them and pins down their wings. In the passages focusing on the perspectives of colonial officials, Vera uses “lean, clinical prose” (Ogunyemi 261), which delivers plot developments with “linear clarity seldom found in Vera’s works” (Shaw 28). In these passages Vera prioritizes the ordered depiction of events through short, simple sentences in present tense, conveying the linear progression of the day in an orderly fashion. This style contrasts with the majority of the text, in which Vera prioritizes layered meanings and associations through lyrical, complex sentences with alternating verb tense. The irrealist technique of shifts in narrative style enables Vera to present the colonial officials’ cruel and unimaginative divesture of the land, nature and its creatures of their divine meaning. The

²⁹ See McMahon and the Chief Native Commissioner’s Report of Kagubi and Nianda, quoted in Charumbira, “Nehanda and Gender Victimhood” 108-109; Beach, “An Innocent Woman” 39-40; “Extracts from Zambezi Mission Records,” quoted in Weiss 38.

cold and scientific impulse to categorize, control and exploit these creatures correlates with the imperialist attitudes informing core power land conquest. Vera reflects this attitude in pruning her prose of numinous narrative and lyrical poetics in these passages. In the end, however, the words of the black servant Mashoko/“Moses” penetrate this “lean, clinical prose.” Moses repeatedly insists, “We are a proud people” (Vera, *Nehanda* 77). Although Moses has already left the service of Mr Browning to join the revolt, Mr Browning cannot escape the echo of these parting words in his head.

Vera exposes the central fiction that modernization occurs in a linear teleology towards the entrance of a modern, developed nation-state into the even playing field of globalized capitalism. The actuality is that modernization is an unending process, a “timeless cloud of dust” that is inherently chaotic and uneven, *creating* “backward movement” in some communities in order to redistribute their capital resources to the “forward-moving” core communities. Vera renders Mr Browning’s pronouncements that the understanding of geographical and historical order differentiates the more developed civilization of the whites from the backwards society of the natives ridiculous. The pretense of order communicated on maps and in history books masks the dependency of core “development” upon maldevelopment on the periphery (Vera, *Nehanda* 52-53). Vera’s irrealism in *Nehanda* shows the combined and uneven nature of development especially as its contradictions surface in semi-peripheral spaces. Vera would agree with Charles Mungoshi’s commentary on writing within this space:

Just as I am wearing Western clothes, subscribe to an ideology that was invented in the West, was adopted by the East, from whence it came down to me, just as I underwent certain changes, just as I am talking in this foreign language, surrounded by flashtowers and moving machinery—can I say that I continue to be the genuine son of my great-great-great grandparent? If the art of my ancestor revealed hunting scenes on rock-walls, isn’t mine likely to show how I belong both to his world and our present world today? Isn’t my art going to show my confusion of striding both worlds or how I am coping with these worlds? (44)

Like Mungoshi, Vera emphasizes that colonial and postcolonial spaces are places of contradiction and ambiguity, where foreign and local, modernity and premodernity intermingle. Mr Browning's conviction that "civilization" is the bearer of orderly modernity is false.

Thus Vera's irrealist historiography in *Nehanda* deprioritizes historical fact and fact-checking and prioritizes irrealist revisions of exclusionary histories at the national and world-system levels. She reinserts both material and spiritual aspects of the female body into the center of these histories. She resurrects Nehanda's body and agency by retelling the events of her history and her contributions to "primary resistance" through her embodied experiences. She relocates the myth in the female body, reverses the gaze *on* the canonized, romanticized and dehumanized figure of Nehanda to a gaze *from* behind her eyes. She replaces the voice that tells the story into the mouths of women: Nehanda and Mother through Vera as medium and *sarungano*. Because survival is in the mouth, where stories are told, in this way Vera restores Nehanda's spiritual and cultural power to the rightful voices: the black women of Zimbabwe. In order to capture this story while doing justice to its multifaceted meanings, the narrative focuses both on the material history of Nehanda Charwe through portrayal of her corporeal and sensory experiences and also Nehanda's mythological and religious significance by infusing the narrative with the divine. Vera clarifies that Nehanda was a rebel leader "not just physically but *spiritually*," and thus she is central to Zimbabwean "*spiritual* belief" (emphasis added, Hunter 79). For Vera, Nehanda's bones will rise not in service of patriarchal or exclusionary nationalisms but to lend strength and empowerment to the peripheries of a peripheral society. In *Nehanda's* interpretation of mediumship, the female body remains central as not only the vessel of the divine but also the expression of it. The female body's material suffering and ancestral power are together integral to the foundation of the nation of Zimbabwe.

In rewriting the Nehanda myth, Vera corrects the misuse of her name and image as they have been conscripted into the propagation and consolidation of ZANU-PF state power. Nehanda warns her people to “Beware of blinding words!” (Vera, *Nehanda* 37). Mother weeps not only because spirit mediumship will result in the sacrifice of Charwe’s life, but also because under the power of those “blinding words” her daughter’s identity and place in her ancestral lineage will be forsaken: “My daughter is not my daughter,’ [...] ‘My daughter is not my daughter.’ [...] ‘My daughter is no longer my daughter” (49). Vera hopes to reanimate Nehanda so that both her suffering and her strength can be restored, reanimating the myth and history so that “She, who has dared to speak will not be found with an idle tongue, but she will change even the seasons of humankind” (90). As the midwife Vatete explains, “There are divisions, surprises, promises, killings, and intervals of conversation that one wonders how the story is ever told to its end, or the journey completed” (Vera, *Nehanda* 8). The story is not completed because the method and source of its telling are part of that story. The Nehanda discourse has been fraught with partisan “divisions,” unexpected conscriptions, propagandist promises that her bones rise again in service of the state, killings of the original storytellers, and controversies so that it is not a completed “journey.” The cyclical and unfinished status of such stories is both a danger and a hope.

Vera has described herself as, “one of the [...] dream children” who believed that in independence they would accomplish the dreams of the previous generation, but who now “have a feeling we have betrayed our own dream as a country [...]. And that we have a new obligation, which is to create a social change within this new environment which has resulted from our independence” (Primorac, “The Place of the Woman” 388). Vera hopes that the contemporary generation of women will take this obligation on, that “The women welcome the message of their inheritance and they will not forget: the time of fading truths is gone” (*Nehanda* 113). This

does not mean that this novel cannot at the same time be read as nationalist or at least celebratory of “the nation”—indeed it is difficult to read it that way when the story of Nehanda is so central to national consciousness in Zimbabwe. Vera has stated, “I would like to be remembered as a writer who had no fear of words”—who was unafraid to speak in a voice of dissent—“*and* who had an intense love of her nation” (emphasis added, quoted in Cousins and Dodgson-Katiyo xi). In this way, as Mkwesha-Manyonga writes, Vera accomplishes writing Nehanda “both into and out of the nation” (41).

Reanimating *The Stone Virgins*

In both *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins*, Vera inhabits an irrealist modality that emphasizes the relationship between the embodied experiences of women and the divine so that the black female body is seen to be “more than material.” The vulnerability of the black female body is viscerally exposed in the terrible violence inflicted on Thenjiwe and Nonceba in *The Stone Virgins*. Yet the novel also offers the hope of resurrection in Nonceba’s new life at the end of the novel, where the final word is “deliverance” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 184). Vera reinserts these black female bodies into the heart of national history, illuminating them as the casualties of core-peripheral power relations as they manifested in the internecine violence of the 1980s in Matabeleland and the Midlands. She also suggests that reanimating these bodies as part of that history is necessary to reclaim national consciousness moving forward; in this sense even though they are the site of such brutal abuse and suffering, these bodies offer symbolic power and hope.

As in *Nehanda*, the suffering black body is central to the irrealist narrative in *The Stone Virgins*, though here the focus expands to include the suffering of the black male veteran. Vera continues to relate embodied experiences through dense, vivid and non-linear prose. However,

the irrealist modality is expressed less through numinous narrative and more through floating omniscient and omnipresent narration that jumps swiftly and smoothly between perspectives as if airborne. In the beginning of the novel, the viewpoint is sweeping; it provides the layout of colonial Bulawayo and the laboring black bodies within it from a distant bird's eye view. This narration hovers, dipping in and out of consciousnesses without lingering, traveling swiftly from Bulawayo to Kezi as if flying above the bus line with winged grace. Thenjiwe, the ostensible protagonist, is not introduced until Chapter Three and is dead by Chapter Five. Thus the narration is literally floating free for much of the text.

Rather than, as some critics have argued, *The Stone Virgins* functioning as a correction for the earlier nationalistic impulse that informs *Nehanda* (see Hawley 68), the two novels are best seen as a continuity of concern with reinserting the female body into national historiography. It is not that *Nehanda* is nationalist (a statement that does not acknowledge the multiple and varying nationalisms across the geography and history of Zimbabwe) and *The Stone Virgins* is anti-nationalist. In fact, both novels use irrealist techniques to respond to the contradictions of combined and uneven development as they play out in the Zimbabwean postcolony and in cultural production. *The Stone Virgins* suggests that the violence enacted on bodies in majority Ndebele-areas in the 1980s, especially women's bodies, is central to how the nation-state as it currently exists was formed, and is also linked to the history of violence on black bodies and sovereignty by imperial power. This novel is not simply an indictment of the state, but instead reaffirms the unlikelihood of nonviolent transitions after such a brutal era of primitive accumulation and protracted struggle for independence.

The novel is clearly critical of the state-sponsored violence enacted in the 1980s and revises national history to include that violence with unshrinking brutality. When "The war

begins” in *The Stone Virgins*, both “the bones” and “the guns” are “rising,” “rising anew” (65). Although “bones rising” is a clear reference to the popular conception of Nehanda’s prophecy that her bones will “rise again,”³⁰ the rising of these bones does not resurrect Nehanda as Vera does in *Nehanda*. The rising of the bones in *The Stone Virgins* is accompanied by “the burying of memory” rather than the restoration of that memory (65). *The Stone Virgins* depicts the destruction of Kezi, a village in Matabeleland South, as a result of agents of the state attacking Zimbabwe’s own citizens. The grocer Mahlathini is burned alive in his own store by presumably Fifth Brigade “soldiers” who “had demonstrated that anything that had happened so far had not been random or unplanned. Atrocious, yes, but purposeful. They committed evil as though it were a legitimate pursuit, a ritual for their own convictions” (132, 135). These soldiers are so blinded by the words of propaganda and the ideology of the state that their minds are “evaporating” (135).

The material violence inflicted on the bodies of villagers is associated with the symbolic violence of excluding various groups from history, including women, female combatants, ex-ZIPRA combatants who returned to the bush and majority-Ndebele communities in Matabeleland and the Midlands. Characters who belong to these groups become aware that independence does not necessarily reach or apply to them. At independence, the women of Kezi note that “The rocks remain as solid as ever; the boulders are still. Not different. The trees are bare of leaves and carry a stunned and lethargic silence. The women expect sudden and spectacular fissures on the rocks. They expect some crack, some sound that will wrap over them like lightning and they will not need to ask if independence is truly here, or if indeed this is a new day” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 51). These women of Bulawayo and rural areas in Matabeleland can see from the advent of independence that it is only superficial while they

³⁰ This prophecy is recounted in Samupindi; Vera also references it in Bryce, “Interview” 222.

remain in a periphery within the world-system, and a further peripheralized community within the nation.

Unmoving stone, as represented in the “solid” rock and “still” boulders in the passage above, represents the entrapment of living bodies within stagnant and silencing historiography such as “patriotic history.” The contributions of female ex-combatants from the Liberation War are eclipsed by this new war that “bur[ies]” memory. Vera describes these female ex-combatants as the hope of the new nation upon their return from the Liberation War:

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. From this veranda, independence could be watched like a sun in the distance, an arm held up could capture a few of its rays. Female soldiers envisioning independence tuned their bodies to a slow momentum. Waiting. Here. (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 130)

Many of these women were inspired by Nehanda’s history and took her as their namesake; they are her true inheritors and could have done justice to her legacy.³¹ But this hope is denied. The passage quoted above occurs within the broader narrative recounting the subsequent destruction of Kezi and disappearance of those female soldiers, leaving only refuse: “Today, stray paper is trapped around the raised platform, feathers, sugarcane peelings. Goats leap over the rubble of bricks and cement, the collapsed wall, the mixture of broken glass, smashed bottles, pieces of shelving, bent metal door frames, melted plastic bottles, burned wooden crates” (130-131). In this way Vera clarifies that independence is incomplete without the recognition of the centrality of women’s bodies, both civilian and soldier, to that achievement.

Vera’s gendered revisions to national(ist) history critique the double peripheralization of places like Kezi within in an already peripheral postcolonial situation. She locates the violent destruction of Kezi within the history of the struggle between IGO coercion and national

³¹ For example, the Women’s Brigade of ZANLA named their base “Nehanda” (Charumbira, “Gender, Nehanda, and the Myth of Nationhood” 212).

sovereignty by tying it not only to state-sponsored violence but also to the drought that incapacitated state control of the economy: “Last year again, the maize crop withered and left a starved and violated population even more bewildered. There is no harvest” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 127). The death and destruction in Kezi takes on layered significance, suggesting cycles of crimes that are not all attributable to the post-independence Zimbabwean state: “Kezi is a place gasping for survival—war, drought, death, and betrayals” (128). The emphasis on the suffering of the land connects this destruction to many generations of colonial exploitation. “War” suggests not only the impacts of internecine warfare but also those of the Liberation War, much of which occurred in the bush areas of Matabeleland. This land, Vera shows, has suffered betrayal upon betrayal. Yet her purpose is not to undermine the hope necessary for focused resistance to specific tyrannies, not to diffuse the critique, but to render it more comprehensive. The flailings of the ZANU-PF state need to be placed within the context of world-system dynamics in order to be comprehensively understood. Vera’s irrealist style, in which time is collapsed and contradictions are illuminated rather than obscured, responds to this historically and geographically layered crisis.

Sibaso as Instrument of Combined and Uneven Development

Thus, the single fleshed-out villain of *The Stone Virgins*, the rapist and murderer Sibaso, is a complex character who should not be conflated with the partisan propaganda expressive of exclusionary nationalism and “patriotic history.” Mkwesha-Manyonga has suggested that Vera uses Sibaso to hold the “foundational nationalism” expressed in Mutswairo’s *Feso* accountable for creating “a violently masculinist and ethnically exclusive nation” (54; 55). Sibaso carries a copy of Mutswairo’s *Feso* (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 120), which Mkwesha-Manyonga takes as a

suggestion that the character is aligned with the ZANU-PF-brand authoritarian nationalism under which that book was canonized and elevated “to the status of classic [anti-colonial] protest novel” (“Special Report: Zimbabwe Silver Jubilee 25 Years,” published in *New African* in 2005; Charumbira, “Gender, Nehanda and the Myth of Nationhood” 209; Chiwome 2). Mutswairo was eventually selected to compose the lyrics to the national anthem, *Simudzai Mureza weZimbabwe* (“Raise High Our Zimbabwean Flag”) (Vambe and Khan). Literary scholars such as Flora Veit-Wild and Musanga and Mutekwa have placed Mutswairo’s work in the “first generation” of black Zimbabwean writers whose primary goal was to “advance and further the nationalist cause” by “reconstructing Zimbabwean history from colonial distortions” (Musanga and Mutekwa 81). Vera, as Mkwesha-Manyonga rightly interprets, views these “first generation” revisionist histories as themselves restrictive and in need of contemporary revisions, and takes this new round of revisions as her purpose.

In *The Stone Virgins* Vera purposefully muddles the association between Sibaso as villain and the exclusionary nationalism attributed to both the ZANU-PF state and authors such as Mutswairo. It becomes increasingly clear that Sibaso, as a disabled veteran of the Liberation War and a sufferer of PTSD, is also victimized by the struggle between peripheral and core power. Sibaso is not a Fifth Brigade or ZNA soldier, but a lone actor: “I return to the bush. [...] I did not surrender. I did not fight to please another” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 141). He is clearly cut off from any political or military leadership; he belongs to no group. In locating Sibaso’s prewar home in Njube Township, Bulawayo, Vera suggests that he is ex-ZIPRA rather than ex-ZANLA, and therefore likely to have faced conflict and discrimination in the newly formed ZNA. Sibaso is haunted by his old devotion to nationalistic ideology rather than continuing to ascribe to it; reading the opening pages of *Feso* causes a PTSD flashback episode during which he

experiences “an explosion in [his] head and “hold[s] on to the fence [...] like a prisoner,” his “mouth dry” (121). His pathology and his actions indicate that he is a casualty of the protracted war of liberation and the particularly brutal settler colonialism practiced by the post-1965 Ian Smith regime.

Vera conveys Sibaso’s perspective with as much intimate detail as either of the two central female characters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba. Like in *Nehanda*, in *The Stone Virgins* Vera deploys the irrealist technique of abrupt disjunctures in narrative. At times the shift between the perspective of the victim, Nonceba, and the perspective of the perpetrator, Sibaso, is so sudden and unheralded it is unclear whose is whose (e.g., Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 123). Like the women and villagers of Kezi, Sibaso is also excluded from independence. He obtains his old copy of *Feso* on a search for his father, who is now dead. The new resident in his former home is skeptical of the independence celebrations and has no desire to keep *Feso*. Sibaso appreciates this man’s skepticism, suggesting that he shares it: “Joy: It is a task to be achieved quickly. Yet there are those, like the new tenant, with restraint. They stand in front of mirrors and seek their own truth, and wonder what the new day can possibly be about. [...] I liked the new tenant; he was cynical in the midst of the loudest joy. He has failed to understand what people have been doing waving miniature flags in the air for weeks” (120). The implication is not only that Sibaso also has failed to experience “the loudest joy,” but that he is critical of the apparent patriotic requirement that this joy be expressed, a “task to be achieved quickly.” This complication of any simplistic association of Sibaso with ZANU-PF partisan nationalism undermines the assumption that the sole villain of the story is the state.

Thus Sibaso complicates the picture. Vera is not exclusively interested in critiquing the state or national problems, but also the broader forces of combined and uneven development.

These forces possess and act through him as an instrument, in a chilling reversal of the empowering process of spirit mediumship depicted in *Nehanda*. As a sufferer of PTSD Sibaso acts out his own victimization as casualty of the struggle between core and peripheral power in the Liberation War on victims even more peripheralized than he: rural women in Matabeleland. He says, “I endure the war anew. I am an instrument of war” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 141). He is a victim “endur[ing]” the war while also being conscripted into its use as an “instrument.” As a man who is no longer the agent of his own life, Sibaso forgets his name, “an easy task” (82). Sibaso’s capacity to forget, to “bury memory,” contrasts with the spirit mediumship of *Nehanda*, in which “Forgetting is not easy” (Vera, *Nehanda* 3). However, Sibaso’s capacity to forget does not extend to his bodily suffering; he “is a man who remembers harm” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 97). His disability involves fire and nerve damage, both terrible pain and perhaps more terrible numbness. He describes it as “An inch burned from every finger. The smallest of my fingers no longer bends. Something went quiet inside my head. I heard it stop like a small wind. First, my entire left arm stopped moving, or moved but I did not feel it—dangled. [...] The numbness spread. [...] A nerve had vanished” (97). In this way Vera links Sibaso’s psychosis and memory loss, the “something” that “went quiet inside his head,” to his experience of trauma and injury. The paralysis of his arm links him to the fate of the “stone virgins” entrapped in forgetful history. In Sibaso’s words, “Independence is the compromise to which I could not belong. [...] They remember nothing” (97).

Although Sibaso references the belief of many Liberation War soldiers that *Nehanda* would protect them, he loses faith in the capacity of her name to protect him from self-destruction: “I count each nameless ancestor on my dead fingers. The one buried in a noose. *Nehanda*, the female one. She protects me with her bones. I embrace death, a flame” (Vera, *The*

Stone Virgins 117). As a nameless man who has become a puppet of the battle between peripheral and core powers, Sibaso no longer controls his “dead fingers.” He invokes Nehanda, who supposedly “protects” him “with her bones,” but undermines that faith with the following statement that she cannot protect him from death, which in his misery and psychosis he welcomes.

Sibaso’s obsession with spiders is reminiscent of the power of the spider in *Nehanda*, which “weaves all of time into its hungering belly” (Vera, *Nehanda* 89). But in Sibaso’s world, the spiders are crushed and thus representative of the calcification of bodies in the unforgiving prison of stone. The crushed spider is only an “outline” that “cannot merge with words”—its body cannot be fully fleshed out or resurrected through narrative. Similarly, “Humans become fossils by being buried in stone [...]. In stone, bodies are held still. Of all continents, only Africa has known the crushed solitude of a dead spider” (122). Crushed spiders, human bodies encased in stone are the lasting casualties of the history of combined and uneven development, from colonialism through the Liberation War to the contemporary inconsistencies between reality and rhetoric on the postcolonial stage. As Sibaso comments, “Nothing survives fire, not even the voices of the dead. Nothing survives fire but rock” (141). Not even the ancestors can reach him in his stone prison. In this way Sibaso describes the silencing of the story and the bodily suffering of disabled Liberation War veterans who returned to the bush. In fleshing out Sibaso’s character, Vera revises national history to include that story. Sibaso is both perpetrator and victim as an instrument of systemic violence, upheaval and incommensurability in the struggle between core and peripheral power. As this instrument Sibaso not only destroys the lives of his victims but is himself destroyed; he carries this self-destruction within, knowing that “tomorrow I will vanish alone somewhere in these hills” (142).

Reanimating the Women of Kezi

Reanimating national history against partisanship is a process of both resituating national history within the world-system of capitalist modernization and replacing women's bodies at that history's center. Thenjiwe must insert herself bodily into the man's world of public life in the village of Kezi, in the greater province of Matabeleland, in the nation of Zimbabwe: "She must wait for an opportunity to enter the packed doorway filling with men's hats, and arms raised into triangles over their heads, while strong and protective palms slide over the grooved top of each hat, pressing the supple felt peak, holding down. Black, gray, and brown rims" (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 31). The men's hats legitimate the men's belonging in the public world of village commerce, a belonging that is dependent upon the exclusion of others, the "holding down" with "strong and protective palms." Combined and uneven development works through unevenness, empowering some groups by disempowering others. Thenjiwe's entrance into the novel is also her insertion of herself into this world and sets up Vera's focus on the effects of combined and uneven development on local black women's bodies. The backlash against Thenjiwe's forceful insertion of her body into this world will result in that body's gruesome dismemberment later in the novel.

The first attempt to remove Thenjiwe's body comes from her affair with Cephas, which begins on this day in Thandabantu Store. Cephas fails to love her living self, instead focusing the energy of his love on her bones: "He loves each of her bones, from her wrist to her ankle" [...] White bone her inner being [...]. He places his palm along her waist and announces, as though she is a new creation, 'This is a beautiful bone' (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 37). The obsession with bones is reminiscent of Nehanda's prophecy and its calcification in the process of her canonization by the ZANU-PF state. Instead of helping to restore Thenjiwe's body and revive

her story, Cephas finds the already calcified “white bone” within her in a gesture of reduction and entrapment. This kind of love renders these women “a fossil before dying,” so that their incomplete stories become “a cage for memory” rather than living memory (37). Thenjiwe escapes this entrapping love of bones in her own obsession with a seed. The seed of the fruit of the Mazhanje tree is also hard, appears dormant and might be buried. But a seed is fundamentally different as it contains life within it and aches to grow. Her answer to the threat of being fossilized is to transfer her love and her hope to this seed, the “dream child” she keeps in her mouth, sucking its sweetness “like a gift” (39). Her obsession with the Mazhanje seed is a way of reanimating her own story, of taking it back from the closed mouth of her lover and literally replacing it in her own mouth.

Cephas says that his love for bones is related to their capacity, in a living body, to wreak suffering (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 37). In this way Vera connects romantic love and sexuality to pain and destruction. This association is an irrealist device (Deckard et al 93). Vera brings this coupling into brutal focus when Sibaso decapitates Thenjiwe, obliterating her story with finality, and rapes and mutilates her sister Nonceba. The way peripheral-core power struggles under combined and uneven development play out materially on human bodies, particularly black female bodies, could not be illustrated more vividly. Sibaso is an ex-Liberation War combatant who suffers from PTSD and a bush “dissident” probably raised in a poor minority community, targeted by a state enacting violence on its own citizens in attempt to secure its power in the world-system. He is thus doubly peripheralized within the world-system, and both instrument and victim of the violent conflicts of capitalist modernization. The bodies of Thenjiwe and Nonceba, as his victims, are triply casualties of these dynamics.

Decapitation dismembers not only Thenjiwe's physical body but also the relationship between embodied experience, memory and spirit that Vera has so carefully constructed. The act of decapitation forcefully separates the body from the mind and spirit, destroying life and the spiritual significance of the body. The act of rape exploits the female body's particularly feminine vulnerability and takes away Nonceba's agency; it is a form of possession that works as a terrible mirror for the entrance of the *mhondoro* into the body of Nehanda, and echoes Sibaso's own possession as "an instrument of war." The removal of Nonceba's lips is an attempt to take away voice as well as a cruel disfigurement of feminine beauty. As "survival is in the mouth," it seems Nonceba should not survive such an ordeal. In this way Vera brutally and unshrinkingly reinserts the female body at the center of national history and exclusionary historiography. These bodies, she suggests, are central not only to the stories told about the nation, but also to the horrific story of the power struggle innate to combined and uneven development. She insists on illuminating that struggle's destruction of women's bodies, lives, stories, households, agency and voices. Women bear the brunt of combined and uneven development in peripheral and semi-peripheral spaces; they are thus burdened with its history. Yet women's mouths also have the power to bear the stories of this suffering; their bodies also have the power to bear future generations. As always, Vera couples embodied suffering and destruction with the possibility, at least, for the entrance of the divine: "Kezi is a place gasping for survival—war, drought, death, and betrayals: a habitat as desolate as this is longing for the miraculous" (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 128).

In Nonceba's recovery and her eventual ability to begin to resurrect the meaning of her sister's life, the novel offers this paradoxical hope. Nonceba very nearly becomes a stone virgin, as captured in several passages of haunting embodied experience: "I lie on the bed, listening to

my body turning slowly into stone. My jaw is held tight. I do not shout” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 123). For a long period, Sibaso’s act succeeds in silencing Nonceba. Yet she still carries memories, some of which do not belong to her alone: “I move my arms, murmuring, my mouth stiff, as though sewn up, stitched like the hem of a dress, folded; heavy with numbness. I am unable to speak, my forehead is heavy. I carry words at the back of my mind, names of things, objects, places I do not know” (123). In the end Vera resurrects Nonceba as she did Nehanda. Cephas returns, repentant, longing to atone for his role in attempting to ensnare Thenjiwe before her death. Rather than saving Nonceba, he seeks salvation from her. His role in helping to reanimate Thenjiwe’s sister is a way of resurrecting Thenjiwe also: “He looks up at someone else in the room, not her, as though someone else has said something and he is listening to this other voice speaking to both of them and making it unnecessary for them to say anything at all” (162). In restoring Thenjiwe’s voice, Cephas and Nonceba are able to move forward.

The Ecology of Growth

Vera’s exploration of the growth and resilience of flora also opposes the static, entrapping concept of the stone virgins. Her attention to the cycles of nature through the recurrence of the seasons as well as perennial plants serves as an irrealist counterpoint to a linear temporal register. Vera overlays the names of the flowers onto the names of the streets to suggest that their scent and beauty are weightier in understanding history than the specificity of dates and the ordering and territorialization of space. Vera plays with the idea of understanding place through maps and names that memorialize historical events, giving extensive geographical orientation but then interspersing it with the disruptive plumage of wildly prolific blooms. This contrast structures the opening passage of the novel: “Selborne Avenue in Bulawayo cuts from

Fort Street (at Charter House), across to Jameson Road (of the Jameson Raid), through to Main Street, to Grey Street, to Abercorn Street, to Fife Street, to Rhodes Street, to Borrow Street, out into the lush Centenary Gardens with their fusion of dahlias, petunias, asters, red salvia, and mauve petrea bushes, onward to the National Museum, on the left side” (Vera, *The Stone Virgins* 3).

The novel starts with a long meditation on the power of natural beauty, profusion, and growth. Vera describes the rise and fall of the blooms using military metaphors. The flamboyant trees, with “blistering red blooms,” “take over territory from December to January, brightening the sky louder than any jacaranda could” (3). Vera suggests both that this continually recurring, vibrant profusion has the power to infiltrate ordered categorizations of place and time and that its beauty and dominance of the cityscape is frequently forsaken. In this way the flora are metaphorical for her conception of the power of the feminine, expressed perennially in the beauty, sensuality, activity and reproduction of the female body that has been frequently excluded from histories and geographies. The lasting strength and persistence of Kezi’s marula tree in emanating its heady scent provides hope, offering “the only cherishable link with dawn” and a “profuse and dreamlike air with its promise of rescue (128)” The villagers “hold on to its fecundity, and, indeed, its past memories” (128). Vera also offers this hopeful growth in the Mazhanje seed that Thenjiwe holds in her mouth before her death.

Vera’s representation of cyclical time and the wild overtaking of the landscape by the unchecked profusion of floral growth in *The Stone Virgins* is her counterpoint to the futility of a linear and ordered representation of the violence in the novel and in Zimbabwe’s history. This organic temporality is a perhaps less frenetic version of the whirlwind narrative of *Nehanda*. It interrupts and offers respite to vain attempts to accurately recount terrible moments of violence.

Yet Vera also relates moments of violence in narrative loops. The cyclical nature can be a source of suffering as well as a source of growth, in a parallel to the combined vulnerability and strength of women's bodies. Vera relates Sibaso's arrival in Kezi *later* in the novel than she relates the violence he commits there (*The Stone Virgins* 143; 67), so that the novel itself functions as a narrative loop. She describes the scene of Sibaso's murder, rape and mutilation of the sisters once, twice, then a third time, switching from third-person to first-person and also second-person in places. She focuses on the embodied experiences of Nonceba throughout: "there is only the scent of this man, the cruel embrace of his arms, the blood brown of his shoes, the length of his neck, and the gaze bending close" (67). As she tells and retells this part of the story, Vera's sentence style becomes simpler and more direct, to represent Nonceba's living and reliving of these moments, each time grasping for more clarity.

These looping streams of narrative capture an experience that both destroys life and reproduces itself as inescapable memory. Vera also tells the moment in which Thenjiwe and Cephas meet three times (31, 32, 38). Each iteration becomes more clear and concise and answers more of the questions raised by the meandering sentences and descriptions previous. These narrative loops represent the cyclical temporal register of Vera's irrealist style, in which one moment is repeatedly relived. The increasing clarity suggests that revisions of history, especially those that accommodate the cyclical nature of embodied experience, can illuminate such moments at least enough to expose the violence on women's bodies that occurred. In this way Vera captures the incommensurability of experiencing this terror, the illogical pathways to such violence, as well as the ways these incidents disturb linear temporality and rational thinking. Her narrative loops respond to the difficulty of representing the outcomes of combined and uneven development.

No Stone Virgins

How can the material experiences and concrete bodies of women be infused with spiritual energy and power without becoming sterile, imprisoned stone virgins through romanticization and canonization? Vera gives an answer in these works of feminist irrealist historiography, where she insists that female figures in history including Nehanda, female combatants in the Liberation War, and female household heads who were victims of internecine conflict and economic exploitation be reinserted in histories, in order to restore their material lives and inspirational value. Vera describes the stone virgins as “Disembodied beings. [...] Their thighs are empty, too fragile, too thin to have already carried a child. They are the virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king. They die untouched” (*The Stone Virgins* 103). The stone virgins are women’s bodies denied life: materially in their forced sacrifice for a male king and symbolically in their entrapment in silent stone and exclusion from agency in history. In both these novels Vera reanimates black women’s bodies—and the body of a Liberation War veteran—to save them from this fate. She brings these “more than material” bodies into flesh through word in a religious practice, transubstantiation through literary ritual.

These novels have contemporary significance for Zimbabwean women of the 1990s and 2000s. Vera restores agency to the eclipsed and silenced female ex-combatants, reinserting them into history because she believes their material contributions in history offer a lasting source of empowerment for women. As she describes in *The Stone Virgins*, “Their voices wake the somnolent dove. It flies through the dancing light above. Independence will not come again, and the best spectacle of it is in these women, with the pain in their backs, the curve of their voices, and their naked elbows beating the air” (53). In the case of *Nehanda*, Vera intervenes to reanimate the spirit medium’s calcified and canonized body. She prevents Nehanda from being

frozen and exploited in her romanticized image in national consciousness. Vera's irrealist style is integral to this project because it connects the concept of stone virgins to the broader context of combined and uneven development that creates such casualties. Vera perceives the production of history as itself imbricated in core-peripheral dynamics and conflicts. The foci and methodologies for recording history are granted by and depend upon historiographical traditions that may not emanate from an African or Zimbabwean episteme:

History begins in 1896 when the Europeans came here, and it continues like this: the spirit medium Nehanda did this, in such and such a year, in such and such a year she was hanged in 27 April ... And I realized, No, no, no! Our oral history does not even accept that she was hanged, even though the photographs are there to show it, because she refused that, she surpassed the moment when they took her body, and when they put a noose upon it, she had already departed. Her refusal and her utterances are what we believe to be history. What was the nature of that departure, and why we believe in it so much as a nation, when the history books say something else, were questions which were very very important to me. I wrote it in a very emotional state of clarity of understanding that there are alternatives to 'History' [...]. [...] Because as Africans, our history is there to serve us, not us to serve it. (Bryce, "Interview" 221)

For Vera, these novels are a project of developing a new epistemological frame for historical inquiry: the frame of creativity, nation formation, survival, and power "in the mouth." It is a frame that positions the irrealist writer as vessel for story, as narrator for the truth that lies beyond facts, as channel for the divine.

CHAPTER 3

Irrealism and Transnationalism: NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

Reviewers have found NoViolet Bulawayo's first novel *We Need New Names* (2013) more palatable and decodable than the works studied above. Brown describes it as "vibrant" and Busby "memorable." Bisell hails the narrative of the young heroine Darling as "the freshest yet to spring from the fertile imaginations of talented young writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Dinaw Mengestu, who explore the African diaspora in America." These responses frequently locate *We Need New Names* as part of a group of "third-generation" writers from Africa or with African ancestry who now live and write in diaspora, and who tend to reflect a cosmopolitan worldview (Adesanmi and Dunton). These "emerging voices" (Hannan) offer images of local ways of living, histories, and politics but to a diffuse world literary audience. They "have the indelible color and intensity of a folk art painting" (Kakutani), and are thus expressive of a certain particularism, but at the same time offer up observations that are somehow generalizable to "the human condition" (Hannan). Bulawayo has encouraged readings of her own novel as universalizable. While Darling's story is Zimbabwean she hopes "it is also Mexican, Indian, and British" (quoted in Harding). For Bulawayo, writing this novel was "a labor of compassion, especially as it began to transcend Zimbabwe and become a larger narrative about the human experience" (quoted in Harding).

Bulawayo deploys irrealist techniques such as shifts in narrative voice and elements of the oneiric, the grotesque and pastiche. However, her prose is more accessible than other irrealist authors, such as Marechera and Vera, because she deploys these devices as brief experimental flourishes to an otherwise straightforward first-person novelistic narrative. While these moments of irrealism respond to the effects of combined and uneven development on economic refugees, her critique of world-system dynamics is less incisive than either of the previous authors.

Although the first half of the novel chronicles the inconsistencies of capitalist modernization in peripheral spaces, Bulawayo does not fully specify these spaces or the object of her critique on the global level.

Bulawayo erects a stronger and clearer critique of the manifestations of combined and uneven development in the US in the second half of the novel. She focuses on hypocritical and exclusionary immigration practices/attitudes, racism, classism and economic inequity. Thus, although Bulawayo uses irrealist style like the authors studied above, she diverges from them by shifting the locus outside of the home nation to place the host nation at center. While *We Need New Names* does engage with core-peripheral dynamics, in the end it identifies the “big baboon,” the American core, as responsible for addressing the inequitable outcomes of those dynamics (*We Need New Names* 51). In this way Bulawayo calls on American actors to solve global problems. This solution to the unevenness of capitalist development depends on improving knowledge and the spirit of benevolence within that “big baboon,” and thus represents a departure from Marechera’s exploration of oppositional politics and radical individualism and Vera’s of revising national history. While Bulawayo’s work deals with ostensibly more transnationalist themes, such as migration, *We Need New Names* is ultimately more concerned with the *nation*—the core host nation—than the world-system. In this way *We Need New Names* is less reflective of a truly global cosmopolitanism than it may appear on a first reading. Bulawayo’s purpose is to contribute to a stream of American literature that raises awareness about immigration issues from the perspective of immigrants.

Historical Background: 2000-2013

Internal Displacement in Zimbabwe

Land activists and the ZANU-PF state began to target both black and white communities after 2000 in several campaigns of eviction, seizure and destruction of property and violence. These campaigns led to an unprecedented increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Zimbabwe, which went from approximately 150,000 by 2004 to a million or more after Operation *Murambatsvina* in 2005 (Tibaijuka). Although these campaigns appear in *We Need New Names*, this chapter will show that Bulawayo does not historically contextualize them or sufficiently attribute them to specific national or global perpetrators. In this section I detail that historical context and attribution, to provide context for my analysis of the treatment of these events in the novel.

These campaigns correlated with the increasingly exclusionary nationalism that informed “patriotic history.” ZANU-PF rhetoric drew an arbitrary division between rural space, which it characterized as authentically Zimbabwean, and urban space, which it characterized as inauthentic and Western-influenced (Muponde and Primorac xiii-xiv; Primorac, “The Poetics of State Terror” 443). In 2005 Mugabe praised “our rural people” as “the vanguard in the sweet defence of Zimbabwe’s sovereignty,” as well as “the most consistent, reliable and decisive pillar [of] support for the party” (quoted in Primorac, “The Poetics of State Terror” 443). Minister of Information and Publicity Jonathan Moyo described people in the towns as “without totems” and unpatriotic (Ranger, “Rule by Historiography” 241). This rhetoric intensified after 1999-2000. In 1999, a new political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), formed out of networks of trade unions in the towns (Welz). In 2000, ZANU-PF lost a referendum vote to pass a new Constitution, which would have expanded Mugabe’s powers and afforded him the

authority to nationalize land. The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) allied with white commercial farmers and with businesspeople in the towns to campaign for the rejection that represented “the first formal ‘electoral’ challenge to Zanu (PF) hegemony in twenty years of rule” (Hammar and Raftopoulos 10; see also Chan and Primorac 71).

After the referendum, the ZANU-PF state began a campaign to reassert its hegemony over all aspects of public and private life (Hammar and Raftopoulos 31). Repressive measures such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) justified extrajudicial violence against civilians including teachers in rural areas, local government officials, labor unions, community organizations, journalists, and perceived or real opposition members (Hammar and Raftopoulos 15). Since 2002, foreign journalists have been excluded from the country. The regime has worked to undermine the judiciary. These actions have “created profound insecurity, and together with deepening hunger and poverty, have precipitated extensive internal displacement, refugees in neighbouring states, and a mass exodus of trained professionals” (Hammar and Raftopoulos 13). The state has deliberately withheld food aid, as a starvation strategy, from whole regions viewed as the territory of the political enemy (Hammar and Raftopoulos 14). Maintaining a contradictory position as head of a divided (the authentic and loyal v. the inauthentic and disloyal) and somehow also supposedly unified state often involves a “powerful discursive link between the sentimentality of nationalism and the legitimation of violence” (Hammar and Raftopoulos 26).

This particular brand of nationalism, as shown in the chapters above, responded to the imposition of foreign controls over national policy by prioritizing “national sovereignty” over “democracy or rights, concerns that were recast as part of an alien and imperial agenda” (Alexander 185). This rhetoric helped justify Operations *Murambatsvina* (“sweeping out the

filth”) in 2005 and *Mavoterapapi* (“Where did you put your vote?”) in 2008. The policy goal of *Murambatsvina* was to restore cleanliness and order to crime-ridden cities. In practice it was a campaign of violence, property destruction, and forced evictions in areas thought to be supportive of the MDC, particularly the townships (Primorac, “The Poetics of State Terror” 436-437; Welz 607; Ranger, *Bulawayo* 249). Operation *Mavoterapapi* (“Where did you put your vote?”) was a campaign of forced reeducation after ZANU-PF electoral losses. It involved all-night *pungwes* where villagers were dragged from their homes and forced to chant party slogans and declare their hostility to the MDC (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 30). Incidents of torture and killings occurred.

The discord between world-system economic controls and national sovereignty shaped perspectives and policies on land redistribution and contributed to the situation in which the state helped orchestrate separate campaigns of “land invasion” during the same period. “The land question” remained “unfinished business” because racialized, inequitable land distribution persisted (Hammar and Raftopoulos 8). Almost a third of the country remained in the hands of less than 5,000 white farmers (Chan and Primorac 66-67). Although Mugabe and his administration had instituted the Land Reform and Resettlement Programme in 1992, it had failed due to lack of international funding and support. White farmers lobbied the international community to dissuade donors (Chan and Primorac 67). The few willing donors attached demands that were too onerous for the ZANU-PF state to meet as it continued to struggle against economic coercion and peripheralization in the world-system. For example, pressure to withdraw troops from the DRC seemed to intrude on national sovereignty (Hammar and Raftopoulos 9). ESAP had also largely prevented ZANU-PF from prioritizing land redistribution (Chan and Primorac 67-68). The administration of Prime Minister Tony Blair had informed the

Zimbabwean Minister of Agriculture that Britain would not assist in redistribution in 1997 (Chan and Primorac 69).

Although as late as 1999 Mugabe had sought international support for redistribution, in the absence of that support he began considering the preemptory nationalization of commercial farms. A centralized policy seemed necessary in response to the unrest caused by local land activists in addition to the factors listed above (Chan and Primorac 66). Chan and Primorac argue that ZANU-PF had no way to control squatting and failed to acknowledge or address the informal sector, which severely limited its ability to centralize land transactions. Groups of “war veterans” whose relationship to the ZANU-PF state was unclear began to invade white-owned lands in early 2000 (Chan and Primorac, “The Imagination of Land” 69-70). Their leader, Chenjerai Hunzvi, announced a willingness to use violence to counteract the MDC and battle the white farmers (Chan and Primorac 71). ZANU-PF militias and eventually state security forces joined in the campaign, which resulted in “unprecedented extremes of violence and intimidation against both white farmers and black farm workers” (Hammar and Raftopoulos 11).

Once ZANU-PF became involved in the land invasions, the violence spread to any actual or perceived supporters of the MDC. Hunzvi stated that the white farmers were “foreigners, they are British! They should go back to Britain.” In his rhetoric the invaders were not squatters but “Zimbabweans on Zimbabwean land” fighting a “bitter” economic war, that also had the goal of ensuring “that ZANU-PF’s reign shall never be interrupted by sell-outs” (quoted in Chan and Primorac 71). In May, with the election approaching, Mugabe began to match that level of rhetoric, attacking Britain as a neo-colonial power and also the white farmers as “diehard Rhodesian settlers” (quoted in Chan and Primorac 71). The portrayal of fast-track land redistribution as the “Third *Chimurenga*” and therefore the continuation of the Liberation War

remains central to ZANU-PF's rhetoric, depicting radical redistribution as a rural uprising to "liberate" white-owned farmland (Primorac, "The Poetics of State Terror" 435-436). In a departure from the state rhetoric before 2000, ZANU-PF began increasingly to cast land redistribution and other debates in racial terms. These terms associated white Zimbabwean farmers with Rhodesian colonials and the neo-colonial influence of (white) core powers in the world-system, glossed as "British and North American plunder and exploitation" (Tafataona Mahoso, chairman of the Media and Information Commission, 2003; quoted in Ranger, "Rule by Historiography" 226-227).

ZANU-PF rhetoric was inconsistent with reality. The unevenness of capitalist modernization in general was compounded by extreme maldevelopment, evident in the townships and IDP camps, caused by the battle between national and foreign agents for control. The experience of Operation *Murambatsvina* in the township communities was incommensurable with the rhetoric of cleaning up and securing city spaces; the experiences of poor landless peasants who did not receive arable land as part of Fast-Track Land Redistribution were incommensurable with the rhetoric of evening out agricultural resources (Chan and Primorac 72; Hammar and Raftopoulos 13-14 and 22-23). These inconsistencies have characterized Zimbabwe's economic and political crisis since 2000 (Hammar and Raftopoulos 3). In its contradictory peripheral condition, Zimbabwe is both isolated from and dependent upon world-system economics: isolated because Zimbabwe does not have access to assistance and funding from the IMF, the World Bank, and most kinds of North American and European bilateral aid; dependent because Zimbabwe receives North American and European grain and other goods through the World Food Program of the United Nations and several international NGOs (Worby 53-54). This situation is ripe context for irrealist literary work that responds to the

inconsistencies of capitalist modernization. While Bulawayo deals with this historical content in the first half of *We Need New Names*, she conflates the invasions of commercial farms through Fast-Track Land Redistribution with the urban Operations. She fictionalizes radical redistribution as an urban movement and describes its perpetrators using tropes of mob mentality similar to those she deploys in descriptions of the urban Operations. I will explore the details and implications of this conflation below.

African Immigration to the US in Literature

The second half of *We Need New Names* deals with the unhappy experience of emigrating out of the above situation and immigrating into the US. Underdevelopment and conflict occurred in many African nations after decolonization, contributing to a large uptick in African immigrants to the US since the 1990s. Sam Roberts finds in a 2005 *New York Times* article that more Africans arrived in the U.S. voluntarily between 1990 and 2005 than arrived via the Middle Passage during the entire history of the slave trade. Nkiru Nzegwu and Isidore Okpewho edited a collection of essays studying this new wave of “voluntary” migration, which they call the “new African diaspora.” This wave of immigrants has struggled with challenges that are distinct from other immigrant groups. In “Narratives of African Immigration to the U.S. South,” Martyn Bone identifies conflict between new African immigrants and African American communities; white Americans often perceive African immigrants as more hard-working than their African American counterparts, and writers and commentators such as Debra Dickerson and Stanley Crouch have claimed that being truly black in America means being a descendant of the West African slave trade (Bone 67). Newer African immigrants may feel palpably that they do not belong either to the white community or the black community. In addition, African

immigrants often struggle to navigate the complex bureaucracy of the immigration regime. They are subject to racism as well as assumptions based on national origin and ignorance about the African continent. African immigrants since 1990 tend to be highly educated or skilled, but this advantage does not always translate into prosperity.

These realities are inconsistent with the perception of America in many poor communities worldwide as the land of economic opportunity and happy diversity. Recently, American publishing houses have taken on many literary works dealing with unhappy immigration stories of Africans to the US, including Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* (McSweeney's, 2006), Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (Penguin Books, 2007) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), for example. These novels are part of a broader collection of literary works interrogating the conception of America as a "nation of immigrants" from various ethnic and national backgrounds, documentation statuses and historical eras. For example, Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893, Irish-American experience); Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939, Italian-American experience); John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957, Japanese-American internment camp experience); Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959, Barbadian-American experience); Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984, Latina experience); Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994, Haitian-American experience); and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999, Indian-American experience), to name but a few. These works all deal with the hardships immigrants have faced historically and continue to face in coming to America. Thus American literary circles are familiar with works showing that the American immigration narrative is often an unhappy story, at least for the first or first few generations.

Bulawayo's own desire to join this stream and tap into its American audience is evident in several of her choices: the choice to write in English (also a choice made by Marechera and Vera: all these authors aimed for a transnational rather than a purely local audience); the choice to publish primarily in the US, with Little Brown and Company and Back Bay Books; and the choice to make the locus of identity and critique in her novel the American nation, the host country as opposed to the home country. This last choice, I argue, is particularly significant and pronounced and distinguishes Bulawayo's writing from the work of her predecessors. Although *We Need New Names* now has a UK publisher, Chatto and Windus, it does not currently have a Zimbabwean publisher. The novel has achieved most of its readership and success in the US, where it has been featured by Oprah (Davis), the *New York Times* (Kakutani), and *Glamour* magazine and garnered four different literary prizes including the Hemingway/PEN Award (see <http://novioletbulawayo.com/noviolet/> for a full list).

Although Bulawayo has received two Pan-African literary prizes, namely the Caine Prize and the Etisalat Prize, some continental African reviewers have been critical of the universalizing tendencies of *We Need New Names* and its interpretations. For Ikhide Ikheloa, famous for blogging a caustic critique of the Caine Prize for African Writing, the original short story that would become chapter one of the novel (*Hitting Budapest*) is "a fly-ridden piece" that reinforces stereotypes about Africa by focusing on a "roaming band of urchins, one of them impregnated by her grandfather – at age ten." In Ikheloa's view the novel provides an example of what Binyavanga Wainaina has sardonically called "how to write about Africa": always include "The Starving African," never include a "well-adjusted" one. Others see the novel as stereotypical of white Zimbabweans as well (see *Great Zimbabwe Guide*). The novel seems to have been most successful with its American audience. This circulation history varies from both Marechera's,

whose later novels were published in Zimbabwe, and Vera's, whose works have been incorporated into Zimbabwean secondary school curricula.

Palatable Irrealism: Excursions Beyond the Real

How has *We Need New Names* achieved such American success? Bulawayo carefully deploys irrealist elements as part of an overall accessible work of prose. The irrealist disruptions to more straightforward passages from Darling's perspective are experimental flourishes, as opposed to the more holistic irrealist styles of Marechera's Menippean satires and Vera's numinous revisionist histories. Marechera intentionally aimed to discomfit readers with his unseemly satire; Vera's *Nehanda*, especially, is so dense with layered cultural meanings that it has not been as successful abroad as her later works. Bulawayo's novel grew out of several short stories that she wrote in the process of earning her MFA at Cornell; she explains that it "was born out of my very first workshop" (quoted in Hovis). The story "Hitting Budapest," which would become the first chapter of *We Need New Names*, was published in *The Boston Review* in 2010 and won the Caine Prize in 2011. The chapter "In America" was also published separately in *Callaloo*. After the publication of the novel, Ben Marcus published another chapter, "Shhhh," in his anthology of *New American Stories* (2015). Bulawayo designed each chapter for marketability as a short story on the American literary market, a common technique taught in MFA programs.

The novel as a whole also reflects meticulous formal design. Darling's emigration splits the novel precisely in half, down to the page number (147 out of 292). Bulawayo orients the reader in a comfortable novelistic universe that primarily features a sympathetic first-person narrator following the linear chronological arc from childhood through young adulthood.

Bulawayo encourages a sympathetic reading of Darling: she is young and fairly innocent; she has suffered; her immigration struggles are familiar to many American readers. These features treat an American reader with hospitality, so that s/he can accommodate insertions of the unfamiliar, the troubling and the unexpected. Within this precise structure, forays beyond the real/ist/ic are easily digestible as controlled gestures that provide interest and allow Bulawayo's innovative use of language to shine. Rather than entering a numinous state of embodied suffering and power, as in *Vera*, or a carnival of scathing satire and grotesquerie, as in *Marechera*, Bulawayo's readers enter into Darling's relatable and compelling perspective on American society. In this sense the excursions beyond the real position this novel as exemplary of a "palatable irrealism," following Graham Huggan's work on the "palatable exotic." Casanova describes a similar vein of "world fiction," featuring "products based on tested aesthetic formulas and designed to appeal to the widest possible readership" (171).

The rest of this section deals with the broad, formal aspect of Bulawayo's irrealism: shifts in narrative perspective that interrupt the linear flow of Darling's story. The narrative disjunctures occur towards the middle of the novel. In three chapters, "How They Appeared" (*We Need New Names* 75), "How They Left" (147), and "How They Lived" (239), the narrative shifts from Darling's established first-person voice, perspective and experience to a third-person omniscient narration that suggests a collective voice and a more experimental style. Bulawayo images this collective as a group of bodies in motion: "Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. [...] Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing—to all over, to countries near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce. They are leaving in droves. When things fall apart, the children of the land scurry and scatter like birds escaping a

burning sky” (147). “They” move across the nation as IDPs in “How They Appeared” and emigrate out of the country in “How They Left.” In “How They Lived,” the refugees struggle for belonging as denationalized people in a specifically American setting. The figure of the emigrant and the immigrant appears here not only to move across the national and continental borders, but also to bleed over the boundaries separating individuals.

The narration style shifts again in the third of these chapters, “How They Lived,” to first-person plural: “When they debated what to do with illegals, we stopped breathing, stopped laughing, stopped everything, and listened” (244). In this way Bulawayo offers a possible communitarian locus of identity where the status of political/economic refugee establishes membership in a group based on shared experiences and fears. This universalized group of refugees is posed as a possible transnational community. Bulawayo proffers this group identity as a way to “transcend Zimbabwe” and achieve a post-national sensibility (Harding). For example, Rosen finds that “Bulawayo wanted [...] to give voice to all the immigrants without green cards whose movements are restricted;” this voice is “inclusive of all immigrants.”

These chapters also allow a possibly indigenous, local or traditional “African” mode of storytelling to infiltrate the dominant and possibly Eurocentric literary form of the novel. However, these chapters, at only a few pages long each, are short-lived hiatuses to the dominant narrative style: the individual voice of Darling as sympathetic protagonist and first-person narrator. Darling’s identity crisis and struggle for belonging as an unhappy immigrant remains central. In the end, Bulawayo suggests that the character Tshaka Zulu narrates the experimental third-person and first-person plural chapters. Tshaka Zulu suffers from dementia, but Darling remarks that “he doesn’t really need calming but listening to. His appears to be the madness that makes him talk” (235-236). The first-person plural chapter immediately follows Darling’s

commentary on Tshaka Zulu, suggesting a narrative connection. Bulawayo refamiliarizes her experiments with narrative style by placing these passages into the voice of an individual character and offering a possible “realistic” diegetic explanation for their presence. Because these chapters disturb linearity they are examples of irrealist style. However, their brevity and explicability render them less threatening to the reader’s sense of familiarity with the novel’s imaginary and its workings. The text swiftly returns to the now-familiar perspective of Darling.

These forays into irrealist narration function at the formal level as the break between the child Darling, running wild in the postcolonial African shantytowns, and the young adult Darling, struggling to find her place in American society. While they suggest a kind of transnational universality that “transcends Zimbabwe,” the third-person chapters contribute to the overall focus of the novel on this later version of Darling (Harding). According to Bulawayo, she chose a child narrator because “There is something universal about kids. We can all relate to them. They are children; they have no power” (quoted in Rosen). These early sequences encourage readerly sympathy and/or pity, which help the reader sustain connection to the much more jaded and less vibrant Darling of the second half. The indignities and undernourishment Darling undergoes as a child of the IDP camp serve to provide context for her identity crisis later in the novel. The shifts in narrative perspective provide a breakage at the level of narrative in order to signal the irreconcilability of Darling’s childhood and young adulthood identities. They prefigure the character’s breakdown. In this way these chapters work in smooth congruence with the overall structure of the novel as an unhappy immigration narrative. They are brief and controlled interludes to signal the passage of time and the process of relocation, and in this way they help to orient and guide the reader. Bulawayo’s irrealism is therefore more palatable for many American readers than either Marechera’s bizarre Menippean satire or Vera’s “whirlwind

narrative.” Below, a discussion of other irrealist elements including juxtaposition, the grotesque and pastiche contributes to this reading of *We Need New Names* as palatably irrealist.

In the first half of *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo deploys the irrealist techniques of oxymoron, pastiche and the grotesque. She grounds these techniques in the child Darling’s perspective. Darling describes events vividly but with an oneiric vagueness; each chapter captures a particular incident from memory or dream, and chronology serves form rather than linearity. While Bulawayo is critical of the world-system dynamics that underdevelop the periphery of the periphery, in this case the IDP camp, she eclipses the details of historical context in a gesture that aims to transcend local particularities and politics. This historical and geographical dislocation, in combination with measured irrealist embellishments, diffuses the critique of combined and uneven development that is more pervasive and clearly delineated in the earlier works by Marechera and Vera. The narrative of the IDP, especially a sympathetic one such as the ten-year-old Darling, could establish an incisive critique of the world-system forces of capitalist modernization that have resulted in a vast increase in IDPs, even over transnational refugees, since 1990 (see Internal Displacement Monitoring Center). However, in the first half of the novel Bulawayo targets such a miscellany of absurd world-system practices that the critique itself verges on bewildering pastiche.

Historical and Political Dislocation

The novel opens in the IDP camp called “Paradise,” a name dripping with irony. Bulawayo uses the irrealist technique of oxymoron to express the surreal experience of living in an informal, temporary space, at the mercy of the absurdity and havoc of an economy in crisis. She juxtaposes nourishment with death, rot, and scatology; sexuality with destruction; the sacred

with the profane and the exploitative; and incapacitating hunger with the scent of bread baking. “Paradise” consists of “tiny shack after tiny shack crammed together like hot loaves of bread” (*We Need New Names* 28). Bulawayo emphasizes the contrast of “paradise,” a land of milk and honey and “hot loaves of fresh bread,” with “Paradise,” which is characterized by a lack of basic human rights and services. Paradise’s cemetery is called “Heavenway,” a name in oxymoronic relationship to its “sad and clumsy and ugly” junkyard quality (134).

Bulawayo’s juxtapositions often have a grotesque flavor. The sweet satiation provided by stolen guavas—which are rotting on the trees in the wealthy neighborhood where food is plentiful—results in terrible constipation and a long and painful defecation session in the bush. To emphasize the association of nourishment with waste and death, while defecating the children find a dead woman hanging from a tree, apparently having committed suicide. They are horrified by this spectacle but quickly reiterate the coupling of sustenance and rot: “Wait, so who wants real bread?” Bastard says, “Look, did you notice that woman’s shoes were almost new? If we can get them then we can sell them and buy a loaf, or maybe even one and a half. We all turn and follow Bastard back into the bush, the dizzying smell of Lobels bread all around us now, and then we are rushing, then we are running, then we are laughing and laughing and laughing and laughing” (20).

Bulawayo associates the religious with the exploitative and the profane using this same technique. Vodloza, a traditional healer, requires “payment in FOREX ONLY” (29). In a more horrifying and grotesque example, Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro, the head of the local Christian church, rapes a woman in a public ritual of exorcism. As Darling and her pregnant friend Chipso look on, Chipso suddenly reveals that her own unborn child is the product of incestuous rape by her grandfather (42). These irrealist juxtapositions correlate

sexuality/reproduction with suffering, violence and destruction in a parallel to the correlation of sustenance with rot and defecation. In this way Bulawayo reflects the inconsistencies of capitalist modernization that help create the unlivable conditions in African shantytowns. The absurdity and desperation of the situation inspires the children's mad laughter.

Bulawayo mitigates the horror of this peripheral space, however. From the beginning Bulawayo suggests Darling will escape, that "Getting out of Paradise is not so hard" for her (*We Need New Names* 3). As such the reader can view the jarring violence and unfamiliar political, economic and cultural landscape with some distance. Bulawayo removes recognizable indicators of historical and political context that would complicate the dismissal of this space as elsewhere, unrelated to and even irreconcilable with the more familiar travails of unhappy immigration in America. Darling describes the camp in general, as a collection of grotesque refuse and waste: "a broken bottle here, a pile of junk over there, a brownish puddle of something here, a disemboweled watermelon there" (28); Darling sleeps on a makeshift bed cobbled together from "plastic and chicken's and duck's feathers and old pieces of cloth and all sorts of things" (65); in the cemetery, memorials for the dead include "Smashed plates. Broken cups. Knobkerries. Heaps of stones. Branches of the *mphafa* tree" (134). Bulawayo depicts the IDP camp as a generalized pastiche of garbage, oxymoronic combinations and unrelated elements that do not fit together into a whole, suggesting a universalized postcolonial periphery rather than a particular locality.

Bulawayo further decenters the particularity of place by eliminating the name "Zimbabwe" from the text. She forsakes every opportunity to use the name Zimbabwe: one woman describes it as her "dad's country," even though she is careful to specifically name her own origin, "London" (9). Darling repeatedly refers to Mugabe vaguely as "the president of our country" (194-195). Bulawayo only identifies the country by its colonial name, Rhodesia (120,

126). In response to an interview question about this choice, Bulawayo offers a triplicate and somewhat contradictory set of reasons. First, she claims her readers will easily infer the context: “I felt it wasn't necessary. I felt the context was there. We all know that it is Zimbabwe” (*DW*). Second, she alludes to her objective to achieve universality: “It’s not specifically a Zimbabwean story. It has happened in a lot of places in the world and is going to happen. So I wanted it to have this kind of universal aspect to it” (*DW*). Finally, she was concerned to prioritize the accessibility of the story by eliminating the risk of repelling some readers with a discernible politics: “Sometimes when you name a thing it arrests people’s imagination and perceptions. [...] the first drafts of the novel were actually naming Zimbabwe [...] you can imagine it was very political. It started to kill the story after a while” (*DW*). The assumption that readers are aware of the Zimbabwean context is in tension with the objective of writing a universal story in which specificity of place is purposefully denied. Below, I argue that the effect of this choice is to dislocate Darling’s story from the particularities of Zimbabwe because many American readers have little prior knowledge about Zimbabwean history. Bulawayo’s final rationale, that simply naming Zimbabwe would be too political and would “kill the story,” reveals the difficulty of writing about an intensively partisan context. It also reveals Bulawayo’s prioritization of the unhappy immigration narrative in the second half of the novel over the particularities of Zimbabwean politics.

Perhaps “We all know this is Zimbabwe” because Bulawayo is Zimbabwean, and so many readers will assume the first half of the novel is set in Zimbabwe (*DW*). If readers easily infer contextual details, then the elimination of the name could take on specific political meaning and historical interest. The silencing of the name “Zimbabwe” could be an expression of her claim that “we need new names.” The choice of the name “Zimbabwe” for the new nation

resulted in the “Zimbabwe Controversy” because its namesake, Great Zimbabwe, is a Shona monument. Michael Mawema, who was President of the African nationalist party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), chose the name “Zimbabwe” in 1960 in “an act of defiance to our white masters who argued that we were far too primitive to have been capable of constructing such a sophisticated structure as the Great Zimbabwe edifice” (Lawrence Vambe, quoted in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 72-73). However, Ranger shows that the Matabele Home Society (MHS) and others in Bulawayo felt this choice was unilateral and exclusive of the Ndebele and other non-Shona groups; they would have preferred “Matapos” (*Voices from the Rocks* 212).

As already evidenced above, majority-Ndebele communities have felt excluded from national belonging, in particular because of the silencing of the history of state-sponsored violence in Matabeleland and the Midlands in the 1980s. In this sense Bulawayo’s suppression of the Shona name “Zimbabwe” could have the political purpose of ironically reversing the repression of Ndebele perspectives in “patriotic history.” If so, the title *We Need New Names* resurrects the “Zimbabwe Controversy,” and critiques the failure of representative governance post-independence. In this way she could be commenting on the history of exclusionary nationalism and state-sponsored violence as perpetrated by Zimbabwe’s party-state. Bulawayo’s personal choice to change her name from Elizabeth Tshele to NoViolet Bulawayo underscores that reading. Bulawayo was the historical capital of King Mzilikazi’s kingdom and is the name of the “Ndebele capital” of Zimbabwe. One way in which “we need new names,” then, is that we need national names that are not exclusive of minority groups.

Yet many of Bulawayo’s mostly American readers are probably unfamiliar with even these basics of Zimbabwean history. While these readers may “know this is Zimbabwe,” they probably have little contextual knowledge of Zimbabwe to draw from in their interpretations of

the novel. Those readers who do not read secondary criticism or interviews may not understand the significance of the names Bulawayo chooses to veil and those she chooses to accentuate. In any case, in interviews Bulawayo emphasizes less political and more personal motivations for these choices. The name “NoViolet Bulawayo,” she explains, is about carrying her mother with her (“no” means “with” and her mother’s name is Violet) and about “staying connected” to her “hometown” (Peschel). In this way Bulawayo deemphasizes the potential political readings of renaming.

Bulawayo’s reasoning that “We all know this is Zimbabwe” does not acknowledge the fact that many Americans have very little education about African societies and contexts; additionally, Bulawayo eliminates other names that do not fit into the above political reading. Darling also refuses to name her language, which is presumably siNdebele, as it is for Bulawayo. Darling refers repeatedly to “my language” (131). When recounting a moment when an American woman asks her what language she speaks, the narrator omits the language’s name: “I tell her, and she tells me it’s beautiful, again, and I tell her thank you. Then she asks me what country I’m from and I tell her” (177). Thus, Bulawayo eliminates many details that could provide the basis for local identities and politics. Eliminating “Zimbabwe” could be a critique of ZANU-PF, but eliminating the name of the Ndebele language undermines the idea that Bulawayo wishes to align with Ndebele nationalism.

The text does include some specific names, as a text preoccupied with names must, but these names serve primarily symbolic rather than historical functions. Place names include “Budapest,” an “adoptive name” signifying a rich suburb and connoting foreignness (Mangena 195); “Shanghai,” most likely a metonymic allusion to the increase of Chinese FDI and industrial “development” in diverse parts of the African continent, including Zimbabwe since the 2000s

(see Moyo); and “Paradise,” which is actually a place in Zimbabwe and could be the site of a resettlement camp, as it is in the novel. However, many readers without knowledge of naming practices in southern Africa may assume the name “Paradise” to be fictionalized because of its ironic significance. Other brief references to the particularities of Zimbabwean history are apparent to a reader already familiar with historical details but probably lost on the average American reader (e.g., “Chimurenga Street”).

The novel recounts several events that are formative both for the fictional character Darling and for the history of the Zimbabwean nation-state since 2000. Yet in describing these events in Darling’s voice, Bulawayo omits the political and historical details of these events. She renders these incidents indistinct by fictionalizing them and relating them as the child Darling’s dreams and memories. Bulawayo’s child narrator is appealing and sympathetic; her innocence contributes to the vagueness with which she relates these incidents. Unlike the child Nehanda whose perspective shapes Vera’s text, the child Darling is neither prescient nor politically aware. In this way Bulawayo prioritizes developing an affective connection between Darling and the reader rather than exploring layered historical and cultural narratives. In her depiction of Operation *Murambatsvina*, MDC political campaigning, Operation *Mavoterapapi* and land invasions, Bulawayo forgoes historical specificity and political particularity in favor of creating a generalized African periphery and cementing that reader-narrator relationship. In this way these events provide character development instead of critiquing combined and uneven development. Bulawayo’s portrayal of these events shows that she prioritizes the “universality” of the story—its attractiveness to American readers—over concerns with the specific context of Zimbabwe.

Darling recounts her family’s experience of displacement as a result of Operation *Murambatsvina* in a recurring nightmare. She describes that in their original home they “were

happy” and had “real walls, real floors [...] real tables and a real TV and real clothes,” in contrast to Paradise, where they “live in this tin” (*We Need New Names* 64-65). Darling’s dream focuses on the monstrous bulldozers that operate as the agents of property destruction and violence: “I hear the adults saying, Why why why, what have we done, what have we done? [...] the bulldozers start bulldozing and bulldozing and we are screaming and screaming” (67). The child narrator’s palpable fear and the oneiric nature of the narrative lend the episode poignancy, but also eclipse historical orientation and attribution. An American readership could easily generalize this situation to make assumptions about the prevalence of arbitrary brutality and insecurity across postcolonial Africa. The perpetrators are, vaguely, “the men driving the bulldozers,” in contrast to Vera’s reference to the “soldiers” who tortured, killed, and burned in the specified village, Kezi, and her choice to flesh out the character of the bush dissident Sibaso (67). Bulawayo includes details more for their impact as easily decodable symbols than to provide historical context. The bulldozers crush both “Freedom Street” and a baby named “Freedom,” in a gruesome but clearly legible message of the destruction of liberal democratic values. The problem of internal displacement also shapes the chapter “How They Appeared,” in which more IDPs arrive in Paradise. Yet Bulawayo does not attribute the problem to particular historical forces.

Similarly, when a political party appears in Paradise to campaign, Bulawayo does not offer details particular to Zimbabwe. She describes the party’s branding, which suggests that it is the MDC. Its representatives, including a local youth named “Bornfree,” wear “T-shirts with little white hearts at the front and the word *Change* written in red just below the hearts” (30); the MDC began to campaign on the promise of a “New Beginning” and a “New Zimbabwe” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 25). However, Bulawayo introduces this party with the purpose of showing

the impossibility of change (the chapter is ironically titled “Real Change”). The adults in the camp put their faith in the party and turn out in large numbers to vote. But the outcome of this political participation is violent retribution. A mob comes to the camp and beats Bornfree to death. Darling narrates this incident in a fragmented manner, mentioning it first in passing and then recounting the kids’ reenactment of Bornfree’s murder (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 146). Although the incident is presumably a representation of Operation *Mavoterapapi*, Bulawayo again eliminates historical detail in favor of a generalizable symbolism of postcolonial hopelessness. Darling remembers, “But then the waiting did not end and the change did not happen. And then those men came for Bornfree. That did it, that made the adults stop talking about change. It was like the voting and partying and everything that had happened had not even happened. And the adults returned quietly to their shacks to see if they could still bend low. They found they could bend; bend better than a branch burdened with rotting guavas” (137). “Bornfree,” the symbol of the liberatory potential of independence and democracy, suffers a violent death at the hands of the generalized perpetrators, “those men.” Thus, this portrayal easily serves to reiterate cynical and stereotypical views of African postcoloniality.

Bulawayo’s account of land invasions is equally vague. She fictionalizes the setting for land activism, which mostly occurred in agricultural areas, by relocating it to the suburbs (113, 125). She also elides the mob violence against white-owned property with the killing of the MDC activist Bornfree: “They are wild, chanting and screaming and yelling and baring teeth and waving weapons in the air, and I’m reminded of the gang that came for Bornfree; that is how they did” (115). The conflation of these disparate campaigns renders these different incidents of violence equal within a generalized postcolonial arbitrariness. Bulawayo suggests that the same indiscriminate mob—“the drivers of the bulldozers” and “those men”—is responsible for

evicting black township residents as well as rich white suburbanites, destroying property and eliminating political opposition through terrorism and extrajudicial killings. She characterizes this mob as male and, here, black. Unfortunately, many American readers who “know this is Zimbabwe” will readily buy into an interpretation of postcolonial African history as an indecipherable maze of conflict in which local communities destroy each other. Although a reader who has some background in Zimbabwean history can easily find historical references in the text, Bulawayo deploys these historical references primarily to set up the generally deplorable postcolonial conditions that Darling will escape. Thus Bulawayo deploys the irrealist technique of oneiric narration in a way that reflects the general absurdity of living in the periphery, but has the primary function of narrative cohesion.

Transcending Zimbabwe

In this way, Bulawayo’s claim that “We all know this is Zimbabwe” is less compelling than her explanation that she aims to convey a “universal aspect” rather than a “specifically Zimbabwean story” (*DW*). As Bulawayo insists, “It should not be confined to Zimbabwe. I believe you can translate across borders” (Peschel). Because she eliminates the historical and political specificity of Zimbabwe, her “Paradise” represents a stereotypical African postcolony, a quagmire of arbitrary violence, incapacitating poverty, absurd living conditions and political futility. Bulawayo replaces the name “Zimbabwe” and the historical details of Zimbabwean history with generalized references to how “things fell apart” post-independence. Bulawayo’s choice to repeatedly invoke the phrase “things fell apart” or “things falling apart” suggests that she rewrites the destruction of precolonial African nations, as narrated in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, in the context of postcolonial disillusionment (*We Need New Names* 49, 79,

147, 285). This “falling apart” in the absence of names and details becomes a generalized arc for an African failed state from precoloniality to postcoloniality:

There are three homes inside Mother’s and Aunt Fostalina’s heads: home before independence, before I was born, when black people and white people were fighting over the country. Home after independence, when black people won the country. And then the home of things falling apart, which made Aunt Fostalina leave and come here. Home one, home two, and home three. There are four homes inside Mother of Bones’ head: home before the white people came to steal the country, and a king ruled; home when the white people came to steal the country and then there was war; home when black people got our stolen country back after independence; and then the home of now. Home one, home two, home three, home four. When somebody talks about home, you have to listen carefully so you know exactly which one the person is referring to. (193-194)

Bulawayo thus supplants “the Ndebele state,” “Southern Rhodesia,” “Rhodesia,” and “Zimbabwe” with “Home one, home two, home three, home four.” This gesture of historical denial is a powerful indicator of Darling’s loss of nation as locus of identity. It also encourages the takeaway that the “universal aspect” of African history is suffering and fragmentation (*DW*). It eclipses the historical cause and effect of conflict and the interconnectedness of global systems.

The metatextual allusions to “things falling apart”—which refer to the one African work widely read in the US—do suggest a parallel between postcolonial present and (pre)colonial past, but they also suggest the elision of African diversity. Darling’s child’s viewpoint lends urgency and energy to the shantytown sequences, but also lends itself to a fuzzy depiction of events and circumstances. Darling’s individual voice is then disrupted by generalized commentary on groups of unspecified sufferers of postcolonial conflict, as Moji has commented (186). For example, the chapter “How They Left” is an attempt to universalize the experience of national failure and economic exile. The attempt to “transcend Zimbabwe” and develop a “universal aspect” encourages stereotypical understandings of Africa as a place plagued by political violence, primarily exporting refugees (quoted in Harding; *DW*).

Because of the decentering of the nation in Darling's subject formation, some commentators interpret *We Need New Names* as a treatise on the broad inapplicability of national identities in the contemporary world-system. The nation has failed; as Bornfree says, in past times "the country was still a country," but no longer (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 162). Moji reads the passage where Darling and her friends reenact Bornfree's bloody death as "the symbolic death of the nation" (186). She sees the detail where "The flag of our country is bloodied" (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 145) as a "satirical criticism of the nation" (Moji 186-187). The nation is as impermanent as a "Coca-Cola bottle that can smash on the floor and disappoint you" (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 162). In this way the nation itself is a cheap product of globalized capitalism. Further, "When a bottle smashes, you cannot put it back together" (162). Robert Muponde reads this cathartic smashing of the nation optimistically; he describes Darling as a "post-national post-child," the defining figure of the denationalized future. Yet in the second half of the novel, Darling suffers a breakdown because of her inability to reconcile her childhood self with her Americanized young adulthood self. This breakdown is an indicator that the loss of national identity is still to be grieved.

As already explored above, Bulawayo denies nation and language as productive factors in Darling's subject formation. Darling also denies the figure of the father a positive role in her origins. The chapter featuring his return from South Africa and his death from AIDS is called "Shhhh." As she suppresses the names of her nation and language, Darling suppresses the title "Father": "F—when he lifts his head and I see him for the first time. He is just length and bones" (91-92). Bulawayo literally cuts off the word, replacing it with the generalized pronoun "he." The life and potential have seeped out of her father's body, as they have seeped out of Zimbabwe and out of its languages. All that remains are shapes that take up space in a room, on a map, on a

page, the skeleton of a meaning that is now deceased. Darling cannot locate her identity in her father, in her fatherland, or in her mother tongue. Yet, even though Darling will emigrate out of the postcolonial nightmare, her origins will continue to haunt her in the second half of the novel.

In this way, although Bulawayo uses irrealist techniques to represent the absurdities of living in peripheral postcolonial situations, these techniques work in service of her broader project to set up the unhappy immigration narrative in the second half of the novel. She expunges historical and political detail in order to focus on what she calls “story.” Her argument that “naming Zimbabwe” would “kill the story” depends on the assumption that “when you name a thing it arrests people’s imagination” (*DW*). This assumption is in tension with the theory that irrealism as a response to specific manifestations of combined and uneven development leads to innovations in form, aesthetics and narrative. As a contrary example, Vera’s choice to name the specific village of Kezi, in order to locate the story within the campaigns of state-sponsored violence in Matabeleland, did not kill it. Perhaps naming specifics does “arrest” the imagination, but in a productive way that encourages historical investigation alongside reading literature.

Pastiche, Grotesquerie and Transnational Systems

In the Paradise sequences, Bulawayo critiques various world-system institutions of combined and uneven development with the irrealist devices of pastiche and grotesquerie. In their exploration of the white-owned house taken over by the mob, Darling and her friends find an awkward conglomeration of obvious symbols of imperial power alongside symbols of African culture and absurd objects with fragmented significations. These include portraits of Ian Smith and the Queen of England (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 125), a mask (125), and a picture of a “little toddler holding hands with a monkey. They are dressed in identical blue thingies that are

half shirts, half vests, like they are twins” (126). The last, bizarre, object encourages random illogical associations; it could be a reversal of the scientific racism that associated Africans with primates, or a commentary on the exploitation of bodies, either/both animal and human, by whites. Bulawayo deploys the grotesque tropes of urination and genitalia in this scene (115), and reiterates the persistent coupling of eating and defecation.

The kids eat a miscellany of “bread, bananas, yogurt, drinks, chicken, mangoes, rice, apples, carrots, milk and whatever food we find. We eat things we have never seen before, things whose names we don’t even know,” while sitting in the confusion of opened taps, overturned furniture and abandoned “plates and cups and pots and gadgets” in the mob’s aftermath (131). Understandably, after this spectacle of post-apocalyptic consumption, the children search for a place to “defecate,” only to find the bathroom already desecrated with feces: “There is also a terrible reeking smell, and we look at the other end, and there, near the toilet, we see the words *Blak Power* written in brown feces on the large bathroom mirror” (132). This example contains both scatology and a reference to a Pan-African mixing of black nationalisms from different eras and places. Immediately afterwards the kids find the bedroom, where they pantomime sexual intercourse, only to be interrupted by the phone ringing. The conversation that ensues between Darling and the increasingly confused and alarmed son of the evicted white couple illustrates the many layers of disconnection between core and periphery, magnified further by difference in race and age. This intermixing of references and allusions from divergent spheres alongside “low-life naturalism” provides a carnivalesque critique of the bewildering inconsistencies of capitalist modernization.

Bulawayo also critiques global trade and development and foreign direct investment (FDI). Unlike the unspecified perpetrators of mob violence, Bulawayo assigns an identity to

these forces, which manifest most clearly in “Shanghai” at the hands of Chinese industrialists (*We Need New Names* 44). The “made-in-China” shoes Darling’s mother purchases on the South African border “fell apart,” leaving Darling barefoot (28). The Chinese developers are building a “big big mall” full of designer shops instead of much-needed infrastructure, such as “A school? Flats? A clinic?” (48). Bulawayo uses the irrealist technique of oxymoron to express the unevenness of the “development” happening in “Shanghai.” She pairs dehumanizing and polluting industry with agriculture and land: “The Chinese men are all over the place in orange uniforms and yellow helmets; there’s not that many of them but from the way they are running around, you’d think they are a field of corn” (44). She also associates FDI with the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane: “Now there’s this skeleton of a building that looks like it wants to belch in God’s face” (45). In this way Bulawayo depicts the Chinese industrialists as agents of the absurd in the economic systems that develop through maldevelopment.

Like her descriptions of Paradise, Bulawayo describes Shanghai as an incomprehensible miscellany: “It’s like listening to nonsense, to people praying in tongues; it’s Chinese, it’s our languages, it’s English mixed with things, it’s the machine noise. Because the men don’t really understand one another, hands and tools often rise in the air to help the language” (46). The incommensurability of the discrete languages reflects the incommensurabilities of capitalist modernization. The fortune cookies the Chinese industrialists give the children offer pithy and sardonic commentary on the dearth of opportunities in Paradise: ten-year-old pregnant Chipso receives advice that “If I bring forth what is inside me, what I bring forth will save me;” Darling’s cookie proclaims, “Your future will be happy and productive” (48). In response to this mockery, “We are booing and yelling when we walk out of Shanghai. If it weren’t for the noisy machines, the Chinese would hear us telling them to leave our country and go and build

wherever they come from, that we don't need their kaka mall, that they are not even our friends" (49).

Although Bulawayo's critique of FDI as manifest in Chinese development in Africa is clear, she depends upon racial stereotypes to erect that critique. The foreman of the Chinese construction project is obese and characterized primarily by angry "ching-chonging" and his proclivity for the entertainment provided by local prostitutes (47). Here Bulawayo could be referencing the use of the term "zhing zhong" as a critique of Zimbabwe's post-2000 "Look East Policy" in Zimbabwean street talk (Mangena 197). But because Bulawayo's claim that "We all know this is Zimbabwe" does not hold up under scrutiny, that reference may be lost on most of her readers. The negative portrayal of Chinese people in the chapter "Shanghai" is problematic. Bulawayo's tendency to generalize places such as the "African postcolony" and peoples such as the Chinese limits the potency of her writing and reveals a problem inherent to the objective of universality. In seeking the "universal aspect" of Darling's experiences (*DW*), Bulawayo denies diversity. This problem is integral to the impulse to universalize: such a project risks misrepresenting various groups when it glosses over difference.

Bulawayo also critiques international charity as imbricated in combined and uneven development. Darling's grandmother asks if "they"—the government leaders planning to switch to the USD—think she can "defecate" American money (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 27). Bulawayo further critiques the dependency of the local economy on funding and aid from the capitalist core in her description of Bastard's miscellaneous attire. He "wears black tracksuit bottoms and a faded orange T-shirt that says Cornell. Now he takes the top off, ties it over his head, and I don't know if it makes him look ugly or pretty, if he really looks like a man or a woman" (14). People at the peripheries end up with random leftovers that are absurd rather than

useful. A T-shirt from Cornell on a hungry African boy in an IDP camp juxtaposes the core and peripheral contexts to highlight the unevenness of development. This jarring inconsistency also combines unexpected elements, resulting in Darling's confusion. Bulawayo implies that the charity system that delivered this shirt to Paradise is complicit with combined and uneven development.

Bulawayo is also critical of transnational NGOs, which reiterate rather than alter the dominance of core power over peripheral spaces. To the children, the position of power the NGO people hold over the adults is clear; they know they can avoid their parents' discipline because "the NGO people are here and while they are, our parents do not count;" the dynamic is "like maybe the NGO are their parents" (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 56, 59). The community in Paradise waits in anticipation for the arrival of the NGO lorry that delivers food aid and treats for the children. The dependence of the Paradise residents on this charity results in their subjection to the NGO people and their frequent disappointment. The NGO people are sometimes late, unpredictably skipping their regular monthly delivery (53). As shown above, these systems of aid rarely deliver what the community needs: "Each one of us gets a toy gun, some sweets, and something to wear; I get a T-shirt with the word *Google* at the front, plus a red dress that is tight at the armpits" (57); the kids would rather have "shoes, All Stars, balls, cell phones, cake, underwear, drinks, biscuits, U.S. dollars" (58). The adults "get small packets of beans and sugar and mealie-meal but you can see from their faces that they are not satisfied. They look at the tiny packages like they don't want them, like they are embarrassed and disappointed by them, but in the end they turn and head back to the shacks with the things" (57). In a final reference to the further imbrication of NGO charity in the world-system dynamics that enable core powers to

supply weapons for internecine conflicts on the peripheries, Bulawayo writes that the kids “run to kill each other with our brand new guns from America” (59).

In Darling’s experience interactions with transnational institutions perform disconnection rather than connection. She explains that “We are careful not to touch the NGO people, though, because we can see that even though they are giving us things, they do not want to touch us or for us to touch them” (*We Need New Names* 56). Representatives of both the NGOs and the international press “just like taking pictures, these NGO people, like maybe we are their real friends and relatives and they will look at the pictures later and point us out by name to other friends and relatives once they get back to their homes. They don’t care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn’t do it, they just take the pictures anyway, take and take” (54). A BBC reporter chronicling the mob violence that killed Bornfree “clicks and clicks away at his camera like he is possessed” (137-138). His valuing of the marketability of a news story over real human suffering is suggested when he asks, “What kind of game were you just playing?” to which Bastard replies, “Can’t you see this is for real?” (146).

Bulawayo portrays fragmentation of communication and compassion in these transactions where the power differential enables the NGOs and reporters to “take and take” from the community (54). This critique is straightforward and easily decodable. However, the fragmentation Bulawayo depicts fragments the critique itself, so that the miscellany of world-system problems she targets is overwhelming. She directs blame towards a pastiche of national and transnational culprits. “Country-game” parodies the hierarchization of countries within the world-system: the “country-countries” include “the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them,” the countries where “at least life is better than here” include “Dubai and South Africa and

Botswana and Tanzania and them,” and the “rags of countries” include Congo, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Haiti, Sri Lanka and “this one we live in—who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart?” (51). But Bulawayo diffuses the attribution for this hierarchization by offering varying responsible parties with no sense of systemic structure.

Rather, the object of critique is a pastiche of various self-interested institutions. Bulawayo critiques international governmental institutions (IGOs), transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational media institutions, and global trade systems. The result is “bewilderment” instead of empowerment, in the case of Vera, and incisive critique, in the case of Marechera (*Great Zimbabwe Guide*). The “national anthem” is compared to “a Lady Gaga” in this pastiche of problems and culpable parties (64). The pastiche is perhaps best represented by the children’s intermingling of the American picture-taking lingo with the lingo of the MDC: “We smile and we strike poses and we look pretty and we shout, Change! Cheese! Change!” (64). Such confusion about the signified reinforces a generalized hopelessness about the terrible circumstances in a generalized African postcolony. This fragmentation is both a function of and a contradiction to Bulawayo’s attempt to achieve universality.

The Figure of the Unhappy Immigrant

The free-floating fragmentation of the first half of the novel gives way to the grounded and located Americanness of the second half of the novel. The irrealist techniques of dream, pastiche and grotesquerie that contribute to this fragmentation also contribute to the overall narrative coherence of the novel. Bulawayo portrays Darling’s postcolonial childhood in this dislocated and diffuse style in order to prefigure her identity crisis and breakdown as an unhappy immigrant. *We Need New Names*, despite the proclamation of its title, reiterates a story at the

heart of American national identity through history: the story of one of America's names—the “nation of immigrants.” The narrative of the “nation of immigrants” does not assume those immigrants to be happy; in fact a part of that narrative is the idea that first-generation immigrants struggle to survive and second-generation immigrants “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” As the reviewer Bisell comments, Darling's voice is “the freshest yet to spring from the fertile imaginations of talented young writers [...] who explore the African diaspora in *America*” (emphasis added). Bulawayo has tapped into a specifically *American* story.

Whereas Bulawayo avoided historical markers in the portrayal of Darling's home country, she portrays them more specifically in the American sequences. For example, “On TV that pretty man Obama who has been saying Yes We Can, America, Yes We Can, is becoming president. He does not look old like our own president; he looks maybe like our president's child” (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 158). Bulawayo readily provides the name of the American president, the name of the nation, and the historically accurate slogan, in contrast to the still nameless “our president.” These historical details also immediately provide a temporal orientation (2009) that should be clear to a readership of primarily Americans. As a reiteration of a particularly American nationalist narrative, this novel does not achieve the universality Bulawayo suggests when she hopes the novel can be equally Zimbabwean, Mexican, Indian, and British (Harding). Although Bulawayo critiques the exclusionary policies and practices of American citizenship, this critique is itself a central narrative of American national identity. Despite the limitations to American hospitality, Bulawayo reiterates the overall view that America is a space of hope, where there are no “ghosts of apartheid” and where people from all corners of the world can make a “home” (“Dear Reader”). Bulawayo's purpose is to contribute to the stream of American literature that raises awareness about the continued struggles of new

immigrants, and reminds readers that American national identity is transnational at its very foundation. She hopes that Darling “speaks to you,” “dear reader,” in the hopes of furthering education about difference towards the American ideal of happy diversity (“Dear Reader”). Although Bulawayo claims “to marry Zimbabwe with America” in *We Need New Names*—a task she acknowledges to be “difficult”—the marriage is one-sided at best (“Dear Reader”). The novel reinscribes a classic form of American exceptionalism.

Bulawayo prefigures Darling’s identity crisis and mental instability in the narrative disjunctures in the three chapters in the middle of the novel. In the second half of the novel, Bulawayo uses irrealist techniques to depict Darling’s breakdown as an unhappy immigrant. These include devices similar to those in the first half, oneiric narrative as well as grotesque interpretations of nourishment (here, consumerism) and sexual reproduction (here, infidelity and pornography). Bulawayo also deploys non-linear narrative techniques such as intensive flashbacks, formal parallelisms and a doppelganger figure. While Darling’s experience of disillusionment and psychosis due to the incommensurabilities of moving from a peripheral to a core space critiques the broader system of combined and uneven development, that critique is subsumed by Bulawayo’s portrayal of these inconsistencies as the outcomes of particularly American brands of consumerism, complacency and ignorance, as well as her insistence upon American solutions to the problems caused by the capitalist world-system. Irrealist elements indicate identity crisis caused by the particularly American irreconcilabilities of unhappy migration. Despite the apparent psychosis of the central character, her perspective continues to be believable and to ground the narrative; the prose itself remains less challenging than either Marechera’s or Vera’s. Instead of Marechera’s labyrinthine narrative that becomes more and

more divorced from time and place in *Black Sunlight* and Vera's insistence on inflecting her prose with the divine, Bulawayo's forays beyond the real do not permeate her narrative structure.

We Need New Names portrays problems complicating happy immigration, including documentation issues and deportation concerns, labor exploitation, social alienation and the clash between traditional/home country and the modern/host country. Bulawayo communicates the national, racial, social and cultural losses associated with unhappy immigration, host country hostility and the self-alienation that comes from unbelonging. Instead of portraying these problems as world-systemic, Bulawayo represents them as contradictory American structures of feeling that cause problems in people's social and psychological functioning. These include the contradiction between the ideal of America as the "nation of immigrants" and immigration policies that limit immigrants' movements; the conflict between American consumerism and fetishization of productivity; and the tension between the American value of diversity and the failure of community in practice. The irreconcilability of these specific American ideals and practices leads to various pathologies in various characters, including eating disorders and alcoholism. The further irreconcilability between the American identity in which these conflicts struggle and Darling's childhood identity in Paradise leads to her breakdown. In this way her identity crisis is a particularly American psychosis that provides opportunity for critiquing American society and culture rather than broader world-system dynamics.

Bulawayo reflects on the anxiety and loss caused by documentation and deportation concerns in the character of Uncle Kojo. While these concerns are clearly problems for immigrants living in other countries, most statistics show that the issue is proportionately much larger in the United States, where undocumented immigrants make up approximately 3.5% of the population (see Zong and Batalova; Schain). For comparison, the country with the second

highest proportion of undocumented immigrants, the UK, reports that undocumented immigrants make up approximately 1.4% of the population (see Eurostat; Schain). While immigration in general is a controversial issue in the UK and EU, the controversy over “illegal” immigrants is especially polemical in the US. Uncle Kojo suffers a panic attack on the way to a wedding when his son TK, in a cruel trick, pretends a police officer is pulling him over. In a stereotypical portrayal of marriage for the purposes of citizenship, when they arrive at the wedding the African groom is marrying an obese American woman. Darling overhears a woman in the bathroom comment, “But the things people will do for these *papers*, my sister, I tell you” (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 175).

Darling discovers that she cannot visit her home country because of her documentation status; she has, unbeknownst to herself, overstayed a visitor’s visa (191). Bastard foresees this problem before Darling’s departure: “What if you get there and find it’s a kaka place and get stuck and can’t come back? Me, I’m going to Jo’burg, that way when things get bad, I can just get on the road and roll without talking to anybody; you have to be able to return from wherever you go” (16). This is precisely the problem Darling faces. She cannot fully belong in the US because she is undocumented; she cannot return home even though she might agree with Bastard that the US is a “kaka place.” As she says, “This here is not my country; I don’t know whose it is” (149). She later comments, “In America, roads are like the devil’s hands, like God’s love, reaching all over, just the sad thing is, they won’t really take me home” (193). In the hyperbolic juxtaposition of “God’s love” and “the devil’s hands,” this passage captures the contradictory experience of living in a place with impressively functioning infrastructure that still fails Darling’s needs.

Bulawayo highlights several inconsistencies inherent to the American ideal of prosperity. She emphasizes the contradiction between American consumerism and the fetishization of productivity. Bulawayo figures American overconsumption grotesquely, in what Darling calls “American fatness,” which “takes it to a whole ‘nother level: the body is turned into something else—the neck becomes a thigh, the stomach becomes an anthill, an arm a thing, a buttock a I don’t even know what” (173). Fostalina’s family enjoys the luxuries of laptop computers, cell phones and video games (155). Bulawayo juxtaposes this access to consumer goods with the preoccupation with productivity and efficiency. Immigrant families shoulder a disproportionate share of this expectation. The indicators are stereotypical; Aunt Fostalina holds two jobs, one of which is in the proverbial nursing home. As Bastard warned presciently before Darling’s departure, “Well, go, go to that America and work in nursing homes. That’s what your Aunt Fostalina is doing as we speak. Right now she is busy cleaning kaka off some wrinkled old man who can’t do anything for himself, you think we’ve never heard the stories?” (17). Although life for Darling’s mother improves in this period because Fostalina sends her remittances, Bulawayo does not directly connect this responsibility to Fostalina’s double-time labor. Neither Bulawayo nor Bastard connects the two in the larger global system that would define remittances as another form of the dependency of the periphery on the core. TK joins the army, a choice possibly dictated by a lack of economic opportunities (although Bulawayo does not directly state this). Aunt Fostalina tells the teenage Darling she must work, so she gets a job at a market and also cleaning houses.

Thus Bulawayo depicts the second contradiction: abundance is inequitable, and prosperity is less certain and widespread than Darling believed: “This place doesn’t look like my America” (152). She had believed that “I just know, because of this feeling in my bones, that the

car is waiting for me in America, so I yell, My Lamborghini, Lamborghini, Lamborghini Reventón!” (113). Upon realizing that her Lamborghini is far out of her reach, she thinks, “The thing is, I don’t want to say with my own mouth that if the car costs that much then it means I’ll never own it, and if I can’t own it, does that mean I’m poor, and if so, what is America for, then?” (227). Darling’s friends and family in Paradise shared the belief that “everything in America was better” (191). To prevent them from experiencing her same disappointment, Darling pretends she lives in this mythical America of wealth and equal opportunity when she talks to her Zimbabwean friends and family; she omits details such as poor people on the streets, gun violence and child abuse. She says, “I left out these things because they embarrassed me, because they made America not feel like My America, the one I had always dreamed about back in Paradise” (190).

Her disillusionment leads to apathy and depression; despite the opportunities offered by public education, Darling has “zero passion” for a career in medicine or law (277). The incommensurability of the impulse for consumption and leisure and the impulse for productivity and industry manifests in particularly American pathologies of self-flagellation. Bulawayo is especially interested in how women internalize the struggle between decadence and diligence. This interest surfaces in her treatment of eating disorders and obsessive exercise. Aunt Fostalina pours over Victoria’s Secret magazines and spends hours on the treadmill or in front of the television doing aerobics (150). She repeatedly asks Darling for validation that she is thin. The daughter of a man who employs Darling to houseclean is both bulimic and suicidal (270).

The final contradiction of American prosperity is unique to the immigrant experience. Darling lashes out in anger at the ridiculous contrast between an American college student at

Cornell purposefully starving herself and the malnourishment Darling, and Bastard in his out-of-place Cornell T-shirt, experienced in Paradise. She launches into a silent diatribe:

You have a fridge bloated with food so no matter how much you starve yourself, you'll never know real, true hunger. Look around you, and you have all these riches that you don't even need; upstairs, your bed is fit for a king; you go to Cornell, where you can be anything you want; you don't even have to clean up after yourself because I'm doing it for you, right now; you have a dog whose wardrobe I couldn't afford; and, what's more, you're here, living in your own country of birth, so just what exactly is your real problem? (270).

While Darling does not have an eating disorder, she is depressive and increasingly unstable, and Bulawayo indicates that she is absorbing these American problems. While on the phone with her childhood friends in Paradise, Darling notices a pizza left casually on the counter and suddenly realizes that she has adopted the American insensitivity to privilege and learned to take the overabundance of food for granted (210). She cannot reconcile this privilege with her past or with the present condition of her friends. This incommensurability of her US and Paradise experiences defines her identity crisis.

Bulawayo also deals with the inconsistency between the American narrative of the "nation of immigrants" living in happy diversity and the failure of community. Darling's group of teenage girlfriends could represent the possibility for happy diversity: Kristal is African-American and Marina is a Nigerian immigrant. However, their relationship is frequently competitive, and fraught rather than strengthened by cultural and class differences. Darling criticizes Kristal's use of Ebonics as an inability to "speak proper English" (223-224); Kristal retorts that both Darling and Marina are "trynna sound like stupid white folk" (224). This particular debate reflects the conflict between African immigrants and African American communities that sociologists writing on "new African diaspora" have identified (Nzegwu and Okpewho). Kristal's teenage pregnancy, an unapologetic stereotype of young African-American

women, only reinforces this division. In the end Darling loses touch with Kristal because of the baby and Marina because she ends up at a private high school. Darling complains that Marina “thinks she is the princess of Africa just because her grandfather was a chief or something over there” (Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* 201). Bulawayo provides another example of the failure of diverse community in the marriage between Fostalina and Kojo. Uncle Kojo is Ghanaian, and thus completely excluded from Fostalina’s social gatherings: “he sits there looking lost, like he just illegally entered a strange country in his own house” (163). Eventually Aunt Fostalina has an extramarital affair; Darling compares the failing marriage to “just living together, like neighboring countries” (283). In the failure of both friendships and familial relationships, Darling becomes socially alienated. She also adopts American brands of racism that further foreclose on the possibility of community. Darling and her friends “keep staring” at a woman in a hijab “like we are maybe at the zoo” because “of her dress and the things on TV” (234).

Darling comes into contact with American racist attitudes towards Africans in the bathroom at the wedding. In a neat parallel to the NGO people who “take and take” pictures of hungry children in Paradise, the white woman Darling meets expresses a comprehensive indifference to the geography and peoples of Africa. She associates Darling, as an African, with generalized African suffering, represented by “this little girl” on CNN who made her cry: “It just broke my heart, you know” (178). Then the woman “solves” the problem of this little girl who is suffering in some unnamed way by talking about charity: she mentions a friend in the Peace Corps who is “doing great things for Africa, just great” and her own donations to an orphanage in South Africa “for those poor African children” (178). Darling describes, “her face is looking much, much better, like the pain from earlier is going away. [...] Then she puts her hand over her heart and closes her eyes briefly, like maybe she’s listening to the throb of her kindness”

(178). To drive the point home, Darling adds, “Then I’m seeing myself in the woman’s face, back there when we were in Paradise when the NGO people were taking our pictures” (178-179). This scene is the crux of Bulawayo’s critique. She suggests that white Americans like this woman are responsible for the system that makes people on the peripheries, such as IDP camps in Zimbabwe, dependent on their charity. In this way, Bulawayo locates her critique in the US instead of developing a broader critique of combined and uneven development. Additionally, this woman’s stereotypical portrayal of a generalized Africa has uncomfortable parallels with Bulawayo’s description of the IDP camp in the beginning of the novel.

In her most material depiction of the fragmentation of community, Bulawayo deploys the irrealist pairing of sex with violence and destruction. She portrays an activity that is supposed to represent the culmination of physical and emotional intimacy as brutal and exploitative. Bulawayo intersperses Darling’s text conversation with Marina about their recent sexual experiences with an accident in which Darling bruises her pelvic bone, as well as Darling’s memories of watching violent pornographic films with her girlfriends when they were younger. She recalls a sexual dance she observed, called “daggering”: “I thought it strange and wrong, but after a while I found myself clapping because that’s what everyone was doing” (281). That same evening, Darling came home repulsed enough by her experience of kissing a boy that she brushed her teeth compulsively. In this way Bulawayo images the gender divisions that separate individuals from each other.

These particularly American inconsistencies manifest in psychological disorders in several characters. Uncle Kojo falls into despair and alcoholism after his son TK is deployed in Afghanistan. He regularly embarks on aimless wandering drives, searching for the impossible: the return of his son, his own return to his fatherland of Ghana, a happier immigration story.

Tshaka Zulu is an inpatient at Shadybrook, a home for the mentally ill (180). He eventually suffers a nervous breakdown, and is killed by police during his a reenactment of an Anglo-Zulu battle. Bulawayo conveys Darling's breakdown using irrealist devices of non-linearity, including increasingly severe flashbacks, paradoxes of modern and traditional, formal parallelisms and a doppelganger. These devices all reflect the various incommensurabilities of Darling's American life.

Bulawayo's careful formal design is evident in her parallel structure, in which she reworks episodes from the first half of the novel in the second half. For example, Darling compares the cemetery in Kalamazoo, which is beautified to the point where she "didn't even know it was a place of the dead; I thought it was a museum of something, another interesting place where interesting things happened" (193), to Heavenway in Paradise, which was "nothing but a mound of red earth" (193). This smooth structure provides a contrast with Darling's increasingly fragmented and unstable state. It also encourages comparison between the experience of living in postcolonial Africa and the experience of living in the US in order to accentuate the inconsistencies between the two. Bulawayo parallels "Hitting Budapest," the first chapter of the novel, in "Hitting Crossroads." Both chapters chronicle crime: in "Hitting Budapest" Darling and her childhood friends steal guavas off the trees in the rich suburb; in "Hitting Crossroads" Darling and her teenage friends steal Kristal's mother's car and drive without a license to the mall. This parallel contradicts child Darling's comment when they "hit Budapest" that once she gets to America she will be "doing better things than stealing" (12). Bulawayo's irony is that the joyride to the American mall seems just as joyless as the desperate satiation of stealing guavas. These scenes also emphasize the irreconcilability between the perception of happy immigration and the reality of unhappy immigration. Although Darling

stakes claims on both her childhood home (“my Paradise”) (188) and her host country (“my America” and “my country”) (188, 17, 51), she cannot find belonging in either place or reconcile these two sides of her personal history (190).

Towards the end of the novel, Bulawayo illustrates Darling’s identity crisis in intense flashbacks that contribute to her unpredictable behavior. She sings the Vasco da Gama rhyme from primary school in Paradise at the top of her voice “until Marina is yelling my name and Kristal has turned off the radio and is saying, The fuck? You need to calm down, damn” (222). She sees her childhood dream car, and “Maybe I start freaking out, I don’t know, but Marina is pulling me away and asking what’s wrong with me” (226). In the chapter called “Writing on the Wall,” Darling sinks into psychosis. She draws penises and writes all over her bedroom wall in red marker, then attempts to cover the stain with a mask that is half white and half black with all kinds of “crazy designs” (125). The mask clearly denotes identity crisis and suggests racial division. The “writing on the wall” implies that this kind of identity crisis is widespread, that the American story is foundationally a story of unhappy immigration.

In the final chapter of the novel Darling makes a last effort at reconciling her fractured selves. She calls home and ends up talking to Chipo, her childhood friend. Chipo has named her daughter, the result of her rape, after Darling (287). The presence of this doppelganger makes Darling uneasy; she is the physical manifestation of Darling’s other, irreconcilable self. Bulawayo makes it clear that Darling’s last effort has failed when Chipo tells Darling that she can no longer lay claim to her home country: “You left it, Darling, my dear, you left the house burning and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn’t even suit you, that this is your country?” (287-288). Yet Darling does not fully belong in the US either; after all, she wasn’t born with an American accent, and it doesn’t even

“suit” her. Thus, in her childhood friend Stina’s words, “leaving your country is like dying” (162).

Transcending Zimbabwe, Settling in America

Despite Darling’s unbelonging as a denationalized first-generation immigrant, Bulawayo still attaches hope to American democracy. She describes, at Obama’s 2009 Inauguration, “crowds and crowds of white people and black people and brown people, just people, and they are happy and cheering and clapping. [...] That is democracy, we can’t even say that word back home” (158). The novel also touts the opportunities offered by American education (160). Thus, although Darling cannot settle in or adapt to America, the novel itself does. In *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo attempts to “transcend Zimbabwe” and the suffering Darling undergoes as a child in a generalized postcolonial failed state. She gestures towards a transnational transcendence in trying to marry Zimbabwe and America in a migration narrative. She suggests, briefly, that a universalized refugee community could be represented textually by a collective voice. However, Darling’s first-person narrative of unhappy immigration leaves the final impression.

Bulawayo explains, “Darling, the narrator and main protagonist in Zimbabwe, does not have a strong connection with me. My childhood was very normal and beautiful. So it is when she crosses the border to the US that our stories started to sort of intersect. I actually allowed her to borrow from mine, because I kind of know what it is like to be an outsider. To be an immigrant, to struggle with fitting in, find my way in a new space” (Peschel). The story of struggle and suffering to achieve prosperity and fulfillment for future generations of diverse Americans is central to American nationalism and exceptionalism. In this way the text occupies a

contradictory position that suppresses Zimbabwean national concerns and installs American national concerns in their place. In the end, Bulawayo's clearest criticism is of American racism, ignorance and complacency. *We Need New Names* attempts to call Americans on their "expensive nonsense" (270). She suggests that the "big baboon" of the world should improve the education of its citizens (51). That is, the focus seems to be on American solutions to the global problems of combined and uneven development. The locus of power that this novel hails, perhaps despite itself, is the core power of American defense, domination of IGOs, and exportation of culture and media. As Deckard et al point out, "It is only those citizens inhabiting the privileged spaces of dominant nation-states in the contemporary world-system who tend to speak confidently of their ability and desire to transcend nations" (Deckard et al 42). Bulawayo draws a connection between herself and Vera (without attribution) in her statement that she likes to "write from the bone" (Peschel). This phrase could be interpreted in many ways. This chapter has attempted to show that Bulawayo does not "write from the bone" in the way that Vera used irrealism to critique the broad system of combined and uneven development, or to do the bloody work of revising national history and consciousness.

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