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From Harare to Harvard: Education, Gender, and Citizenship in J. Nozipo Maraire's *Zenzele: A Letter For My Daughter*

Carrie J. Walker*

Abstract

The article examines the representation of gender, education, and citizenship in J. Nozipo Maraire's epistolary novel *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter*. This novel consists of a letter written by the protagonist, Shiri Shungu, to her daughter, who has recently left her home in Harare, Zimbabwe to study at Harvard University. Through her letter, Shiri seeks to supplement her daughter's formal learning experiences regarding Shona culture, family history, and national events. Through the informal teaching offered in her letter, Shiri fosters her daughter's understanding of indigenous practices and stresses the importance of self-definition. Shiri intends that the information contained in her letter will empower her daughter with a stronger sense of identity while *Zenzele* is far from home, yet her narrative also reveals ambiguity and anxieties she experiences regarding the status of women in contemporary Zimbabwe. While Shiri's missive draws attention to the struggles of individuals who made sacrifices to ensure educational access for all, it also challenges assumptions regarding the nation that education is a panacea, exposing how Western education can undermine African systems of knowledge. Through her novel, Maraire argues that although education may offer benefits such as social mobility and prestige, it leads to empowerment and promotes dignity only when accompanied by full recognition of dual citizenship and responsibility to family, community, and nation.

Keywords: women, gender, education, Zimbabwe, shona, epistolary novel, citizenship, migration, mjiba

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How could I prepare you for a world that I did not even understand? I was struck by the absurdity of my predicament as a woman. I had been excluded from the social contract that drafted and perpetuated those very rules that it fell in to my lot to inculcate in you (Maraire 1996, 3).

I have learned something in my awkward journey through womanhood. The lessons are few, but enduring. So I hope that you will pardon this curious distillation of traditional African teaching, social commentary, and maternal concern. These are the stories that have made me what I am today. It is just that you are my very own, and it is an old woman's privilege to impart her wisdom. It is all that I have to give to you, Zenzele (5).

In J. Nozipo Maraïre's novel, *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter* (1996), the protagonist, Shiri Shungu, writes a letter to her daughter Zenzele, a young woman who has recently moved from Harare, Zimbabwe to the United States to attend Harvard University. Shiri's letter seeks to supplement Zenzele's formal learning experiences with new knowledge about Shona cultural traditions, family history, and national events. Through the informal teachings offered in her letter, Shiri fosters Zenzele's understanding of indigenous practices and stresses the importance of self-definition for modern African women. Due to her concerns regarding Zenzele's enthusiasm for Western culture, Shiri intends for the contents of her letter to empower her daughter with a stronger sense of Shona identity while Zenzele is far from home. In addition to "imparting her wisdom," Shiri's words reveal the ambiguities and anxieties she experiences concerning the status of women in contemporary Zimbabwe. As suggested in the epigraphs, Shiri struggles to mediate conflicts stemming from her socially circumscribed maternal duties—inculcating the norms and values of her culture—with the second-class citizenship she experiences as a woman in contemporary society. Shiri's letter is an effort to share this struggle with her daughter so that the lessons that emerge will assist Zenzele as she navigates the myriad challenges of modern citizenship.

It is regrettable that scholars and critics have thus far largely overlooked Zenzele; little published research on the novel exists. That Maraïre's novel makes such a serious intervention into the issues of education, gender, and postcolonial culture makes this investigation all the more crucial. The primary focus of Shiri's letter is education, and, through it, Maraïre endorses ideas about universal access to education espoused in human rights doctrines, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Conventions on the Rights of the Child, and the Zimbabwean Constitution. Shiri's missive draws attention to the struggles of female fighters who made sacrifices to ensure educational access for all, and it demonstrates how schooling fosters opportunity for advancement. However, Shiri's anecdotes also challenge Western universalist assumptions underlying international rights doctrines that claim that education is a panacea and exposes how Western education systems can undermine African systems of knowledge. Shiri's letter argues that although education may offer benefits such as social mobility and prestige, it leads to empowerment and promotes dignity only when ac-

accompanied by full recognition of a dual citizenship in Africa and the West along with responsibility to family, community, and nation.

Broadly speaking, Maraire's novel channels the national disappointments, educational and otherwise, that arise from the complications and contradictions surrounding the history of education in Zimbabwe. More specifically, it depicts the impact of colonial legacies, globalization, neoliberalism, and local policy failure on individuals. At the same time, however, Shiri's narrative celebrates achievements related to education, particularly among her own family members. Shiri's outlook toward Zenzele's academic successes is emblematic of this complex history; though she is proud of Zenzele's accomplishments, Shiri's letter communicates her skepticism about the lures attracting her daughter to Harvard, and she is saddened by geopolitical realities that give rise to Zenzele's sojourn across the Atlantic. Events detailed throughout her letter reveal that Shiri's concerns regarding Zenzele's well-being are informed by her life experiences, and the lessons enclosed in her letter are an attempt to instill in her daughter a firm sense of what it means to be a Shona woman in the modern world. As such, the novel provides readers with a glimpse of how one African writer portrays a new kind of feminism for African women, one that unites patriarchal indigenous traditions with modern Westernized concepts of human rights and gender equality.

The epistolary nature of Maraire's novel has significant implications. Through the epistolary novel format, which relies on the pretense that the letter is a private exchange between characters, Maraire invites readers to become familiar with the intimacies of the Shungu family. As indicated in the first epigraph, the purpose of Shiri's letter is didactic, an attempt to impart a "curious distillation of traditional African teaching" to her daughter. However, Shiri's letter not only educates Zenzele about family history, gender politics, and educational struggles but also the outside reader of the novel.¹ As such, Maraire's use of the form transforms private experiences into public discourse, blurring the boundaries between the public and private spheres. It is precisely this artificial distinction—one identifying women with the home—that has been used to relegate women to second-class citizenship. In addition, through the epistolary format, Maraire blends elements of oral tradition into written literature. As will be discussed in more detail, Maraire incorporates folktales and other oral elements in order to bridge the gap between "oral" and "written" modes of storytelling. Furthermore, through her employment of the epistolary form, Maraire contributes to the resurgence of the epistolary novel form that has occurred among women writers, such as Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Sindiwe Magona, Hope Keshebi, Carolyne Adalla, and Gloria Samuels Dike, from across the African continent since the late nineteen seventies. Like these authors, Maraire uses the conventions of the epistolary novel to challenge hegemonic discourses and translate modernity into local contexts.

Historical Context: Education in Zimbabwe

Before turning to the novel, it is helpful to review the history of education in Zimbabwe. It should be emphasized that African societies had their own systems of education before colonization. Pre-colonial African education promoted the transfer of practical knowledge

between consecutive generations. African education was, as Walter Rodney describes, characterized by:

close links with social life, both in a material and spiritual sense; its collective nature; its many-sidedness; and its progressive development in conformity with the successive states of physical, emotional, and mental development of the child...through mainly informal means, pre-colonial African education matched the realities of pre-colonial African society and produced well-rounded personalities to fit into that society (Rodney 1974, 239).

Under Rhodesian occupation, extant systems were dismantled, and Africans were restricted from the majority of formal educational opportunities. Stemming from English mandates of direct rule in the colonies as well as the prioritization of self-serving economic interests, the Rhodesian government only provided educational services to white citizens, for whom education was compulsory.

To some extent, the early Rhodesian government funded mission schools. In the 1890's, African students were educated in technical fields, including agriculture and industry. However, these programs were funded as long as schooling only prepared students for servile positions and did not encourage "racial tensions" (Owomoyela 2002, 128). In addition, because mission schools generally charged tuition, these schools were only accessible to students whose families could afford school fees. Most families preferred to send their male children to school because it was commonly believed that educating females would only benefit her immediate family until marriage.² Moreover, colonial school curriculum was problematic in that it promoted unequal power relations and inculcated students with notions of Western superiority under the guise of progress (Altbach 1995, 425). Due to factors such as these, the majority of Africans were effectively marginalized from participation in decision-making and development due to lack of educational access under Rhodesian rule (Shizha 2006, 190). Rodney minces no words in stating, "Colonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion, and the development of underdevelopment" (Rodney 1974, 241).

Many Christian and African organizations began independent schools as early as 1902. Many of these schools sought to do more than create low-wage workers and taught academic subject matter. For a short time, the government endorsed an expanded curriculum. In 1925, however, the government established the Department of Native Education, increasing its control of African education and banning independent schools. Efforts to curtail access to meaningful educational opportunities intensified during the 1970's after the second *Chimurenga*, the liberation struggle, began (Owomoyela 2002, 128). Educational expenditures from this period shed light on the extreme gap between spending on white and black pupils. During 1967-1977, the Rhodesian government spent more than twenty times per capita on white students than black students. From 1977 to 1978 the education budget was Z\$ 4.6 million; Z\$31.7 was spent on white students and Z\$42.8 million on black education. Given

the disproportionate numbers of these populations, these expenditures translate to Z\$522 per white student and Z\$52 per black student (Weiss 1994, 109).

The formative educational experiences of the peri-independence generation represented by Shiri and her husband were shaped by these factors. While Shiri and her husband's families had the financial means to send their children to school, Zenzele's parents' educational achievements were the exception rather than the rule under Rhodesian control. In 1971, around the time Shiri and her husband would have attended school, only 43.5 percent of black children were enrolled in primary school (Gordon qtd. in Shizha 2006, 188). Because the colonial administration was dependent on low-wage workers and continued illiteracy among black Africans to maintain power, few educational opportunities existed for black students beyond primary school. Only 12 percent of black students attended secondary schools, and 37.5 percent of those students were steered toward vocational training. Further still, a mere 0.2 percent of black students were allowed enrollment at the university level (Dorsey qtd. in Shizha 2006, 189). Since Shiri attended a teacher training college, and her husband, Zenzele's father, earned a law degree at an American university, they had opportunities that separated them from the normative experiences of black Africans under Rhodesian rule.

Maraire's novel also reflects the national and international forces shaping the educational opportunities of Zenzele and the Zimbabweans of her generation. After independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government initiated mass education programs to ameliorate the dearth of scholastic opportunities that were available to Africans during colonial rule and to prepare Zimbabweans for participation in the global economic market. At this time, school fees were rescinded and attendance became compulsory. Between 1979 and 1990, enrollment in secondary schools jumped from 66,215 to 710,619 (Ministry of Education, Sport, and Culture qtd. in Shizha 2006, 191). This increase in attendance reflects policy changes that were informed by human capital theory, which assumed that investments in education would lead to a skilled workforce, generate more income, and stimulate the national economy (Shizha 2006, 192).³ Although literacy levels in Zimbabwe have surged since independence, investments in education remain unrealized since high numbers of educated Zimbabweans still lack employment opportunities (Shizha 2006, 194).

Zimbabwe's social welfare programs proved to be unsustainable, and, as a result of high government spending, political corruption, and the troubled global economic climate of the early 1990's, the Zimbabwean government enrolled in structural adjustment programs as a way to achieve financial stability. Under the directives mandated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Zimbabwean government scaled back social spending, resulting in drastic cuts to educational resources (Abdi et al 2006, 21). At present, free primary schooling is no longer available in Zimbabwe; students are required to pay for tuition, books, uniforms, transportation, or any combination thereof. Regardless of public assistance available to some poor families, the financial burden of the user pay system remains too high for many parents who, despite a deep commitment to educating their children, cannot afford school fees (Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang 2004, 407).

One additional consequence of this economic climate has been the privatization and commercialization of Zimbabwean schools. Like many upper class Zimbabwean children, Zenzele was educated at a private international school. While these institutions offer a prestigious education to those students whose families can afford high tuition rates, private schools subtract resources from investment in public schools, further prohibiting students who cannot pay school fees. According to Edward Shizha,

Private education widened the inequality gap between the rich and the poor in the country. The rich are able to consume the educational commodity that private schooling attracts, while the poorer are marginalized and pushed toward poorly furnished and crowded schools with minimal learning materials (Shizha 2006, 205).

In addition to exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities, international schools privilege Western curriculum over local knowledge. Although adopting foreign curriculum and promotion structures empowers Zimbabwean students to engage Western discourses, it also perpetuates notions of Western superiority and denies students valuable opportunities to learn about their own complex cultures and histories. Thus, while Zenzele's private school experience grooms her for a Harvard education and the privileges such credentials will grant, it distances her from knowledge about Shona culture. Much to Shiri's dismay, Zenzele's enthusiasm for the course offerings at Harvard indicates that her overseas education may only encourage this trajectory. Shiri recalls how, before her departure, Zenzele looks at her prospectus, rattling off the names of professors from across the globe. She exclaims, "Oh, look, I could even learn Polish. Ha-ha. There is no limit, Mama, don't you see?" (Maraire 1996, 2).

Comments such as these fuel Shiri's anxieties regarding her daughter's relocation to Harvard. In response, Shiri seeks to enhance Zenzele's understanding of her family's own educational history so that Zenzele understands the sacrifices that have made her trip to Harvard possible. Shiri stresses their family's longstanding commitment to education by including an anecdote that compares her in-laws' attitudes toward education with those of their neighbor, Granny Patience. Shiri explains that, whereas Patience was more interested in buying new dresses for herself than educating her children, Zenzele's grandparents invested their resources in their children's academic careers. With pride, Shiri describes the benefits of her in-laws' sacrifices:

Mbuya and Babamukuru, meanwhile, plowed their investments in the hearts and minds of their children. And today they are yielding large returns. Today Tete Murielle is a doctor, your father is a lawyer, and your uncle Babamunini Arthur, is a professor at the university. Had it not been for been for Mbuya's foresight, Tete Murielle would probably be changing the nappies of some European baby in the suburbs, as is the fate of most of our un-

educated rural girls, and your father and uncle would be garden boys and cook boys (30).

In this passage, Shiri employs a farming metaphor to pay tribute to Mbuya and Babamukuru's investment in their children's futures, highlighting how their cultivation of their children's intellects has not only reaped benefits for their family but also their community. Through this anecdote, Shiri critiques those individuals who act in self-interest, and she reminds Zenzele about her responsibility to past, present, and future members of her family and community.

Shiri does not explain her decision to send Zenzele to an international school, yet she does address the fact that most women in Africa do not have access to such prestigious educational resources. Responding to Zenzele's question about what it means to be an African woman, Shiri points out that most women do not have the opportunities that Zenzele does. She writes,

[...] for the majority [of women, it] means to rise out of bed before others, to make the cold kitchen warm, to work the fields in the blazing heat, to walk for miles on dusty paths carrying water on your head, wood under your arms, and a baby on your back (41).

Though, in comparison to the rest of Africa, Zimbabwean women enjoy high levels of education, Zenzele's enrollment in tertiary education is remarkable and her enrollment at Harvard is exceptional.⁴

Modeling Dual Citizenship

Shiri begins writing her letter in the early morning hours, while sipping tea in the garden, a place where she says she feels more connected to Zenzele. She tells Zenzele that the garden "was your stage and my refuge" (1). Shiri's grief regarding Zenzele's departure is conveyed by the opening words of her letter, which reads, "today is the first day of winter, I believe. There is a thin frost on the ground that makes the white wall almost silver and casts a pallor on the garden. Not a single bloom remains..." More than just "small talk" about the weather, Maraire's alignment of Shiri's melancholy with the winter season alludes to the Greek myth of Demeter.⁵ However, in Shiri's case, the "underworld" is Harvard and Zenzele's red prospectus is the "pomegranate" that lures her daughter away from home.

Although false mythologies of Western superiority have caused immeasurable injustice since European colonialism began in Africa, Shiri's allusion to the Demeter myth shows that Western narratives can be revised for use in local contexts. Shiri engages this story of a mother/daughter relationship to establish common ground between Africa and the West, drawing attention to the mutual respect for storytelling in both cultures. This portion of Shiri's letter shows Zenzele that, despite her criticisms, Shiri values certain aspects of Western culture, and it reminds Zenzele that her mother is more than a provincial thinker.

Moreover this reference also positions Shiri and Zenzele's separation within what Wai Chee Dimock labels "deep time," showing their story is not unusual (3).⁶ Instead, their relationship is situated within a long history in which foreign lures separate mother from daughter.

Shiri advocates the value of indigenous culture throughout her letter, yet she does not romanticize any notion of returning to a pre-colonial existence. Her use of Greek mythology indicates the infeasibility underlying such a yearning, a sentiment Ali A. Abdi reinforces in his article "African Philosophies of Education":

because the world of colonialism has irretrievably permeated that of indigenous population across the globe and current levels of interdependence are so intertwined and complex, a total separation of the two, even if desired, will be, for the time being, impractical, if not completely impossible (35).

In addition to Shiri's allusion to Greek mythology, she repeatedly invokes Shakespeare and the "many seeds, one fruit" philosophy of the African Diaspora. These devices draw attention to cultural hybridity by emphasizing the "intertwined" reality linking Shona culture and global forces. They also foreground the folktales Shiri records later in her letter, particularly one in which Shiri "flips the script" by telling the story of Rudi and Dikani, a Shona tale similar to *Romeo and Juliet*.

Many of Shiri's other recollections call attention to the fact that family and community investment in the schooling of the younger generation does not guarantee stability or empowerment. In this sense, educational access is analogous to Independence: people believed that both factors would rectify social ills when, in reality, neither have offered the Zimbabwean citizenry the full benefits for which they had hoped and fought. Shiri points to "postcolonial syndrome" as one explanation of this failure. She states that after Independence, despite their "common vision," many Zimbabweans:

developed all the symptoms of postcolonial syndrome, endemic to Africa: acquisition, imitation, and a paucity of imagination. We simply rushed to secure what the colonialist had. We bought their homes, attended their schools, leased their offices, spoke their language, played their sports and courted their company. We denied our own culture... We created a visible white line of ultimate aspiration: to achieve what the Europeans had (18).

Here, Shiri critiques the "West is best" mentality perpetuated by Harare's nouveau riche after independence. Through her use of the pronoun "we," Shiri acknowledges her own participation in cultural colonization.

As an alternative, Shiri advocates a "dual citizenship" model of citizenship as a viable strategy to remedy postcolonial syndrome. Though Shiri, too, struggles to negotiate a balance between indigenous traditions and modern customs, she argues:

We have to acknowledge our dual citizenship. We are urban and rural, old and new. We exist in contradictory time frames; in one we are creating computer programs for artificial intelligence and in another we are carrying a bucket to the river to fetch drinking water. It is our reality; we cannot run away from it (18).

Instead of relying on unsustainable traditions or fleeting new realities, she argues that the “old” worlds should be reconciled with “new” ones rather than replacing the former with the latter. In Shiri’s mind, the dual citizenship approach is a more sustainable form of personhood for modern Africans, one that allows for and even celebrates the dualities between indigenous belief systems and modern technologies. Shiri hopes her daughter is able to unify her identities as a Shona woman and Harvard student. Thus, the dual citizenship mindset is the pedagogy Shiri teaches, and her letter is the instruction manual.

Shiri’s letter confronts Zenzele’s aversion toward visiting Chakowa, her family’s rural village. To strengthen Zenzele’s allegiance to the village and enhance her understanding of her dual citizenship, Shiri attempts to reframe Zenzele’s perspective. For example, Shiri contextualizes an incident in which one of the village elders suggested that Zenzele should be “given” to one of his sons. Recalling her daughter’s horrified response to this invitation, Shiri writes, “Sekuru Isaac is a simple and honorable man, an old friend of your grandfather’s. The old man had meant no harm. On the contrary: he meant to give you the greatest compliment he could” (8). With these words, Shiri translates Isaac’s outlook so that Zenzele may consider his actions from a more well informed perspective. In addition, Shiri reminds Zenzele that such aspects of village life are “part and parcel of the other traditions that you adore.” (7)

Central to her dual citizenship pedagogy, Shiri directs Zenzele to integrate both traditional and modern worldviews. She evokes Zenzele’s enthusiasm regarding Harvard’s vast resources and directs her to find equal value in Chakowa’s “libraries.” Shiri reminds Zenzele that the elders “are our living history. The village is our library,” (7) a statement that intimates her belief that one solitary institution cannot compare to the human “encyclopedias” who populate the village. In response to Zenzele’s critical view of local perspectives, Shiri asks, “How could I allow you to grow up reading Greek classics, Homer’s *Iliad*, the voyages of Agamemnon, and watch you devour *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* yet be ignorant of the lyrical, the romantic, and the tragic that have shaped us as Africans?” (8). In and of itself, Shiri’s letter testifies to the depth of lyrical, romantic, and tragic experiences that abound in the tales of elders passed down through generations.

Shiri’s letter guides Zenzele to contemplate her cultural inheritance and, through her missive, Shiri suggests that Zenzele is as much a product of the collective experiences of her family members as of her formal education. Shiri underscores this point by transmitting a lesson she learned from her father as a young girl. She explains how one evening, after she had skipped school to go climbing with a boy, her father summoned her to tell a story. Shiri explains, “I have no idea to this day if my father knew of my deviant behavior or not. He was a man who saw much but said little” (108). However, without mentioning Shiri’s tru-

ancy, her father related a story about a woman whose lover had seduced her into killing her husband and child, and then after these crimes, rejected her for being untrustworthy. In conclusion, Shiri's father stated,

“You will meet many men in life. Allow none to tempt you to abandon your principles. Follow what is right. Stick to the path of honesty and integrity.... There is not a man in this world who is worth your dignity. Do not confuse self-sacrifice with love” (112).

Shiri's written record of her father's oral account testifies to local wisdom passed down through generations. Moreover, his story emulates African models of education that emphasize cultivation of knowledge and skills rather than the inculcation of Western styles. Rather than punishing or interrogating his daughter, Shiri's father's story provided advice for further contemplation and empowered Shiri to make her own decisions.

The cultural and ethical approach to education reflected by Shiri's father's story and Shiri's letter converge with formal proposals by African education experts. Shizha argues,

[A] redefined African education system should aim at reclaiming the African cultural histories and memories. Schools should be cultural spaces and centers that provide strategies to reclaim African indigeneity and overcome threats from cultural alienation. Schools should empower students to define their own destiny and cultural selves (Shizha 2005, 67).

Whether traveling with her children to Chakowa or recording anecdotes in her letter, Shiri imparts a more distinct understanding of specific cultural practices and family history. As such, Shiri acts out the inter-generational transmission of knowledge that was commonplace in pre-colonial educational models (Abdi, 2005, 29). Recording her experiences for Zenzele helps Shiri remedy the lack of indigenous perspective available to her daughter and increases the likelihood that Zenzele will see her heritage as a source of strength and power.

Navigating the Intersections of Gender and Culture

As part of her attempt to strengthen Zenzele's understanding of her dual citizenship, Shiri revisits previous disagreements they shared about gender-specific customs, such as hand-washing rituals,⁷ lobola,⁸ and naming.⁹ Through her reexamination of these discussions, Shiri reveals her own efforts to navigate the contradictions of modern citizenship. Historically, Shiri has defended gendered social customs despite the fact that, under certain conditions, such practices can lead to the subordination of women. However, her missive reveals that, after Zenzele's departure, Shiri experienced an epiphany that brings her to a new understanding of dual citizenship. Whereas, previously, Shiri viewed her daughter's assertions about gender inequities to be a threat—“terrible inconsistencies” that she could not iron out—

she now acknowledges the reasons for Zenzele's "feminist litany" as valid and encourages her daughter to find her own balance (Maraire 1996, 36-37).

Shiri's record of their conversations about gender traces the shift in Shiri's perspective, though she commences her discussion by asserting a stance that does not change. She emphasizes that abundant benefits accompany the practice of Shona cultural traditions, especially those involving the institution of the family. She explains, "The extended family is your community, your own emotional, financial, and cultural safety net. It is Africa's most powerful resource" (31). In addition, Shiri asserts that there are responsibilities to which Zenzele must also subscribe as a member of this extensive family tree, especially because she is the oldest daughter of the Shungu family. Shiri explains,

[there are] hierarchy and customs attached to each specific relationship in our ubiquitous family tree. It will take time, but you will learn. As my daughter, it will be your responsibility to maintain those links for all of us. Do not be discouraged by its breadth. Therein lies its beauty [...] (31).

While comforting Zenzele with the notion of a "safety net," Shiri's words also draw attention to the responsibilities they share as the first-born daughters of their respective generations. Shiri's language—beauty in breadth—indicates that this responsibility is not an unwelcome obligation but an honor. Moreover, this perspective reveals an added layer of urgency to Shiri's letter; it intimates the immense loss that would result if Zenzele were not to return home.

Shiri addresses their argument about lobola most extensively, outlining their assertions about the costs and benefits of the ritual. Shiri reflects on how, despite Zenzele's protest, "I will never be bought! Mama, how could you possibly accept some cattle and cash in exchange for my freedom" (31), she urged Zenzele to view lobola as a central aspect of Shona identity. Rather than viewing it from a "Western anthropological perspective" which maintains that lobola "identifies women as property," Shiri attempted to convince Zenzele that lobola is much more than a financial transaction. Instead, she asserted that lobola is a "tribute" or an "expression of appreciation" that unites families. Shiri proclaims, "Westerners give rings; we have lobola," and that Zenzele should not "reject a custom because it is vulnerable to abuse" (32). Before reading Shiri's letter, Zenzele may not have known how much this conversation upset Shiri; however, Shiri notes her feelings of frustration here. She remembers her initial reaction to the argument: "I have made my contributions. I have nothing more to add. It is all up to your generation to carry us the rest of the way. That was all I could think of then" (37).

By mapping Shiri and Zenzele's debate on paper—as well as Shiri's reaction to it—Maraire draws attention to the complexities surrounding lobola. Since the war for liberation, many Shona women have questioned whether lobola is a tool of equality or subordination.¹⁰ Though Zenzele appreciates some aspects of lobola, particularly that it is "an appreciation of the gifts that a woman brings to her marriage," she rejects its patriarchal underpinnings. She is especially disturbed that some men use lobola to justify maltreatment of their wives "be-

cause they feel they bought them.” This phenomenon leads her to question the value of women in Zimbabwe, asking, “What is a woman worth after all? And who has the right to make such an audacious calculation?” (34). In spite of Zenzele’s criticisms, Shiri initially maintains that lobola is an equitable system if it is practiced with integrity. Maraire shows that, for Shiri, there is more at stake than gender equality; for her, cultural preservation is of greater importance.¹¹ Considering the post-Independence disappointments and the homogenizing forces of globalization faced by Zimbabweans, Shiri’s concern for the survival of local cultural value is understandable, even commendable. On the other hand, Shiri’s readiness to defend this custom at the expense of gender equality also perpetuates the notion that women’s equality is a threat to the welfare of Shona society. This situation is particularly problematic since, in Zimbabwe and across the globe, recent advancements in women’s rights are being denied and/or revoked by governments that claim women’s sacrifices are necessary for the “greater good” of their respective societies.¹²

This situation is painfully clear in the overturning of laws that provided some measure of gender equity for Zimbabwean women. After independence, measures to ensure gender equity were widespread, especially due to women’s participation in the liberation movement. Though women only had the legal status of minors under Rhodesian law, legislation such as the Sex Disqualification Act (1980), the Customary Law and Primary Courts Act (1981), the Legal Age of Majority Act (1982), and the Matrimonial Causes Act (1985) all helped to ensure women’s equality and full citizenship under the law (Essof 2010, 64-65). Despite legal gains, however, the advances in women’s status began to be reversed in the late 1980’s. As stated by Shereen Essof,

...the ensuing years [after Independence] saw patriarchy reassert itself as the political will to address gender inequality in Zimbabwe diminished rapidly and was replaced by intensified regulation of women in both the private and public spheres. This was done through the powerful invocation of counterrevolutionary cultural-nationalist discourses that portrayed women’s organizing as feminist, and feminism as antinationalist and proimperialist, which went a long way toward destabilizing and weakening the movement (Essof, 59).

Amidst anti-feminist nationalist sentiments and the imperialist forces of globalization, it is not surprising that Shiri, a passive observer who prefers the domestic sphere, would affirm traditional practices such as lobola. Shiri’s standpoint is consistent with many women, particularly women in rural areas, who believe that lobola enhances family unity (Ranchod-Nilsson 2006, 62).

Shiri’s views seem at odds with her family, however, due to the fact that her husband is an internationally renowned human rights lawyer, and her sister Linda and cousin Tinawo were freedom fighters during the *Chimurenga*.¹³ Shiri finds more of their qualities reflected in Zenzele’s personality than her own:

There is a vision of some “greater than this” that you share but that I cannot see—some snapshot that you carry around like a soldier of his beloved, which gives you the courage to fight, to cast away this domestic tranquility that I have created for you, and to seek out life’s difficulties. I stood apart from you activists. It was as if I had skipped through some critical developmental milestone in the metamorphosis from precolonial clone into the post-independence Zimbabwean (Maraire 1996, 77).

Through these words, Maraire portrays Shiri’s conservative attitudes toward women’s domesticity; in the same breath that Shiri elevates her family members’ courage, she diminishes her own role in their lives. Rather than seeing the household environment she creates as a factor that enables their bravery, Shiri belittles herself and the importance of her caregiving.

Insecurities emerge through other comments Shiri makes about her domestic contributions. Reflecting on Zenzele’s relationship with her and her husband, Shiri writes, “I was knitting a red cardigan for you...something warm and protective....You would one day outgrow my sweater, but [your father’s] story would suit your mind, body, and soul perfectly for eternity” (77). A similar perspective surfaces when she reflects on a discussion she had with Linda and Tinawo during the war when she tells them: “I am not as brave as you, little sisters. The bush is not for me. I wage my own insignificant, small struggles from day to day...But my door is always open and my pots are always full for you and your friends...” (169). Shiri may not be a revolutionary (as she imagines Zenzele wishes she would be), but her outlook denies recognition of how essential these offerings are to the success of the public causes for which her activist family members fight. By devaluing her own importance, Shiri inadvertently downplays the involvement of the majority of individuals who contribute to the communal well-being in small yet significant ways. Though this self-denigrating standpoint is commonplace, it is problematic since modest contributions are just as vital to social movements as more dramatic gestures. This situation highlights the impact of patriarchal traditions on Shiri, which contributes to Zenzele’s alienation from them.

To help Zenzele understand her disinterest for politics more clearly, Shiri explains that her submissive nature is related to the death of her first love, a sculptor who was killed in an ambush during the war. Shiri must have imagined Zenzele’s surprise at learning that she had a boyfriend before Zenzele’s father for she writes that, though discussing love relationships with a daughter is not typical of Shona culture, she wonders, “What are these little secrets to me now? They mean nothing if they cannot become the folklore of your wisdom and judgment” (113). To Zenzele, she describes the trauma she experienced because of the sculptor’s death, stressing the physical toll his death took:

Once the funeral was over, there was nothing to keep my hands occupied, and so I developed bouts of violent tremors. I was never quite the same afterward. It is true that my hands ceased to shake with time, but the restless-

ness and the emptiness never left me. Something that had just been born prematurely died inside of me. For years, the pain was unbearable (125).

Shiri's focus on the changes her body underwent as a result of her grief underscores her pain. By revisiting this experience, Shiri shows Zenzele that, though the war for independence had ended decades earlier, the costs still weigh heavily on the present.

In addition to explaining Shiri's passive tendencies, this story offers Shiri the opportunity to teach Zenzele about overcoming loss. While the story of the sculptor's death showcases the depth of Shiri's pain, it also lays the foundation for her relationship to Zenzele's father. Shiri explains that her relationship with Zenzele's father had a restorative effect. She writes, "The longer we were together, the more stable my steps became, the clearer my vision, the steadier my hands, and the more lucid my thoughts (131)." Her portrayal of these changes denotes her belief in the capacity for healing, stating, "over the years, my cynicism has been mitigated as I watch with awe as your father has achieved what others would not dare" (177). Though Shiri claims she had "ceased to dream," she likens Zenzele's idealism to the attitudes held by her father, Linda, and Tinawo, contending they all share a gift of the "third eye." Shiri describes their courage as "the vision that empowers, that makes you bold to laugh in the face of fate's stern, set, furious glare, to ignore the path that she has pointed out for you and to opt for some other, grassier path to tread" (178). Surely, her mother's words provide inspiration and comfort to Zenzele, who is forging a new path thousands of miles away. However, at the same time, it is likely that this reference to "fate's stern, set, furious glare" also leads Zenzele to contemplate the recent news that Shiri has been diagnosed with cancer.

While, undoubtedly, the recent discovery of Shiri's illness underlies her purpose for writing, the epiphany about the status of women that Shiri experiences while drinking her morning coffee compels her to take action and write to Zenzele. Shiri confesses that, before this moment, she has been exhausted by Zenzele's zest for life, even comparing Zenzele's incessant queries to "little bombs." Shiri's portrayal of her daughter indicates that Zenzele lives up to her name, which means, "You can do it!" Shiri explains the reason for her fatigue over her daughter's zest for life:

Ever since you burst into womanhood with your fervent egalitarianism and sweet idealism, the complacent foundation of my morning reveries had been shattered. Now I descended every morning to an apparently unending quest to uncover every inconsistency of modern society (36).

This passage shows that, just as Shiri has sought to instill specific Shona values in her daughter, Zenzele challenges her mother to be a more modern engaged citizen, highlighting the fact that education is a two way street. For example, interrogating why women's names change to reflect a shift in social status due to marriage or motherhood, Zenzele asks, "Why should [women] give up the name we have had all of our lives when our husbands do not? Who made us the accommodating gender? Men have stability and constancy in their iden-

tity.” She continues, “Not so for a woman. No indeed. Our names must be a reflection of our relationship to this constant other, as if our own identity were not enough” (35). Shiri reveals that, initially, her attempts to answer questions like these only made her feel inadequate. However, now, Shiri’s letter indicates that she is ready to answer such questions.

After Zenzele’s departure, Shiri has uninterrupted time to reflect on her daughter’s questions. Shiri explains that, “As I sat musing, staring into my cup, *part of me snapped*. What’s in a name? What difference does it make if Katie is called Mai Farai, Professor Marodzi, or Professor Marimba? She is the same person. But deep down, *I knew it did*” (37, my emphasis). At this moment, Shiri forsakes Shakespearean wisdom and concedes that names *do* matter, acknowledging the gender inequity informing this tradition, and Shiri begins her letter to Zenzele, moving beyond complacency.¹⁴ Acknowledging the gendered inequity informing this tradition, Shiri begins her letter to Zenzele, moving beyond complacency. Whereas beforehand, Shiri defended tradition out of her desire to protect her heritage, she no longer believes that one must choose an exclusive allegiance to either gender or culture. Instead, she asserts gender-sensitivity is not only possible but desirable.

As a result of this shift in consciousness, Shiri admits Zenzele’s inquisitive nature threatened her sense of identity, explaining:

I had accepted without question to be Mrs. Shungu, to leave my home and family and be a wife. Indeed it had all seemed an honor...And now...I finally believed, seeing you grow, that I have achieved something...I had played out my role with grace. I had fulfilled society’s expectations and my duties as a woman. And there you were—clever and talented—the very fruit of my labors, challenging my assumptions, making me feel inadequate and obsolete (37).

By disclosing this crisis to her daughter, one rooted in her own insecurities as a mother, Shiri reveals that she found value, respectability, and dignity by following conventional expectations for women. Not only did Shiri feel valued as a wife and a mother by following tradition, but this sense of belonging also made her feel like a respectable citizen.

Due to this shift, Shiri’s letter embodies what Homi Bhabha calls the “need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha 1994, 1). He continues, “These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). The recollections and reflections Shiri records in response to conversations she shared with Zenzele regarding the status of women in Shona society reveal that the process of writing guides her to “think beyond” her cozy kitchen space and redefine her identity. The act of writing to Zenzele about these discussions reflects Shiri’s willingness to enter a liminal space where she confronts conflicts existing among the intersections of gendered and cultural identities. Though previously Shiri found solace in fixed traditional gender identities, her separation

from Zenzele and recent cancer diagnosis compel Shiri to take action and grapple with Zenzele's feminist concerns. Thus, by putting pen to paper, Shiri models the dual citizenship she promotes, rife with conflict and requiring constant negotiation and vigilance.

It is fitting that, after sharing this revelation, Shiri remembers her conversation with Zenzele about what it means to be an African woman. Shiri recalls how, when Zenzele first asked the question, she imagined how her own mother would have responded and remembered her mother's statement that "[t]o be an African women means to work hard." Witness to her mother's unceasing labor, Shiri had embraced this view, and, now, she realizes that Zenzele has provided an expanded definition of womanhood. Shiri states:

Her silent industriousness was so convincing that I came to believe that she was the very epitome of the African woman—until, of course, you came along. Never still, always questioning, molding the world around you rather than trying to fit into some niche that was pre-destined according to your race and gender, you shattered my image to pieces. I no longer know what or who is the African woman. Perhaps she is some synthesis of you both (Maraire 1996, 40).

Shiri augments this definition of the ideal African woman by contextualizing the members of their family within a long tradition of heroic women, including Nehanda, Cleopatra, Nefertiti, and freedom fighters in Soweto, Mozambique, and the *mjiba*, women who "found the balance between cause, culture, and self" (40). In these passages, Shiri cultivates her daughter's understanding of her identity as a Zimbabwean citizen as well as a global one. Because she spent her childhood in Chakowa, Shiri understands traditional village society as well as modern urban lifestyles. Her letter to Zenzele emphasizes that, like gender and culture, these two identities are not mutually exclusive, and she encourages Zenzele to forge an "authentic expression" of her dual self, determine her own path. She writes, "Being an African woman is what you will make of it, Zenzele," (40) highlighting the fact that there is no one monolithic "African woman."

Despite Shiri's skepticism about Western feminism and defense of patriarchal customs, her attitudes toward gender reflect what Obioma Nnaemeka terms "nego-feminism":

First, *nego-feminism* is the feminism of negotiation; second, *nego-feminism* stands for "no ego" feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of "give and take/exchange" and "cope with successfully/go around." [...] it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework (Nnaemeka 2003, 377-378).

Shiri's reflections on her complex interactions with her daughter and others show that she is constantly renegotiating her relationships. Her interaction with Sekuru Isaac, who proposes that Zenzele marry one of his sons, is a prime example. Though she has no intention to accede this request, she believes he is well-meaning and, thus, treats him respectfully (while Zenzele runs away in tears). Shiri includes this anecdote to show Zenzele how to work within existing frameworks to navigate differences between traditional and modern values.

Her letter maps the insights and observations she has accumulated in life in the hope that Zenzele will fulfill her responsibilities to her family and the broader community. She states, "I could not forsake our determination to expose you to our culture. If in the end you rejected it, that was fine, but we had fulfilled our responsibility as African parents; the rest was up to you" (Maraire 1996, 18). Shiri does not force Zenzele's respect; instead, she provides a context for social practices and allows her daughter to draw her own conclusions. Further, by transcribing the evolution of her own worldview, Shiri reflects the dynamism Nnaemeka ascribes to African feminism. Shiri's dual citizenship model is consistent with neo-feminism as both standpoints promote growth through flexibility in negotiating the complex terrain of modern African womanhood.

Lures and Lessons of a Life Abroad

In addition to addressing her thoughts regarding the status of women in Zimbabwe, Shiri seeks to advise her daughter regarding challenges she may encounter abroad. By sharing stories about family members who have traveled overseas, Shiri provides Zenzele with strategies to cope with the xenophobia and racism she is likely to experience while in America. Shiri hopes that familiarizing Zenzele with her own experiential knowledge will help Zenzele to attribute negative experiences to external factors rather than allowing herself to be "psychologically colonized" (Shizha 2005, 71). In this sense, Shiri's letter is a mechanism that allows her to continue to support her daughter from afar.

Shiri's story about her cousin Byron Makoni shows that the Western discourses with which formal education in Zimbabwe are inextricably linked can lead to internalized oppression. A student educated in local village schools before winning an award to study in London, Byron was the pride of Chakowa and his preparation to travel abroad was a communal effort. Maraire's characterization of Byron demonstrates how "the process of colonial education annihilated people's beliefs in their names, their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves" (wa Thiong'o 1997, 3). The "case of Byron," as it is referred to in village lore, testifies to the fact that internalized oppression endangers not only the individual who experiences it but also his or her community.

Shiri explains how, after Byron departs the village, he promised to write letters weekly (a sentiment that echoes Zenzele's promise to return home to Harare during every break). After years of communication, his letters ceased, and his only contact with family became the money that he sent to his mother. Rumors followed that Byron had dropped out of university. After a fifteen year absence, when a telegram signed "Byron Makon" announced his

impending return, Shiri was amused by the misspelling of his name and innocently blames the telegraph company for omitting the “i” from Byron’s last name. She recollects, “I chuckled over the last name. It was just like the Brits to leave off the *i*. They had such difficulty with foreign names” (Maraire 1996, 50). However, upon Byron’s arrival, Shiri’s naïve assumption is revealed when he informs her that he changed his name to seem “less African.” During his visit, Byron’s outsider behavior demonstrates that the missing “i” is symbolic of his buried Shona “i” identity.

Moreover, when he returns to Harare, Byron is dressed in formal English garb. He also brings his white British wife, whose safety and comfort he uses as an excuse to treat his countrymen and women rudely. While staying with Shiri, Byron offends her on multiple occasions, including when he refers to his home country by its colonial name, Rhodesia, instead of Zimbabwe. In addition, he requests that his dying mother come to see him so that he could avoid traveling to Chakowa. Despite his insensitivity, Shiri arranges his transportation to the village, and she accompanies him there. Though Byron’s arrival is a considerable celebration, he exits in disgrace. Shiri records Byron’s offenses to his community in great detail to emphasize the profundity of his transgressions. After a conversation with his mother during which he claims to have forgotten how to speak Shona, Byron admits he did not finish his medical degree and reveals he is married. In response, Byron’s mother curses him from her deathbed for robbing her of her *tsika*, or dignity. Shiri explains the severity of this situation in the eyes of the community, stating, “The wrath of any elder was condemning enough, but the weight of a mother’s curse was damning” (62). In pointing out the taboos that Byron violates, Shiri highlights Shona social etiquette and values, especially the high esteem in which mothers are held.

In recounting Byron’s visit, Shiri draws Zenzele’s attention to problems that emerge when students study abroad. Shiri’s analysis raises concerns about the “brain drain” phenomenon in which educated citizens remain in the West rather than returning home with the knowledge they were sent to acquire. Shiri asks,

If our brightest minds go and never return, then it is no wonder that we have poor leadership to guide our nations, that we have no engineers to run our machinery, no doctors to staff our hospitals, no professors to fill our universities, and no teachers to educate the generations to come.... Who is left to us (64)?¹⁵

Shiri knows that appealing to Zenzele’s sense of social responsibility will increase the likelihood that she will return home after completing her degree, and she presents Byron’s story to remind Zenzele of the responsibilities that accompany dual citizenship. While the lure of life abroad may be seductive, Zenzele’s talents are greatly needed at home.

Reflecting on Byron’s fate, Shiri argues that the community bears partial responsibility for his betrayal. After returning to Harare with Byron after their disastrous visit, Byron tells Shiri about the feelings of isolation he had as a student. Though Shiri told him “you should

have come home,” (65) she acknowledges her complicity in his alienation, indicting herself as an accomplice. She writes,

I remembered [his] tortured letters and my own inability to respond, my own helplessness in his confusion. I had failed him. I remembered how in the beginning he had wanted my response to those questions. But I was confounded by the questions themselves. I could not even begin to formulate a response.... Could I really stand in judgment of him (66)?

The somber tone of Shiri’s meditation suggests that the expectations imposed on students who are sent overseas to be educated are too high, requiring young people like Byron or Zenzele to be nearly superhuman. Including this perspective allows Shiri to give Zenzele permission to return home if her educational goals elude her. In addition, Shiri’s story about Byron Makoni provides reassurance for any feelings of isolation that Zenzele may be experiencing. Moreover, sharing this tale with Zenzele reminds her that she will always be Shona, regardless of geographical location. Shiri states, “I would not have let you go if I did not believe you had courage enough to remain true to yourself” (70). By writing to Zenzele, Shiri aims to avoid repeating the mistakes she made with Byron. Even though she remains confounded by Zenzele’s questions about life’s contradictions, Shiri’s correspondence offers her another way to support her daughter’s endeavors.

Zenzele’s father, too, knew struggle when he was a student at Columbia University, and Shiri recollects one of his experiences to caution Zenzele against institutional racism. Shiri details how, as a student, Zenzele’s father and other African students were compelled to petition for the removal of the African Studies Chairperson due to a patronizing speech she gave at their annual banquet. As part of her speech, the Chairperson remarked,

I enjoyed your conference very much. I am disappointed that there were no drums, however, at your symposium. My husband and I, during our stay [in Africa], used to love hearing the little village boys playing at night. I cannot imagine any exhibit or even discussion on Africa is complete without them (74).

Despite her high position, this chairperson’s view of Africa is rife with condescension. As noted by Zenzele’s father, “while we were seeking to enlighten, she was in search of entertainment” (76). The students’ activism against the chairperson at Columbia illustrates forms of active resistance against the denigration of African culture and the field of African Studies that Shiri endorses. Shiri uses this anecdote to emphasize the importance of self-definition. She writes, “According to many, particularly the “do-gooders” [...] our continent has no life, no definition, and no spirit of its own. It is an object to be acted upon [...] It is up to us to grow and nurture ourselves. We have to define ourselves and write our own history” (78).

Shiri cites other examples of how European academics have distorted African cultural accomplishments, including scholars’ attempts to categorize Egyptian art as a Western

achievement rather than an African one and to credit Egyptians and Phoenicians with building Great Zimbabwe rather than to Bantu people.¹⁶ She acerbically advises Zenzele, “[d]o not be fooled by the whitewashed apparent objectivity of the ivory tower. Until the ivory tower turns to a rainbow with all countries represented, you would do well to be suspicious of the so-called facts” (78). Clearly, Shiri is skeptical of Western empiricism and its methodological presumption to attain or represent truth. Thus, Shiri advises Zenzele to be critical about the messages that she receives during her education, highlighting the fact that strategies used by the West to maintain cultural dominance are both blatant and subtle.

To underscore this idea, Shiri recites a proverb often told by her husband: “until the lion learns to write, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter” (78). While Shiri’s words indict the inaccuracies and misrepresentations that abound in academic institutions, she also asserts that African people must be more proactive in representing themselves. By sharing stories about Africans experiences abroad—including one of her own in which she renders an Italian countess speechless due to her knowledge about Roman history—Shiri draws attention to the continued influence of colonial attitudes on educational matters in Africa. Yet, Shiri’s reflections on education indicate her belief in its liberatory potential if it is inclusive and multi-dimensional.

As highly as Shiri regards oral traditions and wholesome forms of education, she insists on the value of putting “pen to paper” as a practical preservation strategy. Shiri’s choice to record her thoughts on paper indicates this form of communication to be more profound and long lasting than phone calls. And, by composing this letter, Shiri establishes an example for writing one’s own history. Frustrated by how much of the African historical record has been lost, she states, “Ours is an oral tradition, and each time one of those ancients dies, we lose an entire century of our history. We cannot continue like this” (79) precisely because of her conviction in the power of the written word. This statement indicates that, though Shiri has attempted to distance herself from conflict throughout her life, separation from her daughter and illness have caused her to embrace the challenge of being a modern African woman.

Crucially, Maraire shows that Shiri’s standpoint changes not through cultural colonization but rather through the human experience of encountering crises and resolving them in light of traditional values and contemporary influences. In other words, she models an indigenous, performative education. Whereas she once felt words were “lifeless things” (132), Shiri now uses them to show Zenzele how to “own your history” (80). As such, Shiri’s letter constitutes a political transformation. Though Zenzele worshipped the authority symbolized by her red prospectus before relocating to Harvard, Shiri’s letter will provide Zenzele a more meaningful learning experience than any university course.

The Fighting Years: Gender(ed) Legacies

As the author of this letter, Shiri joins a longstanding tradition of African writers who use language to challenge colonial narratives by contesting Rhodesian perspectives about the *Chimurenga*. Shiri addresses how Europeans, on the surface, separated themselves from the ravages of war, acting as if the war were only “bush skirmishes.” However, her words reveal

that, despite their posh suburban surroundings, the Rhodesians had become prisoners of their own barbarism.¹⁷ She explains, “The Europeans stayed behind their concrete fences as if cement and steel were strong enough to bar the winds of change that howled and lashed at their hopeless fortresses of oppression.” Compounding the problem, the media masked the instability of the Rhodesian state:

The newspapers warned everyone to be on alert for terrorists who were trying to destabilize the country, but they published not a word about the battles that raged daily in the bush. No ink was wasted on the tanks and troops that overran whole villages, killing our cattle, massacring our children. The radio still blared soothing jazz [...] All was under control. The taming of Africa was right on schedule (135).

Through these words, Shiri exposes the relentless managerial and empirical logic of European colonization. She highlights the racism of a government that sought to protect the Europeans from terrorists while fueling machines that killed and maimed African civilians. Rather than providing specific details about the bloodshed (and reliving the traumas she experienced), Shiri juxtaposes the violence with the false radio transmission of jazz music to highlight European hypocrisy and trickery.

In addition, Shiri exposes the double irony underlying the Rhodesian propaganda posters affixed to buildings across the city during the war. On one hand, Shiri’s report of the indiscriminate killing of African children in rural areas belies the message communicated by the poster, which portrays a “caricatur[ed] African with thick lips and shifty eyes wielding an AK-47 rifle in the face of a screaming (and presumably defenseless) white mother and babe” (135). She explains that despite the Rhodesians’ own brutal campaign, “the terrorists were depicted by the media as barbaric blood thirsty black anarchists.” Shiri also challenges the brutal male stereotypes portrayed on the posters by revealing Zenzele’s aunts’ experiences during the war. Despite the differences in their appearance and gender from the stereotype printed on the placard, Tinawo and Linda were the “terrorists” it warned against, even though Tinawo had “the face of an angel” (135) and Linda was a schoolteacher. Through Shiri’s observation that “neither one of them had the look designated for a *mjiba*,” Maraire shows that Shiri, too, has internalized stereotypes about guerrilla fighters. Although this comment highlights Shiri’s disbelief that the girls she raised became fighters, it exhibits the awe she feels toward their accomplishments. Reflecting on the past, Shiri states, “it was extraordinary that I had never really grasped the reality of their perilous underground lives” (169).

Familiar with Zenzele’s commitment to gender equality, Shiri elaborates women’s involvement during the *Chimurenga* by discussing Linda and Tinawo’s experiences as *mjiba* in detail so that Zenzele understands the significance of women’s contributions to the liberation struggle:

[The *mjiba* were] women of a new generation who wore trousers like men and could aim just as steady. They were women who killed. They were fit and strong, running through the bushes brandishing AK-47s and machine guns...On their backs, they carried not runny-nosed babies but the hope of a different generation in the form of runs of ammunition, maps, codes, and supplies to fuel the battles that ultimately was to lead us to independence... (168).

Here, Shiri honors, even romanticizes, the strength and poise of women who devoted their lives to armed struggle. Despite the fact that she prefers working from within the domestic sphere and even downplays the importance of caregiving earlier in her letter, this description implies a critique of narrow gender assignments. Her discussion of the *mjiba* denotes the wide spectrum of women's participation in the struggle—whether serving as combat soldiers or cooking food for troops—to show Zenzele the recent history of women's activism in Zimbabwe.

Through her discussion of Linda and Tinawo's experiences as *mjiba* twenty years prior, Shiri enhances Zenzele's understanding of the desperation and chaos that reigned during the war. Shiri describes how, after their Form Two exams, Tinawo disappeared:

One day, she was playing by the riverside with us and the next day she had completely vanished...In those days, many young boys and girls suddenly disappeared from the village. One speculated that either they had been captured by the Rhodesian army or they had crept over the border to Mozambique to join the struggle. They said nothing to their families. It was an act of charity to spare them the burden of knowledge that, late one night in a raid, they might be beaten senseless to reveal (136).

The fact that Tinawo severed ties with her widowed mother and disabled brother (after her father had been killed in an attack) speaks to her dedication to the cause. The traditional relationship of girls to their families made these separations even more difficult for women soldiers. This description reveals the profound sacrifices made by those individuals who gave up their personal needs and even endangered their families in order to achieve freedom.

In addition, Shiri shares Tinawo's explanation of the incident that caused her to enlist, one that she ties to her family's belief that education would lead to liberty. In her rendition of Tinawo's story, Shiri conveys, how, before his death, Tinawo's father made many sacrifices to pay for his daughter's education. As an incentive, he promised to buy her the pink dress hanging in the window of a European store. Tinawo explained that the dress "became a symbol of my progress, my determination, and my father's dream of a better future for me" (165). However, when, after his death, Tinawo passed her tests to enter Form Two and went with her mother to buy the dress, the European clerk refused their patronage because they were African. Tinawo cites this experience as the crucial moment informing her decision to

join the nationalist cause. She explains how, after suffering this humiliation, she transformed from a consumer to a patriot:

my ambitions had grown beyond the little outfit to encompass the nation.... I could not buy freedom—I knew that at fifteen—but I knew that I could fight for it. I realized that once we had the land, the rest would come with it, for it was from the red earth of the veld that the richness and beauty of Zimbabwe grew. If we gathered the soil to us, if we grew the cotton and spun the cloth [...] if we sewed the prints and owned the shop, then never again would we have to beg (167).

Whereas earlier in the letter, the concept of a new dress symbolizes Granny Patience's greed—Patience bought new dresses for herself instead of investing in her children's tuition—it has the opposite meaning for Tinawo. Here, Tinawo's childhood efforts to earn a dress are linked not only with academic success and commitment to family but also demands to gain control of the economic base. By sharing this story with Zenzele, Shiri guides her to contemplate intersections between her personal ambitions, family, and Africa itself as she defines herself as a strong woman.

Maraire's representation of Tinawo's undercover work in Shiri's letter spotlights the bravery and acumen of female spies during the war, but it also shows the depth of Rhodesian racism toward indigenous Africans. As part of her deployment, Tinawo lived in the home of a Rhodesian commander where she photographed his military documents on the sly. When Tinawo was nearly caught stealing files from a safe, the commander's disbelief regarding any possibility that she could be anything but an imbecile allowed her to escape certain death. By tapping into Commander Pelleday's view that she was "the thickest native" around, Tinawo was able to warn the insurgency about the offensive strikes planned by Rhodesian troops (149). Tinawo's descriptions of the Commander's assumptions of her alleged incompetence, exposed in conversations with a Lieutenant and a British reporter, encapsulate the depth of paternalism and bigotry that Rhodesians felt toward Africans. In his discussion with a British reporter, the Commander claimed, "These people are like children. They need to be guided and taken care of. These Africans have among the best standard of living in the world. That is because we look after them" (156). Ironically, as the anecdote about Tinawo shows, it is exactly this level of deprecation—and Tinawo's skill as a storyteller—that contributed to the nationalists' success. Maraire's depiction stresses that, despite the fact that Tinawo was a high level official, Pelleday's racism and sense of entitlement is so strong that he is unable to imagine her as an equal to his own intelligence, and she bests him as a result.

The boundary crossing that Tinawo underwent as a *mjiba* was not limited to crossing national borders to train as a guerilla in Tanzania. Her story shows Zenzele how earlier generations of Zimbabwean women stepped away from the domestic sphere to take up arms on behalf of their country. Nearly overnight, Tinawo transformed from a schoolgirl who yearned for a dress hanging in a store window into a gun-toting, fatigue-wearing freedom

fighter as a result of the discrimination she experienced. As a commander, the dress that she once yearned for would be of little use in armed conflict. However, when she began working undercover at the Pelleday's home, she manipulated traditional gender dress codes to her advantage by wearing the costume of a house servant. By sharing how Tinawo navigated social conventions to contribute to the movement for democracy in Zimbabwe, Shiri provides Zenzele another successful model of dual citizenship. Whereas, earlier in her letter, Shiri reminded Zenzele of legendary African women, now Tinawo's stories provide a personal family example, highlighting the extraordinary feats accomplished by ordinary women during the struggle for liberation.

The story of Tinawo's pink dress augments Shiri's earlier acknowledgement of family members who take pains to educate their children. Because Tinawo is educated, she was able to make a more critical contribution to the liberation effort. Due to her family's insistence that Tinawo approach her education seriously, her knowledge of subjects such as chemistry, calculus, and literature enhanced the contributions she could offer to the struggle, despite her gender. Tinawo became a commander within the ranks of the insurgency, and her high status is due to the intellectual skills she exercised during long nights of studying. Thus, Tinawo's story testifies to the fact that educating girls benefits not only individuals but Zimbabwean society as a whole.

Maraire's focus on the *mjiba* draws attention to the fact that, while the West glorifies its own sordid history in Africa, this same deconstructing phenomenon occurs along gender lines within national borders. Her account of women's resistance challenges not just European renditions of the war but it also contests patriarchal narratives that mask the involvement of women soldiers. Shiri's letter explains that the Rhodesians called the *mjiba* "bobcats" because "Shona women were as fierce as lions" (168). This label is particularly interesting in light of Shiri's earlier citation of the proverb that "until the lion learns to write, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter" (78). From this perspective, "bobcat" is an especially fitting label since the Zimbabwean patriarchy has since marginalized women's wartime role. The cultural amnesia regarding the involvement of women soldiers draws attention to the process by which the Zimbabwean government has repeated the crimes of their former colonial oppressors.

In Shiri's concluding statements to Zenzele about the *mjiba*, she lauds Linda and Tinawo's courage, yet her words also point to the disappointment and betrayal felt by women ex-combatants after the war. Tanya Lyons explains how, after the war, female combatants were cast as "prostitutes, murderers, and unfeminine" in order to recast "them into traditional feminine roles in war that did not undermine conservative gendered expectations" (Lyons 2004, 295). Perhaps, in part, this explanation accounts for Linda's silence about the war. Shiri writes that Linda,

does not talk much about it now; I am not sure why. But it is all there inside of her and I know she would be flattered to have you interested in the revolution. So few of the young people are nowadays. Freedom is all some-

thing you take for granted. Yet. Fifty—no, not even twenty years ago—it was a dream we dared not even dream of (Maraire 1996, 169).

Shiri recommends that Zenzele begin a dialogue with Linda about her “fighting years” so that Linda’s sacrifices are remembered. Moreover, this passage suggests that Shiri believes Linda’s perspective can guide Zenzele toward significant insights regarding national history and gender equity.

The culture of silence surrounding women’s wartime activities indicates another extension of oppressive national and familial education in post-colonial Zimbabwe. Lyons argues, “In the case of Zimbabwe, one cannot understand women’s status and role in society without understanding what women actually did in the liberation struggle” (Lyons 2006, 43). By alluding to the fact that Linda’s contributions to the struggle are no longer discussed, Shiri teaches Zenzele that citizenship “is not gender neutral.” Shiri’s portrayal of the silence surrounding the *mjiba*’s contributions draws attention to the methodology used to deny women’s citizenship in Zimbabwe and beyond. By pretending that “war is the exclusive domain of men” women are relegated to second-class citizens. Failure to recognize women’s wartime efforts in Zimbabwe has barred women from equal access to resources and reinforced the gendered division of labor. It explains why, as Essof claims, “the control of Zimbabwean women, be it in the private or public sphere, is central to the nationalist agenda, and the identification of women as bearers of cultural identity affects their emergence as full-fledged citizens” (Essof 2010, 63). Since Zenzele is already sensitive to gender inequities, Shiri unveils this situation so that Zenzele can contemplate the contradictions she will encounter upon her return home. Shiri’s accounts of the not-so-distant past provide Zenzele new tools to interpret the present, and they inform her future identity as a modern Shona woman.

Inheritance

The final segment of Shiri’s letter is written during her visit to Chakowa, where she revels in the spiritual comforts that surround her. She asserts that Chakowa is a refuge, a place where she feels “alone and yet embraced” (Maraire 1996, 186). While in the village, Shiri expands her dual citizenship paradigm to include a temporal dimension, strengthening Zenzele’s understanding of the connection between the past and the present. Shiri’s mood remains contemplative as she states, “I stand at the crossroads of life, with what could have been behind and what must be ahead” (192). Shiri explains that, after visiting her parents’ graves and updating them about family matters,

[I] felt lighter, as if I had indeed sat with my father and told him my joys and troubles. I heard no voices, but the answers were in the lightness of my heart and the clarity of my thoughts, as if spirit had answered spirit in the form that eluded the mortal tongue...I feel stronger just being here...I thought to myself that we are all bridges. We form a link between the present and the future (191-192).

While she explains that speaking to her parents at their gravestones unburdens her from the emotional weight of her cancer, Shiri's record of this experience suggests that writing also has a cathartic effect. Though thousands of miles separate her from Zenzele, Shiri's letter transcends this divide, and her words also offer Zenzele strategies for coping with her mother's death. Though she may not survive until Zenzele returns home, Shiri reminds Zenzele that her spirit will live on in Chakowa.

At the close of her letter, Shiri writes, "It is a pity that I have not more to leave you than words. But what is a life, after all, but a story, some fiction and some truth? In the end, there are words. They are the very manifestations of our immortality" (193). In addition to offering comfort to Zenzele, these final sentiments highlight Shiri's transformation. Through them, Shiri recants her earlier doubt about the power of words. Now, words offer Shiri peace and hope, particularly due to their ability to keep alive "the story of my ancestors and the tales of those whom I have loved." This perspective reveals added impetus for Zenzele's understanding of Shona customs and traditions: the survival of family stories and memories depends on the investment of successive generations. Shiri concludes, "Your own life is a story yet to be told, and wisdom, when it comes, is simply to understand at last the beginning of the word and the story of our birth, death, and rebirth" (193), a blessing which underscores the dynamism she advises is necessary for survival in the modern world.

Zenzele highlights the complexities faced by Shona women as they negotiate citizenship in an increasingly globalized world, and it guides readers toward a greater respect for African culture. Shiri's letter not only traces Zenzele's intellectual growth but also her own evolving journey, showing that though mothers may be the primary transmitters of culture, they also learn from their children. Though Shiri's allegiance to Shona culture may have, in some cases, outweighed her concern for gender equality, her letter demonstrates how her relationship with Zenzele leads her to conclude that the former need not supplant the latter. Out of this awareness arises Shiri's primary lesson for her daughter: dual citizenship. Shiri's letter invites Zenzele to share her perspective, to find equal value in her indigenous heritage and her feminist principles. Education is the central aspect of Shiri's message. Her exploration of the factors influencing Zimbabwean students highlights past struggles for women's access to education and contemporary dilemmas surrounding their quest for knowledge. Furthermore, Shiri's exploration of issues such as the experiences of Africans abroad and the role of women in the *Chimurenga* calls attention to the continued struggle for African women to control knowledge production and dissemination. For these reasons, Shiri's letter—and, by extension, Maraire's novel—echoes the spirit of "the full development of the human personality" advocated by international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR Article 2.6) but also the long-standing tradition of education among Shona speaking people. Through Shiri's advocacy of Shona cultural preservation, dual citizenship in Zimbabwe and the West, and gender equity, Maraire reveals how dignity and equality for women—the fundamental goals of education—are achieved.

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¹ *Zenzele* was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year in 1996. Currently, *Zenzele* is not widely available to readers within Zimbabwe (Lyons 27). For these reasons, it can be assumed that the primary reading audience is most likely unfamiliar with Shona culture.

² Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* draws attention to the gender politics of privileging the education of boys over girls. Because she comes from a poor family, Tambu, the protagonist, only attends school after the death of her brother and because there are no other school-aged boys in her family. Her father's point of view elucidates why the education of girls has been historically undervalued in Zimbabwe. He views her education as a waste; he states that her "sharpness with her books is no use because in the end it will only benefit strangers" (56) in reference to the fact that, when she marries, Tambu will leave her maternal home to join her husband's family.

³ Human capital theory is an economic model that has shaped policy-making beginning in the 1960's. This perspective argues that investments in education lead to a skilled workforce and that skilled workers generate more income, increasing profits to the benefit of workers, employers, and the nation.

⁴ In Zimbabwe, roughly 93 percent of girls are educated through grade five (Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang 403). However, these numbers vary according to geographic location; urban residents are more likely to attend school than their rural counterparts (408). However, the percentage of female students who attend secondary school drops considerably and the gender discrepancies at the tertiary level are more substantial (403). In 1999, only 23 percent of eligible female students between the ages of 15 and 24 graduated school (407).

⁵ In this story, Demeter turns the earth into a barren state after her daughter Persephone is seized by Hades and trapped in the Underworld due to the allure of a pomegranate. Shiri's emotional state mirrors Demeter's upset at Persephone's abduction.

⁶ In *Through Other Continents*, Dimock argues there is not an "immutable gulf" between the ancient and the modern and that modernity has progressed at an "uneven pace" (2). She defines deep time as a phenomena that "highlights... a set of longitudinal frames, at once progressive and recessive, with input going both ways, binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric (3-4).

⁷ As part of the hand washing ritual, which is performed before a meal, *Zenzele*, as the oldest daughter, is required to kneel before her relatives in descending order of status and offer them a water bowl and towel. The order of people served is determined by age and gender; elder males are served first and younger female relatives last.

⁸ *Lobola* is a traditional custom found throughout Southern Africa in which the family of a bride is compensated by her new husband and his family at the time of their marriage. As practiced among Shona speaking people, is intended to reimburse the woman's family for the labor that is lost after marriage. Traditionally this payment came in the form of cattle, but, in contemporary society, money is more frequently exchanged (Owomoyela 94-95). The families of women who are virgins and/or who are educated often receive more generous offerings. Controversy surrounds whether or not protects or degrades women. Shiri and *Zenzele* explore arguments surrounding in great detail.

⁹ After a woman gives birth to her first child, she is most commonly referred to by the prefix "Amai" (mother) combined with her child's name. For example, since *Zenzele* is Shiri's first child, Shiri is often called Amai *Zenzele*. The same can also be true for men, but this practice

occurs less often. In Zenzele's father's case, he would be called Baba va Zenzele (or, Father of Zenzele).

¹⁰ For more background regarding the controversies surrounding since the 1970's, see Sita Ranchod-Nilsson's "Gender Politics and the Pendulum or Social Transformation in Zimbabwe." In addition, Maureen Kambarami's "Femininity, Sexuality and Culture: Patriarchy and Female Subordination in Zimbabwe" argues that subordinates women by restricting women's citizenship rights and controlling women's sexuality. On the other hand, Munyaradzi Mawere and Annastacia Mbinidi Mawere's "The Changing Philosophy of African Marriage" argues that both promotes women's dignity and protects women against abuse.

¹¹ In "Introduction: African Feminisms II: Reflections on Politics Made Personal," Sisonke Msimang reflects on her decision and ability to "reinterpret" to suit her feelings and her family's wishes. She explains that, despite the patriarchal roots of , she is "proud of [her] heritage, of the rich traditions that kept African people alive through centuries of colonialism and apartheid" Msimang identifies that as a middle-class Zulu woman marrying a white man, she experienced differently than other Zulu-speakers, yet the process of redefining tradition "so that [it] draw[s] on positive meanings," is becoming more commonplace (11). For more on the changing nature of marriage unions among Shona-speakers, see Dominique Meeker's "The Noble Custom of Roora," which finds that financially independent Shona-speaking women increasingly explore less formal marriage alternatives to (or, roora, more specifically).

¹² See Mrinalini Sinha's "Gender and Nation" for a full-length examination of this issue.

¹³ Though Shiri's positive stance on represents the majority of Zimbabwean women (as argued by Maware and Maware), she has strange bedfellows. In the early 1990's—near to the time Shiri composes her letter—President Robert Mugabe and other leaders reacted to proposed legal reforms that aimed to improve marriage, property and inheritance rights by claiming that women's rights efforts stemmed from foreign interlopers whose presence threatened the "cultural and family values" (Ranchod Nilesson 62). Considering her husband's profession—he is a human rights lawyer whose work would likely support the legislation which Mugabe campaigns against—Shiri's viewpoint is somewhat unexpected.

¹⁴ Immediately following Shiri's epiphany, she alludes to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, echoing Juliet Capulet by asking, "What is in a name?" Like Shiri's earlier reference to Demeter and Persephone, this allusion reinforces that Shiri finds value in certain aspects of Western culture. Not only does she use Shakespeare's question to frame her own thoughts, but by representing her epiphany in this way, Shiri reaches out to Zenzele in a way her daughter will find appealing and models dual citizenship.

¹⁵ Ama Ata Aidoo comments on similar issues in her 1980 story "Love Letter" in *Our Sister Killjoy*. In it, the protagonist Sisi critiques the excuses of Africans who study abroad but fail to return home.

¹⁶ See Innocent Pikirayi's *Origins and Decline of Southern Zambian States* for an overview of this history.

¹⁷ Shiri's sentiments align with Aime Cesaire's description of the effects of colonization on the colonizer in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, where he points out, "each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a

center of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and “interrogated” all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been instilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward *savagery*” (35-36).