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## "IN THE CENTRE OF OUR CIRCLE"

*gender, selfhood and non-linear time in yvonne vera's nehanda*

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“**A**s Africans, our history is there to serve us, not us to serve it [...] The legend, the history, is created in the mouth, and therefore survival is in the mouth. That’s what I wanted to capture in *Nehanda*,” said Yvonne Vera (1965–2004) in an interview with Jane Bryce, connecting the collective survival of formerly colonised people to the retrieval, articulation and transmission of their past (Bryce and Vera 221). History was equally important to the Cape-Verdean intellectual and freedom fighter Amílcar Cabral, for whom “the foundation of national liberation lies in the inalienable right of every people to have their *own* history” (173; my emphasis). For Cabral, as for other anticolonial thinkers like Aimé Césaire or Albert Memmi, the European colonisation of Africa provoked a rupture between Africans and their own historical trajectory (172). Against the commonly held Western belief that it was the European presence in Africa that set the continent in motion toward modernity and progress, Cabral saw colonial domination as a hindrance, a derailing, an off-path turn. It was liberation from colonialism that would return to African societies their “capacity to create progress” (173) and see them “return to the upwards path of their own culture” (174). Cabral’s choice of words here, likely inspired by Marxist theory, indicate however that he partook in Western conceptions of history as requiring “a linear and cumulative sense of time” (Trouillot 7). It highlights the hopes of progress prevailing in newly independent Africa, once colonialism no longer blocked the path to modernity (Gikandi 19).

Vera’s tackling of colonialism and history follows another direction: stating that “survival is in the mouth,” she emphasises the centrality

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of orality and storytelling to African societies and subjectivities. Meanwhile, she relies on highly modernist writing techniques, such as intuitive writing and altered consciousness, to convey the feelings and symbols associated with African identity while marginalising the colonial archive as a historical source (Bryce and Vera 220). The fashioning of the subject propelled by her writing does not evoke fragmentation or alienation as is often the case in European modernist writing. Rather, it presents the subject as composite, permeable to and dependent on her environment, her community and her ancestors. In lieu of an individual unconscious sheltering fantasies and impulses, the frenzied state Vera experienced

when she was writing allowed her to reconnect with a collective memory and imaginary that had been discredited, denied and discarded by European modern imperialism. The connection between the visible and invisible worlds in African cosmologies, for example, omnipresent in *Nehanda*, is key to African emancipation, while heroism is portrayed as a collective and spiritual deed rather than emanating from exceptional individuals. Acknowledging the “intimate knowledge” she had of her heroine and the “emotional clarity” that guided her as she departed from colonial accounts about Nehanda (a point I will return to shortly), Vera embraced history’s fundamental ambivalence as both a process and a narrative of which social groups and individuals are agents as well as narrators (Trouillot 23–24).

By dedicating her first novel to the anticolonial heroine who mobilised her people against British rule in the late nineteenth century and was a major inspiration to the anticolonial armed struggle of the 1960s and 1970s in Zimbabwe (Bertho, “L’histoire de la Chimurenga” 144–45), Vera appropriated a major symbol of Zimbabwe’s patriotic history to offer a deeply mysterious and subversive portrayal of a woman. According to Vera, *Nehanda* “came out of [her] almost like a dream” “as if [she] were [herself] a spirit medium” (Bryce and Vera 220). The novel’s emphasis on religion, spirituality, possession and prophecy (for Nehanda allegedly announced, as she was about to be hanged by the British: “my bones shall rise again”) put forward spiritual and utopian aspects of anticolonial resistance, while resolutely locating both within African women’s experiences and voices. Against the symbolic violence Africans were subjected to within the European project of modernisation, *Nehanda* participates in a cultural project of reparation and healing through its powerful integration of African cosmologies and systems of belief.

One of the novel’s most original aspects lies in its tackling of non-linear time, manifested in the narrative structure (opening and closing on Nehanda’s death), the countless allusions to time, connecting past and future, and

its corresponding spatial evocation of circularity and roundness. As Johannes Fabian highlighted, colonialism and its favoured knowledge apparatus, anthropology, mobilised time to institute hierarchies and exclusion: they proclaimed that the Other lived in a different, more primitive time, while Europeans and their superior understanding of chronology and history were located at the top of the evolutionary tree (Fabian 30). These considerations, as I will show, are radically displaced and mercilessly parodied in Vera’s novel, set at the height of the European project of modernisation, in the late nineteenth century. To explore cyclical time, the author draws on the figure of Nehanda, herself characterised by reincarnation and prophecy. The first Nehanda was the daughter of the founder of the Mutapa empire in central Zimbabwe in the sixteenth century. She was considered to host a powerful lion spirit, who after her death would communicate with and be reincarnated in spirit mediums. One such reincarnation was in the spirit medium Nehanda Charwe, who, in the late nineteenth century, called on the people of colonial Zimbabwe to expel the colonisers. After her arrest, the prophecy of her return announced the second Chimurenga, the liberation struggle that unfolded from the 1960s to independence in 1980. The figure of Nehanda became a palimpsest of Zimbabwe’s history of resistance, connecting anticolonial insurrection to the struggle for liberation and to precolonial Zimbabwe. Bringing together various historical periods, memories of resistance and narratives of defeat and victory, *Nehanda* highlights the connection between subjectivity and temporality, pointed out by Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* (15). As such, she defies Western conceptions of linear time and monolithic, stable identity, embodying instead a fluid, complex consciousness shaped by its connection with the land, its constitutive natural elements and the departed.

Exploring further the link between time and selfhood in postcolonial Africa, this article analyses how Yvonne Vera’s debut novel *Nehanda* offers a powerful rebuttal of colonial discourse

on Africa and its history while simultaneously subverting male-centred narratives of resistance and liberation through the display of cyclical time and emphasis on circular, round and bended spaces and bodies. The insistence on and recurrence of the circular and the curved throughout the novel, in its structure and its descriptions of places, objects and characters, displace Western notions of linearity, verticality and direction, while also anchoring the narrative of struggle and liberation in women's actions, women's memories and women's voices. Appropriating the figure of the spirit medium Nehanda, a highly institutionalised symbol of Zimbabwean resistance, to offer a dream-like, highly poetic and modernist account of the first Chimurenga (liberation struggle), Yvonne Vera signalled her impatience with both colonial and anticolonial male-centred historiographies. Turning her back on highly gendered and sexualised scripts describing colonialism as penetration and colonisation as emasculation (Oyewumi 121), Vera created instead a dreamlike, highly aestheticised atmosphere that brought forward the spiritual, collective and feminine dimensions of the struggle for emancipation as "new resources for the radical imagination" and post-colonial futures (Forter 5).

The displacing of linear and chronological time is immediate in the novel, whose very structure suggests a cyclical pattern weaving past and present in the quest for liberation. *Nehanda's* opening paragraphs capture her demise, presented as both physical and spiritual, while in the final, one-page-long chapter, the words "death" or "dead" are repeated seven times. The mirror structure of the narrative emphasises the repeated pattern of revolt and rebellion until true liberation can be achieved, while the departed function as sources of strength and inspiration towards this emancipatory project. It is new beginnings, not death, that are figured as the horizon in *Nehanda*. The metaphor of the circle is mobilised on many occasions throughout the novel to signify the need to connect the past with the present and future of the struggle. Nowhere is this more evident than in the

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scene of the birth of Nehanda, taking place in the early moments of the novel and expanding a previously brief and discontinued narration into meticulously crafted descriptions and dialogues. Arriving after the figuration of Nehanda's death and immediately following a short episode from her childhood, Nehanda's birth concludes a reversed introductory triptych, the function of which I will return to. Using Adriana Cavarero's work *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* as well as Nwando Achebe's study on female power in Africa, I first examine how Nehanda's birth brings together a circular conception of time and a feminist evocation of power.

The scene opens with an enigmatic description of a calabash, "which holds the memories of the future" (Vera 3). The apparent contradiction in words, gesturing towards prophecy, destiny and utopia, is reiterated in the next proposition: "forgetting is not easy for those who travel in both directions of time" (ibid.). Anchoring the future in the past, both moments of time are stirred together in a round container evocative of nourishment and wholeness, celebrating the coming together of the dead and the living in this cyclical moment of life and ritual: "The departed had come to deliver a gift to the living, to shape the birth of voices, to grant the safe passage of the unborn" (ibid.). The presence of the ancestors, the protection they extend onto the newborn, highlight the powerful bond uniting generations and the belief in the constant interventions of the invisible world, shaping the lives of men and women.<sup>1</sup> Circularity also materialises in objects and bodies: the calabash and its roundness are evocative of a pregnant belly; the pot is decorated with beads, another round object, while the spoon used to stir it has a "curved handle" (ibid.). Bodies similarly come together in a circle, delineating the space to indicate solidarity and cohesiveness, as we are told that: "Three women wove a circle of strength around the central hearth" (ibid.). Time, bodies and objects echo one another, creating a space both sacred and intimate, and unequivocally female.

Cavarero has examined how inclination in Western philosophy has traditionally been associated with the putative weakness of women (4), while rectitude echoed the superior moral autonomy of the masculine self. As a movement through which one “leans out of the self in the direction of whatever may affect me from the outside world” (6), inclination implies a loss of balance, a dangerous state of vulnerability and dependence. Central to Cavarero’s feminist critique of rectitude is her analysis of natality and motherhood, with the mother bending over her newborn figuring a primordial scene of inclination. This initial movement of protection towards another opens the possibility for an ethics of relationality, where vulnerability and exposure “[counter] the violence of the egocentric subject” (12). In a colonial context such as that of *Nehanda*, rectitude and straightness were associated with European (male) identity while natives embodied deviance, assigned in social evolutionism with both femaleness and a lower, less advanced stage of development. Thinking about straightness and linearity, Sara Ahmed noted how “a line [...] both divides things and creates spaces that we imagine we can be ‘in’” (14). The dividing force of the line is also present when one examines categories of knowledge produced during colonial times: Fabian showed how the West’s apparently inclusive singular frame of temporal reference actually excluded non-Europeans by locating them within a different, primitive time (30). The line as metaphor is also mobilised by the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, to figure the abyss in which indigenous knowledge frameworks and cosmologies have been precipitated under European expansion and imperialism. Alternative knowledge, histories and experiences thus become “unthinkable” and are “actively produced as non-existent” as an invisible line sets them apart from Western thinking, constructed as the only cognitive possibility (Sousa Santos 118–19; Rooney 15).

*Nehanda* offers such an alternative framework, fighting epistemological and historical erasure by radically displacing Western

narratives about Africa. In Vera’s account of the birth of Nehanda, where inclination, roundness and circularity are associated with femininity, these forms do not denote the vulnerability characteristic of European representations and categories. On the contrary, it is strength and spiritual forces that emanate from the scene, as circularity connects and brings together women and spirits. Nehanda herself is a “bridge” (another symbol of inclination in the sense of Cavarero, as bending and relationality) between the living and the dead (Mangwanda 142). Far from the alienation or incompleteness implied by dependency in Western philosophy through Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum*, Nehanda’s birth enacts the African saying of “we are therefore I am” and resolutely inscribes this relational subjectivity in the feminine (Oyewumi 143), highlighting one of “the ways in which African women and/or the female spiritual principle exhibit power, influence and authority” (Achebe 20–21). The strength of these women, however, relies not on their capacity to influence the birth, but rather resides in their knowledge that the spirits are in control, their acceptance of their own limitations. As such, the power they hold is akin to wisdom, and transpires through their physical appearance. The “highly respected” midwife, Vatete, is distinguished by the “deep secretive furrows” of her brow (Vera 5), her “wrinkled pouches, containing many memories,” “the folds of skin around her knees and ankles, and around her elbows” (5). The marks of time on her body are celebrated as so many indications of experience and all evoke roundness and bending, from the pouches under her eyes to the folds around her articulations, body parts whose very function is to bend and flex.

Far from Kant’s marvelling at the moral authority through which man, “by freeing himself from the world, proudly raises himself over himself” (Cavarero 70), away from the “arrogant posture [of the ‘I’]” (37), roundness and bending imply the capacity to receive, nurture and mobilise knowledge, memories and experiences to ensure the protection and flourishing of one’s community. Subjectivity,

in Vera's prose, is therefore also shaped by one's environment, in a movement reaching beyond the self and beyond the human. This brings us back to the novel's aforementioned opening, which places Nehanda within various concentric circles that are also located within her. The initial description of Nehanda, as she is about to be "irreversibly" damaged at the moment of her death (Vera 2), merges her with natural elements: "rivers and trees cover her palms" (1), her eyes "have been filled with dark heavy clouds" (2): Nehanda's self and fate are inseparable from the land and natural elements. The second scene figures a barely walking Nehanda, about to be engulfed by "a gust of wind," "nodding like a spirit" as she hears the call of the ancestors form within herself (2): Nehanda understands that she hosts the voices of the departed. And finally, the scene of Nehanda's birth mostly focuses on a small group of women, symbolising the community that Nehanda will later endeavour to free from colonial oppression. Land, ancestral spirits and community are never external elements but intrinsic dimensions of Nehanda. She embodies a humanity whose identity extends beyond the human and connects with all forms of life, visible and invisible. Interdependence and reciprocity displace classical hierarchies and expose the vanity of the autonomous subject. For Nehanda's birth, the women come together, squatting or seating, either on the floor or on a small stool, in a low posture denoting humbleness and testifying to their deep connection with the land. Humility is physically and discursively performed, as the midwife pleads with the spirits to protect the unborn by appealing to their collective filiation, again in the plural: "We are your children" (7).

Analysing Arendt's relation between birth and action in *The Human Condition*, Cavarero notes how the newborn, symbolising the emergence of newness and uniqueness, "constitutes the foundation of action and thus too of politics" (110). For Arendt, this irruption of the new is what deviates human existence from a linear path to death and destruction, offering instead possibilities for renewal contained

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within cyclical patterns of life (Cavarero 111). As such, the newborn is characterised by her agency, which also echoes the scene of Nehanda's birth in Vera's novel: the women have been summoned by the newborn to assist her coming to the world and to fortify her mother in labour. Here, the newborn (more precisely in the novel, the unborn's agency) is channelled to raise awareness among and bring together the community and its ancestors. Collective mobilisation is essential in the face of a new danger: during Nehanda's birth, one of the women present, a trader, tells of her unsettling encounter with white colonisers. In Vera's narrative, Nehanda is a response to colonial violence, the gift sent by the ancestors to the living (3). Her identity is an emanation of the collective and a forewarning of coming battles, a promise.

The initial pages of the novel put forward a conception of subjectivity and temporality as composite, fluid and cyclical: humanity is not impermeable to the non-human but an amalgamation of different forms of life, including natural elements and invisible forces. New life, inspired and possessed by ancestral voices, allows for a deviation from the path imposed by the harmful colonial presence. As the trader tells of her vision of the "stranger" (Vera 8), oscillating between dream, premonition and realist description (Bertho, *Sorcières* 249), the impending chaos resulting from the sacrilegious presence becomes evident and casts colonial occupation in a different light, focusing on religious and spiritual damages. The uncertain source of the story (travel or dream) reveals the discrepancy between the historiographical, archival traces of the colonial encounter and its lasting imprint on colonised minds and imaginations. One aspect in particular captures the attention of the women: the stranger has settled on a hill: "Why would the stranger choose to build on the hill, instead of below it? A visitor to a strange land must be humble enough not to choose the highest ground in the land to build his home" (Vera 10). Verticality betrays the settler's hubris, expressed in his choosing of the highest point to confirm his own sense of superiority

towards the people and his panoptic project to control and exploit the land. It offers a chilling contrast with the serene humility of the women: the destructive, singular masculine presence stands at the polar opposite of the plural feminine gathered to welcome life. Defamiliarising the Western trope of the rational male individual, Vera exposes its brutality and inhumanity, offering the reader a symbolically charged counter-reading of the colonial encounter that is, here, a non-encounter. No direct exchanges, no gazes or words between the stranger and the trader and her companions are reported by her, confirming the “denial of co-presence” at the heart of the colonial project and, therefore, the impossibility to coexist (Sousa Santos 120). Khombe Mangwanda remarked that in this scene, Vera offers a reversed account of colonialism and Otherness, by depicting the journey of a native trader (rather than the classical description of the coloniser’s expedition) and having her express puzzlement and curiosity at the “stranger” and his “unknown customs” (144). The marginalisation of the European subject announces the parody of colonial society that takes place later on in the novel. Through her detailed narrating of Nehanda’s birth, Vera centres African voices and cosmogonies and constructs the European presence as disruptive and parasitic.

The white man’s appearance as a character in the narrative (“the stranger”) figures the brutality of his irruption on the land and is enacted through a sudden shift in tone from one chapter to the next. After a dramatic scene describing a collective and solemn deliberation in Nehanda’s village, where the inhabitants anxiously discuss the various profanations and provocations perpetrated by the settlers, the reader is taken to the bedroom of the colonial administrator, Mr Browning, as he freshens up. The lyrical and poetic are replaced with a realist, excessively down-to-earth tone, replacing ambivalent poetry with “linear clarity seldom found in Vera’s works” (Martin Shaw 28). Mr Browning’s grand “goal of civilising the country” materialises, somewhat pathetically, in his attempts at teaching proper table etiquette to his servant, whose “heathen”

name, Mashoko, he has not bothered to remember (Vera 37). Performing clichés of Englishness (drinking tea, having a small and tidy garden) and colonial domination (“how is one to get prompt action from Africans if one does not shout?” (37)), uttering worn-out statements about his mission (“Action is progress” (44), “We need order and justice” (46)), Mr Browning exudes mediocrity and triviality. His unawareness of the hostility he arouses creates an atmosphere of tension and discomfort. Both his and his servant’s physical stiffness betray their mutual lack of trust and complicity (27, 38). Later on, as we learn that it is Mr Browning who built the government station on the hill, the connection between verticality and colonial hubris is reasserted by Browning’s instruction to the native police “to put authority in their step by walking stiffly, their shoulders raised to the sky” (42). Emphasising the affectedness of colonial authority, the over-reliance on verticality stresses the brutal and performative nature of colonial rule as well as its compensative function, as the colonial administrator is himself described as small and chubby, repressed and self-conscious (43).

The masterfully composed scenes figuring Mr Browning, the British administrator, Mr Smith, a junior colonial civil servant, and Browning’s servant Moses/Mashoko, create a sharp contrast in style, tone and atmosphere with the chapters centred on Nehanda and her world. The juxtaposition effect dramatises the radical alterity displayed by the white man, bringing ridicule and discredit to himself and a civilising mission devoid of beauty and poetry. Emphasising the irreducible otherness of the white coloniser, the novel also assigns him to specific, enclosed spaces, underlining his peripheral status, narrow-mindedness, isolation from African society and lack of connection with his environment. While Nehanda and her people travel through the land, hide in the forest, create ambushes in the hills, Mr Browning is confined to his house, his “embryonic garden” (Vera 37), his veranda and, at the very end of the novel, Nehanda’s prison cell. The discrepancy between his project of

modernisation and civilisation and the actual spaces he carves out for it, reveals the delusional nature of the civilising mission and its reliance on Western ignorance and denial. The extent of this delusion is brought out by Mr Browning himself, as he asks, from the safety of his veranda: "Smith, do you know the difference between us and the natives? The difference is that we know where we are and the native does not" (44). The self-aggrandising joke, provoking feeble protest instead of the loud support Browning expected from Smith, betrays the colonial administrator's failure to convince even his own countrymen of the grandness of his schemes.

Whereas Browning makes grand claims about progress and civilisation while shielding in the safety of his home, embodying the Christian ethos of salvation in Africa, Smith personifies a more secular and scientific form of modernity, partaking in "natural-historical projects of observation, collection, classification and description" (Fabian 8). The mention of his frequent expeditions through the forest, searching for insects that "he took prisoner," mutilated and often crushed in his pocket (47), metonymically represents what Mary Louise Pratt called "Eurocentred Planetary Consciousness," which subsumed animals and plants globally to a European scientific order (37). It symbolises the extractive nature of modern Europe's relation to Africa, African resources and environment. It prefigures the hunting down of Nehanda in the forest, her arrest and exhibition as a trophy, and confirms Malcom Ferdinand's statement that postcolonial societies were founded on "the predation of Black flesh" (368). The scientific varnish masking Smith's own brutality does not fool Nehanda's people. After they take arms to expel the colonisers from the land, Smith's body is found in the forest, killed during one of his quests for insects. While Nehanda's connection to the land allows her to hide from colonial authorities in the forest, Smith's presence is but a hostile intrusion, a profanation, and is treated as such.

The contrast between Nehanda's survival during her flight and Smith's death is

heightened by Browning's and Smith's genuine inability to figure both Nehanda's strength and her influence over her people. The colonisers' complete failure to grasp the atmosphere of tension and resentment, the cecity produced by their faith in their own prejudice, are brought to light on numerous occasions in the novel ("Who would have thought these calm placid people would revolt" asks Mr Browning candidly (Vera 63)). Their constant under-estimating of Nehanda, however, is also the fruit of their deep-seated misogyny, which leads them to project their own sexism onto "the natives" (63). "This society has no respect for women, whom they treat like children. A woman has nothing to say in the life of the natives. Nothing at all.' His voice quivers" (62). Despite the energetic denegation of African women's power, the final trembling in Browning's voice suggests a repressed doubt, a painful denial. For McClintock, "[t]he invisible strength of black women presses everywhere on white life so that the energy required to deny it takes the shape of neurosis" (271). Juxtaposed with the narrative's careful description of African women's active participation in political meetings and debates, Browning's dismissive statement turns against him, exposing the magnitude of his ignorance and prejudice against women, especially "old" ones (Vera 62). For Browning, and colonial administrators more generally, who came from countries where women were legally prevented from participating in politics, it was "unthinkable" to find women in positions of influence in Africa (Oyewumi 123–24). Their exclusive acknowledgement of male power (but also male labour) led to the gradual exclusion of women from powerful positions during colonialism.

Beyond the issue of political participation/representation, racism and sexism intersected to locate African women at the "bottom of the [civilisational] ladder" (Schmidt 738–39). If women were recognised some form of influence, it was exclusively in negative terms, as they were accused of being even lazier, looser and more hostile to the civilising mission than their male counterparts. This transpires from



Browning’s bewilderment as Nehanda keeps eluding him: “How could a woman survive this forest?” (Vera 73). Browning’s inability to envision the connection between Nehanda and her land prevents him from understanding that the forest is not a threat to her, that “she is at home in this orbit full of welcoming ancient secret spaces” (74). During Nehanda’s flight in the forest, the narrative forcefully returns to the circular motif (the aforementioned “orbit”), again associated with birth and femininity: Nehanda walks “in circular paths through the forest, in a ritual of another birth” (77). This brings back Arendt’s association of birth with political action and agency, summed up here by Cavarero: “we are born twice: first as newborns and second (and then repeatedly afterwards) as ‘actors’ on the political scene” (110). The new birth Nehanda experiences is regenerative, suffused with the spiritual forces of the forest who strengthen her connection with both the ancestors and the living. A sacred shelter for initiation rituals in many African societies,<sup>2</sup> the forest fosters this process.

For Browning, having a woman as one of the major inspirations of anticolonial revolt is a threat and a humiliation. Embodying colonialism’s pernicious contradictions, Browning cannot comprehend the power that stems from Nehanda’s spiritual connection with the dead, the living and the land but he is still eager to crush it through forced modernisation and Christianisation (Vera 62). Significantly, Mr Browning’s difficulties with women extend beyond female African spirit mediums. His own wife is just as elusive as Nehanda: “This is not the first letter Cecilia has written to say that she is coming. Mr Browning chooses to believe her this time” (43). Inferring lies, deceit and masculine powerlessness, the two lapidary sentences suggest, in passing, a woman’s refusal to join her husband’s posting, resulting in heightened masculine anxiety and denial. This implicit domestic revolt destabilises harmonious Victorian ideals about the heterosexual couple and women’s subservient position within it, that Mr Browning ought to personify for the enlightenment

of the natives. In the colonies, the presence of white women was considered essential to operate the sealing of white society (Levine 140). It kept white men in check and minimised both homosexuality and miscegenation (Stoler 2). As such, Cecilia’s absence and plausible reluctance to join him casts doubt on Mr Browning as a figure of colonial masculinity.

The brief parenthesis (Mr Browning’s wife will no longer be mentioned from then on) is enough to insinuate doubt about the core of English society and its legitimacy to erect itself as a model to emulate. Against mainstream representations of white women as either passive or complicit with the colonial enterprise, these two sentences open up new possibilities of dissent and resistance at the heart of European patriarchy. At the same time, the deferred arrival of Mr Browning’s wife gestures towards the fantasised nature of a harmonious colonial society and the impossible fulfilment of the colonial project, always postponed, incomplete, partial and contested. Whereas Nehanda, as an African woman and a spirit medium, is the epitome of the Other, a figure of abjection that colonialism was intent on crushing (or “civilising”), Cecilia is the Other within, who connects the imperial project with the domestic sphere of Victorian society and makes visible its underlying cracks and contestations. Their double challenge to Mr Browning mockingly illustrates male anxieties and the masculinist trope that viewed women as “the ruin of Empire” (Knapman).

It is no coincidence that Cecilia’s deceit is conveyed by a letter. Throughout the novel, writing and its concrete manifestation, paper, inspire fascination, repulsion and suspicion from Nehanda’s people. In contrast to the force of orality which binds a person, or a group, to another through mutually exchanged words, paper and other concrete supports make words “tremble with the wind” (Vera 36), detaching them from face-to-face relations and promises. The politics of language are constantly intertwined with the quest for freedom, as these remarks uttered by Ibwe, a village elder, make clear:

We do not believe that words can become independent of the speech that bore them, of the humans who controlled and gave birth to them [...] Words surrendered to the stranger, like the abandoned child, will become alien – a stranger to our tongues. (33)

At the core of this fear of words dying or becoming alien, lies the distrust for the colonisers, who mobilised writing to deceive, manipulate, racketeer and expropriate. Adopting writing, for the colonised, is already surrendering to the coloniser, to his world view and his unreliable narratives. By dramatically enacting the antagonism between orality and writing, Vera emphasises how the colonial situation produced and exacerbated difference and hostility. While the novel itself, by carefully weaving together writing and orality, evades binary opposition between the two and signals the subversive and aesthetic possibilities contained in their combination (to which I will go back promptly), Vera is careful to remind the reader of the major epistemological and political claims that opposed writing and orality in the colonial situation (Balandier; Oboe 130).

Colonial archives exemplified the coloniser's ambition to exert power through a careful written compilation of data that attempted to provide unity and coherence to what Thomas Richards called a "paper empire" (4). In the case of *Nehanda*, it is worth recalling that her presence in the British colonial archive is scarce (Bertho, *Sorcières* 122), and that she has been retrieved as a major figure of anticolonial resistance from oral histories: as suggested above by Ibwe, orality is what has been keeping *Nehanda's* story and legacy alive. Terence Ranger, who played a major role in reconstructing the memory of the first Chimurenga through oral sources and became a close friend of Yvonne Vera,<sup>3</sup> recalled the novelist's irritation with the discipline of history, her refusal to be bound by facts (Ranger, "History Has Its Ceilings" 203). This Vera confirmed herself, when she explained how she wrote *Nehanda*: "I wrote it in a very emotional state of clarity of understanding that there *are* alternatives to history" (Bryce and Vera 221).

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Discarding the Western opposition between reason and passion, by which the latter would be deemed detrimental to historical "truth," Vera implies here that her lucidity stemmed from the powerful emotions generated by the story of *Nehanda* and its mishandling in Western historiography. Retrieving *Nehanda's* revolt to locate it within an African (more specifically Shona) political, cultural and religious context that predated, co-existed with and largely survived colonialism, Vera "uses writing to validate 'truth' claims in the non-linear, symbolic, polyrhythmic discourse of the black woman [...]" (Oboe 132). Suffused with the poetic and performative qualities of orality, writing is no longer alienation and surrender. On the contrary, it opens up creative possibilities to subvert Western scripts by centring African voices.

Language is thus an essential weapon in the struggle for collective emancipation, of which *Nehanda*, as a medium spirit whose essential function is to listen, transmit and speak, appears as a central figure. Language and the struggle against historical erasure and silencing come together through *Nehanda* from the first page of the novel: "*Nehanda* carries her bag of words in a pouch that lied tied around her waist. She wears some along her arms. Words and bones. Words fall into dreaming, into night. She hears the bones fall in the silence" (Vera 1). Like charms used by warriors to protect them from the enemy, *Nehanda* carries her words on her body and in a pouch. Words are sacred weapons, given by the spirits to the people, through *Nehanda*, their medium. The short, scattered sentences juxtapose curved objects (bag, pouch) with bodily elements (waist, arms, bones) and ethereal ones (words, dreaming silence), evoking *Nehanda's* demise and prophecy that "her bones shall rise again" (Oboe 128). While her bones will fall into silence, gesturing to the inevitability of her death, her words, which are also those of the ancestors that speak through her, will feed dreams of victory and promises of liberation, once they are made alive through *Nehanda's* voice. The passage captures the ambivalence of *Nehanda's* legacy

and the contradictory emotions attached to it: if silence is evocative of death and defeat, dreaming on the other hand suggests renewed hope and possibilities. The circular narrative echoes this temporal ambivalence, oscillating between dream and reality, the dead and the living, unescapable defeat through the demise of Nehanda and a final victory, “memories of the future” (Vera 94). The past is both identity and inspiration, and future possibilities depend on the people’s capacity to remember and mobilise the past: “hope for the nation is born out of the intensity of newly created memory” (92). Moments of despair, on the other hand, manifest when the people “cannot see into the future or into the past” (31). Death itself, as it opens the narrative, is defused and constructed as a beginning, just like the innumerable mentions of the future in the novel counterbalance the constant bad omens and pervading sense of fear, grief and apprehension. Trauma and utopia are thus held together as irreducible legacies of empire and resistance, conveyed, among the colonised, by oral tradition, which, like the story of Nehanda, will inspire future struggles. Whereas the coloniser is repeatedly portrayed as the one who, incapable of listening and understanding, reduces the people to silence, the words nurtured and spread by Nehanda carry the seeds of hope and freedom as they travel from mouth to mouth among her people. In Nehanda’s extraordinary vision of the future in the last pages of the novel, where she is remembered as “the death-defying mother of dreams” (93), the people discover “new languages with which to cross the boundaries of time” (ibid.). Emancipation is first and foremost a work of the imagination, a projection into the future, a clinging to utopia, fed by binding memories of defiance and sacrifice. It is not a mere returning to a world untainted by the coloniser, but rather a creative process, bringing people together as they share new words and new dreams leading to the birth of a new community, a new nation.

The poetic oneirism of *Nehanda* stands as a counter-memory to colonial accounts of colonialism and resistance while suggesting “a radical

alteration of humanness” that opens up utopian possibilities and implicitly questions African patriarchy (Bryce 10). By mobilising narratives of Nehanda and making her “the whirling centre of the wind” (92), Vera defamiliarises classical historical accounts, both Western and African, by locating resistance and revolution resolutely within the realm of women’s experiences and women’s voices (Bryce 10). Women are portrayed playing a central role in their communities and in the struggle, beautifully captured when the village recognises Nehanda as a spirit medium: “The men stop dancing and kneel around Nehanda, and the women in the outer circle cast protective shadows over the bending bodies of the men” (Vera 52). The double inclination, encapsulating veneration and care in this moment of recognition, casts women, and Nehanda’s influence over them, as both protective and subversive.

Nana Wilson-Tagoe observed that Vera’s focusing on the figure of Nehanda departs from Terence Ranger’s and Laurence Vambe’s historical accounts, which put more emphasis on Kaguvi as a leading figure of resistance (161). Vera contrasts Nehanda, whose unparalleled authority over her people comes from her gift of vision, bestowed upon her by the ancestors, to Kaguvi, who, despite his courage, will eventually give in to Christianity. While Kaguvi is captured, Nehanda is presented as having surrendered to put an end to British retaliations against civilians. When Kaguvi’s death is presented as terrifying agony, Nehanda’s passing is a “joyful celebration,” as she is reunited with her ancestors (Vera 98). Beyond Nehanda’s words, visions and selfless heroism, the narrative rests on a largely female choir of voices: the colonial encounter is narrated, first by the woman trader and later by the midwife Vatete. Nehanda’s mother, her bad dreams and terrible premonitions occupy an important space in the early part of the novel, conveying the pain, fear and sorrow that colonialism brought upon African societies. Drawing on Robert Holton (43), Wilson-Tagoe identifies a larger quest for legitimacy emerging from the women’s claim to historical representation and narration (163), and an oscillation in the

narrative, between the centrality of Nehanda's exceptional destiny and a wider gesturing towards women's prominent role in the struggle.

Albeit shadowed by her selfless devotion to her community against the desecrating presence of the "stranger," Nehanda also displays subversive attitudes that cannot be exclusively accounted for by her possessed state. In the shadow of Vera's denunciation of European colonial sexism, African patriarchy is also questioned and defied in *Nehanda*, offering a nuanced account of power relations that evades simplistic binaries. Before she became the widely acknowledged spirit medium leading the revolt, Nehanda was deemed "head-strong" and "troubled" because she refused to marry and never bore children (Vera 40). Her refusal to conform to traditional expectations placed her at the margins of her own community. Whereas Mashoko was humiliated because his work as Mr Browning's domestic forced him to perform feminine tasks, Nehanda willingly stepped away from predetermined gender roles to embrace her mission as leader and prophet. This confirms her exceptional destiny as an instrument of the ancestors, since shunning away from biological motherhood was a major challenge to social conventions (Minh-ha 30–31). The symbolic violence Mashoko suffered is evoked ambivalently, as it also brings to light his own dominant social position in his village: "In his own compound, Mashoko has a woman to bring his food to him" (Vera 39). Mashoko is the archetype of the emasculated colonised subject, who will regain his honour by proudly announcing his resignation to his boss, fully dressed in hyper-masculine warrior attire. Masculinity is repeatedly defined through the performance of power in *Nehanda*: when a *n'anga*, a traditional healer, is called by the villagers to decipher Nehanda's trance (in exchange for many "valuable gifts"), he asks the women to sweep his footprints and his every command is obeyed (41). As for "the hunter Kaguvi," the gesture through which he symbolically enters the struggle, the slaying of a bull and the drinking of his blood (58), can also be characterised

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as hypermasculine. Through these successive portrayals, the novel unsuspectingly draws our attention to the spectacle of African male power and places it under scrutiny. Eventually, these hypermasculine figures collapse as violence surges and defeat appears inevitable. The collective display of courage and strength will not suffice and it is Nehanda's defying retreat in the forest and later sacrificial surrender, which will provide the sources for future victories and alternative histories. Nehanda, who refused to be constrained by gender roles and social norms, was exclusively concerned with collective emancipation and spiritual cleansing. Although she refused to marry and bear children, her sacrificial death paradoxically constructed her as a maternal figure of inclination, whose identity forever extended beyond herself and towards her people.

This article has correlated temporal circularity and spatial bending to analyse *Nehanda*'s feminist and subversive message and examine how the novel's revisionary appropriation of the figure of Nehanda constructs, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "a different order of truth" (qtd in Forter 7). By centring African cosmologies through elaborate descriptions of material culture and rituals, while drawing on oral tradition to create a lyrical narrative of hope and defeat, the novel conveys colonialism's destructive impact while constituting in itself a defiant, highly aestheticised proof of Africa's cultural resilience. If the narrative powerfully demonstrates how the colonial situation constructed European and African cultures as alien and irreducibly antagonistic, its challenge to gender stereotypes provides nuanced and more subversive accounts of both European and African masculinities. Through Nehanda and the other female characters in the novel, women's role is re-evaluated, no longer reduced to biological reproduction (and the bearing of sons to defend the nation) but rather associated with a spiritual inclination towards one's community, a gift to listen to the voices of the departed and inspire new stories of the future. Valuing inclination and the spiritual strength of a gender-bending woman like Nehanda, Vera displaces colonial and

## “in the centre of our circle”

anticolonial narratives centred on masculinism and the restoration of male pride and dignity, to propose instead a radical re-imagining of women's role in African societies. In the cyclical time of *Nehanda*, women are both messengers and agents of the revolution.



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1 For an exploration of the role of the ancestors and the uncanny in Zimbabwean novels on the second Chimurenga, see Bertho, “Spectralités et ancêtres.”

2 Initiation in itself is a form of death and rebirth. See Eliade and Ellis.

3 Terence Ranger is a major figure of the history of resistance in Zimbabwe and Africa more generally, basing his research on nineteenth-century anticolonial protest and establishing a political filiation between those revolts and the struggle for independence (1964–79), therefore labelled “Second Chimurenga.” See Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896–97*.

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