The reinvention of history
A reading of South African novels of the transition

By Oscar Hemer

Abstract
History is the great forger of national identity, but literature also played a key-role in its construction, in Europe as well as in the newly independent former colonies of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Many post-colonial writers actively participated in the nation-building process, providing epics for identification and contributing to a national imaginary.

In most of Africa, the national projects have failed and given room for disillusion, which may also be artistically productive. But neither happened in South Africa, where national modernization was frustrated in an embryonic stage by the imposition of Apartheid.

During the transition process, and especially in the last decade, South African writers have reexamined history in the pursuit of neglected and suppressed configurations. The marginal, yet critical role of literature in the transition seems to be that of deconstructing prevailing myths, rather than the forging of new identities.

This paper discusses the presence of history and the near past in recent novels by five South African writers (Zakes Mda, Marlene van Niekerk, Zoë Wicomb, Aziz Hassim and Ronnie Govender), and takes a special interest in the disclosed legacy of creolization.

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1 The transition is here defined as the period from 1990 – when Nelson Mandela was released and the formerly forbidden political organizations unbanned – up to the present.
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On my first journey to South Africa in 1991, I interviewed journalist and writer Mike Nicol in Cape Town. Nicol, who grew up in Fish Hoek on the Cape peninsula in the conviction that he was living in England, talked about South Africa’s history as a virginal land untouched by literature because writers during Apartheid were obsessed with the political present. As an example of all the fantastic stories that remained to be told, he mentioned the disastrous millenarian Cattle-Killing Movement in the mid 1800s, when the prophecy of a young woman, Nongqause, inspired the Xhosa people to kill their cattle and destroy their harvests in the firm belief that the ancestors would return and drive the white intruders into the sea. The real outcome of this suicidal action was that the severely weakened Xhosa, who until then had resisted colonization, had no other option than to become destitute labourers on the white farms of the Cape colony.

That this crucial and symbolically loaded event in Xhosa history were untold in literature, is a qualified truth. It had been used and interpreted as justificatory myth in H.I.E. Dhlomo’s play The girl who killed to save: Nongqause the Liberator (1936) and

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2 Interviewed by the author in Hemer 1993.
more recently by Mtutuzeli Matshoba in the short story “Three days in the land of a
dying illusion” (1979), where Nongqause’s radical stand is contrasted to the
corruption and nepotism of the late Transkei bantustan, whose leaders sold their
heritage for the crumbs of a farcical independence. But it is nevertheless significant
that the returning exile Zakes Mda takes on the challenge of exploring this theme in
his second and to date most ambitious novel, The Heart of Redness (2000). In his
version the historical watershed event is juxtaposed to the watershed moment of the
present, the first democratic elections in 1994.

The novel starts with the Xhosas’ primordial encounter with modernity – what
Chapman poetically describes as technology’s crash into the bucolic past – and the
two opposing strategies for survival that were adopted in response to the imminent
threat of modern violence and change. The historical cleavage between Christian
converts and traditional countrymen, epitomized by the Xhosa prophets Ntsikana
and Makana\(^4\), has in Mda’s elaboration been slightly altered to a conflict between
‘Believers’ and ‘Unbelievers’, where the former represent traditionalism – their
‘redness’ stems from the red ochre with which the women adorn themselves – and
the latter stand for enlightenment and modernity. This conflict is handed over from

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\(^3\) Through Dhlomo and Matshoba the cattle killing had in fact superseded its originary Xhosa significance and entered an ‘African national’ consciousness of oppression and liberation (Chapman 2006, p. 41.). Michael Chapman even suggests the frontier between Xhosa territory and the Cape Colony in the 19\(^{th}\) century to be the cradle of modern African literature (Ibid., p. 38).

\(^4\) Ntsikana claimed to be a servant of the Christian God in favour of peace and accommodation, while Makana identified himself as a leader of resistance attached to ancient custom. Makana, who was imprisoned on Robben Island and who drowned in an attempt to organize an escape, was in the 1970s adopted by the Black Consciousness movement and granted iconic status as a ‘freedom fighter’.
generation to generation up to present time in the village Qolorha-by-Sea, where the current dispute concerns whether to welcome the transformation into a lucrative casino and hotel resort or to try to manage small-scale eco-tourism on the villagers own terms. The protagonist Camagu is an academic in Communication who has returned from exile to vote, only to be disillusioned by the nepotism of the new élite. Determined to resume his exile he happens to attend a vigil in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, where the singing of the mysterious NomaRussia captures him and gives a new meaning to his return. It is in the pursuit of her elusive figure, a modern incarnation of Nongqause, that he travels to the Eastern Cape. There he is drawn into the centennial conflict, staged as an allegorical love-triangle in which he must choose between the nature child Qukeswa, with supernatural gifts, and the school teacher Xoliswa, who adores the America of Eddie Murphy and Dolly Parton as the apogee of desired modernity.

_The Heart of Redness_ is flourishing with mythical and intertextual references. The title is of course alluding to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness; extermination being on the agenda of the British colonial troops. As Attwell observes in his lucid analysis, there are also a number of allusions to Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe’s immensely influential _Things Fall Apart_ (1972). Like Achebe, Mda fuses fiction and anthropology and uses the Xhosa principle of twinning and the tradition of overtone singing as structural devices in the arrangement of the narrative. Thus the novel seems in the

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5 Attwell 2005, p. 196.
end able to overcome the splitting duality: Although Camagu chooses Qukeswa, thereby endorsing the believers in the strategic battle, the metaphorical power of twinship, which traditionally is regarded as one single identity, makes it possible to combine the two positions. Splitting and twinning comprise a warp and woof, as Attwell puts it.\textsuperscript{6} Most importantly, Camagu’s quest reverses the common ‘Jim-comes-to-Joburg’\textsuperscript{7} trope:

“[I]nstead of narrating the emergence of the African as modern subject – the end of innocence – the novel attempts a \textit{reintegration} of the already-modern subject into the dilemmas of southern Africa’s post-coloniality.”\textsuperscript{8}

The story of Nongqause and the cattle-killing movement has superseded its local origin and attained the status of a national myth, in its ambiguity more compelling than the stylized figure of the defiant Zulu warrior.\textsuperscript{9} History is the great forger of national identity, but literature also played a key-role in its construction, in Europe as well as in the newly independent former colonies of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Modernization as a project has, without any exception that I know of, historically

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 199.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Jim Comes to Joburg} (1949) was the first full length entertainment film made in South Africa with an all native cast. It depicts the modern city as the ruin of the idealized rural African and has served as justification for Apartheid.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., p. 198.

\textsuperscript{9} The expansive Zulu kingdom of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century not only resisted colonization but challenged the British domination in the region. The legendary battle of Isandlwana in January 1879, in which a superiorly armed British force was annihilated by the Zulu army, remains the greatest military defeat of the British Empire at the hands of native forces.
coincided with a process of nation-building. Many post-colonial writers, like Chinua Achebe, actively participated in that process, providing epics for identification and more or less deliberately contributing to a national imaginary.

In most of Africa, the national projects have failed and given room for disillusion, which may also be artistically productive. But neither happened in South Africa, where national modernization was frustrated in an embryonic stage by the imposition of the perverse and exclusive nationalist project of Afrikanerdom. The anti-Apartheid struggle of course served to forge a shared culture of resistance and in the 1980s literature created and proposed subject-positions that exceeded the racialized determinations of the Apartheid system and the colonial legacy. But from an artistic point of view, the struggle was also a limiting and constraining factor.

In the transition a new over-arching myth was launched along with the radical democratic Constitution: the non-racial Rainbow Nation. Persuasive as it may be it seems however to have had only marginal impact on cultural production. The socio-political reality, with rampant crime and the aids pandemic, is perhaps as pressing as the demands of the struggle ever were. Nobody has even attempted to write ‘the great South African novel’, and perhaps nobody ever will. Although South Africa has the most sophisticated media structure in Africa – TV, radio and print media alike – the public sphere remains fragmented and incomplete. One can in fact question

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whether it is even meaningful to talk about a common, collective imaginary – which has hitherto been a prerequisite for the formation of any imagined community that stretches beyond the limits of the local neighborhood or community. That is of course a very disturbing question, because if there isn’t a common imaginary it is difficult to assume that literature – or art in general – would have any social impact at all.

There are however also signs that point in a more encouraging direction. Even if the book market is dominated by the bestsellers from London and New York, including regional heroes like Wilbur Smith, the local publishing scene is remarkably lively and there is clearly a growing readership for contemporary South African literature. Mike Nicol’s prognosticated boom for historical themes may not have happened, in spite of Mda’s and others’ example¹², but there is an obvious interest in excavating the near past, in reassessing the alleged parenthesis of Apartheid, sometimes by putting new wine in old bottles, so to speak.

**Back to the farm**

Marlene van Niekerk’s second novel *Agaat* (2004)¹³ is a variation of a classical genre in Afrikaans literature: the farm novel. While the garden myth in Europe’s New World colonies was associated with paradise and had a utopian motivation, the South African *pastoral* art attained a quite different character. As J. M. Coetzee demonstrates in his essay *White Writing* (1988),

¹² A notable example, in addition to the ones I discuss, is André Brink, who was one of the writers that were most firmly identified with the alleged obsession with the political present. In his novel *The Other Side of Silence* (2002), Brink turns his creative attention to the disastrous German colonial enterprise in Namibia (former South-West Africa) of the early 20th century.

¹³ English translation by Michiel Heyns 2006.
“it looks back, usually in a spirit of nostalgia, to the calm and stability of the farm, a still point mediate between the wilderness of lawless nature and the wilderness of the new cities; it holds up the time of the forefathers as an exemplary age when the garden of myth became actualized in history.”  

The heyday for the essentialist and conservative plaasroman was in the 1920s and ‘30s, when the boer of the platteland went through the painful transition from farmer to townsman. It had a European parallel in the German bauernroman of the interwar period, and one can of course find allegories between rising Nazism and the build-up of Afrikaner nationalism, in which the farm novel played a substantial part. But rural life was not exclusively a subject of Afrikaans literature. The precariousness of the settler existence in Africa was shared by the English-speakers, and the genre’s paradoxically most important predecessor is Olive Schreiner’s The Story of an African Farm (1883),\textsuperscript{15} to which Marlene van Niekerk’s reinvention also clearly alludes.

Agaat is a tour de force, to use a worn-out cliché, and surely one of the lasting South African novels of the first decade of the new century. It tells the story of a modern African farm during and after Apartheid, and the political changes at national level are mirrored in the parochial microcosm of the homestead Grootmoedersdrift, near Swellendam in the Southwestern Cape. The central consciousness and main narrator is the farm’s late owner Milla Redelinghuys.

\textsuperscript{14} Coetzee 1988, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{15} Paradoxical, because Schreiner is at the same time, in Coetzee’s words, “the great antipastoral writer in South Africa”. In her novel the farm, representing the Cape Colony, is an anti-Garden and dystopia, “pettiness in the midst of vastness”. Ibid. pp. 4, 65.
Suffering from a motor neuron disease, she is completely paralyzed, unable to speak, and at the mercy of her adopted housekeeper Agaat, with whom she communicates via eye blinking. The history of the farm, and of the complex, in some ways inverted, relationships between the four members of the household, is recapitulated on Milla’s sickbed during her last few months. The other narrator, in the novel’s present tense, is her biological son Jakkie, an ethnomusicologist who briefly returns from exile in Canada to attend his mother’s funeral.

Agaat’s intrusion on the pastoral scene begins on the symbolism-laden Day of the Covenant\textsuperscript{16} 1954, when childless Milla rescues the mistreated, violated and deformed coloured girl from the labourer’s quarter and sets out to raise her as if she were a white child, almost like a daughter. By adopting Agaat, Milla defies both her dominant mother and her battering husband and is condemned by the entire farmer community. But when she at last, unexpectedly, becomes pregnant with her own child, Agaat is relegated to the role as nanny for Jakkie and, eventually, housekeeper. In her unarticulated frustration Agaat gradually turns into a house tyrant, feared and hated by the servants and workers of the farm. Hence, although Milla’s philanthropic idealism stretches the boundaries of her upbringing and culture, it remains

\textsuperscript{16} The Day of the Covenant is celebrated in remembrance of the battle at Blood River 1838, when the Afrikaner Trekkers defeated a superior Zulu army and afterwards vowed to keep the day in religious memory. This crucial event in Afrikaner nationalist mythology is consecrated in the Voortrekker monument in Pretoria. The Day of the Covenant also plays a crucial role in Njabulo Ndebele’s novella Fools (1983), where the protagonist addresses a class of black school children and tries to make them understand that they are in fact celebrating a defeat.
ambiguous, as ready for punishment as for gentleness, and the end result is a Frankenstein’s monster: an Apartheid Cyborg, as Jakkie puts it.

Agaat’s fate reflects of course the dehumanizing structural violence of the racist system. But subtlety and brutality seem to constitute all human relations in van Niekerk’s evoked Afrikaans universe of deformed humanity and deplorable bigotry. Sensitive, caring Milla is battered by her husband, the handsome but hollow Jak de Wet (MooiJak), who was forced to become a farmer against his will - and against his skills. In many ways a ridiculous figure, the churlish and brutal Jak also evokes some sympathy in his perpetual shortcomings. He pities himself as a victim of the manipulations of the women of Grootmoedersdrift and he tries desperately to rescue Jakkie from their feminine powers, to the extent that he is even ready to sacrifice his only son for the sake of the threatened Nation. Jakkie’s (deputy) service as a bomb pilot in the war in Angola is Jak’s great triumph, and the prodigal son’s suspected treason (which remains unsettled) is what finally destroys the petty patriarch. Battered Jakkie is also a riddle, neither standing up against the tyrant father – not even when he is directly provoked – nor defending his mother, whom he apparently despises. He is a deserter of the army, but also of his own heritage, turning his back on the dead parents, leaving his inheritance to its fate.

As in the classical farm novel, the labourers and servants are merely ornamental figures. Even Agaat remains essentially the adopted and abducted other; mysterious, inscrutable, faithful and vengeful at the same time. She becomes the inheritor of the farm, and a paradoxical guarantor of continuity, because not very much seems to
change, and the prospects for radical reform appear to be slim. An extra sheep for Christmas to the labourers, but the patriarchal/colonial power structure remains intact under the new regime.

To read the novel merely as a disheartening allegory of the transition would however miss the point. Van Niekerk’s great achievement lies in the subtle psychology of the interpersonal relations and in the bittersweet beauty of her poetic prose. The evoked rural world of early modernity has a tinge of nostalgia, but the affection is attached to the landscape rather than the land. The past is revisited with the perspicacious gaze of the ambivalent exile.

**Griqualand revisited**

While Marlene Van Niekerk is shedding new light on the recent past by reinventing an existing, yet discredited and abandoned genre, Zoë Wicomb reinvents history itself in her exploration of a core aspect of South African experience that has been negated and effectively repressed: creolization – or miscegenation, to speak in more blunt biological terms. In the specifically South African racial categorization system, Wicomb belongs to the middle group of “coloureds”, that is those of mixed race who, according to the Apartheid logic, are neither black nor white,\(^\text{17}\) and the refusal to

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\(^{17}\) In the Population Registration Act of 1950 a coloured person (*kleurling* in Afrikaans) is defined as ‘not a White person or a Black’. This notion of *inbetweenness* as a void of non-belonging stands in sharp contrast to the notion of *mestizaje* in most Latin American countries, where racial mixture is affirmed as the national norm. In current coloured politics in post-Apartheid South Africa this inbetweenness is however celebrated, as in the use of the word brown in the ‘Coloured Liberation Movement for the Advancement of Brown People’, launched in March 1995. For a critical analysis of coloured identity politics, see Wicomb 1998.
Affirm this complex and shame-laden identity is a recurrent theme in both her academic work and her up to date three books of fiction\textsuperscript{18}.

David’s Story (2000) is a multi-voiced and, as Dorothy Driver puts it in the extensive afterword, quintessentially South African novel\textsuperscript{19} which fearlessly deals with several sensitive or even tabooed topics. The main protagonist, David, is a former freedom fighter from Cape Town, who engages a (woman) writer and outsider - not a member of the movement - to tell his story. The narrator, ‘coloured’ like himself and with a certain resemblance with the author of the novel, is however not provided with all the information she needs. Significant blanks are for her to fill in. There is for example a mysterious relation to a woman, Dulcie, a heroine of the struggle who falls into disgrace with the comrades. There is also the sickening jealousy of David’s wife, Sally (originally Saartje), also an ANC cadre, who waits in Cape Town while David is out on his journeys. The present time is 1991 and David is doing a trip to Kokstad in Namaqualand (former Griqualand), to “find himself” as his wife scornfully puts it. He is doing an exploration into his own Griqua ancestry and hence into a little known and dubiously documented part of the history of the Cape colony. The Griqua were originally descendents of the indigenous Khoi people – called Hottentots by early European travellers. Rather than succumbing or becoming servants to the Dutch colonists, The Griqua travelled north to set up their

\textsuperscript{18} You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town (1987), a collection of short stories, was hailed as the first book of fiction set in South Africa by a “coloured” woman.

\textsuperscript{19} Driver 2000, p. 218.
own independent state. They were joined by runaway and freed slaves (brought to
the Cape colony from Madagascar, Mozambique, India, Indonesia and Malaysia),
people of mixed race and a few whites, who all assumed the Griqua identity. Moving
through Namaqualand and across the Orange River, they settled at Klaarwater,
which was renamed Griquastad.

The Griqua journey in search of the Promised Land bears a striking resemblance to
the Boers’ *Groot Trek* in escape of British colonial rule, and the two migrant groups
had more than myths and religion (Christianity) in common; they shared the
creolized Dutch that would eventually develop into Afrikaans. But while the Boers –
later Afrikaners – were more and more concerned to identify themselves as white,
the Griqua embraced a variety of ethnicities, and racial mixture was an
acknowledged part of Griquaness.\(^\text{20}\)

David’s Story gives a fragmented reconstruction of the various Griqua migrations
and settlements from the early 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century to the 1930s, when the late leader Andrew
Le Fleur struggles to establish a separate homeland for a separate Griqua race, thus
following an ideological line that would later cohere with Apartheid policy and
portend “the shameful vote of Cape coloureds for the National Party in the first
democratic elections”\(^\text{21}\).

\(^{20}\) Ibid. The myth of whiteness was largely maintained through the racial purity of white women’s wombs, while
white men’s sexual activity across racial lines was accepted or ignored.

\(^{21}\) Wicomb 1998.
One of the most influential books in fomenting the racialized discourse that is still underpinning South African identity politics is *God’s Stepchildren* (1924) by Sarah Gertrude Millin. Still acclaimed as an important writer, Millin is now discredited and neglected because of her ideas on race and her support of Apartheid. *God’s Step-Children* is a family saga spanning over five generations. An English missionary, Andrew Flood, arrives to the Cape colony in the early 19th century and tries to win the confidence of the Hottentots by marrying a native woman and fathering two children. His light-skinned daughter later sleeps with a passing white and bears an even lighter-skinned son, Kleinhans, who tries but fails to pass as white. He marries a ‘coloured’ woman and their daughter, Elmira, is sent to a white convent school, but she is disclosed like her father and expelled. Elmira is later lured into marrying her white patron and bears a son, Barry, who to all appearances is white. Barry, at the end of the novel’s genealogical line of strenuous ascent towards the bliss of whiteness, goes to England to study (at Oxford) and returns with an English bride. But when Barry’s jealous half-sister reveals his ancestry to his wife, she leaves him and goes back to England. At the same time Barry is reached by the news that his mother is dying, and he returns to his family in Griqualand West and realizes that his true home is with the “brown people”.

This tragedy of blood, as Coetzee calls it, is one of the key intertextual references in David’s Story, where Andrew Le Fleur’s Grandfather Eduard is replacing Andrew

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22 “Certainly the most substantial novelist writing in English in South Africa between Olive Schreiner and Nadine Gordimer”, according to Coetzee (1988, p. 138).
Flood in the progenitive Griqua position. Shame is a recurrent theme in both books.
For Millin the shame lies in the sexual unions that give rise to racial mixing, spreading the “degenerate seed” that is inherited from one generation to the next and always threatens to erupt, “thereby retrospectively revealing all the past white generations of its carriers as frauds, false whites”\textsuperscript{23}. Shame is in fact not strong enough to denote the ‘original sin’ of mixing fluids, because black blood is a form of defilement, a formless horror evading description - much like the HIV virus, which can be kept at bay, at best, but never cured. The only way the polluted community can cleanse itself is by expelling the polluter. And the only way that the responsible polluter can put an end to the suffering is by sexual abstinence, thereby killing the taint (virus) and extinguishing the bloodline that carries it – the ever-damned tradition of hybrid impurity\textsuperscript{24}. In Wicomb’s account, by contrast, it is not the “degenerate seed” that threatens to be spread, but instead “the infection of shame”\textsuperscript{25}:

In its general outlines, and details, the novel’s historical account is faithful to documented fact. But David and his narrator distort the picture by insinuating a connection between the Le Fleur genealogy and “the father of biology”, Georges

\textsuperscript{23} Coetzee 1988, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{24} It is worth observing that the disdain for miscegenation is not solely an obsession of the white minority. Wicomb cites Sol Plaatje’s \textit{Mhudi} (1930), one of the pioneer works of black South African literature, regarded as the first African Nationalist novel, which fervently warns against the Bechuana’s alliance with the Boers, because the Boers will “take Bechuana women to wife and, with them, breed a race of half man, half goblin”. As Wicomb notes, “shame is still inscribed in the tragic mode routinely used to represent coloureds where assumed cultural loss is elevated to the realm of ontology” (1998, p. 100)

\textsuperscript{25} Wicomb 2000, p. 162.
Cuvier. The professor of animal anatomy at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris is in South Africa mostly known as the one who brought Saartje Baartman to Europe. Advertised as “the Hottentot Venus” and displayed in a cage, she toured Europe as an ethnological museum exhibit. After her early death, Saartje Baartman’s genitals, brain and skeleton were put on display at Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974, when they were removed to a back room. The feature that caught the European spectators’ amused and aroused attention was Saartje’s bountiful behind. Steatopygia is the term, which recurs throughout the novel, almost obsessively. All the women, including the narrator, seem to be equipped with the impressive bottom, associated with another insistently repeated word, concupiscence, and surely the most important and down-to-earth explanation of the abundant miscegenation in the early history of the Cape colony.

Saartje Baartman enters David’s story when he is asked, by the narrator, to write about Dulcie, since he seems unable to speak of her. He reluctantly agrees, but when he hands over his notes it turns out that he has chosen to displace Dulcie by the historical figure of Saartje Baartman.

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26 Madame Le Fleur, a protestant Huguenot escaping catholic persecution, actually arrived in South Africa already in 1688, but by erasing a century Wicomb makes her the housekeeper of Georges Cuvier and her son Eduard presumably Cuvier’s illegitimate son. Since David’s own grandmother is the illegitimate daughter of Andrew Le Fleur, David may himself be a Cuvier descendent.

27 Baartman’s case gained world-wide reputation after it was rediscovered by biologist Stephen Jay Gold in the essay collection The Flamingo’s Smile : Reflections in natural history (1985). One of Nelson Mandela’s first requests as the new president of South Africa was that France return the remains. The French National Assembly finally acceded to the request in 2002.
“[...] Thus he brought along the meticulously researched monograph, complete with novelistic detail: Saartje’s foolish vanity, the treachery of white men, the Boer mistress who would not let her go, whose prophetic words rang in her ears, the seasickness on the ship, the cage in London decked with leopard skins, and, on the catwalk of her cage, the turning of the spectacular buttocks, this way and that, so that Europeans would crack their ribs with laughter. And the bitter cold of a northern winter that lasted all year long.

There are quite enough of these stories, I say impatiently. I believe ours can do very well without. Besides, what on earth has Baartman to do with your history?

But it’s not a personal history as such that I’m after, not biography or autobiography. I know we’re supposed to write that kind of thing, but I have no desire to cast myself as hero, he sneers. Nothing wrong with including a historical figure.

But she may not even have been a Griqua.

David gives me a withering look. Baartman belongs to all of us.

Ergo, we are all Griquas, I laugh [...]”

If the return of Saartje Baartman’s remains was “one of several initiatives towards reconstructing a national cultural past”29, Wicomb’s witty historical reinvention rather aims at deconstructing the national myths. Her quite deliberate purpose is in full accordance with Nuttall and Michael’s attempt at rereading South African

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28 Wicomb 2000, pp. 134 – 135. The association Dulcie – Saartje Baartman is curious in the light of the suggested kinship between David and Cuvier. But, again, it is more than just an ironic twist. Dorothy Driver makes a poignant interpretation: “Whereas current debate about Saartje Baartman refers to the need to rebury her body parts on home ground, Dulcie’s body refuses burial. [...] Dulcie’s story is a story of what has not yet been said about violence and betrayal, political commitment and love, about writing and representation and truth. For David, Dulcie remains at a stage of unrepresentability, not least because certain aspects of her treatment cannot be faced, since facing them would force him to confront his own past not only as victim but also as victimizer.” (Driver 2000, p. 232.) Other obvious connotations, as noted by Driver, are Don Quixote’s imaginary mistress Dulcinea, and the ANC activist Dulcie September (1935-1988) whose murder in Paris remains unresolved. (Ibid., p. 252)

culture and history, by turning the focus from the all dominant configuration of separation and stratification, to other co-existing configurations that have been neglected or denied, such as cultural fusions, intimacies and creolizations.\textsuperscript{30} The imaginative closure – South Africa’s self-image as a closed space and a place apart – has prevailed after Apartheid, in spite of the new openings. Although the anti-Apartheid struggle was marked by a non-racial ethos, it emphasized the very segregation as a means of generating support. And in the new nation of the transition, the complex configurations of hybridity and syncretism remain masked, now by the foregrounding of an over-simplified discourse of ‘rainbow nationalism’.\textsuperscript{31}

Wicomb’s reinvention of history by means of fiction makes David’s Story a drama of ideas rather than a ‘historical novel’. The wide range of references, in epigraphs and in the narrative itself, to colonial and historical texts, and a diverse set of writers from South Africa and overseas, including Cervantes, Laurence Sterne, James Joyce and Toni Morrison, denote an exemplary strategy of ‘writing back’\textsuperscript{32}. The fictional twist serves to further dispense with Biology’s crucial influence over modern thought – the bloodline in Western social science, if you will – but, fictional as it is, her reinterpretation is nonetheless also in accordance with recent rewritings of the early colonial history, for example Robert Shell’s \textit{Children of Bondage} (1994):

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] Ibid.
\item[32] The term was coined by Ashcroft et al in \textit{The Empire Writes Back} (1989).
\end{footnotes}
“Slave ancestors injected diversity and challenge into an oppressive settler culture, bending and finally changing it, creolising into a new culture. [...] Slavery brought different people together, not across the sights of a gun, as on the frontier, but in the setting of a home. Each slave was exposed to each owner and each settler to each slave on a very intimate footing. There was, in fact, a common reciprocal legacy.”

The complicated relation between ‘coloured’ and black is one of the core topics in David’s Story. The coloureds’ subservient alliance with the Boers, sealed by Andrew Le Fleur – a “sell-out” in David’s eyes – who readily accepted the separate homeland for his volk, is also illustrated by David’s father, who has no understanding for the son’s involvement with politics and with kaffirs, as blacks were commonly called by the coloureds. And, inversely, the coloured comrades are regarded with suspicion by the black cadres, as potential spies and infiltrators. On his trip to Kokstad, David discovers that he is on a hit-list, like Dulcie. It is never clarified why, nor do we as readers know whether the torture of Dulcie is ‘real’ or an invention (interpretation) of the narrator. Here, the novel touches upon other likewise tabooed issues: the mistreatment of dissidents in the ANC detention camps and, more generally, the sexual abuse of women by their male comrades throughout the liberation struggle.

33 Shell 1994, p. 415, quoted in Nuttall and Michael, p. 5. This legacy, the as yet unexamined creole culture of South Africa, had its own language, Afrikaans, which was first written in the Arabic script of Muslim slaves from Indonesia and Malaysia. As already noted above, and as sublimely suggested by Wicomb’s narrative, it is one of the great ironies of South African history that this poetic language, shared by Boers and Griquas, should become the language of Apartheid.

34 Although the ANC proclaimed itself to be nonracial, there was intensive debate about whether whites, coloureds and Indians should be allowed to become members. Open membership was accepted in 1985, but the bitter disagreement lingered on and Africanist tendencies remain strong within the ANC.
Both David and Dulcie obviously have a connection to the infamous Quatro camp\textsuperscript{35} in Angola, but it remains unclear what their respective roles were. Was David even, as Driver chooses to suggest, one of the lover-torturers? His own story to the narrator both reveals and does not reveal ANC atrocities, reflecting his ambivalence about what he sees as inevitable violence in revolutionary times. The narrator’s refusal to provide straight answers is a crucial feature of the novel’s method; it investigates the past, and present, without any sense of political rectitude, or even moral authority. The provisionality of truth, is one of Wicomb’s major themes and the novel’s scepticism is self-reflexive as well.

“Why, then, does David want his story written – which is to say, have it read? Yes, he does feel ambivalent about this project, which invites a reader to perform a task he does not value. But he cannot explain: he is in a sense ashamed of appearing to be vain, of thinking of himself as special. It is not that he wants to be remembered; rather, it is about putting things down on paper so that you can see what there is, shuffle the pages around, if necessary, until they make sense. When I suggest a pseudonym, he looks scornful and says no, not that he wishes to be naive about the truth, but he does want his own story told, wants to acknowledge and maintain control over his progeny even

\textsuperscript{35} Quatro alludes to Johannesburg’s main prison, whose black section was known as Number Four. It was one of several detention camps set up in Angola during the war, when ANC guerrillas fought with the MPLA government forces against the UNITA rebel army, supported by the South African state. The South African freedom fighters would rather fight in their own country, against their real enemy, and there was a growing discontent with the lack of democracy within the ANC. After the unmasking of a spy in the ANC high command in 1981, many dissidents were detained on suspicion of espionage. Some were publicly executed, others were sent to camps for political correction, where they were tortured by members of the ANC security department. These conditions were disclosed in the early 1990s, after the unbanning of the ANC, and Nelson Mandela appointed a commission to investigate the complaints by former detainees. Evidence against the ANC security department was also heard at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and just before the presentation of its report, on 29 October 1998, then deputy president Thabo Mbeki made applications to the Cape High Court to prevent publication, stating that the report contained inaccuracies about the ANC. President Mandela, by contrast, supported the TRC findings, saying that nobody could deny the deaths in ANC detention camps, although he reiterated that the war against Apartheid had been just. (Driver 2000, p. 237). For a thorough discussion of the ANC detention camps, see Ellis & Sechaba 1992.
David shakes his head: the corners of his mouth drop in disappointment or disbelief. It would seem that truth is too large a thing even for those who take on vast projects like changing the world, that it can only be handled in tit-bits: something like a sheet of steel has since fallen between the truth about things in the world and the truth about himself.”

It is hardly a coincidence that issues of ‘truth’ and ‘responsibility’ come to the fore in a novel which is conceived in the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC has had a crucial influence on South African cultural production in the transition period. But Wicomb is, along with Antjie Krog, the first writer to engage with these core post-Apartheid issues in-depth, from philosophical, historical and personal points of view, and at a meta-narrative level: What kind of (provisional) truth can fiction tell? What political change – if any – can it bring about?

In one of her early statements about her own writing, Wicomb has declared her need to write in a realist mode and yet not impose order on reality, “precisely because there isn’t order, there’s conflict and that’s not only in the South African situation”. Subsequently it is important to have ‘chaos’ on the page – chaos being “an alternative to the camouflage of coherence that socio-political structures are about”.

Chaos could also, as Driver suggests, be thought of as “that which has not yet entered language as proposition, or as cliché, or as meaning, or truth”. I find the last

36 Wicomb 2000, pp. 140-141.
38 Driver 2000, p. 251.
suggestion profoundly compelling, in a way that possibly differs from Driver’s intention: Hence, writing as truth does not only work at the discursive formations that order the world, in a way similar to philosophical deconstruction; it precedes them at a pre-discursive level.

Climbing the Apartheid ladder
In Wicomb’s second novel, Playing in the Light (2006), she investigates a curious and absurd consequence of South African racial politics: the play-white phenomenon, in other words coloureds who managed to pass as whites, thereby getting access to the privileges of the Apartheid system. Since miscegenation was much more common than acknowledged, the racial division-line was blurred, with a substantial “grey-zone” and room for arbitrary judgment. Even the National Party leader and Apartheid architect Hendrik Verwoerd’s wife Betsie is in the novel rumored to have been a play-white, with alleged African features. Attempted ascent to whiteness was moreover stimulated by the government’s policy of deliberately boosting the numbers of whites by letting light-skinned coloureds pass over.

Although thematically a sequel to David’s Story, Playing in the Light is more like a conventionally realistic novel, with the suspense of a detective story. The main protagonist, Marion, is a successful business-woman in Cape Town who runs a travel agency although she hates travelling. She’s single, with a record of short and complicated relations with men, and has obvious difficulties to connect to other people, male or female. Her immaculate home in Blouberg, with a beautiful view of Table Bay and Table Mountain, has never had a guest. Every Saturday she pays a
visit to her widowed father, who has always been very affectionate with her, calling her “his mermaid”. Like her father she is proud of their Afrikaner heritage, although she is English-speaking. She does not feel responsible for Apartheid, yet has some difficulties adjusting to the New South Africa; she is particularly disturbed by her young and clever coloured employee, Brenda, who challenges the silent order at the office. But her ordinary routine-driven life goes on, until one day, when a picture in the newspaper catches her attention.

“At lunchtime, Marion picks up the Cape Times – must be Brenda’s – from the coffee table. On the front page is a large colour photograph of a young woman, taking up a quarter of the broadsheet. Marion doesn’t usually bother with newspapers. The tired old politics of this country does not divert her. She has no interest in its to-ing and fro-ing, and is impatient with people in sackcloth and ashes who flagellate themselves over the so-called misdemeanors of history, or with those who choose not to forget, who harp on about the past and so fail to move forward and look to the future. (…)”

The woman in the picture is former ANC activist Patricia Williams at the hands of the Security Police. Brenda tries to dismiss it, but she can’t. There is something arresting about the face: the eyes look directly into hers and trigger something, she doesn’t know exactly what, but a memory comes up of her childhood’s nanny, a coloured woman sitting in the backyard, drinking from an emerald cup. When she died her parents had an argument as to whether they ought to attend the funeral. Her mother sternly refused, but cried heart-rendingly and seemed devastated. A

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sequel memory emerges, of how she confronted her mother with the wish of having a sister, and the mother said that she couldn’t have any children. Marion suddenly comes to the chocking realization that she was adopted, and that the nanny, Tokkie, served as an intermediary. Hence she decides to make her own investigation. She confides her secret to Brenda in the hope that she will help her get access to the coloured community. A fumbling friendship begins to evolve between the two women. They make a trip together to Wuppertal, the hometown of Tokkie. But the trip does not yield the expected result; the clues seem to lead to a dead end and Marion returns disillusioned, until an even more sensational explanation dawns on her: The nanny was actually her grandmother, expelled to the servants’ quarter by her play-white parents, who had successfully climbed the Apartheid ladder at the expense of denying their origin and cutting all relations with their past, including their own families. Recovering from the first chock, she continues her investigation, now extending it to the entire phenomenon of passing as white, only to find that there is practically nothing written about it. Marion’s literal library research gives a tint of essay or investigative journalism to this part of the novel, but unlike the genre-mixed David’s Story, Playing in the Light consequently stays within the confines of its narrative mould.

In the above cited interview from 1990, Wicomb explains that she has "drawn extensively" on her own experience and on the people and landscape with which she is familiar. However, she is sharply critical of the tendency to read fiction by black
women as necessarily autobiographical, thereby in a patronizing way denying their literariness. In her own stories [You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town, 1987] she is in various ways subverting this kind of reading, for example by resurrecting characters, insisting on their fictionality. Playing in the Light does not deploy “magic”, nor does it reinvent history, but it defies the representational testimony by telling from the (play-)white, not the coloured, perspective – although it is suggested in the end that Brenda actually is the narrator, who reveals Marion’s secret by recapitulating her parents’ story.

As a novel it is less intricate and less wittily ironic than David’s Story, but its characters are the more elaborate. Not least the portrait of Marion’s mother, Helen, is impressive. Cunning and full of self-contempt, she abides (to) austerity as the prize for her obsessive ambition. The father, John, is more reluctant to play by the evil system’s rules, and he keeps sneaking away to meet his loved sister, Elsie, in secrecy – until, in the late 1970s, after the Soweto uprising and the killing of his nephew, he is no longer welcome. As Elsie puts it, when she is finally confronted by her niece:

“[B]ecause he thought of skin as the alpha and omega, he grew stupid and couldn’t think properly about the world beyond passing for white.”

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40 In accordance with ‘Black consciousness’, Wicomb identifies herself as ‘black’, not ‘coloured’. She says in the interview: “I don’t imagine that I would ever have been able to speak and write if there hadn’t been black consciousness, if there hadn’t been feminism” (Hunter & MacKenzie 1993, p. 88.)

41 Ibid., p. 93.

42 Wicomb 2006, p. 171.
History from within

The other middle category in the racial hierarchy, the Indians, has been more invisible – even invisibilized – in South African literature. The first Indians were brought as slaves to the Cape Colony already in the 17th century\(^43\), but the big immigration wave started in 1860 and lasted five decades, when indentured labourers were shipped to the Sugarcane plantations of Natal\(^44\). Today’s Indian community, with its stronghold in Durban, amounts to more than one million, or three percent of the South African population\(^45\). Unlike the coloureds they have maintained a strong sense of cultural belonging and a diasporic identity.

The history of the Indian presence in South Africa has until recently remained largely untold, in spite of the significant role that Indian trade unionists played in the early liberation struggle.\(^46\) The undocumented and partly even erased history of the Indian community and, more specifically, the experience of growing up as an Indian under Apartheid, are subjects of a number of novels in the transition period, most ambitiously in Aziz Hassim’s *The Lotus People* (2002), a family saga of three generations in Durban, from 1882 to the late 1980s. Hassim was a retired accountant

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\(^43\) More than a third of the foreign-born slaves in the Cape were from India. They mixed with other slaves, mainly from Indonesia, and their descendents were later to be classified as Malay or coloured. (Bradlow and Cairns 1978)

\(^44\) The slave-workers were predominantly Tamil and Telugu speaking Hindus from the then Madras presidency. They were followed by traders, many from the Gujarat and Rajasthan area.


\(^46\) Ibid. The Natal Indian Congress (NIT) was a fore-runner to the African National Congress (ANC). Mahatma Gandhi spent his formative years (1893-1914) in Durban and left an important legacy.
when he wrote his first novel as a form of cleansing process – his “personal TRC” – in order to record a past that seemed bound for oblivion, vanishing with the memories of those who experienced the bittersweet romance of Durban’s Casbah area, around Grey Street, in the 1950s and ‘60s. By interweaving present and past, anecdotes and historical events, Hassim recreates a romanticized yet nakedly realistic urban universe, with its underworld of gangsters and political activism and its day-to-day struggle for survival. As a historic document of Durban’s development, and a retrospective rewriting of the city, The Lotus People will surely remain a landmark in South African literature.

Unlike most Indian South African writers, who speak from a basically testimonial, intra-community perspective, Hassim “suspends disbelief and provides truth from multiple viewpoints”, as writer and critic Devarakshanam “Betty” Govinden puts it.

In Hassim’s novel we see a merging of history not just from the inside but from the underside. There is a deft interweaving of past and present, fiction and history, testimony and memory. Hassim presents eyewitness accounts of historical happenings, drawing from his own personal experiences, but transposing them into the lives of his fictional characters.47

The juxtaposing of different genres and merging of history and fiction, has a certain resemblance with Wicomb’s intertextual method (David’s Story), but unlike Wicomb’s distanced and ironic narrator, Hassim is “embedded” in his grand epic.

47 Govinden 2008.
He is writing history from within, yet seeking a position from which he can scrutinize and criticize it.

Ronnie Govender is also a transgressor of communal limitations. He is a storyteller, but he inscribes his tales in the tradition of black writing, with the Drum writers and Alex La Guma – the chronicler of District Six – as obvious predecessors. Like Zakes Mda, Govender started his literary career as a playwright. His political comedies were immensely popular and had a substantial impact in the anti-Apartheid struggle. His later plays, like his short stories, are mostly based on his childhood memories from Cato Manor, the mostly Indian suburb of 180,000 inhabitants which was evicted in the late 1940s, as a prelude to the notorious evictions of Johannesburg’s Sophiatown and Cape Town’s District Six. The short story collection *At the Edge & Other Cato Manor Stories* (2001) and, especially, his first novel *Song of the Atman* (2006) rendered him a rightful national break-through.

*Song of the Atman* is the life-story of his uncle Chin Govender – “as close to a biography as the structure of a novel will allow”, according to the author’s afterword. But what makes the novel interesting in this context is not so much the relation between fiction and fact as the recurrent theme of (suppressed) creolization. (The two are in fact intertwined.)

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48 Drum magazine was the legendary forum for a generation of black writers in Johannesburg’s inner suburb Sophiatown in the 1950s: Henry Nxumalo, Es’kia Mphalele, Arthur Maimane, Todd Matshikiza, Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Casey Motsisi, Bessie Head and Lewis Nkosi.

49 Govender 2006, p. 325.
Chin Govender grows up in Cato Manor, but escapes after a clash with his father, many years before the Black-on-Indian pogroms in the late 1940s, instigated by the white regime. While his family believes him to be dead, he eventually finds his way to Cape Town, where he works his way up to becoming the fellow-owner of a hotel (for whites). Later on he opens his own hotel in District Six. Seen from a Durban perspective, Cape Town appears as a haven of easy-going life and inter-racial relations – in contrast to the stiff segregation at home, where the three cultural groups – English, Zulus and Indians – keep to themselves.50

Govender’s characters may seem typecast for a Bollywood melodram, but his ear for dialogue, his eye for the significant detail and his sense of humor make Song of The Atman an astonishing novel, immensely rich in local colouring and time atmosphere, yet delightfully void of nostalgia and ethnic romanticism.

Interestingly enough, the fictional parts of the uncle’s story are those that deal with the tabooed sexual relations – on the one hand the top secret affair with his white woman employer and companion-to-be – his vehicle of upwards mobility, whom he self-destructively abandons, but who generously takes him back – and on the other his guilt-ridden relation with a black mistress, who bears a son whom he supports but does not recognize. When the climate hardens in the ’70s, the beloved but denied son Devs joins the struggle and finally ends up in jail, on Robben Island.

50 This segregation, which preceded Apartheid, has largely persisted in Durban. In the 1991 census the racial division was: 56% Black, 27% Indian, 14% White, 3% Coloured. The blacks are almost entirely Zulus, with tiny Xhosa and Sotho enclaves, and the whites are predominantly English descendants, with a small Afrikaans minority.
As a militant freedom fighter he has become friends with his cousin Guru, who is unaware of their illicit kinship. When Guru finds out he is enraged and confronts his uncle with accusations of cowardice and hypocrisy, proudly stating that he is not an Indian but a South African. Devs’ imprisonment is a hard blow to Chin, and it is followed by an even harder one; Guru’s death at the hands of the security police. On top of everything comes the evacuation of District Six and the loss of the hard-earned hotel. Urged by relatives and friends to play by the new rules and petition the authorities to build a new hotel in an Indian area, the grieving Chin stubbornly refuses and withdraws into a state of soul-searching. He remembers the song of the Atman, the abiding melody of the soul, which is passed on from parent to child, and it dawns on him that he had not availed his own son of that precious heritage, “denying him the silent, primal song of life”. Moreover,

“[i]n the denial of his child lay the denial of the music of his own life, the abrogation of a sacred trust, the severing of an eternal rhythm.”

Hence the aging Chin takes on a pilgrimage tour to Robben Island, not to ask for his offended son’s forgiveness, but to pass on the words and the melody that his mother had uttered so often in his own youth.

Govender does not defy ‘the representational testimony’. On the contrary he chooses to interpret his own uncle’s life-experience and lets the openly biographical material lend authenticity to his tale. It is indeed based on a ‘true story’, but it is

51 Ibid., p. 320
adamant for Song of the Atman to claim its property as a novel, precisely because fiction allows transgression of the representational boundaries. Whether the fictional Chin Govender’s illicit affairs had real-life counterparts is irrelevant. Their relevance in the novel lies in the unveiled secrecy, not only disclosing the configurations of fusion and intimacy that are still over-shadowed by the dominant ones of separation and stratification, but incorporating the Indian into this neglected and denied truth of the South African narrative. That is a truly pioneering achievement, and it may perhaps only be imagined in the realm of a novel. Apparently, fiction offers that position from which the many colluding histories of South Africa’s textured postcoloniality can be critically assessed and reinvented from within.

52 Nuttall and Michael 2000.

53 Attwell uses the term ‘textured postcoloniality’ to describe South Africa’s peculiar combination of the history of settler-colonial and migrant communities with that of indigenous societies (2005, p. 1).
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