

“Significant Silences” and the Politics of National Reconciliation in Chater’s *Crossing the Boundary Fence*

Cuthbeth Tagwirei

Summary

The article explores Patricia Chater’s *Crossing the Boundary Fence* (1988) within the framework of Macherey’s (1978) concept of “significant silences”. I argue that in her representation of the decolonisation of Zimbabwe, the writer circumvents pertinent areas that are central to any discussion of the colonial history of Zimbabwe and the liberation war against colonialism. Among the areas the text is silent on is the role of white people in institutionalising racism in the colony and the contributions of ZAPU and the Ndebele during the war of liberation. These silences are informed by a reconciliation agenda which makes silence integral to its realisation.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel verken ek Patricia Chater se *Crossing the Boundary Fence* (1988) binne die raamwerk van Macherey (1978) se begrip van “betekenisvolle stilswye”. Ek voer aan dat die skrywer in haar uitbeelding van die dekolonialisering van Zimbabwe relevante areas omseil wat die kern vorm van enige bespreking van Zimbabwe se koloniale geskiedenis en die vryheidsoorlog teen kolonialisme. Daar heers stilswye in die teks oor die rol van witmense in die institusionalisering van rassisme in die kolonie en die bydraes van ZAPU en die Ndebele gedurende die vryheidsoorlog. Hierdie stilswye word geïnspireer deur ’n versoeningsagenda wat stilte ’n integrale deel maak van die realisering daarvan.

***Crossing the Boundary Fence* as a Historical Text for Children**

Crossing the Boundary Fence (Chater 1988) is a novel about two girls, Musa and Diana, who cross the racial divide, symbolised by a fence separating their two farms, in order to become friends. The white girl, Diana, crosses the boundary fence first, despite her hardcore racist brother’s disapproval. Musa, the black girl, in turn accommodates Diana on her side of the fence and thus an enduring friendship ensues between the two. This

friendship involves mutual intermittent visits to one another's homes. When both of them go away to boarding schools they sustain their friendship by writing letters to each other. As the war of liberation intensifies, Musa is forced to re-evaluate her friendship with Diana seeing that Diana's family has the wealth that blacks are fighting to repossess. She is able to discern the disparities which exist between whites and blacks. This results in a temporary lapse in the two girls' relationship. When the war ends and independence is proclaimed, the bond is rekindled, albeit with strength because Musa can now participate in the friendship as an equal participant.

Chater's *Crossing the Boundary Fence* (1988) performs two functions which motivate the need for the current analysis. Firstly, it fulfils the demands of historical fiction for children through its recreation of Zimbabwe's colonial past. Secondly, the text, along with texts such as Gascoigne's *Tunzi the Faithful Shadow* (1988), Hanson's *Takadini* (1997) and Mucheri's *Friend Billy and the Msasa Avenue Three* (1989) performs an institutional role of "teaching" pupils about nationhood in Zimbabwean secondary schools, where the text has its widest circulation. Below, I consider these two functions *Crossing the Boundary Fence* performs in order to validate the need for analysing the text twenty-five-years after publication.

The challenges of distinguishing a historical text from a realistic text have been discussed before; with Hastings (1999) conceding that the distance we need to go in order for events to be historical varies with circumstances. *Crossing the Boundary Fence* is treated as a historical novel precisely because it focuses on historical concerns which include the liberation war in Zimbabwe, independence and the drive towards reconciliation between whites and blacks during and after the independence. Published eight years after the war it narrates, *Crossing the Boundary Fence* suffices to be read as historical fiction, albeit one narrating an immediate past. The text, like its contemporary, *Tunzi the Faithful Shadow*, was published a year after the signing of the Unity Accord which ended the disturbances in the Matabeleland and Midlands region in Zimbabwe. These disturbances, popularly known as *Gukurahundi*, have generally been defined as an ethnic-driven offensive against the Ndebele by a Shona-dominated army under the directive of the government (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and Legal Resources Foundation of Zimbabwe (CCJP and LRF) 1997; Nkomo 2001; Fisher 2010).

Crossing the Boundary Fence makes numerous allusions to historical names of people and places as well as events. In fact, these allusions are all part of the narrative plot. Events in the text such as the war between the "guerillas" or liberation fighters and the Rhodesian forces, boys crossing to Mozambique to join the liberation war, the *pungwe* or secret night meetings conducted by the liberation fighters during the war of liberation in Zimbabwe and the Lancaster House Conference in London are all renditions

of events leading up to independence from colonial rule in Zimbabwe. These events are not merely alluded to but are in fact integrated into the main plot of the story. Places such as St Stephen's Secondary School, and Umtali (now Mutare) are actual places in Zimbabwe. While individual personalities, such as Ian Smith, "Comrade [Robert] Mugabe", "[Joshua] Nkomo" and "the Bishop" (a reference to Bishop Abel Muzorewa), appear in the background, they lend the narrative historical flavour. This does not diminish the text's fictional disposition. Generally, historical texts depict or convey information about a specific time period, place or historical event. They consist of "imaginative stories grounded in the facts of our past" (Galda & Cullinan 2002: 205). The name of the country Zimbabwe, the independence celebrations on 18 April 1980 and the ensuing reconciliation policy are all reflections of what transpired in Zimbabwe. The text blends real and fictional people, real and fictional events and real and fictional places. In other words, we have the historical war of liberation and its results, on the one hand, and Chater's rendition of that war in *Crossing the Boundary Fence*.

Secondly, the text performs what Brennan (1990: 46; italics in original) calls "the *institutional* uses of fiction in nationalist movements". This function of the text is where fiction is at times made an integral element in the movement towards nationhood. One of the ways in which this is done is by making certain fictional texts mandatory reading in schools. *Crossing the Boundary Fence*, alongside the aforementioned *Tunzi the Faithful Shadow*, is part of a canon of children's texts that circulate in Zimbabwean schools as set books for the literature component under the four-year ordinary level English syllabus. Before the disbanding of the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (Z.J.C.) level in Zimbabwe, the texts were examinable at the end of a two-year course. Regardless of the cancellation of Z.J.C, the texts remain in the school curriculum and they are still taught in most schools in Zimbabwe. This second function of *Crossing the Boundary Fence* is herein designated an institutional use of fiction in the service of nation-building. Research on how *Tunzi the Faithful Shadow* performs a similar function has been carried out by Tagwirei (2013).

The inclusion of *Crossing the Boundary Fence* in the school curriculum was part of a new drive by the Zimbabwean government to restructure the education system to rid it of colonial traces and introduce nationalist-cum-socialist rudiments. In line with this drive new history textbooks with a nationalist outlook, for example, were published. Barnes (2007) notes that Zimbabwean secondary school historical textbooks which include Proctor and Phimister's *People and Power Book 1* (1991); Prew, Pape, Mutwira and Barnes's *People Making History Book 4* (1993); Mukanya's *Dynamics of History* (1994) and Mlambo's *Focus on History* (1995) were produced to meet the requirements of "a nationalist, Africa-centred and Marxist-inspired history syllabus introduced in 1991" (p. 633). It is from this background that

Crossing the Boundary Fence is critiqued for the way it tries to establish a national agenda of reconciliation through various forms of silence informed by the discursive and political economy of the time of its publication.

While it is not the responsibility of critics to impose a political or sociological agenda on a writer, writers who drift towards the historical in their fictional texts “invite historical judgements” (Turner 1979: 353). Hadebe (2005b: 1) notes that although creative works are not obliged to be consistently factual “[their] versions of historical events are popularized more than documented history”. Indeed Posada-Carbo (1998) notes how Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970), a magic realist text, popularised the history of American imperialism in Colombia to the extent that historians have consulted the text when writing their own versions of that history, the clampdown on strikers against the United Fruit Company in 1928, in particular. Posada-Carbo concludes by saying, “It would not be an exaggeration to say that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* contains today’s ‘official version’ of the developments in the banana zone in the 1920s” (p. 399). For these reasons readers and critics should never suspend historical judgement when reading historical texts. In *Crossing the Boundary Fence*, it is easy for the reader to sacrifice this judgement in order to accept the plot of two girls who cross the racial divide to become friends. Yet, “[i]t is the distortions, omissions and additions made by the creative writer that [should be] interesting to the literary critic” (Hadebe 2005b: 1). While writers are not necessarily compelled to write everything, there are moments when some omissions become glaring and call for examination.

Reconciliation and Its Silences

Crossing the Boundary Fence articulates an agenda of national reconciliation spearheaded by the ruling ZANU PF government during the early years of independence. It does not, however, problematise the nature of reconciliation, seeking instead to participate in a ritual of silencing that characterised the government of the day. Eagleton (1976) makes reference to “significant silences”, a concept developed from the ideas of Macherey (1978) who considers the ways in which literary texts are prevented from speaking about certain issues by the discursive contexts in which they emerge. According to Eagleton (1976: 35), “it is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things”. *Crossing the Boundary Fence* is no exception to this judgement. In articulating an agenda of national reconciliation, the text is constrained by the dominant ZANU PF ideology of the day. It is therefore imperative to highlight and account for those areas which are not given to easy identification in the text, that is the silences, gaps and contradictions.

Macherey (1978) does not use the two words, significant and silence, together although both terms feature prominently in his work. Silence, for him is integrated in every utterance. He insists that “in order to say anything, there are other things *which must not be said*” (p. 85; italics in original). Ideologies govern what should and what should not be said. They exist precisely because some things must not be said (p. 132). They provide the parameters by which writers can tell their stories while avoiding certain aspects. Equally important are the positions writers hold in a particular discursive context. Writers can be influenced by who they are as much as by the environment in which they operate. Macherey (1978: 86) explains that

it is this silence which tells us – not just anything, since it exists to say nothing – which informs us of the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance, and thus its limits, giving its real significance, without, for all that, speaking in its place.

(Macherey 1978: 86)

In this regard, the reader’s task is to “distinguish the necessity of this silence” (Macherey 1978: 84). Reading should not be confined to the latent material, which is still important, rather there should be a deliberate drive towards discriminating between the latent on the one hand and the gaps, absences and silences, on the other.

In *Crossing the Boundary Fence*, national reconciliation is imagined in two specific ways. Firstly, reconciliation refers to the social integration of whites into the new Zimbabwe. In this case, reconciliation has a racial dimension which evidently surpasses the economic. As will be seen, this imagining informs some of the omissions in Chater’s narrative. Secondly, reconciliation is imagined as an alliance between the whites and the Shona-speaking community. In so imagining, *Crossing the Boundary Fence* circumvents certain specific issues in its propagation of the reconciliation agenda. The researcher argues that the text is silent about the part whites played in institutionalising racism in colonial Zimbabwe, the fact of colonial violence, the shortcomings of reconciliation and the role the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) and the Ndebele played during the war of liberation and its aftermath.

Chitando (2008: 19) is of the view that “*Crossing the Boundary Fence* prepares children for the important task of reconciliation. It enables children to appreciate that differences in race and culture do not translate to superiority and inferiority. It is possible for black and white children to develop and sustain true friendships. Such friendships put an end to conflict”. Apparently, Chitando fails to consider the various problems that characterise a reconciliation based on banishing certain issues to silence. In fact, the text’s compliance with a politics of silence makes it unsuitable for creating sustainable relations as Chitando claims.

The researcher identifies one discursive context which conditions the silences in *Crossing the Boundary Fence*. This will be looked at in this article, with the awareness that other possible contexts exist but are beyond the scope of this article. This discursive context is the two-part reconciliation agenda of the first decade of Zimbabwe’s independence. The first part involving black-white relations was set in motion by Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister of the newly independent Zimbabwe in 1980, when he said:

I urge you, whether you are black or white, to join me in a pledge to forget our grim past, forgive others and forget, join hands in a new amity, and together as Zimbabweans, trample upon racialism, tribalism and regionalism, and work hard to reconstruct and rehabilitate our society Let us deepen our sense of belonging and engender a common interest that knows no race, colour or creed. Let us truly become Zimbabweans with a single loyalty.

(Mugabe quoted by Fisher 2010: 28)

The message, directed at the minority whites, was meant to allay their fears that in a black-ruled Zimbabwe they were going to face reprisals as had whites in other countries such as Mozambique and Burundi. The second form of reconciliation, this time referred to as “unity” and targeting black-black relations, was back on the new black government’s political agenda in 1987 following seven years of political disturbances in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces, which left “at least 30 000 people” dead (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) and Legal Resources Foundation of Zimbabwe (LRF) 1997: ix). Both discourses on reconciliation resonated of “a culture of impunity” which Mashingaidze (2010: 21) identifies as typical of Zimbabwe’s political firmament.

The point is that in Zimbabwe, people were discouraged from speaking about certain aspects of the liberation war and the post-independent disturbances by the ZANU PF-led government, which were conveniently left in a monologue about the past. This monologue has come to be known in Ranger’s (2003) terms as “patriotic history”: ZANU PF’s self-serving discourse about the past.

Reconciliation in the context of the 1980s in Zimbabwe demanded certain forms of silence. Among the issues to be silent on include the atrocities committed against blacks by the colonial regime, the role played by ZAPU and the Ndebele in Zimbabwe’s liberation war, the divisions which characterised the liberation movements and, more recently, the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces during the first seven years of independence in Zimbabwe. A report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces in Zimbabwe during the 1980s by the CCJP and LRF draws attention to the need to “break the silence” surrounding the 1980s conflict (1997: xii). CCJP and LRF (1997) argue that true reconciliation does not entail a silence on the ugly aspects of conflict.

The limits of the policy of reconciliation in Zimbabwe have been discussed before (CCJP and LRF, 1997; Huyse 2003; Raftopoulos & Savage 2004; Fisher 2010; Mashingaidze 2010). They will therefore not be elaborated on here. However, it should be emphasised that all writers agree on the part of silence in reconciliation politics in Zimbabwe. Huyse (2003: 36) characterises reconciliation as “an officially imposed form of forgetting”. In describing the nature of reconciliation politics, Huyse explains “silence about the past, it was argued, was what the newborn country needed. Searching for the truth would constantly reopen old wounds and damage the politics of reconciliation. This strategy drew a veil over the human rights violations of the Rhodesian secret service, army and police” (2003: 36). According to CCJP and LRF (1997), the same fear of reopening old wounds would inform the need for silence about the post-independent disturbances in Matabeleland and Midlands.

Crossing the Boundary Fence perpetuates the silences foregrounded by the political leadership of the 1980s. The call to forget the “wrongs of the past” is heeded by Chater to the extent that some issues are left unsaid. One such aspect which needed to be forgotten was colonial violence. Silence on colonial violence, while not directly benefiting the ZANU PF government, which has since been animated about this issue over the years, fits well into a white liberal agenda. Not only does silence on colonial violence offer moral reprieve for the coloniser, it also creates the illusion of peace and justice in the colony. In the context of reconciliation at the time of independence, speaking about colonial atrocities, it was feared, would derail the movement towards racial coexistence.

The original violence which characterises the colonising act is therefore absent from *Crossing the Boundary Fence*. The harsh realities of colonial life during the time period selected for this book are not fully revealed. While a book cannot contain everything, the absence of this violence is questionable. Kinloch (1997: 821) cites Mandaza (1986b: 22) who contends that “white colonisation of [Zimbabwe] was extremely aggressive”. The presence of “whites” in Zimbabwe is therefore not adequately explained. Neither are the relations which resulted from the colonial encounter. Such omissions have ideological connotations. Freire (1972: 28-29) calls this tendency of not confronting the truth “a purely subjectivist perception by someone who forsakes objective reality and creates a false substitute”. He goes on to say:

The fact exists, but the fact and what may result from it may be prejudicial to him. Thus it becomes necessary, not precisely to deny the fact, but to see it differently. This rationalization as a defence mechanism coincides in the end with subjectivism. A fact with its truth rationalized, though not denied, loses its objective base. It ceases to be concrete and becomes a myth created in defence of the class of the perceiver.

(Freire 1972: 29)

To put it in simpler terms, the coloniser or oppressor hides certain truths which he/she finds a drawback to the positions he/she occupies. Certain information might be omitted. It is in this context that the researcher finds Chater complicit to a silencing of “ugly” aspects of colonialism. Informed by a white liberal attitude and a reconciliation agenda, Chater deliberately disregards the part violence played in the construction and maintenance of colonies.

In a similar vein, the relations of master and servant are not adequately contextualised. The author does not account for the servitude of blacks. She presents blacks in servile roles as a given. That blacks were made servants due to economic disparities is one area the text does not dwell on. Contrary to Hove’s *Bones* (1990), where blacks beg Manyepo, the white man, for work because they have been dispossessed by the whites, *Crossing the Boundary Fence* does not explain how blacks came to be servants of white men. Rather, the text claims that blacks “lived very well” on white men’s farms immediately after colonial occupation (Chater 1988: 54). Diana recalls that Peter, one of the Herons’ cooks “had been with her family since long before she was born and he would do anything for the ‘piccanin madam’” (p. 11). Anna, one of the Herons’ black servants is convinced that Africans will only ruin the land if they were given control of it. What the author seems to be driving at is that blacks were faithful and devoted to their servile roles and apparently derived satisfaction from these roles.

In *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee draws attention to the tendency in white South African pastoral writing to either depict black labourers and their white masters as amiable and happy or erase black labourers from the literature altogether. In *Crossing the Boundary Fence*, the former seems to hold. The author does not tell us that blacks worked for whites out of desperation. The fact that Peter had been with the Herons for long demonstrates the confinement blacks endure as a result of economic incapacitation. That he is a cook shows the extent to which blacks have been alienated from their culture. In the African tradition women cook for the men. Although through Kevin, Diana’s brother, the author represents the ugly and racist aspects of the colonialist, we are not explicitly told that relations between black servants and white masters were more than often characterised and maintained through violence. Silence on these “ugly” aspects of colonial life is meant to create the illusion of peace. The result is a reconciliation founded on a falsity.

Furthermore, there is no record of colonial atrocities in *Crossing the Boundary Fence*. One may be compelled to excuse this omission on the grounds of the fact that the text has children as its target audience. In the context of children’s literature, silence on war atrocities finds theoretical justification under a romantic sensibility which considered children as pure and innocent. The notion of childhood innocence would inevitably sanction a silence on “horrific” and “ugly” aspects of life. The notion of childhood

innocence, underpinned by the romantic tradition partly informed by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau “claimed that children embody a state of innocence, purity and natural goodness that is only contaminated on contact with the corrupt outside world” (Kehily 2008: 5). Since the romantic period, the notion of childhood innocence has become pervasive. Omissions and understatements necessitated by this view of children comprise the other silences that constitute the text but will not find further elaboration in this article.

In proffering a racial solution to what she has earlier characterised an economic problem, Chater (1988: 63) circumvents the economic disparities which characterise independent Zimbabwe. The ending is not optimistic. While the races have reached a compromise symbolised by the strengthened friendship between Musa and Diana, there is not much for the Africans to celebrate. For Musa, going to the Herons’ place through the front door has great significance. However, it is an empty gain. Musa tells Spiwe, “[W]e’re free now. This is our country, even if this isn’t our farm. We are not going in the back way anymore; we’re going through the front door, like I said” (p. 130). This surely is an anticlimax. Chater acknowledges previously that the land is central to the struggle, yet seems to make a mockery of “independence”. While this is a reflection of what really transpired, that is, the failure to gain economic independence, the writer seems to represent this empty “independence” as meritorious. By celebrating piecemeal achievements by Africans, Chater is silent about the real losses that characterise political independence. She does not tell us that Mr Heron is not going to share the wealth he owns at the expense of blacks with the same people he now calls friends. The land remains in white hands. After Musa’s visit to Diana through the front door, she is still going back home to her subordinate place. One can only agree with Nkosi (2008) when he notes that the ideology of reconciliation was a mere ruse to preserve economic disparities inherited from Rhodesia. By overemphasising the need for racial unity, the author consciously circumvents the economic implications of independence. Huyse (2003: 37) recognises that “the maintenance of [whites’] pre-independence privileges was seen as absolutely normal. Prejudices and the destructive social relations they generated were kept alive”. Chater’s overt contentment with the economic disparities persisting in independent Zimbabwe cannot be missed. Suddenly the rhetoric on the importance of land and the equal distribution of land which were part of the narrative are banished.

A reconciliation which emphasises race as the one advanced in *Crossing the Boundary Fence* ignores the economic dimension of conflicts. Racism, in Marxist terms, is only a superstructure. An attempt to change the superstructure without making solid efforts to change the base on which the ideology rests is futile. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus”, Althusser (1970: 1) reasons that “the ultimate condition of production is

therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production”. It should be submitted that if white economic power relies on relations between “whites” and “blacks” all attempts will be made to reproduce such relations. Chater’s text reproduces the economic relations between “blacks” and “whites”, which will sustain the continued dominance of whites and misrepresent the aspirations of Africans as limited to “going through the front door” only. The “white” man can continue extending his hand of reconciliation to the African through invitations to tea and claim that together they can “start to build Zimbabwe” (Chater 1988: 131). Yet, true reconciliation, according to Freire (1972: 21), must constitute “true generosity”, which “consist[s] precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity”. Mamdani (1998) points out the shortcomings of reconciliation when he explains that in the aftermath of colonialism, settlers and natives do not automatically become equal. Arguing that the term reconciliation does not fully embrace the change that is required in the new environment, Mamdani captures the hollowness of reconciliation.

Such emptiness is what obtains in *Crossing the Boundary Fence*. The text represents reconciliation as the ultimate goal of independence. Significantly, the friendship between whites and blacks in such economic circumstances remains purely theoretical and fruitless. Musa is ecstatic about the prospect of going into the Herons’ house through the front door even as she rightly acknowledges “this isn’t our farm” (Chater 1988: 130). What she fails to imagine is the possibility of failing to get into the white man’s farm altogether, for the Herons could easily bar her from doing so.

Another glaring omission in *Crossing the Boundary Fence* concerns the role other political parties besides ZANU PF played during the war of liberation and the significance of other ethnic groups to national reconciliation. Among the omitted groups are ZAPU and the Ndebele. The narrative of the liberation war and independence written by Chater in 1988 is conspicuously silent on the part played by ZAPU, led by Joshua Nkomo, in the struggle for independence. This is despite the fact that ZAPU’s army made great strides fighting the Rhodesian army from Zambia during the war of liberation. The army operated mainly in the south-west of the country. Until 1980, when Zimbabwe gained its independence, ZAPU and ZANU PF were the dominant nationalist parties to the extent that a government of national unity was created at independence to accommodate both parties and acknowledge their individual contributions to the war. What one gets from *Crossing the Boundary Fence* is a different story. No mention is made of ZAPU. Ultimately, the story of the liberation war tells a tale of the Shona and ZANU PF. The reader is made aware of the direction the country hopes to take after independence. Although reference is made to “leaders involved in the war” in the order “Ian Smith and Comrade Mugabe and the Bishop and Nkomo, as well as the British” (p. 105), there is a reluctance on the part of the writer to make visible the significance of ZAPU. It is “the policy of

ZANU PF” that finds voice in the text (p. 115). Shadreck, one of the boys who joins the liberation war, tells Musa about life in the camps. In his narrative, ZANU PF is portrayed as the sole liberation party. Later on, the author highlights that “Comrade Mugabe’s ZANU PF party had achieved overwhelming victory in the elections” (p. 127). The author is mute on who has been defeated despite the fact that ZAPU contested the election results. The writer thus erases ZAPU from Zimbabwean history.

Interestingly, the desire to position ZANU PF at the centre of the narrative demands another omission: the internal struggles that characterised the liberation movements. Chung (2006) draws attention to these struggles in her memoirs on the liberation war. While it might not be practical to mention all these issues, their absence is consistent with the reconciliation discourse.

In striving for racial unity, *Crossing the Boundary Fence* virtually ignores the political strife between ZANU PF and ZAPU before and after independence. The text published in 1988 is consistent with the 1980 version of reconciliation which emphasised the racial aspect of colonialism and conveniently ignores a later reconciliation agenda of 1987 which, this time around, had an ethnic (and not a racial) basis. The Unity Accord signed between ZANU PF and ZAPU in 1987 was meant to break an ethnic-based impasse which generally pitted the Shona against the Ndebele from the time of the liberation war. It is generally believed that ZANU PF had a Shona support base while ZAPU had a Ndebele support base, to the extent that any conflicts which emerged between the two parties during and after the war were generally understood to be ethnically driven (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008). While the 1980 reconciliation agenda called for coexistence between blacks and whites, the Unity Accord of 1987 subsumed ZAPU into ZANU PF. Theoretically, from the moment the Unity Accord was signed, ZAPU as it had been known before, then ceased to exist. *Crossing the Boundary Fence*, published a year after the signing of the Unity Accord, is mum about ZAPU and ZIPRA’s contributions to Zimbabwe’s independence. That this silence is informed by the signing of the unity accord which saw ZANU PF and ZAPU merge into ZANU PF in 1987, a year before the publication of *Crossing the Boundary Fence*, is debatable. However, Fisher (2010: 92) shows that in other circles, the signing of the unity accord, rather than being a call to silence, provided the impetus to review the role ZAPU and ZIPRA played during the war.

Crossing the Boundary Fence imagines the new nation through two languages: Shona (the language spoken by the majority in Zimbabwe) and English. In the text we are made to understand that being able to speak Shona and English is mandatory for nation-building. This is despite the fact that Zimbabwe boasts of other languages besides these two. Ndlovu (2006: 305) writes that “Zimbabwe is a multilingual country with eighteen African languages that include Shona, Ndebele, Kalanga, Nambya, Tonga, Sotho,

Dombe, Xhosa, Tonga of Mudzi, Venda, Shangani, Tshwawo, Tswana, Barwe, Sena, Doma, Chikunda and Chewa”. Of course, Chater is not obliged to educate the reader on the language ecology of the country. Nevertheless, her insistence on the part language will play in the construction of nationhood after colonialism raises significant interest.

Chater is adamant that to build a new Zimbabwe it is “terribly important” for the whites to learn Shona since this will build up “an understanding between the races in the new Zimbabwe” (Chater 1988: 133). It seems the position of English in the colonial and postcolonial nation needs no qualification. Chater takes it as axiomatic that English is the de facto language of nation-building. No mention is made that blacks need to learn English. In this regard, the author naturalises the language and deliberately fails to tell the reader that English is a second and a foreign language. Chater also seems to intimate that all the whites speak English while all the blacks speak Shona. This can only be a deliberate and calculated assessment conditioned by the need for silence. Silence on other languages, and by extension, speakers of those languages, is tantamount to social erasure. Hadebe (2005a: 7) notes that “it is often said that one’s attitude towards a language usually reflects one’s attitude towards speakers of that language”. If such an observation is to be taken seriously then one would conclude that *Crossing the Boundary Fence* systematically eliminates other social groups from the history of Zimbabwe.

Possible explanations can be proffered to account for the silence on the Ndebele language. One such explanation is that the Zimbabwe after 1980 was imagined as Shona (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008; Fisher 2010). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008: 36) explains that “since 1980, the Ndebele identity continued to undergo a continuous process of minoritisation as Shona identity picked the agenda of hegemonic triumphalism”. CCJP and LRF (1997) argue that the 1980s disturbances in Matabeleland and Midlands have been viewed in some sectors as ethnic cleansing. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011: 27) also draws attention to “a very xenophobic document entitled ‘For Restricted Circulation: Progress Review on the 1979 Grand Plan’” that circulated in Zimbabwe in the 1990s. The central thesis of this document was that Zimbabwe belonged to the Shona and the Ndebele; being of “foreign” origin had no legal claim to it. Similar ideas about the Ndebele’s supposed foreign identity have been raised by Smith (1997) in his bid to claim legitimacy as rightfully belonging to Zimbabwe. According to Hadebe (2005a: 3), “the language situation in Zimbabwe can be seen as a hierarchical structure with English at the top as official language, followed by Ndebele and Shona, with the ‘minority’ languages lowest both in prestige and in official recognition”. The actual positions Ndebele and Shona hold in this structure is expressed through the observation that Ndebele is taught as a subject in Matabeleland and Midlands, provinces which are predominantly

Ndebele-speaking while Shona is taught in the remaining six provinces (Hadebe 2005a: 3).

The relationship between the Shona and the Ndebele has been rightly noted as predicated on “ethnic fault lines” which erroneously considered Shona and Ndebele identities as fixed, essential and inherently antagonistic (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011: 7). Explaining the marginalisation of the Ndebele in Zimbabwe Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008: 51) says in the imagined nation

Ndebele experiences, histories and heroes are subordinated to triumphant and hegemonic Shona history, if not completely ignored. The way the post-colonial state was abused by ZANU-PF in its drive to violently destroy Ndebele particularism set in motion the current Matabeleland politics of alienation, resentment and grievance that are combining to fuel the desire for a restoration of the pre-colonial Ndebele state.

(Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2008: 51)

Through Chater’s references to the importance of the Shona language, it can be concluded that *Crossing the Boundary Fence* is complicit to the creation and perpetuation of Shona hegemony. The absence of other languages in the text creates the illusion that Zimbabwe could easily be divided into Shona and English and competency in both would make one a legitimate citizen.

Conclusion

It has been argued that Chater’s *Crossing the Boundary Fence* (1988) is conditioned by the politics of national reconciliation in the Zimbabwe of the 1980s to circumvent pertinent issues concerning the liberation war and the period which followed the war. These issues, labelled “silences”, include the “ugly” aspects of colonial life and the significance of ZAPU and the Ndebele to the history of Zimbabwe. The text participates in a ritual of silence, which has been an integral component of the reconciliation agendas in Zimbabwe. For a text which is historical and is read mainly by children in Zimbabwe’s secondary schools, *Crossing the Boundary Fence* demands ample historical judgement.

References

- Althusser, L.
1970 Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses. Online:
<<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>>. 12 October 2007.

- Barnes, T.
2007 *History Has to Play Its Role: Constructions of Race and Reconciliation in Secondary School Historiography in Zimbabwe, 1980-2002. Journal of Southern African Studies* 33(3): 633-665.
- Brennan, T.
1990 *The National Longing for Form. In: Bhabha, Homi (ed.) Nation and Narration. London: Routledge, pp. 44-70.*
- Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and Legal Resources Foundation of Zimbabwe
1997 *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matebeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988. Harare: CCJP & LRF.*
- Chater, P.
1988 *Crossing the Boundary Fence. Harare: Quest.*
- Chitando, A.
2008 *Imagining a Peaceful Society: A Vision of Children's Literature in a Post-Conflict Zimbabwe. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.*
- Chung, F.
2006 *Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle, Harare: Weaver.*
- Coetzee, J.M.
1988 *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa. New Haven: Yale University Press.*
- Eagleton, T.
1976 *Marxism and Literary Criticism. California: University of California Press.*
- Fisher, J.L.
2010 *Pioneers, Settlers, Aliens, Exiles: The Decolonisation of White Identity in Zimbabwe. Australia: The Australian National University.*
- Freire, P.
1972 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Penguin.*
- Galda, L. & Cullinan, B.E.
2002 *Literature and the Child. 5th edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.*
- Gascoigne, M.
1988 *Tunzi the Faithful Shadow. Harare: College Press.*
- Hadebe, S.
2005a *Reflections on the Proposed Ndebele-Shona/Shona-Ndebele Dictionary. Lexikos* 15: 1-10.
2005b *The Significance of Ndebele Historical Fiction. Online: <http://ir.uz.ac.zw/jspui/bitstream/10646/29/3/Hadebe_Historical_the_mes_in_Ndebele.pdf>. 13 April 213.*
- Hanson, B.
1997 *Takadini. Harare: Fidalyn.*
- Hastings, W.
1999 *Toward a Theory of Historical Fiction for Children. Paper presented at the Third Biennial Conference on Modern Critical Approaches to Children's Literature, Nashville, TN, 24 March 1999.*
- Hove, C.
1990 *Bones. Harare: Baobab.*

- Huyse, L.
2003 Zimbabwe: Why Reconciliation Failed. In: Bloomfield D., Barnes, T. & Huyse, L. *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, pp. 32-39.
- Kehily, M.J. (ed.)
2008 *An Introduction to Childhood Studies*. 2nd edition. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.
- Kinloch G.C.
1997 Racial Attitudes in the Post-colonial Situation: The Case of Zimbabwe. *Journal of Black Studies* 27(6): 820-838.
- Macherey, P.
1978 *A Theory of Literary Production*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mamdani, M.
1998 When Does a Settler Become a Native?: Reflections on the Roots of Citizenship in Equatorial and South Africa. Inaugural Lecture delivered by A.C. Jordan, Professor of African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa, 13 May 1998.
- Mandaza, I.
1986b The State and Politics in the Post-White Settler Colonial Situation. In: Mandaza, Ibbo (ed.) *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition 1980-1986*. Dakar: Codesria, pp. 21-74.
- Márquez, G.M.
1970 *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Mashingaidze, T.M.
2010 Zimbabwe's Illusive National Healing and Reconciliation Processes: From Independence to the Inclusive Government 1980-2009. *Conflict Trends* 1: 19-27.
- Mlambo, A.S.
1995 *Focus on History Book 4*. Harare: College Press.
- Mucheri, M.
1989 *Friend Billy and the Msasa Avenue Three*. Harare: Longman.
- Mukanya, S.
1994 *Dynamics of History Book 3*. Harare: College Press.
- Ndhlovu, F.
2006 Gramsci, Doke and the Marginalisation of the Ndebele Language in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 27 (4): 305-318.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J.
2008 Nation Building in Zimbabwe and the Challenges of Ndebele Particularism. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 8(3): 27-55.
2011 *The Zimbabwean Nation-State Project: A Historical Diagnosis of Identity and Power-based Conflicts in a Postcolonial State*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute.
- Nkomo, J.
2001 *The Story of My Life*. Harare: SAPES.
- Nkosi, L.
2008 The Ideology of Reconciliation: Its Effects on South African Culture. *Baobab: South African Journal of New Writing* 1: 7-11.

- Posada-Carbo, E.
1998 Fiction as History: The Bananeras and Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30(2): 395-414.
- Prew, M., Pape, J., Mutirwa, R. & Barnes, T.
1993 *People Making History Book 4*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.
- Proctor, A. & Phimister, I.
1991 *People and Power Book 1*. Harare: Academic Books.
- Raftopoulos, B. & Savage, T. (eds)
2004 *Zimbabwe: Injustice and Political Reconciliation*. Cape Town: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.
- Ranger, T.O.
2003 Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe. Online: <<http://www.ocms.ac.uk/docs/Ranger%20Nationalist%20Historiography.pdf>>. 16 December 2012.
- Smith, I.D.
1997 *The Great Betrayal: The Memoirs of Ian Douglas Smith*. London: Blake.
- Tagwirei, C.
2013 Fictions, Nation-building and Ideologies of Belonging in Children’s Literature: An Analysis of *Tunzi the Faithful Shadow*. *Children’s Literature in Education* 44(1): 44-56.
- Turner, J.
1979 The Kinds of Historical Fiction: An Essay in Definition and Methodology. *Genre* 12: 333-353.

Cuthbeth Tagwirei
Stellenbosch University
ctrafaz@yahoo.com