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To cite this article: Buhlebenkosi Dlodlo (2024) Within the Landscape: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, English Studies in Africa, 67:1, 34-45, DOI: 10.1080/00138398.2024.2347036

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2024.2347036>



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Published online: 20 May 2024.



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Within the Landscape: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

Buhlebenkosi Dlodlo

ABSTRACT

This paper problematizes the anthropocentrism that dominates critical responses to Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning* (1998). It considers how Vera inscribes colonial issues within the landscape and emplaces nature in decolonial thought. Contrary to claims that most African writers have resisted the ecocritical paradigm, I argue that writers such as Vera exhibit an environmental consciousness. In my reading, I focalize the everyday experiences of ordinary people as they relate to nature in the wake of colonial modernity. While colonialism was dehumanizing to black people, Vera underscores the environmental injustice and capitalist phallocracy that undergirds it. The paper draws from and builds on the growing body of work on postcolonial ecocriticism, suggesting that postcolonial and ecocritical discourses can productively enrich each other in deconstructing toxic modernities.

KEYWORDS

postcolonial ecocriticism; environmental injustice; ecological refugees; colonial modernity; phallocracy; capitalogenic; *Butterfly Burning*; African literature

Critical works on Vera's fiction have largely concentrated on how she redefines the interactions between history, nationalism and gender. Her writing has been eulogized locally and internationally 'for its feminist breaking of taboos in a male dominated society ... and how she brings into focus fissures in the national discourse of power' (Muponde and Maodzwa-Taruvunga xi). This paper writes alongside these anthropocentric analyses by reading Vera's work ecocritically.¹ My focus is on how Vera's fictional narratives focalize everyday experiences of ordinary people as they experience nature in the wake of colonial modernity. In this, I signal a departure from how the mainstream media, social movements and other disciplines have engaged with the spectacular dimension of environmental injustice.² My discussion concerns the following: how has Vera reworked environmental injustices into her narrative, and how has she interwoven human and ecological concerns in her work? I pursue these questions to surface the link between the human and nonhuman, and to interrogate the ways this relationality can be detrimental or nurturing, depending on human practices.

The paper draws from and builds on the growing body of work on postcolonial ecocriticism, suggesting that postcolonial and ecocritical discourses can productively enrich each other to challenge toxic modernities. While postcolonialism traces the continuities

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and discontinuities of colonization, ecocriticism demonstrates the intersection of literature and nature: it 'takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies ... which considers nature not just as the stage upon which the human's story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama' (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii; see also Kern, Wylie). Recognizing the agency of nature displaces the anthropocentric tenor of mainstream postcolonial discourse.³ Where ecocriticism and postcolonialism were traditionally perceived as mutually exclusive, I concur with Anthony Vital that it is the 'history of Africa's insertion into a globalizing modernity that indicates the need for an African ecocriticism to engage with one or another form of postcolonial critique' (90; see also Huggan). However, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley caution, this endeavour should not be a mere 'extension of postcolonial methodologies into the realm of the human material world [since] ecology does not always work within the frames of human time and political interest.' Consequently, 'postcolonial ecology reflects a complex epistemology that recuperates the alterity of both history and nature, without reducing either to the other' (3). It is this refusal to subordinate either that lays bare the nexus of nature and humans in the project of colonization.

Bringing postcolonialism and ecocriticism together offers a sharper lens for unpacking the harrowing aftermaths of colonization. DeLoughrey and Handley point to the affordances of a postcolonial ecocritical lens. First, they posit that 'geography has been and still is radically altered by colonialism, including resource use, stewardship, and sovereignty – issues that have been crucial to independence movements'. Second, considering the binaries undergirding the process of colonization, the 'turn to nature is not so much an epistemological break in postcolonial studies as a continuity with the historical scrutiny of social hierarchies that has characterized the field'. Third, incorporating ecocriticism affords 'something beyond the confines of our human story, an imagination that is essential to modes of sustainability'. Last, this combined framework 'theorizes the question of who can "speak for nature" or speak for the subaltern subject in a narrative mode that does not privilege dualist thought or naturalize the hierarchies between the human and non-human' (24–25). A postcolonial ecocritical lens therefore inscribes decolonial issues within the landscape and emplaces nature in decolonial thought.

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera dramatizes how anthropogenic and capitalogenic activities contributed to environmental crises in Zimbabwe.⁴ Set in Rhodesia, the non-linear plot oscillates between 1896 and 1946, a period that marks the violent establishment of British colonization (1890–1896) and the rapid capitalist industrialization of Rhodesia (1940–1946) predicated on the voracious exploitation of natural and human resources.⁵ Through poetic prose and a series of flashbacks, Vera excavates the traumatic history that characterized the colonization of Zimbabwe. At a time when black Zimbabwean writing was preoccupied with exclusivist nationalist discourse, *Butterfly Burning* shifts to centre the experiences of the most peripheralized – women and nature. The narrative follows Fumbatha and Phephelaphi, a couple living in Makokoba at the height of colonial modernity. The ambitious protagonist Phephelaphi is discontented with the constraints of phallogocratic logics operating at both domestic and national levels.⁶ A concatenation of betrayals from her lover, her best friend Deliwe, her own body and the larger patriarchal system drives her to commit two abortions before self-immolating. Other characters who are central to the plot include Getrude and Zandile, who at different points are

presented as mothers to Phephelaphi. Leaning towards historical realism rather than romanticizing nature, Vera underscores the simultaneous assault on nature and black subjects in the establishment of colonial modernity.

Rereading *Butterfly Burning* from a postcolonial ecocritical lens not only reappraises the text, but also demonstrates Vera's awareness of how colonization impacts both humans and nature. This is what Vital characterizes as 'the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, and how language both shapes and reveals such interactions' (90). My analysis unfolds in two sections. The first foregrounds the impact of colonial modernity; the second explores how Vera deploys ecological features as metaphors to index issues of gender, colonial modernity and environmental racism.

The Toxic Logics of Colonial Modernity

In this section I take Rhodesian urban development as a point of departure to read Vera's inscription of invasive anthropogenic activities within the landscape of Rhodesia and her novel. Before British incursion, indigenous people had an established subsistence economic system. White settlers, however, transformed this mode of production and in the process rearranged the entire landscape. Kadmiel H. Wekwete explicates how settlers set up administrative structures, developed supportive infrastructure and communication linkages in the form of roads, railway lines and telegram lines. Through legal instruments such as the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, urbanization also involved the displacement of blacks from fertile lands to parched soils.⁷ Here we witness the environmental racism that undergirds colonization. Additionally, various taxes were imposed to satiate the growing white agricultural and mining economy labour demands. Both measures drove blacks to migrate either to cities or mines in neighbouring South Africa around the 1940s.⁸

To control urban settlement in Zimbabwe, 'Early attempts concentrated on moving as great a proportion of the African population as possible from town itself into the location and railway and industrial compounds' (Kaarsholm 229). This forced migration meant that African shanty locations were exposed to heavy pollution from the industries while whites enjoyed fresh air in the suburbs. As Mariko Lin Frame explains, 'it is especially the cheaper residential areas for low-income groups near centers of industrial production that are permanently exposed to various pollutants in the air, the water and the soil' (25). *Butterfly Burning* instantiates this toxic urban planning as the black townships are deliberately positioned in the west towards which the wind blows the smoke and effluvia from the factories. According to the narrator, 'their own homes are not too distant from this, from that, and always, they can smell this, and that, and squalor of every kind' (20). Later in the novel we read how

The women, dizzy and spellbound, walk through the night and past the factories and refineries which make nothing but sugar. They might hate the smoke but they like this astonishing dedication to sweetness and so they move a little faster. They skip over the thick stems of burdened cane which have fallen from large trucks in the afternoons. The strong sugary scent claims the morning air and sobers them a little ... They smell the sugar burn. Smoke curls out of six towering thermal pillars and hides the stars. (58)

Through rich visual, olfactory and auditory language, Vera elicits an encounter with sugar that evinces the paradoxes of colonial modernity. A product of ecological imperialism,

sugar cane is naturally sweet and highly calorific but, in the passage, it is burnt and strewn on dirty streets. The women detest the smoke but savour the promise of sweetness in the sugar. I read this bittersweet quandary as indicative of the paradoxes of colonial modernity whose tantalizing promises of industrial goods, mobility and progress remain elusive. And though a pleasure to consume, sugar is also linked to chronic health conditions such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

Yet *Butterfly Burning* transcends anthropogenic concerns as the slow violence of capitalism on the human is juxtaposed to the assault on the environment. For example, in chapter three, as children play, they witness

the fire blaze the sky as the oil tank bursts at the factory site and the men working underneath are swallowed in the blistering flames. ... [T]he fires glaze the sky like a dream, billowing with dark fuming smoke which builds a mountain in the sky, thick and blocking the sun for as long as they stand there. (21)

The fire reduces black bodies to that which is exploitable and disposable.⁹ That they are exploitable and disposable coheres with the racist logic of imperialism. Sylvia Wynter reminds us of the different iterations of humanity and nonhumanity within such a paradigm: to westerners, 'there is Man' and the 'racially inferior Human Other' who is also 'the ostensible missing link between rational humans and irrational animals' (267). Man, therefore, signifies the human and is the measure of being and rationality. Katherine McKittrick adds that 'the other' comprises 'colonised-non-white-black-poor-incarcerated-jobless people who are not simply marked by social categories but are instead identifiably condemned due to their dysselected human status' (7). *Butterfly Burning* depicts this human other as the cheap black labour that sustains the colonial economy.

Vera's focus on gender further invites us to link the fire to Phephelaphi's ritualized self-immolation at the end of the novel. The protagonist resists the pressure of colonial and traditional phallocratic regimes that police and confine her to motherhood. She seeks escape through fire that is poetically described as 'a ribbon of flame', 'an enticing spectacle', a 'glorious and unquenchable flame' (148). The scene significantly contrasts with the 'blistering flames' that consume men as 'dark fuming smoke clouds the sun' (22). Where the red blaze annihilates the men, the gracious blue and yellow flame metamorphosizes Phephelaphi into 'a liquid breeze' (150). Fire liberates Phephelaphi from the colonial economy.

Shifting from the element of fire, *Butterfly Burning* also recognizes the centrality of water in (de)colonial contexts. Reflecting the harmful impact of capitalogenic practices, the only river that flows in the narrative is polluted with carrions, hair shavings and oil residue from the servicing of trains belonging to the Rhodesia Railways (now National Railways of Zimbabwe). We read:

Along Sidojiwe E2 is a long ditch which carries waste from the factory on the other side of Jukwa Road. This ditch is black with sediment, a viscous factory water and oil, harsh yet fascinating to young minds and absolutely tolerable to their senses, going past and flowing, over the other side of Makokoba, pouring into the Umguza River. The children do not wander that far, not beyond the boundary where the houses stop suddenly then yield to rock, to distances of flowering thorn bushes, then further down, land so empty and barren the soil simply slides and falls among a few stunted shrubs, scarcely living. Their houses are much closer together than the bushes, though equally stark. (20)

This resonates with Mariko Lin Frame's notion of toxic modernity, where he argues that 'the project of nation building, the very idea of the modern nation-state, is made possible by the existence of toxins – chemical poisons – that permeate every social institution, human body, and the natural world itself' (23).

Vera also draws attention to thermal power stations (used for the extraction of coal), which are run by exploited black labour whose operations result in the defacement of the landscape. The power stations are illustrative of the unequal power that existed within the Rhodesian landscape. Moses Chikowero claims that burgeoning availability of electricity constituted one of the central driving forces behind the town's urbanization and industrialization that mostly benefited white Rhodesians. *Butterfly Burning* depicts the black experience within this context. Characters such as Deliwe rely on kerosene, a poisonous and environmentally unfriendly energy source, and candles. Here we witness 'environmental inequalities perpetuated by a system where profits accrue to a global minority but environmental destruction is shouldered by the marginalized and impoverished' (Frame ix). Paradoxically, even though black labour was pivotal in the mining of coal, the electricity produced therefrom did not reach their homes. This 'extractive theft' exemplifies Rob Nixon's resource law of inverse proximity where 'the closer people live to the resources being "developed", the less likely they are to benefit from that "development"' (165). The distribution of electricity in Rhodesia was racially predicated. Only the privileged spaces, such as white suburbs and industrial sites, had proper access. As for the black population, electricity was a monitoring tool, only used in streetlights to police their movements (see Chikowero 2007).

In the same vein, commodities like coal, sugar and corn were also produced within the Zimbabwean landscape and yet, as portrayed in *Butterfly Burning*, the black majority struggled to access these commodities. Black Rhodesians cleaned pavements they could not tread on, assembled trains they did not operate and built an economy that exploited them. Fumbatha, Phephelaphi's partner, illustrates this point poignantly having built the city of Bulawayo brick by brick, yet the demarcations in his cubicle are made of cloth. Vera underscores links between urban modernity, environmental racism, power relations and social inequality. This resonates with Arundhati Roy's comprehension of modernity (writing on India's postcolonial context), where 'the orbits of the powerful and powerless [spin] further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing' (14).

Omnivores and Ecological Refugees

Although formulated in the context of India, Ramachandra Guha's stratification of the population into omnivores and ecological refugees manifests within *Butterfly Burning*. According to Guha, 'omnivores draw upon the natural resources ... to maintain their lifestyles' at the expense of the environment and discounted communities (6). He further argues that the land-based projects of omnivores, fuelled by greed, displace people from their environments, creating ecological refugees. The creation of ecological refugees resonates with Wynter's logic of Man as human and the rest as the human other, also synonymous with Nixon's description of developmental refugees, where local communities are physically and imaginatively displaced under the banner of development (150).

In this paper, I use the term omnivores to refer to the owners of the 'NO BLACKS,' 'WHITES ONLY' signs in *Butterfly Burning* (9), those whose presence is felt through massive air and water pollution while they contain themselves behind barbed wire fences. Omnivores may also refer to those who uphold and defend patriarchy while they confine women like Phephelaphi to the margins of modernity. Stratifying the population in this manner demonstrates the unequal consumption of resources and the unequal distribution of environmental risk. Here we witness 'a hierarchical global capitalist world-system that systematically favors the capacity of particular social groups to accumulate wealth, consume a lion's share of the Earth's resources, and pass the burden of ecological degradation onto others' (Frame 11). Others in this omnivorous context are the ecological refugees who live in slums, exposed to all manner of pollution flowing from the omnivores higher up in the economic hierarchy. Etymologically, the word slum has its roots in the Irish term 'slomic', which refers to an exposed vulnerable place. There is no urban planning in slums, effluent is not processed through industrial apparatuses; it is a locale that lacks safe reliable water, electricity, access to sanitation and security. This description fits Vera's Makokoba, where ecological refugees occupy tiny houses bunched together with a communal tap and no clinic in the vicinage. They seek to escape their circumstances somehow, but the grim reality of the industries replicates in their inhospitable homes – spaces meant, but which fail, to provide security, peace and comfort.

In one bizarre scene in the text where a man mysteriously dies in Sidojiwe E2, Vera illustrates how ecological refugees bear the burden of omnivore activities on the landscape. In the words of the narrator, 'The tragedy is her exclusive property, they know, but the absurdity is not. ... [T]hey inquire at the quality of a man who has died through the force of a word gathered in another's mouth' (63). I read the fragility of this man's life, endured in a slum, sharing space with garbage, near ditches with stagnant oily water, exposed to kerosene and other fossil fuels, to speculate that he most likely succumbed to respiratory complications.

Within the Cracks of Phallocratic Capitalism

Frame reminds us that the defining attribute of capitalism is 'its tendency to develop pockets of extreme wealth and vast swathes of poverty simultaneously on local, national and global levels' (32). Those who are disenfranchised by capitalism find themselves living within the cracks of modernity. In the context of Zimbabwe's social infrastructures, this existential compromise is captured by writers such as Charles Mungoshi in his collection of short stories *Coming of the Dry Season* (1972) and novel *Waiting for the Rain* (1975), Dambudzo Marechera in his collection of stories *The House of Hunger* (1978) and Musae-mura Zimunya in his book of literary criticism *Those Years of Drought and Hunger* (1982). While these works are somewhat anthropocentric in scope, despite their ecological leanings, Vera's *Butterfly Burning* is more starkly ecocentric, though without romanticizing or deifying nature, which is often harsh and inhospitable.

Butterfly Burning is a dry text. As previously illustrated, the only waterscape in the narrative is polluted and rarely overflows. Rain is only encountered through the imagination and dreams. In one illustrative case, Vera describes Fumbatha's dream where 'Clouds gather in the sky and there is heavy rain. Umguza is in flood full to the brim. Children

drown because they understand nothing of rivers which are in flood' (14). Later in the text, children experience rain only in their imagination. As they play,

they pick the skeleton of a broken old umbrella and hold it up to the sun as though they have found shelter of a separate and distinguished kind. They huddle under the umbrella and pretend heavy rain is falling and that their tattered clothes are now wet. They bend over, drenched, and wipe water seeping down their foreheads, and draw their dripping arms under their chests to retain whatever warmth they can, in this beating rain. One of them holds the handle of the umbrella upright. The children raise their eyes to the empty sky: it hardly ever rains. (17)

The children's game signifies both a physical and a spiritual drought that deprives them. They are born and raised at a time when freedom and dignity are elusive. The absence of rain can therefore be read as the scarcity of life-affirming opportunities; indeed, Phephelaphi compares her ambitions again with drinking water, as she 'wonder[s] how long it will be before she can taste water', but 'She is in dry land' (123). It is this scarcity of water in the text that signifies Zimbabwe's stifling conditions in the 1940s, what Vera calls '[living] within the cracks' (6).

The cracks of colonial Zimbabwe were widened by the skewed distribution of resources along racial lines. Muchaparara Musemwa contends that racial politics compounded the uneven distribution of water. Whilst whites nurtured the greenery in their gardens, blacks struggled to meet bare basic water demands. Even in the post-colonial era, the Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project, meant to alleviate the scarcity of water in Bulawayo through drawing water from the Zambezi River, remains incomplete because of political meddling. While Bulawayo is naturally dry, the drought is exacerbated by a man-made discriminatory system. In other words, the Makokoba residents, Makokoba being a microcosm of the whole region, are living within the cracks created by human and nonhuman determinants.

Vera's metaphor of living within the cracks also explains the adverse labour practices of the Rhodesian economy:

In the air is the sound of a sickle cutting grass along the roadside where black men bend their backs in the sun and hum a tune, and fume, and lullaby. They are clad in torn white shorts, short sleeves, with naked soles. The grass burns over their palms where they reach over and pull at it ... (3)

The evocative imagery highlights the back-breaking labour that black people are forced to endure. Vera describes every detail of their labour, executed under inclement weather conditions with no protective clothing. She emphasizes how 'The work is not their own: it is summoned. The time is not theirs: it is seized. The ordeal is their own. They work again and again, and in unguarded moments of hunger and surprise, they mistake their fate for fortune' (5). These black men become expendable raw materials that sustain the colonial economy.

Nonetheless, in this economy of 'cold embraces' (3), Kwela music offers a 'curing harmony' (5). In *Butterfly Burning*, the repurposing of garbage is witnessed in the production of rhythm and harmony through garbage to produce Kwela music: 'guitars made out of empty, battered cases of Olivine Cooking Oil. And flutes. Of pawpaw stems' (17). Here waste can be transformed from an environmental menace to a generative resource. The retooling can also be linked to the origins of Kwela music, which is a re-

assemblage of different music genres such as spirituals, Western jazz and choral, developed in the segregated slums of Johannesburg.¹⁰

Kwela has often been read as a music of resistance and catharsis. Postcolonial ecocritical principles invite me to reread this music as an assemblage of junk (literally and stylistically), a recycling of waste into an aesthetic of beauty and survival. My reading follows the waste hierarchy model that focuses on the socio-materiality of waste. This model prescribes possible solutions to waste management that include recycling, incineration and prevention (Hultman and Corvellec 2012). This ingenuity and resilience, which results in the production of music out of waste, speaks to how the colonial precariat survives within the cracks of turbo-capitalism.

Vera further captures the everyday struggles of ordinary people through a graphic description of Fumbatha's room:

One room. Solid brick walls. Asbestos and cement.

Phephelaphi and Fumbatha had a bed though it creaked and sagged and scraped down to the floor. A paraffin stove. A wire running diagonally across the room above the bed where they placed their clothing and let it hang down to partition the room; the bed was split in two, the top half on one side, the bottom on the other. The cooking was done on one side and they bent under the skirts and trousers and sat on the bottom half of the bed and held painted metal plates and ate hot meals from their laps. (47)

Two health risks are indexed in this extract. The first is their exposure to asbestos. Research indicates that inhaling asbestos fibre may lead to mesothelioma, a type of chest and lung cancer. Mark R. Cullen and Rabelan S. Baloyi also point to morbid asbestosis and non-malignant pleural disease in their study of the health risks associated with the mining and use of asbestos. The second is in their use of kerosene, which emits pungent and toxic substances that nurse long-term respiratory complications. Beyond the dangers of compromised and restricted domestic spaces are inhospitable public spaces, where systemic and structural exclusion predominate. According to the narrator,

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 ...

They understand something about limits ...

They help [drunk white] men into an upright and respectable position, then lead them into solid black cars. Then they spit on the pavements and move on. (6–7)

This speaks to racial inequality that dehumanizes black bodies in public spaces controlled by white people, who enjoy the freedom of movement only insofar as they have imposed restrictions on black bodies within these public spaces.

Black women's bodies are particularly vulnerable in these contexts, where Vera shows how black women exist under phallocratic capitalist regimes. To restrict their movement in urban spaces, legal instruments, such as the 1946 Native Accommodation and Registration Act, were promulgated. While black men were accommodated in dormitory towns close to the city, black women were largely excluded and confined to rural areas. It is for this reason that Zandile, a kind of surrogate mother to Phephelaphi, asks her, "What are you going to do in Makokoba without being a man? ... Makokoba is unkind to women like you who pretend to be butterflies that can land on any blossom they choose" (129). Grace Musila indexes this 'gender exclusionary urban economy'

that restricted women to certain spaces, obligating them to apply for passes to visit their husbands in the city (58). For women, the city held hope and freedom from traditional phallocracy. But its hostility compelled them to devise means of cheating the system. Some turned to shebeens and others to brothels, instantiating how 'women construct their freedom and resistance of the system around their bodies, a potent act of subversion in the way they craft their marginalized bodies into weapons for surviving in the cracks' (Musila 58).

Feeling threatened, the colonial authorities moved to ban shebeens, claiming that home-brewed beer posed health hazards to the public. Deliwe, a shebeen owner in *Butterfly Burning*, becomes a threat to the municipal economy, inviting constant harassment from the police. However, as Preben Kaarsholm explains, 'The great pride of the Bulawayo council was the high rate of growth in profits from the municipal African beer brewery and the monopoly of beer sales and of beer gardens in the townships' (10). Yet Phephelaphi seeks a different path of upward mobility through training as one of the first black nurses in Rhodesia. For her, nursing was 'the movement forward – the entrance into something new and untried' (71). But her plans are derailed when she falls pregnant. Under the exclusionary phallocratic policies of the Rhodesian regime, pregnant women were not eligible to train.

When Phephelaphi is born, she is named Sakhile (*we have built*). The name is connected to the land, with connotations of stability and development. Later, she is renamed Phephelaphi (*where do we find refuge?*). I read the new name as a collective identifier for all women characters in the novel. As Phephelaphi explains to Fumbatha,

'As soon as I was born her struggles began. When I was born, she had given me another name. She called me Sakhile. Then she discovered that Makokoba had no time for a woman who was raising a child on her own, so she renamed me. I was six years old by then. She still called me Sakhile, but she sat down often with me and said that Phephelaphi was the name she had now found for both of us. She had struggled.' (30)

Naming, misnaming and renaming pervade the novel, with each instance capturing the socio-economic crisis of Rhodesia. Deliwe (*abandoned*) suggests how women are neglected either by family or by the colonial system. Fumbatha means *hold on and never let go*. One of the streets in Makokoba is called Sidojiwe, which in English translates to *we have been picked up*. The children in Sidojiwe are also crowned with names presaging a better future – Themba (*hope*) and Vusumuzi (*home-builder*). Brought together, these names register a plea to be rescued from the squalor of Rhodesia.

Conclusion

In the novel, characters such as Fumbatha become disposable – raw materials that fuel the rapid industrialization of Rhodesia. Makokoba residents wallow in poverty and are exposed to toxic industrial waste while colonial settlers enrich themselves and enjoy the fresh air of their strategically positioned suburbs. In a narrative that indexes the debilitating paradoxes of capitalist modernization, the waste products of colonial modernization that include industrial effluent, sewage, animal carcasses and even human bodies all float in the waters of Umguza River, the sole provider of water to the dry city. Vera forces us to reckon with the extent of colonial violence targeted towards both humans and nonhumans, enacted in both human and nonhuman spaces.

The importance of such a literary pursuit is one that is articulated by postcolonial ecocritics more generally. DeLoughrey and Handley suggest: 'Since it is the nature, so to speak, of colonial powers to suppress the history of their own violence, the land and even the ocean become all the more crucial as recuperative sites of postcolonial historiography' (8). It is from this basis that this paper has examined how Vera reflects and refracts colonial socio-political realities through the landscapes and waterscapes of Zimbabwe. She subtly and poetically exposes how colonialism sustained itself through the exploitation of both human and natural resources. It is for this reason that a postcolonial ecocritical rereading of *Butterfly Burning* is generative. As Huggan observes, combining postcolonialism and ecocriticism provides tools that allow us to '[address] the social and environmental problems of the present, but also [to imagine] alternative futures in which our current ways of looking at ourselves and our relation to the world might be creatively transformed' (721).

Vera's text adds a gendered inflection to the ecological devastation advanced by colonialism, illustrating the struggles of black women through ecological language. The novel's radical attention afforded to natural elements – water, fire, land – exposes asymmetric power relations, gender inequality, poverty and discrimination. While colonialism was dehumanizing to black men, women had also to bear the multiple yokes of traditional patriarchy, capitalist patriarchy and political patriarchy. My postcolonial ecocritical rereading of *Butterfly Burning* foregrounds the human and non-human as co-conscripted in the violent establishment of colonial modernity.

Notes

1. Here I am adopting the definition of anthropocentrism offered by Helen Kopnina, Haydn Washington, Bron Taylor and John Piccolo, who describe it as the 'belief that value is human-centred and that all other beings are means to human ends' (109). On Yvonne Vera, see also *Emerging Perspectives on Yvonne Vera* (2012), an anthology of essays that read Vera's work through postcolonial, feminist, psychoanalytic and historical lenses. Of the seventeen essays, only Helen Cousins embraces ecocriticism in her reading of Vera's short stories.
2. In his essay, 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa' (1986), Njabulo Ndebele critiques South African apartheid-era writers for their privileging of spectacular representations of reality. By 'spectacular' he refers to the representation of the larger, overwhelming and highly dramatic issues in society. According to Ndebele, spectacular representations extirpate analytical insight and reinforce existing power structures. He argues that rather than centring spectacular events, literature should focus on the everyday, ordinary lives of people.
3. Ella Shohat defines postcolonialism as 'an operation of simultaneously privileging and distancing the colonial narrative' (107).
4. According to Moore, capitalogenic practices 'justify and enable the profit-driven conquest, appropriation, and exploitation of humans and the rest of nature, to sustain the endless accumulation of capital' (98).
5. Rhodesia (the southern African nation named after British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes) was renamed Zimbabwe in 1980 in the wake of independence from Britain. I use both names in this paper depending on the political and historical context.
6. Phallogocentric logics recognise that 'men are the ones who possess power and exercise the same over women. From these derivations, politics is inherently infused with patriarchal assumptions of power that control knowledge – reasoning and rationality' (Makulilo 78).
7. Mariko Lin Frame contends that colonization depended on 'the manipulation of the natural environment and the devaluation of people of color' so much that 'the practices of racism

and class domination themselves must be redefined as the domination of people and their environment' (5).

8. Alois S. Mlambo, in 'A History of Zimbabwean Migration to 1990,' documents how Zimbabwean men migrated to South Africa to meet the colonial tax requirements at home.
9. In his paper titled 'Aesthetics of Superfluity,' Mbembe explores the disposability, commodification and dehumanization of black bodies in the gold mining industry of colonial South Africa. It is Mbembe's use of disposability that I adapt for my reading of Vera's text.
10. In this respect, see David B. Coplan's *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*. Another insightful text is Lara Allen's 'Commerce, Politics, and Musical Hybridity: Vocalizing Urban Black South African Identity during the 1950s' where she explores the origins and role of Kwela music.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my PhD supervisor Professor Grace Musila for her invaluable insights, my colleague Luck Makuyana for the brainstorming sessions, the African Literature Department at the University of Witwatersrand for providing an academic home, and WiSER for the stimulating academic debates. The 7th Es'kia Colloquium (2023), convened by the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, helped refine my work. The colloquium is where I presented some of the ideas in this paper. For that, I am thankful.

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