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Coloureds, Griquas and the Body of the Non-White Subject in Zoë Wicomb's Work

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PREFACE

My dissertation concerns the literary works of South African writer Zoë Wicomb and the environment and historical events that influenced her as a person and her writing accordingly. Wicomb's personal experience as a coloured woman both in her native country and in the United Kingdom is central in her publications, in which a wide range of topics coexist. Alongside intimate matters such as family bonds, love and physical self-consciousness, Wicomb's works deal with larger political, economic and historical issues, such as the social status of coloured people, pass-whites, South African nationalism, the treatment of female guerrillas during the anti-apartheid struggle, and the widespread identity crises that followed South Africa's Liberation.

Zoë Wicomb was born in a small rural settlement in Little Namaqualand (Western Cape) in 1948—the year that marks the official start of separate development in South Africa.¹ In 1970 she left South Africa and moved to Britain,² two years before Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement mobilised university students against the white rule: “I was hot-headed, impatient, I just wanted to leave the whole oppressiveness of my own culture far behind”.³ Once in London, she took up the fight against racial discrimination, and in 1989 she moved to Scotland.⁴ Though she has spent most of the last forty years in Europe, Wicomb stated that she is still in denial about living abroad: “I say to my family, my friends, and myself

¹ Judith L. Raiskin, ““Miskien of Gold Gemake”: Zoë Wicomb”, in *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) pp. 205-234 (p. 214).

² Dorothy Driver, “Afterword”, in *David's Story*, by Zoë Wicomb (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), p. 51.

³ Wicomb quoted in Scotsman, “Under the Skin of Lies” (2006) <<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/features/under-the-skin-of-lies-1-1119465>> [accessed 15 March 2013].

⁴ Scotsman.

virtually every year, “Just one more year”. I really do believe that I'm going to come back to South Africa and live here for good”,⁵ “I have a ghost existence here: my whole intellectual and emotional life is in South Africa”.⁶ Wicomb has taught at the University of the Western Cape and at the University of Strathclyde (Glasgow).⁷ A writer as well as a literary critic, Wicomb is the author of two novels, two collections of short stories and several other pieces of prose fiction and academic writing.

The fourth—and main—chapter of this thesis is specifically focused on her work, while the first three chapters are aimed at examining the wider topics that are recurrent in Wicomb's fiction, and which I find essential in order to develop a historical and political background to her production, and to understand—to some extent—the behaviour of her characters.

Chapter one is about the so-called coloured community in South Africa, which includes Wicomb herself and the large majority of her characters. I will start by clarifying what the term ‘coloured’ refers to in South Africa, and then proceed to summarise the political behaviour of the community since the beginning of the twentieth century. As a result of their historical intermediate status in the social hierarchy, in fact, coloured people were affected in a peculiar way by the various laws introduced during apartheid, which restricted the rights of non-white citizens and separated them from the white minority. This goes some way towards explaining the ambiguous alliances they formed with the main political forces of the

⁵ Wicomb quoted in Hein Willemsse, “Zoë Wicomb in Conversation with Hein Willemsse”, *Research in African Literatures*, 33.1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:abell:R01683517:0> [accessed 15 September 2012].

⁶ Wicomb quoted in Scotsman.

⁷ Zoë Wicomb, “In Search of Tommie”, *Wasafiri*, 24.3 (Routledge, 2009), pp.51-55 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690050903017065>> [Accessed 5 August 2012] (p.51).

country and their 'shameful vote' in support of the National Party on the occasion of the first democratic elections in 1994. By providing a general overview of this group's characteristics and the reasons behind their generally 'white-identified' behaviour, which is ostensibly contradictory, this chapter aims at explaining the social dynamics that drive Wicomb's characters' actions and their perceived self-image, for instance the reasons behind a life-changing choice like re-classification, or those responsible of their feelings of either shame or pride towards their 'colouredness'.

Chapter two concerns the main historical events related to the Griqua ethnic group, which has been struggling for recognition and independence since its formation, and whose components were simply classified as 'coloured' during the years of separate development. Following a survey concerning the numerous divisions and treks that progressively challenged the survival of the Griqua community from the eighteenth century onwards, the chapter deals with the historical figure of the paramount chief A.A.S. le Fleur who, as a fictional character, has a major role in *David's Story*.

Chapter three focuses on the body of the coloured subject in South Africa, especially on the life and legacy of the so-called 'Hottentot Venus' Saartjie Baartman. Firstly, this section analyses the reasons behind most of the characters' physical self-consciousness, such as their concern with hair, skin colour and steatopygia. Secondly, it aims at explaining the multi-faceted influence of Baartman's bicentenary story of appropriation and exploitation on Wicomb's production: her symbolic role of oppressed colonial subject and national icon, her emblematic status as a representative of non-white womanhood.

Chapter four approaches the preceding issues from a literary perspective, riveting on the complex ways in which Wicomb managed to depict and debate South Africa's past and present peculiarities and contradictions, which diversely affect her characters. This chapter begins with a general synopsis of her publications, and is then subdivided into a number of distinct sections. Taken separately, each of the segments focuses on one of the main topics, thus taking the form of a potentially independent essay. However, the segments are engaged in a constant dialogue with each other, and only taken together can they illustrate the complexity and richness of Wicomb's fiction.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF COLOURED HISTORY AND IDENTITY

“shame for our origins of slavery, shame for the miscegenation, and shame, as colonial racism became institutionalized, for being black”.¹

This chapter contains general information concerning the coloured community before and during the twentieth century, such as their peculiar position in the racial hierarchy established during apartheid, their heterogeneous ethnic origin, and their political behaviour and approaches towards their ‘colouredness’.

1.1 The coloured community

The term ‘coloured’ refers to one of the ethnic groups identified in South Africa during the period of white rule, in which the population was divided into four main racial classifications: European/white, African/black, Coloured and Asian/Indian.² In particular, it concerns the phenotypically diverse group of people having ‘mixed blood’ (European and African), being descendants from Cape slaves, the indigenous South African peoples, “Black-White, Black-Asian, White-Asian, and Black-Coloured unions. Complicating this designation, however, is the inclusion of Sunni Arab and European Muslims in the Coloured group”³ together with a number of sub-

¹ Zoë Wicomb, “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa”, *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91-107 (p. 100).

² Kendrick Brown, “Coloured and Black Relations in South Africa: The Burden of Racial Hierarchy”, *Macalester International*, 9.13 (2000)
<<http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol9/iss1/13>> [accessed 3 November 2012]. (p.200).

³ Brown, p. 198.

groups, such as Griquas, Malays, Namas and Basters.⁴ Therefore, the individuals included in this category originated from a variety of different ethnic groups, cultural backgrounds, and social status, and had a wide range of different customs. In Zimitri Erasmus' words, "the term 'coloured' refers to those South Africans loosely bound together for historical reasons such as slavery and a combination of oppressive and preferential treatment during apartheid".⁵

Before the whole country was 'scientifically' divided and organized and racial segregation required a systematic location of the whole population according to their ethnic background, the word 'coloured' was not a designation with legal value, but was rather a social category that included all those people with mixed ancestry, (generally) lighter skin than those in the African group, and traditionally held an intermediate status between white and black people.

Distribution of coloured people

There are about four-and-a-half million coloured people in South Africa today, in a population of almost 52 million people.⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, coloured people constituted no more than 9 per cent of the population; as they never held any considerable economic or political power, they composed both a small and marginal group, compared respectively to the black and white communities. Moreover, the coloured population is not evenly spread across the

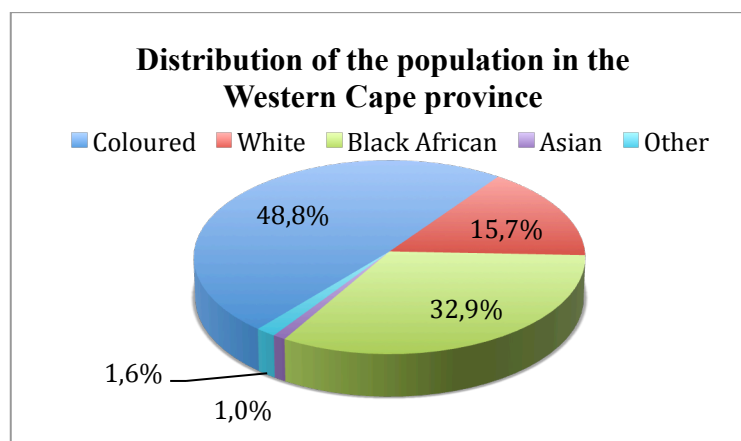
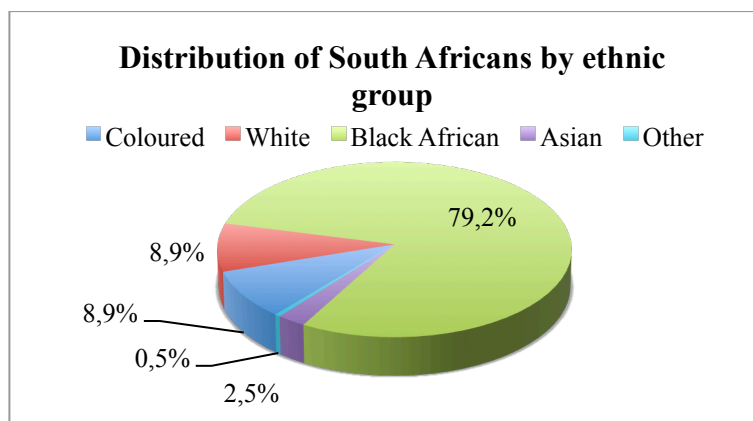
⁴ Mohamed Adhikari, "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa, 1910-1994", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32.3 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 2006), pp. 467-487 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25065118>> [accessed 6 August 2012] (pp. 468, 469).

⁵ Zimitri Erasmus, "Recognition Through Release, recognition Through Violence: Gendered Coloured Subjectivities in South Africa", *Current Sociology*, 48.3 (2000), pp. 71-85 <<http://csi.sagepub.com/content/48/3/71>> [accessed 6 November 2012] (p. 84).

⁶ STATSSA, *Census 2011* (2012) <<http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03014/P030142011.pdf>> [Accessed 27 November 2012].

country, but mainly concentrated in the Western Cape, 40 per cent of them being located in the Cape Town area.⁷ The concentration of this group in the south of the country directly derives from the fact that a large part of coloured people originated from the interactions between Dutch—and later English and other European—settlers with the indigenous inhabitants of the area, most notably KhoiKhoi and San.⁸

As illustrated below, today the coloured population still constitutes around 9 per cent of the population, but it is the majority in the Western Cape area.



Data taken from STATSSA.

⁷ Adhikari, p. 469.

⁸ Brown, p. 199.

Coloured political history and the ‘racial laws’

As reported by Mohamed Adhikari, coloured political history has mostly been defined by compromise. In the beginning, coloured political leaders believed that the best chance to defend the rights of the coloured population was to assimilate as much as possible into the dominant white society. Therefore, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that they began to form separate political organisations;⁹ when the progressive rights restriction became clear, they realized that if assimilation was not possible, something had to be done in defence of their rights.

The African Political Organisation (APO), founded in 1902 and led by Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, was the first major coloured political body, and “became the main vehicle for expressing this community's assimilationist aspirations as well as its fears at the rising tide of segregationism until its demise in the mid 1940s”.¹⁰ Among other political parties, there were the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO), the Labour Party of South Africa and the Federal Coloured Party. As the APO's moderate approach seemed to be unsuccessful, some radical organisations, such as The National Liberation League (NLL) and the European Unity Movement (NEUM), were founded in the 1930s and 1940s. Inspired by Marxist ideology and not very keen on compromising, “the radical movement failed in its quest to unite blacks in the struggle against segregation”.¹¹

The series of restrictions and social, legal and political changes imposed by apartheid leaders in the course of the second half of the twentieth century had a

⁹ Adhikari, p. 470.

¹⁰ Adhikari, p. 471.

¹¹ Adhikari, p. 471.

strong impact on all South African communities, but it affected the coloured community in particular because of their previous relatively privileged status, which was deeply downsized. For instance, while the black population never had the right to vote for their representatives until the 1994 elections, coloured people gradually lost the right to vote they previously had, thus suddenly becoming unable to fashion the political structure of their country.¹² As a matter of fact, at the end of the nineteenth century the government started to impose franchise restrictions through the Parliamentary Registration Act of 1887 and the Franchise Ballot Act of 1892. In 1930 the relevance of coloured vote further diminished, following the enfranchisement of white women, until in 1956 coloured people were finally and completely removed from the Common Voters' Roll by the National Party.¹³ Coloured people thus began to hold an intermediate status between full citizenship and complete subjection, so that “Their socio-political position was characterized by both racial exclusion and selected inclusion”.¹⁴ In fact, the progressive reduction of their civil rights was not restricted to voting right, but was consistent with the increasingly racialization of the country and the introduction of more and more segregationist measures imposed through apartheid laws since the late 1940s.

The ‘apartheid era’, which goes from 1948 with the election of the National Party to the democratization of South Africa in 1994, is defined by the effort of the white government to protect the interests of the white share of the population, while dividing and ruling the rest—and majority—of the population. These divide-and-rule policies involved language and education, too; in fact, the language diversity in South Africa was the perfect justification for the separation of the

¹² Brown, p. 203.

¹³ Adhikari, p. 470.

¹⁴ Erasmus, p. 71.

country and for the creation of ethnic homelands. In Frantz Fanon's words, South Africa was “a boiler into which thirteen million blacks [were] clubbed and penned in by two and a half million whites”.¹⁵ The ‘racial laws’ that were imposed in this period operated on all levels of society, regulating both the public and private life of citizens in an ostensible attempt to improve the country through a separate development of the various South African communities, while in fact protecting the interests and the ‘purity’ of the white group¹⁶ in a particularly eventful historical moment (as after the Second World War, colonies around the world and especially in Africa started to claim their independence from their colonizers).

Although it is during the years of apartheid that a systematic segregation of the population occurs, measures aimed at separating and discriminating black and coloured people had long been at the basis of the government's policies; for instance, in 1913 the Natives' Land Act is promulgated: non-whites are prohibited from owning land outside of designated reserves, which consisted in a small percentage of the total land.¹⁷ The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) was the first law to actually disallow the legal union of people belonging to different ethnic groups;¹⁸ this law did not appear as a mere legal definition of a social separation that was already in place, but actually served the purpose of stopping a frequent phenomenon of intermarriage. This act worked in synergy with the Immorality Amendment Act (1950), which stated that sexual intercourse between people of different racial groups would be followed by legal prosecution¹⁹—thus working on an even more private level—and indicating “the desire to rewrite the

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 87.

¹⁶ Brown, p. 201.

¹⁷ Gareth Cornwell et al., *The Columbia Guide to South African Literature in English Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. x.

¹⁸ Cornwell et al., p. xi.

¹⁹ Brown, p. 201.

fact that the societies of Southern Africa had for centuries intermingled culturally and racially”.²⁰ In 1950 another central and even more unequivocal law was issued, the Race Classification Act or Population Registration Act. This law officially separated the inhabitants in the four main categories mentioned above: White, Black, Coloured and Indian, thus legally legitimating the informal hierarchy—“the white minority at the top and blacks at the bottom, with Indians and coloured people in the middle”²¹—that had characterized South Africa since its colonization. In the same year the Group Areas Act proceeded to physically segregate people according to their colour. In fact, it regulated the occupation of land and monitored the acquisition of property, limiting the possibilities for residence and occupation changes. Direct consequences of this act were the Pass Laws, which forced non-whites to carry an identification pass at all times, and restricted their access to white areas unless stamped with a work permit;²² by “closely monitoring, and at times forbidding, travel between regions designated for particular groups”,²³ the pass laws further limited the possibility for social mobility. To conclude, in 1953 the Separate Amenities Act racially separated public places, and the Bantu Education Act proceeded to segregate education.²⁴

The various resettlement measures adopted by the government in the following decades and the creation of ethnic homelands and townships had a precise aim: in Achille Mbembe’s words, “a sociopolitical, cultural, and economic formation, the township was a peculiar spatial institution scientifically planned for the purposes of

²⁰ Bill Ashcroft, et al., *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 18.

²¹ Brown, p. 200.

²² Ashcroft et al., p. 18.

²³ Brown, p. 201.

²⁴ Cornwell et al., p. xi.

control”.²⁵ In 1955 the removal of people from the black area of Sophiatown (Johannesburg) began, and the shacks were completely razed by 1963. Part of the government's resettlement program, the destruction of Sophiatown was supposed to be a measure against criminality, disease and degradation, but as a matter of fact it was aimed at transforming the inner-city slums into a white suburb.²⁶ In 1966 District Six (Cape Town) met the same fate of Sophiatown. In 1960 a peaceful protest against the pass laws provoked the Sharpeville massacre. Another tragedy took place in 1976, when the police opened fire on Soweto students protesting against education in Afrikaans;²⁷ one year later, Steve Biko—founder of the Black Consciousness movement—was murdered in detention. Violence and protests continued in the course of the 1980s (in 1986 a National State of Emergency is declared), until Mandela's release from prison in 1990 and the first democratic elections four years later.²⁸

1.2 Four key features of coloured identity

Although some form of coloured group consciousness started to take shape since the beginning of the Dutch colonial rule, it is the liberation of the indigenous KhoiSan and of the imported slaves that facilitated the formation of a shared identity, which was “based on a common socio-economic status and a shared

²⁵ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture: Bulletin of the Society for Transnational Cultural Studies*, 15.1 (Chicago, Ill.: Duke University Press, 2003), pp.1-40 (p. 26).

²⁶ Cornwell et al., pp. xii, xiii.

²⁷ Helen Boaden, “Soweto Protests Turn Violent”, *BBC news* (1976) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/16/newsid_2514000/2514467.stm> [accessed 5 April 2012].

²⁸ Cornwell et al., pp. xii, xiii.

culture derived from their incorporation into the lower ranks of Cape colonial society”.²⁹ Coloured identity then started to be more and more separate from the identity of the African majority for two main reasons: coloured people mainly felt that their culture was closer to that of the colonial minority, mainly because of their European ancestors; asserting a separate identity was a way to have a position of relative privilege in the racial hierarchy.³⁰ As pointed out by Adhikari, in order to understand coloured identity in white supremacist South Africa it is necessary to identify some of its core attributes, which he believes have remained unchanged during the whole period of white rule,³¹ these key features being: assimilationism, intermediate status, negative associations and marginality.³²

Assimilationism

Assimilationism was “a striving for acknowledgement of the worth of coloured people as individuals and citizens, and inclusion within the dominant society on the principle that it was ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’ rather than colour that mattered”.³³ This attitude was linked to the belief that western culture and mode of civilisation represented the top of human achievement, and that despite their skin, coloured people shared with the dominant group the same language, core values, and ambitions, as in most cases their forefathers were after all Europeans; thus the “value placed in a fair skin and straight hair, the prizing of white ancestors in the

²⁹ Adhikari, p. 469.

³⁰ Adhikari, p. 469.

³¹ Adhikari, p. 467.

³² Adhikari, pp. 475-487.

³³ Adhikari, p. 479.

family lineage or taking pride in their assimilation to western culture”.³⁴ Therefore, this attitude towards the dominant society reflected the desire to be recognized as equals and be accepted in the higher levels of society, and to share not only white people's culture and beliefs, but also the benefits, rights and duties that belonging to that minority entailed. This approach seemed for a long time to be a safe and practicable way to face the changes in a society that became gradually divided according to ‘race’; in fact, the main coloured professional association in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, the Teachers' League of South Africa, supported the idea that social advancement was possible “by being white in mind and spirit and achievement”.³⁵

As extreme consequence of segregation and assimilationism, in some cases coloured people with light skin would cross the racial barrier to be classified as white and enjoy all the privileges linked to this group, thus becoming ‘pass-whites’. The reasons behind this social crossing were varied; in fact, people may be motivated to classify as white to obtain better housing, education and job opportunities, to avoid discrimination, or to be able to marry with white people.³⁶ Assimilation into the dominant society, however, had negative outcomes for two main reasons: firstly, it meant disowning their coloured identity and leave family and friends behind; secondly, it entailed being in constant danger of exposure.³⁷

³⁴ Adhikari, p. 479.

³⁵ Adhikari, p. 476.

³⁶ Brown, p. 199.

³⁷ Adhikari, p. 477.

Intermediate status

Adhikari's second key feature of coloured identity is based on the fact that, once the efforts to reverse the gradual loss of political and social rights had failed, the coloured community mainly opted for the promotion of the interests of the group. This attitude, therefore, was based on the acceptance of those racial lines imposed from above. Accepting it must have seemed like the best possible chance for the coloured people to maintain a status of relative privilege; moreover, because of their minority status and lack of political relevance, most people feared to be demoted and be subordinated like Africans.³⁸ The intermediate status imposed upon coloured people before and during apartheid was then contradictory: on the one hand the coloured community was being oppressed and deprived of previous rights; on the other hand, the impossibility to be part of the ruling class made it so that the best chance at having some privilege was to underline, rather than fight, the racial difference between them and the African majority.

Creating a society divided into three or four categories instead of two was part of the divide-and-rule strategy. In fact, the coloured and Indian communities, who enjoyed better living and working conditions than Africans, were used as an instrument to channel anger towards the inegalitarian system away from the more powerful white minority. As Kendrick Brown puts it, “the intermediate status carried a price because coloured persons often served as a buffer group between whites and blacks”.³⁹ As a result, the two—although unequally—subjected groups struggled to find a common ground in their struggle under the white rule. Brown explains the reasons for the communities' mutual distrust:

³⁸ Adhikari, p. 478.

³⁹ Brown, p. 199.

Black people were likely to view coloured individuals with suspicion and resentment because overall the coloured group benefited more from the social system than blacks located at the bottom of the hierarchy. Coloured people were likely to be wary of the black group that could vent its frustrations and displace aggression toward whites onto the more socially acceptable target that the coloured group represented.⁴⁰

Negative associations: Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Step-Children*

The intermediate status and the assimilationism of the coloured people contributed to create a set of negative associations with colouredness, for two main reasons. Firstly, both because of their lack of political and economic status and their limited number, the coloured group was usually perceived and described according to what it was *not* with reference to the black and white group, which were respectively larger and more powerful.⁴¹ The issue of coloured identity as lack is in fact clear in the very definition of colouredness, provided by the government in the Population Registration Act. Zoë Wicomb, in her analysis of the multi-faceted aspects of shame in connection with coloured identity, points out that “the shame is located in the very word *Coloured*, a category established by the Nationalist government's Population Registration Act of 1950, when it was defined negatively as “not a White person or a Black””.⁴² In *Africa*, Bessie Head exemplifies this lack of positive identity: “you are yet essentially ashamed of me as the thing of nothing from nowhere? Nothing I am, of no tribe or race”.⁴³ Being officially and legally defined in a negative fashion, colouredness was more and more viewed as an artificial category imposed from above by the supremacist

⁴⁰ Brown, p. 200.

⁴¹ Adhikari, p. 480.

⁴² Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 101.

⁴³ Bessie Head, *The Cardinals: with Meditations and Stories* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), p. 141.

establishment for political purposes,⁴⁴ at the same time carrying a number of inbred characteristics resulting from miscegenation. Therefore, the group struggled to represent themselves as a genuine people with their own peculiar history, customs, and identity; they were believed to lack black and white people's degree of ethnic and cultural authenticity⁴⁵, to be “without culture and definitely not African”.⁴⁶ Brown explains how one of the major points of conflict between the subjected communities in South Africa was “the stereotype of coloured individuals as “mixed-breeds” with no nationhood, identity, land, or culture. This stereotype exists in contrast with the image of black people as proud, “pure-breeds” with history, culture, and identity going back centuries”.⁴⁷ The very assimilationism of the coloured people, their tendency to underline their European heritage, only made it more difficult to fashion themselves as an ‘authentic’ ethnic group and to deny accusations of ‘racial hybridity’. Therefore, as coloured people supposedly lacked authenticity and were a product of miscegenation, they were somehow less human, “God's step-children”⁴⁸ as Sarah Gertrude Millin put it. Moreover, ideas connected with social Darwinism were popular at the time, implying that people who were result of miscegenation were necessarily lacking all the positive characteristics of the ‘pure races’ they combined, while embodying all the negative ones.⁴⁹ The second reason why the coloured group was associated with negative attributes is connected with its ethnic diversity. In fact, all those smaller groups that did not fit either in the white or African categories were placed in the intermediate category of ‘Coloured’. This fact could only make the category even

⁴⁴ Adhikari, p. 471.

⁴⁵ Adhikari, pp. 468, 481.

⁴⁶ Erasmus, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Brown, p. 202.

⁴⁸ Sarah Gertrude Millin, *God's Step-Children* (New York: Boni and Liveright Publishers, 1927).

⁴⁹ Adhikari, p. 482.

more blurred and difficult to define as what it *was*, rather than what it *was not*. Because the coloured group was composed of a wide range of smaller ethnic groups and because of its negative connotations, it was difficult for coloured people themselves to see it in a positive fashion; as stated by Adhikari, “coloured identity tended, rather, to be accepted with resignation and often with a sense of shame by its bearers”.⁵⁰

The negative associations connected to colouredness are more evident when taking into consideration the work of Sarah Gertrude Millin (1889-1968), a South African author who, in novels such as *God's Step-children*, narrates the stories of ‘unfortunate mixed-breeds’ and where, in Wicomb's view, “The shame-bearing coloured finds her literary origins”.⁵¹ Although in the first half of the twentieth century people may have had different conceptions of ‘race’ and identity depending on their cultural background, level of education, social status and, of course, ethnic origin, Millin's work is particularly pertinent, as it exemplifies how rooted certain beliefs about blood and ‘race purity’ were even before apartheid. Millin's work was certainly influenced by the political situation in South Africa at her time; however, as pointed out by John M. Coetzee, there is no point in wondering whether Millin agreed or not with her time's attitude towards people of mixed origin.⁵² What she wanted to show was that a coloured person, as such, could not find his or her place in the society as it was, and therefore could not pursue happiness.

⁵⁰ Adhikari, p. 481.

⁵¹ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 100.

⁵² John Maxwell Coetzee, “Blood, Taint, Flaw, Degeneration: The Novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin”, in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988) pp. 136-162 (p. 140).

In *God's Step-children*, Millin narrates the history of a family through several generations, since the first drop of 'Hottentot blood'⁵³ entered the family line. Since then, an unfortunate doom seems to be transmitted through the blood from father to son. Coetzee underlines that Millin's is a poetics of blood, because the difference between ethnic groups is not solely marked by the colour of the skin, but by what is hidden inside the individual and transmitted to the following generations; in Millin's words, "His skin was white as anybody's. 'But it isn't only the skin,' some inner voice would whisper".⁵⁴ As a result, because "There is no chemical bounding or compounding of the two bloods. The man of mixed blood has two identities [...] not a new compound identity", and "All acts of shame are recorded in the blood",⁵⁵ it is the mixing of two different kinds of 'pure blood' that deprives coloured people of their identity.

Millin's work exemplifies three main points mentioned above: coloured alleged inner flaws, the coloureds' struggle to find a common ground with the black community, and the price of becoming pass-whites. Firstly, it shows that the negative attributes associated with colouredness were considered congenital and hereditary, in the form of a 'flaw' that is thus an "inherited reminder of a fall from grace, the grace of whiteness, into a state similar in many respects to a state of sin";⁵⁶ as a result, on the one hand the approach of the other ethnic groups towards them may have been distrustful, and on the other hand a coloured person's self-consciousness may have been permeated by shame, as Wicomb puts it.⁵⁷ Secondly, it displays why the black and coloured communities historically struggled to find a

⁵³ Derogatory term for KhoiKhoi.

⁵⁴ Millin, p. 250.

⁵⁵ Coetzee, pp. 138, 150.

⁵⁶ Coetzee, p. 141.

⁵⁷ Wicomb, "Shame and Identity", p. 92.

common ground against the white establishment.⁵⁸ Returning to the topic of blood, Millin believed that “Whatever else the black man might be, he was at least pure”.⁵⁹ In fact, in her opinion, “The purer a black people, the more “aristocratic” it is. The Zulus are the most aristocratic of South African peoples [while] Hottentots, with their “Mongolian” faces, are the opposite extreme”.⁶⁰ Hence the contradiction: although negative attributes were associated with coloured people because of their ‘mixed blood’, blacks with their ‘pure blood’ were forced to a condition of inferiority to both coloured and white people. Thirdly, Millin's *God's Step-children* engages with the cost of becoming pass-whites. Coetzee underlines that “Characteristics of the flaw passed down to the line of Andrew Flood's descendants is that, for two generations, as long as they do not deny their racial inheritance, it does not come into play”.⁶¹ Therefore, if being of mixed origin was a source of shame, the denial of such a fractured identity could lead, in Millin's opinion, to trouble, affliction and to the “vengeance of the Lord”.⁶²

Marginality

The fourth key feature of the coloured community, in Adhikari's view, is marginality, as “South Africa has conceived of its multiracial individuals as having an in-between status derived from, but marginal to, both parent groups”.⁶³ This characteristic is closely connected to the fact that they never formed more than 9 per cent of the total South African population. Their limited number and their

⁵⁸ Brown, p. 202.

⁵⁹ Millin, p. 153.

⁶⁰ Coetzee, p. 153.

⁶¹ Coetzee, p. 140.

⁶² Millin, p. 294.

⁶³ Brown, p. 199.

gradual loss of political influence over the twentieth century—which had its apex with the complete removal of coloured people from the common voters' roll in 1956—contributed to their marginality concerning the political development of the country. These dynamics occurred even in the Western Cape, where they actually formed the majority of the population, and “marginality to a large extent accounts for the pragmatism and opportunism of much of coloured protest politics”.⁶⁴

On the one hand their status of second-class citizens was imposed from above and dangerous or simply hardly possible to question, and on the other hand joining the non-racial struggle alongside the African majority did not seem worthwhile. As a result, the coloured community found itself “isolated and politically impotent [and] set out to play the racial system to the minimum disadvantage of coloureds”.⁶⁵

1.3 Coloured rejectionism and assertiveness

In the 1970s, as the Black Consciousness movement gained more and more popularity, a number of people who were classified as ‘Coloured’ rejected their belonging to this group: “since the 1970s “Coloureds” have for the most part preferred to be called “Blacks” and have aligned themselves with black South Africans”.⁶⁶ Coloured rejectionism was a direct consequence of a new non-racial mentality. In fact, if all inequities in South Africa could be retraced from the initial separation of people according to ‘race’, the creation of a new non-racial society

⁶⁴ Adhikari, p. 485.

⁶⁵ Adhikari, p. 486.

⁶⁶ Raiskin, p 206.

became a common goal of the black community and part of the coloured one. However, although coloured rejectionism was motivated by high, anti-racial ideals and may be a way to finally create solidarity and find a common ground with the other subjected communities, it was mainly “an emotionally laden negation of apartheid values and an act of political defiance and not necessarily the result of a profound conversion to a strict non racism”,⁶⁷ meaning that those people who rejected their colouredness did not necessarily believe that coloured identity was in effect non-existent. As far as South African literary production is concerned, Wicomb and other novelists struggled to find an alternative, non derogatory term to refer to coloured people, as explained by Judith L. Raiskin: “As offensive as the term “Coloured” is for most South Africans so described, Wicomb and other writers resort to it lacking any other word that would demarcate the particular racial identity created and then reified by recent apartheid legislation”.⁶⁸

While after 1994 part of the coloured community understood their coloured identity “as an apartheid relic best forgotten”,⁶⁹ post-apartheid South Africa also witnessed a revival of coloured assertiveness—especially in the Western Cape (Cape Coloureds)⁷⁰—both because coloured rejectionism was never a mass phenomenon, and because the existence of a coloured identity had never really been questioned. In fact, some people started to claim “authentic identities based on ethnicity and historical links to the indigenous Khoi-San”.⁷¹ The December 1st Movement and the various KhoiSan revivalist movements exemplified this

⁶⁷ Adhikari, p. 474.

⁶⁸ Raiskin, p. 210.

⁶⁹ Erasmus, p. 72.

⁷⁰ Cornwell et al., p. xiv.

⁷¹ Erasmus, p. 72.

coloured revival.⁷² Wicomb points out that, if shame defined coloured identity from the start, as previously mentioned, coloured assertiveness could be seen as an attempt to finally negate shame: “a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid's strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame”.⁷³

“I refuse to be anything other than what I am”: Richard Rive's *Emergency*

Richard Rive's novel *Emergency* (1964)⁷⁴ is an example of how, during apartheid, the sense of shame connected to colouredness could be turned into coloured pride and non-racialism at the same time. The story is focused on Andrew, a young coloured man. Set in Cape Town in March 1960, it takes place during the days between the announcement of a campaign to protest the Pass Laws led by the Pan African Congress and the declaration of a state of emergency that followed the shootings in the townships of Sharpeville (Transvaal) and Langa (Cape Town).⁷⁵

In a passage of the novel, Andrew listens to a discussion between his friends Justin and Abe. The former starts off saying that he wishes he were not coloured, because of what being coloured in South Africa implies: exclusion, hardship, humiliation. The latter, however, replies that “One only becomes Coloured when one thinks of oneself as Coloured. [...] There is no such animal as a Coloured South African or a European South African. There are only South Africans”, because the

⁷² Adhikari, pp. 472, 474.

⁷³ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 92.

⁷⁴ Richard Rive, *Emergency* (Claremont, Cape: David Philip Publisher Ltd, 1988).

⁷⁵ Cornwell et al., p. xii.

difference between races is “artificial”.⁷⁶ Later on, at the train station, Abe argues with a clerk that is “taken in by his fair complexion” and refuses to serve him at the non-European desk:

“Round the corner, sir. This is the non-European side” [...]
“That's all right. I'm Coloured or so-called Coloured” [...] “So I have to fight now in order to establish my non-white status” [...]
“But I am Coloured. I have a mother with bushy hair and thick lips [...] Hundred per cent pure mixed breed” [...]
“It's against the law to serve you at this window” [...]
“Like hell! I'm staying right here”.⁷⁷

Although Abe is not only allowed but urged to buy his ticket at the window reserved for white people, he addresses the impatient non-European queue, saying “I refuse to be anything other than what I am, one of you”.⁷⁸

With his fair skin and coloured background, Abe represents one of the contradictions—and weaknesses—of white rule: the difficulty to categorize and separate people according to both colour and ‘blood’, and therefore to create a discourse representing them. When he is given the choice between two categories that he believes man-made, Abe refuses to obey the white clerk and to reject the category he was placed in by the white law in the first place; by doing so, he protests with irony against the absurdity of a racial establishment in which people must be black, coloured or white—and more or less privileged as a result—depending on the circumstances (in this case depending on the judgement of a white clerk in a position of relative power over Abe). Therefore, here coloured assertiveness is not intended to underline the racial line between coloured and black people; on the contrary, it becomes a form of resistance against racial classification.

⁷⁶ Rive, pp. 86-87.

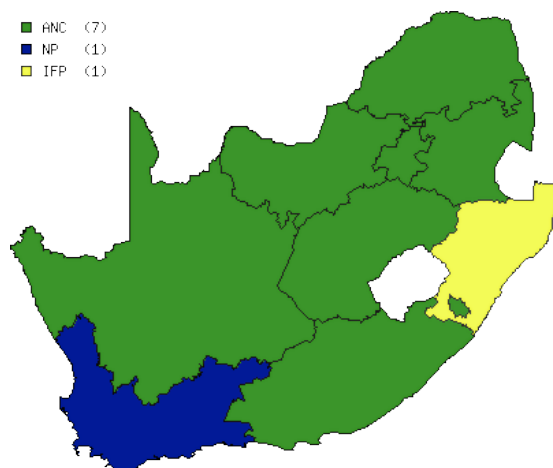
⁷⁷ Rive, p. 143.

⁷⁸ Rive, p. 144.

1.4 A shameful vote

The first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 proved to be a revealing moment in coloured political history, summarized by Adhikari's words: “Even then, in the 1990s, the majority of coloured people felt vulnerable and alienated from the African majority, preferring to ally themselves with their former oppressors, as the 1994 elections emphatically demonstrated”.⁷⁹ The success of the ‘former oppressors’ in the Western Cape, area inhabited by a majority of coloured citizens, is even more striking if compared to the resounding defeat it suffered in the other provinces.

The image below illustrates the distribution of votes following the 1994 elections, with an African National Congress (ANC) majority in all provinces except for Kwazulu Natal (yellow)—with an Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) majority—and the Western Cape (blue)—with a National Party (NP) majority.



Manuel Álvarez-Rivera, “1994 General Election Map”, *Election Resources* (2010) <<http://electionresources.org/za/maps.php?election=1994>> [accessed 20 October 2012].

⁷⁹ Adhikari, p. 486.

According to the IEC Independent Electoral Commission,⁸⁰ the ANC won the elections with an average of three times the votes of the NP, respectively 12 millions and 4 millions approximately (for a total of almost 20 million votes). However, out of 2,126,013 total voters in the Western Cape, 1,195,633 favoured the NP over the ANC (714,271 votes).

Although the coloured community was isolated from both the white and black community as a result of the cooperation of the key features illustrated above, it always tended to identify with the former to a greater extent, for two main reasons. Firstly, because of an actual similarity in customs and culture which, as previously mentioned, is connected with their European heritage. Not by chance, the historical assimilationism of the coloured community became one of the strong points of the NP electoral campaign in the Western Cape: “the National Party's false appeal to a shared culture centred in the Afrikaans language, the Dutch Reformed Church, and mutton bredie”.⁸¹ The second reason why coloured people kept identifying themselves with the former rulers is again connected to the fear for a change in their social status. In fact, in case of a democratisation of the country, identification with the powerless black community could lead to the complete deprivation of their limited privileges in order for the resources of the country to be redistributed equally among the population.⁸² This issue was also seen as threatening and highly exploited by the NP during their campaign, as pointed out by Wicomb and Brown: “the National Party, with its superior resources [...] would lead them to believe that Africanization necessarily meant depriving them of their homes, schools, and jobs,

⁸⁰ IEC, *Independent Electoral Commission 2012*
<<http://www.elections.org.za/content/Workarea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=1282>> [Accessed 20 October 2012].

⁸¹ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 99.

⁸² Erasmus, p. 72.

and ultimately their culture”,⁸³ “Another threat associated with the ANC-led government is the possibility of legislation that will allow the black majority to compete with coloured people for jobs, housing, and education”.⁸⁴

Another factor that influenced coloured voters is connected with their unstable identification with black allies. As a matter of fact, during the struggle against the supremacist government, coloured political representatives felt on the one hand threatened and on the other hand marginalized by the ANC leaders:

Some coloured people may envision themselves as being considered expendable by the leaders of the ANC-led government. They may believe that the government officials perceive members of the white group as useful because of their skills, technology, and money, and also see Indians as necessary due to their skills, business acumen, and money, but regard coloured people as having nothing of value to offer.⁸⁵

The 1994 vote thus lead to more friction between the black and coloured communities, and coloured people were accused of being “traitors, racist and white identified”.⁸⁶ As a result, the success of the NP in the Western Cape was both not surprising and an act of shame, as Wicomb puts it when calling it a “shameful vote”:

And the shame of it lies not only in what we have voted against citizenship within a democratic constitution that ensures the protection of individual rights, the enshrinement of gay and lesbian rights, the abolition of censorship and blasphemy laws - but in the amnesia with regard to the National Party's atrocities in maintaining apartheid.⁸⁷

⁸³ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 99.

⁸⁴ Brown, p. 204.

⁸⁵ Brown, p. 204.

⁸⁶ Erasmus, p. 73.

⁸⁷ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 99.

2. THE GRIQUA COMMUNITY

This chapter deals with the origins, constitution and main characteristics of the Griquas, as well as with the main historical events wherein the Griqua community struggled for recognition and independence.

2.1 Early Griqua history

The Griquas were a heterogeneous group mainly constituted by descendants of the Grigriqua or Chaguriqua people, who belonged to the larger Khoi population and spoke the Khoi language Xiri (not part of the larger Bantu linguistic group).¹ The Khoi people, together with the San people (often taken together with the name KhoiSan), formed the main body of early South African hunter-gatherer and pastoralist autochthonous population, and in the past were commonly called “Hottentots” and “Bushmen” respectively.² As pointed out by Robert Ross, in the course of the eighteenth century the Chaguriqua social organisation was disrupted with the establishment and expansion of European farms, which forced them to either move or take service as labourers, although “Most often they succumbed to the opiates of a broken people, alcohol, dagga, and a sexual laxity that contrasted with the rigid morality of their tribal life”.³

The group included a variety of other ethnic groups, such as members of other KhoiSan and African tribes, escaped slaves hailing from Madagascar, Mozambique,

¹ Driver, p. 216.

² Driver, p. 219. These terms are now considered derogatory.

³ Robert Ross, *Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 12-13.

India Indonesia and Malaysia,⁴ free blacks from the colony,⁵ a few whites and a large number of Basters or Bastaard-Hottentots, so called because of their mixed Khoi and European origin.⁶ In Millin's words, "It was even a thing of pride for a man to call himself a Bastaard, for that definitely assumed European blood".⁷

The first Griqua chiefs

The early history of the Griquas is intertwined with that of the Kok family, who were able to unite all these groups under their leadership. Adam Kok I (ca. 1710-ca. 1795), alleged former slave and (Khoi) founder of the family, obtained grazing rights by the Dutch government for the Stinkfontein farm (in the Piketberg area, north of Cape Town) in the 1750s, and in this area he came into contact with the remnants of the Chaguriqua people⁸ and with Bastards, attracting "a following from among the most vulnerable local groups [...] who occupied an insecure and marginal position in local society".⁹

In the eighteenth-century Adam Kok I led the first of a number of Griqua treks across the country, the trek north into Little Namaqualand, and thanks to the considerable size of the clan, Adam Kok was soon conferred the title of *Kaptyn* by the Dutch East India Company. However, at the end of the eighteenth-century the pressure of white expansion forced the Griquas further north across the Orange

⁴ Driver, p. 220.

⁵ Ross, p. 1.

⁶ Linda Waldman, "When Social Movements Bypass the Poor: Asbestos Pollution, International Litigation and Griqua Cultural Identity", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33.3 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 2007) pp. 577-600 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25065227>> [accessed 6 August 2012] (p. 481).

⁷ Millin, p. 99.

⁸ Ross, p. 14.

⁹ Karel Schoeman, *Griqua Records: The Philippolis Captaincy, 1825-1861* (Goodwood, Western Cape: The Van Riebeeck Society, 1996), p. xi.

River and the area that was to become Griqualand West,¹⁰ under the leadership of Kok's son Cornelius Kok I (1746-1820).¹¹

In 1804 Adam Kok II (1782-1835) and Barend Barends—Cornelius Kok's son and nephew respectively—moved through Namaqualand and finally settled at Klarwater, later to become Griquastad or Griquatown,¹² in an area bordering Bantu speaking Africa,¹³ where they were appointed as joint *Kaptnys* of a new-born Captaincy. In the meantime, Cornelis I Kok had moved to the village of Campbell in the Transorange, where he exerted his authority until he was succeeded by his other son Cornelis Kok II, and then by his nephew Adam Kok III.¹⁴

Rev. John Campbell and the influence of Christianity

In 1913 Rev. John Campbell, a representative of the London Missionary Society, visited the Klarwater settlement, and in his *Travels in South Africa* he described Klarwater, its inhabitants, and how he contributed to their development. Firstly, Campbell suggested that the pejorative name “Basters” or “Bastaards” be changed into the more neutral Griquas, and Klarwater be called Griquatown. In Campbell's words:

having represented to the principal persons the offensiveness of the word to an English or Dutch ear, they resolved to assume some other name. On consulting among themselves, they found the majority were descended from a person of the name of Griqua, and they resolved hereafter to be called Griquaas.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ross, p. 14.

¹¹ Schoeman, p. xi.

¹² Driver, p. 220.

¹³ Ross, p. 15.

¹⁴ Schoeman, p. xii.

¹⁵ John Campbell, *Travels in South Africa* (London: Black and Parry, 1815), p. 349.

As a result, the town was renamed “Griqua-town, instead of Klaar Water”.¹⁶ Secondly, he introduced a set of rudimentary laws that included specific measures in case of murder, theft, corruption and so on.¹⁷ These laws would apply to the whole community, regardless of ‘race’ and origin, so that Campbell also introduced legal equality.¹⁸ Law number IX, in fact, stated that “if a Bushman, Coranna, or other stranger, commit murder, theft, or any other crime within the limits of the Griqua country, the punishment to be the same as if he had been a Griqua”.¹⁹ Campbell then proceeded to enumerate the inhabitants of Griquatown as following:

NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN GRIQUA LAND—CHURCH—
SCHOOL—WAGGONS—TRADES.

THE following is the number of Griquaas who reside
at Griqua town and the out-posts connected with it.

Men	291
Women	399
Boys	310
Girls	266
	1266

Campbell, p. 354.

As pointed out by Linda Waldman, Christianity was a major influence in the formation of a collective Griqua identity. In fact, Christian missionaries were particularly interested in culturally influencing those polities that were not yet directly subjected to European political control, such as the semi-independent Captaincies, and thus tended to regard people depending on whether they were

¹⁶ Campbell, p. 351.

¹⁷ Campbell, pp. 351-353.

¹⁸ Ross, p. 16.

¹⁹ Campbell, p. 352.

Christians and lived at the mission or not.²⁰ Because it meant a closer affinity with European culture and better chances at political and social advancement, Christianity was associated with a higher status.

Although not all Griquas agreed to convert—and some of those who did were not recognised by the church authorities—Christianity “became in some senses a badge of Griquatown, at once an inherent part of Griqua identity and a prime means of acculturation”.²¹ Moreover, the missionaries had an active role in the political centralisation of the Griqua people,²² this is exemplified by the role the Rev. John Campbell had in outlining an early set of regulations and in changing both the names of the people and the town so that they would be admissible to a European ear.

One of the outcomes of Christianity, other than the higher status enjoyed by the Griquas and their leaders, was the introduction of a different mode of existence, directly imitative of that of missionaries and colonialists. In fact, Ross states that together with the new religion, “frugality, monogamy, individuality, settled agriculture, were introduced into the community”.²³ Because of this new core of values, of their treks and because they progressively got more and more involved in commerce to the detriment of the traditional farming and livestock holding, the Griquas started to have a lot in common with the Boers. In fact, although they were excluded from the Boer community due to their illegitimacy and colour,²⁴ Griquas and Boers “identified themselves in terms of similar myths—notably, the myth of the Promised Land, and the great Trek or journey it entailed—and spoke a version of

²⁰ Waldman, p. 481.

²¹ Ross, p. 18.

²² Ross, p. 15.

²³ Ross, p. 17.

²⁴ Ross, p. 10.

Dutch [...] Both proclaimed themselves Christian”.²⁵

The division and the great trek of 1861

The gradual change in the social dynamics of Griquatown induced by contact with the missionaries and the colonists, commerce and immigration also meant that the traditional clan-based system could no longer hold the community together. In fact, while on the one hand the people related to the clans remained the richest in Griquatown, on the other hand their political role slowly collapsed.²⁶ This phenomenon became evident in the early nineteenth century, when following the Hartenaar revolt, both Adam Kok II and Barend Barends were forced to abdicate and leave Griquatown. In 1819 the role of *Kaptyn* was then assumed by Andries Waterboer, who was of San descent and had no family relations with the old clans, but was supported by the missionaries. However, Waterboer's election was followed by more uprisings (the Bergenaar rebellions), as he failed to win the trust of the whole population.²⁷

The political crisis in Griqualand West led to the separation of the Griquas into four main units that went separate ways, each of them headed by one the leaders previously mentioned: Cornelis Kok II, Andries Waterboer, Adam Kok II and Barend Barends. Cornelis Kok was in power in Campbell with a few followers, while Waterboer remained in Griquatown thanks to the support of the church and the colonial government. In the meantime, Barend Barends moved north towards the Harts river valley, settling in Boetsap, and Adam Kok II became leader of a number

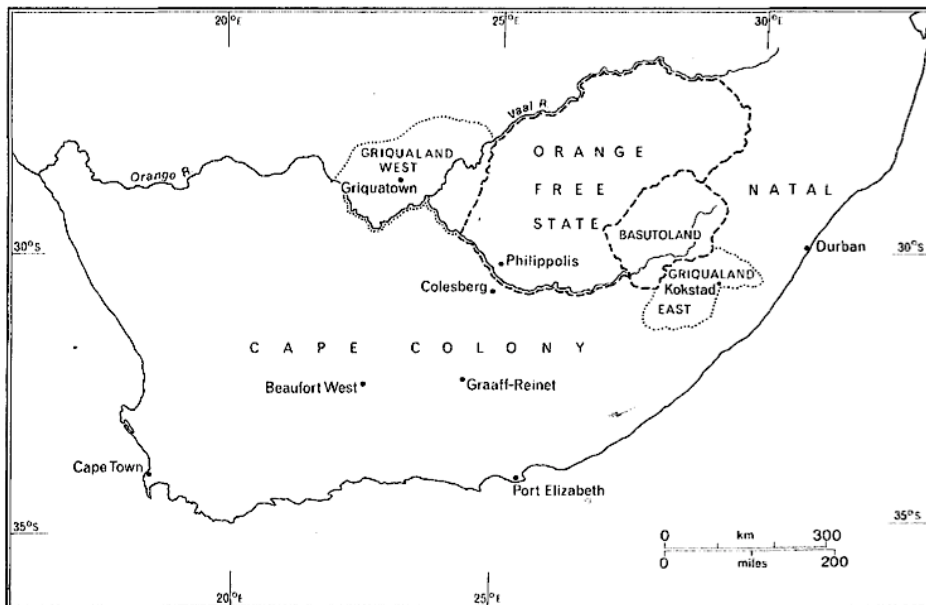
²⁵ Driver, p. 220.

²⁶ Ross, p. 19.

²⁷ Ross, pp. 19, 20.

of Bergenaars, people who had decided to leave Griquatown in protest against Waterboer's election. In 1826 Adam Kok II's group moved to Philippolis, a station of the London missionary society, where they resumed a settled life and created the Griqua Captaincy of Philippolis.²⁸ In 1835 Adam Kok II died and was succeeded by his son Abraham Kok, who was soon deposed in favour of his brother Adam Kok III (1811-1875) in 1837.²⁹

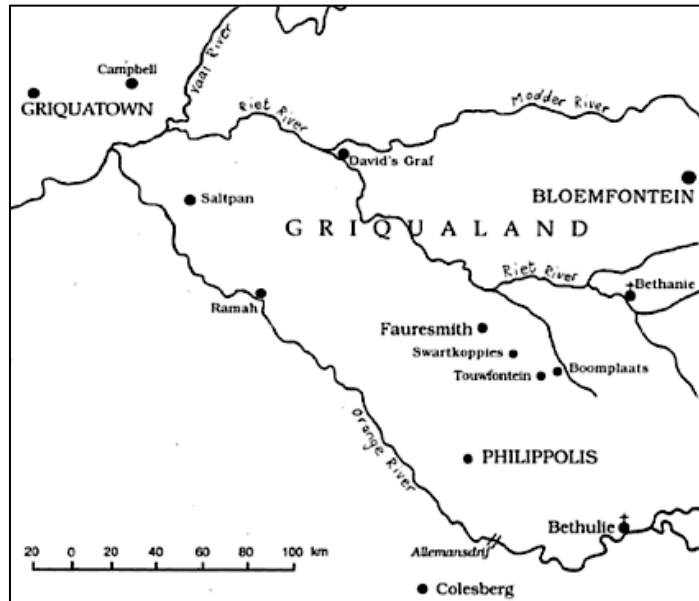
The following maps illustrate the main locations referred to in this chapter.



Ross, p. xiv. Map of Southern Africa c. 1850.

²⁸ Ross, pp. 20, 21.

²⁹ Schoeman, p. xiv.



Schoeman, p. xv.

In the course of the 1840s and 1850s the Philippolis Captaincy started to show its weaknesses. In fact, because of the pressure of the Orange Free State on the Captaincy's borders, many Griquas started to sell their land, and in 1860 they decided to move to Nomansland, over the Drakensberg. In Ross' words, "In the face of Boer pressure, the alienation of Griqua land and the absence of succour from the British, the Griquas could either cease as a community or they could trek. They chose to trek".³⁰ Although some of the inhabitants of Philippolis went west to Namaqualand, some chose to stay and some others were absorbed in the Free State, most of them agreed to move east.³¹ In 1861, about 2,000 or 3,000 people left Griqualand West under the leadership of Adam Kok III and settled in Nomansland, which was to become Griqualand East, and were Kokstad was to be founded.³²

³⁰ Ross, p. 94.

³¹ Ross, p. 99.

³² Ross, p. 94; Driver, p. 221; Schoeman, p. xix. The first two authors seem to disagree on the actual number of people involved in the 1861 trek, Ross recounting 2,000 and Driver 3,000. There is further disagreement concerning the actual entity of the journey: Ross states that "it was not of great size", while Driver calls it "a massive trek" and Schoeman "an epic trek".

The 1861 trek took place just a few years before the discovery of diamonds in the area in 1867, but by that time Griqualand West had become part of the Orange Free State. Although other Griquas still owned land (most notably those under the leadership of Waterboer), the Boers claimed that Kok had sold them all the land, so that they were the only ones to obtain compensation for the valuable land when the British annexed Griqualand West in 1871.³³

The previous wealth of a large number of the Griquas was badly affected for a number of reasons. Firstly, the sale of the land was in most cases managed to the advantage of the Boers. Secondly, the journey itself proved difficult because of cattle theft and various other incidents that decimated the animals along the way. Lastly, settling in Nomansland turned out to be challenging, too.³⁴ As a result, “In the travails of the two-year trek they had become an impoverished and demoralised people”.³⁵

2.2 A.A.S le Fleur's Griqua revival

Although the new Captaincy in Griqualand East managed to survive, it was annexed by the British Government in 1874. Moreover, Adam Kok III died the following year, leaving no direct successor,³⁶ “so that the noble line of Kok was

³³ Driver, pp. 221, 222.

³⁴ Schoeman, p. xix.

³⁵ Ross, p. 102.

³⁶ Ross, pp. 127, 129.

about to end in Griqualand East”,³⁷ and his death came to symbolise the end of the political independence of the Griquas of Griqualand East.³⁸

The annexation, Kok's death and the Griqualand East rebellion in 1878 against the Cape Government jointly increased the misery of the Griqua community.³⁹ Deprived of their pride and independence, the Griquas were split and the category ‘Griqua’ itself ceased to carry any identity value, “only reviving when A. A. S. le Fleur [...] made use of the label in the early twentieth Century”.⁴⁰ In fact, more disorders were led by Abraham le Fleur, Adam Kok III's political heir, and later by his son Andries Abraham Stockenstrom le Fleur—the paramount chief or *opperhoof*. Andries' father, son of a French man and a woman from Madagascar, had been working as a secretary to Adam Kok III, while Andries linked himself to the Kok family marrying Rachel Susanna Kok, daughter of Adam ‘Muis’ Kok.⁴¹

In 1922 Andries (later known as Andrew), who by that time had been arrested and imprisoned several times for being an ‘agitator’, led about 800 people from Kokstad and other areas to Beeswater (Namaqualand)⁴² in an attempt to recover the Griqua lost pride and political status, in what Ross calls “a foolhardy and disastrous move”.⁴³ In fact, Andrew's dream of regaining independence for such a small community in twentieth century South Africa was unsuccessful. Dorothy Driver reports that in Beeswater the Griquas were still forced to work for the whites, “struggled against low wages and often succumbed to the drunkenness and

³⁷ Millin, p. 101.

³⁸ Robert Edgar and Christopher Saunders, “A.A.S. Le Fleur and the Griqua Trek of 1917: Segregation, Self-Help, and Ethnic Identity”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 15.2 (Boston University African Studies Center, 1982), pp. 201- 220
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/218547>> [accessed 18 November 2012] (p. 203).

³⁹ Ross, p. 130.

⁴⁰ Ross, p. 133.

⁴¹ Edgar and Saunders, pp. 201, 203.

⁴² Driver, p. 222.

⁴³ Ross, p. 135.

alcoholism brought about by the “dop system”, whereby farm labourers were rewarded for their labor with tots of brandy or wine”.⁴⁴

2.3 Griqua and coloured identity

With the annexation, Adam Kok III's death and A.A.S. le Fleur's failure at bringing them back together, the Griquas spread around the country and lost their sense of community and ethnic, cultural belonging.⁴⁵ As a matter of fact, during the apartheid years the struggle at racial subdivision led to the classification of the descendants of the Griquas as ‘Coloureds’, a broad category that, as previously mentioned, included all those people *not* evidently ‘white’ or ‘black’.⁴⁶ What Ross calls a “centrifuge force” thus drove them further away from being a compact and conscious group, so that “A few of them with lighter skins might be accepted surreptitiously into the white group, but most were depressed into the general mass of the coloureds”.⁴⁷

As a result of separate development policies, Griqua identity mingled with coloured identity, in an ambiguous relationship that led Griqua ancestry to be either rejected or affirmed, and in which Griqua and coloured status were in a shifting position of superiority to each other, as pointed out by Wadman: “The wealthiest coloured people have successfully adopted white standards, are educated and have long smooth hair and pale skins. These people dismiss their Griqua and Khoi ancestry while poorer members of Griquatown refuse to abandon their Griqua

⁴⁴ Driver, p. 223.

⁴⁵ Ross, p.1.

⁴⁶ Waldman, p. 481.

⁴⁷ Ross, pp. 137, 138.

identity”.⁴⁸ Ross, however, points out that in most cases the contemporary affirmation of Griqua heritage has more to do with the search for an identity and history than with actual genetic links to the old Captaincies.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Waldman, p. 482.

⁴⁹ Ross, p. 137.

3. NON-WHITE BODIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

This chapter revolves around the notions of self-consciousness, skin colour and the objectified non-white body. Firstly, I will deal with the problematic identity and self-representation of the colonized subject in contexts where racial difference is institutionalised—that is to say, recognised, defined and regulated by the local law. Secondly, I will analyse the negative associations connected to non-whiteness that are a direct result of eighteenth and nineteenth century ‘pseudo scientific’ studies on the African body. In particular, the second half of the chapter will focus on the black/coloured female body, resorting to Saartjie Baartman's peculiar story and legacy as a representative case.

3.1 Skin colour and self-consciousness

Mbembe points out how in the colonies there was a denial of any human bond between ‘conquerors’ and ‘natives’, so that the colonized could be relegated into “a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood”.¹ Rationalising the ‘other’ as intrinsically different, as a result, made it possible to establish racialised forms of government: “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction”.² Just as the Orient, in Edward Said's view, is an idea that has been historically fashioned by the

¹ Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, p. 26.

² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 70.

West to pursue its personal agenda,³ “Africa as an idea [was a] polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world”,⁴ and thus a justification for colonisation and oppression. These ideas were created “according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections”, and had more to do with the West’s aims and psychology than with the ‘other’ himself.⁵

In South Africa, the perception of the ‘other’ as dissimilar to the ‘self’ was based on the most visible—and easily identifiable—of human features: skin colour (which was a signifier of specific racial belonging). In Homi K. Bhabha’s words, “The difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural - color as the cultural/political *sign* of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural ‘*identity*’”.⁶ The social-engineered, racial-based plan of the apartheid government, in fact, contributed not only to the subjugation and exploitation of the majority of the inhabitants, but also to the systematic humiliation and alienation of people according to the colour of their skin. Coetzee underlines that “at the heart of the evil of white *baaskap* or *Herrshaft* in South Africa [...] is its desire not only to use the black man as a tool for its own material gain, but to strip him of all dignity in the process”.⁷ Chromatic difference, which made it relatively straightforward to draw a line between colonisers and colonised, was therefore the element on which apartheid racism was based on and which made it possible to develop a hierarchy in which all individuals would inescapably be inserted. Racism “creates a double standard for

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 5.

⁴ Achille Mbembe, “Introduction: Time on the move”, in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 1-23 (p. 2).

⁵ Said, pp. 8, 12.

⁶ Bhabha, p. 80.

⁷ John M. Coetzee and David Atwell, ed., *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 373.

human membership [...] if those who are “above” consider themselves human, then those who are “below” are subhuman and closer to animals”.⁸ Race thus becomes a cage both for black/coloured and white individuals; as observed by Coetzee, “the masters, in South Africa, form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste”,⁹ which cannot be resigned from. Therefore, in a racist country there is no way of escaping one’s skin: segregation applies to every/body’s corporeal envelope.¹⁰

In a society in which ‘cultural hegemony’—meaning the cultural leadership of one group in a particular society¹¹—is at work, what could be seen as a merely pragmatic set of beliefs, aimed at justifying the welfare and political power of a minority, has a direct impact on the psychology of the oppressed majority. In fact, as the hegemonic group have the capacity to impose values on the rest of the population, developing a black/coloured self-consciousness that differs from the way the group is ‘officially’ represented proves challenging. In other words, if the people in power hold an ethnic group as naturally inferior, it is hard to fashion an independent identity disregarding of the labels imposed from above. Mbembe observes how in South Africa “the African self has become alienated from itself”, it has been “relegated to a lifeless form of identity”¹² because of the phenomena of slavery, colonization and apartheid. Therefore, the ‘self’ of the non-white subject is no longer unrecognised only by the white man, but becomes estranged from the subject himself.

⁸ Lewis Gordon, “New Introduction to ‘I Write What I Like’”, *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (2007) <<http://abahlali.org/node/3039>> [accessed 25 December 2012].

⁹ Coetzee and Atwell, ed., p. 96.

¹⁰ André Viola, “Martyred Bodies and Silenced Voices in South African Literature Under Apartheid”, in *Bodies and Voices: The Force-Field of Representation and Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Merete Falck Borch et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 3-15 (p. 3).

¹¹ Said, p. 7. The concept of ‘cultural hegemony’ was developed by Antonio Gramsci.

¹² Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-writing”, *Public Culture: Bulletin of the Society for Transnational Cultural Studies*, 14.1 (Chicago, Ill.: Duke University Press, 2002), 239-273 (p. 241).

In order for non-white individuals to build a renewed self-consciousness, it is necessary for them to deconstruct their whole system of beliefs and reconstruct an identity for themselves. This was the aim of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement, which "represented a new self-confidence and militancy".¹³ In Biko's opinion, self-consciousness was only possible if black people stopped viewing themselves as the appendix of a machine, because a truly free society would be possible only insofar as "this material and spiritual alienation had been transcended".¹⁴

Frantz Fanon's 'white mask'

When he left his native Martinique (a French colony) for France, Frantz Fanon experienced these alienating dynamics. Although he had been educated as a Frenchman, in fact, he soon realized that he was assumed to be inferior to white French people, and expected to 'perform' as such: "The white world, the only honourable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger".¹⁵

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recounts how he became suddenly conscious of his 'blackness' (and later undertook the task of questioning it) only when he came into contact with white people: "I had to meet the white man's eyes".¹⁶ In fact, colour awareness cannot occur unless two different 'types' encounter: "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development on his bodily

¹³ Nigel Gibson, "Black Consciousness 1977-1987; The Dialectics of Liberation in South Africa", in *Centre for Civil Society Research Report No. 18* (Durban: Centre for Civil Society, 2004) <<http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/files/gibson.%20final%20edit.pdf>> [accessed 25 December 2012] (p. 1).

¹⁴ Gibson, p. 4.

¹⁵ Fanon, p. 114.

¹⁶ Fanon, p. 113.

schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negative activity. It is a third-person consciousness".¹⁷ Stared at and pointed out, Fanon felt objectified through his physical appearance ("I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects"; "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored").¹⁸ The gaze of the white man thus prove to have the power to turn the colonial subject into "a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego",¹⁹ that is to say, into an individual whose identity is not fixed but artificially assembled from the outside and likely to be contradictory.

The traumatic discovery of the power of imperial discourse induced Fanon to analyse how and why his 'self' had been torn to pieces, and what to do to reconstruct it. What he calls the "disalienation of the black man",²⁰ in his opinion, can occur only once the subject recognises that his "black skin is not the wrapping of specific values",²¹ and that his inferior status has social and economic reasons:

If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:
—primarily, economic;
—subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority.²²

In Bhabha's view, "discourse and the fractures within it are the source of destabilization of colonial power".²³ Therefore, only once the social and economic dynamics and the weaknesses of the colonial discourse are exposed, the subject will have the tools to build the foundations of a new 'self'.

¹⁷ Fanon, p. 110.

¹⁸ Fanon, pp. 109, 113.

¹⁹ Bhabha, p. 75.

²⁰ Fanon, p. 13.

²¹ Fanon, p. 227.

²² Fanon, p. 13.

²³ Gen Doy, "Objectified Bodies or Embodied Subjects?", in *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), pp. 111-155 (p. 135).

The book ends with a final prayer: “Oh my body, make of me always a man who questions!”²⁴ Fanon addresses his own body for two main reasons: firstly, his black body was the reason he was refused by the French society, thus realizing he was black; secondly, the same body that made him look different proved to be the key to develop a renewed self-consciousness as a black man, no more as a black man wearing a white mask. Notably, Wicomb chose to use this very phrase as epigraph of *David's Story*,²⁵ as its message is powerful despite the fact the novel is set in a different place and time than *Black Skin, White Masks*. In this way, Wicomb suggests to the reader that the novel will deal with issues of self-representation, the non-white body, and with the problematic identity of black and coloured individuals.

3.2 Saartjie Baartman: black womanhood and the display of the body

The story and legacy of Saartjie Baartman is especially pertinent to the theme of non-white bodies, and in particular to the exploitation of black/coloured womanhood. In fact, both during her lifetime and in various following colonial and postcolonial discourses, she became a vessel for a series of beliefs, values and ideologies. In Wicomb's words,

Saartje Baartman, whose very name indicates her cultural hybridity, exemplifies the body as site of shame, a body bound up with the politics of location. I adopt her as icon precisely because of the nasty, unspoken question of concupiscence that haunts coloured identity, the issue of nation-building implicit in

²⁴ Fanon, p. 232.

²⁵ Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001).

the matter of her return, her contested ethnicity (Black, Khoi or ‘coloured’?) and the vexed question of representation.²⁶

Baartman's life and eighteenth century scientific enquiry

Taken from South Africa to Europe in 1810, in the last five years of her life Saartjie Baartman (also referred to as Saartje, Sara, Sarah or Saarti Baartman) was exhibited in London and Paris and became well known with the epithet ‘Hottentot Venus’.²⁷ Baartman was born in the 1770s in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, and descended from the Quena people (a Khoikhoi tribe).²⁸ Because of her distinctively KhoiSan features, she was taken to Britain as a human spectacle—a ‘Hottentot freak’—by her Dutch ‘keeper’ Hendrik Cezar, and daily performed on stage at No. 225 Piccadilly Circus.²⁹

Baartman's arrival in Europe—or, better, the arrival of the Hottentot Venus—was an event of major importance for two main reasons. Firstly, she became a living exemplification of the hyper-sexuality and inferiority of the ‘barbaric Hottentots’. Secondly, her body became the battleground for the debate upon colonisation. In fact, slavery had been recently abolished in Britain in 1807, but was allowed in the British Empire until 1833, so that in the 1810s abolitionists

²⁶ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 93.

²⁷ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 91.

²⁸ Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, “Introduction: Claiming Sarah Baartman, a Legacy to Grasp”, in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, ed. by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1-14 (pp. 6,7).

²⁹ Gordon-Chipembere, p. 1.

were organising, and found in Baartman's story—a woman (supposedly) taken to Europe against her will by a Dutch ‘keeper’—the perfect test suit.³⁰

After her death in Paris in 1915, French scientist Georges Cuvier dissected her corpse, and a plaster cast was made of her body. Cuvier's examination of Baartman's physical structure was functional to ‘scientifically’ prove the racial inferiority and sexual deviancy of black and coloured people, and to place KhoiSan people at the very bottom of the hierarchy of races. Her skeleton, brain and genitals were then conserved and exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974.³¹

As pointed out by Hershini Bhana Young, the seventeenth century saw a shift in the European attitude towards the ‘other’, starting to base prejudice not so much on culture difference but on scientific grounds, thus legitimating pre-existing racial classifications that would serve the purposes of colonisation.³² Races, seen as “fixed and divinely created”,³³ had to be catalogued according to their specific evolutionary stage, more or less distant from that of animals. Ethnography and the study of races consistently developed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with “Flora, fauna, animals and people [...] commodified and shipped to England”.³⁴ Ethnographic collections included not only photographs and objects of

³⁰ Hershini Bhana Young, ““Rude” Performances: Theorizing Agency”, in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, ed. by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 47-63 (pp. 48,49).

³¹ Gabeba Bederoon, “Baartman and the Private: How Can We Look at a Figure that Has Been Looked at Too Much?”, in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, ed. by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 65-83 (p. 65).

³² Young, p. 52.

³³ Sheila Smith McKoy, “Placing and Replacing “The Venus Hottentot”: An Archeology of Pornography, Race and Power”, in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, ed. by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 85-97 (p. 88).

³⁴ Young, p. 48.

the racial types in question, but also whole human parts, which would be observed, measured and often exhibited, as in the case of Saartjie Baartman's organs.³⁵

Nineteenth century visual culture regarded non-white bodies as specimen of exotic racial types, whose differences from the white body—seen as the standard model of human appearance—had to be studied and appropriately classified by scientists.³⁶ The display and examination of unusual people and artefacts was important on a psychological level for Europeans, who were at once fascinated and repulsed by the bodies of non-whites. In fact, the physical variance from the ‘norm’ was instrumental to set a dividing line between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, thus reassuring Europeans on both their superiority as human beings and the righteousness of the colonial enterprise: “In the Western minds, these hips marked the boundary between self and racialized “other”; they also demanded correction”.³⁷

Seventeenth and eighteenth century encounters with South African KhoiSan inhabitants was followed by a growing scientific interest because of their peculiar features that differed for many aspects from those of other African individuals. In Young's view, travellers' accounts of KhoiSan people as fair-skinned was likely to disrupt the chromatic classification of race that supported slavery (“This literature on the Khoikhoi insists that that they are not black or brown but yellow, tawny, fairer skinned, with their babies being born white-skinned”),³⁸ so that further analysis on this ethnos became necessary. Carolus Linneus, Swedish botanist, physician and zoologist, classified ‘Hottentots’ as ‘*Homo sapiens monstrosus*’, a category that

³⁵ Doy, pp. 111, 112.

³⁶ Doy, p. 111.

³⁷ Smith McKoy, p. 86.

³⁸ Young, p. 53.

“included wolf-boys, wild girls, and the like”,³⁹ thus placing them at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder.⁴⁰ As remarked by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, the KhoiSan people were thus appointed “the most ignoble group in the progression of mankind, purported to mate with the orangutan”.⁴¹

There are several reasons why, amongst the large number of people exhibited at the time, Saartjie Baartman became the most popular. Firstly, because of her distinct ‘Khoisan-ness’. In fact, her steatopygia and pronounced genitals were believed to be typical features of this ethnic group, and thus became objects of curiosity.⁴² Moreover, being a representative of the ‘*Homo sapiens monstrous*’ category, she was believed to lack emotion and intelligence, so at once altogether dissimilar to her audience, and “a reminder of the primitive living deep within the self”.⁴³ During her performance, the audience would poke and pinch her to check if her body was real and to test her reactions, and in this way “they consolidated their own mastery, their own fantasy of white superiority, and subjectivity”.⁴⁴ Thirdly, Baartman was a woman, and as such represented an argument supporting the inequality of all women and their closeness to nature.⁴⁵ Therefore, during her performance—that Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully call an “ethnopornographic freak show”⁴⁶—the Hottentot Venus simultaneously incorporated difference (and, as a result, ‘deviancy’) in terms of physical appearance, race, culture, and gender.

³⁹ Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: a Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 15.

⁴⁰ Smith McKoy, p. 88.

⁴¹ Gordon-Chipembere, p. 6.

⁴² Gordon-Chipembere, p. 3.

⁴³ Crais and Scully, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Young, p. 58.

⁴⁵ Crais and Scully, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Crais and Scully, p. 73.



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All these supposed characteristics and the way her show was advertised made Baartman's exhibition intriguing not only because she was claimed to be the first KhoiSan individual ever to travel to Europe, but because for the first time the female non-white body was presented in terms of hypersexuality,⁴⁷ establishing “the iconographic link between the black woman and sexual lasciviousness”.⁴⁸ In fact, Saartjie Baartman underwent a process of complete dehumanisation, in which

⁴⁷ Karlien Van der Schyff, “Staging the Body of the (M)other: The “Hottentot Venus” and the “Wild Dancing Bushman”” in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, ed. by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 147-163 (p. 156).

⁴⁸ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, p. 91.

her genitals and buttocks became a synecdoche for her very essence,⁴⁹ which was as a result reduced to an abnormal and excessive sexuality.⁵⁰

Baartman's legacy: from 'Hottentot Venus' to 'National Mother'

As reported by Crais and Scully, the debate concerning Baartman's return was initiated by people claiming Khoikhoi descent, especially the Griquas, and in 1995 Griqua National Conference (GNC) leader Paramount Chief A.A.S. le Fleur II brought the issue to the attention of President Nelson Mandela. After years of negotiations with the French government, Baartman's remains were taken back to South Africa and buried on 9th August 2002, as part of the Woman's Day celebrations.⁵¹ In his speech, Thabo Mbeki—President of South Africa at the time—said: “The story of Sarah Baartman is the story of the African people [...] It is the story of the loss of our ancient freedom... It is the story of our reduction to the state of objects who could be owned, used and discarded by others”.⁵²

Saartjie Baartman's burial has arisen larger questions concerning the evolution of the discourse on non-white womanhood and the problematic status of Baartman as an icon of nation building. Gordon-Chipembere points out that after her death, Baartman was remembered as a victim, a drunkard and a prostitute, and that these labels—denoting weakness, behavioural and sexual deviancy—were applied to black/coloured womanhood as a whole, as Baartman was believed to stand for all

⁴⁹ Crais and Scully, p. 147.

⁵⁰ Gordon-Chipembere, p. 7

⁵¹ Crais and Scully, pp. 151, 153, 164.

⁵² BBC News, “‘Hottentot Venus’ laid to rest” (2002)

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2183271.stm>> [Accessed 5 January 2013].

non-white women.⁵³ In Wicomb's words, one needs to wonder whether “her burial would also bury black woman as icon of concupiscence, which is to say bury the shame of having had our bodies stared at, but also the shame invested in those (females) who have mated with the colonizer”.⁵⁴

When her remains were taken back to her native country, Baartman was given yet another role, that of ‘National Mother’, a symbol among many others aimed at helping the process of nation building and healing and the recovery of a national past.⁵⁵ Karlien van der Schyff underlines that this new part that Baartman is compelled to play does not do her justice, because once more she is not remembered as an individual, a woman who spent the last years of her life away from home and displayed as a entertaining ‘freak’, but both as the hypersexualised ‘Hottentot Venus’ and the post-apartheid ‘National Mother’, her status “rely on assumptions about the sexualized nature of the black female body”.⁵⁶

⁵³ Gordon-Chipembere, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity”, pp. 91, 92.

⁵⁵ Van der Schyff, p. 147.

⁵⁶ Van der Schyff, pp. 147, 162.

4. ZOË WICOMB'S LITERARY WORK¹

This chapter specifically regards Zoë Wicomb's literary work in the light of the main topics analysed previously. Following a summary of her publications, the chapter engages with specific elements and characters of her fiction that, in my view, can exemplify, challenge and unravel some of the contradictions of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

4.1 Synopsis of Wicomb's literary production

Wicomb's first publication, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), is a semi-autobiographical collection of ten connected stories set in the years of apartheid.² South Africa's main political events are recounted through the eyes and personal experiences of a coloured girl named Freida Shenton, whose central role links all the stories to each other. As a result, this work is what Valerie Shaw calls a “short-story cycle”:

In these collections one or more unifying techniques are employed to bind stories together: a single, sometimes markedly regional background; a dominant tone or mood, and often a central character whose reappearance in successive stories produces an impression of continuity. All of these devices extend the scope of each individual piece without pretending to offer the type of progressive development associated with the novel. [...] Each episode must have its own impact, be able to stand on its own feet.³

¹ In this chapter I will use the following acronyms to refer to Wicomb's publications: CT (*You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, 1987); DS (*David's Story*, 2001); PL (*Playing in the Light*, 2006); GA (*The One that Got Away*, 2011); ST (“In Search of Tommie”; 2009).

² Raiskin, p. 214.

³ Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: a Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Longman, 1983), p. 159.

In this collection, Wicomb develops a multifaceted analysis of coloured identity, although not intentionally: “I honestly did not know that *You Can't Get Lost* was crucially about coloured identity, not until a critic pointed it out—nobody after all was talking about coloureds in the 80s, the very label had been rejected in the period of resistance”.⁴ Although the characters and their actions exemplify different characteristics—and contradictions—of the coloured group as a whole, what connects them, in Bharati Mukherjee's view, is that they all “accept their Government's equation of self-worth with racial classification”.⁵

The short stories are organised chronologically, following some episodes in Freida's life, from her childhood in Little Namaqualand in the 1950s, then her years in St. Mary School and later at a coloured university, until her migration to Britain and her final return to South Africa. Freida's personal life thus intertwines with the historical events that lead to the progressive evolution of the apartheid system, such as the separation and relocation of coloured and black people and the development of the racial laws. As underlined by Raiskin, however, these events are not openly described and criticized by the narrator, but relived through Freida's experiences: “The laws that define Freida's life are not so much named and identified by Freida as they are enacted through her choices, desires, and understanding of her own body and place in the world”.⁶

Born in a small village in Little Namaqualand, Freida lives in an Afrikaans-speaking coloured community; however, her parents have decided to speak English

⁴ Stephan Meyer and Thomas Olver, “Zoe Wicomb Interviewed on Writing and Nation”, *Journal of Literary Studies* 18.1-2 (2002) <[http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Zoe Wicomb interviewed on writing and nation.-a0110229013](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Zoe+Wicomb+interviewed+on+writing+and+nation.-a0110229013)> [Accessed 6 November 2012].

⁵ Bharati Mukherjee, “They never wanted to be themselves”, *New York Times* (1987) <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/24/books/they-never-wanted-to-be-themselves.html>> [Accessed 10 December 2012].

⁶ Raiskin, p. 214.

at home in order to give more opportunities to their children. As a matter of fact, in “Bowl like Hole”, Freida's father is described as “the only person for miles that knew enough English” (CT 6), which makes him both an esteemed member of the community and the only one capable of communicating with the ‘white man’. When the area they live in becomes a ‘white area’ under the Group Areas Act, her father decides to accept to live in the new coloured location, so that his savings may be employed for Freida's schooling at St. Mary's School, a prestigious institution that has recently been opened to non-white children. Leaving the open space of the veld for the coloured location is a great sacrifice for old Shenton (“All my life I've lived in the open with only God to keep an eye on me, what do I want with the eyes of neighbours nudging and jostling in cramped streets? [...] Where will I grow things?”, CT 30), while Freida shows a different approach, excited about the modern facilities and the other benefits of the new location: “I did not really understand what the fuss what about. The Coloured location did not seem so terrible. Electric lights meant no more oil lamps to clean and there was water from a tap at the end of each street. And there would be boys” (CT 31).

The story that allows the reader to connect the narration to a precise moment in South Africa's history—Hendrik Verwoerd's assassination in 1966—is “A Clearing in the Bush”. The story employs the points of view of both Freida, by now an educated coloured young woman, and of middle-aged uneducated Tamieta, who works at the university canteen, and it thus exemplifies how throughout the collection “the meaning of racial, cultural, and national identities in South Africa is explored from a variety of perspectives”.⁷ Struggling with an essay on *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and with the every-day concerns of a normal student, Freida joins the

⁷ Raiskin, p. 213.

majority of coloured students in their boycott of a memorial service in commemoration of Verwoerd, while Tamieta, unaware of the coloured students' action, feels "hot shame" (CT 59) at being surrounded by white people.

In "You can't Get Lost in Cape Town", the short story that gives the name to the book, the protagonist is on her way to Cape Town, where she is to meet Micheal, her white boyfriend, and where she is going to have an abortion. Freida feels lost in Cape Town. While Michael reassures her, saying that "You can't get lost in Cape Town" (CT 73) thanks to Table Mountain, Devil's Peak and Lion's Head, Freida believes that it is "in the veld [that] you can always find your way home" (CT 73).

As suggested by María Jesús López Sánchez-Vizcaíno,

The implication is the feeling of alienation of coloured people in relation to the public and official institutions of the country, and the displacement to which they were subjected as South African cities were literally divided into different areas into which different racial groups were allocated.⁸

The two young people's ability to find their way around South Africa, therefore, is related to their ethnic belonging. Although Freida, as a coloured woman, struggles to move comfortably around the city, she cannot get lost: "Race is inescapable in Cape Town (The all-pervasive classification law "saves" one from getting lost anywhere in the country)".⁹

When she finally moves to Britain ("Everybody wants to go to Canada, so she wants to go to England, where there's nobody, not a soul from South Africa", CT 86), Freida discovers a whole new world where the values imposed by apartheid and mostly internalised by all South Africans, her family included, become hollow, and

⁸ María Jesús López Sánchez-Vizcaíno, "'You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town': Transculturation and Dislocation in Zoe Wicomb's Literary Works", *Afroeuropa*, 2.3 (2008) <<http://journal.afroeuropa.eu/index.php/afroeuropa/article/viewFile/116/106>> [Accessed 8 December 2012].

⁹ Mukherjee.

are replaced by a new kind of pride and self-consciousness, so that she “escapes these myriad petty tyrannies through expatriation”.¹⁰ Once back in her native land, in fact, Frieda realises how deep is the change she has undergone, and struggles to readjust. However, before her departure, Freida's decision to expatriate is accompanied by a sort of survivor's guilt for leaving everyone she knows in a country that masks its horrors behind the beautiful façade of African landscapes: “I do not give a fig for the postcard beauty of the bay and the majesty of the mountain [...] And the District Six I do not know and the bulldozers, impatient vultures, that hover about its stench. [...] At the base of this edifice of guilt rattles the kernel of shame” (CT 86). Despite her profound sense of distress, Freida is determined to leave everything behind: “my guilty secret: I will not come back. I will never live in this country again” (CT 90).

The last short story, “A Trip to the Gifberge”, finally reveals that all the previous stories were in fact written by the fictional Freida herself as her mother—that is present only in the first story and then is implied to be dead—accuses Freida of killing her twice: firstly by killing her in the recently published book, and secondly by leaving the country: “You've killed me over and over so it was quite unnecessary to invent my death” (CT 172). Here the author introduces a second level of autobiographical fiction, in which fictional Freida, too, is an author, and she has the task of telling her story. Through this literary device, Wicomb further distances herself from both Freida ‘the author’ and Freida ‘the character’.

David's Story (2000), Wicomb first novel, follows the coloured protagonist David Dirkse in his quest for family roots and collocation in the ‘new South

¹⁰ Mukherjee.

Africa’, and in the tragic events that follow the presence of his name in a mysterious ‘hit list’.

David, an MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) guerrilla, has asked an unidentified woman to be his amanuensis, “to ghostwrite his story of the years of conflict”.¹¹ Because of her education, David believes that she will be able to give shape and coherence to his accounts, which are bound to be fragmented and incomplete because of his loyalty to the Movement.¹² Her participation in the project is also essential because it allows David to detach himself from his own story: “He wanted me to write it, not because he thought that his story could not be written by someone else, but because it would no longer belong to him. In other words, he both wanted and did not want it to be written” (DS 1). Moreover, David wants it to be a book with national and historical value, and therefore in his narration he draws more or less direct links between himself and South African national icons, such as A.A.S. le Fleur and Saartjie Baartman “in his eagerness to historicise, to link things” (DS 2).

In the Preface of the book, the amanuensis/narrator introduces both David and herself, advising the reader about David's mistakes in recollecting some historical events (“he made a mess and lost a century”, DS 2) and admitting to have partly fashioned the narration according to her personal judgment (“I took liberties with the text”, DS 3). As explained by Wicomb, the “Preface” presents David and the amanuensis' narrative enterprise, immediately exposing its flaws: “What becomes clear is that the project is impossible: the amanuensis has too little to go by and

¹¹ Meg Samuelson, “The Disfigured Body of the Female Guerrilla: (De) Militarization, Sexual Violence, and Redomestication in Zoë Wicomb’s David’s Story”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32.4 (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 833-856 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/512491>> [Accessed 20 December 2012] (p.835).

¹² Christa Baiada, “On Women, Bodies, and Nation: Feminist Critique and Revision in Zoë Wicomb's David's Story”, *African Studies*, 67.1 (2008), pp. 33-47 <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00020180801943081>> [Accessed 25 March 2013] (p. 34).

resorts to invention [...] she has in the end decided for herself what to omit or include, or how to arrange her material—in accordance with her own aesthetic project”.¹³ Moreover, the Preface warns the reader that “This is and is not David's story” (DS 1). In fact, it is his story in the sense that he is in fact the central character and has recollected most of the events that shape the narration. However, Meg Samuelson points out how it is also not David's story in at least two respects: firstly, while the narrator relates her client's story, she is more concerned with the act of writing itself, and with issues such as the search for the ‘truth’; secondly, although David makes an attempt at coming to terms with the contradictions of his Griqua past and of the Liberation Movement, the coherence he would like to impart to his story is continually fragmented and disrupted by the stories and voices of women (the narrator, the Oumas, David's wife Sally, David's love interest Dulcie, Le Fleur's wife Rachael and so on).¹⁴ For instance, as pointed out by Wicomb, the narrator is an instrument to ironize and continually question David, just as Le Fleur's fictional wife ironizes him: “My narrator is the rational one. Her function, more importantly, is that she ironizes David's obsessions; she's the skeptical voice. He's quite taken by Le Fleur's stories and she's the skeptical, ironic voice”.¹⁵

It is 1991, Nelson Mandela has recently been released from prison and most people, David included, are in search of a new identity in the absence of the racial categorisation that has legally defined them for more than forty years. In open disagreement with his wife Saartjie/Sarah/Sally, who believes it to be “all fashionable rubbish” (DS 27), David starts investigating his Griqua roots in Kokstad

¹³ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

¹⁴ Samuelson, p. 835.

¹⁵ Wicomb quoted in Willemse.

("his own ancestors [...] were among Le Fleur's converts in Namaqualand", DS 34), where he retrieves the history of his ancestors, in particular the events related to the paramount chief A.A.S. le Fleur. In Sally's opinion, there is no point in undertaking this research because coloured people's are "all mixed up and tangled; no chance of being uprooted, because they're all in a neglected knot, stuck. And that I'd have thought is the beauty of being coloured, that we need not worry about roots at all that it's altogether a good thing to start afresh" (DS 27, 28).

David is an ANC militant, part of those coloured people who joined the Movement in the years of apartheid because they believed in non-racialism, so that his historical research intertwines with his reflections upon the peculiarities and repercussions of the anti-apartheid struggle.¹⁶ His political alignment is the main reason why his relationship with his father is so problematic. In fact, David's father has always accepted the relative privileged status in society that being coloured implied without questioning, and paradoxically sees his son as both a dangerous revolutionary because of his commitment to the Movement, and as a reactionary because of his interest in the Griqua past ("what do you do? [...] speak with old folk about old Griqua rubbish, encouraging the backwardness", DS 23). David's father thus emerges as a product of apartheid mentality, completely identified with the category he was placed in by the government, and unaware of the changes the country is undergoing. When David tries to explain the reasons for his choices, his father refuses to listen ("Don't you dare preach your politics at me, you who can't even accept yourself as a coloured person [...] A bladdy windbroek Griqua", DS 24), creating a gap between the two generations of coloured men.

¹⁶ Samuelson, p. 834.

As David finds out more and more about his Griqua ancestry, the story starts to alternate between the present (1991, Cape Town and Kokstad) and the past (1917-1922, Kokstad and Beeswater), in which a fictional Le Fleur develops his Griqua revival ideology and struggles to keep the community united. In an interview with Stephan Meyer and Thomas Olver, Wicomb reflects on the difficulties she faced when she resolved to combine two stories set in different historical periods, explaining how the subject matter required an unusual approach: “I dealt with that problem as best I could through a fragmented, indeterminate narrative, and a narrator whose voice is arch, ironic, unsympathetic [...] the fragments are not short stories—they lack the classic lack-quest-resolution structure, and taken together, they resist coherence”.¹⁷ However, Wicomb admits that the disjoint nature of the novel was not favourably received: “Publishers didn't like it. Too “postmodern”, they said, stick with the voice of Frieda Shenton; too complex, let David tell his own story in the first person”.¹⁸ Despite the publishers' concerns, the novel's fragmented structure at once mirrors the complexity and ambiguities of South Africa's political history, and reflects “David's struggle with the indeterminacy of truth”.¹⁹ ANC activism, the struggle for Liberation and the theme of torture are interrelated with a past that is hard or even impossible to interpret, and all these subjects have to come to terms with the narrator's aesthetic project. Because David's voice is in competition with the narrator's and with the other characters', it is up to the reader to combine the material coherently: “There isn't a central authoritative voice [...] The inchoate story,

¹⁷ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

¹⁸ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

¹⁹ Baiada, p. 34.

which for political reasons can't be told, threatens to fall apart; only the reader can hold together some sense of the events".²⁰

One of the main themes of the novel is the issue of nationalism, that is to say, what happens to nationalism—an ideology that has been used strategically to mobilise people in the struggle—when it is not needed anymore: “once the immediate goal is achieved, what do you then do with the unwieldy monster? Its toxic energy is a problem because it's not possible for people to just click into rejection mode once nationalism becomes redundant”.²¹ Wicomb remarks that the a similar argument can be made about militarism: “One of the things I'm critical of in the novel is the value of military value. Again, how would this have happened without these so-called nasty people who are prepared to take up arms and are prepared to kill”.²² In fact, this issue is the object of most disagreements between the narrator and David; while the former struggles to identify with a member of the guerrilla, “Someone who sees no contradiction between military values and the goal of political freedom” (DS 79), David criticises her liberal attitude, that he believes to be naive and ungrateful, and sets out to explain that liberty always comes with a cost, and without the armed struggle the Liberation would not have taken place: “See how far it's brought us all, including the likes of you, who believe in keeping your hands clean at all costs, who reach for lace handkerchiefs at the thought of bloodshed, and choose not to notice that that fine thing, freedom, is rudely shoved through by rough guys in khaki” (DS 79).

²⁰ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

²¹ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

²² Wicomb quoted in Willemsse.

Annie Gagiano points out how David's diverse approaches towards his present, his recent past and his historical background create an ambivalence that runs throughout the novel, which stems from Wicomb's

simultaneous rejection of essentialising narratives that claim a separate Coloured or Griqua identity, and her dissatisfaction, in 'new' South African national narratives, with the erasure, or the failure to recognise, the presence and the contribution of Coloured South Africans to this society [...] a complex and noteworthy text in terms of the ironies it presents in order to counter essentialist or condescending notions of a distinct Coloured, Griqua, South African black or unproblematically inclusive South African nationalism or identity.²³

In other words, what emerges from the novel is a rejection of post-Liberation widespread search for ethnic groups in which to identify, which Wicomb considers to be a reiteration of apartheid's values: "What is this business about finding out who you are? Why have we turned this into a problem? When is it not a problem then? When you've got "pure blood"? Isn't it replicating the old identities of apartheid?"²⁴ However, this attitude is concomitant with Wicomb's efforts to uncover the participation of Coloured people in the anti-apartheid struggle and their successive 'betrayal' once the goal of Liberation has been achieved, as in the case of David, who becomes a target because of his alleged disloyalty to the cause.

Wicomb's second novel, *Playing in the Light* (2006), is set in Cape Town, Wuppertal and Britain in 1995, soon after the end of apartheid. In this novel, she analysed both the largely ignored topic of play-whites and the importance that race can still have in contemporary South Africa. As pointed out by Wicomb, the title is on the one hand a play on the term 'playing white', which used to be used to call

²³ Annie Gagiano, "Adapting the National Imaginary: Shifting Identities in Three Post-1994 South African Novels", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30.4 (2004), pp. 811-824 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4133885>> [Accessed 15 March 2013] (pp. 817, 818).

²⁴ Wicomb quoted in Willemse.

those light-skinned coloureds who crossed over to white identities, and on the other hand refers to “the apartheid ideology of whiteness and its association with light”.²⁵ Moreover, the title is intended to allude to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. Wicomb points out how, even after 1994, the subject of pass-whites struggled to be uncovered; in her words, “I wanted to write about play-whites precisely because the issue was necessarily shrouded in secrecy [...] No liberation then for those who adopted whiteness which turned out to be of no consequence and, in fact, was an embarrassment”.²⁶

Marion Campbell, the protagonist, is a young Afrikaner woman in charge of a travel agency. Just like David, Marion uncovers a secret about her origin that shatters all certainties about her identity. In fact, her parents were originally coloured, but once in Cape Town they took the opportunity to ‘cross the colour line’ and get reclassified as white, thus becoming ‘pass-whites’. Although in post-apartheid years there is virtually no need to bother about race anymore, finding out that her own racial classification—which she is not supposed to care about—is a fraud, creates a sense of deep identity lack in Marion. She suddenly discovers that the old maid that used to clean the house and cuddle her, Tokkie, was in fact her grandmother, forced to play the role of servant to be with her family. She finds out that she actually has a large family, but that she could not even know about their existence because of their classification as ‘coloured’.

The novel shifts between the present and the past. In the present Marion remembers her childhood, questions her father, develops her relationship with her new coloured employee Brenda and with her boyfriend Geoff, gradually uncovering the truth about her origins. The past, on the other hand, is often narrated from

²⁵ Wicomb quoted in *The South African*.

²⁶ Wicomb quoted in *The South African*.

Marion's parents' point of view, and serves to exemplify, together with Marion's childhood memories, the reasons for this life-changing choice and the price that Marion and her whole family had to pay for it.

The One That Got Away (2008) is a collection of thirteen short stories set in South Africa and Scotland. Unlike Wicomb's previous publications, in this book there is no character that operates as linking element throughout the stories, although some characters are recurrent. The collection contains the major themes of her narrative: the problem of race, the status and psychology of coloureds, prejudice, the coloured obsession with body and hair, the cultural encounter between South Africans and Europeans.

In “There's The Bird That Never Flew”, Jane and Drew are in Scotland on their honeymoon. When she visits Doulton Fountain, a monument that commemorates the main colonies of the British Empire, including South Africa, Jane stops to observe the statue of the South African woman more closely: “a young woman, no more than a girl, but unmistakably coloured [...] quite unbelievable that more than a hundred years ago miscegenation was celebrated in a public work” (GA 67). Seeing the statue of a young coloured woman, shaped in a proud posture and with her head held high, makes Jane reflect upon the issue of representation and subjection, as unlike her predecessors in South Africa, the stone woman appears to be refusing to be objectified: “her difference is not a burden, and hence the astounding paradox of a sculpted figure who will not be an image; she cannot be subjected to anyone's gaze. [...] Whilst her descendants at the Cape have been [...] cringing with shame” (GA 72).

“Friends and *Goffels*” is a short story about two childhood friends who meet

again as adults, years after having been bullied at school and mockingly called ‘goffels’²⁷ by their coloured classmates because of their dark complexion and unmistakably KhoiSan features. This short story is one more example of how racial prejudice was common not only among whites but coloureds as well. In this case, coloured colour-based prejudice is shown to apply not only to African or KhoiSan people, often offensively called ‘kaffirs’ and ‘hotnos’ respectively, but to other coloured people as well.

In “Another Story”, Deborah Kelinhans, an old coloured woman, visits her great-niece Sarah Lindse in Cape Town, where the young and educated woman works as a university professor. This short story closes the collection with a more or less direct reference to Sarah Gertrude Millin, whose novel *God's Step-Children*, as analysed later on, has a relevant role in *David's Story*, too. Not by chance, the characters' names “are the names of Millin's characters [...] and the author intending to set the record straight shares the name Sarah with the original author”.²⁸

Soon after Deborah's arrival, Sarah tests her great-aunt with a direct quotation from Millin's novel,²⁹ which hurts the old woman's feelings (“Brakvlei was never rotten. Oh no, theirs was the cleanest of all farmyards”, GA 183). Later on, Sarah explains that the main purpose for this family reunion is in fact to ascertain whether it was their very family history to be depicted in an unnamed white woman's book: “Do you know if someone has written the story of our family, from the beginning, right from the missionary from Europe? Do you know of a woman, a white woman, speaking to your mother or brothers about those old days?” (GA 186). However, Deborah replies: “don't worry, it wouldn't be our story; it's everyone's story. All

²⁷ Derogatory term for ‘coloured’.

²⁸ Raikin, p. 208.

²⁹ The quotation can be found at page 86 of this dissertation.

coloured people have the same old story. Not worth writing a book about” (GA 186).

“In Search of Tommie” (2009), published in the magazine *Wasafiri*, narrates the story of TS, an African gay man afflicted by an unnamed, serious illness. All his life, TS has tried to come to terms with the memory of his biological black father Tommie (“that fucker, that fraud, that vark”, ST 52), who left South Africa when TS was just a child and went to England, where he got a British woman pregnant. His mother, however, has idealized Tommie, and is still waiting for him: “All her life [...] she had remained faithful to her Tommie, a highly educated man, by now a doctor of some kind” (ST 52). One day, persuaded by his partner Joe, TS reads a book by British female author Chris Hallam. Just like Sarah recognises her own family in Millin's work, TS is confident that one of the characters of this semi-autobiographical novel is his own long-gone father. Chris' photograph on the back cover confirms his suspicion (“a slim woman, with short, frizzy hair and big, strong features. A blood relative for sure”, ST 52), so he decides to contact her. Chris, a middle-class writer, takes advantage of a working trip in South Africa to meet TS and his mother, both curious and skeptical towards this alleged half-brother. Neither TS nor his mother seem to have any doubt about the fact that TS is related to this British educated woman (“your coloured sister”, ST 54; “definitely the same eyes, just like her boy, although TS is of course a proper black African”, ST 55). Although she has never seen the Tommie's face (“she has never seen a photograph [...] her own mother destroyed all evidence of the man who had let her down so badly” ST 54), Chris does not want to disappoint them, so when they give her a picture of him she confirms to be TS' sister (“Ye-es, she says, looks like my mom's

picture [...] my brother”, ST 55).

4.2 The drama of pass-whites: *Playing in the Light*

In an interview with the Scotsman, Wicomb recounts how the subject of illegal reclassifications during apartheid was in fact part of her personal experience as a more or less direct witness of such practices: “There was a family living across the road from us, and one day they just disappeared. Our neighbours said, ‘They’ve left. They’ve turned white’. This happened all the time”; “The newspapers were always full of stories about abandoned children found tied up or living under the bed because their families were ashamed of them on account of the colour of their skin”.³⁰ However, because the ‘racial-crossing’ was covered in secrecy, this issue has largely been ignored in official contexts: “We don’t even know how many of them there are. There’s no discourse, nothing in the library, because officially they don’t exist. Yet the truth of the matter, because of their history, is that many Afrikaners are mixed race”.³¹

The lack of material on the subject is exemplified by Marion’s research at the library, where she unsuccessfully looks for any information concerning play-whites. What she uncovers, however, is an inconsistent body of laws and racial definitions: “The 1946 franchise laws allowed mixed blood in one parent or grandparent, but the new bill of 1950 [...] conflicted with the earlier one” (PL 120). While Act No. 30 of 1950 states that a white person is “one who in appearance obviously *is*, or who *is* generally accepted as a white person” (PL 120, my

³⁰ Wicomb quoted in Scotsman.

³¹ Wicomb quoted in Scotsman.

emphasis), for instance, the Population Registration Amendment Act of 1962 states that a white person is someone who is “*not* generally accepted as a coloured person [...] *not* in appearance obviously *not* a white person” (PL 121, my emphasis). As noticed by Marion, the amendment defined whiteness according to what it was not, thus establishing a blurred dividing line which seemed to open up the category: “And how extraordinary that the state should want to investigate, and insist on people's whiteness” (PL 122). In Wicomb's words, “The weird thing [...] was that there was this legislation for racial purity at the same time as the whites were tacitly boosting their own numbers by allowing some people to cross over”.³² As I will illustrate later on, Marion's parents managed to get reclassified in virtue of this very ambiguous definition, and thanks to the complicity of ‘white’ Councillor Carter.

In order to approach the topic of pass-whites in South Africa, Wicomb could have set *Playing in the Light* during apartheid and simply narrated the story of John and Helen Campbell: their economic struggle after the reclassification of the area they live in, the move to the big city, the misunderstandings caused by their white-looking features, the choice to cross the racial line and its psychological outcomes. Instead, Wicomb chose to unfold these events through flashbacks—whether by means of memories or stories—and to rather focus on Marion's identity slowly being challenged, leaving it to her quest for the truth to uncover the past. Doing so, Wicomb triggered a dialogue between historical times on the one hand, and between generations on the other hand. In fact, the main events take place between apartheid and post-apartheid eras, soon after the first democratic elections in South Africa. In that moment the country is on the point of undertaking major changes; however,

³² Wicomb quoted in Scotsman.

these changes are challenged both by the fact that part of the population is not ready for them yet, and because the paradoxical legacy of separate development in terms of social, economic and political structures cannot be abruptly turned around. The ambiguous situation in post-1994 South Africa finds a counterpart in Marion herself, who represents a generation not altogether aware that apartheid (or at least its repercussions) has not ceased to exist with Mandela's release and the election of the ANC.

When he goes to the Traffic Department hoping to become a traffic warden, John Campbell ignores that this kind of job is reserved for white people; motorists being prevalently white, it would not be acceptable for a coloured or black person to admonish them. However, the superintendent mistakes him for a Boer, so that John “watched whiteness fall fabulously, like an expensive woman, into his lap” (PL 127). Helen realises immediately that this misunderstanding could be the threshold of a whole new life they could build from scratch and fashion in the most convenient way possible: “But why, she pleaded at first, why settle for being Boer when you could be anything at all? By which she meant English” (PL 127). In spite of John's naivety and relaxed attitude, Helen is perfectly conscious of the cost and dangers of this endeavour “Surnames had to be changed; ancestors' photographs painted over, lips and noses thinned; thick-soled feet scraped tender”.³³ She is determined to do everything in her power to succeed, and goes as far as joining the Anglican Church and agreeing to an affair with Councillor Carter—who is clearly aware of her coloured ethnicity—in exchange for his mediation for the paperwork necessary to be reclassified.

³³ Scotsman.

Once Helen is pregnant with Marion, the position of the Campbells proves to be utterly opposite. On the one hand, Helen realises how a child could endanger their cover, for in spite of her light skin and red hair, her own mother Tokkie was very dark. John, on the other hand, once more proves to be the reckless, irrational element in the couple, as he “could not see why there should be any problem with the child's looks” (PL 124): he has perhaps already identified completely with his new identity, thus being unable to acknowledge the pregnancy as a potential threat to his ‘white’ status. Although Marion is born light-skinned and with smooth hair, Helen cannot stop concerning about the toddler's future, and thus decides to make a life-changing choice: “she would fight back. The child at least would not be racked by fear and insecurity. She would grow up in ignorance, a perfectly ordinary child who would take her whiteness, her privileges, for granted” (PL 125). Keeping Marion in the dark about her own colouredness, in Helen's view, is no less than a gift to the child: “Helen's achievement was her legacy to Marion, a new generation unburdened by the past” (PL 150).

Part of the cost of reclassification is complete secrecy and the obliteration of the person's old identity, especially once Marion is born and her parents are forced to hide both from the world and from their own daughter. This situation, therefore, makes the Campbell's condition both painful and precarious. When Marion was a child and her mother Helen was still alive, her parents were obsessed with privacy and would never invite other people over. Throughout the novel, through Marion memories, the reader is given several clues concerning the secret of the Campbell family: “they kept indoors, even in summer. Her mother urged her to keep out of the sun” (PL 9); “her parents were always meticulous, neurotic really, about curtains” (PL 10); “Her parents may have hated each other, but they had connived,

conspired against her in the whispering that stopped when she entered a room” (PL 60); “Her parents never had friends over, and not having any family [...] she cannot recall anyone ever eating at their house” (PL 71). However, Marion's first guess is that she has been adopted, which in her view is much more likely than the truth: her parents chose to become white, thus leaving their previous life, culture, history and family behind. Disowning their own families proves to be the greatest sacrifice for both Helen—who cannot even attend her mother's funeral—and John, who in spite of his sister's reassurance that his signature on the papers will be a meaningless bureaucratic formality, believes that “swearing before God that according to the laws of the land he no longer had brothers and sisters had been [...] nothing short of a sin” (PL 157, 158).

Being play-whites also forces the Campbells to live in a constant state of alertness: “Vigilance is everything; to achieve whiteness is to keep on your toes. Which, John reasons, indicates that they cannot achieve it after all; being white in the world is surely about being at ease, since the world belongs to you” (PL 152). Whiteness, what Marion calls “this chimerical thing” (PL 151), thus becomes a utopia, an ideal and intangible state that can be achieved only externally. The Campbells may convince everybody else of their whiteness, but in the privacy of the household they are unable to fashion their identity either as coloureds or as ‘real whites’. In fact, the stressful condition that follows their reclassification forces their public and private life to become one: “With a child to raise, a public-private distinction was a luxury they could not contemplate; the public selves required all their energies. Playing—as others would call it—in the light left no space, no time for interiority, for reflecting on what they had done” (PL 123).

John and Helen's immersion in the identity they have fashioned for themselves seems to take over completely, both outside and at home; in the struggle to be white and in the fear of exposure, the Campbells lose their roots and end up living what appears to be a miserable life: "If there were cold shivers when colleagues talked about hotnos or uppity coloureds, they did not tell each other, did not giggle about it in their bedroom, for that space had lost its privacy, too; instead, they learned to use the vocabulary of the master race" (PL 124). Direct consequence of this attitude is the fact that Marion's parents gradually come to embody almost a stereotype of backwards, racist Afrikaners; in fact, her father's political views concerning the 'new South Africa' ("these kaffirs of the New South Africa kill you just like that, just for the fun of it", PL 13) sound ridiculous to Marion, who prides herself with being a modern, liberal woman. Although she grew up in a poor family and had an unhappy childhood, Marion has turned her life around and become a successful Afrikaner businesswoman. She knows her place in the world and feels, just like her mother had said, unburdened by the legacy of the South African minority she is part of. Even when she thinks about her past as a National Party voter, she dismisses her responsibility in virtue of the lack of a real alternative: "she'd never really supported apartheid. Even though she voted for the Nationalists, she knew deep down that these policies were not viable. But what could one do, short of joining the hypocritical English voters and betraying your own?" (PL 28).

Ever since she was a little girl, Marion's father has been telling her stories about the creatures of the sea, half human and half fish, who lure sailors to their islands with their songs. Marientjie is his own little mermaid, and she plays on the beach, bandaging her legs to pretend she has a fishtail. Helen resents these fantasies: "No good being half woman and half fish, half this and half that; you have to be fully one

thing or another, otherwise you're lost. [...] *Ashamed*, said her mother, as they should be, of being neither one thing nor another. No one likes creatures that are so different, so mixed-up” (PL 47, my emphasis). In hindsight, this bitter remark on a child's game is both a clue on their real identity and an explanation of why in Helen's view it is of vital importance to maintain the secrecy and embrace their white identities while burying their old selves. Her choice to become white in fact, appears to be motivated not only by the obvious practical advantages—such as better housing, employment and education opportunities, higher social status and so on—but also to avoid the shame that being a ‘mixed-race’ individual entails. Notably, Helen's contempt towards her and her family's coloured identity differs completely from the form of coloured rejectionism that circulated in South Africa from the 1970s, which, as illustrated in chapter one, was based on the rejection of an artificial racial classification imposed by the law, rather than on the shame of being of mixed origin.

What triggers Marion's search for identity is the photograph of a Patricia Williams in the newspaper. Although she dismisses the article as “Another TRC story” (PL 49), the image of the woman starts haunting her: “The eyes of the stranger hold hers accusingly, calling her to account [...] it hisses a command, to remember” (PL 54). This event urges Marion to try and make sense of the confused memories she has of the family's old coloured maid. Marion's investigation leads her to Wuppertal to visit an old acquaintance of Tokkie Karelse, who casually solves the puzzle: “O gits, it's like seeing a spook, because from down here with your face tilted like that you look the spitting image of Mrs Karelse my dear!” (PL 97). Although Brenda and Geoff try to reassure her, pointing out that in the ‘new South Africa’ ethnic labels are to be forgotten, Marion's identity is put to the test, she feels

“Naked, slippery [...] Hurlled into the world fully grown, *without a skin*” (PL 101, my emphasis). Before this discovery, her ignorance of her true family lineage made her, in all respects, ‘white’, as she underlines herself when she argues that only her parents were play-whites: “*they* crossed over. I was white, now I will have to cross over” (PL 107). She is the same woman but at the same time she is forced to reconsider herself in the light of her concealed colouredness: “These categories may have slimmed down, may no longer be tagged with identity cards, but once they were pot-bellied with meaning. [...] If everything from now on will be different (which is also to say the same), will the past be different too?” (PL 106). Once the truth is revealed, in fact, Marion starts to reanalyse her childhood memories: the arguments, the isolation and secrecy were all coherent consequences of the mask her parents needed to wear. In spite of all the advantages that her ‘whiteness’ has given her, such as a relatively easy career, Marion cannot help blaming her parents for depriving her of a family and authentic roots: “He has no idea, she thinks, none at all of the terrible injury he has done to her, to his family, to himself. His belief in the might of whiteness surpasses everything else” (PL 155).

When Marion finds out that Vumi McKee and his family, of Zulu origins, were in fact ‘play-coloureds’ during apartheid,³⁴ she believes that he will be sympathetic to her, as his parents, surely, must have harmed him the way her parents harmed her. However, instead of rejecting their family and origins, Vumi's parents made sure that their kids knew about—and were proud of—being Zulu:

His parents carried on pretending that no one knew they were Zulu [...] But at home, with the doors shut, they made sure that their children knew all about their forebears, their Zuluness, and they, the children, would never have dreamt to complain about being bullied at school or being called kaffirs. (PL 205, 206)

³⁴ With the term ‘play-coloured’ I mean those Africans who managed to be reclassified as coloureds during apartheid.

What for the McKee family was clearly a matter of survival, for the Campbells had rather become, as previously mentioned, a strive for the unachievable magnificence of whiteness. While Vumi's mother takes off her wig in relief in front of her coloured neighbours the very moment the end of apartheid is announced, in fact, Marion's father to this day struggles to admit he is not a 'genuine' Boer.

4.3 Griqua history in *David's Story*

This section concerns David's search for his Griqua roots in post-apartheid South Africa as well as Wicomb's fictional portrait of the paramount chief Andries Abraham Stockenstrom le Fleur. David and his family, like many others, were classified as 'coloured' during apartheid. However, once the struggle against white rule is over, and with it racial classification and the need for nationalism and armed resistance, David refuses to settle with his coloured identity, in open disagreement with his father: "It's people like you who give coloureds a bad name. What do you think I worked so hard for, getting us out of the gutter, wiping out all that Griqua nonsense [...] What has been the fruit of my labour but shame?" (DS 21).

Wicomb remarked that once the goal of Liberation has been achieved, David "resorts to a new kind of nationalism that is the colouredness or Griquaness, although he knows that there are problems with it".³⁵ The problems that Wicomb refers to are not only related to the fact that the historical sources David relies upon, mainly the Griqua Oumas, provide him with inaccurate, mythicised stories, as previously stated ("Ouma Ragel's stories may not have been as reliable as he

³⁵ Wicomb quoted in Willemse.

thinks”, “David flew off into another fiction, into the European origins of the Griqua chief”, DS 103, 35), but also to Le Fleur's political ideas, “His invention of the nation, his ludicrous notion of pureness”.³⁶

As pointed out in chapter two, and exemplified by David's father, Griqua ancestry has been viewed by some as a relic from the past with negative connotations: “Look what it's taken your mother and me, sweat and blood, to shake off the Griquanness, the shame and the filth and the idleness” (DS 23); “Griquas are from the olden times; there aren't any left now. We're all Coloured here” (DS 111). In *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, for instance, there are several biased references to Griquanness, in which it is often associated with ignorance and cowardice: “And don't you think you'll get away with it, sitting under the table like a tame Griqua” (CT 9); “here in the veld amongst the Griquas is no place for an educated person” (CT 86); “we were so worried. A Griqua girl, you know, and it was such a surprise when he brought your mother, such nice English she spoke and good features and a nice figure also” (CT 167). Others, however, are proud of their Griqua belonging and esteem the figure of Le Fleur, as exemplified by Ouma Ragel's idealisation of him (“What a job the great man had to civilise us, to get the message through our peppercorn heads. And now they say we are a drunken people [...] We Griquas have never been a drunken people, not since we became Griquas”, DS 95) and underlined by Hein Willemse: “He's such a revered figure with his descendants, in his community. For them he is a messianic prophet”.³⁷

In the novel, historical and fictional Le Fleur are in a constant dialogue. Wicomb relied on historical sources and stories to create this character, using his ideology and documented political activity as a starting point to fashion the figure

³⁶ Wicomb quoted in Willemse.

³⁷ Willemse.

of Le Fleur as a 'man', portrayed in his daily life: his activism and imprisonments, the problematic relationship with his fictional wife Rachael/Dorie, the voice of God telling him to lead the Griqua people to their Promised Land and appointing him a modern-times Moses. In this reconstruction of his life, Andrew le Fleur appears to be a deluded man, a "bumbling, incoherent visionary"³⁸ whose anachronistic dreams of independence and ethnic pride lead what under his guidance had become the new core of the Griqua people after the fall of the old Captaincies to their ruin.

When he has gathered a large community around him, in 1922 Le Fleur leads the Griquas to Beeswater, the Promised Land that Rachael's ironic voice calls "A godforsaken place" (DS 91). Once settled in the new land, the chief starts organising a new social structure and imposing a set of rules that will contribute to make the Griquas a moderate and sober people: "there will be no heathenish music, no dancing like savages" (DS 92); "No place for frivolity" (DS 93). Moreover, he introduces a set of customs that he claims to be old traditions fallen into disuse but in fact seem to have been invented by him; as an example, when Andrew suggests reviving the old usance of the Griqua Rain Sisters' trek through the desert carrying water, Rachael remarks: "I do not recall such a thing" (DS 153).

Through his doctrine based on purity, simplicity and hard work, Le Fleur makes an attempt at differentiating the customs and lifestyle of his community from those of both Europeans and Africans. On the one hand, the Griquas will have to stay away from whites because of their decaying morality: "We will pool our resources and distribute them equally on farms and farming equipment. There through hard work, sobriety and independence from corrupt European influence we will

³⁸ Willemse.

prosper” (DS 77). On the other hand, his people will have to distance themselves from the ‘uncivilised’ customs of black people, too: “No, that was what savage natives did and we are no cousins to Xhosas; we are a pure Griqua people with our own traditions of cleanliness and plainness and hard work” (DS 94). Significantly, Le Fleur draws a precise dividing line also between Griquas and coloureds. While the former term, in fact, is in his view derogatory and imposed from above by an authoritarian establishment, the latter refers to a community that used to be “a motley, nameless people, discarded” (DS 102), but thanks to his leadership has found a name, an identity and a purpose. The Griqua group, however, does not exclude coloured individuals on the basis of their descent, as all coloureds can become Griquas if they choose to: “We will wipe out *the stain of colouredness* and gather together under the Griqua flag those who have been given a dishonourable name” (DS 42); “he saw himself as chief of all coloured people under the banner of Griquas, for why would people choose to carry such an *indecent name* when they could all be Griquas?” (DS 149, my emphasis).

As pointed out by Driver, the already limited political influence of the Griquas of Beeswater further diminishes because of Le Fleur's developing separatism.³⁹ Taken together, in fact, his ideas of a ‘pure Griqua race’ and of a Promised Land lead him to advocate the necessity to be away from the corruption and wickedness of the cities and from all the other ethnicities:

Coloured, he sneered, coloured! Let us for a moment do without the name given to us by others. [...] Let us leave the Union to the Europeans as a white man's country; they, too, must learn to stand on their own feet and do without our labour, make their own arrangements with the kaffirs. Since they cannot look upon their shame, since they must discriminate against their own flesh, we whose very faces are branded with their shame will remove ourselves from their sight. Here, good people, is the

³⁹ Driver, p. 223.

solution for God's step-children: absolute separation. From white and from black. (DS 161)

Le Fleur calls himself and his people 'God's step-children', and shows a hint of pride when, only a year after the Rain Sisters' first mission, Sarah Gertrude Millin launches her novel of the same name: "He saw no reason to read it; he assumed her story would be an endorsement of his ideas—why else would she borrow his phrase?—and so gave it his fulsome praise" (DS 161). Ironically, Millin's novel about miscegenation all but advocates Griquas' right to a separate homeland by virtue of their ethnic worthiness. On the contrary, as discussed in chapter one, Millin's depiction of coloureds and Griquas is utterly derogatory:

In other parts of South Africa, among the Zulus, the Pondos, the Swazis, the Damaras, and other such tribes, the people were big, and black and vigorous—they had their joys and chances; but here, round about Griqualand West, they were nothing but an untidiness on God's earth—a mixture of degenerate brown peoples, rotten with sickness, an affront against Nature.⁴⁰

Although in Millin's work the term 'step-child' refers to the fact that 'mixed-bloods' are not entirely God's progeny, but an ignominious product of ethnic mixture, Le Fleur gets carried away, and is so positive that this novel will champion his ideas that he feels no need to ascertain that it is so. In this passage, Wicomb juxtaposes two completely opposite but equally extreme views on Griquaness: on the one hand, Millin's contempt; on the other hand, Le Fleur's ethnic pride. Doing so, she lumps both together, for they find a common ground insofar as they are based on the importance of 'race'.

As noticed by David, Le Fleur's segregating ideology prefigures the racist policies sanctioned by the National Party from the 1940s onwards: "How had Le

⁴⁰ Millin, p. 304.

Fleur come to be converted to separate homelands before the Nationalists had even dreamt up that idea?" (DS 78); "he offered them Apartheid" (DS 150). The sarcastic voice of the narrator comes into play when Prime Minister General Botha replies to one of countless letters from Le Fleur, showing "great enthusiasm" (DS 90) at the idea of ethnic separation. Just like Millin is inspired by his words to name her book, in the Chief's imagination General Botha becomes a political ally, who "was too busy thinking up good, workable schemes for relieving real black people of the burden of the land, so that only after three years in office did he pass the Natives' Land Act" (DS 162).

Le Fleur's enthusiasm towards the Land Act is the last straw for Rachael, and results in her outburst: "Miracle, my arse! It's a disgrace, a sin, a bloody disaster; it's the end of all predictions, the very death of us all. Then there followed profanities and obscenities" (DS 163). This episode abruptly puts an end to Rachael's already shaky support of her husband's political enterprise. At first an ironic and often critic observer, in fact, Rachael eventually takes a stand against what in the paramount chief's mind is merely the logical outcome of his people's need for recognition, decency and independence.

What emerges from Wicomb's narration is, in effect, the image of a man lost in delusions of greatness and racial pride, whose following was formed of scattered people struggling to find their place in a country that was rapidly changing and that would soon embrace apartheid. Although David has dedicated many years to the fight for a non-racial democracy and thus despises Le Fleur's segregationist ideas, he is also fascinated by the Griqua leader, he is "very drawn to some of those

notions that he knows are retrogressive”.⁴¹ In my view, David is intrigued by the *opperhoof* for the same reasons he is drawn towards the images of Saartjie Baartman and Charles Cuvier: he is a potential personality of the historical background that David wants to reconstruct for himself. The disorientation brought on by the end of apartheid and the fear of the marginalization that will be brought on by the new establishment, in fact, have driven David towards a frantic search for roots and identity, even if this search leads to a man who “defines the coloured as Griqua, and Griqua as pure”.⁴²

4.4 Sally and Dulcie: the domesticated woman and the female guerrilla

Wicomb's publications are rich of fascinating female characters, who exemplify different attitudes towards apartheid or liberation and diverse approaches towards their womanhood and what being a woman in South Africa entails. Freida is the most autobiographical character in Wicomb's work: she comes from Namaqualand, has studied in Cape Town and in England, and wants to be a writer. With her fears, mistakes and human weaknesses, she is the easiest character to relate to. Marion, on the other hand, is an emblem of post-apartheid female empowerment; she is a single young woman in charge of a business and—at least for the first half of the novel—part of that generation of liberal white people that feel unburdened by the past and unaccountable for the horrors that the previous generation have brought forth.

David's Story—which, as the title suggests, is supposed to be the story of a man—is Wicomb's richest work in terms of female characters, who prove to shape

⁴¹ Wicomb quoted in Willemse.

⁴² Willemse.

David's story both in the present and in the portraits of Griqua history. In fact, as previously stated, David relies on the stories of old ladies and relatives to make sense of his past, but once these stories are on paper he complains about that with the amanuensis/narrator (who not by chance is a woman herself): “You have turned it into a story of women; it's full of old women, for God's sake. [...] Can't some of the oumas at least be turned into oupas?” (DS 199, 200).

The main female characters, Sally and Dulcie, have both participated in the fight for Liberation, but in the course of the novel they appear to exemplify utterly different types of woman. Sally is described as “a comfortable wife [...] innocent, naive, a woman who responds artlessly and whose feet [...] are kept firmly on the ground; a character who will arouse sympathy” (DS 17). Having been raised in a ‘respectable’ coloured home, Sally has been taught how to behave properly, like a lady, so that she would in time be a modest and well-mannered lady herself and not end up in service like the other women in her family. This is the reason why her mother Sarie encouraged her to read, an activity that would at once help her stay out of trouble and get accustomed to keeping still for long periods of time, as in Ant Sarie's opinion “keeping still prevented her from making friends. Friends were the ruin of all God-fearing young people” (DS 118).

Joining the Movement, for Sally, becomes a way to escape this traditional gendered role: “It was the Movement that offered freedom in the form of loose khaki trousers and a break from reading about the sad coloured condition” (DS 119). As a result of her marriage to fellow comrade David, however, Sally is released from her role as a guerrilla fighter and has to return to her full-time job in a community centre and to the traditional female domestic duties of household management and

reproduction:⁴³ “marriage to David [...] lost her her place in MK—and took her back to the overrated business of reading novels” (DS 119). In spite of David assurance that her new duties are as important to the struggle as his own, Sally feels “an emptiness, a hollowness inside as if she had aborted, no, miscarried” (DS 14), and following her first pregnancy “Sally was an emaciated scarecrow of a woman” (DS 14). Her attempt at fashioning a new role for herself in society has failed; although Liberation has taken place—and called a halt to colour-based discrimination—women, even those who have actively fought against apartheid, have to go back to their previous life and resign to play the part of wives and mothers. If they refuse to do so, like Dulcie does, they may pay an onerous price.

Dulcie Olifant is one of David's fellow guerrilla fighters, a woman who has managed to reach a high rank in the MK in spite of her gender. David portrays her as a rather masculine, unattractive single woman: “She is not pretty, you know, not feminine, not like a woman at all” (DS 80); “He spoke of her bushy hair, her unfeminine stoop, the ugly nurse's shoes. A woman to be resisted” (DS 128). Although she seems to lack any typical feminine quality, Dulcie becomes David's love interest. Dulcie is also described as an unrealistically strong woman, with mythological, surreal features: “she has supernatural powers” (DS 180); “a protean subject” (DS 35).

Samuelson calls war and its aftermath “a representational mine-field in which women are cast as idealized warriors, silenced victims, and emblems of the domestic world toward which the male warrior ostensibly directs his efforts”.⁴⁴ Dulcie is precisely a symbol of women's presence in the war zone, and of their contradictory

⁴³ Samuelson, p. 851.

⁴⁴ Samuelson, p. 835.

status in times of demilitarisation.⁴⁵ In Gagiano's view, however, Dulcie can simultaneously represent a struggle icon and a figure aimed at mocking the need and desire for such icons because of her heroic, “amazonian” features.⁴⁶

As a result of her courage and superhuman faculties, on the one hand Dulcie disrupts David's role as male champion (“Comrade Dulcie [...] would not be in need of his protection”, DS 114), and on the other hand refuses to be merely the victim of abuse and to conform to gendered stereotypes—such as the weakness and innocence of women—but is first introduced to the reader while she “washes the sticky red from her hands” (DS 18). As suggested by André Viola, “Did she also participate in torturing? There seems to be no end to the cycle of violence and suspicion, so that the very allusiveness of the book suggests the difficulty there still is in reconstructing the garbled, painful history of South Africa”.⁴⁷ In war, in fact, women can no longer be cast solely as the weak part subjected to violence and in need of protection, but can both defend themselves and be the perpetrators of violence, so that stereotyped male/female dichotomies are shattered.⁴⁸

The participation of women in the armed struggle has the potential to establish equality between them and their comrade-in-arms. When the narrator asks David about the condition of female guerrillas, his reply is oblivious of any gendered peculiarity in women's experience of war: “Irrelevant, he barks. In the Movement these kinds of differences are wiped out by our common goal. Dulcie certainly would make no distinction between the men and women with whom she works” (DS 78). Then two questions arise: doesn't equality in the military sphere, for her, mean giving up her gender, or at least what femininity traditionally entails? And

⁴⁵ Samuelson, p. 834.

⁴⁶ Gagiano, p. 818.

⁴⁷ Viola, p. 12.

⁴⁸ Samuelson, pp. 839, 840.

what happens to women, who have equally fought side by side with men, once there is no more need for violence? The former question seems to be answered by Sally when she places herself and Dulcie in two categories apparently impossible to combine: “Does such a woman iron shirts? [...] And are there women in the world who do both? She thinks not” (DS 32). Later on, the same doubt is expressed by the narrator, who ironically remarks that “Such a woman does presumably not *rifle* in her handbag for a lipstick” (DS 79, my emphasis).

The latter question leads to the issue of equality and emancipation in post-war times. In Samuelson's view, the physical and psychological abuse that Dulcie is subjected to after the war is a direct result of the fact that her unfeminine behaviour, her bravery and rank have challenged the gendered status quo.⁴⁹ Once the struggle is over, in fact, all guerrillas are expected to drop the arms, but female fighters in particular must retreat into the domestic sphere and become ‘women’ (and unequal) again—like Sally does. Once there is no more need for her courage and leadership skills, however, Dulcie refuses to go back to ‘normality’, and therefore must be wiped out: “she's grown too big for her boots and they've had enough of her: She must give up her power, hand over her uniform, make way for the big men. But that is not enough. She knows too much” (DS 204). As a result, “Her story suggests that women who have fought for freedom may not, themselves, experience that freedom”:⁵⁰ her revolutionary efforts are bound to be betrayed and appropriated. Dulcie's story, therefore, is “about betrayal, about a faction in the Movement no longer requiring powerful coloured women”.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Samuelson, p. 840.

⁵⁰ Samuelson, p. 847.

⁵¹ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

David's recounting of a story that Dulcie once told him is both prophetic and symbolical of her post-war fate. Dulcie was a young recruit, and she was serving in the Botswana desert. As they were low on food supplies, she suggested to take honey from a bees' nest, but was immediately mocked by her fellow comrades and bullied into taking it herself to prove she was 'man enough'. Although she was badly stung, she did not stop until she filled the basket with honey: "Her hands, eyes, mouth were stung; bees covered her face [...] but she carried on, had to, since it was a matter of honour" (DS 82, 83). However, after several days of painful recovery, she found that her comrades had left her nothing: she had proved her valour, and nonetheless could enjoy none of the benefits that her pain had brought about. In order to participate to the struggle for Liberation, therefore, a woman must sacrifice and endure the same (if not more) sufferance of male comrades, yet not expect to receive anything in return.

The inner difference between Sally and Dulcie is evident in their experience with coercive sex, what Sally calls "this unspoken part of a girl's training" (DS 123). Sally is learning how to swim at a training camp in Mozambique. When she understands the intentions of the comrade that is supposed to teach her, she chooses to consent rather than be forced to have intercourse with him ("because she would not let him force her, lord it over her, she forced herself and said, Okay, if you want", DS 123), telling herself that "there were more important things to think of, there was freedom on which to fix her thoughts" (DS 123). While Sally believes that it may be a small price to pay for liberty, Dulcie is aware that coercive sex is one of the ways—and probably the most effective—in which men can establish their superiority, and therefore resists it. As a little girl, in fact, Dulcie soon realised how

“her body as a raced and gendered subject”⁵² marked her as a target for bullying. However, she also discovered that she had the potential to fight back: “It was then, as they rhymed her blackness with her cunt, that she bit back the tears and discovered the strength in her thin arms and legs that sent the little shits flying into the dust” (DS 80, 81). In another passage of the novel, Dulcie is portrayed being repeatedly tortured by mysterious night visitors, who are “both friend and foe” (DS 179). The man in charge tells his comrades in balaclavas “Not rape, that will teach her nothing” (DS 178), but then torture too proves to be pointless:

They do not understand that for a woman like her—who has turned her muscles into ropes of steel, who will never driven into subordination, who even as an eager girl in the bush wars resisted the advances of those in power, resisted her own comrades, having worked out that fucking women was a way of preventing them from rising in the Movement [...] there is no submission. (DS 179)

Right at the beginning of their collaboration, David gives the narrator a page in which he has drawn a number of geometrical shapes. Although she has had the sketches all along, it is only towards the end of the novel that the narrator makes the connection between these abstract outlines and the distorted silhouettes of genderless body parts:

There are the dismembered shapes of a body: an asexual torso, like a dressmaker's dummy; arms bent the wrong way at the elbows; legs; swollen feet; hands like claws. There is a head, an upside-down smiling head, which admittedly does not resemble her, except for the outline of bushy hair. I have no doubt that it is Dulcie that lies mutilated on the page. (DS 205)

This passage is significant in at least two respects. Firstly, as pointed out by Christa Baiada, it hints to fact that not only are the mysterious tormentors probably fellow ANC members, but that David may have been one of them. This suspicion is further

⁵² Baiada, p. 43.

confirmed by the fact that David commits suicide in the same exact way and place in which Dulcie was intimated to kill herself by her torturers.⁵³ Secondly, it exemplifies the “quasi-impossibility of representing the body in pain”⁵⁴ in contexts in which violence and abuse are impossible to express because of the “virus of secrecy” (DS 204). David's inability to speak about Dulcie's agony is a direct outcome of his loyalty to the MK, as distinctly admitting her brutal mutilation—even to himself—would lead him to put to question the whole Movement in which he has placed all his energies and hopes. In Baiada's words,

The treatment of women within the ANC is a topic shrouded in silence in South Africa. Shame over women's steatopygious bodies persists. Cultural amnesia is a palpable threat as contradictory voices and stories are reconciled into a single truth. Perhaps the concept of nation itself, dependent on constructions of gender difference and asymmetrical relationships between different groups of people, must be re-examined. *David's Story* raises these concerns about the nation, and women's relation to it, as a warning that the struggle for freedom and equality must continue and must include women.⁵⁵

Although she is clearly one of the main characters, Dulcie is never actively involved in the story, but is mainly depicted through David's accounts and projections. In fact, “She's the love interest, so to speak, but there's no physical love scene; she's there and yet not there. There's no Dulcie really as a character that operates in the novel. She's only talked about”,⁵⁶ so that on more than one occasion the narrator questions the very existence of this example of alternative femininity that haunts the story with her experience of sufferance and abuse: “Dulcie is a decoy. She does not exist in the real world” (DS 124). However, hers is the most

⁵³ Baiada, p. 37

⁵⁴ Viola, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Baiada, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Wicomb quoted in Willemse.

represented body in the novel.⁵⁷ Representing Dulcie's concomitant ghostly presence and bodily pervasiveness throughout the text thus proved challenging. In Wicomb's words:

the problem of representing her is twofold: first, she is in a sense 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, and her gender is not unconnected with this treatment. Secondly, as a figure who is pure body, a body that is tortured, she stands in contrast to my playfully echolalic treatment of steatopygia as a motif in the novel [...] And having supernatural qualities, she also echoes Le Fleur himself.⁵⁸

In the end, Sally and Dulcie are two characters who equally exemplify the persistence of patriarchal practices and female oppression on the threshold of the establishment of an idealised 'rainbow nation'. Samuelson observes that when Dulcie thinks about committing suicide by driving off Chapman's Peak, she imagines feeling "that macerated flesh grow weightless in the water, dissolve in the white spray that beats against the rock" (DS 180), and that same image of flesh dissolving in water is used by Sally to describe her physical state after being abused: "[she] found her body dissolving, changing its solid state in the water through which she then moved effortlessly" (DS 123).⁵⁹ Although in different contexts and ways, and despite their differences, Sally and Dulcie find a middle ground insofar as they are led to the same physical experience—imaginary or not—by those who they used to fight with simply for being what they are, women.

Wicomb's analysis of patriarchal practices in South African society is primarily exemplified by Le Fleur's chauvinist behaviour towards his wife Rachael. Although he owes her his leadership position, in fact, he is repeatedly portrayed

⁵⁷ Baiada, p. 38.

⁵⁸ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

⁵⁹ Samuelson, p. 846.

silencing and manipulating her for his own ends.⁶⁰ Seventy years later, this pattern finds a counterpart in David's marriage, as previously illustrated, but also in his relationship with Dulcie, the narrator, and with women in general. Significantly, when Dulcie shows David the scars and excess of stretched skin left by the bee stings in Botswana, "he could see no evidence of that savage attack" (DS 83). Although he holds her in high estimation and feels sorry for her, David is still a representative of his gender, and as such is oblivious of the price paid by all those women who joined the fight, whether they were exploited and betrayed like Dulcie or re-domesticated like Sally:

What David fails to see or even look for in the past, and thus disregards in the present, is the persistence of gender oppression – particularly within the masculinist undertaking of nation building that uses and abuses women's bodies in the name of the nation while silencing their voices and excluding them from full belonging.⁶¹

Moreover, although David has placed the narrator in a position of relative power over him because of her role as storyteller, his patronising attitude towards women is also demonstrated in his continuous derisory approach towards her ideas, opinions and beliefs⁶² ("I have certainly underestimated the extent to which your head is filled with middle-class, liberal bullshit", DS 197). David's biased outlook on women in general is also clear when he asks the narrator to turn some of the old ladies in the narration into old men, as mentioned earlier. In fact, relying exclusively on women to fashion his story would in his view diminish its overall historical and universal significance: "Who would want to read a story like that? It's not proper history at all" (DS 199). As I will analyse later on, David's approach

⁶⁰ Gagiano, p. 817.

⁶¹ Baiada, p. 34.

⁶² Baiada, p. 36.

towards Saartjie Baartman, too, can be interpreted in the light of his patriarchal mind-set.

4.5 Coloured physical self-consciousness

One of the major themes in Wicomb's work is physical appearance: most characters in her books are concerned with the way they look, and generally view whiteness as an ideal of beauty. Body features are particularly relevant because in most cases they are connected with larger questions, such as identity, coloured racism and prejudice, miscegenation and black/coloured womanhood. For instance, first in school and later at university, Freida grows to be a very self-conscious young woman, constantly worried about her physical appearance and tormented by her mother's concerns ("What can a girl do without good looks? Who will marry you? We'll have to put a peg on your nose", CT 164). However, the possibility to live abroad and thus get in touch with the modern Western outlook on ethnic diversity leads to her reevaluation of her own physical peculiarities, which in her view cease to have automatic negative connotations only due to their connection with a specific ethnic belonging. This change of attitude is exemplified by Freida's decision to abandon the usual torture she used to impose on herself in order to have smooth hair ("the terrible torments of the comb", CT 164), arguing that in Europe "Some perfectly sensible people [...] pay pounds to turn their sleek hair into precisely such a bushy tangle" (CT 178).

The allusions to physical consciousness in Wicomb's work mostly concern female characters. When, referring to *David's Story*, Willemsse points out that "The

novel can also be read as a feminist project, for example the physicality of black women: broad bums and their concerns with their hair”, Wicomb replies: “I did want to talk about women in many ways [...] Yes, there is a writing back element, writing back at those colonial descriptions [...] writing back about women's bodies and hair, which is another coloured obsession”.⁶³ As stated earlier, marriage and ‘re-domestication’ have taken Sally back to the activity of reading novels, which for her becomes a reward for all her daily efforts as a wife and mother. However, in a section of the novel, Sally tosses away the book she is reading because “She has had enough of the bodies of black women: their good thick legs, their friendly high-riding backsides, their great sturdy hams” (DS 117). Sally's rejection of the traditional stereotyped descriptions of non-white women thus links to Wicomb's attempt at ‘writing back’, meaning revisiting certain physical features that have been representing women in colonial discourse and infuse them with a new meaning.

The main body and facial features that Wicomb's coloured characters are self-conscious about, other than skin colour, are all those lineaments and body peculiarities typical of KhoiSan individuals and resembling those of Asian people (“Someone had once told her that Chinese people did not look so unlike them, the Namaquas, except of course for the hair”, CT 130). These features are:

- High cheekbones (“We are not paupers with nothing to eat [...] You don't want cheekbones that jut out like a Hottentot's”, CT 24; “In spite of her reddish-auburn hair she was dark [...] If he was not mistaken, there was a certain prominence about those cheekbones”, PL 139);
- Narrow eyes (“if only my eyes were wider I would be quite nice”, CT 164));

⁶³ Willemse.

- So-called ‘peppercorn hair’;⁶⁴
- Steatopygia (which affects several female characters in *David's Story*).

Hair

Hair, whether wild and bushy or sleek and silky, is what most of the female characters are mainly concerned about. In fact, in all of Wicomb's publications there are several references to hair texture, to what good hair—meaning smooth ‘white’ hair—means in terms of social status and self-esteem (“Mrs Bates had said that Helen, with her lovely copper hair, belonged in that set of socialites, the coloured elite” (PL 129); “nice coloured people, those with at least good hair, would have nothing to do with Afrikaans” (PL 128). Most of the characters, being coloured, have however inherited frizzy hair from their KhoiSan or African ancestors. Ross provides an example concerning the Griquas' approach towards their hair, which was viewed as a mark revealing the more or less ‘African-ness’ of the individual: “those Griquas who had the peppercorn hair of their Khoisan forefathers always hid it under scarves of hats, while those who had the straight hair of the European displayed it arrogantly”.⁶⁵

As pointed out by Isaac Schapera, the Khoi and San populations have similar physical traits:

The Hottentots and Bushmen are so much alike in physical characters and so distinct in appearance from the other inhabitants of South Africa [...] Both the Cape Bushmen and the Hottentots have a brownish-yellow skin colour; black, spiral sparsely-distributed hair; low heads and faces, broad flat noses with low bridges.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Often referred to in the books as ‘nylonish’, ‘bushy’ or ‘frizzy’ hair.

⁶⁵ Ross, pp. 134, 135.

⁶⁶ Isaac Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa: Bushmen and Hottentots* (London: Lowe and

In the section of Schapera's book dedicated to these groups' physical traits, he insists on the similarities between them, especially concerning particular genetic traits that distinguish them from other African peoples, such as steatopygia (as we will see in more detail later on), peppercorn hair (“The hairs are tightly coiled into small spiral knots (not inappropriately referred to as “peppercorns”)),⁶⁷ and an overall scarcity of hair (“There is very little hair on the body. The greater part of its surface seems completely bare [...] It is only on the scalp and occasionally on the eyebrows that the hair is at all thick [...] The hair is commonly very short and fine”).⁶⁸ When Jane observes the young South African woman sculpted in Doulton Fountain, it is the very thickness of the girl's hair that reveals her mixed, “unmistakably coloured” ethnic origin: “Not only are her facial features—cheekbones, nose, full lips—distinctly Khoi, but the fullness of hair framing her face speaks unashamedly of miscegenation” (GA 67, 71). As Khoi people have sparse hair, in fact, the young woman must be coloured like Jane.

On more than one occasion Wicomb describes the—at times painful—techniques adopted by coloured women and girls to straighten and ‘tame’ their hair: “They were coloured girls; they wore the cut-off ends of stockings [...] on their heads to flatten their hair” (DS 7); “They didn't talk to each other about hair and never mentioned the visible evidence of a hot comb that occasionally, accidentally, singed an earlobe or left a tell-tale scar on the forehead” (GA 97). Freida even describes in detail the ritual she undergoes regularly in order to have good hair:

Brydone, 1965), pp. 62, 63. As previously mentioned, the terms ‘Bushman’ and ‘Hottentot’ are now considered offensive.

⁶⁷ Schapera, p. 56.

⁶⁸ Schapera, p. 56.

I check my preparations: the wet hair wrapped over large rollers to separate the strands, dried then swirled around my head, secured overnight with a nylon stocking, dressed with vaseline to keep the strands smooth and straight and then pulled back tightly to stem any remaining tendency to curl. (CT 26)

In “Friends and *goffels*”, the quality of one's hair is explained to be a major factor determining a kid's popularity in school. The two protagonists become best friends because they are equally bullied and isolated by their class-mates, mainly by reason of their bushy hair:

In the class of posh coloureds Dot and Julie were the only ones who were very dark, had short frizzy hair and flat noses with prominent cheekbones. Everyone knew the indexes of worth amongst coloureds, knew the acceptable combinations of facial features, and that good hair would always override the other disabilities. (GA 95)

However, some characters decide to resist this hair-based discrimination. Freida, for instance, returns to South Africa proud of her nylonish hair, “an alternative European, bourgeois style” (CT 117), while Drew responds to Jane's aunt Trudie, who “set about checking the hair in the nape of her neck for frizz. Always a give-away”, remarking that “it gave away everything about the one who investigates” (GA 64).

In a passage of *David's Story*, Wicomb draws an interesting parallel between women wearing nylon stockings over their head to straighten their hair and guerrillas, who wear stocking masks to conceal their identity. Ouma Sarie stops to look at young coloured girls chatting, and “Their tilted, stockinged heads were those of guerrillas deliberating over an operation” (DS 7). Soon after, the reader is given an ironic explanation of why so many coloured women joined the Movement:

This was the decade of brave baby girls with tightly bound guerrilla heads, which goes some way towards explaining the little-known fact that the Movement managed to recruit so many

coloured women [...] who found that it took no more than a swift tug to drag the nylon across the face and radically transform their sleek-haired selves into guerrillas. Thus killing two birds with one stone, they saw in the Movement a liberation from laying their weary heads on the discarded panty hose of the rich. That Africanisation would at the same time discourage the fight against fizzy hair was an irony which they could not foresee. (DS 9)

As a result, nylon stockings appear not only to have encouraged women to join the fight towards Liberation, but also to be a symbol of oppression because they were used to look less ‘African’: “It would be, they were sure, only months before the overthrow of apartheid, [...] only months before rows of girls would whip the stockings from their heads” (DS 15). However, Sally—who has been wearing a nylon stocking over her head since the very moment she was born, and later joined the Movement—refuses the oversimplified association between straightened hair and white mimicry, saying to David: “So leave people like myself to straighten my hair if I want [...] And it's not about aping white people; they don't straighten their hair [...] I'm sick of people with their so-called ethnic bushy heads” (DS 29).

Steatopygia

The main female characters affected by steatopygia in *David's Story* are Sally, Dulcie, Ouma Ragel, Rachael (Lady Kok), Antjie, the Rain Sisters and the amanuensis/narrator. This ‘excessive’ accumulation of fat on the buttocks and thighs is believed to be particularly common in KhoiSan female individuals, as pointed out by Schapera: “[in San women] there is often found a strong accumulation of fat on the thighs and especially on the buttocks, a character known as steatopygia”;⁶⁹ “[in Khoi women] Steatopygia is far more common and more pronounced than in

⁶⁹ Schapera, p. 58.

Bushwomen; it is found in the women of all the Hottentot tribes, although it tends to disappear when there is any degree of intermixture with other peoples”.⁷⁰ This genetic trait constitutes a link between all the female characters across time, and takes different, contradictory meanings.

In the present (1991) there are allusions to the negative association with steatopygia, which would link this physical peculiarity with female hypersexuality and deviancy. As an example, David—although he regards it in a positive fashion as it is a trait of his ‘hero’ Saartjie Baartman—by seeing a body part as carrier of a particular value only underlines the objectification of black women through their body: “he is anxious, having found the fancy name, that it will not be understood simply as natural fat padding of the buttocks but rather might be read in white people's pathological terms” (DS 17).

In the past (1920s), Ouma Ragel and the “irregularity of her birth” (DS 96) seem to suggest that she is actually chief Le Fleur's daughter, and not Gert Klaassen's. In fact Antjie, who was believed to be infertile (“That she remains childless does not matter to him; there are enough mouths to feed”, DS 97), gives birth to a green-eyed baby: “It was Gert who declared that she looked like a Le Fleur [...] those telegonous eyes were a brilliant green” (DS 158), like the Griqua chief's. Antjie's adultery would not only create a blood link between David and the paramount chief, but would also “seem to support the colonial assumption that concupiscence and steatopygia are necessarily linked” (DS 96), as bitterly remarked by the narrator.

It is relevant that the Rains Sisters, appointed to journey to the promised land of the Griquas carrying water, were chosen by Le Fleur himself among steatopygous women—steatopygia being here regarded as a sign of holiness—so that the colonial

⁷⁰ Schapera, p. 62.

assumptions about this genetic characteristic appear here to be completely reversed: “He 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” (DS 153). Middle-aged Antjie, who has been chosen by the paramount chief to lead the other steatopygous women through the path, has thus been blessed herself, and when she unexpectedly gets pregnant she believes—or is sarcastically assumed to believe—to be a modern-time Mother Mary: “her womb having been filled in that fire, she felt at last at peace with God, who had taken charge and translated the locked gaze, the whispered syllables, this time into the substance of flesh” (DS 157); “Even after the Sunday service, when they all shook hands in a circle outside the church, [Le Fleur] barely held hers for fear of another miracle” (DS 158). Ironically, not only is the baby born out of this Immaculate Conception clearly Le Fleur's, but it is also a girl. As explained by Wicomb, magic realism notably influences the apocryphal stories that circulate about Le Fleur; consequently, she chose to elaborate on them in order to create a fictional blood link between the two characters, thus opening a dialogue between the two historical periods: “I could [...] 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”.⁷¹

As steatopygia ties all main female characters together, this genetic trait becomes a signifier for coloured womanhood, despite the negative, stereotypical associations—such as hypersexuality, lasciviousness and adultery—it may seem to have. As far as Sally and Rachael are concerned, both embody a link between

⁷¹ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

steatopygia and female oppression; in fact, their bodies fatten more and more as they are forced to play the traditional role of decent, passive and silent women. Sally, as already mentioned, spends most of her childhood and teenage years sitting at home and reading—decent activity for a young lady—her sedentary life being a major factor in the development of her steatopygia: “No one had told her that all that keeping still encouraged the growth of an uncommonly large posterior” (DS 119). In one passage of the novel, Rachael leaves the church in anger because of the preacher's words of praise for the Land Act. When her husband finds her sitting on the stairs of the building and tries to talk ‘some sense’ into her, Rachael wants to leave, but “struggled to manoeuvre the bounteous behind in which she stored her sadness, so that in those days it had grown quite unmanageable” (DS 163). As Rachael is not allowed to express her views and resentment, all her sorrow transforms into body fat. In both cases, steatopygia seems to be passed on from mother to daughter both in the form of genetic inheritance and through a traditional education that would have women at home, still or merely preoccupied with household management.

Steatopygia seems to lose its power to represent women negatively and thus confine them to the private sphere through Dulcie, who incarnates a new kind of womanhood thanks to her dignity, courage and strength: “Her own body, always in trousers and shirt, lives in the curious past tense of the Venda dress, taking its aspect from the gaze of a viewer who cannot undress it, who cannot imagine the criss-cross cuts on each of her naturally bolstered buttocks” (DS 19). Dulcie cannot be undressed: her steatopygia is hidden behind heavy khaki trousers and cannot be turned into a female weakness. Concealed by masculine clothes, Dulcie's body thus

does not offer any possibility for a viewer to use her body parts to represent or oppress her.

Coloured prejudice and miscegenation

As previously remarked, many coloured characters are biased towards other coloured people because of their KhoiSan or African-looking skin colour, facial features or hair. One of the reasons behind coloured prejudice is the fact that, as analysed in chapter one, during apartheid coloured people with fairer skin and European features generally held a higher status in society and had better opportunities concerning employment, housing, and so on.

Skin-colour appears to be a very influential factor in coloured marriages. For instance, Freida's family do not have a high opinion of aunt Truida, who has married mentally unstable Jan Klinkies: “in spite of her light skin, came from a dark-complexioned family and there was certainly something nylonish about her hair [...] Truida had in other words made a good marriage” (CT 14). Unlike aunt Truida, aunt Nettie managed to take advantage of her looks to advance socially: “Not that she would ever lose sight of those attributes that lifted her out of the madam's kitchen, the pale skin and smooth wavy hair that won her a teacher for a husband” (CT 102). Moreover, Marion's grandmother Tokkie was very concerned about her engagement to Flip Karelse—“a handsome, light-skinned man with dreamy hazel eyes” (PL 135)—because of her dark complexion:

She told him of her own blood, her mother's sister who was white as driven snow with good red hair, but he laughed. He was no butcher; what did he care about blood or skin? [...] How could he possibly value what he called her long slender limbs, her delicate facial bones, her almond eyes, all black as the night? (PL 135)

Flip's appreciation of her 'African' looks astonish both Tokkie and the village girls, who gossip about her using witchcraft to marry such a light-skinned man (PL 137).

At times prejudice is the result of actual racism, that is to say, of an automatic association between body features and mental and behavioural characteristics. Helen, for example, worries about her white-looking baby by juxtaposing blackness and lack of intelligence: "the child's hair would grow into a mass of fuzzy curls; she would be slow to learn, mentally retarded; she would become a kaffirboetie" (PL 125).

While white features are generally considered to be synonym of worth, David has a completely different attitude towards his green 'European' eyes: "There is no hint of a Griqua slant in those eyes. They are a soft, feminine green [...] Sally will never guess how he hates those eyes, fake doll's eyes dropped as if by accident into his brown skin" (DS 98). As a militant in the Liberation Movement, in fact, David has joined other ANC guerrillas in the struggle against racialism, which in his case translates into the rejection of his 'white' roots: David finds his own green eyes distasteful because they are an unmistakable sign of miscegenation, the shameful legacy of a European coloniser. While most coloured people, his father included, are proud to acknowledge their 'white blood' and to remember their European forefathers, David is only interested in his African roots (Sarah: "Next thing you'll be off overseas to check out your roots in the rubbish dumps of Europe, but no, I forget, it's the African roots that count", DS 27). However, his research of his African roots appears unsuccessful in the novel, as David ends up identifying only his European white forefather—Madame la Fleur's son, "green-eyed Eduard", whose "story can be found in Mrs. Sarah Gertrude Millin's narrative about miscegenation" (DS 37, 38)—and thus solely reconstructing the lineage that gave

him those unusual eyes in the first place. A. A. S. le Fleur, the main focus of David's historical research, looks in fact very similar to David himself, and incorporates all the traits of his heterogeneous origins: "The mixture of Malayan-Madagascan slave, French missionary, and Khoisan hunter blood had produced a *perfect blend* of high cheekbones, bronze skin, and bright green almond eyes" (DS 39, my emphasis). Significantly, light eyes are a tell-tale sign of blood relation and miscegenation also in "Another Story", in which two distant relatives, Sarah and Deborah, meet for the first time: "In the two pairs of eyes, the green-flecked hazel eyes derived from the same sockets of a long-dead European missionary [...] improbable eyes, set generations ago into brown faces" (GA 181).

In *Playing in the Light*, Marion and Brenda meet a man with different iris colour on their way to Wuppertal: "his extraordinary eyes [...] one green and one black [...] He is a peacock man, a brightly coloured creature from mythology, a messenger from the gods" (PL 87). Unlike David, this man seems to reconcile his African and European roots through his eyes, and thus becomes "a messenger from the gods", maybe announcing a new era in which racial definitions and the search for African or European roots will lose significance.

4.6 David and Saartjie Baartman

In *David's Story* there are several connections between the narration and Saartjie Baartman, who becomes an essential character inasmuch as her erratic presence helps the protagonist give a historical and national value to his story. Although the narrator questions David's monograph about Baartman's journey and sufferance

(There are quite enough of these stories”, DS 135), he states that a part about her is essential in order to write about Griqua roots: he “insists that a story of Sara Baartman must be told in relation to his own locations and politics”.⁷² As a matter of fact, the narrator admits to have removed the part about Eva/Krotoa at the Cape, but to have agreed to include Baartman because in David's view “One cannot write nowadays [...] without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself” (DS 1).

Because she came from South Africa, she is a national symbol of the colonial subject's exploitation at the hand of colonial powers and because of her heterogeneous as well as still uncertain ethnic origin (“her people—variously called the KhoiSan, the San, the Nama and the Griqua—had been intermixing with the Dutch and British settlers of South Africa for nearly 200 years”),⁷³ Baartman, in David's view, can be turned into an ancestor to all coloured people. Her presence, therefore, enhances the narration in at least two respects: first, Baartman serves as an immediately recognizable and distinguished historical character to whom the other characters can relate; second, she is a token representing the repression of all coloured people, as her “meaning has been reclaimed from a colonial symbol of Otherness and shame, to a symbol of indigenous roots and a reminder of past suffering”.⁷⁴ Moreover, as previously discussed, through her steatopygia Baartman is connected to all main female characters in the novel, thus becoming a symbol of non-white womanhood as well.

⁷² Desiree Lewis, “Writing Baartman's Agency: History, Biography, and the Imbroglios of Truth”, in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*, ed. by Natasha Gordon-Chipembere (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 101-119 (p. 101).

⁷³ Smith McKoy, p. 90.

⁷⁴ Baiada, p. 35.

The protagonist reconstructs the Le Fleur family lineage from Madame la Fleur, who was—in David's fictional account—the housekeeper of Georges Cuvier, the 19th century French scientist who studied and then dissected Saartjie Baartman's body (“the historical figure of Madame la Fleur was transformed into Cuvier's housekeeper”, DS 35). Cuvier is told to have “taken responsibility for her son's education” (DS 36), and as Eduard's mentor he exposed the boy to the ‘scientific’ evidence he had gathered from the examination of Baartman's body: “the benefactor who beckoned him into his room to see the grotesque drawings of a woman's vast buttocks and other parts that he knew were sinful to look at” (DS 38). When a new wave of persecution leads Huguenot Madame la Fleur and her son to the Cape, Eduard is inspired by Cuvier's tuition to bring God to Baartman's people, “roused not at the thought of brave colonial adventures but by the souls of the poor barbarians, clumps of disfigured steatopygous people [...] It was the buttocks that made the boy sigh deeply [...] those mountains of insensible flesh that would have to be infused with a love for God” (DS 38, 39).

In his Kokstad hotel room, David finds Francis T. Buckland's *Curiosities of Natural History* on the bookshelf, right next to the Bible. After having by chance opened the book in the very section concerning Georges Cuvier, he decides to delete from the story a long part concerning the French scientist, who both angers and fascinates David: “it was that page that persuaded him to cut out from the story the lengthy piece on the scientist whose name so enraged him”, DS 33. On the one hand, he cannot but despise Cuvier's anatomical studies of Baartman's genitalia:

For it was not only the spectacular steatopygia that she strutted in her cage for all of England and France to giggle at—no, the entire world, thanks to Cuvier could peer in private at those parts of which no decent person would speak, let alone make drawings [...] It was the shame in print, in perpetuity, the

thought of a reader turning to that page, that refreshed David's outrage. (DS 33)

On the other hand, however, David is intrigued by the scientist's genius and intellectual life: “he found his interest deflected from outrage on Baartman's behalf to fascination with Cuvier's mind [...] That Cuvier, rejecting the obviousness of form, should have invented a system based on features hidden from view appealed to the guerrilla” (DS 33). David's monograph on Baartman is significantly described as both “meticulously researched” and “complete with novelistic details”, which are not necessarily appreciative of her: “Saartje’s foolish vanity, the treachery of white men [...] the cage in London decked with leopard skins and [...] the turning of the spectacular buttocks this way and that, so that Europeans would crack their ribs with laughter” (DS 134, 135). Despite his outrage at the thought of European people peeking and laughing at her, David's approach towards Baartman does not ultimately differ from theirs, as he “reduces her to an objectified body and feminine weakness, and has little sympathy for her as a person”.⁷⁵

At one point in the novel, the narrator complains against the fact that David uses Saartjie Baartman for his own ends (giving a historical foundation to his story), pointing out that “she may not even have been a Griqua”. When David replies “Baartman *belongs* to all of us” (DS, 135, my emphasis), he in fact exemplifies the way she “has been collectively laid claim to”⁷⁶ and seen as an object to be possessed and employed to pursue specific goals—whether to create pseudo-scientific systems or to fashion a family or national history—two hundred years after her death. As pointed out by Baiada, Baartman is important to David only insofar as “she symbolises the historical mistreatment, racist manipulation and misrepresentation of

⁷⁵ Baiada, p. 35.

⁷⁶ Lewis, p. 103.

South Africans by colonial powers”,⁷⁷ and can therefore be of some use as far as the development of a post-Liberation national culture is concerned. David's desperate attempt to connect his story with Baartman's is indicative of the whole country's rush for national icons on whom to ground the search for a new identity no more based on ‘race’, as explained by Wicomb:

Well, I suppose the furore about the return of Saartjie Baartman's remains says it all. Dozens of groups are staking their claim, including the Griquas. Another version of the fashionable scramble for alterity—and with no regard to the further outrage to her memory. But that's the kind of thing nations rely on; icons, and let's face it, we're rather short on those [...] in a world of vulgar obsession with race, we happily escape having to identify ourselves in those tired old black/white terms. We have families, communities, there is no need to angst about identity, to hang on to old apartheid lessons in racial identity. Or to search for ancestors, symbolic ones because Baartman can't of course be everyone's biological ancestor. So she has to be fictionalised, like the steatopygia in my novel! And such appropriation of an icon of brutalisation and oppression as Baartman undoubtedly is, does it not smack horribly of staking a claim on suffering?⁷⁸

However, in Gabea Bederoon's view, David's attempt at appropriating the ‘Hottentot Venus’ is ultimately unsuccessful: “The Baartman whom Wicomb writes into existence in *David's Story* is definitely resistant to all mythological claims, leaving readers at the end of the novel with an image of a recurring, elusive figure whose meaning cannot be defined by national or ethnic symbolism”.⁷⁹

Saartjie Baartman finds two distinct counterparts in Sally and Dulcie, who once more appear to be complementary characters. Besides the fact that they share their first name, Saartjie and Sally have both given up their bodies: the former by contracting it away, the latter by allowing fellow guerrillas to abuse it. On the other hand, the recurrent descriptions of Dulcie's mutilated body parts mirror Eduard's

⁷⁷ Baiada, p. 36.

⁷⁸ Wicomb quoted in Meyer and Olver.

⁷⁹ Bederoon, p. 70.

memories of Cuvier's laboratory and notes: "There were also sketches of a delicate face with high cheekbones, shell-like ears and slanted eyes, but these were severed from the bodies" (DS 38). In these regards, David and Cuvier appear to perform a similar role towards the two women respectively, as "David perpetuates the injury to Dulcie in his narrative fragmentation of her. Reducing her to pieces and distorting her story, David becomes Cuvier to her Baartman".⁸⁰ Because of the confused accounts that David is able to provide concerning the physical torture that Dulcie has suffered, she is linked to Baartman's fate post-mortem, that is to say, to the fact that her body was torn apart and examined for the sake of science.

In David's mind, Dulcie and Saartjie Baartman are inescapably connected, so that the latter can be used to talk about the guerrilla: "Because of his inability to speak of her, he has promised to make notes on Dulcie [...] having tried and failed, he chose to displace her by working on the historical figure of Saartjie Baartman instead" (DS 134). Baiada suggests that, through these connections, the novel presents a long chain of women abused throughout history in the name of science or nation building, and that Dulcie's displacement may be symptomatic of David's refusal to recognise the ANC's—and his—responsibility: "by discussing Baartman rather than Dulcie, or the distant rather than recent past, the blame can be placed elsewhere rather than on himself and the Movement".⁸¹

⁸⁰ Baiada, p. 37.

⁸¹ Baiada, p. 38.

CONCLUSION

In this work I have tried to identify the main thematic areas that are characteristic of Wicomb's production, and analysed them in the light of historical, political and literary research. Because of the complex quality of her writing, gathering material concerning, for instance, the social structure and political events that led most coloured people to vote for the NP in 1994, or the reasons behind the choice of some coloureds to 'cross the racial line', has been essential as it provided a firm starting point in order to read and interpret the texts.

I would like to add a few words regarding the complexity of Wicomb's writing, taking one episode from *Playing in the Light* as an example. Brenda is a very critical voice inside Marion's travel agency, where she is the first non-white employee. In one of many arguments with white colleague Boetie, the latter complains about the current state of things in the country, blaming her ethnic group: "Just chaos and violence, that's what we can thank the new government for [...] This is your lot, killing each other and causing mayhem; nothing to do with us" (PL 36). Then again, Brenda replies by calling him—and with him the whole white minority—to account:

You don't think that years of oppression and destitution and perversion of human beings, thanks to the policies that you voted in, have anything to do with you? [...] wouldn't it be more honest to say that you didn't know any better, that you didn't understand the implications of accepting jobs and salaries that others were barred from [...] in those good old days all you fine people who didn't vote for it enjoyed the benefits [...] Oh no, it didn't occur to you then to be disgusted by the state of the country; it didn't occur to you then that such decent, law-abiding living was immoral, unacceptable (PL 36, 37).

The juxtaposition of Boetie's and Brenda's opposite points of view on such complex dynamics is indicative of Wicomb's approach towards the central issues that surfaced with the end of apartheid, such as the burst of violence and crime in the

country, the responsibilities of the white and black communities, the status and search for identity of coloureds and of other ethnic minorities such as the Griquas, or the quest for 'truth' with the end of the 'white' cultural hegemony. Instead of imposing her narrative voice, in fact, Wicomb always lets her characters speak for themselves, in a constant dialogue in which these issues are introduced casually, discussed from different and at times contrasting points of view, and finally left open. In this way, the reader is given several elements to analyse and can in the end elaborate their own personal opinion on the matter.

Wicomb always questions the existence of one fixed 'truth', which translates into her postmodern approach to literature, which, as previously illustrated, is admittedly "fragmented, indeterminate".¹ The contradictory structure and legacy of apartheid, in Wicomb's view, cannot be simply dealt with using a traditional narrative system, because reality is still a battleground of different, contrasting 'truths'. The issue of coloured people's struggle to fashion their identity, for instance, is present in all of Wicomb's books, but the characters approach it in different ways. On the one hand, especially in the short stories and sections of the novels set before the 1990s, most characters identify with the social category they have been placed in by law. Others, on the other hand, believe that coloureds should take advantage of the end of racial classification to participate in a collective rebirth, in a new society in which one's identity will cease to matter. Sally, for instance, calls coloureds "multipurpose, adaptable [...] brand new Tupperware people" (DS 29), while Freida's childhood friend Moira explains: "we're so new [...] Coloureds haven't been around for that long, perhaps that's why we stray. 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

¹ Wicomb quoted in Willemsse.

that's why we stray” (CT 156). But then, David refuses to give up his quest for a new identity; in his view, coloureds cannot just be themselves: “We don't know what we are; the point is that in a place where everything gets distorted, no one knows who he is” (DS 29). All these contrasting points of view on colouredness exemplify how all the other issues are dealt with in Wicomb's fiction: nobody is really right or wrong, every one is the bearer of his or her personal ‘truth’.

In my view, Wicomb approached the problems that afflict South Africa—both in terms of style and thematic choices—in a groundbreaking way, thus allowing the reader to be aware of the country's past and present contradictions, and to understand why it will most likely take a long time to recover. Wicomb's production, in fact, not only mirrors the complexities of contemporary South Africa, the psychological damage of many of its citizens, the difficulties for people of different ethnic origin to communicate with each other and so on, but it also provides the reader with a key of interpretation of a new reality in which everyone struggles to find him or herself.

Although I relied on a variety of sources in order to shape the general background in chapters one, two and three, and in order to confirm or challenge my ideas regarding Wicomb's books in chapter four, many more are to be found, as her writing lends itself to in-depth analysis. Surely, further research will be necessary in order to fully comprehend the implications of her work. To conclude, I hope that my dissertation does justice to the production of this remarkably talented and introspective author, and that it successfully links her fiction with South Africa's actual historical and political issues.

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