Silence, the Unsaid and the Unsayable in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*

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Silence, the Unsaid and the Unsayable in Yvonne Vera’s
*The Stone Virgins*

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**ABSTRACT**
The primary aim of this article is to think through how silence can be considered as generating meaning in literary prose. For this purpose, the article focuses on Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera’s last novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002a), which has often been described as ‘breaking the silence’ about the genocidal violence remembered as *Gukurahundi*. As a secondary aim, the article sets out to rethink Vera’s idea and argues that rather than ‘breaking’ the silence, her novel explores different forms of silence, some of which are necessary for healing and regeneration. However, silence is not just a theme or motif in the novel: Vera also uses silence in her own writing to generate new meaning. Using an essay by Elleke Boehmer as a point of departure, this article proposes a conceptualisation of silence through two terms: the unsayable and the unsaid, where the former refers to meaning that is suppressed and the latter to that which has not yet been said. It argues that the novel presents a poetics that aligns with its theme of meaning, generative silence, which uses opaque and imprecise syntax and referentiality in a way that maximises the possibility of the unsaid to be said.

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Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera (1964–2005) has been regarded ‘a literary heroine’ for her ‘unapologetic approach to exposing the ills of her society’ and referred to as a ‘fearless taboo queen’ (Zhou 2004, 102; Hartmann 2009). In her novels she addresses taboos such as political violence, incest and infanticide, and her last novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002a) has been described as a work that ‘broke the silence’ about the campaign of violence in Zimbabwe’s Matabeleland and Midlands between 1980 and 1988, a period remembered as *Gukurahundi*. The years after this extremely violent period, which followed on the War of Independence (1964–1979), saw the active erasure of references to the violence from public discourse by Robert Mugabe and his party ZANU-PF. While pointing out that it was preceded by two novels in Ndebele and Shona, Gibson Ncube and...
Gugulethu Siziba argue that *The Stone Virgins* was the first novel ‘by an established and reputed author to confront Gukurahundi’ (2017, 233). The notion that the novel was an intervention into the culture of imposed silence has, in other words, shaped its reception in academic as well as non-academic contexts.

Silence is a word that appears frequently in the discourse surrounding Zimbabwe’s history of political repression and violence since the end of the War of Independence. It figures prominently in cultural works like the collection of poetry and short fiction, *Silent Cry: Echoes of Young Zimbabwe Voices* (Nyahathi 2009), Robin Hammond’s photobook *Zimbabwe: Your Wounds will be Named Silence* (2012), Kudzanai Chiurai’s exhibition, *We Live in Silence* (Goodman Gallery, 2017), and in academic works like Stephen Chan and Ranka Primorac’s edited volume *Zimbabwe in Crisis: The International Response and the Space of Silence* (2007) and Zvenyika Eckson Mugari’s monograph *Press Silence in Postcolonial Zimbabwe: News Whiteouts, Journalism and Power* (2020). As some of these titles suggest, silence in this context is anything but an absence or negation of meaning. Because it is the result of political repression, it takes the form of an overdetermined, invasive silence. It is conspicuous, for example, in the opening chapter of *Zimbabwe Beyond Robert Mugabe* (2022), Tendai Rinos Mwanaka’s collection of epistolary texts addressed to members of the country’s political elite. Mwanaka describes the silence as an anthropomorphised presence ‘crowding upon’ him, which ‘commands’ him ‘to pour out [his] soul’ (2), which shows that this particular kind of silence demands a response rather than further silence.

As in Mwanaka’s text, the relation between silence and voice or sound is often oxymoronic in the Zimbabwean context in general. Jocelyn Alexander explores this relation between the unsayable and the intrusive insistence on ‘breaking the silence’ in the aftermath of the 1980-1988 campaign of genocidal violence in her article “The Noisy Silence of Gukurahundi: Truth, Recognition and Belonging” (2021). In Alexander’s use of the term, noisy silence ‘refers to a collective imaginative response to a *failure* to grant recognition to a violent past’ (my emphasis; 764). She describes the noisy silence as a ‘failure’ because her focus is on Zimbabwean civil society in general, but for the political elite in ZANU-PF, the fact that the violent past for a long time remained unrecognised was not a matter of incompetence but a strictly enforced policy. Pressed to comment on the allegations of sanctioned violence after the publication of the 1997 report by the Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice (CCPJ) titled “Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace” — discussing in detail massacres, torture and rape on a genocidal scale — Mugabe explicitly commanded that the decade long silence be maintained. He said that ‘if we dig up the country’s history in this way, we wreck the nation and we tear our people apart into factions’ (qtd. in Wetherell 1997, 21; see also Ncube and Siziba 2017, 232). In other words, to Mugabe, it was the act of mentioning the violence, rather than the violence itself, that was the cause of the wrecking and the tearing apart.
This article focuses on different kinds of silence and the roles they play in *The Stone Virgins*. As a contribution to the already vast and growing body of academic studies of Vera’s oeuvre, this article explores the relation between the semantic content of the text and its silences. I argue that what in other texts can be seen as a purely textual-aesthetic phenomenon takes on specific ideological meaning in *The Stone Virgins*. What is and what is not said in the text, what can and what cannot be said, are key to the text’s status as an intervention into political reality.

**Silence, the Unsaid and ‘Poetic’ Language**

In “Everything to do with it: Articulating the Unsaid and the Unsayable” (2014) Elleke Boehmer brings attention to a series of examples of African writing in which the ‘unsaid’ is said. These examples, one of which is *The Stone Virgins*, speak to such things as the ‘pain and fear’ inflicted on victims by ‘state commandment’ (84–85). However, texts do not only remain silent about painful collective memories or contentious social issues and censorship, and the threat of political violence are not the only reasons why things remain unsaid. Boehmer includes in her theorisation of the unsaid that which has not previously been articulated simply because it has not yet been conceived in thought:

> By means of what it makes possible, for example, by its joining together of oddities and incommensurabilities, by its juxtaposition of the unlikelihoods, writing allows the reader/the writer to conceive of what has not yet been conceived. It also encourages that which till now has been silenced or subdued, even when it was conceived, to be imagined. It allows the silenced to be thought in a new, perhaps digressive, evasive, oblique, yet still meaningful and memorable way. (81)

On the one hand, then, there are traumas and topics that are avoided because to write about them would be socially or politically risky. Such topics — in the case of Vera’s novel, government-sanctioned violence — can and must perhaps be talked about when it becomes relatively safe to do so, but until then they are made *unsayable*. In this case, that which is not (yet) talked about is a thing in the world whose existence precedes the moment of articulation. Its existence in the world and therefore in readers’ minds means that it can be evoked through implication among other techniques (Boehmer 2014, 85). In *The Stone Virgins* Vera does this by representing in detail moments of extreme but more or less random violence in the Matabeleland village of Kezi, which the informed reader will connect with already existing accounts of the campaign of violence in the region.

On the other hand, there is that which at a particular moment in time is *unsaid* in the sense that it has not yet been articulated in speech, print or thought. From the point of view of a moment after it has been said, the previously unsaid can be conceptualised as having been waiting just beyond the horizon of the said. The
process by which the unsaid becomes said, Boehmer points out, does not have to be a conscious act. For example, sometimes ‘rhetorical imprecision allows newness to enter the world’ (87), through the interpretive possibilities that ambiguity creates. Thus, through ‘poetic’ techniques that widen the scope of possible meaning, the creative process — writing — opens up an infinite exponentiation of possible texts that can enter the world of the said.

In what follows, I argue that the ‘breaking of silence’ that occurs in *The Stone Virgins* to a large extent is achieved through the process by which the unsaid becomes said, rather than by saying what I have referred to as the unsayable — that which is known but not talked about. It is not so much, I argue, that Vera breaks the silence by describing the postwar violence in Matabeleland and Midlands (though she does that too as mentioned above) as by creating a ‘poetic’ language that foregrounds its status as previously unsaid by being at the same time semantically dense and ‘rhetorically imprecise’. As a matter of fact, Vera explicitly acknowledged that she wrote *The Stone Virgins* after reading Jocelyn Alexander, Joann McGregor and Terence Ranger’s *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the ‘Dark Forests’ of Matabeleland* (2000) which tells the history of the Matabeleland genocide in minute detail. This account along with the above-mentioned CCPJ report had said the unsayable and by so doing arguably opened up a possibility specifically for a literary intervention: to make it possible ‘to conceive’ of what had ‘not yet been conceived’ in the context of the Matabeleland genocide by narrating violence and suffering on the horizontal level of (fictional) individual life stories. In an interview done during her work on the novel Vera said that like *Violence and Memory, The Stone Virgins*, ‘is also about violence and memory, though it is fiction,’ and that as a fiction writer, ‘you don’t want to suppress history, you want to be one of the people liberating stories, setting them off’ (Bryce 2002, 226). While the authors of *Violence and Memory* made ‘history’ in the sense of suppressed facts known, Vera can be understood as saying that her job as a fiction writer is to ‘liberate’ stories from this historical narrative, because what historiography does not do is to show that ‘people did live, as well, and fall in love, at this time’ (226). She can be understood as saying that rather than mentioning the unsayable thing in the world and in the reader’s mind, she allowed ‘newness to enter’ the violent and politically oppressive world of post-war Zimbabwe.

While Vera has been seen as breaking the silence about *Gukurahundi*, her writing has often been described as ‘poetic’ and ‘lyrical’ (Shaw 2004, 38; Gagiano 2009, 50; Muponde and Maodzwa-Taruvinga 2002, xii; Kostelac 2006, Falk 2007, 90; Graham 2017, 355; Musila 2019, 323) and it has been pointed out that her ‘layered, symbolical’ prose has a defamiliarising effect (Coundouriotis 2021, 415; see also Zeleza 2007, 15; Harris 2007, 41; Boulanger 2022, 232). In contrast to the authors of *Violence and Memory* and the CCPJ report, which like all such texts hinged on fact gathering and on established historiographical forms, Vera employs a language that maximises what Boehmer (2014) calls an
‘oblique’ language where ‘rhetorical imprecision’ plays a central role. Vera touches on obliqueness when discussing adverse responses to her writing, which she partly puts down to her ‘style of writing, technique’: ‘people forget that writing is not just about issues’ she continues, it is also a ‘fulfilling search for expression’ (Primorac 2007, 378). Considering the fact that she said this while working on her fifth and last novel, it is easier to read this statement as referring not to a search for ‘a voice’ or personal style, but as a continual search for that which has not yet been expressed, or what I call the unsaid. ‘To Vera,’ writes one critic, ‘meanings of words are infinite. The lengths to which language can be stretched are limitless since the limits of language generally mean the limits of one’s world’ (Zhou 2004, 102). Carolyn Martin Shaw describes Vera’s prose as ‘self-conscious, each word measured, designed for its effects on the page and on the minds and emotions of the reader,’ but although what is consistent in her writing is that the assigning of metaphorical meaning to words, this meaning is ‘slippery’ and unstable (2004, 38;2002, 26). The effect of this is a prose that presents itself as dense with poetic meaning, by which I mean different forms of symbolism, including symbolical referentiality where there is no immediately obvious referent.

**Gukurahundi and Breaking the Silence**

The events referred to as Gukurahundi occurred in Zimbabwe’s Matabeleland and Midlands regions in the period 1980–1988 and were officially meant to target ‘dissidents’ in the wake of Zimbabwe’s independence and Mugabe and ZANU-PF’s rise to power.¹ The War of Independence was fought by two guerrilla armies who defeated the colonial Rhodesian forces: one was Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), which was the armed wing of Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), consisting mainly of Shona speakers. The other was Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), which was attached to the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), whose members were primarily Ndebele-speakers from Matabeleland and Midlands.² After the war, ZANU-PF won the majority of the seats in parliament and soon started to see the former ZIPRA guerrillas who had returned to army assembly points in the south western part of the country as a potential threat to their consolidation of power. Consequently, former guerrillas scattered into the bush and hills of Matabeleland and Midlands, occasionally attacking key points in the infrastructure in order to cause chaos, but also civilian communities from whom they demanded food and supplies (Alexander 2021, 766). ZANU-PF and Mugabe’s response was swift and brutal, and soon the region was overrun by specially trained soldiers, the Fifth Brigade, who according to the official narrative were rounding up ‘dissidents’, largely shorthand for ex-ZIPRA fighters. The violence was not only targeted at (and perpetrated by) former guerrillas, however, and the campaign almost immediately took on ethnic dimensions (CCJP 1997,
Members of ZANU-PF openly argued in parliament that it was impossible to know who in Matabeleland and Midlands were dissidents, who were dissident supporters and who were ordinary civilians (CCJP 1997, 45). The violence was consequently directed at the Matabeleland and Midlands population in general. Alexander writes that soldiers ‘made clear the blood link between being Ndebele and being dissident through the killing of children and pregnant women, the justification of rape as a means of producing a ‘Shona’ generation, and the crushing of men’s testicles’ (Alexander 2021, 770). By one estimate, as many as six thousand people were killed, most of whom were civilians, while the total number of actual dissidents possibly did not exceed four hundred (773, 766).³

As mentioned above, people’s memories of this extremely brutal campaign of violence were effectively and ruthlessly silenced. During the early stages of the violence, ZAPU leaders tried to meet with Mugabe to get an explanation for what was going on, but were instead ‘removed from office, detained, disappeared and killed, from the most senior levels to ward councillors and village chairs’ (770). With the Unity Accord that was signed in December of 1987, ZAPU became part of ZANU-PF and an amnesty for ‘dissidents’ who agreed to lay down arms was announced in April 1988 (CCJP 1997, 73). While this set the course for an end to the violence, it also meant that it was now in the interest of the former ZAPU leadership to downplay the terror waged against their own voter base (Alexander 2021, 770).

As noted earlier, when starting work on The Stone Virgins, Vera had read Alexander et al.’s book and the CCJP report. In her novel, she neither retells facts in these accounts through fiction, nor seeks to rectify mistakes or omissions. Instead, it might be argued that she uses the two historical accounts as an intertext that allows her to not tell the story of Gukurahundi as cross-ethnic, national history. What is more, even before the report and Violence and Memory were published, the atrocities had already received a name – Gukurahundi – by none other than Mugabe himself (CCJP 1997, 45; Werbner 1991, 161). The exact definition of this Shona word varies depending on the source consulted: it has to do with the rains or winds that follow on the season of threshing (see Harris 2007, 38; Werbner 1991, 161; CCJP 1997, 45; Kostelac 2006, 86; Ncube and Siziba 2017, 232; Sithole and Makumbe 1997, 133; Alexander 2021, 767). So, already in Mugabe’s use it ‘signif[jied] purging and purification’ and thus carried metaphorical associations to genocidal violence — denoting a seasonal weather that blows or washes away the detritus of the crop after harvest (Martin 2007, 75).

To purge the country of ZIPRA fighters and political rivals, Mugabe and his closest confidants in ZANU-PF created the Fifth Brigade, which by its own accord was answerable not to the Zimbabwean army but to Mugabe directly (Alexander et al. 2021, 191). When the Fifth Brigade had been put together, trained by North Korean instructors and armed with AK47s and other weapons no other Zimbabwean army unit had access to, Mugabe held a speech in
which he instructed the brigade to ‘plow and reconstruct’ and handed over to its colonel the brigade flag, emblazoned with ‘Gukurahundi’ (CCJP 1997, 45). While the word initially was used to refer to the task the Fifth Brigade was assigned, it attached itself to ‘the period in which the Fifth Brigade terrorized the provinces of Midlands and Matabeleland’ (Harris 2007, 38). In other words, long before the ‘breaking of silence’ surrounding Gukurahundi, for which The Stone Virgins has been said to be instrumental, Mugabe had inadvertently both coined the signifier and acknowledged the existence of the wave of violence it came to signify. While this is perhaps to make too much of a semantic shift, it is worth mentioning it here because while Mugabe refused to talk about Gukurahundi, the word did in fact in more than one way attach itself to what I have referred to above as ‘the thing in the world’ — the wave of violence that was made unsayable but of which few people in Matabeleland and Midlands were oblivious. Therefore, in a strict sense it is incorrect to see Vera’s breaking of the silence as an articulation of the unsayable, since her literary treatment of the thing in the world had already been described in much greater detail by the CCJP and Alexander et al. and named by Mugabe. Therefore, to really understand the intervention that Vera made in and with The Stone Virgins, it is necessary to think of it in more nuanced terms than ‘breaking the silence’, especially since it in many ways uses silence and semantic ‘imprecision’ to engage with the discourse on Gukurahundi.

While The Stone Virgins may not have broken the silence in the specific, factual sense discussed above, it clearly is infused with the subversive energy that the notion of ‘breaking’ imposed discourse entails. Below, I will read the language of the novel in terms of the ‘revolutionary’ poetics that Julia Kristeva describes in her Revolution in Poetic Language (Engl. transl. 1974). Since it may be helpful for the reader to keep this in mind when reading the quoted passages from the novel in the next section, which focuses on silence as a theme rather than a textual quality, I will briefly outline Kristeva’s view here and return to it below. Kristeva observes that in the language of writers such as Lautrémont, Malarmé, Joyce, and Artaud, a ‘shattering’ of discourse occurs, which corresponds to a ‘shattering’ of the ‘status of the subject’ itself — that is, a breakdown of the structural relation between the subject and the world (15). She sees this shattering as a crisis of the system of production, but also as caused by contradictions in this same system. She points out that every system of production already contains ‘fragmentary phenomena which have been kept in the background’ of the signifying system but which ‘point to the very process of significance’ (16). One of these phenomena is seemingly “‘incomprehensible’ poetry’ which underscores ‘the limits of socially useful discourse and attest[s] to what it represses: the process that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures’ (15). What Kristeva describes (within quotation marks) as ‘incomprehensible’ I refer to here as a kind of silence, as the horizon of signification in a specific utterance. My point is that this kind of silence limits what is actually objectively said, but at the same time reveals that
the process of signification ‘exceeds’ the words on the page and is ultimately ‘unbounded’ (17). It is, therefore, in the present context, a force that ‘breaks’ the limits imposed on public discourse by Mugabe and ZANU-PF, by pushing not only beyond the unsayable, but also beyond the unsaid.

**Silence as theme in The Stone Virgins**

Before I return to the silences in Vera’s literary language, I will discuss the roles silence plays in the narrative, since the values that characters ascribe to silence may help explain the operations of Vera’s poetics. This analysis of silences in the text must by necessity begin with the plot, which gives meaning to different relations between characters and the forms of silence between them. The story takes place in Bulawayo, the village of Kezi and the Matobo Hills in Matabeleland, mainly in the years immediately before and after independence, and during the 1980–1988 violence. It centres on the brutal murder of a young woman, Thenjiwe, and the rape and mutilation of her sister Nonceba at the hands of the ex-guerilla fighter, Sibaso in 1981. In the wake of the attack, Nonceba is taken from Kezi to a hospital in Bulawayo where she remains for several months. After she is released and has returned to Kezi, she is visited by a man, Cephas, who previously has had a short but intense relationship with her sister and who has come to bring her to Bulawayo in order to nurture her back to health, as a way to honour the memory of Thenjiwe. After the village store is burnt down and its owner killed by soldiers, Nonceba realises that she cannot remain in Kezi and agrees to go with Cephas to the city. At the end of the narrative, Nonceba and Cephas share a flat in Bulawayo, where Nonceba receives reconstructive surgery, while Sibaso wanders the bush and takes refuge in a rock-shrine in the Matobo Hills.

Silence figures into the story in a host of different ways. It is used metonymically — silence in characters’ personal life is an instantiation of silences and taboos on a larger social level. Oliver Nyambi (2014) writes that ‘the killing of Thenjiwe and the facial maiming of Nonceba are not only symptomatic of the suffering inflicted on Kezi (and Matabeleland) but also an allusion to the state’s attempts to obliterate memories of Gukurahundi atrocities (as symbolized by the decapitation of Thenjiwe’s head — the symbolic repository of her memory about the event — and the mutilation of Nonceba’s mouth)’ (7). In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Nonceba is struggling to find the words to speak about what has happened to her, but she is also literally struggling to form words:

She is mute. A voice dying. Unable to shape words into language, to breathe freely. She will have to find the sources of sound inside her, pure and timeless. Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will flow. Only then would she discover a world in contrast to her predicament. She would restore her own mind, healing it in segments, in sound. She thinks of the language of animals which has no words but memory. (82)
Nonceba’s silence is akin to the silence of the colonised as Boehmer reads it in Vera’s early works, which is a noisy, vocal silence: the body represents ‘its own silence’, ‘uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition’ (1993, 272). Language is ascribed the power to heal and restore, because language is conceptualised as a bodily function. However, language does not only restore in the sense of bringing the wounded back to health, but in language there is an undiscovered world beyond suffering. Her words are literally unsayable, because she cannot use her mouth, but when they ‘will flow’ the unsaid (the not-yet-conceived) will follow. This silence contrasts to that of the female ex-ZIPRA fighters who sit all day outside the store in Kezi. Their experiences from the war are unsayable because it remains beyond the horizon of what can be talked about in the space outside the village store, where the Bulawayo bus terminates, which serves as the communal area of the village. The men in Kezi are ‘unsure of words, the tone of voice necessary to be tolerated, to gain the response of these mighty and serene women whom nothing seems to disturb’ (54). Nonceba’s and the female ZIPRA-fighters’ silence is the result of external forces, but in very different ways. The female fighters know what they have seen and done, but remain serene in their silence, which is a result not of their inability to speak but of the village men’s inability to participate in conversation. Though these are different forms of silence, they can both be read as allegorically referencing the culture of silence in the wake of the war: it has become temporarily impossible to speak but at the same time imperative to discover a new ‘world’ beyond violence and suffering.

However, silence cannot always be read as allegorically gesturing toward the censoring of stories of violence that the novel has been read as resisting. For example, the relationship between Cephas and Thenjiwe ends because he misunderstands the value that silence has for Thenjiwe (40). The place in Kezi where the Bulawayo bus terminates and where ZIPRA women sit in silence is also where the intense affair between Cephas and Thenjiwe begins. Cephas has stepped off the bus from Bulawayo and is sitting outside the village store when Thenjiwe passes by. They communicate with looks and gestures, but do not speak. Cephas follows Thenjiwe ‘like a shadow’ back to her house and they begin a brief, emotional and sexual but largely wordless relation (33). In contrast to their sparse dialogue, the wordless gestural communication between them is described in such detail that it resembles a dance, as Ashleigh Harris has pointed out (2007). This dance does not last for long, however, and in Ncube and Siziba’s reading, Cephas’s and Thenjiwe’s relationship ultimately ‘fails’ because they are ‘unable to verbalize what they need to say to each other’ (2017, 235). While it is true that things remain unarticulated between them and that silence is a key reason that their relationship ends, it is not the silence in itself that is the reason for the split between them. What causes their break-up is the fact that Cephas fails to understand that to Thenjiwe silence is a source of permanence and stability. The following is from the passage in which their relationship ends:
She loves him, but wants to rid herself of a persisting vision of him, a passer-by, a stranger sitting at Thandabantu Store, swinging, swinging his knees and whistling a wicked and irresistible tune, casting his glance this way and that, and holding the earth still. She wants emotion of another kind, more than that, she wants to be alone with him, find him again in their silences, and know him with an intense knowing which she herself would never wish to escape. (Vera 2002, 40)

To Thenjiwe, only silence makes it possible to know Cephas in a way that is intense enough to replace her image of him as someone whose presence is temporary, who will soon board the bus back to Bulawayo. Seeds and roots are central metaphors in the passages about their time together, and when Cephas finally leaves her, she gives him back a seed that he has given her and that she has kept in her mouth. Silence, she imagines, would let her truly communicate with him by showing him things that he will understand on a deeper level. She is seeking an intense ‘mystical communion’ (Falk 2007, 96) in which, had it existed between them, wordless knowledge would bind them together and to the land: she would start by discovering a marula tree, whose roots she would show him until they are ‘no longer under the ground but become the lines planted on his palms’ (Vera 2002, 40). Could she only discover these roots, they would both ‘know a deep truth about her land, about Kezi, about the water buried deep underneath their feet’ (40). Cephas would ‘never forget’ because this knowledge would be like the memory of a scent or a flavour ‘that would never leave his lips or desert the cave of his mouth’ (40). To Thenjiwe, it is only by relishing this taste and ‘know[ing] the shape of these roots’ that Cephas can ‘with truth and abandon, ever proclaim to linger, to love her as absolutely as she desires to be loved’ (40-41). Thenjiwe sees the silence as something the two of them share, since it is a necessary requirement for the cultivation of shared sensory and embodied memories and knowledge that can make their relationship permanent. During her short relationship with Cephas, Thenjiwe thus does not ‘fail’ to ‘break the silence’ but actively seeks to preserve it.

However, Cephas sees the silence as belonging to Thenjiwe only and as a possession that she wants and has a right to keep for herself. In the first section of dialogue in the text Cephas talks to Thenjiwe about how if she died, he would bring her back by touching one of her bones, as he is now touching her and feeling a bone under her skin. What he does not say is that he is slowly reaching the decision to leave her and to go back to Bulawayo. When he stops talking, he feels that she has not been listening:

She does not answer. She has said nothing throughout. He realises that she is listening to that lonely sweetness she has already found, not him. She has not heard him. She is one of those women who never miss dawn, it resides in her arms. Her silence sifts into the room like fine dust. He slides, from light to shadow. He has to. He decides to leave this body of milk and dew and mazhanje seeds. Leave it as apart as it already appears to be, as fulfilled, without his voice disturbing its silence. He leaves with a terrible thirst in his own bones, of loving her. (40)
To Cephas, Thenjiwe has made her choice between him and silence and chosen the latter. His decision to leave is not so much a response to Thenjiwe’s perceived failure to listen or respond to him as his way of preserving the silence that makes her fulfilled.

As shown above, while Thenjiwe sees silence as something out of which things can grow and as a deeper form of communication (and indeed ‘communion’), to Cephas it is something that his presence threatens to destroy. However, after Thenjiwe is murdered and he has brought Nonceba to Bulawayo, Cephas comes to view silence in a different light. He adopts a view that is closer to Thenjiwe’s when it comes to the restorative, unifying and generative power of silence. While he cares for Nonceba, who is going through a series of surgeries and is slowly healing, he comes to a realisation about his short relationship with Thenjiwe:

She had hesitated; he had hesitated; and left. He had not heard her at all. Perhaps this was the similarity between the sisters, to ask him to wait, till she calls again his name. He would let Nonceba be. Leave her and bury his own longing, but he would not walk away. When he met Nonceba, then, he was seeking penance, for an absence, for a forgetfulness, for abandon: he now felt that it was he who had walked away. Thenjiwe had asked him to stay. (164)

Now Cephas sees his own need to cut through the silence and tie himself to Thenjiwe through dialogue as what he thought he saw in her: an inability to be present for the other. The fact that he realises that he did not hear her can be read as an indication of the fact that he has realised that her silence was a form of wordless communication. It was wordless not because of a taboo or (self-)censoring, but a form of communication that centres on the unsaid, that which cannot be said because there is not yet a form for it.

Having reconsidered his understanding of the value of silence, Cephas comes to perceive the wordlessness that exists between himself and Nonceba as essential for her processes of healing and something that allows their relationship to grow stronger and deeper. The following lengthy quote is from the last chapter, where some stability has at last arrived after the attack. The quote is of necessity lengthy because it is semantically dense, but simultaneously centres on what is unsaid:

Cephas has provided her with a home, and a new life. She has no regrets in coming to the city. Certainly, their relationship is undefined. It is pleasurable, supportive. They both avoid defining it, embraced by an innocence born of the tragic circumstances of their unity. They do not complicate it with questions they dare not answer. Around 5.30 every evening the traffic in the city turns to a murmur, by 6.30 it hums. The streets are empty; so empty you can hear the soft sound of tyres as a bicycle goes by. … Cephas returns home soon afterwards. They do not discuss their relationship, the limits of it. They focus on the things which need to be done, the things they are definite about. Helping; a type of rescue, a deliverance. He helps her. They avoid the most imprecise element, love, the least predictable, the most enduring human
quality, the most intriguing, the most difficult to control. They let their feelings exist separate from each task, from their tremors. (154)

There are two silences in this passage: the evening stillness in the streets is described from a point inside the flat, which makes it possible for Nonceba to hear bicyclists pass by in the street. This perspective then connects the silence that Nonceba and Cephas are careful to maintain in order to allow healing to take place with the larger historical forces outside the walls of the building and a different kind of silence — the peace that ensues after war and state-sponsored terror. This ‘noiselessness is visible’ in ‘dim footsteps’ and ‘streetlights’ when Nonceba looks out the window (154). The silence inside the flat is possible because Nonceba and Cephas do not force each other to say and define the unsaid — that which has not yet taken the shape of a specific form of love. This time the silence is allowed to become generative: it allows for a relationship to form, not despite but because it is undefined. The stillness in this passage, both in the microcosm of the flat and on the macro-level of the young nation outside it is not due to an absence of activity. Just like there are still some cars, footsteps and the occasional bicycle in the streets in the evening, there is still activity in Cephas’s and Nonceba’s home, things that need to be done.

In and through silence, then, they work toward a future, albeit slowly. This future, whatever it will be, is foreshadowed in the word ‘deliverance,’ which also is the final word of the final sentence on the final page. Cephas works for the archives of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, while ‘helping’ Nonceba and doing his part to achieve ‘a deliverance’ for her (154). When this word returns it operates both on a larger scale, on the level of the nation, and on the level of their personal history of violence and healing. Cephas realises that he ‘must retreat from Nonceba’ so as not to ‘replicate histories’ by insisting on engaging her in a dialogue she cannot yet have with him (165). He decides that what he must do instead is to ‘stick to the restoration of kingdoms’, a different form of replicating histories:

A new nation needs to restore the past. His focus, the bee-hive hut, to be installed at Lobengula’s ancient kraal in kwoBulawayo the following year. His task is to learn to recreate the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet, and dry, the way grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool livable places within; deliverance. (165)

As above, the silence is here what makes commitment possible. The silence that is necessary so that Nonceba can heal also allows Cephas to focus on his part in the building of ‘a new nation,’ which is not necessarily the nation as it is envisioned by the political elite. His work will be to weave together an uncertain future and the pre-colonial past in its smallest and ‘tenderest’ forms. As indicated by the language in the passage, he is not resurrecting a glorious national past, like that which the official national narrative projects onto the ancient stone structures of Great Zimbabwe. Instead, he will restore bits of a history of
endurance and overcoming, manifested in the grass huts erected by the Ndebele, survivors of the waves of genocidal violence radiating out from the expanding Zulu empire in the 1840s (See Samuelson 2007, 28–29). For Cephas, the deliverance that awaits seems to arise from the ‘livable places within,’ which offer shelter from the violence of the world outside, and such forces as those that swept him, Nonceba and Thenjiwe away from the life that could have been.

In the narrative, then, silence is represented neither in a consistently negative, nor unequivocally positive light. While silence is a necessary condition for healing and the slow growth of relationships, the destructive effects of the forces that make experiences unsayable are equally central in the narrative. When confined to her hospital bed in Bulawayo, Nonceba has to endure ‘an insistent, absolute, silence’ which is necessary for her healing process but also the direct result of violence (134). Even after her bodily scars have been healed, however, she and Cephas limit their conversations to ‘things they are definite about’ and let other things remain unsaid, for the time being. They embrace the silence that Thenjiwe cherished so that something new can take shape in their lives. This silence, in contrast to that which Nonceba has to suffer through after she is attacked, is generative and healing. So is the silence in which Cephas weaves bee-hive huts, as a reminder that the people who once settled the land also lived through violence but survived to build a new home.

**Vera’s Poetics of Silence**

If silence is generative in the relationships between Thenjiwe and Cephas and between Cephas and Nonceba, this can be seen as a hint to the role it plays in Vera’s writing. As was pointed out above, Vera’s writing can be likened to the ‘revolutionary’ poetic language that Kristeva sees as underscoring the limits of signification by ‘exceeding’ the particular relations between the subject ‘the body, other people and objects’ that are imposed by the system that this repressed language seeks to ‘shatter’ (1974, 15). There too silence is anything but the absence of meaning and there too there are more than one kind of silence. The most concrete form of silence in the text is instantiations of absence of direct and concrete references to things that arguably can be expected to be mentioned in the text, such as the word Gukurahundi. However, there are also forms of silence in Vera’s literary language that are modelled around the fact that any utterance about a world is silent about most of the things in that world.

Vera’s ‘poetic’ language generates meaning by obfuscating syntactic connections and through oblique symbolical referentiality. It is often unclear how components of sentences and larger textual structures are connected. Instead of foreclosing meaning, however, this technique adds meaning to the often-fragmented representation of events and settings. The novel’s page-long fifth chapter consists of two paragraphs: one that describes the vibrancy of life in
Bulawayo after the War of Independence and the other, which will be discussed below, about the moment when violence returns. Both paragraphs list sights and things in Bulawayo, as if things one can see around the city somehow are the totality of existence at a moment in time. During the brief period of peace, there are in Bulawayo:

| Street-lights and luminous balconies, doorways, drinking houses, tailor-shops, bus-stops and fish-seller porches. Shoemakers in makeshift shelters. Milkmen in torn and faded blue collars, ice-cream vendors chatting to forgetful prostitutes, ambulance drivers, blood drying on their fingernails. Husbands carry loaves of bread to their lovers, bespectacled priests, dogs bark at half-masked nuns from mission schools. [...] Dragonflies drink from potholes in Luveve Road. Funeral parlours are scented with hibiscus bushes. (Vera 2002, 59). |

Here Vera creates a sense of place by describing things that make up the city, but the sense of place is also an effect of things that are not named. It is the fact that these things must be only a fraction of the totality that makes us see it as a representation of a city coming back to life after the war. It is not so much that the reader has to ‘fill in the gap’ that the text leaves between the streetlights and doorways and forgetful prostitutes, because this would require not only an exceptional imaginative power but also intimate knowledge of this place and moment in time. Instead, the text silently indicates that there are things there — innumerable sights, events, objects, people — which are not mentioned. What is more, while Vera uses the realist technique of listing things to achieve a ‘reality effect’, she at the same time defamiliarises the city by muddling the relations between them (Barthes 1989). While the husbands’ relationship with their lovers is consolidated by a gift of bread, the syntactic ambiguity makes it unclear what their relation is to the bespectacled priests. The ice-cream vendors talk to the prostitutes, but it is not possible to tell what their relation is to the ambulance drivers and milkmen. Syntactical structures and conjunctions are not there to connect the things and people in the city, but the effect of this is that the city becomes more, not less city-like. It is a more complex, vast and interconnected image of a place than any direct representation could produce.

As we will see below, Vera uses the same technique in her brief reference to the beginning of Gukurahundi. Instead of trying to expand her descriptive language to encompass the violence, she explodes representation in a similar way as when describing the vibrancy of Bulawayo in peacetime. She describes the onset of violence by listing sights and metaphors, which ultimately do not represent the violence in itself but gestures at the enormous spaces of meaning that cannot be contained on the page. In a reading of a sentence in Vera’s Under the Tongue (2002b), Martina Kopf (2012) shows how Vera’s literary language draws attention to that which cannot be said and thus still in a sense creates meaning through silence. The sentence reads ‘scars are our hidden words, our places of forgetting’ and Kopf writes that ‘the scar as physical sign
represents the lack of a verbal sign for the experience of suffering’ (100–101). The scar is in other words a signifier for an experience whose reality can be gestured at but not articulated. As other ‘moments’ in the text, it ‘indicate[s] an absence in language’ (101). Kopf reads these moments as characteristic of how symbolism works in Vera’s texts — they gesture toward what I have called the unsayable/unsaid, to something that calls attention to itself because it cannot be talked about. Thus, the signifier gestures toward an empty space, which in turn signifies the thing that cannot be articulated. In other words, the ‘silence’ in Vera’s literary language is ‘noisy’ in the sense that it generates meaning. To Kopf, this particular form of symbolism ultimately amounts to an ‘aesthetics’ that does not so much project concepts and experiences into the mind of the reader as it ‘insists on the presence of the addressable other’ that acknowledges the existence of suffering (108). If in her story about Cephas and Nonceba Vera makes the point that naming and saying are not always desirable and silence allows a new life to take shape, she also puts this belief into practice in her writing by bringing attention to the meaning of specific ‘absences in language’.

The primary way in which the reader’s attention is brought to meaningful silence is through semantic ‘slippage’ and the kind of ambiguous syntax discussed above. There is in Vera’s prose a high frequency of what Boehmer calls ‘rhetorical imprecision,’ which multiplies the possible meaning of words and symbols and makes a multitude of different interpretations possible. Insofar as these tendencies can be seen as characteristic of a ‘poetic’ language, which foregrounds its difference from everyday referential language, ‘poetic’ texts particularly offer possibilities for the hitherto unsaid to find its way into the world. If this is true, the ‘poetic-ness’ of Vera’s language is related to the poetic-ness that Julia Kristeva theorises, which in turn emerges from the ‘exploration and discovery of the possibilities of language’ (Kristeva qtd. in Roudiez 1984, 2). It is a language that through its ‘infinite possibilities’ (Kristeva qtd. in Roudiez 1984, 2) allows for the possible liberation of ‘the subject from a number of linguistic, psychic, and social networks’ and constitutes ‘a dynamism that breaks up the inertia of language habits’ (Kristeva qtd. in Roudiez 1984, 2–3). If writing and interpretation are both generative of newness, they are so to the extent that the text (what is written and read) does not allow itself to be subsumed under something that has already been said. It is in other words ultimately the ‘play’ made possible by ‘rhetorical imprecision’ and what Vera’s critics refer to as her poetic and ‘lyrical’ language that opens the door to newness. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser write about the ‘play-movement’ in texts as the turning of ‘the split signifier into a matrix for double meaning’ (1989, xiii). Only through this play-movement can ‘difference as oscillation be manifested, because only play brings out the otherness that lies on the reverse side of all positions’ (xiii). Thus, instead of activating one particular referent, the imprecision of the referentiality of an utterance (a poem, a verse, a passage in a prose text, a literary symbol, a word) allows for
multiple constellations of mental images to be made, and thus for previously unsaid and unconceived meaning to be said.

As has been argued above, if Vera’s intervention with *The Stone Virgins* is to ‘break’ the silence surrounding *Gukurahundi*, she achieves this by allowing new thoughts and new meaning to emerge in relation to the violence and destruction. As was pointed out at the beginning of this article, ‘Gukurahundi’ was at least initially a floating signifier — a metaphor whose meaning was not stable, which made Mugabe himself inadvertently put a name on the campaign of violence he fervently tried to repress into oblivion. In Vera’s poetics, however, it is not the signifier but the signified that is ‘floating.’ The surface level of the text clearly gestures at violence and suffering, but like the scar that Kopf discusses, it ultimately brings attention to the fact that there is a lack of a ‘verbal sign’ that encompasses the full meaning of that violence and suffering. As pointed out above, Vera does not represent the campaign of violence in Matabeleland and Midlands in the 1980s as a complex series of key events, set in motion and carried out by specific actors on particular dates. The CCPJ report and Alexander et al.’s *Violence and Memory* had already pieced together the facts and forensic evidence of the violence in Matabeleland and Midlands. Vera thus speaks to *Gukurahundi* not as a previously unknown series of historical events that she sets out to create awareness of through truthful literary narration, but as an impossibly complex reality that ultimately cannot be narrated through the conventional means of transparent literary representation.

Thus, in *The Stone Virgins*, *Gukurahundi* is an historical setting rather than a theme. There is little in the form of actual representation of the violence: there is one passage in which soldiers burn down the village store and kill its owner and villagers who try to escape the violence in Matabeleland are marched off a bus and into the bush (Vera 2002a, 121–124). However, as mentioned earlier, one of the two paragraphs that make up Chapter five describes the moment when *Gukurahundi* begins:


The relation between signifier and signified is unclear here because what the passage is ultimately about is the return of violence and the beginning of *Gukurahundi*. The ‘poetic’ way in which the passage is written indicates that this moment can only be invoked and that it cannot be exhaustively and accurately described. Consequently, the passage contains contra-factual elements: ‘war’ does not in fact begin in 1981, and independence does not formally end. However, as in Ezekiel Chapter 37, the scattered bones of the dead reassemble and become ‘a vast army’, violence and suffering again rise and are present ‘in the street’ as during
the war, and the state-sanctioned violence arguably devalues the hard-won freedom from white rule to the extent that it is lost in a figurative sense.

As mentioned above, while these complex forms of signification are certainly a central component in Vera’s poetic literary language, meaning is also generated, multiplied and refracted through syntactic ambiguity. It is often unclear how key elements in the text are connected, as in the novel’s last sentence (quoted above), whose ambiguity makes it unclear what the relation is between the final ‘deliverance’ and the elements that precedes it, the way branches bend and grass folds over them and keep the ‘places within’ cool. It is therefore up to the reader to think through the possible ways to connect the final word syntactically and semantically to Cephas’s silent work.

**Conclusion**

In this article the primary aim has been to think through connections between silence and meaning-making and to suggest ways to read different forms of silence. I have discussed two forms of silence: the unsayable and the unsaid, and argued that Vera’s ‘poetic’ language maximises the chances of the latter form of silence to be generative of meaning. A secondary aim has been to qualify the often-repeated claim that *The Stone Virgins*, ‘broke the silence’ about *Gukurahundi*. I have tried to show that the novel presents a poetics that aligns with its theme of meaning-generative silence, which uses opaque and imprecise syntax and referentiality in a way that maximises the possibility of the unsaid to be said, and thus map out the complex relations between silence, the unsaid, the unsayable and saying in Vera’s writing. While it is not my intention to play down the role that the novel might have played in bringing international attention to the atrocities committed by the Fifth Brigade and sanctioned by Mugabe and the ZANU-PF, I have tried to show that Vera’s slim novel offers us more than this — a poetics that problematises the relation between the unsaid and the said in such a way that she makes it a tool for discursive resistance and for literary imagination.

**Notes**

1. Different sources give different end dates for the *Gukurahundi* period. I have chosen to use the longest timespan. Vera’s narrative ends in 1986.
2. It should be noted here that the ethnic composition of ZANU-PF/ZANLA and ZAPU/ZIPRA was more convoluted than is sometimes suggested in the literature (see Alexander 2021, 770).
3. Alexander (2021) references an estimate by CCJP. The CCJP say that at least 3000 people were killed but adds that the number may well be twice that. Alexander does not make an estimate but points out that some sources put the death toll at 20,000 based on a misreading of the CCJP report.
4. Cephas means ‘rock’ and is the name given by Christ to Peter, the apostle.
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