Erik Falk

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract


This study is concerned with subject formation in the fiction of contemporary postcolonial authors Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera, and David Dabydeen. In contextualised readings of a total of nine works – Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Desertion* (2005); Vera’s *Without a Name* (1994), *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002); Dabydeen’s *Disappearance* (1993), *Turner* (1994), and *A Harlot's Progress* (1999) – it explores thematic and formal aspects of the subject’s constitution in the texts. Investigating the representation of material and discursive traces that constitute the individual, this study has a double aim. First, it describes the particular historical formations that mould the individual in the different texts. Second, it investigates the tactics used to imaginatively upset these formations in order to present new and more enabling modes of being.

Gurnah’s fiction depicts the intricate meshwork of social codes, emotions, and narratives that shape subjectivity in a highly unstable and cosmopolitan social reality. His novels repeatedly thematise cultural disorientation, migration, and the efforts of establishing a minimum of social and narrative stability in the form of a home. The chapter reads Gurnah’s fiction against a background of Zanzibari history and diaspora and suggests that various forms of “entanglements” paradoxically provide the means to pull the subject out of states of anxiety and alienation into more viable states of being. Vera’s novels engage a powerful Zimbabwean discourse on history, and the psychic and bodily wounds that result from its violent impact on the subject. Set at moments of special and contested historical importance, her novels address the exclusions and silences of this discourse in order both to assess its effects and the possibilities of imagining alternative versions that would enable other modes of being. These possibilities of alternative subject formations are manifested, thematically and textually, through an improvisational form of “movement” that is geographical, linguistic, and musical. Dabydeen’s fiction investigates the textual dimensions of identity and its connections to larger cultural archives of tropes and languages. Focusing on the constraining yet constitutive impact of various modes of colonial and racial rhetoric, his literary texts display a manipulation of the textual elements of these archives that approaches a re-conception of the subject. To describe this manipulation of English and Caribbean sources, thematised and dramatically staged in his fiction, I am using Dabydeen’s own phrase, “creative amnesia.”

**Keywords:** Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera, David Dabydeen, Édouard Glissant, Achille Mbembe, subject, history, subject formation, entanglement, movement, creative amnesia, postcolonial literature
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Introduction

A thematic of subjectivity and history in postcolonial settings moves through the sections of this study. The writings of the contemporary authors Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera, and David Dabydeen consistently foreground the historical dimension of the subject and the conditions of its emergence. Gurnah’s fiction evokes a transnational Indian Ocean and British world that emphasises the subject’s involvement in familial and economic networks which channel the circulation of property and determine social identity. Under pressure from migration and cultural interaction these familial networks offer provisional social and psychological stability, yet prove in other respects to be severely limiting. Vera’s novels are deeply embedded in the ravaged history of Zimbabwe. They explore how narratives of the past can lead to destructive exclusions and violent repercussions in the present. With a particular focus on the historically entrenched tendency to allegorise the female body as native “land,” she thematises both the literal and metaphorical dimensions of the fracturing of the subject. Dabydeen’s fiction addresses the notion that subjectivity relies on representation in order to explore the connection between personal memory and cultural archives. Through a recurrent theme of forgetfulness and displacement, his texts depict the rupture of memory that occurs when new linguistic and cultural codes are imposed, and the indeterminate subjectivities that result from these impositions. While the three authors write from out of different historical and social contexts and elaborate different textual strategies, their similar concerns suggest that they might be meaningfully brought together in a single study and their works of fiction be regarded as variations on a theme. Accordingly, it is the objective of this study to investigate these variations in a total of nine works, eight novels and a volume of poetry: Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Desertion* (2005); Vera’s *Without a Name* (1994), *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002); Dabydeen’s *Disappearance* (1993), *Turner* (1994) and *A Harlot's Progress* (1999). Each work, I will argue, traces the impact on the subject of discursive and material formations.

The three authors’ engagement with history is part of an investigation into the limits of subjectivity, especially under conditions of ontological disorientation and trauma. This study describes the thematic and rhetorical expressions of the investigation. But the texts are also tactical imaginative responses to these limitations. A second aim of this study, then, is to
complement the mapping of the subject’s historical dimension with an inquiry into the possibilities of its transformation. In Gurnah’s fiction, new forms of family, possibly connected through “impossible” stories of the past, become ways to entangle the subject in new social modes of existence. For Vera, both body and land are imaginatively conceived as territories existing in relation to other bodies and spaces that may be reconfigured through various forms of movement. In Dabydeen’s writing, a complex form of forgetfulness which he calls “creative amnesia” serves to rearrange the elements of cultural and discursive archives that determine the subject. This imaginative dimension of the texts makes them projects in the sense of both a short-term intervention and an imaginative act directed towards the future. My aim is to analyse and evaluate these projects.

“Subject,” “subjectivity,” “history,” and “discourse” are extremely elusive terms, and while the following chapters will elaborate different inflections of these notions, some preliminary definitions are required. I use the term “subject” to denote a social mode of being that acknowledges the impact of power exerted through discourse and regulation of the ways individual selves speak, behave, move, and think. Even bodies, I will argue, are shaped by such regimes of power. My usage here loosely follows the approach taken by Michel Foucault (Discipline, “Discourse”), but also Achille Mbembe, who is central to this study. The value of the term “subject” lies in the notion that individual selves (as well as ideas of individuality) are inextricably part of specific historical circumstances and that they are always moulded into being in a particular context. “Subjectivity” here refers to the not-yet-formed subject. I have opted for these terms rather than “identity,” which, despite elaborations by scholars like Stuart Hall, who has incorporated the word into Foucauldian analyses, still remains too closely associated with discourse and representation (Hall, “Introduction”; cf. Mbembe 5-7). The common usages of the concept therefore tend to disregard the material dimensions of subject formation with which this study is also concerned. In Yvonne Vera’s fiction, for instance, the subject is repeatedly shaped through physical violence, and “identity” seems inadequate to account for this level of subject formation.

“History” refers primarily to a recording of past events in any medium. Importantly, it does not refer either to the past as such (except when this is explicitly stated) or exclusively to linguistic records. Historiography and literature are considered to be two genres that represent the past, but they are also two examples of traces that the past has left in the present. Crucial to this study is what could be called an archaeological view that reads the indexical
traces of the past in present structures and strata – whether in language, habits, bodies, or landscape. By “discourse” I mean, again following Foucault’s formulation in his earlier works, an assemblage of statements, or a mode of language that is invested with the power to call reality into being (Discipline, “Discourse”). It should be noted that while Foucault’s analyses of discourses or discursive regimes connect disciplining power and language, the term is often used in a looser sense. As will become evident in my discussion of nationalism, Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, and Michel de Certeau attribute to less strictly defined aggregates of language – such as news reporting, early historiography, and even novelistic fiction – a power to construct reality that has much in common with Foucault’s notion.

THE QUARREL WITH HISTORY

In his now classic Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson analyses the intersection of an emerging national subject and time in the context of colonialism. The nation, he argues, is an “imagined community” of anonymous individuals held together through, on the one hand, forms of cultural representations whose circulation is guaranteed by “print capitalism” – typically novels and newspapers – and, on the other, institutions and practices that contribute to a standardisation of language and administration (Anderson 37-46). He uses the colonial functionary career as an example, observing that it was less a position than a journey from one colonial territory to another, with the prospect of higher rank at every turn. The “unification” that a developing sense of national belonging required “meant internal interchangeability of men and documents” (Anderson 55). Paradoxical as it may seem, it is in the colonies that these changes first solidify into a national consciousness.

Anderson’s undoubtedly valuable account has been criticised and complemented by scholars who have attended to what remains unspoken in his account: the exclusions and the margins of national consciousness. Homi Bhabha and Simon Gikandi, for example, have in quite different ways argued that a national culture – “nationness” as Bhabha calls it – necessarily excludes and differentiates as much as it unifies in its establishment of a social territory (Location 140; Gikandi 55-56). What is excluded, according to Bhabha, is not only the hybrid and migrant characters that exist between cultures rather than securely within them, but also the fact that culture – even national culture – constantly differs from itself (Location 152, 162). Gikandi’s historically oriented study of different phases of English cultural identity shows how it has
established itself through an affirmation of cultural difference. “Englishness,” Gikandi argues, has repeatedly emerged in relief against what it is not – notably black or Caribbean (50-83).

The gradual establishment of a national culture was not, Anderson argues, only a geographical cultural process. It also effectively created a new conception of time that was most visibly emblematised in the newspaper page. Drawing together reports of quite disparate and distant events, it became a spatial image of a form of time that Anderson, with a phrase from Walter Benjamin, calls “‘homogeneous, empty time’ … in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). The emergence of the modern national subject, in Anderson’s account, thus coincides with the emergence of an abstract time of equal and empty measure.3

The result of this process is a new synchronous “now” that in effect expresses a philosophy of history. Each “empty” present moment turns into the past with the symmetrical regularity displayed by the clock’s hand, the turning of the page of the calendar, or the daily issue of the newspaper. History, in the sense of the past, thus constitutes itself as a series of once present moments that are simultaneously separate and continuous. According to Michel de Certeau, this conception of time underpins the discipline of historiography that develops coterminously with that of “print capitalism.” Historiography – both as a mode of writing in its early phases and as a fully institutionalised academic discipline – thrives on this temporal division that allows it to resurrect the past in its representations (de Certeau 2). For de Certeau, the division is far from given. On the contrary, it is produced through a number of rhetorical and scholarly procedures – assembling data, copying and classifying them, submitting them to interpretation according to established and institutionalised academic methods – that he refers to commonly as the “historiographical operation” (de Certeau 56-113). The past that reappears in historiographical accounts is thus effectively the product of the discipline itself as it “moves” across, and in relation to, the past it articulates (de Certeau 3). Historiography is in this sense a “discourse of the dead” (de Certeau 46), feeding off, on the one hand, a conviction that the past is irrevocably lost, and, on the other, that historiography is the appropriate technology for making it return in as transparent a form as possible. De Certeau further relates time to subjectivity when he claims that the production of the “other” time of the past accompanies the establishment of an “other” subject. Historiography, he
argues, emerges alongside ethnology as a European means to account for the
difference of the colonial other (de Certeau xxv-xxvi, 3).

Anderson’s view of the gradual unification of a national collective
subject and its corollary time, and de Certeau’s, Bhabha’s, and Gikandi’s
complementary focus on the exclusions and margins of this process provide the
double analytical frame for this study. It allows me to investigate the processes
that bring history and subject together while also attending to the alternatives
that are excluded at certain points. This frame, though, offers only the most
general enclosure of the ground covered in this study. It will be necessary,
therefore, to provide a somewhat more precise theoretical point of departure. I
will do so by introducing two theorists on whose ideas I draw extensively:
Achille Mbembe, who provides much of the theoretical framework for my
reading of Vera’s novels, and Édouard Glissant, whose conceptualisation of the
Caribbean “nonhistory” (Caribbean 62) is essential to my discussion on
Dabydeen’s fiction. The works of both these scholars critically reconsider the
intersection of subjectivity and conceptions of the past in what Glissant aptly
terms a “quarrel with history” (Caribbean 61). While their theories feature mainly
in relation to two of the three writers studied here, their discussions have an
affinity with Gurnah’s literary project. In an article with the telling title “An
Idea of the Past,” Gurnah favourably compares Walcott’s view of history as an
“imaginative memory” to Wole Soyinka’s call for a more authentic form of
remembrance in the service of cultural self-creation (“Idea”). The centrality of
the word “entanglement” in Desertion – a word that also provides the title of
chapter one – offers, however, a more suggestive sign of the affinity invoked.
In Gurnah’s novel employed within a theme of narrative and subjectivity,
“entanglement” also appears at key moments in the theories of Achille
Mbembe and Édouard Glissant. In all three cases, it is part of a reassessment of
the historical limitations to subject formation.

Achille Mbembe begins On the Postcolony by arguing that academic and
political discourses on Africa have been hampered by habitual assumptions
about the “traditional” nature of African societies. Scholars, Mbembe argues,
have persisted in reproducing the view that African societies are ruled by
unchanging traditions which make them virtually historyless. In addition, and
closely related, these traditions have been seen as having no origin in
themselves. African societies are determined by their “facticity”: “there is
nothing to justify; since things and institutions have always been there, there is
no need to seek any other ground for them than the fact of their being there”
(Postcolony 3-4). To both its citizens and outside observers, this approach
suggests that African societies do not change. They exist in stasis, outside the realm of history.

The limitations inherent in this approach derive from the fact that the social theories on which it is based were developed in Europe and were intended to explain the emergence of a particular European urban form of modernity (Postcolony 10). When the theories are applied to African conditions they cannot present anything but mirror images of Western modernity. Europe and Africa become each other’s opposites: the first rational, historical, and modern, the second irrational, inert, and traditional. However, as Mbembe adds, the opposite here is not simply a negative image, but virtual nothingness, “being nothing” (Postcolony 4).

Against this relegation of Africa to a featureless and “traditional” sphere Mbembe proposes a “theme of contemporaneity” that seeks to move beyond both the reductions of the language of neo-colonialism and the rhetoric of postcolonial national freedom (Postcolony 5). He argues that the “postcolony” is made up of several layers of time and temporal movements that change the layers and their internal relations. Drawing on Ferdinand Braudel he suggests that time should be seen as made of age and durée, where the former is a “number of relationships and a configuration of events” and the latter “made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an entanglement” (Postcolony 14). One example of this complex make-up of time is the discussion of the rituals, discourses, and institutions that remain from colonial days and whose lingering presence prevents the development of a civil society. This colonial longue durée parallels the shorter postcolonial period that has seen the virtual collapse of certain nation states (Postcolony 24-66).

The stress on the multiplicity of temporal layers and rhythms leads Mbembe to state that time manifests itself in and through material, social, and phenomenological objects and structures and that these collectively make up the “spirit” of an age:

for each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular – or, to use the term, a “spirit” (Zeitgeist). These distinctive and particular things are constituted by a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individuals’ imagination and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called “languages of life.” (Postcolony 15)
As these sets of “things” and the rhythms that change them are always multiple, so too are the times that constitute them. These times, in turn, make up the subjectivity of an age or an individual, and so “one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality” of a multi-faceted nature (*Postcoloniality* 15).

Édouard Glissant has developed a socio-cultural poetics of “Relation” with a conception of time akin to Mbembe’s. Elaborating an archaeological view of time, he suggests that the past is visible in the traces it leaves in different spheres of reality. Landscapes, languages, statutes, and bodies are all records of past events. The Creole language, for example, has been “marked” by a need for camouflage and double meaning during the age of plantations and slavery. The religious syncretism of the Caribbean, to take another example, is arguably a product of the same “tactic of diversion” (*Caribbean* 21, 22).

Glissant’s archaeological notion of time is not that of a slow continuity, however. On the contrary, he argues that the Caribbean is largely a place of “nonhistory” due to the ruptures that have shaken it. He develops this as a collective experience of being ‘without’ history. The Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade. Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment…. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory. (*Caribbean* 61-2)

The uprooting, enforced transport, and plantation experience resulted in a traumaising loss of orientation and cultural identity and also in a loss of the sense of a continuity of or direction to historical time. It might be argued that what Glissant addresses is collective “historical consciousness” rather than historical time, but this consciousness was itself constituted by slave trade and so indexes the history that it reflects upon. The people brought across the Atlantic, he claims, were “transformed … into another people” (*Caribbean* 15). The “historical consciousness” is thus formed through that kind of cataclysmic rupture that it can conceptualise in terms of a different view of time.

The transformation of people prevents any possibility of restoring identity or history through a cultural return or “reversion” since the origin sought has vanished in the transformation process (*Caribbean* 16). This leads Glissant to conclude that all such attempts express an “obsession with a single origin” (*Caribbean* 16). And yet, the transformation process is itself an origin of sorts, albeit an origin that cannot be properly placed in time. It includes the
centuries-long slave trade and its transports and so constitutes, as Ian Baucom has argued, “something like an exemplary or originary space of emergence, a first scene” rather than a temporal event (Specters 314). This “first scene” is what Glissant names the “point of entanglement”: “We must return to the point from which we started…. not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement” (Caribbean 26).

In related but different ways Glissant and Mbembe develop theories of history and subjectivity that “quarrel” with what they see as insufficient and reductive conceptualisations of historical time. While Mbembe postulates time as a pattern of intersecting and resonating rhythms, Glissant ultimately conceives of time as, in Baucom’s expression, an accumulation of events (Specters 311).

In the fictional universe of Gurnah’s Desertion, “entanglement” is used to label the power of stories, which in the novel is connected to the creation of families, that ensnare us. The narrator states that his story reveals “how one story contains many and how they belong not to us but are part of the random currents of our time, and about how stories capture us and entangle us for all time” (Desertion 120). Chapter three will explore this entanglement by showing how narratives are socially effective ways of tying individuals to versions of the past that define their modes of being.

The subjects that correspond to the different and multiple times outlined here differ from the self-identical entity that inhabits the “homogeneous, empty time” of the modern nation. They are constantly in the making; processual subjects who are at once sites of converging social and discursive regimes, and movements through and among those regimes. The chapters that follow will elaborate this overarching proposition by providing contextual analyses of the ways subjectivity is realised in the authors’ works. In Gurnah’s fiction, as we shall see, the response to the “entanglement” of stories is to challenge it with ever more entangling stories that pull the individual in previously uncharted directions. Temporary and fragile, the new entanglements involve both new social arrangements and imagination. Admiring Silence portrays efforts to come to terms with the pervading anxiety that results from diaspora through narrative construction of a coherent self. By the Sea ends with the proposal to form a family that amounts to a form of social improvisation since it moves beyond accepted codes and conventions. In Desertion, an investigation into personal history opens avenues of reconceptualisation of a past that continues to mark present modes of social existence. In Vera’s novels, both
geographical and linguistic movements are tactical and provisional responses to exclusion from a national and stable identity. *Without a Name* charts the movements of its protagonist as she tries to join village and city experience in order to negotiate the crushing influence of a powerful discourse on land that excludes women and may cause severe traumatic effects. *Butterfly Burning* presents several forms of movement inside the city, and centres on the ability to improvise social and linguistic forms of subjectivity and expression in an environment circumscribed on all sides by heavy colonial and patriarchal discursive and political regimes. *The Stone Virgins*, finally, addresses a forcefully sustained silence in Zimbabwe’s history in order to present a relational movement potentially capable of overcoming socially damaging rifts and conflicts. Dabydeen’s fiction is extremely attentive to the representational nature of the past. History as it appears in his writing is always the effect of a semiotic recording, and “creative amnesia” inevitably proceeds through the assembled records of the past in order to unsettle it in the service of an open-ended self-creation. In *Disappearance*, the narrator’s autobiographical account is undermined by the recognition that it relies on a number of cultural and racial stereotypes that simultaneously allow its object to disappear behind the mask of language. *Turner*, re-writing’ a painting by J.M.W. Turner, obsessively thematises how representation is limited by historical archives of images and language, but assesses the potential of rearranging the elements of these archives. The strategy is taken to an extreme in the dizzying array of intertextual echoes in *Harlot’s Progress*, reaching towards the “unfolding into mystery” as its narrator puts it (Harlot 277).

In spite of the different contexts and tactics employed, their exploration of the interdependence of subject and history reveals a deep affinity between the writers discussed in this study. The family histories and legal arrangements that capture individuals in Gurnah’s work; the traumatic memories and mutilated bodies in Vera’s fiction that index the violent effects of the past; the cultural archives and languages that underpin and circumscribe memory and experience in Dabydeen’s texts are all examples of very different objects and structures that impose on, permeate and shape (or break) the subject into being. They endow the subject with its multi-faceted historical dimension. It is the manifestation of these various entities in the subject, then, that makes the subject historical. The delimiting nature of these histories compels the authors to offer alternative representations of subjectivity. As we will see, these alternatives are invariably processual. The writers gathered here are consequently writers of migrancy, charting modes of subjectivity without roots.
PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a small but growing body of research on these authors. The recent emergence of the criticism makes it difficult to speak of larger trends. The following survey is thus of a number of individual interventions in an as yet less-travelled and changing field, and it serves to introduce recurrent themes rather than draw a definitive map of academic positions.

Of the writers included in this study, Gurnah has received least attention. There are a few articles that discuss a number of his novels (Whyte, Schwerdt), but my chapter offers the most substantial analysis of his fiction to date. In the criticism, two features are readily observable. The first is that most of the analyses are on *Paradise* (1994), which was short-listed for the 1994 Booker Prize (Schwerdt, Bardolph, Callahan). The second feature is the observation, often made in relation to that novel, of Gurnah’s strong anti-nationalist stance and its relation to diaspora and displacement (Maslen; Schwerdt; Bardolph; Callahan; Seel). Ann Blake includes Gurnah’s *Dottie* (1990) and *Admiring Silence* within a tradition of black British writers who portray immigrant experience by “writing back” to an established British literary canon. She argues that Gurnah’s fiction transforms the genre of “domestic fiction” by appropriating it for new purposes (Blake 33). Blake’s claim, it might be added, is implicitly critiqued in Bruce King’s examination of categories like “Black British” and “postcolonial” applied to Gurnah, an attempt, however, that is too general to carry much critical force. Simon Lewis’s discussion of *Paradise* and *Admiring Silence* employs the word “apatride” to describe the primordial hybridity of the characters: “there is ‘no new land’ for these East African Asians, but there never was a stable home-land before that” (Lewis 222). Philip Whyte, following a similar course, describes Gurnah as a “chroniquer du déracinement” – a chronicler of rootlessness (“Chroniquer” 89; cf. “Heritage” 11, 15).

Several scholars have also reflected on the intersection of smaller and larger “imagined communities” in tension and conflict with each other in Gurnah’s novels. Jacqueline Bardolph has observed the recurring interest in the powerful figure of the “uncle” in *Paradise* and *Admiring Silence*. Dianne Schwerdt, Elizabeth Maslen, and David Callahan have emphasised the imaginary dimension of collectives, noting how incessant story-telling serves the double aim of distinguishing one ethno-cultural collective from another and fabricating instant histories for the benefit of the community. Bardolph and Callahan’s respective coupling of narration and family structures on the one hand, and economy and narrative on the other, are important starting points for my
analysis of Gurnah’s fiction. One of the predominant features of his writing is precisely the interaction and mutual interference of different social and linguistic networks.

Apart from Blake’s observation that Gurnah appropriates and transforms a literary genre, and the observation, made by several scholars, that *Paradise* rewrites the Biblical and Koranic story of Joseph/Yusuf, there is at least one reading of Gurnah’s fiction primarily along intertextual lines (Bardolph; Seel). Johan Jacobs has argued, in terms echoing Blake above, that *Paradise* rewrites Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (cf. Schwerdt 97). While Jacobs is right in drawing attention to the many literary influences that resound throughout his fiction (156), the turn to Conrad’s canonical work is perhaps a little misjudged. As Susheila Nasta has argued, the focus on Conrad may in fact be regarded as part of a “postcolonial exotic” upheld both by authors and scholars who expect postcolonial literature to respond to Western or European literature (“Gurnah, Paradise” 309-10). Nasta’s point is important; it is also one that resonates closely with Gurnah’s own views (“An Idea of the Past”) and her reading of the novel sketches a complex historical background that invalidates attempts to see his fiction as primarily a response to a Western literary canon. This is also my approach. It seems important, therefore, to point out that a stronger candidate for textual precursor to *Paradise* is non-fictional: Sir Richard Burton, whose narratives of his famous expeditions into the East African interior—*Zanzibar: City, Land, Coast* (1872) and *The Great Lakes of Central Africa* (1860)—better matches the narrative movement of Gurnah’s novel. Burton also appears as an important, if marginal, figure in *Desertion*. By situating Gurnah’s fiction in the rich and trans-oceanic history of Zanzibar, I will show that it develops its literary visions both out of and against historical structures and forms that are the effects of a distinctly cosmopolitan past that includes but is not limited to European colonial history.

The predominant approach to Vera’s novels has been through trauma and gender. Flora Veit-Wild reads *Without a Name* against a backdrop of African myths about dismembered women to argue that claiming the subjective position of “the one who bleeds” in a double sense may offer a point of departure for “the African woman on the way to authoring her own life” (133). This is a reading which shares many traits with Eleni Coundouriotis’ discussion of *Butterfly Burning* and Anne Trevarthen’s general thematic survey. Pauline Dodgson, by comparison, has contrasted *Without a Name* with Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones* and concluded that Vera’s novel portrays a more individual mental and emotional burden. Dodgson reads the end of the novel, where the protagonist
returns to her village, as an enabling reinscription into a social context (101), and Meg Samuelson has analysed *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue* (1996) with much the same focus (95; cf. Tsevarthen). Penny Ludicke, in a largely descriptive commentary on the novel, sees instead an ambiguity in Mazvita’s return and in the novel’s ending. In a more analytical discussion, Robert Muponde has similarly argued against the positive evaluations of *Without a Name* on the grounds that it accepts an unreflective notion of history and community (“Sight” 123). Ato Quayson has taken a related but different approach by reading *Without a Name* as a trauma narrative that may be usefully “calibrated” by way of analogy to enable better social analysis of South Africa’s fragmented social body (76-98). Muponde’s discussion of movement in the novel, and his criticism of Dodgson’s and Samuelson’s readings, provide important points of departure for my analysis. Yet I will show that he too fails to give full account of the layered nature of the final scene in which past and present merge to complicate both a notion of return and the tragedy of the narrative.

Carolyn Martin Shaw and Elleke Boehmer have both discussed sexuality in Vera’s fiction. Shaw focuses on the conflict between mothering and sexuality, concluding that in “Vera’s world, generation (reproduction) and sexuality are intertwined and antithetical” and that sexual expression requires the abandonment of motherhood (“Turning” 39, 42). Boehmer, seeking to unsettle the predominance of heterosexual preconceptions in analyses of African literature, has offered a reading of the “queer” potential in Vera’s work (172-186).

Nana Wilson-Tagoe and Terence Ranger have repeatedly addressed Vera’s thematisation of alternative approaches to Zimbabwean history. In a special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, the editors Wilson-Tagoe and Kwadwo Osei-Nyame write that the novel, as a kind of narrative about the past, may be generally regarded as a means to “appropriate and take over the subject of the past” (“Literature and History” 118). In her article on Vera’s fiction in the same issue, Wilson-Tagoe develops this idea. She argues that Vera’s novels challenge received versions of the historical past in more ways than merely filling in gaps in these accounts, and thus avoids making fiction subservient to historiography. Vera’s fiction rather challenges the foundational assumptions of “European historicism” itself: its “view of history as objective and scientific, its separation of historical and fictional discourse and its unitary chronology for representing all histories” (“Narrative” 156). She elaborates the theme in a more ambitious analysis of several of Vera’s novels, concluding that
the texts’ subversions of historicism lie in their different conceptualisation of historical time and of key concepts in accounts of the past (“History and Gender”). By reassessing the implications of the notion of freedom – crucial to national(ist) accounts of the country’s past – she counters prevalent selection and emplotment of historical facts in the historiographical narrativisation of the country’s past.

Ranger’s explicit concern is with the thematisation of attitudes to the past (“Ceiling”). He reads the two male protagonists in The Stone Virgins as representing contrary approaches to history. One crouches under history’s low “ceiling” and sees his existence as determined by a long and pre-determining historical past. The other embodies a more ethical and inclusive approach. Working as an archivist, he restores historical monuments with a constant awareness of their present function and the need to include previously silenced voices in the narrative of the past. Lene Bull-Christiansen has pursued a related critical course with a more specific discourse analysis approach. She attends to the ways in which Vera’s fiction rewrites discourses on history and identity with a very powerful institutional and political backing in the present Zimbabwean context (“Rewriting,” Tales).

For my study, Wilson-Tagoe and Bull-Christiansen’s discussions are of more immediate relevance because of their wider contextualisation and attention to novelistic form. Yet Wilson-Tagoe’s analysis loses some precision by stressing the politically subversive potential of Vera’s literary rewriting. Bull-Christiansen’s discourse analysis makes no such unqualified claims. Yet, the claim that literature and politics share the same discursive space, which motivates her “political discourse” analysis, seems, like Wilson-Tagoe’s assertion, to risk exaggerating the social impact of literary fiction (Bull-Christiansen, “Rewriting” 203–5). Bull-Christiansen’s analysis is part of a more socially and institutionally grounded cross-fertilisation that has emerged in Vera criticism, as seen for example in the anthology Versions of Zimbabwe. In the vanguard of this trend are Stephen Chan and Ranka Primorac who have crossed disciplinary and discursive barriers by discussing the tortuous issue of land from a social science perspective while drawing on Vera’s and other Zimbabwean writers’ fiction. While at present Zimbabwe suffers from a “fetishization of land,” they suggest that Vera’s novels can be used to extrapolate a more sustainable view: land as “past of both national and narrative time-space, and as such … something to be traversed” (Chan and Primorac 75). Rather than taking the subversive potential of literature for granted, their analytical effort presents a careful extraction of social and potentially political
insights from the field of creative fiction. Chan has followed up this work in an article on Vera’s contribution to, in Valentin Mudimbe’s terms, an African *gnosis*: a knowledge of Zimbabwe that draws on past and present notions of history, myth, and religion in order to circumvent the dominance of Western-derived models of analysis, but which also aims at bringing out a fuller understanding of the wounded state of society (“Memory of Violence”).

The emphasis on traversal and movement, which is a central theme in my readings of Vera’s novels, has been further explored in the criticism by Muponde and Sarah Nuttall. For both critics, it seems to be a turn to the city in Vera’s fiction (also noted by Robert Fraser) that has prompted the approach. Muponde writes that the city in *Butterfly Burning* “animates sites upon which women can assume self-directed agency,” a gendered relative freedom that occurs as an excessive feature of the severe surveillance of the apartheid city (“Roots/ Routes” 16). Despite efforts to strictly regulate its spaces, the city’s sprawl opens ways outside and under the radars of the political regime as well as ‘traditional’ patriarchal social codes (“Roots/ Routes” 21-23, 25). Nuttall’s reading is more expressly geared toward the interaction of the city and the subject, how “human subjects and material objects in the city constitute one another” (Nuttall 178). The city and its human inhabitants construct a space of reality and potential that Nuttall calls “citiness”: an “assemblage of people and objects” (Nuttall 191). In this context, Boehmer’s important discussion of the limits and usefulness of nationalism in Vera’s works must be mentioned. Boehmer agrees with the critics above that spatial movement is crucial to Vera’s representation, but stresses the continuing importance of locale and concludes that while writers like Vera “experiment with alternative, heterogeneous constructions of community” they “remain characteristically nationalist in certain key respects” (191; cf. Primorac, “Blood”). Both Muponde and Nuttall’s readings are important to my study.

A number of scholars have focused on Vera’s distinctly poetical style (Attree; Primorac “Crossing”; Bryce; Louviot; Harris). Most important for my discussion of Vera’s “poetics of movement” is Ashleigh Harris’ analysis of the novels as analogous to black improvisational music, even if my conclusions are different. While Harris employs the analogy to argue that it allows language to indirectly represent trauma, I contend that improvisational music represents a means by which discourses are “moved” to simulate new forms of subjectivity.

One of the central themes in the criticism of Dabydeen is the relation between language – especially hybrid and fragmented language – and identity. Benita Parry and Wolfgang Binder have in different ways discussed Dabydeen’s
poetry as part of a “polyglot postcolonial literature” (Parry, “Between” 48) that explores the possibilities and restrictions of creating a cultural identity in and through language (Binder, “Finding”). Discussing his prose, however, Parry is less positive, stating that the polished Cambridge English surface of The Intended (1991) belies the important insight, expressed in the novel, that “Black people need their own words” (“Intended” 89). Sarah Lawson Welsh has similarly explored some of the “permutations of brokenness” in Dabydeen’s collection of poems, Slave Song, to assess their “creative potentialities” (“Experiments” 27, 28). Elizabeth Wallace, with an emphasis that will be further elaborated in my concluding discussion of Dabydeen’s fiction, has discussed the difference between “told” and “untold” stories as dependent upon fundamentally commercialised relations between teller and audience. While Wallace rightly assesses the ensuing problematisation of the possibility of giving authentic accounts of past sufferings, she attributes this to Dabydeen’s postmodernism. I will complement her claim by contextualising this commercialism in terms of a British imperial history stretching back to the 18th century.

Several critics have discussed the way Dabydeen’s fiction ‘writes back’ to an English colonial tradition and a Caribbean literary tradition in a complex pattern of “resistance and complicity,” as Fee puts it (67), which both contributes to and complicates the creation of cultural identity (Jenkins; McWatt, “Self-Consciously”; Fee; Hand; Thomas; McIntyre). In a reading of the textualised English landscape in Disappearance, Mark Stein importantly notes that the novels ‘writes back’ also to V.S. Naipaul’s Enigma of Arrival (“Perception”). While such contentions are useful in pointing to a central theme, their focus, despite good intentions, risks reducing the dilemma to a linguistic, if impossible choice of either resistance or complicity. More attuned to the historical dimension of the dilemma is an exploration of the shape and content of the archives at hand at each present moment, and the manipulations of its elements.

It is Tobias Döring who most successfully and most ambitiously has taken this approach by focusing on the textualised self and its relation to cultural memory, although Sarah Fulford and Lars Eckstein have also explored this theme. Döring states that in Turner remembrance is shown to be disturbed because the medium of recall has changed, and he contends that memory is a “territory occupied” (Caribbean-English 165). He is careful to point out that the stress on the medium of representation of past events inevitably broadens the issue to involve cultural memory rather than individual experience, a shift that is further emphasised by the stereotypes of race and civilisation that make up
the linguistic medium through which the speaker remembers (a theme also explored by Jean Popeau in a chapter on Disappearance). Döring’s approach further allows him to connect thematical aspects with intertextual dimensions of the poem. Just as the narrating slave problematically remembers through the – more or less fragmented – languages that have been handed down to him, so the poem itself dramatises a kind of remembrance that is equally fractured and language-dependent. The attention to the interdependence of theme and dramatic form within a wider investigation of the cultural conditions of recall and subject formation will, with significant differences, be at the centre of my own analyses of Dabydeen’s fiction.
Abdulrazak Gurnah: entanglement

Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction is thoroughly cosmopolitan. His novels tell stories of migration and dispossession as characters move – voluntarily or not – from Zanzibar to the African mainland or England, or from the East African coastal area into the interior of the continent. These stories of migration or exile are part of the grand-scale demographic movement initiated by British imperialism, and yet Gurnah’s fiction shows that they also belong to a multi-faceted past that predates the intrusion of Western powers. Before the British and Germans, there were Arab rulers and Indian traders (as well as there was the coming together of African peoples before the Portuguese). This history of cultural encounters, which is at the centre of Gurnah’s writing, hints at the social instability and multiple overlapping identities that are determining characteristics of east African coastal societies. Constantly addressing issues of belonging and migration, Gurnah’s novels do not contrast “home” with “exile,” but rather show that estrangement may be the effect of a highly volatile society, the outcome of a complex interaction of competing and converging codes, laws, and expectations that make up social reality. At no point do his works represent a zero point of identity and belonging.

The evocation of this rich social and cultural historical patterning offers an alternative both to African cultural nationalism and more recent Eurocentric approaches that read African cultural expressions exclusively as responses to European colonial legacies. The former, as Achille Mbembe has shown, relies on a circular logic in which race, geography and society mutually support and define each other:

> The spatial body, the racial body, and the civic body are thenceforth one, each testifying to an autochthonous communal origin by virtue of which everyone born of the soil or sharing the same color or ancestors is a brother or a sister. (“Self-Writing” 256)

The result of this logic is an exclusion of all who do not fit this simple overlap: “The idea of an Africanity that is not black is simply unthinkable. Whence the
impossibility of conceiving, for example, the existence of Africans of European, Arab, or Asian origin – or that Africans might have multiple ancestries” (“Self-Writing” 256). The irony of the essentialising approach is that the idea of communal origin visible in racial characteristics is deeply influenced by European ideas of race, and dependent on colonial systems of education that institutionalised these ideas (Amoko 21-24; cf. Mudimbe 1-23; Appiah 10-13). When backed by institutions of political and disciplinary power, these conceptions recurrently result in the creation of social taboos, as we shall see in the chapter on Yvonne Vera. Gurnah, who is an academic and literary critic, has in his scholarly work drawn attention to the exclusivist nature of simplifications of this kind, for example in discussions of fiction by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Wole Soyinka (“Matigari”; “Wole Soyinka”). African nationalism is also frequently the target of savage irony in his fiction.

The Eurocentric approach to African cultures explicitly or tacitly ties evaluation to the revision of European representations, and so ignores the possibility that it may have values above ‘writing back’ to an imperial metropolitan culture. Such a Eurocentric approach arguably directs Johan Jacobs’ reading of Paradise as a revision of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Indeed, as Susheila Nasta has argued, a singular focus on the presence of Conrad in Gurnah’s novel is an example of the “postcolonial exotic” (“Gurnah, Paradise” 309-10). Nasta’s point is not that Conrad’s canonical work does not feature in Gurnah’s novel, but that the kind of intertextual echoes evoked reveal as much about the scope and limitations of the reader’s expectations as it does about the text.

Gurnah’s literary project negotiates both African nationalism and the “postcolonial exotic” in its projection of a historically informed vision of alternative subjectivity. In a reading of three of his novels – Admiring Silence, By the Sea, and Desertion – I will show how Gurnah draws on the long history of cultural interaction to foreground diaspora as the pervading condition for both migrants and residents “at home” in the east African littoral. This diasporic awareness offers the basis for a reimagination of the extended family as a network with the potential to generate more enabling modes of social existence. To this end, the chapter has a three-fold aim. First, I will outline and exemplify the complex web of institutions, social codes, and emotional forces that work upon the characters in Gurnah’s works. These are both material and discursive, and consist of legal and political machineries, family ties, expectations, moral and cultural norms, ownership of property, and family narratives as well as literary fiction. The codes, forces, and narratives exist on the level of family,
community, and nation, but also include, on a global level, diasporic states of being. Combined, they shape the individual’s or group’s social existence in a place, but may also pull away from home. The focus on the configuration of networks rather than socially and culturally stable entities puts Gurnah’s literary representation at odds with conceptualisations of exile and migration that accept rather reductive notions of cultural belonging. As I will show, the categories of “exile” and cultural difference as they have been elaborated by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha respectively do not do full justice to the extreme complexity of social reality in Gurnah’s fictional worlds. Against Said’s postulations, many of Gurnah’s characters are alienated from the culture of their birth. In addition, a multi-faceted hybridity that exceeds Bhabha’s theorisation seems to be the primordial mode of being even prior to migration. Gurnah’s fiction also represents migration and exile as related to a “home” that is not conceived on a national scale. The family, not the home country, is the arena for home-making, though the family may be global and trans-cultural in reach. I will borrow and slightly modify the term “entanglement” used in the novel Desertion to account for this multi-layered matrix of subject formation in Gurnah’s fiction.

The second aim of the chapter is to discuss this “entanglement” in terms of a literary vision. Gurnah’s fiction, although entrenched in and concerned with the history of a geographical area, is more than a reflection of that history and place. It offers perspectives on subject formation that contest prevailing models based on nation, family, or race. Gurnah accomplishes this through a transcultural and global re-imagination of the family and of love relationships. This re-imagination, however, is not an assertive answer to the problems inherent in traditional conceptions of family or nation. It is rather a barely imaginable potential, at best waiting to be realised.

Thirdly, in a concluding discussion I will situate Gurnah’s placing of families at the centre of his narratives within an academic discourse on modernity. Anthropologists have deemed non-Western societies to be governed primarily by genealogical and kinship codes in contrast to European societies whose social constitutions rely on bonds of intimacy and love (Povinelli 230; Giddens 88-98). This allegedly European privilege has been regarded as underwriting the nation and a defining mark of modernity. Gurnah’s constant attention to cross-cultural imaginative and intimate bonds presents a critique of this anthropological view. Kinship and love both work alongside, and frequently against, each other in the migrant modernity Gurnah depicts. His novelistic universe thus not only displays the traits of a historical
encounter between European modernity and other forms of cosmopolitanism, but also of an imagination that reconceives established modes of social organisation in the search for viable alternatives.

WRITING NATIONALISM AND DIASPORA

Zanzibar has a long history of cultural exchange. From the 6th century, merchants from the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent used seasonal monsoons to establish trade routes that stretched from the African east coast all the way to China. In Africa, these commercial routes contributed to the development of city-states like Zanzibar, Pemba, Mombasa, Malindi, and Lamu. Multicultural societies resulted from the interaction: the first known inhabitants in the area, the Waswahili, were descendants of Arab and African peoples. Over the centuries, numerous other groups arrived to settle or trade, so that when the British explorer Richard Burton visited the island in the late 1850s he noted the international character of Zanzibar town: there were craftsmen and traders from “Madagascar, Mozambique, minor islands of the Indian Ocean, Bombay and Guzerat, the Somalia coast, the Red Sea, Maskat, and the Persian Gulf” (73). In addition, there were ships from France, Hamburg, and America.

Some scholars have taken the co-habitation of various peoples on the African east coast to indicate that Swahili societies were “plural,” characterised by a number of distinct cultural and ethnic groups and strictly hierarchical and static. Michael Lofchie, for instance, claims for Zanzibar that “[a]lthough intermarriage occurred, it was not sufficient to blur the ethnic boundaries and fuse different groups together” (93). Lofchie presents statistical data on land and business ownership as well as on the level of education to support his thesis. While the data are persuasive when it comes to outlining the economic and political power in Zanzibar, his reliance on categories such as “Arab,” “Indian,” and “African” is problematic. The cultural and ethnic categories cover collectives of people who may in fact be regarded as ethnically and culturally diverse, as well as changing over time. His own presentation shows for example that the word “Swahili” developed into a vague but derogatory term in the 1920s, and Lofchie admits that the most plausible reason for the correlated decrease in “Swahili” inhabitants and increase in “Arabs” at that time is the fact that individuals tried to avoid falling into the newly stigmatised category by passing as “Arabs” (75).

Kelly Askew’s case against clear-cut ethnic and cultural categories follows up on Lofchie’s concession. One of the fundamental traits of Swahili
society, she argues, is “the assimilation of newcomers” from various Indian Ocean points of departure: “Whatever the route and impetus that brought them there, every group of newcomers contributed to the development of Swahili town life and a semblance of unity was wrought out of great diversity” (Askew 71). The Zanzibari people are difficult to categorise because what holds the group together goes against the grain of an anthropological desire to see cultures as stable and distinguishable. The lingering tendency to divide Swahili society along Arab/African lines ignores the subtlety of social classification. “Africans” comprised a great many groups; similarly, “Arabs” consisted of immigrants from different historical periods as well as different geographical regions (Askew 72).

This cultural complexity notwithstanding, British colonial rule, lasting from 1890 to 1963, placed a racially rigid grid upon the Zanzibari society. To the British colonial administration, the island was made up of three ethnic groups: Africans, Arabs, and Indians. In political practice, this tri-partite division was reduced to a division between the politically powerful but numerically few “Arabs” – which meant chiefly an influential class of people around the ruling Seyyid with Omani origins – and the politically silent majority of Swahili or “African” descent. The former were better represented in the Legislative and Executive Councils, had access to better education, and were encouraged to seek positions in the administrative top, while the latter consistently found themselves underrepresented and excluded from successful career paths (Middleton and Campbell 43-45; Lofchie 63-66).

The reductive classification of colonial rule not only represented actual society in an erroneous way. It also contributed to its transformation. The rise of nationalism and the revolution that followed upon independence in 1963 was an effect of this enforced racial simplification. In the run-up towards elections before independence, politics were largely polarised along “ethnic” lines. “Arab” nationalism became a means for the ruling class to prolong political influence, and was channelled first through the Arab Association, and later through the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP). Though claiming to be multi-racial and multi-cultural, the party was largely conceived as serving “Arab” interests. “African” nationalism, for its part, was a response to this force (Lofchie 157-67). After the stalemate and reholding of the elections in 1961, and the formation of a coalition after the 1963 elections, the country was largely racially divided due to the parties’ campaigning. The Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) was excluded from the coalition despite their large vote, and their discontent set the stage for the revolution (Lofchie 200-20). During the
revolution, the ASP seized power with the help of the Umma Party, and in the riots that followed “Arabs” were the main targets. Ironically, this did not mean that only the ruling class was attacked. As was the case in the violence after the 1961 elections, where “Manga Arabs, petty traders and small shopkeepers” living on or near the clove plantations were the victims, in the post-election riots individuals were targeted on grounds of their alleged ethnic identity (Lofchie 203-04; cf. Petterson 49-70).

Soon after independence, Tanganyika and Zanzibar formed the union of Tanzania, and the island’s political structure was annexed to the mainland Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) administration led by President Julius Nyerere. The government formulated its policies around notions of self-reliance and socialism, and set out to modernise the country and the agricultural business through rural development. The efforts in the first decade after independence took the form of a number of schemes that repeatedly failed because they were too radical in conception or were based on weak research and old colonial ideas (Ingle 48-67, 100-01). While the focus on the villages was perhaps understandable since that was where the vast majority of the country’s population lived, the combination of a socialism based on peasant and worker achievements, the reach and power of the ruling party, and the character of the national political rhetoric, reveal some of the contradictions, intended or not, in the government’s stated commitment to multi-racialism. Almost from the beginning, Tanzania was a one-party state and the ruling party TANU was in control of local politics through the establishment of Regional and Area Commissioners (Maguire 356-60). One of TANU’s tenets, moreover, was that national or local political leaders must be either peasants or workers, and that its members should subscribe to the (distinctly gendered) motto: “All men are my brothers and Africa is one” (Ingle 6; Maguire 321). On the assumption that modernization in its socialist collective form presented a return to pre-colonial ways since, as President Nyerere expressed it, “individualistic social attitudes” that go with “selfishness and individual advancement” were introduced by the colonial powers (qtd. in Ingle 8), it is clear that the trade-based and commercial character of Swahili society fell outside the Tanzanian conception of African oneness. The 1967 nationalisation of banks that exemplified Nyerere’s socialist and rural-centred politics plays an important role in By the Sea, as we shall see.

In Gurnah’s fiction African nationalism is constantly ridiculed and critiqued – often through savagely ironical turns. In his first novel, Memory of Departure (1987), the protagonist makes the acquaintance of a zealous nationalist who claims to be a student at the University of Nairobi. The latter reads Peter
Abrahams’ *Mine Boy* but finds the Pan-African writer’s book too full of “liberal preaching, soft-nosed and confused. … There is no sense of identification with the mass of oppressed Africans” (*Memory* 73). When the nationalist outlines his own political vision, it proves to be a violent one. He proposes a strongman politics based on the exploitation and deportation of various minority groups (*Memory* 76). His aggressive demagogy is later revealed to be empty rhetoric; when the protagonist meets him in the company of his rich uncle, the uncle declares that “He’s a flunkey, a nobody. He gets a few shillings for taking the risk with somebody else’s money. He probably works for some ambassador or something. He’s a pimp, he gets women for these tourists” (*Memory* 122). In *Dottie*, too, the gap between high-flown political rhetoric and everyday practice is used to ridicule (Pan-)African nationalism. The eponymous protagonist has a sister, Sophie, whose boyfriend Jimmy befriends a Ghanaian deeply committed to the black struggle. Jimmy is drawn into political activism and is given a new name as a sign of his commitment. Sophie’s reaction to his proud announcement veers close to outright racism: “He sang out a long name which was incomprehensible to her but which was unmistakably African. It sounded like Bongbongbong, and she wondered if he was saying it right” (*Dottie* 184). Ironically, her scepticism towards Jimmy’s new identity is confirmed by the fact that his sense of responsibility for his son is conspicuously unchanged despite the patriarchal rhetoric on family that comes with the new name. Finally, *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea* depict post-independence governments as so many corrupt leaders who deeply betray their political mandates. In the former novel, the political leaders are compared to “organs of consumption and penetration, prehensile tools of self-gratification” (*Admiring* 202). In the latter, one of the protagonists is sentenced to several years in prison on a very dubious charge of fraud that glaringly reveals the bankruptcy of the political and juridical system. Dianne Schwerdt has noted that Gurnah’s *Paradise* is “clearly not a liberationist text,” a contention that she shares with several other critics (Schwerdt 92; Callahan 55; Bardolph 81). As the above examples show, the comment extends to all of Gurnah’s oeuvre.

African nationalisms – as perhaps all forms of nationalism – stand in complicated relation to migration and diaspora. As Mbembe indicates, African nationalisms typically exceed national borders in their vision of an African national subject. Brent Hayes Edwards has added to this contradictory picture by showing that many of the founders of African nationalisms formulated their tenets in diaspora, and in environments that featured extremely high degrees of cross- and inter-cultural exchange. In historical and empirical terms, Edwards
thus bears out the theoretical point made by Homi Bhabha that nationalism is performative as much as it is descriptive: voluntarily or not, nationalism discursively creates the national subject it refers to, and the position from where it is formulated does not, by definition, fully belong to the nation it conceives of (Location 145). This complexity notwithstanding, nationalism establishes a set of criteria to include and exclude individuals. Once they are in political place, these criteria are tied to political processes that engender new exiles and diasporas for those excluded. Gurnah’s fiction recurrently thematises this tendency to homogenisation and the resulting homelessness and migration. The thematic is partly drawn from his own experience. As he states in “Writing and Place,” he began writing to deal with the “overwhelming feeling of strangeness and difference” he felt in the British capital, and he concludes that “I realize now that it is this condition of being from one place and living in another that has been my subject over the years” (26, 27).

In order to introduce the diasporic theme of Gurnah’s novels in more detail, it will be useful to consider Edward Said’s extended analysis of the state of exile. Said argues in his “Reflections on Exile” that exile (which he carefully distinguishes from forced departure, voluntary migration, and refugee status) is characterised by a deep anxiety that becomes a fundamental part of the exile’s identity. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past…. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology – designed to reassemble an exiles’ broken history into a new whole – is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today’s world. (“Exile” 177)

To Said, the loss of a home country and culture leads to an obsessive preoccupation with alternative identities and their protection. Exile is a “jealous state” that often results in new exclusive group formations, an “exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you” (“Exile” 178). In Said’s analysis exile therefore stands in painful contrast to citizenship and belonging. Still, exile may furnish the individual with a critical distance and a “contrapuntal” view of “at least two” simultaneous perspectives on the world (“Exile” 186). This aspect of exile in fact becomes a matter of socio-cultural
choice and commitment for Said. Quoting Theodor Adorno, he suggests that it is a critic’s obligation “not to be at home in one’s home,” to “stand away from home” in order to critically scrutinise notions and concepts that are taken for granted (“Exile” 184).

The textual slippage from actual exile to exile as metaphor and conscious choice – social, cultural, and even political – should not be taken as an oversight, or inconsistent argumentation. It is rather a shift from description to performance. Said derives from the experience of exile a mode of analysis that can be turned back to unsettle notions of grounded existence. This is something he has done earlier. Contrapuntalism is the structuring metaphor in Said’s important *Culture and Imperialism*, where it denotes a theoretical double optic that allows for a reading of “intertwined and overlapping histories” (19).  

In the present context, it is the assumption with which his theoretical reflection begins that is essential: exile entails being cut off from one’s roots, land, and past. “Reflections on Exile” is a revision of his introductory chapter in *The World, the Text, the Critic*, the most theoretically articulate framing of his founding assumption. There Said distinguishes between a primordial tie to a place – called “filiation”– and a secondary, learned, and sometimes exilic “affiliation” that provides a critical distance to this culture (The World 1-30). As Rose Marangoly George has pointed out, Said’s original argument postulates quite uncritically a kind of natural cultural belonging from which the individual is excluded (16-17). Ironically, then, this assumption remains axiomatic in several revisited discussions of exile in a long career, despite the claim that exilic states foster a critical attitude towards precisely such naturalised notions (“Exile” 185).

For Gurnah’s characters, no such primordial bonds of belonging exist. On the contrary, many of them are strangely homeless in the cultures they belong to. It is with a curiously distant clear-sightedness, for instance, that the narrator in *Memory of Departure* exclaims that “[a]fter three years of independence, it was clear that the future had to be sought elsewhere” (28). The background here is the rise to power of a black political leadership whose politics puts “Arabs” and “Indians” at a disadvantage. The narrator’s response is to pack his bags and depart. Yusuf, the protagonist in *Paradise*, enters into a protégée/slave relationship to an uncle that is so unbearable that he escapes and joins the departing Germans. Although the role of domestic slave is well-established in the society of his birth, it drives him to take his chances with the unknown, even if it means exchanging one form of subjection for another, as Johan Jacobs has suggested (163). Latif’s homosexual brother in *By the Sea* finds
himself in a similar situation. After an older man’s secret courting he is taunted by a number of “plunderers of flesh” who behave according to the historically entrenched code that young Muslim men, once they have had same-sex intercourse, may be freely used by other men (By the Sea 95; see Murray and Roscoe 14-54). Emotionally worn down by the approaches and talk, he eventually feels compelled to leave. Migration, in all these cases, is the result of a sense of alienation from the home culture that is caused not by external or foreign influences but, on the contrary, by central social codes and protocols. In contrast to Said’s elaboration of exile, Gurnah’s fiction suggests that cultural belonging in a Zanzibari context is in no way a given experience even among individuals who are geographically and socially located well on the inside of their home cultures.

Gurnah’s novels not only complicate Said’s notion of exile. Their evocation of an extremely complex and volatile social reality also blurs the distinction between exile and other forms of migration. The social situation in Memory of Departure is, if not life threatening (as it might have been just before or after the elections), at least precarious and bleak. When the narrator leaves, he does so as much in a search of a better life as in an escape from danger. In Said’s schema, then, it is both migration and exile. The narrator in Admiring Silence similarly leaves for England in order to improve his future prospects, but he is also motivated by the realisation that post-revolutionary Zanzibar has become a dangerous place for people like him. For Saleh Omar in By the Sea the situation is almost the reverse. He leaves the moment the British government has declared Zanzibar an unstable society and grants asylum to its refugees. This political redefinition has little to do with the actual social and physical dangers of Zanzibari reality. With good reason, Saleh states that “I too was in fear of my life, had been for years” (By the Sea 10). The difference between refugee, exile, and migrant appears highly arbitrary in this context. Gurnah’s account of his own arrival in Britain two years after the revolution displays the same blurring of the political and economic categories: “It was a time of hardship and anxiety, of state terror and calculated humiliations, and at eighteen all I wanted was to leave and find safety and fulfillment somewhere else” (“Writing and Place” 26). Geographical and social homes, then, do not always provide a cultural or psychological sense of being at home. There is no primordial belonging underneath the cultured and acquired. Nor is the forced exclusion from a community always readily distinguishable from voluntary migration. Gurnah’s fiction – with much of the critical distance that Said calls for – in this way questions notions that are frequently taken for granted.
Where Said only hints at a connection between critical and intellectual distance and the emotional states of distress and “jealousy,” Gurnah’s fiction explores the nuances and ambiguities of these dimensions. Simon Lewis has insightfully argued that Gurnah’s characters are “apatrides,” not at home anywhere, their rootless state a result of a complex and mismatched overlap between cultural identity, geographical home and social collective belonging (222). This mismatch creates extreme uncertainty that often expresses itself in overwhelming feelings of shame. This shame is strong enough to threaten the psychic constitution of the individual but has a vague and indefinable origin and results from an entire situation rather than from a single cause. Anthony Giddens has described this kind of shame as an “existential anxiety” arising from an ontological insecurity intimately connected to modernity (35-69). In Giddens’ broad outline, modernity places new strains upon the individual that may lead to severe forms of anxiety and insecurity. The combination of abstract systems of government, decline of traditional authorities, and multiplication of possible, or at least imaginable life trajectories, puts the individual in the position of more or less constantly having to make difficult choices without much guidance. In addition, the consequences of these choices seem unforeseeable, which not only creates new forms of stress, but also a discrepancy between expectation and reality that causes feelings of insufficiency and shame. Shame, to Giddens, is not merely a public castigation for a transgression, or an effect of humiliation, it is – in its “bypassed” sense – a failure to live up to ideal modes of existence (10-70, 181-208).

While he speaks of the interconnection between local and global influences upon the self, Giddens does not address migration or exile specifically. It is easy to see, however, that migration constitutes an emblematic expression of modernity as he conceives it. The implications are drawn out more fully in Arjun Appadurai’s analysis of modernity as a number of converging and diverging flows of capital, technologies, cultural elements, ideologies, and people, where the criss-crossing flows give social reality a texture but no solid structure. Life courses, Appadurai writes, must be improvised as much as followed (31-37, 55). Gurnah’s fiction, through its constant attention to this complex and often problematic relation between geographical home versus movement, and cultural belonging versus marginality, contributes to the mapping of modernity from the point of view of the migrant.
ADMIRING SILENCE: ANXIETY AND DIASPORA

Dislocation and narration

Admiring Silence is set in contemporary Britain and Zanzibar. It tells the story of a Zanzibari immigrant of Omani Swahili descent who is suddenly faced with the consequences of being able to reconnect with the family and the island he has long since left and never revisited. Before we turn to the analysis of anxiety and diasporic subjectivity in the novel, a selective retelling of the story is needed to do justice to the meandering quality of the narrative and its significant suppressions. The unnamed protagonist is a writer and a literature teacher at a secondary school, apparently well settled in British society and culture. He lives with Emma, a literature PhD student working on a dissertation on the “semiotics of dedicated narrative,” and the couple have a daughter, Amelia (Admiring 75). All his time in England he has communicated in the most perfunctory manner with his family, receiving and sending off ritualised letters about weather, health and professional duties. Hence they do not know about Emma or his child. His silence is due to two closely related reasons. The first is his fear that he would shame his family if he announced that he lives unmarried with an English woman. The shame would in fact be double since the arrangement means that he has denied the family their customary influence on the choice of partner as well as participation in the marriage settlements. The second reason, which is perhaps as much a pretext as a real explanation, is that his illiterate mother has to rely on gossipy little boys to read his letters and write hers, and this public exposure would preclude discussions of private and sensitive matters.

When the political situation in Zanzibar changes, he takes the opportunity to go back and encounters a society where most things have gone wrong. Infrastructures and services are non-existent or malfunctioning and the island is governed by an administration that is deeply corrupt, from the Prime Minister down. The narrator’s half-brother, Akbar, works in a government office but frankly declares that he has all the time in the world to accompany his visiting brother: “We don’t do any work here. We just turn up at the office and hang around and then go home” (Admiring 148). The narrator himself is asked to take a translation job sponsored by foreign aid, an offer made on the basis of personal connections and exemplary of the society’s corruption: “This, I imagined him saying to Akbar, is what it means to be a Permanent Secretary to a Minister. To be able to hand out such luscious prizes to the deserving of your choice” (Admiring 152).
More painful and emotionally disturbing for all involved is the narrator’s encounter with his family. He coaxes his mother to tell the story of his father’s disappearance, and the narration opens old wounds: Abbas, she says, left her in a state of pregnancy after a year of marriage, and her present husband, Hashim, married her in a rescue operation of sorts that gave stability and security to her life. Familial relations become even more strained when the narrator finds out that his mother has arranged for his marriage in the belief that her middle-aged son is still single. The young bride-to-be is an acquaintance of the family and she visits once the preparations have begun. It takes until after the second meeting for the dumbfounded protagonist to reveal that he already has a partner, and the belatedness of his revelation, as well as the fact that he has kept this secret through all the years, draws the shame on his family he has tried to avoid. His stepfather summarises the situation in a comparison between father and son that contains at least a morsel of gleeful malice: “‘I think [your father] just wanted to run away from his life, from us, from here. He could not imagine the hurt and shame he was leaving behind. And now you have done the same” (Admiring 188).

On the plane back to Britain, the narrator meets Ira, a Kenyan woman of Indian descent whose family left for Canada and England after independence since business “became much harder then” (Admiring 179). Ira’s experience of displacement and the anxiety it generates will come to represent a barely conceivable possibility of a new relationship in the face of the ensuing events, for when he reunites with Emma, it is to learn that she has met another man. At first, however, the narrator unexpectedly reacts by contemplating whether he should take a course in plumbing to learn what “clogs up the works,” but his interest in toilets has a very practical reason: it is “[b]ecause I don’t want to talk about Emma, and I’m not going to” (Admiring 212, 214). The novel ends with the protagonist sitting by the phone, trying to summon up the courage to call Ira but only deliberating because he is afraid of “disturbing this fragile silence” (Admiring 217).

The narrator’s story, as I indicated, is virtually labyrinthine. Many of the events are made up, and many actions are attributed to the wrong people. The story he has been telling his wife about his arrival in England, for example, is only partly true. The uncle he lived with during the first year is in fact a business associate of his uncle Hashim’s – an uncle that, in turn, the narrator eventually reveals to be his stepfather. His story of Hashim’s marriage to the daughter of the businessman Nassor Abdalla is in fact about his mother – information that is withheld from the reader for some time. Most striking,
however, is the revelation that the escaped uncle Abbas is really the narrator’s father. Abbas’ shameful disappearance also reveals the second marriage to be a socially and culturally acceptable solution to a severe crisis since Hashim is Abbas’ uncle. The revelation upsets the narrator’s long story about his parents’ marriage. It does not crumble, as he has maintained, because Abbas’ sister shames her brother by going begging to Hashim’s house. The act, he has claimed, is so shameful that it overwhelms Abbas with self-hatred enough to erode his wife’s love (Admiring 52). The story the narrator’s mother tells her son, that Abbas leaves because the students depress him, because she is “negligent” of his distress, and because the prospect of having a child scares him, is more plausible (Admiring 130-31). The circumlocutionary and even deceitful narration is an effect of an anxiety that is directly related to geographical and cultural dislocation. The narrative of Admiring Silence in this way traces the bonds between dislocation, narration and emotion, and it is to this intricate pattern we will now turn.

One of the striking features of the narrator’s presentation is his inability to compartmentalise past events. The beginning of stories, he reflects, are difficult to establish because events seem linked in series that retreat infinitely into the past:

> Sooner or later I am going to have to go back to the beginning and tell this story properly. I can’t quite fix on the beginning yet, where it is as such. When I think I’ve found a good position from which to start, I am tempted by the possibility that everything would seem clearer if I began with what led up to it. (Admiring 17)

The uncertainty in turn has an emotional foundation. The narrator’s story is deeply connected to feelings of shame and hurt. He admits in the beginning that

> I have found myself leaning heavily on this pain. At first I tried to silence it, thinking it would go and leave me to my agitated content. That it would linger for a season, a firm reminder of the disquiet that lurks and coils below the surface of the stubbornly self-gratifying vision of our lives. (Admiring 3)

The pain does not recede, however, and later he is able to see the same emotional charges drive the stories his mother has suppressed for so long: “I
saw she could not stop, and she could not hide the hurt of those years” (Admiring 130). In both cases, disquiet propels narratives that work their way to the emotional core through detours, digressions, silences, and revisions because of the emotional charge of their content. From this perspective, the story about his parents’ failed marriage is less a lie than a displaced truth. It is his own marriage he is talking about. Emma’s decision to leave him appears, indeed, to be caused by his obsessive self-hatred and bitterness.

The disquiet that drives the protagonist’s narrative is compounded by two contrary and intertwined desires: a wish to present himself as better than he really is, and a desire to take the blame for transgressions and betrayals. It is the collision and mutual interference of these two desires that create his repetitious and vacillating story-telling mode. He declares that what he has told Emma and her parents about his arrival in England and his family situation is partly created for effect. He does not have an uncle or father but has made them up “for Emma out of my one stepfather, more or less” (Admiring 35). Equally embellished is his immigration narrative: “It was a good story, and most of it was true. It made me sound a little heroic and a little weak. A nice balance” (Admiring 84). At the other emotional end the narrator willingly assumes the blame after his and Emma’s separation, admitting that he could have informed her about his family “ages ago” (Admiring 215). Both the tendency to boastful hyperbole and self-abjection are apparently generalised through the epigraphs that introduce the novel’s various sections. Part two begins with a phrase from the 12th century poet Farid ud-din Attar: “Your Self’s grown gross, a dog that sleeps and feeds,” and a passage from Sir John Harrison (who is also the inventor of toilets, as the narrator discovers) introduces the third part: “Wee goe brave in apparell that we may be taken for better men than wee bee” (Admiring 101, 175). The narrator’s confession of his staged identity and the two epigraphs both show narrative to be an instrument that faces two ways. On the one hand, it is a tool with which to construct a relatively stable and coherent self under adverse circumstances. On the other hand, it registers the destructive impact of an emotional disturbance that constantly threatens to break through these narrative constructions. In the recurrent metaphor the narrator employs, it does so by punctuating the narrative with releases of stench. The narrator declares that his pain has refused to go away as he had hoped. Instead it has hardened over the years to become “an object that occupied space within me, cockroachy, dark and intimate, emitting thick, stinking fumes” (Admiring 3). The fumes, the metaphor suggests, are at least in part the stories we read.
Despite the epigraphs’ claim to generality, the narrator’s vacillating narrative mode is in very direct ways shaped by his migration and the ensuing sense of being lost between cultures. It is an instance of Giddens’ “existential anxiety” (35). The anxiety and the ensuing shame, Giddens explains, is not simply the result of transgressions of social codes. On the contrary, they happen partly outside the boundaries of any single society, and are the result of incompatible codes and ideals. The narrator’s shame, in Giddens’ sense of “bypassed,” thus arises out of the dilemma of a diasporic existence that prevents the individual from living up to perceived ideals. We will return to this connection between narrative composition of self and diaspora in a more racialised context in the chapter on David Dabydeen’s fiction.

If narration (in one of its functions) is a means of dealing with the disquiet that lurks beneath the surface, it is emotionally exhausting work. The fatigue makes the narrator long for an alternative mode of existence, and the sudden interest in plumbing and its metaphorical implications represents his realisation of this wish. However, it also ironically reveals the limits of the understanding it unfolds. The narrator, as noted, turns to toilets in an attempt to evade memories of Emma and the compulsion to represent those memories in narrative. But the toilets also become a way to join the imagery of stench and corruption, in both the political and biological sense of the word, that runs through the narrative, and to construct an analogy between social and bodily states of being. When he is in Zanzibar, the narrator is disgusted by the constant blockage of the sewers. They are signs of degeneration because good sanitary systems are essential to “civilized life as we know it” (Admiring 212-13). Inversely, political corruption is depicted in terms of excrement: the “homegrown bullies” that rule the country, the “lawmakers and the bullshitters, squatted over everyone’s faces and issued their wastes on them” (Admiring 41). When he takes the course on plumbing he discovers the toilet’s place in colonial history, and he exclaims with wry irony that like “any idea of any value” it is an invention by an Englishman, Sir John Harrison (Admiring 213). The toilet being a colonial export to the African island, the blockage thus becomes an apt metaphor for the tragic inability to deal with a colonial legacy on an infrastructural level. The analogy further joins the socio-political and anatomical body through its vocabulary to suggest that both are subject to corruption. That “cockroachy, dark and intimate” object of pain the narrator carries within him sends stinking fumes into his story, and in his reflection on his fellow passenger on the plane from Zanzibar this comparison is even more explicit: throughout the journey his neighbour releases a series of “foul-smelling
farts” that possibly originate from “a meanness and bitterness which had corroded his body and made it rot” (Admiring 3, 178, 203). On both a social and bodily level, the corruption that blocks the machineries stems from an inability to come to terms with a colonial history, and it is the desire to deal with this issue which underlies his joining the plumbing course in the first place. He wants to “get to the bottom” of things, and “know what clogs up the works” (Admiring 212). If his wish is to find a method to flush out the anxiety and the corruption, as it were, his choice of analogy already indicates why this functional approach must fail. The “works” themselves are of colonial origin and will not be affected by the cleansing. Sanitation will represent a tacit acceptance of colonial history and the subjection to its definitions on “civilisation.”

Another way to put this is to recall the dual nature of his narrative. The narrator’s desire to get to the “bottom” is only one of the reasons for turning to plumbing; the other is the wish to avoid talking about the painful loss of Emma. As in the case of his earlier postponements and revisions, the narrator speaks in order to remain silent on the more pressing issue. Such silence is not only destructive, as the reference to the “admirers of silence” shows (for example Khomeini issuing a fatwa against Salman Rushdie); it is virtually impossible since narrative is generated by anxiety (Admiring 209). The clear-cut distinction between material reality – the infrastructure – and social reality – corruption, anxiety – that the analogy makes is false. Anxiety and narrative are locked together as dynamic poles, each both cause and effect, and there exists no “bottom” level. This fact is given a further ironic twist by Emma’s explanation why she wants to leave. In words that reflect her literary training, she declares that her life is a narrative that resists closure and that her new relationship is a new beginning (Admiring 210). Emma has been read as a personification of a poststructuralist theoretical approach (Stierstorfer 141-42), but this is an over-simplification; Gurnah’s novel is not an allegory of literary theoretical positions. More importantly, the overlap of life and narrative that Emma refers to, and which to her results in an enabling semi-open-endedness where one narrative moves into another, is contrasted to the narrator’s very different kind of non-closure. He is unable to compartmentalise the past within a narrative frame, and so is unable to move on. He is captured in an emotional-narrative dynamic where, paradoxically, openness prevents movement because it leads neither to an end nor to a new beginning.
The narrator’s weaving of stories does not occur in solitude. His efforts to construct a coherent self to counter the pervading “existential anxiety” are enmeshed in larger social constructions of reality and central to these efforts is home-making. The construction of a self, the novel suggests, inevitably includes establishing a space where that self is at home. In what follows, I will relate the narrator’s diasporic predicament to the notion of home, which offers an alternative to national belonging and so presents one facet of Gurnah’s anti-nationalist vision of subject formation.

In the beginning of this chapter, I referred to Homi Bhabha’s discussion of the migrant’s unsettling of national culture. Bhabha’s argument moves on two levels. On the one hand, he delineates a historical shift by which formerly excluded individuals now inhabit the majority culture and challenge it from the inside through alternative narratives of national belonging (Location 164-65). On the other hand, he asserts that “cultural difference” is a self-differentiating process of cultural production attributable to the iterability of the signs that make up cultural and social affiliation (Location 34-36). The “minority discourse” of the migrant is thus simultaneously a particular kind of discourse and the enunciation of a particular group. Bhabha’s discussion remains an important point of reference for my study and has been used to discuss Gurnah’s anti-nationalism (Maslen 55), but in the present context it must be complemented by another perspective, and this for two reasons. First, while Bhabha attaches much productive potential to the alternative national affiliations, and the power of “minority discourse” to rupture narratives of “nationness,” that power is primarily perceived as critique. It is not clear what the alternatives strive towards, except that they must not solidify into a new national people and culture (Location 150-51). Secondly, his argument concerns the level of national belonging and leaves other scales of belonging without comment. In Admiring Silence – as in Gurnah’s entire oeuvre – national inclusion and exclusion present only one level of affiliation, and not the most important one at that. National belonging, whether approved or rejected, is less significant as the arena for subject formation than small-scale yet often global familial networks. Dislocation, to be sure, often occurs as migration from one nation to another, but it is the alienation from home in a geographically and socially more restricted sense that causes anxiety and a sense of loss. Hence, as Ann Blake notes in her reading of Dottie, the concern of the migrant is to set up home rather than to become part of a national culture (51).
In *Admiring Silence*, it is quite explicitly the family that represents “home.” During his visit to Zanzibar, the narrator is flooded by feelings of homesickness. With customary irony he explains that he longs not for his more recent home country, but for the family he has temporarily left: “It wasn’t England that was home (so you can roll back the red carpet, or file away, if you care, reproaches against the alienated native), but the life I had known with Emma” (*Admiring* 170). Conversely, the pervasive anxiety of his diasporic state does not result from losing a Zanzibari national (or republic) home culture, but from losing the familial home. This restricted space of community is connected, it might be added, to transnational Islamic cultural elements as well as to a wider regional cultural Swahili imaginary that make him unsure of where he belongs. As he explains, he has never identified himself in national or proto-national terms, but rather negotiated a series of larger and smaller identities. He is “strictly an Indian Ocean lad, Muslim, orthodox Sunni by upbringing, Wahhabi by association and still unable to escape the consequences of those early constructions” (*Admiring* 10). Nation and national culture, then, is not the primary level on which cultural affiliation and subjectivity is forged; it constitutes instead a less significant middle stratum in social positioning. Given the specific local-familial and transnational-religious levels of subject formation, it is therefore highly ironic that inconsistent views of race or ‘blackness’ come to partly determine his existence in England. Emma’s parents treat him as any backward ex-colonial subject, and a doctor misreads him – with polite and hypocritical precision – as Afro-Caribbean. But “[h]e didn’t mean Afro-Caribbean … anyway. He meant darkies, hubshis, abids, bongo-bongos, say-it-loud-I’m-black-and-I’m-proud victims of starvation and tyranny and disease and unregulated lusts and history, etc” (*Admiring* 10).

Through its concern with more local varieties of home, *Admiring Silence* gives support to Rosemary Marangoly George’s claim that what she calls the “immigrant genre” typically postulates “home” as juxtaposed, and sometimes opposed to, notions of national belonging (195-96) – a tension that is central also in Yvonne Vera’s fiction and an urgent concern in *Without a Name*. “Immigrant” fiction, moreover, persistently thematises home-making as an attempt to overcome the distress of displacement (George 2-3). George’s argument adds important nuances to Bhabha’s perhaps too ready celebration of the productiveness of dislocation and migrancy. As I noted above, George also develops her argument partly as a criticism of Said’s axiomatic postulation of a primordial and natural state of cultural belonging. In the section on *By the Sea*, we shall see that Gurnah’s fiction does indeed exemplify George’s theoretical
formulation. For the characters in that novel no primordial belonging exists. The effort to construct a home, in both novels becomes urgent not only in diaspora, but is a consistent and difficult task in all the social environments Gurnah portrays. His fiction also casts doubt upon any dream of ever finding a permanent and stable home.

“Home,” *Admiring Silence* shows, is not primarily a geographical location. It is rather the small imagined community of the family, which does not coincide with, or in any simple sense represent, a specific place. “Home,” then, is fundamentally social and narrative, but where it is located is far from clear. The home that the family in England represent collapses when Emma leaves, and with it, a minimum of stability is also lost. Not even his daughter Amelia offers much solid ground in the wake of the separation; she moves on, having “things to do” and she holds him in contempt for letting the “fragile silence” envelop him (*Admiring* 216, 217). This “silence” is not the opposite of speech. It is rather the heightened state of vacillation that has pulled the narrator’s story in contrary directions throughout. It is the incapacitating state of paradoxically being unable to structure the past in narrative form, while simultaneously being unable to allow this open-endedness to lead into other stories through a new beginning. At best, silence and waiting in this novel offer respite from the exhausting process of constructing and revising subjectivity in narrative. A future relationship with Ira suggests a possible exit from this incapacitating state, but it lies on the other side of the silence.

**BY THE SEA: RE-IMAGINING THE FAMILY**

*Fluid states and estranged subjects*

Gurnah’s sixth novel is a convoluted story about the emotional hurt and the painful consequences of what one of the protagonists later refers to as typically Islamic “family squabbles” (*By the Sea* 195). Two Zanzibari men meet in England after a long time and begin unravelling the dealings they have had in the past, and the suffering this has resulted in. More complex than *Admiring Silence*, its story stretches over generations and is full of lacunae, corrections, and contradictions. In order better to follow the analysis of the constructions of identity and the powerful emotions at stake in the narrations, it will again be necessary to give an account of the novel’s significant events and relations. The narrative begins with Rajab Shaaban – who declares at once that this is a name he has borrowed for the occasion – relating his arrival in England. He has come
to seek asylum away from the dangerous political situation in Zanzibar, knowing that he will succeed since the British government grants asylum to Zanzibaris who claim that their lives are in danger (By the Sea 10). Refusing at first to speak English, Rajab is brought into contact with an interpreter, Latif Mahmud, a university teacher who also comes from Zanzibar. Despite the fact that Rajab eventually reveals his fluency in English, much to the annoyance of the customs staff and the social services, the two men meet several times. The first encounter is preceded by much emotion; the borrowed name, it turns out, is the name of Latif Mahmud’s father, and the impostor, as Latif rightly guesses, is Saleh Omar, a man who has already caused his family much pain and grievances in the past but may not be “finished with us yet” (By the Sea 97).

The meetings develop into a contest of competing accounts of the past, as well as an exploration of gaps in their own respective stories. Latif’s suspicion of Saleh’s malice comes from the belief that he has deceived Latif’s family twice. The more recent deception involves Latif’s father’s home, the place where Latif grew up. Rajab Shaaban mortgages his house as security for an investment into a business venture with an Omani merchant, Hussein, whom he has befriended. The venture fails and in order to help save Rajab’s economy and his sense of dignity, Hussein raises a loan from Saleh Omar with the contract on the house as security. When Saleh’s economy falters, he contacts Rajab and eventually – and to Latif’s mind, gleefully – drives the family from their home. Rajab suspects that Hussein and Saleh have engineered the whole setup together. The emotional pain is doubled by the conviction that Saleh has previously tricked Shaaban out of another house. Rajab’s aunt, Maryam, owned a house that her first husband, Nassor Abdallah, had signed over to her to prevent his greedy relatives from obtaining it at his death. After Nassor’s death, Maryam marries Saleh’s father, and at her death, the house goes to Saleh. Saleh’s unlawful inheritance is allegedly the result his forging Maryam’s will.

Saleh Omar’s version of the events is very different. He claims that the first house is voluntarily signed over to Saleh’s father. This saves it from passing into the hands of Abdallah’s relatives, which it would if it had stayed in her name. Regarding the second house, he asserts that he went to great lengths to find an acceptable solution for all, such as offering Rajab to keep the contract against a loan raised on the house, or, alternatively, raising the loan himself, then tearing up the contract. Rajab, Saleh maintains, refused any deal, and, hurt by the response, Saleh pressed the case. Saleh’s actions have dire consequences for himself. He has taken a loan with the house as mortgage, but
with the nationalisation of banks he is suddenly required to repay it at once. He is unable to do so and loses the house. Rajab and his wife Asha have their house returned and move back in. In addition, Rajab files a complaint against Saleh that he has falsified Maryam’s will, and Saleh is sentenced in a summary court procedure to what will eventually be 11 years on a prison island outside Zanzibar.

It is Asha who is behind his fate. She is avenging the fact that Saleh, when in possession of all the belongings in the house, refused to give back a table which Hussein had given to her son Hassan, whom the merchant had courted and who later disappeared. After Hassan’s disappearance, Latif reflects, the table had become an important memento to Asha, and she demanded it back. Saleh admits that he refuses out of petty greed and malice, and Asha who by this time is the mistress to a minister is able to work secretly against Saleh with devastating effect (By the Sea 158). “My pettiness must have disgusted her,” he contends, “for it turned her completely against me. After that, she began her own campaign, one which in time she saw to complete victory” (By the Sea 211).

After Saleh is released from prison in 1979, he begins to plan his escape. It is not until the middle of the 1990s, however, that he succeeds. Because he is not allowed to have a passport of his own, Saleh escapes under Rajab Shaaban’s name, having obtained his passport with other items from the house and having kept it over the years out of “mischief, thinking that its loss would cause him some inconvenience” (By the Sea 242).

Like Admiring Silence, By the Sea is a novel about storytelling and the representation of past events in constructions of subjectivity; it is about the pain that generates stories, and the narrative tactics used to deal with this pain. And, as in the earlier novel there are also many digressions and postponements in the narratives that unfold the story. Saleh, for instance, does not relate at once where his borrowed name comes from, and he postpones information about Hussein and Hassan’s affair in order to create a chronological account of his life and family background. He also withholds until the very end the fact that Hassan comes back and tries to extort money from him, and that Aunt Maryam constitutes a link between him and Latif. Latif, on his part, does not relate the fact that he has not kept in touch with his family over the years. In the conversations between the two men, both also digress at several points in order to avoid, or prepare for, more difficult issues: the story about Nuhu (or Faru), Saleh’s assistant, their discussions of Melville’s “Bartleby” or the American Embassy’s library, and Latif’s remarks on the architecture of Saleh’s house are all such narrative digressions serving to avoid more central and
difficult issues. The discussion of the house, for instance, serves as a detour round the humiliation, pressing to be articulated, that Latif feels when the ebony table is not returned to his mother (By the Sea 151-58). In Admiring Silence, the turns of the protagonist’s narrative is part of an exploration of the psychological and emotional aspects of diaspora and the efforts to construct a self through narrative; the familial webs, though an inevitable dimension of the self’s construction, occupied the background in the narrator’s detailed autobiography of diasporic anxieties. The confronting and dialoguing narrators in By the Sea make the situation more immediately social. While they try to represent and come to terms with the past in a process of self-construction, they become entangled in the other’s different version of the same past. The confrontations are in turn deeply entwined with a volatile social and emotional reality. Where the emotional dilemmas and narrative efforts in Admiring Silence were directly related to geographical migration, By the Sea extends the exploration of culture to suggest that the fluid and complex Zanzibari society prevents notions of cultural belonging.

The tragedy of the story is the way a number of converging social codes and regulations seem to direct events and subjects towards their disastrous ends. Most conspicuous in this respect are perhaps the codes governing family behaviour and property. The sequential signing over of the first house is directly related to the patriarchal Islamic codes that govern inheritance. It is this code that raises Rajab Shaaban’s expectations by bringing the house into his family but then prevents him from possessing it. In the case of the second house, changing politics and legal frameworks come to affect the dominion and reach of this code. The new government in 1967 nationalises the banks and as a consequence Saleh is required to repay his loan. Hassan’s fate presents another, if quite different, tragedy. He becomes Hussein’s lover, and is tormented by the “plunderers of flesh” after Hussein’s departure (By the Sea 95). As noted earlier, what drives the older and younger men that harass and follow him is the notion that young men, once they have had intercourse with a man, are regarded as prostitutes – an attitude that has a long history in the Islamic East African world (Murray and Roscoe 18-20).

The pattern of kinship structures, legal frameworks, and social codes that socially situate the subject is further complicated by the tendency of these codes and frameworks to mesh. The code governing Islamic male sexuality is itself elusive (Murray and Roscoe 1-18), but more conspicuous in this respect is the intersection of economic and familial relations. In Admiring Silence the narrator’s London-based “uncle” is really a business associate. While this was a
half-lie in the context in which it was related, the “uncle” does indeed occupy a fleeting but powerful position at the juncture between family and economy in Gurnah’s fiction, even if it is one of waning authority as Jacqueline Bardolph has observed (86-88). Susheila Nasta has in a similar vein discussed the commodification of relationships in Gurnah’s fiction (“Gurnah, Paradise” 312). Both comments are made in relation to the historical setting of Paradise but also apply to the more recent past of Admiring Silence and By the Sea, as well as to Memory of Departure. With some adjustment, Bardolph’s and Nasta’s observations may also be extended to Dottie’s story of a young boy virtually inherited by his older half-brother in a region of what is today Pakistan (Dottie 16). In By the Sea, the shift from economic to kinship vocabulary between Rajab and Hussein displays the elusive nature of this position. The relation between the two men is economic, but the venture becomes the basis for socialising, and, after several visits in the Mahmud household, Rajab instructs his children to call Hussein “uncle.”

In this fluid state, emotions and affects are both driving forces and end products. Angered by what he regards as the theft of the house, Rajab is also overwhelmed by feelings of loss and a sense of failure to fulfil the role of father as he will leave nothing to his son. He tries instead to pass on a feeling of righteous indignation. Standing before the house, he says to Latif: “‘those people stole it from us. This is all I can leave you when I’m gone. Your inheritance’” (By the Sea 110). But affects also put powerful pressure on social codes as well as the political systems. When they are channelled directly into the political sphere and its machineries, as is the case with Asha’s revenge on Saleh for refusing to return the table, they become amplified with far-reaching and unforeseen consequences. While Asha is behind Saleh being sentenced to a long prison term, the outcome is not her responsibility as Saleh acknowledges: matters are soon “out of everyone’s hands once the machinery of terror began to grind” (By the Sea 211). The tragic end is rather the compounded effect of a corrupt legal system that allows the politically powerful to bend it to their own ends, a political system that recognises no distinction between private vendettas and political government, and feelings of hurt and historical disenfranchisement that fan these actions.

The complex and fluid social totality of colliding and meshing social codes, rapidly changing and corrupt political and legal systems, and affective alterations, make up the environment in which the characters in By the Sea move. It is a society existing “at full stretch” as Gurnah has stated elsewhere (Nasta, Writing 361). Whereas in Admiring Silence the body’s inner and outer
surfaces were metaphorically connected to social states, in *By the Sea* this connection is elaborated into a description of a fluid social order. One of the effects of this volatile dynamic is that it severely complicates the sense of being at home by repeatedly estranging the citizens who live in it. I argued above that the urgency of home-making was directly connected to the sense of dislocation and loss that followed diaspora. *By the Sea*, however, shows that such emotions are not exclusive to migrants. On the contrary, they are common throughout a society as complex as the Zanzibar Gurnah portrays. Hassan, Saleh, and Latif all leave Zanzibar for different reasons, the latter two ending up in states of diasporic anxiety, but disorientation is as much the cause for departure as the consequences of it. Hassan is plagued by sexual suitors and gossip, Saleh is victimised by the changing political circumstances, and Latif eventually tells Saleh that he escaped because he was unable to stand his parents’ hatred of each other (*By the Sea* 239). What the characters have in common is an alienation that results neither from the adoption of foreign life styles nor from a refusal to submit to clearly demarcated social codes. Simon Lewis has observed that for Gurnah’s characters, no home exists (222). Contrary to Said’s axiomatic postulation, as I argued above, in Gurnah’s literary universe there is no “filiation,” and “affiliation” often turns into alienation. As Askew argues, the capacity of Swahili society to accommodate external influences leads to a complexity that effectively puts society in a state of flux (71). Individuals consequently have to negotiate their way through a maze of social codes without much guidance. *By the Sea* maps the emotional and social effects of such a volatile state by showing that it repeatedly leads to the estrangement of individuals both from within and by that society itself.

**Imagined families**

Arjun Appadurai has conceptualised existence in a fluid society as including an essential element of “imagination.” In late modernity, he argues, imagination becomes an “organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility,” and as such it becomes a repertoire of thinkable options for individuals who stake out their life courses (31). The significance of imagination is in turn related to the tendency towards “deteriorialization” that the contemporary world expresses, that is, the “loosening of the holds between people, wealth, and territories” (Appadurai 49). Socially and culturally, the increasing number
of points of contact and influence between individuals and cultures – as well as the technologies that support them by transmitting images, text, and sound – do away with stable frames of reference and regulations for performing and imagining society. Life must therefore be lived with a high degree of flexibility, what Appadurai calls “improvisation,” and it is in this state that imagination takes on a particular power and social character (53-55). As Askew’s study shows, “deterritorialization” and social improvisation have long been defining characteristics of Swahili societies, but Appadurai’s conceptualisation of imagination has a further implication for Gurnah’s novel in that the re-imagination of the family takes place as an explicitly social fantasy with potentially far-reaching if uncertain consequences.

When Saleh and Latif meet in London, they are both worn out by their experiences of pain and loneliness and seek to find “relief” (By the Sea 207). Their mutual unburdening is a prolonged and difficult process of negotiation between conflicting versions of the past. The process is not dissimilar to a re-interpretation of literature, as their recurring references to Melville’s “Bartleby” illustrates. Saleh uses Bartleby’s well-known phrase “I would prefer not to” to avoid explaining his reluctance to speak English when first landing in England. Latif, having learnt about Saleh’s use of the phrase, quotes him back when they have their first talk about the story. To Latif it is at first a story of futility and victimization in which he sees his own father, a man “afraid of the dark” who is tragically exploited through Hussein’s temptations of “secret arrangements that would yield importance in the world, and make him seem daring and knowing, a proper man” (By the Sea 87, 91). “I learned to read the story differently later,” he says later, “to see that it was not all about resignation and futility, but the first time I saw him in it” (By the Sea 168). To Latif, then, the personal or familial past is like Melville’s short story a narrative whose meaning may change after a second reading. This, indeed, is what happens. In the encounter with Saleh, Latif comes to revaluate his father, his mother, and even his brother. He is unaware, for example, that his father has spread rumours about Saleh being a colonial stooge and he does not know about his mother’s scheming against him (By the Sea 156, 211).

As in Admiring Silence, the re-reading at stake here entails a profound alteration of the individual’s constitution. Saleh offers an archaeological image (that will return once more in Desertion) when he reflects that “it is as if the details of our lives have accumulated in layers, and now some layers have been displaced by the friction of other events, and bits of contingent pieces still remain, accidentally tumbled about” (By the Sea 142). In By the Sea this
dissembled state becomes the impetus for re-imagining familial relations that may offer respite and homeliness. At their last meeting, Latif suggests that they validate Saleh’s appropriation of his father’s name and their kinship:

‘I’ll have my tea and go. But then I’ll be back. If I may. After all, we’re related it seems.’
‘Only by marriage,’ I said, in the same bantering tone. ‘And there was no issue.’
‘Yes, but then you took my father’s name. Doesn’t that combination make us related?’ (By the Sea 194-95)

The creation of a family with Saleh’s false identity as the link between its members is radically improvisational in Appadurai’s social sense. It does not merely manipulate the existing, if flexible, codes. The new family line is on the contrary conceived in direct opposition to the Islamic kinship codes that incessantly breed feuds: “all this family business, all this muttering that stretches further back all the time. Have you noticed how the history of Islam is so tied up with family squabbles?” (By the Sea 195). Saleh’s information that Hassan has returned to Zanzibar presents a final example of the potentially endless generational nature of these “squabbles.” Hassan has taken possession of the house as his rightful inheritance from Hussein, but discovers that due to an administrative blunder Saleh still legally owns it. In order to press a legal case – a second time – against Saleh’s ownership, Hassan has begun developing powerful political acquaintances and this threat is the immediate cause for Saleh’s departure. As Saleh points out, Latif is equal inheritor along with his brother as prescribed by Islamic inheritance laws. Latif, then, has the option of returning to claim his share of the inheritance – and enter into legal battle with Saleh. In addition, this would entail subjection to the fate that seems inscribed in his name. Latif’s full name is Latif Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, literally comprising those of his male forbears. Latif’s suggestion to Saleh thus entails a radical break with male genealogy and the codes of conduct that support generational conflicts. It is an imaginative and conciliatory family constellation, but it is also motivated on practical grounds: “And we are in a strange land. That would more or less naturally make us related, or so people tell me when they ring to ask me for a favour” (By the Sea 195).

In Admiring Silence, narrative is an expression of diasporic anxieties capable only of providing a very provisional and unstable identity. In By the Sea, the dialogic situation offers at least the possibility of a viable future. At the margins of the social codes that hold them, the two men are possibly able to
construct a small social unit that redefines the family. *By the Sea* in this way represents a social improvisational imagination at work. In contrast to *Admiring Silence*, which posits an alternative social mode as an elusive possibility at the other end of an incapacitating silence, *By the Sea* makes such an alternative a more feasible possibility. As in the earlier novel, however, it is a fantasy precariously waiting to be realised. In the discussion of *Desertion* to follow, we shall see how the novel itself partakes in an imaginative vision that includes many of the features we have discussed so far. This vision, I will argue in the concluding discussion, constitutes Gurnah’s literary poetics.

**DESERTION: ENTANGLEMENT AND MIRACLE STORIES**

*Narrative entanglements*

*Desertion* is another tale of cross-cultural encounters and liaisons over generations, stretching from the turn of the 20th century to the present. The first part of the novel returns to terrain Gurnah depicted in *Paradise*: the East African coast in the late 19th century. In 1899, Martin Pearce, a British Orientalist and traveller, appears in a small town that, though unnamed, is later indicated to be Malindi. He is exhausted from several days of walking after his guides have robbed and deserted him. Hassanali, an Indian shopkeeper, brings him home and nurses him back to strength with the help of his wife Malika and his sister Rehana, who lives with them after the disappearance of her first husband Azad. They have barely begun their ministrations when the British District Officer, Frederick Turner, bursts in on them to take Pearce to his place. On Turner’s estate Pearce slowly regains his powers, and a return to Hassanali’s house to thank his hosts leads to a developing love affair between Pearce and Rehana.

The love affair is narrated in retrospect by Rashid, one of the present-day protagonists of the novel’s second part, who has learnt about it from his older brother. It is a story Rashid finds provocatively improbable: “I don’t know how it would have happened. The unlikeliness of it defeats me. Yet I know it did happen, that Martin and Rehana became lovers. Imagination fails me and that fills me with sorrow” (*Desertion* 110). Despite his failing imagination, Rashid unfolds the story, retelling the couple’s relocation to Mombasa to avoid gossip and slander, and Pearce’s eventual departure: “At some point, Pearce came to his senses and made his way home” (*Desertion* 119). Pearce and Rehana’s story is important for Rashid’s older brother Amin
because he embarks on a similarly difficult liaison with Jamila, an older woman who has been left by her husband. Apart from structural similarities, it is later revealed that Jamila is Rehana and Pearce’s granddaughter. Like their historical forbears, Amin and Jamila’s relationship struggles against the odds. When Amin’s parents find out about Jamila, they betray their earlier radicalism in like matters by pressing him to stop seeing his lover, and Jamila eventually becomes a courtesan like her grandmother. At a conference in London, Amin, now a literature PhD, meets Barbara Turner, granddaughter of both Frederick Turner and Martin Pearce. Learning that she has an unknown cousin in Jamila, she decides to go with Rashid to Zanzibar to look for her.

We have seen in the earlier novels how narratives are means by which the characters attempt to establish a coherent self, as well as construct viable realities in relation to others, notably in the form of a familial home. In Desertion, as in By the Sea, the social dimension of story telling is at the centre. The self-reflective narrator claims that the story of Pearce and Rehana’s love, which will lead him to Amin’s and Jamila’s relationship, is part of a continuous but disparate pattern:

It is [a story] about all of us, about Farida and Amin and our parents, and about Jamila. It is about how one story contains many and how they belong not to us but are part of the random currents of our time, and about how stories capture us and entangle us for all time. (Desertion 120)

Stories, then, are distinctly part of social life, and this because they “capture and entangle” individuals – and possibly groups – for “all time.” As in By the Sea, these narrative entanglements interact with larger and more officially sanctioned codes and regulations. However, the focus in Desertion on “stories” signals a self-reflexivity that is part of the novel’s engagement in a miraculous form of imagination.

It is again the social landscape of the “dizzying array of identifying labels” that provides the setting for the stories in Desertion (Askew 73). Hassanali and his family are Muslims of Indian descent; they are jointly ruled by the “Arab” nobility whose seat is on Zanzibar Island and the British who maintain a powerful presence on the coast. Religious, cultural, and ethnic codes inform the interaction between individuals and groups and have to be carefully negotiated in each meeting. As in By the Sea, this negotiation proceeds with a high degree of improvisation that undoes the predictability the codes would seem to guarantee. The proceedings and outcomes of Hassanali’s and Rehana’s
marriages illustrate the complexity of the matter. Hassanali marries Malika after negotiations undertaken by his aunt. They proceed according to Islamic protocol and are facilitated by the families’ mutual knowledge of each other. Rehana’s marriage to Azad, an Indian merchant, is less smooth. Hassanali rejoices at their shared “national” background, which surprises Rehana since her brother has never before deemed this an important dimension of identity. There are few people to speak for Azad – as Rehana states, they know next to nothing about “him or his people” – and so Hassanali who is responsible for her marriage after the death of their parents lets his Indianness stand in for the absence of relatives and more specific knowledge (Desertion 71). This proves to be a mistake. Azad eventually disappears and leaves a grieving Rehana behind.

The English operate with a more stable racialised – and racist – understanding of the local socio-cultural dynamics. Turner is acquainted with Richard Burton, and their discussions bring out their differing attitudes as to the possibility of educating the African population both men regard as existing on the margin of humanity. The Indian part of the Swahili population fare a little better in their eyes. When he visits Hassanali’s house Turner is convinced that the uncivilised Indian Zanzibaris have stolen Pearce’s belongings. The conversations and feelings of the Englishmen highlight the mechanisms of othering that, as Simon Gikandi has shown, has been an essential element in the historical construction of English identity (50-83). It is ironic, therefore, that Turner hardly lives up to his own standard of civilised behaviour when he bursts into the house, dirtying the interior with his boots. Rehana and Malika accordingly take his rude behaviour as a sure sign of cultural inferiority. As an upset Rehana notes, Turner has in fact stolen from them: he has rolled Pearce into their eating mat to carry him home. Malika soberly replies that he has ruined the mat, so it needs to be replaced in any case (Desertion 59-60). With this interaction, Desertion, much like Maslen’s reading of Paradise, depicts a turning of tables in the matter of civilisation to reveal the process of othering as a means of cultural self-assertion.

The love stories in the novel unfold in defiance of these complicated webs of social positioning. Pearce and Rehana’s relation is unimaginable precisely because it runs against the social codes that conduct behaviour on both sides in colonial encounters: “This was 1899, not the age of Pocahontas when a romantic fling with a savage princess could be described as an adventure. The imperial world observed some rigidity about sexual proprieties” (Desertion 116-17). Less radical is Amin and Jamila’s relationship – and, it should
be added, Rashid’s sister Farida’s unapproved love with a Mombasa youth – but they, too, challenge the social norms and expectations.

As in the earlier novels, narratives in Desertion are shown to constitute the very fabric of reality. And again, this is done through a metaphor that merges material and discursive dimensions of reality, through an analogy between geological layers and narrative. During their encounters, Jamila tells Amin about her grandmother. When he records the story in his diary, he puts it in the following way:

She was the story in their family, the one who had caused all the trouble. For a long time the stories were mixed up, one layer on top of another, some layers missing, so later, when [Jamila] wanted to know the story in full, she could not get to where it all started and where it finished. (Desertion 237)

This passage calls attention to an ambiguity in the narrator’s presentation. His claim that “stories capture and entangle us for all time” seems a less than self-evident way of describing the different love affairs. They are hardly narrative or discursive at their inception. Pearce and Rehana’s love story begins with a physical encounter that is strikingly silent, and Amin and Jamila exchange shy glances before they begin inquiring about the other, with Farida as the informant. Farida, on her part, meets her future husband in Mombasa and their encounter is not preceded by any stories, nor do they speak very much when they meet. We may ask then in what sense Rehana is the “story” of her family. “Story,” it would seem, is a misnomer, a slightly misplaced metaphor. It is not narratives per se that capture and entangle individuals but physical meetings and silent chance encounters. Similarly, Rehana does not live as a “story,” but becomes one in retrospect, as do all stories. “Stories,” consequently, do not so much construct as represent social reality.

There are occasions when stories act on their own, however. Rashid’s gradual estrangement from his environment and preparation to leave are effects of his colonial education, the English literature he has studied, and the stories that are fed to him by his teachers: “the things he had come to know and the books he had read that gave him an idea of the world that was ampler than anything he saw in the lives they lived” (Desertion 155). It is this influence that makes him depart for England. Which books Rashid has read is not stated, but the comparison between his textual nourishment and the retrospective narration of the factual turn-of-the-century love affair – which becomes a narrative for the younger couple to draw strength from – would suggest that
their commonality has little to do with their referential or epistemological status. “Stories,” that is, may vary in kind; what gives them the capacity to entangle is not their truth-value but their way of showing an “ampler” world. Such a contention arguably places the category of “stories” closer to fiction than fact; and yet, their potential to create desires that incite individuals into action reveal the social character of stories. Whether they are fictional or not, their repercussions are played out in social reality. We recognise this emphasis on the productive function of narratives from Gurnah’s earlier novels. On the one hand, stories are representations of previous sequences of events; on the other, they make up the reality in which these events occur. This points again to Appadurai’s elaboration of the social dimension of imagination, and his suggestive comment that its employment of cultural expressions “has a projective sense about it,” is directed towards the future (7). In a more restricted sense, the foregrounding of the fictional component of stories points to the novel’s self-reflexivity. In contrast to the autobiographical and family narratives, the codes and names that we have met as representation of imagination so far, Desertion emphasises its own textual participation in the imaginative work. It does so, however, in a curiously self-defeating way, by calling attention to its own fictional status in a comparison with historiography. To more fully answer the question about the entanglement of stories, we need to turn to these textual intricacies.

Imagination and miracle

The “entanglement” that stories effectuates and their usefulness as resources for a social imagination is evident in the novel’s juxtaposition of Rehana and Pearce’s story to its historical and intertextual framing. Improbable stories of their kind exist on the threshold between scholarship and fiction, or history and fantasy. The events around Rashid’s performance at the conference illustrate this. A scholar in the field of postcolonial studies, he gives a paper on “race and sexuality in settler writing in Kenya” (Desertion 257-58). The content of the paper, he claims, is a series of “low-key observations on the fiction as well as on some memoirs, remarking on the absence of sexual encounters in this writing or their sublimation into gestures of pained patronage or rumours of tragic excess” (Desertion 258). During the question and answer period after his reading, he relates the story of Pearce and Rehana as an example of the stories that are missing in most written accounts. While his academic presentation addresses the matter of sexual relationships, it is significant that he remarks on their
absence in written representation. His concern is with a gap in textual genres, but his own narrative does not fill that gap. This suggests that the story about Rehana and Pearce is indeed almost impossible to believe, as he stated upon first hearing it. It is too rare an instance to be the basis of historical research. His own story brings it into the academic forum, and places it at the margin, as it were. It is anecdotal evidence, and speaks to the imagination rather than to accumulated experience.

Gurnah, like Rashid, is a scholar of postcolonial studies. Rashid’s academic paper in fact closely resembles a book chapter Gurnah wrote entitled “Settler Writing in Kenya: ‘Nomenclature Is an Uncertain Science in These Wild Parts.”’ The chapter, as the title indicates, is about settlers’ desire and frustration in naming the landscape, and it covers the same disciplinary and geographical area as his novel, if not exactly the same period. Needless to say, in Gurnah’s scholarly text too, love of the inconceivable kind depicted in his novel is absent. Gurnah’s literary academic not only doubles himself, however. Desertion also, as I noted above, revisits the terrain of Paradise. The 1994 novel was hailed for its unsentimental dissection of power and exploitation (Bardolph, Schwerdt, Callahan). That novel’s focus on racial and social power dynamics in relation to sexual exploitation seems to foreclose the possibility of a story such as Pearce and Rehana’s. Rashid and Gurnah’s respective treatments of their love story illustrate the conjunction and difference between a scholarly and a literary imagination. As an academic, Rashid can note the absence in settler writing of the kind of story he has learnt from his brother. These exceptional stories are not easily incorporated into scholarly discourse because they are unrepresentative, if not completely implausible, and must be relegated to the margin. Gurnah, through his fictional revision of his own academic contribution, as well as his shifting emphasis from Paradise, suggests that the academic discourse about these colonial situations – as well as some of the fiction – have perpetuated the silences around these improbable facts of empire. These silences he corrects through his fiction, but in doing so, his voicing of alternatives moves outside what is supported by historical records towards the realm of fantasy, or even where “imagination fails” (Desertion 110).

Desertion’s depiction of the passionate and transgressive love story is not only an alternative version of the past. It also presents an alternative source of narrative “entanglement.” This is the way the older relation functions in the novel; Rehana and Pearce’s story becomes both an example and a precedent for the younger couple Amin and Jamila. It entangles them in its implications and similarities and it offers consolation as well as gives a sense of fatefulness to
events. This fatefulness seems confirmed for the reader. While the latter couple is separated for different reasons than the former, the transgressions seem to yield similar results. Jamila, like her grandmother, is ostracised for her acts, and Amin endlessly suffers the loss of his love.

But what is asserted on the story level as a suppression of historical fact – “I know it did happen” – is on the textual level self-reflexively revealed to be a fantasy. Rashid’s narrative is countered by Gurnah’s representation because the novel calls attention to its own manipulation of historical fact, and this self-reflexive manipulation undercuts the coherence of its own fictionalised alternative past. The most conspicuous example is the inclusion of the historical figure Richard Burton. An explorer and military man, Burton was employed by the Royal Geographical Society to search for the source of the Nile. The expedition set out from Zanzibar in 1856, and his reflections upon the island and its people were published as *Zanzibar: City, Island, Coast*. The book is a distinctly racist account of various aspects of the island’s culture. In *Desertion*, Burton’s racism comes to the fore in his views on cultural difference and the necessity of keeping cultures apart. It is simultaneously undermined, however, by rumours of him being a “beachcomber,” engaging in sexual affairs with local women (*Desertion* 93). This novelistic depiction of Burton’s contradictory approach to other cultures is in accord with historical research: one of his most oft-cited traits is his sexual profligacy, which has often been described as a sign of a cultural relativism standing in opposition to a sexually oppressive Victorian culture (Rice 3-4, 236, 251, 295). (This somewhat premature celebration of sex as abridging cultural divides has also been attributed to Dabydeen, as we will see in chapter three.) Dane Kennedy takes a more plausible approach to Burton’s racism and sexuality by relating his private experiences in Africa to a British mid-nineteenth century environment of changing attitudes on race and science (94-100, 131-40). The novel’s depiction of Burton’s ownership of an estate on the East African coast in 1899, at any rate, departs from historical fact since he died in 1890. Rashid’s lamenting words about “our age,” that we “think we know that the miracle is a lie” (*Desertion* 110), are consequently true enough even for Gurnah’s literary fantasy. While it unfolds its miraculous story, Gurnah’s novel, too, signals that it is a lie.

The double relations of past and present that the novel creates – an implausible past presented as fact within its own frames, and metafictionally through intertextual links – again points to the social function of imagination. It will be useful, therefore, once more to draw on Appadurai’s theory to assess some aspects of the potential this literary fiction holds in store. For it is by
virtue of being simultaneously performance and reflection upon its own use of fictions of the past that *Desertion* constitutes an important part of Gurnah's literary project.

Appadurai's conceptualisation stresses the future-oriented dimension in the imaginative employment of cultural expression. Regardless of the tense of their representations or of their temporal setting, representations enter repositories of imagination and may be drawn upon in social action and performance. The past – or more precisely representations of the past – is "now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios" (Appadurai 30). This concern with the use of representations of the past in the creation of social modes of being is of special relevance here. Through its almost impossible love story, *Desertion* presents an attempt to imagine a past that is directed towards the future. Aware of the power of stories to provide the fundamental elements of social codes and to form the building blocks of the extensive social patterns that shape the subject, *Desertion* is a story that "entangles" subjectivity in new ways. This re-imagination is not governed by a naïve belief in the power of narrative. On the contrary, the alternative past the novel offers is overtly undermined and carefully questioned. While it is represented as carrying a potential within the story, the textual level reveals it to be a fantasy. As I noted, Rashid disbelieves Rehana and Pearce's story because it goes against common sense as well as received historical knowledge; its improbability is also, for him, tied to a profoundly disenchanted view of the world: “We think we know that the miracle is a lie and we always look for the hidden or suppressed explanation. We would rather have greed and lust as motive than love” (*Desertion* 110-11). Rashid accepts the romantic love story (the sheer banality of which makes him squirm as he retells it) against his enlightened convictions. In its depiction of love across cultural barriers, *Desertion* apparently strives to represent a "miracle" that may serve as a resource for different modes of subject formation. As in all of Gurnah's works, however, such a projective effort is deeply ambivalent. *Desertion* emerges as much as an investigation of the role of imagination in social organisation and subject formations as an affirmation of its power. Not unlike the vacillating narrator in *Admiring Silence*, or the possibility of a new mode of family in *By the Sea*, *Desertion* subscribes to the view that stories are paramount in the deterritorialized world it represents, and yet the novel hesitates to offer a "miracle" story.
The *OED* lists several related but different meanings for the verb “entangle”: to impede, ensnare and interlace, but also to “involve (a person) in compromising relations with another” (V: 286). One meaning of the noun “entanglement” is “a compromising relationship, an unsuitable liaison” (V: 287). The two descriptions point to the double and often contradictory functions of stories and codes that I have discussed in the foregoing analyses. Both impediments and compromising relations fold the subject into narrative or discursive webs, and the difference lies not in the process itself but in its direction. Gurnah’s novels incessantly thematise and enact this double nature of social narratives, as well as their dynamic interactions. Codes of kinship and property join and clash with categorisations like nationality or race (“Indianness,” “Arabness”) to give the subject a social position. The vast mobile pattern that results is the social terrain that the subject inhabits and navigates. Its complexity is firmly tied to a “deterritorialized” society that repeatedly estranges its own citizens. The consequence, as we have seen in *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*, is an overwhelming sense of disorientation and loss that is tempered through narrative attempts to create a minimum of coherence in life. This is achieved through piecemeal assemblage of scattered pieces of memory and imagination that occasionally break under the weight of eruptive emotions or collapse in the face of contrary stories. The gaps and silences that punctuate the life stories in Gurnah’s novels resemble the fragmentary and intermingling memories to be discussed in chapter three. But whereas for Dabydeen they are the result of inscription in different cultures, in Gurnah’s novels such narrative holes are more often forms of suppression, even if stories, as we have seen, may stretch infinitely back in time and so resist full representation. The stories the narrator of *Admiring Silence* delivers are “fumes” emitted from the “cockroachy” self-disgust he has made out of his fundamental uncertainty, and the lacunae or postponements in *By the Sea* and *Desertion* are attempts to avoid sensitive memories that may have disruptive effects. The narrative uncertainties and lacunae are caused by these affective or emotional centres.

The psychological dimension of narrative is closely intertwined with its social function. Narratives are in Gurnah’s fiction incessantly depicted as a way to create social reality, and the construction of a self by narrative means always occurs in relation to others. Networks of family and community depend on social boundaries, values, and norms that are established and maintained through forms of labelling and story telling. Both *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea* thematise the subject’s compliance with, and struggle against, the flexibility and

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hold of such familial webs in diasporic circumstances, while *Desertion* portrays the strain placed on individuals who stray too far from the normative matrices. The power of stories to reproduce, disrupt, or creatively reform social relations is in Gurnah’s novels closely connected to the family, and the familial sphere is the arena of social reproduction and transformation. This concern presents one of the anti-nationalist aspects of Gurnah’s writing. From Omar Hassan’s migration in *Memory of Departure*, Sharon’s escape from home in *Dottie* and Yusuf’s exploitation and escape in *Paradise*, to the havoc and shame caused by the narrator in *Admiring Silence*, the protagonists’ slow and painful reconciliation in *By the Sea*, and the repercussions of Rehana and Pearce’s transgressions in *Desertion*, events and their results are always propelled by what Latif in *By the Sea* calls “family squabbles.”

The families of concern here are intricate structures of genealogy and social codes regarding kinship, names, property distribution, and narrative. Indeed, as the various but always ambiguous and powerful role of the “uncle” shows, the family is a structure capable of incorporating business partners as well as combining social responsibility with exploitation or intimidating exercises of power. In spite of this patent complexity, the importance and influence of families have been seen as a distinctive trait of non-modern, or non-Western “traditional” societies. By connecting the on-going social improvisation that always is at the centre of his literary depiction with the historical defining characteristic of Swahili societies as open-ended, I want to suggest that Gurnah’s fiction is preoccupied with situating emblematically modern issues within a regional and multilayered historical context outside the European period that is commonly seen as the pre-eminent modern environment. I am also suggesting that Gurnah’s thematic is a double-sided attempt to both see the family as a distinctly modern category, and to envision new kinds of family that go beyond narrow blood relation, kinship, or, in its broadest version, ethnic nationality or race. To this end, I return to two points mentioned in the preceding pages: the social nature of the family, and love as an almost inconceivable factor in relation building in (historical) East Africa.

One recurrent assumption among anthropologists concerned with ethnic struggles and violence has been that larger collectives and their accompanying identities are modelled on familial ties. They “draw their affective force from the sentiments that bind small groups,” in Appadurai’s words (140). Ethnic struggle, according to this view, is a lapse into a primordial state where feelings on family and kin are channelled into larger abstract group-identifications like nation or race. At the centre of this thesis is an
unacknowledged assumption that ethnic struggles are regressions into more primitive states of social interaction. This assumption is the inverse of the belief that feelings on family are natural and primordial. One of the tasks of modern society, according to this view, is to relegate the family and the affects that animate it to the civil sphere.

It is this assumption that Appadurai is keen to counter by insisting that feelings around families are results of socialisation and that they rely on technologies of mediation (139-49). There is nothing primordial, he argues, about the affects that stir familial networks. Moreover, the connections between smaller and larger collectives are partly strategic responses to external expectations and pressures. Issues of family, kinship and ethnic identity are consequently matters of conscious choice rather than unreflective reactions. Governments, media networks, or social collectives deliberately exploit cultural differences in order to assert themselves, or oppose assumed enemies (Appadurai 146-47). In the introduction to this chapter, I briefly sketched the complicated results of the merging of smaller religious and regional identities with racial grids under the British colonial regime in Zanzibar. In all of Gurnah’s novels we have also seen how various levels of identification lock into or unsettle one another.

If Appadurai uncovers the social origins of “primordial” sentiments and the modern technologies that support them, Elizabeth Povinelli has addressed another aspect of the interaction between larger social collectives and smaller units. In anthropological research, she argues, non-Western societies have often been defined through kinship structures and heterosexual reproduction, in contrast to modern European societies that have long derived their familial structures from relationships based on love. Gradually freeing itself from the “grip of familial kinship, descent and rank,” the European modern individual is, according to this approach, incorporated into the large and abstract category of humanity, from which she is able to establish various relations based on relative autonomy and love (Povinelli 217; Giddens 88-98). Love in this way constitutes a crucial aspect of the modernity of the Western world, not only by being the basis for new forms of intimate relationships, but also by being the bond that holds strangers together within communities such as the nation (Povinelli 230). The gradual decoding of the individual does not mean that genealogy ceases to be important. According to Povinelli, intimacy and descent are two “grids” that constantly work in tandem, but with different emphases and function (Povinelli 217, 227-28). Nonetheless, the two grids are still employed to draw boundaries in binary fashion between, on the one hand, Western and modern individuals.

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and groups capable of forming organisations based on love, and, on the other, ‘primitive’ peoples still caught in the matrix of marriage and familial constellations based on genealogy (Povinelli 234).

With some adjustment, Appadurai’s and Povinelli’s analyses are pertinent to a discussion of Gurnah’s literary project. In *By the Sea*, Latif suggests a new form of family in which two distantly related and previously antagonistic men are to enter into a familial relation. The reasons are practical and symbolic – they are both strangers abroad, and are already tied to each other through a real and false genealogy – but it also takes a kind of intimacy to break with the previous genealogy and construct an alternative family. In *Desertion*, the love story of Rehana and Pearce serves as an explanation and precedent for the almost equally difficult relation fifty years later between Amin and Jamila. Romantic love is here a transgressive force that needs and employs narrative in order to provide a sense of continuity and history. But through the projection of a history of such liaisons, Gurnah’s novel attributes to his characters an emblematically modern kind of humanity that makes them transgress social and cultural norms for the sake of love. The intimacy that Povinelli suggests has underpinned notions of the nation is here imagined as supporting trans-national and trans-local communities of a much smaller kind.

In Gurnah’s novels, then, familial conflicts are anything but primordial. They are highly modern effects displaying the interaction and interference between social layers that collide and converge upon the family and the individual. Imagination is a vital component of the construction and support of family structures as it ties into the representations circulated by various mediating instances. But imagination may also be used to conceive of new forms of family. It is this ambiguous and social dimension of imagination that Gurnah’s novels actualise. By having his novels represent new families, he employs the potential of literature as a resource of social imagination. The realisation of this potential, however, is very uncertain, as the self-reflexivity of Gurnah’s *Desertion* makes clear. Balanced on the edge of reality, literature risks being locked into the realm of the miraculous.
CHAPTER TWO

Yvonne Vera: movement

Yvonne Vera’s fiction constantly evokes a rich and conflicted Zimbabwean history. Her novels are all ‘historical,’ set at various significant moments in the past. Her first novel *Nehanda* (1993), for instance, relates the story of the Shona spirit medium and rebel leader crucial to the 1890s rising against the British that came to be called the Chimurenga. This historical moment is crucial to the novels I will analyse in this chapter, even if their stories unfold in a more recent past. *Without a Name* is set in and around the city of Harare (then officially Salisbury) in 1977, at the height of the war of liberation; the narrative of *Butterfly Burning* takes place in a township on the outskirts of Bulawayo in the middle of the 1940s; and *The Stone Virgins* revisits the Gukurahundi, the government-led 1980s massacre of so-called dissenters in Matabeleland in southern Zimbabwe. In the Zimbabwean context such acts of reimagining take on a particular significance. Representations of the past have a very strong presence in various discourses in Zimbabwean social and cultural life, and history is inextricably tied to national cultural identities. With the constructions come a number of exclusions and reductions, and Vera’s fiction is concerned with tracing the borders, gaps, and silences that such identity building entails. This has led critics to describe her novels as acts of taboo breaking (as indicated by the title of a study of Vera’s writing, *Sign and Taboo*) and a voicing of concerns that have been excluded from historiographical accounts (e.g. Trevarthen 64; Attree, “Falling Apart” 31). In the case of Zimbabwe, historical accounts have not merely been a matter of collective narratives. They have been harnessed by political administrations, tied to punitive and administrative regimes, and quite directly implicated in acts of murder, rape, and psychic breakdown. These complex interrelations between historical narratives and discursive and physical forms of power are prominent themes in Vera’s fiction.

This chapter has a twofold aim. The first is to map the historical dimensions of subjectivity that are central to Vera’s literary project. As we shall see, her fiction represents the past as traces that are inflicted on the subject in the most violent ways. Most conspicuously, her fiction focuses on the gendered dimension of this process, particularly on the ways that women are ‘broken into being,’ as it were, by the social forces imposed upon them. This simultaneous
process of social construction and destruction of the subject is intimately connected to discursive regimes, but also takes overwhelmingly physical forms. Mazvita’s pregnancy in *Without a Name* and Nonceba’s scared face in *The Stone Virgins* are grim indexes of pasts that have inscribed themselves directly upon their bodies, which materially ‘remember’ the events. History, as the examples show, is in Vera’s novels a matter of both discursive and non-discursive recordings of the past.

Different logics or dynamics govern the layers of recorded pasts, the most significant being the difference between a history underpinned by notions of progress of the kind Anderson connects to the national subject (24-26), and the repetitious and circular dynamics of memory. In accordance with Anderson's description, the first kind has in Zimbabwe become increasingly powerful with the emergence of a “patriotic history” whose features will be outlined below. The consistent exploration of various kinds of memory in Vera’s fiction presents an alternative to this version of history. Mnemonic records of the past operate according to affective impact, and that past may be re-actualised involuntarily. This is particularly the case with traumatic memories which make the past return with a power strong enough to completely overtake the present. History and memory, then, belong to different orders of separating past and present and construing their relation. As we will see throughout the chapter, these orders often enter into conflict with each other, and these conflicts are a central concern to Vera’s fiction.

Vera’s writing not only displays the necessity of acknowledging alternative, complementary or rival notions of the past, but it also explores notions of historical change that are intimately connected to subjectivity. Her novels show that in the Zimbabwean context prevailing notions of history prevent the emergence of new modes of being, but they also suggest how such modes may nevertheless be imagined. The second aim of this chapter is consequently to explore Vera’s visions of alternative subjectivities. I have chosen “movement” as a descriptive term for her strategy. Vera’s fiction recurrently portrays the possibilities and failures of movement in her texts, be it geographical, musical or linguistic. In a concluding discussion, I will show that Vera’s difficult poetic style performs a kind of movement analogous to the various movements represented in her novels. It does so through disjointed syntax, elusive and rich lyricism and shifting narrative points of view. The resulting style has much in common with musical improvisation, and it is this form of traversal across acoustic codes that best captures what I will call Vera’s poetics of movement.
HISTORY AND ITS USES

Terence Ranger, among others, has shown that accounts of the past have long carried heavy political investments in Zimbabwe. In recent years, with the creation of “patriotic history” at state level, historiography has become subject to legislation (“Rule”). Charting the development of the role of history in public and cultural discourse, Ranger discerns three main trends. The “nationalist history” of the 1960s and 1970s developed narratives of the past that challenged contemporary colonial accounts and could be used in the struggle for liberation. Ranger’s own path-breaking *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7* and Lawrence Vambe’s *An Ill-Fated People* exemplify this tendency through their textual connection between past and present. Both studies show how the revival of ancient spiritual, martial, and social formations helped establish a sense of cultural identity that could be used in the nationalist struggle for independence. The implicit assumption for these historiographies was that the present demanded a similar retrospective strategy. In the ensuing phase, from the late 1970s through the 1980s, historiography was predominantly a “history of nationalism” that sought to trace the origins and trajectories of various conceptions of the nation. “Patriotic history,” which has developed in the present decade, displays the third phase in the changing usage of historiography in the country, but it also entails a qualitative difference. While research in the previous periods was carried out by historians, and circulated through university presses and conferences, history has now become a matter of government concern and control. “Patriotic history” has been developed at government level (and as Ranger notes, many of the country’s leading politicians are historians) and has become part of an officially sanctioned public discourse. Its linear narrative excludes contradictions, internal conflicts, and ruptures to depict the history of Zimbabwe as filled with hardships, justified struggle against the colonial settler, and inevitable if belated victory over the oppressive power. Tellingly, it employs the term “Third Chimurenga” to suggest continuity with past struggles (Ranger, “Rule” 221). The term indicates the reduction of a complex history of settlement and colonialism – initially the property of Cecil Rhodes’ British South Africa Company, Rhodesia was brought under British government control in 1923 and declared independent by Ian Smith in 1965, before it became independent as Zimbabwe in 1980 – to an antagonism between a colonising “Britain” and Zimbabwe. This narrative of an ancient and unfolding conflict between two parties has allowed the current President, Robert Mugabe, to accuse the British Prime Minister of seeking continuous domination over Zimbabwe (Bull-Christiansen, *Tales 70*). Despite its exclusions
and its rigidity, however, this version of history is flexible enough to accommodate small variations. One such significant transformation is the inclusion of ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union) and ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army) – the political party and guerrilla organisation respectively that competed with the ruling ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) for power – into the narrative of the past (Ranger, “Rule” 224).

“Patriotic history” is not only a narrative of the past. Supported and dependent upon a number of institutions, organisations, material bodies, and even physical means by which power is executed, it is the prescribed version of history for schools, and the government has created youth camps in which it is taught to young children (Ranger, “Rule” 221). “Patriotic history” thus constitutes an effort from the Government to establish a single, exclusive history – to establish the narrative of the past. The debates around monuments and statutes – such as Heroes Acre in Harare – further illustrate the connection between discursive and material manifestations of this view of history. Devoted to honouring the soldiers who died in the struggle for liberation, the site has become an arena for a distinctly gendered and elitist politics, as well as a testimony to political corruption (Werbner, “Smoke” 78). Many women participated and died in the struggle, yet only one woman, Sally Mugabe, the President’s late wife, lies buried there. Her presence testifies to the political privileges associated with places of memorialisation and mourning. Richard Werbner highlights two fundamental tensions underlying the site, in its actual architecture and in the rituals that surround it. The difference between the empty Tomb, intended to recall the many nameless soldiers, and the individual graves serves to memorialise the distinction of the select few, a national elite. It is the unmistakeable representation of a nation of – in Zimbabwean usage – the chiefs over the povo or masses, a nation of graded levels, subordinating the local to the national, the hinterland to the capital. (Werbner, “Smoke” 87)

The second tension is between kin and state. Here, official memorialisation virtually seizes the memory of the dead relative – as well as the material remains of the deceased – and obstructs more local or familial commemoration (Werbner, “Smoke” 87). Heroes Acre is not open to the public, which has occasionally led to widows being prevented from visiting the graves of their husbands. The restrictions that limit access to the place exemplify the way in
which regulations of people’s movements form part of an official policy regarding commemoration and representation of the past. The same policy sustains the official expectations that citizens take to the street during the Heroes Day celebrations to cheer the President and his speech (Werbner, “Smoke” 87).

This far-reaching control over the citizen’s body is a fundamental characteristic of governance in what Achille Mbembe has called the African “postcolony.” Inherited from colonial regimes, this kind of rule, which he refers to as commandement, respects no division between public and private sphere, nor does it recognise the body as belonging to the subject. On the contrary, it is formed by the twin efforts to rule and “civilise,” and actively and directly targets the body in its exercise of power. Through such diverse means as punishment, incarceration, and harassment on the one hand, and coercion or encouragement to celebrate, dance, and cheer on the other, commandement constitutes the postcolonial subject, Mbembe argues, by presiding over citizens’ bodies and their movements (Postcolony 103).

Amanda Hammer and Brian Raftopoulos note a number of recent developments in Zimbabwe that corroborate Mbembe’s analysis, among them an effective merging of party and state; politicisation and cooptation of the army, police and intelligence agencies, and to a lesser extent of traditional leaders, for partisan ends; deprofessionalisation of the public service in general; undermining of the independence of the judiciary; normalisation of violence and social production of terror against those considered outside of or dangerous to the new nation, while reinforcing a culture of impunity. (32)

Hammar and Raftopoulos describe the situation after 2000, but there are precedents. The Gukurahundi massacre presents an earlier example of systematic use of violence and infliction of pain in the process of governing. Named after “the spring rain,” the massacre of 1983-84 was an operation to root out dissent in Matabeleland, where support for rival political and guerrilla groups had been strong. Its main agents were the feared 5th Brigade which over the course of several months threatened, harassed, tortured and killed a large number of civilians and villagers accused of abetting the enemy, but violence from the dissenters, however, also occurred. This series of events has still not been appropriately dealt with in public discourse (Ranger, Voices 246-253, “Rule” 241; Bull-Christiansen, Tales 56-58).
Two related aspects of the history outlined above are crucial to Vera’s fiction. First, “patriotic history” implements a particular version of history that implicitly and explicitly silences contending versions. This powerful suppression is a discursive violence that leaves gaps in history which Vera’s fiction addresses. This makes her fiction taboo-breaking. Secondly, as Ranger, Wilson-Tagoe, and Bull-Christiansen have argued in different ways, Vera’s novels not only fill in the gaps in history, but also question the notion of history itself and submit it to reconceptualisation. To Wilson-Tagoe, Vera’s fiction shows the overlap of past and present and thereby challenges the assumptions that underlie “historicism”: its objectivism, separation of fact and fiction, and its homogenous chronology (“Narrative” 156; cf. Ranger, “Ceiling” and Bull-Christiansen, “Rewriting,” Tales). These observations are important because they highlight the recognition, essential in Vera’s writing, that historiographical accounts of any kind run the risk of solidifying into a monophonic and exclusivist discourse. Consequently, what is required is a mode of historical description that remains open, and able to reflect upon its own arbitrariness. Wilson-Tagoe resists defining more closely the alternative to “European historicism” that she observes in Vera’s fiction (“Narrative” 156), no doubt because it would repeat the historiographic impulse Vera’s novels reveal as inadequate. My argument is that movement is Vera’s means to unsettle exclusivist accounts of the past in fictional form and the method by which she performs the same unsettling in the language her fiction is steeped in. This movement aims to intervene in linguistic and other codes, and has much in common with musical improvisation, which, in turn, I will use as an analogy to Vera’s literary poetics. This emphasis on improvisation aligns Vera’s fiction with Gurnah’s, but with a very different slant. Where Gurnah’s narratives foreground family history and social codes as the larger elements of improvisation, Vera’s novels present both landscapes and bodies as entities in motion, while representing landscape as a territory to traverse. What the two novelists have in common is the assumption that history cannot be escaped and therefore has to be negotiated.

WITHOUT A NAME: LAYERS OF PASTNESS

History and memory

Different from Gurnah’s meandering stories, the difficulty of Vera’s novels, as I indicated above, lies in their elusiveness, a quality that has moved critics to
differ over the novels’ story-lines. Summary is, in Vera’s case, interpretation, and for this reason some recapitulation of events is motivated. Without a Name is set in 1977, at the height of the civil war. It tells the story of Mazvita, a young woman from Mhondoro (a region in Eastern Zimbabwe whose name in Shona literally means “ancestral lands”), who is raped by a guerrilla. After the violation she finds herself in a state of incapacitating suffering and leaves her village in an attempt to begin a new life. She takes up a job on a tobacco farm where she meets Nyenyedzi, with whom her life achieves some stability. Mazvita decides nevertheless to continue to Harare convinced that only the city will allow her to forget, a belief that originates in her half-conscious association between the rural landscape and the rape: “She connected him only to the land…. She saw him grow from the land, from the mist, from the river. The land had allowed the man to grow from itself into her body” (Without 37). Nyenyedzi, though deeply in love with Mazvita, is reluctant to leave his job and the land that he works – even if his labour is for the benefit of the white settler. He argues instead that they should marry and return to Mubaira, her village. The city, he maintains, is a dangerous place, full of robbers and violence, where “everyone carries a knife…. What kind of a place is that?” (Without 30, 31). In his view, it is better to stay and await the inevitable defeat of the white intruders. This will happen because the land ultimately belongs to the people who have lived on it forever. The spiritual connection with the land and the ancestors is the evidence. Or, as Nyenyedzi puts it, the land puts a historical claim on the people: “We have to wait here with the land, if we are to be loyal to it, and to those who have given it to us. The land does not belong to us. We keep the land for the departed” (Without 38). Mazvita does not agree with his vision. For her, the land has “no fixed loyalties” (Without 40), and they part over this issue. She travels to the city alone.

Mazvita is at first exhilarated by the anonymous freedom offered in the city. With no relatives or friends in Harare, and with no memories of the place, she is able to disappear into the city’s crowds of people. The high-rise buildings, the wealth of impressions, and the constant movement furthermore present a space of existence optimal for forgetting: “Harare was like that. To be here was not to be here at all, that’s what made being here. It was special. The absence filled you up” (Without 53). When she meets and moves in with a new man, Joel, it is on the silent condition that they do not share each other’s pasts, secrets, and intimacies: “Details meant communicating and intimacy. The main point of freedom was maintaining boundaries, though such boundaries were questionable” (Without 59). The freedom of the non-committed relationship
disappears when Mazvita discovers that she is pregnant. The child is born seven months after her arrival in Harare, and by the time it arrives it has dawned on Mazvita that it is the result of the rape. Joel orders her to leave, and becomes increasingly aggressive when she lingers. Mazvita decides to return home. In a state of distress and only half-conscious of her actions, she strangles her child with one of Nyenyedzi’s ties, and, persuading herself that it might still be alive, straps it on her back and walks to the bus terminal.

The walk is a journey through impressions and perceptions fragmented by her traumatised mind. On the verge of collapse, she experiences light, colour, and sound as entities or even living organisms that invade her psyche: “Thick layers of brown earth covered the windows and the rest of the body, but the bus still shone red. It was that red. It was so stunningly red it was living” (Without 5). She eventually reaches her village, seems to be met by her mother, and wanders off to the place outside the village where the rape occurred. Standing at the very spot and looking at the burnt grass, she relives the incidents of that day: the mist, the rape, and later the flames from the houses that were burnt down. She unwraps her child, possibly to bury it as she has intended, and decides that she will make a new “beginning”; by “carry[ing] the voices that she remembers from this place … Mazvita walks in gentle footsteps that lead her to the place of her beginning” (Without 116).

Without a Name is a richly allusive and poetical text, and its narrative organisation is chronologically disjointed. The novel begins with Mazvita’s walk to the terminus, and in the story that unfolds, the presentation rapidly shifts between present and past moments. The free indirect discourse in which it is written further prevents a clear distinction between character and narrator even if, as Ranka Primorac states, the overall impression is of a narrator who articulates experiences the traumatised character is unable to (“Crossing” 89). This composition immediately highlights the novel’s thematic relation between trauma, history, and memory: her rape traumatises Mazvita and the oscillation between past and present imitates the movements of a psyche unable to separate the temporal orders. We will return to the characteristic difficulty of the text in a discussion of Vera’s poetics of movement in the concluding section. For the moment, I want to concentrate on the chronological shifts and temporal layers, and relate them to the central theme of trauma and memory.

The latter part of Mazvita’s story is one of gradual psychic decline. She relives her rape when she makes love to Joel, and with the birth of the child she breaks down and only half remembers her murder: “Bewildered and standing outside her own self she remembered some of her action toward this child”
Without 109). On the subsequent journey home she hallucinates in schizophrenic fashion:

The woman told her to release the child from her back and allow the child to play. Why did she not allow the child to play? She was a cruel woman to her child, keeping her on her back all the way on the bus. A child must not be kept on the back for such a long time, and in this heat. Did she not know that this heat could kill her child? She must remove that napkin from the baby’s head at least. Mazvita spoke, the woman spoke. Their voices were one. The woman spoke with Mazvita’s voice. (Without 103)

Mazvita’s breakdown is an effect of the resurfacing traumatic event, whose defining characteristic is precisely that it refuses to stay in the past and turn to memory (Vickroy 12). This return of the repressed completely shatters the structures that order the experience of time and physical reality. In this state Mazvita returns to her home only half aware of where she is heading (Without 50). Vera’s novel thus presents a more radical or extreme version of the problematic of memory and recall that we encountered in Gurnah’s fiction, where gaps in narrative are often meticulously calculated to cover deep emotional pains, and disorientation is connected to receding chains of causally related events. However, Without a Name not only takes issue with the excluding nature of a linear notion of history through its tabooed subject matter; it does so by foregrounding trauma and memory as alternative ways of conceptualising the past that must be acknowledged. In place of history as progression, Without a Name presents a series of loops around an affective centre whose hold on the self must be managed.

The emphasis on traumatic experience and memory affects the conception of the future to become a matter of healing rather than historical progression. Meg Samuelson and Pauline Dodgson have in slightly different ways argued that the novel’s ending represents that necessary healing which creates the possibility of a future. For both critics, Mazvita’s return depicts a curative reinscription into family, history and identity. Mazvita, Samuelson writes, is “remembered and reclaimed through her matrilineal line” (95), and Dodgson states that the ending of Without a Name, which “returns Mazvita to her origin and her past (whether in reality or fantasy is unclear), may seem nostalgic, even regressive, but it offers the possibility of return, which may or may not be realized, to a time before the war and death” (101). Despite Dodgson’s caution, and Samuelson’s insistence that in reclamation the past is
both “recalled and re-configured” (94), it is difficult, especially given the name of her region, to see the return as something other than a re-inscription into the history she had earlier attempted to escape. This, Robert Muponde has argued, is in fact the tragedy of the story:

Mazvita’s cyclic journey reflects the cyclic experience of women in the closed circle that Zimbabwean history has become. She also experiences the mythic entrapment in the ‘mother’ land itself, an ancestral force which leads her back to Mubaira. The journey itself is a mythic cycle; nothing more than a walk in the night in the palm of a great ancestor (the Land). (“Sight” 123)

Muponde is right to point out that Mazvita’s return is a tragedy rather than a consolation, and in the analysis of Butterfly Burning we will return to the tragic dimension of such reinscription by way of a discussion of “land,” which functions as the central metaphor for the kind of history that reclaims her. And yet, Muponde’s reading does not account for the temporal subtleties of the novel’s ending. Here, as in the examples mentioned above, it is the disjointed syntax and textual organisation that makes interpretation difficult, in this case by merging points of view and temporal moments. Mazvita’s return is both a mnemonic and an actual event that occurs both “yesterday” and “today,” and it is uncertain in which time Mazvita’s mother comes to meet her. It is clear that her return entails a restoration of name and identity, but it also ties her again to the land she blames for her rape, and has sought to escape: “It is cumbersome to have a name. It is an anchor. It brings figures to her memory. It recalls this place to her, which, earlier, she has chosen to forget” (Without 115). Mazvita concludes that her desire to begin anew “without a name” has “begun poorly, with too many visitations” (Without 115). Rather than healing, Mazvita’s return brings her back to the place of the traumatic events.

This re-inscription may also be read as a psychic event. The village has been burnt, “disappeared,” and she returns to find that “[n]ew grass grows over the burnt grass” (Without 115). Still, remembrance of the attack on the village and the morning of the rape are powerful enough to envelop her sensory experience. The smoke still hangs in the air, and the mist “grows over the hills” to saturate the landscape: “The mist fills her eyes and hides the sky. The mist is the sky” (Without 115). In this reading, her mother is one of the “visitations” that prevents her new beginning (Without 115). No actual reclamation occurs, but the power of memory to impose itself on the present shows a prospect even bleaker than the past. Mazvita is brought back, as it were, to something less
than her beginning because she will inevitably have to move on. This unresolved ambiguity of the ending presents one aspect of Vera’s view on history and subjectivity. Against the excluding linearity of history of a “patriotic” kind, *Without a Name* does not simply offer the alternatives of either a mnemonic past or a past to be commemorated. In ways that resonate with the ideas of Édouard Glissant, Vera’s narrative suggests that by a terrifying erasure of the point of origin, the future is inevitably – if relatively and very disturbingly – open. That this is not a consoling view is indicated by the imagery of travel that recurs throughout the novel. Mazvita’s travels present a series of departures rather than an arrival (*Without* 50-51). The position of being “without a name” is even further loaded with ambiguity as it connects Mazvita with the baby she has refused to name since the act would confirm a bond between them (*Without* 85).

The past that returns with overwhelming force is not only a matter of psychic recording and replay; it is also fundamentally corporeal. The escape to the city works for some time as she holds obligations to no one. It is freedom defined in negative terms, a flight from social and cultural bonds. As her experiences gradually reveal, however, there is no such absolute negative freedom. While Mazvita pretends that she is free to leave, she becomes economically dependent on Joel and settles into the role of housewife. If freedom in the city is defined in terms of anonymity and self-reliance, in short in the absence of commitment, it is also highly qualified. And yet, this does not necessarily mean, as Rino Zhuwarara and Penny Ludicke claim, that freedom is an illusion (307; 71); despite its restricted nature, Mazvita and Joel’s relationship is significantly different from marriage, in which two full families would be involved and intertwined in multiple ways. Mazvita’s sense of freedom collapses with her pregnancy and it is thus her body that starkly reveals the limits in her escape plan. The body proves to be its own memory, a recording of past events she cannot forget by moving. This material memory does not coincide with her conscious memory, as her amnesia around the murder of her child shows. It is memory of a different order.

*Without a Name* in this way represents the protagonist as doubly or triply inscribed in the past. Unconscious recordings of traumatic experience constantly threaten to break through the thin walls of her new self and subject the present to the past. In addition, her body constitutes its own memory with traumatising consequences. The psychic and somatic levels of the body are thus equally if differently imbued with a brutal history. The past in *Without a Name* thus exists as recordings on various levels and the novel illustrates not only the
lacunae in progressionist or mystifying conceptions of history, but also the flaws produced by such conceptions. In their place, the novel advances the vision of a heterogeneous history in dynamic relation with the present.

Arrested movement: city and village

Mazvita’s hope that the city will promise newness and amnesia stands in sharp contrast to Nyenyedzi’s beliefs. Where he seeks social stability, inclusion, and identity in a communion with the land, she contends that the land has no “fixed loyalties,” and her fate tragically bears out the gendered dimension of this difference (Without 40). The novel’s distinction between city and country further displays the gendered conflict over space in the history of Zimbabwean social and cultural life (Chan and Primorac; Bull-Christiansen, Tales 89), but it also invokes a perceived opposition of European and colonial origin between modernity and tradition that despite its obvious reductionist flaws – and despite the occasional attempt to critically investigate the invented and historical character of this pairing – has had a persistent influence on research and cultural criticism in and about Africa generally (Mbembe, Postcolony 1-11; cf. Ranger, “Invention”). Stephen Chan and Ranka Primorac locate this separation within a powerful discourse on history and belonging that fetishizes “land,” and “forgets principles to do with human and political rights, that forgets the principles of modern agriculture, and that retreats from internationalism” by postulating a primordial community between inhabitant and land (Chan and Primorac 74). It is this notion, moreover, that has played such an important role in the struggle for liberation, and more recently in “patriotic history” (Ranger, “Rule” 234).

Scholars including Teresa Barnes and Elizabeth Schmidt have shown this clear-cut distinction to be historically false. Modernity, in the sense of growing urban landscapes, introduction of new technologies for transport and building, break-up of families, and the demise or change of older social customs developed in complex interaction between village life and city life, and between existing codes and new ones: workers commuted from farms to the city; mapoto relations, which ranged from romantic love to outright prostitution, emerged but were resisted and socially denigrated; bride prices were transformed from symbolic bonds to business transactions (Barnes, We Women; Schmidt 78-85). In Without a Name, as we have seen, Mazvita’s pregnancy reveals the limit of the city as a space for forgetfulness. Her body, brought ‘from’ the land, constitutes a memory she does not control. At the same time, however, both the rape by a
“son of the soil” and Nyenyedzi’s, admittedly much less violent sense of community with the land, reveal the gendered and excluding nature of memory and social inclusion. Neither city nor village are spaces that allow a viable new beginning for Mazvita, and this is the tragedy of the narrative. And yet, Mazvita’s journey between the locations is a negotiation of this crippled existence. Her movement creates a de facto connection between city and village that through its “archetypal” character reveals the illusory nature of their opposition (Zhuwarara 301). Both historical research and Without a Name, then, show city and village to exist not as separate and somehow oppositional realms of social space, but as locations whose connection goes unrecognised in various discourses. In the creative acknowledgement of their relation it is possible to detect some important elements of a poetics centred on movement.

Assessing the violence and the conflicts that have arisen from this discourse, Chan and Primorac argue for a reconceptualisation of land based on a right to traversal: “The right to traverse space … is bound with the right to leave the land and not return” (Chan and Primorac 75-76). In Yvonne Vera’s writing, they find such a reconceptualisation of land. Chan and Primorac’s insightful analysis concentrates mainly on the social and political aspects of the land question, and while they note in passing that Nyenyedzi fears the possible estrangement from the land, they do not elaborate on that fear, or comment on the novel’s ending. Without a Name, however, suggests the cost of such reconceptions. What holds the “static discourse” together is feeling, the desire for identity and belonging. In the different assessments of the novel’s ending, we can glimpse the power involved in the reconceptualisation called for. Samuelson and Dodgson both read Mazvita’s return as reclamation and healing, and hence valorise the reconstitution of identity, while neglecting its stunted character. With a similar gloss, the tragedy that Muponde sees in the narrative could be said to concern precisely the strong desire to belong. Mazvita returns by her own will, driven back to the place she has left when nothing else remains. It is precisely the “force” of desire that moves the individual back to her point of origin in order to escape the half-life of the city. With a very different emphasis, we will see in the section on Stone Virgins that what anchors the individual to a certain place is not a law, or external constrictions, or discourses, but precisely – and more problematically – strong affective bonds.

From Chan and Primorac’s point of view – defining the right to traverse as a right not to return – arguably Mazvita’s failure is that she has to go back to her village at all. But Vera’s novel and Barnes’ and Schmidt’s historical work suggest that the dilemma may be put in slightly different terms. Mazvita brings
city and village into relation by her movement but she is forcibly denied the translation of experiences and wishes from one place to the other. Contact, realised through movement, becomes an essential feature of Vera’s 1940s Bulawayo, as we shall see in Butterfly Burning. In The Stone Virgins, contact is articulated as a way of defining entities. If Mazvita’s journey thus depicts an alternative conception of land as Chan and Primorac have suggested, I would add that the novel also emphasises the impact of the discursive mechanisms that work against such revisions. What Mazvita painfully experiences is the tragedy of moving between two alienating modes of existence, but also the force that prevents their constructive combination. What is prevented, in other words, is the joining of places that would allow her to evolve into something else.

**BUTTERFLY BURNING: IMPROVISING THE CITY**

**Urban movement and potential**

Butterfly Burning tells the story of Phephelaphi’s life in Makokoba, a township on the outskirts of Bulawayo, in the mid-1940s. Phephelaphi is the daughter of Gertrude—a prostitute it is suggested—but raised in the household of her aunt, Zandile, after her mother is killed. Or so she believes. It later transpires that Zandile is her biological mother, even if the seamless shifts of narrative point of view as in Without a Name imparts the revelation with a certain ambiguity. Gertrude’s murderer is a white policeman, possibly a lover or customer. Both the murder and Phephelaphi’s witnessing of the crime are presented in a highly poetic scene using a language evocative of dance or love. Gertrude’s murder, and the possibility that Phephelaphi might be sexually exploited by her aunt’s husband, highlights the vulnerable situation of women in Bulawayo in the 1940s. This vulnerability is recorded in the name “Phephelaphi,” which means “shelter” and acts as metaphorical compensation for the material and economic safety she lacks: “My mother named me Phephelaphi because she did not know where to seek refuge when I was born. She slept anywhere. She had no food in her stomach, but her child had to sleep under some shelter” (Butterfly 29). As in the 1970’s Harare of Without a Name, Bulawayo of the 1940s is a place of precarious relationships and frail alliances, as well as sudden outbursts of violence (Butterfly 43). Phephelaphi lives with Fumbatha who is a generation older. He is the son of one of the participants in the first Chimurenga executed by the colonial administration, an event that has
left Fumbatha bereft and psychically wounded. His fractured identity is presented as alienation from the land of his birth, but since he has never known his father he conceives of the birth itself as the cause of his state of being: “Perhaps if he had not been born the land would still belong to him” (Butterfly 29). Thus damaged, Fumbatha tries to mend his broken connection with the land, and his means to do so is Phephelaphi. Evoking the meaning of her name, he regards her as a “shelter” to dwell in. He wants to “hold her”: “Fumbatha had never wanted to possess anything before, except the land. He wanted her like the land beneath his feet from which birth had severed him” (Butterfly 28-29).

Ironically, it is precisely Fumbatha’s desire to hold Phephelaphi that is the cause of their growing apart. She applies to a nursing school in an attempt to find herself. Fumbatha tries to prevent her: “We are happy together. I work. I take care of you. It is not necessary for you to find something else” (Butterfly 70). Phephelaphi eventually discovers that she is pregnant, which would disqualify her for the training programme. She ventures into the bush outside Makokoba and performs a self-induced abortion. Like Mazvita’s burial of her dead child, and her insight into the shifting loyalties of the land, Phephelaphi reflects during the painful operation on the indifference of the land: “Is. Is. Is. The soil just is. It does not move. No kindness to it. It is a violent quiet” (Butterfly 122). Only days after her abortion, Fumbatha coerces her into having sex with him. Phephelaphi becomes pregnant again, and, unable to see any way of going through the process again, or live an acceptable life as mother, kills herself. This is in the narrative presented as a final reclamation of her own body: “A touch, her own genuine touch; to love her own body now, after he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially” (Butterfly 150).

In Without a Name, we saw that Mazvita’s mental and mnemonic return entailed a re-inscription into family and place that was intimately tied to the notion of “land,” which Nyenyedzi expresses as a mutual obligation between individual and the earth (Without 38). The novel explored the exclusion of women that this notion led to, and the gendered conflict that followed. Butterfly Burning further elaborates this gendered conflict through the contrasting views of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha. But where Without a Name portrayed Harare in the years before independence as ultimately incapable of erasing either the mental or the bodily memories of the traumatic events, the city in the current novel offers a compromised but more enabling alternative.
In the urban setting of Makokoba, Fumbatha’s vision of “holding” the land seems hardly more than a relic or an antiquated dream. Workers like him hardly live off the land in any practical sense: economic support comes from salaried employment – something Fumbatha is well aware of as a construction worker. Rather than living rooted in the same spot, the workers commute from the township to their jobs in factories or homes, as far away as the mines of Johannesburg. Materially or socially, then, the township is hardly the ancient land of the ancestors. Fumbatha’s vision of a community with the land is not an expression of nostalgia, however. It is not a memory of former days because he has never lived in close relation to the land. It is rather a ‘loss’ and a yearning that is actively created in the very recent past. Knowing nothing about his father, at the age of fourteen Fumbatha is taken to the place of his father’s execution. Standing by the tree where his father was hanged, he listens to his mother calling his name in order that he may know his “link with the past”:

His father died on the tree. Fumbatha looks everywhere. There is no sign of death. His mother continues to whisper his own name in the quiet wind. Fumbatha is not the name of his father. He wants to know the name of his father. He cannot ask for the name of a dead man. He dares not intrude. Only the dead can receive his name and be free. His father has vanished. A liquid that has sunk into the ground. (Butterfly 14)

The scene is richly complex. His mother does not call his father’s name, which would be a call to remember him (cf. Primorac, “Crossing” 88). Her attention to her son and the present may instead be read as a desire not to dwell in the past. Yet the fact that she brings her son to the very place reveals that such an effort does not amount to an escape from memory and the past, but to their suppression. Fumbatha’s connection to the past is thus paradoxically constituted as a radical loss. And it has its own history: it comes about through the transfer of his mother’s sorrow, through her simultaneous invocation of family history and the silence that accompanies this presentation. This felt (if not experienced) loss is turned into a desire to reclaim the land, which in turn apparently locks him, by way of a metonymical logic, in an oppressive attitude towards Phephelaphi.

In contrast to Fumbatha, Phephelaphi is attuned to the “absurdity” of the city (Without 43). In colonial Bulawayo violence is sudden and unpredictable. On the street one night, Phephelaphi sees a man fall down “in the middle of a quarrel, in the middle of Sidojiwe E2. The man dies” (Butterfly
The “absurdity” of this event is part of a dynamic of sudden horrors that shape everyday life, but it is also indicative of a pattern of equally absurd transformations that may open unexpected opportunities. The opening of the nursing college to black students in 1946 is such a sudden opportunity. The formidable apparatus for controlling and surveying Bulawayo’s black inhabitants display a similar, if unintended, combination of violence and momentary possibilities. The arbitrariness of the policies and practices of the police, for instance, inadvertently open temporary spaces of possibility for those who know how to take advantage of them. What is required to explore these spaces without being detected or captured is a capacity for tactical manoeuvring:

The people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned. It is difficult, but they manage to crawl to their destination hidden by umbrellas and sun hats which are handed down to them for exactly this purpose, or which they discover, abandoned, at bus stations. (Butterfly 6)

Like the Harare of 1977, 1940s Bulawayo and Makokoba are places for chance encounters on street corners and shebeens. Phephelaphi’s explorations bear this out. In the absence of Fumbatha who is away for long periods of work, she begins visiting Deliwe’s shebeen where she meets long-distance commuters with stories to match their exotic work-experiences. This venture into new places, denigrated by her husband as easy pleasure seeking, is to Phephelaphi a new kind of freedom. She is “free of his protection and glorie[s] in an unexpected and absolute surprise” (Butterfly 62). The city, as the narrator has it, is “moving” (Butterfly 53), and in order to survive in this mobile environment, individuals had better move too.

Historically, the urban landscape of what was then colonial Rhodesia coincidentally gave African women a certain freedom. Barnes shows that the legal systems that regulated the black population tended to define the African subject as male, and colonial authorities were therefore uncertain how to apply laws on vagrancy, for instance, to women. In addition, they were reluctant to prevent the mobility of women in the city, knowing that their presence contributed economically and socially – also by keeping men in the city. While the surveillance and control of black African men were rigorous, women were “on the move” in the city (Barnes, “We are Afraid”’ 96). Ironically, the pressure to regulate the movements of African women was strongest from African male organisations that wanted control over what they considered
‘their’ women (Barnes, “We are Afraid” 105). This gendered relative freedom of the colonial Rhodesian city that Vera’s literary presentation captures has made Muponde claim that the novel’s Bulawayo is a “feminized and sexualised space. It represents unhindered movement and expression … for the women, while the men … [are] unable to grow and move with the same vigour and agility as the women” (“Roots/Routes” 23-24). While this statement seems a little exaggerated, it is nevertheless the case that if the trick of living in the city is to exist in its “cracks,” as the narrator states, women seem to be the most successful in doing this (Butterfly 6).

The movement and surprise that the city and township allow in spite of all attempts at prevention Sarah Nuttall has described as “rhizomic.” The concept, drawn from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, denotes a network structure that has no centre, beginning or end, but consists of a number of points of connection (Deleuze and Guattari 5-13). In Vera’s novel, Nuttall argues, it is the township road that “connects lives, imposes selves on others and others on selves” in rhizomic fashion (183). These unruly encounters between individuals and ways of life, habits and views, create powerful “confrontations of the self with numerous other selves” and thereby open spaces for self-fashioning or escape from the self (Nuttall 183). The rhizomic space exists in the city’s material and social manifestation, in the way people are actually forced to confront each other, but also in its potential. The infrastructures, the multitudes of people thrown together, the various lifestyles and modes of behaviour inevitably collide and coalesce. But the collisions and movements are also actively perceived and sought – if with varying success. Depending on one’s perspective, the city is both a location and a process. Phephelaphi sees the city move, as she herself moves through it. The manoeuvres and masquerades that the citizens engage in are the realisation of an urban potential and the patriarchal demands for regulation of women, reflecting as much fear of what might happen as of what had happened, display a disapproving awareness of this potential.

Phephelaphi’s life in the city thus contrasts experientially with Mazvita’s. Still, like Without a Name, Butterfly Burning is a tragedy. More importantly, the tragic fates of the protagonists in both novels share a common feature. Phephelaphi’s pregnancy and ensuing suicide are represented as an arrest and a continuation of movement. Pregnant, Phephelaphi has “stopped moving,” and when she sets fire to herself she becomes the burning butterfly of the title, or in another metaphor the text offers, a “bird with wings spread” (Butterfly 150). As in Mazvita’s case, it is neither the alienating experience of the city, nor its
illusory freedom, that causes the tragedy but the fact that the diverse movements of the city are arrested.

The territorial body

*Butterfly Burning* not only attributes to the city a mobility and capacity that stands in contrast to the “land,” but it also invokes and transforms the trope of “land” itself. More specifically, the novel engages the allegorical connection between the female body and earth. As Flora Veit-Wild has argued, in both *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning* pregnancy and motherhood result from male violence and oppression. These negative depictions of reproduction invoke and critique a cultural tradition that regards both women and land as essentially “fertile, motherly, receptive, sane and strong” (Veit-Wild 133). Veit-Wild refers to a number of Southern African myths to sustain her thesis, but there is a more recent literary tradition that addresses the notion of “land.” Dambudzo Marechera’s *House of Hunger* creatively reworks the allegorical tendency through its distinctly urban structuring metaphor of the nation as house, but it also disturbs its own allegorical tendency by offering several incompatible significations. For example, in one of the episodes, a muscular pan-Africanist and reader of Heinemann’s African Writer Series beats a weak student of the arts to a pulp and has his shirt stained with his opponent’s blood in the shape of a map of Rhodesia (Marechera 65). Earlier in the novel, this allegorizing tendency has self-reflexively been held up for scrutiny when a female character has a t-shirt with the caption “ZIMBABWE.” Captured by her vulgar make-up and large breasts, the narrator begins allegorizing her as an ambiguous mother Africa figure doubling as prostitute, but interrupts himself: “With weapons like that Africa could…” (Marechera 21). Through this kind of ambiguous accumulation of metaphorical meaning, the novel both repeats and unsettles nationalist allegories of “land” by showing, as Ato Quayson puts it in another context, that the “language in which the creative imagination in this case seeks to bring forth a new world is always itself already caught within the webs of hierarchical violence that shapes society” (85). In a more realist vein, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* emphasises the transformation of landscape and social life by technologies of transport. In a retrospective narration that merges description with flights of imaginary interpretation, the female narrator and protagonist of the novel relates her first journey in her rich uncle’s car:
What I experienced that day was a short cut, a rerouting of everything I had ever defined as me into fast lanes that would speedily lead me to my destination. My horizons were saturated with me, my leaving, my going. There was no room for what I left behind. My father, as affably, shallowly agreeable as ever, was insignificant. My mother, my anxious mother, was no more than another piece of surplus scenery to be maintained, of course to be maintained, but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the path of my departure. (Dangarembga 58)

The ensuing narrative shows the complicated consequences of her departure, here recalled with such egotistical naivety, but the scene significantly displays technology as directly impacting upon the self and its self-reflection – not to mention the impact on the language in which the self is described. What the narrator leaves behind is a peasant self, and what she expects to find at the destination is “another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self” (Dangarembga 59). Subjectivity, then, exists in intimate relation with its physical environment, and its contours and possibilities change in relation to the transformation of this landscape.

These variations on the trope of “land” bring attention to the allegorical significance of events in Butterfly Burning, and may be extended to suggest that Vera’s recurrent interest in portraying the city is in itself an intervention in a tradition that has determined “land” in rural terms and repeatedly portrayed the city as destructive (Primorac, “Blood” 13; cf. Nuttall 177). Vera’s novel not only resists the assumptions on femininity that underwrite the allegory, nor does it simply engage with and transform the notion of “land,” but fashions a different allegory. In Butterfly Burning, the characters and narrator recurrently employ “land” metaphorically to describe bodily and mental states of being. Fumbatha, as we have seen, wants to “hold” Phephelaphi “like the land” and sees in her a dwelling and a substitute for the land he has lost. Phephelaphi, on the other hand, wishes to “find herself” and learn how to “love her own knees, and kiss her own elbows” (Butterfly 80), and turns to a similar territorial metaphor with very different implications:

she knew nothing about any of it, not even what kind of flower she was, but only some kind of water plant a stranger told her about after his own long journey through some twin hills somewhere in the distance she had not yet traveled. This was dry land, she knew that. She had to find what she could here, from
within her own land, from her body. She opened her hand and searched. A petal. Buried in water. She held her breath and swam to shore. This she could do and did. (Butterfly 81)

In ways that invoke Marechera as well as Dangarembga, the characters’ respective notions foreground the gendered conflict of the allegorised body. The difference is specifically over movement. While Fumbatha sees himself as alienated from the land and searches to inhabit it once again in the substitutional form of Phephelaphi, she instead desires, in the logic of the figure, to assemble, to travel over, and to assess the land that she is. Parallel to her movement through the topography of the city, she conceives of herself as a landscape she traverses. The image returns in the scene where Phephelaphi hears kwela – the penny whistle and guitar-based music of South African origin that resounds through the narrative – for the first time. The music “shift[s] every boulder, every firm rock in her body,” and builds an energy that is stored in her body like a coiled spring (Butterfly 66). This energy later finds its release in her decision to apply to nursing school, which is described as a forward-motion and a search for newness: “It is not the being a nurse which matters, but the movement forward – the entrance into something new and untried” (Butterfly 71). Physical movement, as well as processes of sensation and affect are all represented as forms of movement, often across rural terrain. What is the significance of this description of the body, and how does it affect the territorial allegory? I will draw on Brian Massumi’s philosophical discussion of the body in an attempt to answer this.

Following Deleuze, Massumi states that a body is always in motion, always in a process of transformation, in fact is process. This seemingly banal observation has at least one radical consequence: it makes the body stand in a curious relation to itself, because in motion the body is always in the process of becoming something other that it is:

When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation. The range of variations it can be implicated in is not present in any given movement, much less in any position it passes through. In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary. (Massumi 4)

The range of variation that the body coincides with is to Massumi its virtual dimension. The body as object is related to this virtual dimension, and yet every
time the body ‘freezes’ – when it stops moving (if it could) or when it is treated as an object – this virtual dimension is lost, or made invisible. In fact, it is the subtraction of movement that turns a process into an object to be perceived, categorised, or measured. Massumi summarises his conceptualisation in the formula: “*A thing is when it isn’t doing*” (6).

According to Massumi, it is *affect* that puts the body in motion. Affect is an impersonal sensation of pure intensity, an unqualified feeling before it has been named and classified as a certain emotion held by a certain individual. A form of sensation that cannot be measured in terms of joy and happiness, or pleasantness and unpleasantness, its only measure is its degree of intensity. Like the actual and virtual dimensions of the body, affect and emotion are related to each other as virtual and actual. Affect, when turned into an emotion, is captured through naming and lodged in a specific body to become the property of an individual who experiences the emotion as sadness or joy, anger or guilt. Through the capture the virtual – that is to say the unqualified and open-ended dimension of affect – disappears, but as the excess that escapes capture. This escape is in turn the evidence of the autonomy of affect, which reveals itself in punctual or continuous form: either (in negative terms) as a shock – where the usual sorting devices for sensation break down, as in psychosis or trauma – or (in positive terms) as one’s “sense of aliveness” (Massumi 36). This sense of aliveness exists alongside the emotion as precisely its excess, what does not ‘fit’ into the emotion. In this way autonomous and virtual affect is drawn into concreteness through actualisation. The unqualified nature of affect also means that what is contradictory or paradoxical on the level of emotion can exist alongside each other in affect. Thus, for instance, the co-presence of what is joy and sorrow is perfectly normal in affect. Since its only measure is the level of intensity, this co-presence may indeed contribute to a heightening of the sensation (Massumi 24).

Massumi’s general account of the processual body has in the case of Vera’s writing more specific and historical ramifications. As we saw in Mbembe’s account of *commandement*, political administrations directly target the body and treat it as a malleable thing to be controlled, coerced, and even violently transformed, thus simultaneously exploiting it and bringing it into being. The African postcolonial subject is consequently never allowed to fully ‘own’ her body, to be the master of its functions, or to protect its borders. On the contrary she comes to inhabit a body that is a site of contrary and coalescing movements and forces. I referred to Werbner’s description of the restrictions and compulsions around Heroes Acre (78-82) and Hammar and
Raftopoulos’s comments on the concentration of power in the state administration above (32) to illustrate the particular forms of this process in Zimbabwe.

Phephelaphi’s metaphors bring this dynamic character of the body to attention. Hers is a body that is constantly in the process of becoming something yet undefined. Such a body is characterised not so much by what it is as by what it is capable of doing, like swimming to the shore of the river (that she is): “This she could do and did” (Butterfly 81). To be more precise, it is a body defined by its capacity to affect and be affected.

The unqualified nature of affect and its power to move the body is in Butterfly Burning most clearly visible in the representation of music and its effects:

She is thoroughly unprepared. When the music tears into the room she almost falls to the floor with agony. It hits her like a hammer, a felled tree, even though the noise is far and low and way back beneath her eyes where it trickles away like a stream. Stunned, wounded, she holds on to the door while she listens to the stream grow into a river and shift every boulder, every firm rock in her body. It leaves a tunnel, an empty tunnel she fills with far-flung desire. A yearning. She can swim, but she prefers to sink deep down and touch the bottom of the river with her naked body and her stretching arms. (Butterfly 66)

The music that hits Phephelaphi performs a double function. It brings back the memory of her foster mother’s murder and with it an overwhelming sorrow. Phephelaphi reimagines and repeats the gesture of Gertrude’s hand falling from the doorway as she collapses, the re-enactment allowing a previously suppressed grief to surface: “She raises the slender arm high up to the top of the doorway and keeps it there, for the longest time that she can, that her heart can, before the pounding in her head grows to a pitch which she cannot bear” (Butterfly 67). Affectively actualising a painful memory, the music is nevertheless healing: “Phephelaphi brings her right arm over her chest and holds down the hurt. Finally, she has found Emelda” (Butterfly 67). Emelda is the official name of her mother, and with Phephelaphi’s ambiguous genealogy noted earlier, this scene once more displays the complex interaction between memory and fantasy. Phephelaphi’s recalling Gertrude’s falling seems a memory of a mother, and yet she wonders whether she should forgive Gertrude instead of Emelda (Butterfly 67). The kwela music, then, is the medium for the expression of
sorrow that possibly allows a returning memory to blend with fantasy or another memory. Music, that is, creates an “empty tunnel” that can be filled with “yearning,” and the yearning is for a mother figure Phephelaphi has lost even if the identity of that figure is not unambiguously clear. It is thus the affective character of the music itself which triggers desires that bring memories with them, and not vice versa.

A second, forward-looking function of music balances the retrospective one: the “yearning” that builds in Phephelaphi’s body will also propel her onwards. It is this yearning that is subsequently and gradually qualified into a desire first to “find herself,” then to want an education, and finally to a decision to apply to nursing school. The affect that the music creates in this way passes through a number of stages until it takes the form of a very specific decision and ensuing action. The autonomous affect is embodied and then actualised in an individual and willed decision.

The co-existence of deep sorrow and the desire to begin something new, to simultaneously “sink” and move, testifies to what Massumi calls the paradoxical nature of affect. Music might here better be termed an affective and extra-linguistic medium in that it creates intensive sensations that are subsequently channelled into various emotions, and turned into grounds for decisions and social action. In the concluding discussion we will return to the relation between music and movement, as it constitutes an essential element of Vera’s poetics. In the following section, however, I will focus on how *Butterfly Burning* “moves” the allegory of land.

**Moving the allegory of land**

We saw above that national culture in Zimbabwe relies heavily on a powerful discourse of “land,” one of whose features is the allegorical connection between female body and land, and further that *Butterfly Burning* engages this allegory by re-conceptualising “land” as well as “body” in terms of movement. This movement now requires some elaboration.

In the novel’s Bulawayo, the powerful control mechanisms of the colonial state require its inhabitants to manoeuvre with an agile flexibility (*Butterfly* 6). This kind of tactical navigation skills may be called improvisational, as Michael Titlestad does in his study of South African apartheid fiction (9-10). Improvisation denotes for Titlestad a short-term manipulation of coded or regulated space in order to seize possibilities that the codes constrain (10). Such a description displays the similarity between pedestrian and linguistic activities,
as it were, for as the city-dwellers improvise their way through town in order to reach destinations and have experiences the colonial authorities try to foreclose, so Phephelaphi’s convoluted territorial metaphor is a form of linguistic improvisation aiming at a redefinition of herself under narrowly circumscribed conditions. This is the case because the metaphor is not her own. She adopts it from a company of men in the shebeen who compare her to a lily and elaborate on her petal-like features (Butterfly 79-80). It is this clichéd and gendered imagery Phephelaphi turns into the elusive and complex image discussed above. She thus performs in the realm of language what the city-dwellers’ do in the urban landscape: she ‘moves’ through a sentimentalising and gendered linguistic context and turns its metaphorical elements into a fluid and surprising image of self as territory.

The image that Phephelaphi adopts, it should be noted, is distinctly rural. Her inner self is not compared to a city, but to a landscape of rocks, rivers, and water plants. And yet, insofar as it is described as a landscape of movement, a landscape to travel over rather than hold, it is infused with a capacity that is otherwise integral to the city. Phephelaphi’s metaphor thus not only transforms a gendered stereotype, it also improvises on the discourse on land by casting “land” in terms analogous to the urban space. Just as Mazvita’s geographical movement connects the two locations of city and village, Phephelaphi discursively connects them. In her trope, “land” moves as much as the city. And just as Mazvita’s tragic story ends with arrest, so Phephelaphi’s pregnancy arrests her: she has “stopped moving” (Butterfly 146).

Elleke Boehmer has argued that Vera’s attention to the marginalisation of women by “national structures” and her emphasis on specific everyday locations and localities in her writing does not lead to an abandonment of the idea of the nation as a viable social construct (189) (an idea related to Chan’s claim that Vera’s novels refuse the creation of “official meaning” [380]). Boehmer’s contention here has a complementary dimension. The novel negotiates the two terms of the allegory and their accompanying connotations and so reveals their immersion in an imagery that has underpinned discourses of national culture. But it also reconceives this imagery through its own interventions. Like Without a Name, Butterfly Burning is a tragedy, but the outcome and implications are different. Where the tragedy in the former narrative is that in order to continue living, Mazvita has to return to her point of origin (or something less than her origin), the tragedy in the latter is that for Phephelaphi movement can continue only in death.
THE STONE VIRGINS: RELATIONAL MOVEMENT

History and the “state of war”

*The Stone Virgins* is a story of unspeakable events in the turbulent times before and after liberation. Set in Bulawayo and the village Kezi with surroundings, it tells of two sisters, Thenjiwe and Noneeba, the first of whom is murdered and the second raped and mutilated by a war-torn guerrilla. Noneeba eventually moves to the city with Cephas, Thenjiwe’s former lover, and gradually learns to deal with her suffering.

The novel is divided into two sections, the first labelled “1950-1980,” the second “1981-1986.” Despite the relatively long temporal perspective of the first part, its focus is on the late 1970s, when “war is in their midst” (*Stone* 9). Thenjiwe and Noneeba live together after their mother has left and their father has died. While her sister is away at school, Thenjiwe meets Cephas, who has come from Bulawayo, and begins a love affair with him. Cephas is overwhelmed by desire for the woman who “places a claim on the entire earth. He is part of that earth, so he follows her like a shadow” (*Stone* 35-36). The romance is fragile and hesitant, however, and comes to an end over what seems an insignificant detail. Cephas has brought some seeds from his home region; Thenjiwe tastes them, then plagues him with questions about what kind of tree they come from, when it blooms, what its roots looks like et cetera – all in the spirit of an “illumination so profound, so total” that she “forgets his name” (*Stone* 39). Feeling rejected, Cephas eventually leaves.

The second section opens with a short evocation of the vibrancy of life in the city after liberation that is no more than an interim state because already in 1981, the narrator says, “war” begins again: “A curfew is declared. A state of emergency. No movement is allowed. The cease-fire ceases. It begins in the street, the burying of memory. The bones rising. Rising” (*Stone* 65). The “war” is what develops into the Gukurahundi mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the campaign in Matabeleland against political dissenters. One of these dissenters is Sibaso, whose narrative is given in retrospective fragments. After liberation, he returns to his house in Bulawayo to find that someone else owns it. He returns to the bush, to the ancient shrine of the Mbelele cave in Gulati in the Matopo Hills, a place so sacred that the local people never go there. In this place, he claims he is “free” and has “no other authority above me but the naked sky” (*Stone* 141). This freedom is simultaneously a merging with ancient mythical history since Sibaso believes that Nehanda, the spirit medium from the first Chimurenga, watches over him. He professes that he is able to accumulate
“forty thousand years … in my memory” and “travel four hundred years, then ten thousand years, then twenty more” (*Stone* 104). What Sibaso experiences as an exhilarating freedom based on isolation and lack of authority is in fact the expression of a static version of history that becomes a form of confinement: “On the rocks, history is steady; it cannot be tilted forward or backward” (*Stone* 104). History has a “ceiling” under which the soldier crouches, unable to raise himself fully, and he becomes an “embodiment of time” from which he cannot escape (*Stone* 83).

It is in the midst of the *Gukurahundi* that Thenjiwe is killed by Sibaso, and that Nonceba is raped and mutilated by having her lips cut off. The scene, as is the case with many of the most horrific events in Vera’s writing, is rendered in very lyrical language. The beheading of Thenjiwe is described from the point of view of Nonceba:

His head is behind Thenjiwe, where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body; he is in her body. He is floating like a flash of lightning. Thenjiwe’s body remains upright while this man’s head emerges behind hers, inside it, replacing each of her moments, taking her position in the azure of the sky. He is absorbing Thenjiwe’s motions into his own body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied. (*Stone* 73)

Nonceba passes out after the mutilation and is taken to hospital by her aunt and uncle. In her shocked and wounded state, the boundaries of her psyche threaten to collapse, and she vividly imagines her sister’s presence, and incorporates the voices of fellow patients, imagining their horrors. After leaving the hospital, Nonceba moves back to her old house in Kezi, but the village is changed. The local store, which had been the social and commercial centre of the village, has been burnt down in an attack by soldiers who ruthlessly shoot more than twenty villagers and kill the owner by dropping burning plastic on his skin. Nonceba reflects that Kezi is now “only a place for those who were born here and have nowhere else to go” (*Stone* 153). This is where Cephas, who has secretly visited her in the hospital, comes to see and help her. “Kezi is a naked cemetery” (*Stone* 159) he says, and asks Nonceba to come with him to the city. She agrees after some hesitation and they move to a small flat in Bulawayo, where they live in an “undefined” relationship of both shared and separate lives based on everyday practicalities because they “cannot yet discuss matters that concern the cause of their despair” (*Stone* 171, 172). In this way,
they help each other by slow and incremental steps. Nonceba, by being both a
reminder of her sister and a different individual, allows Cephas to remember
and contribute to improvement; Cephas, by accepting the uncommon terms of
their relationship, lets Nonceba begin fending for herself.

The ZANU-dominated government campaign that the novel refers to
was extremely brutal, with killings, rapes, torture, and the burnings of villages.
The atrocities depicted in Vera’s story, Ranger notes, are far from being the
must atrocious (“Ceiling” 208). The campaign, as I noted above, has been
completely absent from officially sanctioned versions of the recent history of
Zimbabwe, and Vera’s literary treatment of it makes the story, like Without a Name,
a taboo-breaking breach of silence and a fictional voicing of suppressed
experiences. Her articulation is given additional weight in that it is closer to
historical fact than any of Vera’s previous novels (Ranger, “Ceiling” 208). In
this sense, it has also been seen as Vera’s most political novel. Bull-Christiansen
describes it as an overt challenge to “nationalist discourse,” and furthermore an
intertextual revision of her previous novel Nehanda (Tales 84, 97-98). One
prominent example is the allusion to Nehanda’s bones rising after her death,
which originally was taken to signal continued struggle against the colonial
power, but in The Stone Virgins refers to the perversion of anti-colonialism into
violent government abuse of power (Bull-Christiansen, Tales 90).

The Stone Virgins develops and extends Vera’s conception of history. In
Ranger’s reading of the novel, Sibaso and Cephas embody two different and
oppositional approaches to history. For the former, history has a limit – the
“ceiling” – that the individual must crouch under. For Cephas, by contrast,
history becomes a means to restore, if in very tentative and experimental ways,
a past. He exemplifies the process in his nuanced and delicate approach to
Nonceba, as well as in the recreation of Lobengula’s beehive huts at his old
kraal in the Matopos (Ranger, “Ceiling”). Ranger’s is an acute reading that may
be elaborated. Sibaso, we have seen above, identifies with a history that includes
the first Chinurongwa, the foundational moment of Zimbabwean national identity
that is constantly invoked in nationalist rhetoric and historiography. This
history stretches further back into pre-historic times, however, connecting itself
to the land and its rocks, the sky, and the stars. Already turned into legend
through the story of Nehanda, this kind of history transforms into myth, or
into a cosmology. It also becomes static and, paradoxically, predetermining.
Because this mythic history is located on a scale well beyond the human it
seems to relieve the individual of decision-making and responsibility. Thus,
paradoxically, in Sibaso’s conception the individual falls outside the sphere of
human interventions that is commonly regarded the domain of history. In this sense, Sibaso’s history constitutes a form of death.

For Cephas, on the other hand, history is a way of negotiating a painful past. As a historian he works in the public sphere to reconstruct a past that in its inclusiveness differs radically from “patriotic history.” He helps rebuild the beehive huts at Lobengula’s historical kraal as a token of this, because a “new nation needs to restore the past” (Stone 184). This task does not involve mere replication of the past, however; it requires learning how to “re-create 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, liveable places within” (Stone 184). The public work is also reminiscent – perhaps even influenced – by his love for Thenjiwe. When they first meet, and Cephas follows her home, she is metaphorically described as a beehive and Cephas as a bee:

if the man has followed her all the way from Thandabantu Store like a helpless child, what is she supposed to do? What does a beehive do with a multitude of bees but harbor them and provide each a delicate task, each a shelter? (Stone 36–37)

Metaphorically, then, the historical work of reconstruction is also a work of personal memory and of mourning. This, in combination with the tenderness and inclusiveness in the performance, makes Ranger conclude that for Cephas "history is healing" (“Ceiling” 215).

Mbembe’s discussion of the modes of subject formation during what he calls the “state of war” in the African postcolony may be used to enrich Ranger’s observations on the role of history for the two men. Under extreme conditions such as the ones depicted in Vera’s novel, history may not only be a prison house; paradoxically, it may also be a means to transcend a confining state. The “state of war” entails a fundamental breakdown of institutions and codes: “frontiers between the rule of law and chaos disappear, decisions about life and death become entirely arbitrary, and everything becomes possible” (Mbembe, “Self-Writing” 267). In this extreme state of existence – which, Mbembe argues, in the African postcolony amounts to a general cultural experience – the ongoing processes of self-reinvention become perversely transformed (“Self-Writing” 267). “Self-styling,” as Mbembe calls it, normally proceeds through contemporary everyday practices, but with the normalisation of violence and in the absence of stable social, legal, political and cultural frameworks and reference points, death and murder become means to stabilise
a sense of being alive (“Self-Writing” 242, 258, 267). By killing – and allowing for the possibility of being killed – the subject is able to violently draw the line between life and death, turn apparent death into real death, and prove himself to be on the side of life. Thus the “state of war becomes part of the new African practices of the self” (Mbembe, “Self-Writing” 269). The Gukurahundi is an example of the “state of war” Mbembe conceptualises, and in Vera’s literary re-imagination, Sibaso’s violence conforms to its thwarted logic. It apparently authorises the use of extreme violence and gives him a chance to prove that he is alive by taking control over life itself. When Sibaso maintains that he “steals shelter from the dead” (Stone 104), he thus illustrates what Mbembe describes as the desire to transcend history, to “abolish any idea of ancestry and thus any debt with regard to a past” (Mbembe, “Self-Writing” 269). The transcendence does not occur, however. Sibaso remains a traumatised individual capable only of perpetuating a cycle of violence.

**City and village: the locations of history**

Sibaso’s assembling of history occurs in the hills of the Matopos, a place of great historical significance. The place is imbued with a sense of history that Sibaso draws upon, even as he, as Bull-Christiansen observes, defaces that history (Tales 96). As in Without a Name, where “land” contained a specific notion of the past, location and time are here folded into one another. History is carved in the rocks whose solidity continues to express the static nature of that history. In a pattern we now recognise, the city stands in apparent contrast to such a site, and is given even more prominence than in the earlier novels. Whereas Harare presents a place for a highly provisional freedom in Without a Name and Bulawayo in Butterfly Burning manifests an only partly tapped potential, in the current novel the city emerges almost a character in its own right. The first chapter of the book is devoted solely to the city. More importantly, it is also a place for reconstructive, that is, healing, movement.

The brief passage depicting city life between the wars lists a number of unrelated objects and phenomena. There are “[s]treetlights and luminous balconies, doorways, drinking houses, tailor shops, bus stops and fish-seller porches,” milkmen “in shirts with torn and faded blue collars, ice-cream vendors chatting to forgetful prostitutes, ambulance drivers,” while priests and nuns are juxtaposed to “[n]aked hips [that] dance Jerusalem dances at the small city hall for the first black mayor” (Stone 65). When Nonceba moves to the city with Cephas – where, he has explained, the war is not as bad – it is presented as
a multitude of impressions and sensations. The flower shop on the corner, for instance, houses fragrances that are “provocative” in their excess (Stone 164). This multitudinous character of the city makes it a place seemingly without history and apparent lack of guiding principle. It is a place where people drift in and out of relations and places, and where they can be anonymous and skirt social strictures. There they hear bits of music and conversation and encounter unknown smells, and there they can experience how new forms of artistic expression suddenly emerge, and new social patterns develop. It is this meshwork that makes Mazvita and Phephelaphi seek newness in the city. Their respective fates in the city also reveal the limits and obstacles that equally contribute to the city’s make-up. The Bulawayo of The Stone Virgins, by contrast, is not only a space of rapid changes and unpredictable events; it is also a site for social and anatomical (re)construction. In the city, Nanceba slowly begins to cope with her suffering and grief. She does this by living in an “undefined” relationship with a man whose only connection to her is that he has been her sister’s lover. The loose character of their relationship and the newness of their situation require the anonymity and the indifference of the city.

Healing does not mean either restoration or return. Nanceba’s recuperation depends on the rhizomic connections forged in the city. Her “undefined” relationship to Cephas, her new job, or the possibility of buying the flowers she likes, have very little to do with remembrance of the “dead” village of her past. Although her aunt and uncle live in the vicinity, Nanceba has been virtually alone in it. What is important is the possibility of creating new encounters and new experiences. This, however, is a difficult process after the physical and mental violence done to her. In a perceptive passage, Nuttall captures this fragility of the healing psyche and its relation to its immediate surrounding:

> although Nanceba occupies the flat, is inside it, and is alongside the objects, the domestic infrastructure, she also views them from a distance, the quality of her observation of them reveals a gap between her and them. This gap is the profound dissociation between the events of the past and present she finds herself in, the temporal delay of the trauma itself. (190)

Nanceba’s healing, Nuttall argues, does not occur through re-membrance, reclamation or re-inscription into a history but rather through interaction between objects, environments and the subject in the creation of a new “assemblage” (191). It is significant that the body too is given new chances in
the city. Nonceba has her face re-constructed through plastic surgery. Whereas the body in *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning* presents a limit to the reconstruction of history or “self-emergence,” in *The Stone Virgins* the city offers the possibility to transform a brutal history that has inscribed itself on the body.

If the city is a more viable place to live in than either the ancient Matopos or the village, its boundaries are curiously imprecise. Bulawayo exists in Vera’s novel more as a point of connection, a node, than as an enclosed geographical space. It is intimately connected to Johannesburg through Selbourne Avenue and its extension. Like an “umbilical cord” the road links the two cities, and “therefore, part of that city is here” (*Stone* 5). In another direction, the bus connection between Bulawayo and Kezi – the Kezi-Bulawayo-Kezi bus as the narrator insists – makes one place part of the other (*Stone* 27). Messages and news, goods and people flow from one place to another, in both directions: “The bus also brings the disintegration of relationships, empty parcels with no letter enclosed, or a letter with a message of which the heart cannot partake, but always there are goods to be removed from the roof of the bus” (*Stone* 27). It is not, then, Kezi’s village character *per se* that makes it uninhabitable, but that its local transaction centre has been burnt to the ground and its means of communication with the city and the outside world have been cut off. It is no longer “a meeting place where anything could be spoken, planned, and allowed to happen” (*Stone* 132). Adopting Nuttall’s term above, we might say that its rudimentary “citiness” has been destroyed.

Just as the channels of circulation between city and village make it difficult to separate the two places, so the difference between the two sisters is equally vague. They are thoroughly involved in each other. Though different, Nonceba “is also she, Thenjiwe” (*Stone* 48). Nonceba’s slow improvement in the city may at a first glance seem to stand in contrast to Thenjiwe’s rootedness in the village. Cephas, thinking back, “could never have imagined Thenjiwe living in the middle of this city with him, the center of her pulse being Kezi” (*Stone* 179). Her rejection of him seems to confirm this. She is gripped by an “illumination” when chewing the fruit seeds he brings from his home region, and so “forgets his name” (*Stone* 39). That the sensation represents an almost fundamentalist belief in the spiritual connection between the individual and the land seems further indicated by her assertion that Cephas, were he to do the same, would arrive at a “deep truth” about her place:

> She would start, perhaps, with the marula tree. She wants to discover the shape of its roots and show them to him till these
roots are no longer under the ground but become the lines planted on his palms, each stroke a path for their dreaming. She knows that if she finds the shape of these roots, at least, he would know a deep truth about her land, about Kezi. (Stone 46)

This apparently mystical communion, however, contrasts sharply with what seems to be Thenjiwe’s approach to life. She has no parents to watch over her or help her out, and she is used to improvising her life, having “always just lived her life, with a bit of set pattern” (Stone 34). In addition, she allows a strange man to follow her home without hesitation, having no desire for commitments or common futures: “all she wants, a man touching her knees and telling her his own pursuit, no matter what it is” (Stone 36). Her rootedness, in fact, is not an inscription into a place or a past. On the contrary, the “truth” that she seeks is the sensation itself, and it stands in opposition to history, habit, and tradition. To Thenjiwe, each raindrop during the rain season is a “rendezvous” and the months of winter are her “own abode” (Stone 35, 34). The “truth” about this experience is its intensity: it is so powerful that it prevents the sequentialisation of moments that is necessary for history – and for narrative. When Thenjiwe eats the seed she is completely enveloped by the sensation: she “sink[s] into” the sweetness of the fruit and emerges exhausted from the experience (Stone 39).

The search for intensity of feeling – represented also in the physicality of their meetings where she gives “instructions with her body” (Stone 40) – presents a very different paradigm for the connection between individual and land. It is an affective connection. When Thenjiwe desires for Cephas to know the marula tree and its roots, it is not in order to enter into a mystical communion with the land. When she reflects that “[t]ill he could relish that taste [of the Marula seed] and know the shape of these roots, how can he, with truth and abandon, ever proclaim to linger” (Stone 46), her thought expresses the fear that he will return back, not because he is claimed by social orders, spirits, or glorious narratives of the past, but because he is affectively bound to the place and has not yet been equally bound to her village. This bond, moreover, is not static, but is a bond of multitude bordering on excess. We saw in Butterfly Burning that affect puts the body in motion so that it never coincides with itself. The affective bond between Thenjiwe and the village has the same transformational character. She sees in each drop of rain a new meeting, and consequently there is an abundance of new sensations in the small village. What determines this experience is its radical openness. Though Kezi may be the
“center of her pulse,” Thenjiwe is not inscribed in a solid, confining history. On the contrary, her village existence seems from this point of view rhizomic to an almost hallucinating degree.

_The Stone Virgins_ in this way continues the dismantling of the patriarchal allegory that connects land and the female body. In contrast to the earlier novels, city and village are here inextricably connected. Where _Without a Name_ and _Butterfly Burning_ displayed efforts to bring the places into contact, this contact is already a fact in _The Stone Virgins_. There is nothing inherently “static” in village life or in its relation to “land”; movement is as much a potential there as in the city.

**Relational identities**

In _The Stone Virgins_, relations define both individuals and places. The novel implies that in order to describe a subject or a geographical place it is necessary to regard it as a node in a network rather than as a self-enlosed entity. The individual subject consequently “inhabits” several bodies, or, inversely, each body is a site where several partial subjectivities converge. In a very different context, we will encounter this idea again in the chapter on Dabydeen. Where in _Butterfly Burning_ the comparison between body and city hinges on their transformations, in _The Stone Virgins_ motion is explicitly the effect of relations between one body and another or between geographical locations. This is indeed Nuttall’s point when she describes subjectivity as the relation of “people and objects” that “melt into and onto one another” (191).

The various relations between bodies are in constant transformation. Some of the changes involve violent destruction, as when Sibaso kills Thenjiwe and mutilates Nonceba, or when the soldiers burn the Thandabantu Store, destroying the meeting point for the villagers. Other transformations are gradual and beneficial: Cephas co-habitation with Nonceba is a means for him to habituate herself with Thenjiwe’s absence, as it is for Nonceba a way of escaping the dead environment of Kezi and its surroundings.

The dispersed subjects in _The Stone Virgins_ offer a complementary lens to Mbembe’s description of subject formation. Where he charts the intersection between officially sanctioned discourses and their embodiment in individual subjects, Vera’s novel focuses also on the development of relations that lie at the margin of social grand narratives and commandement. Thenjiwe and Nonceba’s intimate relationship not only feeds off official or public discourses, it develops with a relative degree of independence. Cephas and Nonceba’s
relationship, likewise, evolves partially outside state-sanctioned rituals and discourses. Vera’s novel thus displays the gradual and fragile construction of what could perhaps be called a private sphere.

Relationality is what overcomes the city-village divide in The Stone Virgins. In Without a Name city life offers a highly qualified freedom and the village a complex point of beginning that anchors the individual in a name and a history, or alternatively offers only ruin. In Butterfly Burning we saw how the possibilities of the city are cast figuratively in terms drawn from rural landscapes. The moving body is represented as a piece of land, and this figurative use is a means to infuse “land” with a sense of movement emblematic of the city. The Stone Virgins, too, presents the city as an ongoing and experimental movement, but here the dismantling of the opposition has gone further. The movement is not exclusively the city’s, but a potential that can be realised, albeit in various degrees, in different spaces. “Citiness,” in fact, is a moveable potential. The village Kezi, when its connection to Bulawayo still existed, presented a rudimentary realisation of this potential. Thenjiwe’s rootedness in the village, similarly, is not an incarceration into a static discourse of history and land. On the contrary, her life is almost too full of change. In The Stone Virgins, then, Thenjiwe experiences the landscape as one of profound movement. If, as Bull-Christiansen has argued, the love story between the city man and the village woman is a way to overcome a powerful dichotomy in Zimbabwean culture (Tales 89), the representation of village experience in The Stone Virgins contributes importantly to this overcoming by showing it to be as full of motion as the city. Representing both locations and bodies as thoroughly folded into one another, the novel replaces a static allegory with a relational dynamic bond.

VERA’S POETICS OF MOVEMENT

In Vera’s novels, movement brings spaces, objects, and phenomena into contact, but it also unsettles previous structures, and is intimately connected to open-ended transformation. In the three novels investigated, we have seen that the city is recurrently depicted as a site of convening fluxes that allows for new experiences and new beginnings. The city’s architectural and technological surfaces, as well as its regulatory and legal make-up, are shown to be processes, and its inhabitants tentatively move with its changes. The Bulawayo of The Stone Virgins is not even a self-enclosed physical space, but a node in a relational network that stretches out in at least two directions. Linked to Johannesburg in
one direction and Kezi in another, the processual city itself is dispersed and exists in several places at once. In all of the novels, this portrayal of the city is complemented by a re-definition of the body. Where Mazvita’s body is a memory of a traumatic rape in *Without a Name*, in both *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins* the body is represented as a territory in motion that is relationally connected to other bodies. These representations of movement correspond to the novels’ performance. Vera’s novels enact a kind of movement that is also the mark of her poetics, and it is musical improvisation that best describes the character of this movement.

Ranka Primorac describes Yvonne Vera as the most difficult Zimbabwean writer since Dambudzo Marechera, and the scholarly disagreement over what actually happens in the novels is an indication of this difficulty. Zhuwarara, for instance, claims that it is a Rhodesian soldier who rapes Mazvita in *Without a Name* (293), a misreading of the novel in my view. The unresolved ambiguity of Mazvita’s return, which depends on the double actualisation of psychic and actual realities, is another example. The interpretative difficulties are directly related to the novels’ poetical and elusive style, as well as to their composition and fluid points of view (Primorac, “Crossing” 77). These traits have often been discussed in terms of a representation of the workings of traumatic experience. Quayson, in his reading of *Without a Name*, sees the fragmented representation and the shifts to a metaphorical register as reflections of the collapsing boundaries around Mazvita’s experience of reality (91). Ashleigh Harris uses a discussion of black music to suggest that Vera’s ostensibly lyricist renderings of traumatic events are a flight into metaphor that leaves gaps in the narrative. These gaps are filled with meaning that indirectly expresses a trauma which cannot be represented directly (Harris 12). Vera’s style in this way contributes to increasing the “signifying capacity” of language (Harris 16). Harris’s discussion of Vera’s style is especially relevant here because she succinctly captures the double capacity of black music to express suffering and contribute to healing (12). Her examples are drawn from *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, but music performs a similar function in *Without a Name*. On the verge of breakdown, Mazvita hears *mbira* – the music of Shona ‘thumb piano’ – played on the bus, and the sensation brings waves of memory and yearning, of soothing respite and intimations of alternative ways of being. There is “forgiveness” in the sound, but the *mbira* is also a “splendid remembrance” that is not necessarily individual memory since it loses itself in its own depths (*Without 79*). In addition, the music triggers a joy that is “reckless and free, stirring and timeless” (*Without 79*).
Significantly, the representation of this music, retrospective and forward-looking at once, is couched in a language that draws its vocabulary from the marine sphere: “The sound came to her in subdued waves, in a growing pitch, in laps of clear water…. She breathed calmly, in the water…. She had awakened” (Without 79).

While both Quayson and Harris offer seminal discussions of Vera’s style, their focus on expression of trauma does not do full justice to Vera’s stylistic movement as a projective attempt to envision new modes of subjectivity. The fragmented representation and the metaphorical tendency are not exclusive to representations of trauma but are recurrent features of Vera’s writing. Their readings must therefore be complemented by a focus on non-traumatic aspects of her style. We saw above how music in Butterfly Burning transformed Phephelaphi and that this transformation was depicted in terms of a rearrangement of her inner landscape. If Harris is right to note the actualisation of a near-traumatic memory through the medium of music, it is equally important to note that music also triggers a forward-looking movement without pathological implications, a “yearning” to become someone else. These stylistic features belong to a literary project that strives to transform narrative and syntactical conventions and codes in order to allow the expression of more enabling modes of being. This, as Paul Gilroy and Nathaniel Mackey among others have argued, is as determining a characteristic of (black) improvisational music as its invocation of sorrowful memory. In Mackey’s words, this kind of music performs a social and existential critique by “pointing” to an alternative reality through a paradoxical witnessing of what is left out of … reality, or, if not exactly what, to the fact that something is left out. The world, music reminds us, inhabits while extending beyond what meets the eye, resides in but rises above what is apprehensible to the senses. (232)

In his study of South African representations of jazz, Titlestad offers a description of improvisation that emphasises such awareness of the “right to expression” as well as an imagination of unforeseen modes of existence:

Striving for liberty beyond staves and the established musical order, sounding off against the strategies of acoustic governance, is about seizing the right to expression. For ‘undisciplined’ acoustic conduct, as it is defined by regimes seeking to homogenise ‘appropriate behaviour,’ is a way of imagining a
different order. The tactics of the improviser … [is to] sound out new power relations, new forms of becoming along the borders between the self and the world. (27)

Titlestad further offers a comparison between improvisational challenge to musical code and the challenge to architectural code through walking (8-9) that is relevant to Vera’s city-dwellers who must be creative in order to reach their destinations (Butterfly 6). The similarity between improvisational musical performance and walking extends to Vera’s prose. Just as improvisation in music unsettles melodic and harmonic codes in an attempt to express the inexpressible and imagine a “different order” which allows “new forms of becoming,” and just as pedestrian improvisation may be an effort to reach a banned destination which partakes in the imagination of another way of life, so Vera’s style transforms and upsets conventions and expectations on literature and the assumptions that underlie them (such as self-identity and chronology) in ways that imaginatively express as-yet unnamed modes of being.

The most prominent examples of improvisational becoming that Vera’s literary style simulates are the narrators that present her stories. Vera’s novels are all written in free indirect discourse and have little dialogue. This arguably modernist way of writing, reminiscent, for instance, of a writer like Virginia Woolf, enables a fluid combination of narrator and character that unsettles the distinction between them. The undecidability takes on particular significance when the language employed in narration draws on highly contested and powerful imagery such as the trope of land. Who, it seems necessary to ask, is responsible for Mazvita’s, Nyenyedzi’s, Phephelaphi’s, Fumbatha’s, Sibaso’s, Thenjiwe’s, Nonceba’s, or Cephas’ conceptions of land and body? Does a narrator or an impersonal narrating instance provide them, or are they the inventions of the characters themselves? They are all both inner and outer speech and so cannot with certainty be attributed to either as they connect a fictional outside – where the narrator exists as analytical category independent of the narrative underway – to the psychological and emotional interiors of the characters. The difficulty is exacerbated when the third-person narration suddenly transforms into first-person, as happens in all the novels studied here. Aligning itself with the characters, the “I” appears at moments of heightened intensity: at the distressing moment when Mazvita is about to leave Joel (Without 98), at Phephelaphi’s insight that she is pregnant for a second time (Butterfly 145), and – inhabiting both the victim’s (Nonceba’s) and the perpetrator’s consciousnesses – before and during Sibaso’s attack (Stone 68, 76,
In *Without a Name*, this moment takes Mazvita to the bus terminal and leads to her breakdown, in *Butterfly Burning* Phephelaphi’s knowledge will make her commit suicide, and in *The Stone Virgin*, Nonceda is mutilated moments later.

The breach of literary convention, which will reappear in a very different context in the chapter on Dabydeen, dramatizes an attempt by the narrator to identify with the characters, perhaps in order to share their suffering. Ranka Primorac regards Vera’s predominantly third-person narratives as the sign of an ethical stance in relation to narration. They are narrated by all-knowing narrators who stand in for characters unable to fully tell their own stories (Primorac, “Crossing” 89). In this way, they reject the naïve view that experience, whether fictional or not, can be fully and adequately represented by somebody else. This conclusion neglects the importance of the shift itself, however. It breaks the narrative pattern of the text and highlights the distance between the narrative act and the narrated world while it attempts to cover that distance. The double-faced process thus draws attention to the imaginative (in the sense of non-experiential and empathetically involved) dimension of narratives of suffering. In this way, the texts dramatize a form of subjectivity that must be called improvisational since its mode is not adequately captured by common narrative conventions.

The newness of the modes of being that Vera’s novels represent and enact is not absolute. Improvisation, as Titlestad states, is tactical rather than strategic (9-10); it aims at manipulations on a small scale when full confrontation is fruitless. It also constantly displays its historical and cultural embedding as it moves across a given musical, territorial, or linguistic domain and makes use of what is at hand. Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning*, we saw above, turns the gendered clichés on femininity into a more enabling self-description. The kwela musicians, in a related way, use street-corners and shebeens as their temporary stages, and occasionally build their own instruments, and children imitating the grown-ups make guitars out of “battered cases of Olivine Cooking Oil” and wind instruments out of bottles (*Butterfly* 17, 88). Vera’s actualization and manipulation of the allegory of land displays this process of improvisational recycling on the textual level. Her novels are thoroughly permeated by a language drawn from the discourse on land that is not simply attributable either to the characters or to the narrators. Vera’s style, within the realm of her fiction, subjects the “static” discourse to movement through improvisation. Through the reworking in each novel, an intertextual relation emerges with regard to “land” and the body that testifies as much to the social and literary embeddedness of her fiction as to her
interventions. The continuous presentation of the city, the body, and the relation between the two may be taken as a way of “improvising” on the ever-pervasive discourse of land, but the relation between the versions also interfere and affect each other. If, as Mbembe argues, subject formation in the postcolony occurs through the mediation, circulation and embodiment of a system of signs (supported by violence and coercion) (103), and if, as Mackey has stated, the empirical and social world could be expanded through improvisation (232), Vera's characters, narrators, and texts exemplify such performances. They transform conceptions of history and subject, figuratively moving them across a discourse of land, in order to reimagine subjectivity.
CHAPTER THREE

David Dabydeen: “creative amnesia”

David Dabydeen’s fiction is full of expressions of absence, emptiness, and invisibility. These expressions provide the focal point for my readings of three of his works. Disappearance, his second novel, ends with the narrator contemplating the risk that the flower he holds in his hand may “flake and disappear” at the slightest movement (180). The poem Turner, likewise, ends with a series of negations: “No stars, no land, no words, no community, / No mother” (42), thus encapsulating a thematic of cultural alienation that unfolds in a story of slavery and the Middle Passage. In A Harlot’s Progress, finally, Mr Pringle, editor of the slave Mungo’s autobiography, intends to “make him visible again” (Harlot 4). The expressions signal several interconnected central issues in Dabydeen’s work: the subject’s textual character and its connection to large but fragmented archives of cultural memory, and the ambiguous desire to simultaneously disappear and become visible. This is partly taken from Dabydeen’s own experience. In an interview, he speaks of the shame he felt in his early years for the conspicuousness of Asian people and their languages, and contends that “there would be a very great pressure among us to become invisible” (Binder, “David Dabydeen” 70). The scene Dabydeen depicts in this dialogue appears almost unchanged in The Intended, his first novel (15).

The conflicting desires are in turn part of a larger context of Caribbean writing that has thematised the lack of a stable identity, the absence of distinctive marks that make the individual visible. My goals in this chapter are threefold. The first is to situate Dabydeen’s fiction within a tradition represented by George Lamming, Derek Walcott, and Édouard Glissant that addresses the consequences of the Atlantic slave trade through what could be called a “loss of history” within Caribbean culture. A fundamental assumption of this tradition is that the displacement of Africans from their geographical and cultural homes during the Middle Passage resulted in a sense of rootlessness and loss of identity for the individual as well as for the community.

The second aim is to chart the features of this loss of history and its influence on the formation of subjectivity in Dabydeen’s fiction. Loss, I will argue, is not simply the absence of a past, but a complex experience of belonging to several pasts which resist organisation into one single chronology.
Thematically and formally, Dabydeen’s texts investigate this loss as a source of deep anxiety and abject selfhood, but also of potential. Loss of history, Dabydeen’s work suggests, results in the lack of a stable identity but holds a potential for cultural – and perhaps social – renewal and reinvention. In order to realise this potential, however, this loss must paradoxically be ‘forgotten’ through a process Dabydeen calls “creative amnesia” (Turner 7).

One of the fundamental aspects of Dabydeen’s “creative amnesia” is the rejection of a point of origin for the individual or collective, whether it is genealogical, cultural, or historical. This rejection would seem to put his writing in opposition to the idea of tradition, paradoxically since this holds in many ways also for the cultural tradition he belongs to. The third aim of this chapter is therefore to situate this opposition historically. I will argue that Dabydeen’s work indexes a history that is not a linear sequence of events, but rather a particular British and trans-Atlantic temporal space. This historical space differs in Dabydeen’s case from Glissant’s similar conceptualisation of diaspora by being closely connected to a British-Caribbean social and commercial capitalist paradigm that subjected new areas of human reality to market laws.

CARIBBEAN NONHISTORY

In The Pleasures of Exile (1960), George Lamming attempts a multi-faceted social, existential, and psychological description of the West Indian immigrant to the colonial metropolis. In particular, his concern is the situation of the African-descended Caribbean writer. Lamming’s book was written during a period of significant immigration of West Indians to London, and, as the author states himself, at a time when the West Indian novel was only in its infancy (38). Lamming discusses the Caribbean writer’s dilemma in terms of several interrelated distancing effects from the past that bear upon the possibilities of future becomings. Through colonisation and the slave trade, he argues, Africans were severed from their traditions. In the colonies they were subjected to new forms of culture, which at the time of Lamming’s writing means an English school system and an English cultural tradition. In order to be accepted, a colonial writer-to-be has to conform to the literary patterns established by “Dickens, Jane Austen, Kipling and that sacred gang”; that is, use the accepted language, and choose themes that appeal to a metropolitan audience (Lamming 27). A Caribbean writer never writes for a home audience. In order to be given the “occasion for speaking” at all (Lamming 23), the West
Indian must erase his Caribbean identity, becoming – or striving to become – “invisible” in at least one of the senses Dabydeen’s narrators use the term.

The double exile from the geographical and cultural home occurs simultaneously in Lamming’s schematic outline with a discovery of the conditions behind this state of existence, and a desire to counter them. Placing the emphasis quite differently from Edward Said, whose discussion of the critical potential of exile I referred to in chapter one, Lamming contends that the desire to pursue a literary career is as much a desire to investigate Caribbean identity as it is to envision new modes of language, expression, and identity. The point of departure for such undertakings is the predominantly rural life of the West Indies. The first generation of writers, including Edgar Mittelholzer and Samuel Selvon, “looked in and down” to depict Caribbean peasantry, and eventually restore “the West Indian peasant to his true and original status of personality” despite the fact that the authors themselves inhabited the imperial capital (Lamming 39). The two tendencies that Lamming presents – of an alienation from what he calls a self and from history, and the successful investigation of that self as it restores a “true and original status of personality” – constitute the signal dilemma that the Caribbean writer must confront. The problem is exacerbated by the imperative that the writers express themselves in a language that belongs to a colonial education and culture. Lamming uses Shakespeare’s play The Tempest throughout his book to illustrate the problem, focusing in particular on the relationship between Caliban and Prospero. The former is “entirely outside the orbit of Human,” not a “personality” but a “condition” that functions as a projective screen for the different kinds of rules and desires of his master (Lamming 110-11). Insofar as Caliban merely reacts to these impositions, he does not possess a full sense of self, and his effort, therefore, is to constitute himself as a “personality.” This will inevitably occur through a language his master has taught him, and yet, the acquired language can become the expression of a “true and original” self. When it does, it will amount to a kind of history, because it is only a “personality” – collective or individual – that can possess a history.

To Lamming, the dilemma also has a practical dimension. In the attempt to wrest free from the norms of a British audience and literary tradition, the Caribbean writers want to gain respect from their own societies and contribute to them, which would entail a cultural return from exile. This is not easy, however, since there is little in terms of institutions and audience to support the writer at home. Secondly, fear of being neglected or even ridiculed prevents their return. What “are you bringing them back to?” Lamming asks in direct
response to C.L.R. James – author of *The Black Jacobins* (1963) – who had called on Caribbean writers to return home to work for their national cultures (Lamming 47).³

For Lamming, then, Caribbean experience is largely a loss of a historically and culturally rooted identity. Self-expression must begin, paradoxically, with an acceptance of this state of exile. Only by countering the established tradition with instruments derived from that tradition can the Caribbean writer create true “personalities.” Lamming does not elaborate the characteristics of the personality, nor does he explain how its forms of expression differ from imitation and cultural domination. Peter Hulme persuasively suggests that to Lamming, there is a need for “at least a partial disidentification” by the Caribbean intellectual and writer with a Caliban who is Prospero’s creature (“Reading” 229). At any rate, the assumption that underlies Lamming’s diagnosis comes to play an important role in later investigations of the Caribbean diaspora.

Derek Walcott’s 1974 article “The Muse of History” shares many of Lamming’s conclusions (as well as the use of the figures of Caliban and Prospero [52]), but it also departs from them in significant ways. For Walcott, too, the Middle Passage resulted in a loss of history for the victims that were transported from Africa to the Americas. The Caribbean, consequently, is a place without history. But this also means that history remains to be created. The Caribbean therefore offers a place to begin. To “all the decimated tribes of the New World who did not suffer extinction, the degraded arrival must be seen as the beginning, not the end, of our history” (Walcott 41). This has partly to do with the actual severance of the African slaves from their culture of belonging: “In time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World” (Walcott 39). But this need to see it as beginning – this “must” – also shows Walcott’s view of history as an instrument of enslavement. It is not history itself that is the goal; creativity is, and history is its inevitable result. That is to say: creative interventions make history.

More important than “history” – in the sense both of a narrative account of the past with academic credentials and the remembrance of experiences of the past – are “tradition” and “religion.” A historicist concern with the past, Walcott writes, can only lead to literatures of revenge or despair (produced by the formerly colonised) or self-incrimination (by the former colonisers). A literature that is concerned with “tradition” manages, paradoxically it may seem, to avoid the dominating influence of a chronologically ordered past. This because tradition is “alert, alive,
s simultaneous,” a network of influences and borrowings that span time and race (Walcott 42). It is this state of affairs that allow the “great poets” of the New World (Walcott repeatedly cites Pablo Neruda and Aime Césaire as examples) to maintain that they belong to a tradition while their literary practices challenge or transform those very traditions:

They know that by openly fighting tradition we perpetuate it, that revolutionary literature is a filial impulse, and that maturity is the assimilation of the features of every ancestor…. These writers reject the idea of history as time for its original concept as myth. (Walcott 36-37)

The creation of this tradition-in-flux established by the “great poets” relies, moreover, on “religion.” Walcott borrows from T.S. Eliot the idea that the culture of a people is the “incarnation of its religion” to argue that a hybrid Christian religion underlies the processes of creative name-giving and expression that initiate the history and the “tradition” in the Caribbean. The religion is hybrid because it is a Christianity mingled with African beliefs: “the Catholic pantheon adapted easily to African pantheism. Catholic mystery adapted easily to African magic” (Walcott 48). Indeed, the conversion of West Indians to Christianity is in reality a conversion by the West Indians themselves since “no race is converted against its will” (Walcott 48). The Christian God thus “captured from the captor” what allows the Caribbean to recognise him-and herself as “elemental” and “Adamic,” and endows him or her with the privilege and capacity to name the world anew. But the naming and expression are as much collectively “tribal” as they are Christian, and its ultimate foundation is the perception of the New World as “mystery” (Walcott 52). It is this “awe” before the mystery of the world that Christianity and African beliefs share, and which shapes the poetry of “great poets” (Walcott 40).

In Glissant’s cultural theory, the loss of history is a crucial element in what Celia Britton has called his “fluid and unsystematic system” of cultural theory and social poetics (11). Glissant, too, begins from the premise that the Middle Passage entailed a severance from history and a fundamental rupture of cultural identity. In a comparison with the Jewish diaspora, he writes:

There is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place
where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities. (*Caribbean* 14)

The irreversible effect of the displacement makes cultural return, or “reversion” as Glissant calls it, impossible, and the aspiration to “revert” should be abandoned. “To revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact,” he writes, and reveals an “obsession with a single origin” (*Caribbean* 16). The “new set of possibilities” can instead be realised by embracing the fact that the people have forever changed, and by developing a language adequate to express the new cultural self. This linguistic development involves very mundane work. Glissant argues that the most conspicuous aspect of the Creole languages as the primary means of communication in the Caribbean is their insufficiency. Caribbean peoples are forced to use a primary language that cannot fully express their social, cultural, and material reality. Glissant captures this apparent paradox through a distinction between langue and langage, where the former is the actual language spoken by a community, and the latter a collective attitude towards that language (Britton 30-31). In many colonial and postcolonial societies there is a discrepancy between langue and langage that stunts the expressive possibilities and forces cultural forms to strategically expand their range through “diversion”: strategies of linguistic trickery that include double meanings, puns and word play, and the intentional simplification of language (*Caribbean* 18-22).

But the realisation of the “new set of possibilities” also takes place on a more general cultural level. Lacking stable identities, the Caribbean communities have developed a capacity to engage with cultural difference as difference. Glissant calls this to “relate” and contrasts this notion with a predominantly Western mode of cultural contact whose prime feature through history has been the reduction of difference to sameness. In schematic form, the Western mode proceeds according to the following logic: “In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with the grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce” (*Relation* 190). This will to reduce and dominate the other is particularly striking in the venture of colonialism. On the contrary, “relation” is in Britton’s succinct formulation

in the first place a relation of equality with and respect for the Other as different from oneself. It applies to individuals but more especially to other cultures and other societies. It is nonhierarchical and nonreductive; that is, it does not try to
impose a universal value system but respects the particular qualities of the community in question. (11)

In the concluding discussion, I will return to Glissant’s cultural poetics in order to elaborate Dabydeen’s particular version of this dominant Caribbean theme. Suffice it here to observe that it emerges out of a rejection of the idea of being “rooted,” that is, of postulating a cultural, historical, or genealogical home.

Like Glissant, the interconnected issues of loss of historical identity and the possibilities that may be realised in their absence are for Dabydeen closely related to language and discursive regimes. Benita Parry’s praise of Dabydeen’s earlier poetry for its employment of a number of linguistic registers displaying a “self dispersed between affiliation to an Indian parentage, solidarity with Guyana’s history of conquest, colonization and slavery, and a consciousness irreversibly marked and fissured by English education and residence” (“Between” 2) can be juxtaposed with Mark McWatt’s commentary on the poetry’s incessant “masking” to illustrate this double tendency (“His True-True” 20). While Parry sees the fragmented poetic diction as representing a self transformed by the colonial transportation of people, McWatt contends that the recourse to several languages and linguistic registers inversely opens up the possibility of creative impersonation. The possibilities inherent in the loss of identity anchored in history, then, constitute the other side of the problematic of belonging. As we shall see, Dabydeen’s fiction recurrently thematises and dramatises unpredictable and novel modes of being that emphasise the relational aspect of subjectivity and resist notions of rootedness.

In addition, it is necessary to refer to a more narrowly national context for Dabydeen’s writing. Guyana is a country whose social stratification relies largely on a historical distinction between people of African origin and people of East Indian descent. After the 1838 abolition of slavery, British Guiana, like a number of other colonies, began importing indentured workers from India. The migration caused a great deal of tension between the newly released slaves and the immigrants, who found themselves competing for the same jobs. The hostilities and suspicion proved difficult to overcome and in the elections and campaigning that preceded Independence, which arrived in 1966, the division played a crucial role. In 1949, the socialist Cheddi Jagan, of Indian origin and subsequently the country’s first independent prime minister, tried to bridge the rift when he enrolled the black Linden Forbes Burnham in the newly launched People’s Progressive Party. His conciliatory politics failed. The reasons, in Ronald Segal’s account, were a combination of desire for power on Burnham’s
part, a bad sense of political judgment on Jagan’s, and British and American anti-communist interventions (195-202). One effect of the racial tensions and the failure of reconciliation has been recurring racial violence. In an interview, Dabydeen mentions that his earliest memories are of this violence (Binder, “David Dabydeen” 67). These racial issues have left an imprint on some of the names in Disappearance, and, more importantly, in Turner, whose layering of African and Indian diasporic memory expresses a cultural inclusiveness that in a Guyanan context carries immediate political resonance.

**DISAPPEARANCE: THE VANISHING POINT OF SELF**

*Textual selves*

Disappearance tells the story of an unnamed Guyanese engineer employed to oversee the building of a protective sea wall on the Hastings coast. He lodges with the widowed Janet Rutherford, a woman who has spent significant time in Africa as a drama teacher. During one of their habitual evening conversations, she asks him about his choice of profession. Her seemingly casual question opens the novel, and propels the narrator into a past he has long since let “revert to bush” (Disappearance 64). The narrative that follows moves gradually back in the narrator’s memory to uncover the intricate connections between personal and social attachments, and between the desire for inclusion in the sphere of English culture and reactions against such a desire. His choice of profession, it turns out, is laden with all the burdens of the past.

Scrutinising his motives, the narrator admits that he has been driven by a desire for control and power generated, in turn, by a fear of being tied to a sorrowful past:

*It was the sea … that made me a civil engineer. Every cell in my brain was absorbed in addressing the sea, there was no space for the sorrow of ancestral memory…. It frothed and babbled against the shingle heaped on the foreshore but however much it fetched towards me, threatening to drench me in contempt, there was no question of withdrawal to higher ground, or withdrawal into silence…. I plotted my life in relation to the life of the sea. How to shackle it with modern tools was the challenge before me, how to enslave it to my will and make it work for me. (Disappearance 17-18)*
As his remembering reaches further back in time, the distinction between modernity and tradition that underpins his choice is given a background. In his Guyanese school, he and the other pupils have been taught that an engineer is the embodiment of modern rationality and science. Their authoritarian teacher has told them that an engineer is “a man who builds a bridge over a dangerous stretch of water. An engineer is a man who builds a dam against the wild sea. An engineer makes things spick and span, he straightens out whatever is lopsided” (Disappearance 60). More than that, he “is a man of grammar”; he tucks his shirt in his pants and he writes neatly upon the lines in exercise books. Most importantly, he is not a “nigger” (Disappearance 60). The teacher displays perfectly the discourses of modernity and race that contrast English (or European) rationality with black backwardness. The engineer embodies a male, scientific, rational, white Englishness, whereas the “nigger” represents backwardness, irrationality, and domination by tradition.

The teacher’s outburst is caused by the narrator’s vandalism of a newly constructed local basketball court, built by American engineers. With empathetic pain the narrator has watched the bulldozers dig their “steel teeth” into the ground, moving soil and rearranging the landscape for the court, and he has later participated in the inaugural basketball game (Disappearance 39). The chaotic game, in which most of the villagers take part and where the half-conscious local drunk scores the only goal before the ball is punctured, has filled him with a sense of anger at their unruly behaviour. Out of defiance of the notions of civilisation contained in orderly gaming, as well as to prevent further humiliation, the narrator breaks the court floodlights. The villagers, however, see the act as a confirmation of their own backwardness. As his mother complains, not knowing that her son is behind it, “Why everything black people handle become ruination and ash?… Is like King Midas in reverse” (Disappearance 63).

The binary structure of this colonial rhetoric means that the narrator can only lose. Resisting the tyranny of English colonial rationality, he only confirms his “nigger” identity, while, on the other hand, his desire to be included in an English or Western culture entails the erasure of cultural difference encoded in “ancestral memory.” In addition, the embrace of English modern rationality means that he changes sides in the game of power. The narrator admits that he has supervised his “coolie” workers in Guyana on an earlier project with a “pharaoh’s authority,” and has forced them to work “according to the drawings I provided, the inflexible lines like poles in their ankles” (Disappearance 25). If he manages to escape the personal and familial history through his choice of
profession, it is only to re-enact a colonial position of dominance. His escape, then, is not from history; it is a repetition of it from a position of power. One of the workers puts the fact to him in blunt terms: “eh-eh, like you act white man or what?” (Disappearance 28-29). The narrator’s reminiscences contrast sharply with his professed sense of being without history. He claims to have “cultivated no sense of the past,” and so is free to reinvent himself at every moment: “I was always present, always new” (Disappearance 10). Regardless of his “sense” of the past, however, his narrative reveals the ways in which a colonial history and its discursive categories have fundamentally shaped him.

As the work on the sea wall proceeds, what the engineer learns about the English village is sometimes disturbing. The man in charge of the building site, it is revealed, has stolen masses of gravel, and the narrator’s initial contact in England, a Professor Fenwick who has been his model representative of English civil culture and helped him get the job, is suspected of corruption. The village, moreover, has its own local scandal. Curtis, the leading entrepreneur, has masterminded a campaign to save the village that has resulted in the commission for the structure that the engineer is at work on. The campaign has been drawing on a nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric to legitimate its demands. As the narrator tries to dig into the matter, however, he encounters no solid proof of Curtis’s suspected xenophobia, nor does he learn about his whereabouts. At one point he turns in frustration to Janet, who may have had a love affair with Curtis: “I’m beginning to think nothing exists in England. Everything is a reported story…. Take Curtis. He’s a photograph in a newspaper and a lot of descriptions, that’s all” (Disappearance 157). The frustration with “second-hand information” and the endless proliferation of rumour erode the narrator’s image of England (Disappearance 156). He has earlier described to his hostess his feeling of estrangement from English society in terms of an uncertainty whether there are any “stories” there:

‘It’s all those thousands of people I passed in the taxi in London, and the thousands of brick buildings joined seamlessly in which they lived seamless lives. I stared at everything and everybody, wondering whether there was a meaning to them, whether their lives had stories, whether I could connect with them.’ (Disappearance 74)

What the narrator comes to discover during his stay is that English lives may in fact be little else but stories. The distanced awe, based on a disbelief in the existence of “stories,” gradually turns into an irritation with the opaque and
incomprehensible character of the society he has entered. This revision of the image of English society does not change much, however. English people seem as remote and unapproachable as ever. If the absence of stories first makes them unapproachable, it is later their excess of stories that causes it. The narrator, in all events, wants to “connect … with something real and solid” (Disappearance 157; ellipsis original). In the end, it is with Janet that he connects. She asserts that his stay in England has made it a “home” for him, and that he has “carved [his] name in our history” through his achievement (Disappearance 174, 177). When he is about to leave, she gives him a necklace for his mother as leave-taking gift. The object confirms the “connection” that already binds them to each other (Disappearance 175).

As I noted, Benita Parry has observed that in Dabydeen’s fiction self-expression is intimately connected to a dilemma that involves both language and cultural memory. Discussing The Intended, she notes that it is a roman à clef whose narrative of apprenticeship is fractured by the “very utterances [the narrator] would denigrate and deny, every move towards the projected goals diverted by the voices recalling him from the urge to historical and cultural amnesia” (“Intended” 85). To Parry’s mind it is the adoption of “Cambridge English” that creates such amnesia, and the resurfacing Creole voices and phrases, which she finds more prominently expressed in Dabydeen’s poetry, that resist its success (“Between” 1-2). In Disappearance, however, the situation is similar. The narrator has erased all traces of Creole, and it is characters like the labourer Swami or the narrator’s mother who articulate this other language in the novel. These instances nevertheless serve as reminders that the retelling of experience involves a translation from one cultural environment to another, which undermines the truth-value of the autobiographical account. The representation of the past, that is, inevitably relies on genres and forms that shape it at the moment of narration: autobiographical narratives consequently do not reveal a true self but rather fashion a self through textual categories. Situating the dilemma of self-expression in a postcolonial context where modes of writing derive from a former colonising culture, Tobias Döring argues that the element of response and self-invention in autobiographical writing of this kind by necessity makes it “parabiography” (“Passage” 150). In Disappearance, the issue can be detected in the dilemma of modernity and blackness outlined above. As much as the narrator’s story can be seen as a revelation of discursive categories that have influenced his life, these categories may also be retrospectively employed to order a life story, and the immediate context of the narration illustrates the difficulty. The retelling takes place in the presence of a
number of African masks Janet has used to decorate her living room, and their influence casts doubt upon his story’s reliability:

I was aware of the presence of the masks. They looked so full of spite, evoking vague stories of primitive violence. They forced me to connect the smudged photograph, and Swami’s death, and, before that, the rape of Amerindian women, malarial fever, the drowning of my Dutch predecessors and the wastage of slave bodies. (*Disappearance* 38-39)

The masks exert a pressure upon the narrator, “forcing” him to connect his past to a long colonial history. They activate the narratives of progress and rationality, civilisation and race as they cast him, as he later observes, in the role of a “Negro” bowing before a “tribal goddess” (*Disappearance* 7). The past that is recalled comes back, then, in a shape thoroughly affected by categories drawn from discourses of modernity and race, but it is impossible to determine whether that shape constitutes an accurate or a distorted image of the past. Memory and experience are shown to exist in a dynamic and unstable relation, one constituting and changing the other. Identity is made up of experience and memory, but the two cannot ultimately be held apart. The effect, following McWatt’s observation, is that the self disappears behind – or into – the textual mass. As the novel’s epigraph from Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* – “What opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence” – reminds us, this is an unavoidable effect of language itself. The self disappears precisely because its presentation depends on a language whose fundamental trait is its empty repeatability.

The textual dimensions of self do not pertain solely to the narrator. They include the English whose lives he has perceived as structured by order and rationality. It is deeply ironic that his disappearance into the medium of representation parallels the discovery that English lives are equally textual and labyrinthine: every life is an absence covered by a “reported story.” It is even more ironic that his initial estrangement from English society is based on an uncertainty whether there are any “stories” there.

Sex seems to offer an alternative to the confusions and contradictions inherent in discursive encounters between individuals. To the narrator’s doubt of ever connecting with the English and his scepticism about their stories, Janet responds with a question that surprises him: “‘How much sex have you had in all your years?’ (*Disappearance* 75). And she goes on to tease him by painting a sexual encounter with a typically English girl:
‘just the sheer thrill of nerves as you slide your hand up her thighs, the whiteness of it, the strange hungry flesh, the down of fine blond hair. And don’t do it mechanically, don’t gouge her flesh as if you were digging one of your canals. Soft, surprisingly oblique touches, insinuating and playful. Isn’t that the way to seek out England’s story and make the connection you want?’

(Disappearance 76)

Sex, when “insinuating and playful,” Janet suggests, is a way of connecting with the English. One body meeting another is, it seems, a “real and solid” connection (Disappearance 157). Jean Popeau has argued that this “echoes one of Dabydeen’s ideas” that “[c]arnal knowledge of the Other is one means of overcoming cultural and historical ignorance: in the sexual act, differences of flesh, history, culture etc. dissolve and true knowing can begin” (103). The claim, which strangely echoes the celebration of Richard Burton’s preferred method of acquainting himself with a foreign culture discussed in chapter one above, rather naïvely places intercourse outside social and discursive spheres. It is also doubtful if it “echoes” Dabydeen’s ideas. Rather to the contrary, Dabydeen’s texts constantly emphasise the ambiguity of sexual encounters. For instance, several poems in Coolie Odyssey thematise the impossibility of sex outside the discursively established domains of race. In “Impotence” the black male subject waits “below” his lover and her “blue moon-motherness” eye like a “deep earth hole / That snakes and eyeless insects make” (Coolie 29). The “impotence” is not only sexual; it is the failure to overcome a sense of shame and the inability to see in his lover’s eyes anything else than images of a slave past: the “interminable sea, / Strapped horizontal to the deck” (Coolie 29). Poems like “The Seduction (for Catherine Jane)” and “Miranda” elaborate similar sexual meetings and fantasies to both comic and tragic effect. In the former, the male speaker declares that he is “not Caliban but sprite” and is finally abandoned by his lover because of his compulsion to identify her with Englishness (as well as with the fabled golden city):

Tell me again, what is your name?

Britannia it is not she cries!
Miranda also she denies!
Nor map nor piracy nor prize
Nor El Dorado in disguise
With pity gazed into his eyes
And saw he could not improvise

So left him to his impotence. (Coolie 31)

The latter poem describes a black peasant’s semi-erotic dream in which he is nurtured by a Miranda associated with the moon – “Like a new mother licking clean its calf / And hugged milk from her breast to his cracked mouth” – but wakes to a reality in which the “sun shook with imperial glee / At the fantasy” (Coolie 33). The dream, the poem suggests, is an expression of the sexual exoticism unwittingly engendered by imperialism through its divisions of race and culture, the inapproachability of a Miranda for a Caliban-like peasant.

Dabydeen’s recurrent use of the relationship between Miranda and Caliban in interviews and critical commentary further illustrates the ambiguity of sex as an inter-cultural means of communication. Referring to Lamming’s The Pleasures of Exile as much as Shakespeare’s The Tempest, he has stated that “it is not sufficient to rape Miranda, because rape is destructive. It is better to love her, the sexual romance peopling the isles with new Prosperos” (Binder, “David Dabydeen” 79). This is a re-writing of both his predecessors. Caliban in Shakespeare’s play states that were he to rape Miranda the island would be peopled with Calibans (Tempest 1.2.352-53), an assertion Lamming nuances by stating that the offspring would in fact be “bastards,” as he puts it (102). Dabydeen’s manipulation of the scenario seems bleak by comparison, but may be delivered with a wry sense of humour as a performance of the interventions in cultural archives he repeatedly thematises in his fiction. This, in fact, is suggested by his return to their relation in a later piece, “Hogarth and the Canecutter,” where he claims that the “deeper vision” in both Slave Song and Coolie Odyssey is of “the possibility of tenderness between Miranda and Caliban” (261). The desire of the cane cutters he has depicted throughout his poetry is “not to rape Miranda and people the isle with mulatto monsters,” but to imagine the possibility of “romance (that is love and poetry)” (“Canecutter” 262). In the later statement, the potential offspring are not Prosperos but hybrid, if monstrously so, but his statement shifts the emphasis away from the coupling itself. It is not primarily sexual reproduction (or domination) that the workers aspire to but the imagination of love and poetry.

In Dabydeen’s fiction as well as in his critical works, then, sex is not an encounter outside discursive regulations but takes place within their midst. Rather than displaying a belief in “true” carnal knowledge, he echoes the experiences conceptualised by Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks, and the
arguments launched by scholars like Ann Laura Stoler and Robert Young that sexuality has always been at the centre of constructions of “race,” but that these constructions have fostered very different, and sometimes unpredictable, sexual behaviour. The important difference in Disappearance is not between a discursive and a physical encounter, but between the ways in which these encounters take place. To account for this difference we will turn to the novel’s recurring imagery of sinuosity and straightness.

The sinuous and the straight

In its rhetorical organisation, Disappearance draws on a vocabulary and imagery of “straightness” to signify English – or European – modern rationality and its desire for domination. Figured in the ordered writing of an engineer, or the narrator’s drawing lines to control “his” workers, the “straight” disregards the qualities of the materials or of the human body it encounters. Herein lies its oppressive approach. The bulldozer presents the most conspicuous emblem for the will to dominate that informs “straightness.” On a material level, the bulldozers are instruments for working the landscape according to rigid plans with little regard for the characteristics of the land itself. Their result is the perfectly square and asphalted basketball pitch, which the narrator sees as a form of torture visited upon the earth. The machines “dig their steel teeth” into the flesh of the land, as it were. Their violent power is further signalled in the death of Swami, one of the “coolie” workers on the dam project who is crushed by a machine that tips over a ridge. Figuratively, too, the bulldozer signifies a dominating approach, and this is distinctly gendered: driven by a “bulldozer mentality,” Janet’s husband Jack has sexually exploited African women. The same rationality underlies the narrator’s sexual satisfaction on the Caribbean canteen worker Annette, an exploitation that is compared to a violent mathematical operation. He “break[s] her down to manageable parts like the equations I was learning by rote” (Disappearance 75, 89).

The vocabulary evokes ideas of progress and linear concepts of time, but also accentuates the incapacity to accept difference with which such notions have been associated. Glissant, for instance, describes European imperialism and its will to impose its worldview on the surrounding world as an “arrowlike nomadism” expressive of modern rationality (Relation 12). Europe’s conquering is “nomadic” because it expanded outside the national borders that were slowly and gradually being established throughout the modern period; it is “arrowlike” because the expansion and encounter with other cultures were not allowed to
any great extent to influence the explorers and conquerors or their societies. Consequently, the “West” is where nomadism “becomes fixed” and Glissant describes the solidifying of nations and national cultures as the development of an “intolerant” rootedness (Relation 14). It is the legacy of this process to postulate single standards, a legacy that Glissant glosses as a tendency to reduce (Relation 190).

There exists in the novel an alternative to this approach, and that is “the sinuous, the curved, the circular, the zigzagged, the unpredictable, the zany, the transcendental and the invisibly buried” (Disappearance 75). The list is Janet’s response to the narrator’s doubt about the existence of English stories: “‘There are stories enough in the brick houses, crooked and abrupt stories that contradict their seamless straight line’” (Disappearance 75). Janet’s insistence on the existence of the sinuous in England highlights the ambiguity in her earlier invocation of the racial and sexual stereotype. Her encouragement is not simply to a sexual “connection” per se, but one that avoids the straight line: “don’t do it mechanically, don’t gouge her flesh as if you were digging one of your canals.” If this is a meeting with the “story” of England, it is the way it takes place rather than its physical nature that is important.

It is significant that it is Janet who provides this insight. As a representative of Englishness, she is anything but rational and “straight.” This is borne out by her unconventional ways of teaching. She has used flower names to disrupt stereotypical images of England by emphasising the cultural encounter signalled in a name like “Turk’s cap”: “‘There are echoes of sultans everywhere in England if you look closely’” (Disappearance 72). “Sinuous” behaviour thus proves to be an inherent part of Englishness and not, as the Guyanan teacher professed, its opposite. But Janet’s insistence on the alternatives to the straight line also echoes a remark made by Swami, who at one point wanders into the engineer’s tent to half-jokingly accuse him of following the “ruler”:

‘So if you don’t respect the straight line, how do you live?’ I asked, containing my irritation at his insubordination. ‘I tell you already, I does stray about in circles. I does curl and disappear like smoke ring and reappear somewhere else. I already done convolute and circumnavigate the world before I come to this spot.’ (Disappearance 36)

Swami’s proclamation harks back in turn to the village drunk in the narrator’s home village. There is “[n]othing straightforward abroad, all is twisting and
turning till your head grow giddy,” he asserts when he learns about the narrator’s imminent departure (*Disappearance* 49). If the difference between the straight and the sinuous is thus a difference between a reductive rationality attached to a politics of domination, and a pragmatic hermeneutics that allows for the unpredictable through respect for the other, that difference has little to do with cultural belonging or ethnic background. The Guyanese narrator moves, as we have seen, from one pole of the colonial power matrix to the other, and has more in common with Jack’s “bulldozer mentality” than his fellow countrymen, whose approaches lie closer to Janet’s.

**Sinuous intertextuality**

The novel’s recurrent use of geometrical imagery gives it an almost crude allegorical form. And yet, despite the obvious centrality of the distinction between “straight” and “sinuous,” the novel offers little guidance on the thematic level of the more precise characteristics of this difference, or how one should realise the sinuous. However, a look at the novel’s many literary and textual allusions will illuminate the matter. For it is in the form of the text itself, more precisely in its intertextuality, that *Disappearance* displays a kind of “sinuosity.”

The allusive method Dabydeen employs is most conspicuous in the choice of names for his characters. Swami is eponymous with the protagonist of *Wizard Swami* by Cyril Dabydeen (Dabydeen’s cousin). Fenwick, the corrupt overseer, has his name taken from Wilson Harris’s *The Secret Ladder*. Janet Rutherford is possibly a combination of two different historical persons. Dabydeen’s third novel *The Counting House* is dedicated to Janet Jagan, the wife of Guyana’s first Independent prime minister and later President, Cheddi Jagan. The book’s second dedication is to Anna Rutherford, founder of *Kunapipi*, the scholarly journal dedicated to Caribbean literature, and Dangaroo Press, which published Dabydeen’s first collection of poetry *Slave Song*, as well as his academic work *Hogarth’s Blacks*. In *Our Lady of Demerara* (2005), which includes two priests with the names Dr Wilson and Dr Harris, Dabydeen has done much the same thing to Wilson Harris.

This literary echoing has been a distinguishing mark of Dabydeen’s writing from the beginning. *The Intended* is named after Kurtz’s waiting fiancé in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and much of the story centres on interpretations of that novel. In *Coolie Odyssey*, as we saw above, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is used as a model for a series of poems that thematises belonging
and race, immigration and power through the relationship between Caliban and Miranda, in the process inscribing Dabydeen into a tradition of Caribbean writing that re-imagines the myth “almost as a rite of passage” (Binder, “David Dabydeen” 78). Dabydeen’s re-imagination of literary characters includes his own previous work. There is a Janet in Dabydeen’s first novel, a young English girl whom the narrator woos partly for her emblematic English whiteness (e.g. Intended 201). An 18th century nobleman named Joseph Countryman appears briefly as a name on an ex-libris in a book in one of Janet’s bookshelves (Disappearance 9). Joseph Countryman is also the name of the Rastafarian juvenile delinquent in The Intended, a marginalised figure that devises his own theories of cultural exclusion and racism and resists cultural assimilation. In the earlier novel, the weight of this liminal existence becomes at last too much to bear, and he commits suicide by setting himself on fire. The name again appears in The Counting House, as Döring notes, where a will belonging to Joseph Countryman is found ("Passage" 162).

The literary and historical echoes that fill the narrative may be seen as homage, implicit critique, or dialogue. The historical Janet/Anna’s fictionalised life may be an example of the former, whereas the reference – perhaps both playful and mischievous – to Cyril Dabydeen’s The Wizard Swami exemplifies intertextual dialogue. Ironically, in Disappearance, Swami is a manual worker who, despite his claims to special kinds of knowledge and to have circumnavigated the world, has his life brutally ended by a bulldozer, the emblem of “straightness.” The narrator’s insistence that he will return home to work because there is “always some emergency there” (Disappearance 174) may be seen as a response to the debate on nation-building that preoccupied James, Lamming, and Brathwaite. The examples could be multiplied, but what concerns me here is less the significance of each individual allusion than their overall effect. The echoes and allusions imply that Dabydeen’s novel is as labyrinthine as the characters’ lives. It, too, is a “reported story” through and through, not only in the sense that it is told, but also in the sense that its narrative elements are drawn from a historical and literary archive that exists outside the novel and circumscribes the author’s intention. Just as The Intended unsettles the reliability of its autobiographical dimension by highlighting the textual and conventional nature of self-expression, Disappearance shows that its fictional universe has been shaped by texts that have gone before it.

This is nothing new, of course. Literary allusion and intertextuality are part and parcel of every instance of writing. What characterises Dabydeen and a number of Caribbean writers is that the literary echoes are connected to a
thematic of memory and tradition. More precisely in the case of Dabydeen, literary allusion is a means of conceptualising and negotiating the historical dimension of identity. Just as the narrator’s remembrance is inevitably structured by racialised discourses on modernity, the novel as a whole reveals its indebtedness to a textual archive. But by altering the characteristics, or the politics, or the racial and cultural belonging of characters drawn from this archive, Dabydeen reshuffles its elements. He becomes a compiler, but his compilations transform as much as preserve the cultural repository. Disappearance detaches names from their original owners (fictional or real) and submits them to circulation, attaches them to new characters, or to different sets of characteristics. This transformation of a cultural archive demonstrates Dabydeen’s “sinuous” method. The proliferation that the narrator in Disappearance laments is thus offered by the novel’s author as a response, foregrounding an understanding of the self as a fundamentally textual entity and the cross-cultural encounter as a textual phenomenon.

The “sinuous” approach to the cultural archive is also a way to negotiate the affective bonds that fetter cultures in the colonial modernity. The engineer’s story is a confession, delivered in a “ritual sequence of shame” (Disappearance 39). Its expected endpoint is precisely the recognition of the betrayal of his past and the reiteration of the colonial desire for domination. For his story, he is supposed to receive the forgiveness of the sinner by the interlocutor – or the reader. In the novel investigated here, this exchange of confession and forgiveness is represented in terms of an economy of feeling. One of Dabydeen’s poems, “Coolie Odyssey,” depicts this exchange in a scene of poetry reading. The Caribbean poet barters his stories of childhood and misery (the ambiguity of the poem deepened by the fact that the theme of the textuality of memory is coupled with autobiographical references to one “Dabydeen”) in exchange for the appreciation of a metropolitan audience. He captures “memory in songs” to “congregations of the educated / Sipping wine, attentive between courses – See the applause fluttering from their white hands / Like so many messy table napkins” (Coolie 13). In a similar fashion, the narrative of Disappearance suggests that the “ritual sequence of shame” amounts to no more than a transaction of feeling that leave both parties bereft.

Derek Walcott argues in his “Muse of History” that “recrimination and despair” are the only feelings left for the victim (37). To come out of victimisation – and the “filial impulse” displayed by revolutionary literature – there is a need for alternative and more inclusive approaches. The “sinuous” as thematised and dramatised in Disappearance presents an attempt at such an exit,
while it also acknowledges its limits and obstacles. The novel thematises the shame that inheres in the dilemma of choosing sides in a powerful discourse that casts modernity and civilisation in terms of race, but also challenges it through the similarities that connect characters across cultural divides. The novel’s intertextual performance, moreover, displays a means to negotiate the language regimes that mould the subject. Evoking and manipulating a number of fictional and historical precursors, Disappearance shows not only that the discursive nature of the subject means that self-expression is an effect generated in and by a medium, but also that the multiplication of discursive connections (possibly complemented by bodily ones) will affect the archive from which image and language are drawn. This textual exploration of the fractured self and an unstable inheritance is motivated neither by recrimination nor despair.

**TURNER: CREATIVE AMNESIA**

**Undoing the archive of cultural memory**

Turner is a poetic re-writing of J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting Slaver Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon Coming On, and a reproduction of the painting is included in the book (black and white in the 1994 and coloured in the 2002 edition). The close proximity between poetic text and painting warrants a brief description of the image. Turner’s canvas depicts a vast and stormy ocean, rich in colour and nuance, with the slave ship struggling among high waves in the background. In the near foreground, toward the lower frame, body parts protrude from the sea. The viewer can see a pair of hands and a leg that belong to slaves who have been thrown overboard. In the visual arrangement of the painting, the sea covers its lower half. The slaves’ limbs are in the foreground: the hands in the middle, the leg placed on the lower right side.

The poem centres on one of the slaves in Turner’s picture, afloat, as Dabydeen writes in his preface, “for centuries” in the sea and subsequently startled awake from a lifeless sleep into remembrance and speech by a child, tossed from a “future ship” that drifts toward him (Turner 7-8). The preface thus immediately creates two temporal contexts for Dabydeen’s poem: its historical setting, and a present or an imagined future. The merging of temporal layers imitates the thematic of the poem where two strands of memory constantly entwine in the speaker’s imagination: images of a childhood before
the advent of the “stranger” – “Turner” and his slaver companions – and remembrances of the subsequent journey and the exploitation at the hands of “Turner” – now the name of the captain of the ship. Village life is depicted as slow and unchanging. The speaker recalls “the wisdom / Of our village elders passed down forever / (Until Turner came),” and the games he played with his sisters among the household animals: “We play / Games as our father milks, crawling under / The [cow’s] belly like warriors, then springing up / At the other side” (Turner 10). The peaceful existence is brutally crushed when the English arrive. The narrator is taken aboard Turner’s ship destined for England. During the transit he and the other boys receive the rudiments of an English education: “since Turner’s days I have learnt to count, / Weigh, measure, abstract, rationalise” (Turner 10). Turner’s teaching of the children, however, is compared to – and concomitant with – sexual exploitation:

Turner crammed our boys’ mouths too with riches
His tongue spurted strange potions upon ours
Which left us dazed, which made us forget
The very sound of our speech. Each night
Aboard ship he gave selflessly the nipple
Of his tongue until we learnt to say profitably
In his own language, we desire you, we love
You, we forgive you. (Turner 40)

The relationship between Turner and his “boys” is not without intricate ambiguities. The captain is mother and nurse as well as exploiter and teacher. He stuffs them with “riches,” feeds them language “selflessly” and has lured them away from their families rather than having more bluntly stolen them: “Five of us hold his hand, / Each takes a finger, like jenti cubs / Clinging to their mother’s teats, as he leads us / To the ship” (Turner 14).

The repetitive use of “Turner” as the name for the captain, the slaver, and all English men (“All the fair men are Turner, I can tell” [Turner 14]) indicates the problem of remembrance that unsettles the narrator’s story. His memories have not so much been erased by the sea as they have been transformed. He has invented “fresh names” for things “[d]imly recalled, or dead” and explains that the sisters – Ellar and Rima – whose vivid portraits he has painted are inventions, imaginations produced in “memory” of the village magician, Manu (Turner 9, 36). In addition, the villagers’ “[n]ative schemes” to counter the invading slavers – and the narrator is uncertain whether they are a dream recalled or a real memory – owes more to the Crucifixion of Christ than
any “native” religion: “Premeditations to spear his side, spill / The magic from his wrist, sacrifice / Him to a withered babla tree” (Turner 29). The village life is also repeatedly depicted as waiting for the invasion, and its goings-on are interpreted in the light of ensuing events. During the children’s games, the family’s cow beats its tail to “join in, / To lash and surprise us as we wait in ambush / Under its belly for the English,” and a line of ants are said to hang their tongues like “slavers” (Turner 11, 12). In a central scene, the shattering of the tribe has even been incorporated into the local mythology. During one of his prophetic séances, Manu rips off his “jouti” necklace whose pattern of beads represents the tradition of the tribe, and foretells that

in the future time each must learn to live
Beadless in a foreign land; or perish.
Or each must learn to make new jouti,
Arrange them by instinct, imagination, study
And arbitrary choice into a pattern
Pleasing to self and to others
Of the scattered tribe; or perish. (Turner 36)

The transformation of memory results from the fact that the very medium through which the past is recaptured has been changed. It now consists of “[w]ords of my own dreaming and those that Turner / Primed in my mouth,” emblematically represented by the religious and aesthetic vocabularies that include “angelic,” “sublime” and the symbolic significance of the crucifixion (Turner 19).

The child arrests this oscillation between unhinged fragments of memory and imagination. It cries “‘Nigger!’” – “naming itself, naming the gods, / The earth and its globe of stars” (Turner 41) – and so aggressively bestows a crippling identity upon the speaker. But the cry is also an abject self-labelling, as the speaker recognises. Both are slaves, and “nigger[s] made impotent” (Turner 33). The slave tries to mother it, driven as he is by “dreams of family” but the efforts are cut short, and with this the possibility to “begin anew in the sea” disappears (Turner 7, 21). The poem ends with the slave contemplating the utter destruction and void that is the result. A “slave to nothingness,” he concludes that there are “No men to plough, corn to fatten their herds, / No stars, no land, no words, no community, / No mother” (Turner 42).

Like Disappearance, Turner thematises identity in terms of a dynamic relation between memory and experience that hinges upon language. The emphasis on the representational character of memory and experience entails
the same shift in focus from the individual to the cultural level, a shift that is
further signalled by the statement in the preface that the slave has been afloat
“for centuries.” Dabydeen’s poem, then, like the novel, investigates cultural
memory, and its impact on the formation of the subject. The poem, however, is
subtler about the consequences of this impact. The forced acquisition of the
new language entails the subjection to new cultural codes, exemplified by
Turner’s Romantic aesthetic vocabulary. Its powerful imposition also
reconfigures memory, transforming and erasing images of previous experiences.
The result is that partial images and fragments of language remain but are
unhinged and merge with subsequent memories. The process has turned the
slave’s memory into a “territory occupied” to use Döring’s phrase (Caribbean-
English 166).

The emphasis on the social and cultural dimensions of memory puts the
poet in a situation analogous to its speaker. Dabydeen’s poem, too, constitutes
a form of memory of the past, and its characteristics may be charted in regard
to its form as much as its content. The poem’s explicit employment of an
earlier canonical representation of a scene from the slave trade offers a means
to do so. Indeed, as in Disappearance, it is the intertextual dimensions that bring
out the full range of the problematic of history, memory and identity that is the
theme of the poem. It will be necessary, therefore, to refer to the context in
which Turner is enfolded.

Turner’s painting was immortalised by John Ruskin who included it in
his Modern Painters (1843). Ruskin was paramount in the creation of a national
culture of “Englishness” (Gikandi 55), and his comments on the painting reveal
the reliance of such a construction on an extremely selective view of the
country’s actions and involvements. Calling it the “noblest sea that Turner ever
painted, and if so, the noblest certainly ever painted by man” (qtd. in Hamilton
139), Ruskin concludes his description by stating that it is

dedicated to the most sublime of subjects and impressions
(completing thus the perfect system of all truth, which we have
shown to be formed by Turner’s works) – the power, majesty,
and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable sea. (qtd. in
Hamilton 140)

It is the sea that is the focus of Ruskin’s description; only in a footnote does he
add: “She is a slaver, throwing her slaves overboard. The near sea is
encumbered with corpses” (qtd. in Hamilton 140). Paul Gilroy has taken
Ruskin’s avoidance of the painting’s content as an example of the double
mechanism of inclusion and suppression of the black figure in English culture. The painting, he avers,

offers one opportunity to appreciate that English art and aesthetics are not simply in place alongside English thinking about race. Thinking about England is being conducted through the ‘racial’ symbolism that artistic images of black suffering provide. These images were not an alien or unnatural presence that had somehow intruded into English life from the outside. They were an integral means with which England was able to make sense of itself and its destiny. (Small 84)

Almost as well known as Turner’s painting and Ruskin’s analysis is the specific historical case that is assumed to stand behind the painting (Baucom, Specters 14-16). In 1781 the Zong, under Captain Luke Collingwood, jettisoned a great number of sick slaves in an attempt to save money for the owners. The event resulted in a legal conflict between the owners and the insurers that entered the courts in 1783 and dragged on for several years before it was ruled that the owners were in the right (Baucom, “Specters” 63). The Zong case, Turner’s painting, and Ruskin’s analysis have engendered a surge of commentary in cultural criticism and fiction, of which Gilroy’s discussion is one of the early examples. Michelle Cliff’s novel Free Enterprise (1993), to give another example, contains a scene which stages a dispute over the painting’s interpretation that evokes Gilroy’s analysis (71-80). As Ian Baucom has noted, there are others: the Zong’s dispatching of slaves and Turner’s painting have also, more or less explicitly, been represented in poetry and prose writing by M. NourbeSe Philips and Fred D’Aguiar, and the massacre constitutes an unnamed foundational event in Glissant’s theoretical enterprise (Specters, 309-11, 324). To Baucom’s list one could add Caryl Phillips, whose novel Cambridge (1992) evokes the incident. These representations and re-writings constitute an archive, and it is precisely this cultural archive that Turner engages. Dabydeen refers to Ruskin’s analysis in his preface (Turner 7), and as Döring has observed the poem borrows much of Ruskin’s vocabulary (Caribbean-English 150), adding that the intertextual dimension of the poem constitutes a form of cultural memory (“Chains” 192). The observation has been picked up by Sarah Fulford who questions the alignment of Ruskin’s commentary with Turner’s painting by arguing that Dabydeen’s poem in fact conflates Turner’s ambiguous representation with Ruskin’s suppression of what is actually depicted (pars. 4, 6). This is a valid comment. Turner was a zealous abolitionist, and his painting of the slave ship
was intended to show the “unspeakable evil of the past” (Hamilton 47). It was originally part of a contrastive diptych, whose other painting, *Rockets and Blue Lights (Close at Hand) to Warn Steam Boats of Shoal Water*, “celebrate[d] the ad hoc system of coastal safety being set up in the 1830s and 1840s” (Hamilton 47). However, as Baucom has argued, the ambiguity is itself part of a Romantic aesthetic that encouraged sentimental meditation on the past rather than feelings of injustice or revenge, and thereby covered over the temporal links as much as it uncovered them (*Specters* 274-280). The horrors of the past are in Turner’s painting revived in order first to invite the spectator’s sympathy, but then to securely place them within that past now irrevocably gone. The painting thus becomes an “experiment in interestedness” that “autoreferentially satisfies any demand for justice” the spectator may feel on behalf of the suffering slaves, allowing him or her to “abandon the damaged past” (Baucom, *Specters* 281) – an effect, to be sure, that was amplified by the contrast created between the two pictures. Moreover, as Döring notes, this conflation is part of the thematic of cultural memory the poem investigates (*Caribbean-English* 147). It is not Turner’s painting itself that is the target of the poem, but its many uses and transformations.

*Turner* centres not on remembrance but on how to forget. As Dabydeen writes in his preface, the slave longs to “begin anew in the sea but he is too trapped by grievous memory to escape history…. The desire for transfiguration or newness or creative amnesia is frustrated” (*Turner* 7). The statement addresses the thematic aspect of the text. The slave, that is, remains trapped in a “nigger” identity he is neither able nor allowed to forget. As Döring has observed, the active forgetfulness – or “disremembering” – that is at stake here involves a fundamental problem. In order to create a “space beyond the painful monuments of history” it has to go through history “for there is nowhere else to go” (Döring, “Chains” 201). Creative amnesia is inherently paradoxical because it “must always name what, at the same time, it tries to negate. For the negative in language cannot erase without also creating something to erase; in doing so it gives life to what it tries to kill” (Döring, “Chains” 201). This is why amnesia is always a re-establishment of tradition, and a form of memory. While Döring is right to observe the intricate dynamic relation between remembrance and forgetfulness, his reliance on a representational logic that postulates a “negative in language” seems inadequate here. The concern is not with the “paradox” of language – or with the *failure* of aesthetic “decolonisation” (Fulford par. 9) – but with the limit and shape of the archive. In an archive, only “positive” textual elements exist. It is not negation that is Dabydeen’s method of amnesia, but
multiplication and circulation. In *Turner* this can be seen in the metonymic attribution of names. The slave gives the name “Turner” to the slaver, the captain, and all the English men he meets. The name is detached from a (fictional and historical) character and circulated through the textual memory. As it loses the stability of its referential function, it also loses its foothold in a specific history. “Turner” thus becomes a gateway of sorts into different representations of the past, whose internal relations are unclear.

Related to this circulation of names is the circulation of familial functions. The slaver “Turner,” as I noted above, is a mother figure as well as an exploiter. The English women, who the slave sees briefly on other ships, are in a similar way endowed with family names: “I name them Adra, Zentu, Danjera, / The names of my mother and my father’s wives” (*Turner* 15). To the slave, family is a function rather than a genealogical bond. More precisely, it is a desire for parenthood and nurturing that attributes familial roles to the various characters.

The examples above are thematic, but it is on the intertextual level that Dabydeen’s poem presents its most ambitious attempt to “disremember” cultural memory. What Sarah Lawson Welsh has noted about *Slave Song* (31) is true also of *Turner*: the repetitious inclusion of Hindi-sounding words such as “panoose jar,” “brumplak leaf,” “jenti cubs,” “jouti necklace” and “babla tree,” or names like Rima, Ellar, Adra, Zentu, and Danjera, evoke the second diaspora of the Indian workers who came in large numbers after Abolition to work under contracts of indentureship. The placement of the “village magician” Manu – who in Hinduism is the progenitor of the human race as well as the first man (*Encyclopedia* 178) – at the centre of what is supposedly the depiction of African rural life effectively merges two temporal phases and socio-cultural systems. Memories of the Indian diaspora exist not so much alongside memories of slavery; they are rather seamlessly incorporated into them.

This highly unreliable actualisation of another range of experiences has very little to do with negation. “Creative amnesia” is not exclusion, suppression, or absence. On the contrary, it is through addition, multiplication, and circulation that “amnesia” may be accomplished. This forgetfulness is not absolute but gradual and incremental. It creates its effects through a rearrangement of the elements of the cultural memory and pushes its limits by the incorporation of new elements.
**A HARLOT’S PROGRESS: UNSENTIMENTAL FORGETTING**

**Ruined archives and failed memories**

_A Harlot’s Progress_ is like _Turner_ an *epiphysis*. It uses William Hogarth’s eponymous series of engravings to tell the story of the slave Mungo. Mungo, later renamed Noah and Perseus under successive owners, is captured in Africa and brought to England, where he lodges with Betty Moll before he is sold at an auction to the Montague couple. He enters their service as a household servant on their estate. Betty has previously worked in the Montague home but has been dismissed after the theft of one of Lady Montague’s handkerchiefs. During his stay, Mungo is plagued by Lizzie and Jane, the maid and her daughter, but remains until he is about to be sold again, when he escapes with some of the household possessions. He eventually seeks company with a Jewish ambulating doctor, Gideon Sampson, who has previously treated Lady Montague, and assists him in the treatment of his patients. One day, the artist William Hogarth comes to visit the clinic. He wants to paint the women and their doctor. To persuade them he guarantees that his representation will be truthful. The women “opened up to him, vying with each other to be heard” (Harlot 272). The artistic result, however, betrays his promise: “for all the seeming realism of his art, he lied. He lied about Mr Gideon, making him whore Moll, the Virgin Mother, so that you, dear reader, will be roused once more to ancient hatred of the Jew” (Harlot 272). Under the hands of Mr Gideon, the women slowly and gradually die by poisoning. The cause of their deaths is unclear. It may be the incompetence of the doctor that kills them, or it may be a conscious act on Mungo’s part, a series of mercy killings to save the women from a society that views them as ‘ruined.’ After the burial of Moll – also called Ceres – Mungo goes into hiding, cherishing the silence of his “cell” and trying to escape the voices of the past – memories of his fellow villagers – that populate his mind. At some point one Mr Pringle, secretary of the English Anti-Slavery Society, contacts him to persuade him to write his autobiography, which he, Mr Pringle, will edit. Mungo protests and resists, but eventually relents and offers his story to Mr Pringle.

Mungo’s story is riddled with uncertainty, paradox, and contradiction. For instance, he delivers three incompatible accounts of the origins of the marks on his brow. In the first account, they are a punishment for his trespassing into forbidden territory in his African village; in another, they are his birth-marks of evil: “πεια, an obvious corruption of the Greek π, which we also signify as ‘TT’” (Harlot 31); in yet another, they are the initials of his Master.
Thomas Thistlewood, captain of the slave ship, branded upon his forehead *(Harlot* 75). There are several causes for this inconsistency. The first is that Mungo’s memory has been affected by his transport to England and the education and language he has acquired there. Like the slave in *Turner* and the narrator in *Disappearance*, his memories are filtered through and transformed by later images and values. His depiction of his African childhood in the village, for instance, owes more to a grotesque version of colonial stereotype than actual experience: “I was, I believe, a normal malnourished child existing on an African diet of animal droppings” *(Harlot* 27). And when he mentions his father, he does so through a reference to an English explorer: he is “congruent with travellers’ tales in books such as Adamson’s *Voyage to Africa*, which I later perused in England” *(Harlot* 41). Indeed, the subsequently imbibed knowledge makes him see the entire cosmology of the tribe as an expression of their ignorance. The quasi-mythological invaders, he can conclude in retrospect, are a lost legion of ancient Greek soldiers:

They possessed fleshy shoulders and chests, but their lower bodies were wooden barrels attached to bizarre animals and rolling magically along the ground. My ancestors were encountering the chariot for the first time…. What appeared to them to be dreamlike and inexplicable became knowledge to me once I encountered whitemen and their books. The incident of their visitation, once a source of terror to my tribe, became a trite historic affair to me: I knew them to be loose Alexandrians, a battalion of Greek marauders…. *(Harlot* 30)

In *A Harlot’s Progress* as in Dabydeen’s previous texts, memory is shown to be a cultural artefact, and it has become unhinged by the self’s multiple inscriptions. Mungo himself acknowledges that he is a “ruined archive,” in which fragments of remembrance are dispersed *(Harlot* 36). As earlier, “ruined” does not mean that records of the past are necessarily gone, but that their order and significance have been disrupted. “Ruin,” then, is excess as much as it is lack. Mungo testifies to this excess in his capacity to switch codes and move between cultural registers. He can quote Shakespeare in one moment and shift to Creole in the next: “Pish! Where the bee sucks there suck I. Let me talk like dis and dat till the day come that I die, soon” *(Harlot* 5).

It is not only Mungo who thinks himself a “ruined archive.” Mr Pringle also uses the phrase about the former slave. In other words, Mungo is not alone in telling his story, and this is the second reason for the inconsistency. It is Mr
Pringle in fact who is the implied interlocutor of the outburst above (though Mungo only thinks it), which is part of a tactics of confusion on Mungo’s part:

I let go my classical breeding when I say to him, ‘Sir, I am unworthy of your subscription,’ and I catch myself and right away I start humming a street ballad and working some froth to the side of my mouth and spluttering and behaving stupid. (Harlot 5)

Mungo’s antics are a reaction to Pringle’s manipulation of his story. Though nominally only an editor, Mr Pringle has quite determined views on how Mungo is to present his story. He wants – in Mungo’s words – “a sober testimony that will appeal to the Christian charity of an enlightened citizenry who will, on perusing my tale of undeserved woe, campaign in the Houses of Parliament for my emancipation and that of millions of my brethren” (Harlot 5).

It is to this use of his narrative that Mungo exclaims “Pish!”

Pringle’s commitment to a certain genre is revealed by the dramatic scheme he has already developed for Mungo’s story. Above purging it from “infelicitous expressions, and so forth” (Harlot 3) – a pruning Mungo refers to as Pringle’s attempt to “properize” his narrative (Harlot 11) – Pringle has constructed chapter headings. Their turns of phrase are quite explicit about their biblical indebtedness (and the influence of Milton): “The Beloved Homeland of My Birth: Africa”; “Paradise Lost: The Terrors of My Expulsion to the Americas in the Bowels of a Slaveship”; “Redemption of Mungo by the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery” (Harlot 6-7). Pringle’s manipulation of the text is not intended to be noticed, however, as he will hide his presence in the first-person narrative voice of Mungo. The slave reacts by producing a counter-narrative, actually writing his own story, which blends and merges with Pringle’s “properized” account (Harlot 45). Mungo and Pringle thus tell two different stories that compete and rival each other, but also, problematically, merge, sometimes seamlessly, as one ventriloquizes the other.

If A Harlot’s Progress thus thematizes the fragmentation of memory and the textuality of self, it is again in relation to previous texts that its full significance emerges. Mungo’s story is a slave narrative, and bears many similarities to its most famous historical predecessor: Olaudah Equiano’s The Interesting Narrative of Olandah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa (1789), a work that Dabydeen has reviewed (“Strategies”). Indeed, some of the events are drawn more or less directly from Equiano’s text, such as the prophetic class and its initiation rites through branding the forehead, and the name Mary (though
initiation and name both refer also to more English sources as we will see) (32-33, 69). Dabydeen has acknowledged the importance of Equiano’s autobiography by calling *A Harlot’s Progress* in certain respects a “novel by Equiano” (Stein, “Dabydeen Talks” 29).

One of the striking features of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* is its coherence and precision. Despite the occasional reference to his memory being an “imperfect sketch,” the author displays very little hesitation when reconstructing his story (Equiano 43). Contrary to the slave in *Turner*, Equiano seems to remember the past in all its vividness and this even when he does not yet have the language to relate or fully decode what takes place. Such is the case, for instance, with his recall of the name of the town in Barbados where they land, of the name of his future master’s ship, or the customs and manners of his Igbo community (Equiano 31-45, 60, 63). On the other hand, the interspersed lines from English poems are signs of the incorporation of subsequently acquired knowledge in the autobiography. This covering-over of early impressions with later knowledge is an essential part of memory, but what is suspicious, from the point of view of Dabydeen’s recurrent theme of fragmentary memory, is the absence of conflict between these two modes. There are moments, however, when the remembered reality appears unfamiliar to the mind that recalls it, even if it ostensibly belongs to someone who has lived in its midst. The recurring references to the “superstition” of his African community are one example:

> These magicians were also our doctors or physicians. They practiced bleeding by cupping, and were very successful in healing wounds and expelling poisons. They had likewise some extraordinary method of discovering jealousy, theft, and poisoning; the success of which no doubt they derived from their unbounded influence over the credulity and superstition of the people. (Equiano 42)

It is Equiano’s shorthand use of a fully-assimilated European Christian value judgment that makes this aspect of the society appear exotic and remote. And yet, it would undoubtedly have made perfect sense to its inhabitants. Equiano’s account, then, does not dwell on the problematic malleability of memory and its inextricable involvement with language in his autobiographical account.

The smoothness of Equiano’s narrative may be explained by the fact that he was not African by birth at all. Vincent Carretta makes this case in a recent book, claiming that Equiano was born in South Carolina (*Equiano* xiv).
“Equiano’s Africa” and his Middle Passage would then be literary constructs, probably pieced together from several accounts of factual experience. This gives his account a degree of historical veracity, but makes it strictly speaking a fraudulent autobiography (Carretta, *Equiano* 5-16). Equiano, Carretta states, is a “self-made man” and skilled writer who develops a semi-fictional persona to serve an Abolitionist agenda that dearly needed an eyewitness account to further its cause (*Equiano* 2-5). Carretta’s persuasive thesis naturally changes the epistemological status of the first chapters of Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, but it does not change the text’s rhetorical organisation. Regardless of its relation to individual experience, the artefact itself does not generally display the effects of a memory-at-work that are central to Dabydeen’s fiction.

There are episodes, however, where Equiano’s narrative evinces a split between two selves seemingly inscribed in different cosmological systems. He states without further comment that he has visited a psychic who has recounted his past correctly, and has anticipated his release from slavery (*Equiano* 127). Equiano takes the prediction quite seriously. Despite his show of rationality in describing the Igbo villagers, he is at least partly involved in a world of “superstition” and acts as if it does not conflict with the Christian faith he has embraced. Another instance of such splitting is his simultaneous distinction between African and European forms of slavery and their conflation as being both destroyers of “human rights” (*Equiano* 38-39, 51). These however, are rare moments of half-acknowledged tension between memory and linguistic mediation in *Interesting Narrative*, and it is this tension that *A Harlot’s Progress* thematises through its mazelike constructions. Dabydeen’s novel stages a dialogue with Equiano’s autobiography, bringing out dimensions that are not immediately visible in the earlier narrative. Through its intertextual connection, the latter novel suggests that Equiano’s narrative, too, represents the assembled pieces of a “ruined archive,” and that the consistency of the narrative is achieved at the price of suppressing the fragmentation that inevitably follows the inscription into a supremacist culture. This also amounts to an intervention in the field of cultural criticism directed against critics who have not paid sufficient attention to the dilemma of self-expression and language. Chief examples of this tradition are Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates Jr., whose critical projects have consisted largely in charting a distinctly African lineage in modern American culture. Baker, typically, reads Equiano’s narrative as an example of strategic resistance that he calls “blues” (32-33). What both Baker and Gates are concerned with, in other words, is the search for a distinct
difference, and a historical and cultural point of origin. Dabydeen’s fiction reveals the illusory nature of such foundations.

Forgetfulness in *Turner* amounts to the creation of new memories. Captain Turner seduces the slave children into a paedophilic relation that is both exploitative and nourishing, resulting in their exchange of previous beliefs, customs, and language for new ones. In *A Harlot’s Progress* this process is more closely the result of physical violence. In his prologue, Mungo reveals what he sees as the secret of slavery: a

sudden blow can make you into a slave forever. If you creep up to someone, as I do to Saba, and with a quick blow knock all the stuff from his head, words and all, then you make a fresh space where only you can dwell. (*Harlot* 13)

It is with such violence that Mungo himself is turned into a slave. Aboard the ship, Captain Thomas Thistlewood brands his initials into Mungo’s forehead. The branding is done twice, once for each initial. The “first pain [is] so excruciating that it banishes[s] desire for Africa from my mind,” and with the second the “final traces of African utterance” vanish (*Harlot* 75). Through the violence, Thistlewood, a representative of English culture, indeed creates a space where he can dwell to impose his language and customs on the slave.

*A Harlot’s Progress* thus stages a dialogue with Equiano’s narrative in order to unsettle it, re-assess its experiential status and bring out the violence that lies behind the linguistic and cultural acquisition of the slave. Against Equiano’s orderly prose, Dabydeen’s novel presents a fragmented memory and a linguistic subject whose past is unhinged and partially erased. It is in this respect that Dabydeen may claim his novel to be “by” Equiano.

**The rhetoric of sentimentality**

It is not only to investigate the function of memory that *A Harlot’s Progress* engages in dialogue with *Interesting Narrative*, but also to explore the aesthetics and cultural politics of a rhetorical mode prevalent at the time of Equiano’s writing. *Interesting Narrative* is typical of a late eighteenth-century culture of sentimentality or sensibility distinguished by certain rhetorical features and cultural themes that were frequently put to use in debates over slavery (Carey 18-72). Equiano’s eventful autobiography is also an emotional adventure story, albeit against a very sinister background. *Interesting Narrative* couches its story in a language that appeals to the reader’s capacity to sympathise with a victim of
harsh circumstances, and simultaneously presents its protagonists as what Brycchan Carey has called a “sentimental hero,” a man of sentiment who is capable of surpassing the hardships he encounters (40-41, cf. 50-56, 59). Equiano’s autobiography is only one of the interlocutors of Dabydeen’s novel, however. The sentimental rhetoric is also pronounced in two other intertexts that are immediately present: Mungo Park’s *Travels to the Interior of Africa* (1799), and William Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732). Before moving to these sources, it is worth noting that Mungo’s name by way of a play invokes a late 18th century popular figure. Isaac Bickerstaff’s *The Padlock: a Comic Opera* (1768) features a black servant with the same name as Dabydeen’s protagonist, and according to Peter Tasch the popularity of the play, which went on export to Russia, America and even the West Indies, resulted in “Mungo” becoming a staple comic figure in the period (157-59; cf. Carey 178-79). Even if the role was performed by a white man in blackface, the theatrical role and the popularisation of the name points to a fact that Dabydeen has stressed throughout his scholarly career, namely that blacks have long been an integral part of English society (*Hogarth’s Blacks* 17-21; cf. *Black Writers*).

Park’s text, similarly actualised by Mungo’s name, is an account of his 1795-1797 journey in search of the source and direction of the Niger River. Park’s expedition was funded by the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, and its objectives were twofold: to map and provide scientific information about Niger, and to determine whether a trade route to African peoples could be established. According to Mary Louise Pratt, what distinguishes Park’s account is above all its sentimentality (76). Park is a traveller for whom subjective impressions are more important than factual description. Importantly, it is not only his reactions, but also those of the people he encounters along the way that are presented. There is a fundamental reciprocity, Pratt observes, to the encounters he presents. Park is a relativist who does his best to explain the Africans’ reactions to his behaviour as well as to avoid imposing his own views. For example, when Park meets a man wounded by a bullet and says that his leg should be amputated, the horror this suggestions evokes is enough for him to withdraw it. This consistent recognition and respect of another viewpoint signifies the anti-conquest aspect of his account. Ultimately, the subjective and relativist sentimental approach differs from the objective, (quasi-)scientific in its spirituality. Pratt comments on a scene in which Park, destitute, hungry and in misery, falls down to embrace the moss on the ground: “The man of sensibility, in the hour of his
need, looks through the language of science and finds the alternative spiritual understanding of nature as image of the divine” (78).

Park’s sentimentalism and respect for alternative worldviews did not prevent him from being implicated in Britain’s imperialist venture. Although he never profited personally from the exchanges he engaged in, he brought with him European moral values in the form of an idealised image of Africa for which the Africans themselves stand in the way. As Pratt observes, “Through his anti-conquest, Park acts out the values that underwrote the greatest non-reciprocal non-exchange of all time: the Civilizing Mission” (85). Park, Pratt suggests, sets himself up as an ideal: a model representative for a feeling, compassionate, and understanding civilisation. But in doing so, he depends on a cultural other that is ultimately less capable of sentiment and morality. Cultural encounters, this implies, even in their relativist mode are more about self-understanding – or better, self-invention – than knowledge of the other. This is the way Park’s “anti-conquest” travel partakes in an emerging capitalist imagination that reconceives “Africans as a market rather than a commodity” (Pratt 71).

Mungo’s journey through the English society in Dabydeen’s novel is a grimly playful inversion of Park’s journey into the African hinterland, where the succession of masters, his abuse at the hands of the Montague servants, and his final stay with Dr Sampson illuminate its darker sides. His recurrent repetition and manipulation of stories also display the influence of sentimentalist rhetoric. Mungo’s awakening in Betty the washerwoman’s cellar is first depicted as a scene of hostility and malice, with Betty throwing a loaf of bread down his cellar hole, but is later changed to show Betty soothing the distressed Mungo (Harlot 105, 125). Mungo’s editor Mr Pringle bears out the double character of the sentimental rhetoric more prominently. Pringle’s narrative of Mungo will be one of sin and redemption because he is “obsessed with such” (Harlot 276). He will present the slave’s story with “such compassion that my sins would be forgiven by the Abolitionists of England” (Harlot 70). This literary portrait of the editor is not far from reality. The historical Thomas Pringle was the secretary to the Anti-Slavery Society from 1826 to 1834, but was also a poet and prose writer who had lived as a farmer in South Africa. He recounted his experience in Narrative of a Residence in South Africa (1834) and wrote poetry about the landscape and its people. What characterises his poetry is a combination of sentiment and morality, exemplified by the poems “Bechuana Boy,” in which a young escapee lodges with the poet and becomes his loyal servant in the manner of Crusoe’s Friday, and “The Slave Dealer” which
delivers a morality tale of a slaver haunted by memories of his wrongdoings in a language reminiscent of Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (qtd. in Pereira 3-7, 62-63).

Mungo and Pringle are not the novel’s only characters to be caught in a sentimental rhetoric. On the contrary, it permeates the language of all its narrators. The many different and contradictory accounts of the theft of Lady Montague’s handkerchief provide a striking example of this rhetoric at work. Betty, who first narrates the event, maintains that her assistant Mary is the culprit (Harlot 110). She later changes her story several times to claim, first that the handkerchief is the Jew’s, next that the Jew steals it from Lord Montague to give to Mary, then that the theft is used as an excuse by the Lady to dismiss both servants in order to keep the Jew to herself, and lastly that Betty steals it and gets Mary hanged by blaming her (Harlot 127-28, 145-48). When Mungo at one point confronts her about the handkerchief, she admits that it never existed. Instead, she confesses that her crime is that she has cheated on the soap she is given in her capacity as a washerwoman (Harlot 129-30). This version is later described as Pringle’s manipulated story of Betty as a common thief, victim of her own ruined character (Harlot 142-43). The section of the novel which includes the stories of Betty and Mary ends with Mungo’s plea that the reader remember “her by my testimony, and not by descriptions of thief and sinner that Mr Pringle will furnish of her” (Harlot 168). In a final retelling of the events, Mungo contradicts all the previous versions by claiming that he stole the handkerchief before he escaped the Montague estate (Harlot 245-46). This claim allows him to parallel Pringle’s earlier account of a scene in which the handkerchief figures:

Then she replaces her handkerchief carefully in her sleeve (No. In truth I swear she let it fall), for it is a token of Lord Montague’s love, especially made in Flanders for her, with her initials in raised gold thread. (But it never. It was plain, no marks except of blood, unless my mind is as frail as I pretend to Mr Pringle. As soon as he is gone I will examine it again to be sure). (Harlot 204)

The many contradictory representations, the shifting narrative voices, and the incessant impersonation preclude a judgement as to their truth-value. It is impossible to tell who in the last instance is responsible for each story. Instead, the construction emphasises the emotional forces that drive the stories. They are directed by impulses to blame and confess, and it is in order to assume guilt and escape blame that the narrators change their versions.
In *A Harlot's Progress*, Mungo resists this combination of morality and guilt that informs the rhetoric of sentimentality, quite rightly suspecting that its concern is less the well-being of others, or knowledge about others, than self-promotion. His suspicion is confirmed when Pringle takes out his pouch to reward him for his story. The prospect of money, and possibly empathy with Pringle’s desperate desire for a story, makes Mungo succumb (*Harlot* 5, 8). But as an act of resistance he wilfully invents a counter-narrative of his transport across the Atlantic in which the slaves laugh and gossip on their way. He also portrays Captain Thistlewood “as I wish him to be” (*Harlot* 71). Mungo, that is, refuses the urge to “move you to customary guilt, gentle reader, even though you may crave that I hold up a mirror to the sins of your race” (*Harlot* 70).

The satirical use and undermining of sentimentality derives from the third major intertextual source actualised in Dabydeen’s novel: William Hogarth’s series of engravings. Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* consists of six plates (they also existed as paintings at first) that narrate the ironically named “progress” of a country girl and her corruption and downfall in the city after she has been lured into prostitution. The images depict “Moll” at various stages in her career. In the first plate she arrives in the city as a shy and naive country girl. The second shows that she has moved up in the world. She is a kept mistress to a Jewish merchant and sits in a richly furnished room speaking to her lover, while being served by a black boy. This youth, one example of the “widespread presence in English art” of black individuals (Dabydeen, *Hogarth’s Blacks* 18), is obviously one of the sources for Dabydeen’s narrator. In the background a second lover is ushered out through a side door by a maid. From this high point, Moll slides gradually down the social scale. The third plate finds her in a small shabby room with flagging wallpaper and broken crockery, the scene revealing that she is now a street prostitute. She is about to be arrested by representatives of the law who burst through the door. The fourth plate displays her in Bridewell prison beating hemp as a punishment for her crimes, while the fifth and sixth images depict her disease and death. In the fifth image, two doctors quarrel over the best treatment of her as she sits veiled on a chair. Bottles of various kinds strewn on the floor show the range and number of medicines she has taken. In the last plate, a motley crowd of priests and prostitutes are gathered around her coffin, only one of whom possibly expresses grief at her demise.

Hogarth’s series, Ronald Paulson writes, belongs to two contemporary artistic genres, both of which are narrative: the moral narrative, which depicts moral or legal crime and its rightful punishment, and the “graphic atrocity
series” (254) where crimes go unpunished. He adds that a third genre, that of the representation of a life of a prostitute, is also activated. The double (or triple) attachments of Hogarth’s images hint at the ambiguity in its depiction of society and its social critique. Moll is punished for her immoral behaviour, and as much as for aspiring to be a lady as for being a prostitute, while the organisers and high society that profit from her prostitution go free (Paulson 253-56). Mark Hallett is more outspoken about the double investments of the pictures. The first three plates, he observes, amount to a gradual stripping of Moll, from the first scene in which she, fully dressed, clutches her own body with her arms, to the third scene in which her loose dress falls open to reveal part of her breast. This stripping unashamedly participates in the popular pornographic imagery of the time, offering “a fantasy of sexual invitation and availability that was clearly aimed at the male visitors to Hogarth’s studio” (Hallett 86). This complicity with pornography, which the series condemns at another level, was no secret at the time. The contemporary art critic George Vertue commented on Hogarth’s original painted version of the third plate that “this whore’s desabille careless and pretty Countenance & air – this thought pleas’d many” (qtd. in Hallett 85). Hogarth, moreover, actually thematizes this salaciousness in his series. In his first image, a priest greedily looks at the young countrywoman, while his hand “slides in anticipation towards his groin” (Hallett 74). The combination of genres points to a testing of the limits of polite patriarchal society. The eroticized first half of the series is balanced against the second part, in which Moll’s decline and concurrent gradual dressing up and disappearance from view is designed to evoke sympathy and pity. Hogarth thus aligns his work both with the pornographers and the moralists. The ambiguity actualises the limit of polite society both as a titillating challenge and as the boundary it uses to establish and redraw itself.

The employment of limits to reproduce norms is a common cultural strategy. If the prostitute constitutes the boundary for patriarchal polite society, the black figure has played much the same role for white English society. Simon Gikandi has shown that the debates around blackness in the English public sphere have at different historical junctures been essential ingredients in the creation of an English identity. Within various discursive frameworks, and with different effects, the black or African figure has functioned as a projection screen for cultural fantasies and has thereby offered the negation – or the limit – for Englishness (Gikandi 50-83). Without the limit or negative of the black individual, Gikandi’s analyses suggest, English culture would not know itself. Dabydeen has suggested as much in his scholarly analysis of Hogarth’s series.
Blacks and prostitutes are frequently employed in Hogarth’s work to represent the corruption and the artificial culture of the artist’s commercial age (Hogarth, Walpole 11-40; Hogarth’s Blacks 128-30).

For the abolitionist Pringle in Dabydeen’s novel, the way England knows itself is deeply troubled. With slavery it has “ruined” other cultures like the Edenic Africa, and contributed to its own moral degradation. While the latter may be the prime concern for the Abolitionists, the two are directly related. The “nation” is responsible for horrible wrongs, but it is only that same nation that can right these wrongs by terminating slavery and helping the ruined Africans. Mungo, however, resists this employment as a “yardstick,” as Dabydeen elsewhere has it, of the ruined state of the nation (Hogarth’s Blacks 130). Mungo’s language, however, is distinctly visual. He rejects Pringle’s attempts to restore him to “visibility” as a black individual ruined by the slave trade, saved by the Abolition committee, and held up to a British audience as a warning example. For him, such visibility means fixity, the incarceration in a social role through cultural depictions. Hogarth’s pictures lie, he claims, not because they are incorrect, but because they fix women in the role of victims, denying them the mystical dimension of life. In the same way, Pringle’s depiction of him will be a lie because it aims to present him solely as a “ruined” noble savage.

“Unfolding into mystery”
If being restored to visibility means being fixed in painterly realism or a coherent narrative scheme with Christian sentimental mores, it is clear that Mungo’s story remains in the dark. While Pringle struggles to endow him with a “beginning, a middle, an end” (Harlot 275), the accumulation of contradictory accounts makes Mungo as much of a “reported story” as Curtis in Disappearance. I have given a few examples of inconsistencies and paradoxes above, but there are more. Someone screams at Mungo’s birth. Who screams is unclear as Mungo offers several versions of the event. In a first version, it is his mother, in a second his father, and in a third narrative it is Rima, his nanny (Harlot 27, 39, 42). The confused state of affairs has not exclusively to do with Mungo’s narrative tactics or his fragmentary memory. Betty, as we have already seen, also delivers different accounts of the theft of the handkerchief. More problematically, the impersonal third-person narrative voice that supposedly exists outside the fictional universe also repeats and changes its accounts (Harlot 105, 125).
If scenes and events are repeated and mutate as different narrators recount them at different times, so do phrases and words. We have already seen that Mungo quotes Pringle when he calls himself a “ruined archive.” And when he speaks about his childhood, he states that his mother is a veiled “votary to Whatever-It-Was” given to sign language:

my mother was veiled from head to toe and sworn to absolute silence. Cocooned in a black silence, she ruled the household by gestures which over the years became so elaborate that a new language was formed among our women. (Harlot 37)

The characteristics as well as some of the phrases are later carried over in a description of Mary Moll – one of Mr Sampson’s patients:

She differed from [the other women] in covering herself from head to toe with a blanket…. One day, all of a sudden, Moll cocooned herself, refusing to emerge from under the blanket. When she wanted anything … she would gesture and I would supply her. (Harlot 266)

In a similar fashion, Mary’s rural background seems to belong not only to her. Betty reveals at first that she is a country village girl, but her origin is later attributed by Mungo to Lizzie, who is the new servant girl in the Montague household. Names, as the quotations have already revealed, also migrate in the text. Mary is the name of Betty Moll’s assistant (who may be invented by Betty as a scapegoat). It is later used as the name for Betty’s child with the Jew (also, perhaps, a fantasy), and finally, as Mary Moll, attributed to one of Sampson’s patients (Harlot 265). The novel thus stages a repetition and circulation of scenes and words within its own confines, but it also opens the text toward a historical and cultural outside through intertextual references. We have already seen the novel’s extended engagement with Equiano’s autobiography, Park’s travel writing, and Hogarth’s Progress, but the number of textual and historical allusions in the novel is dizzying. Captain Thomas Thistlewood’s name is borrowed from a British 18th-century plantation owner in Jamaica whose diary – a massive document of over 10 000 pages – records, among other things, his practice of branding newly bought slaves with his initials on the shoulder, which presents an alternative source for Mungo’s marks (Hall, Miserable 124). Thistlewood’s meticulous note taking of intercourse with his female slaves also testifies to the erotic dimension of colonialism, as Eckstein points out (131-32).
His captaincy in the novel also alludes to Captain Luke Collingwood of the *Zong*, and in consequence to Dabydeen’s own fictional reimagination of the jettisoned slaves in *Turner*. The historical Montagu couple are John, second duke of Montagu, and Mary, who were helpful in managing the education of Francis Williams, a free black Jamaican whose talents and wealth was the subject of intense debates on slavery and the alleged inferiority of blacks during the late 18th century. They were also temporary employers to Ignatius Sancho (Carretta, “Francis Williams” 214, 232). The Duke also commissioned a painting by Hogarth (Jarrett 92). “Moll” is the prostitute protagonist of Daniel Defoe’s novel *Moll Flanders* (1722) besides being the girl in Hogarth’s print. Mungo’s claim that “our true slavery was temporary slavery to death” seems to echo Thomas Carlyle’s infamous “On the Nigger Question” (1848/1853) with its rhetorical and ideological conflation of physical and existential slavery (*Harlot* 51; Gikandi 57-58). *A Harlot’s Progress* does not only draw on an English colonial archive, however; it also makes references to contemporary Caribbean works of fiction. Most conspicuous is the allusion to Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge*, whose protagonist’s name is doubled by Dabydeen’s. As I mentioned earlier, Phillips’ novel also includes the jettisoning of slaves from the *Zong* in its narrative, a similarity that is not coincidental.

In addition, Dabydeen here as elsewhere recycles names and characters he has used before. In *Turner*, Rima is the first sister, equipped with a “clear voice, fingers / That coax melody from the crudest instrument” (*Turner* 39). Her musical abilities can transfix even slavers like Turner, who with tears in his eyes “sits cross-legged before her, beguiled by her song” (*Turner* 39). Ellar is the second-born and the butt of Turner’s brutality: “he will ravish [her] with whips, stuff rags / In her mouth to stifle the rage, rub salt / Into the stripes of her wounds in slow ecstatic / Ritual trance” (*Turner* 39). In *A Harlot’s Progress*, the characters reappear in altered roles. Rima, as mentioned, is Mungo’s nanny, caring and spiteful, sometimes professing that she is a sexual slave in the household, sometimes claiming that she is Mungo’s real mother. Ellar is the village prostitute, ridiculed and poor, but also a truth teller whose voice remains after all the others’ have died out: “for when the waters ebb, there is smoke still, the first smouldering thing that arise is the spirit of Ellar” (*Harlot* 280). As in Dabydeen’s earlier novels, Joseph Countryman appears also in *A Harlot’s Progress*, this time as a “notorious” shape-shifting thief impossible to keep in prison. Demonstrating a transformational capacity that reflects his reappearance throughout Dabydeen’s oeuvre, he changes into “a flock of jackdaws” and disappears, to be found in human shape days later (*Harlot* 74).
The many contrasting versions render it impossible to fix a consistent story line in the novel, and my summary above thus reduces its textual maze through an operation of precisely the kind it resists. Mungo is consequently right in a literal way when he declares that he has “many beginnings” (Harlot 27). The rejection of one single origin is crucial to the case against a linear understanding of history that has been the theme of the preceding chapters of this study. It also dramatises Dabydeen’s creative amnesia. If Pringle aims at restoring Mungo to “visibility,” the narrative as a whole achieves rather the opposite. Mungo expresses a similar attitude in his criticism of Hogarth, whose images are intended to stir anti-Semitic rage. But they also fail to capture the dimensions of subjectivity that lie beyond what the eye can see when they evoke “nothing more worthy than pity in the viewer” (Harlot 272). Where Hogarth has failed, ultimately, is in his refusal to paint the women’s lives “unfolding into mystery” (Harlot 277). English sentimentalist culture fixes the prostitute and the black as victims of degradation caused by English society or its imperial extensions. They are marginal figures that support conceptions of cultural and national identity. In the case of Pringle and his abolitionist peers, the identities are almost masochistic in their obsession with “ruin.” Mungo asserts that the “ruin of our Christian lives will be his theme, for Mr Pringle is obsessed with such” (Harlot 276), and he speculates about the reversal of roles it implies:

> what is it that has so afflicted him that he comes to me for relief? Why his obsession with ruin? What dreadful thing has happened to his mother that makes him seek of me the story of my mother? What conflagration has engulfed his family that he insists on knowing my Ellar, my Kaka and others of my tribe? (Harlot 276)

“Mystery,” the word used to designate the escape out of the rhetoric of sin, confession and forgiveness, and the “obsession with ruin,” is chosen with care. According to the OED, the word has a range of meanings in Christianity, from a truth revealed through Christ to the Eucharist and an “incident in the life of our Lord or of the Saints regarded as an object of commemoration in the Christian Church or as having a mystical significance” (X: 173). In A Harlot’s Progress, the term is detached from its historical sentimentalist context and infused with new meaning in much the same way Walcott claims that the slave “captured” the slaver’s gods (48). Referring to the dimension of the human existence that falls outside the representational frame of realism as “mystery,” Mungo has wrested a fundamental Christian word from Abolitionists like
Pringle to employ it in a vision that challenges the "obsession with ruin." The novel's range of literary echoes makes it as open-ended as Mungo himself. A textualised memory fragment, it emerges out of a cultural historical archive that provides its scenes, its events, its names, and shapes its narrators. Its author has reshuffled the elements of that archive, however, in order to extract new possibilities, and the practice, as we have seen, also adds to the archive. In A Harlot's Progress, this archive is not only British colonial-historical, but Caribbean and contemporary. By this tactical reshuffling, Dabydeen strives to unfix the discursive elements of the archive by submitting them to circulation, an undoing of its solidity that amounts to creative amnesia.

**DABYDEEN'S SENSE OF HISTORY**

In chapter one, I invoked Anthony Giddens' description of modernity and the "existential anxiety" it creates (35). To Giddens' general and rather metropolitan account, and aided by Arjun Appadurai's conceptualisation of modernity as the development of a number of "flows," I suggested that Gurnah's characters experienced this "existential anxiety" in more historically particular ways through extensive patterns of migration and inter-cultural encounters. For Paul Gilroy's seminal book on modernity and trans-Atlantic cultural exchange, The Black Atlantic, such movements are the starting point. It begins, not with nation states and national cultures, but with the displacement and repopulation that the Atlantic slave trade entailed. Because his definition departs from mainstream accounts of modernity, Gilroy calls his project a mapping of a "counterculture of modernity" (Black Atlantic 1).

Gilroy's characterisation of modernity is similar to Glissant's, for whom too modernity begins with slavery. To Glissant, it is not primarily that the brutality and the large scale of the system are indicative of a modern coupling of evil with bureaucratic organisation; nor does its modernity consist in the haunting of the descendants of slaves by slavery's suffering victims. Instead, he argues that slavery's modern character lies primarily in the "creolizations" that resulted. For Glissant, the slave ships, the plantations, and the baracoons are exemplary, if extreme and brutal instances, of modernity's enforced joining of people:

> the Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed
dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted. In this outmoded spot, on the margins of every dynamic, the tendencies of our modernity begin to be detectable. (Relation 65)

The powerful joining of people, if taken in a most general sense as a joining of what was previously held apart, is indeed one of the most characteristic aspects of modernity even for a theorist like Giddens. For Glissant, however, this general description of modernity corresponds to a particular historical experience. The slaves, he argues, lived this modernity as they were violently brought from their homelands. Thrown together with other peoples they had to find ways to survive, physically as well as socially and culturally, without recourse to a common language, ancestry, mythology, knowledge or understanding of society. The end result of this displacement was a change in the very being of the people affected, and, as I noted above, a new capacity to “relate.”

“Relation” is achieved chiefly through what Glissant calls “errant thought” or “rhizomatic thought” (the word “thought” signifying here systematic thinking such as philosophy, but also other forms of expression like myth, fiction, and social and cultural criticism). It is a mode of symbolic (in the sense of sign-dependent) activity that travels from one domain to another and thus connects them. What characterises its activity is that it never reaches a final goal of solid knowledge, or whole – a “totality.” The “thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it” (Relation 21). Even more important than its refusal to postulate an ultimate goal is its rejection of a beginning, or origin. Notions of origin, whether taken in the sense of ethnic belonging, cultural or national homes, or genealogical lineages, have to Glissant’s mind contributed precisely to the hostility and lack of understanding that informed colonial encounters and imperial attitudes. In place of a single “totalitarian root,” Glissant – like Sarah Nuttall on Vera’s Bulawayo – employs Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual metaphor of rhizome, or root system, where no single root is primary:

The notion of the rhizome maintains … the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other. (Glissant, Relation 11)
“Rhizomatic thought,” it barely needs stating, is not—and cannot be—an isolated activity. Neither can it be silent: the realisation of Relation depends on language and must be expressed in communication (Glissant, *Relation* 18). To exist in “relation,” in Britton’s encapsulation, is “to be an element of an ever-changing and ever-diversifying process and to be nothing over and above this: in other words, to lack any permanent, singular, autonomously constituted essence” (14). This absence of stable and particular traits is what modernity creates; the demand Glissant makes is that this tendency be regarded as a possibility and a potential (and not a cause for recrimination or despair), and that it is taken in a socially and ethically responsible direction by accepting difference as difference.

Glissant’s counterintuitive point of departure is that the loss of stable distinguishing features (belonging in and to a language, a family, a cultural or religious home) is the specific characteristic of certain people at a particular point in time: the slaves during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This conclusion, Ian Baucom has shown, is in fact historically well grounded. In his extensive and ambitious discussion of the legal and financial systems that developed along the slave trade, and the economical and philosophical modes of thought that underpinned them, Baucom draws out the implications of the view that slaves were goods rather than human beings. They represented a value that was realised when sold. As the slave trade expanded and the need arose to delay payments and insure the value the slaves represented, this value was standardised. A model equivalent was made where one adult male African slave in good health represented a certain price. Other slaves, such as children, women, and old people could be calculated as part of this standard, and other types of merchandise could also be measured against the standard value the slave represented; through this mechanism slaves became general equivalents of exchange. In other words, they became a form of money, and the characteristic of money is to be a medium of exchange without any qualities other than its exchangeability (Baucom, *Specters* 61-62). For Glissant, this exchangeability is not something negative. If what is lost in the process is a set of particular characteristics that support a stable identity, exchange is also a “word for gain,” as Baucom writes (*Specters* 311). What is gained is the capacity to “relate.”

Just as Glissant sees “gain” in the exchangeability of slaves, Dabydeen’s “creative amnesia” derives a productive potential from the experience of loss of history and identity, with the imperial and commercial British history as the setting. And where Glissant’s “relation” may be regarded as an acceleration of emblematically modern features, Dabydeen’s reshuffling of cultural archives is
analogously an accelerated version of what he has described as a commercialisation of human relations. Elizabeth Wallace sees this process as determining which stories are told and which remain untold in *A Harlot's Progress* (237, 244), but where she regards this as a distinctly postmodern approach to the possibility of narrating a past of slavery (236), Dabydeen’s literary tactics are linked to less recent transformations. In his own studies on eighteenth-century British culture, Dabydeen describes deep-rooted anxieties for what was seen at the time as a development of dehumanisation and an increasing social and cultural artificiality. He notes that the black and the prostitute become emblematic figures of a corruption and an artifice to be at once lamented and condemned, but states that the commercialisation of reality involved all parts of society and all its people (*Hogarth's Blacks* 17-40; *Hogarth, Walpole* 15-40). The process is visible in the case of Hogarth, for instance, whose artistic adaptation to the interests of patrons and the art market Dabydeen attributes to a wish to “exploit” a current topic and “make capital” out of popular feeling (*Hogarth, Walpole* 20). As indicated above, Hallett suggests that the artistic ambiguity of Hogarth’s *A Harlot's Progress* contributes to such capitalisation. The social artificiality and the subjection of reality to commercial laws become in Dabydeen’s fiction a general condition where money, narratives, and emotions are simultaneously assets and means of exchange on a vast social market.

We have seen that selves are textual effects in Dabydeen’s works, but the commercialism that seems to pervade all his representations also gives rise to the suspicion that stories are calculated to gain profit rather than to relate facts. In *A Harlot’s Progress*, Lord Montague vents his frustration over this possibility when he returns after a journey to read a file of newspaper clippings compiled by his wife. The items concern a case of jettisoned slaves from a ship (possibly the *Zong*). As he reads his confusion grows:

> No longer was there a simple and straightforward account of events. Now, each version was calculated to inflate or depress the value of shares. Truth itself was hostage to the designs of stockjobbers, another commodity changing hands at a price. (*Harlot* 199)

Reports are not subjected only to a money economy, but also to an economy of feeling. The dealings between Pringle and Mungo show this transformational commercial mechanism at work. Pringle’s editing is intended to evoke a self from Mungo’s text that will be vital in the abolitionist campaign, and he is
prepared to see this gain in economic terms by paying cash for a story that will provide him with a political and moral high ground. Inversely, this means that the exploited or the historically disenfranchised is the possessor of goods for which there is a high market price, as Mungo knows when he sells his story of “ruin” to Pringle.

This thematic is not specific to Dabydeen’s historical fiction, as I indicated above with reference to “Coolie Odyssey.” Set in the present, the poem depicts a poet crafting and then reading a poem about his miserable Guyanese childhood to an educated middle-class audience. Receiving their polite applause “fluttering like so many white napkins,” he feels that he has sold his background to a metropolitan crowd for their pity (Coolie 13). As the text’s meta-thematic shows, however, the poet also gains from the transaction by becoming recognised as an artist. The complexities notwithstanding, it should be noted that in both “Coolie Odyssey” and A Harlot’s Progress, the exchanges do not often occur on equal terms. The demands for certain narratives become pressures strong enough to lock individuals in social positions that, despite their lack of origins, do not lead to enabling modes of being, as the narrator in Disappearance and the slave in Turner learn at their own cost. Yet, the all-pervading commercialisation of reality means that there is no alternative to engaging in exchange over narratives, and it is telling in this respect that the text of A Harlot’s Progress ends with the “spirit of Ellar,” the village prostitute, remaining as the last apparitional presence after all others have vanished (Harlot 280). The only avenue open is to intervene in the archives that provide the narrative elements. While several of the characters and protagonists in Dabydeen’s fiction fail to successfully make such interventions, the “creative amnesia” dramatised by his texts performs such actions by reshuffling the elements of various cultural archives. This artistically profitable intervention suggests in its resemblance to Glissant’s tracing of “relation” that the absence of cultural roots is a resource in a reality where human relations follow the logic of the market.

Glissant’s social poetics emerges from what could be described as a geographical and temporal milieu, the “point of entanglement” (Caribbean 26). Baucom glosses this as “something like an exemplary or originary space of emergence, a first scene” (Specters 314). Baucom’s alternatives indicate precisely what Glissant holds for his own poetics: that the “first scene” is not a singular event or a specific point in time but the time-space of the Atlantic slave trade itself in its entirety. The millions of people shipped across the sea, the innumerable instances of suffering, the uncountable bodies jettisoned from
numerous ships all belong to the centuries-long “moment” it constituted. The commercial paradigm that underlies Dabydeen’s “creative amnesia” is a similar index of a historical trajectory. Dabydeen seems implicitly to acknowledge this historical inscription in a comment on Hogarth that is as true for his own art: Hogarth “challenges us to speculate and to indulge in a hectic chase after meaning” (Hogarth, Walpole 12). As much as this provides the “essential intellectual fun for the interpreter of his work” (Hogarth, Walpole 12), it also proves a rewarding way of using history. While is engaged in an active kind of forgetfulness that turns against history in order to envision alternative forms of subjectivity, Dabydeen’s reliance on a commercial matrix shows this amnesia to emerge out of a particular national-imperial and temporal space.
Conclusion

This study has dealt with textual representations of subjects formed under severe strain, in often violent historical and personal circumstances. It has explored three different fictional universes in order to chart the geographical, social, historical, and textual vectors that mould subjectivity in these worlds. Considering Gurnah’s fiction, I used the term “entanglement” to refer to the multilayered social and narrative webs that capture individuals and tie them to alienating homes as well as pull them into new geographical regions and modes of being. These mobile social webs create states of pervasive and permanent rootlessness for the characters in his fiction, but the means to negotiate such uncertain existences is to extend the entanglement by creating new social and narrative yarns that can offer at least temporary respite. From the focus in Admiring Silence on the subject’s attempt to create a minimum of coherent self-identity by narrative means to the explicitly mutual constructions in By the Sea and Desertion, I have shown that Gurnah’s characters are implicated in projects of organising self and society through forms of story-telling. Importantly, these projects are carried out on the level of the family. In an environment where nation and race are not primary determining factors, Gurnah’s fiction shows how extended familial networks become the arena for subject formation. It is appropriate, therefore, that Gurnah’s literary vision offers new modes of family, and new “impossible” stories of the past as a basis for more enabling modes of subjectivity.

My readings of Vera’s fiction have focused on the different social and discursive regimes backed by extreme and gendered violence that literally and figuratively break their subjects into being, as it were. They come into social existence as physically dismembered and psychically fragmented. In Vera’s novels, the overwhelming presence of these regimes and their utterly destructive effects is creatively used as a point of departure for a vision of the subject as a form of territorial movement. The characters in her novels, notably the women characters like Mazvita in Without a Name and Phephelaphi in Butterfly Burning, imaginatively traverse geographical and linguistic terrains in order to assemble themselves in haphazard, contingent ways. This movement’s relational aspect is taken to its high point in The Stone Virgin where entities and individuals alike are defined by their connections with other entities and individuals. Vera’s own aesthetics dramatises this movement on a narrative and rhetorical level through its disjointed chronology and syntax.
Dabydeen’s fiction, finally, elaborates a version of cultural forgetfulness for which I borrowed the author’s own term “creative amnesia.” This form of forgetfulness is determined to work against history. Repeatedly concerned with the representational character of history, as exemplified by historiography on the one hand, and the inescapable presence of the past in archives of images and languages on the other, his works of fiction chart ways to unsettle the past by reconfiguring their traces through ever-increasing circulation and reconfiguration. From the cultural stereotypes that interfere with autobiographical narration in Disappearance, to the specific historical and artistic archives invoked in Turner and A Harlot’s Progress, Dabydeen’s works accelerate this circulation of traces of the past. Both fiction and poetry draw elements from various historical cultural repositories and fuse them with previously unrelated parts in a process that is deeply historical yet anachronic. Of the works studied here, the development culminates with The Harlot’s Progress, whose inter- and intra-textuality create a vertiginous pattern of echoes and transpositions that undermine the individuality of the novel’s narrative voices, while also establishing patterns of repetition and change between Dabydeen’s own works.

As each chapter has sought to account for the specific ways in which subject and history are mutually constituted and reconfigured in the various texts, they have also attempted to establish explicit and oblique points of contact between the texts and the tactics they engage in. Some thematic elements, such as anachrony, relation, improvisation, and memory, reappear explicitly or implicitly throughout the study. In each case they have been given specific ramifications, but their recurrence displays the affinity between the writers. This affinity, more generally, is seen in the concern with an imaginative exploration of new modes of being. Gurnah, Vera, and Dabydeen all insist on representing and dramatising subjectivity as open-ended and processual, which makes their literary works projects in a double sense. They are on-going experimental work as well as imaginations thrown forth in the service of a not-yet formed future. Paraphrasing Salman Rushdie, we might say that these writers want newness to enter the world (Homelands 394). I have taken this similarity to suggest that these texts may be regarded as variations on a theme.

There is an additional comparative point to make. Elleke Boehmer has argued that one of the prevalent contemporary tendencies in academic and public debate is to conflate postcolonial states with global modernity. The conflation neglects the fact that the power centres in global modernity by and large remain the same old western metropoles as before (Boehmer 187-88). One way to counter such analytical imprecision while recognising the evidence...
that cross-national flows of people, capital, and culture have deeply affected the position of the nation, is in her view to make comparisons between cultural forms that circumvent the former imperial centres to some degree (Boehmer 189). In a recent book, Ania Loomba has similarly advocated a combined attention to transnational exchange and local specificity as the preferred double focus of postcolonial studies (213-229).

This study is less explicitly comparative than Boehmer’s and more specific than Loomba’s largely theoretical discussion, but it has been informed by similar concerns. Boehmer postulates that a ground for comparison between writers from different postcolonial spaces is the recognition that various powers of global modernity impact very heavily on local lives (Boehmer 189). This recognition is certainly shared by the writers included in this study. In the present case, that ground for comparison is perhaps even more directly discernable. Vera had a doctorate in literature from York University, Toronto, and edited an anthology of African literature by women writers, *Opening Spaces*, while Gurnah and Dabydeen are both professional academics who have written widely on postcolonial cultural and historical issues. More importantly, I have shown in this study that the histories and subject formations at stake in their respective works of fiction cannot be reduced to responses to European colonial legacies, but represent layered and overlapping pasts with varying depth and structure. The texts investigated here engage different transnational and imperial histories of various European and Omani powers, but they also take on the intricate intersections of colonial and postcolonial national and local pasts. More than being literary responses to former colonial centres, they navigate deeply entangled histories in order to work out their literary visions of subjectivity.

While they negotiate their own respective histories, and project their own tactical responses, the textual explorations of subject and history display a number of convergences, similarities, and points of difference. By bringing these authors together in a single study, I have sought not only to discover pre-existing relations. It has also been my intention to forge new ones, by establishing a number of resonances between their works. This conversation, though bound to invoke and relate to imperial metropoles also ventures outside their reach. In this way, my study contributes to a mapping of contemporary cultural expressions that recognises their multi-directional migrations.
Notes

Introduction

1 To Anderson’s credit it should be noted that he addresses exclusion as well as unification. He notes that the emergence of nationalism in the colonies came about as an effect of the “unification” of language, administration, and economy that had everything to do with the imperial centre. It was the denigration of the Creoles, and their exclusion from the culture and society of the metropole that effectively created the ground for adversary nationalism (Anderson 56-58).

2 For complementary discussions of this central issue in Bhabha’s cultural theory, see his “Third Space” and “Culture’s In-Between.”

3 The development of this time is another point where Bhabha criticises Anderson. The nation, Bhabha avers, is always produced as a double form of articulation, and a double “complex time” (Location 143). The cultural representation of “nationness” faces two ways (Location 140). On the one hand, it presents a referential object, the national people, which ostensibly precedes the representation. On the other hand, the “people” is created, at the moment of enunciation, through the representation itself (Location 145). There is an incommensurability between these two temporal axes, the continuity of a past presumed in the possibility of referring to a people, and the momentous establishing of the people in the act of representation.

4 This is criticism Gurnah agrees with. In the article “Imagining the Postcolonial Writer,” he denounces the category as lazy shorthand with unfounded homogenising tendencies (e.g. 32).

5 In a larger study of the early Caribbean writers, Simon Gikandi contends that they stand in “anxious” relation to a metropolitan modernism that is for them inextricably connected to a colonial history (Limbo 1-5).

Chapter One

1 Said develops his contrapuntal theory as a way to escape the “politics of blame” and the “politics of confrontation and hostility” that in his view underlie much anti- or postcolonial cultural criticism (Culture 19). Methodologically, it is exemplified by a reading of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness that notes the “two visions” that inform the text (Culture 27). One the one hand, Said argues, the self-enclosed nature of Marlow’s narrative conforms to the all-encompassing nature of imperial reality that precludes any alternative or resistant version. The empire is at this point “an aesthetics, politics, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable” that does not permit the representation of Africans (Culture 26). On the other hand, the care with which Conrad has placed the narrating event reveals the contingency of this reality and thus opens a possibility for conceiving of other social and cultural forms of reality (Culture 28).

2 Murray’s discussion of the Islamic “will not to know” is relevant to Gurnah’s representation. He argues that religion and the sense of honour create a public silence around often widespread practices. In Islamic societies, public transgressions generally matter far more than private, but
accusations risk breaking codes of religion (by being sins themselves) or social norms (by being untactful or impolite) and the result is that the public sphere is in certain respects cloaked in silence: “Since men are not reproached in public for even flagrant violations of norms … it is difficult for them to be able to distinguish with any certainty what is genuinely secret from what is politely not mentioned” (16). In addition, sexual acts do not bear directly upon identity, and they include complex interactions of power and lust. Older men repeatedly use younger men sexually without being suspected of being homosexuals. The younger men whom they use are conversely regarded as objects of sex – unless they enjoy and encourage the practice in which case they acquire the identity of homosexuals (18).

Chapter Two

1 This quality is also seen in Under the Tongue, Vera’s third novel, which thematises the equally taboo matter of incest.

2 Teresa Barnes (“Heroes’ Struggle”) and Norma Kriger have made related studies on the reception and co-option of war heroes in relation to the war of liberation 1965-1980.

3 The translation is tricky. While it is often the campaign that is alluded to, and sometimes the 5th Brigade that goes under the name, Richard Werbner states that a “popular name for this period of counter-insurgency, Gukurahundi, is revealing. According to a school text-book, written from a ZANU point of view to teach the nationalist lesson of history to the children of Zimbabwe, ‘ZANU President Mugabe named 1978 the “Year of the People” and 1979 Gore reGukuhurahundi, the “Year of the People’s Storm.” ‘Rain after threshing, early spring rains’ is the pre-war translation in the Standard Shona Dictionary” (“In Memory” 198).

Chapter Three

1 For the purposes of this study, I take cultural memory to be a dimension of the “collective memory” by which collectives invoke a past to define and describe themselves. Ron Eyerman describes collective memory as a number of discourses that “intersect” in the individual, and it is this social dimension that makes it collective rather than individual (66). Cultural memory can then be regarded as the artefacts that record and thus preserve such discourses. Benedict Anderson discusses censuses, maps and museums as instances of such cultural memory in the service of the state, but the process may occur at any social scale, and in the interest of any group (163-86).

2 The phrase “loss of history” is intended as a general label. Walcott speaks of “amnesia” as the “true history” of the Caribbean effectuated by the Middle Passage (39), and Glissant uses the term “nonhistory” to describe the broken relation between past and present (Caribbean 62).

3 The term is essential especially to interpretations of Turner (see e.g. McIntyre, 153-55; Döring, “Chains” 200-01; Fulford pars. 18-19). Indeed, much of the critical debate is around what is at stake in this kind of forgetfulness.

4 For complementary surveys of early Caribbean writing, see e.g. Elaine Savoury’s article in The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature, vol. 1.
James and Lamming were not alone in debating the issue. Poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite had approached the problem of vanishing cultural talents that could be useful for the countries’ cultural development in 1957 in his article “Sir Galahad and the Islands.” He continued his discussion in “Roots,” written six years later.

Though Walcott speaks of Catholicism, it is clear that his argument extends to Protestantism as well.

The Amerind segment of the population is invisible in the novels I investigate here but appear in Dabydeen’s latest novel Our Lady of Demerara.

The echo, interestingly, might be Islamic by way of Hogarth. “Turk’s Head” is the name of a brothel in Hogarth’s Marriage à la Mode (1745), a name, Dabydeen writes, that displays the theme of savagery and civilisation that runs through the series (Hogarth’s Blacks 81).

There is also, it might be noted, a Cyril who works in the reception at a Boys’ Home in The Intended (80).

Dabydeen is an old acquaintance of the Jagans, and has edited a collection of the President’s correspondence (Jagan; Mair).

On a similar point relating to Dabydeen’s reworking of his sources, see also Lars Eckstein (e.g. 140). This gives a certain ambiguity to Dabydeen’s claim that the “intensity” of Turner’s Slave Ship reveals sadism on the part of its painter (Turner 8).

See also Paul Edwards’ comment on the narrative shifts between rhetoric of high drama and plain description (xvi-xvii).

Cf. however Catherine Molineux, who notes that the cultural visibility of blacks not nearly reflected their actual number in England at the time (497).

It is this subjection Houston Baker describes as a strategy of resistance he calls “blues.” In his conceptualisation it applies to “Afro-American creativity” in general and slave narratives like Olaudah Equiano’s in particular (39). Baker writes that Interesting Narrative may be regarded as a text “whose protagonist masters the rudiments of economics that condition his very life. It can also be interpreted as a narrative whose author creates a text which inscribes these economics as a sign of its ‘social grounding’” (33).

David Bindman and Derek Jarrett both make a similar point by drawing attention to the way Hogarth managed to create a new market for his art by selling and controlling the prints made from his paintings (Bindman 85; Jarrett 93-95).

This, of course, is both anachronistic and inconsistent with the suggestion that the Montague’s painting represents the same event. As we have seen before, however, Dabydeen is no stranger to such arrangements. On the contrary, anachronism is itself a trait of the (staged) fragmentation and unhinging of memory.
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Subject and History in Selected Works by Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera and David Dabydeen

The powerful influence of history on the present is an urgent concern in much post-colonial literature. This study examines the relation between historical forms and the constitution of the subject in works of three contemporary authors. Drawing on a range of theoretical elaborations, it presents readings of nine works of fiction: Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Desertion* (2005); Yvonne Vera’s *Without a Name* (1994), *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *The Stone Virgins* (2002); David Dabydeen’s *Disappearance* (1993), *Turner* (1994), and *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999). It charts the subtle ways in which history permeates language, emotions, and even bodies in the fiction, but also proposes that the texts can be regarded as creative enterprises that envision alternative forms of subjectivity. The terms “entanglement,” “movement,” and “creative amnesia,” drawn from the fiction, are used to label the methods the texts employ in this project.

While each chapter emphasises the specificity of each text through careful contextualisation, the study as a whole establishes a number of similarities and resonances between them. In this way it contributes to a mapping of contemporary cultural expression that recognises its mobile character.