

**Navel-gazing or Re-enactment of History:
The Loops of Postmodern Narration and the Power
of the Written Word in Zoë Wicomb's
*You can't get lost in Cape Town***

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Abstract

Zoë Wicomb's collection of linked short stories was published in 1987, three years before the official end of apartheid in South Africa. It has often been superficially interpreted as a negotiation of female identity; even though to the careful reader it reveals itself as a highly complex reflection on the power of (written) discourse on the formation of subjectivity and the perception of history. In this article, it will be argued that Wicomb's literary project inscribes itself in a tradition of female (South) African (political) writing that challenges the silencing of (coloured) female history. In a first step, the main character's development will be traced with a particular focus on the concepts of subjectivity and relational identity. Secondly, the question of metafictional elements embedded in the stories will be approached to carve out an understanding of Wicomb's text as an essay on (political) writing and reading 'in disguise'.

Preamble

Zoë Wicomb was one of the first female coloured writers who dared to act as a literary voice for her minority. Her first published work *You can't get lost in Cape Town*, a collection of linked short stories, came out in 1987, three years before the official end of apartheid in South Africa.

While – rather hurriedly – reading *You can't get lost in Cape Town* for the first time, I felt somewhat disappointed. The collection of separate stories that, at first sight, formed a quite unspectacular coming-of-age-novel about a coloured South African woman did not match the expectations I had formed after the

reading of her (second) novel, *David's Story*. Neither, at first sight, did political issues occupy any prominent space, nor was I able to really get interested in its protagonist Frieda – a character so apparently struggling with her sense of alienation and self-consciousness, so unsettled by all sorts of social relations and deaf to the political turmoil around her and so much defined by the restrictions of her milieu, that it seemed impossible to discern any independent 'self'. However, when I finally reached the last story, "A Trip to the Gifberge", I stumbled over a brilliant conceptual twist: The resurrection of a dead mother and a structural loop that allows reading all the preceding stories not only as the female protagonist's (fictional) autobiography, but as the very stories she and her mother are referring to. Whose stories and whose story had I been reading? Wicomb's "flirt with [...] auto/biography" (Meyer/Oliver 2002: 184), fictional Frieda's (auto-) biography, or fictional Frieda's fictional "dreary little things in which nothing happens" (Wicomb 2003 [1987]: 171)? Confusion ... Consequently, I opened the book again on page one and started reading anew. With the hindsight and prudence the last story had raised, I then was able to grasp the significance of writing for the narrator's development – its significance on various levels. The new reading perspective, on the one hand, allowed understanding the stories as a narrative means of coming to terms with a complex identity within a conflictual society and, on the other hand, to discern the metafictional elements embedded in almost all of the stories. I did no longer skip Wicomb's cues on writing, language and the written word that invite to reflect the text on a more general, political level. The stories I initially read as the mere representation of the life of a coloured South African woman, turned into a (quite poststructural) reflection on the representation of identity and society, on the writing of history and the power of (written) discourse on the formation of subjectivity.

In the following, the question of writing and female subjectivity in *You can't get lost in Cape Town* will be approached from two main angles. Firstly, the female main character's development will be traced with a particular focus on subjectivity and on the notion of relational identity underlying the stories. Secondly, the question of metafictional elements embedded in the stories will be addressed to carve out an understanding of Wicomb's text as an essay on

(political) writing and reading 'in disguise'. For this, it will be necessary to go beyond the mere content level and to reflect on the form of Wicomb's representation of a South African woman. To grasp the significance of Wicomb's work and to create a frame for the following analysis, however, it is important to shortly introduce the key aspects of *You can't get lost in Cape Town* and to contextualise the stories – to present them as exemplary for a certain tradition of contemporary female (South) African (political) writing.

Wicomb's writing as exemplary for contemporary female (South) African writing and its socio-political significance

You can't get lost in Cape Town is a collection of short stories and was published in 1987, three years before the official end of apartheid in South Africa. As the stories are linked to each other and in the end form a complex (but in a certain sense coherent) picture of a female protagonist and her milieu, it is justified to refer to the collection as a novel. Set mostly in Griqua settlements in the Western Cape (Little Namaqualand) and Cape Town and covering the time period from the 1950s to the 1980s, it represents the situation of mainly coloured characters in a country divided by racial segregation and high economic inequalities. Ordered chronologically and inter-related by one and the same first person narrator, the stories represent a kind of fragmented 'coming of age' of the female protagonist Frieda Shenton, daughter of coloured middle class parents (a Griqua mother and Scot-coloured father). Focussing on single events and leaving large temporal gaps between the single stories, the novel covers the period from Frieda's early childhood, school and university up to several visits after the adult's emigration to England. The very last story, "A trip to the Gifberge" is about Frieda's visit to Little Namaqualand after her father's death and treats, among other things, her 'coming out' as a writer as it mentions the publication of Frieda's short stories as a book in the near future. This narrative trick blurs the levels of narration and represents a twist in the reception of the novel as it suddenly suggests reading the former stories no longer as Frieda's (auto-) biography, but rather as the stories she discusses

with her mother. The novel can thus be understood on two conceptual levels, namely, as a kind of fragmented *künstlerroman*¹ representing Frieda's development towards being a writer and, in the fashion of a typical postmodern loop, as the very collection of short stories Frieda refers to in the last story.

Literature written by (black²) African women and literary criticism of their texts has not a very long history within the (African) literary canon, enhanced production and interest in it awakening as late as the 1980s. Moreover, literary critics have long been preoccupied with analysing female characters in the novels of male authors, where women mostly were represented in idealistic, allegorical and one-dimensional ways – for example in the literature of the *Négritude* or *Black Poetry* movements where nationalist issues were so foregrounded that they completely covered differences and inequalities within the black communities (Nnaemeka 1998: 2). This means that problematic aspects of patriarchy and the suppression of women, her 'double-colonization', double discrimination due to aspects of race *and* gender (*and* class, one might add) were hardly an issue in the literary canon (Ashcroft et. al 1998: 103). However, female authors like Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), Miriam Tlali (South Africa) or Mariama Bâ (Senegal) have struggled since the late 1970s to develop counter-discourses that allow a focus on black female protagonists' struggle

¹ Unfortunately, I could not get hold of André Viola's article "Zoë Wicomb's You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Coloured Girl"; however, the reference in the title is telling enough to quote it as a backup for a reference to the *künstlerroman* ...

² I am well aware of the fact that Zoë Wicomb's position as a coloured South African writer is a complex one and that it is slightly simplistic to put her in this cluster of 'black' writing. However, for the sake of this overview on female black African writing, it is done nevertheless. Moreover, Wicomb herself associates herself with *black* consciousness and *black* feminism (Hunter 1996: 256). Even in anthologies and overviews that deal with South African literature in particular, Wicomb is categorized as black writer – as these works surprisingly often split South African literary production into two neat blocks, distinguishing only between black and white writing – see Viola (1998) - where for example even Achmat Dangor is classified as 'black' – and Nkosi (1998).

for self-defined identities in the face of multiple suppressions. Their novels can be read as manifestations against the allegorisation of women and offer more heterogeneous and dynamic representations of female identities (Nfah-Abbenyi/Makuchi 1997: 4f; Brown 1981: 4ff).

What can be said about African literature in this quite general and simplistic way, nevertheless, is particularly true for the South African context, where decades of racial segregation, liberation movements and extreme economic inequalities have split the society and made the project of a unified 'rainbow'-nation extremely delicate (Richards 2000: 75). Zoë Wicomb herself comments in an interview with Ewald Mengel that „to speak of South Africans is a confusing business because South Africans have always been, and still are made up of separate racial constituencies.” (Mengel 2010: 20). Moreover, during the struggle against apartheid and the building of a new nation, questions of race were so prevalent that difference and inequalities concerning gender and class tended to be overseen. Apartheid also had its influence on literary production: Novels by black female writers were rare, although from the 1970s onwards, a few authors like Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo and Lauretta Ngcobo voiced their concerns; published works by South African women of colour are an even more recent and less spread phenomenon (Richards 2000: 85). In fact, Wicomb's *You can't get lost in Cape Town* can be seen as the first (published English) novel by and about coloured women in South Africa³ (Gaylard 1996: 177).

In an essay about feminist issues within the South African liberation struggle, Zoë Wicomb is particularly bitter about its tendency of “putting gender on the backboiler while mighty matters of national liberation are dealt with” (1990: 7). Asserting her influence by both, feminism *and* black consciousness, she stresses the importance to stay critical with regard to racial segregation and

³The question of the 'first' novel by and about female coloureds is problematic in this case. Bessie Head published novels about mixed race identity long before Wicomb, but her plots are mostly set in Botswana to where she emigrated. Moreover, her novel *The Cardinals* – that is set in South Africa – was proposed to several publishers in 1964 and retained by Patrick Cullinan for a long time. It was finally published only posthumously in 1993 (Lewis 1996, 73). [I am indebted to the editors for their reference to *The Cardinals*].

(black) patriarchy (1990: 2) and cautions against one-dimensional (political) discourses that cover differences of gender, ethnicity and class. Likewise, Eva Hunter observes “the importance of *difference* in the South African context”, where the “specificities involved in the formation of different sorts of female subjectivity” and the fact that “like white women, black women are divided among themselves by, for instance, class” (1996: 255) have to be taken into account. Zoë Wicomb, therefore, stresses the importance to search for discourses that allow to stage variety and injustice:

“The search for a literary/cultural theory to suit the South African situation must surely take as point of departure a conflictual model of society where a variety of discourses will always render problematic the demands of one in relation to others and where discursive formations admit of cracks and fissures that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs.” (Wicomb 1990: 2)

This interest in individual “cracks and fissures” allows to interpret Wicomb's fiction in the light of a certain 'tradition' of contemporary African female writing that engages with the political through a concern for the personal (Lazarus 1990: 211)⁴. In this context, the genre of autobiographical and semi-fictional writing that is so popular in (South) African literature (cf. Tlali and Head) has a political significance as it quite directly challenges the silencing of black women and the colonial and patriarchal belief that they have no history (Hunter 1996: 256). As will be discussed later on, *You can't get lost in Cape Town* pays tribute to this genre, but also subverts it.

Like Frieda, who is blamed to use her English “as a catapult” (Wicomb 2003 [1987]: 171), Wicomb's writing challenges the silencing of women. Thus, her literary texts can be interpreted as an attempt to open up discursive spaces that are sensible for gender and race issues on equal terms. Her texts can be said to aim at a “psychological change whose major route is in rewriting representation” (Driver 1996: 45). In the spirit of the Zimbabwean writer

⁴ Cf. also the belief that the personal is the political as one of the founding assumptions of feminism (Weedon 1997: 71).

Yvonne Vera, *You can't get lost in Cape Town* can thus be interpreted in the light of the feminist fights against women being "swallowed by history" (Vera 1999: 2). The written word is of particular importance in this context. On the one hand, it allows more freedom than speech in societies where "speaking is still difficult to negotiate" (Vera 1999: 3), it allows to say "that which you can't utter: it compensates for the fear of speaking" (Wicomb in an interview with Meyer/Oliver 2002: 183). On the other hand, the written word (in the medium of fiction) allows questioning official truths and "has the capacity for showing truth as a complex, many-sided, contingent thing" (ibidem: 194). What Chris Weedon writes about female articulation in general, applies particularly well also in this African context:

"Women have been more actively involved in literary production than in many other areas of cultural production. The social relations which in different ways and at different historical moments have denied women powerful forms of subjecthood have helped make fiction an important site for the articulation of oppression and of utopian hopes for a different future. The power of fiction lies in its ability to construct for the reader ways of being and of understanding the world." (Weedon 1997: 140)

Wicomb makes use of the above described (poststructuralist) belief in the power of fiction to raise awareness for the limitations and open up discursive spaces for the negotiation of female subject positions.

Identity as a troubled and troubling notion

As was already mentioned, *You can't get lost in Cape Town* often was misread as dealing mainly with the representation of female identity. However, the following will try to illustrate that identity is perceived as a troubled and troubling notion. Frieda's development in the novel will be traced with a particular focus on subjectivity and on the notion of relational identity

underlying the stories. It is thus necessary to reflect on the understanding of identity that informs this paper.

The majority of articles about *You can't get lost in Cape Town* deal with it as an expression of female South African coloured identity. Carol Sichermann, for example, defines the novel as "a depiction of the formation of South African 'Colored' identity" (1993: 113), Rob Gaylard reads it as the "sustained interrogation of Frieda's attempt to define or negotiate her identity" (1996: 178; see also Richards 2000: 74ff; Richards 2005; Viola 1989).

Interestingly, Zoë Wicomb herself seems to be reluctant to accept the widespread reception of *You can't get lost in Cape Town* as a novel on coloured identity and explains this tendency with the fact that identity has become the "fashionable topic" of our era (Mengel 2010: 26). In interviews she ironically comments that she "discovered from critics that *You can't get lost in Cape Town* is about coloured identity" (Mengel 2010: 26; see also Wicomb/Willemse 2002: 147) and shows herself wary of some critics' eagerness to read Frieda's individual development as a way to find out who the coloured South Africans are:

"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? This is in the past, we're in the avant-garde. [...] I can't understand why they suddenly invented this discomfort with the notion." (Wicomb/Willemse 2002: 147)

Wicomb's prudence as regards the "fashionable topic" of identity, reminds me, in fact of Gayatri Spivak's "trouble with questions of identity or voice" (1996: 21) so prevalent within postcolonial and feminist studies. In an interview given to Alfred Artega, she warns against the essentialising notion of identity and prefers, instead, the notion of "clearing space, from where to create a perspective" (1996: 21). In the same interview, Spivak goes on to specify that

"History is, after all, storying. [...] This [...] storying doesn't give you an identity as something intimately personal which lets you know who you

are. It gives you a whole field of representation within which something like an 'identity' can be represented as a basis for agency." (Spivak 1996: 25f)

Thus, Spivak links the concept of identity to strategic identification, but avoids any essentialist belief in anything like a 'real' self. Our sense of ourselves lies within the stories we tell about ourselves and those that are available in official discourses and form a collective consciousness. Or, in the words of the post-colonial feminist Bahri Depika, there is "no authentic Third-World womanly self that lies (let the pun be noted) awaiting discovery, just that which inhabits the language games, plots, and discursive regimes of the social world" (Bahri 2004: 23). This actually refers back to what has already been written about the significance of Wicomb's literature as an attempt to alternative history writing as a form of political subversion. At the same time, Spivak's comment shows that, even if she deconstructs the notion of identity, she cannot utterly avoid it as intrinsically linked to the idea of agency. In this spirit, then, identity can be understood as a helpful category, if it is not taken for granted and if its contingent and inherently discursively produced quality is taken into account.

In this context, it seems helpful to link identity with the poststructuralist concept of subjectivity (as the sense of ourselves) as a socially specific, discursive creation that is "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (Weedon 1997: 21). Indeed, when Wicomb claims to be "not sure that there is such a thing as individual identity" and reminds that identity is "by definition relational" (Mengel 2010: 26), she positions herself within poststructuralist assumptions of identity.

The following analysis of Frieda's development is thus informed by a concept of 'the self' as inherently socially constructed, but nevertheless forming "a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices" (Weedon 1997: 121), which avoids the essentialising notion of identity Wicomb so obviously rejects.

From this it should be clear that self-realisation is not linked to its more esoteric meaning of finding a 'true' self, of becoming what one 'really' is, but in terms of the "fulfilment by one's own efforts of the possibilities of development of the self" ("self-realization", Oxford Engl. Dict. 1989: 928), as an open and contingent process with a stress on "possibilities" and change.

Writing as self-realisation: two tracks through the novel

In an interview, Wicomb once stressed her resistance "to telling THE story; there isn't, there can't be a definitive story" (Meyer/ Oliver 2002: 187). As Zoë Wicomb rejects a one-dimensional concept for her novel and plays with the postmodern blurring of well-defined tracks, it would be somewhat inappropriate to read the novel as a representation of any clearly defined identity or to provide a clear-cut interpretation of her literary text. Therefore, in the following, two possible ways of reading Wicomb's stories will provide two slightly different approaches to the topic of writing and self-realisation in the novel. Firstly, the focus will be on Frieda as a character and the question of how Wicomb's writing negotiates Frieda's journey from youth to maturity and which obstacles to self-realisation are at stake in the narrative, leaving, for the moment, aside the twist suggested in the very last story. Wicomb's novel will be hence read as the (fictional) auto-/biographical representation of a coloured South African woman's coming of age; self-realisation will be understood more broadly in terms of awakening consciousness and self-definition. Secondly, the shift of the reading perspective in "A trip to the Gifberge" will be taken into account and the stories will be read as Frieda's 'own' texts, Frieda's narrative "attempt to 'write' herself home" (Gaylard 1996: 186). For this, it will be necessary to go beyond the mere content level and to reflect in more detail on the form of Wicomb's representation of a South African woman, on her aesthetic decisions and on the metafictional elements that are woven into the narrative.

***You can't get lost in Cape Town* as a depiction of Frieda's development**

To begin with the first track, let me ignore the metafictional cues and the twist in "A trip to the Gifberge" and read the cycle of stories in *You can't get lost in Cape Town* as a fragmented, fictional auto-/biography of Frieda's journey from youth to maturity as a writer (which, in fact, allows to think of the novel in terms of a distorted, postmodern *künstlerroman*). On the content level, Wicomb's novel represents her female protagonist's coming of age – with particular attention to the places she inhabits and the people she encounters and who form her social network. The following analysis will thus trace Frieda's development from estrangement, inauthenticity, self-hatred and an ideology of pureness to the acceptance of plurality, communal duty and self-definition. The analysis will start with a reading of the stories as narrative representation of Frieda's identity that is understood as, firstly, a relational process and, secondly, as an intersectional category (negotiating aspects of race, class, gender and culture). Thirdly, the questions of alienation and the desire to belong will be identified as driving forces in the novel.

If self-realisation is understood as the fulfilment of one's possibilities, this notion implies the idea of choice, self-definition and individuality. *You can't get lost in Cape Town* traces the development of Frieda's identity from restrictive social prescription to (reconciled) self-definition, never leaving out of sight the relational element of identity. Indeed, I would argue that the characteristic trait of this novel is the fact that, although Frieda is presented as a very individualistic character, her personal development is described as an essentially relational project. The depiction of her self lives from and serves the depiction of her milieu⁵ (and vice versa). Zoë Wicomb notes herself that "a novel constructs lives in order to represent the world" (Mengel 2002: 25f). Consequently, Frieda is constructed as a mirror for the world around her. The reader experiences Frieda's self as unfolding in a process of differentiation. Frieda's identity is formed and presented in relation to various 'others'. Thus,

⁵Cf. stories like "Jan Klinkies", "A fair exchange" or "Ash on my Sleeve" which do not focus on Frieda, but in which she is rather present as a 'looking glass' on different aspects of South African life.

the reader follows the development of the main narrator's self, but this self ultimately also serves as a basis from which the reader explores different South African milieus.

One of the strengths of Zoë Wicomb's novel is to represent the intersectional construction of Frieda's identity, showing how impossible it is for her to identify with one particular community or role model, as she has to negotiate questions of race, gender, class, and culture on equal terms (Gaylard 1996: 178; Richards 2000: 92). Which are then the different realisations of her being and the conflicts Frieda has to go through until she finally reaches a (temporary?) reconciliation with her family and herself and a flirt with the places of her origins? The following section sheds light on some of the aspects that make Frieda's development a conflictual project.

Frieda belongs to one of South Africa's coloured communities that, in the context of strict racial segregation, were classified 'in between' the white ruling class and the black devoid of all rights. They were (self-)defined by the heritage of shame, the struggle for an independent 'pure' status and divided among themselves (Wicomb 1998: 92; Pucherová 2011: 4f). Therefore, the character Frieda, as a coloured South African, allows mirroring the psychological consequences of racial segregation with particular regard to the difficulties of those who were classified as 'non-whites' and whose status officially lacked 'racial purity'.

Frieda's identity as a coloured is not the only, but a major reason for her constant feeling of alienation. This is particularly noticeable in scenes where she is confronted with racial differences, like during her bus trip through white quarters in "You can't get lost in Cape Town" in which she is in fear of basically everything (from missing the stop to not reacting correctly to the white bus driver [65ff]⁶). Another scene that quite markedly represents Frieda's feeling of malaise is in "Behind the Bougainvillea". Frieda is unsure on which side of the waiting room door she should stay as she feels neither comfortable with the whites within (in fact, she does not even dare to enter the room) nor with the blacks and the lower class coloureds outside (whose

⁶ If not indicated differently, all the following page numbers refer to: Wicomb (1987) 2003.

languages she does not understand and among whom she does not dare to read the book hidden in her bag as “such a display of literacy would be indecent” [106]).

Frieda's inner conflict concerning her racial identity is not surprising regarding that Frieda has grown up in a community that is preoccupied by questions of race. In “Bowl like Howl” the internalised racism of Frieda's mother is hinted at in the scene in which she calls Frieda a “tame Griqua” to reprimand her (9) – which is quite ironical from the very person who shows herself hurt by the fact that the “Boerjongens” of her husband's family had called her a “Griqua maid” (165) before she and her husband got married. Furthermore, Frieda's mother is preoccupied by her appearance, and although she at least has the advantage of smooth hair, Frieda's father mentions her as a negative example when he encourages Frieda to eat more: “Your mother was thin and sickly, didn't eat enough. You don't want cheekbones that jut out like a Hottentot's.” (24) In fact, Frieda's father is no less racist than his wife. He is proud of his family's Scottish blood, judges people by the colour of their face and differentiates among different degrees of colour. For example, Frieda is cautioned by her father against Henry, the boy with whom she is exchanging love letters when she is at school in her village, because he is “almost pure kaffir” (116). This spirit of segregation and distinction marks Frieda so much that later she lies to her friend Olga about Henry. Asked whether Henry is the boy she is writing to, she negates and asserts that she would never ever write love letters to a “native” (124).

Moreover, the Shentons, Frieda's family, are among those coloureds who aspire to social ascension, which, in the South Africa of apartheid, means assimilation to white values and Englishness. Frieda is alienated from the other children of her community because the Shentons are exceptional (“for who in Little Namaqualand does not know of Shenton”, his motor car and good command of English” [46]). They are middle class, better educated than the others, speak English (instead of Afrikaans) and tell their daughter to stay away from the lower class coloureds and indigenous people (4). Frieda's position as a middle class child, on the one hand, plays to her feeling of alienation (in her youth, she is an outsider as she is too privileged to play with

other Afrikaner children and blacks and too black to have white friends), but, on the other hand, it is also the basis for her development away from racial and social contempt. One could argue that only her education and, linked to it, her experience of emigration allow her to be more sensible for her origins and the differences around her. While in "A Clearing in the Bush" Frieda is still among those who do not even think of informing the coloured kitchen maid Tamieta not to go to Verwoerd's memorial service (because they just forget that she is or could be one of them), in "A fair exchange" Frieda shows interest for Skitterbound's story, engages with the life of a person so distinctly not of her class and in "Ash on my Sleeve" she most uncomfortably is aware of the differences of class that separate her old friend Moira from her servants (149). However, her parents' system of values based on racial, class and cultural distinctions and prescriptions marks Frieda through and through, and particularly in the early stories leaves no space for self-definition. While she has little trouble to work herself into the cultural values her parents define for her (namely, English as her mother tongue, English cultural references and university education), her sense of herself is deeply troubled by her body. This, on the one hand, refers to the racial characteristics of her appearance (like her frizzy hair), and on the other hand, relates to her being a woman and leads to the difficulty to negotiate gender issues in a country that is marked by national liberation struggles. The first issue is particularly marked by Frieda's obsession with her hair that betrays the black part of her ancestry. Incited by her mother's contempt of frizzy hair and according to the prevalent fashion, as a child and a teenager, Frieda constantly fights battles against it (cf. Frieda's "preparations", her wetted, straightened, vaselined hair in "When the train comes" [26f] or in "A Clearing in the Bush" [49]). Even shortly before emigrating to England, she wonders that she would not be surprised if her "hair should drop out in fistfuls, tired of being tugged and stretched and taped", her biggest fears being that the "damp English weather" (93) will mercilessly betray the texture of her hair. In fact, Frieda's decision to no longer wear her hair straightened (117) in England and her defence of this style in front of her mother towards the end of the novel ("Some perfectly sensible people [...] pay pounds to turn their sleek hair into precisely such a bushy

tangle" [178]) mark an important step in Frieda's development. By refusing to fight the natural form of her hair, she openly displays that she refuses the blind assimilation of her youth and that she accepts and is proud of her coloured origins. As mentioned before, Frieda's insecurities can therefore be interpreted as a mirror of the class struggles and racial conflicts that divide the South Africa of the depicted period.

Similarly to the fight with her hair as restricting obsession, especially in her youth, Frieda is markedly limited by her gender. She is fed into obedience by a father who does not seem to be too unhappy that his daughter (as the educational investment she represents for him) is "not the kind of girl whom boys look at" (21). Concerning this point, I would oppose Carol Sicherman's interpretation according to which Frieda's father "frees her from the prison of gender" (1993: 113) by fattening her, because gender is clearly one of the aspects that most markedly inhibit Frieda in the early stories, even though her body does not conform to beauty standards. The fact that she is fat and does not feel comfortable in her body compels her to be a rather introvert, self-centred person throughout her youth. Her malaise is bordering on self-hatred when she thinks of herself as slow and clumsy (she accuses herself of grasping "slowly, as if the notion has to travel through folds of fat" [27]). In "When the train comes" and "A Clearing in the Bush", Frieda is so conscious of her body that she can hardly think of anything else than the impression she makes on the boys around⁷.

⁷In fact, in these two stories, Wicomb's critique on the oblivion of gender issues within black consciousness is most evident. While in "When the train comes" the boys on the platform assert their origins with self-confidence, and, in contrast to Frieda's assimilation and self-betrayal, show themselves proud of their blackness, they force their conviction on to the other girls on the platform. They rudely take away one of the girls' *doekies* to uncover her frizzy hair and let her not decide for her own what she considers to be beautiful (26f). In "A Clearing in the Bush" the coloured male students plan the boycott of Verwoerd's memorial service and count on the girls' complicity, but do not even think of involving them in the planning, offering them only "lady-like bites" of the "apple of knowledge" (53) – a condition which the girls accept at this stage, Frieda being too self-conscious about her gender and appearance to approach the centre of discussion in the cafeteria.

She is so uncomfortable that she fails to understand the political dimension of what is going on around her. However, one could argue that in later stages of the novel, Frieda has freed herself from the prison of gender (or at least builds one in which she is not constantly confronted with the bars) through education and emigration that allow her to live a financially independent life far away from the over-determining structures of her youth – even though this liberty is earned with the feeling of being “a Martian” (123) everywhere she goes.

This observation leads to the last point that should be mentioned in this section. One could argue that one of the fundamental aspects tying the stories together is the question of belonging and Frieda's fundamental feeling of estrangement.

As should be clear by now, throughout the novel, Frieda goes through various stages of assimilation, alienation and rapprochement, never stopping to negotiate where she belongs to and with whom she can identify. Although at the very last page of the novel, Frieda flirts with coming back to Cape Town, in the end, the reader realises that Frieda does not belong to any single definite group, that her journey is not one of finding a 'true' identity, but rather one of finding the means to express the journey and coming to terms with the places and people she encounters⁸.

One could well argue that, as a writer, Frieda is able to 'come home'. This becomes particularly manifest in “A fair exchange” and in Frieda's interest for Skitterbound's story. When in her youth, Frieda spent her time in her darkened room reading, dreaming of the „bright green meadows of Hardy's England“(90), in the later stories she realises the potential of the world of her origins and tries to engage with the history of her country and the stories of the people in it. When first her cultural interest is directed entirely on English

[For a straightforward critique of black consciousness' lack of feminist issues, cf. Wicomb's essay “To hear the variety of discourses”(1990).]

⁸This aspect, in fact, reminds me of the texts of other female African writers of this period who relate experiences of migration and stories of 'coming home' – think only of Malika Mokeddem's *L'interdite* (1993) and its protagonist Sultana's choice of an eternal odyssey at the end, refusing any ties that go with the feeling of belonging.

literature and culture⁹, she later on awakens to the responsibility to press “even further” and reassemble the “bits released” to be able to represent “the story given its coherence” (136) for *Skitterbound*. She cherishes the value of the oral culture she has negated throughout her youth and pays tribute to it (cf. a pair of glasses for a story, spectacles for a new vision). Nevertheless, I would argue that, seen in the context of the various movements and re-orientations throughout the whole novel, the final scene in which Frieda apparently finds peace and flirts with the idea of returning to South Africa is to be understood as a final ironic hint to this desire of 'coming home' expressed throughout and through the stories. In this (and maybe only in this) sense, Frieda's auto/biography is a *narrative* means to come home. The conciliatory tone of this last story shows the writer-character finally has developed the ability of self-reflection and to observe her surroundings much more consciously, without the self-consciousness and self-hatred encountered in the earlier stories.

However, as Zoë Wicomb herself wonders why “a work in which a character is dead and then reappears many years later could be called autobiography”¹⁰ (Wicomb to Meyer/Oliver 2002: 185), it is necessary to leave this slightly forced track and turn to my second reading.

A story about stories and a narrative loop

The second approach to Wicomb's novel will set out from its very end and read the stories as Frieda's literary reflection on her youth. As already hinted

⁹ Frieda spends her youth reading English classics in her room, hiding away from the African reality outside. However, this obsession with European culture and her ignorance concerning the past of her 'own' country or continent and the cultural production of its people is, in fact, no wonder taking her education into account – cf. also the discussion between Wicomb and Thomas Oliver about the canon at South African universities. Oliver remembers that he “went through eight years of university in South Africa without ever once 'doing' South African literature” (Meyer and Oliver 2007: 187)

¹⁰ Here, of course, referring to the resurrection of a mother that is thought dead throughout the rest of the novel.

at, "A trip to the Gifberge" reawakens the slightly inattentive reader as they stumble over the first sentence: "You've always loved your father better" (163) so clearly ascribed to a mother that has been thought dead throughout the earlier stories. In fact, in all the preceding stories, Frieda's mother is either absent (apart from the very first where Frieda is still a small child), missing at decisive developmental stages of her daughter, or referred to in the past tense (e.g. when Frieda's father instructs her about menstruation and tells her that "[her] mother was never regular" [22]). However, this confusion clears up as soon as mother and daughter engage in a discussion about Frieda's professional life. Stories are mentioned. Stories that will be published "as a book" (171), stories without "neat endings" in and through which the mother is killed "over and over" (172) – killed as a character and killed symbolically in form of the negation of her hovering and restricting influence through the transgression of holy taboos like the revelation to "the world that it is all right to kill God's unborn child" (172) (referring to Frieda's abortion). This dialogue allows to read the rest of the stories as Frieda's literary creations and therefore as her means to actively engage with her past, as the self-realisation of her personal history. Although Frieda affirms that they are "only stories. Made up" (172), her mother is very well able to filter the message and understands the way her daughter has "used the real" (172) and her "English as a catapult" (171) – as the means of self-assertion and liberation it is.

From this reading perspective, Wicomb's novel reveals a further level of interpretation and allows to be understood as a narrative reflection on (autobiographical) writing and the power of the written word in the context of history writing and identification. In the following, Wicomb's cues on reading as a challenge and her use of blurred visions as a reflection on political and of fragmented stories as on autobiographical writing will be analysed.

If, in an interview, Wicomb claimed that "form and content are inseparable, it is not a question of taking a coherent story and breaking it up for, say, aesthetic purpose" (Mengel 2010: 24), a reflection on self-realisation in *You can't get lost in Cape Town* has to consider the structural decisions Wicomb has taken for her representation of a South African woman. Wicomb did not write a coherent novel, but presented Frieda's coming of age in form of several

different stories that are linked to each other, but change in settings and tone. Thus, one could think of the novel as a kind of 'photo-mosaic'¹¹ – which can be taken as a perfect concept-metaphor for poststructuralist identity and the way identity is dealt with in Wicomb's novel. Although we cannot get rid of the idea of a coherent self, we are constantly made aware of its necessary deconstruction and its inherently composite essence. The choice of a sequence of short stories mirrors this concept of fragmented identity and Wicomb's unwillingness to tell "a definite story" (Wicomb to Meyer/Oliver 2002: 187), to write a coherent and neat auto-/biography. Therefore, if Dorothy Driver alludes to the form of the conventional novel as a way to "buttress the illusion of national unity and normality" (2010: 531) and interprets Wicomb's choice of short stories as a way to disturb national discourses, this observation could be similarly applied to the idea of a coherent identity that is smashed by Frieda's stories. Furthermore, on a narrative level the reluctance of the 'whole' story that covers dissident voices is hinted at in "Home Sweet Home", where Frieda (internally) rages at the way her family deals with the past:

They cut stories from the gigantic watermelon that cannot be finished by the family in one setting. [...] Their stories, whole as the watermelon that grows out of this arid earth, have come to replace the world [...] I would like to bring my fist down on that wholeness and watch the crack choose its wayward path across the melon, slowly exposing the icy pink of the slit. (87f)

Frieda's texts as fragmented stories that reveal bitter and hitherto hidden memories – or imaginary flirts with taboos like abortion, mixed relationships and liberation from her parents – represent the cracks that choose their way through "a memory embedded in lies" (109; cf. Richards 2000: 94). However, it is the cracks that Wicomb ascribes discursive power to and that enable Frieda's self-reconciliatory development. As in the end, Frieda can present a

¹¹ These are huge posters of a person that, on a closer look, reveal themselves as a mosaic made out of hundreds of little photographs showing the very person or people related to them in different settings.

self-asserted version of her own, a modern South African woman of “not altogether unbecoming plumpness” (117) crowned by a “bushy tangle” (178), finally, writing has indeed been Frieda's means of self-realisation.

In the introductory chapter, Wicomb has been said to oppose monolithic official discourse and to engage with the personal in order to subvert homogeneous truths. This attitude is rendered by the way Wicomb's novel refers to political events. For the reader, Frieda serves as a kind of 'looking glass' through which Wicomb presents historical facts, places and different political opinions that are clearly blurred by Frieda's perceptions. It is this aspect that allows linking Wicomb's stories to the already mentioned notion of alternative history writing, where personal stories open up space for political and historical considerations. Frieda and most of the people around her are quite “politically naive” (Wright 2003: xv) characters. The political dimension of events is never directly addressed and Frieda herself is never politically conscious enough to pinpoint where her feeling of malaise comes from. In her youth, she stumbles through political events without thinking in depth about their significance. Issues like her uncle's mental problems after the resettlement of his community in “Jan Klinkies”, her own family's resettlement in “When the train comes”, Verwoerd's assassination in “A Clearing in the bush” etc. are hinted at, but Frieda never really engages with them. They have effects on her, but they do not really affect her – and this until the very end of the novel. Thus, the narrative voids of Frieda's time in England allow hardly any traces of the liberation struggles. Again, events are mentioned in passing (like Henry, who, at some point is suspected of being a government's spy and armed for the war in the bush [121]), but in the narrative Frieda never reflects on them. This narrative decision allows Wicomb to relate to political events and opinions in passing, to let them shimmer through 'telling' voids and through reactions of and psychological effects on the characters. Through this, one-sided and dogmatic political statements are avoided; there is no character in absolute power of political interpretation and truth. Besides, this aspect is not only suggested at the narrative level, but also supported by the structure of the novel (fragmented stories) and by Wicomb's frequent representation of dialogue in the narrative. She thus adds a plurivocal and multi-perspective

element to her first person narrative. This narrative strategy then mirrors the firm belief in the necessity to “hear the variety of discourses” (Wicomb 1990) and to open up discursive space for silenced voices.

The last aspect that should be covered in this article is its metafictional dimension with its hints at writing and reading that have been woven through the novel. Although, as has already been argued, (Frieda's) writing in the novel is linked to the trespassing of restrictions and norms¹², warnings about the veracity, authenticity and reliability of (written) words occur throughout the novel. In “Bowl like howl” Wicomb warns of the danger of 'overwriting' reality when she depicts the scene of Mr. Weedon, the white tax collector, making poetry out of the black men's sweating, hardworking bodies. The representation of the white man musing about the 'beauty' of the scene ironically comments on the danger of disconnection through beautiful speech and 'whitewashing': “Distanced by the translation, the winged word fluttered; he was moved to a poetic comparison [...] midst all that making poetry, two prosaic mounds rose on either side of the deepening pit” (6). In “A Clearing in the Bush” Frieda's struggles to write an essay on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Her attempt at finding an interpretation that fits better to her impression of the novel than the notes of the professor's lecture and her final capitulation can be read as a profound “distrust of the reliability of writing” (Richards 2000: 93) – and as a hint at the reader's responsibility to ask whether they read a “reworking” of what somebody wants (55) or the expression of a genuine thought. This can be linked to Wicomb's persuasion that “Reading should be challenging. It is supposed to make you rethink your real world, not confirm what you already know” (Wicomb to Meyer/Oliver 2002: 197)¹³ and leads back

¹² In this context it is also interesting that Frieda's writing is mentioned for the first time in “You can't get lost in Cape Town”, the story in which she confesses both, the relationship to a white man and her abortion. Thus, writing and stories are linked to the transgression of social taboos.

¹³ A notion that, quite interestingly, mirrors Jean Paul Sartre's definition of reading as an active act of generosity that requires mental freedom in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (Sartre [1948] 1985: 60ff).

to the subversive power of fiction to question official truths that has been alluded to in the introductory section of this paper. Taken the metafictional cues in *You can't get lost in Cape Town* into account, the stories can be indeed read as a reflection on the socio-political significance of writing and reading.

Conclusion

The cycle of stories in *You can't get lost in Cape Town* does not depict a form of self-realisation in the sense of finding one's core identity, but represents the realisation that the self is intrinsically linked to its context and has to be sorted out (narratively) in relation and with regard to its contradictions and ambivalences. In this sense, the stories are intrinsically tied up with South African particularities and the trial to come to terms with them narratively. At the same time, they offer a complex and more general reflection on the importance of consciously engaging with the (official) history and the stories around to negotiate the present.

As "A trip to the Gifberge" suggests, all the preceding stories can be read as the little texts Frieda has been writing throughout the novel and published from England. They can be understood as her attempt to narrate herself and the different stages she has gone through. In this sense, the stories can be interpreted as a means of coming to terms with one's personal history – however, with a perspective on a self that is intrinsically related and 'storied', following Spivak's assertion that "history is, after all, storying" and that this "storying doesn't give you an identity as something intimately personal which lets you know who you are" (1996: 25f). Wicomb's novel mirrors this conception with its fragmented representation of an ambivalent female protagonist's development and her choice of an open ending that invites to re-read and re-interpret the cycle of stories. In fact, her conceptual twist at the end of the novel can be read as Spivak's "clearing space, from where to create a perspective" (1996: 21) and invites the reader to reflect on the (deconstructing and reconciliatory) power of the written word – on a personal, but also a more general, historical level.

As it is finally up to the readers to decide whose stories they have been following and how to interpret Frieda's suggestion of coming home, Wicomb incites to search for the "icy pink of the [watermelon's] slit (87), to rather go for the crack that "choose[s] its wayward path across the melon" (86) than to believe in the whole- and spotlessness of any official and accepted history. Wicomb's novel invites the readers to re- and de-construct official (South African) memory and, on a more general level, to challenge their perspectives on history, writing and reading – as does the character and writer Frieda with her personal history. *You can't get lost in Cape Town* can therefore be understood as both, a novel with two narrative levels and an 'essay in disguise' on the socio-political dimension of writing AND reading.

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