'Travelling Light': Images (via Wicomb) from the Gifberge to Glasgow

Kai Easton

> BEESWATER 1922
>
> On the crest of the last hill, the new Griqua trekkers saw before them the
>
> promised land of Beeswater rolling down from low hills in the west, hemmed in
>
> by the Soutrivier in the east, and in the distant south the gleam of Varsrivier's
>
> white rocks.[1]

If we were to begin in Beeswater, we would have to find a way to cross that cattle

grid through the rambles of wire. There is a large thorn-bush[2] growing this way and

that, taking over the entryway, as if to say, do not trespass, the road is long and the

village no more. The green sign on the N7 pointing to Beeswater is, however, large

and welcoming as you head north from Cape Town, past Citrusdal and Clanwilliam

near Vanrhynsdorp and Vredendal, in the plains below the Gifberge. It is still in the

boundaries of the Western Cape, just south of the famous flower country, with the

Namaqua daisies that bring tourists from all over the world to small Northern Cape

towns like Concordia and Okiep, and the hub of Springbok.

Beeswater is, in fact, the village where Zoë Wicomb was born and raised, but

her birth certificate says Vanrhynsdorp, since it was the nearest town.[3] We have a

photograph of Beeswater from 1989 by the British artist Roger Palmer, who has

kindly provided us with our frontispiece. The work is *Untitled* but, going by the

information in the essay by Stephen Bann in Palmer's book, *Remarks on Colour*, the series dates from that time and place.[4] Palmer had photographed the abandoned buildings of the village and, on a later visit in 1991, discovered a 'cache of newspapers and other forgotten materials'[5] there that then made their way into the artwork he created on the walls of the Cape Town home in Observatory which he shared with Wicomb, whom he had met in England. He was, by this time, lecturing at the Glasgow School of Art in Garnethill, commuting between Scotland and South Africa.

Wicomb's first book of short stories, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, was originally published in London by Virago in 1987; though it has since been published by the Feminist Press of New York (2000); and, for its first appearance in South Africa, she offered a revised edition for the Cape Town imprint Umuzi (Random House, 2008). Wicomb had been staying in the U.K. since 1970, and in 1990 she returned to Cape Town, where she taught English literature at her alma mater, the University of the Western Cape. She remained there until 1994, before moving back to Glasgow with Palmer and their daughter, Hannah. Her last long sojourn at home in the Cape therefore covers the transitional years – from Mandela's release to his election as President of the new South Africa.

Lecturing in creative writing and English at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, she completed in 2003 a practice-based doctorate, 'Ethnicity and Gender in South African Writing: *David's Story* and Critical Essays'. This back and forth – between criticism and fiction, writing in Scotland about South Africa, but 'inhabiting' South Africa in order to be able to write in Scotland – has been at the heart of Wicomb's writing career. *David's Story* was published by Kwela in South Africa in 2000 and subsequently by The Feminist Press of New York in 2001. Her fiction

straddles both hemispheres, but to read Wicomb in Scotland requires a text that will travel: in other words, it will require reading an imported South African or U. S. edition.[6]

Her most recent novel *October* (2014) continues to navigate what Dorothy Driver describes in this volume as Wicomb's 'two half-homes'.[7] Its literary scope, however, is more global. Indebted to the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas for its title, the novel also includes epigraphs from two American novelists (Toni Morrison and Marilynne Robinson), both of whom have written novels called *Home*, the title Wicomb originally intended for her own work.[8] It is set mostly between the West End of Glasgow and Little Namaqualand, both locations where Wicomb has previously lived. The village of Kliprand may be 'invented', but it is also a real place – a long rural road off the main road will take you there: there are scattered farm gates and distant mountain views.[9] There is the familiar – that which is transformed in the fiction – and there is a wider cosmopolitan canvas that reaches beyond the epigraphs, since *October* roams around other locations too: islands and coastal sites, in particular. In the acknowledgements, she notes her residency in Macau and borrowed cottages for writing in Galloway. Individuals are also singled out for mention, and they include both Roger Palmer and Sophia Klaase. A suite of Klaase's photographs is also featured in this volume, with an Introduction by the Edinburgh- and Cape Town-based anthropologist Rick Rohde.

There are several interconnections in Wicomb's acknowledgements – surprising connections around geography, cartography and photography in relation to several of our contributors. All of this is incidental, but each speaks to the specific confluences of locations that find their way into Wicomb's life and work.

Thinking visually, I would like to turn to the South African photographer Paul Weinberg, whose book title and epigraph (from the French writer and aviator, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry) have inspired my own title.[10] How does the idea of 'travelling light' offer a way towards a translocal reading of Wicomb's migratory spaces in Scotland and South Africa, or the Cape and Glasgow? How do the seven still images and captions that comprise the visual sequence from my own journeys to Wicomb territory travel *through* or skirt *around* these spaces? How might they suggest ways of *seeing* the translocal in Wicomb's work retrospectively?

You have to imagine at this point in the text an earlier selection of moving images – stills and video clips, in colour and in black and white – that feature in my short companion film.[11] You also have to imagine that the film features a stunning soundtrack of Cape jazz by Abdullah Ibrahim. It is true that *Image – Music – Text* is already the title of another work by another French writer,[12] but I would like to highlight this trio of words – and the hyphens between them – to evoke the mobility of spaces and stories, questions of memory, voice and the fragmentary, that are key aspects of Wicomb's own compositional practice.

Both Palmer and Klaase provide fascinating intertextual 'frames' for reading Wicomb and the translocal visually. Wicomb is after all the novelist and critic who has written a brilliant essay on setting and intertextuality, with an extremely fine and nuanced Barthesian reading of her fellow South African writer Ivan Vladislavić's story, 'Kidnapped'.[13] The title again sounds familiar, since this is a story of an attempted rewriting of Stevenson's original. 'Kidnapped' would resonate with her (as it would with reference to J. M. Coetzee – Wicomb refers more than once to his fifth novel, *Foe*). But before Wicomb offers her analysis of Vladislavić's fiction, she expresses her dismay at her topic, and the occasion of her talk, where she has been

asked to 'speak as a writer', and where the questions she is expected to answer she imagines are the usual ones: '[W]hy, when you have lived so long in Scotland, do you write about South Africa? When will you set your fictions in Scotland?'[14]

Wicomb's essay was published in 2005 – three years before *The One That Got Away* (2008). Her second book of short stories and fourth work of fiction, it is the one book (as of that date) that she has acknowledged in her entry for the Scottish Book Trust as not having only a South African setting. She is quite specific though – it is not Scotland and South Africa she refers to but the city spaces with which she is familiar: Cape Town and Glasgow.[15] And yet, as we will see in the work of Palmer and Klaase, and in the images that make up the rest of this essay and other essays in this volume, the translocal is not only to be found between urban (Glasgow and Cape Town) and national spaces (Scotland and South Africa). It also traverses the rural village and the urban neighbourhood (Beeswater and Observatory) as well as historical geographies and small towns (West Griqualand and East Griqualand; Namaqualand and Nomansland; Phillipolis and Kokstad). There are also seascapes (Cape Town, Bloubergstrand, Simonstown, the West Coast; Islay; The Firth of Clyde; the Solway Firth). As we see in Wicomb's work, the translocal is not just about the here and the there but also about the gaps in between and the journeys *elsewhere*. It allows for waymarkers en route and all around that can speak to, and across, the distances and proximities of home. We find this, for instance, in *October*, when her 'border' character Mercia 'reads' the Cape botanically in Macau and Lanzarote.

We cannot be sure that the author has herself been to Lanzarote, nor is this in any way crucial to our reading, but the paratextual material does allow us to be confident about Wicomb and Macau. We know, from her acknowledgements, that this is where she held a writing residency that allowed her to complete this very novel.

Roger Palmer

Similarly, we also know that Roger Palmer was an artist-in-residence at Macau at the same time. The book that emerges from his residency has the resonant title, *Macau Macau*, and was also published in 2014. Alongside his long and illustrious career of working with film, he has turned to digital photography for this project, even here to a series of colour photographs, as he also does for *Phosphorescence* (2014), following a short residency in 2014 when Glasgow hosted the Commonwealth Games. As their overseas correspondent and Visiting Artist, he went to the smallest Commonwealth nation of Nauru, formerly known as Pleasant Island, now notorious as a detention centre for refugees as part of Australia's 'Pacific Solution'.[16]

Born and raised in Portsmouth on the south coast of England in 1946, close to the major port of Southampton ('The Gateway to the World' as it has been called), the son of a naval officer, Roger Palmer spent his childhood watching the sea and the ships going by where they lived, and studied art. He taught in Nottingham and subsequently in Glasgow before taking up a Professorship of Fine Art at the University of Leeds. He commuted weekly between Scotland and England until his recent retirement, which he now spends with Wicomb in their home in Glasgow's East End; for some of the winter months they stay in South Africa. His most recent solo exhibitions overlapped in 2016, with *Winter Garden* opening at the Tetley in Leeds, and *Spoor* at Commune1 in Cape Town.[17]

As an artist, Palmer thinks a great deal about space and place – about the printing (if it is a photograph) but also its size and format and where it will be placed on the wall. The lighting, the space between, the location of the exhibition – all of these are just as important and integral to the work that he produces. His work is

original, some of it is ephemeral: the concession, if there is a concession, is that his books and website provide an overview of some of these works; one can see retrospectively a *version* of them.

There are two areas I want to highlight from my own discovery of Palmer's work and the importance of it to what follows: he is consistently interested in place (and *placelessness*) and the way a place can be recast in another site on a distant shore.[18] In this the seminal work of the spatial historian Paul Carter in *The Road to Botany Bay* would be an influence.[19] Like Wicomb, Palmer is fascinated by place names, for example, that appear on different parts of the globe (Aberdeen, Algiers), and the random and coincidental connections that often occur between them (just as much as the deliberate ones).[20] There is usually a nationalist or a regional impulse in this project of remapping, as we see in John MacKenzie's book, *The Scots in South Africa* and a current website dedicated to 'Scottish place names in South Africa'.[21] Indeed, the explanatory text to one of Palmer's projects, *Meridian* (2010), shows how his Scottish residency inspired a dual-hemisphere project: he describes 'navigating my way through all but one of South Africa's provinces' and plotting 'a route through towns that bear colonial Scottish place-names'.[22]

Palmer's *International Waters* project a decade earlier moved across four locations: Britain, South Africa, Namibia, New Zealand. The exhibitions were held in two sites in 2000 and 2001 in Southampton and Cape Town – integral to the route of the old Union-Castle Steamship Company, whose centenary it was in 2000 – a route that held resonance for him personally, having grown up by the sea so nearby, and then, as noted earlier, visiting Little Namaqualand and living for some time in Cape Town – in Observatory, a neighbourhood that also makes its way into Wicomb's novel, *Playing in the Light*.

Palmer has written the text for the acknowledgements page of his book only, but keeping with the geographical theme he groups his acknowledgements by location. Under 'Britain' (not Scotland), you will find family names/familiar names: Eve and Les Palmer, Hannah Palmer, Zoë Wicomb. The photographs of Palmer's work and associated sites are taken by others, including one of Port Glasgow Library attributed to Hannah Palmer. The book includes illuminating essays written by experts. 'The choice of material in this exhibition is not governed by conventional aesthetic criteria,' writes Bridie Lonie of Dunedin, 'but by a desire to initiate a change in the way we think about the objects and consequences of travel'.[23]

Having documented the travels of the Union-Castle steamship company – enacting them through his multi-sited exhibitions – we might look at the ways in which this affects Palmer's visits to the communities in Little Namaqualand where he stayed through family connections. What modes of representation are available to him?

Pavel Büchler notes that 'There is indeed hardly an image of a human presence in the whole course of his work',[24] while J. M. Coetzee's Introduction to *Remarks on Colour* highlights how Palmer's work negotiates a long history of representing the Cape: 'The lofty skies and bleak ochre plains and leaping antelope are still present in his work, but no longer where one might expect them'.[25]

His work during this time makes use of captions (from oral testimony to official history to hearsay and observation) to supplement and interrogate his photographs – usually triptychs, and it is in these series that we learn more about Beeswater. The series called KLEIN NAMAKWALAND, for example, includes the following text:

1. 'The Griqua village of Beeswater was abandoned in 1981 when the land changed hands…'

2. The community dispersed, some to a new "coloured" location near the town of Vredendal. Others have moved several hundred miles away from the original home of the Griqua Khoikhoi.

3. 'In 1985 Beeswater is occupied by Elias the shepherd'.[26]

It is off the Cape–Namibia route, south of the Orange River. On a map you will find the names of real places – the Matsikamma Mountains, the singular Gifberg Pass – widened exactly a century ago in 1917 from a road they say was paved out of original elephant tracks.[27]

Sophia Klaase

The photo essay by Sophia Klaase in this volume consists of ten images.[28] She has given us permission to use them (with thanks to Timm Hoffman, who provided the captions, and who negotiated with Klaase and her family on our behalf). I have curated them from a much larger selection, since at the time of commissioning them, Rick Rohde was in the process co-editing his own volume of essays – in his case on Klaase, together with full-colour plates of her photographs. Recently published by the art books publisher Fourthwall Books in Johannesburg, *Hanging on a Wire* includes a remarkable foreword by Zoë Wicomb. It was originaly entitled 'Vytjie', after Sophia's nickname. There is a disclaimer regarding an earlier request for an essay on Klaase's photographs: 'What do I know about photography?', she protests. It was Rohde who had shown Wicomb Klaase's work. The novel that eventually became *October* had stalled. Klaase's real images – of family, friends, community – helped

give life to Wicomb's cast of characters, developed the plot and fleshed out the character of Sylvie.[29]

How do the images by Klaase speak to ideas of the 'translocal', since they are seemingly so rooted in one place – a small village near the small town of Garies in Little Namaqualand? To what extent do her photographs, as they have been selected and displayed here, in the pages of this book, interact with Wicomb's fiction?[30] Wicomb helpfully provides some answers. Reticent of authorial revelation and resistant to nostalgia, she nevertheless tussles with the genre she has been asked to produce, revealing, in the process, what is behind the sentence in her acknowledgements for *October*: 'Many thanks to Sophia Klaase, whose photographs have been an inspiration'.[31]

> There was the promise of a character filled out with what I had failed to give her: youth, beauty, vigour, a fore-life for the downtrodden woman. And above all, a camera. Vytjie's photographs offered possibilities, complexity for a character that thus far had eluded a full fictional life.[32]

The inspiration is not only relevant to the current novel but acts retrospectively as a 'counter-memory', for Wicomb 'finds in the photographs of Vytjie's community those who people a previous novel, *David's Story*, written long before I encountered these images'.[33]

Unlike Palmer, Klaase works predominantly in full colour, and most of her photographs are staged, not least her various self-portraits which, as earlier critics have noted, are extraordinarily playful and performative. She enlists friends and family members, both as subjects and as her assistants.[34] There are fewer examples of

black-and-white photography (three out of ten in our selection), though that is how they all appear in the printed version of this book. Klaase has a sense of history and occasion, since she captures visitors to the village too – for example, at wedding ceremonies and funerals. But most of Klaase's pictures tell a story about the ordinary and everyday – her home ground. There is little in the way of landscape photography or flora and fauna or wide survey images of a road or the village. While Palmer works primarily at a distance, [35] navigating home-spaces through more global connections and journeys, alert to the semiotics of landscape and to signs on buildings, abandoned villages and railway tracks, Klaase works close-up in a single home-space. But she has done more than document her home-space of Namaqualand, the village of Paulshoek and its inhabitants. She has activated it, travelling light, with characters that cannot be contained, who step out of the frame.

'The reason for putting these photographs and texts together is not a strategy as such, it becomes a strategy once it has happened.'
~ Roger Palmer, interview with Pavel Büchler, 'On the Face of It'

'None of the above is important, and neither is the map, be it Scotland or South Africa. One overlays the other, like an alternative truth or fiction.'
~ Penelope Curtis, 'Un train peut en cacher une autre… .'

[INSERT Figures 5.1-5.7; each image with caption to appear on a separate page]

Figure 5.1: The Gifberge

Figure 5.2: [Seaforth Beach] Simonstown

Figure 5.3: [Ostrich] The Cape of Good Hope

Figure 5.4: [Table Mt] Signal Hill

Figure 5.5: [Elephant] Falkirk

Figure 5.6: [Piper's Walk, Solway Firth] Galloway [via Glasgow]

Figure 5.7: [Union-Castle, Kokstad] East Griqualand [Museum]

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Notes

[1] Wicomb, *David's Story*, 91 (Feminist Press edition). See also, with reference to Kliprand and Wicomb's setting in *October*: 'It was 1983, a good forty years after the death of the Chief, that the Griquas ⌊SEP⌋ moved away from Beeswater to Kliprand, the location on the edge of the white town' (124).

[2] This description is used generically, rather than botanically.

[3] Personal communication to Derek Attridge, 5 and 6 April 2017.

[4] Bann, 'Associations of Sensibility', 13–14: 'From the 1989 visit, there emerged in the first place a series of large upright photographic images (*Untitled*), which is represented in part in the current exhibition. In each image, it is now a question of foregrounding the decaying outer walls of the surviving dwellings, and framing the vista of featureless land which stretches away towards the horizon'.

[5] Ibid., 14.

[6] Wicomb has not been published in the U.K. since the first editions of her first collection, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*. She maintains longstanding and familiar publishing arrangements with Kwela (S.A.) and the New Press (U.S.A.).

[7] See Dorothy Driver's lead essay in this volume.

[8] Wicomb, 'Foreword', 9.

[9] In an interview in 2015, Wicomb states, 'I invented a small settlement called Kliprand, a common country name. My protagonist Mercia, in fact, carries Robinson's *Home* from Scotland to her family home in Namaqualand. This novel was turning out to be the same old story: my preoccupation with moving between two countries' ('Leaping Upstream: 2015 Barry Ronge Fiction Prize Shortlistee Zoe

Wicomb Discusses the Origins of Her Novel *October*').

http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2015/06/18/leaping-upstream-2015-barry-ronge-fiction-prize-shortlistee-zoe-wicomb-discusses-the-origins-of-her-novel-october/).

[10] See Weinberg, *Travelling Light*, whose epigraph from the French writer reads: 'He who would travel happily must travel light'.

[11] Easton, 'Travelling Light', http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/21421/.

[12] Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*.

[13] Wicomb, 'Setting, Intertextuality'.

[14] Ibid.

[15] http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/profile-author/33187

[16] http://www.rogerpalmer.info/newsite/index.php?/publications/phosporescence/

[17] See the interview with Roger Palmer on *Winter Garden* at the Tetley:

http://thetetley.org/roger-palmer-winter-garden/. See also the images from the *Spoor* exhibition at Commune1 in Cape Town:

http://www.rogerpalmer.info/newsite/index.php?/spoor-commune1-cape-town-2016/;

http://www.commune1.com/2016-roger-palmer-installation, and an earlier exhibition, *Sediment* in 2014: http://www.commune1.com/2014-roger-palmer-artworks;

http://www.rogerpalmer.info/newsite/index.php?/sediment-2014/.

[18] He was the recipient of a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship on *Photography, Place & Placelessness* in 2001.

[19] See Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*; note also essay by Papastergiadis, 'Return to International Waters', 56. http://www.rogerpalmer.info/texts/text_interwatertxt.htm.

[20] Specific examples of Wicomb's own alertness to the transplantation of names are highlighted throughout this volume by our contributors; some of the quotations are so

directly relevant to ideas of the translocal that they appear across different essays in this volume.

[21] http://www.rampantscotland.com/placenames/placename_cape_town.htm.

[22] Palmer, *Meridian*. http://www.rogerpalmer.info/texts/text_Meridian.html. '*Meridian* is the product of road journeys of similar length and duration made in South Africa and Fenno-Scandia in the first half of 2010, i.e. late summer in the southern hemisphere, early summer in the north. References to Scotland, my country of residence, figured in the planning and execution of both journeys'.

[23] Lonie, 'Sea Changes', 56.

[24] Büchler, 'On the Face of It', 13.

[25] Coetzee, 'Introduction', 5.

[26] This is my own list. The sentences in Palmer's book, *Precious Metals* (which are hand-written, all in upper-case), are not enumerated as I present them here, but appear between two images and two captions 'Klein Namakwaland' and (in its translation from Afrikaans to English) 'Little Namaqualand'.

[27] Marion Whitehead, 'Gapping it through the gates of Gifberg', *Getaway Magazine*, August 2012, http://showme.co.za/lifestyle/gapping-it-through-the-gates-of-gifberg/.

[28] Three of the images were sent to me by Wicomb. Lewis and Rohde's article in *Social Dynamics* includes the same or similar images in a few cases too, but with captions provided by Klaase at the time. The captions in Rohde and O'Connell (eds), *Hanging on a Wire* are descriptive, identifying the subject(s) of the photographs (or the occasion) and the year. We read in Rohde's essay in the same volume, 'Camera Arcana', that Klaase 'recently remarked laconically that she was "retiring" from photography after being asked to provide some captions for the images in this book', 160.

[29] Wicomb, 'Foreword', 9.

[30] The production, processing, and exhibition of Sophia Klaase's work provides further reflection on ideas of the translocal, in particular between Paulshoek and Cape Town. See, e.g., Timm Hoffman's essay, 'Sophia and the Scientists', in *Hanging on a Wire* and the website for 'Extraordinary Lives: Portraits from a Divided Land', the 2013 exhibition of Klaase's work at the District Six Museum: http://sophiaklaase.ccaphotography.org. Thanks to Rick Rohde, this was my first exposure to Klaase's photographs. It was also my introduction to Sophia Klaase, who travelled to Cape Town to attend the opening.

[31] Wicomb, *October*.

[32] Wicomb, 'Foreword', 9.

[33] Ibid.

[34] See Lewis and Rohde, 'Sophia Klaaste'.

[35] This goes back to Palmer's earliest engagement with South Africa. See his interview with Pavel Büchler, 'On the Face of It', in *Precious Metals*: 'The choice of what to photograph, how to photograph, and where to photograph from, parallels that peculiar practice that many westerners seem to have adopted as a means of acquainting themselves with unfamiliar places; the habit of collecting your personal memories through photography or filmmaking. But I was conscious of a need to photograph in this way from a viewpoint which reflects my own familiarity with the place, and so the pictures are deliberately made at a distance. At the beginning of looking at the work it may seem likely that these pictures will lead to much more intimate photographic involvement with the place, but this never happens. The horizon stays the same, the buildings are always at a distance, and there is always the space in between'.