

**“Finding Another Face Inside My Face’:
The Semiotics of Mime in Edgar Nkosi White’s
Racialized Dramaturgies”**

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According to Tadeusz Kowzan, facial mime may be regarded 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, it is possible to observe certain constant features in the mimic design of a dramatist that do not necessarily depend on the actors’ peculiarities and which may be analyzed.

In Edgar Nkosi White’s dramatic production, mimic expression plays a prominent role: indeed, a broad variety of facial inscriptions informs both the dialogues and stage directions of his plays. Even if the mimic signs devised by this Afro-Caribbean playwright have a variety of functions, most of them expose the inner and external tensions underlying situations of racial oppression. Considering the double axis of gaze and mouth which, as Anne Ubersfeld points out, determines facial expression, (1997: 224) this paper intends to analyze the mimic expressivity of Edgar Nkosi White’s characters and its specific contribution to the author’s theatricalization of the phenomenon of racialism. At a more general level, the mimic designs inscribed in Edgar Nkosi White’s extensive dramatic work will be shown to unveil the discourse of ambivalence that tinges the racialized body when this is portrayed and represented from the victim’s point of view.

Starting with the expressive axis created by the gaze, facial expressions underlining the conflictive potential of a line, gesture or movement through the eyes stand out as the most abundant in the author’s dramaturgies. Hence, faces connoting concern, (*I, Marcus Garvey* 258) nervousness, (*The Nine Night* 17) embarrassment, (*I, Marcus Garvey* 260) power, (*Like Them That Dream* 96) cunning, (*The Mummer’s Play*

155) suspicion, (*Ritual by Water* 53, *The Boot Dance* 109) defiance, (*The Boot Dance* 104) disdain, (*The Lovesong for Langston* 68) or anger (*I, Marcus Garvey* 263) 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. Though with a lesser degree of troubling charge, mimic signs which indicate a moment of sudden, uncontrolled emotion, (*Lament for Rastafari* 18, *The Boot Dance* 142) as well as facial expressions of gravity, (*Lament for Rastafari* 12) disappointment, (*That Generation* 181) nostalgia (*Redemption Song* 26) or sadness, (*Redemption Song* 80, *The Boot Dance* 113) may also be understood as underscoring the wounds that racial marginalization inflicts upon the victim.

All the signs of conflict conveyed through the expressivity of the eyes in Edgar Nkosi White's theatre can be said to portray racial oppression at a close-up level. This is also demonstrated every time a character alludes to the faces of the oppressed and what is harboured in them in his dramatic work. In *Les Femmes Noires*, for instance, an Afro-American girl called Carolyn wants to tell her mother about "those faces" which she sees on the streets: "Black faces. So many tribes. Eyes crazy." (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." (*Les Femmes Noires* 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* when Robert writes to Smintheus: "... 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." (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." (*The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* 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." (130)

The haunting power of gazes and faces is even more enhanced in Edgar Nkosi White's work whenever oppression is mirrored in deadly facial expressions. Mimic manifestations of death are observed in the oppressor's looks: the West Indian protagonist of *Ritual by Water* says he does not want to die in England "where people already look like death," (51) and 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." (100)

However, the deadly mimic signs also characterize the victim's face, as implicit in *Like Them That Dream* when the main character, a South African man called Sparrow, describes his marginalized existence in New York by saying that "death was in [his] mouth, in [his] eyes ..." (123) Interestingly enough, allusion to deadly 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 deadly mask, the playwright signifies the zombification of the Self to which racialism ultimately leads.

Whereas the facial signs of conflict 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 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. 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 ostended, thereby demonstrating, again in Anne Ubersfeld's words, that mime can express what cannot be communicated through other corporeal manifestations. (1997: 229)

In this vein, 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." (55) It is the power of Silence's gaze that makes her 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 ... (*Ritual by Water* 55)

“That second spine which is the gaze,” as Eugenio Barba puts it,¹ is indeed a powerful 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 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 eyes of an ageing West Indian character of *The Nine Night*, which are “luminous and childlike” (12) and resist the sense of disappointment reflected in his words; or, by a different token, in young Izak’s look 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. (7) Silence’s, Ferret’s and Izak’s eyes hence refract 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. (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*, (76) *The Wonderfull Yeare*, (205) *Ritual by Water*, (40, 66) *Redemption Song*, (32, 48, 64) *The Boot Dance*, (103) and *The Lovesong for Langston*. (45) 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” (1994: 53) that undermines the inferiorizing power of a predominant mime of negativity and suffering. With seductive and lust-filled looks, then, 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. (133)

The observation of mouth movement in Edgar Nkosi White’s characters leads to similar conclusions. Thus, half-open or widely-open lips are implicitly and explicitly present in the dramatist’s work to convey various degrees of surprise, (*The Case of Dr. Kola* 161) puzzlement, (*Redemption Song* 39) shock, (*The Boot Dance* 137) awe, (*Ritual by Water* 39) or even catatonia, (*The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* 5,

¹ Comment made during one of Barba’s speeches at the last International School of Theatre Anthropology (Seville, October 2004).

64) 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.

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. (*Dija* 17; *Fun in Lethe* 97; *The Mummer's Play* 133; *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* 19, 36; *The Crucificado* 86; *Lament for Rastafari* 36-7, 45, 65; *Like Them That Dream* 83, 92, 125; *The Nine Night* 11, 30; *Ritual by Water* 43, 47, 50; *Redemption Song* 17, 41, 46; *The Boot Dance* 92, 130; *Les Femmes Noires* 153, 165, 190; *The Lovesong for Langston* 45, 52; *Millennium* 7 279) In addition, the smiling face of some characters may contribute to dramatic irony by providing a clear contrast to a tragic situation. (*The Boot Dance* 113)

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 vein 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.” (*Redemption Song* 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.” (*Redemption Song* 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 figures reinforce the meaning of other dramaturgical elements which, as mentioned in previous chapters, 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 ... (Fanon 1986: 49-50)

Edgar Nkosi White depicts this “demand” in *Millennium 7*, for example, when an old Afro-American woman called Naomi says: “They expect you to be smiling and cheerful all the time.” (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." (21) From the beginning of the play, however, Langston's mother refers to her son's capacity to "laugh at the damnedest things." (*The Lovesong for Langston* 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. (*Fun in Lethe* 74 80-1, 83; *The Wonderful Year* 183, 185, 187, 201; *The Mummer's Play* 136; *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* 34; *The Crucificado* 73, 141; *That Generation* 198; *Ritual by Water* 52, 55, 58, 60, 69; *Redemption Song* 45; *Les Femmes Noires* 163; *I, Marcus Garvey* 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)

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; (*Segismundo's Tricycle* 146; *The Burghers of Calais* 5, 7; *Fun in Lethe* 109; *The Wonderfull Year* 237; *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* 61; *Lament for Rastafari* 52; *The Nine Night* 12; *Ritual by Water* 42; *Redemption Song* 53) or by laughing at the absurdity of his/her own subjugated position. (*Fun in Lethe* 79, *The Crucificado* 115, *Lament for Rastafari* 75, *Ritual by Water* 41, *Les Femmes Noires* 158,

I, Marcus Garvey 269) 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?” (*The Nine Night* 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.” (*The Nine Night* 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)

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; (*The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* 59; *The Crucificado* 108; *Like Them That Dream* 112, 118; *Redemption Song* 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; (*Lament for Rastafari* 55; *Man and Soul* 135, *Ritual by Water* 44-5; *I, Marcus Garvey* 239; *The Lovesong for Langston* 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. (*Fun in Lethe* 70, 76; *The Mummer's Play* 144; *Redemption Song* 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." (*The Nine Night* 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 gaze and mouth, it is possible to affirm that the essential mime of his Theatre of Oppression 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. As has been said, where facial expressions of negativity are conveyed through the gaze, they are contradicted by the positive message of the mouth, and vice versa. The distinct layers of expression in the mime of the oppressed actually reflect their 'Quest for Selfhood.' As the protagonist of the play *The Crucificado* clearly expresses it, "[their] job is finding another face inside [their] face." (108)

On the other hand, 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, in *Segismundo's Tricycle* the main character asks his Black servant, "[w]hy aren't you sad?" (149) –which implies at least a smiling disposition on the servant's part– to which the Black man replies, "I am sad," (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. (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," (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 other composite facial expressions in Edgar Nkosi White's work can be understood, such as Hilda's recurrent laughing face in *Lament for Rastafari* during her poignant soliloquy on White-on-Black racism, (63-4) or Sparrow's 'angry' laughter about the same reality at the end of *Like Them That Dream*. (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. Through the myriad mimic signs which his characters can produce, Edgar Nkosi White teaches reader and spectator about the multiple, often devious faces of racism. As one of his marginalized figures puts it in *The Wonderfull Yeare*, "[t]here are too many faces but someday, it's got to make sense." (184) The playwright's mimic designs constitute a vivid corporeal cartography in this search for meaning, which demands further exploration.

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