MAXIMUM SPACE AROUND THE TYPEWRITER: YVONNE VERA AND THE CRAFT OF WRITING

JESSICA HEMMINGS

I would not write if I weren’t in search of beauty, if I was doing it only to advance a cause. I care deeply about my subjects, but I want to be consumed by figures of beauty, by story and character. It must be about perfection. Like a basket-maker or a weaver or a hair-plaiter, you are aware of what you are trying to accomplish from the first sentence.
I must be able to taste the words on my tongue.

Yvonne Vera (qtd. in Bryce 224)

Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera (1964–2005) published five novels in relatively quick succession – Nehanda (1993), Without a Name (1994), Under the Tongue (1996), Butterfly Burning (1998), and The Stone Virgins (2002) – all set in the country of her birth, with a final manuscript, Obedience, incomplete at the time of her death. This article attempts to understand what we can know – posthumously – of her creative writing process. Rather than revisit her published fiction, I rely predominantly on published interviews, material in the Yvonne Vera and John José fonds held in the Clara Thomas archives at York University in Toronto, Canada (where Vera obtained her PhD in 1995) and the Beit Trust Library at the National Gallery in Bulawayo (where Vera was Regional Director from 1997 to 2003). Vera’s comparison of her own creative writing process to craft practices such as weaving, plaiting, and basketry confirms her recognition of the creative energy which informs many material practices. Could it also explain her frequent inclusion of material culture in her writing? This article attempts to suggest that recognition of Vera as an embodied practitioner may extend our understanding of her writing and return some attention to the importance of creative thinking that Vera often referred to when speaking about her writing process.

Previous engagement with material culture in Yvonne Vera’s writing includes Jane Bryce’s focus on the photograph and film techniques (2002); Sarah Nuttall’s consideration of the township and city as assemblage (2005); Sarah Kastner’s attention to the role of the archivist and overlaps between Vera’s fiction and her curatorial work at the National Gallery, Bulawayo (2018). Most recently, events organised by Nontsikelelo Mutiti and Tinashe Mushakavanhu as part of the 1–54 Contemporary African Art Fair in New York took Yvonne Vera’s short story ‘Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals?’ as their inspiration, acknowledging in their curatorial statement for the event that:

the representational strategies and ideologies that Vera was questioning were, however, not limited to those of colonialism. She was concerned with subverting the hierarchies that have become institutionalised in the art world, taking a position to celebrate and elevate everyday experiences and forms. (Mutiti and Mushakavanhu np)

Sarah Kastner’s elegant efforts, as a researcher and archivist, to navigate the material complexity of the Yvonne Vera and John José fonds, have inspired my return to Vera’s voice in an effort to further understand this remarkable individual’s writing process. Comprised of material donated by Yvonne Vera’s Canadian ex-husband John José, the fonds include a variety of material sources ranging from photograph albums to personal correspondence and printed ephemera of daily life, such as notes and receipts. As Kastner observes of Vera’s fourth book, Under the Tongue (1996), her

caracterisation throughout the novella as a desiring subject with a ‘profound belief in her own reality’ unsettles a culture of reception in which the reader is positioned to claim a kind of mastery over the life narrative presented. (Kastner, ‘A (Re)turn’ 12)

Kastner’s PhD on Yvonne Vera and Dambudzo Marechera has taught me to be more accepting of the shifting purpose of textiles and craft within Vera’s writing and hear the varied explanations of the
writing experience Vera speaks about in recorded interviews.

Attention to historical and political readings of Vera’s writing tend to overlook her voice heard in interview transcripts. In her extensive study of Zimbabwean literature, Ranka Primorac observes

in the field of Zimbabwean literary studies, the critical tendency towards the weakening of the two kinds of boundaries – the textual and the intra-textual – has gone hand in hand not only with the decline in the historical and social contextualisation of texts, but also with the concept of local literary intertextual links between texts and different writers. (The Place of Tears 45)

Primorac commits her own research to an extensive historical and social contextualisation within anglophone Zimbabwean literature. As an addition to such scholarship, my interest here is to suggest that the less predictable nature of the creative process, which Vera refers to in interviews, also deserves attention. In an interview with Primorac in 2001 (published in 2004) Vera explains, ‘People forget that writing is not just about issues, such as the ones you and I have been discussing. Writing is also a fulfilling search for expression’ (Primorac, ‘The Place’ 160).

Speaking in an interview with Catherine Hobbs about her work assembling the Yvonne Vera and John José fonds, Sarah Kastner explains the similar challenge she faced in her early efforts to organise the archive.

Determining distinct fonds and making title choices and series arrangements all try to stabilise authorial intentions, and in the case of Yvonne Vera, these stabilizations are difficult to reconcile with her notion of memory, as expressed both directly and indirectly, in her writing: ‘Memory for me is the act of writing itself.’ (Hobbs and Kastner np)

Hobbs observes in dialogue with Kastner, ‘It struck me repeatedly that both archival theory and deconstructive constructs of archives were leaving out personal situations and the individual’s creativity and space to reject or reformulate ideas’ (Hobbs and Kastner np). Vera’s recorded explanations of her own writing process do just this — articulate her own creativity as an individual, but at times reject and reformulate her explanations of elements of the creative writing process. This leaves us with a complex legacy of explanations which fluctuate between describing the embodied experience of creative writing as something that is not strategically deployed because ‘it’s not there in your head being carried, it’s only there as you write it’ (Bryce 220) and an acknowledgement that ‘you are aware of what you are trying to accomplish from the first sentence’ (224). Such fluctuations are perhaps more familiar to researchers in the visual arts, where inspiration, instinct, and intention are often inseparable, much to the consternation of the gatekeepers of academic rigour.

In stark contrast to Hobbs and Kastner’s interest in archival alternatives that respect and celebrate Vera’s creative mind, Charles R Larson offers a dangerously small reading of what creativity entails when, after learning that Vera was HIV-positive, he rereads her writing for biographical clues. In his obituary published in Wasafiri several years after Vera’s death, Larson writes, ‘I cannot help concluding, however, that when Yvonne Vera delivered her address she was articulating a plea for help. I, for one, failed to realise what she needed’ (5). Larson’s patronising insight clashes with my personal experience of hearing Yvonne Vera speak in May of 2003 at the ‘Versions and Subversions in African Literatures’ conference at Humboldt University, Berlin. At the conference an audience member asked Vera how much personal biography informed her work. Her ironic response confirmed the impossible: yes, she had died all these deaths. A similar response is recorded by Primorac in her interview with Vera,

And often people believe these things have happened to me. And then I say to them, look, I couldn’t have been the victim of incest, killed my child, had an abortion, been a spirit medium, committed suicide, and still be talking to you. (‘The Place’ 160)

While Vera refers to her need to ‘taste the words on my tongue’ (Bryce 224), tying the creative process to literal experience denies the significant function of imagination, an imagination I see draws on material culture as a touchstone and recurring source of inspiration.

The historian Terrance Ranger similarly acknowledges the distance between Vera’s fiction and an autobiographical reading when he writes,

The contrast [to Zimbabwean author Shimmer Chinodya] with Vera is striking. In her books she imagines things that
Much like the response Primorac records in her interviews and Ranger explains, the voice I remember in Berlin sounded tired of equating her writing to personal experience alone — an irritation Larson’s perspective posthumously places back on Vera by erroneously hearing a cry for help. In contrast, Kastner writes:

Holding up the signs without closing off interpretation or assuming a clear, causal relation between her HIV-positive diagnosis and her writing habits, means resisting readings that collapse her physical body with her body of work in such a way that her writing becomes a series of clues to be symptomatically mined by literary scholars. (‘Only Words’ 216)

Vera put material culture to use throughout her published fiction, but her engagement with the physical stuff that enters her writing reflects less the current wave of political craft scholarship and perhaps more an opportunity to work with the beauty of details provided both by horrific violence and the everyday. In Vera’s penultimate publication Butterfly Burning, Ranger acknowledges that the story is ‘written in the pauses of the historian’s narrative, at a moment when everyone expects something to happen but nothing has’ (Primorac, ‘Iron Butterflies’ 103 quoting Ranger, ‘The Fruits’ 697). Vera herself explained of Butterfly Burning:

It was a period of anticipation rather than action, so it gave me the chance to concentrate on the everyday aspects of people’s development without having to embroil the plot in politics. (qtq. in Anon, ‘Fuellimg’)

Her acknowledgement that Butterfly Burning seeks to deflect expectations suggests another reason why material culture may have provided such ongoing inspiration in the development of her narratives. Ranger observed, ‘Time and time again [Vera] speaks of academic History as a burden or as an obstacle’ (‘History’ 204).

Heeding Kastner’s warning, I also hear other versions of expectation in email correspondence between Ranger and Vera in the year before she died. In response to the manuscript she was writing at the time of her death, provisionally titled Obedience, Ranger writes:

Here, as in the rest of my comments, you must remember that I am only a historian and not a literary critic. I do not have Irene’s [Staunton, publisher of Baobab Books] gifts and skills. So maybe the symbols of the birds and the bridges remain with sensitive readers and don’t need any explanation.

Maybe these questions arise because I expect — wanted, I suppose — the book to be more ‘political’ than it is! (Ranger, Email)

Listening to the voice Vera offers us in interviews discussed in the following section, we receive a reminder that Vera’s authorial intent often dwelt in the embodied experience of writing. This experience is described as a physical as much as intellectual art, often initially inspired by relatively mundane details drawn from the everyday. As Ranger self-checks above, this occurred despite increasing expectations that her writing service motivations beyond creative expression.

**WRITING LIFE**

In interviews and lectures Vera repeatedly articulated her embodied experience of writing. For her lecture at the Indaba 2000 in Harare she began by referring to one of few stories in which she does refer to her own body, ‘Writing Near the Bone’:

I often state that I learnt to write by scrawling the surface of my body with matchsticks and fingernails till I bled. I wrote my name and my hopes down, then a few mistruths. I felt free. Then histories intruded. (Vera, ‘The Writer’s Place’ 25)

In the closing lines of the lecture, Vera returns to celebrate the materials of a writing practice:

A writer’s world, finally, is an invented one, even when seeming true, even when the backdrop is familiar or its characters. For me it must be a vision of beauty even in the worst ugliness. Finally, in any time and circumstance, the writer celebrates phrase, metaphor, image, paragraph. (‘The Writer’s Place’ 29)

Vera’s reminder of the craft of invention that creative writing demands is sage, particularly considering the frequency with which interviewers questioned her biographical relationship to her writing. For example, when John Verkis asks Vera about the relationship
between her characters’ identities as Shona speakers and her own cultural background she responds, ‘I’ve always written out of emotion’ (Verkis 11). One of the most poignant examples of this approach can be found in her description of how she approached the writing of infanticide in Without a Name (1994).

Speaking in an interview with Jane Bryce, Vera explains:

I’ve always been visually oriented, and before I worked at the National Gallery, perhaps my larger influence was film, and how images are prepared, constructed and made to move. I also have a strong leaning towards photography. (Bryce 219)

Vera then goes on to describe the inspiration for writing Without a Name (1994) beginning with a mental image of ‘a woman throwing a child on her back … Then I change one aspect: that the child is dead’:

This moment, frozen like that, is so powerful that I can’t lose sight of it, visually or emotionally. From it I develop the whole story, the whole novel: how do we get to this moment when the mother does this? Everything ripples around that, the story grows out of the image. I don’t even have the story at the beginning. I have only this cataclysmic moment, this shocking, painful moment, at once familiar and horrifying because of one change of detail which makes everything else tragic. For me, an entire history is contained in such a moment. (Bryce 219)

Vera’s explanation of how she began work on Butterfly Burning is similar. A woman she had met carried with her a photograph of her sister who had died in a fire: ‘Sometimes it’s a detail that falls into my lap when I’m writing and I know I can’t write about anything else but this detail’ (Hunter 85). Speaking of the murder of Thenjiwe and mutilation of Nonceba, sisters in Vera’s last novel The Stone Virgins (2002) in her interview with Bryce, Vera offers an explanation that could easily apply across all her writing: ‘I have to enable it to be read, when it is encountered, as an astounding, beautiful, creative experience’ (Bryce 224). This desire to craft language that contains beauty even when dealing with the horrific, and surprisingly mundane, is also explained in her interview with Verkis:

Sometimes it should almost appear incidental, as you are writing, that you have a high moral thing … You are not particularly an activist, as a writer, you have an aesthetic that is primary. (Verkis 13)

In Primorac’s interview with Vera she searches for other concrete intentions in Vera’s writing, but is instead met with evocative descriptions of the embodied feeling of the creative writing process:

RP: So to go back to the question of readers. Do you think about ‘here’ and ‘there’? Are you aware of any doubleness, thinking, there is a need for me to say things to Zimbabweans about Zimbabwe, but it’ll also be heard outside?

VY: No. My first commitment is to the act of writing. Especially finding a voice for a particular story. And once I have it, I’m so liberated and excited that I’m not considering the audience. I’m considering the characters, the story, the voice I found, the language I found. When it’s finished, I always think a book will find its audience. (‘The Place’ 164)

Vera dwells on her craft — the experience of being in the making of writing as a primary concern. Primorac goes on to remark, ‘You sound like [Dambudzo] Marechera’, to which Vera responds again with descriptions of how the action of writing makes her feel:

Do I? I don’t know. I’ve only met him once for two minutes, in ’87. And I’m glad for that meeting. But I think I miss him — Marechera, who I don’t know. Because I think he would have understood why we write. The pursuit, you know, of writing. How your heart beats as you write. How it should beat. You must feel it, you know. You must feel it and experience it as something which transforms you. I always feel, with each paragraph that I write, I have to be at a new threshold. Either in my own mental state, or in the voice and the language, in what I have discovered about the character, about the moment, about the art of writing, the act of writing. Paragraph by paragraph. I feel transformed. And I always feel at the end of the day, when I manage to write, I panic, my heart beats, and I think, if I had not written today, I would not be where I am right now, right now, this moment. But people don’t know that, you know. They just read, sometimes, and they just know a theme, they think everything is in advance, you know, of the act … But it isn’t. (165)

After Vera’s description of the emotional action of writing Primorac does not show an interest in continuing the line of conversation, instead responding, ‘How about [Chenjeri] Hove? He is another Zimbabwean man who has written a lot about women. Can you comment on his writing?’ (165).
Rather than tracing a literary lineage in Vera’s work as Primorac research provides, Kastner has observed that the narrative Vera builds for her last published novel *The Stone Virgins* (2002) and her curatorial work at the National Gallery in Bulawayo share much in common. Kastner concludes that ‘the gallery space acted as an extension of the textual space of her novel *The Stone Virgins*, written concomitantly’ (‘A (Re)turn’ 32). For example, the ‘Thatha Camera’ exhibition, curated by Vera and exhibited during 1999 and 2000, invited the public to bring their own photographs of Bulawayo to the gallery for display. Reviews were positive (see Banafa; Anon, ‘Exhibition’; Anon, ‘Fuelling’; Pambili; Toni; Moyo) and the exhibition run was extended significantly due to public interest.

Despite economic hardship, Vera referred to the considerable creative fulfilment she felt during this period (see Beauchemin). But amongst the acclaim, one review raises the criticism that:

> while it is useful to see the photographs as an expression of ‘desire’, township life of the 1960s and the 1970s tends to be romanticised ... the photographs’ expression of ‘desire’ lacks historical placing ... no information is given on the practice of photography. (Schmidt 267–69)

It is striking how similar this critique of Vera’s curatorial approach chimes with Ranger’s fear that the meaning of symbols needs explanation for readers like himself and his hope for more political content behind her words. For Schmidt, Vera’s curatorial voice is insufficiently secured. Conventional expectations seem to overshadow the compelling nature of the creative risks Vera undertook in both her writing and curatorial work.

Vera’s curatorial eye is of interest when considering the fiction she wrote because it is often physical objects that assist her characters’ comprehension of events around them. For example, in an interview with Eva Hunter in March of 1998, Vera describes the development of the character we will meet as Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning*:

> Right now I am writing about a character who cannot believe in things until she’s got an object. So when somebody throws a brick through her window, she takes it and she keeps it under her bed and she touches the brick quite often and then she can believe that somebody threw it through her window. (Hunter 84)

By the time *Butterfly Burning* is published the scene refers to a stone, rather than a brick, but the proof physical objects provide remains crucial:

> Phephelaphi pulled the stone toward her and held it. It has not been broken though it had been flung through the window and straight on to the opposite wall, then back to the bed where she lay. Only one edge of it was chipped. The events she remembered were true. Here was the object; and the time ... She had picked the stone from the bed where it had fallen and carefully turned it in her hand ... The darkness made her doubt each detail. A portion of her mind rejected the broken glass, as in a way it rejected the child she was expecting. (Vera, *Butterfly* 94)

The darkness enveloping the room has the potential to overwrite events, just as Phephelaphi’s mind too wants to be able to reject more than one event — the mundane object which has shattered the glass, but perhaps more importantly her unwanted pregnancy. Vera uses the visceral sensation of touch to confirm that the events in Phephelaphi’s memory are tangible, are real. Vera acknowledges the importance of sensory evidence for her character Phephelaphi; I would venture that she also drew, quite often, from sensory evidence as a source of inspiration for her writing. Tracing this pattern in explanations about her writing perhaps helps to shed light on what, most recently, Nontsikelelo Mutiti and Tinashe Mushakavanhu see as Vera’s ability to ‘celebrate and elevate everyday experiences and forms’ (Mutiti and Mushakavanhu np).

Finding something physical is how Vera ends her last published work, *The Stone Virgins* (2002) with Cephas, a character who ‘works for the archives of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe’ (163). In the closing lines of the novel Vera writes:

> He [Cephas] must retreat from Nonceba, perhaps he has become too involved in replicating histories. He should stick to restorations of ancient kingdoms, circular structures, bee-hive huts, stone knives, broken pottery, herringbone walls, the vanished pillars in an old world. A new nation needs to restore its past. His focus, the bee-hive hut, to be installed at Lobengula’s ancient kraal in KwoBulawayo the following year. His task is to learn to recreate the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet, and dry, the way grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool livable places within; deliverance. (165)
Terrance Ranger writes of how moving, as a historian, he found the closing lines of The Stone Virgins confirming: ‘Today the beehive huts at kwoBulawayo have been built’ (‘History’ 216).

In an audio interview describing the months prior to her departure from the National Gallery in Bulawayo in 2003, Vera describes her need to remain physically connected to her surroundings. Echoing her earlier observation that ‘sometimes we need to go back and find something physical’, she explains:

I have to see and to sense memorable and tangible things that come to you as you observe people. And the pain that you harbour as you watch them, as you participate in a life with them … as a writer it is my role to absorb and to synthesise those experiences that are at the ground.

(Beauchemin np)

Reflecting on her decision to resign as Regional Director of the National Gallery in Bulawayo, Vera advocates for the work and freedom needed by the artist. It is a request that we should perhaps heed not as she intends in her appreciation of the artistic work of others, but also when we return to read her own writing:

There should be no prescriptions for artists. I would never be one to say artists should say this or that or do this or that … I remember Marechera saying I want the maximum space around my typewriter, maximum space, you know. An artist must be given that liberty to explore whatever subject they wish no matter what the times are. So, I simply think that sometimes you cannot escape the times you are living in and that percolates into your work. And I have, you know, written about things that have happened in Zimbabwe, like the book called The Stone Virgins, not because I thought it was my task to do so, but because I felt a deep inspiration to do so. (Beauchemin np)

Vera speaks of the freedom to write and for an author to select content of their choosing pulled by creative inspiration more than strategic planning.

**SOAPSTONE BIRDS**

It is these experiences at the ground — physical anchors to ‘important and violent events’ — that Vera is writing in Obedience, her final work incomplete at the time of her death in 2005. Multiple drafts of the manuscript are held in the Clara Thomas archives and while the work is unfinished, one scene reads as particularly complete. Over a handful of pages Vera describes the ruins of the Great Zimbabwe, today an abandoned site of creativity. She lists the former inhabitants as ‘artisans, sculptors, woodcarvers, stonemasons, weavers and potters’ (Obedience manuscript) — a list striking in its shared attention to material culture and craft as the closing paragraph of The Stone Virgins. In selecting the Great Zimbabwe, Vera is writing about a tangible site known to have contained a vast range of material culture, but a site fraught with varied and unresolved professional opinions about its history and meaning (see Beach).

In response to the descriptions of craft in Obedience, Kastner suggests that Vera is working to celebrate other forms of knowledge:

Vera suggests that the resurrection of the past is more than reclaiming territory by re-possessing and nationalizing land and resources, and that instead it could be about reclaiming greatness of another more intangible, creative nature. (‘Writing Against’ 11)

Unlike Kastner, I see the creative nature — particularly of craft — as utterly tangible. But I find Kastner’s acknowledgement of greatness in the artistic, rather than the political or national, a compelling explanation of Vera’s choice of setting in what became her final writing. An unusual variety of material artefacts were found in the Great Zimbabwe (Huffman 72), despite the site being over 400 kilometres from the coast of the Indian Ocean. Vera incorporates many of the materials found there in her writing:

They take gold bracelets and anklets and place them beneath rock, they take thousands of glass beads and cast them in all directions of the wind: they challenge memory. Glass beads? Were they traders? (Obedience manuscript np)

Rather than fix facts, Vera’s artefacts suggest movement, change, and creativity. In this final fragment of Vera’s writing, material objects challenge, rather than confirm, memory.

Vera describes her own fascination with other creative mind(s) of the past, writing of the soapstone birds (which appear on Zimbabwe’s post-independence insignia ranging from coins to the national flag) as ‘the trace of a human being enraptured by
the notion of flight' and speculating that a miner too had tried to imagine the sculptor of these birds:

Who was he? Soft, slippery, the touch of soapstone held against his skin. He tries to imagine the state of mind of a man who made over one hundred and fifty birds, and buried them, one by one. He looks about him; searches for footsteps of a dead man. He feels delirious. (*Obedience* manuscript np)

Vera uses this trace to write her own version of history and imagines the moment when the birds look 'newly hatched' and take flight:

The thumb-sized birds he clutches with awe seem to have left his custody and pitched on the rim of the outer wall of the enclosure. They now squat above him, enlarged. ...

There are soap stone monoliths all over the wall, even these, by their height alone, feel portentous. (*Obedience* manuscript np)

A copy of Edward Matenga’s book *The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Symbols of a Nation* is held in the Yvonne Vera fonds with passages physically describing the birds marked in pencil. In her writing, Vera elides two archaeological finds into one living moment, allowing ‘150 soapstone figurines ... removed in 1905 from the Alter Site, a *zimbabwe* site near Matare’ (*Matenga, The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Symbols 57*) to fly approximately 227 kilometres south-west, growing in individual size but reduced in number, to land as the soapstone bird monoliths found at the Great Zimbabwe. Eight soapstone bird carvings are known to exist today. Seven are now in Zimbabwe, while one remains in Groote Schuur, the former home of Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town, South Africa (*Matenga, The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Archaeological*).

The fact that the actual number of large soapstone birds remains unresolved by scholarship (*Matenga, ‘The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Archaeological’ 100*) sits well with Vera’s desire to move and morph the birds, to use material culture as inspiration, but also a challenge, to memory. Vera captures the crude moment when the top of one soapstone carving is broken away: ‘Finding the bird too heavy to carry the miner breaks off the column and discards it. He is a practical man, after all’ (*Obedience* manuscript np). History attributes the removal of the first soapstone bird to Willie Posselt, a hunter and trader rather than a miner, who acquired the sculpture from Great Zimbabwe in 1886 (*Matenga, ‘The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Archaeological’ 70*) and later sold it to Cecil Rhodes where it remains today in the private collection of the Groote Schuur estate (72).

Today all but one of the known soapstone birds have returned to the Great Zimbabwe, but not without controversy. A Belgian exhibition in 1998 temporarily brought together the top half of one bird held by Zimbabwe with the matching column held by a museum in Berlin and ‘the handover by Germany to Zimbabwe in 2003, of a half Zimbabwe bird that had been kept in Europe for more than a century’ (*Matenga, ‘The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Archaeological’ 22*) presumably occurred while Vera was working on the *Obedience* manuscript. Zimbabwean filmmaker and author Tsitsi Dangarembga, with Olaf Koschke, created for German television in 1998 *Zimbabwe Birds* and Koschke credits their interview with the German Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz as prompting the recorded statement which began negotiations around the return of the lower fragment. While the fragment became a permanent loan to Zimbabwe National Museums and Monuments several years later (Koschke), the gesture was marred for some by Mugabe’s use of the object for nationalist rhetoric (Kastner, Email).

When Vera chose to give flight to the soapstone birds, she was continuing a line of thinking present throughout her writing, but perhaps clearest in the closing passages of her previous novel *The Stone Virgins*. From recreating the beehive huts, she imbues the soapstone birds with flight. Her writing about the Great Zimbabwe is arguably another example of her instinct to inspire her creative process through material culture, to provide as she described Phephelaphi’s need for ‘evidence of the senses’ (Hunter 84), but she chose strikingly precarious objects in the fraught and contested history of the soapstone birds.

**CONCLUSION**

At the outset of this writing, I acknowledged my debt to Sarah Kastner’s treatment of the Yvonne Vera and John José fonds and by extension Vera’s fiction as
intentionally unstable. Rather than a frustration I can now see – and marvel – at the instability Vera’s choice of material culture in Obedience hoped to offer the reader. The complex Yvonne Vera and John José fonds are now another form of material culture through which the legacy of Yvonne Vera’s writing has been made available to the public. But following Kastner’s reading of Under the Tongue, which ‘unsets’ a culture of reception in which the reader is positioned to claim a kind of mastery over the life narrative presented’ (‘Only Words’ 224), I remain acutely aware that my efforts to trace the inspiration material culture provided Vera’s writing may smack of yet another attempt at mastery.

If one of the marvels of Vera’s writing is her ability to bestow beauty on circumstances of horrific violence, her recourse to material culture may have supported her construction of such scenes with unusual dignity. Speaking of Butterfly Burning during her interview with Hunter, Vera explains:

Now that you’ve asked me about memory and truth, I realise that that is what is going on with my current character and that is what goes on generally, though not with such an elaborate intention, when we actually keep objects. But when it comes to very important and violent events, I think sometimes we do need to go back and find something physical. (84)

Perhaps my journeys to Toronto and Bulawayo have also been a need ‘to go back and find something physical’? Nonetheless, I wish to ask if it is possible to recover some space for reading Yvonne Vera as the creative practitioner she repeatedly voiced when interviewed. It is a voice that has been of less interest to scholarship than many other aspects of her oeuvre, but I feel it is an aspect of her legacy that deserves at least a portion of our attention.

NOTE
[1] Fonds are archived documents grouped according to shared origin that may reflect daily life.

WORKS CITED
Anon. ‘Exhibition of Pre-independence Photos Opens’. CHN 1 Nov. 1999. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.

______. ‘Fueling the Flames of Freedom’. The Bulletin Nov. 1998. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.

Bafana, Busani. ‘Thatha Camera Evokes the Art of Photography’. Independent 5 Nov. 1999. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.

Beach, David. ‘Cognitive Archaeology and Imaginary History at Great Zimbabwe’. Current Anthropology 39.1 (1998): 47–72.

Beauchemin, Eric. ‘Yvonne Vera, Zimbabwean Author’. YouTube 29 July 2018. Accessed 5 Mar. 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UDUFEMjVQO>.

Bryce, Jane. ‘Interview with Yvonne Vera, 1 August 2000, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe: “Survival Is in the Mouth”’. Signs and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera. Ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinka. Harare: Weaver Press and Oxford: James Currey, 2002. 217–26.

Dangarembga, Tsitsi and Olaf Koschke. Zimbabwe Birds. Nyerai Films. 1998.

Hobbs, Catherine and Sarah Kastner. ‘Literary Archives, Fictional Truths and Material(real)ities: The Yvonne Vera Project — Catherine Hobbs and Sarah Kastner’. NOMOREPOTLUCKS. Accessed 2 June 2019 <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/literary-archives-fictional-truths-and-materialrealities-the-yvonne-vera-project-catherine-hobbs-and-sarah-kastner/>.

Huffman, Thomas N. ‘The Soapstone Birds from Great Zimbabwe’. African Arts 18.3 (1985): 68–73; 99–100.

Hunter, Eva. “Shaping the Truth of the Struggle” An Interview with Yvonne Vera’. Current Writing 10.1 (1998): 75–86.

Kastner, Sarah J. Email to the author. 26 Mar. 2019.

______. ‘Only Words Can Bury Us, Not Silence’. Safarids: The Journal of South African and American Studies 17.2 (2016): 213–30.

______. ‘A (Re)turn to the Archive: Reading the Lives and Words of Yvonne Vera and Dambudzo Marechera’. Diss. Queens University, Canada, 2018.

______. ‘Writing Against Possession: Yvonne Vera’s Obedience Manuscript’. MA thesis. Trent University, Canada, 2012.

Koschke, Olaf. Email to the author. 31 May 2019.

Larson, Charles. “Yvonne Vera: Sorting It Out”. Wasafiri 23.2 (2008): 1–5.

Matenga, Edward. ‘The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Archaeological Heritage, Religion and Politics in Postcolonial Zimbabwe and the Return of Cultural Property’. Diss. Uppsala University, Sweden, 2011.

______. The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe: Symbols of a Nation. Harare: African Publishing Group, 1998.

Moyo, Godfrey. ‘Fascinating Insight into Camera-Induced Behaviour’. Daily News 25 Feb. 2000. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.

Muititi, Nontsikelelo and Tinashe Mushakavanhu. ‘Curatorial Statement: “Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals”’. 1–54 Contemporary African Art Fair. Accessed 8 June 2019 <https://www.1-54.com/new-york/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/04/Online-CS_-_Why-dont-you-carve-other-animals.pdf>.

Nuttall, Sarah. ‘Inside the City: Reassembling the Township in Yvonne Vera’s Fiction’. Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture. Ed. Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac. Harare: Weaver Press, 2005. 177–92.

Pambili, Masiyeh. ‘Gallery File: Celebrating the Camera’. Independent June 2000. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.

Primorac. Harare: Weaver Press, 2005. 177–92.

With this model, I wish to ask if it is possible to recover some space for reading Yvonne Vera as the creative practitioner she repeatedly voiced when interviewed. It is a voice that has been of less interest to scholarship than many other aspects of her oeuvre, but I feel it is an aspect of her legacy that deserves at least a portion of our attention.

NOTE
[1] Fonds are archived documents grouped according to shared origin that may reflect daily life.

WORKS CITED
Anon. ‘Exhibition of Pre-independence Photos Opens’. CHN 1 Nov. 1999. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.

______. ‘Fueling the Flames of Freedom’. The Bulletin Nov. 1998. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.
Primorac, Ranka. 'Iron Butterflies: Notes on Yvonne Vera’s Butterfly Burning’. Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera. Ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga. Harare: Weaver Press and Oxford: James Currey, 2002. 101–08.
Primorac, Ranka. The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Modern Zimbabwe. London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006. _____. “The Place of the Woman Is the Place of the Imagination”: Yvonne Vera Interviewed by Ranka Primorac’. Journal of Commonwealth Literature 39.3 (2004): 157–71.
Ranger, Terrance. Email to Yvonne Vera. 11 Oct. 2004. Yvonne Vera fonds, University of Toronto, Canada, fond 2016-034/009 (05).
Ranger, Terrance. ‘The Fruits of The Baobab: Irene Staunton and the Zimbabwean Novel’. Journal of Southern African Studies 25.4 (1999): 695–701. _____. ‘History Had Its Ceiling. The Pressures of the Past in The Stone Virgins’. Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera. Ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga. Harare: Weaver Press and Oxford: James Currey, 2002. 203–16.
Schmidt, Heike. “‘Thatha Camera’ — The Pursuit for Reality. Township Photos in Bulawayo to 1980, Bulawayo National Gallery, 1999–2000’. Kronos 27 (2001): 267–69. 
Toni, Wellington. “‘Thatha Camera’ Was a Screaming Success’. CHR 21 Nov. 2000. Beit Trust Library in the National Gallery of Bulawayo Library archive.
Vera, Yvonne. Butterfly Burning. Harare: Baobab Books, 1998. _____. Nehanda. Harare: Baobab Books, 1993. _____. Obedience manuscript. Yvonne Vera fonds, University of Toronto, Canada, fond 2016-034/009 (04). _____. The Stone Virgins. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. _____. Under the Tongue. Harare: Baobab Books, 1996. _____. ‘Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals? Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals’. Toronto: TSAR, 1992. 71–73. _____. Without a Name. Harare: Baobab Books, 1994. _____. ‘The Writer’s Place’. Indaba 2000: Millennium Marketplace. Harare: Zimbabwe International Book Fair Trust, 2000. 25–29. _____. ‘Writing Near the Bone’. Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region. Ed. M J Daymond et al. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003. 490–91.
Verkis, John. ‘Talking to Yvonne Vera’. Social Change [Harare] 42–43 (1997): 10–13.