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Abstract

There are remarkable similarities between Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story* and Elleke Boehmer's *Bloodlines* which were published in 2000. Both present characters, classified as coloured under the race categories of apartheid, who are compelled to re-examine their past, and both texts set this endeavour in the South Africa of 1990-91 which they represent as a time of euphoria and fear-filled uncertainty. The resistance movements had just been unbanned and leaders released from prison, and an interim constitution was being drawn up so that a government of national unity could oversee the country's first democratic elections in 1994. At the same time, as previously exiled revolutionary groupings re-established themselves in the country, rumours of counter-coups circulated and ordinary people were subjected to a decade of continuing terror as various factions either enforced or resisted change.

M.J. DAYMOND

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There are remarkable similarities between Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and Elleke Boehmer's *Bloodlines* which were published in 2000. Both present characters, classified as coloured under the race categories of apartheid, who are compelled to re-examine their past, and both texts set this endeavour in the South Africa of 1990–91 which they represent as a time of euphoria and fear-filled uncertainty. The resistance movements had just been unbanned and leaders released from prison, and an interim constitution was being drawn up so that a government of national unity could oversee the country's first democratic elections in 1994. At the same time, as previously exiled revolutionary groupings re-established themselves in the country, rumours of counter-coups circulated and ordinary people were subjected to a decade of continuing terror as various factions either enforced or resisted change.

These novels also reflect an apparently more reassuring feature of their period of writing — presumably the years just before their publication in 2000. This was the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), hearings in which the role of individual memory in liberation and in nation building was publicly enacted. In their representation of the reception of historical inquiry conducted through personal stories, both novels engage with one of the problematic aspects of the TRC to which Robins (1998) has pointed. He argues that despite its noble purposes, the testimonies that the TRC received were not always reported to the public in their full and painful complexity, and sometimes this was because the agenda of nation building was allowed to re-shape what was being said. For example, during a televised broadcast of a woman's account of how her sister was burned alive on suspicion of being a police informer and of how she had had to identify her sister's sexually mutilated body, the SABC interrupted her evidence with 'a commissioner's call for a minute of silence to salute ... [the dead woman's] heroism and martyrdom'. In this way the sister's 'traumatic memory of the mutilation of ... [a] tortured body' was mis-appropriated into the heroic narrative of a nation in formation (Robins 138). It is in this context of difficult, uncomfortable and dangerous reporting that Wicomb and Boehmer explore the politics of identity in the 1990s; here they situate their protagonists who, as the prospect of nationhood somewhat paradoxically brings both liberation and coercive control, ask themselves 'where do I belong?' and 'to what?'

The choice made by both novelists, of a coloured protagonist through whom to pose these autobiographical questions¹ indicates their judgment that it is in this heterogeneous group of people, established as a racialised category in the interests of white supremacy, that issues of identity will be most telling in a democratising South Africa, but this category contains significant local differences. Wicomb's protagonist in *David's Story* is David Dirkse. He is of Griqua descent, which means that the issue in this novel is ethnicity in relation to his official racial category. The Griquas form part of the Khoisan peoples (historically they are not part of the Bantu-languages group to whom the term 'African' is usually given); furthermore, as Dorothy Driver points out, the 'relation between ... [Griquas] and the more general grouping of "coloured" has been variable and complex'.² In recent years in South Africa, Griqua identity has been used to raise 'questions about ethnic identities felt to have been politically eclipsed in both the old and the new systems' (Driver 2001 216).³ In *Bloodlines*, Boehmer's protagonist is a woman, Dora Makken, who is the granddaughter of an African woman who had a love affair with an Irish soldier who introduces himself as in the 'Transvaal State Artillery' (205)⁴ during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1901, and thus the issue in this novel is the construct of race itself.

Both protagonists explore identity by trying to write, and so re-write, the past, and this is presented as a hazardous project. In *Bloodlines* the dangers are located in the characters' emotional turmoil as they write; in *David's Story* experiential trauma is joined by sharp political danger and by a more philosophical, poststructuralist inquiry into writing; the view of writing that is enlisted is that it is a flawed and deceptive exercise which cannot guarantee access to, or produce, the truth. However, Wicomb's staging of writing should not be understood as primarily philosophical and general in intent because, as I will argue, it so clearly serves certain specifics of time and place which should be kept paramount as we consider both textuality and interpretation. As I have already indicated for the choice of protagonists, the different histories of hybridity in South Africa necessitate this emphasis on the specifics of local history, but, in addition, both the present conjuncture in South Africa and the wider postcolonial politics of culture require that critical reception should give primary place to the author's responses to local conditions in the present and representations of specifics in the past. This emphasis on the local is not to advocate the 'new tribalism' against which Said has warned (1994 21) and nor is it to invoke a local authority of experience and interpretation which would tend to encourage a 'cultural paralysis' (Donne 1) in cross-cultural readers. In discussing the very real problem of 'the legitimacy of readings' in postcolonial criticism, Donnell has positioned this very real problem as affecting metropolitan readers, 'British/European/Western/white readers ... especially across the ex-colonial/postcolonial divide' (103), but the history of South Africa, as a settler colony, ensures that this divide operates at the margin as well as between the margin and the centre — 'native critics' cannot

take refuge in authoritative essentialisms (Donnell 104–105) for they have to grapple with cross-cultural questions too. My approach is rather to insist that the writer's place in, and interpretation of, local history should be made foremost in all equivalently positioned, self-conscious readings so that, as Said has argued for the interaction between margin and centre, there can indeed be 'both a stubborn confrontation and a crossing over in discussion' (1994 34). Criticism must promote this resistant exchange on two fronts. Firstly, and as is now commonly agreed, it needs to prevent texts from the margins being drawn into and 'dominated by powerful cultural interests and capital centred in the First World' (Boehmer 236). Wicomb and Boehmer pose a particularly striking challenge to this tendency in that although they both live cosmopolitan lives away from South Africa, they have chosen to write narratives which are powerfully local rather than reflecting their own migrant or immigrant condition, and in Boehmer's case this has involved imaginative entry into a 'coloured' heritage that is not her own. Secondly, as with the representation of historical recovery in the novels that I am discussing, critical resistance to neo-imperial interests also entails taking care that the cultural and historical specificity of each postcolonial text is not drawn into a postcolonial sameness. Literatures at the margins must be allowed to resist each other, as well as the centre. In this spirit, the aspects of the novels by Boehmer and Wicomb which I will read as responses to local history are (besides the choice of protagonist and the reception of painful reports): the consideration of 'writing' as both a noun and a verb; the status given to historical documents; the use of a narrator figure to raise (or expose) questions of authority and complicity; the embodiment of the politics of identity; and the implications of intertextuality.

In *David's Story*, David Dirkse is an uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) cell leader who has been working undercover to establish support for his party (the ANC), particularly among the heterogeneous grouping of people classified as 'coloured'. He is a selfless freedom fighter, 'disciplined' is his word, and yet, for reasons that he is unable to articulate, he takes time off from his dedication to a non-racial future to go to Kokstad in the Eastern Cape to delve into the history of the Griqua people and one of their nineteenth-century leaders, Andrew le Fleur, whose forebear Eduard la Fleur, had emigrated from France. It emerges that he may be the grandson of a natural daughter of Andrew Le Fleur. This man's letters show that he gradually turned away from making common cause with African people over their loss of land to white colonisers and that by 1917 was calling instead for a separate land for a separate volk — apartheid. In 1991, this is dangerous material. While the documents that he finds contradict David's own beliefs that his race is 'of no consequence' (11) in the struggle to establish a unifying freedom, his search itself seems, to the comrades who (we must infer) keep him under surveillance, to imply that he harbours an ethnic separatism which threatens their unity, or, and this is the sinister unspoken, threatens the interests of an emerging African majoritarianism. In a further indication of the dangers to which his actions expose

him, reactionary forces also try to seduce him to their cause. Their attempted bribery takes symbolic intensity when David is offered illegal diamonds, for the Griqua people were systematically denied their claims to diamond-bearing land in the late nineteenth century. From all sides, David's quest puts him in grave danger.

Bloodlines has two protagonists. The first is Anthea Hardy who knows little about the actual fight for freedom until she is pitched suddenly into its effects when her boyfriend is killed by a bomb in a beachfront cafe. She is the daughter of a typical white bourgeois family, but her need to find 'the larger process' (68) in what has happened takes her to the family of the bomber and she gradually compels his reluctant mother, Dora Makken, to explore the family's historical identity. Dora thus becomes the novel's second protagonist and, while *Bloodlines* does not focus on the political dangers of acting alone,⁶ her journey into the past is, like that of David Dirkse, filled with personal anguish. She knows something of the history of her long-dead grandmother, Dollie Makken, but she has shut it out because Dollie's is yet one more story carrying 'the vomity stink of betrayal' (181) that marks the history of coloured people. When Dora first begins to overcome her profound reluctance to look into the past, and to try to write Dollie's story, she does so for instrumental reasons. Anthea persuades her that uncovering the family history might serve to reduce the life sentence that has been imposed on her son, Joe. History might literally set him free. Then this hope is gradually joined by Dora's recognition that she needs to write Dollie into life for her own sake. We are never asked to doubt the results of Dora's writing; as Anthea says, '*Writing... makes things happen after all*' (49 [original italics]).

The danger facing David Dirkse in his enquiries is doubly figured in Wicomb's novel, for inside his own story stands Dulcie as the unacknowledged heart of his quest. She is a fellow revolutionary about whom he is reluctant to think, let alone write or talk, because he believes that to bring her into his narrative would be to admit that 'there is something between them' and this would be to contravene discipline and to 'betray the cause' (137). Thus Dulcie, like David's enquiry into the Griqua past, comes to embody the novel's central socio-political paradox: 'the contradiction between military values and the goal of political freedom' (79). In *Bloodlines*, the problem of means and end is also raised although not as fully; when Joe Makken's bomb explodes it kills innocent bystanders thus clouding his reminder to the state that the unbannings of 1990 have not liberated the oppressed majority, but the desired figure of Dollie Makken is not linked to this contradiction because she is imagined as embodying the history that has to be recovered rather than the problems surrounding the search. Her recovery does not call into question the act of writing itself.

David, unsure in his own mind why he wants to record his history and determined to give away nothing about politically sensitive matters, asks an unnamed woman to be the amanuensis to whom he tells his story, and she soon

notices that Dulcie is a desired but forbidden figure at its centre. David's denials of his desire are necessary to his belief in himself as a soldier, but they conflict with his claim that searching for the truth is synonymous with fighting for freedom (116). The contradiction is one he is unwilling to tackle and consequently Dulcie's obscured meaning renders uncertain any other meanings about the past and the present that may emerge. This radical uncertainty is supported by the thematic, epistemological and structural features of *David's Story*, but because Wicomb uses the profound ambiguity of writing to underscore the very real fears and the personally imposed inhibitions which a freedom fighter who was curious about his ancestry might have experienced in the 1990s, postmodern playfulness is not the immediate outcome. Instead uncertainty and provisionality function as devices that give us access to David's and the narrator's states of mind. A comparable network of reluctance, fear and writing is a more personal matter in *Bloodlines* and does not flow as immediately from a current power struggle or from this novel's representation of writing, and it is not sharpening the difference between these novels too much to suggest that while Boehmer's protagonist is shown to give herself (and maybe her son) renewed life by rewriting the past, Wicomb's novel implies that David's writing is what literally threatens Dulcie's life and ends his own.

Writing as life-giving in *Bloodlines* plays through into the ways in which documentary and other sources are treated in the narration of this novel. Its narrating voice is only a lexical presence which, sometimes, accounts briefly for the historical documents it presents — as when it introduces the first of the letters written by Kathleen Gort, the Irish woman who comes to work in a Red Cross Hospital during the Anglo-Boer War and who meets Dollie Makken in a field hospital, with these words: '*A letter folded into fours is stored undisturbed under the old vellum lining of the odds-and-ends chest that stands on Dora's back stoep*' (61 [original italics]). As there is no explanation of who finds this letter or when, the reader's access to it at this point is privileged and controlled by the narrator — or the implied author who is ordering matter — and our confidence in this writerly control is never seriously disturbed. There are also letters ascribed to W.B. Yeats and to Maud Gonne, which we are told in the 'Acknowledgements' are fictional.⁷ Those from Yeats (written to Mrs Olivia Shakespear) appear entirely without motivation and their reception is unlocated. This momentary masquerade of the fictional as the real could be read as Boehmer's silent acknowledgment of the provisionality of historical documents, but, largely because all of these documents and other mementoes appear providentially at the moment they are most needed to guide the progress of the characters' research, their effect is to invite us to believe that when the right purposes arise then the truth about the past will reveal itself and that the revisioning will be redemptive, 'as if a gap, a wound, is beginning to knit' (187). One of the documents which appear somewhat to order is the journal kept by Kathleen Gort which, we learn later, Anthea has found

in the city archive. It confirms that Dora's father was the love child of Dollie Zwaartman and the Irish soldier, Joseph Macken, and suggests that Dollie herself was probably the grandchild of a white farmer and his African servant. Another kind of confirmatory source turns up while Dora is in Cape Town, trying to bring Dollie's story to closure of some sort. She has gone to be 'alone' (233) with Dollie and she finds, at the end of a harbour quay, a statue dedicated to an Irish soldier lost at sea in 1902. The trust that Dora has already placed in the documents that Anthea has found leads her to believe that she can 'build on [her discovery ... it is] a destination, a point she can move towards and fasten her story on' (249) and she is able to write Dollie's last communication with her now departed lover.

In counterpoint to *Bloodlines*, written documents and the act of writing in *David's Story* are not to be trusted. This is signalled immediately by the narrator's remarks about 'gaps', 'meaning in the margins' and 'absence as an aspect of writing' (2), phrases which David dismisses as 'prattle' (2) and which he later links with her 'liberal bullshit' (197). Thus, against his self-protective wish for simplicity and his attempts to control written production by deciding what he will and will not reveal is ranged her understanding of discursive complexity; out of this comes the textual weave of his words and her voice, not so much David's story as her story of writing the story.⁸ The context in which they are working makes the narrator fairly sympathetic to David's evasiveness: in her Preface she tells us that he was 'simply unable/unwilling to disclose all' (2) and that she accepts the slash which both separates and joins those two words because it bridges the 'mixtures of meaning' (3) which arise in a context when contrary purposes and secret struggles for power can barely be contained, even by silence, but David's evasiveness does drive her to ask him 'what ... is the real subject of your story?' (34) and, when he finds it impossible to answer, this sceptical scribe, in one of the most disturbing of the novel's playful ironies, feels compelled to become the creator of much of David's story, especially of Dulcie's part in it. At one point in her conjectures the narrator's knowledge that she might be imposing coherence on the revolutionaries in their world leads her to wonder whether Dulcie should be narrated only in 'the middle voice', but she dismisses the idea with the joke that it is 'unfashionably linked with the sixties and French letters' (197). Her levity causes David to 'shake his head in disbelief' as he transfers her disrespectful attitude from writing to a struggle that is 'sacred' (197) to him while she persists in the knowledge that 'Dulcie has, after all, always hovered somewhere between fact and fiction' (198). Again and again, *David's Story* ranges the need for political certainty and control against the question of liberty and compels the reader to experience ways in which language itself, especially in its written form, can be made to serve both or, if it is understood as a self-referential system, neither.

In her creation of Dulcie, the image with which the narrator repeatedly confronts David is that of Dulcie's being tortured by unnamed 'men in balaclavas' (81). Guilt, as well as fear, is part of the horror of this scene with its sustained

impossibility of knowing who these men are, so that Dulcie's body in pain comes to represent both an extreme possibility in her relationship with David⁹ and what might happen when a power struggle is working itself out. In both meanings she is shifted from being agent to, simultaneously, victim and trophy. By repeating scenes of this horror, this sexualised torture that the perpetrators say is 'not rape' (178) but is intended as more than rape, the narrator is clearly trying to shock David into speech about Dulcie, (incidentally, her questions are a reminder of the resounding silence around the abuse of women in the TRC hearings) but by now we know that she too is complicit in concealment. Her part in evasion and duplicity has increased as the context in which she is working muddies matters and this is half revealed in her Preface, which by convention is written last but read first. In the last two paragraphs she tells us that 'David has not read all of the manuscript' and that this is 'of some concern' to her because she has not always done what David 'had wanted' (3). (For example she puts 'Nkosi sikilele iAfrica' at the end of the Preface rather than at the end of David's story, as he had requested.) The explanation for her anxiety is buried in the use of a negative and a sly shift in the verb tense from the present perfect, in 'David has not read' (the negative implying 'not yet'), to the simple past, in 'David wanted'. What is half concealed here is that David cannot read the manuscript because he is dead, as we discover on the last pages of the novel. What we also discover at the end is that the narrator's anxieties arise not only because she has taken on the doubt-filled task of writing Dulcie into being; like David's, hers are also specific, local fears which arise from the danger in which her role in writing his story has placed her. In line with our ironised, self-conscious relationship to the text, the bullet which smashes into the narrator's computer at the end can be understood as both playful (a metaphor for the dangers of the constructs of writing) and reportage (an indication of the political reality which has relentlessly shaped the story-telling in which she and David have been occupied).

We also have to second-guess the narrator's more personal inclinations, as she writes Dulcie, for it is possible that her historical understanding of gendered oppression is prompting her to expect that David's contradictions will be inscribed on the body of his betrayed comrade. The text makes several references to particular historical women — Krotoa and Saartje Baartman for example (Driver 2001 230) — who were the occasion of vigorous debates on the politics of identity in the 1990s (Coetzee 1998); and within the fictional account of David's research, Andrew le Fleur's wife Rachael, or Dorie (little thorn) as he calls her, provides similar material. For example, Andrew will not tell Rachael about his political dealings, his alliance with the Bhaca and the Hlangweni people in order to regain the land that the colonial powers are denying them, and he justifies his refusal on the grounds that '[t]hese things are too complicated for women' (53) whom he dismisses as extravagant and frivolous, but when he has to hide crucial documents from the men who have betrayed him to the colonial authorities, he has no

hesitation in asking his wife to help. He no doubt knows where she will hide them — on her body, in the hollow at the small of her back (55). The narrator knows that the word 'steatopygia', used for the congenitally large buttocks of Griqua women, fascinates David (17) and that he is angered by the associations in the colonial mind between bodily shape and concupiscence; but what he does not ask himself, and what she does not prompt him to ask, is whether echoes of the colonial and patriarchal impositions of meaning on bodies are still operative in his present.

The expectations which arise from the narrator's knowledge of the past and her unwilling location in a power struggle in the present combine to force her into complicity with David over Dulcie's representation, and this may be why she cannot cope when he is finally brought to speak of the single gesture of placing his hands on Dulcie's shoulders (116) which had been such a powerful revelation of his feelings. As he reaches the moment of confession, the narrator is suddenly terrified:

Once, thank God, once only — he looks up at me, into me, with irises a ghostly green line of light around pupils black and dilated, like those of a trapped animal, mute, distorted, and it is I who must look away and pray that he will say nothing.

This is an intrusion, a weight that I cannot carry. That no amanuensis should have to carry, I later decide as I ponder the boundaries of my task. (151)

When the narrator, hoping to prevent the silence that she too has come to desire from obliterating Dulcie, tries to imagine how Dulcie herself sees the connection with David, she dwells, perhaps guiltily, on this silence and has Dulcie think: 'She understands the question of honour, but what she cannot endure is his silence, the primitive fear that to speak of something will bring it into being, let loose the tokolos' (183). When she finally allows herself to represent David's brief embrace from Dulcie's point of view, she writes:

His fingertips pressed precisely into the wounds under her shirt, plunged intimately into her flesh, caressed every cavity, every organ, her lungs, liver, kidneys, her broken heart, with a lick of fire. She would not have been surprised to see those hands withdraw dripping with blood. (199)

The lover's caress is no different from the torturer's intimacy; and writing itself participates in this terrible bond, for what the narrator may have imagined in order to bring Dulcie into being, into a body of writing, is at the same time what ensures that she cannot be written except as a 'recurring imprint' (150). She cannot be 'translated into words, into [the] language we use for everyday matters' (151).

Yet — and this is the novel's own enactment of a 'fracture between discourse and the speaking subject' (Donnell 113) — not everything about Dulcie slides into the gap between David's need to grasp the world through language and the narrator's discursive doubts (Driver 2001 217). The narrator's shock tactics do work on David; firstly he acknowledges verbally that Dulcie probably was in Camp Quatro in 1984 and might have been tortured there on suspicion of ill-

discipline. Then he accuses the narrator's imaginings of causing him actually to see Dulcie's mutilated body 'full bleed' (201) on the computer screen before him and he admits that he may be responsible for what might be happening to her. Finally he says that a special connection between them has always been suspected and that she is now under attack not only because '[s]he must give up her power, hand over her uniform, make way for the big men' but because '[s]he knows too much' (204). Despite the inadequacies of language and the bodily dangers of writing, the reader has been made to imagine Dulcie — and David — as historical subjects.

The desire associated with writing and the limits of writing are most fully established in the narrative through Dulcie, but, in another example of the novel's delight in paradox, the experience of writing as an absolute is also explored through her. This happens when David finds a longish hit list that contains his name with Dulcie's below it; it has been placed under a chair in his hotel room in Kokstad where he has gone to research Adam Kok and his nineteenth-century Griqua followers, including Andrew le Fleur. In a hitlist, signifier and signified no longer connect through received cultural agreement; instead the name coalesces into meaning with mysterious, magical, terrifying import. The narrator imagines this moment as one when, '[w]ritten down, intended to be read, your name becomes the bearer of menace' (112). One unexpected recognition to which the horror of such a reversal can bring us is that the fact of cultural agreement enabling the uncertain and arbitrary connections between language and the world is a reassuring, if not vital, one for us. Once again, the poststructuralist questions about language have been taken into a local socio-political purpose; they are not an aspect of what has been stigmatised as art's self-regarding withdrawal from social responsibility, but a representational and philosophical entry into the very real issues of acting and surviving in a particular time and place.

If gender was a factor in the impossibility of writing Dulcie, it is also crucial to the shock that David gets from this instance of finality in writing's power to name, for the list is 'in a girlish hand' (113). Cultural difference too is used to open up the nature of the shock that the list gives David when the narrator suggests that its power to name is 'a cultural variation on sticking pins into a doll or sending a tokolos' (112). As has already been mentioned, the narrator will give David's silence about Dulcie a similar slant when she has Dulcie reflect that his silence enacts 'the primitive fear that to speak of something will bring it into being, let loose the tokolos' (183).

Because writing is presented as a much more complex issue in *David's Story*, discussion of it has moved a long way from the less provisional approach of *Bloodlines*, but, perhaps not surprisingly, the hitlist and its associations with the tokolos provides a way of reinstating the similarities between these two novels, and of underlining the central focus of my discussion — the phenomenon of two novelists simultaneously reading the demands of a particular, local conjuncture

in such comparable ways. In *Bloodlines*, Dora is helped to imagine the missing years in Dollie's story (from her first meeting with Joseph Macken during the war to her death in 1913), when she conceives of the charmed coat of animal skins that Dollie makes for her lover in order to keep him 'faithful and safe' (214) in battle. The coat does protect him but it cannot bring him back to her, as she knows as soon as she hears his account of having kissed the flag of 'crisp ... green Irish poplin sewn for us by women of Dublin' (215). When she is certain that she has been abandoned, Dollie sends him the piece of the charmed coat that she had kept for herself. Two years later, she is reminded of the power of her charm by the final letter that Dora, in the novel's closing pages, imagines her receiving. It comes from Kathleen Gort and tells Dollie that her lost lover now lives in physical and mental torment and that his Irish wife fears that their unborn child may be harmed by 'some force, some African spectre' (277). Then, although Kathleen Gort tries to distance herself from such a one-sided attribution of magic by acknowledging that '[d]ifferent beliefs are as we know but lenses through which to look at Truth' (278), the letter concludes by asking Dollie to show mercy to Joseph Macken. The charmed coat has brought its mysterious powers into the narrative from Dollie's culture and beliefs, but whatever the contradictions in Kathleen Gort's appeal, Boehmer has been careful to support an even-handed view of cultural difference by pointing up many examples of 'charms' in Western culture too. The flag that Maud Gonne sends the Irish Brigade in South Africa (McCracken 58) is, as Dollie knows immediately, as much a charm, a symbol with mysterious powers, as her coat. So are the songs that Joseph Macken sings to her, causing her to murmur 'you too know the heaviness of a charm' (211), and so too is the red t-shirt that belongs to Joe Makken and which Anthea, on impulse, asks to wear. This even-handedness has obvious connections with what Wicomb is doing with the tokolos-hitlist in *David's Story*. Each novelist is, by incorporating a belief in magical symbols into her representation of both of the cultures in conflict at two particular moments in South African history, challenging the easy and persistent division in colonial discourse between what has been claimed as civilised and Western and what has been dismissed as primitive and African. It is, however, in linking this challenge to writing — to the novel's own medium — and to the representation of a woman's body, that 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.

What this still quite selective discussion of the bodies of writing in *David's Story* and *Bloodlines* has tried to suggest is that they 'offer their own analytic guidelines' (Boehmer 249) by exposing to readers the specific ways in which the meanings of writing, and of bodies, are shaped by a particular conjuncture in South African history. I now wish to suggest that the extensive intertextuality of each novel also serves the historicity of the local, and that each one does so as it situates its major intertextual encounters *in the past*. One set of intertexts in

Bloodlines is the collection of songs and poems which Dollie Makken learned from her Irish lover during the Anglo-Boer War and passed on to her descendants.¹⁰ By the time we hear them they have, like Dollie's kist [chest] which contains some of Kathleen Gort's letters and which has remained on Dora's verandah unattended for years, become household clutter; they have been translated to form part of Joe Makken's collection of freedom songs, family songs, South African songs. In *David's Story* there is a comparable example of the abrogation of a text leading to its naturalisation and absorption into local culture. It comes through a passage from Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* that was brought to South Africa by Eduard la Fleur. Some generations later Andrew hears a daily recitation of lines which contain the phrase 'the due contention for mastery betwixt the radical heat and the radical moisture' (88) and we are told that since childhood he too has waited impatiently to 'get to the root of what he believed to be a sacred text' (89). Wicomb is asking us to relish a misunderstanding which has persisted in the le Fleur family since the eighteenth century of Sterne's playful quotation of the ancient theory of bodily humours, but she is also pointing out that despite this misreading, or perhaps because of it, the lines have over time been localised to serve a very real 'struggle for justice' as le Fleur searches for a way to 'fan the dying embers of self-respect of a people driven and crushed and robbed of the land, which is to say of their selves' (89). With the passage of time, the meanings which arise from these intertexts are not so much actively palimpsestic, 'in between' the metropolis and the margin, as local and naturalised.

Another of Wicomb's intertexts that enables her to take up the history in South African writing of race and its base in biological determinism and, indirectly, to connect with the theory of the bodily humours, is *God's Stepchildren* (1924) by Sarah Gertrude Millin.¹¹ In his essay on Millin, J.M. Coetzee argues that, taking her views from the European ideas that had been 'viable intellectual currency' (1988 137) since the mid-nineteenth century, she thought that it was in the blood that 'the most fundamental distinction [that is, racial] between peoples is marked' (138) and, literally, passed on. To account for racial diversity and the need for racial purity, the idea was used that blood could vary, it 'can be thick or thin, hot or cold, healthy or diseased' (138). This variety could then be 'metaphorically correlated to a psycho-physical state' (146) and it is here that connections are made with the humours and their necessary balance in each personality — sanguine (airy), phlegmatic (watery), choleric (fiery) and melancholy (earthy). A lingering of biological determinism in contemporary South Africa is clearly also one of the presences in Boehmer's title, *Bloodlines*. Its linguistic continuity is made evident, although not actively questioned, when the 'doctor from England' tells Dora that her child Joe, the bomber, is a 'sanguinary' child, '[f]ull of blood and good humour' (83).

As the example of Wicomb's use of Millin indicates, intracultural processes within South Africa mean that when *David's Story* was published in 2000, these

intertexts no longer, as they once might have done, signal a concern with continuing metropolitan hegemony: because the exchange between texts is now a South African dialogue between past and present, their citation is not primarily a resistant act of writing back to the centre. Rather, texts from a South African past are under examination in the present; they have long been culturally translated and relocated, and their dialogue with the present is a localised one. At this point, and because these issues are nonetheless postcolonial, it may be helpful to remember what cultural translatability looks like to the European critic, Wolfgang Iser, precisely because he omits recognition of the forcible hegemony of colonial culture, a hegemony which I am suggesting that *David's Story* and *Bloodlines* are now moving beyond. He points to three aspects of exchange: 'Receiving a tradition entails recasting the inheritance; charting the open-endedness of a cultural present makes the tradition peripheral to the now important core; translating different cultures into each other results in a recursive looping between them' (296). Iser sees the intra and inter cultural exchanges as free and open, he gives them none of the coercion which has so occupied analysts of colonial discourse, but his selective focus may be unintentionally helpful to South Africans for, despite the workings of neo-imperialism in our cultural life, it may provide a reminder of what texts such as *David's Story* and *Bloodlines* are pointing towards — that the reciprocity, the exchange between cultures which Iser presents as unproblematic in Europe, is what we can now begin to consider in South Africa .

Certainly the idea of interaction and reciprocity is one which beckons to the South African critic, Michael Chapman, when he asks for a new critical practice based in a self-confidently located comparative study. He turns away from comparisons produced in anxiety, which is how he characterises much postcolonial work and its concern with the dichotomies of 'the centre and the edge, or the metropole and the periphery, or the rich North and the poor South' (47), and seeks instead 'open conversation between different understandings, different vocabularies, and different cultural paradigms' (48). An important step towards this open conversation is, I think, what Boehmer, as critic, has pointed to in her suggestion that postcolonial criticism will increasingly find that it must 'address itself to the particularity of different textual situations, to the history of a neighbourhood, or the struggles of a compound ... [in order] to locate texts in their own specific worlds of meaning' (1995 248). It is in this spirit that I think it important to read *Bloodlines* and *David's Story* primarily for the ways in which their authors represent the specific history of particular South Africans at the beginning of the decade in which their society moved, at last, towards democracy.

NOTES

- ¹ 'Autobiographical' takes up Lionnet's suggestion that such rewriting is not so much a 'retrieval of a repressed dimension of the *private* self but the rewriting of ... ethnic history, the recreation of a *collective* identity' (Lionnet 39) [emphasis in original].

- ² Zoë Wicomb has discussed the links between colonially imposed 'shame' and coloured identity in an article (1988) which takes as its point of departure the 1994 election in the Western Cape in which the coloured vote went, largely, against the ANC.
- ³ As I give such importance to the specificities of issues and meanings in these two novels, I would like to acknowledge my particular indebtedness to the historical and critical account of Wicomb's novel in Dorothy Driver's 'Afterword' (2001) to *David's Story*.
- ⁴ The details of Joseph Macken's movements match those given for the First Irish Transvaal Brigade by McCracken (1989 141–49). It was under the command of JYF Blake and John MacBride was second-in-command. In her introduction to the issue of *Kunapipi* titled 'South African War?: 1899–1902', which she edited, Boehmer writes of people such as the Irish soldiers: 'It would be worth revisiting the South African War from our centennial, and millennial, perspective, if only to reread and re-evaluate the participation of this vast mass of (alleged) bit-part actors, both assistant and victims, consorts and collaborators; to see how and to what extent their involvement and legacy changes the accepted picture of the war' (x).
- ⁵ David understands that Eduard la Fleur and his mother were Huguenot refugees, arriving in South Africa in the seventeenth century from France, but the narrator points out that David is no historian and in imagining that Madam la Fleur might have been housekeeper to the anatomist Goerge Cuvier (1769–1832), David has 'grafted ... [his forebears] onto the wrong century' (35). Sometime between their arrival and the nineteenth century, the family name changes to le Fleur.
- ⁶ The suspicions with which his comrades view David's independent actions might have applied equally to Joe Makken in *Bloodlines*, but this issue is not pursued. In fact it is suggested that he receives approval from his superiors.
- ⁷ Boehmer writes that the 'hands' that wrote these letters are 'imagined but nonetheless keenly felt' (2000 np).
- ⁸ This aspect of Wicomb's novel makes it a rejoinder to Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*.
- ⁹ Driver suggests that we are invited to contemplate the possibility that David himself has been one of Dulcie's torturers (2001 240).
- ¹⁰ Boehmer chooses two songs to quote at length for the Makken family, though there are references to others. One is a 'somber anathema' (van Wyk Smith 1978 84) which had been translated from the Gaelic. Lady Gregory calls it 'The Curse of the Boers on England' (1903 95); in the novel it begins 'England was a Queen/A Queen without sorrow/But we will take from her/Fiercely her crown' (167). The other song begins 'When the Lion shall loose its strength', and is said by Lady Gregory to be 'an old Irish vers' (89) prophesying the defeat of Ireland's enemies. The 'Song of the Transvaal Irish brigade', which van Wyk Smith says is 'more concerned with Ireland than the Transvaal' (84) is not quoted in the novel.
- ¹¹ See Driver (1999) on Wicomb's responses to Millin's novel in 'Another Story'.

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