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## Speaking When No One Else Can: Textiles and Censorship

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Textiles from around the world are capable of conveying sophisticated narration. But in regions where censorship, both in the form of overt government censorship as well as individual self-censorship exists, the ability of textiles to narrate becomes a crucial tool in the discussion of topics otherwise left unspoken. Textiles can offer a form of communication that, ironically, may go unnoticed precisely because of the “innocent” materials in which these messages are told. A growing “illiteracy” to alternative modes of narration such as those offered by the crafts offers an ideal foil for such sensitive conversations. As record keepers these textiles reveal that attempts to stifle free speech in fact do little to suppress public outcry. Instead, artists seek alternative materials and metaphors such as thread and cloth to record injustice and violation, particularly against the female body.

In “The Prison of Colonial Space: Narratives of Resistance” the late Zimbabwean fiction author Yvonne Vera discusses the role of sewing in South African political activist Ruth First’s biography, *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law*. First writes in detail of her use of a sewn calendar hidden “behind the lapel of my dressing-gown<sup>1</sup>.” During extended periods of solitary confinement designed to break First’s spirit, she sought sanity in this forbidden record keeping, which provided a way to chart time and return some sense of emotional control to a situation designed to remove all sense of hope from her future. First explains, “Here, with my needle and thread, I stitched one stroke for each day passed. I sewed seven upright strokes, then a horizontal stitch through them to mark a week. Every now and then I would examine the stitching and decide that the sewing was not neat enough and the strokes could be more deadly exact in size; I’d pull the thread out and re-make the calendar from the beginning. This gave me a feeling that I was pushing time on, creating days, weeks, and even months. Sometimes I surprised myself and did not sew a stitch at the end of the day. I would wait for three days and then give myself a wonderful thrill knocking three days off the ninety.”<sup>2</sup>

Vera notes that, “First’s connection of consciousness to the domestic and therefore non-official realm is apparent in the manner she invites the act of sewing to challenge confinement.”<sup>3</sup> The non-official discourse, the avoidance of predetermined nomenclature and discredited ways of knowing, play an important role in both Vera and First’s writing. In the case of Ruth First’s experience in isolation, anything that could be seen as outside authority and speaking beyond the sanctioned voice and the sanctioned speaker was unseen by official discourse and remained uncensored. This space where the control of the prison system could not penetrate was vital to her sanity. Vera sees the stitch as a forbidden text, precisely the tools of distraction and hope which First is intentionally denied in isolation. “If the stitches measure time, they also achieve recordation. First writes her experience on her dressing gown, which is close to writing her

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth First, *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law*. (London: Bloomsbury, 1965), 74.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Vera, “The Prison of Colonial Space: Narratives of Resistance.” (Diss. York U, North York, Ontario, 1995), 203.

experience on the body. Writing is a pre-occupation for First throughout her prison ordeal and clearly the stitches she sews are a form of writing for her, of certifying and recording her memory of confinement. The importance of writing is to invoke an official discourse that legitimises experience, even though that writing is produced as a ‘domestic graphology’.”<sup>4</sup>

The notion of a domestic graphology is central to this research and represents, in many cases, the voice of cloth. Graphology is commonly understood to be the study of handwriting, often for the purpose of assessing an individual’s personality. Thus a domestic graphology can be understood to be any other similar process that the hand engages with and that reveals vital details about an individual’s experiences. These details may simply be unspoken, consciously concealed or even denied. Many objects can function in this role but, in keeping with Vera’s own reading of First’s work, my research suggests that it is the textile that reveals such details about characters’ experiences that would otherwise be denied by “official” discourse.

In Vera’s own fiction the rhythms of making communicate a variety of structures through which characters attempt to cope with the pains of life. When read as domestic graphologies, the textile structures record events and voices that stand outside or beyond conventional or accepted discourse. In Vera’s short novel *Butterfly Burning*, weaving exposes the contradictions of Phephelaphi’s decision to abort her unplanned pregnancy. Similarly, the most simple of textile structures, the knot, acts as a place where undesired and unordered events can temporarily be brought under control. While order is possible, its presence, like the knot, is always temporary. In these examples cloth exposes the true nature of the unspoken social relations that occur in its presence and, as a result, present us with domestic graphologies through which we can further our understanding not only of the space of the narratives, but also all too common, but often silenced, violations women endure around the world.

When the central character of *Butterfly Burning*, a young woman named Phephelaphi, has an unplanned pregnancy, she rejects her maternal identity and performs her own abortion. It is with a fibre of thorns rather than thread that the contradictions surrounding Phephelaphi’s culminating actions are charted through weaving. Phephelaphi’s actions reject the assumption that the female body is silent and subservient to its own fertility. The woven vessel she constructs and offers her unborn child is the embodiment of all the contradictions that saturate her unspoken actions. “The thorns and the red petals wait together. She is standing on shaky legs near the bush weaving a cradle out of thorn. Her fingers bleed as she breaks each small branch, each tiny wing of shrub. The skin on her hands tears. She leaves the delicate blooms intact. She weaves a nest, a coarse cradle of thorn which she offers to the ground near her feet where a smooth agony flows. The cradle holds her flowing blood like a sieve. The grey and smooth sharpness of each thorn locks bravely into another and rests beneath her body, a tight nest, above it is the stretch of her body and its shiver toward light, beneath her the child, not yet, is released.”<sup>5</sup>

The structure Phephelaphi creates before ending her pregnancy acts as both a cradle and a grave for the life she terminates. The thorns and petals of the stems she weaves together offer a similar contradiction of beauty and pain existing on a single stem.

The contradictory functions of the vessel both as a container and an object that resolutely refuses to act as a container mirrors her own body, her ability to conceive and abort the reality of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning*. (Harare: Baobab Books, 1998), 103.

her pregnancy. As textile practitioner and historian Kay Lawrence observes, “vessels that leak, like the sieve, can play on our anxieties about the dissolution of identity and suggest the impossibility of maintaining a permanently fixed and stable sense of self.”<sup>6</sup> Phephelaphi’s weaving subverts any notion of traditional maternal instinct as well as the feminine, passive connotations associated with the female production of cloth. Here the textile is constructed as a memorial. Unlike mending or making do, this particular weaving is an emblem of destruction. Rather than a domestic tool for family use, the thorn vessel is an object that celebrates Phephelaphi’s existence as an individual capable of confronting harsh realities in order to preserve her identity. While this reading relies heavily on the metaphors Vera embeds in her work, it is understandable that a topic so often silenced by public recrimination or anger, would be written, in part, through a coded language that relies on the textile metaphor to tell the story.

Phephelaphi believes the prospect of a career in nursing is part of her future. The termination of the life her body creates can be read as an emboldened attempt to create a life for herself: a career that will offer economic independence and purpose outside the poverty she currently faces. Hence her destructive act is driven by a desire for progress. But as critic Meg Samuelson notes, “The blood that pours over Phephelaphi’s blank page is not the creative menstrual blood of *écriture féminine* but the deadly aftermath of a tortuous abortion; an abortion necessitated by androgynous society’s control over women’s fertility and demarcation of it in the realm of separate to other self-fulfilling practices. The only way that Phephelaphi, placed in the either/or dilemma of biological or creative fertility, can write herself onto this page is through the self-performed abortion, the closest she ever gets to the nursing career of which she dreams.”<sup>7</sup>

Rather than conceal the body in modest privacy the petticoat Vera’s character wears is asked to absorb an act of intimate violence. The cloth rejects the task. The sheer and impermeable petticoat offers nothing more than an attempt at impossible politeness. Instead, the glistening pink frills reveal the unspoken horror of Phephelaphi’s reality. Within the narrative both textiles – the sieve and petticoat – resolutely refuse to function in the manner expected. This lack of function foreshadows the futility of Phephelaphi’s actions when her brutal attempt to secure an independent future for herself is foiled by her body’s second pregnancy. The devastating reality of this second unwanted pregnancy drives her to finally take her own life along with her unborn child’s in the closing chapters of the novel.

Unlike weaving, the knot is the simplest structure used to connect fabric together. More immediate and less permanent than the weave or stitch, knots are equally as quick to secure as they are to undo. Textile historian Elaine Hedges notes, “For women, the meaning of sewing and knotting is ‘connecting’ – connecting the parts of one’s life, and connecting to other women – creating a sense of community and wholeness.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in Vera’s narratives the function of the knot is the inversion of its commonly associated role. While its place and purpose is to bind together, the presence of the knot seems to refer more to its opposite, the desire to untie and

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<sup>6</sup> Kay Lawrence, quoted in Conroy, Diana Wood. “Oblivion and Metamorphosis: Australian Weavers in Relation to Ancient Artefacts from Cyprus.” *Reinventing Textiles: Volume One Tradition and Innovation*. Ed. Sue Rowley. (Winchester: Telos Art Publishing, 1999), 116.

<sup>7</sup> Meg Samuelson. “A River in my Mouth: writing the voice in *Under the Tongue*.” *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Eds. Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvunga. (Harare: Weaver Press; Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Elaine Hedges. “Quilts and Women’s Culture.” *In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Crafts*. eds. Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt. (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1980), 5.

undo. When understood as a domestic graphology, the knot represents a site of tension, a location where a battle between chaos and order takes places.

Research published by the Southern African Research and Education Trust<sup>9</sup> has shown that when investigating crimes of infanticide, abortion, baby dumping and attempted suicide in Zimbabwe, culpability and blame rest squarely on the shoulders of the female involved, regardless of circumstances. The acknowledgment of rape, incest, mental abuse and the financial or psychological pressure of widowhood are systematically ignored by the courts when the verdicts of such cases are determined. As a result, the female body is legally determined, regardless of circumstance, to be in the wrong. The simple presence of the female body determines and assures guilt. It is in light of legal systems such as these, that the metaphor of cloth, as a system to expose the experiences of Vera's characters, becomes a crucial tool in the communication of unspoken and often unacknowledged violence.

In *Without a Name* Mazvita's act of infanticide is a depiction, through the language of fiction, of the very statistical facts published by the Southern African Research and Education Trust. Mazvita's body is a physical site of crisis, a structure on the brink of collapse, unable to support its own skeleton and therefore unable to nurture the life of another. Rape and an unplanned pregnancy aggravate Mazvita's fractured sense of the world. Philosopher Cathryn Vasseleu addresses the complicated legal matter of mother and foetal rights when she writes, "Maternal subjectivity as opposed to ethical responsibility is based on being held hostage in the paradigm of responsible motherhood. Any deviation from the paradigm slides into an adversarial relationship in which the humanity of the infant is pitted against feminine autonomy. This construction of the maternal relation is perhaps most apparent in legal issues, which consider the relation in terms of the designation of autonomy and responsibility. For example, in instances where women have been found culpable of damaging their unborn children, the foetuses have been effectively construed as innocent victims, held as hostages rather than accommodated in their (hostile) mothers' wombs."<sup>10</sup>

Mazvita's actions disrupt the notion that the female body must remain hostage to a paradigm of responsible motherhood. Assumptions that the female identity is always fertile, protective and instinctively nurturing are challenged. While infanticide is an act of violence against another body, a child's, it is for Mazvita also the death of her own identity as mother. In this way the action can be seen as suicide rather than murder, the killing of a version of herself she could not afford to keep alive.

The manner in which Mazvita elects to kill her child can be understood as yet another effort to order disorder. Recreating the "first knot" noted by Giorgia Volpe and Mariette Bouillet as the umbilical cord<sup>11</sup>, Mazvita uses knots to prevent her child from seeing. Later, a knot is looped into a noose around the child's small neck and is then used to bind the apron she has purchased across her own empty belly and breast. Mazvita perceives her movements as a determined and maternal response to her predicament: "She drew the bottom end of the tie across the baby's

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<sup>9</sup> Women and Law in Southern Africa Research and Education Trust. *Joy and Childbirth: Women and gender-generated reproductive crimes of violence*. (Harare: Women and Law in Southern Africa Research and Education Trust, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Cathryn Vasseleu. *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 103.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgia Volpe and Mariette Bouillet. "Bodies, Clothes, Skins: A Conversation in Quebec." *Reinventing Textiles: Volume Two Gender and Identity*. Ed. Janis Jefferies. (Winchester: Telos Art Publishing, 2001), 37.

neck [. . .] It was bold, this pulling of the cloth and she held on till there was no cloth to pull because the cloth had formed one tight circle the smallest circle there was, and so there was no longer any use to her boldness. [. . .] She had managed a constricting knot from which the child could not survive. She felt the neck break and fall over her wrist. She felt the bone at the bottom of that neck tell her that the child had died. The bone broke softly. [. . .] Still, she held the knot firmly between her fingers, for a while longer. She released the knot.”<sup>12</sup> Ending her child’s life with a necktie, Mazvita recognizes that the father of the child, Joel, is implicated in the act she has chosen. His absent role in the child’s life, his refusal to acknowledge or accept the child, is evident in her choice of patriarchal knot.

Under the Tongue describes the ritual of weaving early each morning and again with the setting sun by Runyararo, the mother of the young female protagonist Zhizha. The action of her weaving frames each day, setting Runyararo’s actions to a methodical rhythm very different from the distorted relations that occur within her family. While these distortions will occur in the future, unbeknownst to the young husband and wife at the time the weaving is depicted, they are, due to Vera’s non-chronological style, set late in the chapter sequence and arguably function as both foreshadowing and catharsis for the tragic events which the narrative unfolds. Due to Vera’s nonlinear presentation of facts I am concerned less with the sequence in which these events take place in Under the Tongue and more with the opportunity of foreshadowing and cathartic repair that the rhythm of the making offers the weaver.

The terrible distortion of the family unit is due to the actions of a single person, Runyararo’s husband, Muroyiwa, who violates their daughter, Zhizha. The presence of incest within the family disrupts the balance of every relationship within the family and leaves Zhizha, her mother and grandmother with a knowledge none know how to name. Incest destroys all sense of balance and natural rhythm within the family. The relationships between husband and wife, mother-in-law and son-in-law, mother and daughter and, most decisively, daughter and father, are dismantled and emptied of definition.

For Runyararo, weaving is an opportunity to create symmetry and balance absent from life. “Pass[ing] the wet thread between her lips to soften it and recover memory” the couple sit “quiet with no words spoken”<sup>13</sup> while Runyararo weaves into her mats all that is painfully absent from her own family. While these creations by no means compensate for or repair what has come between her husband and daughter, they do offer a structure that Runyararo alone has the power to shape and control. The symmetrical weavings are very different from the distorted family structure she was born into, the man she married, and the daughter she bore. Runyararo’s mother explains her own pain to Zhizha, “Grandmother tells me of her son, of her hidden word [. . .] I had been given the gift of death and my method had been to feel scorned and humiliated in the company of my husband [. . .] His relatives whispered that the child’s existence was evidence of my talent for untold evils.”<sup>14</sup> Grandmother’s deformed child, Tonderayi, is considered to be only Grandmother’s problem: “The child was my own mistake and I had to clear it up in my own woman way, with the help of my own kin.”<sup>15</sup> It is possible to read the birth defects of this child as yet another symbol of incest which Grandmother, like granddaughter, has experienced. But even without this reading, the women of Under the Tongue all share in Zhizha’s burden of

<sup>12</sup> Yvonne Vera. *Without a Name*. (Harare: Baobab Books, 1994), 96.

<sup>13</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue*. (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 92.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

violation, required to bear sole responsibility for actions that are not of their own making and are denied or ignored by all the male members of the family.

It is not until the final chapters of *Under the Tongue* that the family tree is clearly revealed, possibly because the presence of incest has stripped such identities as “father”, “mother” and “daughter” of meaning. Incest is written as an aberration in keeping with the aberration that allowed Muroyiwa’s mistaken life to exist in the first place. Runyararo describes a list of euphemisms for the act of incest, all of which refer to the disruption of natural rhythms and natural progress. Vera writes, “Like a hen chasing its own shadow he has left footprints which cover the homestead but lead nowhere. He has stolen the light of the moon and its promises of birth. [. . .] Have you seen the sun forgetting its direction which it has known for many years, turning, in mid-noon, to go back and set where it began at dawn? Have you seen shadows repeat themselves, grow once more where they already grew in the early morning? Are these the unmentionable sights you have seen?”<sup>16</sup>

A similar use of language is present in an early short story by Vera entitled “A Woman Is a Child”. The story tells a much more ambiguous story of incestuous relations, this time with responsibility and blame placed on the daughter rather than the father. “Words are not for forgetting. She has learned a new language with which she tries to forget her loss, words that would free her. She has claimed her body. She has become separate from him. They have parted in a ritual of disbelief.”<sup>17</sup> The consummation of incest is ambiguous, “What has she spoken, standing naked, in front of her father? She has shown him her naked body. A challenge, a taboo.”<sup>18</sup> Along with the narrative’s discussion of the disappointment the birth of a daughter, rather than a son, brings to the family, there is also mention of a transgression that is somehow the daughter’s responsibility. “My daughter has made me see her mother in her. This is not a thing to be talked about.”<sup>19</sup> The short story is difficult to come to terms with, but in many ways it offers an early inversion of what will become Zhizha’s experience in *Under the Tongue*, a narrative that makes no attempt to bring guilt to Zhizha’s character, although at times her father is portrayed in a manner that makes his actions if not excusable, perhaps inevitable.

In contrast to these dysfunctional rhythms, the patient rhythm of weaving is a purposeful and functional action, which allows for the release of physical and emotional tension for Runyararo. Unlike the torn fabric of her family, weaving offers an order she can pick apart and repair. “In the evenings Muroyiwa would watch Runyararo creating her mats [. . .] he would watch the perfect symmetry of her mats, the confident movement of her arms, of her wet fingers, of her lips. The symmetry of mats between her fingers gently folding, caressing every thread. [. . .] She would twist the thread of the reed between her second finger and her thumb, rolling it over and over till it was thin and taut and sharpened, then pass it through the thick braids of the mat she had prepared, and hold the braid close to the place she had linked it to, her thumb pointing toward her chest, and the mat held secure near her breast like something precious so she could examine her thread, what she had created; the symmetry of her mats. She would spread the mat on the ground and flatten it, her eyes moving devotedly over the cloth, she would touch every

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Yvonne Vera, “A Woman is a Child.” *Fiery Spirits: A Collection of Short Fiction and Poetry by Canadian Writers of African Descent*. ed. Ayanna Black. (Toronto: HarperPerennial, 1994), 53.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

part, searching, removing loose threads, pressing away at the unevenness. She would touch the mat with a particular satisfaction, then look up to the dying sun.”<sup>20</sup>

The large flat symmetrical mats have every loose thread carefully picked free, every flaw pulled out of sight. Runyararo’s woven mats offer her a place where she has the power to conceal the frayed and disconnected threads that peek through the surface, aberrations that disrupt unity. Through weaving the mats Runyararo constructs a semblance of symmetry and logic that is absent from the relations her immediate family will inflict and endure. While it is beyond her control to press away the unevenness of the family unit without unravelling the entire structure, the production of mats is admired by husband and wife alike and offers a sense of logic and control painfully absent from what will become of their own identities. Runyararo’s final actions against her husband make the chance of repair impossible. With his murder the family is dismantled, the “flaw” that Muroyiwa represents irrevocably banished.

Textiles are constructed in a variety of structures, from the complexities of the warp and weft of woven fabric to the single strand of yarn used to knit or crochet, the needle and thread of the stitch and the efficient simplicity of the knot. In Vera’s fiction, the analysis of the textile structures produced in the narratives reveals a relationship between these structures and the social interactions that occur in their presence. Through their diverse structures textiles chart and map the unspoken interactions that occur near them, between them, because of them and in spite of them. Without the domestic graphologies these textiles provide, these events would remain largely unheard, silenced by social taboos and fear of recrimination.

Along with the structural insights textiles can offer about the personal relationships contained in Vera’s fiction, the textile helps not only to express these tragic and too often silenced experiences, but also offer some measure of comfort and the beginnings of recovery. Textile production is typically rhythmic in nature. The soothing motions of production offer the maker a sense of comfort in situations where little else brings pleasure and are seen as an escape, at least temporarily, from the troubled and tragic relationships that occur in the textile’s presence. Thus textile production offers the possibility of increased self worth for the maker through the satisfaction the creative process brings. But this benefit must be read against the backdrop of economic hardship where textile production takes place. The economic role of the textile as an object of trade reveals the unsatisfactory relationships that its trade fosters. More often than not the textile as an object and, as a direct result, the maker are systematically undervalued because of the object’s lack of economic value.

Nonetheless the textile’s ability to narrate plays a crucial role, not only in these examples from southern Africa, but worldwide in the communication of subjects that would otherwise remain mired in the silence of taboo and censorship. The voice First and Vera record may be partial, metaphorical and encoded, but it is a start, a first step towards breaking the bonds of silence that have existed for far too long.

### **Acknowledgment**

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<sup>20</sup> Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1996), 92-93.