Performance of social class and race in Zoë Wicomb' s *Playing in the Light* and Danzy Senna's Caucasia

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Abstract:

This paper aims to study the social construction of race and class in American and South African fiction. We compare and contrast the ways in which performance of race and class operate in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*. We first discuss two tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), namely the social construction of race and intersectionality. We then study the correlation between race and class in the two novels through the theme of racial passing. We argue that in order for racial passing to be successful it has to be associated with specific class attributes. In fact, we show through an analysis of the main characters and plot of the two novels that social class position affects racial identity. This exposes the extent to which South African and American societies are marked by essentialism and stereotypes. We also explore the persistence of racism and inequality in the two novels and argue that the legacy of apartheid and racial-segregation continues to have an impact on people of color in South Africa and in the United States.

Keywords: race, class, performance, social construct, discrimination, racial passing

Résumé:

Cet article vise à étudier la construction sociale de la race et de la classe dans la fiction américaine et sud-africaine. Nous comparons les façons dont la performance de la race et de la classe opère dans le roman *Playing in the Light* de ZoëWicomb et le *Caucasia* de Danzy Senna. Nous discutons d'abord deux principes de la TheorieCtitique de la Race (CRT) à savoir la construction sociale de la race et de l'intersectionnalité. Nous étudions ensuite la corrélation entre race et classe dans les deux romans à travers le thème du passage racial. Nous soutenons que pour que le passage raciale réussie, il doit être associé à des attributs de classe social. En fait, nous montrons à travers une analyse des principaux personnages des deux romans que la position de la classe sociale affecte l'identité raciale. Cela montre à quel point les sociétés sud-africaines et américaines sont marquées par l'essentialisme et les stéréotypes. Nous explorons également la persistance du racisme et de l'inégalité dans les deux romans et soutenons que l'héritage de l'apartheid et de la ségrégation raciale continue d'avoir un impact sur les personnes de couleur en Afrique du Sud et aux États-Unis.

Mots-cles: race, class, performance, construction social, discrimination, passage racial

ملخص

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى دراسة البناء الاجتماعي للعرق والطبقة في الروايات الأمريكية والجنوب أفريقية. نقوم بمقارنة الأساليب التي الإعتماد عليها في ابراز أهمية الآداءالإجتماعي في بناء الهوية العرقية و الطبقية في رواية Caucasiaلدانزي سينا و Playing in the Lightلزويويكومب. نناقش أولاً مبدأين من نظرية النقد العرقي (CRT)، وهما البناء الاجتماعي للعرق والتقاطع. ثم ندرس العلاقة بين العرق والطبقة في الروايتين من خلال ظاهرة التحول العرقي العرقية.نوضح كيف أن نجاح التحول العرقي مرتبط بمكونات الطبقة الإجتماعية. نبين من خلال تحليل الشخصيات الرئيسية و حبكة الروايتين أن مكانة الشخص في الطبقة الاجتماعية يؤثر على الهوية العرقية. يكشف هذا عن مدى ترسخ الصور النمطية و الأحكام المسبقة في المجتمعات الأمريكية و الجنوب افريقية. كما نستكشف ايضا استمرار العنصرية وعدم المساواة في الروايتين و نبين كيف أن إرث الفصل أنظمة التمييز العنصري في جنوب أفريقيا وفي الولايات المتحدة ما زال له تأثير سلبي على السود و الإقليات العرقية الأخرى.

كلمات مفتاحية: العرق، الطبقة الإجتماعية، بناء الهوية، التمييز العنصري، التحول العرقي.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the social construction of race

The contemporary passing novels that we study in this paper are influenced by classic narratives in their engagement with issues of race and class. The novels under analysis here reevaluate racial relations in the light of modern reflections on racial identity and racism. They present race as a multilayered constructed concept that intersects with other notions such as class.

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 making it in essence changeable and uninheritable. This gives race a non-essentialist view. As we shall later in the analysis of the novels under study and their characters, race can be constructed and deconstructed depending on the social setting. This leads us to another important concept: performativity. Our reading of race and class in the two novels under study in this paper is based on the premise that passing is a performative act. In this sense the passer will act according to his/her understanding of the norms of the social class and racial group he/she wants to belong to.

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 the 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 (8).

Characters in passing narratives choose racial passing not only as a way to avoid racism but also as a vehicle for upward class mobility. Characters in passing narratives 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.

Performance of social class and race in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*

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.

In the first half of the novel and before discovering her true coloured 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" (Wicomb 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 unsavoury 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 (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" (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 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 (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, who could not be looked up in libraries, who had escaped the documentation of identity? She thinks not. They thought only of their own advancement (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?” (10). For her, it is not just about becoming white but essentially about achieving "no less than respectable whiteness" (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" (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" (140) and a "giveaway" (140), in favor of the Anglican Church; insists on using and mastering the English language; and cut all ties with coloured 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" (143). But her resolve to attain whiteness overwhelm her when she remembers how she was raised by a single coloured 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”(155) 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" (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." (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 misdemeanours, and who would not object to renewal” (141) What Marion needs to wash away is her tainted colourdness to be "remade" (144) in pure whiteness. By casting off her defiled coloured 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" (152). Because of the lack of formal education, Helen 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" (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" (4). Hellen however eventually sees her success in her daughter Marion who is raised in the "ease of whiteness"(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 Helen then Marion is the fulfilment 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).

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" (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" (151).

Performance of social class and race in Zoë Wicomb's*Playing in the Light*

Obliterating the past and escaping the burden of history are also central themes in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, a passing narrative that tells the story of Birdie Lee from early childhood to adolescence in the 1970s and early 80s. Birdie is the daughter of a black intellectual named Deck Lee and a white radical Civil Rights activist named Sandy Lee. Birdie is very close to her three years older sister Cole and the two sisters have even developed their own language, “Elemeno”. The two sisters are different in appearance: while

Cole is dark skinned with curly hair, Birdie is light-skinned and pale with fair hair. The two sisters become the embodiment of Senna's critique of the post-Civil Rights racial categorisation maintained through the white/black binary. In this narrative, Senna exposes the ways in which the continuing dichotomous logic of race after the end of legally enforced racial segregation uphold racial injustice in America.

As Wicomb in *Playing in the Light*, Senna explores the social construction of racial identity showing how it is ultimately based and dependent on performance. The performance is based on behavioural traits linked to class and culture as we shall see. Senna however pushes the classical passing narrative to new limits: in addition to passing for white, the novel incorporates characters passing for black, that is into the disadvantaged group. The ability of the main character Birdie to pass for white *and* black shows the power of racial stereotypes and essentialism as vehicles of racial categories. It also shows the absurdity and inconsistency of racial categories; for Senna, race, as a performable socially constructed act, is an illusion, an ever-shifting and fluid concept. The constant focus in the novel on the ability of Birdie to morph from one racial identity to another with ease shows that individuals live within a society that gives to the physical body a cultural meaning. While traditional views of race have put emphasis on biological difference, race in fact is about how we treat each other and not a condition of skin color. As we shall in later in the discussion of two novels, race can be constructed and deconstructed depending on the social setting.

Before making a racial choice, Birdie is portrayed as trying to make sense out of the discourse of the racial color line. At first, Birdie is neither aware of her own light skin color nor of its social significance. As such, when she is too small to look into mirrors, Birdie sees her blackness through her sister, she tells us: "I was content to see only Cole, three years older than me, and imagine that her face-cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired, serious-was my own." (Senna 2) As she is growing up, she is exposed to post-Civil Rights politics and semantics of race:

The summer before I turned eight, the outside world seemed to bear in on us with a new force. It was 1975, and Boston was a battleground. My mother and her friends spent hours huddled around the kitchen table, talking about the trouble out there. *Forced integration. Roxbury. South Boston. Separate but not equal. God made the Irish number one. A fight, a fight, a nigga and a white…* (3)

It is within this context that Birdie begins to be aware of the existing racialized social structure. When her father for example is driving to Roxbury with his sidekick Ronnie Parkman, Birdie notices how her father always speaks differently around him by switching into slang. This earns him instant mockery from the mother who deems his act as an attempt to "purge himself of his 'honkified past'" and to embrace a newfound Black Pride. This incident and her mother's interpretation of it introduces Birdie to the power of language in the normative structure of race and class. Language would later be important in her performance when she passes as black and then as white.

Once Birdie understands the racialized structure of her social environment, she then begins to realize how this structure places limitations on the place of a black person within society. When she and her sister Cole are bused together to a school in South Boston, a predominantly white Irish neighborhood known as Southie, their bus is forced to turn back home and to cancel school because an angry mob is in the process of lynching a black man. Watching later the race riot on television, Birdie relates to us the event in graphic details emphasising at the same time the extent to which it has affected and deeply marked her:

We all crowded around it to watch the news, the image grainy and cracking on the small screen--one lone black man being pulled from his Volkswagen only to disappear under a cloud of white fists. The parents were silent as they watched, mesmerized by the image. I held my mother's hand and stopped breathing, terrified by what I saw. My mother seemed frozen as well. The newscaster talked excitedly over the live footage, saying something about riots and race wars. At one point the man's face rose from the throng, anguished, terrified, bewildered (63).

After this traumatizing experience, Birdie starts to understand the realities of (neo)racial segregation, that "the Irish lived in one part of town, that black people lived in another" (64). She realises that this is the reason why her father as a black man "had to duck down when [they] drove through Southie" (64). In yet another more personal incident, Birdie witnesses how her sister Cole is victim of an explicit racist aggression by white Irish girls when the two are shopping in a department store. After shoving her into a rack and sticking chewed bubble gum in her hair, the white girls tell Cole to "go back to the jungle, darkie. Go wash your ass. Go, you little culahd biscuit" (65). Through this incident Senna brings to light the continued bigotry actions committed against African Americans in a so called post-racial age. The fact that Cole is after the aggression left "standing, hidden in the curtains of cloth, her bottom lip quivering but not letting go" (65) shows the immediate effect of racism on its victims. In fact, the racist aggression inflicts an evident traumatic stress injury on Cole which would of course affect her behaviour and views on racial matters and relations later on in the novel.

The fact that Birdie is a person of mixed race furthers her understanding of the racialized social structure. If a black person like her father is limited by his skin color within the white space as we have seen, a mixed race person, like Birdie, being neither white nor black in the dichotomous logic of American racial hierarchy, feels displaced and unfit within her/his own social group. Birdie as a person of mixed race is confronted to the challenge of how to properly and successfully relate to others within the racialized social structure based on the white/black binary. When, after the riot incident in Southie, her mother sends her and Colie to Nkrumah, the Roxbury Black Power school, Birdie is bullied by her classmates because she's considered white. She hears her classmates hissing that they thought "this was supposed to be a black school" (69) and one of them throws a spitball at her and barks: "What you doin' in this school? You white?" (69) The rejection culminates in a scene in which we see Birdie being bullied by a group of girls led by a girl named Maria in the restroom. Maria yanks Birdie's ponytail, accuses her of being "stuck up" because she has "long, stringy hair" that she threatens to cut with with scissors. Through all these incidents, Birdie is informed of her differences within her social group in negative ways. Now that she knows her placement and status within her social group, Birdie feels that she does not fit in and informs her sister that "I don't want to go back, I'm scared" (74). Cole on the other hand is able to fit in easily because she's visibly black and she therefore quickly becomes Birdie's protector: she confronts Maria about the bullying and tells her not mess with Birdie again because she "isn't white. She's black. Just like me" (75). Interestingly, Cole herself has troubles with her black classmates as a black girl raised by a white mother, she tells Birdie:

"They all laughed at me last week. Just like the time my knees were ashy. 'Cause of my hair. It looks crazy. They were calling me 'Miz Nappy.' None of the boys will come near me. Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn't" (81).

The dissatisfaction both sisters feel relate to their desire to be recognized and find a role within their social group where they are marginalised because they do not conform to perceived cultural and physical attributes of race. The sisters decide to do what sociologists David Snow and Leon Anderson call "identity work" by engaging in "in a range of activities

to create, present, or sustain identities that are congruent with or supportive of their self-concept" (1348). In order for the "identity work to be successful, Snow and Anderson argue that certain strategies are employed by individuals in order to forge and sustain certain identities: (1) to set up personal appearance and do cosmetic face work; (2) to associate with certain individuals and groups; and (3) to assert personal identity through identity talk and verbal construction (1348). The latter strategy is where the two sisters in fact decide to start their "identity work", Cole tells Birdie:

"We talk like white girls, Birdie." She picked up the magazine she had been reading, and handed it to me. "We don't talk like black people. It says so in this article." (...)

Cole continued: "they have examples in here. Like, don't say, 'I'm going to the store.' Say, 'I'm goin' to de sto'.' Get it? And don't say, 'Tell the thruth.' Instead, say, 'Tell de troof.' Okay?" I nodded, and whispered to myself, 'Tell de troof." (81-82)

Within the context of racial studies, the sisters' efforts to alter the way they talk to pass as black is called "performing race" (Khanna and Johnson 12). Like the Campbells in *Playing in the Light*, the sisters' racial identity is a strategically constructed through performance. The choice of language by the sisters as the primary focus of projecting their black identity and distancing themselves from white identity points to the correlation between class and race.

In this sense, Birdie's effort to alter her speech is not only a way of associating herself with the black race but also an attempt at distancing herself from the language of higher social classes that represent a symbol of whiteness. When for example her mother tells her to go look out the window and tell her what she sees, Birdie responds: "I don't see nothing". Angry, the mother corrects Birdie's language: "Anything! You don't see anything!". Of course the two utterances have the same intended meaning but they are associated with different social classes. The fact that the mother chastises Birdie for using that language shows that she associates it with speakers who have lower educational and social status than herself. Birdie herself reflects on her mother's way of thinking about language, class and race after she scolds her for 'talking black':

She didn't like my new way of talking. Sometimes a piece of her that she tried to keep hidden seemed to sneak out--a piece of her that had grown up in a big old Victorian house in Cambridge, had been educated at one of the best prep schools, had spent evenings reading sartre aloud to her father, the Harvard classics professor, in the den off the living room (112).

In a broad sense, 'talking white', as the mother wishes her daughter to do, points to socioeconomic advantages accessible only to whites; it is a mark of belonging to a class of the privileged. By the same token, because members of the dominant group consider that 'talking white' is considered "normal", "natural", "standard" and "correct", using black speech is disparaged because it represents poverty, poor education, and failure. Language then is yet another aspect that exposes the ways in which inequality is reproduced in post-Civil Rights America. The power and prosperity of the White dominant group is maintained through dictating what constitutes "Standard English" which becomes here an example of cultural hegemony. In this sense, "white language" becomes a vehicle of socioeconomic mobility; a route to success and privileges. On the other hand, rejecting this language of socioeconomic mobility may lead to experiencing marginalisation and lack of success and opportunities to move upwardly in class. This explains why the mother is so angry with Birdie's 'black language': she doesn't want her daughter to miss all the practical socioeconomic advantages that come with "talking-white" in terms of progressing through education and professional life. Like Marion and her parents in Playing in the Light, the mother wants to make sure that she passes to her daughter privileges that she has herself inherited from her WASP upper-

class family. She also wants to make sure that she eliminates from the education of her daughter the hurdles associated with blackness that would hinder her chances to achieve success.

Birdie however does not only change her way of talking to pass for black and distance herself from whiteness, she also operates a physical transformation in order to manage her black identity: she masks the texture of her straight hair into tight braids; she wears Nike sneakers with Sergio Valente Jeans; and puts on gold hoops. She manipulates her physical appearance not only to claim a black identity, but also to avoid association with white middle class. She refrains from adopting any cultural symbols of whiteness. Once Birdie is initiated into the "art of changing" (30) and learns "how to become someone else, how to erase the person [she] was before", she's "knighted black by Maria" (64) and accepted as a member of the Brown Sugar Clique.

This becomes even more evident when Birdie passes for white after passing for black the first half of the novel. When her parents separate following a long history of bitter disputes, her father chooses Cole to accompany him to Brazil, while the mother runs away from Boston with Birdie. Birdie finds out later that the two sisters were separated according to their skin color: the light-skinned Birdie is grouped with her white mother, while the dark-skinned Cole is grouped with her black father. While on the run from one motel to another, the mother tells Birdie that the FBI is looking for her because of her association with a radical activist group. In order to elude the FBI, the mother then invents a new identity for her daughter: Birdie becomes Jesse Goldman, a white half Jewish girl. After years on the road, the two settle in a predominantly white small-town in New Hampshire where Birdie passes as a white girl.

Having successfully performed blackness in Nkrumah, Birdie finds no difficulty in performing whiteness. Her performance of whiteness is based on the same strategies that she had followed when she passed for black, namely altering her speech, her appearance, highlighting white cultural/class symbols, and distancing herself from cultural/class symbols of blackness. The mother herself though white has to perform white middle class values in order to be considered by the Marshes, a local WASP upper class family, for renting a cottage that they own. When the Marshes started asking her mother questions about her life and background, Birdie could easily see that "it was a way of proving that she spoke their language" (202) and when they felt that she did "they smiled knowingly at her" (202). The Marshes are even more comfortable and pleased with their new white tenants when Birdie answers positively to their question about if she knows how to ride horses. Riding horses as a cultural and leisure activity linked to middle and upper classes is an indicator of having a true white identity. Birdie is smart enough to realize this and quickly makes up a background story about how she is familiar with horses: "Yeah, I've ridden a little. My dad had a horse once. We called her Bernie and I rode her bareback. Nothing fancy. I nearly got thrown once--"(203). Birdie's narrative adds texture to their white middle class claim. In fact, it does not take long after this for the Marshes to decide on the mother's racial allegiance:

> They heard her accent, so like their own, and knew she would do just fine. Never mind that thin, glowering, dark adolescent by her side, they thought. They saw a woman and a child. No man? No problem. They knew she was one of them (203).

Despite the fact that Birdie possess biological markers of African ancestry through her brown skin, the Marshes consider the mother and her daughter as one of them because they consider that they have been socialized into middle-class values and environment and therefore they bestow upon them white identity. The mother is trusted by the Marshes to such an extent that they eventually get her a job as a research assistant to a sociologist friend of

theirs at the university. In order to maintain this trust and reinforce their white identity, the mother even engages in explicitly teaching Birdie "how to spot a real WASP from a fake one" (207). The mother who herself "admitted to being a real Wasp, at least by birth" (208), relates genuine WASP identity to the performance of certain class and cultural values like for example when she tells Birdie that "A Real Wasp is eccentric, often prematurely white (haired), fascinated by the ironies of history, and often finds salvation in Asian religions late in life" (209). The mother further explains that the Marshes are Real Wasps not just because they are white but because of:

...the layer of dust covering their house--and the way Walter sucked on a toothpick, picked his nose, hacked into his hand, and performed other blatantly rude personal habits in public, oblivious that they might be offensive to the people around him (209).

What is important here is not whether these exaggerated features of a real WASP are true or not but rather the fact that her daughter Birdie understands that whiteness, in principle, can be socially constructed; it is about how one defines oneself by self-ascribing to certain values and qualities and how others define him/her based on perception of the performance of those values and qualities.

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