

## Bodies that Question: Anti-Illusionistic Acting in Edgar Nkosi White's Theatre

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### Abstract

Many members of the theatrical profession believe that dramaturgies which subvert the apparently coherent and truthful world offered by Naturalistic aesthetics represent our world of mirrors more faithfully. At the same time, the type of deconstructive acting that is derived from anti-illusionistic playtexts usually exploits the specificity of stage-language more distinctively than the forms of characterization encountered in Naturalistic drama. The power of deconstructive theatrical conventions becomes especially significant in the work of playwrights writing from the marginal position of the migrant and the postcolonial. In the vast landscape of contemporary theatres in English, a case in point is presented by the Afro-Caribbean playwright Edgar Nkosi White, whose extensive dramatic *oeuvre* theatricalizes the phenomenon of racial oppression from varied angles and using differentiated stage-codes. This article will look at the inscription of anti-illusionistic actoral devices in his plays with the aim of finding out in what ways they express and help to cope with aspects of individual and collective oppression. More generally, it will also attempt to demonstrate the validity of the deconstructive mode not only as a performative code to stage the conflicts of our time, but also as an empowering vehicle for actors and spectators alike.

“This imitator never loses himself in his imitation.

Never does he lend himself whole  
To the person he plays.

He remains, disengaged, the one who shows”.

Bertolt Brecht, *Poems on the Theatre*.

“My final prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who  
questions!”

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

As Marco de Marinis contends, our everyday life and social reality have progressively become the space and time of that which is not authentic, of falsehood, of deceptive appearances (1998: 332). For this reason, many members of the theatrical profession believe that dramaturgies which subvert the apparently coherent and truthful world offered by Naturalistic aesthetics represent our world of mirrors more faithfully. At the same time, the type of deconstructive acting that is derived from anti-illusionistic dramaturgies usually exploits the specificity of stage-language more distinctively than the forms of characterization encountered in Naturalistic drama, which are closer to

cinematic and televisual performative registers in many respects.<sup>1</sup> From both a functional and aesthetic point of view, then, it can be stated that the anti-illusionistic register still plays a relevant role in contemporary theatres: through its negation of theatrical illusion, the individuals and communities represented can be veritably unmasked, and the peculiarity of the stage as artistic medium may be better preserved despite the hegemony of technology-based narratives.

The power of deconstructive theatrical conventions becomes especially significant in the work of playwrights writing from the marginal position of the migrant and the postcolonial, whose communities still regard the theatre and related forms of performance as part of everyday life. In the vast landscape of contemporary theatres in English, authors from very different origins and traditions have resorted to the anti-illusionistic register in order to fictionalize their figures' cultural identities and the complexities of their sociohistorical conflicts. A case in point is the Afro-Caribbean dramatist Edgar Nkosi White, who consistently dramatizes the intricacies of racialism in his extensive work, especially as perceived and experienced from the (Black) victim's point of view.

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 has been writing for the stage since the 1970s, and has seen his plays performed mainly in the United States, Europe and the Caribbean. Reflecting the author's own diasporic trajectory, his plays can be considered as part of Caribbean, Afro-American or even Black British drama.<sup>2</sup> Even if his theatrical style draws from multiple literary and theatrical traditions, anti-illusionistic actoral devices are prominent in his theatrical discourse and provide an interesting contrast to the mimetic forms of representation that are also inscribed in his playtexts.

The inscription of anti-illusionistic actoral devices in Edgar Nkosi White's plays will be looked at here with the aim of finding out in what ways they express and help to cope with aspects of individual and communal oppression. More generally, the study of these devices will also attempt to demonstrate the validity of the deconstructive mode not only as a performative code to stage the conflicts of our time, but also as an empowering vehicle for actors and spectators alike.

## 1. Questioning the Self

A clear feature of the deconstructive actoral mode, the presentational delivery of the text is one of the most obvious anti-illusionistic techniques that can be detected in Edgar Nkosi White's drama. Recognizably part of Bertolt Brecht's legacy in Western theatre, the presentational actor does not embody the character, as is expected in mimetic acting, but presents it, or rather, *shows* it, to the audience. This implies a detached relationship between performer and figure which, in Brechtian theatre and epic dramaturgies in general, is often translated into the actor's standing aside from the character to comment on an aspect of the play, with the corresponding modification in tone and mime—and often posture and gesture—that this implies, and the inevitable disruption of the convention of the fourth wall.

Presentational acting also involves a dual construction of the character itself at a dramaturgical level, which can be detected in many of Edgar Nkosi White's plays. In this way, the protagonists of some of his pieces—and hence, the actors playing them—are at times granted an external perception of themselves. This is the case of Hamartia in *Fun in Lethe*, who addresses the audience referring to himself in the following terms:

“See the young poet / afoot in the streets / gives a little smile to all he meets. / Just like Jesus” (White 1970b: 90). Bellysong’s self-introduction in *The Wonderful Year* is even closer to the Brechtian ideal of the actor-character binomy, as he uses the third person singular of verbs to refer to himself throughout his soliloquy (White 1970d: 124-5). By the same token, Morose goes a step further in *The Crucificado* as he tells spectators about “the implications of [his] history” (White 1973a: 79) and even refers to the dramaturgical structure of the play by announcing the beginning of a “[s]treet scene” (White 1973a: 95), which is, on the other hand, another typically Brechtian dramaturgical strategy (Desuché 1963: 98).

Diametrically opposed to the technique of the physical actions advocated by Konstantin Stanislavsky and his followers, presentational acting does not require mechanisms of identification between character and performer but, rather, strategies of contrast between them. Whereas the mimetic mode clearly leads to the performer’s—and the spectator’s—affirmation of the character’s predicament, role estrangement generates an almost scientific attitude of observation towards the figure, thereby facilitating ideological contestation. This scientific approach places the emphasis on understanding the character rather than on experiencing what she or he feels at a fictive level. From the presentational actor’s point of view, as Bertolt Brecht put it, characters “ought to be presented quite coldly, classically and objectively. For they are not matter for empathy; they are there to be understood. Feelings are private and limited. Against that the reason is fairly comprehensive and to be relied on” (1978: 15).

In Edgar Nkosi White’s plays, a strong sense of interpretative coldness and objectivity is additionally generated whenever characters address the audience using the technique of reportage to provide them with contextual information. Coherent with the dramatist’s theatrical microcosm, seldom is the theme of racialism absent from their speeches. Utterances like “[b]y the 30’s the Negro had become a tremulous ghost breathing heavily from the back of buses and from beneath certain beds” in *The Burghers of Calais* (White 1970a: 7), “[h]e could certainly have been a success in this world ... were he not, as he said, ‘so unmistakably Negro and moreover poor’” in *The Mummer’s Play* (White 1970c: 125), “if you black, them don’t even want to sit by you” in *Lament for Rastafari* (White 1983a: 53), “[w]hen you call a man a boy you only have to pay him a boy’s wages” in *Like Them That Dream* (White 1983b: 130), “what if a nigger can’t sing or play no instrument. He’s going to be dead” in *Les Femmes Noires* (White 1985b: 188-9), and “[i]s there any black man here today who could say that this world is any better for him now?” in *I, Marcus Garvey* (White 1989: 237) are but a few examples taken from different expositive soliloquies.

Through the aforementioned simultaneous distancing and embracing effect engendered by this alienating device, the playwright constructs the world of the racially-oppressed as it exists both within and without the temporal parameters of the dramatized world onstage. The expositional technique thus enables the character-narrators to speak about the experience of discrimination in ‘the here and now’ of the drama, stepping away from the play’s time-line to emphasize the persistence of racism in the contemporary, real-time world of reader and spectator. Stemming from the dramatic reality of oppression, the knowledge that is passed on to audience and reader becomes, in Howard Barker’s words, “the material of a new drama which regards men and women as free, cognitive, and essentially autonomous, capable of witnessing pain....” (1997 (1989): 50). At the same time, the presentational format becomes the most adequate vehicle of expression for actors to illustrate the detachment of the Self or, in Frantz Fanon’s words, to explain “the third-person consciousness” that is imposed upon the victims of racial oppression (1986 (1952): 110) due to the hypervisibility of their

racial difference or, in Elin Diamond's terms, due to their constant "being looked at ness" (in Brooks 2006: 5).

## 2. Corporeal Texts

The deconstruction of corporeal identities through the use of cardboard signs is another anti-illusionistic strategy that is made present in Edgar Nkosi White's work. It can be found in *The Burghers of Calais*, in which the characters representing the famous Scottsboro boys and their jailers are supposed to "wear signs hanging from their necks saying: *I am Negro*, or, *I am white*" (White 1970a: 12).<sup>3</sup> In the same play, a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who fails to help them "has a question mark hanging from his neck", signifying "he is neither black nor white" (White 1970a: 26) and, hence, underlining the interstitial position of the Black bourgeoisie and the NAACP itself in this racialized case of injustice.<sup>4</sup> In the existentialist play-within-a-play represented in *Fun in Lethe*, the figures also wear signs indicating their race (White 1970b: 105) and in *The Wonderful Yeare*, a dead body and a baby are given theatrical existence through the signs "coffin" and "baby" printed on a coffin and a baby carriage, respectively (White 1970d: 239, 245). In *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus*, signs held by dwarfs anticipate the protagonists's emotional turmoil as a Black scholar in White-dominated America before it is developed in different scenes (White 1973b: 17, 22, 27, 40).

As these examples demonstrate, the cardboard signs in the author's work present the body as a social construct. Other stage systems in Edgar Nkosi White's plays dismantle the notion of the body as a purely biologically-determined entity. However, the use of signs constitutes a more aggressive strategy to semiotize the construction of a social corporeality. In other words, spectators do not have to reflect upon the connotations of the body onstage or on the ways in which the actions represented affect character development; the visible materiality of the sign inevitably confronts the audience with the fixed identity that society ascribes to the figure. In the context of the dramatist's work, signs on bodies ostend the effect of denaturalization that racial oppression inflicts upon the characters' corporealities, transforming them into sets of values and features that are as artificial as a piece of cardboard, as enslaving as wearing a sign around one's neck can be.

In this respect, the author's re-presentation of the body demystifies contemporary revisions of racialized corporealities, which have been complicated further by scientific and technological advances, especially in the field of molecular biology. In line with these changes, Paul Gilroy maintains that we are currently led to "rethink the development of a racial imagery in ways that are more distant from the reasoned authority of logos and closely attuned to the different power of visual and visualizing technologies" (2000: 43). The signboards on Edgar Nkosi White's theatrical bodies, on the other hand, signal the persistence of an essentialist perception of the human body, thereby underlining the remoteness of a post-racial future which, according to Paul Gilroy, could be facilitated by the biotechnical revolution (2000: 19).

## 3. Fragmenting Identities

Actoral discontinuity is another anti-illusionistic device that works in a similar direction. Even though the author does not use this performative strategy in its most

extreme form, that is, the split-character technique, the epic dramaturgies of *I, Marcus Garvey* and *The Lovesong for Langston* would easily enable a discontinuous rendering of the protagonists by means of several actors. Beyond this possibility at a performative level, the dramatist does inscribe actoral discontinuity in some of his playtexts by indicating that a single performer should play different roles, as occurs in *The Burghers of Calais* (White 1970a: 3), *I, Marcus Garvey* (White 1989: 240, 273) and *The Lovesong for Langston* (White 2001: 67).

Aside from the pragmatic function of this strategy, which is suitable for low-budget productions and companies working with a limited number of actors, the split-actor device reveals the artificial nature of the performance. In particular, it creates *metaxis* which, as Augusto Boal explains, offers a double image of two worlds at the same time, the world of reality and the world of fiction (2002 (1992): 214). This duplicity is always part of the split-actors' creative process, as well as of the spectators' reception of their multiple performance. The focus of attention is not placed on the actors' "embracement" of the characters, to use Ervin Goffman's term (1961: 106), but on the function that their figures carry out in the story represented and on the multiple faces they display.

The performing corporealities of Edgar Nkosi White's theatre are also deconstructed as realistic, unified bodies through the use of recorded voices. This device, which appears at the beginning and end of *The Life and Times of J. Walter Smintheus* (White 1973b: 5-7, 64-5) and all through *I, Marcus Garvey* (White 1989: 211, 235, 255, 274), presents once more a duality of worlds –the world of the physical and the mental in the first play, in which recourse to the voiceover stages Smintheus' complete dissociation between his body and his mind as an Afro-American intellectual with a double consciousness; the world of the living and the dead in the second one, in which Marcus Garvey's voice on tape underlines the absence of the historical character that inspired the piece; and, more generally, the present-time world of the natural representation and that of the artificial recording. An epic performative strategy in line with Erwin Piscator's technological experiments, the use of the voiceover in both plays reminds reader and spectator of the artificial nature of the reality dramatized, while at the same time helping performers obtain a detached vision of the figures they represent.

Both the split-actor technique and the use of the recorded voice can additionally be connected with traditional and modern forms of story-telling, which are essential to African and Afro-Caribbean cultures. Indeed, African-derived communities have perpetuated an ancient theatrical notion of the oratorical format that enables the disengagement between actor and figure into several performers, or into the performer's own bodily and vocal presence. As Geneviève Fabre maintains, Edgar Nkosi White's use of modes of expression that are encountered in allegory, fable and tale "have rarely been used in black theatre, although they hold a prominent place in the oral traditions of Africa and black America" (1983: 189). His combination of the Western epic mode with African and Caribbean traditions hence not only creates a distancing effect by which individual recognition-mechanisms operating between the character-actor and spectator-reader are blocked, but also underlines a kind of subjectivity that is associated with the African notion of community and which, as a result, embraces all spectators into a similar form of perception. Again in Geneviève Fabre's words, such a combination "furnishes insights that are often difficult to render in drama" (1983: 189). In Edgar Nkosi White's plays, this fusion of styles expresses the individual fragmentation of the (Black) racially-oppressed and the strong interconnection between their private distress and a communal history of deprivation.

#### 4. Beyond the Self

Choral acting in some of Edgar Nkosi White's plays leads to similar effects. The presence of a Chorus in some of his pieces as well as of more diluted forms of vocal chorality recuperate this convention of classical plays to underline the artificiality of the performance, while at the same time undermining the strong individualistic pull of mimetic acting. To quote Jacques Lecoq, "[t]o speak through another's mouth, in a common choral voice, is to be, at one and at the same time, grounded in the truth of a living character, and in touch with a dimension which transcends human reality" (2002 (1997): 135). Contrary to the Naturalistic register, kinetic and vocal chorality foreground the social dimension of the character as well as the collective nature of theatrical creation itself. This is mirrored in the choral lines and songs of *The Burghers of Calais* (White 1970a: 23), *The Wonderfull Yeaere* (White 1970d: 193), *Dija* (White 1972: 16), *Lament for Rastafari* (White 1983a: 73, 76-7), *Ritual by Water* (White 1984b: 67), *Redemption Song* (White 1985c: 59, 66), *I, Marcus Garvey* (White 1989: 229, 244-5, 248, 252, 270-1) and *The Lovesong for Langston* (White 2001: 23-4, 28-9, 57, 83, 85). From the actor's point of view, choral interventions demand a differentiated form of performance, that is, one based principally on parameters such as rhythm, tempo, harmony and intensity, the mastery of which requires collective training and that, consequently, differs from the mostly lonely processes of research and internalization that the analogical actor goes through.

Even at an individual level, some of the stage directions of Edgar Nkosi White's plays favour an externalized approach to character creation that is in tune with Vsevolod Meyerhold's anti-illusionistic techniques and those of more modern theatre pedagogues such as Jacques Lecoq. Actors following this principle of externality do not aim at acquiring deep knowledge of the character's predicament or at getting to a point of confluence with the figure's fictional mood and thoughts; they aim for a completely opposite objective, namely, finding an external form that can signify the character's inner state without actually experiencing it. Even if the mechanisms of character externalization can give rise equally to a mimetic type of acting, they can also lead more easily to anti-illusionistic forms of performance if acted out to the full. Strategies of externalized characterization also differ from the Stanislavskian system in that they are not bound to the constructed sociocultural and psychological individuality of the character, but are universal in scope, based as they are on the accurate enactment of specific body positions and on a profound analysis of the nature of movement.

In the playwright's work, some descriptions of movements, gestures and mime in the stage directions reflect the physical impulses that, according to Meyerhold, constitute the foundations of the actor's interpretation (1998 (1971): 125). Moreover, the imitation of the dynamics of nature—including the four elements, materials and animals—leads to a rich and precise expressivity that is in line with Lecoq's pedagogy (2002 (1997): 87). For example, in *The Nine Night* the stage direction that reads "*as though he's just sat on hot coals*" depicts the movement that Izak makes when jumping from his father's chair (White 1984a: 8), whereas "*as if reaching for a rare book*" describes Ferret's peculiar quality of movement (White 1984a: 11) and "*feeling an arctic breeze*" portrays Hamon's shock once his wife has found out about his secret daughter (White 1984a: 25). In *Redemption Song*, "[q]uiet destruction" signifies the quality of Verity's tone when speaking to Fowler's son (White 1985c: 69), "snake-like" refers to Dr. Adder's mimic expression in *The Boot Dance* (White 1985a: 107), "his face begins to take on the appearance of black leather" alludes to King Alfa's change of

looks in *Les Femmes Noires* (White 1985b: 159), and “showing crocodile teeth” and “makes the movement of a monkey” characterize the Editor’s appearance and motions in *I, Marcus Garvey* (White 1989: 255). Even though not all these examples of deconstructive acting are directly connected with conflicts of racial oppression, they are all to be executed by characters whose private and public lives are affected by the racial divide. Ultimately, they highlight the playwright’s interest in externalized forms of actoral performance, which can be applied to individual and choral enactments of other scenes even if they are not indicated in the stage directions.

The physical constructedness of the character’s body or of that of the Chorus as either a social entity or a blank slate on which performers create a recognizable, yet non-realistic appearance, establishes a dissociation of the theatrical Self whereby the actor or group of performers become the subject that masters, presents, temporarily embodies and mostly ostends the character-object. This is indeed a liberating actoral practice to stage racialized conflicts. The anti-illusionistic actor or, more specifically, the Black deconstructed actor in Edgar Nkosi White’s theatre, is allowed to dissect the character’s Self without having to delve into the horrors of the figure’s history and social circumstances, without internalizing the meanings inscribed in its cultural idiosyncrasies and even, in some cases, without having to deal with his own unsettling experience as a person who has been discriminated against racially. The performer’s creation can be perfectly attained and conveyed through a technically correct delivery of speech and through a mastery of movement quality.

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As has been shown, the anti-illusionistic mode in Edgar Nkosi White’s theatre strongly empowers its performers: it enables them to explain the story of their oppressed characters by detaching themselves from their fictional distress using different performative techniques. The actor’s distance from the figure also debilitates the audience’s empathic response, favouring instead a more cerebral understanding of the character’s plight. Within the convention of the anti-illusionistic game, spectators can notice the performer’s subjectivity and, at the same time, follow the figure’s development within the story represented. All in all, the inscription of this actoral approach in the dramatist’s plays leads to a representation of racial oppression that does not foreground the victim’s moral, but rather his or her social necessities, a value that was already promoted by Bertolt Brecht in his theatre (Boal 2000 (1979): 100). Furthermore, it unmasks the apparent normality of the worlds in which oppression takes place through the actors’ stylized expressivity and the figures’ corporeal de(con)struction.

In any event, as suggested at the beginning of this study, deconstructive acting co-exists with the Stanislavskian idiom in Edgar Nkosi White’s work. This combination of the two modes sheds light on the representability of the author’s drama and on the connotations of its performative potential. On the one hand, it signals the dramatist’s intention to depict his characters from both subjective and objective points of view, insofar as interpretive styles that favour individuality and commonality are inscribed into his texts. On the other hand, the combination of illusionistic and anti-illusionistic devices reflects the points of confluence between the two performative styles which, in spite of their methodological disparity, can be detected in the history of their respective developments in the 20th century.<sup>5</sup>

The scenic poetry of Edgar Nkosi White’s performative language lies precisely in the usage of these methodological interfaces to transform formal and ideological

opposition into a new theatrical idiom. Through it, the racialized body can be presented in a subjective objectivity, and the world in which such a body is allowed to exist, suffer and express itself, may appear as a realistic portrayal of dis-illusioning societies. The playwright's use of a cross-methodological register thereby demonstrates that paradox lies within the realm of theatrical efficacy and constitutes the best conceit to dramatize the complexities of human interaction. As Robert Hodge affirms:

If high reality-value is the key to semiotic power, then low reality-value is a source of freedom, the freedom to speak the unspeakable in safety, the safety of impotence. So complex combinations of high and low reality-value can have their own function, and the more contradictory the combination, the more effective it can be. (1990: 142)

Edgar Nkosi White's use of deconstructive acting certainly enhances the necessity of theatre to re-activate audiences and readerships in their apparently passive roles as receivers, not only to decode and react against pervading mechanisms of racial oppression, but to become more sensitive towards other games of falsehood that characterize our world of appearances.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that this intersection of codes is specific of our time: at the beginning of the 20th century the development of photography and the cinema already favoured the return of Western theatre to non-realistic forms of representation or, what is the same, to a representational language that was more faithful to the theatre's own conventions. The revolutionary, anti-Naturalistic methods of directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud developed for the most part during the early decades of the 20th century, as did the experimental theatre of German Expressionism. Moreover, anti-illusionistic acting *per se* is only relatively modern as theatrical style: the deconstructive mode was already part of classical registers of performance and different traditions of popular theatre, from which the masters of anti-illusionistic acting took inspiration for their theatrical innovations. The anti-illusionistic register is, in a way, at the origins of theatre itself.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas Geneviève Fabre (1983: 189-99) and Davis and Harris (1985: 278-82) dedicate a chapter to this author in anthologies of Afro-American theatre, Judy Stone does the same in her study of West Indian drama (1994: 161-7), as well as M. Banham *et al.*, who have included an entry on him in their guide to African and Caribbean theatre (1994: 184). Playwright and theatre scholar Michael McMillan, on the other hand, has considered him one of the first authentic voices of Black British drama (in Ugwu 1995: 198).

<sup>3</sup> *The Burghers of Calais* is based on a real case of racial injustice that marked the American nation during the 1930s and 1940s, namely, the Scottsboro Boys trials. As Douglas O. Linder explains, "no crime in American history—let alone a crime that never occurred—produced as many trials, convictions, reversals, and retrials as did an alleged gang rape of two white girls by nine black teenagers on a Southern Railroad freight run on March 25, 1931" (1999: 1). Edgar Nkosi White represents the case of these nine teenagers by focusing mainly on the painful thirty-year-long struggle for freedom of seven of them.

<sup>4</sup> The NAACP or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is a civil rights group that was founded by W.E.B. DuBois, amongst others, and that has worked for the rights of Black people within American society. Despite its equalitarian intentions, the NAACP brought confusion into the Scottsboro Boys' case. As Nancy Cunard explains, the NAACP constantly mis-stated that the International Labor Defense was not the only organization in charge of defending the Scottsboro Boys. Because of this,

the boys and their relatives had to issue as many as 6 statements from May 1931 to Jan. 1932 making the position clear ... Yet, persistently for many months, the N.A.A.C.P. continued to issue press releases and make publicity to the effect that it had control over the defence ... Thousands of dollars were meanwhile being collected by it for the defence on the basis of these statements. (2002: 160)

<sup>5</sup> For example, Vsevolod Meyerhold was first Konstantin Stanislavski's student and actually recognized that the separate pathways of his teacher's actoral pedagogy and his own would converge at some point (1998 (1971): 127). Bertolt Brecht, as Augusto Boal contends, does not "speak against emotion", but "against the emotional orgy" of many Naturalistic plays (2000 (1979): 103); Brechtian aesthetics can actually be moving, though the emotion they create always includes the emotion of learning. Jacques Lecoq aimed at an alternative method to the all-pervasive Stanislavskian techniques and their subsequent developments, but, as John Martin affirms, his pedagogy "seeks a truth of expression through a logic of the body's experience and trains that body to express its interior workings" (2002: 61), thereby maintaining some connections with the Stanislavskian system.

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