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The Stories Behind the Stories Mediation of Narratives in *David's Story*

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ABSTRACT

The Truth and Reconciliation Committee was set up in the aftermath of apartheid to bring to the surface human rights abuses that took place in the apartheid era, through witness testimony and recounting of trauma. The TRC undoubtedly brought to the forefront the challenges of narrating and the reasons for remembering a contested and traumatic past. It is impossible to read *David's Story*, which shifts temporally between Griqua efforts for self-determination and the South African liberation movement and foregrounds the act of telling, without taking into account the ambitious project of the TRC. This paper examines how history is made and articulated in *David's Story*. Wicomb's novel is a larger exploration in how stories are translated, transcribed and retold through multiple narrators and mediators, prompting readers to question the ownership and authority of written and oral histories.

The Truth and Reconciliation Committee was set up in the aftermath of apartheid to bring to the surface human rights abuses that took place in the apartheid era. Through witness testimony and recounting of trauma, it was a step towards healing the wounds inflicted by apartheid. Though its legacy has been a contested one¹, the TRC undoubtedly brought to the forefront the challenges of narrating and the reasons for remembering a contested and traumatic past. It is impossible to read *David's Story*, which shifts temporally between Griqua efforts for self-determination and the South African liberation movement and foregrounds the act of telling, without taking into account the ambitious project of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. *David's Story* is set in 1991, the eve of independence, and unfolds as David, a high-ranking member of the MK cadre, narrates his story to an amanuensis (the narrator of the novel). Though David tries to make sense of his colored identity (as opposed to national identity which was heightened at this moment) and of South African independence, his back and forth with the amanuensis reveals the difficulties he faces narrating his time in the Movement. The narrator tells us that he is particularly guarded when talking about Dulcie, a fellow guerrilla fighter in the MK, with whom he is in love. The text alludes to torture and sexual violence Dulcie faces at the ANC training camps at the hands of the other members and possibilities of David's complicity in this. While David resists talking about Dulcie, he is increasingly preoccupied with his Griqua heritage and Andrew LeFleur – the Griqua Chief who warded off white colonialists from his land, rebelled against the colonial regime and went to prison. David pours himself

over LeFleur's writings, which the amanuensis suspects is a tactic to avoid talking about the Movement and Dulcie.

From the onset we see that David, though commissioning his own story, struggles with its actual narration. The narrator, hired by David, explains that her presence was necessary since David was 'unable' to tell his story. This inability, we come to see, is derived from his military training to instinctively remain silent. This instinct is perhaps best captured at the hotel, where David swallows everything that he writes down. For someone who, as an act of destruction, literally consumes everything he has articulated, the inability to 'flesh out the narrative' is not surprising. For David, nationalism meant silence and articulation was the ultimate treason. Articulation, as *David's Story* shows us, does not depend merely on the person who has to speak, but is contingent on those who listen. *David's Story* not only problematizes the binary of narrator and interpreter, but tries to unravel how in the absence of 'narrator', the interpreter takes it upon herself to become the narrator, so much so that the absence of the original narrator turns into a constant presence. The amanuensis' handling of David's stories into *David's Story* can thus serve as a metaphor for how from stories and whispers of the past, historians give birth to History.

The TRC and *David's Story* are set against the larger backdrop of the anti-apartheid revolution in South Africa. The African National Congress, had been a key figure in organizing resistance against the apartheid regime since the 1950s, and in 1990 with ANC President Mandela's release from prison, South Africa's transition from an apartheid state to a new nation state was being concretized. Though Mandela had initially avowed himself to non-violent resistance, in 1961 he founded the militant wing of the ANC called uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) which was banned soon thereafter. It is this armed movement that is foregrounded by Zoe Wicomb in *David's Story*. David, his wife, Sally and his love interest, Dulcie — were all at one point or another part of the underground functioning of the

¹ The TRC was seen as antithetical to apartheid censorship, and hailed as a progressive step for a newborn democracy. There has been much debate around whether the TRC has just been a part of creating a new national narrative which is convenient for the state. There are also questions surrounding the ethics of making a spectacle out of trauma narratives, especially given the fact that in most cases perpetrators were granted amnesty and only a few of the witnesses received any legal justice.

Movement, and were secretly trained and armed in camps. The MK worked behind the scenes of the ANC or the more official liberation movement. In 1990, the Movement was no longer banned, Mandela was free, and the end of apartheid was nearer than ever. This moment then becomes crucial for thinking about how freedom would manifest itself and how South Africa would move forward as a newly independent nation. As accusations that the ANC had “executed and tortured prisoners in its own training camps” surfaced, what became clear was that it wasn’t just the apartheid regime that had participated in mass human rights violations (Ignatieff 16). In this context, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was set up in 1994, to investigate all the human rights violations that had taken place between 1960 to 1994.

The TRC was to operate as a quasi-judicial body, with publicly aired witness testimonies of atrocities committed. While it was not granted any powers to order restorative justice for victims, it could grant amnesty to perpetrators of violence who gave testimony. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, appointed the first chair of the TRC, saw the goal of the organization as three-fold: The first was confession by way of testimony, the second was forgiveness by way of granting amnesty, and the third was restitution by way of perpetrators making amends. But by no means was this process of healing (or dealing with) past traumas straightforward. If

we look past the idealistic, redemptive vision of Tutu and Mandela, we can start thinking of the TRC not just in terms of national healing, but as a manifestation of the nation’s reckoning with its past.

As mentioned, the legacy of the TRC is contested but not simply because it granted amnesty to perpetrators and aimed at “restoring humanity to both perpetrator and victim” (Cole x). TRC sessions were held throughout the country, in towns and cities, and were conducted in public spaces like city halls, churches and courtrooms. Beyond justice, the TRC also raises a fundamental question around trauma — can testimony and narration actually be cathartic or is it simply a reliving of the traumatic event? Michael Ignatieff, in an introduction to *Truth and Lies*, says that, “No one who was there was entirely sure that such a bitter catharsis was always a good thing for the country or the individuals to go through” (Ignatieff 16). The Commission was ambitiously aiming for justice and for transparency and in the process often failed to do both. In this paper, I cannot answer whether it was successful or not, and nor do I aim to. Rather I look at the TRC and the processes it inhabited as a translator, a machinery that sought to translate the nation’s past for the future.

A massive achievement in what can be seen as democratizing the archive, “the TRC put the voices and words of thousands of ‘ordinary’ people into the public record, an extraordinary feat both in South African history and in African history in general” (Cole xii). Cole tells us that by the time that witnesses spoke in the TRC for public listening, they had already testified multiple times before the Commission. And despite its aim to provide the ‘truth’, the commission couldn’t really separate itself from meaning making. This is not to say that the TRC was a success or a failure, rather it is to look at how even the most primary of sources are in some

ways secondary, and what can be gained when we acknowledge the latter. Cole says, “In the disjunctions between the participants’ performances of the truth they wished to perform and the commission’s public iteration of the truths it wished to perform, we come closest to perceiving the complexity of the knowledge the TRC brought into being” (Cole xvii-xviii). With judges, translators for 11 different languages, journalists, interpreters, lawyers, television and radio, there was indeed a process through which each story reached spectators. At every step, portions were selected, edited, reordered, and supplemented – so much so that a broadcasting channel advertised its program TRC Special Report as – “the stories behind the stories”² (Cole xvi). Borrowing from this, I argue that Wicomb doesn’t really give us David’s Story but rather she presents us with some ‘stories behind the story.’ What a wonderful supplementary text this would make to the actual David’s Story.

“With each retelling, each translation of the story, assumptions are added and deducted, resulting in a long-drawn-out game of telephone.”

Just like the TRC complicates the question of narrative ownership, so does the novel. Drawing upon Barthes’ concept of the death of the author reveals the impossibility of locating ownership in *David’s Story* - for authorship in this text (and of this text) is a murky business. Barthes argues that the author is a contemporary phenomenon, in which ownership of narratives is assumed by an individual figure, as opposed to a tradition in which narratives are mediated by multiple actors, like in oral storytelling. In such a tradition, mediators are not credited for the story, but for their performance of the story. He calls for a shift from the author to the reader, claiming that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes et al. 148). But in a story where the original author David dies before the amanuensis retells his story, the reader is forced to insert David into the text. The reader must devise new ways of understanding in order to account for ruptures and attributions, and to interrogate moments in the text that David would have revised, corrected or objected to. *David’s Story* is a deeply layered text with multiple narrators and multiple readers, often leaving it unclear who is speaking for whom. With each retelling, each translation of the story, assumptions are added and deducted, resulting in a long-drawn-out game of telephone. Wicomb draws out how stories are carried from one player to another, sometimes masquerading as history, sometimes as myths. By the time a story reaches us, we know not where it came from or what it once was. It is in the context of this novel that I find a return to Barthes’ concept of the ‘mediator’ to be crucial.

It is when both the writer and the reader become mediators of a narrative, that the death of the author takes place. The role or the power of the listener³ is often overlooked, and David does so him-

² The South African Broadcasting Corporation ran a weekly television program titled the *TRC Special Report*.

³ In the text I use the reader/writer, listener/narrator, interpreter/speaker, interviewer/interviewee binaries quite interchangeably. This is not to overlook the nuances of each, but rather because in the scope of this paper and the book these roles are rapidly changing.

self. When he first reaches out to the amanuensis, he is unconcerned by her ability to ‘understand,’ for he does not seem to think that there will be a need for her to engage with his narration. But David’s idealized Barthesian desire to “father his text from a distance” is so preoccupied by his own presence in the story that it takes for granted the amanuensis’ proximity to the text (Wicomb, *David's Story* 2). But the narrator is not only a writer, she is also a listener. Describing the relationship between her and David, she refers to “a curious, artificial intimacy” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 2). Can this description be applied to the relationship between oral historians and the people whose stories they wish to record? Between authors and readers? I argue that this intimacy is what shapes the narrative. Sean Field in his work, repeatedly brings up a question asked by Pierre Nora, “Whose will to remember do they [oral history dialogues] ultimately reflect — that of the interviewer or the interviewed?” (Field 7). Though it is David who first propositions the amanuensis to record his life story, over the course of the book we come across incidents where David has a much stronger will to forget. Field points out that oral historians have developed an understanding of “how storytellers are not only driven by a desire to be recognized, but how they forge meanings through remembering” (Field 7). The exact reason behind David’s desire to immortalize himself in print isn’t always clear but the narrator speculates, “it is not that he wants to be remembered; rather, it is about putting things down on paper so that you can see what there is, shuffle the pages around, if necessary, until they make sense” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 140). The past then does not inherently make sense, but rather must be made sense of. The need to comprehend the past doesn’t just work on an individual level but also at a national level, as the TRC shows us. How can history be organized so that the nation can heal?

The tension between doing right by David as opposed to doing right by history is a tumultuous one. Should the amanuensis be concerned with the realities of the Movement, or an accurate Griqua history other only with David’s view? David is biased and sympathetic towards LeFleur and the ANC liberation movement and she takes it upon herself to give us a text which corrects for his bias. At one point when David and the narrator get into a debate about

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corruption in the movement, and its own contradictory limitations – David pleads, “the struggle is sacred; it’s been my life. It must not be misrepresented” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 197). But to maintain the struggle’s sanctity while trying to paint an accurate representation is not possible. Though the amanuensis claims that people cannot be trusted to tell their own stories, by revealing her betrayal of David’s wishes she shows that ultimately, she too could not be trusted to tell his story. But what does it mean to trust someone with

a story? What does David mean when he says he has “trusted [her] with a delicate job?” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 197). And ultimately how much does trust depend on truth?

If the book makes an argument that historical truth is tweaked and glossed over to serve the project of nationalism, then nowhere is it more evident than in women’s position in the nation and thus, as a result, in history. Given that the book is published by the Feminist Press, it cannot avoid instilling in the reader a certain ideological expectation. Perhaps caught in this trap, I was puzzled by the narrative focus on David. Why would Wicomb not choose a female heroine? But by keeping Dulcie elusive from the narrator and as a result from us, Wicomb does not let the female reader forget her own positionality, or forget feminism’s positionality in relation to nationalism. If we position national identity vis-a-vis gender intensity, then in the context of the Movement, Dulcie and Sally were set up as South African first, and women second. Dulcie’s silence is rationalized as “pride in belief” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 204). If Dulcie speaks about the torture she endured in the ANC camps, does she risk betraying the nation? Is moral legitimacy of the national movement necessary for the legitimacy of the nation itself? How then can the historian articulate nationalism’s failure towards women without undermining women’s struggle for nationalism? Or as Wicomb has said elsewhere, “Concealment, then, becomes a trope for the woman writer who has to negotiate the conflicting loyalties of race and gender” (Wicomb, “To Hear the Variety of Discourses” 51).

The handful of women’s testimonies that made it into the TRC’s archives speak to the silence of women, who are often victims of sexual violence. The TRC has not been successful in representing the violent subjugation of women. Al-Kassim notes that the TRC’s “final report explicitly highlights the missing testimony of women, whose victimization under apartheid risks remaining untold, uncompensated and unredeemable in the symbolic economy of reparation” (Al-Kassim 175). Given the exclusion of these testimonies, Wicomb’s choice of a male protagonist allows for an investigation into how and why certain exclusions take place. What does the absence of female testimonies tell us? The interim Constitution of South Africa states that amnesty would be granted in the interest of “national unity and reconciliation” so long as the violations were “associated with political objectives.” But what about when they weren’t? The rhetoric of the TRC was valid as long as the violence that took place was between two opposing political groups. Can violence against women not be understood as political in agenda? Did survivors of sexual assault think that their trauma lay outside of the confines of apartheid? Outside the scope of the TRC? Did women’s stories bear little relevance to national healing?

The narrator is intrigued by the women in David’s life. Unhappy with the amanuensis’s focus on the women in the story, David asks, “Who would want to read a story like that? It’s not a proper history at all” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 119). Yet, as Dorothy Driver points out, he “depends on their [women’s] storytelling, whether for the historical facts and myths they provide or for their critique or for his own emotional stability” (Driver 229). In the afterword, Driver proposes that this might have been called Dulcie’s Story instead, if only her story was not so untellable (Driver 218). But it is David who insists that “even if a full story [of Dulcie’s] were to be figured

out by someone, it would be a story that cannot be told” (Wicomb, *David’s Story* 151). Who wants Dulcie’s experiences to be unspeakable? And who is implicated if she does speak? While we ask who is invested in her silence, we must also ask who is invested in her speaking?

One can also wonder why LeFleur’s wife Rachel’s story has not been told. Wicomb tells us she had to “invent a wife for” LeFleur because “there is no information about that wife to be found anywhere” (Wicomb and Willemse 145). In all the stories about Griqua history that were passed onto her nowhere was there any mention of Rachel. Rachel isn’t silent in the archive, she’s absent. Was Rachel’s story untellable too? More and more, the choice of the male protagonist makes sense. *David’s Story* is not an attempt to plug the holes of a history deplete of female voices, rather it is an investigation into a creation and perpetuation of that history. Wicomb does not offer us an alternate story of David. Rather by looking at how stories are created, she makes visible the possibility for endless alternatives. By not granting primacy to one story over another, she iterates the complicity of all stories. Perhaps by choosing to write David’s and not Dulcie’s story, Wicomb is highlighting that all history is men’s history with women as footnotes. Is this why she feels the need for a narrator who questions at every step male erasure of women’s experiences?

The amanuensis fulfills this role by constantly urging David to give up more information and details about Dulcie. If the narrator is advocating for Dulcie, her voice and her representation to protect her from being buried in David’s Story — if the narrator wants to hear Dulcie speak then we must also be careful of her eagerness to articulate Dulcie. Is the amanuensis’ insistence on writing Dulcie into

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the narrative based on her desire to be able to flesh out the subaltern or Dulcie’s desire to be represented? If the narrator insists that David cannot understand Dulcie because she is a woman, she must also acknowledge her own distance from her. Jenny Sharpe’s *Figures of Colonial Resistance* warns that writers and historians who seek to emancipate the subaltern marginalized in historiography run the risk of “subordinating the subaltern.” She argues that scholars must recognize when they lack the ability and the framework to retrieve certain voices, instead of appropriating said voices in their eagerness to correct elite historiography. Sharpe theorizes that the elusiveness of the subaltern is a necessary feature of counter-histories that exist today. What Sharpe says of these counter-narratives, I think, applies to the TRC as well — “the necessity for defining our project as something other than the simple recuperation of lost

testimonies” (Sharpe 139). With her death, Dulcie’s testimony is lost. What do we do with this loss?

In the case of Dulcie, the subaltern does not speak not because she cannot speak, but perhaps because we cannot understand. Not because she isn’t ready but because her audience isn’t (we already know David was not ready to accept her story). So the subaltern must carry the burden of our inability to comprehend. As a reader, the amanuensis’ excavation of Dulcie leaves me conflicted. The amanuensis clearly feels some responsibility to not let Dulcie’s experience in the anti-apartheid movement be glossed over, and does not want to be complicit in covering the Janus face of nationalism. Yet at the same time she is too far removed from Dulcie, and knows nothing of her wishes, to avoid robbing agency from Dulcie, no matter what narrative decisions she makes. The successful navigation of such a bind “depends on the recognition that the subaltern is irreducible and yet ultimately irretrievable” (Sharpe 152). Wicomb, though, allows neither David nor the amanuensis to appropriate Dulcie’s subalternity nor does she allow them to use her as a metaphor. The narrator comes to accept that Dulcie cannot be given shape. With barely any information about her, save “the thin anecdotes, the sorry clutch of hints and innuendos,” as far as the text is concerned, “resolution is not possible” (Wicomb, *David’s Story* 152). Thus acknowledging the irretrievability of Dulcie. However, when David claims that she is a “scream somehow echoing through my story,” the narrator makes clear that he “won’t get away with abstracting her,” insisting on her irreducibility (Wicomb, *David’s Story* 134).

With access to Dulcie cut-off, the narrator is informed of her life through David. When she is unable to trace Dulcie out, she must begin to perform her, to construct her from the ‘art of inference.’ The narrator allows us to see how she has arrived at certain conclusions about Dulcie. She deduces that Dulcie must be a high-ranking officer of the ANC when David claims that she would never differentiate among the men and women she works with (Wicomb, *David’s Story* 78). Given that Dulcie is in a position to make distinctions amongst her co-workers, gives the narrator enough information to make an educated guess about her position in the ANC. The narrator remarks that David is surprised by her ability to read between the lines, which is not a part of an amanuensis’ job description. She speculates that it is perhaps a part of “a pretense about giving nothing away” (Wicomb, *David’s Story* 79). However, I am inclined to believe that David underestimated how easily control over narration is lost — that the reader/listener is not a static board that only retains what she is given, but rather demands, argues, refuses, and rejects what she is given.

Wicomb on the other hand is committed to challenging the reader. How much of the telling must the narrator do? Wicomb clearly does not care to indulge the lazy reader. The reader has to be as intrusive, as attentive, as tuned into clues and disjuncture, as the amanuensis is to David. Though the narrator tells us that she has left out the portion of Sarah Baartman that David wanted included, she certainly has not left out Baartman herself. With repeated textual references to Baartman, with no historical explanation whatsoever, the reader is not just invited to independently delve into Baartman’s history but is also invited to wonder how to connect it with David. Once the narrator reveals that David thought excluding Baartman

from the story “would be like excluding history itself,” she does a lot more than just write a “little monograph” on Baartman (Wicomb, *David's Story* 1). The reader, unclear what about Baartman she should know, then tries to know everything she can. The narrator goes on to question the literature David must have read on Baartman, since someone as pragmatic as him “would surely have quoted existing texts” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 2). She is aware that history is not being excluded, but being layered upon.

While the narrator is critical of David's worldview, she is also sensitive to David's criticism of her outsider status. She notes that David “says condescendingly” that “it's a different world out there, one you'll never understand” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 137). This reminder to the amanuensis of her inability to understand and of her outsider status, is also directed at the reader, who must be always conscious of his/her/their positionality in terms of gender, class, nationality, race and lived experiences. While David accuses the narrator of not being able to understand those in the Movement, the narrator accuses him of not understanding women. The only consciousness of hers we are privy to is her female consciousness. She says that “a clumsy, steatopygous woman like myself, simply has to get out of the way or risk being knocked down” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 201). The amanuensis' experience of being knocked over and deviated from her path certainly influences the way in which she interacts with David. She resolves to not be deterred by David's detours, and cannot prevent herself from crossing the line. Historians cannot separate their experiences of themselves from the way in which they come to regard and interact with their historical subjects. Her distaste at David's insistence on including Baartman, “as someone who belongs to all of us” is perhaps clearer. The national movement may seek to iconize Baartman as a figure of South African resistance, but appropriates the female body while doing so. All the women in *David's Story* are steatopygous, and in a way “‘steatopygia’ is the narrative of how one is able or unable to relate to women in this narrative” (Dass). It is the one recurring gendered symbol that betrays the narrator's own relation to the other steatopygous women in David's life, whom she has not met but feels she must advocate for.

While the narrator questions the assumptions David makes claiming Dulcie is “not feminine, not like a woman at all” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 80), she herself cannot help but try to imagine what female guerillas are like (Wicomb, *David's Story* 79). Speculating whether such a woman indulges in acts of feminine vanity, the narrator conjures up a Dulcie who takes “pleasure in her double life as she dabs perfume on her pulse points before target practice” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 79). Her little inventions and performances of Dulcie are uncomfortable and violate all kinds of ethical practices. Like the narrator, Wicomb too has taken her liberties with Griqua history but she has done so in the cocoon of fiction. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that she has taken liberties with the historical sources of Griqua history available to us. Since Wicomb was concerned not with the history itself but its creation, writing *David's Story* “required invented truths” which was only possible in the realm of fictionality⁴ (Meyer and Olver 193). Then, we are compelled to think, what is the amanuensis doing? Inventing truths because of the scarcity of actual information available to her?

These inventions function in two ways. The first is that they are an

act in what Gayathri Bahadur terms as “speculative history”⁵ (Bahadur). In the absence of Dulcie's voice, the narrator uses her own “to question the records” (Bahadur) — both David's narrative and LeFleur's writing. This is mimicked by Wicomb, who speculates and invents LeFleur's wife for the reader. But even David must engage in his fair share of speculation as he pours over LeFleur's writings, which remain inadequate to conjure a true picture of the Griqua ruler. And Dulcie comes to mark the ‘limits of what can be known’ (Bahadur).

“The entirety of the text before us was mediated by the amanuensis' memory, reminding us that to articulate is to distort.”

Secondly, these inventions of Dulcie are part of a coercive strategy to get David to reveal more. The narrator hopes that in inventing and appropriating Dulcie's consciousness, she will perhaps be able to provoke David into correcting falsities. Even if David does not edit her fiction, she knows that his reaction would serve as fodder. The narrator admits that she must “invent and hope that David's response will reveal something” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 80). Thus, she goes on to perform Dulcie — Dulcie whose nose stings when she wants to cry, Dulcie whose blackness was rhymed with her cunt, Dulcie who has never had a real doll, Dulcie who wishes to “weep like a gargoye” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 82). These delicately crafted details do enough for David to part with bits and pieces of Dulcie. He tells us the story of Dulcie, who braved bee stings on every inch of her body for dripping sweet honeycombs she could never get a taste of. The reader cannot help but squirm at the tactics the narrator uses to get this story. The only question is, why?

But does the narrator have to be true to ‘the story’ or to David or to Dulcie? Can these take place simultaneously? Or does that pose an inherent conflict of interest? The narrator often loses patience with David, undermines his recollection, and speculates motives behind his absences. The narrator continuously revisited the original contract between her and David, which outlined her role as “simply to write down things as he told them” (Wicomb, *David's Story* 2).

⁴ It is interesting to note that though Wicomb chose fiction because it allowed her to circumvent expectations to remain true to real people and real stories, by choosing to write a fictional biography by a fictional narrator, she is able to highlight the mating ritual behind co-authored texts.

⁵ Bahadur uses speculative history to describe what she has tried to achieve with her book *Coolie Woman*, in which she tries to reconstruct the lives of female indentured labourers in the plantations. Her own great-grandmother had arrived in Guyana alone, and when Bahadur tried to piece together her life, the official records failed her. So she had to rely on other sources, family stories, the lives of other indentured women to speculate what her own grandmother's story was. Though I use this term to describe that this is in a way what the narrator is doing – I must be clear that Bahadur has speculated from within an academic ethical framework.

While there is a renegotiation of her level of involvement, she tells David that LeFleur's example "only goes to show that people cannot be relied to tell their own stories" (Wicomb, *David's Story* 103). Does this indicate that she believes David cannot be trusted to tell his own story? Or is this to remind David that without her a telling of his story would not be possible. Thus, emphasizing the need for her to be the arbiter of David's memories.

The process of arbitration, of mediating through multiple mediators, is evocative in the narrator's description of David listening to stories of the Griqua Chief from Ouma Ragel. Wicomb has drawn from some of the stories she was told by her own *oumas*. So the reader can trace these stories back to Wicomb's *oumas*. They are the first mediators we are aware of. However, the text presents the narrator's recreation of David's childhood interactions with Ouma Ragel. She tells us about an impatient boy, who tugged at his grandmother's skirt, as she worked in her cooking shelter, to tell him for the "millionth time the tale of the Chief's imprisonment, for sometimes she would remember a new detail" (Wicomb, *David's Story* 103). How the narrator knows about "slow-cooked mealies" and "beans packed on a marrowbone" that "flavored the story" in David's memory, we do not know (Wicomb, *David's Story* 103).

Wicomb however is aware that the way in which the Griqua chief lives in the memory of the people is significant irrespective of the historical validity of their claims. Why does the narrator go through the lengths of trying to imagine the young David who was a captive audience to his grandmother? Nevertheless, we are privy to this intimate moment, which may or may not have taken place this way. The narrator mediates David's recollections to demonstrate the unreliability of memory. But the only device she relied on, to achieve this reconstruction, were David's unreliable memories. Moreover, since at the end of the novel a bullet passed through her computer, destroying its memory, we can assume that the text we are reading now was not the one that was being written at the time. So, the entirety of the text before us was mediated by the amanuensis' memory, reminding us that to articulate is to distort.

There are few moments in the text that foreground the amanuensis' inability to process Dulcie's or David's trauma. At one point when David comes close to confessing certain details about Dulcie, the narrator says, "it is I who must look away and pray that he will say nothing. This is an intrusion, a weight that I cannot carry" (Wicomb, *David's Story* 151). In order to examine how the narrator processes these other stories that are not hers, but ones she must tell, we must look into her own investment in the story. In *The Problem of Speaking for Others*, Alcoff argues that speaking for is often "a desire for mastery and domination," and when operating from this space of mastery "one's own location and positionality would not require constant interrogation and critical reflection" (Alcoff 22). While the narrator does a good job of interrogating David, she conveniently absolves herself from the same scrutiny. Moreover, given that "the speaker's location is epistemically salient," we must look into the amanuensis' positionality vis-à-vis David, and vis-à-vis Dulcie (Alcoff 7). The power scales tip overwhelmingly in favor of the amanuensis, since neither David nor Dulcie are alive any longer to contest anything, she says.

We must acknowledge the narrator's trauma as well. Not only has

her confidante been murdered, so has the text that she was working on, forewarning of what may come next. "I will have nothing more to do with it," she finally says (Wicomb, *David's Story* 213). But this incident presumably happened before she started writing this version. What was lost and what was transmitted between the destruction of that copy and the creation of this? How did the narrator's trauma shape her narrative decisions? At the end she asks, "is this no longer my house" and "does no one care what I think?" (Wicomb, *David's Story* 213). Similarly we may ask of her, is this no longer *David's Story*? Does she not care what David thinks? What Dulcie thinks? What will the reader think of her betrayal? Yet, readers must confront that they are now complicit in the distortion of David and Dulcie. For they continued to read. As we are invited to read through the behind-the-scenes exposé of *David's Story*, Wicomb is able to "compel us to question the extent of the power that we are prepared to grant to 'writing' as both a document and an action" (Daymond 34).

David's and Dulcie's deaths raise questions about the feasibility of narrating in a public domain like the TRC. The perpetrators of violence may very well still be part of the victims' lives. The public nature of the TRC intended for transparency means that narrators already self-select themselves. Moreover, if Dulcie and David are dead, they cannot, even if they wish to, lend their testimony to the TRC. So while this is a shortcoming of the project of the TRC, *David's Story* exemplifies what we can learn of history from the cues, references, and absences in the testimonies of those who do testify. From *David's Story* we learn of Dulcie, Sally, Griqua history. This is what Field asks the oral historian to do - "to attempt to imagine the unimaginable losses and 'deaths of relationships' that evoke afterwardsness and resist articulation in narrative or other forms of representation" (Fields 662). While the narrator does attempt this endeavor, she fails to be ethically responsible to David, and even to Dulcie.

Truth commissions can only attempt to write the future of the past. The irony of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee is that its failure lies in its success. To arrive at reconciliation is a false triumph which only underscores the failure of the TRC. "Thus, it becomes harder to celebrate the successes of the TRC as an exercise in confession and historical reconstruction when confronted with the deep ruptures in South Africa's sense of space and time, language and body that *David's Story* so searingly dramatizes" (Graham 143). David's and Dulcie's deaths show that storytelling is not just a healing balm for violent encounters but can result in its own violence, something that the TRC must take cognizance of. As should the narrator.

David's Story is a poignant reminder of what is at stake when we tell stories. Storytelling is a complex negotiation of what to say and how much to say. Wicomb thus manages to do what every historian must strive for — making known the failures and absences of one's project without trying to plug them. However, there is a thin line between attempting representation which is actually appropriation versus not trying to represent at all. We must try to represent and if we are unable to, we must accept that at the current moment with the current resources, we cannot, instead of feigning triumph. And thus, the narrator tells us, "I wash my hands of this story," (Wicomb, *David's Story* 213) ultimately raising the question, how

much must we tell to convey how untellable a story is?⁶

⁶ In writing this paper, I must acknowledge that I keep returning to the physical text of *David's Story*. My memory of first reading the book has been lost somewhere in my repeated returns, but at the same time, sometimes I go back only to realize that I was misremembering certain details.

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