

**Moving in “a forest of hieroglyphs”:** Enigmatic and mutable signs of identity in  
**Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light***

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This article analyses Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, focusing on protagonist Marion’s process of coming to terms with her coloured identity as she puzzles over secrets and signs, struggling to endow them with meaning, but finding they only work as ghostly and elusive traces of the past. Wicomb’s engagement with colouredness is framed by a recognition of semiotic and hermeneutic processes of identity construction and material representation – rejecting fixed and essentialised conceptions of identity in her special focus on racial identity. She privileges, instead, visual materializations of identity characterised by metamorphosis, opacity and semantic elusiveness. In the context of post-apartheid concern with the recuperation of damaged, oppressed or hidden identities, Wicomb rejects a logic of empirical verification, referentiality and closure, presenting identity-making and representation as an ever-open performative process, dependent upon imaginative projection and reconstruction, and hence endowed with provisionality and indeterminacy.

**Keywords:** Zoë Wicomb; identity; colouredness; secret; sign.

Zoë Wicomb’s (2006) novel *Playing in the Light* is constructed as a quest narrative in which the main character, Marion Campbell – a young middle-class white woman living in post-1994 Cape Town – embarks on a personal journey that will lead to the discovery of her coloured identity, one that her parents had kept hidden from her as they had successfully passed as whites during apartheid. To the extent that Marion is the carrier of a secret transmitted by her parents, her life story can be approached through Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s theory of the transgenerational phantom, “an undisclosed family secret handed down to an unwitting descendant” (Rand 1994, 16). As a series of clues alert her about the “unspeakable fact” (Abraham 1994, 172) of her and her parents’ colouredness and hence about “the gaps left within [her] by the secrets of

others” (171), Marion becomes aware of her life story as irretrievably traversed by alterity and secrecy, and this leads her to a process of self-discovery and search for meaning.

In this process, Marion is essentially presented as an interpreter and decipherer of secrets. In their response to Wicomb’s works, critics have underlined how they tend to represent reality as a complex and misleading system of signs. Sue Kossew (2010) has shown how, in spite of their seeming semantic fixity and authority, representations of monuments in Wicomb’s fiction allow for destabilising and anti-canonical interpretations. Dorothy Driver (2010), for her part, has spoken of “the struggle over the sign” (528) in Wicomb’s texts, which often takes place against ideologically and politically imposed meanings. Kossew and Driver, then, highlight how Wicomb’s texts suggest competing and conflicting interpretations of signs. My emphasis, on the other hand, is on those signs that resist being deciphered, working as enigmatic materialities whose literal and symbolic meanings can only be partially grasped by Wicomb’s characters. Thus, I see Marion’s process of coming to terms with her new identity as a coloured person as one of puzzling over signs, which she struggles to endow with meaning and fit into the narrative of her life story, but which can only work as ghostly and elusive traces of the past.

Through the analysis of this process I argue that Wicomb’s reflection on the coloured condition – the aspect of the novel to which critics have paid most attention<sup>1</sup> – has to be seen as part of a complex engagement with the semiotic and hermeneutic processes involved in the construction of identity and its material representation – one that highlights the problematic and indirect relation between external signs and the identity or meaning they purportedly stand for, privileging visual materializations of identity characterised by metamorphosis, opacity and semantic elusiveness. In this way, *Playing*

*in the Light*, in its contribution to the national meditation on the legacy of apartheid and the process of refashioning identities taking place in democratic South Africa, rejects fixed and essentialised conceptions of identity. Instead, identity is presented as a performative act of playing, materialized in a configuration of signs with no correspondence to a preexistent essence or reference, in constant transformation and mutability.

From its opening pages, *Playing in the Light* presents Marion as the recipient of signs which may – or not – have a hidden meaning and which she may – or not – decipher. Thus, the very first scene shows a guinea fowl falling at her feet, an accident that she decides to dismiss as having no significance (Wicomb 2006, 3). This reluctance to engage in semiotic interpretation goes hand in hand with her refusal to go to therapy in order to deal with the panic attacks from which she regularly suffers and that she simply sees as deriving from her peculiar childhood and her parents' strained relationship. These attacks, however, following Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994), can be seen as functioning as the first symptoms or early manifestation of a repressed conflict or trauma dwelling in the depths of Marion's unconscious: "the living-dead knowledge of *someone else's secret*" (Abraham and Torok 1994, 188; emphasis in the original)

The fact that Marion is "haunted" (Abraham and Torok 1994, 188) by a transgenerational phantom<sup>2</sup> becomes clear in the series of dreams she has, and that she feels the urge to relate to people at the office, hoping that "in the telling, the dream will release at least some of its meaning" (Wicomb 2006, 29). These dreams, presented in a Freudian fashion, work as a "picture-puzzle" (Freud 1961, 260) whose signs, in the event that they are interpreted, will provide Marion with meaningful material to incorporate into her self-narrative. In one of her dreams, she sees a woman with a face

“sunburnt and cracked like tree bark” (Wicomb 2006, 31), a vision that triggers the memory of a family servant, Tokkie, who looked after Marion when she was a child, and who, as she later discovers, was actually her grandmother on her mother’s side. It is in these dreams, then, that we first see how images work in the novel as the trace of a past that “stubbornly manifests itself” (Attwell and Harlow 2000, 2). These dreams also mark the beginning of Marion’s engagement with the process of “interpreting something hidden by deciphering manifest signs” (Miller 1992, 58).

The fact that these traces of the past can only manifest themselves at an unconscious level is a consequence of Marion’s parents’ decision to get rid of every material proof of their coloured identity and family history. Early in the novel we learn that Marion has “no photographs of her ancestors” (Wicomb 2006, 26), as her parents, Helen and John, in trying to build a new life as whites, turned her childhood home in the Observatory into an empty one:

The pursuit of whiteness is in competition with history. Building a new life means doing so from scratch, keeping a pristine house, without clutter, without objects that clamour to tell of a past [ ... ].

If the whiteness they pursue is cool and haughty and blank, history is uncool, reaches out gawkily for affinities, asserts itself boldly, threatens to mark, to break through and stain the primed white canvas that is their life. (152)

If the novel metaphorically associates whiteness with light, in this passage we see how whiteness is also presented as a blankness, one that works both in a literal and a figurative sense: blankness, in relation to the racial question, understood as the absence of colour, but blankness also understood as the absence of a signifying materiality that may reveal identity or tell any personal or collective story. Dealing with the multiple interactions between writing and photography in different media and authors, Karen

Beckman and Liliane Weissberg (2013) have pointed to the importance of images and photographs at the family home, functioning as the visual rendering of a personal narrative, so that “the graphic trace of missing photographs becomes the bearer of much more significant absences and losses” (xiv). Helen and John have turned their house – and by extension, their own lives and Marion’s – into a “white canvas”, a blank, a space of absence and loss, deprived of history and memory, and hence, of substantial and meaningful identity.

History, however, “threatens to *mark*” (Wicomb 2006, 152; my emphasis), that is, to leave its material and visible trace, and it is precisely in a photograph that the mark of history comes to manifest itself:<sup>3</sup> that of Patricia Williams, an anti-apartheid activist and torture victim whose image in the *Cape Times* inexplicably captures Marion’s attention and triggers her decision to excavate the past. Williams first haunts Marion in the form of a material object – the photograph itself – that she feels inexplicably addresses her and that she carefully scrutinizes. As she reads about the imprisonment, torture and sexual abuse that Williams suffered in the late 1980s, she feels that

the face retains the memory of these acts. There is a hint of asymmetry, of distortion, as if the *marks* of a fist lie as a *trace* just below the healed features. The ghost of the past hovers in her gaze. (55; my emphasis)

Through Williams’s photograph, Marion comes to confront the materiality of history, which can only manifest itself – through marks and traces – in a fragmented and incomplete way. But it is not history in the abstract that Marion encounters in Williams. She feels that some kind of personal bond links her with this stranger – who, it will later emerge, is actually a member of her extended family – and “whose face is that of the beloved Tokkie” (74). Marion, then, would like to have some kind of access to Williams

herself and through her into Tokkie, the woman who, when she was a child, gave her the maternal love that her mother denied her.

In *Ariadne's Thread*, J. Hillis Miller (1992) analyses the different literal and figurative meanings of the word *character*, pointing to the play back and forth that, in the use of this word, takes place between its meaning as a material or physical mark and the complex of invisible qualities that the mark indicates (55–57). In relation to this matter, Miller discusses Walter Benjamin's "Schicksal und Charakter (Fate and character)", in which the German thinker similarly reflects on "the uses of the German word *Charakter* to name the marks on a person's face as signs of inner 'character'", leading him to conclude that neither character nor fate "can ever be confronted directly, only known through the signs for them" (61). Marion approaches "William's face" as "a sign alerting her to the truth" (Wicomb 2006, 62). It is a physical mark, then, that "stands for something else, 'means' it. The mark ceases thereby to be simply or literally itself, since it has become a letter, a character, a sign – that is, a figure. The literal is already irreducibly figurative" (Miller 1992, 57). In her search for truth, Marion eagerly tries to read the marks she encounters as signs that may lead her to whatever they stand for. It is meaning, then, that in the event that it reveals itself, will only do so "through signs that stand for something to which there is no possibility of direct access" (62).

This emphasis on marks and signs with only an indirect relation to meaning is seen in the use of the motif of the face, which triggers Marion's semiotic journey and governs it throughout. From the very beginning it is as a face that Patricia Williams arrests Marion's attention – "The newspaper on the table is folded into a quarter, framing a face" (49) – and as a face she begins to haunt her everywhere (Wicomb 2016, 73). As the sign of a truth that Marion never totally grasps, Williams's face stages the paradox inherent in this "semiotic medium" (Frow 2014, 226) as analysed by John Frow

in *Character & Person*: the face can be seen as window to the soul but also as mask (228), standing in a masked relation to the spirit which lies behind, making it available but also concealing it (229). This contradictory quality of the face is significantly underlined early in the novel, as John's face is first presented as a manifest sign providing direct access to the emotions and feelings it materializes: "For all his jolly banter, Marion recognises in his facial lines the guardedness, the hesitation that must have been there all along" (Wicomb 2016, 3). In the next paragraph, however, the text turns against this expressive conception of the face, presenting it now as an undecipherable surface: "Family! he used to exclaim elliptically, shaking his head and pulling a face she could not interpret" (4).

Putting a stronger emphasis on the face as sign and on the hermeneutic processes it arouses, Miller (1992) deals with Wittgenstein's famous assertion in *Philosophical Investigations* that "Meaning is a physiognomy", in order to interrogate "the assumption that the meaning of a sign is its correspondence with something extrasemiotic" (83). As opposed to the common assumption that there is a "self", "consciousness" or "moral character" that manifests itself in signs such as the face, Miller, through Wittgenstein, claims that the signs themselves constitute that character: "They *are* that character. They *are* that character as they are read by the man himself or by his neighbours, that is, when used in a certain way" (1992, 89; emphasis in the original). Miller is defending a theory of meaning as "performative, constitutive, not referential" (89), and as I am trying to show, Wicomb also espouses this theory, determining her conception of identity construction and representation.

Although she learns a few factual details about Williams, first through the newspaper and towards the end of the novel through her aunt Elsie, Marion does not really get to know the character or identity supposedly lying behind Williams's face. In fact, the

relevance of this face as sign for Marion's personal development derives less from its expressive, referential or symbolic value, than from its status as a material mark that, in its capacity to slide from one place to another, comes to transform the marks and signs constituting Marion's familiar world. First, from being safely contained in a newspaper photograph, Williams's image comes to spread itself on the sea, disrupting the comfortable view that Marion, from her house, has had until then: "From her balcony, she stares in horror at an enlarged face floating on the water, a disfigured face on the undulating waves, swollen with water" (Wicomb 2016, 55). As this passage shows, the face, as material mark, is characterised by mutability, fluctuation and disfigurement. To borrow terms from Paul de Man (1979), one could say that *Playing in the Light* is concerned with "the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration" (926; emphasis in the original). This slippage between face and defacement in Williams's face undermines its capacity as a sign to stand for a single, unitary, fixed identity, a univocity that is definitely ruled out as her face simultaneously stands for another identity: "Tokkie, it is Tokkie's face on the water" (Wicomb 2016, 55).

The face starts persecuting Marion everywhere, even appearing in her father's house, thus transforming Marion's reading of the material signs of history she encounters not only in the private realm but also in the South African public space:

At least the terror of the Williams face stretched on the water is dissipating, dispersed into family history. The history of the country, too, has slid from the textbook into the very streets of the city, so that these landmarks that constitute the world – Robben Island, Table Mountain – are no longer the bright images of the tourist brochures. Nothing is the same. (Wicomb 2016, 177)



When Marion first encounters it, Williams's face stands out as a clearly localized material mark. As this passage shows, however, it undergoes a process of dispersion, becoming one sign among the many others that Marion has to decipher in order to trace her family history. But the most important fact to which this passage alludes is how, thanks to the process that Williams's face has initiated, Marion's reading of "landmarks" such as Robben Island and Table Mountain, which due to their iconic status are representative of the identity of South Africa as a nation, has been radically altered, so that she cannot see them as "the bright images of the tourist brochures" any more. Wicomb's choice of the term "*landmark*" (my emphasis) cannot be read as a coincidence, for it suggests a conception of the elements of geography as signs susceptible to be read and interpreted in multiple and contradictory ways. Through Williams's face, the mark of history comes to be inscribed not only upon Marion's house and her personal life, but upon the whole South African landscape, in which she is now able to read stories of suffering and oppression that she had previously ignored.

This reading is reinforced because, as the novel emphasises (Wicomb 2016, 74, 76), Williams's story is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) story. As Marion's personal trauma unravels against the backdrop of the TRC hearings and is presented as tied to a story – Williams's – told in this context, it acquires national and collective reverberations.<sup>4</sup> Wicomb has defined the TRC as "the public, institutionalized remembering and narration of trauma" (2010, 19). *Playing in the Light* suggests the mutual involvement of individual and collective trauma in the South African context and the complexities and paradoxes of both personal and national processes of coming to terms with the past. According to Nicholas Rand (1994), Abraham and Torok's idea of the phantom helps us understand "the phantomatic return of shameful secrets on the level of individuals, families, the community, and possibly even entire nations" (169).

In *Playing in the Light*, Williams's phantom<sup>5</sup> cannot be seen as separate from all the other innumerable phantoms from the past haunting the South African nation, which Marion starts to listen to for the first time, turning her into "a reluctant traveller who has landed in a foreign country without so much as a phrase book" (Wicomb 2016, 74). Her experience of space, then, comes to be "translocal" as analysed by Dorothy Driver (2017): it becomes a space "marked by the presence of the other" (10), in which "location" is turned "into *dislocation*, reminding us of the impossibility of ever making final sense of the world and ourselves" (11; emphasis in the original).

The dissolution of Williams's face, as part of a constellation of signs in constant transformation and with "no fixable proper meaning" (Miller 1992, 78), culminates in the last scene in which Marion contemplates the sea:

the waves throw up broken images that she strains to put together. At first she thinks that Patricia Williams has returned, but then it seems to be a mermaid, holding like any mother a baby to her breast. The wind wraps strands of wet hair around the lump of baby, then when it grows fiercer the mermaid somersaults, clutching her child, and with her tail whips the water into a moonlit froth in which she disappears. Marion would like to think that it is the sea mammal who suckles her young, the dugong, whom sailors thought to be a mermaid, but the Cape is too far south for that. Thus it is, she says aloud, a figment of her imagination.  
(Wicomb 2016, 185–186)

Meg Samuelson (2010) has pointed out the importance of Marion's shift of identification from the figure of the mermaid – as her father had always called her – to the figure of the dugong. For Samuelson, "mythological figures such as the mermaid [ ... ] are ultimately damaging to women, refusing their mobility and silencing their voices" (556). On the other hand, the dugong suggests "a more productive emblem":

“the dugong as maternal figure suckles its young, foregrounding the experience of motherhood, rather than the patriarchal institution that places women’s wombs in service to ‘God’s holy plan’” (556). Samuelson relates this shift of identity to what she calls “Wicomb’s protean poetics”, in which the sea as “a fluid archive” of “scattered and repressed histories” works as an emblem, “throwing textual meaning and identities into flux” (543).

Samuelson’s focus on the possible meanings of the figures of the mermaid and the dugong can be complemented by the attention that the passage pays to them as material signs – derived from the initial Williams photograph – and to Marion’s act of interpretation itself. The process from face to defacement, from figuration to disfiguration, that this article has been tracing, is now complete. The referential dimension is totally gone and everything Marion is left with is “a heap of broken images” she can put together and read whichever way she wishes. In this sense the final appeal to the imagination is pivotal. Marion’s journey can be seen as a struggle to turn the blankness she has inherited into what, following Marianne Hirsch (2013), I will call “postmemory”: “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experience of those came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (205). Hirsch adds that postmemory’s connection with the past is “mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (205). In Marion’s attempt to remember through fragmented and scattered images, imagination becomes an indispensable tool. In the context of post-apartheid concern with the recuperation of damaged, oppressed or hidden identities, Wicomb rejects a logic of empirical verification, referentiality and closure, presenting instead identity-making and

representation as an ever open process, dependent upon imaginative projection and reconstruction, and hence endowed with provisionality and indeterminacy.

Samuelson points to the maternal image that the passage on the dugong contains, reading it in terms of its anti-patriarchal value. I would like to emphasise its role in the link between present and past that Marion is trying to build, following Hirsch's contention about gender as "a powerful idiom of remembrance in the face of detachment and forgetting" (2013, 225). Focusing on the image of the absent mother in Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* and in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, Hirsch analyses the use of familial and feminine tropes to "rebuild and reembody a connection that is disappearing" (225), arguing how they show that the index of postmemory is a performative one that has to do with affect, need and desire more than authenticity and truth. The image that Marion sees on the sea is certainly one of motherly affection and protection, of a kind that she has never had due to Helen's obsessive fear of their secret being discovered, and as such, expressive of "the desire for a return to the imaginary oceanic unity of the pre-Oedipal" (King 2000, 31). That Marion's journey is motivated by the absence of the mother, entailing the literal or figurative encounter with a series of female figures – Williams, Tokkie, her employee and new friend Brenda, Mrs. Murray or her aunt Elsie – makes it possible to see her narrative as a restorative one, seeking the re-enactment of the lost, pre-Oedipal mother-infant relation, characterised by attachment and mutual recognition (King 2000, 31).

Full recognition, however, is continuously thwarted in the novel by the mediation of signs which can only work as distorted and enigmatic clues. This is especially seen in the chapter in which Marion examines the Black Magic box containing the few remains of her mother's possessions. There are a few photographs of Marion, one of them with another child whose face has been scored. Again, the novel calls attention to

photography as a medium that should provide a direct link to the past and to the face as the singular expression of an underlying identity. The face, however, is disfigured, and the photographs – one of Marion’s graduation with Helen, her parents’ wedding photograph, or the one in Helen’s identity card – can only work as “ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world” (Hirsch 2013, 215) to which Marion can have no access: “None of these things, much as she studies them, turns them this way and that, yields any meaning, any insight into the past or into the mind of the woman of whom she knows so little” (Wicomb 2016, 116).

In her eagerness to turn Helen’s things into meaningful signs, Marion pays special attention to

a faded Sunday-school card with a picture of two bearded men in biblical garb poring over a book while a lamb lies at their feet. It is the only thing that puzzles her, especially since the image does not illuminate the text. (Wicomb 2016, 117)

As stated on the card, the text is Acts 8: 22:

As a sheep led to his slaughter or a lamb before his shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth. (118)

In its emphasis on Marion’s frustration at being unable to decipher the card, the novel again underlines the opacity involved in the visual and material representation of meaning. The card, both in its iconic and textual dimensions, has a figurative sense that Marion is unable to grasp, and as such, it is characterised by muteness: “To the extent that language is figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute” (De Man 1979, 930).

The next day, at the National Library, Helen looks for the Bible and confirms that the text is indeed from Acts 8. The verses, however, are 32–34

and they refer to an Ethiopian eunuch being converted by someone called Philip. Were all the texts printed on the cards in quotation marks? Did her mother know that the eunuch is in fact quoting from Isaiah? That the repetition is about the fulfilment of a prophecy? Her guess is that Helen learned her texts by heart without questioning. [ ... ] Helen would not have known what it meant. (Wicomb 2016, 119)

Andrew van der Vlies (2010) points out that the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is “all about conversion, about literal and figurative translation, about how ‘race’ is trumped in this Christianised context, and about *acts* – performance and performativity” (594; emphasis in the original), meanings that, according to van der Vlies, the reader is able to apprehend, whereas Marion, “a singularly underqualified and inept reader” (593), is not. The Bible passage certainly is about conversion and the performance of identity and race, to which Marion pays no heed. Her interest, however, falls on aspects that are also relevant, namely, the material aspects of the transmission of the text, approaching the card as the site of inscription of a set of unfixed signs, involved in a long chain of (mis)quotations, repetitions and hence displacement, and on her interpretation as different from her mother’s, who – her daughter believes – would not have understood the card.

van der Vlies, however, argues to the contrary, pointing to a passage later in the novel belonging to the chapters – not focalised through Marion’s point of view – that tell of Helen’s and John’s early years in Cape Town: “The Sunday-school texts of her girlhood, learnt by heart and seldom understood, grew clear with the music of meaning, of revelation” (Wicomb 2016, 144). This passage can be read in ways not pointed out

by van der Vlies. The moment of linguistic revelation it tells takes place when Councillor Carter finally gives Helen an affidavit attesting her white race, after receiving sexual favours from her. As Marion rightly suspects, Helen had indeed learnt the Bible verses by heart until then, but at this moment, they are suddenly endowed with meaning: “Like the signs and wonders of the Acts of the Apostles, the miracles where men and women rose and made their beds and started their lives anew speaking in fresh tongues, so Helen was remade” (144). Like the Ethiopian eunuch, Helen – who can now definitely forget about her coloured identity – begins a new life. But what is of particular interest is how this “conversion” and accommodation to apartheid ideology is presented as tied to a particular conception of language and meaning, and a particular interpretation of signs. If, as I have been arguing, signs work for Marion as misleading and ambiguous marks, whose materiality is their most prominent feature and with only an indirect access to signification – as we have seen in Williams’s face and the Bible card – then Helen experiences signs as revelation, that is, as the complete unveiling of meaning.

Helen had already had a moment of revelation, which significantly takes place when John is considered white as he applies for a job at the Traffic Department, the other key event in their transition from coloureds to whites: “She’d read his triumph at the Traffic Department as an epiphany. It was a gift, a *sign* from above that they should set about the task of building new selves” (Wicomb 2016, 128; my emphasis). Helen’s accommodation to apartheid ideology goes together with a belief in the capacity of signs to have an unequivocal or unambiguous meaning, which allows her to see sense in the definition of whiteness according to Act No. 30 of 1950, quoted in the novel after she receives the affidavit from Councillor Carter (Wicomb 2016, 144). Act No. 30 again highlights how Helen and Marion differ in their approach to meaning and interpretation.

This Act has already been quoted earlier, in the section devoted to Marion's visit to the National Library, together with the amended definition included in the Population Registration Amendment Act of 1962. As Marion and the librarian try to understand the differences between the two definitions, the folly they find in these texts makes them fall into uncontrolled laughter (121). Where Marion sees absurdity and nonsense, Helen finds revelation. Apartheid is thus presented as related to acts of interpretation in which signs are made to respond to the single, unified and authorised meaning of racial essentialism and fixity.

This fixity, however, has been definitely disturbed in post-apartheid South Africa, as we see in the key passage in which Marion, in a room in London, contemplates "a rectangle of light" projected on the wall:

The rectangle is a painting, or rather, is painting in action, of white light on the white wall. It is a picture of time, a projection of rain drilling into the angled glass, rolling down the pane, translating itself into a dance of light on the wall.  
(Wicomb 2016, 192)

The novel lingers on Marion's vision of the changing patterns that the combination of rain and light make on the wall, presented as some kind of epiphany that keeps her mesmerized for hours. J.U. Jacobs (2008) has seen this passage as symbolizing "the increasingly complex, unpredictable and irreversible course that Marion's life has taken since her discovery of her coloured parents' decision to recreate themselves in terms of whiteness" (10), whereas for Ludmila Ommundsen (2010), the "painting/playing of lights evokes the refiguration of hybridity in a silenced history and the negotiation of a space of the self through hybrid subjectivities" (94–95). The passage certainly seems to evoke the changing and non-fixed dimensions of identity, but in its focus on Marion's vision as a "painting", I also see it as related to the novel's concern with the visual



representation of identity and more particularly with Marion's acts of interpretation of signs around her, traversed by provisionality and indeterminacy.

Marion's experience is one of "watching the light move in a forest of hieroglyphs" (Wicomb 2006, 193). As defined by Miller, a hieroglyph is "a sign without identifiable governing signification" (1992, 78). To the extent that this scene is presented as central to Marion's transformed understanding of identity, the novel again suggests an understanding of the construction, representation and interpretation of identity as an always open, never-ending performative process, one which also comes to the foreground when Marion visits her aunt Elsie and feels puzzled by her grandparents' portraits – "of uncertain genre, neither photograph nor painting" (Wicomb 2016, 173) –, having been tinted by the photographer with a paintbrush probably to make them closer to the ideal of white beauty prevailing at that time. Her aunt explains to her that she

no longer minds the transmogrification, since this is the only likeness of her parents. Except for the identity cards, and she giggles: they ought to have framed the paintings with the cards inserted in the corner, now such a before-and-after look would have been a good representation of the folly of the past. (174–175)

In this passage, Wicomb undermines the fixity that photography purportedly imposes on identity conceived as "governed by the central presence of a fixed personality expressing itself in face, portrait, and chirography" (Miller 1992, 79). Elsie explains to Marion that this is the only image of their grandparents that her children have, one that she herself has come to accept, so that identity is presented as a performative process in which the meaning of signs emerges as they are read or interpreted by a particular person or community (Miller 1992, 89).

The scene is also concerned with the specific relation between race and photography in the South African context. As Samuelson points out, the history of photography in

South Africa has been one “in which the camera has fixed and classified its subjects in colonial-apartheid taxonomies of race – it has, in other words, objectified them into race as a ‘matter of fact’” (2016, 131), as indeed would have been the case of the photograph in identity cards. Marion’s grandparents’ transmogrified portraits, however, entail a subversion of apartheid’s obsession with racial fixity and objectification; they present race, instead, as a fluid, unstable category. In this way, Wicomb joins post-1994 debates on racial and cultural identity in South Africa that have tried to move away from apartheid fixation on rigid racial identity, emphasising instead conceptions of identity – “shifting selves” (Wasserman and Jacobs 2003) – characterised by openness, flexibility of multiplicity. This is also evident in Nuttall and Michael’s (2000) well-known use of the term “creolisation” in order to “disturb[s] or destabilize[s] notions of fixed identities” (6).<sup>6</sup>

The fluid, unstable representation of identity that Marion encounters in her grandparents’ portraits must be seen as opposed to her experience in Scotland, when she reads the stories about people’s lives carved into the flagstones of a park in Garnethill: “Marion shudders at the thought of her life laid out in lines, carved into a stone tablet for a tourist to bend over, bum in the air, and read” (Wicomb 2016, 204). It is highly revealing that Marion should think in terms of “life laid out in lines”, as it is precisely the conception of the line as structuring principle of narrative form and storytelling – one that is continuously undermined by rhetorical and figurative disruptions – that Miller sees as tied to the belief in a unitary selfhood, as opposed to the conception of the self as a set of signs without identifiable governing signification, one that as has been noted, Wicomb seems to espouse. Thus, for Marion “the stone tablet cannot be for the ephemeral lives of people; it is for gods, with their messages or commandments” (204), and she turns instead to the novel she is currently reading, J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart*

*of the Country*, “cheered by Magda’s fictionality and the flimsiness of paper” (205). Whereas lines carved into stone entail a representation of identity and the self characterised by semantic and interpretive fixity, “the flimsiness of paper” – just like Williams’s protean image, the ambiguous Bible card or the changing rectangle of light – suggests a representation of people’s identity and a telling of their lives characterised by provisionality, mutability and openness.

And it is precisely in this way that the telling of Marion’s story ends, given the final twist of the novel, in which it is suggested that the text we have been reading may actually have been written by Brenda, in which case Marion is definitely displaced from the story that is supposedly hers. As she protests against Brenda’s claim that her father’s story was the one she wanted to tell, Marion’s search for a personal and familial narrative ends up in bafflement, misrecognition and displacement, as in her previous reaction to her grandparents’ portrait: “So they are and are not Marion’s grandparents; they are strangers who hint at a connection with her father. [ ... ] she has no claim to these people” (Wicomb 2016, 174). There is a mirroring, then, in this novel between the story it tells – a process of searching for identity that rules out the possibility of full recognition and completeness – and its discourse level, which rejects closure and monologism, with the subsequent loss of authority and certainty. All in all, *Playing in the Light* shows the fallacies and limitations of authoritarian conceptions and representations of identity – with a special focus on racial identity – emphasising the capacity of fiction to generate multiple, contradictory and provisional versions of people’s ephemeral lives. Playfulness and performativity, desire and the imagination emerge as essential ingredients in the processes of individual and collective search for identity and in the telling of one’s story, a story to which one may have no claim after all.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> See "Shame and Identity" (Wicomb 1998) for Wicomb's best-known analysis of coloured identity in South Africa, in relation to the question of shame.
  - <sup>2</sup> Herrero (2014) makes a detailed and acute analysis of trauma in the novel according to Abraham and Torok's theory of the phantom.
  - <sup>3</sup> Wicomb's interest in the photograph as trace of the past, representation of identity and medium through which one character tries to get access into another one is found in other texts such as "In Search of Tommie" (Wicomb 2009), in which TS carefully studies Chris Hallam's photograph, and in *October* (Wicomb 2014), in which Mercia's discovery of Sylvie's photographs makes her radically question her previous conception of her: "There is knowledge that crosses over from the ghostly world of the photograph, that flicks across eerily into the real, now a flickering shadow across Mercia's heart. A shadow of fear and awe. Who is this apparition who rises out of the darkness, whose bright, ironic grin haunts the viewer? Who is Sylvie?" (167). Wicomb has shown an interest in the relations between writing and visual representation, from a more general perspective (see Wicomb 1995).
  - <sup>4</sup> As analysed by Ownbey (2017), Ivan Vladislavić's (2010) *Double Negative* is another South African text that uses photography – in this case, actual photographs – and the motif of the ghost to engage with official South African history and the TRC hearings.
  - <sup>5</sup> See De Michelis (2012), Klopper (2011) or van der Vlies (2010) for an analysis of the ghostly dimension of the novel.
  - <sup>6</sup> See Strauss (2013) for a discussion of the concept of "creolization" in relation to coloured identity in South Africa.