

## Complex Collaborations: Elsa Joubert's *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*

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**Abstract:** This essay examines how South African author Zoë Wicomb's novel *David's Story* (2001) critiques collaborative life writing. More specifically, it argues that the faltering collaboration between the protagonists David and the unnamed amanuensis in *David's Story* serves as an illuminating critique of past collaborative works such as Elsa Joubert's *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1980) by shifting the focus from the end product to the collaborative writing process that precedes it. The analyses in this essay reveal that the fallibility of language demonstrated in Wicomb's novel serves as a reminder of the impossibility of the narrative project that the amanuensis and David have set out to work on. Moreover, this essay argues that Wicomb's novel highlights what can be unequal power relations between an amanuensis and an autobiographical subject in a collaborative writing process.

**Keywords:** Elsa Joubert, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story*, collaborative autobiography, South Africa

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In 1978, the Afrikaans journalist and novelist Elsa Joubert published *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, detailing the life and hardships of a black South African woman during apartheid. Two years later, an English translation with the title *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* was published. The book became immensely popular; it was reprinted three times within half a year of the original publication in Afrikaans and was translated into several languages such as French, Spanish, and German. As David

Schalkwyk astutely observes in his article “The Flight from Politics: An Analysis of the South African Reception of ‘Poppie Nongena,’” the public that was moved to tears by the account of a black woman’s suffering under pass laws and homeland resettlement was the same public that indirectly or directly contributed to keeping those laws in place. Much debate arose among book reviewers and scholars whether Joubert’s book was political or not, with Joubert asserting in an interview that “it is not a political book” (Schalkwyk, “The Flight From Politics” 187).

The original framing of the book, conveyed through its prefatory note and an interview published in 1984, was that it told the real life story of a black woman who showed up on Joubert’s doorstep on Boxing Day in 1976 (Daymond et al. 58–61). In Coullie et al.’s *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography*, Joubert says that Poppie worked for her in her household prior to the creation of *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (174), placing their relationship in the context of domestic labour. Joubert taped interviews with Poppie and other members of Poppie’s family. These interviews became the basis of the novel *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, which Joubert describes in the note to the reader that precedes the first chapter:

This *novel* is based on the actual life story of a black woman living in South Africa today. Only her name, Poppie Rachel Nongena, born Matati, is invented. *The facts* were related to me not only by Poppie herself, but by members of her immediate family and her extended family or clan,<sup>1</sup> and they cover one family’s experience over the past forty years. (Emphasis added)

As mentioned earlier, *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* received much attention upon publication, and many discussions arose among scholars regarding the potential problems of a white woman writing a black woman’s story. It was not the first narrative resulting from collaborations between blacks and whites, preceded by collaborations such as early mission-press publications printed by the Lovedale Press during the second half of the nineteenth century. Another example is the novel *Blanket Boy’s Moon* (1953) on the life of Monare of Lomontsa, written by Peter Lanham and Mosotho author A. S. Mopeli-Paulus. While not a collabo-

ration in the conventional sense of the word, it could still be considered a form of collaborative autobiography in this context, and it resembles *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* in the sense that a white author is (re-)writing a black person's narrative. *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* was followed by many other collaborative autobiographical narratives such as Margaret McCord's *The Calling of Katie Makanya: A Memoir of South Africa* (1995), Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya's *Singing Away the Hunger* (1997), and Rebecca Hourwich Reyher's *Zulu Woman: A Life Story of Christina Sibiyi* (1999), to mention a few. Also notable is Jonathan Morgan's collaborative text *Finding Mr. Madini* (1999) and the Zwelethemba book project headed by Black Sash member Annemarie Hendrikz and creative writing facilitator Anne Schuster. Through the use of workshops, they assisted the activist women Nongeteni Mfengu, Mirriam Moleleki, Neliswa Mroxisa, and Nothemba Ngcwece in writing their respective autobiographies, published in 1997.

In an interview with Thomas Olver and Stephen Meyer in 2004, Zoë Wicomb mentions that collaborative autobiographical works such as *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* have been one of the motives for the creation of her own novel *David's Story* (2001) whose storyline problematizes this form of writing.<sup>2</sup> Wicomb emphasizes the problematic situation regarding the creation of narratives such as Poppie's where the story is "mediated by [an] authoritative voice" (Olver and Meyer 139) and where one cannot be sure of "whose project it is" (140) or whose initiative it was.<sup>3</sup>

The main protagonist of *David's Story* is David Dirkse, who fought as a guerrilla during apartheid. The novel's narrative present is mainly set in South Africa in 1991 after Nelson Mandela's release, and the novel raises questions about genealogy and archival projects<sup>4</sup> through its problematizing exploration of the history of the Griqua people,<sup>5</sup> the treatment of people classified as coloured during apartheid, and the role of women within the African National Congress (ANC) movement. Simultaneously, it is a metanarrational story in the sense that David tells his life story as a freedom fighter to an unnamed female amanuensis<sup>6</sup> whom he has asked to transcribe for him. At times, this amanuensis also functions as the focalizer of the novel. The story that protagonist David

wants to write seems to be a work much like the apartheid narratives mentioned earlier, a straightforward narrative without much problematization of this form of writing or of the issue of having somebody write on behalf of somebody else. In *David's Story* we can thus identify the tensions between previous generations and a new generation of African writers. David wishes to perpetuate the old form of autobiographical narration, whereas the female narrator has a completely different view of the relation between text and subject.

As Dorothy Driver notes in her afterword to *David's Story*, rather than remaining invisible to the reader, the amanuensis has inserted herself into the narrative and can be found commenting on various scenes between herself and David, scenes where she functions as the narrator and focalizer instead of David. Driver observes that the use of a first-person frame narrator draws attention to “acts of representation and mediation, and adds other angles of narration (David’s, Dulcie’s, and a neutral voice) to unsettle any authoritative access to truth” (217). What Driver does not mention is the power that Wicomb lets the female narrator have over the structure and content of the narrative. This power is not presented as something that David has intended for her, but rather one that she as a narrator has assumed. By having the character of David die at the end of the novel, Wicomb has ultimately shifted the power balance between the two characters in such a way that the amanuensis is given the ultimate freedom to make any changes she pleases without having to seek David’s approval for them. As I will demonstrate later on, the writing and narration that David provides the amanuensis is not always aesthetically pleasing or readable. The amanuensis has explicit aesthetic concerns for the text. In the preface, the amanuensis writes that “David believed it possible to father his text from . . . a distance” with her “simply recording” his words (3), likely a pun by Wicomb on Roland Barthes’ argument that an author is “to his work as a father to his child”; he nourishes it, “thinks, suffers, lives for it” (145).<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, on the very same page of *David's Story*, the amanuensis admits that she “took liberties with the text and revised considerably some sections that [David] had already approved” (Wicomb 3). She explains further that she has included words David wished to add to the

very end of his narrative but that she has moved to the preface where she hopes “they will serve another function” (3). This is not the only instance of the amanuensis changing or amending David’s narrative, or of her contravening what we as readers can surmise were David’s wishes. The continuous battle of wills between these two characters serves to illuminate the powerlessness of David over his story (emphasized by his actual death at the end of the novel) and his naivety in thinking that his amanuensis would serve as a simple writing tool in his hand.

In this essay, I intend to examine the ways in which *David’s Story* as a South African post-apartheid fictional narrative problematizes and critiques actual collaborative autobiographical narratives as exemplified by *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*. I will argue that *David’s Story’s* problematization of this kind of narrative extends beyond the critique in the plot itself into the language and structure of Wicomb’s novel as exemplified by David’s failed attempts to write about Dulcie and what happened to her, as well as his inability to write the word “truth”. Moreover, *David’s Story* prompts its readers to question the premises of the production of not only the fictitious collaborative autobiographical narrative that they are holding in their hands, but also those of countless other non-fictitious collaborative autobiographies. I am thus intending to read *David’s Story* as a critique of collaborative autobiographical writing exemplified by *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* rather than attempting to compare the fictitious writing process portrayed by Wicomb to the actual writing process that resulted in Joubert’s text.

I will begin my analysis by taking a closer look at the relationship between author and subject as portrayed in Joubert’s book. The foreword quoted earlier expresses the author’s desire to be perceived as a conveyor of a narrative rather than as the author and creator of the narrative. At the same time, it is only Joubert’s name that is listed as the author on the front page, while Poppie does not receive any credit as author. Philippe Lejeune argues that this can be the case in collaborative autobiography projects where the writer is renowned and the subject is an ordinary person since the writer then “must flaunt his presence and assume the status of full-fledged author, with the social prestige and the financial advantages that this entails” in order to improve the chances of success

for the book (196). In the interview published in Coullie et al.'s book, Joubert explains that her own involvement in fact extended far beyond merely relaying facts as they were told to her:

[I]f you had to tell your life story . . . it would be merely small slices of humanity. There would be no order in or structure to it. I had to add structure to Poppie's story to hold the reader's interest. . . . Just organizing her account of the events was a huge task in itself, although that was not the most difficult. The hardest part was working out the details of every scene because she [Poppie] would say something like: "My husband and I went to the Ciskei, and we enjoyed staying there, and then we came home again." Well, that certainly didn't make a story yet. (Coullie et al. 175)

Joubert goes to great lengths both in the prefatory note and in this interview to guarantee her readers that, as Lejeune puts it, "what has been written is a faithful image of what [s]he said" (196). This is part of the framing of the novel as authentic. While they are both involved in the creative process of writing, it is Joubert who is in charge of the narrative and makes any and all decisions about how to present the content of it. Joubert was also likely cognizant that the book had to be written in such a way that it did not become banned by the apartheid censorship. Peter McDonald writes in *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and Its Cultural Consequences* that "[i]n the six years from 1975 to 1980, most of the new Afrikaans literary titles scrutinized were banned" (68), meaning that censorship was a real obstacle for white South Africans writing in Afrikaans. This meant that in order to be published in South Africa, a text could not be overtly political or critical of the apartheid regime, a circumstance that probably affected the contents and wording of Joubert's book as she had to think carefully about *how* she was telling Poppie's story in order to ensure that the finished text would be publishable in South Africa.

Let us return to discussing collaborative autobiography. Expanding on Lejeune's description of different kinds of autobiographies,<sup>8</sup> Thomas Couser regards collaborative autobiography as a continuum spanning "ethnographic autobiography, in which the writer outranks the gen-

erally anonymous subject, to celebrity autobiography, in which the famous subject outranks the generally anonymous writer” (222). Couser suggests that, while most collaborative autobiographical works are located at either extreme of the continuum, there are also quite a few works reflecting a type of collaboration located more in the middle. Precisely halfway along the continuum, Couser places collaborative autobiographies where two peers either contribute two separate narratives, or where two peers “truly co-authored” a narrative rather than the narrative being “as-told-to” (222). This continuum illuminates the differences in social status between the writers and the subjects of the narratives in question in this article. However, it does not capture the collaborative writing process and how much influence the writer and the subject respectively have over this process. To better illuminate this, I want to add a vertical line to intersect Couser’s horizontal continuum at the center. At the top of this vertical line is the kind of autobiography where the outranking subject can pick and choose between various writers and fire them at will if the writer’s work is unsatisfactory. In the center remains the collaborative works that contain two separate narratives, or a narrative that in theory is co-authored by peers. At the bottom of such a vertical continuum are many biographies for which the subject of the biography is not in a position to approve or disapprove of the writer or the content of the narrative. This would be typical of cases where the subject is not involved in the project personally. My revised schematic of Couser’s continuum takes the following form:

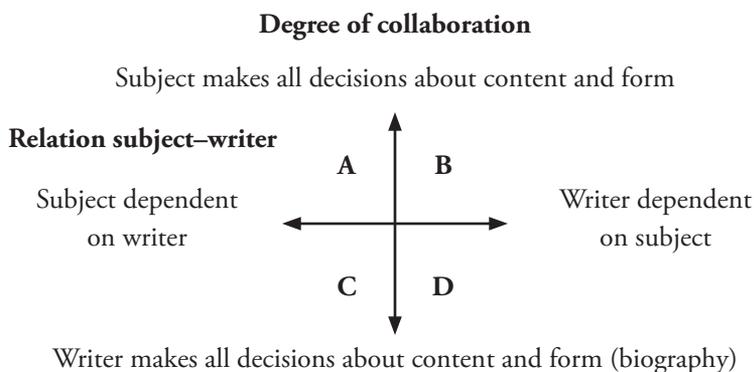


Figure 1.

The purpose of this schematic is to illustrate and illuminate the nature of different relationships between writers and subjects in terms of their respective influence over the writing process. In the case of *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, it seems safe to conclude that the writer Joubert outranks the anonymized subject Poppie in terms of authorial decisions and social status in South African society at the time. This narrative would thus occupy quadrant C. These are the kinds of narratives that Wicomb criticizes in the interview discussed earlier. *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* represents a narrative where the white woman takes the position of helping and speaking for the black woman. This approach affected critical responses to the text, with much of the scholarly discussion criticizing Joubert speaking as a white woman for a black woman.<sup>9</sup> The South African apartheid-generation narratives, often political in nature and aiming to raise awareness of apartheid and the struggle against it in the 1970s and 1980s, were inescapably complicit in maintaining the very binary they were attempting to work against. Mark Sanders explores this concept in his book *Complicities*, in which he writes:

If apartheid was a system of enforced social separation, its proponents were never able to realize the essential apartness they proclaimed as their brainchild's *archê* and *télos*, its originary law and ultimate end. When, in diverse ways, its opponents affirmed an essential human joinedness against apartheid, they thus proclaimed not only the evil of this thinking but also its untruth. At the same time, like its dissenting adherents, opponents found themselves implicated willy-nilly in its thinking and practices and shaped their responsibility accordingly. (1)

Sanders explores the role of the intellectual during apartheid and concludes that the anti-apartheid intellectuals could not avoid some degree of complicity in that which they opposed. Even though Joubert is not an intellectual of the kind that Sanders discusses in his book, it is helpful to read Joubert's text in the light of the concept of complicity. In so doing, what becomes of real interest is the nature of the collaboration and how this moment of "speaking for" was carried out.

As we can deduce from the schematic above, the kind of collaborative narrative written by unequals risks becoming a case of a writer “speaking for” an object rather than a writer “speaking with” a subject. Joubert’s quest for authenticity caused her to inadvertently place Poppie in a position similar to that of Gayatri Spivak’s “native informant.” The “native informant” is an “implied ‘subject’(ive) position” (9) and an “unacknowledgeable moment” (4) in which Poppie is assumed to be able to tell us what it is “really” like for blacks at this time. Joubert uses what Poppie tells her to “re-construct” Poppie as a character within a narrative that carries Joubert’s name. Joubert simultaneously constructs herself within this narrative, tangibly present in the voice of an omniscient anonymous third-person narrator but also present in the gaps and in the silences, in what is not said in the text. This is exemplified when Poppie talks about her work at a fish factory:

There were two kinds of jobs in the fish factory, says Poppie. Some were cleaners, others packers. . . . The packers put the fish into tins, a machine fixed the lids on, and then the tins were thrown into a big sieve pot on wheels ready for the steamer. The steamer could take four of the big iron trolley sieve pots at a time.

At what time we started work? Now, that was just when the boats came in. (Joubert 51)

The passage illuminates Joubert’s implicit directing of the narrative as Poppie is responding to questions posed by Joubert that are not part of the narrative. When Poppie says “At what time we started work?”, it implicitly indicates to the reader that Poppie was asked a question about it. Yet this question and its poser are not actually explicitly present in the narrative. In fact, throughout the narrative there is no detectable concern that Joubert might end up speaking for Poppie rather than with her, nor any indication that Joubert would be concerned about unintentionally objectifying Poppie. That is also why it is of great importance to discuss the implications of the unequal relationship between Joubert and Poppie. Linda Alcoff’s article “The Problem of Speaking for Others” problematizes this issue and examines different instances of “speaking for.” She asks herself “whether all instances of ‘speaking for’ others

should be condemned and, if not, where the line of demarcation should be drawn” (8). Alcoff establishes that the act of speaking for necessarily entails that one is representing another person and “participating in the construction of their subject-positions” (9) and that this act of speaking takes place in a context. The social location of a speaker and the listener has a great impact on the meaning of the speech that is produced. The conclusion that she reaches is not that speaking for others should always be avoided, but rather that “anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved” (24). Alcoff suggests that people contemplating “speaking for,” whether it is in an academic context or elsewhere, should first consider their reason for doing so. The act of speaking is, according to Alcoff, often “a desire for mastery and domination” (24) and a right that one might feel one has due to one’s privileged position. Moreover, one should examine the position and context of one’s speech in order to consider “where the speech goes and what it does there” (26). Lastly, one must be willing to take responsibility for what one says.

Alcoff’s four points of consideration coincide to a great extent with Wicomb’s concerns about narratives such as *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, where the author Joubert reveals few traces of concern regarding the issues involved in creating this type of text. Wicomb, just like Alcoff, advocates that the speaker contemplate the reasons for speaking; whose initiative is the collaboration? Wicomb is concerned about the possibility of Poppie becoming an object rather than a speaking subject in the public sphere. Alcoff argues that this objectification can be avoided by thinking about “where the speech goes and what it does there” prior to speaking (26). It seems problematic to embark on a collaborative project such as this one if the writer does not consider the implications of the text produced. Unfortunately, one of the effects of using Poppie as a version of a “native informant” who can supposedly tell the readers of the book what it is “really” like to be a black woman in South Africa at that time is a reinforcement of confining notions of what blacks and their lives were like. In Poppie’s case, she is produced as a black mother, something that other critics such as Schalkwyk (1989) have also noted. Poppie is denied the status of co-authorship as

it is Joubert's name that appears on the cover as the sole author while Poppie's life has been turned into a novel. This framing of the project reinforces oppressive ideas about black women. Thus, first and foremost it is an issue of framing Poppie in a confined role of a poor black mother, rather than an issue of an educated, rich, white woman trying to write an uneducated, poor, black woman's story.

However, it is important to bear in mind the societal constraints that were in place at the time *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* was written. In order for the book to avoid censorship and reach the wide South African readership that it did, Joubert could not write the book in a way that overtly criticized the apartheid regime and its effects. Even so, Poppie is portrayed and framed as a black mother in the narrative. However, this black mother is not the figure of the empowered, anti-apartheid activist black mother that we can find examples of in other literary works from roughly the same time. The conflict of this time period saw many women take a more active role in the fight against apartheid. For example, Ellen Kuzwayo's well-known autobiography *Call Me Woman*<sup>10</sup> foregrounds her motherhood while describing her life from an activist's point of view. Kuzwayo's work against apartheid and her attempt to show the horrors of this era leave the reader with quite different connotations regarding black mothers than Joubert does in her book. As Daymond et. al. write in the introduction to *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, in the late 1970s and 1980s "[w]omen's maternal positioning combined with street activism, and other activism outside the home, rather than contradicting it as in much Eurocentric feminist thinking, even if the male-dominated movements often refused to take women seriously as activists in their own right" (45). While Poppie's main concern is her family, she does not want anything to do with the trouble that the younger black people are causing when trying to fight the apartheid system:

But Poppie had no heart for what was happening in the location. It seemed to her that Mosie and Johnnie and Jakkie and everybody else [the children] was stirring up a trouble that would get too big for them to control. And God knows, more trouble she did not want. . . .

The children didn't want advice. They didn't talk things over with us, says Poppie. Their parents tried to stop them, but it was no use. The older people were afraid of the children and no one knew what they wanted. (Joubert 313–14)

The Poppie produced in the text does not see how the children's fight is connected to her and what she has experienced. She sees it as trouble-making, and the children are at times described as being not much better than lawless gangsters. While some critics such as Anne McClintock argue that the refusal of women in *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* to "leave their children, men and families, signals a profound refusal of the state, a massive act of political resistance, written untidily but indelibly across the face of white South Africa" (215), it seems to me that Poppie's clear distancing of herself from the kids' fight against apartheid contradicts such an interpretation of Joubert's framing of Poppie.

How is Poppie's identity constructed within this framework? In his article "Elsa Joubert: Women and Domestic Struggle in *Poppie Nongena*," Schalkwyk describes *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* as "a mixture of styles and voices" (255). There is an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator whose voice is mixed with first person narratives mainly by Poppie, but also by other family members like Mosie and Johnny Drop-Eye. Schalkwyk writes that Joubert's problem was how to shape Poppie's story into "an appropriate form . . . with the minimum degree of distortion" (255). Schalkwyk says that Joubert tried to write only in Poppie's words but that the result was boring. He presents a quotation from Joubert indicating that she "had to get into her [Poppie's] mind and write in her idiom: Stay in her key" (255). The result is that the heterodiegetic narrator uses the same type of expressions that Poppie does. What the text does not problematize is the fact that as soon as Joubert stops using only Poppie's own words, she has abandoned the role of a tape recording device. Alcoff writes that even though a person might have received authorization to speak on behalf of someone else, "[o]ne is still interpreting the other's situation and wishes (unless perhaps one simply reads a written text they have supplied), and so one is still creating for them a self within the presence of others" (10) as exemplified earlier in this

paper. This is very much so in the case of Joubert, as Joubert is fully in charge of the narrative that is produced and thus creates Poppie within this narrative.

While Joubert has considerable power over the production of her book, Wicomb portrays two people who struggle for control over the end product in the fictitious collaborative writing project in *David's Story*. Here, the amanuensis is never mentioned by name (though she is much more visible than Joubert when it comes to presence in the text itself), while Wicomb shows that the protagonist subject considers himself to be a war hero and this is how he would like to be portrayed in the text he originally envisaged, but which the amanuensis never writes for him. Thus the balance of power between these fictitious collaborators is very different from the one between Joubert and Poppie. While both Poppie and David are portrayed as driven by a need to tell their stories, David is portrayed as having very strong opinions on how his story should be told. Even so, the amanuensis makes a lot of decisions about content and form, some of which David has not agreed to or stated that he does not want. While the narrative itself is fictitious, the power relations between the two protagonists in Wicomb's novel would be located in quadrant D in the schematic above, while David originally aimed for a narrative occupying quadrant B. That the protagonist of *David's Story* and his amanuensis are social equals makes the critique of collaborative autobiography that Wicomb expresses in and through her novel all the more poignant, as the novel suggests that this peer-like relationship does not inherently ensure the subject more power or control over the end product of the collaboration.

The amanuensis in fact rarely adheres to David's wishes. David expresses a desire to create a book with a proper history and a story that makes sense with a beginning and an end: much like the narrative in *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (though this book is never explicitly referenced in *David's Story*).<sup>11</sup> David wants his narrative to be about Griqua history and his own experiences as a freedom fighter. The cooperative process is foregrounded in the novel on the first page, as Wicomb has her protagonist amanuensis write a preface contemplating her task and David's expectations:

I confessed to being unequal to the task, to not understanding such a notion of telling or for that matter of truth, to having a weakness for patterns, for repetitions and intersections; but he insisted that my views did not matter. If there is such a thing as truth, he said, it has to be left to its own devices, find its own way, and my role was simply to write down things as he told them. . . . I am, as David outlined my task, simply recording. Aesthetics, he said, should be left to the so-called artists, to the writers and readers of fiction. There is no need to fret about writing, about our choice of words in the New South Africa; rather, we will have to make do with mixtures of meaning. . . . For my part it is comforting to know that my occasional flights of fancy, my attempts at artistry, would not be detected by him: proponents of plain writing are notoriously vague in their definitions of that category. (2–3)

In this passage, truth is positioned as inherently separate from aesthetics, and, according to David, the two cannot co-exist in a text. In fact, David is of the opinion that truth will find its own way into his narrative as long as the amanuensis writes things down exactly as he tells them to her. He has not enlisted his amanuensis to do any of the things Joubert discusses in her interview quoted earlier in this paper, such as to “add structure” or “make a story” (Coullie et al. 175), but rather because he needed “someone literate and broadly sympathetic to the liberation movement” to put his words into writing (Wicomb 2). David sees no need to “fret about writing” (3). If one writes down exactly what is said, it will be the truth. While Wicomb’s novel critiques projects such as *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, this quotation shows that to think that an amanuensis can “simply record” and retell a story as told to them is equally naïve, and David represents this naïve faith in language. David finds that he is dissatisfied with what the amanuensis has written. While he is perfectly happy to leave the issue of form to the amanuensis, he still very much wants control over the content of the text, a control he never really has and completely loses when he dies, leaving the amanuensis free to take any liberties she wishes with the text.

David thus fails to provide a coherent story of his life as a freedom fighter and a true history of the Griqua people. Wicomb lets the amanuensis open the novel with the remark that David was “simply unable/unwilling to disclose all” (2). This is certainly true regarding David’s disclosures about his comrade Dulcie, whom David describes as “a scream somehow echoing through my story” (134). Dulcie is wordless and yet always there. Meg Samuelson notes Wicomb’s choice to render Dulcie as a “disruptive figure” in the text who destroys the “secure meanings” (125) that David and his amanuensis attempt to create. I interpret this choice as a further attempt by Wicomb to show how impossible it is to write the kind of polished, coherent collaborative narrative David wants. This impossibility is shown to us also through David’s aforementioned attempt to write a history of the Griqua people, something that is part of Wicomb’s critique of an idea of racialized identity, which is a topic she has explored in scholarly articles as well. For example, in “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa,” she advocates a move away from these obscuring, fabricated racial labels towards an acceptance of what she refers to as “multiple belongings” (105).<sup>12</sup> This shift of focus away from a conception of race as identity to a different use of language is a distinguishing characteristic of South African post-apartheid narratives. Wicomb’s exploration of the potential pitfalls of collaborative authorship mirrors the complexity of text and language that contemporary South African writers often explore. The issue of generational differences between them are echoed not only inside *David’s Story*, where for instance David’s father and other relatives are portrayed as angered by David’s interest in exploring Griqua history, but also in other novels by Wicomb such as *Playing in the Light*.

David’s writing and research of a Griqua history shows us how he is unable to escape the imperialism and racism that permeate this history since embracing the idea of the Griquas means embracing the racial label of coloured that the apartheid regime instituted by law as one of the four main racial groups: white, black, coloured, and Indian. Spivak’s discussion of the “native informant” is helpful in shedding some light on why David fails to escape this racist discourse:

In [ethnography], the native informant, although denied autobiography as it is understood in the Northwestern European tradition (codename “West”), is taken with the utmost seriousness. He (and occasionally she) *is* a blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western-model discipline) could inscribe. (6; emphasis in original)

The ANC might be close to coming into power in the narrative present of 1991 in *David's Story*. However, that does not mean David's and other Griquas' embracing of the imposed labels and groupings of the apartheid regime by thinking of themselves as a people or ethnic group is anything but a reiteration of the apartheid regime's racist message. Thus, the ethnic and cultural identity embraced by both David and the Griquas is inscribed by the West. As Mike Marais argues in his article “Bastards and Bodies in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*,” the novel shows that the Griqua leaders of the past played right into the hands of the apartheid regime through their actions. Wicomb highlights the importance of these events by having David try and fail to write a history of his people, an aspect of the novel's storyline that probably serves to emphasize the failure of fabricated identity labels since his project fails as well.<sup>13</sup> As Minesh Dass reminds us in his article on *David's Story* and the act of telling, language is a crucial factor in history-telling since we use language to record history. Language is thus, according to Dass, simultaneously an enabling and limiting factor in history-making. It is precisely these two sides of the language coin, that language both enables and limits not only history-making but narration in general, that are represented by the two main characters in *David's Story*—the amanuensis and David.<sup>14</sup>

A different example of the limitations of language and of how David is unable to escape the oppressive framing and language discussed by Spivak when writing a story for or about the oppressed becomes evident in a passage where the amanuensis describes David's attempts to write about what happened to his comrade Dulcie:

Although I have made numerous inferences from that last page, I do not quite know how to represent it. It is a mess of

scribbles and scoring out and doodling of peculiar figures that cannot be reproduced here. I know that it is his attempt at writing about Dulcie, because her name is written several times and struck out.

[. . .]

Truth, I gather, is the word that cannot be written. He has changed it into the palindrome of Cape Flats speech—TRURT, TRURT, TRURT, TRURT—the words speed across the page, driven as a toy car is driven by a child, with lips pouted and spit flying, wheels squealing around the Dulcie obstacles. He has, hauling up a half-remembered Latin lesson, tried to decline it.

trurt, oh trurt, of the trurt, to the trurt, trurt, by, with, from the trurt [. . .]

There are all the symbols from the top row of the keyboard, from exclamation mark, ampersand, asterisk, through to the plus sign, then all are scored out. There is also a schoolboy's heart scribbled over, but not thoroughly enough to efface its asymmetrical lines.

TRURT . . . TRURT . . . TRURT . . . TRURT . . . the trurt in black and white . . . colouring the truth to say that which cannot be said the thing of no name . . .

towhisperspeakshouthollercolour

Who, dear reader, would have the patience with this kind of thing? My computer has none; it has had enough, is embarrassed, and mysteriously refuses to process the elliptical dot-dot-dots, which I have to insert by hand. (135–37)

David's writing shows traces of what could be interpreted as frustration in trying to write "the truth." It does not come out in a coherent way, or at least not in a way that pleases the amanuensis. In addition

to the multiple failed attempts to write the word “truth” and Dulcie’s name, David’s doodles imply that language is insufficient to express the truth; he has even tried to write in symbols “from the top row of the keyboard” (136) and the symbol of love in the shape of a heart. All of this he has crossed out or scribbled over. Almost everything in and about Wicomb’s novel is a testament to the instability and limitations of language. That which he cannot say is related to colour—this is why the line “towhisperspeakshoutholler” ends with “colour.” Whereas texts such as *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* do not problematize race and the issue of truth in writing, *David’s Story* places these issues at the forefront. David cannot move past the issues of truth and identity when he attempts to write, as exemplified by his attempt and subsequent failure to write something about Dulcie. While Joubert’s Poppie is made to represent the hardships of all black South African women, in the words of Sanders “Dulcie will not be the sign of anything” (“Ambiguity of Listening” 85). Gillian Gane argues that *David’s Story* “explicitly lament[s] the inaccessibility of truth and the inadequacy of the language available . . . as a means of articulating that truth” (102). Driver reaches a slightly different conclusion about Dulcie and describes her as “to an extent the subject of another language altogether”—a language that is “let loose into a writing that writes itself, transgressing the bounds of discourse, exceeding signification” (“The Struggle over the Sign” 532). Thus, where Gane reads *David’s Story* as attempting to show how our language is inadequate, Driver argues that the novel shows how certain things not only cannot be expressed through the language available to us but also in a sense transcend language. I agree with Driver, since Dulcie is not only someone or something that David cannot adequately describe with his own words—she and her terrible experiences in the guerilla camp transcend the language available to him. This language is perhaps what the amanuensis in *David’s Story* refers to as the Derridean “middle voice” (197), a voice which Samuelson describes as permitting “a play of *différance* between dichotomies—such as those of active and passive, past and present, masculine and feminine, or speech and silence” (*Remembering* 125).<sup>15</sup> As Wicomb portrays in *David’s Story*, in attempting to write about Dulcie, David’s

writing simultaneously dislocates her and himself. In this I agree with Derek Attridge and his argument that the experience of Dulcie “tests, more strongly than anything else, the limits of narrative as a conveyor of truth” (“Zoë Wicomb’s Home Truths” 162). In order to make his story work, David therefore needs to produce himself as a heroic freedom fighter, an effort that Dulcie disrupts. David has attempted over and over to write about Dulcie, but he cannot even write her name without striking it out. If he tries to symbolize her by drawing a sign such as a heart, it becomes asymmetrical. In trying to write the truth about Dulcie, he ends up writing “trurt” over and over. In the quotation above, Wicomb has the amanuensis conclude that truth is a word that “cannot be written” (137), but to me the passage represents more than this. I would argue that the fallibility of language that Wicomb’s novel portrays is emphasized by the fallibility of the collaborative project that the amanuensis and David take up. In order to collaboratively write a text together with the amanuensis, David and the amanuensis must share the same language. If that language cannot be trusted to express everything David wishes to say, if there are no words that can convey his (and Dulcie’s) experiences, then his story cannot be written down. Just as the amanuensis’ computer is a limitation as it cannot process David’s symbols and scribbles, our language is a limitation on what can be put into words. Thus, the fallibility of language demonstrated in Wicomb’s novel simultaneously serves as a reminder of the impossibility of the narrative project itself that the amanuensis and David have set out to accomplish.

In conclusion, then, the fictitious collaborative narrative created in *David’s Story* thus “is and is not David’s story” (Wicomb 1). At the outset David takes the initiative and has a clear view of the kind of narrative he wants created. As the storyline progresses, the balance of power shifts onto the amanuensis. When David dies, the amanuensis is free to do what she wishes with the narrative. This shift in power over David’s narrative is one of the ways in which Wicomb’s text urges us to consider the implications of the vulnerability of the collaborative autobiographical subject, as well as the extent to which such a subject’s life story can be at the mercy of his or her amanuensis. What is more,

*David's Story* also problematizes the very idea that language, as exemplified by storytelling and narration, is reliable and reminds us of the complexity of truth.

## Notes

- 1 The vast majority of *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* comprises of Poppie or the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator telling the story. However, one must bear in mind that the narrative is informed by other people in Poppie's family and clan, even though it is impossible to determine the precise extent of their contributions due to the way Joubert has structured the narrative.
- 2 Whether *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* should be labeled a collaborative autobiography or a novel is not easy to determine, and I do not presume to have a clear-cut answer to that question. However, as Wicomb in the interview refers to Joubert's text as a collaborative autobiography or at the very least an attempt at this kind of work, I will also treat it as such in this article, rather than as a novel with Joubert as the author and Poppie reduced to a character invented by Joubert. For a more informative discussion of the problems with reading *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* as a collaborative autobiography instead of a novel, an interested reader may want to consult Dalven or Carlean.
- 3 It is important to keep in mind that Wicomb wrote *David's Story* after J. M. Coetzee published his novel *Foe*, in which many of these issues regarding writing and voice are explored. Joubert's text was written much earlier in a different context, and in this sense Joubert and Wicomb could really be said to belong to different literary generations in South Africa as the influence of Coetzee's work has been monumental.
- 4 Carli Coetzee explores the role of readers and reading in Wicomb's work, especially how written resources such as archives or newspapers are used by Wicomb "to interrogate notions of originality, origins and stability" (559).
- 5 Driver writes very informatively about the Griqua origins in her afterword to *David's Story*: "The Griqua were descended from one of the largest groups (the Grigriqua or Chagriqua; *qua* means "people") of the Khoi people, who were among South Africa's earliest aboriginal inhabitants, along with the San" (219). These two groups were severely affected during the eighteenth century by the Dutch and the British colonists. The Khoi and the San were originally nomads, but at that time they were forced to either work for the colonists or move to parts of the country that were not yet occupied by Europeans. Some who journeyed up north established their own independent state and called themselves Griquas. They were joined by runaway and freed slaves who had been shipped to South Africa from such diverse places as Madagascar, Mozambique, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, but also by people of mixed racial origin. They embraced their racial mixture and made that part of their "Griquaness" (220). Several myths

- and legends formed a basis for their identity, such as “the myth of the Promised Land, and the Great Trek or journey it entailed” (220).
- 6 I have chosen to refer to this unnamed female narrator as an amanuensis since it best describes the role that the character of David intends for her, and since the ways in which she transcends this role are important for my analysis and discussions. For a more extensive problematization of this character and her role in the narrative, consult Dass or Richter.
- 7 Wicomb’s choice of words here, “to father his text from a distance” (3), is most likely another reference to Barthes’s “Death of the Author”. Barthes writes that “[a]s soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (142; emphasis in original). The birth of the readers of David’s story is at the cost of the death of the author—literally, since the character of David dies at the end of the novel with his text only completed post-mortem.
- 8 While I do not explore this subject as it falls outside of the scope of this inquiry, there are other recent discussions on autobiography and postcoloniality that add interesting new postcolonial perspectives to the traditional and narrow definitions of autobiography such as that of Lejeune. See for example Huddart’s *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* and Moore-Gilbert’s *Postcolonial Life-Writing*.
- 9 See, for example, Marquard, Wenzel, Dalven, and Lenta. A more recent scholarly article that touches on this issue is Attridge’s “To Speak of This You Would Need the Tongue of a God.”
- 10 The title of Kuzwayo’s book is a reference to Matshoba’s story-collection *Call Me Not a Man*. As Driver notes, “Kuzwayo’s text is strongly motivated by Black Consciousness, for which she has been one of the primary advocates” (“The Child’s Mother” 231).
- 11 In this sense, the difference between David’s concern with political and historical truth in writing and the amanuensis’ concern with the aesthetic aspects of writing can be linked to the politics versus aesthetics debate that took place in the 1980s in South Africa. Up until then, literature was first and foremost considered by non-white South Africans to be a cultural weapon in the struggle against apartheid. However, Ndebele (1986) argued against a literature focused mainly on the spectacular and shocking and instead proposed that literature should focus on the ordinary everyday life of the oppressed, and that focusing on the aesthetics and the story-telling rather than on politics and resistance does not make one’s writing less valid. In the speech “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” (1989), Albie Sachs proposed that ANC members be “banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle” (239) in order to push artists to improve the aesthetic qualities of their work rather than being given a free pass as long as the content is politically correct.

- 12 Wicomb has explored the issue of discourse, colour, and coloured identity in other works, such as “To Hear the Variety of Discourses,” “Culture Beyond Colour?”, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, and *Playing in the Light*. See also Jacobs and Macmillan and Graham on coloured identity in Wicomb's fiction.
- 13 Bartley explores the act of narration as a means of healing and links it to the TRC in suggesting that *David's Story* portrays “the power of the act of public storytelling to produce a national community” (123).
- 14 Samuelson explores the issue of Dulcie and the limitations of language further in her examination of how Wicomb deals “with women in and at war” (“The Disfigured Body” 834). A reader interested in the significance and role of the female characters in *David's Story* may also want to consult Baiada, Morton, Poyner, Álvarez, and Charos.

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