

2008

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## Recommended Citation

"'This Text Deletes Itself': Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Wicomb's David's Story." *Studies in the Novel* 40.1-2 (2008). 127-45. (Special issue: "Postcolonial Trauma Narratives.")

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## “THIS TEXT DELETES ITSELF”: TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND SPACE-TIME IN ZOË WICOMB’S *DAVID’S STORY*

SHANE GRAHAM

The group of cultural and literary theorists whom I would loosely categorize as practitioners of “trauma theory”—including, most notably, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra—share several assumptions. Their ideas all derive to a large extent from Freudian conceptions of memory and trauma, and they all emphasize the temporal aspects of psychic trauma: Caruth, for instance, describes the traumatic encounter as “a break in the mind’s experience of time” (61). Implicit in this conception of trauma, as well, is the assumption that trauma is an individual and private phenomenon. And they all suggest, moreover, that trauma manifests itself primarily as a loss of language, coupled paradoxically with the compulsion to talk about that loss. The corollary of this point is that the “cure” for traumatic memory disorders is some variant of the talking cure. For some theorists, this is the task of formal psychoanalytic therapy: Dori Laub, for instance, argues that therapy is “a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event*” (Felman and Laub 69). For LaCapra, “testimonial witnessing” is a more effective mode of constructing narratives around traumatic occurrences: “witnessing based on memory... provides insight into lived experience and its transmission in language and gesture” (*History and Memory* 11).

Such conceptions of trauma, memory, and testimony have been very influential in the design and in the study of South Africa’s transition to democratic rule—and especially of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). One of my tasks in this article is to show that this “talking cure” paradigm of the TRC is inadequate in itself to account for the complex dynamics that emerged from and shaped South Africa’s revolutionary transition due to

that paradigm's tendency toward a depoliticized individualist psychology. Certainly there are exceptions to this rule, especially among trauma critics in American studies—those like Kali Tal, Ron Eyerman, and E. Ann Kaplan, who in different ways theorize collective and transgenerational traumas through material, visual, and oral culture. Eyerman's formulation of "cultural trauma" within the context of African-American descendants of slaves is particularly useful: "As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (2). A central premise of this essay will be that we need to understand the trauma of various groups in South Africa in precisely such collective terms of rupture and social dislocation.

Unfortunately, though, even as these scholars have complicated and enriched the discourses of trauma in the context of American race relations, the Vietnam War, 9/11, and so on, South African studies (especially as practiced outside of South Africa) has often been dominated by more reductive notions of confession and the talking cure. Indeed, it is tempting to see the TRC, which held public hearings from both confessed perpetrators and survivors of apartheid violence, as a powerful instrument for restoring language and narrative to individuals. Susan VanZanten Gallagher, for instance, praises the TRC for its "confessional mode" (179-80); and Teresa Godwin Phelps, in her comparative study of truth commissions, emphasizes the need for a victim to reclaim her "ability to articulate her pain" (5): "the turning of inchoate pain and grief into a narrative gives the victim control and distance from the traumatic event and empowers the victim to get on with his or her life" (57).

These critics highlight important strengths of the South African TRC process; there are indeed some who gave testimony at the TRC and found relief or healing there. These critics, moreover, generally do point to the ways that the TRC attempted to weave a larger national narrative of overcoming injustice out of the individual stories of victims and perpetrators. But insofar as the TRC is seen as a project of documenting stories about isolated traumatic events, it is also largely seen as negotiating disruptions in individuals' memories, which is to say their senses of time and language. My project, by contrast, is to deepen and expand our understanding of historical trauma in southern Africa while suggesting in particular that we must pay at least as much attention to the ways in which traumatic events are 1) *collective*—they create psychic disruption in whole families, clans, and communities; 2) *spatial*—memorialization is contained or inhibited by particular configurations of space and place and by particular uses of the land; and 3) *material*—they involve the loss of not just language but also land, houses, shops and stocks; breadwinners lost their abledness and the ability to earn their own living.

These points are made clear by a careful reading of Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000). At first glance, the novel seems to confirm certain assumptions of trauma theory about how anti-narrative representational methods can be used to convey the paradox-laden disruptions to temporality and language of a traumatic event. One of these assumptions is nicely summed up in the MLA call for papers that originally prompted this essay, which said that attempts to represent a traumatic event must employ "anti-narrative modernist forms" including the "disruption of linear chronology, fragmentation, narrative self-consciousness...[and] non-closure." Certainly Wicomb employs (post-) modernist narrative techniques in order to dramatize the ways in which history itself has been ruptured in southern Africa. But her novel also calls into question the adequacy of narrative alone to enable healing and the restoration of agency; it implies that such recovery of language must be joined by material compensation and a fundamental refiguring of socio-spatial relationships in the post-apartheid dispensation.

Let me begin, then, by acknowledging the ways in which *David's Story* confirms the insights of trauma theory with its emphasis on the linguistic and temporal aspects of narrative. The book follows a number of plotlines across two distinct but parallel historical periods. The narrative present of the novel is 1991 in the uncertain midst of transition and negotiation; the protagonist, David Dirkse, is a guerilla fighter for uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC). He is attempting to narrate to an unnamed woman amanuensis the story of the last decade of his life, a story he is loath to admit revolves around his unacknowledged, unconsummated relationship with his mysterious comrade Dulcie Olifant. As the vague outlines of the story begin to emerge from the half- and misremembered fragments David can convey, we can deduce that Dulcie, a high-ranking officer of "coloured" descent,<sup>1</sup> has most likely been forced to serve as concubine for the male troops in the field; that she was tortured in the ANC-run prison camps in Angola; that her name appeared on a hit list; and that she may in fact have been killed, though whether by right-wing forces or as a result of power plays within her own organization is left murky. In Wicomb's telling, we see how struggles for power even within the resistance movements play out on human bodies and especially (as throughout history) on the bodies of coloured or Khoi-San women.

David, however, finds this traumatic history difficult to recount. He says of Dulcie that "I think of her more as a kind of...scream somehow echoing through my story" (134). Yet, paradoxically, Wicomb describes Dulcie in an interview as "the necessary silence in the text; she can't be fleshed out precisely because of her shameful treatment which those committed to the movement would rather not talk about" (qtd. in Meyer and Oliver 190-91). As the novel's narrator notes wryly, "Dulcie has, after all, always hovered somewhere between

fact and fiction” (198); and David, having tried and failed to bring his story around to describing Dulcie’s role in it, engages instead in what the narrator peevishly terms an “exercise in avoidance” (33): he “chose to displace her [Dulcie] by working on the historical figure of Saartjie Baartman instead” (134). As Gillian Gane remarks, these are “layerings of displacement among which it is virtually impossible to find a ‘real,’ ‘true’ Dulcie” (106). David wants his narrator to begin the story with Krotoä, the Khoi woman renamed Eva by the Dutch settlers for whom she became an interpreter. She refuses to incorporate this material but does include some of his notes on the later historical figure of Sara or Saartjie Baartman, who was hauled around Europe on display as the “Hottentot Venus” in the early nineteenth century. Both women’s stories become ur-texts of a sort for the situation of the women in David’s life—in other words, they are phantoms whose later incarnations include Dulcie, the narrator, and David’s wife Sally (called “Saartje” as a child).

Before the end of this essay I will have more to say about both of these figures from the Khoi-San past, as well as about the most important parallel narrative in the novel, which concerns the actions and words of Andrew Abraham Stockenstrom le Fleur, David’s ancestor by an indirect route, who led the Griqua people on a series of treks in the 1910s and 1920s. The inclusion of all of these historical figures, I will argue, is Wicomb’s way of revealing how the past continues to echo in and haunt the present. But at the level of the fictionalized narration in David’s accounts to the amanuensis, his detours into the Griqua past are indeed an “exercise in avoidance,” a way of putting off the question of what happened to Dulcie. Before I analyze the novel’s many metatextual layers, then, let me first grapple with its difficult and elliptical structure, which is itself a symptom of the untellability of David’s story. David insists early and often, and the narrator tries to keep up the pretense, that her role in the telling of his story is one of neutral amanuensis, capturing the key events and putting them in a sensible order (see, for example, 141, 142, 147, and 151). In fact, though, one of the central concerns of *David’s Story* is the impossibility of telling stories about apartheid’s bloody past and the superficiality of linear telling as a mode of conveying psychological damage.

In one interview, Wicomb speculates that non-linear narrative is characteristic of all her fiction but that, in this case, it is a necessary conceit given her intrinsically disruptive subject: “I do now wonder if I’m capable of writing a linear, chronological novel and perhaps it’s because I’m not capable of doing it...Because the story is by nature an incomplete story, it can’t be told” (qtd. in Willemsse 152). Any such narrative will have to forego an easy sense of beginning, middle, and end; the narrator pleads, “let us not claim a beginning for this mixed-up tale. Beginnings are too redolent of origins, of the sweaty and negligible act of physical union which will not be tolerated on these pages” (8-9). This story’s endings are no more straightforward; again the narrator remarks, “Dulcie and the events surrounding her cannot be cast as

story. There is no progression in time, no beginning and no end. Only a middle that is infinitely repeated, that remains in an eternal, inescapable present..." (150).

For David, then, Dulcie is a sort of ever-present haunting, and it is precisely the subject of her end that his rambling narrative tangents serve to distract him from. David's difficulty in talking about Dulcie is best encapsulated in the "mess of scribbles" he gives his scribe at the end of the manuscript on Sara Baartman: "I know that it is his attempt at writing about Dulcie, because her name is written several times and struck out. Then there are beginnings scattered all over, and at various angles that ignore the rectangularity of the paper, as if by not starting at the top or not following the shape of the page he could fool himself that it is not a beginning" (135). The resistance to beginnings is perhaps born out of fear of the ending; yet the ending is already foreshadowed in the specter of Dulcie's name written down and then struck out, just as it was on the hit list left mysteriously in David's hotel room in Kokstad.

Thus it seems Wicomb does depict traumatic memory disorders as disrupting time and narrative as the Freudian model predicts. David's incapacity to come to terms with Dulcie's fate likewise presents as a rupture in his ability to use language. The narrator continues her description of the scribbled mess: "Truth, I gather, is the word that cannot be written. He has changed it into the palindrome of Cape Flats speech...TRURT...TRURT...TRURT...TRURT...the trurt in black and white...colouring the truth to say that...which cannot be said the thing of no name" (136). The novel's oblique evocation of the TRC (never mentioned by name) suggests that Wicomb's skepticism about the supposedly panacean virtues of realist representational modes extends beyond fiction and historiography to the work of the quasi-official TRC and its own narratives of past trauma. Dulcie's story, in contradistinction to the TRC's conceit that "revealing is healing," is "a story that cannot be told, that cannot be translated into words, into language we use for everyday matters" (151).

Dulcie, in short, is an overdetermined cipher. On the one hand, she is the very embodiment of unrepresentable trauma; on the other hand, she is, as Wicomb puts it, "a figure who is pure body, a body that is tortured" (qtd. in Meyer and Oliver 191). Dorothy Driver helps to resolve the seeming contradiction: "the notion of the unrepresentable, so fashionable a concept in postmodern and postcolonial debate, is deconstructed in Wicomb's text: it is given a historical context and a political force" (232). Indeed, Dulcie is a linguistic construct or lacuna only from the point of view of the narrator, who does not remember meeting Dulcie and sees her as "surrounded by a mystique that I am determined to crush with facts: age, occupation, marital status, what she wears, where she was born and raised—necessary details from which to patch together a character who can be inserted at suitable points into the story" (78). David refuses to address questions about such details, so the narrator feels, with "little to go by other than disconnected images, snippets of Dulcie,

[she] must put things together as best [she] can, invent, and hope that David's response will reveal something" (80). She even suspects that "Dulcie is a decoy. She does not exist in the real world: David has invented her in order to cover up aspects of his own story" (124).

For David, on the contrary, it is Dulcie's very realness—the materiality of her body and the devastating violations perpetrated on it—that makes her story so essentially untellable. It is Dulcie's role as "pure body" that makes her such a powerful illustration of the spatial-material dimensions of trauma. In one passage, for instance, the narrator imagines Dulcie being visited and raped in the night by men in black balaclavas, who "come like privileged guests into her bedroom, in the early hours, always entering the house by different routes, ridiculing her reinforced bolts and locks, the secret code of her Securilarm system" (81). The scene of a housebreaking immediately offers a spatial trope for bodily violation, and in the ensuing scene, Dulcie's situation comes to resemble another iconic image in South African literature: the political prisoner in the interrogation chamber. Indeed, her passivity in these scenes—for example, when the men bring a doctor to examine her as if she were an injured prisoner—suggests that perhaps the visits are historical echoes of Dulcie's earlier trauma experienced in the ANC's Quatro Camp in Angola. The power of these scenes is in their ability to help the reader understand how profoundly Dulcie's sense of herself as an autonomous body moving freely in space has been ruptured and disoriented.

In short, then, Dulcie represents a mapping of the past—or at least the traces of the past residing in what Eyerman calls "cultural trauma"—through the material body of the coloured woman and through the echoes of the past that affect the present in very real and immediate ways. As Eyerman cautions, "Viewing memory as symbolic discourse...tends to downplay or ignore the impact of material culture on memory and identity-formation" (9). *David's Story* makes no such mistake, and in fact its project could fairly be described as one of generating a system of corporal mappings. In other words, it is a project of symbolically and metonymically linking physical bodies and places with memories of the past through the medium of the landscape on which that past has been inscribed and erased. Three such mechanisms of corporal mapping feature prominently in Wicomb's novel: scars, the birth caul, and steatopygia.

The narrator's description of Dulcie early in the novel may be invented, even fanciful, but it is noteworthy for the emphasis it gives to Dulcie's physical body, and especially the scars on her back. The image of the "criss-cross cuts on each of her naturally bolstered buttocks" (19) offers a potent metaphor for understanding how struggles for power have been literally and figuratively inscribed on Dulcie's body:

Her back is strong, broad, almost a square depending on where one considers the back to end. This square is marked with four cent-sized circles forming

the corners of a smaller inner square, meticulously staked out with blue ballpoint pen before the insertion of a red-hot poker between the bones. The smell of that singed flesh and bone still, on occasion, invades, and then she cannot summon it away.... One day a nice man of her own age will idly circle the dark cents with his own thumb and sigh. Perhaps a man called David, who will say nothing and who will frown when she speaks of a woman in *Beloved* whose back is scarred and who nevertheless is able to turn it into a tree. (19)

The description of the scar as “staked out” evokes an image of land surveying, reinforcing the link between land and body. And this passage highlights the paradox of the traumatic “memory of landscapes” which is unavoidable but also un conveyable: for Dulcie, the scar arouses painful memories that she cannot “summon...away”; but for David, it is an inexplicable mystery and not one that he is terribly interested in exploring. This disjuncture is further underscored by the contrast to the scene in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that the narrator alludes to. In that novel, Sethe acquires her scars under slavery in Kentucky; and in one famous scene, she is reunited with a fellow former slave, Paul D, who touches the “chokecherry tree” of scars on her back: “He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow” (17). Whereas Paul D is able to understand some of Sethe’s sorrow because he too has suffered similar lessons, David’s empathy is more complex and ambivalent, especially since the narrator implies later that he was complicit in her abuse if not himself directly a perpetrator.

The scars, then, become an ambivalent figure for the ways that trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next. They become symbols, that is, of what Kaplan calls “transgenerational trauma.” Her discussion of Native American and African American trauma seems equally applicable to dispossessed populations in South Africa like the Griqua people: “subjects are haunted by the trauma of their parents even as their lives may take on less catastrophic forms....[B]ut in transgenerational trauma subjects are haunted by tragedies affecting their parents, grandparents or ancestors from far back without conscious knowledge” (106). If the scar, as a physical reminder linking the past to the present, symbolizes this transgenerational trauma, two other motifs connect the women of the novel’s narrative present to the country’s past in much more explicit ways.

One of these motifs is the birth caul. Andrew le Fleur, the narrator tells us, was born with “such a caul!—a veritable lisle stocking pulled tightly over the little one’s head, as if he could not risk entering the world without a guerrilla’s disguise” (39). This image finds historical echoes in the novel’s many references to stocking heads and guerrillas in balaclavas. Sally, for instance, has a stocking pulled over her head by an aunt shortly after her birth, “for there was much woolly hair that had to be smoothed and flattened over the pulsating crown” (9); the fact that Sally spends her youth with “a stocking on her head like any rough, roesballing girl” (9) is taken as a sign of future rebellion, which

she confirms by becoming involved in ANC resistance to apartheid. The birth caul finds other echoes in the black balaclavas worn by Dulcie's mysterious visitors and in Dulcie's "grotesque image" of her teenage self with a stocking on her head as "Miss Polly with infant's skin stretched like a caul over her head" (82).

The third motif, which recurs with still greater frequency, is that of steatopygia, a term for the deposits of fat typically found in the buttocks of Khoi women, including the Griquas. "Steatopygous Sally," as the narrator calls her, is unaware of the link her figure provides to the "queens of steatopygia"—Rachel le Fleur and Sara Baartman (16)—but the narrator makes the connection explicit for us. Furthermore, when Rachel hides the records of her husband's anti-colonial activities in the hollow of her back created by her steatopygia, she creates a symbolic link between her husband's advocacy of Griqua identity, Griqua women's bodies, and the land in which the documents had previously been buried.

This symbolic connection is further developed and illuminated with the tradition of the Rain Sisters, including David's ancestor Antjie Cloete, who during a draught in Andrew le Fleur's time were sent to bring back "radical moisture" from the peninsula: in a "memory of a lapsed tradition," Le Fleur "saw in a flash that the women blessed with the most bountiful behinds, the queens of steatopygia, were the chosen Brides of Christ—that they would be the ones to carry water to the promised land... [They] had been shaped by God into perfect vessels for collecting and carrying back radical moisture from the rain-soaked Cape peninsula with which to temper the radical heat of Namaqualand" (153).<sup>2</sup>

Through symbolic motifs such as the birth caul and the steatopygous rear end, then, Wicomb establishes links between David, Dulcie, and Sally (in the present) and Andrew and Rachel le Fleur and Sara Baartman (in the past). In doing so, she emphasizes the extent to which the historical traumas embodied in those figures from South Africa's past continue to echo in the late twentieth century, haunting the lives of the entire Cape coloured population, and especially those who identify as Griqua. Moreover, through these links, Wicomb develops a system of spatio-temporal mapping that draws our attention to the material manifestations of that trauma. What gives these corporal mappings such power, in fact, is how seamlessly they interact with other representational strategies in the novel; working together, these various spatial and corporal mechanisms show us new understandings of history, memory, and cultural trauma. Wicomb's key spatial tropes and themes include the image of the haunted landscape, fractured and gap-ridden genealogies, troubled definitions of the nation, diggings and excavations, and various types of palimpsests.

In *David's Story*, as in a great many works of recent South African fiction, landscapes are haunted by the histories they have borne witness to. This theme

is more than merely symbolic; the linking of land to traumatic episodes in history effectively draws our attention to the ongoing material ramifications of colonial and apartheid policies that led to today's inequitable distribution of land. Indeed, the corporal mapping that I describe above should be seen as part of Wicomb's larger project of inscribing the past onto particular places and landscapes in a complicated interplay with physical bodies, social relations, and group identities. The author says that the land has always been

a political issue in South Africa. And yes, identity is not only about contemplation of being; it is bound up with the body and the ways in which we experience the ground beneath our feet, and rest our eyes on a familiar landscape. But then different groups in South Africa experience these differently....No doubt the new redistribution of land will also produce a new take on the topic. (qtd. in Meyer and Oliver 189-90)

If we are going to consider the spatial-material dimensions of trauma, as I propose, Wicomb here wisely cautions us to take into account the very different experiences of post-apartheid modernity that various groups of South Africans have had. In *David's Story*, she gives us further evidence of these differing experiences, which we might call "uneven postmodernism" in the attitude of Sally's grandmother, Sarie Meintjies, to the renovations of the Logan Hotel where she worked as a cleaner until her retirement. Whereas a white South African might indulge in colonialist nostalgia for the hotel's interior prior to its modernization, the former cleaning lady compares it favorably to her own newly renovated home: "she casts an appreciative eye over her own modernisation, the glazed windows and the lovely patterned lino that looks just like a photo of the Logan foyer. No, she smiles, the bad old days of dung floors are over" (8).

There is an irony to Ouma Sarie's celebration of the hotel's remodeling, however: like the landscape itself, the hotel is a sort of palimpsest from which the marks of the past are only ever partially erased, leaving phantom traces. The changes to the physical interior of the Logan Hotel reflect larger forces at play that make the inscription of memory on space more complicated than storytelling or confession can convey alone. Andreas Huyssen identifies and suggests a causal link between two of the key forces: postmodernism, with its intense compression of space and time, and historical amnesia. He says, "After the waning of modernist fantasies about *creatio ex nihilo* and of the desire for the purity of new beginnings, we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space, monuments as transformable and transitory, and sculpture as subject to the vicissitudes of time" (7). Perhaps nowhere can the disorientation and dehistoricization that accompanies the encroachment of globalization be seen so clearly as in South Africa where the rewriting of the past under political transformation has coincided with the country's newly intensified immersion in the global system of consumer capitalism. If the traces

of the past continue to haunt a site thus transformed, such a site nevertheless resists the kind of inscription that can make those traces readily visible; as Huyssen notes, “any monument will always run the risk of becoming just another testimony to forgetting, a cipher of invisibility” (81). The paradox Huyssen describes resonates deeply with the Kokstad that David finds on his quest to recover the history of Le Fleur’s Griqua tribe: “Kokstad carries no traces of Andrew Abraham Stockenstrom le Fleur. There are no street names, no monuments, and it would seem no memories” (137). Indeed, even the townspeople David meets avoid talking about the Griqua chief.

Yet, even as Le Fleur has been erased from public memory in Kokstad, his ghost seems to haunt the landscape there. And the present absence of Le Fleur in the collectively remembered history of British Settler country is mirrored by the fractured genealogy in the family tree that opens the novel. Between the European ancestor Eduard la Fleur (a fictional creation of Wicomb’s) and Andrew le Fleur’s father Abraham lies nothing but two Xs representing who knows how many generations of interbreeding between European and Khoi-San ancestors. As Kai Easton remarks, “if Wicomb’s novel makes gestures to the lives of Krotoä-Eva and Saartjie Baartman, it also creates gaps, false links, difficult genealogies” (238).

This knowledge has the effect of undermining Andrew le Fleur’s ethnic nationalism based on notions of a “pure” Griqua people. In one interview Wicomb calls this notion of racial purity “crazy,” and says, “That’s why I invented his French ancestry, as well. This he then had to completely wipe out of the picture” (qtd. in Willemsse 146). Elsewhere she elaborates on the novel’s false genealogies:

[The] representation of genealogy has always been bound up with identity construction, with producing a literary identity for a region or a group and with founding myths. Besides, the actual stories that circulate in the real world about Le Fleur, the apocryphal stories, lent themselves to magic realism. I could then elaborate on those, develop the story into the immaculate conception of a fictional love child which connects David biologically to Le Fleur, and so hopefully invite the reader to make other connections between them, between the historical periods. (qtd. in Meyer and Oliver 192-93)

Thus the novel establishes historical analogues between different time periods, while calling into question reductive assumptions about linearity and cause-effect. If David’s generation is connected to Le Fleur’s, this connection exists primarily at the level of the symbolic and thematic as the “immaculate conception of a fictional love child”—David’s own great-grandmother—throws into doubt the protagonist’s expectations of a coherent genealogy.

Wicomb thus calls into question the capacity of genealogy to render a spatial/visual model of linear progress through time. As I have already hinted, moreover, *David’s Story* challenges the precepts of post-apartheid nationalism,

which is, after all, a spatial conceptualization of collective group identity. Nationalism also depends on a stable connection to the land and a linear genealogy that can determine who “belongs” to the nation and who is excluded from that citizenship, two assumptions that Wicomb’s novel undermines. Indeed, one thing Wicomb makes clear in this text is that in a country like South Africa where national or tribal identities have long been conceived in relation to the landscape, displaced symptoms of trauma often shift from violated bodies to damaged landscapes and back again in a movement that conceptually binds the body tightly to the land.

Given that nationalism inevitably defines inclusion and exclusion in spatial terms, and given the damage that spatial engineering has perpetrated in South Africa, it should not be surprising that Wicomb is suspicious of nationalism in the post-liberation era. In particular, as she depicts it in *David’s Story*, ethnic nationalism is intrinsically predisposed to the absolutism and intolerance that characterized the apartheid dispensation. Wicomb confirms this in interviews conducted around the time of the novel’s publication, in which she discusses nationalism as a formerly useful strategy that has now outlived its utility:

What South Africans have done could not have been done without a sense of nationalism....Unfortunately Spivak falls short of discussing what happens next. Part of the ugly things that are told in my novel is the result of nationalism....Of course it is not a nation that is going to be healed—that’s nonsense. It’s people that will be healed. Let’s just forget about the bloody nation now, because it has run its course. It’s done its job. We know what it led to in Europe. I know what it means in Scotland. (qtd. in Willemsse 151-52; see also Meyer and Oliver 92.)

Read in this light, *David’s Story* might become a cautionary Fanonesque tale about the pitfalls of nationalism in the post-liberation era. Indeed, the novel seems to fly in the face of a growing tendency for both ruling and opposition parties to invoke racial or ethnic nationalism in ways that echo disturbing histories in South Africa and around the world.

Beyond using the motifs of haunted landscapes and fractured genealogies to critique ethnic nationalism and its inclination toward spatial dominance, Wicomb employs at least two other spatial/visual tropes to help the reader see how a history of loss leaves its phantom traces. The first is the theme of digging and excavations, a trope all too grimly appropriate for a book published at the culmination of the TRC era. Rachel le Fleur helps her husband dig up some incriminating records of his anti-colonial politics and then, when the hole is refilled, has the idea of redigging it and reburying the empty pouch: “Again they dug into the earth, making for a second time a hole where a hole had already twice been. Taking the spade out of his hand she carefully lifted out the earth, sensing from the density of the site of the original walls of the hole, for a hole being a thing of absence, she focused on the presence of its walls” (55).

The trope of digging helps Wicomb reveal the processes by which certain narrative truths and the perspectives of certain groups and places have been effaced or obscured from history. Further, in performing this function, it acts as a metaphor for the novel itself. If we read this scene as an allegory for reconstructing or excavating the past, then we begin to see that narrating a past such as David's and Dulcie's is like excavating an archaeological site or a graveyard, a negative and inductive enterprise involving the reconstruction or reinvention of the absent. The present absence of the hole in the earth also contains a further absence in the form of the documents missing from the reburied pouch. But what is most telling is not what the hole contains (or conspicuously does not contain) but the simple process of digging and redigging this thing of absence, in a symbolic embodiment of Freudian compulsive repetition. The narrator's attempts to excavate the truth about Dulcie confront precisely such a present absence as the horror of her fate precludes registration in David's consciousness and in his story; the narrator, too, must attempt to reconstruct the contents of the empty pouch—the Truth about Dulcie—within a hole that is a thing of absence. This understanding helps explain the novel's complex meta-narrative structure: *David's Story* is more about the process of telling the story (or digging the hole) than it is about the story itself (or the absent documents).

The final representational strategy that Wicomb employs to lay bare the spatial operations of collective historical trauma has been already much hinted at: the palimpsest, an artifact that has been inscribed multiple times, with older layers of inscription only partially erased. Wicomb uses palimpsestic imagery on several levels as a trope for the ways in which historical injustice is conveniently erased from social memory yet continually reveals itself by making visible the gaps and erasures inherent in the selection and emphasis of the narrative elements (see also Harrow 58, 65, 53). The story of Rachel redigging a hole to bury an empty pouch is one such instance of a palimpsest, but perhaps the novel's most striking example is the portrait of John Glassford and his family circa 1767, that David recalls having seen hanging in the People's Palace in Glasgow. As he stared at the painting David saw the ghostly image of a black man's face staring out of an empty space in the painting; only afterwards did he read the plaque to learn that the painting "included a black slave on the left hand, which has since been painted over." David tells his narrator that he "did not expect to find the effacement of slavery to be betrayed in representation, as an actual absence, the painting out of a man who had once...signified wealth and status and who...had become unfashionable as an adornment on canvas" (193).

The symbolic portent of this vision of erased presence is compounded when David realizes that a waiter who gave him *déjà vu* in the hotel in Kokstad is the same man whose face he saw in the painting in Glasgow many years before. This realization leads David to arrive at what could be called the novel's central

premise: “Surely memory is not to be trusted” (194). This notion is extremely troubling to David, who has a strong belief in common sense and discipline. But as Margaret J. Daymond notes, “*David’s Story* ranges the need for political certainty and control against the question of liberty and compels the reader to experience ways in which language itself, especially in its written form, can be made to serve both or...neither” (30). When David realizes that memory is more like a spectral haunting, ephemeral and mischievous, than it is like a mechanical, objective playback machine, he is forced to question the political absolutism and moral certitude that had always underpinned his soldier’s identity. And it is the palimpsest of the Glassford portrait, with the phantom slave’s face that has been subjected to imperfect erasure, that precipitates this crisis of faith and identity for David Dirkse. Michael Rothberg notes that, “[w]hile the traumatic combination of the extreme and the everyday blocks traditional claims to synthetic knowledge, attentiveness to its structure can also lead to new forms of knowledge beyond the realist and antirealist positions and outside of traditional disciplines” (6-7). This is precisely the function served by Wicomb’s palimpsestic narrative, which draws the reader’s attention to its own structure and thus leads to “new forms of knowledge” that David, with his reliance on black-and-white certainty, finds deeply threatening.

In short, to give her readers a glimpse of both the fundamental unspeakability and the materiality of South Africa’s history, Wicomb deploys a complex combination of corporal mappings—scars, birth cauls, and steatopygia—that work together with various spatial and visual tropes to dramatize the fractures and blind spots of cultural trauma: haunted landscapes, fractured genealogies, troubled nations, digging a “thing of absence,” and palimpsestic traces of that which has been imperfectly erased. In the final sections of this essay, I will show how these various motifs and narrative strategies operate in two of the novel’s seeming diversions from the story of the last days of apartheid.

Both of these tangents concern the history of the Khoi peoples of southern Africa and especially of the Griqua people (who would have been categorized as “coloured” under apartheid law), who are once again suffering a crisis (or opportunity) of group identity in this new “time of all-change” (*David’s Story* 169). Indeed, it is likely in unconscious response to a sense of rapid, unchecked transformation that David feels compelled to excavate and document an origin or some sense of being rooted in the past. The narrator foregrounds this compulsion immediately in the opening pages through David’s obsession with Krotoä/Eva and Sara Baartman: “David’s story started at the Cape with Eva/Krotoä, the first Khoi woman in the Dutch castle, the only section I have left out. He eventually agreed to that but was adamant about including a piece on Saartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus placed on display in Europe. One cannot write nowadays, he said, without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself” (1). David, it seems, feels compelled

to resist the sense of uprootedness and the fragmentation of genealogies that characterize his era. His trip to Kokstad is partly an attempt to find traces of “the Old Ones, the Griqua ancestors who once roamed these plains and whose spirit the Chief said they would capture here as a new nation. The Old Ones had left the world as they had found it, their waste drawn back into the earth, *their footprints buried*” (97, emphasis added). The trip also marks an attempt to map a future through the past by excavating the traces of these buried footprints and rediscovering forgotten paths and alternative modes of existence in opposition to the homogenizing and flattening impulses of the postmodern, post-apartheid landscape. In other words, the protagonist attempts to read the partially erased traces of the past on the palimpsest that is the KwaZulu-Natal countryside.

David’s newfound interest in his roots and ancestry arouses derision and suspicion from his comrades and from his wife. Even David himself, with his soldier’s pragmatism, is scornful of the work of scholars and poets and so finds himself conflicted about his compulsion to investigate and reconstruct the past. This contempt for David’s project of recuperating history, expressed by such a diverse collection of characters together with his own growing doubts about his memories of even the recent past, suggest that we should not read David’s accounts of Eva/Krotoä and Sara Baartman as historiography in any empirical sense. Instead, the novel suggests that we should read them as displaced symptoms of a sort of collective or historical rupture: at one point, the narrator realizes that David “was using the Griqua material to displace that of which he could not speak” (145). But I would insist, perhaps ironically, that the unspeakable here includes not just Dulcie and her fate but also centuries and generations of dispossession, violence, and forced migrations among Dulcie’s and David’s ancestors, resulting in a transgenerational or cultural trauma similar to that described by Kaplan and Eyerman.

This collective trauma of the Khoi and San peoples plays out again and takes on deeper layers of significance in another time period much explored in Wicomb’s novel: the early twentieth century when Andrew Le Fleur led the Griqua people on multiple treks in search of a promised homeland for Griqua nationalist separatism. Just as David’s search for roots leads him to Kokstad in search of information on Le Fleur, Le Fleur himself begins with a search for the “bones” of his ancestors. His messianic vision begins in 1885 in Kokstad, where, standing “on the crest of Mount Currie like Moses of old,” he is visited by a burning bush that tells him, “These are your people who have lost their land, who have become tenants on their own Griqua farms. It is you who must restore to them their dignity” (41). This vision leads Le Fleur to the resolution, “Griqualand for the Griquas and the Natives. This is our land. We will wipe out the stain of colouredness and gather together under the Griqua flag those who have been given a dishonourable name” (42). In another, later vision, the voice of God tells him to “[g]ather the scattered bones of Adam Kok and lead your people out of the wilderness,” and young Andrew sees “that the pebbles

were not pebbles and the hills were not hills. Scattered in the valley were acres of bones, bleached bones picked clean by sun and rain" (44). Wicomb here establishes an intricate web of connections between people, bones and bodies, and places and haunted landscapes. David tries to use the figure of Le Fleur as a sort of lodestone in his attempt to map this network.

Given the conservative nature of the Griqua community, who under Le Fleur's leadership began calling for ethnic nationalist separatism long before the National Party came to power, David apparently hopes to recuperate the figure of Le Fleur for the post-revolutionary era; he seizes, for instance, on Le Fleur's slogan "Griqualand for the Griquas and the Natives. This is our land" (42), which David takes as evidence of an inclusive, non-racial vision that is opposed to white domination. Driver remarks that David needs a "recuperated, nonethnic" Le Fleur, "uncorrupted by racism...as a model to live by, and as a model for present-day Griqua and others" (225). More generally, David hopes to recuperate earlier, more open-ended ways of thinking about identity, land, space, and nation like those held by Le Fleur before *Realpolitik* induced him to make fatal concessions to an incipient movement toward Afrikaner nationalism and domination.

For Wicomb, Le Fleur plays a still more complex and ambivalent role, often serving as a cautionary figure against nationalist zeal. For instance, one of the parallels that links the novel's narrative present to Le Fleur's campaign for Griqua nationalism in the early twentieth century is that both eras saw the emergence of competing nationalisms struggling to capture power and influence the rebuilding of the country after a long, destructive period of conflict (the Anglo-Boer War at the beginning of the century, the struggle against apartheid at the end). Inevitably, perhaps, the narrator also links Griqua nationalism to the then newly-emerging ideologies of Afrikaner nationalism and separatism: for instance, she describes Andrew and Rachel as living a "life of trekking" (46), a term that evokes iconic images of the Afrikaner "Great Trek" in the nineteenth century. Wicomb thus simultaneously draws attention to the common genealogical and cultural heritages of the Griquas and the Afrikaners, which apartheid had always disavowed, and alerts us to the similarities in nationalist spatial rhetoric between the two ostensibly separate ethnic groups. The Le Fleur Wicomb shows us in the 1920s is beaten down by decades of slander, betrayal, and imprisonment. This is the defeated Andrew who assures Rachel that Prime Minister Louis Botha is enthusiastic about his proposed separate territory for a "Griqua volk."

David looks scornfully on the apartheid that Le Fleur offers to Botha; indeed, Le Fleur's "solution for God's stepchildren" is shown to be a spatial segregation that anticipates National Party policy by almost three decades when he calls for "absolute separation. From white and from black" (161). But again, Wicomb's own view is more complex than that of her protagonist; she gives us a finely parsed analysis of how Le Fleur's vision of ethnic nationalism functions in the novel: "I didn't write this novel to depict a 'true version' of Le

Fleur. That's not what I was interested in. I was interested in the ideology.... His invention of the nation, his ludicrous notion of pureness which seems to me to resonate with some of the New South Africa-speak, also to do with the new notions of 'colouredness' and essentialism" (qtd. in Willemse 145-46). Ultimately, though, even if the novel highlights the many parallels between the two historical periods, there is no simple key that will allow the reader to decode the Le Fleur narrative as an allegory for David's story. Wicomb can only tell the story of trauma negatively—that is, not through a linear accounting of facts but by dramatizing and making visible the marks of the erasure or rupture that render telling impossible.

Let me conclude with a final example of how Wicomb turns her own novel into a palimpsest, thus allowing us to see the spatial, material, and collective or transgenerational dimensions of the traumas she depicts. The narrator proposes using the "middle voice" for Dulcie's story (197), and in fact does use it with increasing frequency in the novel's closing chapters. The proposal of the middle voice elicits a strong negative reaction from David, so the scribe demonstrates an approximation of the middle voice with a parable:

About Bronwyn the Brown Witch who can do anything at all....She uses her magical powers to get her friends out of scrapes, to feed the poor, to stave off hurricanes and earthquakes, to drive back the enemy, until one day her friends, the sticks in the forest, come clattering together, lay themselves down on top of each other until they are a mighty woodpile. There is no way out. Bronwyn the Witch must die on the stake (203).

The absence of agency and rationality—of anyone responsible for Bronwyn's lynching—perfectly encapsulates the story David has recounted about Dulcie: terrible, nameless things have happened to her, but no one seems to be to blame.

Wicomb's use of the middle voice even in this ostensibly frivolous example lends credence to Hayden White's argument that it may be necessary in the wake of the mass traumas of the twentieth century to recuperate the middle voice and "intransitive mode," which he conflates and then associates with the "modernist style, that was developed in order to represent the kind of experiences which social modernism made possible" (52). LaCapra questions White's argument and ponders "in what sense it is possible to make truth claims in the middle voice and to what extent that question is suspended by its use" (*Writing History* 26). But, in the case of *David's Story*, this objection seems to be beside the point: Wicomb's goal is not to create the illusion of a less frangible and elusive truth but to make it explicit to us why such a remembered truth is so elusive and partial. What Rothberg says of Art Spiegelman's representation of the Holocaust in *Maus* is true of Wicomb's novel as well: "there emerges the possibility of *indirect* reference through the self-conscious staging of the conundrum of representing historical extremity" (103). The middle voice is, if

you will, the syntactic equivalent of the palimpsest, drawing attention to that which has been erased and excluded and to the conundrums of telling.

Later examples of the middle voice perform this work more pointedly. On the penultimate page of the novel, after David's suicide and funeral, the narrator returns home to find several days' work on the book gone, and replaced by a phrase in a sort of middle voice: "this text deletes itself" (212). The novel's (non-)conclusion echoes the ending of Morrison's *Beloved*, which might itself be considered middle voice, with its refrain "This is not a story to pass on" (275). Wicomb's novel ends with a "last warning" bullet striking the narrator's computer, and her disavowal of the story: "My screen is in shards. / The words escape me. / I do not acknowledge this scrambled thing as mine. / I will have nothing more to do with it. / I wash my hands of this story" (213). Yet, as with *Beloved*, the story has been passed on, and the narrator (or someone else?) must have turned her hand to it again for the reader to be holding the book in the first place. Thus, as with the conspicuous middle voice, the novel's conclusion makes explicit the crisis of agency and representation inherent in a tale as damaging and damaged as David's story. "What we are left with," Easton summarizes, "is a co-authored text which negotiates versions of the truth, and the icons of Krotoä and Saartjie reside as palimpsests, while the haunting figure of Dulcie 'echoes like a scream' throughout the pages, refusing to fully emerge or disappear" (245).

What these palimpsestic tracings make possible is a kind of mapping of experience across and through space, time, and embodiment. Wicomb's use of the palimpsest as both motif and narrative strategy reveals traces of the erased past even as it makes clear that the erased texts are never fully recoverable. The palimpsest also reveals the material and spatial dimensions of collective traumatic memory. In uncovering these truths, Wicomb reminds us of what is ultimately at stake in the representation of a traumatic past. If we elide the ways in which time defines and is interpenetrated by space and the ways in which language depends on a material referent, we create a curiously depoliticized conception of "bearing witness" as an individual process of working through the traumatic aftermath of an event rather than a collective contest over public configurations of space, place, and memory. Wicomb's novel has the effect of throwing cold water over post-apartheid triumphalism and nationalist bromides; it becomes harder to celebrate the successes of the TRC as an exercise in confession and historical reconstruction when confronted with the deep ruptures in South Africa's sense of space and time, language and body that *David's Story* so searingly dramatizes. On reading Wicomb's masterpiece, one begins to see that South Africa's road to democracy and the restoration of justice has only just begun and that the process of rendering versions of the past must be ongoing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The category “coloured” was used in apartheid law to describe the mixed descendents of the indigenous Khoi-San peoples of the Western Cape, Asian slaves brought to the early Cape Colony, black Africans, and white settlers. I use the term “coloured” guardedly, aware of its painful apartheid baggage yet unaware of a satisfactory alternative term for what, after decades of segregation, has become a de facto community especially in the Western Cape where coloured people are a majority of the population and are united by circumstances and a particular dialect of Afrikaans.

<sup>2</sup> Irlam notes the allusion here to pseudo-scientific notions of “radical heat” and “radical moisture” from Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. “Wicomb’s satirical point here is precisely that cultural origins are almost infinite. An assertion of identity that passes through reclaimed origins is therefore always bound to involve more fabrication than fact” (713). Daymond notes that Sterne’s lines about radical heat and moisture “have over time been localized to serve a very real ‘struggle for justice’.... With the passage of time, the meanings which arise from these intertexts are not so much actively palimpsestic, ‘in between’ the metropolis and the margin, as local and naturalised” (34). I would add, though, that one of the functions of the narrative in this novel is to denaturalize these narrative understandings—that is, to lay bare the obscured genealogies of the past.

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