# Left Behind: White Rhodesian Women and War in Nancy Partridge's *To Breathe and Wait*

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## Abstract

The article invites conversation on white Rhodesian women's experiences of war. White female voices have been conspicuous by their absence from the war discourse and a paucity of fictional narratives entirely dedicated to this experience exists. For these reasons, discourse on the war is predominantly about white men and black people in general. While mainstream accounts of the war gloss over white women's experiences and cast them as "left behind" from the war, so much was going on in these spaces. Fleeting references to white female experiences do not demonstrate what it meant for most white women to be "left behind" during the war. The article examines Nancy Partridge's *To Breathe and Wait*'s depiction of a white woman whose experience of war consists of illness, stories from external sources and intersubjective relations forged with family and women across the racial divide.

**Keywords:** Rhodesian war; white women; Nancy Partridge; illness; Zimbabwe

Criticism of white fictional narratives about the Zimbabwean war of liberation is conspicuous for its limited focus on white female experiences of the war. Mainstream war accounts provide generalised commentary on the roles white women played in domestic spaces and the military bases in various non-domestic capacities which generally excluded combat (Bhebe and Ranger 1995; Godwin and Hancock 1995; Kriger 1992). These accounts, mostly historical, demonstrate that white women were actively kept as far away from the fighting as possible and obliquely experienced war as mothers, wives and daughters whose men were involved in real combat in the bush. Furthermore, white women were sometimes direct victims of both targeted and stray bullets and missiles. Yet, no account has come close enough to provide the nuance of what experiencing the war from home or the "front" meant in the case of white women. The availability of white female-authored narratives such as Patricia Chater's *Crossing*

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*the Boundary Fence* (1988), Bryony Rheam's *This September Sun* (2009), Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2001) and Judith Todd's *Through the Darkness* (2007) creates opportunities for having this conversation. Yet this has not been so. Partly, this is because these narratives trail the male narratives in depicting incidents outside the domestic space and straddle the colonial and post-colonial periods. Interest in the autobiographical works has focused on questions of self and belonging to Zimbabwe (Chennells 2005; Harris 2005; Javangwe 2011). Furthermore, white female-authored narratives blossoming in the post-2000 era in Zimbabwe dwell mostly on experiences of land expropriation from whites during the period. The most popular of these are memoirs. There is certainly a paucity of post-war narratives by white women. In any event, these narratives are relatively unknown and therefore difficult to locate.

A clear result of the absence of conversations on white female experiences of the Zimbabwean war has been the perpetuation of stereotypes about women as merely victims or "dumb blondes." These stereotypes are not consistent with the experiences of white women. Newspaper records of the time indicate that some white women were instrumental in the war. Women, whether at home or away, volunteered or were forced by circumstances to wield guns during the war (Lyons 1999, 135). Others joined the police while the majority did clerical work (Godwin and Hancock 1995). Of course, white women were not homogenous. Some supported the white Rhodesian cause while others sympathised with the black nationalists. These women, on either side, have not been duly recognised the same way their male counterparts have.

Secondly, there remains a tendency to lump white women with their male counterparts when the history of Rhodesia is relayed. This is not to say white women lacked colonial culpability. On the contrary, lumping them with the men denies them this liability. For instance, we know a lot about call-ups which forced young men to join the Rhodesian army but not so much about the over 1200 applicants who, "within a few days," responded to a 1975 advertisement for women to assume duties at Rhodesian military bases (Godwin and Hancock 1995, 135). Competing groups comprising white women emerged during the war. "Women for Rhodesia" organised to solicit international support for whites against "terrorists" (Lyons 1999, 140) while "Women for Peace" advocated racial equality in preparation for black majority rule (Godwin and Hancock 1995, 209). The absence of ordinary white women in Rhodesian accounts is exacerbated by the focus, albeit isolated, on prominent individual women whose roles could hardly be missed. In fact, accounts of Rhodesia are largely stories of famous, and anonymous, white men in general and the odd white woman.

There tends to be a silence on what white women have to say about their experiences of the war. Black female experience is duly recognised in works by Mahamba (1986), Staunton (1990), Kriger (1992), Nhongo-Simbanegavi (2000), as well as Bhebe and Ranger (1995). Some of the key female writers of Zimbabwean war, who include Yvonne Vera, Freedom Nyamubaya and Tsitsi Dangarembga, are celebrated. This may be so because in general, the experiences of black women during the war belong to

broader narratives of black triumphalism. Part of the nationalist narrative was to project the emergence of a new nation bringing together black people under one family as symbolised by the black on Zimbabwe's national flag. Lyons (1999) rightly notes that voices of white women have been silenced owing to the outcome of the war, an outcome which favoured blacks. This largely accounts for the absence of literature and studies of white female experiences. Lyons' (1999, 142) section on white women relies on how they have been depicted in media propaganda and war discourse.

Male-authored white narratives on the war do not entirely ignore women. Godwin's *Mukiwa* (1996), Moore-King's *White Man Black War* (1988) and McLoughlin's *Karima* (1983) are, for instance, white male perspectives about the war which construct male perpetrators and victims of the war on both sides while often allowing for female victims among blacks and whites. Little attention is paid to the plight of white women who did not necessarily have to go to war or participate directly in the fighting. Because of this, it has been easy to either ignore the experiences of white women during the war or objectify them. While the male narratives are not exclusively about the experiences and operations of Rhodesian military personnel, they nevertheless devote attention to what Rhodesian security forces did, how they conducted themselves and their experiences during the war. This tendency is picked by Bhebe and Ranger (1995, 3) who contend that "on the Rhodesian side—both during the war and in the retrospective literature—it often appears as if the military factors only are significant: as if the war could (and should) have been decided purely by military superiority." One encounters incidents involving the army in these and other texts such as Peter Rimmer's *Cry of the Fish Eagle* (1993), Alan Thrush's *Of Land and Spirits* (1997) and Ian Smith's *The Great Betrayal* (1997). In all these incidents, the experiences of white Rhodesian women are either left out or downplayed.

Where their experienced are included, white women appear only as widows or married women left to fend for themselves as their husbands and sons are called up to fight. While this is still an important dimension to the war, there is no nuanced discussion of this experience of being left behind and waiting for the men who have gone to battle. This experience is only a sideshow warranting neither deep nor sustained focus. The views of these women are made in passing, for example in *Karima* where the reader is briefly brought into the fears and anxieties of the district commissioner's wife regarding her son, who has been conscripted into war; in *Cry of the Fish Eagle*, Sasa fears for her sons as they fight in the war. Beyond this, female experiences are rarely discussed. White male narratives about the war, therefore, create a white female homogeneity, a condition largely marked by victimhood.

It is not enough to mention that white women stayed at home as the men went to fight. Godwin and Hancock (1995, 305) are misguided to say the role and status of white women was "superficially affected by the prospect of 'total war.'" They refer to "largely uninterrupted patterns of 'feminine' social activity: managing the home, delivering or collecting the children, shopping and playing bridge or tennis, chattering with friends

over tea or drinks" (305). This is only possible when one's assessment of war focuses on the so called "front," where military combat took place, and ignores the "rear" where women are literally and ideologically placed. The war was more than just guns, as Partridge indicates, and regardless, women were killed in the war. Jones and Denov (2015), for instance, illustrate how women go through painful experiences as a result of isolation and insecurities. Male narratives keenly use white female deaths as material for plot shifts, for instance to justify atrocities against blacks during the war. Examples of these atrocities include the external raids on Chimoio and Nyadzonia described as refugee camps. In Rimmer's *Cry of the Fish Eagle*, Jamie Grant, a retired member of the British South Africa Police (BSAP), grudgingly rejoins the police in order to revenge the death of a loved one. Jamie resigns from the police ahead of Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence because he does not consider the UDI legitimate. He refuses to participate in the escalating war. Jamie, now close to 70 years old, returns to the militarised police force with the rank of senior assistant commissioner after alleged nationalists attack a mission and kill four missionaries, including Frances Pitt, the woman he loves. Jamie is the one who is later credited for planning revenge missions involving external raids in camps harbouring nationalists (an allusion to the Chimoio and Nyadzonia attacks). His argument is that there are no rules governing the war if black fighters bayonet a defenceless white woman.

The point is, civilian deaths, particularly the deaths of women, have been conscripted into the service of male accounts of the war as part of the justification for the massacre of blacks. Considering this, one is bound to acknowledge the limitations of monologues. The need to amplify dialogic space where war narratives are concerned is here realised through an analysis of *To Breathe and Wait*, with a view to identifying the complex and multiple nuances that were part of the white female experience during the war which ended white minority rule. Such an approach is important to our understanding of current discourses on belonging based on the bifurcated identities of white colonisers and black liberators during the war—discourses which are in danger of ignoring, at times conveniently, the experiences of white Rhodesian women during this period.

What does not get said in most accounts is how white women, "left behind," reflected deeply about the war: its dangers and possibilities as far as rethinking white identities was concerned. The few narratives which contain these musings are a good starting point for the discussions. *To Breathe and Wait*, for instance, takes us, exclusively, into the life of one white woman during the war. Her war journey, and that of other women, is marked by liminal expectancy summed up in the actions of "breathing" and "waiting." Her voice, therefore, expands the dialogue about the war and challenges dominant male perspectives about the war, such as the tendency to narrowly describe war losses to white Rhodesia in terms of deaths of white soldiers and white civilians. There are other unquantifiable losses which the novel attends to.

Contrary to mainstream narratives on the war, *To Breathe and Wait* does not describe any military activities or explicitly delineate fighting incidents. The war is depicted as

an enveloping phenomenon conditioning the individual's experience of other issues such as terminal illness, motherhood and friendship. It is to Partridge's credit that she expands the dialogue on the war along directions not remotely imagined by other white writers. For her the war is not just about people fighting with guns. It is also about people dealing with everyday problems against the backdrop of war. *To Breathe and Wait* tells the story of a woman struggling with cancer during the war years in Rhodesia. The woman, Deidre, finds her life suddenly changed by the discovery that she has terminal cancer and does not have very long to live. Her body begins to deteriorate and she constantly suffers bouts of painful attacks. She gets support from two unlikely sources in a racially bigoted Rhodesia: Julia, her black maid, and Bertrand, her black gardener. Katharine, a close friend and neighbour, also offers support in the absence of Deidre's children who have been drawn into the war in various respects. The novel offers the reader a window into Deidre's consciousness, through which the story is told. The white female protagonist experiences war in three ways which constitute the remainder of this discussion. Illness, the media and contact with other people in the domestic circle ensure that Deidre experiences the war in physical, mediated and intersubjective ways.

War comes to Deidre through illness, for instance. The notion of cancer expresses Deidre's deepest fears and symbolises the existential crises women at home face due to war. This experience of war as body affliction is intimately private. It occurs away from the glare of the public. Women, it seems, have been left behind in private spaces which elude mainstream accounts of the war. Her body becomes the site of struggle to define self and others in the present and future. Her attention is directed exclusively to the question of existence. Illness speaks directly to questions of mortality which are central to war. Rhodesia as a nation is plagued by a cancer which renders it mortal, something which comes to pass with the end of white minority rule in 1980. Deidre's illness and the Rhodesian war develop concurrently, producing anxieties and fears so similar that she may easily be seen as a figurative enactment of a fast deteriorating Rhodesia. The cancer that intrudes upon her is not just a physical illness, but also a statement about the state of the country engaged in a terminal war. It points to the state of a nation whose economic and, more significantly, social fabric has been infected by violence, prejudice and hatred, a condition emanating from all directions. Just as cancer cells spread, Rhodesia's wartime ills multiply over the country to the extent that people, such as Deidre, who have been confined to a life indoors, still suffer the effects of the war.

Both illness and war are enough to engender maternal fears in Deidre. Firstly, that the illness will lead to inevitable death causes her consternation, especially with regard to leaving her children. She feels her maternal grasp weakening as she can no longer shape the lives of her children. One senses that as she physically regresses and loses grip on her children, the war pushes her further away from the people who matter to her the most. She agonises over the possibility that she will leave her children before she has fully participated in their adult lives. Illness and war coalesce to make this possibility a near reality. Secondly, Deidre fears that the Rhodesian war seems to produce no visible solution, and this is enough to make her worry for her children. The illness does not

seem to have a cure. One of her hopes is to live long enough to see the war end so that her children can have a brighter future. Her son Charles is involved in the war where he eventually gets injured. He is constantly called up to fight even though his wife is expecting a baby. Because Charles is always away fighting, he is not available to support his wife during her pregnancy. Jonathan, on the other hand, wants to become a doctor, but as long as the war continues, his prospects are very limited. For this reason, Jonathan wants to skip the country with Adam, his friend, so that they will not live to fight in the war.

In *To Breathe and Wait*, cancer is therefore a metaphor deployed by the writer to describe the ugly corrosion of war. This suggestion is not lost on Moyana (1999, 349) who says, "[c]ancer is a very strong symbol in the novel. It symbolises the global cancerous condition at the heart of the Rhodesian problem." Cancer doubles both as illness and war in the text. Indeed, Deidre succinctly summarises that "her own illness seemed somehow part of the terrible chain of events ensuring that she could do nothing" (Partridge 1986, 239). The "terrible chain of events" alludes to the war. Both the war and the illness render her helpless. They make her future not only uncertain, but also unbearable.

Deidre must live with the knowledge that her body and the Rhodesian politic are giving way to invasions which neither are well prepared to combat. Deidre and the nation cannot get to the roots of their problems. They are overwhelmed by despair. The immanence that illness imposes limits their growth. Deidre ends up spending most of her time in bed aware of the symptoms of her illness, but without the means to touch the root of the problem. Pain is exacerbated by the liberation war, something external to Deidre's body. For example, her fear of dying arises partly from a realisation that she might not live long enough to see an end to the war. For her "it would have been wonderful to see—to think one might see—something coming to flower for the country but there was no hope in her now for that: peace, stability, progress, she would not live to see any of it" (62). To her, an end to the war guarantees a brighter future for her children, who are all affected by the war in one way or the other. Deidre's awareness that her death might precede the end to war weakens her endurance against the cancer in her body. Her illness is therefore tangled with an uncertain war whose end is not in sight.

The war also comes to Deidre through deprivation. From Godwin and Hancock (1995) we learn that the fuel rationing, deaths of friends and loved ones, men being called up to fight in the Rhodesian army and loved ones fleeing the country all subordinated individual lives to an invasive war. For Deidre, the absence, and intermittent presence, of her sons brings the war directly into her home. When they are not around, she suffers a maternal void which only compounds her illness. Their return brings the war into sharper focus and leaves her agonising and less comforted. Charles, coming home from a stint in the war in military gear "brought the whole hopeless, miserable war into the room, the heaviness, the sad questioning of the last five years to which no answers could

yet be given" (20). The image of Charles in army garb makes her aware of "the nightmare which threatened to blot out the ordinary loved things forever" (20). Deidre despondently asks Charles why he comes in uniform (20). A war which is otherwise "out there" finds embodiment in the person of Charles.

Apart from "seeing" the war through Charles, Deidre gets snippets of the Rhodesian war events through newspapers and the radio. She learns about the blowing up of oil storage tanks by black African nationalists, the murder of one Viljoen, the killing of "terrorists," and Smith's plans for an internal settlement in Rhodesia to end the war. She even gets a feel of the South African situation, for example when she reads about Steve Biko being killed by the apartheid regime. Deidre knows that what is mediated via newspapers and the radio is but a fraction of the story. It is part of a constricted dialogue about the war upon which she has increasingly become reliant. Yet she seizes any available opportunity to "put the paper away with relief" (142) because she has become sceptical of the propaganda dished out in the papers. This is why she is eager to learn more about the war from Julia, her black maid, and Katharine, her white friend, who make her aware of the hidden dimensions of the war. Julia, however, does not share more than the occasional comment or facial expression.

Through Katharine, Deidre learns about the ill-treatment of dissenting whites. She learns that Bill, Katharine's husband, is persecuted for fraternising with blacks in his efforts to provide education to black children. She also learns about the shooting of Julia's brother, Lancelot, by Rhodesian soldiers during their raid on defenceless villagers. Katharine tells her about the incident at Julia's village which culminated in the death of Lancelot. Regardless, it is third-hand information passed from Julia to Katharine and finally to Deidre. Her children and the other visitors, such as Elsa, all broaden Deidre's understanding of the war. In other words, war comes to Deidre externally through bits and pieces of dialogue. She is able to attract competing versions about the war from a multiplicity of sources. The fighting outside the home, against which white women have been ostensibly insulated, therefore filters through, regularly, via newspapers and rumours, which do not cohere but offer conflicting accounts of the war. The rumours exist to fill the gaps that the official news creates in its telling of the story.

The horror of war finally catches up with Deidre when Julia's brother Lancelot is killed by Rhodesian soldiers during an attack on Julia's village. This death has a bearing on her in three distinct ways. Lancelot is the first fatal casualty of the war whom Deidre had known while he was alive. Lancelot is therefore not a news item on the radio or in a newspaper. She remembers his visits to Julia. Until Lancelot's death, the other fatal casualties of the Rhodesian war have been faceless. Lancelot, on the other hand, had "such a happy laughing face" (109) when alive. This recognition makes Deidre inconsolable as she imagines her own children in place of Lancelot. This death begins her journey of experiencing the war intersubjectively.

Secondly, the death of Lancelot raises possibilities of widened rifts after the war. While Deidre does not imagine Zimbabwe, there is no doubting that her concern for the future speaks to the challenges that will likely bedevil the new nation. Deidre asks of Julia whether "she [would] ever be able to shake the hand that had killed Lancelot" (125)? In her musings about the future, she toys with the certainty that "the future would be haunted" (125). As if to confirm this, nationalist discourses about nationhood since 2000 in Zimbabwe often invoke images of white Rhodesian massacres of blacks to justify retributive acts against whites. The war, particularly real and imagined atrocities against blacks, lends itself to the reconstruction of citizenship and belonging along racial lines in current dominant narratives in Zimbabwe.

Lastly, Deidre is able to share in the grief of Lancelot's mother. Her maternal instincts are sharpened by a fear of a speculative what-if: the possibility that it could have been her child Jonathan, or Charles, butchered in the war. She fears that Charles could actually die and never find out how much she loves him. Lancelot's death is imagined as a grief to all mothers. Deidre agonises over "the thought of Lancelot being only one of many, many mothers weeping" (186). This ability to empathise, though founded on a selfish need for self-preservation, draws her closer to all mothers who have been similarly affected by the war. Being able to transpose the image of Lancelot's corpse onto an imagining of Charles "lying untendered there in the bush" (99) draws her closer to Julia and her mother, who are grieving for Lancelot. She comes to the conclusion that "a heart sore for Charles aches for Lancelot. The bond binds mothers to gunner or gunned" (97).

While male-centred narratives tend to privilege the voices of fathers (in *White Man Black War*, for example, fathers address their children), *To Breathe and Wait* provides nuance on what it meant to be a mother during the war. One comes face to face with maternal perspectives emerging from the war: how mothers are bonded across racial lines through shared suffering and an intersubjectivity which makes individuals recognise themselves through the pain of others. Thus "left behind" during the war, women's lives are disrupted by a war which, ostensibly a distance from them, nevertheless stays within reach. The disillusionment engendered in mothers by the war is captured in the question: "Why should mothers bother to rear children, why be so mad as to love them, why get so deeply involved in their lives" (141)? The futility of motherhood suggested in this lament shows the extent of loss mothers are forced to bear. They have to suffer or agonise over the reality of children called up to fight in a war they do not believe in. Deidre epitomises this suffering. Both her sons are eligible for call-up despite their non-military commitments. Jonathan is studying to become a doctor and Charles, who is a driver, is soon to become a father. These duties and roles are disrupted by a war which makes it compulsory for white Rhodesian males to fight against black nationalists. As a mother, Deidre finds herself constantly worrying about the future of her children.

Through Deidre's maternal qualms, the text mocks a culture which awards recognition to dead soldiers while failing to cater for the needs of women who are left to tend to the pain of loss. Women of different backgrounds undergo similar pains. The loss of Lancelot is not conceived of as the loss to one mother. It is "only one of many, many mothers weeping" (186). Every death is seen as a multiplication of losses and grieving mothers. Deidre begins to relate to Lancelot's mother after her loss because she is able to recognise the latter's pain. She grieves for Lancelot as if he were her biological son. Mothers are brought together and caught up in a web of grieving caused by the war. Katharine sums up this interconnectedness when she explains that the death of Lancelot is an opportunity to grieve for all mothers who have to endure the pain of their children dying in war.

*To Breathe and Wait* demonstrates that individuals do not live isolated lives. There is a point where every individual is forced to recognise the existence of others. In the text this recognition is made an important aspect of relationships across racial lines. Deidre and Julia are brought closer together as a result of the war. Both their sons are fighting in the war, albeit for different sides. Through suffering and the intersection of war experiences, the two women find themselves drawn to each other in mutual understanding. In the eyes of Deidre, Julia is no longer a servant. Her suffering has increasingly become entangled with Julia's. The two women transcend the limits imposed on them by Rhodesian propaganda and the ingrained racial attitudes that have sustained various traditions of white Rhodesians.

In her depiction of white female experiences, Partridge casts women of both races as the solution to the problems in Rhodesia. To sustain this view, the author relies on a one-dimensional construction of motherhood which does not recognise the instability of the concept. Motherhood is constructed through a repertoire of stereotypical values which include suffering, compassion and understanding. Every mother, that is, Deidre, Julia, Katharine and Julia's mother, is framed as a victim. Their suffering is made an enabling virtue which sets women on a higher moral pedestal compared to the men around them and establishes a foundation for what Yuval-Davis (2006, 206) calls "transversal politics." This concept speaks of alliances which transcend borders and, therefore, allow for solidarity based on shared values (Yuval-Davis 2010, 278). Whereas the image of the male evokes pictures of the "hopeless, miserable war" (Partridge 1986, 20), the woman focuses on "good sensible things out of which life is built" (20), such as love and family welfare. These are the kinds of values women across the racial divide share. Deidre knows that she has to free her children from her maternal hold. Yet she believes that a mother should always be around for her children's sake. Asked by a friend whether she wants to go to heaven, Deidre responds that she doesn't want to go anywhere. "I want to stay here with my children who need me" (20), she explains. The fulfilment of her maternal duty is a burden she cherishes. Nurturing the family is therefore part of the "good sensible things" which mothers suffer to attain during the war.

In her representation of women's roles within the context of the war, Partridge resorts to the primal instincts and fears that are believed to characterise motherhood, conceived as a universal essence. These universal instincts include the abstract notions of love and care unrelated to any circumstantial contingencies. The failure in her representation is in essentialising motherhood to the extent that all mothers in the text appear to share the same vision of a brighter future for their children. The differences that are elided here lie in terms of the best route the country needs to take in order to safeguard the future of its progeny. In short, the author fails to acknowledge that motherhood is not just a biological state, but a set of expectations society has for women, too. These expectations cannot by any account be precisely the same, everywhere.

Through illness and war, the text creates a white female protagonist who is sensitised to the needs of others, particularly black people on whom her everyday life depends. It is therefore important that we look at the representation of black women and their relevance to white female existence as rendered in the text. Julia is no ordinary housemaid. To Deidre, she has become something akin to a companion. It is via the depiction of black women as mothers that white women's sense of insecurity finds expression. While Deidre does get support from some of her white peers, such as Katharine and her children, her major source of sustenance is the black African mother. The whites offer her fleeting comfort. They, like her, are in a state of flux. The sons come and go, beckoned by the war and personal commitments. Katharine is deported, together with her husband, on allegations of betraying the white cause to "communist" nationalists. In other words, whites are enmeshed within a cycle of staying and going, thus damaging Deidre's prospects of permanence, something which she increasingly craves because of the war.

From the outset, Deidre acknowledges Julia and Bertram as "the real supports of her life" (22). She concedes that her life is built "around" her children but "*on* Julia and Bertram" (22). Regardless, Bertram gets little more than fleeting exposure in the text. Indeed, it is Julia, breaking through conventions, who becomes her major source of support during this war. Even Deidre's children begin to respect and recognise her as an extension of their mother. She embodies a stability that is absent in the white woman's life. When Julia's mother, MaDube, finally enters the picture, after the death of Julia's brother Lancelot, the narrative assumes a putatively universal perspective. The bonding of women/mothers across the racial divide takes centre stage. This pseudo-universal sisterhood is offered as an alternative to a male-dominated society. Ahmed (2000) sounds a caution regarding this kind of transversality, noting that encounters between women from the global North and South are already determined by their social locations based on relations of labour and consumption. It is for this reason that Mohanty (2003, 224) emphasises a "non colonizing feminist solidarity."

The superficiality that characterises the end of the narrative reaffirms the insecurities of white women during the war. Black women, projected as virtuous and formidable characters throughout the novel, are cast in the role of consolidators. Deidre,

incapacitated in bed, "reached out her hands to [MaDube's]" (241) in her desperation for the black woman to forgive her the crimes committed by her race against blacks in general and Lancelot in particular. As MaDube prays while holding Deidre's hands, "an assurance [Deidre] needed crept into her through the firmly clasped hand and the gentle stream of unknown words. Fears which had racked her without her understanding them, the despair which followed them, retreated" (241–42). This kind of solidarity, which glosses over real and material differences between black and white women, is what bell hooks (1984, 45) would call "shallow notions of bonding." The narrative ends with an attempt to impose hope. At the core of this attempt is the white woman's need for absolution regarding a war in which white women have been "left behind." Accepting her culpability, Deidre makes us rethink the notion of being thus "left behind." The war rages on in domestic spaces along racial and class lines. In the end, no one is spared.

*To Breathe and Wait* provides an opportunity to rethink the experiences of white women during the Rhodesian war. While mainstream accounts of the war gloss over white women's experiences and cast them as "left behind" from the war, so much was going on in these spaces. The voices of white women have not entered the discourse of war partly because their story is the story of losers. Yet it would be dishonest to pretend that away from physical combat white women were not at war. As the novel demonstrates, war was suffered as an intensely private and terminal illness; it was experienced through several stories shared by friends and in newspapers; and, through the experiences of others, white women witnessed the wrath of war inside their homes. It suffices, then, to say a reading of *To Breathe and Wait* affords us a glimpse into the affective, social and material experiences of white women during the Rhodesian war. Through the coalescence of illness and war, the relationships forged across racial lines and the deepening of social bonds based on gender, the novel destabilises the monolithic male-centred accounts of the war.

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