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Getting Away with Diaspora: Scotland and South Africa in Zoë Wicomb's *The One that Got Away*

Abstract I: Questo articolo analizza le implicazioni legate alla diaspora nella narrativa di Zoë Wicomb, scrittrice nata in Sudafrica e migrata in Scozia durante l'apartheid. Appartenenza alla terra d'origine e radicamento in quella di adozione vengono tematizzati nella sua narrativa, dove si caratterizzano in modo tale da rivelare la costruzione ideologica dei concetti di 'nazione' e 'casa'. Mi soffermerò in particolare sulla seconda raccolta di racconti di Wicomb, *The One that Got Away* (2008), con la sua doppia ambientazione in Sudafrica e Scozia.

Abstract II: My article examines the diasporic implications in the fictional works of Zoë Wicomb, who was born in South Africa and migrated to Scotland during apartheid. The ideas of 'belonging' to her motherland and 'rooting' in her country of adoption play a crucial role in her narrative revealing the ideological fabrication of concepts such as 'nation' and 'home'. I focus in particular on Wicomb's second collection of short stories, *The One that Got Away* (2008), set both in South Africa and Scotland.

This article discusses the role of South Africa and Scotland and the relationship between them in the fictional work of Zoë Wicomb, who was born in Namaqualand (South Africa) and migrated to Scotland in the Seventies, during the apartheid regime. Wicomb is widely acknowledged as one of the leading figures of South African literature and she has played a key role in cultural debates on identity, gender, roots and ethnicity, nationhood, literature, and feminism held in the country during and after apartheid. Wicomb's diasporic consciousness and her familiarity with two places differently but deeply informed by colonial politics play a key role in her narrative, which develops around her concern for, as Carli Coetzee put it, the "unreliable status of origins and originals" (Coetzee 2010: 559) and the difficulty of untangling the question of home and belonging from a theoretical point of view, that is without taking into account the psychological and emotional subjectivity of the individuals. Wicomb's fiction, I believe, is the place where all these knots come to the fore.

Exile, travelling, putting down roots are key issues in Wicomb's life as well as in her writings. Her fictional works (three novels and two collections of connected short stories published between 1987 and 2014) are set mainly in Cape Town, although England first and Scotland later feature, in different measures - Scotland more and more as time progresses - in all her texts. A stereotyped green and rainy England, derived from Thomas Hardy and the BA English literature syllabus, is the place Frida Shenton migrates to in order to avoid the daily boycott of her life under apartheid in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987). In *David's Story* (2000), Glasgow is the city where the former guerrilla fighter David Dirkse went in the Eighties to make contact with anti-apartheid cells abroad. Europe is the destination of a long holiday overseas for Marion Campbell, the South African protagonist of *Playing in the Light* (2006), who needs to take a break after finding out she is a coloured brought up as a white under apartheid due to her family light skin complexion. Among her wanderings around the 'old continent', Scotland is the place where Marion ends up and meets a fellow South African while tracing some of her remote Scottish ancestors¹⁷.

In Wicomb's fiction there is a thread linking the idea of 'here' and 'there', 'home' and 'away': this is structured in such a way as to produce a continuous sense of relativity about spatial issues. In *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, for example, the notion of 'away' coincides with the emotionally unwelcoming place where Frieda has to reluctantly accommodate herself in order to avoid a more complicated positioning 'at home', a far more inhospitable place for a coloured woman under apartheid. Being recognised as an ordinary citizen with the same rights as everybody else in the UK does not put Frieda at ease. On the contrary, she is homesick and haunted by a sense of displacement: "So much rain, I concluded, and I'm in the wrong bloody hemisphere" (Wicomb 1987: 112).

In *David's Story*, Wicomb opts for an historical approach and elaborates on the connections between South Africa and Scotland. The two countries have indeed many ties: the slave trade can be easily traced as the backdrop to Glasgow's economic growth in modern times; later on, the anti-apartheid struggle became rooted there because many Scots perceived their own history of oppression within the United Kingdom, and under Margaret Thatcher in particular, as a colonial evil equal to apartheid (Filling and Stuart 1991). The relationships between the two countries have continued to the present day: once freed from Robben Island, where he served a long sentence together with Nelson Mandela, ANC leader Govan Mbeki went to Scotland and the Glasgow City Council recently named one of its main university buildings after him. In *David's Story* the rewriting of the past is a step in the (de)construction of identities, as Fiona McCann has underlined (McCann 2010:

¹⁷ Wicomb has always been skeptical about the issue of roots, especially in postcolonial societies, where these are mixed and untraceable. In the novel, Marion's search is a subplot which does not progress. Instead, the young woman develops relationships with the locals and with a Zulu acquaintance of hers who is in Scotland for business.

27); history and geography are both perceived as haunting and unstable presences rather than reliable sets of data. Thus, the novel accounts for David's aporetic attempts to learn some truths about himself and his family/national/ethnic history and identity. Sensations and emotions prove that the interaction between any specific space (including its history) and the individual who permanently or momentarily inhabits it is fundamental in the production of meanings. There is no way to eschew the intimate, private, distinctive aspects of this ever-changing relationship: hanging around the rainy Northern streets of Glasgow, David is

fascinated by a city in which he could enjoy the unfamiliar and yet read the well-known names of places at home: Kelvingrove, Glencoe, Aberdeen, Lyndoch, Sutherland, Fraserburgh, Dundee. There was no danger of feeling lost in Scotland, except that he felt dizzy with the to-ing and fro-ing between rain-sodden place names and the dry, dusty dorps at home. It was as if, along with his watcher, the vast terrain of South Africa had accompanied him as map, now folded and tucked into wee Scotland, and who in such wind and rain would choose to unfold a map? [...] In this friendly foreign city, his visit had become an exercise in recognizing the unknown, in remembering the familiar that cast its pall over the new (Wicomb 2000: 188-189).

Building on the idea of the *wrong bloody hemisphere* suggested in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Wicomb goes back to the dizziness provoked by being abroad in *Playing in the Light*. Here dislocation is commented upon using words that recall her first work and, once again, all prefixed ideas of 'abroad' tumble in the face of a series of overwhelming sensations. What should be a travelling experience for the character turns out to be more than Marion expected when she left 'home'. In London,

Marion experiences the world in reverse, she feels the topsy-turviness of being in the *wrong hemisphere*. [...] Believing that at some level she knows the country, or the language, she is shocked to find herself a stranger, so very different from the natives, although the motley crowds about her can hardly all be natives. The sensation of a hole, a curious, negative definition of the familiar emptiness, develops in her chest, and she feels compelled to see a doctor. But there is nothing wrong (Wicomb 2006: 188-189, my italics).

Scotland plays a key role in *October* (2014), being the country where the South African (partially autobiographical) protagonist settles during apartheid. Asked to go back to the new South Africa for family reasons, Mercia Murrey's diasporic standpoint makes way for a series of sharp comments on exile, belonging and affiliation that once again stress the uneasiness of the relationship between the individual and her space:

Return has always been a tricky notion, teeming with thorns. Why, people often ask, has she not returned to the country after Mandela's release? She would shake her head, shrug, would not deign to answer. As if exile were a frozen affair in which you are kept pristinely in the past, one that a swift thaw could restore so that, rinsed and refreshed, you are returned in mint condition to an original time, an original place (Wicomb 2014: 144).

However, it is *The One that Got Away* (2008), the author's second collection of short stories, which throws a light on Wicomb's complex diasporic perspective. In this work, Scotland and South Africa constitute a dual setting and the characters, many of whom recur from one story to the other, either have relationships with both places as natives/residents/exiles/travellers/visitors, or are related to them via parenthood or friendships. A network of connections more or less visible between Scotland and South Africa explored in these stories testifies to the slippery ground the notion of 'home' is supposed to derive from.

Accustomed to both South Africa and Scotland, Wicomb represents the two countries in familiar and unfamiliar fashions at the same time; as homely and un-homely, dissociating herself from their patronizing, clear cut and auto-referential rhetoric of nation and identity. Due to her physical, emotional and intellectual involvement with Africa and Europe, Wicomb has an innovative autonomy in her reflection on the role of places in the interpretation of objects and signs and, therefore, on the instability and arbitrariness of cultural meanings fashioned around inflexible ideas of history and geography. Discussing *Playing in the Light*, Carli Coetzee rightly pinpoints Wicomb's 'obsession' with libraries and archives and underlines the author's "interest in the context in which a text is read and interpreted" (Coetzee 2010: 559). In *The One that Got Away* Wicomb goes one step further and uses the space itself as a text, proving that the contexts in which space is read and interpreted entails a continuous shift of meaning. If we are to perceive it, there is no space without bodies crossing it and the resulting versatility makes it impossible to produce a coherent idea of the relationship between the individual, nation and belonging. A good example of Wicomb's approach to space and its (dis)contents is shown in *The One That Got Away* in the way she uses the Doulton Fountain, a Glasgow monument related to South Africa. This fountain comes to embody new attitudes towards place, nations and belonging because it changes according to different viewing and to the different emotions it evokes in its viewers.



The first story of the collection, *Boy in a Jute-Sack Hood*, is about a Scotsman, Grant Fotheringay, an historian who, as a student in the Seventies, is involved in the widespread Scottish protests against apartheid. Unable to find a job in Glasgow or Edinburgh as an adult, he obtains, quite fortuitously, an academic position in Cape Town and moves there: to the place he fought for when he was young. In a flashback on his childhood in Gorbals, a deprived neighbourhood in Glasgow, Wicomb sketches a shy boy and his dreamlike fascination with faraway places. Long before he commits himself to opposing the politics of a distant country he has never been to:

It was from the grand old derelict fountain on the Green, its cracked, blunt-nosed sculptures, that his dreams were fed. There a child from the Gorbals could escape to far-off lands via the terracotta tableaux of the colonies. [...] Trailing his red kite, he became an explorer, a discoverer of things that no Glaswegian had dreamt of; he wandered through weird vegetation, slew the giants of Africa and sailed off to India (Wicomb 2008: 10-11).

In the lower part of the fountain, which he still remembers badly damaged, smelling of excrements and surrounded by rubbish and broken bottles, his favourite section is that with the South African characters:



He favoured the bearded man in the South African tableau with a gun by his side, and at his feet a sweet, odd-looking girl who would speak in a lovely sing-song voice, quite unlike the slags who smoked and cursed in the close. But best of all was the ostrich with a long snake-neck and full, soft feathers like the girl's bosom, an image that guided his hand at night under the blanket and brought wet dreams of coupling with a continent (Wicomb 2008: 11).

The European man with the gun, the *odd-looking girl*, associated via simile with the iconic South African animal and leading the boy to a nocturnal solitary climax, parody the well-known metaphor for colonialism: a male practice embodying a patronizing attitude towards the land: unexplored, exotic and attractive – *odd-looking* – like a virgin to rape. In this story, the fountain has the side function of anticipating Grant's flight to far-off lands as a young man and adult; he will travel to India and eventually, as we learn, re-locate precisely to South Africa.

The Doulton Fountain was manufactured at the end of the Nineteenth century to celebrate Queen Victoria's reign over the four main British colonies (Australia, South Africa, India, Canada) and was one of the ornaments for the May 1888 International Exhibition of Science, Art and Industry in Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow¹⁸. By the end of the century, the Victorian monument had been moved to Glasgow Green Park, where it slowly underwent abandonment and disrepair (leading to the conditions described in the memories of the daydreamer adolescent Grant) until 2002, when it was restored to be relocated in 2004 in front of the People's Palace, where it still stands. In this renovated shape we find it yet again in another story of this collection, *There's the Bird that Never Flew*. Here Jane, a South African coloured who travels to Glasgow with her husband for their honeymoon, takes a walk in the park to have a closer look at the monument which attracted her attention a couple of days before, when the rain did not allow her a careful examination of it. Jane has already gathered a lot of information about the fountain from leaflets and people. At first sight, she perceives the four niches/colonies as pretty much alike; then, seeing them again and again and stopping in front of the South African one, her attention is captured by the ostrich, Grant's favourite piece. As Julika Griem (2011: 396) underlines, Jane's insistence helps her to overcome the 'repetitive' quality of the colonial representation; that is, Jane's repetitive gazing radically changes the meaning of what she sees. To her, indeed, the ostrich means something different from Grant's interpretation and leads her to reflect elsewhere:

Of course, unmistakably the Cape rather than the riches of the Rand – the exotic flora and fauna that lured the Brits in pursuit of pure knowledge and scientific progress. No wonder the ostrich holds its head up for inspection. And then, following the line of the neck, Jane aligns upon the woman she has passed over at least twice. How could she have not noticed before, for there in the niche, sitting cool as a cucumber in the Glasgow chill, is a young woman, no more than a girl, but unmistakably coloured... Jesus, she says aloud; she has not been looking properly after all, has missed the girl in all that elaborate Victorian detail and modelled in the same white stone as all the other figures. South Africa, then, comes to offer a different kind of knowledge. Astonishing – and Jane stands transfixed as the water

¹⁸ A sort of Scottish counterpart of the more famous 1850 London Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace (Hyde Park).

carriers seem to aim at the pitchers at her - quite unbelievable that more than a hundred years ago miscegenation was celebrated in a public work here in the 'centre' (Wicomb 2008: 71).

The bearded man to Jane's 'culturally' expert gaze is clearly a Boer, not an Englishman, and the young woman a coloured, not an unidentified *sweet odd-looking girl* whose most attractive detail is her bosom. But she gazes further, guessing an intimate, forbidden relationship between the two:

The two figures looking out of the tableau do not instantly reveal their relationship to each other, but the fabric of the woman's classical garb brushes against his right leg, partially covering his knee, which is turned slightly towards her. The brush of clothing and the symmetries, the repeated verticals of spade and rifle in contact with each left hand, are metonymies of matter-of-fact intimacy. They are unmistakably a couple (Wicomb 2008: 77).

There is a third point of view on this fountain, belonging to Margaret, a local cleaner Jane questions about the monument:

Margaret hasn't seen it; it's only been moved there recently, although she seems to remember it elsewhere on the Green, carted over from the West End they said. She was only a girl then, but she recalls the monument being a dump, all in a mess, the fountain dead, statues without noses, the Queen's head lopped off as the winos threw their bottles of Buckfast at the figures, and the dog shat in the dry moat. She, Margaret, doesn't give a toss for all them tourist walkabouts. She nods at Jane with friendly contempt. See yous, she says cryptically, yous get to see everything, but you dinnae know a thing about the real Glasgow. That's why she stays put like that great grandda, stops at home, best place from which to keep an eye on the world (Wicomb 2008: 74).

The same object can, thus, produce quite different outcomes according to the watcher and his/her personal and cultural contexts. Seen from three perspectives, the fountain is also told in different linguistic registers. While in the case of Grant we receive the information from an omniscient narrator who relates with irony the child's sexual excitement in bed provoked by the memory of the statue – possibly suggesting also a puerile aspect in the colonial practices themselves – the two women's attitudes and thoughts about the fountain are given by way of an interior monologue which is typical in Wicomb's fiction, especially in the case of female characters. At the same time, though, classism is also at work: Jane and Grant, transnational characters, elaborate on their relationship with the monument; they interact with it, unlike 'motionless' Margaret, a working-class woman, who has probably never travelled in all her life and for whom the fountain is only a run-down, dirty

monument she has not seen for ages and, in a passive aggressive attitude, does not give a toss about. For Grant it stands as a symbol of his life to come; for Jane it suggests new interpretations of her country, unthinkable at home. To her, the statues also seem to say that there was a possible world, 'abroad', where a South African interethnic couple could exist (Richter 2011: 386). On the other hand, Margaret erases the fountain from her experience: she ignores its restyling possibly marking Glasgow's change of skin in the last couple of decades, a change she has not even acknowledged.

In her essay *Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author* (2004), Wicomb openly deals with the question of writing about South Africa while being based mainly in Scotland: "the impingement of my otherness in Scotland necessitates South African fictions" (Wicomb 2004: 13), she comments. In this essay, taking the cue from Kaja Silverman's concept of *proprioceptivity* (Silverman 1996), loosely translated as 'grabbing one's ownness', that is the body's sensation of occupying a point in space, Wicomb expresses her unease with Homi Bhabha's notion of the *inbetween space* occupied by postcolonial subjects (Richter 2011: 376). In Bhabha's *interstitial*, Wicomb sees the same dangerous denial of the corporality of the postcolonial writer "in much the same way as does the foreign culture that hosts her invisibility" (Wicomb 2004: 23).

Wicomb has been defined as a cosmopolitan writer, not so much because she is an African living in Europe and travelling a lot, but because her fiction builds a cobweb of intertextualities connecting faraway places in unpredictable ways as if to show that we all live in heterogeneous conditions (Driver 2010: 529) and every effort to build a coherent geographical or historical tale, devoid of the individual's emotional and psychological implications, is doomed to failure. The recurring characters in the stories, characters who can interact amongst themselves as well as ignore each other, stand for Wicomb's idea of the world: a small place, after all, but open to infinite readings and intersections.

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Photographs

Figure 1 - *Doulton Fountain, Glasgow* by Jacqueline Banerjee
<http://www.victorianweb.org/sculpture/fountains/3.html> [accessed on 31 July, 2015]

Figure 2 - *Doulton Fountain (detail), Glasgow* by Fergus Murray (courtesy of the author).

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