

*Exile And Homecoming:  
Identity In Zoë Wicomb's  
"You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town"*

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IN THE CONTEXT of a literary and political culture that has for a long time effectively silenced the voices of black people in general, and black women most of all, the publication of Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) was a significant event. Dorothy Driver suggests that Wicomb's stories are "without precedent" in South Africa, that no one has previously written from her particular position and perspective (that of "a woman brought up 'coloured' in South Africa"). Given the forces militating against this, Driver concludes that it is remarkable that Wicomb's stories were written at all.<sup>1</sup> Wicomb attests to the difficulty she had in writing, even once she had left this country:

The subtle British racism made me feel it would be presumptuous of me to write and even to speak . . . so that I was thoroughly and successfully silenced by the English educational system. It took a very long time, and immense effort, to find my voice.<sup>2</sup>

Given the remarkable nature of her achievement, and the poise and sophistication of her stories, the relative lack of substantial criticism is somewhat surprising—even, as Annamarié van Niekerk puts it, "disturbing."<sup>3</sup>

Central to Wicomb's collection of stories is the question of identity, and intimately bound up with this are the polarities of home and exile. Significantly, the stories were written while Wicomb was in exile in England. As Gready observes, "[the exiled] writer finds a home in writing about home, in characters who also seek a home or who can be written home in a kind of vicarious homecoming" (510). The sequence of stories in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* can be read as a sustained interroga-

tion of Frieda's attempts to define or negotiate her identity, and to find a place which she can call home. In particular, the stories explore the problems attendant on the construction of a "coloured" identity in South Africa—a question of no small moment in this country at the present time. This paper examines the way in which class, colour, and gender combine to construct a position and an identity for Frieda which she must question and resist if she is to find some measure of autonomy for herself. At the same time, it traces Frieda's impulse to find or construct a home for herself, an impulse which leads her back to her native land and to an uneasy and tentative *rapprochement* with her mother.

André Viola titles his paper on *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Coloured Girl." The stories trace Frieda's evolution from the young child huddled in a foetal position under the kitchen table (in "Bowl like Hole") to the mature woman who can return to South Africa as an author—of the kind of stories of which her family would *not* approve. The two poles between which Frieda oscillates are, first, the (Joycean) desire to escape or overcome whatever is limiting or constricting in the environment and society in which she has grown up; and, second, the countervailing impulse to return home and reconnect with the family and the milieu which has both helped and hindered her search for self-definition. The polarities of home and exile thus help to shape and define the collection as a whole. What is perhaps remarkable is the almost complete absence of any attempt to represent Frieda's experience of exile. The years spent in the U.K. form the fulcrum—the absent, undramatized centre—around which the collection turns.

While the stories collectively constitute a kind of bildungsroman, they remain fragments of a whole which the reader has to piece together by inference and cross-reference. The stories are subtle, indirect, often elliptical in their construction. The play of memory and association produces shifts between past and present. In all but two stories Frieda is the focal character, but a double or multiple perspective is often created through a kind of counterpointing, as in "A Clearing in the Bush," where Frieda's experience is framed by Tamieta's reported monologue, or in the title story, where the extremity of Frieda's predicament is

juxtaposed with the ordinary conversation of the two working-class “coloured” women seated near her on the bus. In “Ash on my Sleeve,” Frieda’s own choices and assumptions are exposed to critical scrutiny by the encounter with her old university friend Moira, who functions almost as an alter ego. Although the narrative voice is that of the mature Frieda, she is herself exposed to irony. In addition, the later stories are marked by a self-reflexivity which problematizes any simple referential claim to truth.<sup>4</sup>

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The first story, “Bowl like Hole,” introduces the collection and is crucial to an understanding of Frieda’s predicament. It becomes clear that her family in fact *creates* her initial crisis of identity by defining themselves (and her) as English-speaking and therefore as “respectable.” This is in contradistinction to the Dirkses, whose children Frieda is forbidden to play with: they speak Afrikaans and are allegedly infested with lice. The fact that the Shentons are the only English-speakers in their community (her father is the schoolteacher) immediately defines her as other than or different from her peers; it creates a distance which she is expected to maintain.

Mr. Weedon, the visiting Englishman from Cape Town, embodies all those attributes of Englishness which Frieda’s mother admires and seeks to emulate: gentility, decorum, and civility. He is, she observes, “a gentleman, a true Englishman” (2). Not only does this distinguish the Shentons from neighbours like the Dirkses, it also (and even more importantly) distinguishes them from “the Boers.” The terms “Boer” and “English” in fact function as binary opposites: to Frieda’s parents, “Boer” signifies whatever is uncouth, barbaric, and uncivilized.

Paradoxically, of course, English is also the language of the colonizer; England is the former imperial power. And in the Western Cape, Afrikaans has become the language of those whose indigenous roots go deepest—the language of the rural farm workers and the mainly “coloured” urban working class. This valorizing of England and things English therefore brings with it its own problems and contradictions. V. A. February points to the existence of a lively debate on the language question

within the "coloured" community. It was conducted, for instance, in the pages of the journal of the Teachers League of South Africa:

The general attitude was crystal clear even in the fifties. Afrikaans was a language of contempt and of oppression. . . . One language, Afrikaans, was associated with apartheid and Afrikanerdom, parochialism and oppression, and . . . one language, English, was regarded as the gateway to the wider, unprejudiced world. (February 91, 94)

While this helps to contextualize and explain the reasons for the Shentons' choice of English rather than Afrikaans, the title of the story, "Bowl like Hole," alerts us to the significance of the process of language acquisition, which we see enacted. In assimilating the language, the Shentons simultaneously assimilate the culture, the values, and the ideology which the language brings with it.<sup>5</sup> It is surely no coincidence that the opening story provides us with a striking image of a thoroughly docile black labour force working in unison to extract gypsum from the earth, and standing in line to receive their packets of cigarettes. It is the Englishman, Mr. Weedon, whose capital makes possible this spectacle of colonial labour relations. That he insists on being called "Meneer" rather than "Baas" does nothing to alter the realities of the power relations. In presenting Frieda with a lump of gypsum similar to the one selected by Mr. Weedon for his daughter, Frieda's father aligns himself with the Englishman, and his Frieda with Mr. Weedon's Sylvia. Frieda's task, if she is to achieve an understanding of the real relations of power and subordination in the world around her, is to avoid complicity and ultimately reject the role for which she is being prepared, as Mr. Shenton's clever, educated, English-speaking daughter. (It is this imperative to *unmake* herself and find her own identity that constitutes what one might call Frieda's second crisis of identity.)

The Shentons' aspiration to an educated, respectable, English-speaking status is, of course, intimately related to their ascribed status as "coloureds" in apartheid South Africa. The first sentence of "Bowl Like Hole" reads: "At first Mr. Weedon came *like any white man* in a motor car, enquiring about sheep or goats or servants" (1; emphasis added). This points to the significance of *race* as a crucial determinant of identity, status, and power in

South Africa. If the terms “English” and “Boer” function as binary opposites, then the terms “Griqua” or “Hotnot” constitute a further and equally crucial point of reference. The Shentons find themselves in an ambiguous position, situated somewhere on a sliding scale between “white” at the one end and “black” at the other. They have in fact internalized the racism that is endemic to South Africa and seek to escape (in so far as this is possible) the stigma and shame associated with colour and racially distinctive features (such as hair, cheekbones, eyes). Thus Frieda’s mother chastises her for “sitting under the table like a tame Griqua” (9). The father tells her, “You don’t want cheekbones that jut out like a Hottentot’s” (24). Henry Hendrikse, the dark-skinned boy who takes a liking to the young Frieda, is referred to by her father as “almost pure kaffir” (116). In contrast (according to the father), “We, the Shentons, had an ancestor, an Englishman whose memory must be kept sacred, must not be defiled by associating with those beneath us. *We were respectable Coloureds*” (116; emphasis added). Their ancestry is, it seems, defined by their one English ancestor. One way of measuring Frieda’s development is to examine the degree to which she comes to acknowledge and accept her Griqua or Khoikhoi inheritance.

The first sentence of “Waiting for the Train” begins with Frieda’s assertion: “I am not the kind of girl whom boys look at” (21). This points to the no less crucial role played by *gender* in the formation of Frieda’s identity. If as a “coloured” person she is positioned ambiguously (somewhere between the polarities of “black” and “white”), there is little ambiguity in her gendering. “When the Train Comes” represents a significant moment in her story. The chink in the law which obliged St Mary’s, a previously all-white girls’ school in Cape Town, to accept a “coloured” girl comes as a heaven-sent opportunity to Frieda’s father: “Frieda, Frieda, we’ll do it. It’s all ours, the whole world’s ours. . . . You’ll have the best, the very best education” (31-32). Clearly *education* is seen here as the way out of oppression—as the way to improve one’s status and achieve “respectability.” The decision to go to St Mary’s is made for her by her father, who sees her as the means of fulfilling his own aspirations and ambitions: “You show them,

Frieda, what *we* can do” (27; emphasis added). The striving for social advancement merges with the desire to be accepted as equal by the whites. Its logical corollary is the attempt of many upwardly-mobile “coloureds” to “pass for white.” (At a crucial moment in the title story Frieda, in response to the abortionist’s question, identifies herself as white—thereby demonstrating, perhaps, just how “lost” she is at this moment.)

“When the Train Comes” is a vivid instance of the power of patriarchy, made all the more complete by the (apparent) death of her mother. The father exerts control over his daughter through a mixture of concern, bribery, and coercion. A key element in his regime is his overseeing what Frieda eats. Frieda comments: “The habit of obedience is fed daily with second helpings of mealie porridge” (24). Her obedience is regularly rewarded with titbits: “My teeth sink into the biltong and I am consoled. I eat everything he offers” (24). The father turns Frieda into a girl who is (in her own words) “fat” (and therefore “unattractive”). As a result, she relies on her father for affirmation, while he seeks to mould her into a dutiful, compliant daughter whose prime motivation is to please her father. In the absence of the mother, it is left to him to regulate Frieda’s life and even to initiate her into womanhood—which he does by quoting Genesis III to her: “In pain you shall bring forth children” (22). Given the extent of the father’s control and manipulation, Frieda’s survival as a person in her own right is to be wondered at. One can understand her intermittent longing to be subsumed into the non-human existence of objects like pumpkins. Ahead of her lies the necessity to reject or alienate the father if she is to construct a life of some kind for herself.

“Home Sweet Home,” situated just before Frieda’s departure for England, is a pivotal story in the collection. If home, for Frieda, is anything but “sweet,” this is due in no small measure to the norms and values of the extended family to which she belongs. Here the dominant figure is Aunt Cissie, whose apparently endless stream of maxims encapsulates a prudential middle-class morality. Gender stereotypes determine the kind of behaviour which is held to be appropriate: “A lady must never be seen without her handbag” (83); “Behave yourself at all times like

a lady, and remember, honesty is always the best policy" (87); "Nice girls don't do slovenly needlework" (the mother, this time [109]). Aunt Cissie's homilies prescribe the behaviour deemed to be appropriate: to deviate is to ruin one's reputation, to fall from grace. "Their words, all their words, buzz like a drove of persistent gnats about my ears," exclaims Frieda (103). In order to escape the family gathering, she walks alone down to the nearby riverbed, hoping to recover momentarily a sense of prelapsarian innocence, a space where, as she puts it, "I could be the child once more, young and genderless as I roamed these banks alone, belonging without question to this country, this world" (93). She longs to regain a sense of her place in the world as something simply given. She longs, in fact, for a place where she is "at home." Tragically, consciousness of self brings with it a gendered and socialized identity and a rupture of one's unthinking identification with the world around one. The story's ironical title points to the fact that her familial home is in reality the last place where Frieda is likely to feel she belongs. Growth into adulthood—and, we can infer, her privileged education in Cape Town—has brought alienation from those closest to her: "Why do I find it so hard to speak to those who claim me as their own?" she asks herself (94). The need to escape the claims of family and their suffocating insistence on bourgeois respectability impels Frieda to opt for exile—an exile which is also, of course, a search for an alternative home. The fate that awaits her should she fail to make this decisive break is memorably imaged by the mule she observes sinking into the quicksand of the dry river bed:

It balances on its hind legs like an ill-trained circus animal, the front raised, the belly flashing white as it staggers in a grotesque dance. When the hind legs plummet deep into the sand, the front drops in search of equilibrium. Then, holding its head high, the animal remains quite still as it sinks. (103)

Frieda must either go under, allow herself to be subsumed by family, or find an alternative that will give her room to breathe. The green pastures of England ("a landscape anybody could love" [90]) seem to offer a viable alternative. This is a landscape that she has encountered imaginatively, within the pages of the literary texts she studied at university. Her choice—the move

from colony (or ex-colony) to metropolis—replays a familiar pattern: exile is almost a normal condition for the modern writer. As Andrew Gurr points out (with the example of Joyce in mind), “In every case the flight into exile was followed by the painstaking reconstruction of the home in fiction, in near autobiographical terms, and with an identically detached, dispassionate artistic posture” (17). This comes close to defining the impulse which informs Wicomb’s collection of stories.

The final story, “A Trip to the Gifberge,” forms a counterpoint to “Home Sweet Home” and brings the collection as a whole to a symbolic close. The intervening stories allow us to glimpse something of the post-U.K. Frieda as she makes what seems to be an exploratory return visit, impelled partly by the ache of homesickness.<sup>6</sup> “Behind the Bougainvillea”—situated in the Doctor’s yard—reveals the extent to which Frieda, unable to speak or understand the language being spoken, is “sealed off from the eloquent world around her” (117). Returning, she finds she does not belong—at least, not in any simple, unproblematic way. As she listens to the voices around her, however, her alert human interest in this “eloquent world” implies an openness which at least holds out the possibility of relationship. The otherness and variety are a source of fascination: for the father, those who wait in the yard are “Hotnots,” people who do not know how to use a “nice clean water lavatory” (105).

“A Trip to the Gifberge” is written on the occasion of what seems to be Frieda’s homecoming. Aunt Cissie presents her with a bunch of proteas (our “national blooms”) at the airport to welcome her back. We discover that Frieda’s father has died, and that her mother is not only alive but is able to speak and to assert herself.<sup>7</sup> She announces, “Tomorrow . . . we’ll go on a trip to the Gifberge” (173)—a trip which her mother has long been denied by her father. As they drive up the pass the next day, they ascend into “quite another world” (174). For her mother this other world, the world she has gazed up at from her chair on the plain far below, represents a world free from restriction, free from familial tension; she is able to affirm her relation to the country which her ancestors once owned. Earlier, she had challenged the daughter’s presumption in writing about the world in which she grew up:



What do you know about things, about people, this place where you were born? About your ancestors who roamed these hills? You left. Remember? (172)

For Frieda, the trip they make together is a discovery—or rediscovery—of her mother and her motherland. At one point, after they have rested, the mother asks Frieda to dig up a protea to plant in the garden. Frieda's mocking response—"And then you can hoist the South African flag and sing 'Die Stem'"—provokes the following retort:

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 in it their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn't become what people think they inject into it. We know who lived in these mountains when the Europeans were still shivering in their own country. What they think of the veld and the flowers is of no interest to me. (181)

Frieda is effectively silenced. Her mother's response to the land and its flora owes nothing to European colonization and domination. The Afrikaner may have tried to appropriate the protea as a national symbol but it remains "just a bush."<sup>8</sup> It can be (re)appropriated by the mother, who (in this story) retains a sense of her own identity that resists definition by others. Perhaps this awareness is her most valuable gift to her more intellectually developed daughter. That evening Frieda watches the stars in the night sky and traces the Southern Cross:

I find the long axis and extend it two and a half times, then drop a perpendicular, down on to the tip of the Gifberge, down onto the lights of the Soeterus Winery. Due South. (181)

After her long sojourn in the northern hemisphere, Frieda reorients herself in the south, taking her bearings in what is after all her native land. Her mother's eyes "glow with interest" that evening when Frieda mentions the possibility of returning to live in Cape Town again (182). The lines of communication between mother and daughter have at least been opened; as Wicomb herself puts it, "the silence of 'Home Sweet Home' has been broken" (*Between the Lines II* 91).

According to Carol Sicherman, Frieda, "acknowledging her 'ancestors who roamed these hills,' similarly asserts *her Griqua*

identity,” and by the end of the book she “has finally become an autonomous being who knows her own identity as a modern Griqua understanding history and rejecting self-hate” (119; emphasis added). Frieda has clearly come a long way. Before she left for the U.K., her Uncle Gerrie had said to her: “I know that here in the veld amongst the Griquas is no place for an educated person” (86). Towards the end, Frieda is able to acknowledge her Griqua or Khoikhoi origins and to recognize that she can at least relate to “the veld.” She has also learned to accept and even flaunt her “bush” of Griqua hair: “And you say you’re happy with your hair? Are you really?” asks her mother (178). The doll in the shop at Van Rhynsdorp with its “blond curls and purple eyes” (174) is a reminder of the norm of beauty against which Frieda had once measured herself. She has clearly achieved a measure of self-understanding and self-acceptance, but, given her difficult and conflicted personal history and the contradictions inherent in South African culture and society, she is surely unlikely to arrive at any simple or final resolution of her identity. Sicherman postulates an essential or authentic “Griqua” identity as the resolution of Frieda’s struggle, but the term “Griqua” (let alone “modern Griqua”) is itself problematic, implying as it does a mixed identity.<sup>9</sup> The stories themselves suggest that identity is complex rather than simple, provisional rather than final, constructed rather than given. It has to be continually negotiated, particularly in a society as complex and multi-faceted as that of South Africa. Similarly, the “homecoming” that Frieda might yearn for is likely to remain elusive. Her move back to her native Namaqualand is at best tentative, provisional, and exploratory. The “resolution” provided by the final story is more symbolic than real, a product of the exile’s attempt to “write” herself home. Given Frieda’s history, and the many years spent acculturating in England, is there any one place that can possibly represent “home” for her?

Wicomb’s stories are of particular interest and value for those of us living and teaching in the radically altered circumstances of post-election South Africa. André Brink has observed that as the country moves towards greater openness and more freedom, “the most obvious disappearance is that of an easily sloganised

'target' or 'enemy,' an Other in terms of which the self is to be defined" (51). As he points out, this affects "the very notion of 'self' and of 'identity.'" We all find ourselves having to rethink who we are and how we relate to others in this new non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa-in-the-making,<sup>10</sup> but this need is perhaps most acutely felt by those people previously classified as "coloured." The columns of the local press testify to the urgency of the questions being asked by members of this group, and to the variety of possible answers. For the first time, it is possible to use the term "coloured" positively, as a signifier of difference from either blacks or whites. Hence the moves to form a political party or grouping to represent the supposed interests of the "coloured" people. In a recent *Agenda* debate on television (SATV, Channel 1, 1993) on this question, the speakers identified themselves variously as "coloured," "brown," "African," or simply "South African." (Not long ago, some of them would have identified themselves as "black.") One speaker asserted an indigenuous identity (tracing his ancestry back to the original Khoikhoi clans); another asserted the possibility of multiple subject positions. Interestingly, they all spoke in Afrikaans—but with varying degrees of fluency. Evidently there is no such thing as a single, homogenous "coloured" identity. At one point (in "Ash on my Sleeve"), Moira remarks to Frieda:

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 . . . across the continent, across the oceans and even here, right into the Tricameral Parliament, playing into their hands.

(156)

The stories suggest, however, there is no simple recipe for "being oneself." Through their sustained and penetrating examination of Frieda's attempts to negotiate her identity and find a place for herself, they constitute a most valuable resource for readers of all kinds. In the context of a tradition of black protest writing, which has been primarily concerned to document and indict, they offer something refreshingly different.

Finally, while Wicomb's work has obvious affinities with that of Bessie Head and Arthur Nortjé (whose poetry supplies two of the epigraphs for her collection), her stories may also gain by being

viewed in the wider context of postcolonial<sup>11</sup> writing. Comparison with the work of recent women writers from the Caribbean may be particularly rewarding: writers like Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff share a preoccupation with the problems of a mixed or hybridized identity; they often write about home from the perspective of exile and often appropriate first-person narrative forms in order to do so. The theme of exile is endemic to much postcolonial writing, arising as it does out of "the ubiquitous concern with place and displacement in these societies" (Ashcroft 29). Perhaps we are more able (now that South Africa has rejoined the Commonwealth and the world community) to consider the ways in which South African literature relates to (and differs from) that of other postcolonial societies. In this context, Wicomb's stories provide an interesting point of departure.

## NOTES

- 1 These comments are taken from a draft of Driver's introduction to an Italian translation of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1993). I am grateful to her for making it available to me. Driver acknowledges that Wicomb's closest literary progenitors were Head and Nortjé, but points out that Head took Botswana and Botswanan life as the location and subject of her writing, while Nortjé chose the medium of poetry.
- 2 Wicomb's interview in *Between the Lines II* (79-95) is a valuable source of information about her life and her approach to writing.
- 3 In the *Staffrider* review, Van Niekerk praises the stories which, she says, "brilliantly analyse the oppressed status and complex identity of black women in South African society." She also finds the "prevalent lack of interest" in the collection "somewhat disturbing" (96).
- 4 This is done most obviously in the last two stories which in their different ways foreground the activity of writing. In "A Fair Exchange," the fiction-making process is laid bare: the reader discovers that the story is Frieda's fictional rewriting of Skitterboud's own story. (Of course, this in turn may be regarded as a fictional device.) In the final story, the reader is disconcerted to discover that Frieda's mother is apparently alive and has survived her husband. Did she really die? Which is the fiction? Which is the "truth"? The effect is to discourage any naive, autobiographical reading of the stories and to insist on their status as fiction.
- 5 In relation to the more immediate oppression of the apartheid state, it is not difficult to see why the Shentons should opt for English rather than Afrikaans. Here there is a parallel with Wicomb's own parents: in her interview in *Between the Lines II*, Wicomb describes how her parents had "identified English as a way out of oppression," and describes how her mother "literally used to sit and listen to the news [on the radio], and articulate after the newsreader. And so we were taught to speak English" (89).
- 6 According to Wicomb, "the book came out of intense homesickness"; she cites this as a reason for not "writing about Britain" (87).
- 7 Wicomb comments on the mother's "death" as follows: "In a sense I have to kill off the father in order for her to speak. . . . Perhaps her reported death in the earlier

stories can be read as her suppression" (Interview 94-95). In bringing the mother unexpectedly back to life, she also undercuts any attempt to read her stories as thinly disguised autobiography. It is also a deliberate flouting of the conventions of realism, particularly since the mother in this story bears little resemblance to her earlier incarnation.

- <sup>8</sup> Ironically, in the "new" South Africa, the protea has, it seems, become an acceptable national symbol; the equally indigenous springbok has not.
- <sup>9</sup> The Griquas were themselves a hybrid group, the product of extensive interaction over a long period between the indigenous Khoikhoi, freed or runaway slaves, and the *trekboers*. According to Legassick, "the Griqua way of life was fundamentally based on hunting, pastoralism, trading and raiding" (400); until the early nineteenth century they referred to themselves (proudly, it seems) as "Bastaards." The attempts of these "brown frontiersmen" (402) to establish their hegemony over the peoples of Transorangia and form a Griqua polity are described by Legassick.
- <sup>10</sup> I do not of course mean to suggest that we have left the legacy of the old, bad, violent South Africa behind us.
- <sup>11</sup> I use the label because it is convenient, not because it is unproblematic.

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