

Body, Race, and Place in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*

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Introduction

Zoë Wicomb is one of the most renowned contemporary South African writers. She holds honorary degrees from the University of Pretoria and the University of Cape Town, which signify her established position within the South African literary scene (Attridge 3). While she situates herself in the rich literary tradition of South African writing—both in English and in Afrikaans—she confesses that she has also been significantly influenced by female African-American writers, especially novelist and literary critic Toni Morrison, who she described as “instrumental in my formation as a writer” (“Zoë Wicomb in Conversation” 217). Indeed, one of the most obvious references the novel makes is to *Playing in the Dark*, a critical literary piece by Toni Morrison that examines the treatment of black bodies in canonical American literature. Just as Morrison is a significant figure in critical race studies in the United States, Wicomb has also contributed to the theoretical discussion of racial identity in South Africa.

Zoë Wicomb's 2006 novel *Playing in the Light* examines the impact of racial passing in South Africa. The novel is set around the time when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was taking place. Marion Campbell, a white woman and owner of a successful travel agency in Cape Town, finds that her coloured parents

have crossed over the racial line to live a safer and better life under the Apartheid regime. Marion seeks the truth about her family origins by taking a trip with Brenda Mackay, a young coloured employee at Marion's firm. Marion then begins to embrace her family's history, although she undergoes difficult emotions in her efforts to accept the story. The novel's focus occasionally shifts from the protagonist and inserts different characters' experiences as well.

The arbitrary categorization of coloured and their unstable identities are the background of the novel. In *Making Race and Nation*, Anthony W. Marx compares the development of racial policy in the United States, South Africa, and Brazil. The United States abolished the category of "mulatto" for the "mixed-race" population by the mid-nineteenth century and enforced the "one drop of blood" rule. The mulatto category disappeared after the 1910 census, and the extreme Jim Crow segregation encouraged solidarity among blacks and ex-mulattos (70). On the other hand, the treatment of those in the racial middle ground developed differently in South Africa. During the early colonial era, those with white fathers were accepted as white and were able to advance socially. A distinct notion of colouredness developed gradually when political restrictions, such as entrance into schools or voting rights, separated coloured populations from whites and Africans. After the South African War, the population of coloureds was given a distinct category in the census. The mulatto population was allotted more privilege than blacks but less than whites in the Union of South Africa. Only when they experienced more intense discrimination under the Apartheid regime did coloured students begin joining the Black Consciousness Movement and reclassifying themselves as black (70–72).

The category of coloured is still provoking discussion even after the fall of Apartheid. In current South African coloured studies, a debate has raged about how to define the category of coloured and on what ground: race or culture. According to Diana Mafe, coloured studies in contemporary South Africa developed differently from "mixed-race" studies in the United States. She summarizes that the prevailing tone in coloured scholarship is to see coloured identities in non-racial terms and instead to discuss them in the context of "cultural creativity, creolized formation

shaped by South Africa's history ...” (145). She explains that in American scholarship, “[l]oaded terms like ‘mixed race’ and ‘multiracial’ are integral to ‘mixed race studies’ and few scholars suggest doing away with the terms altogether or viewing mixed subjects through a strictly cultural lens” (145). Here, two opposite attitudes about race can be observed.

It is here that attention to the body and lived experience become crucial. In an essay published in *Writing South Africa*, Wicomb shows interest in recording the materiality of a racialized and feminized body as follows: “Not only can the body be thought of metaphorically as a text, as explored in recent Euro-feminist theory, but I also wish to consider the actual materiality of black bodies that bear the marked pigmentation of miscegenation, and the way in which that relates to political culture” (93). Wicomb attempts to distance herself from working solely on textual and metaphorical strategies but sees incorporating a more material depiction of “lived experience” (101) as important.

In addition to the questions of body and race, the novel explores the sense of displacement the protagonist has internalized as well as her failed attempt to build a relationship with her surroundings. I examine this sense of displacement and rootlessness within the context of her parents’ demographic move and the cultural transformation for social uprooting under the Apartheid regime, namely from a rural coloured neighbourhood to a “respectable” white community in Cape Town.

I first argue that the novel engages in a critique of the epistemic bias of the urban middle-class white protagonist. This critique is explored through the process of the protagonist’s gradual realization of her own white ignorance. In addition, I determine that the protagonist’s epistemic change also coincides with the re-evaluation and acceptance of her Afrikaner and coloured heritage that her “play-white” parents painfully rejected in the process of their racial reclassification. By tracing these changes of the protagonist, I argue that attention to physicality and memories of the body are crucial in understanding Wicomb’s feminist commitment to liberate gendered and racialized bodies from the oppressive idea of normative feminine bodies.

Marion's White Ignorance and Racial Insensitivities

At the beginning of the novel, the racial identity of Marion and her self-knowledge are deeply seeded in her whiteness, while a sense of emptiness continues to surround her. As a white woman who owns a flat in a guarded community in Bloubergstrand, Cape Town, Marion never needed to question her worldview. The first scene of the novel begins with Marion on the balcony of her flat, where she finds a dead bird. Marion decides to dispose of it by leaving her domestic help a message. She had not seen the domestic help in person for months by then, but she does not question the relationship. When the narrative moves to describe the interior of her room, Marion seems emotionally detached from her otherwise impeccable flat, described as “the fulfilment of an adolescent dream” (*Playing* 1) that could come straight from an interior magazine. In the secluded apartment, Marion chooses to be on the balcony most of the time. The narrative describes the balcony as “the space both inside and out” (1), emphasizing its ambiguity and in-betweenness. While she is in the dream room that gets automatically tidy and clean through the invisible domestic labour, Marion's body seems to be unrooted and ungrounded.

While her relationship with her flat is unstable, her career and social position in Cape Town are secure (18). Reflecting the time of employment equity policies and black economic empowerment, the all-white travel agency Marion manages feels the necessity to respect the country's diversity. To replace a retired worker with her limited budget, Marion welcomes a young coloured woman, Brenda Mackay. Although she believes that she is more “progressive” than other employees who are not comfortable with Brenda, Marion herself is still sensitive to racial markers. For instance, Marion describes Brenda as having “township eyes, almond shaped and velvety, bovine black” (27). Later, Marion wonders whether Brenda's coloured intonation, or “Cape Flat accent” (17) has potentially negative effects on her clients as follows: “The girl's voice goes up and down, companionable and soothing, but professional. Would the client know that she is coloured?” (48). Even though Marion withholds her thoughts soon after it occurs, she cannot help but scrutinize her first coloured

employee for any deviations from the white norm. In another scene, Marion's inner monologue reveals her difficulties driving her Mercedes, which highlights the way she views her encounter with poor non-whites in the post-apartheid era as follows: "You can't go anywhere nowadays without a flock of unsavoury people crowding around you, making demands, trying to make you feel guilty for being white and hardworking, earning your living; ... being blackmailed by the likes of these every time you park your car" (28). Here, she is experiencing a demand for money on the street, caused by her appearance and her light complexion. The phrases such as "a flock of unsavoury people" and "the likes of these" show that poor and unemployed black Africans on the street are described as a social group with no faces, as indistinguishable, in her gaze. They exist not as individuals who she can interact with but as a faceless category of people. Moreover, she defends her current social status due to her being "hardworking," insensitive to the fact that she was advantaged from the beginning. In fact, the following is what Charles W. Mills calls white ignorance: "So white normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures" (Mills 28). Marion's inner monologue at the beginning clearly demonstrates that her sense of self is deeply embedded in a worldview brought about by her white privilege. As her racial identity is considered normative, she is free to judge others' physical features, gestures, and intonations that she perceives as not meeting her professional standards. What is crucial in the novel is seeing how her perception and self-knowledge shifts as the story advances.

Brenda's Colouredness

Brenda Mackay is portrayed as an ambitious and intelligent coloured woman who is eager to climb the class ladder. She is ready to leave township life, secure economic independence, and improve her social status. Being one of the first people in her community to receive a university degree, she is treated differently in her neigh-

bourhood in the township. She wishes to leave her mother's house in the township soon, although her low income and the increasing price of Cape Town real estate are not helping her achieve this goal anytime soon.

While Brenda is seeking financial independence and social enhancement, she is embracing her coloured culture and a sense of beauty and history. When Marion stops at Brenda's family house in a township in Bonteheuwel without advanced notice, the narrative initially focalizes on Brenda's coloured life and culture there. The kitchen is filled with "a delicious smell of chicken curry" (63) that her mother is preparing, highlighting their unique cuisine. When Brenda goes shopping for a missing ingredient in her mother's curry, the shop owner recites one of his struggle poetries made under the apartheid era, and he proudly tells a story of the political meetings he used to attend. In addition to emphasizing the culturally vibrant aspect of the coloured community she belongs to, Brenda is also interested in the San rock painting, as if to look for validation of her coloured lineage (79). In other words, Brenda is contributing to a sense of coloured community, where their distinct history and culture are acknowledged. In contrast to Marion, Brenda's body is fully grounded in the place.

The Consequences of Racial Transformation

The case of Helen, Marion's mother, demonstrates the experience of a marked body and the painful consequences of racial passing in the Apartheid era. In the independent chapter in which the narrative focuses on Helen to document her experience of becoming white, she visits the British councillor's office to ask for an affidavit that would prove her white racial status. She prepares herself for the important meeting by reading an etiquette book and learning white manners. In the lengthy scenes, Helen and Councillor Carter's perspectives are alternately presented. Carter is perfectly aware of her situation of "play-white," and he focuses on Helen's body parts, pointing out her coloured physical features, such as "a certain prominence about her cheekbones," imagining her breast under the shirt as "brown nipples set in dark aure-

oles" (*Playing* 139). By racializing her body, Carter regards Helen as a female body, whose marked racial inferiority justifies his sexual manipulation. After the first moment of unwanted touch from Carter, the narrative's focus returns to Helen. She is in a state of shock and confusion, which was felt through physical pain as follows: "A block of blinding pain severed her head from the rest of her body, so that it was an enormous effort to put one foot before another, but she had to put herself together, hold her head high, since that was the only defence against obliteration" (140). Although narrated in the third person, the narrative depicts the emotion and sensation her body experienced. After the initial shock, Helen convinces herself that it was a procedure that she must go through to pass as white. The sexual demand continues until she finally receives the document from him.

After she successfully becomes white, Helen decides to change to the Anglican Church, cutting herself off from any traces of coloured culture and heritage. Accepted as a humble member of the religious community, an English Father chooses her among others to participate in a ceremony where he washes the feet of his parishioners. During the ceremony, Helen feels as if "[t]he last trace of her sins would be washed away, and she would finally be white as driven snow" (160). Indeed, this symbolic transformation of her feet is significant as "the memory of skin" (160) — explained earlier in the novel as being thick from her barefoot coloured childhood— is now completely forgotten and replaced by the idea of clean and soft white feet. After the painful procedure, Helen's body is given a new cultural meaning that secures her social enhancement and promises full membership with the Anglican Church.

Marion's Moment of Epistemic Friction

Brenda accompanies Marion's journey of self-discovery, both physically and intellectually. By taking a trip with Brenda to Wuppertal, Marion finds that Tokkie, a coloured domestic servant in her childhood, was actually her maternal grandmother. After learning the truth about her background, she experiences an upheaval of emo-

tions—a response to suddenly being cut out from her unquestionably stable white identity. She confesses her confusion as follows:

It may be true that being white, black or coloured means nothing, but it is also true that things are no longer the same; there must be a difference between what things are and what they mean. These categories may have slimmed down, may no longer be tagged with identity cards, but once they were pot-bellied with meaning. (106)

The dilemma that Marion feels stems from the fact that in contemporary South Africa, theoretically or politically, the notion of “race” is deconstructed and is something that can supposedly be overcome⁽¹⁾. However, her anxiety is based on the fact that for many, including Marion, “these categories” of race are still socially valid and create different experiences for racialized bodies.

Through her search for her family origins, Marion reflects on her racial identity for the first time. I read these moments of reflection as the novel engaging with a social change. In the process of Marion’s journey of self-discovery, Marion and Brenda cultivate a friendship. As they become closer during the trip, Marion begins to feel a special connection with Brenda: “why does she have the irrational feeling that Brenda knows things about her?” (78). Earlier, Marion reveals that since her childhood she has never allowed her friends to stay at her place. Even though there were not many other options available due to Marion’s injured foot, it is still notable that it was Brenda who could stay in her flat for the first time. In a sense, it was the sign of accommodation of the Other for her. The feeling of attraction is mutual; when Marion melts down in her flat after realizing that she is not who she thought she was, Brenda consoles her: “Brenda can do nothing but lie down on the bed and coax Marion into doing the same, hold her tightly in her arms, stroke the shaking shoulders, reset her cheek on Marion’s face to keep her from rising. She whispers that everything’s alright” (100). The two are described as “[l]ike lovers” (100). The intimate touch here and the comfort that both felt create a sense of mutual understand-

ing between them.

The next morning, Marion and Brenda bring up a peach in Marion's kitchen as a subject: "She stares at her peach; she cannot bring herself to eat it. Naked, slippery—that's me, that's who I am, she thinks. Hurlled into the world fully grown, without a skin" (101). For Marion, this is the first conscious moment of self-estrangement from her own body. A sense of discomfort with her own body occurs within her, a sense that the confidence in her worldview has suddenly been shattered by the unknown. Her skin colour no longer promises the link to white lineage for English or Afrikaner. Moreover, the discussion of the peach leads to Marion's unlearning of body restrictions. Brenda mentions bodily manner of coloureds and blacks when Marion hesitates to eat the peach in front of Brenda: "It's not such a tragedy being black, you know And just think of the other benefits: you need no longer speak in hushed tones—you're free to be noisy, free to eat a peach, a juicy ripe one ..." (102). Here, Brenda is inviting Marion to free her body from the ideal of white femininity.

In terms of a racial narrative of the self that affects the body, Marion's reserved physical manner was disciplined by her mother Helen, who desperately needed to prove that they were assimilating into white middle-class culture in every possible way. Helen would describe "the laughter of jolly coloured people" as "impossible" (146) and discipline Marion to "be still" and "mind their p's and q's" (152), restricting her body movement and language. Helen does her best to get rid of poor-white and coloured manners from her daughter—aspects that have traditionally been marginalized in South Africa. In other words, Marion's body was culturally disciplined by the racial discourse on the ideal body.

Empowering women of colour and dismantling the notion of the normative body are treated as primary political issues in the novel, and these are continuing themes from Wicomb's previous novel, *David's Story*. One example can be seen when Marion meets her aunt from her father's side, Elsie. Elsie was involved in the resistance movement and married a man of darker hue, and she was thus despised by Helen. The omniscient narrative reveals that the encounter between Helen and Elsie

was tense as Elsie did not care to respect Helen's obsession with white manners at tea. After Marion visits Elsie to learn about their family history, Marion finds that her body movements start to become influenced by Elsie. For example, the way Marion laughs begins to change: "Marion shakes her head and laughs. She wonders if she's been trying to emulate Elsie's running-water laughter. No, I feel fine—a personality change perhaps? Perhaps it's what the touchy-feelies call finding myself" (182). The fact that Marion allowed herself to laugh freely suggests that Marion overcame the inscription of idealized white femininity on her body. This is a physical sign that she went through an epistemic change after these conversations with Brenda and Elsie.

Marion's Reconceptualization of Whiteness and Its Limit

In the aforementioned article, Wicomb envisions colouredness as a site where continuous negotiations among different groups of people are encouraged. Wicomb dismisses "a totalizing Colouredness," and instead calls for "multiple belongings" as follows:

'multiple belongings' could be seen as an alternative way of viewing a culture where participation in a number of coloured micro-communities whose interests conflict and overlap could become a rehearsal of cultural life in the larger South African community where we learn to perform the same kind of negotiations in terms of identity within a lived culture characterized by difference ("Shame" 105)

Although the article was published a decade earlier, the need for negotiations and a reconceptualization of the given identities are discernible in Marion's process of resituating her racial identity and experiencing others' cultures. Wicomb's idea of "multiple belonging" was characterized as the continuous negotiation of different identities. In the novel, Marion begins to conceptualize race in a similar way as follows:

I was white, now I will have to cross over; but if those places are no longer the same and have lost their meaning, there can be no question of returning to a place where my parents once were. Perhaps I can now keep crossing to and fro, to different places; perhaps that is what new is all about—an era of unremitting crossings (*Playing* 107).

As I have discussed already, Marion's white ignorance was a sign that race, as a visible marker, still determines everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa. However, to envision a truly equal place, unremitting crossings must be an available option for both whites and non-whites. The question remains whether Marion will continue to blur racial categories and borders.

After discovering the family secret, Marion takes a trip to Europe, stopping in the United Kingdom as a final destination. It is in London that she is struck with the “familiar emptiness” within her: “It is in the assumed familiarity of London that she is invaded by the virus of loneliness The sensation of a hole, a curious, negative definition of the familiar emptiness develops in her chest ...” (188). This sense of emptiness in the narrative changes gradually as Marion begins to situate her condition in a historical context through conversations with others. For example, she recognizes her Afrikaner heritage vividly while she is speaking with a local Scotsman, Dougie, a stranger who is feeding birds when she first sees him. Interested in his local stories, Marion starts to forge a sort of strange friendship with Dougie. When Dougie mentions the Scottish poet Robert Burns, Marion recalls an Afrikaner poet as follows:

Do they know Burns, the best poet in the world? It rings a bell, Marion frowns—and then she is transported to primary school. Yes, the father of Afrikaans poetry, Reitz (another F.W., as it happens), wrote the first Afrikaans poem after Burns' Tam O'Shanter, except his Tam is a coloured man called Klaas. ... when Marion recites, clapping her hands to the demonic dance, as they did at school—Aleksander Klipsalmander? Trap hulle algar met malkander—he recog-

nises the iambic beat, the guttural g's and rolling r's (206).

While the episode indicates Afrikaner culture's influence from Scottish literature, as well as the historical and ongoing relationship between Scotland and South Africa, what is noteworthy is that something as fundamental as beats and sounds in the language can open up trust between the two strangers and create a connection here. This moment can be viewed as Marion's discovery of her own centre, grounding herself into the language and the body that creates the rhythm. It is a moment when her Afrikaner cultural heritage becomes her physical experience and a tool to connect with others.

At the same time, Marion begins to contemplate the limitation of her imagination and becomes aware of her white ignorance for the first time. She is now able to imagine the story of her domestic help. Looking back at the time she casually ordered Maria to get rid of the dead bird in the balcony, she contemplates: "Why had she left the bird for Maria to dispose of? What had Maria done with it? ... she knows nothing of Maria and her family" (178). This is the first time Marion acknowledges "the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation" (Alcoff 223) that has unconsciously shaped her behaviour.

In this way, Marion has become someone who could meditate on the continuing effect of racial inequality while acknowledging both coloured and Afrikaner cultural heritages. When Marion returns to Cape Town and to her office, she is greeted by a group of friends and colleagues, including Brenda, at her surprise party. There she finds different styles of meals, including coloured food, and Afrikaner songs are sung by her father and her employee. One of her employees' comments: "in this New South Africa we can play at anything, mix'n match, talk and sing any way we like" (*Playing* 213). The party seems to symbolize a moment of a new relationship where people's cultural differences and identities are not absolute but are overlapped in a utopian fashion. In other words, the party scene suggests that Marion returned changed. She is now able to situate her complicated upbringing in its historical con-

text while praising “multiple belongings.” Furthermore, Marion’s sense of emptiness begins to recede; Marion makes a surprise announcement that she will move out of her flat and find a new place to live with her elderly father, John. This is a symbolic moment as it can be viewed as a departure from her sense of dislocation, which was a consequence of a constant pressure of social and cultural uprooting initiated by her parents.

However, it is telling that this is not the end of the novel. After the party, the narrative that focuses on Brenda reveals that she finds out, with bitterness, that her friendship with Marion is not as solid as she had expected it to become. Brenda feels disappointed that Marion’s manner remains “civil,” but they are not intimate enough to be called close friends (215). From the perspective of Brenda, readers see that Marion seems to have withdrawn to her small circle of middle-class friends. Brenda confronts Marion directly and insists on writing a story about Marion’s father. Brenda reveals that while Marion was away, Brenda checked on John as he kept calling the office, and John told her his life story when she visited him. Writing his story requires further examination of racial identity among the white working class and rural farmers, something that John has internalized and suppressed over time. Brenda’s idea infuriates Marion, and she sharply rejects her proposal.

The attempt to write John’s story demonstrates that Brenda continually chooses to engage in a dialogue on the impact of “race”⁽²⁾. Does this suggest that without examining the concept of whiteness for rural and working-class whites, the unlearning of white ignorance cannot entirely be achieved? At least the dispute between Marion and Brenda suggests that Marion’s self-reflection on her racial identity and white privilege has limitation, and Brenda will be the one to continue examining the significance of whiteness for rural and working-class whites through writing John’s story.

Conclusion

This study examined Zoë Wicomb’s 2006 novel, *Playing in the Light*, focusing

on the way it critiques white privilege and epistemic injustice in “democratic” South Africa, with attention given to the body. The female protagonist’s self-perception is influenced deeply by her racial understanding of the self as a white woman, which thus allows her to have certain ignorance and insensitivity towards the situations of people of colour. I then traced the process of Marion’s change that occurs after learning her family secret of racial passing, focusing on how the epistemic change occurs with a physical unlearning of the racialized norms imposed on female bodies. The process of her epistemic change also allows her to overcome her emptiness and sense of constant displacement. She then seems to begin envisioning a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of racial identity that resonates with “multiple belongings,” a concept that Wicomb explored in her critical essay on colouredness. However, Brenda’s overtaking the story at the end suggests that the critical discussion on white subjectivities in South Africa is still an unfinished story. In this way, the novel succeeds in vividly conveying lingering and unresolved feelings surrounding “race” through experiential narratives and pays close attention to its relation to class, which is still a crucial element when reading literature of the supposedly post-racial era.

Notes

- (1) For a detailed discussion on the treatment of race in post-apartheid South African scholarship, see Erasmus.
- (2) The need for critical intervention on whiteness in African scholarship has started to emerge as Zyl-Hermann and Boersema argue in “Introduction: the Politics of Whiteness in Africa.” Brenda’s determination to record Marion’s father’s story, who truly believes in his “boer” identity, can be seen as an attempt to fill this gap.

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