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Collaborations Final Essay

Finding Home Within Herself: Identity and Power in Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*

“‘There’s no place like home,’ says Aunt Cissie. ‘And home is where the heart is,’ Father adds, and then he frowns for that is not quite what he means.”

-*You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, page 99 (Home Sweet Home)

1948 was a turning point in South African history: the National Party put into effect a series of legislations that established South Africa as an apartheid state under law. As in all colonial states in Africa, segregation had been a *de facto* way of life for more than a century. However, when the legislation passed it became not only *de facto* but *de jure*, meaning that the practice was now asserted by the law. Following the ascendance of the right-wing Afrikaner-dominated National Party to power, the South African population was segregated based on, among other categories, race, education, residence, and socioeconomic status. The Population Registration act of 1950 delineated three primary groupings for the country’s racial makeup: Whites, natives, and Coloureds. The Afrikaner-led government strictly enforced policies of minority rule. Natives, an umbrella category encompassing members of various African ethnic groups, were subject to demeaning and restraining residence and employment restrictions. However, perhaps the most degraded group was those that under the provisions of the Population Registration Act were designated as “Coloureds,” a category that lumped together any person of a mixed heritage; neither entirely white nor entirely African. The ambiguity of this classification was such that by the 1980s, there were eight sub-categorizations of the so-called Coloureds. Marked with the unavoidable proof of the white minority’s fear of interracial relations, or miscegenation, those labeled with a coloured identity represented

a shamed and marginalized sector of society. As sociologist Dimitri Erasmus observes, “Being coloured is about living an identity that is clouded in sexualized shame.”

In her essay “Shame and Identity: the case of the coloured in South Africa,” South African-born novelist Zoë Wicomb, herself classified as coloured, writes about the harm of colonization not only for the stigmatizing way it designated groups of people as inferior beings, but also for its violation of their individual bodies. Coloured women, especially, fell prey to Wicomb’s notion of the colonized body as a site of shame, as an element “bound up with the politics of location.”¹ Their skin colors represented the varied ancestry of South Africa, yet within the fraught boundaries of systematic separation they also represented the shame of miscegenation and the racialized sexual politics of the era. Thus, Coloured women were forced to contend not only with the stigma of their racial category, but also the disgrace of the proof they bore of the complicated relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In “Shame and Identity,” Wicomb calls for a revision, rather than obscuration, of the postcolonial female condition as a way to deconstruct the stigma that continues to surround once-named Coloureds in South Africa in the wake of Apartheid. “It is,” she writes, “after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse.”² Rather than stifle it, she offers an opportunity to confront it in her composite novel of short stories, *You Cant Get Lost in Cape Town*. In the words of Dorothy Driver, “her writing bears witness to a history of deprivation, yet it also suggests ways to subvert this history ... through a psychological change whose major route is in rewriting representation.”³ In my essay, I would like to explore the trajectories of female coloured identity, especially the ways in which Wicomb

¹ Wicomb, “Shame and Identity,” 93.

² “Shame and Identity,” 92.

³ Driver, “Transformation Through Art,” 45.

uses shame as a framework in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* to map the complex identity formation of one young coloured woman in the context of the anti-apartheid resistance movements.

You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town is a collection of short stories whose focalizer is Freda Shenton, and who, as the composite novel progresses, becomes the author of the stories herself; a narrative technique in which, in the words of Dorothy Driver, the “I” of the book and the “I” behind the book”⁴ merge to destabilize the notion of “authority” as a single, dominating perspective.”⁵ Freida, a young light-skinned coloured girl who easily passes for white, and whose distant Scottish lineage grants her certain privileges but not a full claim to a white identity, comes of age in the waning years of apartheid. This is especially a crucial period in the history of South African anti-apartheid resistance movements; a period during which the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement was especially important. The student-led movement was predicated on an insistence on mental liberation as a necessary precondition for political liberation. Freda’s inability to attain her own freeing sense of self recurs in the stories. As Freda wrestles with notions of home and womanhood in a setting where her identity is first and foremost a matter of legal definition, her search for a cohesive sense of self is culled from her confrontation with these disparate elements of her identity, including her experience as woman in the male-dominated Black Consciousness Movement. She experiences pervasive sentiments of physical and emotional domination, manifested not only by colonizing forces but also within her community.

⁴ Driver, Dorothy. “Transformation Through Art: Writing, Representation and Subjectivity in Recent South African Fiction,” 50.

⁵ Driver, 50.

According to Constance Richards, *You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town* is a novel that ventures to “elucidate the fractured reality of national identity and women’s struggle to negotiate the complexities of the postcolonial condition.”⁶ The work serves not only to show the complexities of identity, but of humanity. Trapped between lines, with multiple mechanisms of control pushing down on them, how have these women maintained their humanity while attempting to formulate a sense of self? In the descriptions of her protagonist’s fraught struggles to achieve integration in a racially fractious society, Wicomb endeavors to demonstrate that in a colonized, patriarchal, and racialized setting, female coming-of-age narratives are further complicated by the protagonist’s need to reconcile their desire for autonomy with the expectations placed on them as women. They also struggle to comprehend their emplacement within nationalist ideologies of decolonization.

In the first story of the book, entitled “Bowl Like Hole,” we are introduced to Freda specifically through her relationship with her parents. In the story, Frieda’s mother and father are introduced as links to the English-speaking world, their coloured status and language abilities granting them the privilege of interaction with the white overseer of nearby land. However, the white landowner is still clearly dominant: in one scene his cigar smoke “wrapped itself in blue hands around father’s neck.” Though in a privileged position to be translators for the white man, the Shentons are still reminded of their inferior position in regards to him. What is most interesting to note is that a similar measure of dominance is enacted upon Freda by her own father, in a following story

⁶ “Nationalism and the Development of Identity in Postcolonial Fiction: Zoë Wicomb and Michelle Cliff.” Richards, Constance S. *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 36, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp. 20-33. (Indiana University Press).

When the Train Comes. In an effort to render her sexually undesirable and maintain his hold over her, Mr. Shenton overfeeds Freda, who notes, “I eat everything he offers ... the habit of obedience is fed daily with second helpings of mealie porridge” (24). In his need to dominate his daughter’s body and mind; her actions, and her choices, Mr. Shenton incarnates elements of oppressive colonial paternalism. In the act of maintaining his control over Freda by rewarding her ‘obedience,’ Mr. Shenton becomes an allegory of the relationship between Coloured people and the apartheid regime.

Freda’s departure from the family for university—a moment she celebrates as a step toward autonomy from her father’s domineering tyranny—is undercut when she trades bodily domination by her father for bodily domination by her white boyfriend, Michael. The two of them have a relationship that, in the title story *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, results in her pregnancy. Freda, aware of the laws that prohibit her and Michael from being together, and further aware of the privilege he holds as an embodiment of South African white liberalism, is disgusted by her pregnancy. She can only think of the fetus as foreign, as a “Tsafendas tapeworm” living inside her stomach, something that she cannot even claim as her own (77). In the story, she travels to get an abortion against Michael’s wishes—a representation not only of her disconnection with her body but also of her inability to create or feel lasting love for Michael. Freda views his love as foreign rather than romantic as a way to distance herself from the fetus that represents, to her, a dominant race’s hold over her body—loving Michael would represent acceptance of White dominance, and to Freda that denies her the ability to self-construct her identity. As Guillaume Cingal writes in a deconstruction of the story, “[Freda’s] abortion is a very negative indictment of South African society, as it shows very acutely that the apartheid regime has actually succeeded in its attempt at pulling the

various ‘communities’ asunder.”⁷ Ironically, in the harrowing rejection of both her potential baby and of Michael’s love, Freda begins to enact a reclamation of her female agency and a rejection of white superiority.

In the story *A Clearing in the Bush*, Frieda is exposed to her classmates’ foray into the university student-led Black Consciousness Movements that began in the late 1960s and gained momentum into the 1970s. In the story, when she volunteers to help at a demonstration she is relegated to handing out flyers, a reference both to women’s marginalized positions within the Black Consciousness Movement and her liminal status as a lighter skinned coloured woman, viewed unequal in the eyes of her classmates. Frieda’s inability to relate to her Black peers’ romanticized nationalist ideals shows her conflicting, ambivalent racial and gender identities. Her fractured consciousness is solidified when she realizes her liminality: she is not only subject to the white domination of Michael but she is also aware of her constructed identity as a coloured woman. In one scene she reconnects with Henry Hendrickse, a childhood friend. Freda recalls how when he professed his love to her years before, she thought he was too dark and thus below her. However, in the same instance that she remembers this she refers to herself as nothing more than a vessel for Henry’s sexual pleasure, thinking “he would like to fuck me without my noticing” (123). Her confused perceptions of self cause a dual loss of control. She simultaneously self-inflicts feelings of gender subordination through negative views of her body, yet asserts her class dominance over a boy her father once called “almost pure Kaffir.” Whereas accepting her love of Michael allegorizes her subordination to his racial superiority, aligning herself with the masculine nationalist sentiments embodied by Henry similarly subordinates her as a woman. As Pumla Dineo Gquola notes, “the

⁷ Guillaume Cingal, “Amazing Cityscapes.”

[language of the] Black Consciousness Movement ...didn't have a space for women partly because it was a language borrowed from a culture, English culture, which never accepted women really as full citizens.”⁸ Frieda's attempts to become a part of white culture were limited by the pigmentation in her skin, yet her attempts to align with the viewpoint of Hendricke's nationalist consciousness were similarly undercut by her status as a woman.

Freda's inability to place herself distinctly within strict categories of bloodlines, race, and societal expectations is demonstrative of the larger struggle for postcolonial communities to find an identity within newly defined hegemonic parameters. In the final story of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, the reader ascertains that it is the protagonist who has been writing these stories all along—that it is she who holds agency over her words, referring back to Dorothy Driver's notions of authority and the “I” of the story. In a final and forceful act of resistance to patriarchal domination, Frieda negates her father's control by replacing him in the narrative with her mother, who after the first story has been referred to as dead. By actively reclaiming her link to her mother, Freda bolsters her female identity and recovers a sense of agency. She manages to reject “the father's assertion that he knows best” (102), actively refusing what literary scholar Susan Z. Andrade calls “benevolent domination.”⁹ By the end of the novel, she begins to be able to cull fortifying aspects of selfhood from both her white and her black ancestry, and as she comes into her own sense of self learns to draw strength from her amalgam of her multiple identities. Her mother represents a rekindled connection with her Griqua culture,

⁸ Gqola, “Contradictory Locations.”

⁹ Andrade, Susan Z. “Tradition, Modernity, and the Family: Reading the Chimurenga struggle into and out of *Nervous Conditions*,” pg. 41. As published in *Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga*. (Africa World Press, Inc.) 2002.

or motherland, and reminds Freda to not lose that perspective—to not get lost in the color-blocked and restrictive boundaries of Cape Town. Her mother tells her that she is always able to return to the veld (the rural spaces of South Africa) where, as Freda nostalgically notes in one story, “you can never get lost.”