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## Historical Violence and Modernist Form in Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*

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HISTORICAL VIOLENCE AND MODERNIST FORM IN ZOË WICOMB'S *DAVID'S  
STORY*

by

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## ABSTRACT

The essay brings together Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story* with Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and (less centrally) Julia Kristeva's work on "Women's Time." I argue that, while Derek Attridge claims that the novel's modernism emerges from its interrogation of historical crisis, *David's Story* is modernist because of its experimentation with nonlinear narrative and an engagement with modern intertexts such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Ulysses*. Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" illuminates the structure of Wicomb's novel, which creates what Benjamin calls a "constellation" of stories that are non-causally yet historically related to each other. In this way, she recovers the residues of female subjectivity repressed by the anti-apartheid struggle without simply reincorporating women as "subjects" of homogeneous history. By placing the novel within the vein of modernism alongside Joseph Conrad and James Joyce, Wicomb engages the linguistic revolutions that emphasize the power of language to free us rather than entrap us. To use and imagine language as emancipatory puts the novel at odds with the oppressive historical forces that are actively trying to silence the narrator's stories and that rely on poststructuralist notions of language (self-deleting text) to maintain order. The importance of my analysis is that it considers a different approach to "doing" history. It offers a new model for historical understanding that would enable us to keep faith with those that history has oppressed or forgotten and in so doing would free us from histories predicated on the myth of progress.

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## **Chapter One: Historical Violence and Modernist Forms in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story***

Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2002) illustrates the difficulties inherent in constructing histories of resistance and of resistance fighters. The novel considers how the story of fighting apartheid in South Africa often elides the experience of the colored women who were central to that resistance. Their stories are irreconcilable with the dominant narrative of heroic male resistance and, as a result, have been overwritten by it. The titular character of the novel, David Dirkse, continually displaces Dulcie Onifade's story because he cannot come to terms with the reality of her experience in Camp Quatro, a prison camp in Angola that the African National Congress (ANC) opened to "house those ANC members who had either violated the organization's regulations or were accused of being infiltrators in the service of the apartheid regime" (Cleveland 65). Both Dulcie and David spent time in the camp and were tortured by their fellow freedom fighters. David's inability to tell his own story comes from his fear of confronting Dulcie's trauma, a trauma like, but different from, his own. The unnamed narrator, hired by David to write his story, wants to legitimize Dulcie's experience in the face of historical forces intent on eradicating it. However, the narrator's inability to assimilate Dulcie's story into David's without rendering the latter a radically *other* story turns her into a ghost that haunts the text, a ghost that David tries to escape.

I read Dulcie's resistance to narrative through Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which suggests that a nonlinear construction of history can account for and encompass the oppressed and the traumatized. By reconsidering the

nature of historical narrative and its construction, alternative forms to the “storm of progress,” as Benjamin calls it, can account for and preserve the stories of those who do not emerge as history’s victors.

Recent criticism of *David’s Story* focuses on the material feminine body and its relation to memory and trauma. In “On Women, Bodies and Nation: Feminist Critique and Revision in Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*,” for example, Christa Baiada views Dulcie as willingly surrendering her body to the African National Congress (ANC) and subsequently becoming a receptacle for injury. Because of Dulcie’s willingness to sacrifice, she “bears the physical evidence of the psychic wounds of the nation” (Baiada 37-38). Dulcie, then, is a representation of the resistance’s relationship to the colored, female body as her scars come to signal the suffering of the multitude at the same time as her scars are irreducibly her own. The resistance requires a self-sacrifice that is quite literal: a destruction of colored women’s subjectivities, and of their bodies, in the name and for the sake of the struggle. Since colored women’s subjectivities pose a threat the dominant narrative of the ANC, the resistance, ultimately, requires their silence.

Minesh Dass addresses a similar historical silencing, or erasure of the self, in her discussion of “steatopygia” and “amanuensis.” Her argument has two parts that center on language as an oppressive, silencing mechanism. First, the gendering of “steatopygia” (excess fat deposits) and “amanuensis” (one who transcribes) reduces the experience of South African colored women to either their excessive flesh and/or the act of copying out words spoken by men. These two words perform a specific, socio-historical kind of silence, where they become “the meta-narrative for all stories that cannot be told” in the novel, such as Dulcie’s story, David’s story, and so on (Dass 53). Though she addresses

the criticisms from Marxists that post-structuralism is irredeemably ahistorical, Dass moves away from the analysis of “steatopygia” and “amanuensis” as rooted in a post-apartheid South African history and uses them as examples of language’s perpetual inadequacy. Through her Derridean lens, both “meta-narratives” become instances of language’s “inherent instability” which precludes us from separating truth (history) and fiction (Dass 53, 58).<sup>1</sup> She concludes that *David’s Story* makes us consider history as bound by “the (enabling) limits and the complexities of all narrativisation” because history, at its base, is language and, thus, can only further traumatize and silence (Dass 58). While Dass may be right, I am arguing that a historically specific silencing confronts the narrator in telling the story of Dulcie and David. The narrator must fight David, and the ANC, at every turn to even tell fragments of Dulcie’s story. To accept silence as the only means of response to Dulcie’s experience within a political structure bent on erasing her, is unacceptable because it capitulates to the very political system that tortured Dulcie in the first place.

Stephen Morton’s reading of the novel pushes beyond Baiada and Dass. Morton suggests that, while the story of Dulcie’s part in the resistance is inassimilable to “a masculine narrative of anti-colonial struggle,” she remains equally resistant to conventional modes of feminist “recovery” (Morton 502). She exists in a kind of liminal space that makes her elusive and resistant to representation. Dulcie, he writes, “draws attention to the impossibility of recovering subaltern histories” (Morton 502). Morton considers this “impossibility” to be the driving force of Wicomb’s novel, suggesting that

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Cleveland’s article “We Still Want the Truth: The ANC Angolan Camps and Post-Apartheid Memory” addresses the fine line between telling a story and wanting to keep it hidden as he goes through transcripts from the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) hearings. Though victims of the torture camps were able to voice their stories, justice was never served as officials never had to pay for their crimes. The TRC brought into question the value of testimony and whether the “talking cure” was a viable solution in the face of so much violence.

Dulcie's existence in a liminal space follows from the fact that neither David nor the narrator have a language for her: "neither the masculine discourse of militarism nor the liberal discourse of feminism can account for Dulcie" (Morton 501). Dulcie's trauma, while partially responsible for her resistance to linear narrative, has not destroyed her subjectivity entirely. She continually punctures and disrupts the narrative in the novel, much to David's dismay.

This puncturing (by Dulcie's "story") of the story that David wants the narrator to transcribe produces a formal experiment which current scholarship has not yet adequately described or accounted for. Derek Attridge's essay on Wicomb questions the relationship between David's genealogy and the geography of South Africa, a relationship which leads Attridge to align Wicomb's novel with the modernist mode. He draws the association between Wicomb and modernism, however, by suggesting a similarity between *David's Story* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* because both texts are the "direct product of the ambiguities and conflicts" of a particular time and place (Attridge 161).<sup>2</sup> He also says that "it is from the modernist tradition that it [*David's Story*] derives most of the technical resources it exploits" (Attridge 160). Attridge here conflates modernist and postmodernist modes of storytelling, invoking the modernist revolution of the word but using the *postmodern* Pynchon as his example.

My argument that reading *David's Story* as a modernist text can indeed be revelatory entails interpreting it through and against the modernist intertexts that Wicomb

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<sup>2</sup> The postmodern element of Wicomb's novel is undeniable, and juxtaposing the novel with a modern text suggests to me different similarities than, say, a comparison between *David's Story* and *The Crying of Lot 49*. What Wicomb does to critique the postmodern in her novel involves a reimagining of the paranoia plot that Attridge mentions. The paranoia plot occurs in both novels but the difference between the paranoia plot in which David is stuck, as opposed to the plot in which Oedipa Maas is embroiled, is that David's paranoia is well supported. Someone wants to kill him (the moment he sees his name on a hit list makes this very real for him) and he sees clues at every turn. Danger is real, rather than a conspiracy theory or some conceptual threat that does not seem immediately frightening.

herself selects. While Attridge thinks the novel's modernism comes from its historical specificity, I think the novel's modernist project lies in the exploration of different modernisms and forms. To account for lost subjectivities, the novel stands as a collection of related stories, rather than a linear narrative, that can accommodate the irreducibility of an individual's experience without imposing a rigid, linear form. Instead of linearity, *David's Story* offers interrelated and codependent stories that preserve subjectivities across generations rather than allowing them to be destroyed by self-sacrifice and silence. While Minesh Dass argues that words, in all their inadequacies, render any attempt at reclamation futile, I argue that the narrative rejects this poststructuralist notion. To accept that Dulcie's story is entirely unspeakable means a submission to the historical forces that wish to silence David and the narrator, and, in doing so, erase Dulcie.

## Chapter Two: *David's Story* as a Modernist Text

Though the intensely self-reflexive elements of *David's Story* appear to make it a postmodern work, Wicomb chooses foundational modernist texts as her frames. To draw on Derek Attridge's essay again, he argues that Wicomb "convey[s] most forcefully the new uncertainties we associate with the early 20th century innovations of modernism and their long heritage" (Attridge 160). Wicomb invokes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) to place her novel in relation to that long heritage. These works of course predate World War II, the aftermath of which sees the rise of postmodern literature. Attridge's reading is based on an intuited analogy between two historical moments of "instability and confusion": Europe following World War II and South Africa during the "period of transition from apartheid to democracy" (Attridge 161). "Modern" becomes a blanket term that covers a considerable amount of time without taking into consideration the historical specificity (temporal locations, subjectivities, and aesthetic practices or choices) of both Wicomb's text and those that she draws on to frame her narrative. Nonetheless, the concept of *David's Story* being a modernist project is compelling and Attridge draws it into focus. In my own argument, I shift to consider the high modernism of the pre-WWII era.

Wicomb establishes her novel firmly in a modern lineage of formal and linguistic innovations. In one allusion to Joyce, David and Dulcie meet on Bloomsday, the day on

which Joyce's *Ulysses* takes place.<sup>3</sup> The narrator makes the connection: "Youth Day— Soweto Day, the sixteenth of June—that's also Joyce's Bloomsday, I gabble excitedly, Day of the Revolution of the Word. Imagine, black children revolting against Afrikaans, the language of the oppressors" (Wicomb 35).<sup>4</sup> The associations establish a relationship between the linguistic revolution signaled by Joyce's novel, the social revolution of Soweto day, and the interpersonal revolution of Dulcie and David's meeting. David reacts negatively to the temporal constellation constructed by the narrator and resists the association by moving the discussion away from Dulcie. The narrator persists and asks, "But wasn't that the day you met Dulcie, in the Soweto Day celebrations?" (Wicomb 35). Though David evades the question, the narrator's invocation of Dulcie is irrevocable. The narrator senses her presence, "a protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming itself" (Wicomb 35). Dulcie's manifestation sounds remarkably like language and, in a larger sense, the forms by which language is continually renewed and revised for new eras, for new crises. But in repetition, in revision, elements of previous versions are preserved rather than erased. Dulcie cannot be completely written over: she remains an irreducible, ghostly presence who lurks within and behind David's words.

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<sup>3</sup> Also the day that Joyce met his long term partner, Nora Barnacle.

<sup>4</sup> There is yet another parallel with Joyce's works, this time *Finnegan's Wake*, in a metafictional/metatextual way: the narrator is describing a moment between Joyce and his amanuensis, Samuel Beckett, when Beckett purposefully transcribes Joyce's unintentional "come in" (Wicomb 35). The contrast between Joyce and Beckett and David and the amanuensis suggests something about the way the texts are composed. The gap between the author and the amanuensis gives the amanuensis power over the text: like Joyce did not intend Beckett to write down "come in," there are many ways in which the narrator writes down things which David did not intend, such as mentions of Dulcie. Put another way, like "come in" is true to the spirit of *Finnegan's Wake*, a work propelled by stream of consciousness and nonsense, the ways in which the narrator is careful around Dulcie is true to the heart of *David's Story*: how to represent Dulcie without trapping her.

Another instance of the novel's explicit engagement with modernism occurs when David discovers his name on a hit list. His panicked thoughts allude to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and, in particular, to a reversal of that book's gender codings that profoundly disturbs him:

Now he, David, is the intended. Like a girl in the twilight time of waiting to be claimed as wife, a time of gazing at the world through windows that are columns of light; a girl clutching at straws, at the fading light, waiting to be told the truth. Or, he shakes his head in disbelief, the horror. (Wicomb 113)

The reference to "the intended" and "the horror" establishes the thematic connection between *Heart of Darkness* and *David's Story* in their explorations of the Other. More specifically, both texts explore what it takes to *imagine* the Other, imagine being them, and in imagining, empathizing and identifying with them. David's name, exposed, on a hit list evokes Kurtz's fiancée, only ever called "My Intended," and puts him in the position of woman (Conrad 115). Occupying the position of the female other emasculates and horrifies David, and also sets him apart from Kurtz whose own horror was racially coded. As the intended, his masculinity has been negated, and he is "a girl clutching at straws" (Wicomb 113). To be the intentional object is thus to be at once feminine and targeted for death. David's reaction navigates the connection between race and gender in the texts of modernists, and Wicomb's own reworking of that intersectionality.<sup>5</sup> David

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<sup>5</sup> I am arguing that Wicomb's text is modernist at its core, but have not mentioned one of the cornerstones of modernism: Virginia Woolf. I would suggest that Wicomb's project contains an anti-Woolfian sentiment because what sets Woolf apart from other modernists is her conviction that words are limiting rather than empowering. In *The Waves* (which I would hesitate to call a novel), Woolf's project is formal: stream of consciousness vacillates between six narrators, mimicking the movement of waves. All of the narrators grapple with the limitations of language, limitations that keep them separate and stymie communication. For Woolf, this sentiment is devastating and irrevocable. Only through nature, or a loss of language, can there be harmony. Wicomb rejects both elements at play: she does not turn to the "feminine" mode of writing associated with nature nor does she accept that language can only separate us.

understands his name on the hit list through the lens of Conradian horror, a modernist trope that has infected his subjectivity. Wicomb, through David, demonstrates the value of modernist texts to reveal the complexity of South African subjectivities that are living the “horror” of apartheid, but also those who are resisting that horror and striving to make the revolution.

The importance of the text’s associations with modernist writers like Joyce and Conrad stems from Wicomb’s confidence in the power of language to grasp the real and, possibly, to change it. Postmodernism’s skepticism and emphasis on the limitations of language to effect any kind of change enforces our entrapment in language rather than fostering a sense of the linguistic as a domain of productive agency. However, Wicomb does not completely ignore the ways in which language can be oppressive and damaging: the novel understands how careful it must be in order not to “crush Dulcie with facts” (Wicomb 197). Deconstructive language erupts into the text, “*This text deletes itself,*” and belongs to the historical forces that want to use this self-cancelling language to expunge experiences that threaten dominative power structures (Wicomb 212). The belief implicit in the deconstructionist mantra is that, by deleting the text, David and Dulcie can be deleted. There is a paralytic element to the threat: if text is self-deleting, and if we are just text, what happens to the subject of political change, and how can any change be effected? The emphasis on the revolution of the word suggests the novel’s dedication to the idea that language can (and should) be politically mobilizing and enabling. *David’s Story*, then, enacts its own revolution of language to fashion a structure in which Dulcie can be both memorialized and protected from traditional, traumatic forms of storytelling.

### **Chapter Three: Problems of Historicism and the Path to Alternative Methods of Historiography**

Like Wicomb's novel, Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940) is formally fragmented in ways designed to resist a linear, causal progression. Benjamin, as a Marxist critic, contends that to understand history linearly is to understand history as written by the historical victors. The dominant narrative is constitutively incomplete, lacking the stories of the oppressed. Reading *David's Story* through Benjamin reveals the difficulty of constructing alternate histories: the dominant narrative is ever present and ever oppressive. Benjamin illustrates this threat in his analysis of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" in which history is a vast, continuous destruction, "a storm" that "we call progress" (Benjamin 263). As an alternative to this "wreckage," Benjamin posits a model of history that has the capacity to accommodate the stories of the oppressed without merely "recovering" the subaltern as subjects of a new yet still linear history (Benjamin 263). Wicomb's novel performs a similar deformation of history, resisting linear narrative in order to bring Dulcie's ghost into the light of speech without integrating her into David's totalizing story.

Wicomb's novel converges with Benjamin's essay on the point of restructuring history to question the dominant narrative. The narrator's insistence that she must "invent a structure" in order to tell the story she's been charged with alludes to the inadequacy of present forms, a problem to which Benjamin was attuned in his own historical moment (Wicomb 199). My suggestion for mapping the novel's form, or articulating its inner

structure, is to develop Benjamin's metaphor of the constellation: "A historian who takes this [Benjamin's version of historical materialism] as his point of departure stops telling the sequences of events like beads on a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation, which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (Benjamin 263). Since the image of the constellation is central to my argument, defining it is helpful in understanding its opposition to the project of linear narration. In addition to the stellar connotation of a constellation, the OED has two relevant definitions. The first, for *constellate*, as a verb, is "to form or cause to form into a cluster or group" (OED). The second, as a noun, is "a group or cluster of related things" (OED). What puts this conceptualization of history at odds with linear narrative is the absence of causal relationships. To constitute events as *related* to each other across space and time, rather than proposing that one event *caused* another, is to question the relationship between past and present. It enables a reevaluation of our proximity to the past as well as an interrogation of accepted narratives. Wicomb's novel enacts a reevaluation as it engages both formal and temporal facets of history-as-constellation.

The narrator, our historian, conceives of David's story as a constellation rather than a family tree. She rejects the trope of linear history through genealogy by telling a story through a collection of stories that speak to a common experience shared by South African women: Beeswater 1922, Cape Town 1991, Kokstad 1917 and a condensed overview of the eighteenth century to cover the origins of the Griquas. The narrator does not linearly arrange the events, and they are not causally related, yet their proximity suggests an interconnectedness. In fact, in following Benjamin's thought that the historian must "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," the

moments mirror each other in “constellating” patterns that pose a threat to historicist understanding (Benjamin 255). As an example, after the narrator wrestles with being an amanuensis, what she calls “a weight that I cannot carry,” the narrative segues into a section set in Beeswater, 1922 (Wicomb 151). The shift from the narrator’s present to the past draws a connection between her and Antjie, Andrew Le Fleur’s lover, and Rachael Susanna Kok, Andrew’s wife. They are both biologically related to David—Abraham Le Fleur is his great-grandfather and Chief of the Griquas—but the juxtaposition between the narrator’s lamentation and the stories of these two women ties them all together through the weight carried by women. Le Fleur thus designates Antjie a “Rain Sister”; this makes her responsible “for collecting and carrying back radical moisture” from the Cape to Namaqualand, where the Griquas lived (Wicomb 155). Antjie thinks that being a Rain Sister is a “burden disguised as an honor” which “weigh[s] heavily on her heart” (Wicomb 155). Antjie’s burden metamorphoses from water to a child. Through the “many indications that the Chief cared too much for Antjie” the text suggests that her baby, Ragel, David’s grandmother, belongs to Abraham Le Fleur (Wicomb 158). Bearing a child and bearing water represent material weights that are echoed symbolically in the weights carried by the narrator and Rachael Susanna.

Antjie’s duty as a water bearer is akin to Rachael Susanna’s duty as amanuensis, to write down what Andrew says obediently and without question. When she does question, Andrew says to Rachael Susanna, “Dorie, you had better think of your duty, woman” (Wicomb 160). The weight for Rachael Susanna takes a less literal form: like the narrator endures the weight of the story, Rachael Susanna bears the burden of Andrew’s words. Duty and femininity are in close proximity here, bringing us back to the

woman who began the chain of associations: the narrator, whose duty it is not only to transcribe David's story, but women's stories as well. In her transcription, she bears the weight of history. Dass argues that what connects these women is pain, but she overlooks their shared relationship to story and history. By constellating their stories, the narrator once again shows David's model of (linear, genealogical) understanding to be inadequate while constructing a feminine, non-linear lineage that also includes Dulcie's story of torture.

Dulcie's torture, as depicted on the page, is not just about the "lover torturers" who visit her in the night but also about the trauma associated with the construction of narratives, especially ones full of violence (Driver 240). Dulcie is in the military wing, like David, and the narrator thinks she might be a commander. Despite her high rank, Dulcie is tortured. From what the narrative tells us about Dulcie, it becomes apparent that the only violation of ANC regulation might have been her strength: "They do not understand that for a woman like her—who has turned her muscles into ropes of steel, who will never be driven into subordination, who even as an eager girl in the bush wars resisted the advances of those in power, resisted her own comrades... who has known since childhood that tyranny must be overthrown—for a woman like her there is no submission" (Wicomb 179). Dulcie refuses submission to the ANC's silencing project in a way that David both cannot and will not: though he himself is tortured, he still identifies with the mission of the ANC and wants a narrative that leaves out the torture and the suffering. In leaving it out, he believes he won't have to confront the violence or his part in it. His complicity emerges from the gendered nature of the violence. Dulcie's

strength and resistance, her femininity, threatens the ANC's control and she must be silenced.

The novel walks a fine line in the sequences where Dulcie is being tortured because of its concern with preserving Dulcie and not inflicting further trauma on her. The prose hints at torture, at once refers to and circles around it, as in this instance of second person narration: "Then you can run through the vocabulary of recipe books, that which is done to food, to flesh—tenderize, baste, sear, seal, sizzle, score, chop" or when one of Dulcie's tormentors says, "Not rape, that will teach her nothing, leave nothing; rape's too good for her kind, waving the electrodes as another took off her nightclothes" (Wicomb 178). By providing "the vocabulary of recipe books," the narrator at once avoids and suggests Dulcie's experience at the hands of the torturers. The "you" requires the reader to make the connections and the assumptions because the text cannot ethically spell them out. It becomes our job to understand and seek out the vocabulary marked on Dulcie's body. From the list, we also understand the objectification of Dulcie's body on the part of the torturers. No longer a woman, she becomes "food" and "flesh" or meat. Aware of her responsibility to Dulcie, the narrator questions the narrative impulse and wonders about how to preserve Dulcie from more suffering.

By agreeing to tell this story, Dulcie's story, the narrator is implicated in and cannot be excluded from Dulcie's suffering. She even names herself as a "collaborator" (Wicomb 2). This complicity in (discursive) violence follows from the narrator's frustration both with David's refusal to give her information and with conventional modes of storytelling: "Dulcie is surrounded by a mystique that I am determined to crush with facts: age, occupation, marital status, what she wears, where she was born and

raised—necessary details from which to patch together a character who can be inserted as suitable points into the story” (Wicomb 78). The narrator acknowledges the violence inherent in storytelling: that the compulsion for facts seeks to murder the “mystique” or the Dulcie-ness that makes Dulcie resistant to narrative (Wicomb 78). By using the constellation as a model for the story that belongs to David, but is ultimately about Dulcie, the novel critiques David’s desire for a linear, masculine narrative that, incidentally, subsumes the stories of the women without whom his story would never have been possible.

David’s own method of mapping history can be found in the Griqua family tree at the beginning of the book. David wants to trace his bloodline to the Griquas, who sought their own homeland and whose chief, Andrew le Fleur, would later support apartheid. As far as the family tree is an historical record, it raises more questions about David’s genealogy than it answers. The first five generations of Kok men are, according to the tree, produced with no help from women. Rachael Susanna Kok is the first daughter, and even she is motherless. Besides the lack of women, there are names missing from the tree, such as Eduard la Fleur’s children, their names marked with an X. The family name also changes between Eduard la Fleur, who has the feminine article, la, in contrast to the masculine, le, that appears with his grandson Abraham le Fleur. The shift between articles remains unexplained and demonstrates another example of inconsistency that, in and of itself, reinforces David’s incompetence as a historian. By letting David’s family tree stand at the beginning of the novel with its omissions (there are many people missing and few dates), the narrator silently demonstrates that his linear, or genealogical, historical understanding fails to comprehend the importance of his historical moment.

David's story is the "document of civilization" whose silencing of Dulcie's story makes it at the same time a "document of barbarism" (Benjamin 256). Not only does his story entail casting the anti-apartheid struggle as heroically masculine and linearly intelligible, his historical understanding has clear affinities with the historicism Benjamin critiques. The narrator says that "in his eagerness to historicise, to link things—his own life with the lives of [Saartje] Baartman and the Griqua chief—he made a mess of the dates and lost a century" (Wicomb 21). While Benjamin presents the critique of historicism in theoretical terms, the novel plays out the concrete ways in which historicism is inadequate. David's desire for a continuity between himself and the historical past leads him to botch the timeline. Though the novel is fragmentary in form and frequently jumps in time, David's erasure of a century is generically inappropriate. If he is trying to write a history in which things progress chronologically, jumping over one hundred years thwarts that very project. It is motivated by a historicist selectivity that Wicomb insists is also at its heart masculinist. In order to preserve his connection with the men of his family line, he willingly leaves out the women without whom he would not be there.

David's inclusion of Saartje Baartman (the so-called "Hottentot Venus") is motivated less by feminist inclusiveness than by a masculinist identification with Baartman's exploiters. He is not interested in her, just in Cuvier's analysis of her body. While writing about the two, David "found his interest deflected from outrage on Baartman's behalf to fascination with Cuvier's mind, with the intellectual life he imagined for the anatomist" (Wicomb 33). David thinks of Cuvier's discoveries in military terms in which "the deadly combat of ideas" are "military fronts where function

finally triumphed over form” (Wicomb 33). David can identify with Cuvier more readily than he can identify with Baartman because they, David and Cuvier, both fit into the same militaristic, masculinist discourse. In a text where function and form are interconnected, this moment also reflects the relationship between the feminine body (form) and its position in a masculine setting (function). Cuvier’s “anatomical studies of Baartman’s genitalia” angers David only when he thinks of “a reader turning to that page” (Wicomb 33). David is unconsciously revealing what the narrator understands about his foray into the Cuvier/Baartman history: “it had really been an exercise in avoidance” (Wicomb 33). Thinking too long about Baartman brings Dulcie to mind and it is unbearable. While the narrator’s focus is on the stories of the women as they have been occluded by the male power structure (*history*), David continues to resist inclusion of the feminine in his story.

David’s resistance to the feminine comes from the fact that stories of feminine resistance risk revealing to him how his masculinist history of the struggle contains within it the “document of barbarism,” or the ANC’s treatment of women (Benjamin 256).<sup>6</sup> If the first example of David’s resistance concerns (as I’ve said) the family tree, even the lopsidedness of that tree (its almost complete lack of women) does not succeed in keeping women out of his story. The complete erasure of women becomes impossible when David hires a female amanuensis—it’s as if he can’t help but include the very femininity he wants, at another level, to exclude. David admonishes the narrator for

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<sup>6</sup> To contextualize “masculinist,” Julia Kristeva’s work in “Women’s Time” is helpful as it lays out the oppressive mechanism of time: “female subjectivity...becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival—in other words the time of history” (Kristeva 17). She continues to say that “this temporality renders explicit a rupture, an expectation, or an anguish which other temporalities work to conceal” (Kristeva 17). David’s story, as its own temporality, works to conceal Dulcie’s female subjectivity which troubles his masculinist (or teleological) understanding of history.

turning his story into “a story of women,” as the narrator looks for a medium in which faithful representation of Dulcie is possible (Wicomb 199). The disruptive, non-representational “traumatization” of the narrative form registers the insolubility of the dilemma Dulcie poses.

While I argue that Dulcie cannot be adequately, faithfully, represented in the current modes of historical representation, David, too, poses a problem because of his relationship to the antiapartheid movement. That movement has trained him in modes of secrecy that the narrator finds exasperating:

What else can I do? If it's not really to be about you, if you won't give me any facts, if you will only give me mumbo jumbo stuff, my task is to invent a structure, some kind of reed pondok in which your voodoo shadow can thrash about without rhyme or reason, but at least with boundaries so that we don't lose you altogether (Wicomb 199).

Here the narrator proposes that David's dedication to secrecy—a dedication born of training and loyalty to the antiapartheid cause—cripples her ability to tell his story. He will not give her facts because he cannot. Not only does the cause prohibit him from disclosure, he also cannot confront his complicity in the ANC's torture at Camp Quatro. Though he himself was imprisoned at Quatro and experienced torture, his identification with the heroism of the ANC requires subordinating his personal feelings to the movement and its needs. Through his self-sacrifice, he becomes a participant in the movement's silencing of women.<sup>7</sup> Since David does not speak up for, nor does he

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<sup>7</sup> David, in this way, carries a burden much like the women in the constellation I have just described. His burden is his story which contains the story of Dulcie. David is a complex character, and the novel is also interested in the psychological effect of the ANC's masculinist project on David (it is, after all, called *David's Story*).

challenge, the gendered attack on Dulcie, he is complicit in her torture as well as in his own destruction. To tell his story would be to reveal his role in creating the document of civilization that contains Dulcie's suffering.

Thus, he gives the responsibility of his story, the position of amanuensis, to the female narrator. In choosing her, David makes an unconscious gesture toward the fact that, in telling his story, he also tells the stories of Dulcie and others (women). The narrator does what she can with his evasions and the little scraps of information that he gives her. She tries to faithfully represent him, because she does not want "to lose [him] altogether" (Wicomb 199). For different reasons, both Dulcie and David become ethereal, "voodoo shadows," because of the way they challenge the representational modes that seek to contain them (Wicomb 199). David asks that Dulcie never speak, which seems self-serving and disappointing. However, David understands that Dulcie's experience challenges any arrangement of words that could try to put a voice to it. Nonetheless, the narrator does not accept silence as a viable response to Dulcie's struggle. The novel is a testament to a rejection of silence, and through its form, rejects the structures (linear narrative, for instance) that circumscribe experience.

## Chapter Four: Recovering Dulcie: Forms and Fictions

David and the narrator clash over how to represent Dulcie. David thinks she cannot, and should not, be represented, but the narrator is determined to depict her in whatever fashion possible. Since Dulcie's story has "no progression in time, no beginning and no end" that means, according to David, you cannot call it "story" (Wicomb 150). But there are other forms of representation besides "story" with the implied capital-S. The novel is one such forms, made up of the "anecdotes, sorry clutch of hints and innuendos" that "do not lead to anything" (Wicomb 151). The form of the novel evokes Benjamin's fragmentary history and suggests an alternative to teleological histories (Wicomb 151). David's chosen form, one made up of "and then and then and then" plays counterpoint to the novel's ambitions: it's a modelling of the causal relationships that the narrative refuses to draw (Wicomb 151). David tells his children stories in the fairy tale form, stringing sentences together with coordinating conjunctions to emphasize progress toward a happy ending.<sup>8</sup> Dulcie's story has no such progress and thus deeply troubles David and his convictions about storytelling, which are directly related to his own sense of self.

Dulcie's refusal to be assimilated into a story form intelligible to David disturbs his subjective cohesion. His only recourse is to "abstract her"—to construe her as a

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<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva makes an interesting point about sentences as microcosms of linear time: "It might also be added that this linear time is that of language considered as the enunciation of sentences (noun + verb; topic-comment; beginning-ending)" (Kristeva 17). I think this complicates my point about David's form of storytelling because while the coordinating conjunction acts as a marker of progress, it also suggests an endlessness that may reflect an inability on David's part to effectively tell, or even finish, a story.

notional or non-representational “ideal”—which the narrator steadfastly resists (Wicomb 134). He “doesn’t see the need to flesh her out with detail” and instead thinks of Dulcie as “a kind of scream somehow echoing through my story” (Wicomb 134). The narrator laughs at him because she somehow knows that “Dulcie herself would never scream” (Wicomb 134). The tension here is twofold. First, David cannot grant Dulcie form. He reduces her to a scream that echoes throughout the novel to prevent Dulcie from being further traumatized by representational specificity and to avoid confronting his own implication in Dulcie’s suffering. As a member of the ANC, identifying with their mission, and as a victim of torture himself, David’s relationship with Dulcie is too complicated for him to face. Second, the narrator is acutely aware of Dulcie’s physiological reality: because she is dead, she physically cannot scream, but the text provides ways for her scream to be heard. The narrator makes a chilling observation that “a scream is an appeal to a world of order and justice—and . . . there is no such order to which she can appeal” (Wicomb 134). The narrator refuses the idea that Dulcie would scream because the narrator believes she has no one to listen to her and no one to comprehend her pain. I think David understands what the narrator articulates and, by reducing Dulcie to a ghostly presence, he attempts to circumvent representing the reality that she both lives and represents. His attempt is not entirely successful, however, because the narrator exerts her own kind of power over the story.

The narrator’s silent presence emphasizes David’s inability to tell his story. David “wants [Dulcie] simply outlined” or “wants her traced,” because he cannot actually do it himself (Wicomb 150). The agency of storytelling belongs to the unnamed narrator and so she outlines and traces Dulcie into a Benjaminian constellation. Dulcie falls into the

category of “an eternal, inescapable present” that is not completely negative because she surfaces at moments of danger in the text (Wicomb 151). The tension between Wicomb and Benjamin’s texts comes out of Wicomb’s designator of “present” and Benjamin’s of “past.” Neither masculinist nor feminist discourses can accommodate Dulcie because her experience occupies both past and present: echoes of her story ring throughout the book, from Beeswater 1922 to Kokstad 1991. While the narrative focuses on David’s problematic attempts to narrate his story, the narrator’s involvement is also problematic since she is not an unbiased medium. She, too, has her own project in trying to reconcile her feminist background (a liberal, arty type as David calls her) with Dulcie’s experience. The narrator is troubled by the way Dulcie hovers between fact and fiction, and says that sometimes “I believe in her fictionality” which brings the narrator “a sense of relief” (Wicomb 124). To imagine Dulcie in her entirety exhausts the narrator because she requires an invention of new forms through which to depict her, without either erasing her or making her a new subject of history who merely tells a new homogenous story. Dulcie can be invoked and shaped through multiple forms and stories, as demonstrated when the narrator turns to *Macbeth* to connect to Dulcie.

The narrator triangulates her relationship to Dulcie through Lady Macbeth. When we first meet Dulcie, she washes “the sticky red from her hands and watches the water run clear” (Wicomb 18). The narrator makes the literary connection, “like Lady Macbeth,” which David rejects because “power has never held any lure for her” (Wicomb 18). David, of course, reads *Macbeth* only through Macbeth’s masculine, power-hungry experience. But Lady Macbeth’s story is not entirely about power: while she is instrumental in instigating the bloodshed, the dominative, masculine power system in

which she becomes implicated drives her insane. She keeps washing her hands in her sleep but the psychic blood never comes off. Lady Macbeth's madness leads to her suicide, much as David's own guilt will lead to his. David's refusal to see the obvious connections underscores how difficult it is for him to understand the position of the female guerilla. But the narrator identifies with both Dulcie and Lady Macbeth through the motif of hand-washing: the narrator says, as the last line of the novel, "I wash my hands of this story" as if the story itself were blood (Wicomb 213). The narrator thus metonymically links herself to Dulcie through hands and blood, which reemphasizes the violence associated with storytelling. But unlike Lady Macbeth and Dulcie, the blood is not literal for the narrator. It becomes a representation of the three women's navigations of systems hostile to their existence. Only the narrator survives, and even then her life is in danger. The cost of telling Dulcie's story, of telling David's story, could be death.

The end of the novel suggests that art is subject to the violence of historical forces and is vulnerable to erasure. In the last two pages of the novel, someone leaves a message on the narrator's computer that reads: "*this text deletes itself*" and the same computer is shot by a man who then trespasses in her garden (Wicomb 211-213). Her manuscript is also deleted.<sup>9</sup> Given that the assailant deleted her work, it would be reasonable to assume they read it. Radical in its formal characteristics, even in terms of content, the text becomes a threat to the system. The deconstructionist language serves the oppressive system: to delete the text is to delete Dulcie. In erasing Dulcie, her struggle, and the struggle of so many others, disappears. For people (especially women) to exist only as discourse means that they can be erased with no trace, no consequence. The narrator

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<sup>9</sup> Attributing agency in the assaults on the narrator proves almost impossible, as we never really see the culprit(s).

understands the system that she's working against, probably thanks to David's well-founded paranoia, and keeps a copy of the story on a floppy disk in her pocket. Writing Dulcie's story is not enough to preserve her, to protect her memory: the story itself must be guarded from erasure. What is at stake is not just telling David and Dulcie's story, but also the story's enactment of language's recuperative capacity.

Two moments towards the end of the text both question and affirm the potential power of language to make amends. The first is the narrator's description of David's drawing of Dulcie:

There are the dismembered shapes of a body: an asexual torso, like a dressmaker's dummy; arms bent the wrong way at the elbows; legs; swollen feet; hands like claws.

There is a head, an upside-down smiling head, which admittedly does not resemble her, except for the outline of bushy hair.

I have no doubt that it is Dulcie who lies mutilated on the page (Wicomb 205). The first implication of David's drawing is that his visual representation of Dulcie has "mutilated" her (Wicomb 205). The drawing, constituted of "geometrical shapes: squares, rectangles, triangles," translates Dulcie into yet another symbolic order that cannot accommodate her (Wicomb 205). David's shapes are as jumbled as his attempts to write his story which has, thus far, contained Dulcie's. Faced with rendering Dulcie visible, David understands his own complicity and that his depiction of her is the same as her treatment at the hands of the torturers. Dulcie remains incomplete and illegible in the visual medium because David cannot tell her story for her without inflicting further damage. The drawing suggests that translating her to symbols is harmful, and in the case

of the novel, those symbols are letters. But, unlike David's attempts, the narrator's constellationary history and her rejection of the deconstructionist project provides a resting place for Dulcie.

The second moment, at the end of the novel, suggests to me the ways in which language, despite the fair critiques of it, can be reparative. In the last paragraphs, the text resurrects Dulcie's body. The narrator, turning away from her garden, sees Dulcie:

Only when I turn to go back to work do I see her sturdy steatopygous form on the central patch of grass, where she has come to sunbathe in private. She is covered with goggas crawling and buzzing all over her syrup sweetness, exploring her orifices, plunging into her wounds; she makes no attempt to wipe the insects away, to shake them off. Instead, she seems grateful for the cover of creatures in the blinding light and under the scorching sun. Blinking, she may or may not, through eyes covered by the hairy filaments of goggas, see a pair of shoes disappearing comically over the wall, a figure lifting itself over into the public street. She yawns and stretches in the warm sun. Is this no longer my property? I ask myself. I have never thought of Dulcie as a visitor in my garden (Wicomb 212).<sup>10</sup>

Dulcie's hallucinatory status here is the biggest warning in the text: she appears at a moment of danger, when the narrator is physically threatened, when her story is almost lost. But her physical appearance also confirms the novel's power to grant Dulcie a body, to give back to her a kind of form. She "yawns and stretches in the warm sun" and is "grateful for the cover of creatures in the blinding light" (Wicomb 212). She is alive,

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<sup>10</sup> Shane Graham suggests that the reality of Dulcie's physical being is what makes it so impossible for David to tell her story: "It is Dulcie's role as 'pure body' that makes her such a powerful illustration of the spatial material dimensions of trauma" (Graham 132).

comfortable, at ease, and “makes no attempt to wipe the insects away” (Wicomb 212). The effect of putting Dulcie’s story into a nonlinear form, or of putting her experience on the page, gives Dulcie an energetic new kind of life, suggested by the goggas and flies that are “crawling and buzzing,” (Wicomb 212). The bugs outline her, give her living, yet parasitic, boundaries. The narrative fleshes Dulcie out, something David resisted, yet this active “fleshing” comes with a price. The bugs are also an instantiation of the violence that haunts the narrative: they are reenacting a violation as they give her “cover” from the blinding light and crawl in and out of her wounds and orifices. By covering her, the bugs hide and oppress her while at the same time lending her form. We do not get a description of Dulcie’s body because of the bugs which represent the violence and oppression of that body. The condition of possibility for Dulcie is a paradox: her representation can only erupt into the discourse through the repression and suppression of her body and her pain.

What is at stake in my reading of *David’s Story* as a novel that takes up a modernist and Benjaminian approach to form is justice. The two moments I have discussed in closing sum up the modernist project of the novel: a recovery of Dulcie’s mangled story privileged over postmodern plots that would make her unrecoverability preeminent. To endorse the idea that “*this text deletes itself*” would be to allow Dulcie to disappear without consequence. Formally, the novel proposes and plays out a method of writing history that “constellates” or relates the stories of different women in order to highlight Dulcie’s story and the elements of resistance and suffering that she shares with women such as Antjie and Rachael Susannah. With an historical method predicated on the power of distance, fragmentation, and contiguity, the novel can counteract the silencing tendency of the dominant, linear, narrative that Benjamin analyzes.

Linear history suggests a hierarchy, a conquering, with the “new” representing good and better, but Wicomb’s novel, bringing into close proximity stories which may seem unconnected and disparate, shows how inadequate the linear model is and why it is incapable of accommodating stories like Dulcie’s. The narrator rejects the “history with a teleology,” one made up of “and then and then and then” (Kristeva 17, Wicomb 151). Instead, she finds a new way to represent Dulcie. The novel grants Dulcie her silence and forms her out of juxtapositions and distances, imagines her through fictional characters, and resists the urge to “crush her with facts” (Wicomb 78). In a way that the Truth and Reconciliation Committee could not, the novel delivers a kind of justice by remembering Dulcie. It gives her a form without (discursively) killing her once more.

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