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Carving history out of stone: telling and foretelling in Yvonne Vera's Nehanda

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Introduction

On May 14, 2003, two portions of a soapstone eagle were symbolically re-united in Zimbabwe by President Robert Mugabe. The upper part of this sculpture had always been in the country but it was the base, comprising the bird's torso and pedestal, which had a more adventurous history. It had been part of the Berlin Museum's collection since 1906—barring a brief stay in Russia— and was returned to Zimbabwe on permanent loan by the German government. [1]

The soapstone sculptures of Zimbabwe serve as a counter-narrative to the colonial belief that Zimbabwe, along with the rest of the African continent, was devoid of a civilisation before the advent of explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators. [2] The stone birds constituted an integral part of the people's culture; as Huffman (1985:68) points out, it was believed that the birds were messengers from the ancestors and represented the union between rulers and spirits. The fact that most of the sculptures were taken by colonial administrators or European hunters emphasised the ravages of colonialism. Upon Independence in 1980, therefore, the soapstone bird was chosen as the national flag's emblem and also featured on the country's currency as a reminder of Zimbabwe's cultural history and legacy.

Against this background, it was inevitable that loss and recovery would be the main themes of the speeches on the return of the bird, and that politicians and chiefs would draw upon a vast array of symbols and heap them onto the newly united and precariously balanced body of the soapstone bird. As Munjeri (2009:13-15) and Ranger (2004:8) have noted, interpretations of the bird's return included the claim that the German government had been driven by the ancestral spirits to return the sculpture, and that the bird symbolised ancestral approval of the government's land reform programme.

One could read the history of the bird's theft and return as an emblematic act of recovering the past. The re-unification of the bird itself, however, highlights not only the recovery of the past, but the challenges inherent in choosing and interpreting symbols of that past. Taking into account the etymological origins of the word symbol as *symballon*, 'that which is thrown together ,' which suggests an arbitrariness in determining meaning, such 'throwing together' not only takes place in interpreting the symbol and what it is said to represent, but also in the fragments which constitute the symbol itself. As such, the re-united bird exemplifies a symbol's fragments, and is a sign of the tensions inherent in the act of recovering and re-interpreting the past.

Such tensions in recovering and re-interpreting voices from the past lie at the heart of this paper, which explores Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* (1994) as a reflection on the legacy of historical and fictional representatives of the past. The main argument made in the paper is that in depicting *Nehanda* as a vulnerable narrating subject, Vera interrogates meta-narratives that base their origins in the past. Thus, in putting the past with all its flaws under the spotlight, attention is invariably brought back to the present which may have used such meta-narratives as a form of self-validation.

When nationalism meets fictional narrative

When Vera's first novel was published in 1994, several critics, including Wilson Tagoe (1999) and Vambe (2002) felt that the novel embraced negative aspects of nationalism and hagiography because of its focus on *Nehanda*, a spirit medium who had become a symbol for the independence struggle in Zimbabwe. During the struggle for independence, different political parties had used the myth of *Nehanda* as a way of appealing to national solidarity, highlighting how *Nehanda* is supposed to have vowed, just before her execution, to return and fight again.

Such wariness over the idea of nationalism had emerged over time because of what many critics saw as the ruling government's appropriation of pre-colonial history to serve its own purposes. As Raftapoulos (1999) among others, has shown, early historical accounts of nationalism in Zimbabwe generally imagined it as a unified confrontation against the imperialist presence and a subsequent repossession of the land, emphasised by symbols of the ancestors' presence. These images of nationalism have been the object of criticism by contemporary scholars; as history has shown, nationalism cannot simply translate into the absorption of what had been tribal values into all-encompassing, national

ones. In fact, in reference to the image used in the introduction to this paper, nationalism could be said to resemble a fragmented bird which, from a distance, looks unified. Thus, in his critical analysis of nationalism in Zimbabwe, Ndlovu-Gatseni (2009:8) succinctly sums up the disillusionment associated with the term:

> [...] nationalism is [...] a highly sedimented phenomenon that has operated through privileging certain features of social life while suppressing or de-emphasising others that are considered repugnant to its chosen agenda. [...] Zimbabwean nationalism is overlaid with ethnicity, militarism, neo-traditionalism, nativism, patriarchy and violence—very negative aspects that require urgent deconstruction.

Ndlovu's argument above demonstrates that when selective features of the old nationalism are re-packaged for use in post-colonial Zimbabwe, they generate suspicion and unease amongst different sectors of the population, including writers and critics. It is such an atmosphere of unease that greeted Vera's *Nehanda* by the above critics.

Vera's novel was not the first to focus on *Nehanda*. Solomon Mutswairo, Zimbabwe's first published novelist and composer of the country's national anthem, wrote about *Nehanda* in his epic novel, *Feso*, in Shona. Although his novel does not portray *Nehanda*'s point of view, the characters in the novel address a clan poem to her, appealing for her intervention. The novel was published in 1956 and banned because it was considered seditious by the colonial government. An English version of the novel was later published in 1974. In 1988, Chenjerai Hove published *Bones*, which, set in the 1960s, featured marginalised peasants, chief among whom was a woman called Marita, invoking the name of *Nehanda*. Other examples include references to *Nehanda* as an inspiration to the freedom fighters of 1966 to 1979 in Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* in 1989, a theme that is also taken up in Charles Samupindi's novel, *Death Throes: The Trial of Ambuya Nehanda*, published in 1990.Vera's novel was thus part of a tradition which referred to the pivotal role played by *Nehanda* during the struggle for independence in Zimbabwe, and reflects a people's need to re-write their history. As Vera (1998:77) herself pointed out during an interview:

> When I say myth I am not using it as an opposite to history. To me it is history, told in an oral tradition. It is history being invented,

> which is what our mythical consciousness allows us to do. History has never been fixed; if anything, each retelling is influenced by the time in which it is told and the purpose for which the history is being told. My writing of that novel was part of that activity of re-inventing the history of my current purpose and place, and in that way it is a contemporary novel which follows our own tradition of legend-making. Legend is something which is necessary and which is a re-telling.

Vera's comment shows that reviewing history also involved the making of legends to suit a required purpose. Lewis (2004:34) has noted that such remarks contributed to the idea that Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* was subscribing to a particular brand of nationalist ideology; one which would benefit the ruling government.

Not all the portrayals of the spirit medium came in for the criticism attributed to Vera's *Nehanda*. For instance, in his comparative analysis of Hove's *Bones* and Vera's *Nehanda*, Vambe suggests that Hove's novel, allowing for a multifocal narrative structure, ensures space for multiple meanings, whereas he is of the view that Vera's novel portrays Zimbabwean women during the first war for independence as a monolithic entity (qtd. in Flora Veit-Wild, 2006:193-205). In a different article, Vambe, while allowing for the fact that *Nehanda* challenges nationalistic conceptions of the African female, again states that it does not adequately differentiate women's identities and, as such, it is a novel which endorses "a nationalist romance" because it is trapped in the same ideology that it challenges (Vambe, 2002:128). In a similar vein, Wilson Tagoe, analysing *Nehanda*, voices this concern:

> Vera's recreation of *Nehanda*, for all the chances it presents for breaking old hierarchies and creating women's agency, still harks back to the certainty of truths carved in stone. (Tagoe 1999:165-166)

However, even as Vera engages in revisionist writing, it is not with the aim of conforming to the nationalist narrative. Lewis (2004:48) has rightly shown that although *Nehanda* is "undoubtedly" hagiographical in the sense that it celebrates a national icon, it also opens up spaces through which Vera questions historical narratives. As such, *Nehanda* challenges colonialist as well as nationalist accounts, and this is done by creating an introspective character who tries to negotiate the social norms and challenges which shape her world.

Similar views are held by Maodzwa-Tamuringa and Muponde (2002:xi), who state that what Vera does in *Nehanda* is to change the myth, not subscribe to it:

> Mbuya *Nehanda*, both the woman and the myth, has been appropriated by male nationalists, and her image has been transformed into a patriarchal instrument of power. Vera's *Nehanda* challenges this construction by providing us with a woman at once vulnerable and heroic, one who is nurtured and supported by other women, thereby affirming that traditions are not the prerogative of men.

This school of thought, regarding Vera's novels as an interrogation of nationalist concepts, forms a backdrop to my own analysis. The paper's focus, however, is on the way in which *Nehanda's* narrative reveals gaps, fissures and absences, thus challenging the validation of narratives based on the idea of a flawless ancestry. This section draws attention to the two ways in which the "missing" aspects of the narratives are presented in the novel; as inevitable gaps as well as created gaps.

In referring to the inevitable gap, I have in mind the fact that language, being arbitrary, cannot give absolute meaning to a situation, so that there is always a space within which the attributed meaning can be questioned. Apart from the inevitable gap constituted within language and narrative, my analysis of *Nehanda* also focuses on the idea of the gap as a consequence of actions by an individual or society. Such gaps are indicative of the sacrifices made by *Nehanda*. I read *Nehanda* as a narrative of sacrifice. There comes a point in the novel when the pain of losing Nehanda's narrative is tantamount to losing herself, and such descriptions have been portrayed as wounds in the novel.

This idea of a sacrificed narrative is not based on the assumption that a narrative can completely belong to an individual; I acknowledge the shared nature of a narrative. Bakhtin (1981 [2001:272), who famously asserted that the word in language is half someone else's, best reflects the idea of still coming up with a personal narrative, even within a shared language:

> The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as a language, but simultaneously concretely filled with specific content as an individual utterance.

What marks *Nehanda* is the fact that quite often, she speaks for the people out of duty, fulfilling an expected role, and sacrificing the individual utterance. In making a distinction between the inevitable gap and what might be called the causative gap, the paper attempts to avoid attributing every missing aspect in the narratives to a particular cause. Dominick LaCapra (1999:704) articulates this distinction in terms of the difference between absence and loss. In his argument, focusing on remembering the past, he points out:

> Absence appears in all societies or cultures, yet it is likely to be confronted differently and differently articulated with loss. In terms of absence, one may recognise that one cannot lose what one never had. With respect to foundations, one may argue that absence (not loss) applies to ultimate foundations in general, notably to metaphysical grounds (including the human being as origin of meaning and value).

In this sense, absence is the absence of an absolute that should not itself be fetishized such that it becomes an object of fixation and absorbs, mystifies or downgrades the significance of particular historical losses.

It might be argued that the use of the term "gap", even if it is qualified as the "inevitable gap," still suggests that there is a cause and that there is something which is lost, and that, as such, the gap cannot be equated with absence. However, the gap is a word that Vera herself has used in the novel; since there are instances when the characters do not notice the gaps in their narratives unless they have been pointed out to them. I maintain that the gap still operates as an absence. Moreover, as an image, the idea of an inevitable gap provides a powerful metaphor, for it often leads to situations in which what was a natural absence becomes exacerbated by society and leads to loss or to a gap that no-one can ignore. It is through the gaps in *Nehanda*'s narrative that Vera contests any idea of an absolute pre-colonial narrative.

Such an argument must take into account the impact of continuity on narrative. Let us take the prefix 'inter' to represent the narrative's journey to the present and beyond. In this regard, I am looking at this "inter" as, literally, the "in-between" space. Homi K. Bhabha (1994:2) has captured this idea of the in-between space and its interrogation of monolithic categories in his discussion of hybridity and culture. It is in the image of the interstices, he argues, that collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. In adapting this idea of the in-between to the context of the narrative's continuity, the current

analysis makes a play on the prefix symbolising the “in-between” to chart a narrative’s possible directions.

A narrative does not move in a vacuum; it is affected by different circumstances. As it is told over the years, it is influenced by interactions between people, and in this case such interactions include the power relations between the one who tells the story and the one who is listening. This interaction is what Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1981[2001]:130 describes when he argues that a text is determined by its context, and when he discusses the concept of dialogism. For Bakhtin, a narrative may also intersect with other narratives along the way, and an example to this study is the way in which the stories of two *Nehanda*s, the one of 1896 and the one who helped guerrilla soldiers from 1971 to 1973, are often told as if it is one story. It may also be interrupted by unexpected events, such as war and death, as well as by missing evidence. Along the way, it may be intercepted by those who regard it as a dangerous story, and by the time it approaches the present it has been interpreted in many ways by different actors. In a departure from this play on the prefix, but signalling nonetheless the risky journey that is the continuity of a narrative, parts of it which are not satisfactory to those who are telling, as well as those who are listening, may be interred.

Bearing in mind the relationship between past and present discussed above, the struggles which the grandmother figure faces in recounting her narrative— for the past and the future— are reflected in challenges such as gender issues, tradition and modernity, individual and collective tensions, that her descendants face in trying to reconcile different subjectivities. The grandmother figure thus represents a complex, daunting past, but one which still needs to be revisited, integrated into the present, and acknowledged.

A voice is born: Nehanda’s entry into narrative

The reader’s introduction to *Nehanda* in Vera’s novel is as the character approaches her death. As she waits to be hanged, there is an image of ants dragging a carcass into a hole, signalling the end of life, which, paradoxically, is at the beginning of the text.

This anachronism between fictional and narrative time parallels the contestation of linear time enacted by *Nehanda* throughout the novel; as a medium, she looks at the past and the future, inhabiting both temporal spheres. This contestation of time is emphasised by the fact that she lives in the present as she performs the role of medium and prophetess.

Yet this woman who is shown approaching death had a beginning. Suppose one chose to reconstruct a chronological summary of *Nehanda*. The proposed chronology would start with the day on which *Nehanda* is born, move on to events during her childhood; occasions during which she is told stories about her people by her mother and Vatete the midwife. It would then focus on *Nehanda* as a young woman, from the time the other women in her society start wondering why she is different from them, to the time a diviner informs the people that *Nehanda* has been chosen by the ancestors. The final events would be the activities she carries out as a spirit medium, her subsequent capture, arrest and death by hanging.

In reading *Nehanda* as a developing character, I take a different approach from that of Primorac (2001:79), who argues that *Nehanda's* character is one-dimensional throughout the novel:

> Nehanda remains unchanged throughout. As a character, she does not develop. From the moment of her birth [...] she remains alone, marked by difference, separated from the community around her by being destined for difficult and extraordinary things.

We can draw parallels between Primorac's reading of *Nehanda* as a character who does not develop and that of Bakhtin's definition of an epic hero, who:

> [...] is all there, from beginning to end he coincides with himself, he is absolutely equal to himself [...] *He has already become everything he could become*, and he could become only that which he has already become. [...] There is nothing to seek for in him, nothing to guess at, he can neither be exposed or provoked; he is all of a piece, he has no shell, there is no nucleus within. (Bakhtin (1981) [2001]:35-36, my emphasis).

Even if *Nehanda's* role seems marked out in advance, she neither reflects the description given by Primorac nor the completely formed epic hero that Bakhtin describes. *Nehanda* does develop, and the absorption of words and how they are used is part of that development. Vera also indicates *Nehanda's* development by portraying the character's transition from being a listener to one who tells, as well as from the transition of asking questions as a child to answering them as an adult. The moment of *Nehanda's* birth is the first stage of a process that will

entail changes, for it signals the social codes already in existence and anticipates the fact that she will later negotiate these structures in order to formulate narratives.

Before *Nehanda* has even learnt to speak, there are already expectations about how a member of her society is supposed to use her voice:

> After she had been born she did not cry for a day. Mother worried about this silent child whom she had brought into the world, and wondered if her daughter had the power to assert her own presence on the earth. Where would the mother gather the gifts of speech for her child if it was true that her daughter had lost the gift on that perilous journey out of the womb? The midwife had been scrupulous in the performance of ritual...Could the midwife have erred unwittingly? Afterwards, she cried, and the women sang her back to sleep, willing a silence onto her. She defied them with her tiny speech-seeking voice and cried all day and all night until the mother fell asleep. (Vera 1994:10-11)

Speech, in this case, implies the assertion of one's presence. It is also used here as an introduction into an expected social code in which communication is regulated. Specifically, the social code which the women try to impose on *Nehanda* at this stage is their expectation that she will respond to their voices and conform to a pattern whereby a child who cries is soothed by lullabies or at least succumbs to sleep in due course. The women's action of singing in order to impose silence reads as the first introduction to the symbolic and restrictive law of the father, which, in this case, forbids the child's unrestrained expression. This is not to suggest that the women are there to suppress *Nehanda's* self-expression, but rather that, in this particular instance, they symbolise the regulation of that expression.

In this vein, *Nehanda's* cry as a child anticipates her entry in the Symbolic order and her first encounter with the law, and foreshadows a key idea throughout the novel; that a voice is never completely one's own, but that there remains, even within an established social code, space for struggle against the norm. Such challenging of the norms can thus rely on the question of timing, as in the above example, when a child who cries beyond the acceptable duration is seen as defying society's expectations.

It is not only this experience that indicates *Nehanda's* entry into the world of language. Speech and its governing rules are subsequently emphasised by the inclusion of several speech acts, including the naming of the child. As Mashiri (1999:2) argues, naming, in Shona society, is a discursive act, reflecting one's relationship with other members of society, and can also signal an obligation to that society. As such, as her father names *Nehanda*, he also refers to the need for loyalty to the land: "May you be an offspring of the earth...May you find anchor on the earth.... Bind the child to the earth" (Vera 1994:17).

To be of the soil is, in Zimbabwean culture, to be aligned to the country's traditions, but it also symbolises courage. Thus Nmoma (2008:375), analysing the relationship between land and politics in Zimbabwe, explains that during the second liberation struggle, the rallying call amongst the nationalists was "child of the soil" and served as an effective incentive for landless peasants to join the war.

However, being a child of the earth also constrains *Nehanda* as is seen by the use of the words "bind" and "anchor" in her father's proclamation. The naming ceremony therefore becomes a declaration emphasising obligations; declared amongst witnesses, her father's word is literally binding for *Nehanda*, whilst also recalling the way in which *Nehanda's* umbilical cord has already been buried by the three women who were present at her birth (Vera 1994: 11). The three women's act of burying the umbilical cord is in compliance with Shona tradition, and thus needs to be discussed with this perspective in mind.

The umbilical cord signifies a ritual meant to remind society of its obligations and allegiance to the land and, by extension, to the ancestors. Yet, as a symbol, it goes beyond the ritual, encompassing meanings that are not limited to *Nehanda*'s present, as the narrator points out, "The child's cord, buried in the earth, bound her to the future in ways that she could not revoke" (Vera 1994:11).

The burial of the cord, in the above case, thus symbolises more than the actual ritual because of Vera associates the act of binding with something abstract; the future. Yet, by the fact that it is a recognised ritual and part of tradition, the same act is indicative of the women's compliance with societal norms. In order to emphasise that this is a society in which the spirits of the ancestors have a say in what constitutes tradition, the narrator points out that in burying the umbilical

cord, the women follow "the directions of the spirits" (Vera 1994:11). We note here an example of the way in which the the spiritual influences constitute an essential part of society's rules and requirements.

There are thus parts of *Nehanda* which have already been bound to the earth in requirement with society's expectations, marking a severance of the umbilical cord between mother and child to establish a connection between child and land. What the naming ceremony therefore has in common with the burial of the cord is an enactment of the separation between mother and child.

The more *Nehanda's* narrative skills are developed as a young girl, the more this leads to a separation from the mother. *Nehanda* herself senses this imminent separation in one of the rare moments that she gazes at herself. With the river as a mirror, *Nehanda's* self-gaze reveals the sense of loss that she feels at the separation of her mother, but also the ambivalence of that loss as she reflects on the possibilities of narratives:

> Sometimes she sees her reflection in the river and then feels her heart beat violently. The river distorts her image so completely that she thinks it would destroy her also, dissolving her into itself. During such times she almost drops her pot from her trembling hands and moves back suspiciously, away from the enticing water. She likes to watch herself in parts of the river that are still, but sometimes the sun disappears the way it has done this afternoon, and takes her with it. *Nehanda* turns around, frightened at the sudden disappearance. *It is amazing what things make one long for Mother*. (Vera 1994:14, my emphasis)

Shaw (2002:32), analysing images in *Nehanda*, also describes the river as a mirror, and rightly suggests that it 'hides parts of the body from the knowing, unconscious self.". This is not the first time *Nehanda* has visited the river, as evidenced by the temporal marker 'sometimes', used several times in the passage. The difference, however, lies in the fact that, at other times, she looks at herself in "parts of the river that are still" and which give her a reassuring image of herself. It is those still images that I read as illusory images of wholeness. In this vein, *Nehanda's* constant gazes at the "mirror" reflect a repeated search for such wholeness. The distorted image given by the river, and which disturbs *Nehanda*, is suggestive of the conflicts with which she is faced as she leaves childhood

behind and gradually becomes more aware of the rules that shape her society. Since, therefore, *Nehanda's* initial relationship with the mother is subjected to severance in the form of restrictions caused by speech, such restrictions also lead to a sense of insecurity when the child is away from the mother figure.

Yet, in the midst of such insecurities, *Nehanda* eagerly anticipates integration into the space of speech and narrative. Even as she is frightened by the riverside, the decision she makes is not to rush back home, but to tell herself a story, emphasising the importance of stories for survival.

Adulthood thus brings with it different dynamics in terms of *Nehanda's* relationship with members of her society. Such dynamics are marked by transition; from *Nehanda*'s initiation into a culture's narratives to her resumption of the narrator's role. As part of this transition process, *Nehanda* develops into someone to be spoken through, as opposed to the child who was once spoken to. As spirits and people speak through her, however, the question that remains is whether such a transition from ordinary member of society to spirit medium gives her any space in which to recount narratives other than those that relate to the role of medium.

Spirit possession and the question of personal narratives

Even though *Nehanda* is the chosen site of the spirit's possession, there are passages, especially those dealing with narrative, which suggest the expression of a voice other than that of the spirits. To see *Nehanda*'s negotiation for a personal voice even within the social and spiritual role of the medium, it is important to first discuss the forms that *Nehanda's* possession takes in the novel.

Before her gifts are fully developed, *Nehanda* is portrayed as a sullen, remote young woman. This behaviour initially labels her as a stranger in her own culture, but acceptance and respect emerge from the tribe after they realise that even through her difference, she has been chosen to serve them. Her difference also becomes more acceptable as people realise that the remoteness is not permanent; it often gives way to a woman who tells their story.

The voice with which she speaks is for the people. It is rare for her to use the first person singular, her point of reference mostly being "we", which illustrates her strong identification with the people. As their representative, she is also a part of them and sees herself as part of the struggle against colonialism. Even as she gives commands, she focuses on the ways in which her narrative is about

participation and co-operation. As *Nehanda* tells the people, her narrative is not meant to be about isolation:

> You too have been chosen to tell this story, to accompany the story-teller on the journey which may not be embarked on alone. The story-teller needs an accompanying tongue. (Vera 1994:50)

The above passage shows that *Nehanda* does not see her narrative in terms of the individual, but of the collective. It is also a reminder of the different ways in which story-telling has played a crucial part of her life, literally since birth.

Even as she is possessed by the spirits in the sense of being their mouthpiece, *Nehanda* is also possessed by the people in that she is their link to the ancestors. The spirits, however, have the initial 'claim' in possessing *Nehanda*. The act of possession takes many forms, but there is always a sense that it is a physical burden; there is one occasion when her head is 'too heavy for her' (Vera 1994: 48) and when her body does not feel familiar to her: 'Her brow now carries furrows, knitted in anger. She has aged dramatically, as though overnight she has inherited the wisdom of all her departed' (Vera 1994:49-50).

These images attest to a presence other than that of *Nehanda*, and bear out Keller's thesis of spirit possession as an occupation of the body (Keller 2002:74-78), so that *Nehanda* becomes a site through which the spirits can speak. It is in this sense that she can be regarded as their instrument.

Moreover, the form of possession by the living and the departed runs parallel to the omniscient narrator's possession of *Nehanda's* future. This omniscience takes on added significance because of the reader's awareness that the spirit is meant to see into the future. Thus the narrator gives anticipatory clues into *Nehanda's* future: 'In the future, others would recognize the child by her gifts and her difference—her eyes that would see distances. Her eyes would brim with dancing prophecies of hope and despair'. (Vera 1994:5)

While the use of the omniscient narrative voice emphasises the possession that *Nehanda* is already subjected to in the text, there is also the fact that this narrator literally has the last word insofar as foretelling *Nehanda's* future is concerned. The narrator thus has knowledge that *Nehanda* only acquires at a later stage. Although *Nehanda* is later able to know what will happen in her own life, her knowledge is partial as opposed to that of the omniscient narrator.

To support this idea of the connection between knowing the future and possessing *Nehanda*, I include below a passage in the text in which a vision from the spirits is given to *Nehanda*, and in which the spirit's knowledge of *Nehanda*'s future combines with the omniscient narrator's voice, even in a text that is meant to be told from *Nehanda*'s point of view:

> She has travelled long distances through time to meet this vision of the future. She knows that her own death is inevitable, but sees its significance to the future of her people.
>
> In the future, the whirling centre of the wind, which is also herself, has collapsed, but that is only the beginning of another dimension of time. The collapse of the wind, which is also her own death, is also part of the beginning, and from the spiralling centre of the wind's superimposed circles another wind rises, larger and stronger. (Vera 1994:92)

The effect is thus of a situation in which others possess more knowledge of *Nehanda* than she does of herself, and in which they can narrate her, even as she narrates the tribe. When this foreknowledge is not in the form of the omniscient narrator's predictions, then there are the dreams that her mother has, which also serve as embedded narratives by foreshadowing *Nehanda*'s death (Vera 1994:16-17).

Given these voices — spiritual and human— which possess *Nehanda*'s future, to what extent can she be said to own any particular narrative? She cannot claim, for instance, to own the way in which the narratives are told; she is not in control of the origins of the narratives, or even the forms. She is, after all, relaying a message to others, and as the text points out, "Her voice is that of the departed." (Vera 1994:67)

There are, nonetheless, times when, even as she relays the messages from the ancestors, she is able to take a minimal step back, and to refer to the self, even if it means only talking about her role as a medium. This distancing—minimal because it is subsumed in the message she tells—is still the space which allows *Nehanda* to comment, in a manner not unlike a theatrical aside, on the message she conveys to the people.

An example would be the break in the prophecy that she makes concerning the bare landscape and the sense of abandonment felt by the people. *Nehanda* talks of the past, but there is a shift in tense:

> I am among you. I carry the message of retribution. The land must be cleansed with your blood. You must fight for what belongs to us, and for your departed. I will speak until the birds depart from the trees. (Vera 1994:51)

Such a declaration is marked with ambiguity. It is different from the other references to the self which are manifested during her possession. In these other self-references—"I see vultures", "The vibrating air is not all I feel and hear" (Vera 1994:50)— there are indications that she is in a different temporal zone; she sees what the others cannot see. The first two "I"s in the passage quoted above are located in the present. She is indeed among them; this is something they can see. In the same vein, she does carry a message of retribution. The last sentence, however, *does* not make a distinct demarcation between *Nehanda* as a medium or as a woman of the tribe. It cannot be determined whether this "I" is a promise she is making to the people, an affirmation of her role, or whether she is back in a trance and can see into the future and her role in it. Such glimpses of an "I" that can make references to the narrative demonstrate that even the moments of spirit possession do not completely subsume her individuality, although they take up a great part of it.

Such rare moments of self-reference shift the focus from the narrative as story or form to narrative as the act of telling the story. Applying Gérard Genette's (1980) concept of the three dimensions of narrative illustrates the different perspectives that are emphasised in narrative as *story*, form and narrating. If the focus is on narrative as story, then the content of the story is the ancestors' sense of neglect and abandonment by the people. The ancestors predict difficult times ahead, after which there will again be prosperity. This story could be summarised as the fall and imminent rise of the Shona tribe.

When the same narrative is summarised in terms of its form, then focus is on the trance during which *Nehanda* relays the message to the people, partly told as a myth of a golden, pre-colonial time, and partly as an assessment of the present. If, however, the focus is on narrative as a telling, the process starts by detailing

what used to happen in the past, builds up those events, and incorporates pauses during which *Nehanda* can express herself.

This is an example of overlaps between the categories, for it is difficult to conceive of the form without the act of telling in the above case. What helps to make the distinction in this instance is that the form or structure has already been established through the other examples in the text; in the book, the structure often includes a reference to the past, the situation at present, and finally, questions about what action needs to be taken. Even if it does not include the future, it still has the past as its point of reference and this is the structure that *Nehanda* adheres to.

The narrating in the above case is the fact that she tells the story at all, and it is in this narrow gap between the act of telling and the form in which it is told that the ambiguities slip through. Long before the retrospective identification of gaps in *Nehanda*'s narrative by ensuing generations, we therefore see that *Nehanda* herself notices the spaces in the story she is supposed to tell. This reads as an anticipation of her own descendants stepping into these spaces in order to construct other narratives. In other words, even though she delivers the message, she also leaves her mark or sign on it, so that a message delivered from the ancestors by *Nehanda* is different, for instance, from a message delivered by the other spirit medium in the novel, Kaguvi. *Nehanda* leaves her personality on the text, whereas Kaguvi is said to communicate more through dance, and, because he has not really developed the power of words in relaying a narrative, he too defers to *Nehanda* (Vera 1994:47).

The idea that *Nehanda* can speak and comment through the ambiguities revealed in her trance may be a departure from studies such as Keller's (2002), as well as that by Kjersti (2008), who maintains, in his study of spirit possession in Tanzania, that the possessed body is completely under the control of the spirits during such occasions. However, I am of the view that Vera deliberately introduces these ambiguities to show that there is potential for *Nehanda* to comment even on her own possession, thus emphasising that she is not completely passive.

The moment during which she is confronted by Browning, the administrator, reflects one of the rare "I"s uttered outside of spirit possession:

> "So you refuse to be converted?" he asks.
>
> A wasp has built its home next to the cobwebs, carrying a sting on its back. The wasp moves in and out of her ears, singing of future triumphs. Nothing. I shall tell them nothing. She would not accommodate another people's god. She bites on her tongue and fills her mouth with blood. (Vera 1994:95)

These examples show that there are times when *Nehanda* is able to declare a position that differentiates her from other members of society. This may be within a predetermined narrative or even outside of that narrative. The passage above is one of the rare occasions when *Nehanda*'s "I" is not automatically connected to the people. It is a reflection of what she believes in, but, just as suddenly as this self-reference appears, the narrator takes over the text again and it is through the gaze of the third person narrator that we see *Nehanda* choosing to "bite her tongue" (Vera 1994:95). That Vera describes the literal act of biting one's tongue in the above passage as opposed to the figurative sense only emphasises the painful sacrifice that *Nehanda* makes in continuing as a medium for the people and thus not developing her personal narratives. Even at the end, it is the omniscient narrator who has the last word. As the work of Fontein (2006) and Pfukwa (2008) shows, the myth of *Nehanda* often ends on the prophetic note, "My bones will rise again," as reference to her foretelling the future pro-independence struggle. In Vera's text, the words used are, "My people will not rest in bondage. The day has ceased too quickly" (Vera 1994:97). The focus is on the people again, and not on *Nehanda*. When her story is not that of the people's narrator, then *Nehanda* becomes the narrated, and rarely does she get to form a personal narrative.

The more *Nehanda* becomes the mouthpiece of the ancestors, the more she can enter into a form of conscious negotiation with them. A comparison of the first time she was possessed to the subsequent possessions she undergoes illustrates this point. The first possession is sudden, marked by tears, and beyond her will. One of the final ones, on the other hand, reflects a conscious decision. This is not to suggest that she reaches a point when she can manipulate the spirits, but rather that, with time, she learns to seek them out (Vera 1994:68).

This, together with the ambiguities and interruptions to the spiritual possessions discussed earlier, suggests an element of choice on *Nehanda*'s part. Initially,

Nehanda may not choose to be possessed, but with time, she can work from within the possession by determining the pace of the narrative, and she can also anticipate spirit possession. In fact, there is a point closer to the end of her life, when she can decide whether to continue as a spirit medium or a woman without the attributes of a medium. She chooses to remain a spirit medium, and here, again, the language of choice is emphasised: "She prefers the burden of her seeing self, and will not cross the river to reach its opposite shore" (Vera 1994:91). This echoes what is said about *Nehanda* at the beginning of the novel; her longing for" 'a new language to seek wisdom, and new ways of seeing" (Vera 1994:30).

Choosing to be a spirit-medium without occasionally reverting to the human aspect is a sacrifice, because it means giving up any possibility of her own story in order to narrate the future of the people. Whilst she still has what Primorac has rightly referred to as a "dual character" (Vera 1994:5), there is always room, albeit constricted, for the creation of a personal rhythm even within an existing pattern. The decision she makes means a separation from the all-too-human part of herself, and, subsequently, from the part that would narrate *Nehanda* the woman as opposed to *Nehanda* the spirit medium.

The pain of a buried narrative

Nehanda's decision to narrate for the people is made with the full awareness that she will need to give up her life. However, it is not only about giving up her life; as her death approaches, she realises that it is also about giving up any chance of personal memory.

It is this personal memory that becomes a problem for *Nehanda*; its repression results in a feeling of incompleteness for her, one that is not often acknowledged, but which makes its presence felt as she draws closer to death. For instance, in the description of *Nehanda* just before she is hanged, there is reference to a "gaping wound":

> She feels that gaping wound everywhere. The wound has been shifting all over her body and she can no longer find it. She raises her hands above her head as though supporting a falling roof. She gestures into the sky with frantic arms. She laughs. The skin tears away from her, and she knows that this damage to herself is now irreversible. Nothing will save her from this final crimson of death;

it is too much like her inner self. (Vera 1994:2)

The language used above represents loss, and the pain of that loss. A way in which her "inner self" could be likened to death would be because, in focusing mostly on the spiritual realm as well as the collective society, her individual self has not been nurtured through memory. As with the idea of the shared narrative, the responsibility for this repression lies with society and with *Nehanda* herself; there are some aspects over which she has no choice; such as her birth or the rules which govern narrative, while, as has been seen, some of the choices she makes perpetuate the repression of her own memories.

The idea of repression recalls the references to burial made earlier; the burial of her umbilical cord, and the way in which it binds her to the earth. In analysing this buried self, several passages in the text need to be read outside of the narrative order. The events that take place in the final two chapters of the novel recall those at the beginning. They are not repetitions, but there are certain word associations, all referring to loss, burial and wounds, which suggest a neglected and at times severed, part of herself. For example, reading Chapter Three together with Chapter 26 emphasises the idea of burial. It is in Chapter Three that the women who were present at her birth bury her umbilical cord. In Chapter 26: "Her arms move about the earth, in search of the elusive gourd that holds memories of her being. Some part of herself is buried in the earth, and she can no longer find it." (Vera 1994:96)

The gourd and the umbilical cord are used as synecdoches; representing the missing parts of *Nehanda*'s whole. The relationship of these two to memory becomes apparent in comparing what the gourd and the cord have represented throughout the novel. The cord has already been discussed here in terms of its connotations of lack of freedom, but it might also suggest that the part of *Nehanda* which was buried not only binds her to the earth, but has also been kept by the spirits in order to facilitate her possession. Even though the symbols used in Vera's novels are often interchangeable, the gourd is, according to the narrator, a repository of memory. Its presence is noted at Vera's birth, when the narrator states that it "holds the memories' of the future (Vera 1994:3). There never is just the one calabash or gourd, but its presence is signalled every time there is a narrative relating to *Nehanda*. As a child, *Nehanda* accidentally drops the gourd, leaving it in fragments (Vera 1994:34). As an adult, she drops it again, this time to make a point about strategy; the people need to go into different

directions in order to fight effectively (Vera 1994:55). The gourd is such an integral part of *Nehanda*; she is even said to contain it in her eyes as evidenced by time when she weeps for the people. If burying the cord is associated with the people's actions, then destroying the calabash in order to explain strategy to the people points to the sacrifices—symbolically destroying the narrating self—for the sake of the tribe.

The idea of the gaping wound emphasises the notion of a missing part of the self. The process of possession often leaves her feeling physically exhausted, and is traumatic to her body. However, the trauma is not only in terms of changes to her body; the more she becomes a conduit for the ancestors, the more she hurts herself, not only physically, but mentally as she is not able to focus on herself. The passage suggests a deconstruction of the word "gaping wound"; it is gaping in the sense of a terrible, even life-threatening injury, but also because of the association with the word "gap". There are so many gaps, all dealing with memory, that *Nehanda* is unable to confront, so dedicated is she to the mission she has been given. Whereas other memories may be referred to in terms of wounds, yet others are described as shadows, indicating obscurity.

The images used to refer to her memory are, therefore, the cord, the gourd, and the shadow. All of them refer to a separation and, in the case of the last two, the pain and violence of that separation. The gourd represents this in the way that it is shattered to fragments and the shadow by the way it is almost severed from *Nehanda*. All of these images, therefore, relate to wounds caused by metaphorically cutting off a part of the self.

To support this idea of wounds relating to the self, an analysis of a passage in Vera's *Without a Name* recalls the context of the pain associated with a sense of loss. In the texts that have been discussed above, there is reference to the fact that *Nehanda*'s skin is tearing away from her. Mazvita in *Without a Name* has a similar experience:

> She could no longer swallow even her saliva, which settled in one huge lump in her throat. Whatever she swallowed moved to one side of her body. She had lost her center, in which her thoughts had found anchor[...] her skin peeled off, parting from her body. She had suffered so much that her skin threatened to fall pitilessly to the ground. (Vera 2002:28)

Mazvita, a victim of the war, has been trying to find ways to define herself . In the face of labels—and names— that society confers on her, such as “woman” “mother” and “victim”, she feels that there is a part of her that she has not been able to define. In her futile attempts to locate this self, she thus feels a painful fragmentation, symbolised by her skin falling off, and it is this fragmentation, albeit caused by different experiences, that *Nehanda* experiences. To suggest that the skin is falling off or tearing away in both instances indicates that both women are left vulnerable; for Mazvita, because it is difficult for her to come up with a self-definition, and for *Nehanda*, because it is difficult for her to identify memories which relate to the self.

If the focus is thus on the wounds, then the question of healing is never far behind. Since the narratives that she tells are meant to promise a healing and regeneration of the land, the question that remains is, can this particular physician heal herself? When we consider that she dies still carrying her “bag of words” (Vera 1994:1), then it would seem that this act of self-healing does not take place for her; these are words that she carries for others. This raises a follow-up question: Can the grandchildren heal *Nehanda*?

Picking up the pieces: *Nehanda*’s descendants and narratives of the present

In *Nehanda*, Vera depicts a figure with her own internal struggles who still sees the urgency of telling narratives in order to save and serve her society. *Nehanda* is a character who knows that words mean survival, and, as in this case, if the survival is not her own, then the same words can result in the agency and survival of her tribe.

Yet this does not stop *Nehanda* from the frantic search at the end of her life, which this paper has read as a search for memory and subsequent narrative. This underscores the importance of personal memory and narrative. The narrator’s role in the text is not to criticise the choice made by *Nehanda*, but to reveal the conflicts and paradoxes inherent in constructions of individual and collective memory, and to insist that the narratives cannot wait until such paradoxes are resolved. Instead, it is in their telling that questions are raised and perhaps, solutions are found. Vera’s comment on her novels in general summarises the conflicts faced by *Nehanda* in this text:

> I hope that I am telling stories that are more than stories. I also want to capture a history, but history is in a moment. A woman is in the forest, she’s alone, the ground is bare. What is her relationship to

> this landscape, and who is she at this moment? She's endured all these other things, but at this moment, her mind is collapsing...I'm fascinated with the individual, especially the woman, especially the woman in Africa and how they are forced to endure without having a nervous breakdown, because they cannot afford it. But they collapse inside, and I'm keen to capture that collapse. (In Maodzwa-Tamuringa and Muponde 2002:223).

Vera has captured this idea of internal collapse in *Nehanda* through the portrayal of the collapsing wind. As discussed earlier, this collapsing wind signals *Nehanda's* death. It also suggests a better future, especially after independence. It can, however, also be read in terms of narratives as a legacy:

> The collapse of the wind, which is also her own death, is also part of the beginning, and from the spiralling centre of the wind's superimposed circles another wind rises, larger and stronger. Hope for the nation is born out of the intensity of newly created memory[...]. It is always in a state of creation, and of being born: the legend-creating wind gives new tongues with which to praise it, and new languages with which to cross the boundaries of time. (Vera 1994:92-93)

In the midst of the collapse, therefore, there is the hope of continuity. It is significant that what Vera presents at the centre of the wind is not a closed, compact circle, but an ever-widening spiral. The superimposed circles all culminate into the spiral, so that there is always an opening, or a point of entry into the spiral. By its very nature, therefore, the spiral has a gap, and in line with the argument advanced at the beginning of this analysis, it is through this gap that "newly created" memories and legends can enter to perpetuate the production of narratives.

To relate this idea of continuity to *Nehanda*, one only has to take into account the continued possession of *Nehanda* in present-day Zimbabwe and beyond. Such possession takes the form of appropriation for nationalistic purposes, for the re-evaluation of gender relations, or for the veracity of fact versus fiction in academia. *Nehanda*, as with the character in Vera's novel, anticipates possession and occupation. However, the gaps through which new narratives seek to possess her also manifest themselves, as if in a reminder of the danger of absolute narratives. For instance, the most common reference of *Nehanda* as a national grandmother has depended on the idea of a common history, through

which Zimbabweans can identify a common ancestry. Yet, as Keller (2002:148) has pointed out, this is an image that has presented challenges:

> There is an ironic danger in celebrating Mbuya *Nehanda* as the sovereign of a single spirit province. The Ndebele are now a minority in Zimbabwe, have suffered under Shona discrimination since independence, and are much less likely to identify with Mbuya *Nehanda*.
>
> The *Nehanda* statues, flags, and representations in the fine arts might be interpreted as a reterritorializing of the region in defiance of the British attempt to eliminate the ancestor's power. Identifying her as a national symbol, however, is to elide the history and the difference of the spirit provinces.

It is in this context that I see the gaps in Vera's *Nehanda* as a statement against all-encompassing narratives; such gaps are a reminder of stories that still need to be told. *Nehanda's* descendants might, therefore, not be able to heal her wounds, but in acknowledging the gaps as opposed to ignoring them, they address the possibility of revealing and recognising painful, repressed, narratives, and to structure narratives of healing as a response to pain. For how can one heal an ailment that is supposedly inexistent?

For a character who is able to look at both past and future, Vera's *Nehanda* thus suggests a legacy that is also forked; an emphasis on the gaps that are a part of narrative, as well as a need to continue forging narratives, whilst never forgetting the inherent limitations of such narratives.

Notes

1. See Dawson Munjeri (2009:1-7), 'The Reunification of the Great Zimbabwe Bird', Museum International 241/2 <http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/pdf/abstract_munjeri.pdf> [Retrieved 1 February, 2011]. The idea of a permanent loan meant that the sculpture's return could not be celebrated three years earlier when the bird had actually been returned to the country because Zimbabwe had initially been opposed to Germany's suggestion of a loan, insisting on an unconditional return of the bird. However, by 2003, Zimbabwean politicians had decided it was better to have the bird under the conditions suggested by Germany, than not to have it at all.

2. *Chambers' Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, (2005[1875], ed. by William Chambers, Elibron Replica Edition, London and Edinburgh: Adamant Media Corporation, p.508.
3. David Lan, (1985), *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*, Oxford, James Currey, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
4. For an illustration of this inevitable gap, see, for instance, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960, Vol. Book. VII, ed. by Jacques Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997[1986]), in which Lacan, expounding on his theory of language as an entry into the symbolic which cannot capture the real, argues that for as long as there are signifiers in language and discourses, there is also the accompanying gap to such signifiers. He uses the image of vase as an analogy for a 'fabricated signifier' (p.120), with its opening which, even if it may be filled from time to time, is still a clear indication of the 'hole in the real' (p.121).
5. The position of *Nehanda* as a grandmother has led to debate amongst historians. Although some historical accounts claim that *Nehanda* Charwe, on whom Yvonne Vera's novel is based, was hanged when she was in her late thirties, myth has portrayed her as an old woman at the time of her death. It is rare to find accounts on *Nehanda* that do not refer to her with the title Mbuya *Nehanda*, which translates as Grandmother *Nehanda*. David N. Beach, who has researched on *Nehanda* and how she was transformed into legend, states that the use of the term Mbuya may have been with reference to a later spirit medium, since whoever was supposed to have been possessed by the spirit of *Nehanda* took on that name. Beach's analysis can be understood against the background that there were two major struggles for independence in Zimbabwe, both known as Chimurenga, which means 'revolutionary struggle.' The first Chimurenga, from 1896 to 1897, is the one in which *Nehanda* Charwe, on whom Vera's story is based, was involved. The second Chimurenga, from 1966-1980, saw the participation of another spirit medium, a descendant of Charwe, who also took on the title *Nehanda* and who, according to historical accounts, was eighty years old. Even as the *Nehanda* of the second participation took part in the struggle, it was the name of her predecessor which earned her respect, especially since it was her role in relation to Charwe which was emphasised by those who were

fighting for independence. This suggests that the term Mbuya may have been as a result of a confusion which emerged as the story was told, until the older *Nehanda* was mistaken for the younger one.

6. See Lacan (1998: 187-188), 'Les Trois Temps de l'Oedipe', in Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre 5: Les Formations de L'Inconscient, 1957-1958, compiled by Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris: Editions du Seuil, pp.179-196.

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