The 'Dissident' in Fiction and Non-Fiction:

History, Imagination and the Intimate Violence of Nation-Making

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Abstract: The 'dissident' is a shape-shifting actor and multi-valent political symbol, cast as both cause and effect of the extreme state repression that followed Zimbabwe's newly won independence. This ambiguous figure has been taken up in different genres of writing, including history, human rights reporting and literature, and stands as a powerful metonym for the violent making of the nation. But dissidents inhabited fiction and non-fiction differently. For non-fiction writing, establishing authoritative truths in the service of accountability and as a means to challenge dominant official accounts was a paramount concern, while literature worked in a creative space between the events of the past and imagination. The chapter explores the work of three novelists – Chenjerai Hove, Yvonne Vera and Novuyo Rosa Tshuma – both as historical texts that revealed a shifting, malleable conception of the nation and its enemies, and as a form of writing able to challenge the tight strictures of non-fiction accounts. Novelists illuminated above all how the experiences and memories of violent nation-making inhabited the intimate, gendered spaces made among real, imagined, and desired kin.

Keywords: Gukurahundi, Dissident, Violence, Nation-making, Novels, Chenjerai Hove, Yvonne Vera, Novuyo Rosa Tshuma, ZAPU, ZIPRA

Few figures in Zimbabwean politics are as elusive as the 'dissident'. Produced in the violent and disorderly transition from armed struggle to independent nation, the dissident is a shape-shifting political actor and multi-valent symbol, cast as both cause and effect of the post-independence state violence known as Gukurahundi. Depending on one's position, the dissident may be portrayed as traitor or betrayed; victim or perpetrator; a proxy of the state or its enemy; a South African-backed agent or a mere criminal. Dissidents may be cast as a figment of the government's imagination, simply a ghostly alibi for state violence, or – in dramatic contrast – a fully flesh and blood ethnic or political group. The pivotal, ambiguous role of the dissident has been taken up in different genres of writing, including history, human rights reporting, memoir, and fiction, all of which contend with the foundational violence of the nation and seek, in different ways, to understand it. The dissident thus serves as metonym for the (violent) making of the nation, and offers a shifting lens on the nation's narration.

My focus here is on how the dissident inhabits non-fiction and fiction – specifically historical writing and novels – differently. As is often pointed out, there is a family resemblance between these forms, most obviously in the construction of narrative: both are modes of storytelling. The most obvious difference is that fiction is not centrally defined by its relationship to evidence produced in or about the past. Novelists nonetheless often work in a space of creative tension between 'real history' and imagination, where worlds that do not exist or cannot be documented, notably interior emotional and psychological realms, are

conjured in relation to experience and memory. In their African variants, as Paul Zeleza reminds us, both historians and novelists have sought to tell stories of the marginalised and archive-less, particularly those silenced by colonialism, and have engaged orality, memory and imagination in doing so.[1] Both have also shared an increasingly ambivalent relation to the post-colonial nation and its promise of liberation.

These differences and commonalities create productive engagements and tensions that open out new views on the politics of the past, which I explore in relation to the shifting figure of the dissident. I first consider non-fiction stories about dissidents produced in the 1990s, in the near aftermath of violence and in direct contention with a dominant 'official' narrative. These sought to construct authoritative 'counter-narratives', often with the goal of political accountability and reparation. I then turn to three Zimbabwean novelists – Chenjerai Hove, Yvonne Vera, and Novuyo Rosa Tshuma – each of whom told stories about dissidents in different political moments. As historical documents, their novels reveal a malleable imagination of the modes and meanings of the nation's making. As fiction, they raise questions neglected or unaskable in non-fiction, delving into social and psychological territories that lie in between the political logic of violence and the experience and memory of it.

The dissident in non-fiction

The historiography of the 'dissident' is embedded in broad debates about Zimbabwe's armed struggle and its relationship to post-independence violence. The 'official' story of the dissident was created in 1980 by leading politicians of Zimbabwe's newly elected ruling party, ZANU(PF). At its start, dissidents were identified as former combatants from the armed wing of ZANU(PF)'s main political competition and the loser in the 1980 elections, ZAPU. They stood accused of taking up arms again, this time against the new nation. This view was purveyed in state media, political rallies, parliament, and in the course of acts of repression. The story was elaborated over time, and dominated the public sphere until well after the end of the violence in 1988, when ZAPU was subsumed into ZANU(PF) under a 'Unity Accord'. In subsequent years, non-fiction accounts of the dissident began to emerge as it became possible to undertake detailed research among those subjected to state repression. The public circulation of these 'counter-narratives' altered interpretations of the nation's violent making, and would fuel novelists' imaginations too, as we shall see.

These counter-narratives were constructed through a cumulative process in the 1990s. Major academic works included Richard Werbner's ethnographic study of one extended family, *Tears of the Dead* (1991), and the social history *Violence and Memory* (2000), written by myself, JoAnn McGregor and Terence Ranger, both of which rested heavily on the accounts of those subjected to violence.[2] The text that easily had the greatest impact in the public sphere was a meticulously researched human rights report called *Breaking the Silence,*

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[1] P. Zeleza, "Colonial Fictions: Memory and History in Yvonne Vera's Imagination," *Research in African Literatures* 38, no. 2 (2007): 11-13.

[2] R. Werbner, *Tears of the Dead: The Social Biography of an African Family* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991); J. Alexander, J. McGregor and T. Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'dark forests' of Matabeleland* (James Currey, 2000).

Building True Peace (1997), written by Shari Eppel.[3] There were many other non-fiction texts too, most of which shared the goal of challenging official narratives of the violent past and documenting the terrible legacies of that past in the present.[4] For many of these authors, telling these stories while the perpetrators of Gukurahundi still held state power and while the 'official' narrative still held sway, created ethical and political imperatives. They tried both to represent their informants in a fashion recognisable to them, and, in the context of ongoing denial, to construct rigorously authoritative, evidence-based accounts. For human rights reports, which sought to make a case for accountability and reparation, this required producing particular kinds of evidence, including forensic assessments, sworn testimony, and the quantification of abuses and losses.

The story these texts told about dissidents was not a simple one. At one level, they documented the creation and evolution of the dissident as symbol, category and actor in public discourse and its use to legitimate ZANU(PF)'s violently intolerant nationalism. The term does not have the positive connotation common in other contexts of a critic of (oppressive) state power, and it is rejected by many of those so labelled. These accounts narrated how the ZANU(PF) government's construction of the 'dissident' as, at first, errant cadres of ZAPU's armed wing ZIPRA, and then as encompassing the much larger categories of ZAPU supporter and 'the Ndebele', had the effect of moving attention from the chaotic transition from war to peace in the country as a whole to a specific region (Matabeleland and the Midlands, where ZAPU held electoral sway) and to the dominant ethnic category within that region (Ndebele). In official discourse, the 'dissident' was transformed from a transitional threat to law and order to a treasonous threat to 'the nation', thereby justifying unconstrained state violence, most spectacularly through the vehicle of the Fifth Brigade. The Fifth Brigade was the army unit responsible for the vast majority of atrocities: it killed, beat, tortured and raped tens of thousands during its deployment in 1983 and 1984. It was by no means the only vehicle of state violence but it stood out as the militarised embodiment of ZANU(PF)'s nationalism and it was, itself, a memorable purveyor of historical narrative, song and slogan that dehumanised and justified violence on ethnic and political grounds.

At another level these texts differentiated among the armed actors who more or less ambiguously fell into the category of 'dissident', drawing extensively on oral accounts of dissidents and civilians.[5] The former members of ZIPRA who took up arms again in the early 1980s numbered in their hundreds, a tiny fraction of an army of some 20,000 trained men and women. In these non-fiction texts, their origin story was reinterpreted as an effect of ZANU(PF)'s violence rather than as its cause. ZIPRA veterans recounted their systematic persecution (torture, disappearance and murder) inside and outside the newly formed national army, and its justification by their persecutors in political and ethnic terms. But even if former ZIPRA cadres took up arms again in response to persecution, their accounts – and

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[3] CCJP/LRF, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988* (CCJP/LRF, 1997).

[4] For an account of the production of knowledge about and politics of remembering Gukurahundi from the 1970s to the 2020s, see J. Alexander, "The Noisy Silence of Gukurahundi: Truth, Recognition and Belonging," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 5 (2021): 763-85.

[5] For these accounts, see the main texts cited above and J. Alexander, "Dissident perspectives on Zimbabwe's post-independence war," *Africa* 68, no. 2 (1998): 151-82, which is based on interviews with ex-ZIPRA 'dissidents'.

those of civilians – recorded their regular use of terrible violence against their alleged supporters, among whom they rapidly lost sympathy, gaining the sobriquet 'over hungry' for their constant demands for food. The oral accounts of dissidents and civilians complicated this picture even further. There were stories of 'pseudo-dissidents', meaning government agents posing as dissidents to entrap civilians who offered them support, and who carried out atrocities too. Such figures were recognisable owing to their language and clothing. Another group was made up of young men who had not fought in the 1970s' war but who nonetheless faced state persecution owing to their age, gender, and ethnicity, or who simply sought to exploit the disorder of the 1980s to commit crimes. Finally, a group known as Super ZAPU, made up partly of former ZPRA cadres, received South African backing in the form of training and weapons and operated largely in 1982 and 1983. According to former ZPRA dissidents, they clashed with government forces as well as with other ex-ZPRA men who objected on political grounds to an alliance with Apartheid South Africa. These non-fiction histories depicted a war that had not ended with the cease-fire and independence but that – in the eyes of many of those subjected to its violence and of dissidents themselves – had carried on and subverted its ideals.

There are many points of difference within these non-fiction texts, but they largely agreed that the war-time nationalism of ZANU(PF)'s leaders was the driving force of Gukurahundi, that state actors were its primary perpetrators, and that civilians identified as ZAPU or Ndebele, not armed men, were its main targets. In these narratives, dissidents emerged as ambivalent characters, embodying histories of persecution and violence and a link to both the failures and dreams of the liberation struggle. After the Unity Accord, ex-ZPRA dissidents often remained socially isolated but some nonetheless revived a commitment to the political ideals they had held in 1980. This took the form of establishing cooperatives, with optimistic names like Green Light and Sibantubanye ('we are one'), intended to model a better society for all. They did not thrive, but these efforts tied dissidents' own narratives to the lost future of an alternative nationalism.[6]

This first round of non-fiction accounts of the dissident and the project of Gukurahundi thus sought to counter a powerful official nationalism and to engage a popular 'counter-memory', the public representation of which was seen as a potential – even essential – means of redress for this violent past. The political stakes involved in countering official denial placed great weight on making authoritative truth claims. These texts eschewed the appearance of hyperbole, speculation, confusion, and irrationality, modes that might undermine the credibility of their 'unsilencing' work, and their calls for accountability and reparation. The three novelists I consider here used imaginative modes to situate the dissident in markedly different ways. I first explore their positioning of the dissident before turning to their relationship to non-fiction texts.

The dissident in fiction

None of the novels I consider here celebrates Zimbabwean independence for long or at all. Each offers criticism of the simplistic, binary oppositions and failed promises of an official nationalism. They reject the heroism of war and the idea of independence as a definitive

[6] Alexander, « Dissident perspectives, » 173-4.

break in time; each represents marginalised views. These novels are situated in or after a literary transition marked by 'pervasive crisis for the postcolony and the triumph of post-colonial theory', in which a 'disdain for colonialism and distrust of nationalism' went hand in hand with a growing cosmopolitanism and concern with subjectivity.[7] Within these accounts, however, the nature and offences of nationalism varied and the position occupied by the dissident offered distinct understandings of violent histories and legacies. Here I offer an introduction to each novel's 'dissident'.

Only one of the novels I consider – Chenjerai Hove's *Shadows* (1991) – was written prior to the outpouring of non-fiction work on Gukurahundi, and hence before a substantial counter-narrative was established.[8] It is also the only that is neither primarily set in Matabeleland nor written by an author who grew up in Matabeleland. Hove was not yet the outspoken critic of ZANU(PF) he would become – Primorac refers to him as an 'ardent nationalist' and supporter of Robert Mugabe in the1980s – but his nationalism was, as she notes, never the same as ZANU(PF)'s.[9] I treat this novel first to explore how dissidents might be placed on the sidelines of other failures of nationalism. Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) and Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *House of Stone* (2018) were written after the political upheavals of 2000, but published a decade and a half apart at different points in what became Zimbabwe's amorphously extended, all-encompassing 'crisis'.[10] They are both women novelists who grew up in Matabeleland and lived outside Zimbabwe for extended periods, but they belong to different generations.

Hove's *Shadows* is the first Zimbabwean novel in English to contend with post-independence violence, though it only briefly does so towards the novel's end.[11] The book tells the story of Johanna's father who moves his family from their home in Gutu, Masvingo, to the north-western district of Gokwe. The move does not have the blessing of the family's ancestors. It is motivated by a desire to overcome the hardships and humiliations of poverty by grasping an enticing dream of modernity and riches, sold by the Native Commissioner, in the form of the state-backed cotton boom of 1960s' Gokwe.[12] The move places the family in an alien land where they cannot name places, animals and plants. They break the laws of the owners of this place and their chemical-heavy farming methods poison the fields.

In Hove's narrative, the family is rendered vulnerable to death by their alienated position, a vulnerability that seems obvious to everyone around them and takes its toll even before the war. Johanna (and her unborn child) is the first to die, by suicide. Following a tragic love affair, she drinks the land-poisoning pesticides necessary to colonial cotton growing.[13] When the armed struggle does arrive, guerrillas – the 'sons of the soil' – explain

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[7] Zeleza, « Colonial Fictions, » 12.
[8] C. Hove, *Shadows* (Heinemann, 1991).
[9] R. Primorac, *The Place of Tears: The novel and politics in modern Zimbabwe* (I. B. Tauris, 2006), 3.
[10] Y. Vera, *The Stone Virgins* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); N. R. Tshuma, *House of Stone* (Atlantic Books, 2018).
[11] Two novels published in 1991 in ChiShona and in IsiNdebele also dealt with the 1980s violence and the figure of the dissident. See E.S.K. Hleza, *Uyangisinda Lumhlaba* (Mambo Press, 1991), E. Masundire, *Mhandu Dzorusununguko* (Mambo Press, 1991), and discussion in T. Moyo, F. Sibanda and M. Mazuru, "Angles of Telling and Angles on Reality: Representations of the Gukurahundi Period in Selected Zimbabwean Fiction in Shona, Ndebele, and English," *Matatu* 41 (2012): 35-50.
[12] Hove, *Shadows*, 86-8.
[13] *Ibid*., 102-3.

that they have come to reclaim the land, 'so that our fathers can be buried where they wish to be buried'.[14] But they bring death to this dislocated family. Johanna's father's sons refuse to join the guerrillas and are killed as sellouts: 'Everyone knew they would die a bad death'.[15] Despite a period of madness, Johanna's father survives the war only to be killed by dissidents. They accuse him, a father of sellouts, of selling out.[16] They are a mystery to him – 'his mind failed to understand this new war'[17] – but his death is unsurprising to everyone around him. He is already a 'shadowy presence' living in a 'house of death', his dreams of cotton abandoned.[18] As is repeatedly noted, no one knows him.[19]

Johanna's mother sees her husband's death coming. She tells us that when the dissidents came, he was already 'near death'.[20] The dissidents cruelly kill Johanna's father in a remote place where dogs and jackals gnaw his body. They leave a note saying that sellouts should not be buried. Johanna's mother knows these men are 'dissidents' because that is what they are called on state radio and that is how they sign their note.[21] She describes how they demand good food, 'with guns on their shoulders, telling us all the time that someone had wronged them. How can we be treated like women when we are in the bush together fighting wars? We cannot have leftovers when others are eating the fat of the land, they said to us…. They said the enemy had changed his colour, that was all'.[22] The dissidents' origins are elaborated in other accounts circulating in Gokwe – they were men who had run away from the army; they had been abused in the army; they were simply 'used to carrying guns', and could not accept the feminising effects of giving them up.[23]

In *Shadows*, the guerrilla and the dissident are the same men and they claim the label 'dissident' themselves. In both guises they are inscrutable agents of death who decimate this migrant family. But their story stands on the sidelines of Hove's narrative, which is primarily a tale of the consequences of the unmooring of people from the land and community known through the ancestors – from their living and dead kin – a process initiated by colonial expropriation and expanded through the modernising, poisonous promises of the cotton boom. The new government is not depicted as a directly repressive force. Its failures are by omission – a failure to protect, a failure to honour the dead, and ultimately a failure to return the land to its owners so that people might be buried 'where they wish', as the sons of the soil had promised.

The themes of an unfinished war crossing the barrier of 1980, ruptured kinship, and deaths improperly marked and mourned, permeate Yvonne Vera and Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's novels too, but they see the figure of the dissident through different eyes. Militarised masculinity emerges at the end of Hove's novel as a legacy of war. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera insists on the centrality of masculinity to power and violence too, but for her it serves as a

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[14] *Ibid.*, 89-90.
[15] *Ibid.*, 91.
[16] *Ibid*., 106-7, 95.
[17] *Ibid*., 88.
[18] *Ibid*., see 55, 88, 96, 98.
[19] E.g., *Ibid*., 109.
[20] *Ibid*., 94-5.
[21] *Ibid*., 108, 96.
[22] *Ibid.*, 96.
[23] *Ibid*., 106.

critique of not only war and nationalism but society. The novel is set in the years before and after independence and moves between the city of Bulawayo and the rural district of Kezi, the two connected by a bus in the heart of Matabeleland. At the core of the novel are two horrific acts of violence, one carried out by government soldiers, the other by a man called Sibaso. He is not named as a 'dissident' but we understand that is what he is, and he is at the heart, not on the margins, of this narrative.

Sibaso's (dissident) violence is directed at two women, sisters he finds in their rural home in Kezi, Thenjiwe and Nonceba. He beheads the older sister Thenjiwe and rapes Nonceba before cutting off her lips. Sibaso's first-person account of his life before this moment is scattered throughout the book. It has clues in it of a guerrilla biography: like all ZIPRA guerrillas, he crosses rivers, loses his name and 'borrows' another.[24] He remembers the violence of the 1970s in the course of his visits to a hellish bomb crater filled with the dismembered bodies of his comrades, a place where he finds 'a peaceful calm, except for the signs of death everywhere'.[25] He tells us of his return home at the war's end, amidst joyous celebrations of independence. He seeks out his father, his only family – he has no siblings and his mother died giving birth to him. When he finds his father's house, the new owner, a stranger, says that the previous owner had died in prison. He had been detained, he says, because, 'It was said his only son was in the bush'.[26] The stranger gives Sibaso a novel, *Feso*, that he found in the house – it is Sibaso's from his university days. Walking away, Sibaso describes opening the book and finding in it the map he used to leave the country and 'a crushed spider weighed down by time'. He feels 'an explosion in my head'.[27] He has already introduced the spider to us as a complex symbol of death and attenuated history.[28] Sibaso's connections to his pre-war self are sundered while he apprehends that the future he had once imagined will not come to be.

Unmoored from the nation's making, his home and kin, Sibaso is fixed in time in a violent wartime masculinity, in which he lives with 'betrayals before a war, after a war, during a war'.[29] He appears to try to make this bearable or, put another way, to justify this violent male subjectivity, by allowing his imagination to travel across time, into the past, represented by the paintings in the stone caves of the Gulati hills. He finds comfort in an ancient history of ritualised male relations with women, a myth of his own making.[30] Vera offers us, through Sibaso, not a vision of a lost, romantic African past – one Hove's characters seem to grasp at – but a society always already marked by violent gender relations. The stone virgins of the book's title, painted on the walls of the cave in which Sibaso shelters, 'are the virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king'.[31] They were, Driver and Samuelson have argued, 'sacrificed by men in order to soothe the anxieties about

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[24] Vera, *Stone Virgins*, 82. This is a common set of markers in ZIPRA oral histories.
[25] Vera, *Stone Virgins*, 105.
[26] *Ibid*., 119.
[27] *Ibid*., 121.
[28] *Ibid*., 81-6.
[29] *Ibid*., 71
[30] On Sibaso's use of myth as justification, see A. Harris, "'An ingenious tenderness': The choreography of violence in Yvonne Vera's *The stone virgins*," *Scrutiny2* 12, no. 2 (2007): 42-4; S. Kostelac, "'The body is his, pulse and motion': Violence and desire in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*," *Research in African Literature* 41, no. 3 (2010): 79.
[31] Vera, *Stone Virgins*, 103.

the passage from life to death'.[32] Sibaso's view on his violence against the sisters is located not only in the war of the 1970s, but in this much longer history of male violence towards women, understood as a means of defending threatened masculinity.

Sibaso's acts do not have a specific trigger, but they have a context. He makes just one direct pronouncement that might explain his 'dissident' status – 'Independence was the compromise to which I could not belong. I am a man who is set free, Sibaso, one who remembers harm'[33] – but his acts of violence are placed in proximity to other stories about the failed end to the 1970s' war. These stories depict gendered spatial and temporal transitions. In Vera's account, independence is marked in Kezi by the extraordinary arrival of women guerrillas. They occupy the veranda of the store – named Thandabantu or 'love the people', a place that Vera has established as the heart of this community. The women guerrillas upend its social and gendered purposes as a meeting place of men, overseen by a man: 'They define the world differently'.[34] This is an ambiguous moment: these women are a source of disruption, almost scandal, as well as wonder. They do not fit into the categories that exist for men or women in their clothing, movement, expression and pose on the shop's veranda: 'they forget that they are male or female but know that they are wounded beings, with searching eyes'.[35] Shortly after this return of women soldiers, 'Independence ends'. Vera dates this moment to 1981: 'The war begins. A curfew is declared. A state of emergency…. The cease-fire ceases. It begins in the streets, the burying of memory…. Memory is lost'.[36] The brief moment in which some new nation might have peacefully emerged – and remade gender relations – is over.[37]

Sibaso's attack on the sisters follows this moment in the novel, but it happens several years later, in 1983 (at least, according to Sibaso).[38] Chronologically in between 'Independence ends' and Sibaso's violent acts, we revisit the store where the women soldiers had embodied an alternative future. It is a desolate scene of mass murder, torture and devastation, described in awful detail. It confirms that this is government policy: 'The team of soldiers who had congregated at Thandabantu Store had demonstrated that anything that had happened so far had not been random and unplanned. Atrocious, yes, but purposeful.' The purpose is 'to shock, to cure the naïve mind. The mind not supposed to survive it, to retell it, but to perish'.[39] The store symbolises society itself. Its obliteration and the grotesque torture of its owner is a deliberate destruction of community.[40]

Sibaso's head 'exploded' when, parentless and homeless, he could not make sense of his pre-war self, but it is this society-ending state violence that constitutes the context in which he flees back into the hills. Vera does not identify state or dissident violence with an

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[32] D. Driver and M. Samuelson, "History's Intimate Invasions: Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*," *English Studies in Africa* 50, no. 2 (2007): 111.
[33] Vera, *Stone Virgins*, 97.
[34] *Ibid*., 56.
[35] *Ibid*., 58-9.
[36] *Ibid*., 65.
[37] Kostelac, "'The body',", 80.
[38] Vera, *Stone Virgins*, 82.
[39] *Ibid*., 135.
[40] A number of authors have made this point, e.g., T. Ranger, "History has its ceiling: The pressures of the past in *The Stone Virgins*," in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. R. Muponde and M. Taruvinga (Weaver Press, 2002), 211.

ethnic or party political agenda, but with this 'burying of memory'.[41] The threat that this poses to time and identity creates the conditions, she seems to suggest, that make the mythologised, masculine violence of an ex-ZIPRA 'dissident' like Sibaso possible.

Tshuma's sprawling novel shares many themes with Vera's but it is not told in a poetically opaque, symbolic language – it is less elegiac, at times hilarious, often satirical and grotesque. In contrast to both Hove and Vera, it tells a story in which political and social movements are named, historical figures and events identified and detailed, the politicisation of ethnicity explored. The cast of actors is huge, varied and well travelled, incorporating the international peregrinations of nationalists and guerrillas before 1980 and the spread of the diaspora in the economic collapse after 2000, the moment in which the novel is set, well into Zimbabwe's 'crisis'.

Lost kin and kinship is a central theme in all these novels. In *House of Stone* it is a source of both devastation and conjuring: the novel is driven by the search of its protagonist, Zamani, for a family and so for belonging and love. His search has terrible consequences for those he would claim as kin. He comes to identify not with his mother – who was raped and murdered by the Fifth Brigade – or with his claimed 'surrogate' father, but with the man he imagines as his rapist father, the commander of the Fifth Brigade. As in *Shadows* and *Stone Virgins*, a story of dissident atrocity sits in the novel. This one emerges as a result of Zamani's relentless questioning of his 'surrogate' father Abednego Mlambo, the man in whose house he lives as a lodger and whose family he seeks to make his own through the sinister displacement of their son. We have already learned that Abedenego was a reluctant, unheroic guerrilla; now we learn that he was also, at least for a day, a 'dissident'. His victim is a white woman called Ennis, the wife of Farmer Thornton. Farmer Thornton is, we discover, the biological father of Abednego, who grew up in the black community on the border of Thornton's farm.

Thornton posts his account of Ennis' murder as 'clickbait' on a 'Rhodesians Never Die' website.[42] His version, though he knows (and we know) better, aligns him with the white farming community's elision of dissidents and ZIPRA guerrillas. Thornton deploys the 1970s Rhodesian vocabulary of 'terrs', 'munts' and 'commies' in referring to dissidents, while he praises the Fifth Brigade's work 'protecting the peace-loving citizens of Matabeleland and smoking out the dissidents!'[43] Thornton's white settler persona is performed in the ether, in militarised alliance with ZANU(PF). Abednego's version of the attack emerges disjointedly under Zamani's questioning. He recalls how he had, as a former guerrilla, watched as violence between ZAPU and ZANU(PF) escalated in Bulawayo and 'the Ndebele' were named dissidents. He hears news of Fifth Brigade massacres in his rural home in northern Matabeleland, where his pregnant wife and son are staying. He rushes there, only to witness the sadistic slaughter of his family, including his son, wife, and unborn baby, the foetus cut from her. Following this horrific massacre, Abednego goes to the Thornton's nearby farmhouse – to his biological father – for help, but he is turned away. He returns to bury his loved ones, anger building in him. Covered in his wife's blood, he goes back to the Thornton

[41] *Ibid*., 65.
[42] Tshuma, *House of Stone*, 17.
[43] *Ibid*., 228.

farmhouse, finding only Ennis. Amidst a scene of disconcerting domesticity, horribly overlain with Abednego's longing for lost family, he rapes and strangles her and runs away. Many years later, he visits Ennis' grave, asking for a forgiveness that she cannot give, and convinced that the ills that have befallen his family since are owed to this act of violence.

Abednego's 'dissident' violence is linked in an immediate, causal way to the violence of the Fifth Brigade, but the way it plays itself out rests on the longer history of intimate and unequal relations made by settler rule. Tshuma situates violence in the social relations of kin, real and fictive, and in suppressed and intolerable memories, in ways that echo Vera. But the hinterland of her 'dissident' is less mythological than mundane: he and his victim are neighbours. Abednego may be a former guerrilla, but his violence is not an expression of a soldier's inescapable masculinity. He is not an embodiment of war like Sibaso. He does not demand food from terrified civilians or lament a failed revolution as Hove's dissidents do. The form of his 'dissident' violence emerges from an intimate history of love affairs and relationships across the permeable borders of racially segregated lands. Abednego's murderous act would not have occurred without the Fifth Brigade's murder of his wife, baby and son, but it is also owed to the terrible failure of his biological father to recognise his kinship in his moment of greatest desperation.

Fiction and history

As is readily apparent, all three authors engage 'real history' alongside imagined and remembered history, and allow their characters to do so too, offering us views of worlds inaccessible to non-fiction writers and subversive of official nationalism. Here, I place their work in conversation with non-fiction writing, and consider these novels as historically situated texts that reflect distinct moments in and perspectives on Zimbabwean nationalism.

Hove's account of the failures of nationalism and the new nation-state echo a pervasive 1980s' critique of ZANU(PF)'s developmental agenda. This critique condemned the new government for its unwillingness, as Hove suggests, to acknowledge the ancestors or address their descendants' demands for the return of the 'lost lands', favouring instead a colonially inflected, modernising approach. ZANU(PF) ruled out restitution as a basis for land redistribution, placing it at odds with the expectations of much of its black rural constituency, populist politicians in its own ranks, and scholars on the left who argued for more radical land redistribution.[44] Hove gives us a tragic, personal story of the alienating costs of these aspects of ZANU(PF)'s nationalism. *Shadows* also chimes with scholarly accounts of the settlement of Gokwe, produced in this era though only completed after Hove's book.[45] These affirm the tension, to which he gives such life, between the 'autochthonous' local and the aspirant, outsider evictee and immigrant. Gokwe was in the 1950s conceived of by outsiders as a disease-ridden backwater, barely marked by roads and

[44] A key critic was Sam Moyo. For an early intervention, see his "The Land Question," in *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition 1980-1986*, ed. I. Mandaza (Codesria, 1986), though note his left critique was not on the side of the ancestors either. That view was vividly expressed in D. Lan's *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and spirit mediums in Zimbabwe* (University of California Press, 1985).

[45] See the theses of E. Worby, "Remaking Labour, Reshaping Identity: Cotton, Commodification, and the Culture of Modernity in Northwestern Zimbabwe" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1992), and G. T. Ncube, "A History of North Western Zimbabwe, 1850s-1950s: Comparative Change in Three Worlds" (MPhil diss., University of Zimbabwe, 1994).

bereft of schools and clinics. The thousands of Africans who arrived in the district in the 1950s and 1960s, amidst the state-backed cotton boom that transformed it, were primarily from Zimbabwe's central regions, much like Johanna's father. They were often educated, Christian, familiar with urban work and life, wealthier than the Gokwe inhabitants, speakers of different languages, and intent on agricultural and social 'improvement', attributes that together constituted an identity understood as 'modern'. As Hove explores, their arrival in Gokwe produced suspicions, fed by competition for land and for authority over the land, that played dangerously into interactions with guerrillas in the 1970s.

What Hove's account leaves out, and what was indeed still largely unacknowledged in public discourse when he wrote, was the ZANU(PF) government's central role in creating the category and person of the 'dissident', its overwhelming use of violence against civilians, and its politicisation of ethnicity. Politicised ethnicity goes unaddressed in *Shadows*, though it played a particular role in Gokwe, according to the Ndebele-speaking ex-ZIPRA dissidents who entered the district. They considered Gokwe, a territory ZPRA had dominated in the 1970s, to have grown hostile in the 1980s because it was Shona-speaking: it had been turned against them, they said, by ZANU(PF)'s political mobilisation of ethnic difference through 'vigilante groups' and a people's militia.[46] These aspects of the making of the nation remain beyond the grasp of Hove's characters, who do not engage in organised politics. This is something of an irony: nationalist activism was one of the defining aspects of 'modernity' in the 1960s and it shaped the views of many of the evictees and immigrants Hove describes.[47] Despite their peregrinations, dreams, and interactions with state agents, Hove's characters do not imagine or make new forms of political community – their gaze is focused on a past community at peace with the land and the ancestors, still desired as a future. The failure of ZANU(PF)'s nationalism of interest to Hove lies in its 'modernist' rejection of that vision, and it can only sketchily accommodate dissidents.

Vera and Tshuma both wrote with a deep knowledge of the outpouring of non-fiction writing on Gukurahundi. Vera encountered these 'counter-narratives' when they were first making their impact and were only shakily established, and Tshuma when they had been absorbed into and reworked by a pervasive, oppositional political culture in Bulawayo. Vera remarked in an interview following the publication of *The Stone Virgins* that she was writing for the past and present, intent on overcoming the fear of talking about Gukurahundi: 'I wanted to say, this is how it was. Just that ... we weren't past this violence; we have remained in that'.[48] Her words echo the 'unsilencing' mode that permeated 1990s non-fiction accounts generally; the language of 'burying' memory was used by Richard Werbner.[49] Vera's closest exchanges were with the historian Terence Ranger.[50] Ranger writes that he and Vera read all

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[46] Alexander, "Dissident Perspectives," 170.
[47] See P. Nyambara, "Immigrants, 'Traditional' Leaders and the Rhodesian State: The power of 'communal' land tenure and the politics of land acquisition in Gokwe, Zimbabwe, 1963-1979," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 771-91.
[48] Quoted in D. Deller, "Atrocity, Memory and History: The bewilderment of violence in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*," accessed October 12, 2020, https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.607.3779&rep=rep1&type=pdf, 2.
[49] R. Werbner, "Beyond Oblivion: Confronting Memory Crisis," in *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, ed. R. Werbner (Zed Books, 1998), 9.
[50] See Ranger, "History has its ceiling"; Zeleza, "Colonial fictions," 14-16.

of each other's works in the 1990s. The rural district of 'Kezi' and the 'Gulati hills' in *Stone Virgins* loosely refer to Matobo District and the Matopos hills, the subject of Ranger's book *Voices from the Rocks*. *Voices* traces the 1970s war in this region and explores dissidents' interactions with civilians. Vera would likely have read *Breaking the Silence*, which contains a detailed study of Matobo too. Both *Voices* and *Breaking the Silence* make a case that northern Matobo was unusually severely affected by dissident violence.[51] *Breaking the Silence* describes this region as a place where dissidents were 'greatly hated and feared by the civilians, who particularly resented their continual demands to feed them', and notes that the 'mountainous terrain and lush vegetation provided ideal cover for the dissidents' while posing obstacles to the Fifth Brigade's trucks.[52] *Violence and Memory* contains accounts from ex-ZPRA veterans, including former dissidents, of their visits to the sacred caves of the Matopos in search of cleansing from the ill effects of war.[53] Other places and practices that Vera describes – the emptying of buses and killing and abduction of passengers, particular methods of torture, the dumping of bodies down mine shafts, the establishment of torture camps – are described in these texts too.

These personal and textual touch points may have been partly responsible for shifts in Vera's writing that scholars have identified in *The Stone Virgins*. In comparison to her earlier novels, Vera shows a willingness to engage with the (male) story of the public narrative and event rather than dwelling on the (female) spaces in between them.[54] Primorac notes that *Stone Virgins* is the only one of Vera's novels to substantially cross the barrier of 1980, and that this allows for the 'linearisation' of time and for a female character to undergo positive change.[55] Gagiano argues that *Stone Virgins* is unique in Vera's work for developing so fully and sympathetically a male interior view (that of Sibaso).[56] But Vera's skepticism of the imaginative capacities and liberatory possibilities of non-fiction narratives remains. It is expressed both in the poetically dense form of the text itself and in the ambivalence her characters show towards texts and public history. As we have seen, Sibaso's rediscovery of Solomon Mutswairo's novel *Feso* causes his head to explode. *Feso* is the first Shona (Zezuru) novel, and was an important nationalist charter, much read by nationalists and banned by the Rhodesian censors.[57] Sibaso's capacity to absorb history as a linear story of progress and liberation, an essential aspect of nationalist texts, is lost. (The novel's Shona linguistic and cultural aspects go unremarked, but perhaps its ethnic nationalism shaped Sibaso's alienation too.) Sibaso's doomed flight into myth may be a response to his experience of history as something that he can no longer make sense of, but which traps him nonetheless. As Vera writes,'His mind is perforated like a torn net and each event falls through it like a stone.

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[51] The reasons for this are complex. See T. Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe* (James Currey, 1999), 246-53; CCJP/LRF, *Breaking the Silence*, 114-40.
[52] CCJP/LRF, *Breaking the Silence*, 137.
[53] Alexander et al., *Violence and Memory*, 273-6; Alexander, "Dissident perspectives," 171-4.
[54] Ranger, "History has its ceiling," 205; Primorac, *The Place of Tears*, 156.
[55] Primorac, *The Place of Tears*, 165, 167-8.
[56] A. Gagiano, "Reading *The Stone Virgins* as Vera's study of the Katabolism of war," *Research in African Literatures* 38, no. 2 (2007): 72.
[57] See E. Chiwome, "A comparative analysis of Solomon Mutswairo's and Yvonne Vera's handling of the legend of *Nehanda*," in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera,* ed. R. Muponde and M. Taruvinga (Weaver Press, 2002), 179; Primorac, *The Place of Tears*, 147; Ranger, "History has its ceiling," 213

When he stands, his head hits against something heavy – he discovers that history has a ceiling' and he must therefore 'crouch', assume a 'defensive attitude' and find new enemies so that he may stay in warlike mode.[58] The surviving victim of Sibaso's dissident violence, Nonceba, is distrustful of texts too. Writing and being written are male and state domains that cannot heal her. She finds healing in an unwritten, barely spoken, feminine space of memory.[59] Vera's exploration of these gendered ways of engaging the past by a dissident and his victim evade the constraints of history writing, and illuminate alternative, intimate understandings of the aftermath of the nation's violent making.

Tshuma has set out in an academic article how she sought to 'hew fiction from history' in the writing of *House of Stone*.[60] It is both a personal story of her search for explanation as a child growing up in the wake of Gukurahundi, and a considered engagement with literary theory and history. Tshuma's skill in exploring – and transcending – the power-laden constructions of nationalist narrative is born of this combination. Her work also reflects the moment in which she wrote. ZANU(PF) had, from the late 1990s (Vera's moment of writing), ever more blatantly and publicly manipulated history to justify its rule. Two decades later its 'patriotic history' inspired parody and satire, performed on social media and elsewhere by a younger generation that had never known nationalist loyalties.[61] Tshuma's work also engaged with several decades of opposition activism and cultural production in Bulawayo, which had remodeled the non-fiction accounts of Gukurahundi produced in the 1990s. As Lena Reim has argued, this was not a tale of simply unsilencing a repressed narrative but of remaking the past through the 'interpretative lens' of the present.[62] Tshuma dwells on the manipulation of history in both the present and the past among those who had suffered, and continued to suffer, repression. History is never fixed or finished in *House of Stone* because its characters are always rewriting it, retelling it, reperforming it; they are its active researchers and makers, a process that might be freeing but is not necessarily so. Histories of violence in particular wreak havoc across generations in the form of silence, truth and lies, 'cannibalising our present, mutating our future'.[63] Tshuma describes her protagonist Zamani's desire to 'reinscribe' history, 'with the goal not only of understanding that history but also recreating it', and so 'changing his metaphysical and political positioning in the present'.[64] He knowingly 'uses the tools of his post-colonial environment to try to apprehend and master it' – as does Tshuma. This is how Tshuma sneaks up on and draws us into history, 'a dark thing fraught with secrets', and its memory.[65]

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[58] Vera, *Stone Virgins*, 82-3.
[59] *Ibid.*, 172-4.
[60] N. R. Tshuma, "Hewing Fiction from History: The writing of history, conflict and trauma in House of Stone," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 5 (2021): 745-61.
[61] See P. Maedza in this collection.
[62] L. Reim, "'Gukurahundi continues': Violence, memory and Mthwakazi activism in Zimbabwe," *African Affairs* 122, no 486 (2023), 95.
[63] Tshuma, *House of Stone*, p. 321.
[64] Tshuma, "Hewing," 748; Tshuma, *House of Stone*, 317.
[65] Tshuma, "Hewing," 755. See discussion in G. Ncube, "Gukurahundi revisited in the 'Second Republic': Trauma, memory and violence in Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *House of Stone*," in *Cultures of Change in Contemporary Zimbabwe: Socio-political transition from Mugabe to Mnangagwa*, ed. O. Nyambi, T. Mangena, and G. Ncube (Routledge, 2022).

Tshuma and her characters transmute historical accounts, viewing them through unexpected eyes, with discomfiting humour, and almost always in relation to kin. In her account of Gukurahundi violence, she drew on the *Breaking the Silence* report but sought to give it a 'human shape', considering how the stories it recorded worked in memory to animate political movements and haunt characters who committed or were subjected to violence. Tshuma addresses the role of oral histories in this, a key methodology of the non-fiction texts of the 1990s. This is not the only method of research used by her characters – they explore state archives, read widely, google, and 'self-archive' on and off social media – but it is at the heart of their use of the past to construct relations with one another in the present. Tshuma writes that when she sought to understand the history of Gukurahundi among her own family members she 'interrogated them', but found this past was too painful to tell out loud.[66] The residual pain of the past does not stop the characters in her novel. Her chief interrogator, Zamani, drugs, threatens, cajoles, blackmails and bribes his adopted family members – including the 'dissident', his potential father figure, Abednego – until they reveal their secret pasts. Tshuma's human rights researchers also interrogate. In their search for names and numbers and violations, the essential stuff of their reports, they cannot hear the stories that matter to their interviewees. The histories produced through these interrogations are inevitably distorted by the dynamics of power and the chasm between the desires and needs of 'interrogators' and their 'interviewees'. This is a lesson that echoes across all these fictional works, highlighting the dangers and difficulties inherent in 'unburying' memory and 'unsilencing' history.

Tshuma shows us the personal and political abuse of history by both the powerful and the weak and, at the same time, its essential role in producing meaning, identity and community. Her 'dissident' – Abednego – is an exemplar of these tensions. His story lets us see that the effects of past violence cannot easily be evaded by silence or by opportunistic or imposed retellings, that telling the truth can be life-destroying as well as liberating, and that, in intimate spaces, what the truth is cannot be easily captured or fixed even though some agreement on it will always be sought as a means of affirming kinship and belonging.

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The dissident in each of these three novels offers a lens on the foundational violence of the nation. Each reflects – and reflects on – non-fiction narratives and the particular contexts in which they were produced. Hove, writing just after the end of the violence of the 1980s and before any substantial reckoning with it, locates the failures of the war and official nationalism in the ongoing alienation of the land and the ancestors. Dissidents are a leftover of war, their presence only sketchily explained. Vera wrote with a deep knowledge of the non-fiction texts of the 1990s, at a time when they were only beginning to settle into the public sphere. She places the terrors and tragedies of masculinist militarism at the heart of nation-making. Her dissident, Sibaso, is trapped in war, and violently excluded from the nation. His acts of violence emerge from his search for solace in patriarchal mythology. Tshuma gives us a lesson in the post-colonial, post-national rethinking of the politics of

[66] Tshuma, "Hewing," 758.

historical narration in a moment when the coercive sureties of official nationalism had become ridiculous, even if they were still terrifying. Her survivors take it upon themselves to reconstruct their pasts with great creativity in order to make their present liveable and, possibly, build a future. Abednego's fleeting life as a dissident is the result of an act of horrific state violence but its form only makes sense as a reflection of a long and complex family history shaped by settler colonialism. The intent of non-fiction texts to 'unsilence' repressed histories in an authoritative manner, able to form a basis for accountability, produced constraints on the telling of violent pasts that are brightly illuminated here. The very unreliability of the stories these novels explore, their manipulation, their opacity and mythology, reveal perhaps above all how experiences and memories of violent nation-making powerfully inhabit the intimate, gendered social spaces delineated by the bonds – real, imagined, and deeply desired – of kin.

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