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Buried hurts and colliding dreams in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

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ABSTRACT. Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998) depicts an intense and tragically concluded love relationship between a middle-aged colonised male labourer, Fumbatha, and an idealistic and much younger woman, Phephelaphi. The context is the ghetto adjoining the city of Bulawayo in late colonial Southern Rhodesia. The article employs the concepts of genealogies and of transmodernity to delineate Vera's reinscription of colonised African men and women in her illocutionary, densely poetic account of the growth of modernity in Africa, tragic because (despite similar, buried hurts) the protagonists' dreams are at odds.

Key words: genealogies, colonialism, modernity, hurt, dreams, illocutionary.

RESUMO. Feridas escondidas e sonhos conflitantes em *Butterfly Burning* de Yvonne Vera. O romance *Butterfly Burning* (1998), da autora zimbabuana Yvonne Vera mostra o relacionamento amoroso, intenso e trágico, entre Fumbatha, um trabalhador colonizado de meia idade, e Phephelaphi, uma mulher jovem e idealista. O contexto do enredo é o gueto perto da cidade de Bulawayo na ex-colônia da Rodésia do Sul. O artigo emprega os conceitos de genealogias e da transmodernidade para delinear as re-inscrições dos africanos e africanas colonizados em sua narração ilocucionária, profundamente poética, do desenvolvimento da modernidade na África. É também trágica (apesar da semelhança das feridas escondidas) pela não-coincidência dos sonhos dos protagonistas.

Palavras-chave: genealogias, colonialismo, modernidade, feridas, sonhos, narração ilocucionária.

The chronicles of empire and emancipation when seen fully in their interplay and interpenetration, may yet hold stories untold, interconnections whose intricacies may alter our sense of history (J.P. Nederveen Pieterse).

Genealogies

This essay on the Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera's 1998 text *Butterfly Burning* employs various notions of genealogy, adapting it to different scenarios in order to describe what Vera achieves in this text. Hence I transfer the concept of genealogy from a genetic frame of reference in order to address notions of family heritage or ancestral legacies; the 'genealogy' (ancestry and succession; lineage or line of descent) of modernity in Africa: reading historical process as genealogy. The existence of a **transmodern** (DUSSEL, 1995) text such as *Butterfly Burning* testifies to the complex genealogy of modernity in Africa, since the novel contains a palimpsest of public and private histories of early African modernisation, in the particular setting of late colonial Southern Rhodesia – as Zimbabwe was called during the period of British colonisation (ATTREE, 2002; SAMUELSON, 2007; WILSON-TAGOE, 2007).

In Vera's novel, African genealogies such as those

of her two chief protagonists Fumbatha and Phephelaphi are recognised as ambivalent, fluid, and largely (i.e. historically) inclusive. Vera's concern with her society's histories is widely known; *Butterfly Burning* is dedicated to her historian friend Terence Ranger. As in the extensively studied genealogies of European subjects, history, geography, myth, power forms, ancestry, culture, commodities and ways of making a living within a community (and a political dispensation) provide the complex context or source that has its outcomes in the individual lives and interrelationships that the novelist evokes. Vera set the novel in the late 1940s – a time of colonial power consolidation and indigenous political stasis. The location is the city of Bulawayo and its adjunct, the black township or ghetto of Makokoba. The modern city was established in 1896 by the British born but South African based super-colonist Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902) on the ruins of the pre-colonial Ndebele capital, Bulawayo, which had been razed with brutal efficiency by the troops of his British South African Company. To mark colonial power

acquisition, seventeen bodies of indigenous men, executed for resisting the colonial incursion, were left hanging from the branches of a tree on the edge of the ruined city.

To invoke genealogy in the way I do here is to invoke chronology; to excavate origins as well as to peer towards the future, as Vera's novel does. My title is an attempt to indicate Vera's excavation of layers of historical hurt as well as the tentative, still thwarted aspirations of the community and the characters she here portrays. *Butterfly Burning* not only records and imagines African histories omitted from conventional history books, but simultaneously and correctively addresses European or Western history, which has been lopsided, partial and partisan in its conception of world history. In depicting how early African modernity manifested itself in Southern Rhodesia (as Rhodes named the area conquered by his troops), Vera examines what Enrique Dussel in the title of his 1996 text calls *the underside of modernity*. Dussel challenges the conventional historical genealogy that hegemonically traces a line of development towards modernity from the Renaissance and the Reformation through the Enlightenment, declaring that

[...] this manner of interpreting modern identity is Eurocentric, that is to say, provincial, regional, and does not take into account modernity's global significance and, hence, the role of Europe's periphery as 'source', *equally constitutive* of the modern 'self' as such (DUSSEL, 1996, p. 131, emphasis added).

Vera's historical reconstruction seeks to inscribe the African and female contributions to the making of modernity in Africa.

Embodied colonialism

Butterfly Burning opens with a long chapter depicting black labourers (by implication political prisoners of the colonial government) engaged in daylong toil, cutting the tall southern African grass with sickles to clear space for the settlers' roads and buildings, while later chapters show the chief male protagonist Fumbatha at work (as he has been for two decades) in the building industry. "Bulawayo is a city he understands closely", we are told, a construction "which he has held brick by brick, on his palm" and of which he has "felt the tension of effort over his back" (VERA, 1998, p. 20). The black subject (but not citizen) thus literally co-constructs urban modernity in the colony. But after **almost twenty years** of this labour Fumbatha and Phephelaphi – and other, much larger township families – live in one-roomed asbestos shacks with dirt floors, subject to colonial supervision and police

raids. Native Rhodesians return from participation as soldiers for Britain in World War II to find that black Bulawayans are still forbidden by law from walking on the pavements of the city streets, since (to the settlers): "It was more important for cream-coloured pleated parasols to parade, for bodices clad in expensive gathered satin trains to hold sway" (VERA, 1998, p. 77 – on point of fact see also NUTTALL, 2005, and Ranger, forthcoming). Vera's sarcastic reference to the luxurious trappings of the whites' lives recall Hegel's preemptive validation of "the 'developed' bourgeois society" as being morally obliged to seek land for expansion and economic profit for the European motherland in the colony, as quoted in Dussel (1995, p. 130, emphasis added here).

Like Chakrabarty (2000) in a later text, Dussel (1995, p. 117) concedes that "in its rational nucleus modernity entails the emancipation of humanity from cultural immaturity". Ideologically, however, the dominant European view of modernisation validated the sacrifice and exploitation of the colonised while insisting that such subjugation was "the necessary price of modernization" (DUSSEL, 1995, p. 117). Dussel's reference to colonised men and women being exploited and **immolated** calls to mind the scene of nameless men pulverised by an explosion at an oil refinery early in *Butterfly Burning* – as it does Fumbatha's toil and Phephelaphi's flaming demise. Entering the colony, the Europeans force African subjects down into **primitivity** as they raise themselves up into modernity. By making Fumbatha exactly as old (at fifty years) as the city he has helped to construct and also emphasising that he is born in the same year (1896) in which his father and sixteen other men were hanged outside Makokoba township as a final demonstration of the culpable futility of resisting colonial incursion, Vera locates her male protagonist historically as a figure embodying early African modernity under colonialism – urban, but peripheral; constructively participant in the modernisation process in his society, but a disregarded contributor, meagrely rewarded. By writing **his** story Vera is completing and complementing the genealogy of early African modernity – indeed, the genealogy of modernity. More than this, she is correcting the genealogy of modernity **per se**, since the colonised people's modern histories both coincide with and co-constitute those of Europeans.

The features of **necropolitics** outlined by Achille Mbembe in his eponymous essay equate to aspects of what Vera in *Butterfly Burning* depicts of

the colonised condition. Mbembe speaks of “the slave condition” resulting from the “triple loss” of a “home”, of “rights over his or her body, and loss of political status” (MBEMBE, 2003, p. 21). Whether convict road workers or ‘free’ employees in the construction industry (like Fumbatha), Vera’s black men have lost all three. Her powerfully evocative, visceral descriptions propel readers into empathising with Fumbatha and his fellow workers. Fumbatha is acutely conscious of his thwarted desire “to possess [...] the land beneath his feet from which birth had severed him” (VERA, 1998, p. 23); this constitutes his inheritance of loss. Even the village where his widowed mother raised him no longer exists. The colonised men’s deprivation of civil rights is ‘read’ on their bodies by the woman Zandile, who traces “the line of the whip digging [...] under the armpit, reaching over the breast and making a complete and fiery circle”. She notices places of “missing flesh” and “seared skin” and “deep tooth marks buried behind the legs”; evidence of encounters with “police dogs and chains” that leave the “ankles blistered, the wrists embroidered with the shame of a constant struggle” (VERA, 1998, p. 34). The men’s bodies are texts carrying the records of colonial brutality – a history Vera co-records with Zandile in the vivid precision of her narration.

The narrative of *Butterfly Burning* is initiated in a sentence evoking an unspecified, uneasy stasis: “There is a pause. An expectation” (VERA, 1998, p. 1). This recalls Gramsci’s well-known notion of an historical “interregnum” as a period when “the old is dying and the new cannot be born”, a time characterised by “a great diversity of morbid symptoms” (GRAMSCI, 1971, p. 276). The novel’s opening sentence alludes to the time between the 1896 crushing of the first *chimurenga* (as indigenous resistance to the incursion of colonial rule was called) and the resumption of armed resistance (the second *chimurenga*) in 1966 – initiating a period of anti-colonial war which ended with the achievement of independence in 1980. In the novel, the evocation of unnamed black men who “bend their backs in the sun and hum a tune, and fume, and lullaby” (VERA, 1998, p. 1) can be taken as emblematic of their actual subjugation and hidden resistance. Over and over, the bending, “bowed” posture of these colonised males is noted, the “collapsing” of “memory”; the state of being “caught by barbed-wire fences”; the “long[ing] for flight”; the “fading” of a “dream” (VERA, 1998, p. 1-5). The sordidness of the colonised condition is registered in details such as

references to the “secrecy and stench” of “wasted time, wasted love”, and its humiliating exclusions in the prevalence of public signs saying **NO BLACKS, WHITES ONLY** and **CLOSED** (VERA, 1998, p. 6) in the city erected by black labourers’ toil, whose white inhabitants the indigenes must continue to serve. Anticipating the later evocation of Fumbatha’s existential puzzlement, caught as he is between his politically martyred father’s “memory that dares not be understood” and the reality of having to make a living within the colonial economy, Vera describes the grass-cutters’ brows as “perpetually furrowed” (VERA, 1998, p. 1) – expressive of their troubled bewilderment. The “tune” these men sing to help them endure their arduous labour and their state of defeat, humiliation and entrapment expresses, like the Kwela music which it anticipates, both a simmering fury (in “fume”) and a self-soothing resignation (indicated in “lullaby”) (VERA, 1998, p. 1).

The grass which the men are cutting down to clear the ground subtly but symbolically mimics their own condition: its “roots” are pulled “out of the ground” to “conquer a stubbornness”; the cut grass “submits” to the sickle, while that yet to be cut “stands defiant” – it resembles a “stubborn shadow” like an insistent and awkward reminder of lost pride and purpose (VERA, 1998, p. 1-2). The ambiguous, compromised, “interregnum” quality of the black Rhodesians’ participation in the ‘development’ of the land (alternatively seen: their role in the modernisation of this society) is perfectly captured in the music (called Kwela) that has developed out of their township circumstances. Vera describes Kwela in a paradoxical concatenation of nouns, as “carry[ing]”, simultaneously, “rejection, distaste, surrender, envy. And full desire” (VERA, 1998, p. 3 – see ATTREE, 2002; LUNGA, 2002; MUPONDE, 2005 and SAMUELSON, 2007 on the significance of Kwela). This is the musical equivalent of the unresolvable “nervous condition” (1967, p. 17, in Sartre’s famous phrase) of the native who is yet not a citizen and is therefore excluded from modern subjecthood, while indelibly aware of the injustice of that exclusion. Between their past in this land of their birth, and their present, the natural genealogies of the colonised have been ruptured by “the boundary of thick coiled wire which partitions the land” (VERA, 1998, p. 58). While the “equally dying and bewildered” (VERA, 1998, p. 8) survivors of the 1896 colonial incursion may seem to have recovered equilibrium by the 1940s (the ‘present’ of her text), Vera simultaneously salutes their resilience and registers their “buried hurt” (VERA, 1998, p. 63).

Fumbatha

The same “abiding hurt” fundamentally affects Fumbatha’s sense of self. The second chapter of *Butterfly Burning* hauntingly evokes the image of seventeen hanged men’s bodies dangling from a huge tree. Obscurely but potently, Fumbatha’s genealogy (as the son of one of the hanged men) burdens him with the duty of completing that abortive patriotic struggle – it is his only patrimony. Vera evokes it as “a shadow in which he constantly searches” (VERA, 1998, p. 9). Fumbatha’s name means “a closed fist” (LUNGA, 2002; MUSILA, 2007) – his mother names him thus to mark his father’s political heroism, presumably as a sign intended to invoke the closed-fist gesture of African political resistance. The naming process is described as a painful branding on the “small” and “open” hand of the baby boy Fumbatha – “his palms burn as though covered with wounds which have been rubbed with salt till he wants to close them”; his mother’s militant words are likened to “arrows” impacting on the vulnerable baby body (VERA, 1998, p. 10). Yet, far from avenging his father and taking up his struggle, Fumbatha, can only go on “waiting” (VERA, 1998, p. 11), at the age of fifty, half a century after his father’s death.

Fumbatha never informs Phephelaphi of his family history, yet his politically thwarted state and hidden sense of existential humiliation profoundly affect their relationship. Through Vera’s portrayal of Fumbatha and the effect his emotional genealogy has on the evolution of his relationship with Phephelaphi, the deeper damage and intimate impact of colonisation is depicted. “At the back of Fumbatha’s every dream is a sorrowful wind blowing like a hurricane”, and this “buried song” will eventually “[build] out of the ground like a whirlwind” (VERA, 1998, p. 19). Yet this seeming prediction of suppression leading to eruption will be domestically rather than politically manifested at the end of the novel. The first manifestation of Fumbatha’s hidden melancholia and its transformation into fierce possessiveness towards Phephelaphi occurs when he forbids her seeking training and future (independent) employment as a nurse. Vera eschews demonisation of Fumbatha, however – she portrays him as a wounded, troubled, profoundly perplexed man. Her evocation of him is as tender as Zandile’s gentle cleansing of hurts on her lovers’ bodies – a respectful, even reverent, tracing and recording of the damage done to the body and the buried hurts of the psyche of the colonised male. With delicate empathy Vera conveys how Fumbatha negotiates his guilty anxiety about

compromising with the colonial powers in the labours he undertakes for a small salary:

He does not know if he is part of the larger harm. He does not understand it at all except the lingering hurt which needs not to be understood to be felt. Sometimes the present is so changed that the past is linked to the present only by a fragile word. To build something new, you must be prepared to destroy the past (VERA, 1998, p. 20).

Here Fumbatha obscurely acknowledges a betrayal of the family inheritance which both his parents attempted to bequeath to him; a kink in his genealogy which he rationalises as appropriate to his circumstances. Colonial-centred modernity is portrayed as an interruption to indigenous history or genealogy.

Where Fumbatha works, they “move the rocks to make way for the new structures” (VERA, 1998, p. 59). Like the long grass cut (in the opening scene) by convict labour, the features of the landscape represent the indigenes who are themselves the instruments of denuding their land for the imposition of colonial constructs. Modernity arrives as humiliation, the black men’s “unmistakable shame oozing like a muddy waterfall”. They experience it as displacement and exclusion. They have lost agency and become instrumentalised in the colonial economy – “told what to do, where to stand”; for them, “the world tilts”, and “the dreams of white men have replaced the shrubs and the rocks and the brilliant silver sky” (VERA, 1998, p. 59).

The uncomfortable imbalance in the colonised indigenes’ simultaneous resentment of and inevitable yielding to power is described as a state of “surrender, physical, visible, sharing the same axis of rotation as resistance”. This means that, even as Fumbatha’s “body bends”, “an anger is gathered in the most minute solitude of his mind, in the *folds of history* most charitable to oneself. It is simultaneous with the forced action” (VERA, 1998, p. 61, emphasis added). The metaphor of the “folds of history” suggests a shelter for the colonised subject, even as the image registers the sense of veering from the straight line. Inevitably, “the head bends” even while “the muscles quiver, taut with hostility” (VERA, 1998, p. 61). Vera’s excavation of the body politics of colonised, victimised *men* is brilliant and perhaps not always sufficiently recognised by her critics’ tendency to focus on the female victim-survivors she so compellingly portrays. “We are here”, the men remind one another, but the narrative voice tells us that “they are pitched against an opposite world” (VERA, 1998, p. 62): colonial modernity simultaneously uses, incorporates and

excludes them and is introduced as that alien incursion to which they feel they should not betray their inheritance or hybridise their genealogy – even as they are forced to do so.

Their confusion is inexpressible. “Impotent with unspoken words, they weave forward, and bend”, for “it is not in their voices, their refusal” (VERA, 1998, p. 62). Under colonial direction the men create a modern city, but nothing in it belongs to them. It is from within the harsh force-field of these conflicting forces that one needs to understand Fumbatha's extravagant seeming delight in finding Phephelaphi. It indicates why he so celebrates her confident youth; her vitality, purity and beauty. His amazed joy at her acceptance of himself as a life-partner is from the start shadowed by an insecurity that has everything to do with his family background and his membership of an older generation – as it does with his harsh colonial and familial (gender) socialisation. This is the complex genealogy of his personality, from which stems the vulnerability disguised (even from himself?) in his assumption of the protector's role towards the considerably younger Phephelaphi. The extremity of his response to the shattering of his dream when he discovers that Phephelaphi has aborted the foetus that would have been their first child will be a later outcome of this emotionally damaged and desiring condition of Fumbatha's.

Phephelaphi

Phephelaphi is introduced to the reader through Fumbatha's astonished eyes only in the fourth chapter, following the beautiful but poignant evocation of the life of the ghetto children in chapter three. Like Phephelaphi, these children were born and are being raised in colonised urban conditions; like the adults around them they make music from “empty bottles” and like Phephelaphi their imaginations are unbounded: “they weave their own endless talk of imagined places” (VERA, 1998, p. 13 and 15) as they play their games here in Makokoba township. In them, “floating is the very essence of living”, which associates them with the butterfly-like Phephelaphi. They “find” and “see rainbows” even after witnessing the accident that incinerates a whole group of male factory workers (VERA, 1998, p. 12-17). Even as Fumbatha registers his initial impressions of the nymph-like Phephelaphi, he acknowledges the deeper source of her beauty: “the strength that shone beneath each word, each motion of her body”. This strength is the result of her remarkably wholesome “growth” and integrity, which implicitly contrast her with Fumbatha's sense

of his own fissured soul and compromised existence. He explicitly associates Phephelaphi with the township's children, noting that she possesses “a wild agility that he envied and knew belonged exclusively to the young”. While Fumbatha recognises Phephelaphi's “courage to be here on her own” (at the river, where he first ‘finds’ her), he assumes the customary paternal role of “want[ing] to protect her” (VERA, 1998, p. 21 and 22) – his conservative habit of thought contrasting with her carefree confidence and registering their different genealogies. Later, he “claimed he had pulled her out of the water like a fish” (VERA, 1998, p. 53), but the reader needs to remember that Phephelaphi took the initiative in swimming up to Fumbatha, underwater, and cheerfully introducing herself to him.

Phephelaphi's artless candour appears in her spontaneously divulging her family and domestic circumstances to Fumbatha – laying out to him the broad lines of her genealogy as far as it is known to her, since she is unaware that her birth-mother Zandile had given her to her friend, the woman Gertrude whom Phephelaphi believes to be her mother (VERA, 1998, p. 22-24). This openness contrasts with Fumbatha's close-fisted hoarding of family secrets, his own as well as Phephelaphi's. She is said to be “a woman who made [him] finally relax his palms”, but Fumbatha (ominously) knows from the start that “he could never free her” (VERA, 1998, p. 23 and 22). A genealogy of colonial entrapment, one sees, is transmitted through the male subject, transmuting into the domestic incarceration of his female partner. Fumbatha's is (secretly) a cowed personality. Despite his assumption of authority, based on being decades older than Phephelaphi, and male, Fumbatha realises his immediate, profound emotional dependence on her – “it was he who needed refuge”, even if Phephelaphi's very name is the expression of the anxious search for shelter that her (foster) mother experienced (VERA, 1998, p. 23). Nevertheless Fumbatha and Phephelaphi's relationship in its inception seems ideally complementary; a mutual fulfillment of desire.

Like Fumbatha, Phephelaphi lost her most significant parent – her ‘mother’ Gertrude – in a violent incident of colonial crime and possessiveness. Fumbatha's father was hanged for defending his own land from invaders; Phephelaphi's mother was shot by a jealous white (policeman) lover for speaking to a black man/lover at her shack door at night. Phephelaphi knows that her murder was never investigated. She was buried hugging-mugger and Phephelaphi was not even told

when and where Gertrude was interred; the policeman returns the dress in which she was shot to Phephelaphi with Gertrude's 'professional' name on it. For his part, Fumbatha fails to recognise the political parallel in these circumstances to those of his own family and the similar, emotionally scarring effect of such a parental history – while Vera's narrator here begins to address the inscription of not only the black male, but the black female in the genealogy of African modernity as it is both part-created and part-destroyed by colonial circumstances.

Gertrude, who raised Phephelaphi, is one of three women of Fumbatha's generation that Vera uses in her novel to fill in the gaps of 'official' accounts of the beginnings of colonial urbanisation. The rich suggestiveness of the lengthy chapter (set in Bulawayo's train station) evoking the magnetic attraction that the city holds for rural Africans has been noted by several commentators (MUPONDE, 2005; SAMUELSON, 2007). The excitement of this newness (modernity as opportunity, so observed by the narrator) does not preclude recognition of failure and squalor, as many of the newly arrived indigenes discover the city's unaccommodating underside. Robert Muponde in his essay on *Butterfly Burning* describes them as ending up in "the waiting-room of history", experiencing both "a time for rupture with 'an earlier safety'" (the latter citation from VERA, 1998, p. 45) and "a sense of trapped mobility" (MUPONDE, 2005, p. 17).

African women (as many commentators remind one) were not welcome in the urban townships of Rhodesia which (like apartheid South Africa) wanted a male workforce with families (women; children; the elderly) confined to the barren reserves where traditional patriarchy contained them (MUPONDE, 2005; MUSILA, 2007; THOMAS, 2007). As in South Africa, intrepid and enterprising women soon started coming into the townships 'against the rules', many to make a living as prostitutes – as do Gertrude, Zandile and Deliwe (in a sense, Phephelaphi's three 'mothers'). Vera recognises and articulates the political and historical significance of such women's lives, pulling down the gender curtain that has hidden transgressive black women's contribution to the establishment of an African modernity. What she suggests is that the female role was at least as if not more important than the male's; in her own text she highlights the women's perspectives and experiences and endows them with heroism, independence of mind and daring.

Phephelaphi recognises that the colonial city pre-writes a script for African women that is only

marginally adjusted by African men under empire. Township houses were "built mostly for bachelors, the women were not expected to follow their men into the city". Phephelaphi notes that the men "smuggled what little comfort they could into these tiny shelters"; aware that such comfort lies not in the trappings of modernity, but (in the men's eyes) in "the closeness, the insideness of another being" – the "consoling" sexuality of a woman (VERA, 1998, p. 87-88). While the colonial state disallows the female presence in urban space, black men see it as compensatory; something like being served by 'their' women while they serve the settlers; deflecting colonial loss of status by means of domestic satisfaction. At this point the author comes close to ventriloquising the narrative voice in a remarkable passage:

The women had other ideas about their own fulfillment, not only did some of them arrive in the city independently of the men, they remained in these single shelters no matter what threat was advertised, they gave birth and raised children on the palm of their hands. [...] They craved something possessing the hint of rivers or an expanse as wide and fascinating as the sea (VERA, 1998, p. 88).

The final sentence in the above citation tellingly reiterates a female conception of liberation contrasting with male conceptions of the limited possibilities of the colonised condition. The same sentence anticipates Phephelaphi's aspirational yearnings, just as her birth and township childhood are alluded to in the expression "raised children on the palms of their hands". Phephelaphi, too, has a genealogy of resistance to colonisation – a 'female' form of resistance, and certainly an ancestry of determined female self-insertion in the modernisation process. Thus Vera stakes a claim to African women's role and place within modernity. Gertrude, after rescuing the newborn Phephelaphi from her actual mother Zandile, took the baby and later toddler Phephelaphi with her to assignations with male clients, even as she "struggled" (VERA, 1998, p. 24) to keep both of them alive by means of her earnings as a sex worker. Zandile, while enticing "passing loves", insists on having a "vital question about her [own] comfort heard" (VERA, 1998, p. 32) – a remark registering her refusal to be a mere incidental provider of male comfort. Fumbatha resents (one surmises, fears) the female assertiveness and sexual profiteering of Deliwe; "he said she was teaching young boys to forget their troubles" and that "she liked to see a man fall on his knees" (VERA, 1998, p. 54). But it is precisely Deliwe's fierce spirit that appeals to Phephelaphi (even though eventually this

attraction rebounds on her when Deliwe betrays the fact of her abortion to Fumbatha in order to seduce and 'steal' him from Phephelaphi).

The gestation and development of Phephelaphi's desire for an independent professional role for herself – her plan of training as one of the first black nurses in the colony's medical services – has a 'female' genealogy, but not in a direct line. It is Deliwe, a woman who is as unintimidated by the colonial policemen as by the sophisticated (black) male customers in her shebeen, that initially opens Phephelaphi's eyes to a different way of being a black woman within colonial modernity. Phephelaphi is intensely future-orientated. When she leaves her temporary, brief accommodation with Zandile after Gertrude's murder to go and live with Fumbatha, "each of her strides pronounced a changed womanhood" (VERA, 1998, p. 26). It is Phephelaphi and not Fumbatha who asks: "Why will they [i.e. the colonial authorities] not let black men drive the trains? They know everything about the trains" (VERA, 1998, p. 27). Not only does the question subtly anticipate Phephelaphi's later, confident decision to apply for nursing training, but it expresses her freer, more challenging political thoughts, compared to Fumbatha's. Unlike Fumbatha's ultimately oppressive memory of his father as "a shadow in which he constantly searches" (VERA, 1998, p. 9), Phephelaphi "argued with the memory" (VERA, 1998, p. 27) of her beloved, admired 'mother' Gertrude as she begins to understand that she was a prostitute. The more cowed yet fiercely resentful attitude of an older generation complicates the adjustment to a modernising society that younger people like Phephelaphi are prepared to undertake. There is a generational as well as a gender and familial-cultural gap between them.

Fumbatha both rejoices in and dreads the constant forward reaching impulse in Phephelaphi – her energy from the start contrasts with his own inclination towards possessive stasis as he wonders how to "keep her still" (VERA, 1998, p. 25). He senses that Phephelaphi "needs more" than her life with him in Makokoba, even though his dependency prevents him from conceding to her aspiration (VERA, 1998, p. 59).

Endearingly naïve as she is portrayed as being at this stage, Phephelaphi's thoughts are throughout evoked with uncompromising respect. Defying Fumbatha's disapproval, Phephelaphi "felt a sense of wholeness in making a decision without him" (VERA, 1998, p. 52). Her first gesture of (secret) defiance is to visit Deliwe's shebeen while

Fumbatha is away working. She feels obscurely impelled to make the investigations of the life-forms around them – "want[ing] to hear the music they called Kwela" – from which his "protection" (VERA, 1998, p. 52) would isolate her. Vera makes clear that visiting Deliwe's shebeen – an establishment patronised by the township's stylishly dressed returned miners – is not an indication of any promiscuous impulse on Phephelaphi's part. What these visits help her address is an emotional genealogy, discovering "the well of misery in her own heart" about her 'mother' Gertrude's brutal death; the "empty and harrowing spaces in her mind". It helps her in "finding Emelda" – in other words, in understanding the role (and the reason for it) that Gertrude played as a township prostitute; a role that Phephelaphi as her daughter both recognises at last and refuses to inherit. I share the interpretation (SHAW, 2002; MUSILA, 2007) that in burning Gertrude's "Emelda" dress as well as in refusing the skirt Zandile wants to give her as a family heirloom, Phephelaphi is implicitly rejecting this female genealogy. What is noticeable is that she feels no guilt in resisting a 'family tradition', whereas Fumbatha does (as discussed above). Phephelaphi adored Gertrude, but refuses to follow her 'mother's' precarious, male-dependent profession.

Before experiencing a physical pregnancy, Phephelaphi becomes conscious of the gestation of her ambition to live in a freer, more dignified and mentally expansive way than Makokoba township can offer her. "She wanted a birth of her own" (VERA 1998, p. 64 and 68) uses a recurring pregnancy metaphor to describe as well as validate Phephelaphi's aspiration. Phephelaphi feels her own "buried hurt" because of her entrapment in township conditions (VERA, 1998, p. 67). Gradually but insistently, Phephelaphi discovers the humiliating aspects of female dependency – "that kind of belonging which rested on another's wondrous claim" (VERA, 1998, p. 69). Her ambition is subtly linked to the baseline of black political aspiration in the colony: "the question [...] was [...] not about numbers, [...] but about being human" (VERA, 1998, p. 77). Conventional political protest is tellingly (and clearly deliberately) juxtaposed with a township woman's rooftop demonstration to shame her husband for treating her as an exchangeable commodity (VERA, 1998, p. 78) – one of several anecdotes that anticipate and parallel Phephelaphi's chosen end. The tragic politics of personal relationships are deeply intertwined with the effects of colonialism and come down with double force on African women.

Phephelaphi's dream of becoming a nurse begins to collapse when she discovers she is pregnant (hence ineligible for training) just after receiving her letter of acceptance from the college – the token which had seemed the key to the freedom and dignity to which she aspires. It is from within her “fury” at this thwarting of her hopes that Phephelaphi (re)discovers the township's stagnant, soiled squalor – “garbage tins [...] upturned”, “abandoned tyres [...] filled with stagnant water”, cut hair lying in a “ditch”, young boys ogling her body (VERA, 1998, p. 86-87).

The build-up to her decision to abort her foetus is delineated with delicate care. Unlike Fumbatha's poignant dream of having a family with Phephelaphi – domesticity and progeny as compensation for land-loss, to establish the ‘normal’ family life he had never had – her hope is to take up the “opportunity to be a different woman”. As Fumbatha's hope is to recover a past loss, Phephelaphi's sense is that she will have “missed the future somehow” (VERA, 1998, p. 91) unless she jumps at this one chance of socially upward mobility. In the colony, men and women like these two, with their different visions of emerging from entrapment, are set at odds; their dreams collide. Phephelaphi, who resents Fumbatha's “forbid[ding]” (VERA, 1998, p. 60) her application to the nursing college, has hidden the letter of acceptance from him. She begins to harden against him for having “intruded on her dream” (VERA, 1998, p. 91 and 94). An emotional separation sets in between them under the strain of their mutually irreconcilable hopes within the constricting social structures of a colonised society. After Phephelaphi has performed the abortion, we learn with a sense of poignancy how Fumbatha intertwines his hopes with Phephelaphi's continuing presence in his home: “only she could bear his children, only then would he dream new dreams” (VERA, 1998, p. 111). Sadly, their respective aspirations emerge from a heritage of different kinds of loss: their distinct colonial genealogies entail that “something is freed but collides with something else less hurried and more pardonable – a dream perhaps” (VERA, 1998, p. 61). This oracular pronouncement begins to reach its fulfillment in the final section of the novel.

It is to be emphasised that Phephelaphi evinces no mere brutal callousness in deciding to destroy the foetus she carries. She is shown listening to the “animated” and “cheerful bliss” of the township's children; she senses as “too tangible” her “sense of impending loss”; she feels “a current of grief and regret” as she waits to decide what to do about her

dilemma. The most powerful impulsion in Phephelaphi is her sense of her own present insubstantiality if she is to remain confined into squalid township domesticity by her pregnancy, hence the nightmarish recurrence of the word “nothing” in her self-descriptions (VERA, 1998, p. 90-95). But the potential life of the child is shown to haunt her mind: “she had to *nurse* the candle to *bring it to life* [...] she could *raise* the *small* thread and *pass* the flame to it” (VERA, 1998, p. 95, emphases added) – this helps us to see, later, that the abortion is an ordeal as much emotional as it is physical. Phephelaphi's subtly shown feelings about the abortion are almost the reverse of the ruthlessly heartless process Fumbatha is brought to believe the act to have been (to a large extent, because of Deliwe's representation of the event to him, the narrative implies). Although she is so young, Phephelaphi has a “grave grasp of her own agony” (VERA, 1998, p. 108) during the abortion process, recounted in full detail in a lengthy, harrowing chapter. The image employed at the completion of the abortion, “she has emerged out of a cracked shell” (VERA, 1998, p. 107), is a daring reinterpretation of genealogy; it unequivocally stakes a claim for the validity of female agency and self-liberation, here achieved by means of the rejection of the traditionally enshrined female role of giving birth to and raising children. Vera represents the abortion as an heroic ordeal (“she has endured the willed loss of her child”), without softening or blurring the awfulness and pain of the experience (VERA, 1998, p. 97-108).

The abortion is not something that Phephelaphi manages to shrug off lightly. The act (and presumably its implicit refusal of a particular type of relationship with Fumbatha) “cast a terrible shadow into her being” and it “breaks her memory into fragments” (VERA, 1998, p. 109). While Fumbatha in the harsh fury of his sorrow will accuse Phephelaphi of the same callousness as was shown by Zandile (her birth-mother) in rejecting the infant Phephelaphi, his description of Zandile's conduct (conveyed in free indirect discourse – VERA, 1998, p. 122-124) actually shows how *unlike* Zandile's refusal of ‘mothering’ Phephelaphi's deed has been. Fumbatha has imbibed Deliwe's “scorpion” poison in her presumably shocking and slanderous narration (to Fumbatha) of how and why Phephelaphi had aborted the foetus. Zandile had “intended”- as Fumbatha tells Phephelaphi (from Deliwe?) - “throwing the [full-term] child into a ditch and walking away [...as she] would have successfully done” (VERA, 1998, p. 124), had

Gertrude not intervened to save the child's life. Far from her being trapped by her genealogy into ruthlessness and promiscuity as Fumbatha at this point believes (inappropriately calling Zandile her "true" mother – VERA, 1998, p. 123), Phephelaphi is so traumatised by his terrible words that she "lay still with her teeth chattering" and "wet[s] the bed"; her reliance on Fumbatha's respect of her lost like another miscarriage during the terrible 'showdown' scene (VERA, 1998, p. 121-125).

Phephelaphi's grief-stricken realisation that Fumbatha (enacting emotional vengeance) has started sleeping with Deliwe indicates the depth of her emotional commitment to him, despite her desire to take up an independent profession. The "buried [...] whirlwind" that has always lurked in Fumbatha's vulnerable anxiety about his ability to retain – or contain – Phephelaphi's affections and aspirations, erupts at last in a cruel deluge of words that hits her like a "cloud burst", in a "fierce storm" (VERA, 1998, p. 121 and 122). Vera's empathetic evocation of Fumbatha's pain is unmistakable. "You killed our child?" he asks in anguish, repeating obsessively: "Now you have killed *my child* without telling me about it? Where did you bury *my child*?" (VERA, 1998, p. 121 and 123, emphases added). But the italicised expression reveals the instrumentalisation of the female partner in the imagined family. In addition to ascribing a careless callousness to Phephelaphi for aborting the foetus, Fumbatha viciously describes her as having behaved in a grotesquely promiscuous manner, supposedly permitting her birth-mother Zandile's partner Boyidi to put his "hands [...] all over her body" (VERA, 1998, p. 123). He now imagines Phephelaphi, without actually using such words, as a woman genealogically doomed to whoredom; the opposite of the devoted wife and mother he had wanted her to become. He seems to have lost all memory of Phephelaphi's dream of a professional future and never asks her why she chose to perform the abortion.

Illocutionary efforts

The dénouement of the narrative contains tragic ironies. Even though he had formerly expressed severe contempt towards Deliwe for seducing young men, Fumbatha now takes to (or resumes?) sleeping with her in the "comfort" seeking pattern of colonised male sexual behaviour that features throughout this text. Denouncing Phephelaphi as the equally ruthless daughter of a birth-mother who ruthlessly burnt a sexual rival to death, he fails in his hurt to recognise the fatal ruthlessness of his own

denunciation of Phephelaphi. Even though he never physically attacks her, his soiling and destructive denigration of her very being is as heartlessly and jealously destructive an act as Zandile's in discarding an infant at birth and in burning a sexual rival to death. He, too, is killing another person – "because every word he said pierced her like a spear. He shattered her entire core and she [...] died like a spark of flame" (VERA, 1998, p. 123). It is in Fumbatha's fatal degradation of Phephelaphi that he assumes a role towards his female partner resembling or paralleling the colonisers' towards the indigenes. Phephelaphi's terror (she "lay still with her teeth chattering" – VERA, 1998, p. 123) is not noticed by Fumbatha, who never gives her a chance to reply. He employs his own kind of "necropolitics" in extinguishing Phephelaphi's sense of self-worth by his declarations. To him she is the shatterer of his dream of a re-established dynasty that would have rescued his family from colonial extinction – but what his horrible words demonstrate is the genealogy of violence in the colonial space, as black men oppress the women alongside whom they are oppressed. His male sexual jealousy, articulated in his murderous words (VERA, 1998, p. 123-125), links him with the white policeman who shot down Gertrude rather than with his own heroic father. The link between colonial terror tactics and Fumbatha's own verbal terrorism is made clear in a recurrent image. The colonists' hanging of resistance fighters (among them Fumbatha's father) is described as "seventeen male bodies blown into the branches by a ruthless wind" (VERA, 1998, p. 7), whereas Fumbatha's furious words to Phephelaphi are said to be like "a cloud burst" and a "fierce storm" (VERA, 1998, p. 121 and 122). In this way Vera emphasises the political betrayal enacted in domestic violence in the colonial setting, and how dangerously destructive demeaning words can be.

The remarkable two final chapters of *Butterfly Burning* show Phephelaphi achieving a self-retrieval in the manner of her own chosen death. Her dreadful end is (in a daring authorial stroke) imagined as holding the seed of an eventual retrieval of Fumbatha's respect for and understanding of her purity of being and creative daring. The penultimate chapter opens with Phephelaphi's reiterated, essential refusal. "I will NOT", she declares repeatedly (VERA, 1998, p. 126). Pregnant a second time, she feels that Fumbatha has now "broken [her] stem". She may mean that she cannot face another abortion and is thus cut off from the nursing course and irretrievably trapped in the

township; but also that she cannot accept a life as a single mother to whom prostitution is the only probable income source as alternative to dependency on a man (Fumbatha) who now despises her. In Phephelaphi's view, to be such is to be "nothing" – as she states over and over (VERA, 1998, p. 126). The image of a "stem" that is "broken" suggests that genealogy is severed – by Fumbatha.

Phephelaphi carefully constructs the conditions of her death as a 'statement' to be witnessed by Fumbatha, "paus[ing] for two full days, waiting" (VERA, 1998, p. 130) for Fumbatha to return to see her die. Her death is an act of pride as clearly as Shakespeare's evocation of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra's death in *Antony and Cleopatra*: "I am fire and air, my other elements I give to baser life" (5.2.287-88, SHAKESPEARE, 1951, p. 1195). The powerfully lyrical yet harrowing description of the flaming Phephelaphi resembling "a bird with wings spread" (VERA, 1998, p. 129), recalls the fabled Egyptian *bennu* bird on which the legend of the phoenix (its Greek name) is based. Evoked as an apotheosis, Phephelaphi's self-immolation is yet not an end, for her death transmits something of her true being – her essential integrity – to Fumbatha. Her fiery death proclaims Phephelaphi's worth and courage in the face of his (and Deliwe's, and Zandile's) sullyng words and cruel mockery. On the last page of the text, Phephelaphi through the narrator anticipates a future when "she will eventually rise into her own song" (VERA, 1998, p. 130). This image recalls her earlier desire to "be set free in a melody of her own" (VERA, 1998, p. 86) and subtly suggests that she tells her own story in her death. The real outcome of Phephelaphi's story, and the proof of her successful transmission of her self-image, is announced in an early passage that anticipates how Fumbatha would, "one day",

[...] open the door and find her gone, wishing [...] he had never left her at all; she would be in flight like a bird, laden with the magnificent grace of her wings. [...] She would be whispering [...] a message he would recall much later, when all his senses were finally free: he had moved from his own song into her astonishing melody (VERA, 1998, p. 29).

The use of the perfect past tense in the final clause (above) conveys that such a change of heart and growth of understanding (by Fumbatha, of Phephelaphi's true nature) is going to happen and indeed has happened (in a doubling time-frame) at the time we read this important paragraph. There are other genealogies than the 'line' of familial succession, this passage indicates, and for African men to take their lead from women like

Phephelaphi may be the best way to achieve harmonious existence within true modernity – or "transmodernity" (DUSSEL, 1995). Vera's text makes no suggestion that such a state of harmony could be easily (or quickly) achieved. In her densely poetic, complex novel she emphasises what Dipesh Chakrabarty has outlined as our "diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle – perennially, precariously, but unavoidably – to 'world the earth' in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging" (CHAKRABARTY, 2000, p. 254; PIETERSE, 1989).

Dussel writes of the need to "affirm the reason of the Other as a step towards a transmodern *worldhood*" (DUSSEL, 1995, p. 26, emphasis in the original). The "real surpassing" of "modernity", according to Dussel, occurs when there is a "transcending [of] Eurocentrism on behalf of its negated alterity" (DUSSEL, 1995, p. 138-139). *Butterfly Burning* confronts us with the cost of modernisation to the colonised "other" by making us see the contorting genealogy of violence. Chakrabarty speaks of "conjoined and disjunctive genealogies" (CHAKRABARTY, 2000, p. 255): an expression as applicable to the gendered as to the racial divides hatched and transmitted throughout history. The novel encourages and enjoins the co-realisation of full modernity across racial, gender, generational, class and cultural fissures which cast human beings as eternally competing superiors and inferiors. Of this ideal condition of "transmodernity", Dussel writes that it requires "a corealisation with its once negated alterity and [is to be achieved] through a process of mutual, creative foundation" (DUSSEL, 1995, p. 138). Phephelaphi's "ris[ing] into her own song" and so showing Fumbatha (eventually) the way to "[move] from his own song into her astonishing melody" (VERA, 1998, p. 130 and 29), is the lyrical equivalent of Dussel's pronouncement. I concur with Musila that the women's suicides in *Butterfly Burning* "fling a refusal to live undignified lives" and do so "at life, the body, and the structures which seek to contain the two" (MUSILA, 2007, p. 59-60) – expressing this in a final act of transcendence.

In her text *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*, Francoise Lionnet writes that "in postcolonial literature the gendered and racialized body of the female protagonist is consistently overdetermined; it is a partial object on which are written various cultural scripts and their death-dealing blows" (LIONNET, 1968, p. 82). While applicable in many ways to Vera's text, the political

advance in the vision which *Butterfly Burning* conveys (beyond what Lionnet's account describes above) is a recognition that the victimised woman can refuse mere defeat and can talk back mysteriously but effectively to verbal violence and denigration. According to the author who imagined her, Phephelaphi will succeed in communicating with Fumbatha through his eventual realisation of the significance of her triumphant, flamboyant and agonising death. Phephelaphi's end recalls the picture titled "A Sower" – of a slave drowning himself or herself as the only available liberation from slavery – which she and Fumbatha had placed on the wall of their shack (VERA, 1998, p. 72). Under certain circumstances, a chosen death is the only noble outcome and a genealogy of courage and pride far worthier to beget than offspring. In the novel this idea is conveyed in the statement that "the birth of a word is more significant than the birth of a child" (VERA, 1998, p. 58). This is the kind of genealogy Vera sought for her text: "So that men, or people in general, or the nation – can be as close as possible to women's experiences" (VERA, 2004, p. 162).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I bring in the notion of "illocutionary force", a concept I derive from Maria Pia Lara's work *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere* (1998). Lara in her turn adapted this expression from theories concerning the role of rational communication by means of speech-acts in order to establish the sense of a shared civil sphere, ideas that were initiated by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Lara's adaptation extends the Habermasian notion of "illocutionary force" from signifying (primarily) effective rational communication as the means to consensus, in order to emphasise the need for those who find themselves excluded from the "public sphere" to "address the [powerful] other with powerfully imaginative speech"; using "language as possessing a disclosive capacity" (LARA, 1998, p. 3). In my view one can see Vera's novel as itself exemplifying "illocutionary force" in its complex portrayal of the struggle of Phephelaphi and women like her to gain the ear and understanding of their menfolk in a situation where the men, like the women, are seeking entry into the public sphere of civic dignity. The profoundly tragic dimension of Vera's novel is its demonstration that a young woman like Phephelaphi could only *in extremis*, by means of the "illocutionary" and demonstrative force of her self-immolation *as a speech-act*, make Fumbatha understand her actions and the meaning of her life. I

cite a relevant extract from Lara's text before commenting on it in relation to Vera's engagement with similar issues:

In performative terms, this approach to speech-acts suggests the interrelation of agonistic and consensual moments. The agonistic refers to the initial asymmetry of ego's position and her capacity to produce a powerful narrative that provides an account of the lack of justice created by situations about [sic] marginalization, oppression or exclusion. The other moment consists in the consensual act of reaching agreement about the normative content of this claim for recognition, which must relate such accounts to the moral sphere and depends upon the capacity to propose a better understanding of what justice means and how it can be reconceived through institutional transformation (LARA, 1998, p. 3).

Lara's reference to the [female] ego's asymmetrical position with reference to the powerful other whom she needs to address perfectly fits the condition and the relationship within which Phephelaphi finds herself – however, whereas Lara foresees a successful transition from what she terms the "agonistic" to the "consensual" moment, in the case of Vera's young female protagonist, her "capacity to produce" a "narrative" sufficiently "powerful" to achieve a consensual understanding requires the ultimate agony of her death by self-immolation. In this way Vera's text counts the terrible cost of achieving consensus under conditions of 'combined' colonialism and patriarchy. Yet the novel makes its own contribution to the furthering of consensual understanding in commemorating the damaged dignity of men like Fumbatha and the sacrificial heroism of women like Phephelaphi. African modernity (like modernity anywhere) will not be fully achieved until women are not only factored into the delineation of this condition, but are recognised as co-constituting and co-defining it. Vera's text tellingly communicates this vital point, as powerfully as it insists on inscribing African blacks into the 'European' or 'white' genealogy of modernity.

In its subtle deployment of compassionate irony, *Butterfly Burning* is an exhortatory text; one that, like Fanon, enjoins us to "do battle for the creation of a human world – that is, a world of reciprocal recognitions" (FANON, 1970, p. 155) whilst reminding us in the terrible warning that Phephelaphi's death *also* signifies, that "the important theoretical problem is that it is necessary at all times and in all places to make explicit, to demystify, and to harry the insult to mankind that exists in oneself" (FANON, 1967, p. 246).

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