Tropes of yearning and dissent: 
the inflection of desire in Yvonne Vera 
and Tsitsi Dangarembga

To build something new, you must be prepared to destroy the past. 
(Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning*)

This chapter seeks to bring into juxtaposition two Zimbabwean women writers and a question of same-sex sexuality: its configurations of desire, its vocabularies of aspiration. It thus extends this book’s overall concern with women’s representation into the area of women’s sexuality, especially in so far as sexuality remains the dark secret of the Third World nation. Queer sexuality, in point of fact, probably still constitutes what could best be termed a virtual non-presence, or at least a covert silencing, an ‘unsaying’, in postcolonial discourses generally and in African writing in particular. It is a surprising omission or occlusion considering that, since the 1960s, postcolonial theory and criticism have grown up in tandem with the emergence of a politics of identity and cultural difference, and are deeply informed by discourses of rights and of resistance to a variety of forms of oppression. It can only be hoped that the recent concern in African philosophy and criticism with bodies as sites of protest will eventually bring a welcome change of focus in the field, including a new concern with desire as a possible mode of resistance.

In the African sphere, despite the frequently urgent discussion of how to go about constructing independent identities in relation to the contexts of modernity, fiction has to date kept noticeably, perhaps strategically, silent on questions of gay selfhood and sexuality. This silence is particularly pronounced in women’s writing, especially when we take into account women’s levels of dissatisfaction with the structures of power inscribed within heterosexual relationships. Conventionally, as hardly needs spelling out, the decorum if not the taboo surrounding the airing or outing of gay/lesbian sexuality in African writing has generally been explained with reference to African social norms, cultural nationalism and the status quo (‘it doesn’t happen, it’s not done’). The 2003 conflict within the worldwide Anglican community on the ordination of
homosexual priests, for example, which was strongly resisted by African and other Third World clergy, reiterated if not reinforced widely held views that homosexuality is a western perversion, or even a foolish indulgence.5

With respect to African women specifically, many of whom live with the day-to-day reality of female genital surgery or ‘circumcision’ across areas of North, West and East Africa, speaking of sex rights or the claims of the desiring female body can be emotionally painful and, in consequence, ethically untenable. It would appear that spaces for the articulation of women’s pleasure as self-contained or woman-specific are not easily forged and a tangible sense of taboo, of the unsaid, prevails. As Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi writes, a theorisation of women’s pleasure as exclusive to women is not only socially problematic, perceived as driving a wedge between men and women, but is also seen as politically reductive, having the potential to impact prejudicially upon women’s rights struggles.6 Writers and critics from other non-western vantage-points, such as South Asia (for which, see the conclusion), might well concur, pointing to the host of cultural determinants which in their contexts act as qualifiers and limits to (homo)sexual self-realisation, certainly to the founding of identity on the basis of sexual preferences.7

Within this context of so-called ‘culturally challenging practices’, to quote Nfah-Abbenyi, it becomes clear why the two most prominent instances of lesbian desire in Anglophone African women’s writing to date, both curiously from the 1970s, have both been critically discounted on the grounds of deviance. The two ‘same-sex moments’ are Marija’s pass at Sissie in Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy (1977), and Selina’s seduction of Gaciru in Rebekah Njau’s Ripples in the Pool (1975).8 While acknowledging a certain opportunism on Sissie’s part, Oladele Taiwo in a descriptive (and prescriptive) 1984 reading of Aidoo’s novel, for instance, describes Sissie as finally doing the decent thing as regards Marija, that is, rejecting her, for the reason that to be lesbian is an ‘anathema’ ‘at home’. Aidoo is chided, however, for her temerity in suggesting, no matter how partially, that the friendship between Marija and Sissie implies that women can do without men: ‘If such a situation is tenable in Europe, it has no chance of succeeding in Africa’.9 Marija’s deviant Europeanness therefore is cast as at once sexually and morally, and even perhaps racially or culturally, corrupting.

However, as Taiwo’s anxiety to deny the ‘situation’ betrays, Aidoo’s interpretation of the relationship via the narrator Sissie’s responses is far more subversive than his comfortable judgements give her credit for. Sissie tends to view Marija’s desire for her as part of her exotic and finally disposable otherness, which is concentrated in the figure of the succulent plums that she daily gives her. Yet her initial reaction to Marija’s gaze, which is repeated close to the point of her departure, is to imagine the ‘deliciousness’ of the affair they might have had, had she been a man. For Sissie, while masculinity is bound up with power,
in particular the power of refusal (which she does eventually wield), the vocabulary of her imagined desire also concedes a certain self-forgetting and exhilaration, unmistakably pictured as attractive. The anecdote of the two African girls in bed together which forms part of her stream-of-consciousness on the night of Marija’s attempted seduction is moreover highly ambiguous as to whether their playfulness is unnatural or un-African; it, too, is once again not unenticing. For these reasons it is understandable that, at the point where the two women say goodbye to one another, Sissie is suddenly unable to find words for the emotion that rises up between them, while she at the same time discourages herself from feeling aversion.10

As regards same-sex desire in Rebekah Njau, Selina’s affair is unsurprisingly stigmatised by a male character in the novel as ‘not the normal type of love’.11 In that Selina’s fractured personality is deviant on several other counts also, the narrative appears to reject what it simultaneously also acknowledges, by projecting a cluster of wayward desires on to her, as if she were a scapegoat. Picking up on these signals, even a recent sympathetic reading by Celeste Fraser Delgado of Selina as a complex site of ambivalent womanhood cannot avoid viewing her case and hence her sexuality as, within its context, pathological.12 Njau herself has noted in interview that she was confronted with a certain resistance from readers of *Ripples in the Pool*: they felt the book ‘wasn’t her’ (the specific reason for this is not stated).13 ‘Lesbianism’, observes the critic Mary Modupe Kolawole, self-consciously speaking for ‘ordinary Africans’, is after all ‘a non-existent issue [in Africa] because it is a mode of expression that is completely strange to their world-view’.14

Such silences, sidesteps, censorings and stigmatisations in writing and criticism form the context of this chapter; however, it takes as its central stimulus Yvonne Vera’s fervent suggestion in the preface to her edited short story collection *Opening Spaces* (1999) that the woman writer’s ‘response to... taboo is vital and pressing’.15 She associates this sense of urgency with the important concern to focus on characters’ ‘internal, psychological worlds’.16 By way of illustration she underlines, as Tsitsi Dangarembga herself has done in interview, that *Nervous Conditions* (1988) opens with the shocking breaking of a familial taboo in the form of Tambu’s comment: ‘I was not sorry when my brother died’ – words subversively placed in the mouth of a woman.17 *Opening Spaces* itself breaches several taboos relating to women’s lives: stories broach the subjects of back-street abortion, reverse racism, uxoricide and death by AIDS. Same-sex love, however, the book does not touch. After that interesting moment of emergence in the two mid-1970s novels, the issue has seemingly not openly resurfaced – or not been permitted to resurface – either in Anglophone African women’s writing, or in criticism. And yet, still drawing words from Vera’s preface, ‘the kinship which survives among women in the midst of betrayals and absences’ remains itself a pressing topic to which to testify – and one of its forms of course is gay.
As regards the two writers who stand at the centre of this chapter, Dangarembga and Vera herself constitute for my purposes a strategic pairing: as Zimbabwe's two most prominent women writers they are also linked in their contemporaneity. Neither has, admittedly, explicitly addressed gay sexuality in her work, no doubt for some of the social reasons outlined. I have chosen them, however, because both writers have in noted ways widened the boundaries of what it is possible to say about women, their desires, phobias and aspirations, as the quotations above suggested. As I will explain further, my definition of queer writing therefore will attach not so much to character representation as such, or to content or theme, but to a particular searching and interrogative approach to relations between women, and to women's sexual identity. It will attach therefore to an aesthetic: to an elaborately detailed or, alternatively, experimental and poetic voicing of those relations, even if these are not in any obvious way sexual. Queerness, I will suggest, can find expression as a questioning and/or questioning that takes as its medium a restless and (still now) nameless bodily desire, and, in some cases, is encrypted in metaphor and other poetic effects. I will ask, in other words, whether a queer sexuality may be covertly encoded in these writers' texts in the form of special friendships and special expressions of friendship between women. Moreover, the pairing of the writers, reinforced by their relative isolation in the male-dominated, homophobic context of Zimbabwe, brings out not only the parallels between them, but also the contrasting views they have taken on relationships between women. Whereas Vera tends to be more interested in women in isolated positions, links between women form the foundation of Dangarembga's narrative.

Zimbabwean literature of course represents no exception in the field of African writing as concerns its avoidance of same-sex sexuality – that is, bar a few texts that touch on male homosexuality. In a precise case of writing holding a mirror to reality, Zimbabwean fiction generally repeats the prohibitions on, and consequent invisibility of, gay sexuality in social and cultural life, which Mark Epprecht and Oliver Phillips, among others, have discussed. The Zimbabwean constitution is an exemplary text in this regard for its silence on sexuality (as opposed to race or religious belief) as grounds for freedom from discrimination. Marechera certainly confirmed the anti-patriotic charges against him as a writer when he included an unprecedented lesbian brief encounter in *Mindblast* (1984), which he described as a ‘terrible ecstasy’ and as delicious self-completion. Yet the official prohibitions do not exactly correspond to a society-wide silence. Engaging the discussion of whether homosexuality is un-African, or indeed un-Zimbabwean, the writer Chenjerai Hove, in a comment on the banning of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Zimbabwe from the 1997 Harare International Book Fair, made a telling, language-based intervention. (Although new research questions his etymology) he powerfully observed: ‘There is a Shona word, *ngochani*, to describe homosexuals . . . No
society bothers to name that which does not exist, imagined or real’. 19 Significantly, however, in the very same comment, he undercuts his own advocacy by associating homosexuality with aberration and moral ugliness. As Hove observes, the Zimbabwe government denial of homosexuality was, however, resoundingly exploded by the trial of former President Banana in the late 1990s for the homosexual abuse of his employees. Yet, since Banana has universally been represented in Zimbabwe as deviant, this again has worked to maintain if not to reinforce the taboo surrounding the expression of queer sexuality. Indicatively, many of Mugabe’s electioneering speeches in the 2002 presidential election campaign used homosexuality as a sign of unnaturalness and un-Africanness with which to brand enemies of the state, whether the Movement for Democratic Change or Tony Blair. 20

In so far as it is a charge which keeps repeating itself, I will pause briefly at this point to cite once again the equation of gay sexuality with un-Africanness, but I will do so basically in order to put it to one side. As I said at the outset, this chapter is not directly concerned with representations of sexuality between women, repressed or not, therefore it avoids the assumption that there is a queer African sexuality out there, that may be reflected in writing. Leaving that question begging, it is not my concern to prove or disprove the empirical existence of lesbian relationships in Zimbabwe. Rather I want to consider writing as a site of potentiality for the emergence of sexual expression by women, and in particular of the expression of forms of love between women: for the emergence, that is, of a poetics of queerness. As Eve Sedgwick writes, queer readings are less concerned with how feelings should be than how they change, and, following on from this, how their encodings change. Such aesthetic prioritising favours the non-programmatic, the non-specific, desires that are not necessarily resolvable into distinct object choices. 21

Along lines articulated by Judith Butler, I want therefore to address (queer) sexuality chiefly as a mode of being dispossessed of the self and disposed to others; hence as a widening of possibility, especially of creative possibility, whether for love or sociality, here in the context of interrelationship between women. 22 Adapting from Butler’s concept of sexual being as defined through the experience of ecstasy, of being ‘beside oneself’, individuation (or rights, or autonomy) in a same-sex situation places prime importance on the ethic of existing for the other, for the other-in-relationship: on ‘a field of ethical enmeshment with others’. 23 It is this kind of individuation through love between women peers, even between women friends in an apparently a-sexual relationship, to which I believe the writing of Dangarembga in particular subversively testifies, in spite of itself. As such, her writing provides a powerful alternative scenario of social and political interrelationship to that of the oppressor/oppressed binary that remains so dominant in political discourses – and in the political arena – in Zimbabwe, in Africa, and elsewhere in the postcolonial world.
If for Butler queer desire signifies a different form of sociability through being-for-the-other, Eve Sedgwick, while broadly agreeing, goes further to explore what forms that sociability and widening of possibility might take – forms which I eventually would like to relate to Vera’s as well as to Dangarembga’s writing. Seeking an alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion which, following Ricoeur, Sedgwick sees as dominant in queer epistemology, she proposes instead reparative readings – readings interested in accretion and juxtaposition rather than in exposure; in surprise and contingency rather than in the prevention of surprise. Queerness therefore, she suggests, may be discovered in the experimental and not in the normative, in the contextual rather than the transhistorical, in truculent, wayward or even unfixed varieties of female–female passion rather than in the conventional plot of lesbian identity uncovered or repatriated. As in Melissa Solomon’s reading of Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), queerness may be found, for example, in a female–female relationship in which a woman achieves subjecthood, or gains access to knowledge, through interaction with another. The passion for the female other is the dialectical ground on which identity is sought and achieved.24

This interpretation can be connected with what Florence Stratton, in a discussion of, mainly, Nwapa, Emecheta and Bâ, calls the convention of paired women in African fiction. Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* is pre-eminently concerned with the inversion of the sexual allegory in women’s writing (wherein men have authority and women represent powerlessness).25 With its eye fixed on certain social proprieties, however, her study does not extrapolate that concept of inversion, or the connotations of pairing, into the area of sexuality. Yet Stratton’s comments on the frequent ‘coupling’ of women characters in African women’s writing can nonetheless be productively pushed in the direction of Sedgwick and also Solomon’s suggestions. The ‘familial or social juxtaposition of two [often related] female characters’, she writes, ‘acts as a corrective to the [traditional] image of women which men writers valorize, for it is the radical not the conservative sister or friend, the one that challenges patriarchal authority, who is rewarded in the narrative’.26 African cultures as interpreted by women inscribe ways in which women reach forms of self-fulfilment in interaction with, or in self-aware contradistinction to, the experience of other closely related women.

The Tambudzai–Nyasha pairing in *Nervous Conditions* is, as Stratton recognises, a complicated variant of this trope, in that the initially bold Nyasha is bodily punished for her rebellion. It is a further elaboration of the trope, however, that their togetherness is *for both* the site on which the resistant self achieves expression. Obioma Nnaemeka corroborates this reading when she speaks of the sharp distinction in African women’s narratives between the debilitations of heterosexual love ‘in marriage and outside of it’, on the one hand, and ‘on the other hand, the affirming and empowering friendship
between women inside and outside of marriage. ‘Friendship [between women] has splendours that love knows not’, as Mariama Bâ has written.27 Relatedly, in Vera’s 2002 novel The Stone Virgins, discussed more fully in the next chapter, the intimacy of the two sisters Thenjiwe and Nonceba, though truncated by murder, is described as closer and more compelling than that of heterosexual lovers. The sister is ‘her own breath flowing into her body’: ‘before [Thenjiwe’s lover] occupied all the places in her mind Nonceba, her sister, had already been holding her hand quietly and forever’.28 In the light of these quotations, the question as to why the valencies of female friendship, both non-sexual and, possibly, sexual, have not been more thoroughly explored in African social spaces becomes perhaps even more pressing. As is widely known, polygamy is widespread in African societies and therefore, as in the zenana, women have long lived together as peers and competitive/non-competitive ‘sisters’.

Opening spaces in Yvonne Vera

Like her Opening Spaces anthology, Yvonne’s Vera’s fiction has, subsequent to the retelling of the mhondoro Ambuya Nehanda story in Nehanda (1993), confronted in painfully lyrical ways strong taboos concerning women, and their healing after violation. The taboos include infanticide in Without a Name (1994), incest and sexual abuse within the family in Under the Tongue (1996), and self-induced abortion and self-immolation, a kind of African sati, in Butterfly Burning (1998).29 Moreover, aspects of the forbidden and unspoken are encoded in at least two of her titles: both Without a Name and Under the Tongue signify silencings and suppressions, much as does that notorious expression ‘the love that dare not speak its name’. At the same time, significantly, these are titles which can be construed as figures for female desire, that is, an internal and internalised desire, or a desire folding in on itself like a butterfly’s wings. That Vera has not to date addressed face-on the subject of same-sex desire must therefore have to do with her concentrated preoccupation in several of the novels with the silky textures of a particularly erotic heterosexuality. As The Stone Virgins confirms, it could indeed be said that Vera is one of the more explicitly erotic of the literary African writers working today. This does not, however, close down the significations of what might be termed the excess of sexual yearning in her narratives – on the contrary. Especially in Under the Tongue, in Vera’s fictional worlds survival is characteristically achieved by women through dialogue with other women, in particular with women family members, across the generations: ‘women . . . do not arrive at their identities negatively, but interactively’.30

Taking into account that the defiance of prohibition forms a layered subject in Vera’s work, I have chosen to focus in this chapter on the particularly stren-
uous yearnings of *Butterfly Burning*. Set in 1946–48, the novel offers a vivid dramatisation of a young woman’s frustrated longing for self-realisation — for a selving, that is, as other to a man, and other to the submission to desire with a man. In a powerful scene this yearning is unambiguously brought to a point of crisis in the presence of another woman, the charismatic, enigmatic and ultimately destructive shebeen owner Deliwe. It is she ‘who first inspires in Phephelaphi dreams of independence and free self-expression’.31 By the end of the novel, it is true, Deliwe comes to represent female heterosexuality in an especially vindictive form. Yet it is important to note that Phephelaphi’s lover Fumbatha seeks Deliwe out only after Phephelaphi has already turned away from him, directing her shapeless, urgent longings towards a largely undefined elsewhere — virtually a Lawrentian beyond.

It is a characteristic feature of Vera’s writing that body parts, especially those belonging to lovers, and those in pain, are — like music and labour — often depicted in synecdoche, as disconnected from whole bodies, and thus in some manner as disavowing association with conventionally fixed genders or sexual identities. Bodies themselves insistently ‘long for flight, not surrender’, and disconnect from the earth.32 When in the anticipatory paragraphs that end chapter 4, Phephelaphi distances herself from Fumbatha, she is pictured as ‘in flight like a bird’, ‘brimming with a lonely ecstasy’ (*BB* 29). Such images of floating, rising and straining away from the earth find their terrible fulfillment first in the image of the industrial accident at the oil tank, and finally in her suicide by fire: ‘she can fly . . . She is a bird with wings spread’. Yet this terminal ecstasy significantly does not connect to any fixed shape of love, or specific love object, not even that of her own body (*BB* 16–17, 129). Ceaselessly mixing abstractions and unadorned plain nouns, fascinated with repetitive, non-object-related activity, and the movements of music, Yvonne Vera’s style offers a peculiarly appropriate vehicle for the articulation of such yearning.

Phephelaphi’s open-ended longings briefly alight, butterfly-like, in Deliwe’s shebeen room, in a scene that occurs almost exactly halfway through the novel (*BB* 52–7). Following the loss of her nurturer mother and separation from her birth mother, she is said to be ‘dearly’ charmed by Deliwe, her force, her independence: ‘the sun rose and set with Deliwe’. (*BB* 52) Given that Deliwe has no interest in her and that Fumbatha mistrusts Deliwe, these curious constructions can be explained only if the shebeen owner is seen as some ultimate of freedom, some boundary which Phephelaphi wishes to exceed. The younger woman’s attraction is heatedly described as ‘the bliss, the ecstasy, the freedom spreading its wide wings over Phephelaphi’s body as she stood watching her’. Appropriately, considering the nature of her quickened desire, Phephelaphi dresses herself in a stiff, white flared skirt like a butterfly’s wings to visit Deliwe’s house late at night. Now, for a while, the yearning that occupies Deliwe’s room comes to rest on the sensuous forms of her male visitors.
However, the ambient kwela music unsettles any such identification, and again unlocks a fluid, powerful yearning, one that is both associated with the memory of Getrude her nurturer mother and continues to leave a powerful trace, a furrow, after she has come to terms with the memory.

The presences of Deliwe and music act as catalysts in what is represented as the process of Phephelaphi’s simultaneous breakdown and coming-into-her-own, her ‘finding something else’, which demands that she visits Deliwe twice more (BB 59). Though the chronology of the narrative is fragmentary, as far as the narrative progression is concerned it is after these visits that Phephelaphi takes steps to expand her opportunities. She wishes to realise her dream to train as a nurse. Her heart, it is said, ‘rises in an agony of longing’ at this prospect of a ‘movement forward . . . into something new and untried’. The description of her forceful longing or yearning is worth quoting in full:

Fumbatha could never be the beginning or end of all her yearning, her longing for which she could not find a suitable name. Not a male hurt or anything like it . . . She wanted to do something but had no idea what it could be, what shape it offered for her future.

She could not stop the longing even though she heard the water lapping against the edges, against the rim, as though she was some kind of river and there were things like flooding which could take place inside her body. It was full desire because she liked the lapping on the rim and the liquid falling down her arms, falling, down to her knees. (BB 64, emphasis added)

Responding to a comment by one of the men at Deliwe’s, Phephelaphi feels that what is important is not to be loved but to love oneself: ‘She wanted a birth of her own’ (BB 68–9). It is only when she can feel that she is ‘all the loving that there could be’ that she will ‘seek something more which perhaps only another can provide, and love a man simply because she could’. Significantly, the desired other or loved-one gains a gender only in the second half of this sentence. What is desired seems to bear an unmasculine shape.

Phephelaphi therefore is a study not merely in unfulfilled but in open-ended desire. Yearning, restless, she moves away from the role of heterosexual lover, and destroys in herself, too, with her self-induced abortion, the easily essentialised identity of mother which might have bound Fumbatha to her. Her sexual energy, her identity, her sociality, is directed beyond, to a yet-unnamed elsewhere. As the novel’s ending searingly confirms, she is the self-consuming butterfly of the title, strain to fly, but eventually turned in on itself, its patterns perfectly infolding. Figures comprising image-and-reflection, or inversion, can be read, as Hugh Stevens among others intriguingly points out, as traces of queer desire, that which loops back on itself without ever attaining resolution or articulation. With her ‘secret and undisclosed’ passion, Phephelaphi, we learn, wants to be ‘something with an outline’; and the outline to which her
consciousness and bodily form repeatedly return is that of the butterfly. Even after the abortion she is: ‘Folded into two halves, one... dead, the other living’ (BB 109). She chooses to die because she cannot maintain these two halves in equilibrium, she cannot live with the betrayal of the two people who had become most important to her, Fumbatha and Deliwe (BB 123).

You and you: Tsitsi Dangarembga

Diana Fuss and Judith Butler have both observed that homosexual production, including identity production, can be regarded as analogous with mime or ghost-writing. Homosexual production constitutes a self-reflexive performance, an impersonation of normative heterosexual identities, which exposes the construction that makes up any sexual identity. Throughout the tale that Tambudzai tells in Nervous Conditions, as the first sentence of the narrative immediately emphasises, she is an impersonator. Indeed, her narrative is interleaved with doubles (Chido–Nhamo; Lucia–Ma’Shingayi; Ma’Shingayi–Maiguru, and so on). Tambu herself comes to stand in for what her brother would have been, the educated first child of the family. She is both him and not him, just as she will later act as the good or obedient version of her cousin Nyasha. She is quintessentially a boundary figure, as well as a surrogate.

It is not my task here to go into the different and changing configurations of women–women relationships through which this Bildungsroman complicates both the category of woman, and the oppositions between tradition and modernity, Africa and the west, the family and the individual. Susan Andrade, for example, reads the novel’s dual trajectories of ‘self-development’ in Fanonian terms as figuring a standoff between the self-aware native (Nyasha) and an emergent national subjectivity (Tambudzai). I do want to explore, however, how the central female subjects in the novel support and back each other up, and how their intricate choreography of coming together tracks pathways of desire which, as in Vera, exceed any normative microcosmic tale of national self-emergence. In particular Tambudzai’s narrative dramatically demonstrates how the colonial reduction of selfhood – the deprivation, as Nyasha says, of ‘you of you, ourselves of each other’ – can only be withstood through specific, directed strategies of resistance, one of which entails friendship, another sisterhood (NC 200).

The bond connecting Nyasha and Tambu belongs in the domains at once of friendship and family. They are cousins, who, after an initial period of mutual alienation following Nyasha’s upbringing in England, a period during which they are intently involved in scrutinising one another, come together in an intimacy which Tambu openly describes as her ‘first love affair’. In their shared room, their beds arranged in parallel, these two girls – both separated from their backgrounds by the ‘deep valley’ Tambu also discerns in her uncle
Babamukuru, both, as they mutually confess, culturally intimidated – explore together the risky ‘alternatives and possibilities’ Nyasha first represents for Tambu (NC 37, 78, 64, 75). These are the at-once-questioning-yet-loving terms that Tambu uses elaborately to describe their relationship:

In fact it was more than friendship that developed between Nyasha and myself. The conversation that followed was a long, involved conversation, full of guileless opening up and intricate lettings out and lettings in. It was the sort of conversation that young girls have with their best friends, that lovers have under the influence of the novelty and uniqueness of their love, the kind of conversation that cousins have when they realise that they like each other in spite of not wanting to. (NC 78)

Based on a fundamental sameness, or the mutual recognition of self-in-other of cousinhood (they are ‘split selves’, as one critic comments36), their relationship extends beyond girlhood friendship and involves, significantly, a shift or ‘reincarnation’ in Tambu’s identity whereby she becomes increasingly more like Nyasha, a creature of ambiguity. Conversely, though it is Tambu who speaks often of the dangerous confusions that Nyasha represents, she herself manages to avoid the havoc and self-damage of rebellion. It is Nyasha, instead, who ‘responds to challenges’ and the inconsistencies of life in the colonial mission with Tambu’s early intensity, to the extent of using her own starving body as a protest. Nyasha’s ‘strange disposition’, Tambu writes, in language that could encode other possibilities, resists the starkness of ‘black-and-white’ certainties: she ‘[hints] at shades and textures within the same colour’ (NC 92, 164).

In Nervous Conditions, classically, a woman achieves a new, challenging subjectivity through close interaction with a slightly older peer, another woman. In a narrative preoccupied with the question ‘what is a woman?’, the two friends/cousins/foster sisters explore together and reflect back at each other flexible, autonomous images of self. They achieve an impassioned sociality:

Nyasha gave me the impression of moving, always moving and striving towards some state that she had seen and accepted a long time ago. Apprehensive as I was, vague as I was about the nature of her destination, I wanted to go with her . . . I did not want to spend . . . whole weeks away from my cousin. (BB 152)37

What is particularly important about this statement of at once respect and love is that it underlines how the cousins’ mutual discovery and exploration is specifically realised through their bodily proximity and mutual bodily awareness, as well as through their striving, as in Vera, for a not-yet-defined beyond. It is indicatively when they are separated, following Tambu’s departure for the Sacred Heart College, that Nyasha begins to break down and her anorexia becomes more severe. At moments of deep conflict and pain, such as after the fight between Babamukuru and Nyasha, they unembarrassedly cuddle up
together in bed (NC 119). Even after they have been apart for a while, a short while before her breakdown, Nyasha asks if she can ‘get into bed’ again with Tambu, explaining, ‘I just wanted to see if you would let me’ (NC 200). There seems to be in that request some sense that what is asked for is not conventionally natural or self-evident, and may well be refused. At the school dance, watching people dancing, Tambu qualifies the word ‘couples’ with ‘heterosexual’: again it is an acknowledgement that there may be forms of being together, or lying together, other than the normative (NC 111).

Conclusion

I have attempted to suggest that tropes of same-sex love and yearning for love offer a medium – though not only a medium – through which new forms of identity and desire in African women’s writing may be explored. Queer sexuality, in other words, can be seen as a paradigm, even if disguised or embedded, through which to articulate a still-unrealised striving for self-realisation or an ethically invested expression of desire. This, in the Zimbabwean texts I have looked at, often takes place in the eyes of another same-sex subjectivity, a woman friend. Following from this my reading would propose that, even if unlikely or culturally inappropriate, it is important to try to open out and to speak this paradigm, in the interests of widening women’s possibilities for articulation, witnessing and self-healing. Now that the overcompensatory mechanisms of a defensive African masculinity, and its accompaniment, the celebration of a symbolic but circumscribed motherhood, is more fully understood as an often coercive form of postcolonial nationalism, it is perhaps more than time to begin to develop an epistemology of African queerness. If, as Charles Sugnet cites Lindsay Pentolfe-Aegerter, ‘African’ and ‘woman’ are contested terms both undergoing continuous revision in the postcolonial context, then a malleable, restorative aesthetics of queerness would be the first to recognise this.

Notes

1 I have laid stress on the term *yearning* in entitling this chapter as it neatly captures the force of longing, a force that is at times almost objectless, both in Dangarembga and (especially) in Vera. However, as bell hooks has commented, in the introductory essay, ‘Liberation scenes: speak this yearning’, to *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround Press, 1991), pp. 1–13, yearning also has a political dimension. She writes: ‘Surely our desire for radical social change is intimately linked with the desire to experience pleasure, erotic fulfilment, and a host of other passions’. She might have added that it is perhaps in homoerotic desire that that intimate link is most complexly embedded. Indeed, speaking of Langston Hughes, she observes that, where the full recognition of a black homosexuality may
be ‘dangerous and denied’, homosexual longings are balanced between expression and containment, producing the (codified) ‘rarefied intensity of desire’ that emerges in a context of repression (p. 197).

2 Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1998), p. 20. Page references to this edition will henceforth be included in the text along with the abbreviation BB.

3 Robert Young’s impressively compendious *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) makes no reference to historical struggles for homosexual rights, no doubt because this area remains both contentious and context-bound as a site for political identity formation. I should like to acknowledge here discussions with Alison Donnell about erasures and non-sayings around same-sex sexuality in postcolonial studies, and her own forthcoming work in this area with respect to the Caribbean.


5 Such views were widely expressed, for example, at the time of the New Hampshire consecration, on 2 November 2003, of the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican Church. See Rory Carroll, ‘Two views from the pulpit – in just one church’, *Guardian* (3 November 2003). 4. However, see Ifi Amadiume’s suggestion in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Press, 1987) that female–female ‘marital’ relationships for Igbo market-women past their childbearing years have traditionally been neither accepted but encouraged within the community.


7 Here I might draw an example from the situation of an early twentieth-century South Asian woman of letters that is comparable to contemporary conditions to a certain extent, certainly in terms of the prevailing restrictions on libidinal self-expression. In *India Calling*, her 1935 career memoir, India’s first woman lawyer Cornelia Sorabji styles herself as a tough-minded ‘Man of Action’. In her work as an advocate for women in purdah she proudly represents herself as subjecting her unworldly clients to an openly scopophilic perusal, all in the name of her implied British audience’s imperial and anthropological interests. She would have been horror-struck to hear such scrutiny described in terms of the desiring male gaze, though to the contemporary critical eye it may well invite those terms. Working under empire, her first priority was to conform to western ideas of propriety, to the persona of the unflappable, rational, Oxford-educated observer. Her example strongly demonstrates that no reading of desire, perhaps especially women’s desire, can be dissociated from the cultural, political and economic conventions which inform and/or disallow its expression. See Cornelia Sorabji, *India Calling* [1935], ed. Elleke Boehmer and Naella Grew (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004).

8 Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Drumbeat, 1977), and Rebekah Njau, *Ripples in the Pool* (London: Heinemann, 1975). Aidoo’s novel was, significantly, completed some nine years prior to its eventual publication. On its


10 Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*, pp. 61, 64, 66–7, 76, 78.

11 Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*, pp. 61, 64, 66–7, 76, 78.


20 See, for example, the speech reported in the *Herald* of 6 March 2002 in which Mugabe said: ‘Anyone who is gay is a mad person and if we get to know, we charge them and they will go to prison. So that culture, is it a religion, I don’t know, it’s not our culture and we can’t force it on our people. We don’t want to import it to our country, we have our own culture, our own people’. Mugabe is also on record for having said that God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve. See Rory Carroll, ‘Two views from the pulpit’, p. 4.
26 Stratton, Contemporary African Literature, p. 97, and see also pp. 117 and 143.
29 Vera’s novels previous to Butterfly Burning were all also published by Baobab Books in Harare, in 1993, 1994 and 1996, respectively.
32 See Vera, Butterfly Burning, p. 4, and the whole of chapter 2.
35 To explore such aspects further, see for example the essays collected in Anne E. Willey and Jeanette Treiber (eds), Negotiating the Postcolonial: Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002), in particular Susan Z. Andrade, ‘Tradition, modernity and the family’, pp. 25–59; and Heather Zwicker, ‘The nervous conditions of nation and gender’, pp. 3–23. See Zwicker p. 22 for corroborating evidence of the Zimbabwean state’s officially sanctioned homophobia.
37 See also NC 138.
38 Maiguru, Nyasha’s mother, however, is not happy about such cuddling.