

Secular Blackness in Zoë Wicomb's Short Stories

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Summary

This article submits that selfreclamation in Zoë Wicomb's shortstory cycle, *"You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town" and Other Stories*, is revealed through storytelling. "Ritual enactment", the phrase that bell hooks uses to depict the kind of narrative that calls to mind the mediation of the images of black depersonalisation especially as it pertains to the corporal body, is used in this discussion to explore memory as a site of resistance. The argument is that narration in these stories invents a self that authenticates blackness via discursive and self-dialogised practices, and that these are evident also in a spectrum of voices in black social contexts. Throughout this discussion, memory is shown to be also acknowledging and navigating complicity in that which is being critiqued.

Opsomming

In hierdie stuk word betoog dat selfherwinning in Zoë Wicomb se *"You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town" and Other Stories* deur vertelkuns geopenbaar word. "Rituele rolspel", die term wat bell hooks gebruik om hierdie soort vertellings voor te stel, word in hierdie bespreking gebruik om geheue as 'n weerstandsterrein te verken. Dit herinner aan die tussenkoms van die beelde van swart ontverpersoonliking, veral in soverre dit op die stoflike liggaam betrekking het. Die redenasie is dat die vertel van hierdie verhale 'n self versin wat swartheid via breedvoerige en selfverwekte dialoogpraktyke bekragtig en dat dit ook duidelik blyk uit 'n spektrum stemme in swart sosiale kontekste. Geheue word dwarsdeur hierdie bespreking getoon as sou dit ook die erkenning en naspur van aandadigheid wees aan dit waarop kritiek gelewer word.

The South African short stories of the seventies and eighties such as Njabulo Ndebele,¹ Mandla Langa, and Bheki Maseko's explore the sense of racial negation by privileging journeys via memory to the apartheid that is

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1. For an analysis of the mediations of black depersonalisation in Ndebele's stories see, for instance, Maithufi (2004: 139-147).

being negotiated.² In these stories, it does not seem possible to rise above the dominant order without first mapping its archaeology. An apt illustration of this dialectic is the drawing in which Joël Matlou focuses on his father's employer's pair of spectacles that mirrors what appears to be Matlou's father pushing a wheelbarrow. The eyeglasses function as a metaphor through which Matlou junior develops insight into how black people cultivate spiritual strength in being aware of the extent of the inanity that underpins the dominion such as implied in the cold aloofness of his father's employer, that is, the one who in Matlou's drawing is wearing glasses. In other words, what the mirror reflects back to Matlou junior is a history of toil that his father overshadows via his alertness to his master's indifference.³

In this article, the feminist slant of Zoë Wicomb's stories, suggested in the use of the female storyteller's narration of the black experience, is explored as an enterprise of memory. First, narration is discussed as a project of memory. Next, readings of several stories in which the storyteller examines the portraits of depersonalisation, as well as the narrative spaces that she opens in order to move away from the revisionist responses to colonialism are given.

The black woman's body in Wicomb's "You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town", in "Behind the Bougainvillea" and in the metaphor of Africa in "A Trip to the Gifberge" is a racially and sexually maligned site that Frieda Shenton, the "single narrator-focalizer" (Marais 1995: 42), reclaims. Critical attention to the theme of alienation with reference to the case of "coloured" people in apartheid South Africa traces it to "[t]he humiliation" of being considered "not only not white, but less than white; not only not black, but better than black" (Erasmus 2001: 13). According to Dorothy Driver, Wicomb is not at all interested in this apartheid vocabulary because her "writing signifies not order but disorder, not authority but dissidence, not stereotype but difference" (Driver 1996: 46). Blackness, it is maintained, is a mere essence that "establish[es] subject positions and conclusively fix[es] personal and collective being" (Lewis 2001: 131) and "crowd[s] the subject, shaping responses and being in relation to others in ways which cannot be transcended" (2001: 147). From a different angle, Flockemann refers to the "literal and figurative journeys which provide scope for exploring the strategies of belonging or ... a dream of belonging" in Wicomb's stories, and maintains that these travels establish a "diasporic subject[hood] ... where the negative meanings of unbelonging are reconstructed" (Flockemann 2001: 119). Thus far, it does not seem that there exists a reading of how storytelling in these stories redresses the impression of black

2. Cf. Mbembe (2001) and Werbner (1989).

3. See Maithufi (2002: 3-32) for a discussion of text and image in Matlou's stories.

depersonalisation, and how narration opens spaces that critique these tactics of recompense. Nor does it appear that Frieda's narration of herself terminating the baby that she conceives in contravention of the Immorality Act has been explored as a visualising of a post-nationalist black identity.

This article, therefore, analyses the recurrence of Frieda's "[c]onsciousness" of her body as black and female and, hence, as 'solely a negating activity'" (Fanon 1967: 11). The argument is that she deals with this awareness of estrangement by telling her biography in terms that portray an open-ended normativity of herself. This self-construction can be detected in a characteristic plot structure that also features her unpacking antinomies.

The type of dismantling of typecast that is evident in Wicomb's stories is explicated in this article in terms of an argument that bell hooks makes about how to deal with the terror that whiteness evokes, indeed that which treats blackness as invisible except when racially exploiting it. hooks's analysis is predicated on what she sees as "[t]he eagerness with which contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further mask reality". She continues that this alacrity "is a response to the terror, but it has also become a way to perpetuate the terror by providing a cover, a hiding place" (hooks 1992: 345).

hooks, therefore, argues for a journey via memory back to the incidents of racial violence. She calls this enterprise a "ritual enactment" or a "confrontation that forces the terror to loosen its grip" (1992: 342). This "fantasy of escape, or the promise that what [was] lost will be found, rediscovered, returned" "[re]constitute[s] an archaeology of memory [that] makes return possible, the journey to a place we can never call home even as we reinhabit it to make sense of present locations" (1992: 343). The idea, for instance, is not to articulate the occurrences of callousness in that strategy known as "mimicry".⁴ On the contrary, power is redefined through narration and, hence, in a way that exceeds a traumatic experience that the racist supremacist texts do not show. The dominant order's "texts" are therefore undermined because they are not recognised as "possessing one valid and unitary meaning", but rather as being polysemic (Gramsci in Strinati 1995: 213). This mediation of colonial experience, hooks maintains implicitly, is suggestive of ritual: "This contradictory longing to possess the reality of the Other, even though that reality is one that wounds and negates, is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror" (hooks 1992: 338).

4. Homi Bhabha maintains that the colonised's rearticulation of the values enshrined in the "civilizing mission" is an act of "mimicry" that debunks the coloniser's claim to civilisation. Compare also with Stephanie Newell. According to her, "mimicry", at least in Ghanaian fiction, does not enunciate parody (2000: 32-49).

It is argued in this article that a similar rite resonates in Frieda's portrayal of herself as a teenager who finds out for the first time the brutality of racial segregation ("When the Train Comes"), as a young adult who realises that sex across race during apartheid is criminalised and that abortion is sinful ("You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town"), and as an adult who discovers that the liberation struggle is gendered ("Behind the Bougainvillea"). In all these stories, she "confront[s] and ... appropriate[s]" the images constructed of black women's bodies via "metacommentary", that is, "as ... always already read" (Jameson 1983: 9) and "overdetermined from without" (Fanon 1967: 116). Other related "ritual enactment[s]" that Frieda highlights manifest themselves in black people's usage of creams to develop a lighter skin complexion, and in the free hurling at each other of the notion "coloured", "Hottentot"/"hotnot" as well as of other derogatory equivalents where the aim is to chastise mediocrity or, ironically, to motivate (Wicomb 1987: 9, 24, 30, 86, 105, 116, 164).⁵

An elaborate dramatisation of triumph over the images that evoke colonial negation is depicted in the story in which Frieda travels by bus to meet Michael, her white boyfriend, who will "drive [her] along de Waal Drive into the slopes of Table Mountain where Mrs Coetzee awaits with her tongs" (p. 74), that is, to effect an abortion. This voyage is a metaphor of a rite that she performs on behalf of black women in order to tackle the vile proscription of the Immorality Act, the designation "coloured"⁶ that apartheid uses to refer to children born of miscegenation, and the gendered denouncing of a woman who terminates her pregnancy. Indeed, these images of otherness slip out of the lexicon of apartheid as the constituents of the fact of black womanhood.⁷ Frieda's therapy for this horror involves taking stock of her body through a third-person point of view, specifically through her awareness of her womb, or of the foetus in her womb (pp. 63, 72, 77) and of her "belly" (pp. 67, 72). This alertness to the female body as a site of negation echoes in the image of the bone that a travelling companion raises after she has just picked it over and has said to her colleagues: "[W]ho'd have what another man has pushed to the side of his plate This bone ... picked bare and only wanted by a dog." (p. 71) Frieda's humiliation is also made apparent by her impression that her relationship with Michael makes

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5. Subsequent references to "*You Can't Get Lost*" and *Other Stories* are indicated by page number(s) only.
 6. Consult Wicomb for an analysis of the theme of "shame" in relation to the notion "coloured" (1998: 91-107).
 7. The phrase, "the fact of black womanhood", is coined in order to dialogue with Franz Fanon's "fact of blackness". Anne McClintock's critique that Fanon's construct of the colonial is gendered is here supported.

her a victim of racial abuse because she indirectly concurs with the women whom she is listening to on the bus that a romantic affair across race (during apartheid) is a “disgrace”, that is, abusive to black women who, according to one of her travelling companions “should know better not to go with white men” (p. 66).

Later when asked if she is “coloured” by the abortionist who operates her clinic along racist lines, she declines in a way that alludes to Simon Peter turning his back at Christ: “I say ‘No’, and wait for all the cockerels in Cape Town to crow simultaneously” (p. 78). Frieda is vexed with herself when she answers in the negative to the apartheid designation of “coloured”, because she knows that denial in this case is tantamount to betraying also the child that she seeks to abort. Her refusal of the “coloured” identity must be understood as a force that makes her terminate her pregnancy. In the context in which she articulates her remorse, abortion implies that it is to her a rite that she performs in order to “cement” herself to her body in the same way that Simon Peter became attached to the Church after he had denied Christ, that is, through guilt. Hence her penitence, suggested in her presentation of her having an abortion in terms of being “[d]eflowered by yellow hands wielding a catheter” (p. 80), conveys an impression that she is claiming radical innocence. Similar to the flower that William Blake depicts as slowly rotting because it is being consumed by “the invisible worm/ That flies in the night” (“The Sick Rose”), Frieda’s body that she describes as “pumpkin yellow” (p. 33) is a metaphor of innocence regained. While the flower stands for the divinity that sustains the worm in its metamorphosis into a fly, her body stands for a site into which her child escapes the horror that she knows, that is, the humiliation of being labelled “coloured” in apartheid South Africa. Consistent with bell hooks’s analysis of Sethe, the central character in Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* who imagines herself killing her daughter in order to save her from slavery, Frieda’s thought about terminating pregnancy “conquers the terror through perverse reenactment” and, thus, “makes possible political self-recovery” (hooks 1992: 345).

Structurally, the memorialising of blackness in “You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town” is internal to Frieda, and her dilemmas and conflicts are resolved in her portrayal of herself as radically innocent. This acknowledgement of entrapment in that which is being critiqued reverberates in “A Trip to the Gifberge”, “Behind the Bougainvillea” and in “A Fair Exchange”, the stories in which Frieda imagines herself as an adult who has just returned home to South Africa from exile. In these stories, she engages with her family members in a way that suggests that she is being tutored on how to narrate and define identity discursively, that is, one that can be “subject[ed] to ideological scrutiny”, or one that exceeds the “information” that “has only biological validity” by virtue of pertaining to mere “suffer[ing]” (Ndebele 2006: 18).

In “Behind the Bougainvillea”, for instance, the voice of Frieda’s father is heard subtly urging her to establish a black feminism that rejects anti-

nomies. In this story, she narrates her regret for having sex with a black man whom she knew to be an armed anti-apartheid activist. The centrality of sex and remorse recalls her angst about the Immorality Act, miscegenation and abortion after being impregnated by a white man in “You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town”. In this title story, her investigation of the construction that is imposed on her as black and female does not address and debunk the contention that she makes implicitly, that is, that the solution to her anguish lies in a romance with a black man.

When “Behind the Bougainvillea” commences, Frieda has reluctantly gone to consult Dr Van Zyl for chest pains. Her unwillingness is indirectly questioned in her portrayal of herself as cynical especially when compared to her family who acknowledges that it owes its good health to Van Zyl whom her father describes as a “clever chap” who “got [her] through rheumatic fever when [she was] only five or six” (p. 107) She also recalls that he seems to have healed her late mother of “asthma”, and that she had called him a “decent chap” after he had ordered that she jump the queue because he had said that she was an “old girl” (p. 109). However, Frieda’s description of Van Zyl as “an uncouth old white man” (p. 109) suggests that she sees him as a symbol of apartheid terror, that is, a reminder of the one who, despite impregnating a black woman, votes for (or does not actively challenge) apartheid. In other words, she will not have him touch her, however innocently. When she finally goes to his rooms having been persuaded to do so by her father, and as she waits for her turn, she meets a man from her past wearing “round mirror glass[es]”, and in them she sees her “face bleached by an English autumn” (p. 111). It seems that this mirror image of her cold beaten visage is a sign of her (seeming) aversion to her family’s judicious embracing of such resources as the Western medicine such as Van Zyl dispenses. Indeed, her people do not read anything exclusively colonial in the therapy that he provides. Implicitly, Frieda the narrator presents the grounds for refusing to consult him as his being (unnecessarily) racial, unimaginative and not nuanced and, therefore, a failure to deal with the trauma of white racism. This is why she is presented seeing the likeness of a passage from a book that she had been reading in the “mirror” glasses of her old acquaintance while waiting for her turn to consult: “the right side was browner than a European’s would be, yet not so distinctly brown as to type him as a Hindu or Pakistani and certainly he was no Negro, for his features were quite Caucasian as Edward’s own” (p. 111). The detailed attention to physiological features in this quotation is reflective of her entrapment at this stage in colonial antinomies and essentialism.

Later in this story, she realises that the man in whose spectacles she sees her portrait is “Henry Hendrikse” (p. 115), a childhood acquaintance who once wrote to her professing his love, and that he is a Xhosa (p. 119) freedom fighter who owns a “revolver” (p. 121) He then leads her out of the surgery to have water out of a tap, because she is feeling faint (p. 117).

Thereafter, they walk towards his friend's house to let her "sit down ... and rest" (p. 120) because her dizziness will not ease. She then consents to have sex with him when she "come[s] to" (p. 121). Sex with Hendrikse is for her consistent with her refusal to consult Van Zyl on the grounds that he is allegedly racist.

Her making love to Hendrikse emanates not from her "desire", but from what she feels to be a need to assuage her guilt because, in her view, she had deserted her country for just over a decade (p. 121). In her mind, she (unwittingly) sees the land and, by implication, Africa as blended with her body. However, she soon regrets her failure at this stage to see blackness in postnationalist terms. Hence she immediately goes to the "lavatory" after their brief sexual encounter (p. 123) and "[o]n the seat ... inhale[s] deeply and contract[s her] stomach muscles to expel the stubborn semen" (p. 123). Her expulsion of semen after sleeping with Hendrikse is symbolic of a sense of political maturity that manifests itself through a conscious use of body muscles, and suggests that she (desperately) takes authority over whether she conceives or not. This sense of growth is consistent with a realisation that sex with a black man who also suffers racial depersonalisation does not constitute a useful black female "ontological resistance" (Fanon 1967: 110), and is also indicative of her admission of complicity in the gendered discourse that she seems to be using to negotiate colonial alienation when she sleeps with Hendrikse. Seen exclusively from the fact that she portrays Hendrikse as a metaphor of a "terrifying" (p. 123) male symbolic order, sex, she realises, is a "question of power" reminiscent of the agenda of the petty bourgeoisie in Bessie Head's image of postcolonial Botswana (Head 1974).

In another story in which Frieda establishes a secular postcoloniality by using a metaphor of a journey, "A Trip to the Gifberge", her mother's voice is heard interrogating parochialism and the form of identity that is not dialogised. In this story, Frieda imagines herself being with her mother setting off for the Gifberge, a site that bears the mark of the Khoikhoi occupation allegedly prior to the coloniser's arrival. Symbolically, this trip suggests that they consolidate identity without being encumbered by a sense of alienation with the ancestral land, or without having to contest the history of shame that the notion "coloured" evokes from the perspective of apartheid's obsession with racial purity. Through a manoeuvre that problematises a simplistic aligning of a self with rectitude, however, Frieda presents her mother, that is, a fictional creation in Frieda's stories, as being alive and commenting from across a different ontological arena about her, that is, the narrator of this collection as well as the creator of all the people in these stories. Among others, her mother expresses disapproval at being discarded as one of Frieda's fictional creations (p. 172). This criticism is substantiated in Frieda's narration in "Home Sweet Home" when, according to her, her uncle Dawie shows her "the white stones of [her] mother on the koppie" (p. 95).

Frieda's mother is alert to the fact that the social/political claims to space, identity and legitimacy such as evident in the journey that she and her daughter undertake to the Gifberge are mainly relativist and, indirectly, that the truth-value of such claims depends merely on people's ignorance of/refusal to acknowledge other competing histories. This is apparent when she responds to her daughter's bookish but disingenuous contention that the protea is exclusively a sign of Afrikaner nationalism by saying, "We know who lived in these mountains when the Europeans were still shivering in their own country" (p. 181). Notwithstanding the fact that she refers to history in order to assert authority over the land that Afrikaner nationalism claims by alleging that South Africa was not occupied when the first Europeans arrived, Frieda's mother refuses to equate history with truth, and implicitly reasons that her daughter's connecting of the protea plant with Afrikaner domination is essentialist. Because of being self-critical, Frieda's mother also problematises the argument that the evidence of black occupation of Africa prior to the colonial period guarantees the ascendancy of blackness over the Afrikaner nationalism that attempts to make a case for white superiority. Seen strictly from this point of view, both forms of nationalism cancel each other. Hence she insists on relocating the protea to her yard, and retorts to her daughter: "You who're so clever ought to know that proteas belong to the veld. Only fools and cowards would hand them over to the Boers. Those who put their stamp on things may see on it their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it" (p. 181).

Consistent with her deconstruction of the nationalist claim to space, she encourages her daughter to use guilt in order to mediate her vision of herself deploying Christian mythology to terminating her pregnancy (p. 171). Frieda's mother is, therefore, a voice in her daughter's consciousness through which she defines herself as an imaginative writer who constructs Africa and, by implication, her body, in nonreductionist terms.

Also in the story, "A Fair Exchange", blackness is foregrounded discursively in line with Frieda's mother's thesis on identity as presented by Frieda in "A Trip to the Gifberge". The Frieda of "A Fair Exchange" depicts herself as a self-aware storyteller who attempts to document a biography of the central character, Skitterboud, a sheep-shearer who deals with his predicament as a migrant labourer by initiating stories that reveal him traversing the self/other binary that apartheid uses to establish black migrancy. Frieda is curious about Skitterboud, because she wants to know what transpired that day when he found his wife, Meid, and their children gone (p. 139) after he had been away the whole day to "round up the sheep for a count" (p. 138). It seems that Meid became annoyed when Skitterboud did not return home early after he had promised to bring her "kambroo" "to steady her stomach", because "she was with child" (p. 127). Infuriated, she took their children and left him. Frieda seems fascinated by the fact that he

subsequently approached the court to file for malicious desertion, and to seek custody of his children about whom he speaks with fondness (p. 141). His lawsuit thus resonates with Frieda's wrestling for authority over her body in the title story.

Similar to the guilt that she uses to mediate the sense of supremacy that she asserts over her body, his confession of "shame" for slapping Meid "once, twice" (p. 143) after the magistrate had upheld Skitterboud's complaint also is reminiscent of the secular that Frieda relies on in her narration of the black experience. This interiority in Skitterboud is evident also when he compares his children's meaningless fussing about from which plate to have breakfast (p. 129) with his employer's sheep's unnecessary commotion at shearing when they would be "disobedient" and eager "to scale the walls like monkeys, even though they like nothing better than losing those heavy expensive coats" (p. 138). Indirectly, he sees his children's tendency to be fussy about crockery a mere triviality that has no capacity to detract from the significance of feeding, and this is why he speaks about his children in the terms that are similar to those that he uses to refer to his employer's livestock. (Hence, unlike his nephew, Giel, who fails to rely on textures of everyday life to negotiate racial depersonalisation, Skitterboud does not commit theft. According to Frieda, Giel "look[s] into the distance and his eyes scale the hills and seem to land in the town from where his words c[o]me oven fresh" when he speaks about his prison experience (p. 135).)

Three key episodes in Frieda's documentary of Skitterboud's biography echo in her construction of a fugitive black feminism. The first relates to Dr Van Zyl who said that Skitterboud "need[ed] a nose to wear glasses... [instead of his] baboon nose" (p. 139), and the second has to do with his recalling that the magistrate's "nose [as he was handing down judgment] had disappeared ... [to the point where] he ended up with quite a small nose for a white man" (p. 142). The third involves the Magistrate's judgment that Skitterboud's relationship with Meid and their children is written in civil law and that she "has no right to take away with her anything from his house. Everything, from the children to the last scrap of underclothing she is wearing, belongs to him and is his right to retrieve" (p. 142). Skitterboud finds it absurd that the so-called civil way of resolving a malicious desertion is based on the erroneous assumption that reduces one party to another's inalienable object. It seems that he reasons that the migrant condition which is a product of apartheid modernity ensures that marriage is for black migrants similar to a state of living in separation. However, the environment that is legislated for him as his "home", as well as the sense of depersonalisation that he is made to suffer via the unnecessary attention to his bodily features do not obliterate in his mind that he has responsibilities as a father, a husband and as a person in non-essentialised terms. Similar to Frieda, he establishes normativity of himself by debunking colonial antinomies.

In conclusion, this article has attempted to argue that self-reclamation in Wicomb's stories relies on narration, and that it reveals a series of journeys

that open sites of resistance in which blackness is authenticated in terms of what bell hooks refers to as “ritual enactment”. In these rituals or enterprises of memory, Frieda’s voice and those of other black people enunciate new spaces that foreground identities in secular and dialogised terms.

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