

## **“FINDING ANOTHER FACE INSIDE MY FACE”: THE SEMIOTICS OF MIME IN EDGAR NKOSI WHITE’S RACIALIZED DRAMATURGIES**

**NÚRIA CASADO GUAL**

Universitat de Lleida  
ncasado@dal.udl.cat

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From Cicero to Oscar Wilde, the human face has been generally perceived as the mirror of the mind and the soul; the eyes, as both windows and interpreters of our inner Selves. These associations become especially significant when applied to the theatrical field: for in the artistic game of communication that is established between playwrights, actors and audience, the character’s face plays a key role in both representing and creating the complex but highly communicative discourse of the unsaid. In the same way, Tadeusz Kowzan regards facial mime as the system of kinetic signs that is closest to verbal expression. Indeed, the actor’s face can generate a large number of signs, all of them conveying the feelings, sensations and thoughts experienced by the actor during the performance (Kowzan 1992: 172). At the same time, as Kowzan contends, mime constitutes —together with gesture— the most personal and individualized expressive mode in the theatre (Kowzan 1992: 172), submitted as it is to the performer’s physical, psychological and actoral idiosyncrasies.

In this light, Anne Ubersfeld’s statement that the practical and theoretical complexity of the analysis of mime is almost infinite (1997: 224) is far from being hyperbolic. However, the mimic design of some dramatists enables the observation of certain constant features that do not necessarily depend on the actors’ peculiarities. This kind of mimic design lends itself to dramaturgical analysis<sup>1</sup> that, in turn, can throw light on the work of the playwright and his/her representation

of the world. If the dramatist's work develops around a thematic concern that speaks from and about a very specific corporeal reality so that consequently, the theatricalized body becomes the central subject and object of a complex social discourse, the study of mime in this playwright's drama becomes even more revealing. This is the case with the dramatic production of Edgar Nkosi White,<sup>2</sup> whose plays reflect a corporeal discourse of the unsaid that is persistently loaded with racialized implications.

Beyond the social discourse that predominates in the work of this Afro-Caribbean playwright, facial expressivity performs different functions in his playtexts. Eye-expression, for instance, often acquires a spatial value which complements the austerity of the playwright's stage designs.<sup>3</sup> In some cases, the eye-expressions of Edgar Nkosi White's characters are specific enough to almost act as "actor furniture", to use Jindřich Honzl's term (1976: 82); that is to say, the eye-movements of some of his characters recreate a stage property which the audience does not see yet is led to imagine.<sup>4</sup> However, it is the reality of racial oppression and its effects that underpins most of the facial expressions of Edgar Nkosi White's figures. Here, an analysis of the semiotics of mime in Edgar Nkosi White's drama will show his mimic design to be a potent vehicle whereby the complexities of the phenomenon of racialism may be theatricalized. At the same time, an analysis will also be made of the discourse of ambivalence that tinges the racialized face—and, by extension, the racialized body—in the way these are presented in Edgar Nkosi White's dramatic work. The observation of the double axis of eye- and mouth-expression—which, as Anne Ubersfeld points out, determines mime (1997: 224)—will serve as an ordering principle to attain both objectives.

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Starting with the first axis, eye-expressions underlining the conflictive potential of a line, gesture or movement stand out as the most abundant in the author's dramaturgies. Hence, faces connoting concern (White 1989: 258), nervousness (White 1984a: 17), embarrassment (White 1989: 260), cunning (White 1970b: 155), suspicion (White 1984b: 53; White 1985a: 109), defiance (White 1985a: 104), disdain (White 2001: 68) or anger (White 1983d: 96), constitute indexical signs of the varied types of tensions that unsettle Black and White victims and oppressors in discriminatory situations or in circumstances derived from a racist background.<sup>5</sup> Mimic signs which indicate a moment of sudden, uncontrolled emotion (White 1983c: 18; White 1985a: 142), as well as facial expressions of gravity (White 1983c: 12) or sadness (White 1985c: 80; White 1985a: 113), may also be understood as underscoring the wounds that marginalization inflicts upon the victim.<sup>6</sup>

All the signs of conflict conveyed through the expressivity of the eyes in Edgar Nkosi White's theatre can be said to portray the effects of racial oppression close-

up. The magnified vision they offer of this reality not only enables appreciation of a physical score of suffering in miniature, but also casts light on a striking coincidence between racialism as a social phenomenon and the art of acting itself. In the theatre spectators are not accustomed to regarding mimic expressions of emotions as a response to an *external* situation,<sup>7</sup> as Anne Ubersfeld observes (1997: 227), whilst mimic signs are in fact the result of an interaction between the actor and the other actors or signs in the performance. More particularly, and resorting again to Anne Ubersfeld's words, emotions reflected in an actor's mime do not correspond to the expression of a transcendental Self, but are rather the reflection of an aggression that may well be invisible (1997: 227) but which is at work in the play. Likewise within the context of racialism, in order to interpret the victim's, or even the oppressor's mimic variations as being *externally* stimulated and not the product of some inner motivation, it is necessary to be well-acquainted with the mechanics of racial oppression. Only those familiar with this form of discrimination are able to rapidly apprehend its signs as being externally-generated, and thereby to read the victim's facial expression adequately.

This is demonstrated in Edgar Nkosi White's theatre every time a character alludes to the faces of the oppressed and what is harboured in them. In *Les Femmes Noires*, which presents the lonely, alienated lives of African American women in New York, a girl called Carolyn wants to tell her mother about "those faces" which she sees on the streets: "Black faces. So many tribes. Eyes crazy" (White 1985b: 173). The mental hallucinations suffered by a Black beggar called Cipo in the same play can be interpreted in a similar way: "My mind gets flooded with voices and faces, too many faces" (White 1985b: 174). As these lines show, the stamp of White-on-Black oppression is often concentrated on the eyes of the victim. This is reflected in *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus*, a fictional biography of an African American sociologist who finishes his days in a mental institution. In a letter to Smintheus, his friend Robert evokes their first encounter at university by saying: "[...] I could see in your eyes the same animal furtiveness that was in mine. That is, in the eyes of all black students at big Ivy League colleges. We know we don't belong here" (White 1973b: 15). Smintheus observes the same mark of oppression in the Black prostitute that becomes his lover when he tells her that "the implications of [her] eyes hurt [him] too much" (White 1973b: 62). The same occurs to the Black South African protagonist of *The Boot Dance* when, looking at photographs of himself when he first went to England, he tells another character: "The eyes [...] see the eyes different" (White 1985b: 130).<sup>8</sup>

The haunting power of eyes and faces is enhanced even further in Edgar Nkosi White's work whenever the oppressor's face is verbally depicted with a deadened expression. This kind of inexpressivity is perceived as deadly by the alienated onlooker. Hence, in the play *Ritual by Water*, which presents the connections

between two generations of Caribbean migrants in London, the protagonist says he does not want to die in England “where people already look like death” (White 1984b: 51). By the same token, in *The Boot Dance* Lazarus explains how his father alluded to White people as “the dead” or as “the souls of the dead come back” (White 1985a: 100). Nevertheless, this type of inexpressive mime also characterizes the victim’s face, implicitly in *Like Them That Dream* when Sparrow describes his marginalized existence in New York by saying that “death was in [his] mouth, in [his] eyes [...]” (White 1983d: 123). Interestingly enough, allusion to unfeeling faces may imply a momentary reproduction of this effect by the actor who is speaking. Through the eradication of mimic expressivity in the actor’s facial mask, the playwright signifies the anaesthetization, even zombification of the Self to which racialism ultimately leads.

Whereas the facial signs cited above underline the negativity implicit in racist situations and the range of conflictive emotions they are capable of generating, other mimic expressions reproduced through the eyes of Edgar Nkosi White’s figures seem to contradict the negation of Selfhood to which the victim of racial oppression is submitted and in which the oppressor, albeit indirectly, is also entrapped. As a matter of fact, this mimic paradox of signifiers and signifieds could be understood as a theatrical necessity; for dramatic conflict is born out of oppositions and the performing arts in general are nurtured from contrasts. Hence, totally disparate traditions of actor training, such as Konstantin Stanislavski’s ‘system’ or the highly codified Nô Theatre, coincide in the need to counterpoint the performance of a dominant emotion with calculated touches of the opposite feeling or attitude. Following this contrastive principle, the performer ensures the attention of the spectator through a polytonal physical score. Beyond this performative strategy, however, the contradictory manifestations of mime inscribed in Edgar Nkosi White’s plays are expressive vehicles through which aspects of oppression that may not be conveyed otherwise are acted out, thereby demonstrating, again in Anne Ubersfeld’s words, that mime can express what cannot be communicated through other corporeal manifestations (1997: 229).

In this way, the playwright re-presents the peculiar degree of unsettling happiness felt by a victim of racialism when recognizing, even understanding, his/her own experience through the eyes of another character. This is mirrored in *Ritual by Water*, for example, when a West Indian boy called Silence stares at his tutor’s girlfriend “intently for a long time” and then tells her: “You just look like my mother” (White 1984b: 55). It is the power of Silence’s gaze that makes the female character realize to what extent he has captured her essence as a West Indian woman surviving in White-dominated England, leading her to admit later in the play:

He had some extraordinary eyes. I felt absolutely naked [...]. But really it was like he could see right through you. I didn't know what to say [...]. He frightened me but at the same time I felt I knew him. Still I was helpless [...]. This is such a funny country. You don't ever know quite what you are [...]. But he really did have the most amazing eyes [...]. (White 1984b: 55)

At this point, it is important to emphasize the extent to which Silence's eye-expression is an actional one. Thus far, the characters' eyes have been described as vehicles of the actors'—and hence, characters'—expression when confronted with an external stimulus. Silence's 'intentional' look, on the other hand, becomes the expression of a statement; it is a stimulus itself. It is for this reason that the term 'gaze' becomes more appropriate here, with both its philosophical and theatrical implications. "That second spine which is the gaze", as Eugenio Barba puts it,<sup>9</sup> is indeed a challenging, even interrogating tool through which Edgar Nkosi White theatricalizes the complex subjectivity of the racially oppressed. As reflected in the words quoted above, recognizing the gaze of the oppressed or even one's own oppression through the eyes of 'the other' can either nullify any attempt to speak or make speech itself an insufficient means of communication. The peculiar power of the gaze to counteract the victimizing power of racialism is also reflected in *The Nine Night* through the eyes of an ageing West Indian character, which are "luminous and childlike" (White 1984a: 12) and resist the sense of disappointment reflected in his words; or, by a different token, in the gaze of a young Caribbean boy in the same play, who is said to have "the blood-shot eyes of a raver" in which a resistant attitude towards discrimination is contained (White 1984a: 7). The gaze of these characters hence refracts the preservation of dignity in deprived scenarios, as with the mixture of beauty and sadness that Sparrow observes in Sharon's gaze in *Like Them That Dream*: "Your eyes are the difference between the way the world should be and the way it really is", he says (White 1983d: 85).

Closely connected with this, and also very frequent in Edgar Nkosi White's work, are inscriptions of what could be denominated 'seductive', even 'lustful' gazes, with which marginalized characters momentarily acquire the status of 'Subject' they are most of the time denied. Examples are found in *Fun in Lethe* (White 1970a: 76), *The Wonderful Year* (White 1970c: 205), *Ritual by Water* (White 1984b: 40, 66), *Redemption Song* (White 1985c: 32, 48, 64) and *The Boot Dance* (White 1985a: 103).<sup>10</sup> These intense ways of looking contribute to a peculiar kinetics of desire and affection in Edgar Nkosi White's theatre. Indeed, looks of seduction in the author's work generate, in Susan Melrose's terms, a counteractive "force-field"<sup>11</sup> (1994: 53) that undermines the inferiorizing power of a predominant mime of negativity and suffering. With seductive and lust-filled looks, sparks of life are introduced into the playwright's conflictive mimic designs, momentarily melting the "frosted glass"

through which people “look[-] at each other”, as a character in *The Mummer’s Play* puts it (White 1970b: 133).

The observation of mouth-movement, the ‘second facial axis’ in Anne Ubersfeld’s classification, leads to similar conclusions when applied to Edgar Nkosi White’s characters. Thus, half-open or widely-open lips are implicitly present in the dramatist’s work to convey various degrees of surprise (White 1983a: 161), puzzlement (White 1985c: 39), shock (White 1985a: 137) or even catatonia (White 1973b: 5, 64),<sup>12</sup> which racial rejection produces in both oppressor and victim. At the same time, though, his plays contain many examples of mouth-expression that undermine the aforementioned dominant mime of hate and sorrow. Through them, it is again demonstrated to what extent theatrical discourse often has, at least, one contradictory duplicity. Thus, smiling and laughing faces abound in Edgar Nkosi White’s drama, counterpointing the negative attitudes and feelings evoked by his characters’ looks and reinforcing those gazes that inject degrees of counteractive force-fields. These mimic features deserve special attention, particularly because of their important presence in the playwright’s work in quantitative terms and also due to their highly paradoxical load. To be sure, smiles and laughter may be deemed highly bizarre mime traits in Edgar Nkosi White’s *oeuvre* if his work is perceived as consistently dramatizing racial oppression. Yet, a closer look at their distinct connotations provides the key to understand their central role in the dramatist’s portrayal of racism.

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Happy faces are, on the one hand, indexical signs of characterization. Hence, the cheerful disposition of some of Edgar Nkosi White’s oppressed figures is reflected in their smiles or sudden bursts of laughter, thereby favouring contrast to other serious or sad-looking figures in the same play (White 1970a: 97; White 1970b: 133; White 1972: 17; White 1973b: 19, 36; White 1973a: 86; White 1983d: 83, 92, 125; White 1984a: 11, 30; White 1984b: 43, 47, 50; White 1985c: 17, 36-7, 41, 46, 45, 65; White 1985a: 92, 130; White 1985b: 153, 165, 190; White 2001: 45, 52; White 2002: 279).<sup>13</sup> At a more symbolic level, the oppressed and, yet, smiling characters of Edgar Nkosi White’s plays could be perceived as promoting a fossilized image of the victim of racialism and of Black people in particular. That is to say, the numerous laughing Black faces in his work might be read as perpetuating the stereotypical depiction of Black people as *naïve* and servile, which is especially problematic if the historical background of such an image is taken into account.

The *cliché* of the ever-smiling Black man is indeed one of the oldest, most widespread racist constructions. Dating back to the times of slavery, it has strong connections with types such as that of the faithful, good Christian slave or ‘Uncle-Tom’ type, or the caricaturesque ‘Zip Coon’ of black-face minstrels in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. “The smile of the black man, the *grin*”, as Frantz Fanon says, “seems to have captured the interest of a number of writers” (1986: 49). This smile has been historically interpreted, even constructed, from the Whites’ point of view. In this connection Frantz Fanon quotes Bernard Wolfe’s thoughts: “It pleases us to portray the Negro showing us all his teeth in a smile made for us. And his smile as we see it—as we make it—always means a *gift* [...]” (1986: 49). This enforced ‘gift’ is still offered today through the industry of tourism and neo-colonial visions of underdeveloped regions.

Of all Edgar Nkosi White’s plays, it is *Redemption Song* that more clearly presents Black smiles as generated by a neo-colonial backdrop. The play’s protagonist, a West Indian poet that returns to his homeland after a long exile, needs to be taught about the servile value of smiling in the Caribbean. Thus, his father tells him, “[s]ometimes you must grin until you can do better” (White 1985c: 76). Similarly, his old friend points at his own teeth, teaching him a similar lesson: “These here so your life preservers. Them keep you afloat. If you want to get through in this place that’s what you have to do. Is best you learn now” (White 1985c: 62).

Not all the smiles and laughs in Edgar Nkosi White’s work are, however, collaborative, enslaving “gifts” to White figures. Enacted as they are in very different contexts, most of them generate a wide range of differentiated connotations. For this reason, their outstanding presence in the dramatist’s mimic designs does not foster the use of a racist stereotype *per se*. Instead, the smiling and laughing faces of the author’s oppressed critically re-present Black people’s position of servitude in past and present-time racist societies. As anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer puts it:

The blacks are kept in their obsequious attitude by the extreme penalties of fear and force, and this is common knowledge to both the whites and blacks. Nevertheless, the whites demand that the blacks be always smiling, attentive, and friendly in all their relationships with them [...]. (In Fanon 1986: 49-50)

Edgar Nkosi White depicts this “demand” in *Millennium 7*, for example, when an old African American woman called Naomi says: “They expect you to be smiling and cheerful all the time” (White 2002: 272). As reflected in Geoffrey Gorer’s thoughts, smiles are a deceptive yet intrinsic component in the reality of White-on-Black oppression.

In this light, other complementary meanings underlying Edgar Nkosi White’s smiling characters can be better comprehended. Thus, some of the happy-looking faces in the playwright’s work may be also understood as reflecting a resilient disposition in the face of subjugation and adversity. Langston’s face in *The Lovesong for Langston* is a case in point, above all in the scene in which the poet smiles while scrubbing the

ship's deck, confounding the Sailors with his positive attitude in such harsh conditions and, in so doing, misleading them into thinking that he is "simple" (White 2001: 21). From the beginning of the play, however, Langston's mother refers to her son's capacity to "laugh at the damnedest things" (White 2001: 3).

Resilient smiles become collective signs of resistance when exchanged between members of the same community. Many of Edgar Nkosi White's characters smile to each other or laugh together, thereby creating strong bonds of complicity that make the effects of racism slightly more endurable. The healing influence which laughter exerts on marginalized groups is hence reflected in several of the author's plays (White 1970a: 74, 80-1, 83; White 1970b: 136; White 1970c: 183, 185, 187, 201; White 1973b: 34; White 1973a: 73, 141; White 1983b: 198; White 1984b: 52, 55, 58, 60, 69; White 1985c: 45; White 1985b: 163; White 1989: 257). All these pieces demonstrate, in the words of David Krasner, to what extent —

[l]aughter within a group blurs self-awareness, heightening a sense of commonality with those who partake in it. In the process, laughter secures group solidarity [...]. Shared laughter extinguishes an isolated existence, deepening one's connections and sense of common interests. (1997: 137)

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Indeed, when laughter is shown to be contagious amongst Edgar Nkosi White's oppressed figures, the circle of isolation that alienates these characters from others is momentarily broken, while at the same time enhancing the capacity of marginalized figures to distance themselves from their everyday plights, as done through more individualized forms of smiling.

In distinct dramatic circumstances, laughter may become a sign of parody whereby the power of the oppressor is challenged or, at least, undermined. As such it is also reflected in Edgar Nkosi White's plays, especially every time a racially-oppressed character mocks the racist structure either by teasing the oppressors, be they present or not (White 1970a: 109; White 1970c: 237; White 1971: 146; White 1973b: 61; White 1983c: 52; White 1984a: 12; White 1984b: 42; White 1985c: 53);<sup>14</sup> or by laughing at the absurdity of his/her own subjugated position (White 1970a: 79; White 1973a: 115; White 1983c: 75; White 1985c: 41; White 1985b: 158; White 1989: 269).<sup>15</sup> These are partial manifestations of the "carnival laughter" defined by Mikhail Bakhtin which "is directed at all and everyone" (1984: 11) and with its "gay relativity" and "ambivalence" allows the oppressed to vent their sorrows in an act of subversive derision.

There are at least two implications attached to this type of laughter in Edgar Nkosi White's work. On the one hand, it undermines the subservient smile whereby, as mentioned earlier, Black people have been stereotyped. Through parodic mime, the smile of servitude is turned on its head, divesting the oppressors —even if only



momentarily— from a position of superiority that is taken for granted and that includes a likeable self-image. In *The Nine Night*, the marginal existence of Afro-Caribbean exiles is re-presented through Hamon's parody of White Englishmen in the West Indies, which makes his old friend Ferret laugh. Hamon's mockery alludes to physical difference —“You know how they face get red as soon as the sun touch it?” (White 1984a: 12)— as well as to bodily behaviour —“When the rhythm of the music start to grab him— he jumped and tried to dance, man he look like a chicken when lighting strike it” (White 1984a: 12).

Hamon's farcical representation of his oppressors and Ferret's empathetic response towards it, as well as the mocking attitude of other figures with regard to their 'Others', illustrate at a mimic level “the double vision”, as Homi Bhabha puts it, which menacingly results from “mimicry” —in this case understood, as this scholar does, as “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (1994: 85). Be they representative of (post)colonial subjects —and hence of “mimic men” proper— or simply of Black citizens assimilated into —yet at the same time rejected by— predominantly White societies, the mocking faces of Edgar Nkosi White's figures produce, resorting again to Homi Bhabha's words, “a partial vision” of the oppressor's “presence”, “a gaze of otherness” whereby “the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence” (1994: 88-9).

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On the other hand, the parodic laughter of Edgar Nkosi White's characters offers them temporary protection against the double, even triple oppression that they suffer within and without the same community as a result of their racial inferiorization. In fact, these multiple oppressions are often expressed in the form of laughter as well. In some cases it is the racist's laughter (White 1973b: 59; White 1973a: 108; White 1983d: 112, 118; White 1985c: 34-5); in other cases it is the laughter of division between members of the Black communities, who ridicule one another, failing to recognize that the marginalization of their peers is a sign of their own marginalization (White 1983c: 55, 135; White 1984b: 44-5; White 1989: 239; White 2001: 22, 41); and frequently it is the laughter of female characters, which is presented as another sign of the Black male's emasculation in racist contexts (White 1970a: 70, 76; White 1970b: 144; White 1985c: 21, 25, 70). All in all, these ‘other(ing)’ laughing faces contribute to presenting the (male) victim of racial discrimination as, in Ferret's words, “a figure of fun” (White 1984a: 13). At the same time, however, they are central to understanding the complex value of their own laughing mime when parodying the multi-layered exercise of social mockery to which they are submitted, hence becoming, for a short while, those who laugh longest.

Having considered the distinctive, often paradoxical meanings which intersect in the facial expressions of Edgar Nkosi White's figures through the axes marked by

eye- and mouth-movement, it is possible to affirm that the essential mime of his theatre conforms a polyhedric mask of ambivalence. The dramatist's mimic designs can be collectively regarded as a mask inasmuch as they conceal different faces behind the face that is on display. Where facial expressions of negativity are conveyed through eye-expression, they are contradicted by the positive message of the mouth, and vice versa; whilst mouth-expression seems to respond, the gaze interrogates. The distinct layers of expression in the mime of the oppressed actually reflect their quest for 'Selfhood', a search for the completion of the self which may be recognized in all its human, individuated traits. The protagonist of *The Crucificado* clearly expresses this quest by saying, "my job is finding another face inside my face" (White 1973a: 108).

At the same time, the mimic signs in Edgar Nkosi White's plays essentially conform a non-verbal discourse of ambivalence by enhancing stereotypes while at the same time subverting them, ultimately leading to inextricable contradictions that are at the heart of the complex phenomenon of racialism. It is once more the polysemic smiles and laughter in the author's playtexts that dramatize such ambivalence more vehemently. Thus, the White protagonist of *Segismundo's Tricycle* asks his Black servant, "[w]hy aren't you sad?" (White 1971: 149) —which implies at least a smiling disposition on the servant's part— to which the Black man replies, "I am sad" (White 1971: 150), thereby eliciting a distinct interpretation of his happy-looking face that underplays his apparently 'natural' optimism. Similarly, when Legion, the main character of *Redemption Song*, is stoned to death, a voice wonders if "[h]e laughing" while his body lies on the ground (White 1985c: 80). As conveyed by Sparrow's words in *Like Them That Dream* when he states that in America it is "[...] like you smile but you don't smile" (White 1983d: 115), the mimic expressivity of the oppressed is always an appearance covering a very different signified and yet aiming at truly experiencing what is shown on the surface —an attempt which, as with Legion's case, may be even sustained till the last breath. In this light it is possible to understand other composite facial expressions in Edgar Nkosi White's work, such as Hilda's recurrent laughing face in *Lament for Rastafari* during her poignant soliloquy on White-on-Black racism (White 1983c: 63-4), or Sparrow's 'angry' laughter about the same reality at the end of *Like Them That Dream* (White 1983d: 130).

As Marcel Gutwirth observes, laughter is universal but its occasion "is rigorously circumstance- and situation-bound"; therefore, as David Krasner contends, it "requires a knowledge of circumstances and relevancy" (1997: 139). This thought is applicable to any other mimic expression that can be observed within and without the theatrical arena. Through the myriad mimic signs which his characters produce, Edgar Nkosi White teaches reader and spectator about the multiple, often devious faces of racism. Further to contributing to his multi-layered portrayal of

racial oppression, around which his theatre evolves, the playwright's mimic designs also create a kaleidoscopic reflection of the human soul, in which recurrent but never identical faces mirror both our inner schisms and our social divisions. As one of his characters puts it in *The Wonderful Year*, "[t]here are too many faces but someday, it's got to make sense" (White 1970c: 184). The playwright's mimic designs constitute a vivid corporeal cartography in this search for meaning; or, to paraphrase Patrice Pavis' words about mime (1998: 292), it is in Edgar Nkosi White's theatrical faces that meaning draws signs on the flesh.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. Inevitably, examples of unique mimic styles developed by actors are more abundant. They are even found in accounts of aural performances that could only rely on the impression of audiences and which, therefore, lacked the more objective fixation of video-recording. A famous example was Anton Chekhov's fascination with Sarah Bernhard's fiery facial expressions. Yet, some dramatists have also left a legacy of distinctive facial designs marked at a dramaturgical level. This is the case of Tadeusz Kantor's characters with 'dead' faces in his Theatre of Death, for instance (Ubersfeld 1997: 225).

<sup>2</sup>. Defined by scholar and actress Judy S. Stone as showing promise to become "the most important playwright since Walcott to emerge from the West Indies" (1994: 161), Edgar Nkosi White started writing for the stage in the 1970s. Since then, his plays have been performed mainly in the United States, Europe and the Caribbean. Reflecting the author's own diasporic trajectory, his dramatic production can be considered as part of Caribbean, African American or even Black British theatre. Geneviève Fabre (1983: 189-99) and Davis and Harris (1985: 278-82) dedicate a chapter to this author in anthologies of African American theatre, and Judy Stone does the same in her study of West Indian drama (1994: 161-7); M. Banham et al. have included an entry on him in their guide to African and Caribbean theatre (1994: 184). Playwright and theatre scholar

Michael McMillan has considered him one of the first authentic voices of Black British drama (Ugwu 1995: 198).

<sup>3</sup>. This is reflected in *That Generation*, a play about the lives of Caribbean migrants in London. When the female protagonist gets into her husband's apartment in London, her eyes roam around the room, conveying both its small dimensions and squalid conditions (White 1983: 195). A similar effect is created in *The Crucificado*, a tragedy about the connections between racial marginalization and drug-addiction, when a character named Soledada underlines the coffin-like quality of her house by "looking around the room" before she says: "They make these houses to die in" (White 1972: 137). In the play *Like Them That Dream*, which presents the experience of a South African man in the United States during apartheid, a panoramic eye-movement helps the Black South African protagonist start his description of the hospital where he works (White 1983: 99). Likewise in *Redemption Song*, a tragicomedy about a West Indian exile who returns to his homeland, the protagonist's look at the fictionalized Caribbean landscape enlarges the presentational space beyond the stage arena and creates a specific framework for his monologue (White 1985: 21). In the same play, the expression of the actors' eyes also tinges the space offstage with specific qualities: this occurs when Verity, the protagonist's ex-

girlfriend, expresses her concern with the neighbours' unseen presence by looking in different directions (White 1985: 51); or when Miss B, the protagonist's aunt, announces the arrival of different characters through the expressivity of her eyes before the audience are able to see them (White 1985: 24, 46).

4. For instance, in *The Wonderfull Yeare*, one of Edgar Nkosi White's early pieces, a window is created through the protagonist's stare (White 1970: 177).

5. In most of these cases, the playwright inscribes the specific quality of these looks in the stage directions. For example, in *I, Marcus Garvey*, Garvey's wife is supposed to give her husband "a long meaningful stare" after learning about a case of White-on-Black violence (White 1989: 258). The alleged concern in Amy's "meaningful" look is confirmed through her saying, a few lines later, "Marcus [...] Walk good", before Garvey walks off to assist the Black victim (White 1989: 258). Sometimes, however, the type of eye-expression that the actor should make or the reader ought to imagine is presented through the words of another character: in *Like Them That Dream*, the male protagonist uses an aside in order to describe the way Sharon, his new girlfriend, has just looked at him: "Funny enough, Nkosi, lately she's been giving me strange looks", he says, addressing his spiritual alter-ego (White 1983: 96). Later in the same scene, the strangeness in Sharon's eyes becomes clarified as a sign of her anger at the South African man's unwillingness to look for a job and his constant references to the racial nightmare from which he escaped in his homeland. After Sparrow's comment on Sharon's looks, another stage direction indicates that she "puts down a bag of groceries and stares at him, turns away and gives him a second look again", to which Sparrow adds: "I think I feel a breeze" (White 1983: 96).

6. In all these examples the inscription of eye-expression is made explicit in the stage directions. For instance, in *Lament for Rastafari*, an epic playtext about a Rastafarian's experience in the Caribbean, England and the United States, the playwright indicates that the protagonist's eyes are supposed to reveal the

character's emotion when leaving his homeland. The last stage direction of scene 4 says: "Somewhere in his eyes appear something very much like tears" (White 1983: 18). Tears are also said to appear in the eyes of the West Indian character of *The Boot Dance* when he tells Lazarus, the South African patient, that it takes "a whole heap of dancing" to make people "forgive [their] blackness" in England (White 1983: 142).

7. This is obviously part of the theatrical spell on the spectators, which is made possible through the 'willing suspension of disbelief' to which they are submitted by the signs produced by the actor. The thought that mimic signs are generated by intrinsic stimuli is even more widespread amongst audiences of Naturalistic plays due to the constructed character psychology they create. However, even the most purist of Stanislavskian actors resort to images and other external referents as catalysts to generate their inner actions and hence attain relevant mimic and gestural variations.

8. It should be clarified here that the processes or racialization for Black characters of different origins are only slightly nuanced in Edgar Nkosi White's dramaturgies. Even if in some of his plays, such as *Lament for Rastafari*, the racial plurality of the United States leads West Indian and African figures to regard it as a better destination for migrants, the presence of White-on-Black racism in the fictional lives of the African American characters stands out as a prominent marker of identity. In fact, the dramatist's portrayal of White-on-Black racism reformulates the diversity of his characters' national and cultural differences. The constant interaction between racism and space in his dramatic work results in a peculiar vision of the world, in which race and racial discrimination create their own borders and exiles, and the spatiality of regions, nations, cities and villages is reduced to the same 'nowhereness'. In this respect, the eye-expressions of some characters act as the corporeal map which, independently of their origin, situates these figures on one of the two sides of the racialized border.

9. Comment made during one of Barba's speeches at the last International

School of Theatre Anthropology (Seville, October 2004).

<sup>10</sup>. The playwright indicates the sensuality of all these gazes through the stage directions. In *Fun in Lethe*, for instance, Hamartia, a young West Indian poet that migrates to England, is said to “look intently” at Joyce, an “attractive, light-skinned, straight-haired” girl who has also arrived from the Caribbean and is staying with Hamartia’s aunt in London (White 1970: 76). Complementing these explicit cases, there are implicit stage directions for sensual gazes in other plays, such as *The Lovesong for Langston*, a play dedicated to Langston Hughes. At the end of scene 11, a character named Anne tells the young poet: “I don’t want to hear about any other women. Come, I have a kingdom for you” (White 2001: 45). The fade-out that follows confirms the sensual meaning of at least the second sentence, thereby suggesting the kind of mime that ought to precede it.

<sup>11</sup>. In her “pro-theatrical reading” of dramatic texts, Susan Melrose distinguishes “force-fields” and “waves” that are perceived by the reader and derived from “non-commensurable multi-dimensional and multimodal abstractions from and for praxis, in which discourse is activated as one component” (1994: 53). To this scholar, the meaning of “force-fields” is “self-evident” (Melrose 1994: 53). Therefore, it is possible to understand the term literally and hence ascribe it to any form of reaction that a theatrical sign generates in the theatre’s multilayered discourse. Given the highly subjective nature of mimic production—as stated earlier—and its subsequent personalized reception, it is adequate to associate distinct mimic signs to different “force-fields” due to the generalizing power of the term, as well as to its abstract and yet also material senses, which are close to the abstract-and-material character of mime itself. Needless to say, Susan Melrose’s allusion to “force-fields” represents another way of recognizing the dynamic, energetic universe implicit in a playtext.

<sup>12</sup>. Implicit mouth-movement may be detected in these plays through the presence of words and expressions such as “surprised”

(White 1983: 161), “wonderment” (White 1985: 39), “shock of recognition” (White 1985: 137), “in a catatonic state” (White 1973: 5) or “in a trancelike state [...] as if still speaking on the phone” (White 1973: 64). A more explicit case is found at the end of *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus*, when the protagonist is shown again in the mental hospital. As the last didascalia reads, “his mouth is contorted” while the audience can hear his recorded voice (White 1973: 64). As in the previous example, the separation of mouth-movement and speech semiotizes the internal division that racialism has produced on this middle-class African American scholar; his mime recreates the frozen mask of mental alienation.

<sup>13</sup>. In all these cases, laughter is inscribed in the text as a spontaneous reaction excepting the smile on Pariah’s face in *The Mummer’s Play*, which is presented as a trait of characterization in the stage directions (White 1970: 133). Pariah is a young African American writer who struggles to survive in a society that does not acknowledge his art or his own humanity.

<sup>14</sup>. The characters’ parodic attitude can be understood either through the context in which their laughter is said to appear or through the specific description of the character’s attitude in the stage directions. For example, in *The Burghers of Calais*, a prisoner who acts as master of ceremonies is said to laugh “mockingly” while introducing a dramatization of the Scottsboro Boys case. In his prologue to the famous case of racial injustice, reference to the “excesses” of “certain former judges and lawyers” who convicted nine innocent African American teenagers for nineteen years leads to sarcastic laughter (White 1970: 5).

<sup>15</sup>. This kind of self-parodic laughter is understood through the verbal exchanges which generate it. For example, in the play *Fun in Lethe*, which presents the journey of a young Black poet through Britain, a character called Walter laughs when the protagonist says it is helpful not to be West Indian in England. Walter laughs at their own situation and says: “Yes, yes, very true. Don’t be West Indian if you can help it” (White 1970: 79).

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