

# Post-Apartheid Haptic: Tact and Tactility in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*

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## Abstract

Set against South Africa's transition from white minority rule to democracy, Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006) evokes a world of metaphorical skins understandably thin, injured, and sensitive to scrutiny. Addressing questions of heritage and belonging, this article examines the novel's nuanced representations of racial identity, reading modes of sociability along the skins that facilitate social interaction between the text's fictional bodies. These domains of interpersonal engagement are analysed in three sections: "The Veiled Touch," "Skinned," and "The Light Touch." The latter considers a light, transitional sociability that may foster intersubjective constitution of identity in relationships not conducive to unreserved intimacy. Ironically a remnant of colonial decorum, tact emerges as an intermediate, non-imperial mode of engagement, of expressing respect amid vast socio-economic inequality. *Tact* owes its haptic character to the association with *tactility*, a linguistic correlation that emphasises intercorporeality. The vulnerability of the self acquires a distinctly visceral quality in the novel, as bodies try to find their feet (rather literally) and forge relationships across former divides. Contributing to the burgeoning body of research on the haptic sense in literature, touch is identified as an inventive motif by which Wicomb destabilises racial classification and feels her way towards a language of tactile reciprocity. As a conceptual framework, the haptic—involving touch, kinaesthesia, and proprioception—has much to offer vocabularies of proximity and relationality, and reimaginings of social space after apartheid.

**Keywords:** haptic in literature; skin; racial identity; Zoë Wicomb; South African fiction

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## Opsomming

*Playing in the Light* (2006) deur Zoë Wicomb is gesetel teen Suid-Afrika se oorgang van wit minderheidsregering tot demokrasie, en roep 'n wêreld van metaforiese velle begryplik dun, beseer, en gevoelig vir ondersoek op. Hierdie artikel spreek vraagstukke oor erfenis en behoort aan, en ondersoek die roman se genuanseerde verteenwoordigings van rasseidentiteit. Vorme van sosiale interaksie word gelees by wyse van velle wat wisselwerking tussen die teks se fiktiewe liggame fasiliteer. Hierdie sfere van interpersoonlike betrokkenheid word in drie afdelings ontleed: “The Veiled Touch,” “Skinned,” en “The Light Touch.” Laasgenoemde beskou 'n ligte, transisionele sosiabiliteit wat intersubjektiewe identiteitskonstitusie mag bevorder in verhoudings wat nie vir onvoorwaardelike intimiteit gereed is nie. *Takt*, ironies genoeg 'n oorblyfsel van koloniale dekorum, kom na vore as 'n tussenliggende, nie-imperialistiese vorm van betrokkenheid wat respek te midde groot sosio-ekonomiese ongelykheid uitdruk. *Takt* se haptiese karakter het te danke aan sy assosiasie met *taktiliteit*, 'n taalkundige verhouding wat interliggaamlikheid benadruk. Die kwesbaarheid van die self besit 'n besliste lyflike gehalte in die roman soos karakters (byna letterlik) probeer voete vind en verhoudings smee oor voormalige skeidings heen. Om by te dra tot ontluikende navorsing oor die haptiese sintuig in die letterkunde, word aanraking, of gevoel, geïdentifiseer as 'n vindingryke motief waarmee Wicomb rasseklassifisering destabiliseer en haar weg na 'n taal van tasbare wederkerigheid voel. As 'n konseptuele raamwerk het die haptiese—wat aanraking, kinestese, en proprioëpsie behels—veel te bied aan woordeskatte van nabyheid en relasionaliteit, asook herverbeeldings van sosiale ruimtes ná apartheid.

## Introduction

Identity is not only about contemplation of being; it is bound up with the body and the ways in which we experience the ground beneath our feet, and rest our eyes on a familiar landscape. But then different groups in South Africa experience these differently. (Wicomb as quoted in Meyer and Olver 2002, 189)

Centring on concerns eloquently articulated by the South African-born author Zoë Wicomb, this article considers identity as “bound up with the body,” a body situated within and shaped by overlapping communities and contexts. Enriched by her critical understanding of postcolonial and literary theory, Wicomb’s fictional texts are shaped in their interactions with both real and textual bodies, including historical and literary narratives. Delving into her country’s “archive [...] of skin and bone,” to borrow from Sara Ahmed (2002, 49), Wicomb draws attention to the literal and metaphorical skins that affect social encounters.

In 2013, Wicomb earned international acclaim as one of three inaugural recipients of the Windham-Campbell Prizes. Spanning nearly four decades, her fictional oeuvre, comprising *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), *David's Story* (2000), *Playing in*

*the Light* (2006), *The One that Got Away* (2008), *October* (2014) and *Still Life* (2020), problematises constructions of racial and gender identities in postcolonial milieus. *Playing in the Light*, which is the primary focus of this article, portrays the delicate equilibrium between bodies segregated by race, class, and gender in the city of Cape Town. The explorations of post-apartheid sociability and identity by a writer who suffered from apartheid's racial exclusions were especially pertinent at the time of publication (2006) when a discourse of race was re-emerging in South Africa. Rapid neoliberalisation alongside persistent economic disparity serves as fundamental backdrop for the novel (Emmett 2022), as it vividly demonstrates the complexities of race and representation in the country's fledgling democracy.

The protagonist, Marion Campbell, who considers herself a white woman, learns late in the novel that her parents were so-called "play-whites" during the apartheid era. The term refers to persons legally classified as "Coloured"<sup>1</sup> under the apartheid regime who passed as "White" to gain access to what Stéphane Robolin's constructive reading of the novel calls "the properties of whiteness," properties explained as "both unique qualities *and* legally protected possessions" (2011, 351; italics in original). The discovery wrenches Marion from her seat of white insulation and into the streets of South Africa's turbulent, variegated past. As she begins to explore her personal ancestry in relation to the country's political history, she starts to immerse herself more fully in proximate worlds, forging relationships that contribute greatly to her self-actualisation. Though convoluted, Marion's social connections expose her to alternate perspectives that, in turn, broaden her own, shaping a new identity, or figurative skin, through which to experience the world.

*Playing in the Light* underscores the continuities between formal apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, and the challenges involved in surmounting entrenched racial classifications "pot-bellied with meaning" (Wicomb 2006, 106). Aretha Phiri remarks that the author's "focus on coloured identity—a marginal and marginalised ethnicity and subjectivity in national discourses and narratives—aptly highlights and critiques the poverty of a society that continues, post-apartheid, to imagine and realise itself in starkly and rigidly black and white paradigms" (2018, 118). Through its portrayal of a woman coming to terms with her parents' overtly racialised sense of identity, the novel confronts the hierarchies encoded by apartheid, interrogating fixed categories of racial identity and their supposed properties. In particular, the text explores the uniquely personal experience of the effects of racialisation,<sup>2</sup> of living within a racialised skin, as the façade of the Campbell family's whiteness crumbles.

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* still offers one of the most compelling and influential analyses of racialisation and its effects, in particular via the related concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Wicomb explains the word's genealogy in a South African context (2018, 123).

<sup>2</sup> In "Racialized Bodies," Ahmed frames race not as a dry scientific fact, but as the effects of a highly charged, emotional process referred to as racialisation, "a process that takes place in time and space" (2002, 46).

“epidermalisation,” the internalisation of shame and inferiority that processes of racialisation engender. Fanon’s work suggests that a body racialised, which is a body “fixed” and “dissected under white eyes” (Fanon 1968, 116; italics in original), may give rise to a symbolic framework that is compromised and stunted as well. Because intolerance is targeted at and experienced through the body, it profoundly impacts self-perception as shaped along the contours of the body: “I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance” (Fanon 1968, 116).

In South Africa, scholar and poet Gabeba Baderoon contends that “despite this argument that the meaning of *race* is constructed, I have lived the reality in which my body was a set of markers of racial meanings” (2004). Here, Baderoon makes a crucial statement that resonates with Ahmed’s counsel, that efforts to denaturalise difference should circumvent the “de-politicizing or neutralization of the terrain” (2002, 47). As Wicomb suggests in the epigraph, bodies experience racialisation differently. Marked by the brunt of centuries of overdetermination and segregation, every individual in South Africa lives processes of differentiation in subjective and personal ways. Accordingly, Wicomb’s fiction seeks to denaturalise normative categories of difference whilst acknowledging its effects on the subject’s experiential reality and sense of self. In the writer’s own words,

what contemporary literature appears to engage with is a new meaningfulness of ethnic tags, a probing of identifications that it would be dishonest to disown in a society riddled with inequities, but ones which can be divested of received meanings and can be negotiated afresh. [...]. For the majority of black people whose material conditions have not changed in the New South Africa, racial identity remains the platform from which the fight for equality must be staged. (Wicomb 1998, 382)

In “Shame and Identity,” Wicomb writes of the postmodern concern with the body and “the inscription of power in scopic relations” (2018, 116), further stating that “people can resist received racial descriptions” (2018, 127). Describing an author’s “envelope of space” (2005, 152–153), Wicomb notably associates identity and belonging with a sense of delimitation that is not visual but proprioceptive (2005, 152–153). The comingling of touch, kinaesthesia, and proprioception is encapsulated by “the haptic,” as considered by Abbie Garrington in *Haptic Modernism* (2013) and “Touching Texts” (2010). In the latter, Garrington argues that “no full account has been given of the role of the haptic in literature, either as a subject of fiction or as the basis for a mode of writing” (2010, 810). Sarah Jackson, in *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing* (2015), similarly shows that the relation between touching and writing merits further scholarly engagement.

Contributing to nascent research on the haptic in South African literature (Bethlehem 2015;<sup>3</sup> Gaylard 2023, 7–16), this article identifies touch as an inventive, though somewhat overlooked, motif by which Wicomb destabilises racial identity in *Playing in the Light*. Connoting proximity, variability, and acceptance, the faculty of touch negates racial differentiation, which is an “ocularcentric” (Jay 1988, 3) means of classification. Close reading suggests that the novel’s renderings of skin privilege the haptic, favouring the tactility of skin over its appearance. It is the reversibility, or mutuality, of touch enabled by the skin that serves to undermine divisive stratifications based on vision. Margrit Shildrick’s conceptualisation of “the thematics of touch” (2002, 113) is particularly useful in this regard since it identifies touch as “the very thing that signals potential danger in a specular economy that privileges separation” (2002, 103). Given that the thematics of touch play a subtle yet significant role in *Playing in the Light*’s interrogation of racial constructions, I draw attention to literal and metaphorical representations of skin that thread entwined through the novel’s tactful reflection on post-apartheid sociabilities.

*Playing in the Light* has been subject to an array of critical readings. The ethics of representation and identity formation are central concerns, approached by way of postcolonial diaspora theory (Jacobs 2008), narrative responsibility (Van der Vlies 2010), the “struggle over the sign” (Driver 2010), the “un-homely” (Dass 2011), social geography (Robolin 2011), existentialism (Laue 2018), photographic theory (Van der Vlies 2022), economics (Emmett 2022), and epistemic justice (Phiri 2022). Among these analyses, the following hold particular relevance to my haptic interpretation of the novel.

Applying Sartre’s concept of *Being-for-Others*, Kharys Laue connects the visual gaze to self-perception and development (2018). Regarding the primacy of the visual, Andrew van der Vlies considers the role of photography in Wicomb’s oeuvre, problematising its correspondence to stasis and sameness (2022). Concentrating on a different novel, *David’s Story*, Ruth Choveaux examines the trope of skin in relation to racial identity, associating skin’s protean quality with more malleable ways of being (2010, 20–21). Choveaux broaches (suitably, given the novel’s subject matter) violence and violation, stigma and shame, mentioning torture, disfigurement, scarring, and excess. Attuned to *Playing in the Light*, my interpretation foregrounds a gentler touch, towards a framework of *feeling-with-others*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bethlehem’s analysis of Beukes’s *Zoo City* “deploys the haptic [...] to reconfigure perceptions of home” (2015, 3). The discussion, which posits “buildings as the privileged metonymy for skin” (Bethlehem 2015, 17), could be read as an interesting supplement to scholarly explorations of space, place, and identity in *Playing in the Light*. Bethlehem does not provide “a ‘theory of hapticity’ for ‘South African’ literature” (2015, 11), cautioning against treating both terms as fixed and coherent.

<sup>4</sup> The term is a slight modification of Paterson’s (2007). Unrelated to Wicomb, Paterson posits touch as a conceptual resource that draws others near, providing a framework for empathy or “feeling-with” (2007, 147).

A further influence is Robolin's discussion of *Playing in the Light*, as structured around the following registers: a post-apartheid geography, an apartheid geography, and a literary geography (2011). Focussing on the "spatial dimensions of race" (Robolin 2011, 357), the inquiry necessarily alludes to limits and layers but leaves unaddressed their patent tactility. Comparably, Minesh Dass probes the connection between race and displacement, describing the former as "an endless narrative promise of belonging, of home which displaces [...] any sense of one's own home" (2011, 142).

Augmenting the preceding explorations of racial identity vis-à-vis place, the remainder of this article will touch on three prominent types of social interaction via the "skins" that facilitate, or restrict, contact between *Playing in the Light*'s characters. Since identity is understood as inherently corporeal or, as Wicomb would say, "bound up with the body," the communication of identity is equally embodied. Appealing to the material domain of the skin, the meeting place of body and world that enables social exchange, Wicomb models modes of post-apartheid sociability on tactility. Referring to questions of identity and belonging, the following pages will analyse these domains of interpersonal engagement, which are not so much opposed as interconnected and problematised, in three sections: "The Veiled Touch," "Skinned," and "The Light Touch." The latter will posit a synthesis between the two interrelated extremes of isolation and exposure, arguing that the light touch of tact allows for the intersubjective constitution of identity in post-apartheid contexts not conducive to unreserved intimacy. "Tact" owes its haptic character to the word's association with "tactility," a linguistic correlation that underlies the emphasis on intercorporeality. *Playing in the Light* appears to suggest that a realistic measure of individual freedom lies in neither seclusion nor its antithesis, but arises from a subject feeling at home in her own literal and metaphorical skins. Tim Porges (as quoted in Barnett 2015, 7) puts it beautifully: "The skin is where we find ourselves; its history is ours."

## The Veiled Touch

Those tightly wrapped days did not admit friendship. (Wicomb 2006, 61)

*Playing in the Light* begins on "the liminal space of the balcony" (Dass 2011, 138),<sup>5</sup> "the space both inside and out" (Wicomb 2006, 1). Marion, a "cold blooded" (22) single woman in her late thirties, is wrapping a dead speckled guinea fowl at her feet "in a shroud of sage green" (1). A similar veil surfaces in Wicomb's subsequent collection, *The One that Got Away*, in a short story called "Disgrace." Here, the domestic worker, Grace, covets her employer's scarf, "which [she] must say is the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. Silk, she supposes, and in shimmering blues and greens that flow into each other, exactly the colour of the sea on Boxing Day, although she no longer gets to the sea" (Wicomb 2011, 20). The blue silk is also reminiscent of the "water-silk gown in shimmering aquamarine" (Wicomb 2006, 146) that Marion's mother, Helen

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<sup>5</sup> In his insightful discussion of the passage (and the novel as a whole), Dass "argue[s] that this unhomed state is, figuratively, the condition in which race places us all" (2011, 138).

Campbell, loved but never wore for fear of being outdated. These veils, or second metaphorical skins, associate wealth and privilege with longing, liminality, and detachment, and depict Marion's predominant mode of interaction with the world as a touch that is veiled.

Described as "squeamish about touching" (1), Marion has barricaded herself in a "secure" and "inviolable" luxury apartment with a "cocoon of draped muslin" for a bed where "the noise of the world dampen[s] to a distant hum" (2). Although Marion is the proud owner of MCTravel, a travel agency she runs with "clockwork precision" (26), she is horrified by the impermanence and ambiguity, or the loss of secure boundaries, that travelling entails. Instead, she prefers "seeing the world on film or television" (40). Hers is a life filtered through screens and felt through shrouds.

Although the era of formal apartheid came to an end in 1994, Marion, at this stage of the novel, is very much "sealed in [her] whiteness" (Fanon 1968, 11) in quite an idiosyncratic manner that is simultaneously emblematic of the disconnected state of white privilege after apartheid. Upon receiving a call from an armed-response company warning her of a possible burglary at the office (14), Marion's response captures her contemptible ignorance at the outset: "Shot them down like flies, Marion hopes, then revises the thought—she wouldn't like to trip over dead bodies" (15). The episode swathes the outside world threatening to penetrate "her little kingdom" (16) in moral decay.

Marion lives alone and friendless, convinced that other people pose a threat to her sheltered existence. The thought that Brenda Mackay, the new, young, and (significant, given the changing times) coloured employee, might visit Marion's flat, the walls of which symbolise her rigid defence mechanisms, sends Marion into a panic that "rise[s] systematically from her feet, as if she is slowly, stiffly being lowered into icy water" (71). Somewhat amusingly, the problem is attributed to "CHAOS," the "Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome" (71). Her inability to socialise is mirrored in her aversion to touch, which, as a recurring metaphor for social contact in the novel, associates Marion's seclusion with a general lack of feeling. On the veranda of her ageing father John Campbell's house, "[s]he pinches off the dead leaves of the geranium [...]. Marion probes gingerly with a finger. [...] damn, she's ruined her newly varnished nail" (9–10).

Peter Stallybrass's and Allon White's understanding of the balcony in nineteenth-century literature suggests an elite, elevated space separating the observer from the working classes, yet allowing the desiring gaze free reign: "From the balcony, one could gaze, but not be touched" (2007, 274). From Marion's balcony, a fitting symbol of insulation and privilege, she can see from afar the "finger-wagging Robben Island" (Wicomb 2006, 45), emblematic of confinement, resistance, and freedom, and enjoy Cape Town's natural beauty whilst keeping the city's harsh socio-economic realities at

bay.<sup>6</sup> However, all is not well in Marion's dominion. The barriers of her detached privilege (a protective device responding to feelings of vulnerability) confine her: "[F]or a moment, she seems to gag on metres of muslin, ensnared in the fabric that wraps itself round and round her into a shroud from which she struggles to escape" (2).

Rosalyn Diprose considers the effects of isolation on the embodied subject, explaining that an integrated sense of self comes into being only within a community: "[B]odies signify their uniqueness and are the expression of meaning through community, by being exposed to other bodies" (2006, 240). Critical of the "cocoon" of white privilege, *Playing in the Light* illustrates how the absence of reciprocity impoverishes identity, "impact[ing] not just on the bodies targeted, but also on the bodies it is designed to unify and protect. This loss of meaning will be lived by these bodies, not as an open sense of belonging, but as a loss of the familiar and, in the extreme, as violent discord" (Diprose 2006, 240).

It is not long before Marion's wrappings of isolation are pierced, setting in motion the gradual abatement of her seclusion and apathy. From a large photograph<sup>7</sup> on the front page of the *Cape Times*, the strangely familiar eyes of one Patricia Williams stare accusingly into Marion's. Williams is a young, coloured woman participating in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, having suffered at the hands of the Security Police during apartheid. Perpetually projected onto multiple surfaces, like the drapes of her bed, Williams's face takes to haunting Marion, awakening in the protagonist an unexpected interest in the proceedings and a growing awareness of apartheid atrocities. Suddenly, she finds herself submerged in the tumultuous current of South Africa's history, "step[ping] out gingerly into its strange streets" like "a reluctant traveller who has landed in a foreign country without so much as a phrase book" (74). Thus, history begins to "[assert] itself boldly, threatens to mark, to break through and stain the primed white canvas" (152) of the anaesthetic identity that Marion's parents, Helen and John Campbell, bequeathed her.

Eventually, Williams's face reminds Marion of Tokkie, her family's beloved housekeeper who passed away when Marion was a child. Tokkie, a source of nurture, "would squeeze her tightly, stroke her hair, cup her face in the wrinkled black hands [...]. She said that Marion was her darling kleinding, her beauty, her sweetest heart" (32). Marion starts to suspect (erroneously, as the reader later learns) that she was adopted and that Tokkie played a role in the process. In a characteristically ironic move by Wicomb, Marion subsequently solicits assistance from her new employee, Brenda, presumably the only coloured person Marion knows.

Brenda's appointment signals a personal and political change in Marion's life. Though conscientious and "soft spoken, soothing even," there is "an ironic edge to her voice

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<sup>6</sup> In a pertinent discussion of Marion's insulation and privilege (2011, 350–352), Robolin draws an association between her "spatial illiteracy" (2011, 355) and social limitations.

<sup>7</sup> See Van der Vlies's perceptive reflection on the function of photography in Wicomb's fiction (2022).



that is unnerving” (17). In conversations with others, Brenda oscillates between “impressive diplomacy” (17) and abrupt, even combative, frankness, often on the topic of apartheid, whereas Marion, who is unfamiliar with the ways of friendship, treats Brenda tactlessly. Her new employee’s jarring volubility nevertheless challenges Marion’s ill-informed preconceptions about race, class, and South African politics, thus playing a vital role in the development of her ability to relate to others. Having decided to assist her employer’s pursuit of a new skin of sorts, Brenda joins Marion on a journey to the town of Wuppertal to discover Marion’s origins.

## Skinned

Marion scrapes together the skins [of the peaches] into a sorry pile. She stares at her peach; she cannot bring herself to eat it. Naked, slippery—that’s me, that’s who I am, she thinks. Hurlled into the world fully grown, without a skin. [...]. She chants: Skin and bone, by the skin of one’s teeth, skinflint, skin deep like beauty, thick skinned, thin skinned—can’t think of any more skins. (Wicomb 2006, 101)

Marion is sick with apprehension as they drive into Wuppertal. Asking for information at a certain Mrs Murray’s house, a “blanket of anxiety enfolds her: sweat pours down her armpits, pools between her breasts, beads on her forehead” (94). In addition, “Marion’s foot is swollen, taut as dough risen in the confines of its pan” (96) and she feels vulnerable, aimless, and alienated from her body. As Mrs Murray nurses the foot, soaking it in water, she imagines the shadow of Tokkie’s face falling over Marion’s. Thus, the truth of the protagonist’s ancestry is revealed: Tokkie, the family’s deceased domestic worker, is Marion’s grandmother.

*Playing in the Light* alternates between the present-day account of Marion’s discovery and the tale of her parents’ passing during apartheid. During his first visit to the traffic department in Cape Town, the young John Campbell was mistaken for a white man, an opportunity that inspired the couple’s decision to pass for white to escape the sense of inferiority mainly felt by Helen: “Caught accidentally in a beam of light, [John] watched whiteness fall fabulously, like an expensive woman, into his lap” (127).

The acquisition of properties of whiteness (see Robolin 2011, 358–364) exacted a heavy toll, as the couple found themselves “alone in the world, a small new island of whiteness” that, like the “big constructions” of the bird cages in Cape Town’s Company’s Garden, “were cages all the same” (141). In passing from one racial classification to another, the Campbells exchanged the familiarity of their respective communities for a curtailed state of anonymous displacement, a state of a perpetual non-belonging, which they thereafter conferred upon their only child, Marion. Wicomb states that “[t]he play-white was yet another way of exploring coloured identity [...] and it was important for me to show in the novel how embracing whiteness amounted to nothing” (as quoted in Phiri 2018, 121).

The loss of secure structures of identification and belonging typifying the Campbells' deracination is felt viscerally, as illustrated by Helen's sexual exploitation in procuring an affidavit legally verifying her and John's whiteness. Her body reacted to the pending violation in a manner redolent of the swelling of Marion's foot in Wuppertal: "A block of blinding pain severed her head from the rest of her body, so that it was an enormous effort to put one foot before another" (140). When John signed a document to renounce all contact with "non-whites," thus renouncing his family, his body also rebelled against the dislocation, heaving vomit.

Having relinquished their metaphorical skins, the couple came across as utterly vulnerable, "walk[ing] exposed: pale, vulnerable geckos whose very skeletal systems showed through transparent flesh" (123). In the present, rummaging through her mother's box of treasures for clues to the family's past, Marion finds a Moravian Mission Church card with a quotation associating a lamb's loss of wool (its outer layer or hide, suggestive of skin) with slaughter and a loss of dignity (118). Within the context of her parents' passing, this is another unflinching image of skinlessness related to the loss of an identity so thoroughly embedded in community.

It is important to note that the two seemingly opposed modes of sociability discussed thus far, that is, "the veiled touch" and "skinlessness," are related, as it is the extreme vulnerability of the Campbells' lack of social identity after their passing that gives rise to the skins of self-preserving seclusion inherited by their daughter. The realisation that Marion's parents were "play-whites" brings to light the artificiality of these figurative second skins, which, from the outset, threaten to consume her family. Believing herself deprived of ancestry, community, and ultimately agency, she feels "light and empty as a ghost" (105). The epigraph to this section, describing Marion as skinless and in need of a new self-concept, is a revealing reconfiguration of racialised skin. The corollary that Tokkie is, in fact, Marion's grandmother awakens a strong expression of vulnerability concerning her parents' denial of Tokkie—the need to "spell out the word, whatever it may be: Grandmother, Grandma, Granny, Ouma, Mamma—a new word, naked and slippery with shame" (107).

Mary Evans describes the body as "our means of freedom and the location of our enslavement" (2002, 6). Marion's in-between state after learning of her parents' passing is an example of the novel's exploration of the complex interplay between the skin as segregator versus the skin as facilitator of freedom in relation to the types of social interaction that bring these figurative skins into being and are shaped by them in turn. To illustrate this point, during the high tide of apartheid, skin lighteners and hair straightening products<sup>8</sup> were extremely popular, demonstrating the extent that apartheid succeeded in turning the body against itself. The salient symbol of the stocking in *David's Story* exemplifies the tension between the body as, on the one hand, an impediment to a better life and, on the other, a productive anti-apartheid weapon of

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<sup>8</sup> Hair, like skin, was deemed an indicator of racial identity.

resistance and means of achieving political liberation: “[T]he charity bags of old stockings [...] came to serve the sinister function of fighting the curl in the hair of women who found that it took no more than a swift tug to drag the nylon across the face and radically transform their sleek-haired selves into guerrillas” (Wicomb 2001, 9).

Returning to *Playing in the Light*, in the following rare and complex instance of appreciation and tenderness, Helen meditates on the usefulness of the “tough leather” of the soles of her feet, i.e. enabling skins that protect and carry her through the world:

Disgusted as she was by her horny feet, Helen had a suspicion that the roughness of her soles was what saw her through the trials and tribulations of life in the city. Something hard of her own between the pale, soft body and the asphalt of the world was perhaps necessary, so that she always left it too long, let things slide, until the skin had grown once more into tough leather. (Wicomb 2006, 148)<sup>9</sup>

In “Freedom,” the last chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* (1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty considers liberty in terms of boundaries, proposing that the limits of freedom are not absolute and independent but situated, relational, and produced by the acts and desires of a subject that is already free through exercising initiative. The vision of a greater, perfect freedom (ever out of reach) carves out and defines not only the obstacle but also the boundaries of that particular freedom—“those limits that freedom itself has set” (Merleau-Ponty 1976, 436).

Revealing the inherent dissonance at the heart of the Campbell family’s whiteness, *Playing in the Light* gestures towards a sense of productive envelopment that transcends confinement and dislocation. Via metaphors that are bound up with the body’s ability to touch, feel, and position itself in relation to others, *Playing in the Light* critically dethrones the blank, insulated space that is white affluence in South Africa, demonstrating that political and economic privileges do not constitute freedom, if such fortification precludes individuation within a community of others. Liberation is not a property to be impersonated or bought. On the other hand, as illustrated by Marion’s desire for rootedness, neither can freedom be defined as the total absence of limits, or skins. Without some form of self-definition, without a figurative skin, the subject is unable to touch, relate to, or reach out to the other, leaving social relations stunted and hollow. Intimating the necessity of delimitation, of boundedness and belonging, the ensuing section examines figurations of second skins in *Playing in the Light* with reference to tact as a light, transitional sociability in precarious climes.

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<sup>9</sup> Outa Blinkoog’s mode of understanding the world, as he “[keeps] on the move” (89), is described in similar terms: “[H]e really would recommend getting to know one’s terrain through the soles of one’s own feet.” The character “pats his own [feet] appreciatively, hard as leather; he thinks they have covered a million miles” (91).

## The Light Touch

Issuing vigorous instructions instead may well do the trick, but no, as Geoff Geldenhuys says, it is best to go with the times, and this is the time of the new: a time of hypersensitivity that requires you to recognise the special needs of others, to don your kid gloves, to tread gingerly in the New South Africa. (Wicomb 2006, 25)

For all the anxiety about violence in the country, South Africans from dissimilar backgrounds mingle violently indeed, but also exuberantly, intimately, and courteously. In the excerpt above, Marion's suave suitor, Geoff Geldenhuys, suggests that employers should approach their employees with awareness, sensitivity, and politeness, referring to the kid glove, a metaphor for tact that draws on that term's linguistic relation to "tactility." Instead of issuing instructions in the brusque manner of Marion, Geldenhuys believes that power should be wielded softly.

Comparable to other modes of social interaction portrayed in *Playing in the Light*, representations of tact are problematic and complex. The reader is encouraged to realise that Brenda's employment relies on her ability to conform to MCTravel's ethos by balancing the necessity for truth with a respectful touch that appears simulated at times. Via depictions of light sociability, *Playing in the Light* intimates that the ideal of open dialogue in sensitive environments is complicated. Instead, relationships are suspended in quotidian civility, as Brenda ends an argument—and concludes the novel—by exiting from Marion's car and "shut[ting] the door with a quiet click" (218).

As another example, when Vumile Mkhize, the black owner of the BMW Marion scratches by accident, pays a visit to her office concerning the insurance, Marion gives him her card: "[S]he must make amends, or perhaps she is touting for business" (108). This sentence opposes two possible interpretations of tact, both of which are related to political correctness. On the one hand, such dispositions might only mask potential exploitation or manipulation, an interpretation that resonates with Bourdieu's exposition of the power relations tactically perpetuated in what he dubs the "labour of politeness" (1992, 80). On the other hand, disproportionate socio-economic relations and psychological wounds may require the light or delicate touch of the idiomatic kid glove, a stance exemplified by the novel's tactful representations of interpersonal engagement.

In "Our Debt to Lamb," David Russell (2012) presents an extensive interpretation of Charles Lamb's *Essays of Elia* (1902). From Lamb's writing Russell extrapolates a framework of manners within which conceptions of courteous communication in *Playing in the Light* may be situated. Although his perspective on politeness in Lamb certainly rings true, the scholar uses *Essays of Elia* as a point of departure for a detailed reflection on tact as a quotidian civility. Certain formulations and terms pivotal to Russell's argument are entirely his own, including "tact," which is described as an ethical and aesthetic response to the uncertainties produced by the rapid urbanisation of the early nineteenth century. Russell posits tact productively as "a more cautious and tactile feeling one's way in less certain social conditions no longer governed by

absolutist hierarchies of status” (2012, 181). It is his account of tact as a redressive, localised “sociability of the transitional” (Russell 2012, 188) that resonates with gloved negotiations of South Africa’s period of transition.

The kid glove mentioned by Geldenhuys is a metaphorical instance of an additional surface or pliable second skin that heightens sensitivity. This touch is lighter, more delicate, to sense and appreciate the particularities of the other—“amplify[ing] the perversely feeble power of the tip, the fringe, the edge, the hem” (2004, 265), as Steven Connor writes in “The Light Touch,” the concluding chapter of *The Book of Skin*. According to Connor, “the values of tact, ‘touch,’ subtlety, refinement and so on, all depend upon and ramify from the thought of the sensation of its particular kind of lightness of touch” (2004, 259). Accordingly, the way tact frees up additional space for the other can be understood in terms of a cautious touch that is “not quite one, a touch that refrains from the vulgarity of grasping or handling” (Connor 2004, 264). In this sense, Connor’s vision of tact as a “nonconsuming” approach that preserves (2004, 274) and enfolds the other resembles Russell’s understanding of ethical courtesy that respects diversity and democratises space in acknowledging “the coexistence of many incommensurable life worlds” (2012, 203).

Briefly shifting focus from figurative second skins to literal skins, there are as many representations of feet and their soles as there are modes of social interaction in the novel. It is the foot, instead of the more obvious choice of the hand, that is the text’s preferred symbol of the body’s sensate encounters with the world. On a more basic level, the bare foot, which is a tactile symbol of coloured identity in Wicomb’s novel, might symbolise poverty or a lack of refinement—Helen believed that “only low-class tannies [aunts] went about with bare legs” (147)—as well as mobility or displacement, depending on the situation. The Campbells’ secret kept them on their toes (152), and Helen never allowed Marion to remove her shoes in public, suggestive of the family’s insulation.<sup>10</sup> In *David’s Story*, the “deep scars on the soles of both [David Dirkse’s] feet” (Wicomb 2001, 11) represent a literal and figurative scarring that has disrupted his ability, recalling Wicomb’s phrase, to experience the ground beneath his feet. David’s perception of the world is figuratively scarred and fragmented.

In *David’s Story* as well as in *Playing in the Light*, the leather of the veldskoen (a type of shoe) is a more prevalent, natural, and authentic second skin than the kid glove. The Afrikaans word “veldskoen” is interchangeable with “velskoen” in that the element “vel” (the word for “skin”) has been assimilated to “veld” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2024). The veld- or veldskoen associates reciprocal communication with how the subject is rooted or grounded in a particular context, tradition, or history. Marion’s grandmother, Tokkie, used to be a veldskoen maker who “loved to feel under her fingertips the texture of tanned leather, its warm peppery smell, red-brown as the sunny earth. The animal shape of the hides [...] came to life under her touch” (Wicomb 2006,

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<sup>10</sup> Marion’s shielded privilege is depicted as a figurative absence of feet: “Ever since Marion can remember, her father has called her his meermin, his little mermaid” (22).

136). Like the extra surface of the kid glove, the veldskoens hide, as an organic doubling of the foot's physical skin, envelops and protects the foot, enabling a stronger step.

Wicomb's description of the veldskoens is comparable to Michel Serres's account of the *vair* (fur) slipper as "a sort of bonnet or the finger of a glove" that "gently sheathes the foot, like an invaginated pocket" (2008, 64). This sensate envelope enfolds the foot: "You can feel its shape, an open and shut tent, made by and for the touch, skin on skin in places where it suffers, pathologically sensitive" (Serres 2008, 64). Regarding the kid glove and veldskoens, the skin is in a sense doubled to enhance the sensitivity and reciprocity of the encounter, so that one may "tread gingerly in the New South Africa."

## Conclusion

How will we [...] invent a new language for reconstructing ourselves to replace the fixed syntagmas of the discourse of oppression? (Wicomb 1993, 28)

On the concluding page of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes that the black man and the white man "[b]oth have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born" (2008, 206). Though striving towards Fanon's sense of "genuine communication," as exemplified by near-sublime moments of romantic and familial intimacy (Wicomb 2006, 32, 137, 200), the bodily proximities depicted in the novel have yet to arrive at the "new language" Wicomb mentioned in 1993. *Playing in the Light* does incorporate a transcendent mode of communication through the vibrant speech of the unconventional character Outa Blinkoog, whose language is portrayed as rich, spontaneous, and artless: "With this man, one can say anything: outa, miesies; here language is not the fraught business she has come to fear. Words are fresh, newborn, untainted by history; all is bathed in laughter clean as water" (90). However, ever wary of overruling perspectives and equally cautious of her own authority as a writer, Wicomb leaves not even this representation of unrestrained speech, this free flow of words, without problematisation. Described as "self-centred, like a child, relating all things to himself," Blinkoog "shows little interest in [Brenda and Marion]" (91).

Nearing the novel's end, on an evening in London, Marion is moved to tears by a wonderful sight, a "rectangle of light," of "water silk come alive" (192) on the surface of a white wall (suggestive of skin), reminding Marion of her mother's unused "water-silk gown in shimmering aquamarine" (146). This play of light is a positive symbol, which, much like tact, "allows metaphor to stay on the move, and prevents meaning from congealing into a coercive demand for concession to a single consensus. Metaphor, sustaining sameness and difference in a single thought, allows for a transitional space in which many truths and incommensurable desires may interact without impingement" (Russell 2012, 185).

Beyond her depiction of tactful sociability in *Playing in the Light* as well as her creative deployment of affect and nuance, what defines Wicomb as a tactful writer is her refusal to settle on any one position or perspective in the novel. Questioning her own authority as an author, she makes the following observation: “I feel as if I’m writing in the faintest of pencils, that I’m frightened, not quite in control” (as quoted in Hunter 1993, 85). Written in pencil, so to speak, *Playing in the Light* circulates between different modes of sociability symbolised by skin. Moreover, multiple, conflicting focalisations<sup>11</sup> in the novel serve to introduce different standpoints, deepening the reader’s insight into the complexities of post-apartheid society.

Pertaining to the wider implications of this work, literature offers a way of using language that is closer to the body than most forms of writing, partially due to its haptic character. As a lens for examining post-apartheid literature, the haptic serves to heighten sensitivity to questions of identity, community, and belonging. Under the rubric of “the body,” it provides further basis for thinking about how such questions are felt and mutually constituted in material and affective ways. In this regard, Erin Manning affirms that “[p]olitics of relation are politics of touch” (2006, 103). Touch provides opportunities for improvisation and invention, for “striking new relations between terms, subjects, and ideas” (Manning 2006, xiii). In the domain of skin, Jackson (like Choveaux [2010]) finds equal potential for the creation of “new meanings and alternative lines of thought” (2015, 2). As a conceptual resource, the haptic has much to offer vocabularies of proximity and relationality, and reimaginings of social space after apartheid. I believe that Wicomb’s fiction intimates the broader salience of the modality to South African literary culture, notably to “the renovation and re-habitation of what has been inherited” (Samuelson 2008, 135). Perhaps, this provides additional grounds for Dorothy Driver’s observation that “[Wicomb’s] writing offers the newness that history cannot provide” (2010, 533).

This article has offered a touch-sensitive reading of the literal and metaphorical skins that affect social interaction in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*. The vulnerability of the self acquires a distinctly visceral character in this novel, as bodies attempt to find their feet in changing contexts and forge relationships across former divides. Portraying identity as intercorporeal, intersubjective, and necessarily *skinned*, the text unsettles categories of racial identity by opening bodies to touch. In Wicomb’s novel, a sense of freedom arises, ultimately, from feeling at home in one’s own skin. Feeling its way towards a language of tactile reciprocity, the closing lines of *Black Skin, White Masks* encapsulate *Playing in the Light*’s response to the reservations Wicomb herself articulated at apartheid’s end: “Superiority? Inferiority? Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?” (Fanon 2008, 206).

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<sup>11</sup> Exploring narrative responsibility in *Playing in the Light*, Van der Vlies considers Brenda’s role as a probable focaliser or narrator (2010).

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