

Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990–2013.

Zoë Wicomb.

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It might be useful to read Zoë Wicomb's collection of essays, *Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990–2013* (2018) through the lens of transdisciplinarity. My suggestion here is rooted in the reality that Wicomb and Andrew van der Vlies, the collection's editor,

come to the construction of the text with the intention of surfacing interconnections evinced in their prioritisation of intertextuality, which is given pre-eminence throughout the second section of the collection. My review subsequently takes its cue from this theoretical predisposition, surfacing the political, sociological and philosophical components of the collection. While the first section might not seem like an intertextual reading of South African reality and identity, the thematic analyses and Wicomb's considerations of South African reality cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of intertextuality and how it lends itself to understanding fully and completely the South African context, and I would go so far as even suggesting—the South African condition.

In chapter 4, "Reading, Writing, and Visual Production in the New South Africa", Wicomb makes an observation that is sociological, philosophical and political in nature when she avers "[what] passes for the testing of literature is none other than 'the social conventions of a dominant class, rather than universal logic'" (67). The political and sociological in this assertion lie in the surfacing of the power dynamics that define the politics of knowing and the knowledge project. From the vantage point of an educational theorist, I would also add the politics of pedagogy that can only be fully apprehended when one appreciates, as Boughy and McKenna (1–9) suggest, the factuality that education is both a political and historical undertaking that is defined by deeply personal understandings (I am certain at this point that my reader begins to appreciate the reasoning behind my supplication that we read the text from a transdisciplinary approach). The philosophical component then, lies in the observation of literacy as a standardisation of the social conventions of the dominant class, which invites the questioning of the contemporary South African condition. From here on out, I read the text as a response to this condition for as Van der Vlies notes, Wicomb's writing negotiates the political as she was "transported from the vulgarity of apartheid by books—books opened up different worlds, and brought freedom from an oppressive social order" (12).

The philosophical question in Wicomb's observation inaugurates a consideration of the dominant social class presently that is defined by a dearth of imagination and intellectual sophistication seen in the dominant anti-intellectual vulgarity of the political elites. The philosophical lies in an attempt at discerning what this dearth of imagination and anti-intellectualism means for the contemporary South African academe. Wicomb raises this concern, albeit implicitly, in her

interview with Van der Vlies at the end of the text when she observes "[as the theorists of South-South/inter-epistemic dialogue] say, the north *needs* our input, but populist denigration of 'western knowledge' that surfaced during the [recent] student rebellion is alarming" (277).

The depravity of an anti-intellectual culture in South Africa may be traced back to what Wicomb describes as a culture of violence in our context when she writes, "[if] we think more broadly of culture, the way in which people behave, then it may be more appropriate to talk about our ravaged culture of violence" (63), an observation she comes to owing to an analysis that attempts to understand "Culture Beyond Colour" (chapter 3 of the collection). The intertextuality that defines Wicomb's thinking in the collection, fully surfaces the philosophical along with the psycho-social components that characterise the neuroses that afflict the South African polity.¹ *Race, Nation, Translation* therefore, cannot be understood out of these boundaries of intertextuality and reveals the death of imagination and theory in our context.

The reader might wonder how I come to read Wicomb's work as surfacing/highlighting the death of imagination and theory in the Republic? There are three things that can be said as a mode of substantiating this claim. First, this reading finds substantiation through a close textual analysis of the collection, beginning with the first chapter, wherein Wicomb traces the path "From National to Official Culture". She writes "... as Fanon so persuasively argues, the nostalgic desire for the past is misguided, the very fact that it exists implies its representability, if only with the deployment of irony" (40). Historically, as South Africa sought to define its identity in the international arena and with the looming task of democratic liberation, the mission of fashioning national culture harked back to historical misreading(s), that subsequently were imposed as official culture. Officialdom inaugurated the essentialist and fundamentalist readings of culture that are symptomatic of Mudimbe's observations in *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and Mamdani's notion of a post-colonial state that continues to be ensnared in colonial categories of thought. The death of imagination in this regard is heralded by a return to these essentialist modalities of thought seen in the desire to preserve a utopian conception of African subjectivity through the decolonial discourse—which in and of itself signals the death of theory in our midst. While this might be read as a bold claim, I hold to its applicability in our context owing to the reality that decolonisation has been framed as a return to a pre-colonial Africa, without a sophisti-

cated reading of our conceptions of pre-coloniality as inventions of European domination and subjugation that defined and shaped African subjectivity, being and socio-political economies of ontology and metaphysics.

The second aspect surfacing (even signalling) the death of imagination and theory is the need to grapple with the City State—the University—that imposes micro-management regimes that privilege quantity above quality in the publication regimens of intellectuals contemporarily. In the failure of intellectuals to read beyond their disciplinary silos, evinced (from my disciplinary vantage-point) in philosophical treatises that ignore historiography, political theory and literature along with art theory; social theory in South Africa has become vacuous and meaningless. This observation echoes Wicomb's assertions when she writes, "the reflectionist model of cultural expression, that it simply mirrors what we experience, conveniently conceals the relationship between culture and power" (47). Wicomb's astute observation highlights two things, the death of novel and innovative theory generation, the generation of theory that is cognisant of the socio-political and socio-historical conditions in which we are located. This observation undergirds the second intervention that is surfaced by an intertextual reading of Wicomb's work; the anti-intellectual culture that has firmly taken root in the City State that is the University. This being the reality that frames intellectualism as the object of attack by institutional administrators that would have us (academics and intellectuals) service clients (students) who come into the university, no longer to acquire culture and incisive intellectual training but rather degrees that are hollow and meaningless in the "project of humanity—the project of culture" (Readings 5).

Thirdly and finally, Wicomb surfaces the death of imagination and theory as envisaged in the dearth of intellectual work in the Social Sciences, specifically, that read contemporary societal problems in a holistic fashion. This is to say that Wicomb's work, like many of the literato she makes reference to, i.e. Njabulo Ndebele, Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer, takes seriously a series of social questions as they defined and continue to define South African social existence—these being education, literacy, feminist thinking and existential reality, along with poverty and social inequality. While Philosophy as discipline, which arrogantly enough claims the status of 'mother of all disciplines', may think through the moral and ethical afflictions that define the reality of the South African polity, the discipline does little to surface the interconnections of the abovementioned questions, maintaining rather the

notion of thinking for thinking's sake. This cowardly move that is used by contemporary literary scholars, art theoreticians and practitioners along with philosophers, would define these disciplines as apolitical and ahistorical—choosing rather to address their subject matter as aesthetic objects that are devoid of the political.

Wicomb's *Race, Nation, Translation* highlights that this move is nothing short of an intellectually trite laziness that ought to be chastised for its part in the maintenance of an anti-intellectual tradition that is arresting the South African academe. Wicomb opines pertinently, albeit an opinion that might be symptomatic of a generational misreading, when she avers, "indeed, I am not sure if culture is of much interest to the generation of born-free black South Africans" (266). I frame this observation as a generational misreading on the premise of cultural spaces that have emerged to interrogate culture and its role in the continued growth and development of the South African polity. I would suggest that the disinterest in the traditionally defined cultural domain by Black/Indigenous youth stems from a deracinated reading of cultural and historical artefacts as aesthetic artefacts that are both apolitical and ahistorical—as framed by disciplinary domains that would claim a second order disciplinary make-up. Put differently, in the move that frames Philosophy, Literary Theory, Art Theory and Practice as second order disciplines that are not concerned with the political, the intellectual genuflects to an anti-intellectual tradition that divorces the political and historical from their intellectual pursuits—a move that was and continues to be contested by the contemporary politically conscious student body.

In sum, I would suggest that any intellectual who is invested in the project of theory generation in the South African context, or theory that is concerned with thinking through and about South African reality, do themselves a favour and engage systematically—through reading and rereading *Race, Nation, Translation*. My recommendation comes from the desire to reinvigorate the South African academe with insightful and innovative theory developments that are genuinely and authentically invested in finding questions that will lead to a modicum of novel theory emanating from the global South—and specifically from South Africa.

Note

1. These neuroses are evinced in the anti-intellectualism that has gripped South Africa— with intellectuals, specifically Black intellectuals, being framed as anti-Black, Afro-pessimists, and 'educated' Blacks. Furthermore, this culture is seen in how intellectual

training in the City State that is the University buys into the condescension that would have us read and teach secondary texts or interpretations as opposed to the actual texts themselves. I suggest that this framing underscores my claim of the death of imagination and theory in our context.

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