

# “An Ontological Crisis”: Sartre’s Gaze and Being-for-Others in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*

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## Summary

This article on Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* uses as its point of departure her remark that “there must be an ontological crisis [for play-whites] that nobody can talk about, because officially they don’t exist”. Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of Being-for-Others, as well as W.E.B. du Bois’s and Franz Fanon’s work on black double consciousness, frame my contention that, for the two central characters Helen and Marion, the gaze of other people is at the root of their “ontological crisis” or destabilisation of being. In the article I develop my own interpretation of Sartre’s theory of the gaze and distinguish between two potential forms of the look, which I call the prejudiced-look and the critical-look. I argue that the experience of for-Others, depending on the nature of the Sartrean look, has the potential to trigger either an inescapable alienation from self (in the case of Helen) or a development of self (in the case of Marion). So, for instance, Helen’s exposure to the prejudiced white gaze results in her physical and mental deterioration, whereas Marion’s experience of the critical gaze enables constructive internal changes. Ultimately, my article aims to shed new light on the complex dynamics of the gaze, intersubjectivity, and ontological anxiety in the racially charged space of South Africa.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel oor Zoë Wicomb se *Playing in the Light* het as vertrekpunt haar opmerking dat “daar ’n ontologiese krisis moet wees [vir mense wat wit speel] waaroor niemand kan praat nie omdat hulle amptelik nie bestaan nie”. Jean-Paul Sartre se idee van Wees-deur-Ander, sowel as W.E.B. du Bois en Franz Fanon se werk oor swart dubbele bewustheid is die agtergrond vir my betoog dat, vir die twee sentrale karakters, Helen en Marion, die kyk van ander mense aan die hartjie van hul “ontologiese krisis” of die destabilisering van hul bestaan lê. In die artikel ontwikkel ek my eie interpretasie van Sartre se teorie van die kyk en onderskei tussen twee potensieële vorme van die kyk. Ek verwys daarna as bevooroordeelde-kyk en kritiese-kyk. Ek redeneer dat die ervaring van deur-Ander, afhangende van die aard van die Sartre-kyk, die potensiaal het om óf ’n onafwendbare vervreemding van self (in Helen se geval) óf ’n ontwikkeling van self (in Marion se geval) aan die gang te sit. So byvoorbeeld, veroorsaak Helen se blootstelling aan die bevooroordeelde wit kyk haar fisiese en geestelike agter-uitgang, onderwyl Marion se ervaring van die kritiese kyk weer die geleentheid tot konstruktiewe interne verandering bied. My artikel het uiteindelik ten doel om nuwe lig te werp op die komplekse dinamika van die kyk, intersubjektiviteit en ontologiese verontrusting in die rassistiese gelaaië Suid-Afrikaanse ruimte.

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Zoë Wicomb observes, in a 2006 interview with Manfred Loimeier, that “there must be an ontological crisis [for play-whites] that nobody can talk about, because officially they don’t exist” (2). Her novel *Playing in the Light* is, it seems to me, an investigation into this racialised existential anxiety in not only play-whites but also the “coloured” community as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Set in newly post-apartheid Cape Town during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission proceedings, *Playing* tells the story of an apparently white Afrikaans woman’s discovery of her “coloured” heritage. Marion, after suspecting a secret at the heart of her family, begins a somewhat reluctant investigation into the lives of her parents with the help of Brenda, her newly employed “coloured” employee. These investigations lead to Marion’s discovery that she is in fact “coloured” and that her parents – Helen and John – were play-whites, that is, people originally classified as “coloured” who, during adjustments to the apartheid racial classificatory legislation, crossed-over and adopted white identities. In my study of the novel, I examine what I understand as the ontological crises of not only Helen, who “plays white”, but also Marion, who discovers her “coloured” identity.

Employing as my theoretical framework Sartre’s notion of Being-for-Others, as well as W.E.B. du Bois’s and Frantz Fanon’s work on black double consciousness, I argue that the gaze of other people is at the root of both women’s crisis or destabilisation of being.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that the experience of for-Others, depending on the nature of the Sartrean look, has the potential to trigger either an inescapable alienation from self (in the case of Helen) or a development of self (in the case of Marion).<sup>3</sup> In arguing for these claims, I tease out my own interpretation of Sartre’s theory and distinguish between two potential forms of the look, which I call the prejudiced-look and the critical-look. While the former conforms to the typical objectifying and alienating gaze, the latter allows for a constructive re-examination or

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1. Scare quotes have been used throughout for the term “coloured” – an identity category invented by the Nationalist Party during apartheid – to draw attention to its contested status. On this subject, Zoë Wicomb notes “the resurgence of the term *Coloured*, once more capitalized, without its old prefix of *so-called* and without disavowing scare quotes earned during the period of revolutionary struggle when it was replaced by the word *black*, [which] indicat[ed] both a rejection of apartheid nomenclature as well as inclusion in the national liberation movement” (“Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa” 93, her emphasis).
  2. The “gaze” and the “look” should be treated as interchangeable terms.
  3. Sartre’s concept of the Other (as in Being-for-Others) is distinct from the concept of the marginalised Other. The former refers to other persons, the latter to marginalised groups of people defined by their so-called difference from the Same (that is, the “normal”). To distinguish between the two, I will refer to Sartre’s Other as the Other person or Other people.

affirmation of self. I go on to argue that Helen's repeated exposure to the prejudiced-look results in her obsessive desire and endeavour to "become" white, and eventually destroys her entirely. In contrast, Marion's encounters with the critical-look cultivate in her a more critically engaged and responsible consciousness, resulting in an internal growth. Ultimately I attempt, in this reading of Wicomb's novel, to shed new light on the complex dynamics of the gaze, intersubjectivity, and ontological anxiety or crisis in the racially charged space of South Africa.

### **Being-for-Others, Race, and Double Consciousness**

Race, of course, is a central theme in *Playing* and has, not surprisingly, garnered a substantial amount of critical attention. In an early article, Sue Kossew draws on Wicomb's essay "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa" and Zimitri Erasmus to investigate "coloured" identity and show how the novel "reconfigures the borderlines of race and whiteness" (197). Similarly, J.U. Jacobs, employing Stuart Hall on cultural identity, "examines the representation of "colouredness" in Wicomb's writing" (1), while Stéphane Robolin centres her attention on the racially charged geographies of South Africa, contending that Marion's parents "acquire the property of whiteness not just through the performance of propriety, but also through the fact of proprietorship" (362). In addition, Maria Olausson applies Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of "play" to the idea of "playing white" and argues that the "game [Helen and John] are playing makes them complicit in the power structures of apartheid South Africa" (154). According to all these critics, Wicomb's representation of race exposes whiteness as a "game" (Olausson 149) involving "performativity or role-playing" (Kossew 199) and thus the "mimicry" (Robolin 360) of certain "rules" or "codes" (Jacobs 11, 12). In my analysis of *Playing*, however, I focus on an area of the novel that has received scant critical attention: the role of the gaze, particularly its pivotal impact on the ontology of "coloured" experience.

My understanding of the gaze is largely based on Sartre's conception of intersubjectivity in *Being and Nothingness*. Here, he establishes the foundation of his existential ontology by distinguishing between three states of being, which, taken together, define the ambiguity and anxiety of human existence in the world. The first and most basic of these modes of existence is object-being, which he terms the in-itself. A door, for instance, exists in a state of object-being since it has no mode of existence beyond its *facticity*, or physical characteristics, and is therefore "unconscious Being" (Barnes xxii). A human, however, is defined by an inner consciousness in addition to his/her bodily, object-like exterior. Sartre calls this conscious state of being, constituted by future hopes and possibilities, the for-itself (xxii). While

Being-in-itself is pure facticity (that is, the measurable), Being-for-itself exists as transcendence or freedom (that is, the immeasurable). The third state of existence, Being-for-Others, is triggered by the actual or imagined gaze of another person. At the moment of being looked at, Sartre argues, a fundamental change takes place in the human subject: she suddenly witnesses her physical being through the eyes of the Other person as if she were an object, and is thereby cast from the mode of the for-itself (transcendent being) into the in-itself (objectified being) (352). For Sartre, the existential state of for-Others is characterised by shame, specifically the shame of being an object for another (350). In order to regain the status of subject, the individual redirects the look at the Other person and so subjects her to objectification, which, in turn, is to do the same “violence to [her] subjectivity” (Barnes xxxix). This continues as an unceasing battle between objectification and recovered subjectivity, or, in Sartre’s wry words, “I am referred from transfiguration to degradation and from degradation to transfiguration” (394).

As this brief outline shows, Sartre’s characterisation of intersubjectivity is, on the whole, pessimistic<sup>4</sup> In addition to his disregard for positive interactions with Other people, his generalisation of the look as inherently alienating ignores, or at least devalues, the experience of those who face extreme self-alienation through daily confrontation with the prejudiced gaze. Given this serious failure to accommodate the (often irreparably damaging) look of marginalised experience, Fanon’s dismissal of Sartre’s theory comes as no surprise. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he remarks in a brief footnote that Sartre’s speculations on intersubjectivity cannot be applied to the black consciousness “because the white man is not only The Other but also the master, whether real or imaginary” (106). According to Fanon, Sartre’s notion of Being-for-Others falsifies black experience insofar as an encounter with the white gaze inevitably and necessarily results in an alienated black consciousness, given that whiteness is historically positioned as superior (the so-called “master” race) and blackness as inferior (the so-called “slave” race). For this reason, the (real or imagined) enslavement of black people exists *before* the effect of the look.

In response to critics’ reservations regarding Sartre’s narrow portrayal of intersubjectivity, I have, as already noted, proposed a more comprehensive description of the gaze that distinguishes between a prejudiced-look and a critical-look. The former kind refers to a racist, and/or sexist, and/or homophobic gaze that comes with a preconceived set of stereotypes and judgements that are projected onto the Other. Not only are the Other’s possibilities solidified by the look, but she also experiences a self (through another person’s eyes) that is unrecognisable. Thus, the human “wish that

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4. See Dolezal (23-24) and Martin (97) on this subject. Their shared intuition is that the objectifying look cannot be the only form of interpersonal relationships, and that Sartre fails to account for other, potentially positive, forms of Being-for-Others.

others should confer upon [her] a being which [she] recognise[s]" is denied the Other (Sartre 1998: 351). The second type of gaze, which I have termed the critical-look, refers to an "open-minded" looking that, rather than imposing its own predetermined beliefs on a subject, permits her revelation of self. This does not suggest a kind of blank look devoid of preconceived ideas, but rather one willing to revise its views based on what is perceived. I therefore take the word *critical* to mean the careful observation, analysis, and judgement of both faults and strengths in a person. Such a look has a positive valence in that it can result, for the one looked at, in self-understanding, affirmation, and beneficial growth. Intersubjectivity involving the critical-look, in other words, potentially allows a person to "realise fully all the structures of [her] being" (Sartre 303).

With the above distinction in mind, Sartre's work on intersubjectivity can and does complement race theory. The experience of double consciousness, for instance, can be examined usefully as a symptom of the prejudiced-look. Du Bois, who first conceptualised the idea, describes double consciousness as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of [white] others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (qtd. in Yancy 235). Both Fanon and George Yancy, embracing Du Bois's idea, portray their experience of this internal division in similar terms.<sup>5</sup> If Sartre is right that the Other person is "the indispensable mediator between myself and me", then the black body, subjected to the prejudiced-look, must mediate itself through that white racist gaze (302). This causes a fracture at the centre of being. Put differently, the black person, thrown into an outside white perspective by the look, witnesses him/herself as an unrecognisable object steeped in racial stereotypes, resulting in a disjuncture between the for-itself (how he/she sees him/herself) and the for-Others (how he/she is seen by [white] Other people). The shame of black experience in the mode of for-Others is therefore more than the shame of being an object. To be black under the white prejudiced-look is to be a *shameful* object, that is, a morally and physically reprehensible object of condemnation.

## Helen and the White Other Person

In my reading of *Playing*, I treat Helen's decision to "become" white, and her later ontological crisis, as representative of the formidable power of the prejudiced-look and its destructive effect on the black body. This look imposes its own transcendence on Helen and, as a result of its privileged position of whiteness, bars her re-apprehension of a transcendent self. Given its prior positioning as master and transcendent consciousness, she cannot

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5. See Fanon (85) and Yancy (217-218).

“return” the look in the usual, Sartrean sense. Accordingly, there is no conflict between looks, only the oppressive white gaze that holds Helen in subjugation. Self-imprisoned under the white gaze in this way and thus unable to escape the perpetual state of Being-for-Others, Helen undergoes an internal division at the core of her being. By the end of her life, double consciousness is no longer an occasional experience but an ontological condition, manifesting first in the form of an imaginary friend (her double, or Other consciousness) and then in cancer. Her split consciousness and disintegrating body physically replicate the experience of double consciousness, and, in a profound statement on the nature of whiteness, represent the white gaze as a psychological and physical disease.

From childhood, Helen is exposed to a world that posits what Taylor refers to as “black odiousness, inhumanity, and inferiority” as “a part of common-sense sociology” (58). Her early years are defined by this white institutionalised culture that values whiteness above blackness. Helen’s mother Tokkie, for example, maintains with pride that “her mother’s sister [...] was white as driven snow with good red hair”, and Mrs Murray, a “coloured” woman whom Marion approaches during her investigations into her familial history, describes Tokkie as “[q]uite a dark-skinned woman, you know, although with good features and wavy kind of hair, but nice and smooth” (Wicomb, *Playing* 135, 94). In the “coloured” community where Helen grows up, most of those around her have already internalised an ideology that, as Paul Taylor puts it, “define[s] beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that white people are more likely to have” (59). Accordingly, Helen’s near-white body renders her “a real beauty” in the eyes of her community (Wicomb, *Playing* 95). Her childhood sense of Being-for-Others is thus informed by an experience of herself, through the objectifying gaze of those who surround her, as “lovely” (129). Quickly internalising this conception of whiteness as progressive (and, by implication, blackness as regressive), she comes to rationalise her adoption of a white identity as “forward looking” and something of which her mother would approve (132).

Helen’s entry into the white world is also her unresisting admission into a prison of whiteness, involving a perceptible shift in consciousness affected by the prejudiced-look. Looked at by the white Other person, she is, like Alec Hyslop’s objectified Sartrean subject, “[c]abin’d, cribbed, confined, bound in” (48). Being unable to return to the for-itself, she is trapped in a mode of for-Others by the look and its prior master position. And yet she embraces her entrapment for, in order to achieve a white identity, she must, with “vigilance and continual [self-]assessment”, mediate her psychological and physical being through an ever-present white gaze (131). Wicomb’s use of symbolism in the novel establishes this sense of constant scrutiny. As Kossew points out, “the suburb’s name [in which Helen and John live] – Observatory – draws attention to the idea of surveillance and control that is central to the notion of playing white” (203). Light, however, is perhaps the most suggestive image

of surveillance in the novel, functioning as a symbol of the white prejudiced-look and its brutal effect on the black body. The narrator of *Playing*, for instance, describes how Helen and John, entrapped “[i]n the blinding light of whiteness”, “walked exposed: pale, vulnerable geckos whose very skeletal systems showed through transparent flesh” (Wicomb, *Playing* 123). Uncannily, Yancy uses the exact same phrase in his analysis of *Invisible Man* when he argues that “the protagonist has had to contend with the blinding light of whiteness, its power to see, to gaze, to control” (229). By using a metaphor that compares whiteness to a blinding light that, like an X-ray, exposes and controls, Wicomb and Yancy effectively describe the violence of black experience in a culture of institutionalised racism. The blinding effect of the white gaze underscores both its brutality and invisibility, and further, the way in which it imprisons and objectifies the subject by stripping away her own gaze. Helen, “blinded” by the white prejudiced-look, is unable to return the gaze and regain her subjectivity.

Positioned like this in a constant state of Being-for-Others, Helen lives an existence permeated by existential and moral shame. This is because she is ashamed of not only her object state but also the “crime [...] of being coloured” (Dass 2011: 139). If Minesh Dass is right in arguing that Helen perceives “colouredness” as a crime, then her social, linguistic, and psychological “coloured” heritage renders her, to her mind, an object of moral condemnation. In Fanon’s succinct expression, “Sin is Negro as virtue is white” (106). Despite her predominantly “white” features, Helen faces repeated self-alienation through a white objectifying external perspective, and is forced, as Sartre describes the experience, to “recognise that [she is] as the Other sees [her]” – an unrecognisable object of disgust (302). Through the white gaze, she perceives her body as a shameful, criminal object due to her “coloured” past. Thus, her adoption of a white identity is framed by a desire for physical and moral purity. In order to “cure” herself of “coloured criminality”, she must admit herself into a metaphorical prison, submitting her body and internal being to what she perceives as the reformatory white gaze. The irony, of course, is that this gaze in fact destroys her.

Sartre contends that shame is “in its primary structure shame *before somebody*” (302, his emphasis). The fact that Helen “does not simply live *with* shame, she lives *in it*” therefore indicates the persistent presence of a white Other person through which she mediates herself (Dass 139, his emphasis). She lives in a continual state of double consciousness, which involves, according to Yancy, “a fundamental slippage between one’s own felt experience of the black body and how others (whites) understand, construct, experience, and see that ‘same’ black body” (226). At the “specialist trousseau shop” where she once worked, for example, the narrator describes how, when “a chic customer” spoke of “her future mother-in-law’s vulgarity, her pride in plastic bouquets”, Helen responded by “nodd[ing] in a flush of embarrassment” (Wicomb 6). Through the eyes of the “chic” white customer, her own

use of plastic bouquets is judged as embarrassing, which causes her immediately to “call the company and have them removed” (6). Before she is subjected to the customer’s gaze, however, she presumably regards plastic bouquets as a stylish addition to her domestic décor. Destabilised by the experience of seeing her taste, and therefore herself, as vulgar (which is to say, “unwhite”), she is thrown into a frenzied panic that borders, for a moment, on madness: “And then Helen’s voice grew shrill and hysterical as she threatened to put the flowers in the dustbin that instant” (6).

If whiteness, as Yancy contends, has the “status [of a] norm” (217), and Lawrence Mitchell is right that those who internalise norms “suffer some psychic cost as a result of norm violation” (197), then to be black is to violate a fundamental norm at an immense psychic cost.<sup>6</sup> It follows logically from this that the prejudiced-look, which is a normalising gaze, not only has “the power to affect profoundly a person’s concept of self” (Vaz 33), but also to “modify one’s actions” (Dolezal 15). Helen’s humiliation, then, is the shame of violating a norm that she has been taught to hold sacred. In response, she subjects herself to a rigorous and ongoing process of analysis, comparison, and evaluation so as to manipulate herself and her surroundings to fit white norms. Her “reinvention”, to use her expression, entails amendments to her identity, as well as stringent policing of her physical body, linguistic habits, social conduct, and domestic environment (Wicomb, *Playing* 131). In addition to changing her surname (128) and physically modifying her body (160), Helen, during the course of her time in Cape Town, alters her appearance (124, 125), accent (125), behaviour (139), and home décor (133) in an effort to conform to whiteness.

Even more disturbing than these physical changes, however, is her psychological transformation. As the following passage demonstrates, Helen and John, after living for years in the racist world of Observatory, internalise the white prejudiced-look:

[T]hey learned to use the vocabulary of the master race, were the first to note with distaste the traces of native origins in others. Ja nee, hottie se kind, the child would hear them say sometimes in rare conspiratorial moments.

(124)

The irony here, of course, is that both Helen and John have “native origins”, and that Marion – in their white supremacist language – is “hottie se kind”. Their use of this racist language points to their adoption, as Yancy understands the process, of a white ideological perspective through which they “‘see’ the world and violate black subjectivity” (227). In this way, they employ a language that separates and removes them from the “coloured” community of which they were once a part.

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6. This further supports Dass’s contention that Helen perceives “colouredness” as a crime insofar as it violates the norm of whiteness.



Towards the end of her life, Helen enacts the condition of double consciousness in the literal splitting of self embodied by the emergence of an imaginary friend, who becomes her “double”:

She had a friend who asked helpful questions, a confidante whose role was to prompt, a real lady, not unlike Miss Fisher, whose questions she answered without uttering a sound. [...] She knew what she was doing, and thus the lady friend remained nameless.

(Wicomb, *Playing* 149)

Helen’s description of a “real lady” like Miss Fisher (a white acquaintance of hers) and her long-standing association of “ladiness” with whiteness, quite clearly indicate a white imaginary “lady friend”. The white gaze, internalised throughout her life, eventually manifests in an imagined presence that follows her everywhere and watches her every movement. This invisible “friend” points to the invisibility of the white gaze: as a nameless presence without identity, Helen’s phantom companion evokes the shadowy, unknowable, god-like figure of whiteness that is at once everywhere and nowhere. In addition, that this internalised white Other person is imaginary suggests the invented or constructed dimension of whiteness and all its associations with normality, “beauty, order, innocence, purity, restraint, and nobility” (Yancy 2005: 217).

Helen’s eventual decline into madness is therefore a depiction of both the trauma induced by the white prejudiced-look and, more than this, the insanity of whiteness. Wicomb powerfully inverts its supposed normality, exposing what Yancy terms the “fundamentally symbolic” white body and performing, through Helen, a “demystification” of its privileged, superior status (217). If Helen’s “self-willed and efficient death” is from cancer (Wicomb, *Playing* 4, 47), it is both a physical and psychological cancer. Eaten inside-out by the prejudiced-look, she becomes a husk of her previous self, living in a perpetual state of Being-for-Others that eventually generates a cancerous double, in the form of a white Other person, at the core of her being. Her final condition of madness and disease exposes the violence of whiteness, which, Yancy asserts, “strives for totalization” (238).

### **Marion’s Journey and Lessons on Selfhood**

Despite his pessimistic conception of the look, Sartre acknowledges that the mode of Being-for-Others is essential for developing a richer self-understanding and that, in spite of its features of objectification and alienation, the “the Other teaches me who I am” (366). Without the presence of other people in our lives, we could not in fact experience the transcendence and free possibilities of the for-itself. Importantly, this kind of intersubjectivity – which I have argued involves the critical-look – still causes, by definition, uncomfortable objectification and self-alienation. Unlike the prejudiced-look,

though, it allows an individual to return the gaze and thereby enables the movement from the for-Others back to the for-itself. As I have attempted to show, Helen’s inability to return to the mode of for-itself results in what Anette Horn refers to as her “stunted personal growth and interpersonal relations” (129). Marion’s experience of Being-for-Others thus forms a valuable counterpoint to her mother’s tragic narrative of psychological and physical enslavement to whiteness. In her three crucial interactions with other people, she experiences her self through the critical-look rather than the prejudiced-look, and, on returning to the for-itself, develops a deeper self-understanding. In short, I argue that Patricia Williams, Mrs Murray, and Brenda Mackay teach Marion who she is. Or rather, they teach her the art of journeying, of moving outside herself, and so facilitate her liberation from a confined, narrow point of view.

Marion’s first destabilising encounter with the gaze occurs not by means of a physical person but through a photo. When she comes across the image of Patricia Williams in the *Cape Times*, she finds herself confronted by the critical-look and undergoes a defining experience of Being-for-Others. For a moment she loses her subjectivity and becomes an object of the other person’s gaze:

The eyes of the stranger hold hers accusingly, calling her to account: for what, for the callous fold across her face? But no; it hisses a command to remember, remember, remember .... Marion feels the room shrink around her. She is trapped in endless folds of muslin; the bed grows into the room, fills it, grows large as a ship in which she, bound in metres of muslin, flounders.

(Wicomb, *Playing* 54)

Marion’s bewildering sensation of a world destabilised by another’s gaze bears comparison with Sartre’s description of being looked at by the other person:

I am in a world which the Other has made alien to me, for the Other’s look embraces my being and correlatively the walls, the door, the keyhole. All these instrumental things [...] now turn toward the Other a face which on principle escapes me. [...] the world flows out of the world and I flow outside myself.

(350)

In a sense, Williams has entered Marion’s home and looked at her. No longer the possessor of the look, Marion is held and commanded by her “arresting” gaze and experiences the self-alienation of relinquishing her transcendence to another’s subjectivity (Wicomb, *Playing* 49). Like Sartre’s peeping-Tom caught spying through a keyhole, she is taken outside herself and sees the world from a new perspective, as belonging to another – Williams – who, in the context of the novel, is both the Sartrean and marginalised Other. Thus the familiar is turned alien, and, in the same way that “the Other’s look embraces

[the peeping-Tom's] being", "Marion feels the room shrink around her". Transcended by an external transcendence, her world diminishes as her possibilities drain away under the objectifying gaze of another.

Significantly, it is the mutilated body of the Other – Williams – that draws Marion outside her luxurious cocooned existence and jolts her into an awareness of her complicity in a system of violence and domination.<sup>7</sup> The shock of encountering the Other's gaze destabilises her immobile existence in the limbo of complacency and compels her to embark on a journey of self-scrutiny. Indeed, Williams' unspoken demand that Marion "remember" is an insistence that she journey into her subconscious, into suppressed memory. Although Abdulrazak Gurnah claims that it is "while [Marion] is journeying in a landscape where she leaves no mark [the UK] that she learns to travel in the mind" (274), I would argue that the opposite is true: it is only after journeying into the mind that Marion is able to consider a physical journey. In fact, her journey of remembering starts at the moment she is caught in Williams' gaze, which reminds her of Tokkie and triggers the memory of her.<sup>8</sup>

Afterwards, Marion is haunted by the face of Williams and finds herself obsessed by a need to find her old nanny's identity. She abandons all further efforts to obtain information from her recalcitrant father and turns to Brenda, who eventually leads her to a Mrs Murray in Wuppertal. It is here, confronted by Mrs Murray's look of recognition, that Marion undergoes a second experience of Being-for-Others, irrevocably changing her conception of self and family. She is just about to depart from the Murray home, having concluded that she and her host have a different Tokkie in mind, when she is fatefully delayed by her swollen foot. A moment later, Mrs Murray, who has insisted on bathing the foot in mustard water, looks up at her from a kneeling position and suddenly "gasps loudly", her "eyes wide with recognition" (Wicomb, *Playing* 97). Bewildered, she exclaims that "from down here with [her] face tilted [Marion] look[s] the spitting image of Mrs Karelse", that is, Tokkie (97).

Thrown outside herself by the critical-look, Marion experiences her body, from an external perspective, as an unrecognisable object. Hence, she "tries to nod, but has a feeling that her head hasn't moved, that she has no control over it, that in fact it is not her own" (97). Her self, mediated through the

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7. Marion's four-poster bed, with its "cocoon of draped muslin" that is like "a bower for an egte fairy princess, who would lie for a hundred years in gauzed limbo", is suggestive of her opulent, comfortable, and politically unconscious way of life at the start of the novel (2).

8. Ironically, despite owning a travel agency, Marion has "an aversion to travel" though it is "not exactly a phobia" (40). Her aversion to physical journeying is also a resistance to psychological journeying (into her memory and history), and it is only by opening herself to the latter that she is able to embark on her overseas trip.

Other's gaze, is apprehended in the form of an alien thing as if from a distance. For the second time, she senses a loss of control, a self-estrangement, and discovers her pure facticity, or object-being, in a world of strange objects. In the car with Brenda, for instance, still under the influence of the critical-look, she “hangs the head that hurts and yet does not belong to her, fixes her eyes on the black fabric of her trousers; she does not recognise her voice, does not recognise the linen-clad legs on which her eyes have come to rest” (99). In this moment of self-alienation, she views herself from an external perspective and perceives an unrecognisable thing – an object which both is and is not herself. It is therefore in the mode of for-Others, rather than by means of the spoken word, that Marion discovers her “coloured” heritage and the shame of her parents' crossing over.

Estranged from the person she thought she was, on returning to the for-itself, Marion begins to revise her self-conception and grapple with a new vocabulary with which to understand the world, especially in describing Tokkie. The woman she had once referred to as “their girl, Tokkie”, she must now relearn to call “Grandmother, Grandma, Granny, Ouma, Mamma”, words which are, by necessity, “naked and slippery with shame” (31, 107). Another notable change to her vocabulary is seen in her reference to the woman who cleans her flat by her name, “Maria”, rather than “the girl” (178, 1). In addition, Marion begins to reflect on the meaning of whiteness and its privileges, which, before this moment, she had taken for granted. Her exploration of race begins during a visit to the library, where her investigations yield an abundance of implied, indirect information. Though there are no entries on play-whites and whiteness is apparently “not a category for investigation”, her research on “coloureds” generates “hundreds of entries” (120). In this scene, Wicomb represents the textualisation of the Other in apartheid South Africa, where regulated subjects, under the constant surveillance of the white gaze, were defined and oppressed through written racial classification. Whiteness, the invisible norm that surveys and defines, cannot be a category for investigation because it is the gaze. “Colouredness”, however, being the visible Other situated under the gaze, is analysed and fixed into a dense network of writing. In this way, Othered subjects are rendered knowable so as to maintain them in subjection. The library's classificatory system therefore enacts, as a metaphor and microcosm, the organisation of the apartheid state. Marion's recognition that whiteness and blackness are socio-political constructs, and thus “pot-bellied with meaning”, allows her to see that race influences and irrevocably shapes human lives (106).

Marion's journey into the meaning of whiteness, which I call her intellectual journey, leads to other journeys, all of which are connected and influence one another. She travels, for instance, overseas, into the worlds of novels, and still deeper into her memory. While overseas she relearns to cry, and, in so doing, Gurnah argues, she undergoes a process of “grieving for both a loss and discovery of self” (274). This process of mourning and self-investigation

allows the journey into her “coiling, looping memory”, where she relives her most suppressed and shameful memory: the betrayal of Annie Boshoff (Wicomb, *Playing* 195, 193). Finally, Marion’s journeys into the worlds of novels further supplement her inner exploration by allowing her to grapple with her familial history and developing her sympathetic faculty. Through reading *The Conservationist*, for instance, she finally arrives at and confronts the most painful, uncomfortable, and destabilising question: “Is the [play-white] girl not, at some level, a version of herself? Of her mother?” (190).

*Playing* closes on a note of indeterminacy by depicting the conflict between subjectivities that characterises the mode of Being-for-Others. On the drive back to Bonteheuwel, soon after Marion’s return from the UK, Brenda admits that she has been visiting Marion’s father John and that his story is “the story [she] want[s] to write” (217). This enrages Marion. Pulling off the road, she accuses Brenda of exploiting her father for her own gain and then goes on to demand: “Why don’t you write your own fucking story?” (217). When Brenda replies that her own story is dreary, whereas John’s is captivating “with his pale skin as capital, ripe for investment”, Marion tells her to get out the car, declaring that she knows her father’s story (218). Before she leaves, however, Brenda retorts, “[a]ctually [...] I suspect you don’t” and “flicks at the lock before she shuts the door with a quiet click” (218).

It seems to me that Marion’s aggression is an expression of the vulnerability she feels under Brenda’s critical-look, and of the fear, quite literally, of “being written in and by the Other’s freedom” (Sartre 351). If the look is about seeing oneself from an external perspective, then Brenda’s proposed story about Marion’s family history is an instantiation of the look. Indeed, Steve Martinot argues that “[o]ne is written by the Other as the Other’s knowledge in the act of being read. And in reading the Other’s look, one is transformed from being a writer of one’s world to being part of the world written” (47). Marion’s experience, then, is the anticipation of being transformed from active writer of her world and history – that is, a subject – into a passive reader of herself – that is, an object written by another. Her response to Brenda’s confession (“Why don’t you write your own fucking story?” [Wicomb, *Playing* 217]) is an attempt to divert Brenda’s gaze away from her and so reassert her subjectivity. Yet Brenda has the last word and, as it were, the last look. By negating Marion’s knowledge of her father’s history, she maintains her hold over the gaze, and is, in this sense, the victor of the battle of gazes.

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Wicomb’s novel offers valuable insight into the power of looking and its ability to irrevocably shape the lives of others. My study of intersubjectivity in *Playing*, framed by Sartre’s concept of Being-for-Others and Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, examines the ontological effect of the gaze on Helen and Marion. As I have shown, the character Helen enters, without any resistance, a kind of prison, or, as Dass puts it, a “home”, which by

definition is “deprived of privacy and [in which] she is constantly on show” (139). Positioned under an ever-present white prejudice-look, she lives in a perpetual state of double consciousness which eventually produces an imagined other person at the core of her being. Wicomb portrays her ontological disintegration in the form of mental disease (madness) and physical disease (cancer), which are presented as symptoms of the white gaze. Marion’s encounters with the critical-look, on the other hand, allow her to overcome a physical and mental aversion to travel. Through this constructive journeying, she becomes a more intellectually developed person with richer self-knowledge, for by viewing herself through the eyes of others, she is able to work towards a greater understanding of herself, her parents, and the vicious effects of the apartheid regime. The hostility of the final encounter between her and Brenda, however, points to the conflict at the heart of Being-for-Others, as well as the vulnerability, discomfort, and instability of Marion’s journey towards a revised selfhood.

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