

The Ethics of Waste in Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*

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Midway through Zoë Wicomb's 1987 work *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, Frieda Shenton and her family gather dockside to bid farewell to Frieda's Great Uncle Hermanus, as he prepares to board a ship bound for Canada. The family is tense with anticipation and nervousness. As "Coloured" South Africans during the apartheid era, the Shentons understand emigration as freedom bought at the cost of great distance from one's relations and community.¹ Trying to reassure his family, Uncle Hermanus tells

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¹ Under apartheid legislation, the capitalized term "Coloured" referred to people of racially mixed parentage who were categorized as neither "Black" nor "White." The unstable and tautological nature of such distinctions has been well documented; see, for instance, Judith Raiskin's *Snow on the Canefields* (210-214) for a discussion relating to Wicomb's work, and Mohamed Adhikari's *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* and "From Narratives of Miscegenation to Post-Modernist Re-Imagining" for a more thorough historicization of conceptions of coloured identity in South Africa. Despite its complicated history, the question of coloured identity remains central to post-apartheid life in South Africa. In this paper, the capitalized term "Coloured" specifically references the apartheid category; the lower-case term, on the other hand, refers to a complex and dynamic form of identification resulting from a range of social, historical, and political contingencies. These contingencies range from the apartheid legislation that reified colouredness as a falsely stable racialized identity, to the agency exerted by South Africans who claim both European and African heritage in articulating their own racial and political identity. This conception of

them, “Man, there’s no problem; we’re mos all Juropeens when we get to Canada,” at which point he promptly vomits into the circle of assembled relatives, splattering shoes.² The scene’s sudden turn towards the visceral is unsettling both for the characters and for the reader: “[T]he old man, bewildered in the ring created by his own regurgitation, staggered a grotesque dance around the puddle, looking confusedly at us,” a disorientation which prompts his family to arrange themselves so as to hide the pool of vomit from their relative.³ The unsightly mess punctures the illusion of a happy send-off and reinforces the ambivalence of Hermanus’s flight from a country in which he is only a partial citizen. The racial hierarchies of apartheid South Africa have forced him to choose between perpetual discrimination at home and familial abandonment through exile, and the choice sickens him. Worse still, he is in no way certain that he will live as a “Juropeen,” a white person, upon his arrival in Canada. Fear of the potential rejection of his brown body prompts in Uncle Hermanus a political purging; his vomit represents an involuntary reaction to the dynamics of race and to the multiple uncertainties of a future far from his family.

This visceral turn is less bewildering when read in the context of the politics of embodiment at work in Wicomb’s fiction. *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* repeatedly engages with the meanings of the unruly body and its relation to South African political culture. The text oozes with the material traces of the human form, its excesses and its disruptions. Fluids secrete; garbage accumulates; the body itches, desires, and abandons. Rather than attending solely to that which individual human bodies reject, however, *You*

coloured identity follows Adhikari’s social constructivist model; see “From Narratives of Miscegenation,” 13-17 and *passim*, for an overview of this model.

² Wicomb, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, 84.

³ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

Can't Get Lost in Cape Town uses waste as a lens through which to interrogate patterns of abjection and marginalization at multiple scales, from the individual to the national. The entire body becomes, in Wicomb's text, a register of the political and ethical ramifications of acceptance and disavowal; in the context of late-apartheid South Africa, what the body bears and rejects, what individuals carry and what they lose, bristles with political significance.

The very form of the work resists order and holism. Structured as a series of linked but chronologically dispersed episodes, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* is narrated by protagonist Frieda Shenton, whose mixed-race Griqua ancestry marks her as "Coloured" according to the logic of the apartheid regime. Though readable as individual narratives, the ten sections of the work form a roughly coherent whole that traces Frieda's development from early childhood into her adult life as a politically aware subject. That the work also draws on Wicomb's own life in selective and playful ways compounds its hybrid status; like Wicomb, Frieda grows up in Little Namaqualand, becomes a writer, and emigrates to Britain. But Wicomb takes pains to call such autobiographical readings into question: significant differences appear between the narrator's experiences and those of the author, including Frieda's enrolment at a white school in her youth and, later, her return to South Africa after many years away. Wicomb also introduces metafictional turns in order to complicate easy identifications; the most notable of these turns involves the death, and later resurrection, of Frieda's mother within the world of the text. Wicomb has claimed that such tactics are part of "a deliberate response to the popular idea of black women's writing as autobiography," an idea that relegates all fiction and non-fiction by black women to the supposedly "minor genre" of the personal and the

documentary.⁴ Part fictionalized autobiography, part short story collection, part *künstlerroman*, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* is a generic cipher that indicates the inadequacy of any single form for the communication of its ideas. It is perhaps best considered a novel in fragments, a deliberately broken work only loosely bound together. That Wicomb's fragmentary meditation on waste should appear during the late stages of apartheid is not surprising. The system itself was itself approaching its own dissolution: although hardly yet in its death throes, the regime was in 1987 subject to increasing external and internal pressure in the form of armed insurrection, widespread political unrest, and international blockades and sanctions.

As a mode of political control, apartheid sustained itself through related practices of human and resource exploitation that hinged on selection, valuation, and exclusion. Though their beginnings lay earlier, scientific theories of race and biological difference proliferated in late nineteenth century South Africa (as elsewhere) and served to subtend ideas of white superiority through recourse to Darwinian concepts of evolution.⁵ These theories provided much of the intellectual justification not only for the casual racism of daily life in a segregated society, but for the legislated racism that sought to reify and normalize that segregation both before and during the apartheid era.⁶ This systematized approach to material embodiment is central to *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*: as Judith Raiskin has pointed out, Wicomb's novel emphasizes that for all its social and discursive aspects, apartheid was experienced as a physical phenomenon, "the

⁴ Olver and Meyer, "Zoë Wicomb on David's Story," 139-40. See also Wicomb, "To Hear the Variety of Discourses," 42. For a discussion of the persistent misreading of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* as straightforward autobiography, see Andrew van der Vlies, "'I'm Only Grateful that It's Not a Cape Town Book,' or: Zoë Wicomb, Textuality, Propriety, and the Proprietary," 9-12.

⁵ Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, 1-19 and *passim*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

classification and placement” of the racialized body.⁷ Pigment and other signs of ancestry became, in this system, legible traces in an elaborate hermeneutics of bodily worth. Bodies deemed valuable were prized and protected, while others were abused and neglected.

More recently, Achille Mbembe has tied the valuation of individual bodies to the valuation of other material forms. In “Aesthetics of Superfluity,” Mbembe characterizes apartheid as a doubly exploitative system built around notions of superfluity: gold, long a key aspect of the South African economy, was an inherently superfluous metal (in that it has little use-value, only exchange-value) dug up by a largely black army of reserve labor.⁸ As it scored and undercut the landscape, the mining-based economy of South Africa depended on black labor while simultaneously devaluing it as a means of sustaining a racially segregated society.⁹ Racism, under the apartheid system, was “a transactional practice with radical implications for the distribution of death—as raw black labor was acquired and intensively consumed.”¹⁰ One’s place within the apartheid hierarchy dictated one’s bodily proximity to danger, mortality, and decay.

While this system was most injurious to black South Africans, its physical and psychological distortions affected other groups as well. Wicomb’s fiction is notable for its concern with the experience of coloured South Africans, who occupied a vexed position in the apartheid hierarchy. Though allowed certain freedoms denied to black South Africans, coloured individuals were still burdened with what Frantz Fanon has

⁷ Raiskin, *Snow on the Canefields*, 219.

⁸ Mbembe, “Aesthetics of Superfluity,” 41-2. See also Charles Feinstein, *Economic History*, 106-109.

⁹ Mbembe, “Aesthetics of Superfluity,” 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

called the “epidermalization” of inferiority that accompanies colonial racism.¹¹ As a writer of both European and African heritage, Wicomb has frequently addressed the politics of coloured existence in the sharply racialized environments of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. In her 1998 essay “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa,” Wicomb locates a persistent stigma in the coloured body: whereas, under apartheid, coloured South Africans felt an imperative to downplay their black heritage, the post-apartheid era replaced this form of shame with its obverse. As the liberation movement gathered strength and eventually triumphed, Wicomb claims, the shame of being coloured became tied to the fact that one’s black ancestors had engaged in sexual collaboration with white colonizers. “Miscegenation,” Wicomb writes, “the origins of which lie within a discourse of ‘race’, concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame.”¹² This narrative of coloured “concupiscence,” disproportionately leveled at women, is for Wicomb an unsatisfactory reversal; rather than simply inverting the shame of racialized embodiment, Wicomb instead seeks “to consider the actual materiality of black bodies that bear the marked pigmentation of miscegenation, and the way in which that relates to political culture.”¹³ The coloured body, site and symbol of desire’s breaking of taboo in a racially-stratified South Africa, is for Wicomb dangerously charged with political meaning, caught between worlds.

An early instance of Wicomb’s longer diagnosis of the nuances of the apartheid racial hierarchy, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* invokes the persistent needs and functions of the material body in order to testify to its centrality to lived experience. The case of Great Uncle Hermanus is typical of the concern with embodiment present

¹¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 11.

¹² Wicomb, “Shame and Identity,” 92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 93.

throughout the novel: his body instantiates the conflicts inherent in belonging to a racially charged polity on both a metonymic and metaphorical level. That is, his vomit indexes a historical experience of nervousness and racialized discomfort while it symbolizes a rejection of the crisis of embodiment faced by coloured South Africans. Bodily waste, like other forms of waste, becomes a trope for larger and more complex systems of acceptance and rejection that serve to delimit individual and national subjectivities. As will be seen, Wicomb's aesthetic and ethical project is energized by a dual definition of "waste" that is in operation and in tension within the text: waste as that which is unwanted or excessive, and waste as an unhappy loss of something precious. To talk of human waste might usually be to refer to that which is gladly shed, but it can also encompass that which it is horrific to lose, including the lives wasted under a brutal regime. This distinction is important precisely because of the profound ways in which Wicomb troubles it in the text. By conflating excess waste and precious waste, Wicomb evokes the full horror of apartheid's objectification, valuation, and elimination of the human individual.

Racism, Abjection, and Apartheid

The notion that individual subjectivity is constructed through processes of rejection and abjection has a long history. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), her groundbreaking anthropological study of human relations to waste, Mary Douglas describes dirt as nothing more or less than "matter out of place." "Where there is dirt," she writes, "there is system. Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so

far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”¹⁴ The body serves as the locus for many of the rituals and rules by which cultures determine what constitutes cleanliness and dirtiness, order and disorder, the subject and the abject. But the body possesses an almost endless potential to signify beyond itself: “The body,” Douglas writes, “is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.”¹⁵ As a metonym for the larger processes of exclusion and rejection that animate apartheid existence, the coloured body in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* serves to register the violence done to entire populations, just as it registers acts of resistance.

Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, articulated in *The Powers of Horror* (1980), offers a more focused interpretation of the individual's relation to waste and breakdown. For Kristeva, the abject is that which threatens the individual with knowledge of the permeability and fragility of life and subjecthood; the category therefore includes obvious signs of death, but also of decay more generally, as in rotten food and garbage. The abject also includes those bodily products deemed impure and unclean, like blood, vomit, and feces, which pass through the barriers of the body, and which therefore betray its permeability and instability.¹⁶ As Kristeva frames it, “refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death”.¹⁷ Confronting the abject, she argues, yields a horrified realization that the subject is not discrete and coherent, but is rather in fluid exchange with the world around it, including those things

¹⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

deemed unclean. The abject is that which debunks the myth of bodily and subjective wholeness.

Abjection provides part of the answer as to how individuals relate to waste, and the role it plays in subject-formation. As Gay Hawkins has pointed out, however, psychoanalytic conceptions of waste tend to offer limited and ahistorical understandings of the multiple ways in which human societies interact with bodily and material byproducts; the tendency is to depict a universalized account of bodily horror rather than contextualized and variegated accounts of localized human-waste relations.¹⁸ Kristeva's understanding of the psychology of abjection becomes most useful for the analysis of Wicomb's work when considered in conjunction with the wider social and political systems that enforced apartheid on a daily basis. Derek Hook has posited abjection as a useful explanatory model for the psychological patterns that subtended the larger system of apartheid. While it often confers obvious benefits for the oppressor, he argues, race prejudice is not *only* about the maintenance of socio-economic dominance; the persistence and vehemence of prejudice in the face of reasoned argument betray the irrational roots of racism. Whether institutionalized, as in apartheid South Africa, or latent, racism represents "a set of phenomena that is as *psychical* as it is political in nature, *affective* as it is discursive, *subjective* as it is ideological."¹⁹ Looked at in this way, the body of apartheid legislation passed between 1949 and 1950 in South Africa represents a monumental abjection, inasmuch as the regime depended on racial difference and separation to constitute a white Afrikaner identity. By strictly limiting physical interaction and coexistence, laws such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949),

¹⁸ Hawkins, *Ethics of Waste* 3-4.

¹⁹ Hook, "Racism as Abjection," 676. Emphasis in original.

the Group Areas Act (1950), and the Immorality Act (1950) encoded racism as a physical rejection of the racial “other,” violently enforcing a distance between whites and non-whites.²⁰ Such socio-political encoding reinforces the irrational, affective dimension of racism, which can then in turn feed back into processes of legislation and governance.²¹ To meditate on waste, as Wicomb does, is to call into question the political structures of separation and suppression that apartheid effected, and their relation to embodied experience. Wicomb’s distressed and unruly bodies evoke the anxieties of a political body that rejects and denigrates that which threatens the illusion of its wholeness and integrity; they demonstrate how apartheid thrusts aside non-white individuals in order that it might sustain the foundational lie of inequality and racial difference.

Waste and the Individual Body

From the outset of Wicomb’s novel, the political body asserts itself. The arrival of Mr. Weedon in his sleek automobile draws the schoolchildren of Frieda’s Namaqualand village outside, their fingers jammed in their noses, and precipitates a matter-of-fact emptying of bladders and bowels in nearby bushes.²² The children of the village, Frieda included, live close to their own waste, in a situation of desperate poverty that is totally lacking in modern infrastructure. At one point, facing a forced move to a crowded coloured “location” with newer amenities, Frieda’s father dreams that they will eventually escape to a humble farm home, asking rhetorically, “Who needs a water

²⁰ J.M. Coetzee notes that this legislated abjection is necessary only in a context in which sexual interaction across racial lines is not only possible but highly likely: “[A]partheid was causally overdetermined. It did indeed flower out of self-interest and greed, but also out of desire, and the denial of desire. In its greed, it demanded black bodies in all their physicality in order to burn up their energy as labor. In its anxiety about black bodies, it also made laws to banish them from sight” (“Apartheid Thinking,” 164).

²¹ Hook, “Racism as Abjection,” 695.

²² Wicomb, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, 1.

lavatory in the veld?”²³ But he soon comes to value relocation and its conveniences, linking them with progress: “Brains are for making money,” he tells Frieda, “and when you come home with your Senior Certificate, you won’t come back to a pack of Hottentots crouching in straight lines on the edge of the village.”²⁴ Modernization is a march away from the leavings of the body, towards sterile cleanliness. Furthermore, as Mr. Shenton’s quotation shows, this urge to modernize is bound up with the racial hierarchies of apartheid. He and his family can dream of mobility in the realm of household conveniences like plumbing because their designation as “Coloured” offers slightly more opportunities for advancement than those available to South Africans labeled “Black.” The Khoikhoi of Namaqualand, for example—people Mr. Shenton calls by the incorrect, pejorative name “Hottentots”—have more limited access to modern facilities.

Mr. Shenton is sharply aware of such racial distinctions, but not in a critical way; he and his wife both participate in the status games of race dictated by apartheid. When Frieda returns to South Africa after an extended period in Britain, her father talks to her of the changing social climate of the country in terms of developments at the local medical clinic, adopting a standpoint caught between coloured victimhood and coloured racism: “Oh you’ll find it very different now. It’s not the old business of waiting in the yard; there’s even a waiting room for us now with a nice clean water lavatory. Not that these Hotnos know how to use it...”²⁵ The token improvements of a flush toilet and waiting room (which Frieda in fact discovers still to be closed to non-whites) serve for Mr. Shenton as both an index of improving race relations and an opportunity to

²³ Ibid., 29.

²⁴ Ibid., 30.

²⁵ Ibid., 105.

distinguish himself as superior to darker-skinned Africans. In order to define themselves, the Shentons abject the Khoi elements of their Griqua heritage and embrace the white elements of that heritage; they see themselves as upwardly mobile and culturally, if not physiologically, European. More specifically, they cast themselves as British: in their desire to inch up the social ladder of South Africa, the Shentons cling to the Scottish ancestor who provided their last name, and they set about learning English rather than the Afrikaans spoken by the surrounding community. The links between language, infrastructure, and cultural mobility are punningly enacted in the Shentons' growing grasp of the language: in the first story in the collection, "Bowl Like Hole," the family gleans valuable pronunciation tips on the sly from Mr. Weedon, learning to pronounce the word "bowl" not as "bowel" but so as to rhyme with "hole."²⁶ The humorously imperfect instance of linguistic mimicry slyly suggests a movement from the crushing poverty of bowel-voiding children at the story's outset, to the promise of containment and convenience offered by the toilet bowl. Ethnolinguistic ascent through the apartheid structure—the perfection of their use of English—accompanies shifting relations of the body to its own waste.²⁷

The politics of waste apply to more than just shit; other fluids similarly excite feelings of fear and anxiety. When Mr. Shenton belatedly and awkwardly speaks to Frieda about the menstruation that had long before started for her, he stresses preparedness and ritual: "You must fetch a bucket of water in the evenings and wash the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷ The Shentons' disavowal of their Griqua heritage as unclean is echoed in Wicomb's 2001 novel *David's Story*, in which the father of the titular protagonist chastises David, an anti-apartheid militant, for his interest in Andrew Le Fleur, an ancestor and important figure in Griqua history: "Look what it's taken your mother and me, sweat and blood, to shake off the Griquaness, the shame and the filth and the idleness, and what do you do? Go rolling right back in the gutter, crawling into all kinds of dirty hovels to speak with old folks about old Griqua rubbish, encouraging the backwardness" (Wicomb, *David's Story*, 23).

rag at night... have them ready for the next month ... always be prepared.”²⁸ But he does not realize that Frieda is already aware of, if not using, disposable pads bought at the local chemists’. Material progress, again, distances the body’s waste, negating the need for the messy engagement with the self that characterizes poverty. Not only poverty, but servitude as well: Frieda sees education as a way out of the life of cleaning up after others that would otherwise await her. She imagines this servitude in terms of the body’s fluids: “A terrifying image of a madam’s menstrual rags that I have to wash swirls liquid red through my mind.”²⁹ For Frieda, apartheid enacts politically defined relations of proximity and distance to that which the body produces in excess; class and race divisions, amplified by unequal infrastructure development, ensure that some can shun the body that others cannot.

Waste and the Economic Body

The material goods and infrastructure that mediate the waste of the body—running water, the toilet, the disposable pad—hint at the broader metaphors of industrial production and waste that operate in *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*. If poverty in the novel can be measured by proximity to one’s own waste, it also usually entails proximity to that which is rejected by society at large. In the first chapter, Mr. Weedon and Mr. Shenton visit a mine where black laborers separate valuable gypsum from waste earth; though poisoning their bodies, the workers earn meager wages and cigarettes as a reward

²⁸ Ibid., 22.

²⁹ Ibid., 24. It is interesting to note that, for Kristeva, the two main categories of the bodily abject are excremental and menstrual: the former represents an external threat to identity via death; the latter, a threat internal to society and the individual that embodies sexual difference and signals an overpowering potential for new life (*Powers of Horror*, 71-72). Frieda’s distress in this case can therefore be seen not only as one of disgust but of anxiety in the face of this marker of individual female identity.

while they strip the land of value.³⁰ Just as the young, defecating children watched Mr. Weedon from the bushes, he gazes with fascination at the muscular torsos of the men digging out the mineral to be used in finishing the homes of wealthier South Africans. The work is hard, and the dust that powders the laborers' arms also reddens their eyes, hinting at other, uncalculated damage to the body. Weedon, however, appears aroused by the scene, fixated on the extrication of gypsum from an anthropomorphic and sexualized earth: "then down the dark torsos fell, and a crash of thunder as the blades struck the earth, baring her bosom of rosy gypsum."³¹ The desire prompted by the sight of the black laborers is so strong that Weedon eventually must look away. Frieda, though absent from the scene, proceeds to narrate her own metaphors for the exhausted earth:

And so midst all that making of poetry, two prosaic mounds rose on either side of the deepening pit. One of these would ultimately blend in with the landscape; fine dust cones would spin off it in the afternoons just as they spun off the hills that had always been there. There was no telling, unless one kicked ruthlessly and fixed an expert eye on the tell-tale tiredness of the stone, that this hill was born last year and that had always been. The other mound of gypsum was heaved by the same glistening torsos on to lorries that arrived at the end of the week.³²

The image of an earth stripped of resources, divided into piles of valuable minerals and waste rock, manifests the injustice of a local population denied adequate compensation for the work they perform. Those who do not get to use the finished plaster of Paris are the ones who must live with the dust of its extraction. The "tell-tale tiredness of the

³⁰ Wicomb, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, 6-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

stone” is itself a telling metaphor, linking the wasted earth with the wasted bodies hired to mine it. The men appear autochthonic, emerging as if from the land itself, and will stay behind with the ever-weakening earth as its value is carted away.

Recent theoretical work on the ethics of waste has pointed to such symmetrical patterns of human and resource exploitation as fundamental byproducts of capitalist production, particularly in the South African context. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that processes of exhaustion, breakdown, and disposal are characteristic of all mining, which he describes as “an epitome of rupture and discontinuity. The new cannot be born unless something is discarded, thrown away or destroyed... Mining is inconceivable without *waste*.”³³ As such, mining offers a model for the human toll exacted by global industrial capitalism, in which workers are declared redundant or superfluous, and are disposed of “*because of being disposable*.”³⁴ More particularly, there are in Wicomb’s mining scene clear parallels with the gold industry that helped build South Africa, and with the racialized division of labor behind the extraction that left enormous piles of slag around Johannesburg. Born from a series of mining camps that sprung up around the gold reef at Witwatersrand, the South African metropolis was in many ways the crucible for a new, peculiarly modern kind of economic marginalization. In Johannesburg, the urban signs of the triumph of capitalism were quite literally built on the subterranean legacy of abandoned shafts once filled with non-white laborers.³⁵ The material excess brought to the surface in the form of gold and transformed into other forms of ostentatious wealth

³³ Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 (emphasis in original). The idea of a surplus or reserve army of labor is of course a necessary precondition for the growth of capitalism, according to Marx; see *Capital*, Vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1976), 781-794 (Chapter 25, Section 3: “The Progressive Production of a Relative Surplus Population or Industrial Reserve Army”).

³⁵ Nuttall and Mbembe, “Introduction: Afropolis,” 16-17.

belied this human toll: to cite Mbembe once more, “superfluity consisted in the vulnerability, debasement, and waste that the black body was subject to and in the racist assumption that wasting black life was a necessary sacrifice.”³⁶ In Wicomb’s story, the twin piles of rock—one waste and one valuable gypsum—stand in for the broader duality of South Africa’s past: a brutal history of economic marginalization buried just beneath surface of its paradigmatic city.

Beyond industrial-scale extraction, Wicomb’s analysis of the economies of waste encompasses the relationship of individuals to commodity culture. In “Jan Klinkies,” the title character (cousin to Frieda’s father) takes up the refuse of South African consumer culture as a form of defense. Frieda and her father have come to visit the eccentric Jan and to clean his home. “The gate was barricaded with a hillock of tarnished cans,” Frieda tells us, “and as further security the house refuse was heaped in front of it.”³⁷ The full significance of Jan’s act of reappropriation, and the reasons for his “defense” of his home, are not made clear until the final paragraph of the chapter, when the reader is belatedly made aware of the enormous tin can sculpture Jan has made of the tree outside his house: “The tree barely moved, but the branches stooping heavily under the hundreds of cans tied to them with wire rattled and sent off beams of blinding light at angles doubtlessly corresponding to a well-known law.”³⁸ The law in question is not one of physics, but of apartheid’s legislated separation; Jan’s obsessive collection of detritus stems from the injustice of the Group Areas Act and later discriminatory laws of expropriation. We learn that his wife Truida left him when he resisted state pressure to move into a coloured location on the Cape Flats; while Truida resigned herself to the loss

³⁶ Mbembe, “Aesthetics of Superfluity,” 43.

³⁷ Wicomb, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, 15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

of their land, and even began to look forward to a new home with “green marbled formica” and an “indoor lavatory,” Jan had refused to move.³⁹ While Jan’s mode of resistance may be unique, his experience of dispossession was not. In a reading of the politics of land use in Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist*, Rita Barnard has outlined the tautological process through which such expropriations operated: black residents were presumed to be poor farmers, and were therefore moved to far less agriculturally productive lands, at which point their failure to produce crops amidst “the dust and poverty where they have been dumped” became proof of their inability to farm.⁴⁰ By thus appealing to ideals of agricultural productivity and efficiency, as well as conservation and land stewardship, apartheid land administrators could effectively claim the best land for white farmers. At the same time, dispossessed coloured and black farmers were relegated to the role of trespassers and defilers of the land, a kind of human trash to be kept away from the well-maintained white farms.⁴¹

In Wicomb’s account of the Group Areas Act, waste becomes a means through which dispossessed characters reclaim a measure of control over their environment. For Jan Klinkies, the combination of the government’s theft of their land and his wife’s uncritical acquiescence prompts a breakdown characterized by a host of peculiar habits—including his tin can collection and his tendency to wear a belt made of wire—which gravitate around the material culture of South African society. Having himself been abandoned by his government and by his family, Jan cultivates an environment built of things thrown away, turning the refuse of the regime into a refusal of its standards and

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 73.

⁴¹ Ibid., 84. Barnard cites apartheid-era critiques of such expropriative practices whose titles—including *The Discarded People* and *The Surplus People*—bear witness to the equations between human life and garbage that such practices implied.

order. However, in barricading his home with the excretions of a capitalist system that has marginalized millions of South Africans, Jan achieves more than isolation; he approaches new aesthetic forms. Even before we are introduced to the tin can tree, obviously a work of diligent, if insane, labor and creativity, Frieda muses on Jan's attachment to the pile of cans before his door while her father clears them away:

The cans so callously shoved aside might have been placed one by one, interrupted by the stepping back to appraise from a distance and perhaps replace or reposition. There is the business of balance, for instance; the wrong shape could bring the lot toppling down and you'd have to tap sliding cans gradually back into place... With such a great number and variety of cans the permutations of summit and slope must be endless.⁴²

There is an irrational logic to the structure, evidence of dedication to a set of principles at odds with notions of cleanliness and order.⁴³ We might locate the rationale behind it in Jan's symbolic disavowal of Afrikaner consumer products: when his cousin offers him Boeretrees coffee, for example, Jan refuses the beverage because of the national and ethnic associations inherent in the name, which translates as "comfort of the Boers." "Whatcomfortsaboerispoisontome," he repeats at breakneck speed, until the sentence breaks down.⁴⁴ If what comforts a Boer is poison to him, what poisons a Boer, we may surmise, is therefore comfort; or more mildly, what is distasteful to Afrikaners he finds somehow salutary.

⁴² Wicomb, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, 16.

⁴³ Jan Klinkies presages Outa Blinkoog, from Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006), who similarly transforms the refuse of South African consumer culture into objects of startling beauty. Scraps of cloth and flattened tin cans become mops and lanterns: "his treasures," says the narrator, "are all from found things that others throw away." See Wicomb, *Playing in the Light*, 89.

⁴⁴ Wicomb, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, 17.

He therefore collects garbage, being careful to strip off any labels that speak of a commercialized national Afrikaner identity. Along with avoiding Boeretroos, Jan refuses to drink a particular rooibos tea because the imagery on the package depicts the Voortrekkers.⁴⁵ In avoiding such commercialized images, Jan rejects the comforting, nation-building myth of Afrikaner endeavor, the brave incursion into the savage heart of the land; he refuses to identify with the group that has so callously marginalized him and his family, despite the advantages the Shentons see in aligning themselves with their European heritage. Channeling his maddening rage at the losses he has incurred through laws of expropriation, Jan Klinkies embraces the detritus of the nation both as an emblem of how little he has left and as a mocking tribute to the nation's material culture.

Wicomb has elsewhere explored the meaning of such strategic reappropriations of material culture. In a 1993 article entitled "Culture Beyond Color," Wicomb questioned the appropriateness of charting a new, multiracial path for South African writing at that early stage of decolonization, arguing that the main cultural inheritance South Africa has to work with is, regrettably, a culture of violence.⁴⁶ Her particular example is of the practice of "necklacing" in black communities during the apartheid years, in which individuals identified as *impipis*—traitors aligned with the regime—would be publicly burned for betraying their community by having a car tire filled with gasoline placed over their heads and down around their torsos. It is a horrific way to die, and Wicomb does not condone it; rather, she characterizes it as an act of cultural translation from the Afrikaner *braaivleis*, poolside barbecues that could descend into beatings and torture of blacks:

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Wicomb, "Culture Beyond Color," 30.

Both activities are marked by the iconography of post-industrial culture: the swimming pool... is topologically rewritten as the waste from another coveted marker of bourgeois culture, the motor car, the discarded tire that is placed around the victim's neck... Necklacing then is about displacing Boer culture both physically and symbolically.⁴⁷

More violent than Jan Klinkies' embrace of waste, necklacing nonetheless acts in a similar way to subvert a dominant power seen as carried out through material goods and practices. Rather than blindly consuming the culturally charged products of a South Africa to which he does not fully belong, Jan Klinkies translates those products into an ironic protest against expropriation and violence.

Before leaving Jan Klinkies' home, Frieda engages in her own act of reclaiming waste. Her father asks her to polish Jan's floor, so as to keep the dust down; the usual method for doing this involves a mixture of animal dung, clay, and water. Already, Frieda is well used to working with such materials: "One could be fastidious about handling a cow-pat with bare hands, but the mixture... loses many of the unpleasant properties of freshly released dung... Applied to the floor it is transformed by its function and so becomes sweet smelling."⁴⁸ Frieda is of course inured against "fastidiousness" by the methods required by her environment: commercial cleaning products would be of little use on the bare earth floors she and her family inhabit. But there is a tone of recuperation at work, too; the final product transcends the impurity of the dung itself, becoming an agent of beautification: "the freshly smeared room, just dried, suggests such lush green

⁴⁷ Wicomb, "Culture Beyond Color," 31.

⁴⁸ Wicomb, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, 18.

meadows as the cows have never seen.”⁴⁹ This revaluation is reinforced when Frieda considers dumping the remaining mixture outside: “It seemed a pity to waste it, to pour the mixture away in rivulets down a slope or splash it over a ghanna bush, foully disfiguring wherever it chanced to land.”⁵⁰ The sentence traces a journey from waste as a misuse of the precious and useful to waste as unwanted excess. At the moment of rejection, all value leaves the mixture; it returns to a condition of filth and worthlessness, or at the very least, superfluity. But in the moment of its incorporation in the small labors of home, the most abject of substances shines with value.

Waste and the Appetites of the Body

The tragic center of *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* details Frieda's trip into the city to procure an abortion after she becomes pregnant by her white boyfriend Michael. It would be callous to group Jan Klinkies' fascination with consumer waste and earlier depictions of bodily excretions along with Frieda's abortion, were it not for the analogies Frieda herself encourages. Her journey into Cape Town is inseparable from the discourses of race inequality, appetite, waste, and morality that pervade the novel. As the title story opens, Frieda is alone on the bus into town. She clutches an empty handbag, usually an accessory of fashion and consumerism; the handbag is empty, possibly so she can hide her growing belly. Or perhaps, given the “package” she must deposit at the end of the chapter, it is empty in case the procedure of which she is terrifyingly ignorant leaves her with her unborn child to bury. As another passenger on the bus points out,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

blithely ignorant of the deeper resonance of her statement, Frieda is “dressed to kill.”⁵¹ Frieda admits that she is half-blind to the moral implications of her decision: “No doubt I will sail through my final examinations at the end of this year and still not know how I dared to pluck a fluttering foetus out of my womb.”⁵² But though Frieda seems to discount the degree of her own understanding of the moral weight of the event, her statement shows an awareness that she is crossing a monumental line. In this acknowledgement, she implicitly asks herself, and the reader, to consider the ethics of rejecting tenuous life, of wasting one body to maintain the order, health, and happiness of another.

Frieda’s abortion is, on one level, the medical enforcement of what apartheid legislation had failed to prevent: another mixed-race child. She and Michael have been together for two years, secretly, “steal[ing] whole days, round as globes,”⁵³ but by the time she heads into Cape Town, she is aware that their relationship will not survive the event of the abortion. Michael has stopped loving her; his insistence that they flee to England to be married appears to Frieda as a last-ditch attempt to act honorably given the situation.⁵⁴ She sees in his half-hearted dream of fleeing abroad the fundamental impossibility of interracial happiness at home, an acknowledgement that South Africa will never welcome their love. For her, both the prospect of flight and the prospect of bringing up a mixed-race child in a country that prohibits their creation are too much to bear.

Battling pious feelings of duty and the sanctity of life, Frieda links her impending

⁵¹ Ibid., 73.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

abortion to another act of fraught morality: the murder of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, the “architect of apartheid”, on 6 September 1966. In the previous chapter, “A Clearing in the Bush,” Frieda had obliquely noted that the assassination had provided her with an excuse from finishing a college paper on time, as “a pet abdominal tapeworm hissed persuasively into the ear of its Greek host, whose trembling hand grew still for a second to aim a fatal shot at the Prime Minister.”⁵⁵ The tapeworm refers to a statement attributed to assassin Dimitri Tsafendas, in which he claimed that an intestinal parasite told him he must kill Verwoerd. The metaphor reappears just before Frieda is to meet Michael en route to the abortion clinic, as she stares at a display of dried fruit in a Cape Town shop. “Desire is a Tsafendas tapeworm in my belly that cannot be satisfied,” she says to herself; “Will I stop at just one death?”⁵⁶ The significance of this analogy is radically unstable: Frieda’s meaning slides from the appetite for food that so often arises in her in reaction to social anxiety, to the sexual desire she shares with Michael, and which has brought about her unwanted pregnancy; along the way, the image links Frieda’s abortion to the assassination of a hated political figure. Hunger, sex, and politics are aligned on one side; on the other, an unwanted pregnancy and the symbol of South African apartheid. It is conceptually easier here to imagine the conflation of desires than the conflation of deaths; how, we must ask, is an unborn child like Verwoerd? By the brake it places on Frieda’s desire for growth, challenge, and change? Or by the simple fact that both beings will die? In this move, the novel deliberately confounds moral formulae used to calculate when it is just to end a life, offering only a desperate question that plumbs issues of agency and ethics without reaching a stable bottom: “Will I stop at

⁵⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 77.

just one death?” Or, put another way, what is the end point of a restless appetite for freedom, whether it be political, sexual, or otherwise?

Of course, sexual freedom and political freedom intersect in more than one way. On the bus ride in to Cape Town, Frieda overhears a neighboring passenger tell another about the use of the birth control pill by her employer’s daughter. The daughter’s privileged social position enables access to those technologies that facilitate illicit sex by safely distancing the questions of illegal backroom abortions and their attendant feelings of loss and regret. Frieda’s fellow passenger speaks of the pill as a way of keeping men sexually interested without risking pregnancy: otherwise, “who’d have what another man has pushed to the side of his plate?... Like this bone,” she says, waving a chicken bone stripped of meat and grease.⁵⁷ In Frieda’s imagination, the bone, symbol of a sexually used and discarded woman, morphs into a crucifix, complete with attendant Romans and a regretful Judas Iscariot.⁵⁸

The image of a betrayal bought with silver reappears following the procedure, with the kiss of complicity the abortion provider, Mrs. Coetzee, gives to Frieda, and the purse full of money that buys the abortion. Frieda is disgusted by the cheap consolations offered by Coetzee as part of the transaction, and is physically repulsed by the “foetid air from the mouth of this my grotesque bridegroom with yellow teeth,” who has “deflowered” her with a “yellow hand wielding a catheter.”⁵⁹ As a defense against her own visceral reaction to the entire scene, Frieda distances herself from her own body as she lies on the couch and undergoes the procedure (“I do not care what happens below. A black line of terror separates it from my torso”); it is only through pain at the moment of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁸ See Wicomb, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, 71-72.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

the foetus' death that she rediscovers her own body: "Blood spurts from between my legs and for a second the two halves of my body make contact through the pain."⁶⁰ Once this brief reconnection passes, Frieda returns to a position of separation from her own body. Pain marks the connection not only of woman and unborn child, but also of perceiving mind and feeling body; pain awakens her to these connections at the precise moment that they are broken. The blood shed during the operation is *from* her, but it is not her: "Fear and hypocrisy, mine, my deserts spread in a dark stain on the newspaper."⁶¹ That which she has hated in herself—her fear of bringing a child into the world while herself so young, her hypocrisy in believing in God and the equal rights of all human beings and yet rejecting this nascent one—is abjected as beyond the self. The stains left by the blood she has shed on the newspaper are the traces of these contradictions, their legacy—they are "deserts" in the sense of "that which is deserved," though Frieda's diction cannot help but conjure the barrenness and emptiness of a desert wasteland. While she in no way leaves behind the shame and trauma of her decision to abort her child, her representation of that shame as something external to her being is a telling attempt to push away that which troubles the image she has created of herself.

The final act of the chapter entitled "You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town," in which Frieda throws her aborted fetus into a trash can at a generic and anonymous location in the city, is at once heartbreaking and intensely complicated. It is shocking precisely in that it ties the premature end of one life—the tragic waste—to the world of garbage, the quotidian waste. With its shroud of newspaper and its rubbish bin tomb, the package of Frieda's fetus is horrifying in its identity with the trash of twentieth-century fast food: "A

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

newspaper parcel dropped into this dustbin,” Frieda reassures herself, “would absorb the vinegary smell of discarded fish and chips wrappings in no time.”⁶² This conflation of precious waste with worthless waste is the moral black hole of the novel, the point to which all other considerations of the idea of excess and value gravitate and, once there, disappear into incoherence. The tragedy of the final image of the chapter is made no less complex by Frieda’s relief at having abandoned the fetus in the bin. For her relief occurs in the context of her own abandonment: “I do not know what has happened to God. He is fastidious. He fled at the moment that I smoothed the wet black hair before wrapping it up. I do not think he will come back.”⁶³ The loss of her idea of God—or perhaps more accurately, the loss of the equation she had supposed between her actions and the ideals posited by her understanding of God—is significant for Frieda, but it is not sufficient to stem her feelings of relief. If, in her mind, God has rejected her, it is also true that she has rejected the God that “is not a good listener” and who “withdraws peevishly if his demands are not met.”⁶⁴ That this also entails the loss of her boyfriend Michael—whose name, as Sue Marais reminds us,⁶⁵ means “he who is like God”—adds, however slightly, to the tragedy of rejection woven of repressive laws, restrictive morality, and excessive desire.

Frieda’s adjudication of the superfluity of the unborn child—its status as an unwanted excess, a remainder in the calculus of human passion—indicates the thin line between collective and individual responsibility for vulnerable lives. The impossibility of

⁶² Ibid., 81.

⁶³ Ibid. God’s “fastidiousness” echoes Frieda’s feelings both in handling the unwanted excrescence of cow dung in “Jan Klinkies” and her feelings of distaste at the abortion clinic; the implication, of course, is that Frieda hasn’t the luxury for heavenly fastidiousness while in the grips of earthly predicaments.

⁶⁴ Wicomb, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, 75.

⁶⁵ Sue Marais, “Getting Lost in Cape Town,” 4.

bearing the mixed-race child indicates the intrusion of apartheid's logic of racial "purity" into individual lives. Frieda finds herself placed in a position of power over another, more vulnerable life; faced with a choice between preserving her own health and happiness or that of her fetus, she chooses the former. In a 1991 essay, Wicomb expressed dismay that the story "You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town" has been read as being anti-abortion.⁶⁶ However, she does not shy away from representing the ethical problems of what can only ever be a brutalizing, visceral event, through a language of abandonment that operates throughout the novel. Still, if people in this novel can be uncomfortably figured as chicken bones, fish and chips, waste earth, and piles of garbage, it is not done without deep empathy. Indeed, it is the shock of such equations of the precious and the worthless that animate the novel's moral interrogations.

Through the personal and historical events it depicts, the narrative struggles to come to terms with a world in which human life can be and is discarded and disregarded; sometimes this occurs with clear justification, other times muddy, other times manifestly flawed, hateful, and illogical. The novel forces the reader to consider whether one can ever know adequate justification from inadequate when it comes to making decisions about other lives; and yet Wicomb insists that the damning complexity of that question should not defer individuals and collectives from considering it. As Frieda tells her classmates on the day of Verwoerd's assassination, "It seems to me as if common humanity is harped on precisely so that we don't have to consider the crucial question of whether we can imagine being a particular human being. Or deal with the implications of the answer" (54). For Frieda, and for Wicomb, comforting universals are as misguided as blanket disavowals. In leading us unflinchingly through Frieda's encounters with a world

⁶⁶ Wicomb, "An Author's Agenda," 14.

that is often cruel, unjust, and hypocritical, Wicomb asks that we consider being that other being, embodying that other body, if only to know what it is to reject and to be rejected.

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