

Sex in the Post-Colonial City: Desire, Kinship, and Freedom in Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name*

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Abstract

In *Without a Name* Vera posits her pleasure-seeking heroine, Mazvita, as a 'desiring subject' whose strivings reveal the limitations, especially for women, of both the demands of kinship and the expectations of sovereign subjectivity. By showing how her protagonist attempts to negotiate a space of freedom and pleasure that escapes this binary I argue that Vera ultimately advocates the replacement of over-determined concepts of freedom within colonialist and nationalist frameworks, with a more free-ranging and flexible notion of pleasure and desire. Sex scenes in the novel are an important part of Mazvita's quest. Pleasurable sex scenes between Mazvita and her lover Nyenyedzi in the Zimbabwean rural landscape act as powerful moments of transformation in which the land is recoded as a masculine object of female desire. But Mazvita does not share Nyenyedzi's untroubled relationship with the land because of her experience of being raped by a Zimbabwean freedom fighter in this same space. What is particularly traumatic about the rape, I argue, is its status as a perverse kinship claim. I read Mazvita's move to Harare as an attempt to flee both the relatively benign kinship claim invoked by Nyenyedzi in his idealization of the land, and the far more traumatic kinship claim made by the rapist.

While Mazvita rejects such kinship claims as fantasies in which custom, inheritance, and obligation bind people together and to the land, she pursues diametrically opposed fantasies of her own in Harare – fantasies of individualism, urban anonymity and upward mobility. She is propelled by a notion of herself as a sovereign subject with the power to determine the terms of her existence: her fate reveals the violent limitation of this agency. Mazvita ambiguously acts out her rape experience in her sexual relationship with her new lover, Joel, while patriarchal kinship claims return in the form of her baby, whose

uncertain status as alive or dead in the narrative makes it an uncanny object for the reader up until the narrator's description of Mazvita's gruesome yet tenderly described act of infanticide. The description ascribes to this moment the quality of a ritual or ceremony of liberation and redemption. In performing this ritual Vera's protagonist ultimately makes a dramatic ethical claim upon the social imaginary of her time and place, exposing the violence that underpins it. By framing the narrative via the story of Mazvita's redemptive journey towards and arrival in her mother's village of Mubaira, where the rape took place, Vera attempts to forge an uneasy, not entirely satisfying compromise between the demands of land, kinship, and freedom. The moment of redemption is not without ambivalence, reflected in Mazvita's desire first for anonymity, then the possibility of being re-named by the land itself.

So ... it is a long journey. To arrive – where? At that fine space where you are completely free of that very domination, in your act and in what you say. It takes a long time for a woman to see that; that that is a place that she could aim towards and in fact reach. And when you've reached it, to find a most unexpected pleasure.

*Yvonne Vera*¹

Introduction: the stories of “unknown women”

Since her untimely death at the age of forty on April 7, 2005, Yvonne Vera's reputation as a groundbreaking African feminist writer has been increasingly secure. Vera's major published works include a short story collection, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992), and five novels, *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996), *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002). The author's work is characterized by her unflinching confrontation with taboo topics. She has written about incest, abortion, rape, infanticide, civil war, and the violence of Zimbabwe's independence and post-war eras. Just as striking as these sometimes gruesome themes, though, are Vera's female protagonists, who strive unrelentingly not merely for survival in their hostile worlds, but for

¹ From “‘The Place of the Woman is the Place of the Imagination’: Yvonne Vera Interviewed by Ranka Primorac,” p. 160.

pleasure and autonomy. With the important exception of her first novel *Nehanda*, about the female spirit medium of that name who helped lead Zimbabwe's first *chimurenga*, or uprising against British colonialism in the nineteenth century, Vera writes what she calls "the biographies of unknown women." Because of her interest in "our national history," that is, the history of her country Zimbabwe, she always quite explicitly sets her novels in a specific historical and geographical context (Bryce 2003, 223). Mazvita, the protagonist of Vera's second novel, *Without a Name*², arguably exemplifies the prototypical features of the "unknown women" who populate Vera's later novels and who include Phephelaphi of *Butterfly Burning* and the sensual and enigmatic Thenjiwe of *The Stone Virgins*. In 1977, the year in which *Without a Name* is set, the guerilla war of the second *chimurenga* had escalated to its most violent peak. It is against this background that Mazvita's quest for freedom is played out, especially via her unabashed pursuit of pleasure.

Freedom and the "Desiring Subject"

Vera's representation of Mazvita's experiences of sexual desire and pleasure is fundamental to her re-interpretation of freedom in the novel. By "desire" here I refer not only to sexual desire, but, as Drucilla Cornell writes, "what we broadly conceive as our ability to chart out a life that is our own" (Cornell 2003, 145). In her article "Autonomy Re-Imagined," Cornell uses psychoanalytic insights to retrieve this "desiring subject" from the Kantian sovereign subject, in order to make a claim for a non-prescriptive feminist ethics of desire, dignity and autonomy. Cornell differentiates the psychoanalytic notion of "individuation" from rationalist individualism by pointing to the way psychoanalysis acknowledges the "inherently social" nature of desire. "All of us," she writes, "are transversed by unconscious entanglements with our primary others" (Cornell 2003, 145). Thus we are born as individuals with desires, but they are shaped by these entanglements. The "desiring subject" implies not mastery or extreme individualism but rather anticipation via our "radical imagination," of possibilities of freedom to come, along with the acceptance of our intersubjective reliance upon others. By contrast, the binary between kinship

² For easy reference, the following abbreviation for citations is used: WN

demands and individualist strivings – what Beth Povinelli calls in her book *The Empire of Love* “genealogical” and “autological” fantasies respectively demands the exclusion of one for the other to function. In that fantasy, a subject is either entirely self-made and self-elaborating, or irretrievably constrained by custom and tradition.³ As desiring subjects, Vera’s protagonists are constantly seeking and probing possible points of exit from this binary. In the epigraph above, taken from an interview with Ranka Primorac, Vera herself explicitly links political autonomy with pleasure, emphasizing that the precondition of the “most unexpected pleasure” open to women, is to move into “that fine space where you are completely free of that very domination, in your act and in what you say,” (Primorac 2004, 160). That is, when both physical movement (“your act”) and verbal expression (“what you say”) are liberated. Vera’s tone is optimistic here, implying that this “fine place” is, in fact, reachable. But Vera’s novels are more often tragic stories of women whose attempts to reach this place meet violent, and sometimes fatal, ends.⁴ By positioning her protagonists, like Mazvita, as “desiring subjects” in the face of dramatic violence, Vera nonetheless helps us to imagine the “fine place” of freedom towards which her protagonists themselves strive. It is not surprising that Vera deals with the questions of freedom, desire, and kinship via dramatic recordings of rural and urban experience. The question of land – who has access to and ownership over it – remains fundamental to the history and politics of Zimbabwe, especially since the massive topological transformations of the colonial era. The vast inequality between the massive land holdings of white settlers on the one hand, and the Reserves and miniscule land purchase areas to which black Africans were limited on the other, fueled the discontent that led to the independence struggle during which *Without a Name* is set. In the first half of *Without a Name*, Vera stages two kinds of kinship demands, via scenes of consensual and nonconsensual heterosexual sex which take place in this landscape. One is the more benign claim of

³ For more on these terms see Beth Povinelli’s ground breaking work on discourses of sexuality and freedom, especially in her book *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

⁴ In this her work resembles that of her fellow Zimbabwean writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga, who, in *Nervous Conditions* leaves the fate of Nyasha, the rebellious cousin of the protagonist Tambu, ambiguous and in doubt.

Nyenyedzi, who tries to convince Mazvita to stay in the countryside with him. The other is the perverse, incestuous claim of the freedom fighter who rapes her in the same landscape.

Pleasure and Horror in the Rural Landscape

The moments when Vera depicts the rural landscape most positively as a space of pleasure and renewal, are the scenes of consensual sex between Mazvita and Nyenyedzi. If the landscape is animated at all in these scenes, it is not by nationalist fervor but by an overwhelming erotic charge. Even more revolutionary, in the context of African literature, is the nature of Vera's eroticization of the landscape – she genders the landscape as male, under a female desiring gaze. Early in the novel, Mazvita is mesmerized by the sight and texture of some mushrooms she finds in the woods:

“The mushrooms stood meek beneath the decaying log that was partly buried in the ground, and she had bent forward and touched them fearfully, touched their floating beauty, for they seemed ready to break, seemed waiting to break if they were touched” (WN 10).

In this moment of first encounter, Vera describes how Mazvita,

“[wanted] to pull at the mushrooms, so she reached her thumb and forefinger ever so delicately, and held the soft cushiony head, held it so gently, feeling already the grooved underneath so tender and the surface above so smooth that her finger slid over the head past the grooves and met a thin polished stem, soft, then she held that stem tight but gentle, pulled at it tight but gentle. The ground was soft and yielding” (WN 11).

Here, in a striking reversal of the commonplace metaphorical representation of the African and Zimbabwean landscape as feminine, Vera recodes the landscape as a masculine erotic object, with the mushroom taking on the role of a delicate phallus. When figured as a mushroom, the male phallus is a fragile object in need of the protection of Mazvita's hands. Nyenyedzi is depicted as such a fragile object. In a later sex scene between Mazvita and Nyenyedzi, Vera celebrates their dyadic embrace, via the conferral of an unexpected kind of eroticism onto the natural world:

“The sky overwhelmed her with a lithe blue hanging over her eyebrows, so near her breath embraced it. The blue pulled her up into the sky, and she called softly to tell him about a translucent shiver that tumbled from the sky [...] but he smoothed her stomach in tender fond waves and she forgot about the blue of the sky about his knee about . . . She was breathless with an ancient longing. He smoothed her back with a kind tongue, blue and large like the sky. She felt a brilliant cascading joy. A calm modest thrill sent an even pressure to her palm then circled her bent wrists, resting in the wet spaces between her fingers. She felt the ground, exquisite, pressed at the back of her feet. [...] Their eyes met in a silence rich with imaginings, with a brave ecstasy. [...] There was no beginning or ending to her happiness, only a continuous whirl of blue cloud. [...] They lay still in a triumphant arch, under the spread hem of the horizon, intertwined” (WN 19-20).

Vera articulates Mazvita as a desiring subject, Nyenyedzi as a nurturing Other, and the Zimbabwean landscape as one which is open to sensuality and pleasure. Pleasure here involves both body parts (tongues, palms, wrists, eyes) and spaces (sky, clouds, earth, horizons). The named body parts are strikingly non-gender specific, reflecting a kind of democratization of the body’s ability to experience erotic pleasure, troubling the Freudian focus on the genital. Along with the recoding of the phallus as fragile in the previous scene, these representations challenge the bodily performance of strict gender roles which, as we will see, are so important in the scene in which Mazvita is raped. Vera uses imagery from nature, the “blue and large” tongue of Nyenyedzi, the “exquisite” pressure of the land against Mazvita’s feet, to unite the images of the bodies of her lovers with those of the surrounding landscape, so that their final “triumphant arch” echoes the arc of the sky itself. Interestingly, this pleasure is also presented as a non-linguistic one – Mazvita’s desire to “tell” Nyenyedzi about her pleasure is overwhelmed by that pleasure itself, its “brilliant cascading joy,” which in the next moment has become a “calm modest thrill,” suggesting a multifarious, prismatic kind of pleasure, which moves from psyche, to body, and back, from “shiver[s]” to “waves,” to silence. In the course of their pleasure, Vera’s lovers move from language to the gaze, a movement which takes place in a “silence rich with imaginings” (20). Since “there was no beginning or ending to her happiness,” in this space, it seems, boundless pleasure is indeed possible.

The momentous, pleasurable silence of Mazvita's sexual encounter with Nyenyedzi acts as a counterpoint to the disturbing whispers of the freedom fighter who, before her move to Kadoma, raped Mazvita while her village, Mubaira, was being burned and destroyed. It is the whispering, above all, that makes the event taboo and unspeakable, so that Mazvita cannot explain fully to Nyenyedzi the extent of her violation:

"She had not told Nyenyedzi everything. She had not told him about what that man who pulled her down had whispered to her, how she ran through the mist with torn clothes, with his whispering carried in her ears, how the sky behind her exploded as the village beyond the river burned" (WN 31).

In this depiction, the whispering, the rape, and the burning down of her village are intertwined traumas. In the chapter which describes the rape scene more explicitly, we learn what the rapist has whispered to Mazvita: "*Hanzvadzi* . . . he said. You are my sister . . . he whispered" (WN 35), simultaneously invoking and incestuously transgressing an image of Shona kinship between them. It is the verbal power of the freedom fighter that overwhelms her, and even shapes her body to his will, so that she must perform for him a perverse version of rural Shona femininity:

"He had claimed her, he told her that she could not hide the things of her body, that she must bring a calabash of water within her arms, and he would drink. He had tired of drinking from the river. She must offer him water with cupped hands. She must kneel so that he could drink" (WN 34).⁵

While his words are powerful, Mazvita does not recall the rapist's face at all, which makes it impossible for her to pin her trauma onto him personally: "She could not find his face [...] Hate required a face against which it could be flung but searching for the face was futile" (WN 36). In place of a face, we are told:

"Instead she transferred the hate to the moment itself, to the morning, to the land, to the dew-covered grass that she had felt graze tenderly against her

⁵ In the short story "An Unyielding Circle," published in her collection of stories, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*, Vera also depicts the sadistic claims of men over women's bodies in the performance of feminine roles.

naked elbow in that horrible moment of his approach. [...] She connected him only to the land. It was the land that had come toward her. He had grown from the land. She saw him grow from the land, from the mist from the river. The land had allowed the man to grow from itself into her body" (WN 36).

Here, the very skills that are valued in guerilla warfare, both tactically and symbolically – the seamlessness of the relationship between the guerilla and the land, his ability to emerge from and return to it at will – make him, and therefore the landscape, a threat to Mazvita's own liberty. Mazvita's negative sexual experience in the landscape convinces her that "the land had no fixed loyalties" (WN 40). Nyenyedzi, on the other hand, uses a language of autochthony and mutual obligation to describe the landscape: "We have to wait here with the land, if we are to be loyal to it, and to those who have given it to us. The land does not belong to us. We keep the land for the departed. [...] The land is inescapable. [...] The land defines our unities" (WN 39). Nyenyedzi's language reflects how, in the language and ideology of anti-colonial nationalism, the land took on a spiritual as well as political and economic dimension. Thus the spiritualisation of the land and the peasantry's relationship with it helped buttress the political legitimacy of the guerilla fighters (see also Ranger 1985, 188-200 and Staunton 1991, 31-32; 73-83). In *Without a Name* Vera calls this legitimacy into question via Mazvita's experience of rape. In an interview Vera expresses the problem of the disconnect between the heroism of the freedom fighter narrative and the experiences of women in the period: "Mazvita is raped by a freedom fighter, and this goes against the narrative of the heroism of those who are going to liberate everybody. If anything, the rapist denies her what is essential to her, which is her body and herself and her own particular search" (Hunter 1998, 79-80). In an argument with Nyenyedzi over whether they should move to the city, Mazvita expresses her disillusionment at the ease with which this supposedly animate land has been overcome by the topological transformations created by colonial farming: "The strangers have taken the land. They have grown tobacco where we once buried the dead. They have grown tobacco where we once worshipped and prayed. The land has not rejected them. They have harvested much crop" (WN 40). Mazvita argues that the ability of colonizers to take advantage of the land proves its ultimate status as inanimate and indifferent. In perhaps the most telling

exchange, though, Mazvita says: “We live in fear because even those who fight in our name threaten our lives,” an objection which is met with Nyenyedzi’s dismissive “It is like that with a war” (WN 39). While Mazvita is traumatized by the guerilla fighter’s violation of her, she does not accept even Nyenyedzi’s more benign idealization of the land – and his sanguine acceptance of the war’s violence Robert Muponde points out the ideological continuities between the claims made upon Mazvita by both Nyenyedzi and the rapist, saying, “Ironically Nyenyedzi tries to pin Mazvita down to a single narrative, a single loyalty, much in the same way as the soldier who raped her” (Muponde 2003, 119). Indeed, Muponde places Nyenyedzi, rather than the rapist, at the center of Mazvita’s trauma, claiming that “the story is a dramatization of the irrevocable fatwa pronounced upon her by Nyenyedzi, self-appointed custodian of the land and its secrets” (Muponde 2003, 119). Muponde overstates Nyenyedzi’s sinisterness here, setting aside Mazvita’s pleasurable sex scenes with Nyenyedzi with their suggestion, albeit unfulfilled, of a more egalitarian model for heterosexual relations. But it is undoubtedly this ideological continuity between the more benign kinship claims of Nyenyedzi and the more horrifying incestuous claims of the rapist that explains why the paternity of Mazvita’s baby is left in doubt. Both versions of patriarchy metaphorically propel Mazvita to her ritual of rejection in the dramatic infanticide scene, as I will show below.

Urban “freedom” and the return of the repressed

If Vera reveals the rural landscape as one of both pleasure and trauma, her depiction of urban Harare of the late 1970s is even more searing. It is in her consideration of Mazvita’s experiences in Harare that Vera further expresses the impossibility of sustaining the imagined freedom that Mazvita seeks. In *Without a Name*, Vera stages the self-conscious definition of urban freedom as a kind of commodified exhibitionism in search of an audience. Introducing Mazvita’s township lover, Vera uses the vocabulary of freedom and ease to describe Joel:

“The man walked up to her in *easy* loitering footsteps on the side of the road where she sat. He swung *efficiently* toward her. She noticed his arm swing forward. He swung his arms in obvious and deliberate motions of *liberty*. He did not keep still even as he asked her if she needed a place to stay. He had

such a look. [...] It suited her to consider he was being thoroughly helpful. That is how naive she was about his *freedom*" (WN 56, my emphasis).

In her first great act of freedom – Vera writes “The decision was easy” – Mazvita accepts a ride on the back of Joel’s bicycle: “The whole exercise was free, pleasurable, careless, and uncaring. A public display. She was so involved with her particular version of freedom she did not see that no one noticed her” (WN 57). The movement of adjectives, from ‘free’ to ‘uncaring’ captures the ambiguous pleasures of the anonymity of the city, as does the misrecognition that characterizes her encounter with another woman on the back of another man’s bicycle: “Then she turned a corner and met another woman sitting just like her, and she wanted to wave at their mutual freedom. But she needed both hands to hold on to the seat if she was to remain stable, so she hesitated, and in any case, when she looked at the woman, there was no sign of recognition or sharing” (WN 58). Indeed, Vera seems to suggest women’s particular awareness of freedom as a commodity, observing that while “men heated metal, close-toothed Afro combs and lifted their hair from the scalp; the women, who already knew freedom was purchasable, walked into glittering *Ambi* shops and bought their prepared Afro wigs. ... Black had never been as beautiful as when it married slavery with freedom” (WN 55). The symbolic destruction of kinship ties is exemplified in the faces of people who use *Ambi* skin-bleaching creams: “The people walked the streets without any faces, invisible, like ghosts. Was it a surprise then that they could not recognize one another? Ancestors dared not recognize them. The people had found such a breath-stopping freedom the ancestors knew them not, dared not know them” (WN 33). The process by which Mazvita moves in with Joel is described in less than a page, and when it happens, Vera writes: “There was no discussion, no agreement, no proposal. They just met and stayed together” (WN 58). While Nyenyedzi wanted to return to Mubaira with Mazvita, in order to meet her parents, by contrast, “Joel never spoke of consulting her parents concerning living with her like this. Mazvita found herself wondering about it. Though she had told herself this was freedom, it was not easy to forget where she had come from. They lived as though they had no pasts or futures” (WN 59).

The unsustainability of this fantasy of freedom is demonstrated when Mazvita's pregnancy is revealed and Joel demands that she leave him. The arrival of the baby represents, literally, a return of the repressed. The question of the baby's paternity is left ambiguous, though the narrator includes this suggestive description of Mazvita's menstrual cycle being stopped after the rape: "The days grew into months. The moon glowed a thin but silent awaiting. Mazvita had lost her seasons of motherhood. She did not question this dryness of her body but welcomed it as a beginning, a clear focus of her emotion, a protecting impulse" (WN 36). Mazvita herself seems to read these symptoms not as a pregnancy but as a reaction to her body's violation. This uncertainty around the significance of the "dryness of her body" is a form of forgetting which she regards as "freedom" in Harare. Until the baby arrives, we are told, "Her freedom came in soothing waves of forgetting in her increasing distance from Mubaira" (WN 85). This "forgetting" reaches its apotheosis in the description of sex between Mazvita and Joel, staged as a repetition of the rape. In contrast to the dyadic identification, transcendence of language and exchange of gazes that characterize her sexual connection with Nyenyedzi, silence, here, does not signify identification, but alienation: "Her eyes were closed. Joel saw her eyes close and imagined the closing was about him, about his fingers touching her face, touching the curve of her eyes, searching her forehead. But Mazvita was alone. She imagined Joel was alone too. There were no words spoken between them" (WN 68). The silence here is a repetition of the traumatic "silence" that Mazvita draws into herself in the immediate aftermath of the rape. One of the textual signs that the memory of the rape is being activated here is the invocation of "mist," which was an important aspect of the description of the landscape during the rape. Township sounds and smells emerge nonetheless: "Through the mist Mazvita smelled the stale gray blankets, the worn-out mattress, heard the bell of a bicycle ring below the window" (WN 68-69). There is one crucial difference between the rape scene and the sex scene with Joel – "Joel stirred her abandoned cry" (WN 68). That is to say, the cry that she was forced to withhold in the landscape during the rape, emerges uncannily during the repetition of this scene with Joel: "She heard herself cry. She cried till only she could be heard. [...] She heard only her cry, which expanded into the hollow spaces within her, into the silence she had conceived for herself, in the past of her memory. She lingered in her remembrance. The cry was a divine healing in

which she stood alone, and whole. The cry was a triumph of her will, prolonged and full of her weeping, full of her laughter" (WN 69). But the narrator suggests that the cry is not so much a moment of catharsis as of disavowal. While, according to the narration "Mubaira was so far away it vanished from memory" (WN 70), this "vanishing" itself seems overstated – a reiteration of a wish rather than a reality. And in a rare intervention a narrator's voice emerges to suggest that the cry has had the effect of "dislodging" something from the tolerable, if painful, equilibrium of silence and emptiness that had previously characterized Mazvita's response to the rape:

"But Mazvita did not understand that the cry had defeated the silence in her body, that the cry was a release dangerous and regrettable. The cry was not the lulling freedom she sought. After her discovery Mazvita would once again long that the solitude had protected her, long that the hollow spaces within her had remained hollow, the silence supreme" (WN 70).

The discovery which is foreshadowed here, is the pregnancy. The ambiguously pleasurable cry, emerging from the painful moment in which the traumatic rape is re-rehearsed, is somehow uncannily implicated in the reproduction of the unwelcome child. Thus, for Mazvita the performative models of freedom and autonomy which are possible for her in the world of the novel are inadequate in the face of the demands of reproduction, presented as a violent force that demands a horrific solution. This solution is a concomitant rejection of a central claim of both colonial and anti-colonial patriarchal discourses – the protagonists' obligation to bequeath life in a context of reproductive heteronormativity – in favor of an alternative fantasy of ritual and ceremony. In *Without a Name*, the baby signifies a "return of the repressed."

What is repressed is not so much the rape in itself, but more specifically the perverse kinship tie that was claimed by the rapist when he called her "sister." It is this imaginary kinship tie which she represses by rejecting the rural landscape and fleeing to Harare, and which returns in the form of the baby.

The uncanny object and the ritual of freedom

From the beginning, the novel is dominated by the single, unfolding, and uncanny image of a mother carrying her dead infant on her back. The rest of the novel narrates how this image came to be. Vera herself describes how the creative process of writing the novel began with an imaginary photographic image: “In *Without a Name* I had this ‘photograph’ or series of photographs, of a woman throwing a child on her back. This photograph is a very familiar scene in Africa. If you walk down the street you’ll see it – a certain style and movement, a certain familiarity. And this moment came to me, how it’s done: the child is thrown over the left shoulder onto the mother’s back, she pulls the legs around her waist. Then I change it in one aspect: that the child is dead. ... I don’t even have the story at the beginning, I have only this cataclysmic moment, this shocking, painful moment, at once familiar and horrifying because of one change of detail which makes everything else tragic” (Bryce 2003, 219).

This crucial change of detail renders the scene not only tragic but, in Freud’s terms, uncanny. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud downplays the uncanny significance of the notion of the “living doll” – the bringing to life of an apparently inanimate object – suggesting that it could appeal to adult readers more as a childhood wish than as a source of dread. Freud however never deals in detail with the reverse prospect – that an apparently animate object is, in fact, dead. This is the uncanny image we have to face in *Without a Name*. Indeed, the very familiarity of the image that Vera describes above is crucial to its uncanny effects. In a single chapter early in the book Vera describes in excruciating detail Mazvita’s transferal of her baby from the towel in which she has been carrying it on her back, into a white apron she has just purchased for the task. Whether the infant is alive or dead is deliberately left ambiguous in her description, so that upon the first reading, at least, the reader is gripped by the sense of the uncanny that Freud identifies. Thus, Vera writes, “Mazvita circled the baby with her arms, and held it down. She bent slowly forward and the baby moved slightly along her waist, toward her left” (WN 23). Whether this movement is the voluntary act of a live infant or the involuntary act of an inanimate corpse, is left unclear. At times Vera deliberately hints that the infant is alive, writing, “Mazvita heard a faint murmur move from herself to the baby. She told the baby to keep still” (WN 23). Not long after this, though,

other hints that Mazvita is carrying a corpse enhance the uncanny effect of its presence:

“She turned to her right, slid the baby gently but quickly into her waiting hands, in the front. Her hands waited eagerly for her baby. She felt the baby fall in a lump into her hands. Mazvita tightened her eyes. The moment was rich, it filled her arms. The baby fell from her back and rested across her stomach, its legs spread rigidly around her waist. Mazvita raised her back and opened her eyes wide” (WN 23).

This passage pairs commonplace images of expected maternal love – with “her hands wait[ing] eagerly for her baby” and the “rich” moment of her baby's arrival in those hands – with hints of the more gruesome reality: live babies do not fall as “lump[s],” nor do their legs “spread rigidly” across their mothers’ bodies. Vera repeats this image of the baby's “stiff legs” (WN 26) as she describes Mazvita's departure. The chapter ends with an even more disturbing image in which, again, what is ordinary and familiar is defamiliarized by the inclusion of one crucial detail. Vera writes that as Mazvita moves forward “Milk poured from her breasts. It fell in soured lumps” (WN 27). The repetition of the image of the “lump” emphasizes the lifelessness of the milk's interrupted flow, while the notion of “soured” breast milk suggests overripeness and waste.

The uncanny effect created by the ambiguity of the baby's status as alive or dead continues until the later scene of infanticide which dramatically reveals the “crucial detail” which makes the story tragic. Interestingly, the infanticide is described in ritualistic terms: “Her determination was amazing. She stood outside her desire, outside herself. She stood with her head turned away from this ceremony of her freedom, from this ritual of separation” (WN 109). By ascribing to this private and taboo moment the status of “ritual” and “ceremony,” Vera makes an unusual claim upon genealogical society to recognize the mystery of this event. At the same time, this ritual is also characterized by a physical sense of panic: “She saw nothing of the wildness in her actions, of the eyes dilating, of her furrowed brow, of her constricted face, of her elongated arms, of her shoulders stiff.” Finally, “[h]er rejection was sudden and fierce and total. She stood with the baby balanced on one arm. She took a black tie from a rack in a corner of the

room and dropped it over the child's neck. It rested over the child in a huge loop, which, on another occasion, would have made her laugh. She did not pause. She claimed her dream and her freedom" (WN 109). Even the manner in which Mazvita strangles the baby is significant: the tie itself is a symbol of upward mobility and the "smart dressing" that Joel values, along with other urban dwellers. In the immediate aftermath of the infanticide Mazvita seems to vacillate in her understanding of the horror of what has occurred: "She sought to discover the path she had taken toward this particular horror, but the memory hid from her. It came in flashes of a fathomless and heavy guilt" (WN 110). Again, though, telltale clues suggest what has happened: "She sat in painful isolation, convinced that what had happened was not true at all, yet what was that blindfold in the child, when had she put it there? The unusual detail confirmed the horror in her head" (WN 110). The child's body signifies its own death: "The closing of the eyes was good, but she saw the neck collapse downward on the baby's chest. The neck was broken" (WN 111). The imagery of horror continues in the last line of the chapter: just as the "soured milk" falls from Mazvita's breasts in the novel's early imagery, we are told "[I]t fell in lumps, the milk. It fell from the baby's mouth" (WN 111). The horror of the infanticide and the uncertainty about the baby's status as alive or dead which is created in the mind of the reader up until this scene reflects the "return of the repressed" in the form of blood relationships and the demands of the perverse kinship tie claimed by the rapist when he calls her "sister." But by ascribing to this moment of uncanny horror the quality of a ritual or ceremony of liberation and redemption, on the other side of which awaits an imaginable and attainable pleasure, Vera ultimately celebrates not only her protagonists' survival, but her unwillingness to give up her desires.

Homecoming: an ambiguous redemption

The novel is structured around Mazvita's return to her home village by bus, carrying the dead infant on her back. This journey is figured as one of redemption and atonement, and even the destroyed village is redeemed by Vera's description of the survival of beauty in a scarred landscape: "Mazvita looks up. ... She looks up and sees a purple flower tucked beneath the dry hanging branches, nestling into another season of flowering. The flower rests in a bare tortured tree, surviving, resisting the wind and shaking

pods" (WN 114). Vera's repeated refrain in this final chapter, "[i]t is yesterday" is an ambivalent one. Her use of the present tense suggests the possibility that the painful events of "yesterday" – the infanticide which literally occurred the day before her return to the village, even the rape, which occurred the last day she was in the village – can be re-imagined and redeemed, while it also suggests a striking finality. Since the scene is also one of return to her mother's village – a ghostly apparition of her mother even appears to greet her, calling her "Mazvita!" – it could also be seen as a moment in which Mazvita finally succumbs to the kinship claims she has been escaping. But even here she hopes for anonymity, saying "She wishes to forget the names that call her own name, then the hills would name her afresh. She would have liked to begin without a name, soundlessly and without pain" (WN 115). The moment of redemption, then, is not without ambivalence. On the one hand, Mazvita seems to want to escape the power of genealogical interpellation represented by the apparition of her mother calling her name. On the other hand, her invocation of "the hills" which she hopes will provide her with her new name suggests a sense of reintegration into the landscape, which she had trusted so little. Vera seems to suggest this in an interview in which she postulates Mazvita's next step: "she has to go back to the site where she was raped [...] and maybe bury her child there. It might be an act of recovery for her if she can put the child in the land of her ancestors" (Hunter 1998, 84).

Conclusion: longing and uncertainty

In the lecture "The Writers Place" which she gave at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair's Indaba 2000, Vera states that "[a]s an African writer I often long for a vacuum, that loss of gravity which will allow me to float between word and word, without reference to each of my continent's tragic consequences" (Vera 2000, 25). Here she seems to suggest that, like her protagonist, she herself seeks the dissolution of kinship and historical ties. But she continues in the sentence that follows, "I am not certain of my confidence in this wish" (Vera 2000, 25). It is this oscillation that Vera stages, also, in *Without a Name* between the anticipation of pleasures to come, and the certainty of the tragedies of the present. Vera does not, however, present her journey as tragic or without redemption. Her unique staging of both pleasure and horror in *Without a Name* offers a new vision of an African

woman as “desiring subject”. Scenes of sexual pleasure between Mazvita and Nyenyedzi transform Zimbabwe into a space of erotic possibility. But these moments of erotic redemption seem fleeting and untenable. In her attempts to escape the stark binary of rejecting kinship ties and family histories on the one hand, and being overwhelmed by them on the other, Mazvita looks towards visions of urban upward mobility, visions which alienate her from her rural lover and turn motherhood into an impossible, even lethal burden. Maternity is figured as an uncanny return of a repressed history. While urban spaces seem to offer opportunities for repression in the form of forgetting, fertility signifies the impossibility of such forgetfulness. Vera’s recoding of Mazvita’s rejection of maternity as a ceremony of liberation and a ritual of separation, described with deliberate elegance and beauty, reflect her utter empathy with and investment in her characters’ desires. The demand for pleasure, in Vera’s works, is not presented as a form of hedonism, but as a prerequisite to reaching that “fine place” of freedom from domination for which her protagonists yearn. Vera uses this image of the “fine place,” in “The Writer’s Place” when she speaks of African writers as a group: “We have acquired our own kind of dexterity, an eloquent beauty even within tensions and betrayals. We are at a fine place” (Vera 2000, 29). As with her paradoxically beautiful representations of the fate of her protagonists, the repeated invocation of the reachability of that “fine place” reflects the inviolability and stubbornness of Vera’s optimistic vision for African women.

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