

Racial Passing and Class Mobility in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*  
and Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*

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BOURAHILA Djelloul &  
MAOUI Houcine  
Université d'Annaba

**Abstract**

This article explores the phenomena of racial passing and its relation to class mobility in South African and American literature. The paper compares the American novel *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth and the South African novel *Playing in the Light* by Zoe Wicomb. We first discuss how racial passing has been present in American and South African history and literature. We then show the ways in which race is a social construct in both novels. We also argue that the act of passing is not only an escape from oppression and marginalization, but also a desire to belong to 'whiteness' and get access to its privileges. This condition is revelatory of the persistence of racism, racial discrimination and inequality in post-segregation America and post-apartheid South Africa.

Racial passing means to change race for a temporary or permanent period of time. The act of passing is made by members of a marginalized group in order to get access to the privileges of the dominant group. Racial passing in this sense offers social and class mobility to the passer which would be otherwise difficult or impossible to have access to because of racism and marginalization. There are three types of passing according to Werner Sollors

(1997): 'involuntary', 'inadvertent' and 'voluntary'. The novels under study include all of these types of passing. Within the American and South African context of the novels under study, we mean by racial passing the act of changing race from colored/black to white. Whiteness has been imposed by the racist dominant hegemony in South Africa and the U.S as the state of being 'normal', 'superior' and privileged. Sollors (1997) explains that "only a situation of sharp inequality between groups would create the need for the emergence of a socially significant number of cases of 'passing'" (p. 248).

Passing has been a condition that has existed for a long period of time both in the United States and South Africa and that has been documented in many narratives. Light skinned black slaves had chosen to pass in order to escape slavery. Legal and social racial classifications have been historically different in the United States and in South Africa. While the American social, scientific, popular and legal thinking and practice about racial distinction followed a binary black/white model, South Africa developed a legal and social racial system that includes three categories, namely white, black and colored.

In South Africa, the 'colored' category was created by the law in the Population Act of 1950 to designate a person who is considered neither 'white' nor 'black' and who has mixed race and origins. The South African three-tiered

system of racial classification in the apartheid and post-apartheid periods tells us a lot about the extent to which racial stereotypes have been important in South African society. As Toni Morrison (1993), the African American novelist and critic, tells us: "To identify someone as a South African is to say very little; we need the adjective "white" or "black" or "colored" to make our meaning clear" (p. 47). This shows that racial identification is crucial in the process of conferring identity and bestowing a certain social status and class belonging.

On the other hand, the term 'colored' in the U.S was restricted to 'negro' and not to people of mixed race like in South Africa. In America, the 'one drop rule' has been applied. This rule is a social and legal principle that asserts that a person with even one ancestor of (black) African ancestry is considered black (historically 'Negro'). After the Civil Rights movement, the terms 'black' and 'African American' replaced the terms 'colored' and 'negro'.

The homogenization of blacks in America under one racial category does not mean that 'mixed' race people are not recognized in American society. Within the black American community, the light-skinned blacks (mulatto) have suffered from intra-racial prejudice because they have been considered as not 'purely' black. Moreover, the fact that the white dominant group has privileged the light-skinned blacks has caused many tensions with the

dark-skinned blacks. Judith Berzon (1978) tells us that "the mixed blood, caught between two cultures, has had to exist in an indeterminate area between the boundaries of the American caste system." (p. 4).

The issue of passing has received greater attention and treatment in the United States than in South Africa. In academia and fiction, the act of passing is well documented and studied to reveal how identities are constructed and deconstructed to avoid racism and achieve class mobility. Among the most prominent authors who have conducted theoretical analyses of the act of passing in academia we find Judith Butler (1993); Juda Bennet (1996); Judith Berzon (1978) and Toni Morrison (1993). In fiction, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) has become a classic of American literature and has been analyzed by many critics which mirrors the important place of the issue of passing in literature and criticism.

In South Africa, the topic of passing has received attention in fiction. Writers like J.M Coetzee, Dalene Matthee, Zoe Wicomb, Andre Brink, and Rayda Jacobs have all dealt with the act of passing in their narratives. It has not however received much attention in academia. In fact there are very few studies about the topic of passing in South African scholarship. It seems that passing is a taboo in the academic circles because it involves miscegenation. The silencing of the topic of passing in

academia suggests that it represents a threat to the stable homogenous social identity constructed and construed by the dominant white group.

Our analysis of the act of passing is based on an important tenant in Race Critical Theory (CRT): race is a social construct. Race according to the critical race theorists is a social construct which is given importance or disparaged by the White elite according to how it fits their best interests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). To promote the interests of the White elite, disproportionate emphasis is put on racial biological difference whereas in fact race is about how we treat each other and not a condition of skin color. As we shall in later in the analysis of the novels under study and their characters, race can be constructed and deconstructed depending on the social setting.

Passing takes place within a social context of animosity between a marginalized and disadvantaged racial group and another privileged and dominant group. Passing shows that individuals live within a society that gives to the physical body a cultural meaning. How people define themselves and are defined by others can be determined through viewing race as a construct. This construct can evolve and change constantly which makes it impossible to determine at a certain period in time how people identify themselves with the stereotypes attributed to their race. These attributed stereotypes work in the

purpose of maintaining racial dominance at a specific time. Consequently, when there is a shift in the needs of the dominant racial group, the stereotypes of racial subordinate groups change; as Delgado & Stefanic tell us:

Popular images and stereotypes of various minority groups shift over time...in one era a group of color may be depicted as happy-go-lucky, simpleminded, and content to serve white folks. A little later, when conditions change, that very same group may appear in cartoons, movies, and other cultural scripts as menacing, brutish, and out of control, requiring close monitoring and repression. (p.8)

A good example in this context is how Native Americans were at one time depicted by the White dominant group as savages in order to take their land by force and then eventually portrayed them as buffoons and lazy to justify broken treaties in courts.

The act of passing is not only an escape from oppression and marginalization, but also a desire to belong to 'whiteness'. 'Whiteness' has been posited by dominant society as the only ideal while non-white races have been presumed 'inferior'. Therefore, the passer for white chooses, through constructing a new self, to take part in a system in which gradations of the color of the skin assign status. In playing-white, the passer claims all the

associated privileges of whiteness. Thus racial passing is associated with class mobility.

In the novels under study, we argue that the characters choose racial passing not only as a way to avoid racism but also as a vehicle for upward class mobility. The characters in the novels under study exchange inequality for privilege in the availability of a light skin that permits passing. In the South African and American contexts, 'whiteness' has been appealing to passers because it offers many opportunities for advancement for non-whites (South African Coloureds and light skinned African Americans) that would be otherwise difficult or impossible to get. The quest for status through the 'passing narrative', underscores the persistence of racism and inequality in post-segregation America and post-apartheid South Africa.

Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* offers insights into persistent inequality and racism in post-apartheid South Africa through the theme of racial passing. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, the novel tells the story of Marion, a female protagonist who is raised white and discovers in adulthood that she is coloured after finding out that her parents passed for white during the apartheid era. After the discovery, Marion struggles with the ambiguities of her identity as she weighs her choices.

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In the first half of the novel and before discovering her true colored identity, Marion can be characterized as an 'involuntary' passer because the passing is arranged for her by her parents when she was born. She enjoys all the privileges of being white in South Africa. She owns and runs a successful traveling agency; lives in a "new luxury block on the beachfront" (p. 2); owns a Mercedes Benz and eats at chic restaurants. She is aware of her success and of the privilege of being white in the South African society because she feels that members of other disadvantaged racial groups envy her. For example, when two black young men propose to guard her car for money in a parking lot she thinks to herself that:

She'll be damned if she's going to tip these skollies for hanging about her car. You can't go anywhere nowadays without a flock of unsavory people crowding around you, making demands, trying to make you feel guilty for being white and hardworking, earning your living; and of course there's no getting around it: hundreds of rands it costs per month, being blackmailed by the likes of these every time you park your car. And then the impudence of watching as you get out, watching as you lock the door, willing you to feel uncomfortable about your own belongings. (p.28)

Marion's privileges are handed down to her by her parents who vowed that "she would hold the world in the palm of her pretty hand" (p.114) when they decided to



pass. Marion's parents, John and Helen Campbell, are 'voluntary' passers. They made a conscious and deliberate decision to pass during apartheid in the 1950s in order to be classified as white following the Population Registration Act of 1950. Sollos (1997) tells us that there are many reasons why a person passes voluntarily:

The possibility of economic advancement and benefits (opportunism); interracial courtship and marriage (love); escape from slavery, proscription, discrimination, and the restrictions that segregation imposed on black life (political reasons); the desire to get away from the hypocrisy, narrowness, and double standard of black life; and for many other motives such as curiosity, desire for kicks (an "occasional thrill" ), love of deception, preparation for political acts of subversion or revenge, and investigation of white criminal misconduct. (p. 249)

The motive behind Marion's parents passing is social and class mobility and status. When Marion investigates her parents past and considers the reasons behind their decision to pass she asks herself: Did they think of themselves as dissidents, daring to play in the light? Or as people who could mess up the system, which could not be looked up in libraries, who had escaped the documentation of identity? She thinks not. They thought only of their own advancement. (p. 122)

The conclusion that Marion comes to is primarily based on the fact that she sees her own success and privileges as legacies of their advancement. Her ambitious mother Helen associates passing for white with achieving financial prosperity: "What's the point of working hard, of building a new life, if your husband is determined to be backward, a poor white?" (p. 10). For her, it is not just about becoming white but essentially about achieving "no less than respectable whiteness" (p. 131). Helen being "a real beauty, fair with long hair", is less worried in the act of passing about her skin color than about perfecting the duplication of white mannerisms and culture. For her the act of passing is a "slow process of vigilance and continual assessment". (p. 131). Her determination to achieve status in white society compels her to make many transformations: she abandoned the Moravian Mission Church, because it was "unacceptable" (p. 140) and a "giveaway" (p. 140), in favor of the Anglican Church; insists on using and mastering the English language; and cut all ties with colored family members. To achieve 'whiteness' Hellen is even ready to make the ultimate sacrifice: adultery. To get the new identity cards that reclassified her and John as white, Hellen submitted to the sexual advances of Councilor Carter, a bureaucrat at the municipal office in charge of providing affidavits that prove race. At first resistant to his sexual expectations, she tries to plead with Carter and to appeal

to his morality by telling him: "this is not right. I'm a married woman; the body is the temple of the Lord." (p. 143) But her resolve to attain whiteness overwhelm her when she remembers how she was raised by a single colored mother and how her childhood was marked by poverty: But the image of that bed, the narrow canvas fold-up that precisely fitted a stretched adolescent body with arms held close to her sides, was sobering. There was no room for weakness.

The thought of enduring again the humiliating poverty of her youth is sufficient to make Hellen decide that to carry out her plan there is a "necessity of whatever had to be done" (p. 142), consequently "she understood that she would not get away with being simply the object of his attentions, that the price was to show willing, that she would have to cooperate." (p. 143) Once she fulfilled Carter's sexual demands, she is given the affidavit that proves her new race and obliterates her coloured identity and past. She considers that this is the sacrifice that has to be made in order to prove her resolve to attain whiteness and to achieve social and class mobility. She even compares herself to Jesus and the crucifixion in order to justify her deed:

... it was left to her to make the sacrifice. She found a ready example in Christ, who died on the cross before rising as the Saviour, whose love

washed away the past, the old misdemeanors, and who would not object to renewal. (p.141)

What Marion needs to wash away is her tainted coloredness to be "remade" (p. 144) in pure whiteness. By casting off her defiled colored identity, Marion's obliteration of the past is accomplished and complete.

The obliteration of the past would later become for Helen her most important success and privilege because she's able to "raise the child without the burden of history" (p. 152). Because of the lack of formal education, Hellen and John are unable to prosper financially as they aspired when they decided to pass. They would never have the means to own their dream house "up the slope of the mountain where they could see the curve of the bay" (p. 171), which was supposed to elevate their class and social status. Instead they live in a relatively small "cramped tin-roofed terraced house in Observatory" (p4). Hellen however eventually sees her success in her daughter Marion who is raised in the "ease of whiteness". (p. 152) Marion would in fact have the opportunity to attend university, start her own company and own a luxurious apartment on the beach front. For Hellen then Marion is the fulfillment of her ambitious plan: "They had not prospered in the ways she's imagined, but Helen's achievement was her legacy to Marion, a new generation unburdened by the past" (149)

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It is because her parents obliterated the past for her that Marion is able to escalate the social and class ladder easily and quickly since "being white in the world is surely about being at ease, since the world belongs to you". (p. 152) Hellen then, though unwittingly, represents complete and successful passing since she achieves the "authentic whiteness" that her mother sought: "Whiteness is without restrictions. It has the fluidity of milk; its glow is far reaching." (p. 151)

Obliterating the past and escaping the burden of history are also central themes in the passing narrative of Roth's *The Human Stain*. Set in 1998 during the Monika Lewinsky scandal in the U.S, the novel narrates the story of a professor of Classics named Coleman Silk. Coleman has had a very successful career having served as dean at the Athena College in the Berkshires and having an exceptional record of academic achievement. His brilliant career however comes to a sad end when he asks his students during class whether they know two students who have been absent in his class halfway into the semester or whether they were "spooks". The two students turn out to be black and they accuse Coleman of using a racist slur. Coleman defends himself by asserting that he used the word "spook" to mean "ghost" referring to their invisibility during the semester and not in a racially degradatory sense. As no one in college supports him, Coleman resigns and his wife dies from a heart

attack following the scandal and his fall in disgrace. The irony of the accusation lies in Colman's secret history of passing for white since he was in his twenties. Apart from his mother, brother and sister, no one, including his wife and children, is aware of the fact that Coleman is a light-skinned African American. Ironically, Coleman does not even disclose his secret after the accusation of racism which could re-establish his career and redeem his reputation. As a passer, Coleman's determination to escape the burden of history and to obliterate the past is so radical that he does not even consider revealing his true identity to protect himself.

Colman's wish to avoid labeling at all costs is ingrained in his desire to gain personal achievement in order to move upwardly in class. Like John and Hellen in *Playing in the Light*, Coleman passes voluntarily in the 1950s a period in which legally enforced racial segregation was still in place and passing was a common social practice. His sister, Ernestine, explains to Zukerman, the narrator of the novel, that "Coleman was a part of his time", and that he "couldn't wait to go through civil rights to get his human rights and so he skipped a step" (p. 327). That Coleman continued to pass for white even after the Civil Rights Movement, the abolishment of legally enforced racial segregation and his personal scandal, is indicative of the persistence of racism and the sense that to be black in America is to be discriminated against and to be

limited. Coleman decides to continue his subterfuge after the fall of legal constraints on blacks because he realizes that the social constraints are still in place and that they would work against his desire to maintain his prosperity and class status. Once Coleman obliterated his past, it is impossible for him to go back and burden himself with history. His strong desire for freedom when he decided to pass would pave the way for his social and economic advancement:

He is repowered and free to be whatever he wants, free to pursue the hugest aim, the confidence right in his bones to be his particular I. Free on a scale unimaginable to his father. As free as his father had been unfree. Free now not only of his father but of all that his father had ever had to endure. The impositions. The humiliations. The obstructions. The wound and the pain and the posturing and the shame- all the inward agonies of failure and defeat. Free instead on the big stage. Free to go ahead and be stupendous. Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of the pronouns we, they and I. (p. 155)

The refuge into the "I" that would grant him personal achievement is an escape from the "we" of his racial group and hence from the legacy of slavery.

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You can't let the big they impose its bigotry on you any more than let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you. Not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the Tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral its insidious E pluribus Unum" (p. 155)

Like Helen in *Playing in the Light*, Colman is ready to do whatever it takes to escape from the "tyranny of the we", to make his passing successful and to achieve "whiteness". He gives up his career as a professional black boxer; he converts to Judaism passing for a Jew; and he disavows his mother and cuts all ties with his family. The individualist Coleman decides to shake himself free of all social and legal constraints of being black in order to invent himself into a self-made man.

In this sense, Coleman is pursuing the American Dream which he considers cannot be achieved while being black. For white Americans, the African American is the "other" against which they define themselves and do not want to be. As Toni Morrison puts it, "the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man" is based on the difference from the black slave, "the projection of the not-me" (p. 38–9). It is whiteness that offers Coleman a smooth and almost effortless path to achieving the American Dream: Coleman has a meteoric rise as a scholar and an



academic and is able to achieve success and respectability within the whitewashed bourgeois world. His swift upward mobility would have been totally unimaginable if he continued to pose as black.

It is important to note that Coleman chooses to pass not only as white but also as Jew. In part, this is to justify his light skin and appearance but it is also because the Jewish minority after WWII had enjoyed greater access to social and economic opportunities. Thanks to their vicinity to whiteness, Jewish Americans have been able to better assimilate in American society by accepting the idea of the melting pot. Coleman seems to have put into practice what his father told him about the ability of the Jewish community to assimilate: "Jews ...were like Indian scouts, shrewd people showing the outsider his way in, showing the social possibility, showing an intelligent colored family how it might be done" (p. 97). The fact that Colman is able to rise in the academic and social white world is telling of advantages that Jewish Americans had in upward mobility in comparison to African Americans. As a Dean, the Jewish American Colman appoints the first African American professor at the Athena College which is telling of the extent to which the two minorities have different levels of privilege available to them. Coleman's upward mobility would have been impeded by racial discrimination if he

remained black but it is not when he passes for white even while marked as a Jew.

In our examination of the two novels, we find then that the process of racial passing offers a unique perspective to the complexities and the inter-sectionality of race and class. In both *Playing in the Light* and *The Human Stain*, posing as white in the American and South African context is a choice that the characters make to in order to avoid racial discrimination and to access the same privileges as the whites. All the characters under study in this paper live in an identity exile as they consciously deny their authentic self and inhabit in the in the other. This helps them prosper in society and move upwardly in class. The process of passing however comes at a great cost: all characters have to make great sacrifices in their quest for whiteness. They obliterate their past and identity in order to free themselves from the burden of history and society. The fact that all the characters in the novel chose to continue passing even after the fall of legally enforced racial segregation in the U.S and the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa is revelatory of the persistence of racism, racial discrimination and inequality in post-segregation America and post-apartheid South Africa.

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