

‘Multiple Belongings’ in Zoë Wicomb’s ‘My Name is HannaH’ (2005)

Abstract

This article examines the short story/essay ‘My Name is HannaH’ (2005) by South African-born writer Zoë Wicomb focusing on its generic hybridity, its translocal quality, and its deeply intertextual structure. Retracing the life and works of the South African poet Arthur Nortje through the artifice of fiction, Wicomb exposes the discursive and relational nature of space and identity. By analyzing the story’s extremely heterogeneous intertexts and its playful generic inbetweenness, I seek to show how Wicomb refuses any form of categorization or fixed notion, exposing rather the seams and fissures of the textuality of reality. Ultimately, I argue that the thematic and formal features of the selected narrative can foreground the relationship between world literature and the short story as a liminal, cosmopolitan, and mutable genre, particularly appropriate for the representation of the interconnectedness of our society.

Keywords

short story
translocal
intertextuality
South Africa
generic hybridity
Arthur Nortje

Introduction: Wicomb’s Translocal and Intertextual Practice

‘Zoë Wicomb’s subtle, lively language and beautifully crafted narratives explore the complex entanglements of home, and the continuing challenges of being in the world’ (The Windham Campbell Prize 2013). These are the words used to describe Wicomb’s writing practice on the website of the Windham Campbell Prize, which she was awarded in 2013 for the category of fiction. The dual concepts of home and the world indeed structure Wicomb’s whole oeuvre as well as her own life. Born in Little Namaqualand in the Northern Cape in 1948 and classified by the apartheid legislation as ‘Coloured’,¹ she left South Africa for England in 1973 and, after a brief return to the Cape in the Nineties, she settled permanently in Glasgow in 1994. Her two short-story cycles *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) and *The One That Got Away* (2008), and her novels *David’s Story* (2000), *Playing in the Light* (2006), *October* (2014), and *Still Life* (2020) consistently explore the felt experience of (mostly South African) individuals moving between the two poles of South Africa and England/Scotland. Not surprisingly, the issue of cosmopolitanism is often brought into scholarly discussions of Wicomb’s fictions – see, for instance, the articles in the special issue of *Safundi* titled ‘Zoë Wicomb, the Cape & the Cosmopolitan’ edited by Kai Easton and Andrew van der Vlies in 2011 or the second issue of *Current Writing* in the same year. The idea of the cosmopolitan that emerges from Wicomb’s texts and from the ensuing critical responses to them, however, is far removed from conceptions of cosmopolitanism that deny cultural specificity. It is rather more similar to the notion of world literature as proposed by Neil Lazarus in his article ‘Cosmopolitanism and the Specificity of the Local in World Literature’:²

we begin to realize, perhaps, that not only is there no necessary contradiction between the ideas of the ‘universal’ and the ‘local’ or the ‘national’, but that, on the contrary, there are only local universalisms (and, for that matter, only ‘local cosmopolitanisms’, where ‘cosmopolitan’ is taken to describe a particular way of registering selfhood in a particular time and place), which it becomes our task as readers to situate as completely as we can. (Lazarus 2011: 134)

In 2017, the compelling volume of critical essays *Zoë Wicomb and the Translocal: Writing Scotland and South Africa* was published, edited by Kai Easton and Derek Attridge. Another term used to describe the rootedness and, at the same time, the worldliness of the writer's narratives is indeed 'translocal', defined as 'spatial interactions within and across spaces that reveal, generate, confirm and disturb relations between character and place, saturating spaces with meanings brought into being by different perspectives, discourses, events and behaviour' (Driver 2017: 17). Wicomb's story 'Nothing Like the Wind' from *The One That Got Away* is emblematic in this regard. The South African protagonist, Elsie, cannot understand why the sound of traffic in Glasgow, where she now lives, transports her 'to that place [...] miles away at the tip of Africa' since 'the sound of traffic is nothing like the wind' of her South African home (Wicomb 2008: 137).

The fact of being grounded in a specific local context while at the same time exploring the 'intertextuality of modern culture', to use Wicomb's own words (2001: 168), does run like a *fil rouge* in the writer's prose. One of the textual strategies through which she explores spatial entanglements in her narratives is precisely intertextuality: her fictional works, as well as her numerous critical essays, often incorporate direct or indirect quotations from a wide range of writers (and artists more generally), both major and minor, South African and from other nationalities. Intertextual echoes thus enrich and complicate the reading process, requiring the active participation of readers in the (re)definition of meaning. Wicomb herself commented on the postcolonial writer's (others' and her own) dual commitment to space and intertextuality in one of her most painstakingly instructive essays, 'Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author' (2005). In the latter, Wicomb argues that 'setting functions much like intertextuality' since 'setting is crucially bound up with a culture and its dominant ideologies, providing readymade, recognizable meanings' that are challenged by the postcolonial text (Wicomb [2005] 2018: 231). It is at this point that Wicomb reverses Roland Barthes's argument about the death of the author, according to which there is no authorial intent since every text is a combination of pre-existing quotations ([1967] 1977: 146). Intertextuality, Wicomb argues, in fact allows postcolonial writers to 'resurrect' and find their place in fiction again (238). The agency of postcolonial writers emerges subtly through the text's ironic departure from certain settings' dominant colonial ideology. Wicomb's aesthetics is thus consistently driven by ethical imperatives.

In 2005, Wicomb published 'My Name is HannaH', a short narrative that puts into practice the theoretical tenets on intertextuality and space expressed in 'Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author'. 'My Name is HannaH' was originally a public lecture (the Arthur Nortje Memorial Lecture) delivered by Wicomb at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, on 27 July 2005. It later appeared in its written form in *The English Academy Review*, listed under the 'Autobiographical Fictions' subsection in an issue focused on 'Fact Bordering Fiction'. In fact, 'My Name is HannaH' should be considered a short story for all intents and purposes were it not for its label as 'memorial lecture'. As opposed to creative non-fiction, there are no explicit claims to the factuality of the recounted event since the protagonist, the eponymous HannaH, is an invented character (even though readers of Wicomb will recognize the story's autobiographical coating). Moreover, the selected text is very similar on the level of content and form to other short stories by Wicomb – as Douglas Hesse reminds us, our response to a work is conditioned by 'what we've learned to see in other works we judge it to be like' (Hesse 1989: 204). Like most short stories, 'My Name is HannaH' begins *in medias res*, it can be read 'at one sitting' due to its brevity, it achieves the 'unity of effect' first theorized by Edgar Allan Poe, and it ends with a climactic closure (Poe [1842] 1984: 571–572). Due to its compact structure, the narrative is also quite cryptic and fragmentary, characteristics usually associated with short fiction (Patea 2012: 12).

In this paper, therefore, I intend to close read 'My Name is HannaH' as a short story, focusing on the experience of reading it as a text rather than on the singular event of its performance as public lecture. Since short fiction has been repeatedly defined as a 'gender-bending' form (Lohafer 1998: xi), my discussion will first consider the generic instability of 'My Name is HannaH', which challenges binary distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. Because of its thematic preoccupation

with transnationalism, the text, which straddles between the UK and South Africa, was also reprinted in the above-mentioned volume *Zoë Wicomb and the Translocal: Writing Scotland and South Africa* (2017). The cosmopolitan outlook of the short story is reflected formally in the wide range of intertextual allusions, first of all to the work of South African poet Arthur Kenneth Nortje (1942-1970), after whom the public lecture was named. Several of these intertexts appear in the form of poetry or drama, interrupting the main text graphically. My aim is also to discuss this intertextual scaffolding and how it relates to the short-story form, first by exploring the incorporation of Nortje's poetry and then by examining the embeddedness of other intertextual sources in the story. Ultimately, I argue that reading 'My Name is HannaH' as short fiction can foreground the relationship between the short story (as a migrant, cosmopolitan, and mutable genre) and world literature. The hybrid and trans-generic quality of 'My Name is HannaH', its complex and far-reaching intertextual structure, and its preoccupation with the translocal speak to core concerns of a kind of world literature that never denies cultural specificity.

The Refusal of Categorization: Short Fiction or Non-Fiction?

As opposed to the rest of the bulk of Wicomb's literary and critical oeuvre, 'My Name is HannaH' has not received the critical attention it deserves, even though it was first published almost twenty years ago in the journal of the English Academy of Southern Africa and it appeared again in an important collected volume on the writer's works in 2017. According to Dirk Klopper, the editor of the special issue of *The English Academy Review*, Wicomb's contribution explores 'the implication of the autobiographical "I" in writings that present themselves as fictions [...] deploying voices other than the voice of standard academic discourse, thus bringing the academic voice itself into question' (2005: v). Derek Attridge, instead, defines 'My Name is HannaH' as 'one of Wicomb's own story/essays' (2017: 15). The problematic generic categorization of this short text is matched by a complex and intertextual narratological structure. The narrative is a first-person account of the eponymous writer/narrator HannaH, a South African student who just graduated in English Literature at an unnamed university in Nottingham in the United Kingdom. The story that we are reading is actually one of HannaH's first attempts at writing (short) fiction. Indeed, the narrative begins the day after HannaH's graduation when she buys a 'Little Exercise Book' on which she begins writing the story that we are reading (Wicomb 2005: 9). Through her intertextual and metafictional story-writing, she tries to re-create the biography of the South African poet Arthur Nortje, who immigrated to the UK like her (and Wicomb). The tentative biography of Nortje is interrupted by several digressions on writing and the politics of representation, which alternate with fleeting allusions to HannaH's life in the UK and to her fraught relationship with her father. Through her engagement with Nortje's life and poetry, HannaH claims her agency and re-writes a shameful history that cryptically links her life with Nortje's, as we discover in the climactic conclusion. Readers are thus presented with an extremely complex short narrative in which multiple diegetic levels, intertexts, and genres overlap – which may partially explain why this text is still relatively overlooked.

Generic instability is a sort of genetic blueprint of Wicomb's oeuvre: her first collection of short stories, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, apparently presents itself as an autobiographical episodic novel, or *Künstlerroman* (Driver 2010: 530). The supposed unity of the novel, however, is denied by the subdivision of the narrative into linked yet autonomous stories. Similarly, the illusion of reality and the autobiographical reading are shattered by the metafictional revelation that closes the book: the first-person protagonist and narrator Frieda is also the author of the stories that we are reading. It is easy to imagine 'My Name is HannaH' at home within *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* since the similarities between HannaH and the protagonist of the collection are several, to the point that the former could be thought of as a revenant of Frieda. Both are young South African women writers studying English Literature, trying to lend their voices to the fictions of others, and fighting against the imposition of patriarchal figures and the utter isolation of exile in England.³ Frieda's unnamed father is often portrayed in his parochial and patriarchal attitude, as in the following lines: "The floor is dusty," said Father, [...] 'We must smear it.' By which he meant that I should, since I am a girl' (Wicomb [1987] 2000: 18). Similarly, HannaH's equally unnamed 'Daddy' claims that he 'should

have taken' his daughter 'away before [she] became contaminated', for he interprets HannaH's relationship with her boyfriend Wayne as an 'act of aggression' (2005: 112). The authority of male figures is also represented through the characters of academic tutors, who refuse to decolonize the university curriculum: Frieda's tutor Retief asks her to write an essay on the consequences of murder in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, while the syllabus chosen by Dr Nobel, HannaH's 'odious tutor', is limited to 'Dickens and Austen' (2005: 111). HannaH, however, discards Nobel's and her father's narratives, like Frieda. 'My Name is HannaH', the writer/narrator repeats like a refrain, affirming her agency by writing down her name three times (109; 116; 120). With the insertion of a silent quote from the Bible, and specifically from the Books of Samuel, Wicomb juxtaposes her HannaH with the homonymous biblical figure of Hannah, who was barren until God gave her a child. The capitalized final H, however, allows for a comparison with other female figures who defied societal expectations towards women:

I am who I am: shaped into the single name HannaH, like Sappho or Mikro, not because I have delusions of grandeur but because I would rather stab a long, pointed knife clean into my heart than say or write the other, the surname. The final capitalised H precludes another name and so seals me off from the offending line. This HannaH rejoices in the fact that the Lord hath shut up her womb – or so I hope; she will not, drunk with faith, pray and pray for a boy, and then pass out of the story. (110)

In an interview with Eva Hunter, Wicomb admits having 'flirt[ed]' with the autobiographical genre in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1993: 93). 'My Name is HannaH' plays with the readers' horizon of expectations in a similar fashion. Like Wicomb, HannaH – who incidentally is also the name of Wicomb's own daughter – is a South African young woman who left her home for England, where she studied for an English Literature degree. Most importantly, HannaH is an incipient writer whose textual practice uncannily resembles Wicomb's own. Addressing directly Dr Nobel, HannaH states the following:

your metropolitan death of the author and birth of the reader is itself a regrettable binary, and you would of course not have noticed how for some time now the postcolonial writer has busily been resurrecting the authorial subject, has quite insisted on ethical responsibility. (Wicomb 2005: 112–113)

This indirect quotation is drawn from Wicomb's own essay 'Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author'. The surname 'Nobel', moreover, is an obvious hint at the 'academic posturing' represented by HannaH's tutor and by the Nobel prize itself (112). The scholarly self-quotation and the character of Dr Nobel establish links with both the fictional world of HannaH (her recent graduation) and the external world of the public university lecture delivered by the real-life author Wicomb, who is here following in the footsteps of her fellow South African writer J. M. Coetzee. On the occasion of the Ben Belitt Lecture in November 1996, Coetzee delivered a speech at Bennington College in the United States titled 'What is Realism?'. If read, the lecture actually appears as an autobiographical, highly metafictional, and intertextual short story told by a shadowy and anonymous first-person author/narrator. The text recounts the sojourn of Elizabeth Costello, an Australian ageing writer, and her son John, who shares the name with the real-life author John Maxwell Coetzee, in Massachusetts. There, Costello delivers the acceptance speech for the Appleton Award for fiction, humorously titled 'What is Realism?'. The whole story thus 'plays havoc with the realist illusion', as the narrator ironically remarks during one of the several digressions that expose the textuality of the narrative (Coetzee 1997: 68). Coetzee would repeat the same strategy of this prose piece in the following years, when he delivered other public lectures that presented the views of the fictional Elizabeth Costello. He then collected these stories/essays in 2003 in the eponymous volume *Elizabeth Costello* – 'a kind of novel' and an 'oddly hybrid text', in the words of Gareth

Cornwell (2011: 348–349). In one of her essays, Wicomb defined ‘What is Realism?’ as a ‘superbly postmodern gesture’ (Wicomb 2001: 164), whose intertextual and metafictional structure is echoed in her own public lecture ‘My Name is HannaH’. HannaH explicitly brings into play the Coetztean fictional writer when she remarks that, since South African literature is not taught at her university, she has studied South African works on her own, ‘in a gallery of characters from Mhudi to Elizabeth Costello’ (2005: 111).

Douglas Hesse observed that the dividing line between narrative essays and first-person short stories can be quite blurred, resulting in a so-called ‘boundary zone’ where the two genres overlap (1989: 86). Indeed, HannaH’s elaborate metalinguistic and narratological discussions of Nortje’s poetry and of the nature of writing do resemble academic essays, written by an author/narrator who shares many similarities with Wicomb (and directly quotes from her essays). Yet, the text is devoid of any kind of factual claims, even though its subtitle recites ‘Arthur Nortje Memorial Lecture’. Labelling a piece of short prose as an essay or a story means creating certain expectations for the readers, a ‘contract of sorts’ that indicates how they should receive the work (Morano 2003: 36). A text’s label, however, can compete with intra-textual information that denies or reverses that label, thus complicating generic classifications. In the case of ‘My Name is HannaH’, the piece’s label clashes with the content and form of the text, structured as a short story. Wicomb’s postmodern conflating of life-writing, the essay, and the short story foregrounds the artifice of writing and urges the reader to receive the text in a ‘genre-straddling way’ (2003: 40). If writers of the hybrid form of the non-fictional short story ‘lie openly to tell the truth, so that their ethical posture as storytellers lies in their aesthetic authority’, the same can be said for Wicomb’s playful writing strategy in ‘My Name is HannaH’ (Abildskov 2003: 26).

When writing about Nortje’s life, HannaH insists, ‘as is any writer’s prerogative, on the right to invent’ (118). In an interview with Stephan Meyer and Thomas Olver, Wicomb invokes the power of fiction to destabilize notions of truth-telling, for ‘it’s narrative fiction itself that lends itself to questioning the notion of the truth, and has the capacity for showing truth as a complex, many-sided, contingent thing’ (Meyer and Olver 2002: 194). This remark is particularly significant for a text like ‘My Name is HannaH’, which blurs the lines between the real and the invented. In one of her essays, Wicomb comments on South African coloured writer Bessie Head’s textual practice of ‘writing and not-writing about the self’ as a ‘discourse of liberation’ (2018: 217). The simultaneous presence of autobiography and what Wicomb calls ‘notautobiography’ in Head’s fictions is a ‘transformative strategy’ that allows her to foreground the discursive nature of identity in the face of apartheid’s fixed racial categorizations (220–221). Wicomb’s textual practice in relation to the inscription of Nortje’s and her own biography in the fiction of ‘My Name is HannaH’ serves a similar aim – not surprisingly, Head is briefly mentioned in the story (2005: 118). Nortje’s biography is re-created through the writing act of HannaH and of Wicomb, while she plays, at the same time, with her own biography. The generic instability of ‘My Name is HannaH’ is thus one of the strategies through which Wicomb denies any authoritative, fixed categorization and foregrounds rather the fluid nature of identity.

Intertextuality across Genres: The Worldliness of ‘My Name is HannaH’

The act of writing is precisely what liberates HannaH from the identity of daughter and from her ‘tainted blood’ and ‘shame’ (112). The occasion that prompts her to write is not her graduation ceremony, however. The text hints subtly at an obscure event – the ‘moment of truth’ that characterizes short stories (Pratt 1981: 182) – that happened the night before the present of the narration, when she came across a journal article on the life of the dead South African poet Arthur Nortje. Conflating the levels of the real and the invented, as Wicomb often does, we could speculate that the journal article on the life of the poet is Dirk Klopper’s own ‘In Pursuit of the Subject: Towards a Biography of Arthur Nortje’, published only one year before Wicomb’s Arthur Nortje lecture at Stellenbosch University, incidentally also where Klopper was affiliated at the time.⁴ Nortje, like HannaH, used to annotate his ‘Little Exercise Books’ with ‘diary entries, vignettes, recollections embellished by narrative, drafts of poems [...], notes towards academic literary essays, and speculations about the nature of the aesthetic’, which ‘indicates that Nortje’s life and work are

not clearly separated but mutually implicated' (Klopper 2004: 883). The macro-structure of the narrative is therefore built on overlapping layers of meta- and intertextuality – HannaH confesses her 'copycat fondness for metalepsis' at one point in the story (Wicomb 2005: 116).

Arthur Nortje was categorized as Coloured within South Africa's segregated society and, therefore, left his native country in 1965 after receiving a scholarship to attend Jesus College at Oxford. After graduation, he left the UK for Canada in 1967, but he eventually returned to England in 1970, where he died at the young age of twenty-eight because of an overdose of barbiturates (it is still unclear if it was suicide or an accident). His death as well as his birth are thus shrouded in mystery: his mother, Cecilia Potgieter, was a coloured domestic servant and his white Jewish father, Arthur Kaplan, was the son of Cecilia's employer. Cecilia was disgraced and forced to move to a small town in the Western Cape. She kept the identity of Arthur's father secret until the boy was seventeen, but she never divulged his name (Klopper 2004: 874–875). This fact, together with Arthur's belonging to the coloured community and the isolation he experienced in his self-exile, is woven into the writer's angst-driven poetry, which often speaks of homelessness and indeterminacy.

Wicomb, who explicitly acknowledges the influence of Nortje on her work (see Hunter 1993: 82), had already established an intertextual dialogue with the poet in the early *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, which opens with two epigraphs from his poems 'Immigrant' and 'Waiting' and which contains a short story, 'Ash on my Sleeve', titled after one of Nortje's lines. The figure of the poet also returns in 'In the Botanic Gardens', first published in 1990 and later included in her latest short-story cycle *The One That Got Away* (2008). 'My Name is HannaH', however, takes this intertextual dialogue one step further. While retracing the life of Nortje, Wicomb (and HannaH-the-writer) intersperses her narrative with direct and indirect quotations from several of Nortje's poems, which endow the prose with suggestiveness and imagery. The poetic insertions in 'My Name is HannaH' paradoxically support the interpretation of the text as a short story since the latter has been defined as a form that 'blends the brevity and intensity of the lyric with narrative features such as plot, denouement, character, and events' (Patea 2012: 9–10). Indeed, the ellipsis and implication that characterize 'My Name is HannaH' also depend on the sheer number of silent quotations from Nortje, which are quite difficult to detect for a reader who is not well versed in his poetry – still relatively unknown outside a small circle of experts. When HannaH hints at her obscure discovery, for example, she comments as follows:

No point in burdening Daddy, who is an innocent child, with this knowledge; his bewilderment would only make things worse, his blood confusing mine. 'Hate for the father', that is how the poem 'For Sylvia Plath' starts: what choice does my tainted blood have but to curdle with shame. (Wicomb 2005: 112)

The Literary Review published posthumously, in 1971, two of Nortje's poems titled 'For Sylvia Plath I' and 'For Sylvia Plath II', in which he pays homage to the American poet by referring to his paternal figure in similar words to those used by Plath when she talks about her own father. Wicomb dialogues with the first poem only, which begins with the following lines: 'Hate for the father. A pool of malice in my blood / dribbles like yellowing water down that cliff-face of ferns. / His blood confuses mine' (Nortje 1971: 80). While it is easy to recognize the phrase 'hate for the father' as a quotation in the short story, the preceding sentence, 'his blood confusing mine', is not signalled in any way as a line of Nortje's poem; readers must have read 'For Sylvia Plath I' to disclose that the words belong to Nortje. Wicomb's choice of having HannaH refer to her father as 'Daddy', moreover, is an ironic and playful move that complicates the intertextual relationship between, on the one hand, Wicomb and Nortje and, on the other, Nortje and Plath. Indeed, 'Daddy' (1965) is the title of a well-known poem by Sylvia Plath which deals with her complex relationship with her father.

Other intertexts from Nortje are easier to detect because they are signalled graphically. The following lines, indented from the rest of the story, are the first stanza of the poem 'Immigrant', written in 1967, but published in Nortje's posthumous volume of poetry *Dead Roots*: 'Don't travel

beyond / Acton at noon in the intimate summer light / of England' (1973: 92). This 'warning' (Wicomb 2005: 112), which also opens Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town*, addresses the felt experience of isolation and alienation of the speaking I, a Nortje-figure who leaves England and South Africa to travel to Canada. Wicomb then incorporates in the story a whole poem by Nortje, 'Jesus College Bar', written in 1965. This is followed by a long digression that reads like a very detailed (and meta-linguistic) close reading on the part of HannaH, who claims that the speaker's 'discomfort is palpable' in the poem (115). The figure of the traveller or immigrant thus unites both Nortje and HannaH, who, at the beginning of her written story, asks herself 'What purpose has the traveller now, whose connection is cut with the whale, the wolf or the albatross? Do I know what these lines mean?' (109). The first, quite enigmatic, question is taken from Nortje's poem 'Night Ferry' (1967) – again, a silent quotation – and it tackles the core thematic concerns of home, exile, and belonging. Retracing the life of the poet like a 'stalker' (112), HannaH asks herself if the 'Dogsbody Half-Breed' could ever have overcome his 'self-vilification and angst' (116). Shortly before his death, Nortje published the poem 'Dogsbody Half-Breed' (1970), which obliquely tackles the speaker's (and Nortje's own) complex relationship to his coloured identity:

your delicate nooks and moments noble-gentle
bud-open both to blond and black
and I hybrid, after Mendel,
growing between the wire and the wall,
being dogs body, being me, buffer you still. (Nortje 2000: 344–345)

The poetry of Nortje, therefore, is used by Wicomb to re-represent and re-imagine, through HannaH's story-writing, the poet's own felt experience as a coloured South African immigrated to the United Kingdom. Intertextuality and metafiction are thus always intertwined – Andrew van der Vlies speaks of 'inter/textuality' (2012: 15) – since HannaH the author is ultimately responsible for the incorporation of different intertexts in the narrative that we are reading.

In 1998, Wicomb wrote a compelling essay titled 'Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa', in which she shows how the construction of coloured identity in South Africa before, during, and after apartheid is imbricated in the discourse of shame. At the onset of apartheid, the Population Registration Act of 1950 legislated 'Colouredness' as a separate race, while the Immorality Amendment Act in the same year prohibited sexual intercourse across the colour line, in an attempt to maintain 'pure' races (in the distorted fiction of apartheid). Wicomb takes as a point of departure the case of Saartje Baartman, sadly known as the 'Hottentot Venus', a South African Khoi woman who was exhibited in London and Paris from 1810 to her death in 1815 because of the 'otherness' of her body. Her remains were kept at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until Nelson Mandela asked for their return; she was finally buried in South Africa in 2002. It is worth quoting at length the writer's discussion around Baartman:

Perhaps the more pertinent question is whether her burial would also bury black woman as icon of concupiscence, which is to say bury the shame of having been the object of the European gaze, but also the shame invested in those (females) who have mated with the colonizer. Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of 'race', concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid's strategy of naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame. We do not speak about miscegenation; it is after all the very nature of shame to disguise itself and stifle its own discourse. What the case of Baartman shows is how shame, cross-eyed and shy, stalks the postcolonial world broken mirror in hand, reproducing itself in puzzling distortions. (Wicomb [1998] 2018: 115)

Wicomb also analyzes Sarah Gertrude Millin's arch-racist *God's Stepchildren* (1924), which she identifies as the literary origin of the 'shame-bearing coloured' (Wicomb [1998] 2018: 122) – indeed, the novel 'infuriates' her (Wicomb and Willemsse 2002: 147). The book recounts the story of Andrew Flood, a white English missionary who initiated a generation of coloured individuals after his sexual union with a Khoi woman. Millin narrates that the signs of 'miscegenation' can never be entirely hidden, to the point that Flood's last descendent vows to have no children in order to put an end to the 'original sin' (according to Millin).

The word 'shame' and its derivatives recur significantly eleven times in 'My Name is HannaH', representing a key thematic concern of the narrative. In the last pages of the story, HannaH finally tries to confront Nortje's (and her own) shame linked to his coloured identity by reconstructing, through the artifice of the written word, the story of how his parents met. The speaking I, who dominates the rest of the narrative, disappears to give voice to Nortje's mother Celia – 'this time in the third person', HannaH announces (Wicomb 2005: 118). Celia works as a domestic servant for an unnamed Jewish family of English origins. One afternoon, she is left home alone with 'young master Arthur', the son of her employer, who calls her to help him clean the kitchen:

Celia, without cap and apron, falls to work with her mop and bucket of water. Arthur shuffles about uncertainly with a kitchen towel. He doesn't think that he's seen this girl before. Her head is bent in concentration: her brushed hair is plaited into a perfect laurel wreath that leaves the brown nape of her neck exposed, soft and vulnerable. (119)

The narration stops abruptly here, before it reaches its climax. 'Should I take comfort in the fact that she called the child Arthur? Does it prove that it was not rape?', HannaH asks herself, thus hinting explicitly at the fact that Nortje's birth might be the consequence of sexual assault: like Saartje Baartman, Celia is oppressed and abused because of her ethnicity *and* gender. The ultimate answer to HannaH's question, however, is up to the readers' interpretation. Young Arthur, the 'villain' of HannaH's story (119), is then compared to another 'villain':

The villain: [...] [t]he dotting grandfather around whose neck I had hung, on whose knee I jogged. He called me sweetheart. I shudder with disgust.
My name is HannaH. I will not be called sweetheart. I must carry the sins of the fathers. I must, as Nobel says, try harder. (120)

This cryptic conclusion, typically Wicombesque, catches readers off-guard. Is HannaH here hinting at an abuse from her own grandfather? Or is she rather referring to an obscure secret that somehow links her genealogy to Nortje's own, starting from Arthur's sexual assault of Celia? Could HannaH's grandfather be Arthur Nortje's father? As is always the case in Wicomb's fictions, no easy or univocal interpretation is offered to readers. The various hints, scattered throughout the story – and particularly the fact that HannaH refuses to disclose her surname – do suggest that the discovery made by HannaH the night after her graduation might be precisely that her ancestors 'from Eastern Europe' on her father's side, and particularly her grandfather, are responsible for something unspeakable in relation to Nortje's own biography (111).

Through the re-writing of Nortje's biography, Wicomb engages in 'a multi-layered staging of gestures of iteration' through several acts of re-telling that disclose the postcolonial potential of the technique of iteration (Griem 2011: 395). Intertextuality, built into the very texture of 'My Name is HannaH', constitutes another form of repetition with difference since it 're-presents, reverses or revises, or simply asks the reader to reflect on indeterminate meanings produced by citations, meanings that destabilize received views' (Wicomb [2005] 2018: 231). Apart from Nortje, 'My Name is HannaH', in the brief space of a single short story, performs dialogues with a great variety of other textual sources (including Wicomb's own). As we have seen, the writer mentions or quotes from the Bible, South African J. M. Coetzee, and American Sylvia Plath, but she also alludes very briefly to

British-Boer war correspondent Lady Florence Dixie,⁵ Indian writer Salman Rushdie, and Bulgarian-French literary theorist Julia Kristeva. The allusion to Kristeva's book *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988) and the direct quotation from Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) bring to the fore the linguistic challenges faced by foreigners and the embeddedness of English with colonial discourse. These two intertexts, in turn, allow HannaH to comment on the language used by Nortje in his poems. Language is indeed at the core of the work by the two writers who, apart from Nortje, take up more space in the story: Afrikaner writer Adam Small and Caribbean poet John Agard.

'My Name is HannaH' actually opens with the entire quotation of Agard's well-known poem 'Listen Mr Oxford Don' (1967), which occupies the first page. Agard, who left his native Guyana to settle in the UK, similarly to Nortje's and Wicomb's own transnational lives, tackles the felt experience of being an immigrant in the 'green and pleasant isle', drawing 'attention to the incivility of the host culture that imbues the word "immigrant" with negative meanings' (2005: 112, 117). Agard's mention of an 'Oxford Don' creates further links with Nortje's 'Jesus College Bar', with HannaH's own graduation, and with Wicomb's public lecture. The short story also incorporates a lengthy quote from Adam Small's play *Kanna hy kô hystoe* ('Kanna's Coming Home', 1965), which deals with the return home from abroad of Kanna, a coloured South African, for the burial of his stepmother, years after ignoring repeated appeals from his family. The play is mainly written in Kaaps, a variety of Afrikaans spoken by the lower coloured classes of the Cape, with some standard Afrikaans and English. Interestingly, the lengthy quotation from Small is not translated into English, domesticated: the readers' active cooperation is required. Both Small's and Agard's intertexts represent a gift from HannaH to Nortje, since both discard the oppression and authority of the standard versions of English and Afrikaans by shaping and bending language differently – 'Narrative itself for me is driven, generated even, by language use', Wicomb significantly remarked in an interview (Phiri and Wicomb 2018: 126). Kanna's code-switching from English to Kaaps 'signals filiation to his people', overcoming the shame of being coloured (2005: 117), while Agard bends and modifies the English of the Empire.

The inclusion of different sources, from a variety of different genres (including two entire poems by Agard and Nortje) further complicates the generic classification of 'My Name is HannaH' – the short story, after all, has 'genres of its own invention' (Penn 1994: 44). While playfully parodying the form of the autobiography, a major genre in 1980s South Africa, Wicomb's text at the same time speaks subtly to the black literary history of the country, and particularly to the period of Black Consciousness in the Eighties. In the programmatic manifesto opening the anthology *Forced Landing* (1980), South African writer Mothobi Mutloatse introduced a new genre called 'proemdra', a portmanteau word for prose, poem, and drama, outlining a black aesthetics in which the domains of politics and literature are inseparable: 'We'll write our poems in a narrative form; we'll write journalistic pieces in poetry form; we'll dramatize our poetic experiences; we'll poeticise our historical drama' (Mutloatse 1980: 5). As it emerges from the unconventional graphic layout of the printed page, 'My Name is HannaH' seems to put into practice the theoretical tenets of the proemdra. Excerpts from a play and various poems interrupt the flow of the prose, creating 'chaos on the page' (Hunter 1993: 92). HannaH the writer herself confesses that in her own 'kitchen of poetry, scorch-black, cracked, and broken', she has 'experimented with new forms that take into account the physicality of text, words tapped or kneaded into shape and leavened on occasion at least into startling newness' (Wicomb 2005: 110): the word 'HannaH', turned into a new name by the final capitalized H, is a case in point. The link with black (South African) literary history is explicitly mentioned in the story when HannaH remarks that 'Arthur would not have known of the black poets who gave up on magisterial English', like Agard, who 'flouts graphological conventions' (Wicomb 2005: 117). Through the inclusion of intertexts that, like 'My Name is HannaH', subvert generic and linguistic norms, Wicomb re-writes Nortje's shame, at the same time writing back to racist narratives, like Millin's, that contributed to build a rhetoric of shame in the construction of coloured identity.

Conclusion: The Restlessness of the Short Story

The short story's multiple diegetic levels, its playful trans-generic status, and its transnational echoes both in terms of plot and of intertexts resist and refuse any kind of hegemonic discourse and any attempt at fixed categorizations – it must be remembered that acts of generic classification resonate with political import in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The fact that 'My Name is HannaH' itself was first delivered as a lecture in 2005 and then re-printed in two different spaces in 2005 and 2017 allows readers to reinterpret and revisit the same story each time according to the different contexts of reception and publication, following the device of repetition with difference so pervasive in Wicomb's oeuvre. The discursive nature of (coloured) identity, in particular, is exposed by HannaH's (and, ultimately, Wicomb's) recreation of Nortje's life, which points to the importance of the 'multiple belongings' of individuals, discarding a certain rhetoric that attempts instead to reify identity as something fixed and stable (Wicomb [1998] 2018: 127). The 'multiple belongings' and the worldliness of 'My Name is HannaH' emerge also through the incorporation of other voices next to Nortje's own, thus eschewing the national constraints of South Africa:

In each of her works of fiction, Wicomb has focused on the interconnected nature of South African identities and imaginaries with the world beyond. And if the works' metafiction engages the ethics of representation, its recurrent intertextuality insists on the connection of all narratives that presume any measure of authority to all others, which might complicate such authority (or any pretense at originality). (Van der Vlies 2018: 17)

The incorporation of these extremely heterogeneous voices testifies to the translocal scope of 'My Name is HannaH'. The dialogue among the various intertexts is also enriched by the 'restless itineraries' in the biographies of Wicomb and Nortje, both coloured South Africans who immigrated to the United Kingdom (Bethlehem 2018). From a world literary perspective, apartheid functioned as an 'apparatus of transnational cultural production' (Bethlehem 2018: 50) since it 'disoriented' a national literature of South Africa in ways that also complicated its relationship to the world, so that a South African canon was 'of necessity dislocated to the global sites of exile' (Harris 2022: 60, 74). Wicomb's encompassing intertextuality thus refuses to serve 'monolithic constructions of nation or family' and to be confined 'to a restrictive sense of what it is proper for a "South African" text to engage' (Van der Vlies 2017: 128).

By using the 'protean form' of the short story for an academic discourse (Patea 2012: 7), Wicomb, like Coetzee, shows us the effectiveness of the tools and strategies of fiction to expose and undermine the 'camouflage of coherence that socio-political structures are about' (Hunter 1993: 92). Short fiction indeed allows her to play with several heterogeneous intertexts in a highly condensed textual fabric, which enhances the extreme complexity (but also the playfulness) of the reading experience. From the reader's perspective, reading 'My Name is HannaH' as a short story rather than as creative non-fiction – specifically the personal essay – means being able to delve into (and enjoy) the nuances, suggestiveness, and oblique telling of the text. Approaching a piece like 'My Name is HannaH' as a short story contributes to foreground the narrative's distinctive marks: its experimental and hybrid nature, its suggestiveness and compressed form. These features are tellingly some of the defining traits of short fiction. In 1968, for instance, Nadine Gordimer famously compared the short story to a 'flash of fireflies' to emphasize its 'fragmented and restless form', its flexibility, ephemerality, and openness to experimentation (1968: 459–460). Indeed, the genre presents itself as a liminal space, particularly apt to represent marginal(ized) individuals and threshold situations, such as the condition of the immigrant (see Achilles and Bergman 2015: 4). The 'restless form' of the world literary genre of the short story thus becomes an appropriate vehicle to recreate, through the artifice of fiction, the 'restless itineraries' (Bethlehem 2018) of the immigrant lives of Nortje, HannaH and, ultimately, Wicomb, raising questions on the key issues of nation, home, and belonging in our interconnected society.

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¹ The term 'coloured' in the South African context refers to people of mixed ethnic origins. During apartheid, the Population Registration Act of 1950 divided the South African population into legislated categories: Whites, Blacks, Coloureds, and, later, Asian. I will write the term 'Coloured' in capital letters only when referring to apartheid's racial classification, thus following Wicomb's own use of the term.

² In an interview with Aretha Phiri, Wicomb herself expresses her doubts towards certain theoretical frameworks that risk abstracting particular contexts into generalizations: 'With regard to black writing being read simultaneously as "world literature", I do not feel strongly about the term "world literature". It's a convenient term that does not necessarily deny cultural specificity; at least where it is or was used in academia, I don't believe it has that function, and surely it is up to the individual teacher to make sure that it doesn't' (2018: 123).

³ Another figure that strikingly resembles HannaH is Elsie, the protagonist of the short story 'Nothing Like the Wind', first published in 2004, only a year before 'My Name is HannaH', and later included in the collection *The One That Got Away* (2008).

⁴ The volume of collected essays edited by Craig McLuckie and Ross Tyner, *Arthur Nortje, Poet and South African: New Critical and Contextual Essays*, was also published in 2004. See also McLuckie and Tyner (1999) for a comprehensive, yet somewhat outdated, bibliography on Nortje.

⁵ Lady Florence Caroline Dixie, a Scottish writer and war correspondent, wrote about the first Boer War in South Africa for the London-based *The Morning Post*. She then published her reports in the travelogue *In the Land of Misfortune* (1882). When close reading Nortje's 'Jesus College Bar', HannaH analyzes the 'incivility of the host culture' towards the speaker of the poem and she links it with Lady Dixie's colonial gaze when describing the Other in her travelogue (Wicomb 2005: 114).