



Defining One's Place in the World: Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*

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Defining One's Place in the World: Zoë Wicomb's

You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town

Geoffrey V. Davis*

Zoë Wicomb was born in 1948 near Vanrhynsdorp, a small town in Namaqualand on the main road to Namibia some 300 kms north of Cape Town. Educated at the University of the Western Cape, she moved to Britain in 1970 where she continued her studies at Reading University. She subsequently worked in Nottingham, where she became an active member of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Returning to South Africa in 1990 she spent the following three years teaching Literature in English at her old university, before taking up a teaching post at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. She now regards herself as living in the two cities of Glasgow and Cape Town and has written that, after so many years spent in Britain, she feels that deracination and hybridity have become, in a positive sense, constituent elements of her identity.¹

You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town was Wicomb's first major publication, the ten short stories which comprise it not having been previously published separately since from the start they had been conceived as a cycle. The stories trace the development of the narrator-protagonist, Frieda Shenton, from her childhood in Namaqualand through adolescence – she is educated at a private school in Cape Town and then goes on to university – to adulthood when, after an affair ending in an abortion, she emigrates to Britain where she remains for twelve years before returning – as a writer – to South Africa. Although each of the stories forms a separate entity, the attentive reader will soon notice that there are many links between them, the most obvious of which is the narrator they have in common. Wicomb is careful, however, to indicate how the narrator's perspective matures with advancing age and experience, subtly interpolating memories of childhood and student days which bridge the years of exile. On

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¹ Zoë Wicomb, "Comment on Return to South Africa" in Anna Rutherford, Lars Jensen, & Shirley Chew (ed.) *Into the Nineties*, Armidale, New South Wales, Dangaroo Press, 1994, p.575.

occasion (as in “A Clearing in the Bush”) this pattern is varied to accommodate multiple perspectives.

A further link between the stories is provided by the chronology. Wicomb basically proceeds in linear fashion, starting with childhood and ending with adulthood, but she leaves large gaps between stories (from the young child to the 15-year-old adolescent, for example) and some periods of Frieda’s life one may have thought important such as her exile in England are omitted entirely.² Setting all the stories either in Namaqualand or in Cape Town also lends the stories a sense of structural unity as does the fact that many of them revolve around members of Frieda’s extended family.

There are, then, a number of parallels between Wicomb’s own life and that of the fictional Frieda – her Western Cape background, her university career, her exile and return to South Africa, her publishing of a volume of short stories³ – and, accordingly, it has been suggested that the stories “encode an autobiographical impulse.”⁴ Most critics have, however, resisted the notion that they comprise fictionalised autobiography,⁵ some quoting the apparent demise and subsequent resurrection of Frieda’s mother, Mrs Shenton, as evidence of a fictional rather than a strictly autobiographical intent. Wicomb herself has sought to forestall what she considers “‘the stereotypical way in which black women’s writing’ is viewed as an autobiographical expression of ‘our need to air our grievances’.”⁶ In trying to account for the book’s basic motivation, it is surely more profitable to view the work in terms of a search for origins and identity of the kind suggested by the lines quoted in the first epigraph from Nortje (like Wicomb, a Coloured South African writer who spent a period of exile in Britain) which speak of “origins [which] trouble the voyager much.”⁷

Like other collections of South African short stories, Wicomb’s volume is strongly regional, all the stories being set quite specifically in

² Critics have wondered about this. Gaylard finds this “remarkable” and regards the years in Britain as “the fulcrum [...] around which the collection turns” (Rob Gaylard, “Exile and Homecoming: Identity in Zoë Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*,” *ARIEL*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 1996), p. 178; Viola describes the years of exile as “the blind spot” in the book (André Viola, Zoë Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Coloured Girl*” in Jacqueline Bardolph (ed.) *Short Fiction in the New Literatures in English*, Nice: Faculté des Lettres, 1988, p. 231.

³ Carol Sicherman adds that Wicomb’s parents encouraged her to speak English (cf. Carol Sicherman, “Zoë Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town: The Narrator’s Identity*” in Pauline Fletcher (ed.) *Black White Writing: Essays on South African Literature* (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993, p.111.

⁴ Review by Annemarie van Niekerk in *Staffrider*, vol.9, no.1 (1990), p. 94.

⁵ Sicherman, p.111; Viola, p. 231.

⁶ Letter to Sicherman, cf. Sicherman, p.121, n.10

⁷ Sicherman, p.120.

Cape Town or Namaqualand. In describing both locales Wicomb displays a vivid and convincing sense of place. However, in spite of the book's title only three of the ten stories actually take place in Cape Town: "A Clearing in the Bush" depicts an incident during Frieda's student days at the University of the Western Cape (then still the University College for Cape Coloureds); the title story "You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town" records her nightmare journey through the city to have an abortion; and "Ash on my Sleeve" records a visit to a former fellow student now living in the middle-class environment of a newly built coloured township.⁸ For all its majestic natural beauty, Cape Town, it must be said, emerges very poorly from the text, eliciting nothing but scornful rejection from Frieda, who as a Coloured associates it with disinfectant and the forced removals of District Six.

The fact that Wicomb sets the majority of her stories in Namaqualand to some extent determines their character. For this region, otherwise largely absent from South African literature, is not only extremely arid, it is also renowned throughout the country for the splendour of its wildflowers, as indeed is Wicomb's own home town, Vanrhynsdorp. Wicomb makes use of both of these features: not only does she succeed in communicating a sense of the characteristic features of the landscape and of the resilience of some of the characters who populate it (Skitterboud, for example), she also frequently enhances her text with botanical detail, most notably of course in the final story "A Trip to the Gifberge", where Frieda's mother, roundly dismissing the significance with which whites invested the protea as the national flower of apartheid South Africa, movingly restores it to its rightful place in the veld, thus symbolically reclaiming the land for the original inhabitants.

It would be inappropriate to situate Wicomb's stories within the tradition of protest writing so assiduously pursued by black short story writers during the era of apartheid, yet the ongoing political process is nevertheless ever present in the background, and the stories do – consistently and convincingly – make the reader aware of how the legislation of apartheid determined peoples' lives. Since the main protagonists are members of what, under apartheid legislation, was designated "the Coloured racial group", they reveal particularly clearly how Coloureds, being placed below Whites in the racial hierarchy, were discriminated against in all spheres of life, and how such practices conditioned their attitudes. Thus, the law on race classification, which was the fundamental pillar of apartheid, explains Frieda's sensitivity to her hair (which, being regarded as a racial characteristic, was used as a means of classification) and her constant desire to disguise it, as well as her mother's

⁸ Robin Hallett's guess in his review of this and other works set in Cape Town that Mitchell's Plain is meant here is surely correct. Cf. Robin Hallett, "Novels from Cape Town" *Southern African Review of Books*, Winter 1987/88, p. 5.

speculation on the race of Mr. Weedon's chauffeur; the Immorality Act, which was imposed in a vain effort to limit increase in the mixed-race population, prevents Frieda (a Coloured) marrying Michael (a White); the Group Areas Act, which segregated residential areas according to race, necessitates the expropriation of Jan Klinkies' land and the forced removal to the fictional Wesblok of Frieda's own community, and it also accounts for the references to District Six, the largely Coloured inner-city suburb of Cape Town which amid much resentment was declared White. "Influx control," colloquially known as the "pass laws," which was designed to regulate the movement and presence of blacks in white areas, explains why Moira's daughter Susie is illegally accommodating blacks. So-called "petty apartheid" determines which railway station platform Frieda must wait for her train on – paved for whites, unpaved for Coloureds – and explains why she must travel through Cape Town at the back of a bus, in which Whites occupy the front portion. The *reductio ad absurdum* of such legislation is provided by a scene in which even the illegal backstreet abortionist can lay claims to a spurious legality through maintaining that he observes racial segregation.

Wicomb's attention to the detail of the South African social environment is also evident in the way the hierarchical racial divisions of apartheid are visible in the display of white privilege (Mr Weedon arrives in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes; Michael has never previously needed to travel by bus; at the doctor's Whites are dealt with first, while Coloureds wait outside in the glare of the hot sun) and in the occasional reminders that such a repressive system called forth resistance (a Coloured deacon takes the Anglican church to court with the aim of forcing them to "open" their schools to all races; a student body boycotts a memorial service for the Prime Minister, H.F. Verwoerd, assassinated in 1966; Moira works with a black cultural group affiliated to the oppositional United Democratic Front).

It may very well be that one of the difficulties overseas readers face in reading these stories lies in the wealth of their (often unexplained) references to aspects of South African history which may easily be overlooked. There are several of these in "A Clearing in the Bush", for instance. The very term "bush" in the title of that story is an ironic derivation from the original colloquial designation as "bush colleges" of those segregated educational institutions which were reserved for Coloureds. The description of Verwoerd as "the architect of this place"(which is misunderstood by Tamieta) in fact refers to the Prime Minister, who was commonly referred to as the "architect of apartheid."⁹ The reference to the "pet abdominal tapeworm [which] hissed persuasively into the ear of its Greek host" (39) indicates the tapeworm which

⁹ Cf. for example Henry Kenney's work of that name (Johannesburg, 1980)

Verwoerd's assassin, Dimitrio Tsafendas, claimed to be suffering from.¹⁰ The "trip to the Gifberge" undertaken by Frieda and her mother, where the latter reclaims her Griqua heritage, may be seen as a symbolic re-enactment of the Griqua trek over the Drakensberg which led to the founding of the Griqua nation in 1860. The reason Jan Klinkies gives up drinking his favourite *rooibos* tea is because the illustrations on the packets celebrate the feats of pioneer Afrikaners by depicting the Voortrekkers scaling the Drakensberg – and it is, of course, their descendants who have dispossessed him.

Paramount in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* is a young woman's attempt to define her place in the world, to determine a career for herself and to situate herself amid the myriad demands of family, community and the wider society. This quest for identity is rendered more complex by the fact that she is herself a member of a community, whose identity has long been characterised by ambivalence since, in the racial hierarchy of apartheid, Coloureds were officially categorised below Whites and above Blacks, from both of whom however they are descended. This situation was never a comfortable one in apartheid South Africa, socially or politically. Social advancement long seemed possible to some Coloureds only through alignment with Whites; some – those with lighter skin colour – even tried to "pass for White" and in this way move up the social scale. They thus laid themselves open to allegations that they were complicitous with the system. Others allied themselves with the Black liberation struggle and expressed this political conviction by defining themselves as "Black" rather than "Coloured". When in the 1980s the National Party sought to co-opt the Coloureds but not Blacks into government through the creation of the so-called Tri-cameral Parliament, the acceptance of this arrangement by a number of their representatives was regarded by opponents of apartheid as a betrayal. In "Ash on My Sleeve" Moira puts her finger on the Coloured dilemma: "Just think, in our teens we wanted to be white, now we want to be full-blooded Africans. We've never wanted to be ourselves and that's why we stray..." (156)¹¹

The complexities of Coloured identity and the racial attitudes proceeding from it become particularly clear from the case of Frieda's parents. As Coloureds one might normally expect them to speak Afrikaans and to share, at least to some extent, a common culture with Afrikaners.

¹⁰ Verwoerd was stabbed to death, not shot as Wicomb has it. Frieda later evokes the same image in speaking of the abortion she is to undergo.

¹¹ When the first post-apartheid democratic elections took place in South Africa in 1994, it was the coloured vote which helped to return the predominantly White National Party to power in the Western Cape, a result Wicomb – in view of that party's imposition of the apartheid system on the population of the country for over forty years – dismissed as "the shame of the Coloured vote." Cf. Wicomb, "Comment on Return to South Africa," p. 575.

This is not at all the case, however. On the arrival of the caricatured Englishman, Mr Weedon, in "Bowl like Hole" they both display an almost naïve subservience, demonstrating a boundless respect for the English – they later lay claim to an English ancestor themselves – and a corresponding contempt for the "Boers," whom they regard – erroneously – as solely responsible for the predicament of their own people. Articulating the aspirations of the Coloured middle class, Mr Shenton dreads the notion that his daughter might end up as a domestic, the traditional fate of young Coloured women from the rural areas, believing that the path to social advancement lies through mastery of the English language and private Anglican Church schooling. To some extent he thus contributes to his daughter's identity crisis by imposing upon her an English education and social values which isolate her from her friends. Her later rejection of the role expected of her, and indeed of community and society, through emigration is but the logical culmination of this process.

A factor in identity construction which plays an important role in all of Wicomb's stories is language; indeed, it is essential to the very theme of the book, since English is seen to function as a marker of social status and, as in the case of Frieda and her mother, as a determining factor in human relationships – not for nothing does her mother reproach herself with teaching her daughter a language the latter turns against her, or Frieda regard herself as a Caliban. Language is also, however, an object of fascination for both Wicomb and her fictional creation, Frieda. The author has confessed elsewhere that she has "always liked language, messing about with words, arranging them this way and that"¹² and in this work it is clear that she is exploring her linguistic resources, deploying the colourful vocabulary of South African English with its loan words from other languages to depict landscape and character. On occasion, as the reader soon notices, Wicomb's very delight in the use of language tends to lead her a little astray; she overwrites or becomes somewhat pedantic, especially when she strikes a false register with learned (often linguistic) terminology.

Wicomb's approach to her writing, we should note in conclusion, is metafictional, which is to say that in her stories she thematises the fiction-making process itself. In order to do so she has Frieda become a writer like herself and she heightens the similarity by casting her as the author of a soon-to-be-published volume of short stories, too. In this capacity, Frieda tries, albeit with little success, to discuss her stories with her mother and on one occasion (in "Home Sweet Home") she is also seen to be pondering the nature of language. In this regard the most significant story is undoubtedly "A Fair Exchange" since, in an interesting literary experiment, it attempts to show how (in a process which has latterly become widespread in South

¹² Wicomb, "Why I write," p. 574.

African writing) the writer transforms oral material into creative fiction in an effort to preserve a life history which would otherwise be lost. This it achieves by presenting the first part of Skitterboud's story as fiction and the conclusion as an oral account given in interview with the budding author.

"Frieda's emergence as a writer," it has been suggested, "is more important than her emergence as a woman"¹³ and although this statement is one some readers will no doubt wish to contest, there can be little doubt that by the end of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* the reader has indeed witnessed the emergence of a new South African writer who is becoming a shrewd observer of herself, her gender, her community and her country. Which at the time this collection appeared was equally true of her creator, Zoë Wicomb.



¹³ Sicherman, p.114.