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/ TRAPS OF REPRESENTATION

Against Representation and Other Traps. ‘Black Skin, White Masks’ by Wiktor Bagiński

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In her article, created on the basis of her master’s thesis *White Skin, Black Masks. Selected Representations of Blackness and Whiteness in Polish Contemporary Theatre* (*Biała skóra, czarne maski. Wybrane reprezentacje Czarności i białości w polskim teatrze współczesnym*), Mazurkiewicz reflects on contemporary representations of Blackness and whiteness in Polish theatre using the example of the performance *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Czarna skóra, białe maski*) directed by Wiktor Bagiński. The author defines the key concepts of the argument, i.e. Blackness and whiteness based on the work of researchers Michelle M. Wright, Reni Eddo-Lodge and Emma Dabiri, and provides a local context to these concepts by applying to them the categories of centre and semi-periphery drawn from the writings of Maria Janion, Dorota Sajewska and Andrzej W. Nowak, in search of answers to the questions of what specifically characterises Polish racism and what the scope of the Polish anti-racist discourse is. In a detailed analysis of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the author examines the story within a story structure of the play and the representation of ‘race’ that is actuated by Bagiński as a performative construct. She cites the peculiarly semi-peripheral story of the visits of Black slaves to the courts of the Polish nobility, which is staged in the first part of the performance, and summarises the self-theatrical discussion of the ‘Racists Anonymous group’ moderated by the stage porte-parole of the director in the second part. When interpreting Bagiński’s role, the author concludes that the artist consistently strives for his own individuality and seeks to resign from representing Black Poles despite his unique position as the only Black Polish theatre director. The author critiques the tools that Bagiński uses to achieve this goal, i.e. misogyny and the affective reproduction of violence against women. She proposes an intersectional view of racism.

Keywords: Blackness; whiteness; semi-periphery; racism; sexual violence

When Zygmunt Hübner decided to stage Jean Genet's *The Blacks*[1] at the Ateneum Theatre in Warsaw in 1961, the playwright wrote a letter to the Polish translators to protest the idea. 'I wrote this play – I am white myself, as you know – so that real Negroes[2] could shout their anger and hatred in the faces of real whites. It was written for Negroes. It is therefore not up to Whites to decide whether or not they are allowed to feign on stage the perfidious relations between victims and executioners' (Genet, 1961a, p. 5) we read in the programme of the Polish premiere, which was staged despite Genet's objections. In the postscript, the playwright states: 'Apart from miners, there are no blacks among you. And this is not a play about miners' (p. 6). The programme also included a rejoinder by Jerzy Lisowski, in which the translator expresses the creator's conviction that it is the whites'responsibility to deal with the stereotypes of Whites about Blacks presented in the drama,[3] because the prejudices most concern the prejudiced. The author of the letter defends the universality of theatre, believing that the authenticity Genet calls for is not only unnecessary but also limiting.

> Since they are supposed to be real Negroes, why should they speak on stage the language of Racine or Mickiewicz, and not the dialect of Baluba? If we were to accept such a limitation of authenticity, then we would have to forbid, for example, a Negro troupe from staging Shakespeare or Sophocles, to be consistent (Lisowski, 1961, p. 7).

Lisowski argues that Genet's drama does not need 'real Negroes' to resonate fully, and the play's anti-racist message should not be constricted: 'In our country, we only know from newspapers the news from distant Alabama or the Congo about what racism can be in relation to the black race. […] Unfortunately, there are more such people in our world, whom racism genuinely condemns to death. […] This play is about them' (p. 8).

In *The Blacks*, inspired by, among others, Jean Rouch's film *The Mad Masters* documenting the West African ritual of Hauka in which native Africans immersed in a trance impersonate White colonial officials, Jean Genet divided the Black actors into two groups – the court of European colonisers in white masks and the colonised African people. The colonised execute a grotesque performance perpetuating stereotypes about themselves in front of the colonisers, and to their delight.

In the course of the action, it turns out that they are performing this stunt to camouflage a real trial and execution of a member of their community who killed a White woman. The Black performers, as self-conscious projections of White people, engage in a game of mimicry to divert the attention of the oppressors from their own interests, and the subversive fiction they create is constantly mixed with the reality of the presented world.

In Hübner's staging, both groups were played by White actors with their faces painted black, with the courtiers wearing additional, caricatured white masks. 'These are no longer floors, but skyscrapers of convention. Because whites dressed as blacks pretend to be black actors who are playing a conventional and schematic play about blacks for blacks dressed as whites, played by white actors dressed as blacks pretending to be whites…' commented Stefan Polanica (1962). The remaining reviewers held the actors accountable for their ability to capture the 'characteristic features of a

black's behaviour' (Grodzicki, 1961) and looked for a 'Negro' musicality and sense of rhythm on the Ateneum stage. Most, like Polanica, despite their sincere trust in Hübner, pointed out the incongruity of the Polish performance with the realities in which the play was written.

> The African question is indeed shaking the whole world, but it has a different impact on the life of Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. The spasms shaking the societies of colonial empires concern us only indirectly. They do not mean our abdication; on the contrary, they even open up perspectives for our industry, while our average theatregoer knows them only from newspapers, radio and films. Analogies with other manifestations of racism known to us are also artificial and distant. We saw the fascist explosion of racism with our own eyes, but only as spectators and opponents

– Jerzy Zagórski distanced himself from *The Blacks* (1961), while Edward Csató soberly stated: 'But the Negroes are missing not only on the stage, but in a sense also in the audience. That is, not so much the "physical" Negroes themselves, but the Negro issue in the viewer's consciousness' (1962), which seems to perfectly sum up both the Warsaw staging and the dispute between its creators and Genet.

Hübner's production of *The Blacks*, together with the accompanying correspondence and reception, not only gives an idea of the political and social sensitivity of Poland in the 1960s, but also encourages its examination in contemporary Poland. Sixty years ago, Blackness seemed so distant to Polish theatre artists that they were unable to recognise the consequences of the radical negation of Genet's guidelines and the decolonising foundations

of his work. What has changed since then? How does Blackness manifest itself in Polish theatre in the 21st century? I tried to answer these questions in my master's thesis *White Skin, Black Masks. Selected Representations of Blackness and Whiteness in Polish Contemporary Theatre*,[4] of which this article is an extensive fragment. By examining selected representations of Blackness and Whiteness on stage, I investigated what reality they create, by what means they are called into being, and what they say about the current political consciousness of Polish society.

The subject of my analyses, in addition to stagings by White creators, including *Dziady*[5] (directed by Radosław Rychcik), and *In Desert and Wilderness. From Sienkiewicz and from Others*[6] (directed by Bartek Frąckowiak) and *The Blacks*[7] (directed by Iga Gańczarczyk), were performances by the only Polish Black theatre director, Wiktor Bagiński. *Black Skin, White Masks*[8] and *The Heart*[9] turned out to be crucial for my research work as artistic statements by a Black Polish creator on the subject of his own ethnic identity. Half a century after the premiere of Hübner's *The Blacks*, Black people finally appeared on stage and in the consciousness of Polish viewers — no longer only represented, but also representing.

Blackness and Whiteness, centre and semi-periphery

'But what does Black mean? And what colour is it anyway?' asks Genet in the motto of his play (1961b, p. 77). There are many answers, and each one may be equally true. Blackness is a feature of a population with dark skin pigmentation. Blackness is a complex social identity, dependent on geographical and cultural coordinates. It is a set of experiences of members of the African diaspora, together with its representations and expressions. It

is an affirmative subjectivity based on pride in one's own history and heritage. It is a conscious attitude shaping politics, social organisations, customs and traditions, adopted by people identifying as Black, who fight racial discrimination. It is being perceived as the Other and as being exotic. 'This strange experience, this double consciousness, this sense of constantly looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul against the yardstick of a world that looks on with amused contempt and pity' (Du Bois, 2015, p. 5).[10] 'It can be a network of strategies for self-assertion and radically imagining new social relations' (Rasheed, 2016).[11]

Each of these definitions of Blackness leads to simplifications and stereotyping, which is why they need to be multiplied, fluidified, and contextualised. Researcher Michelle M. Wright postulates that the concept of Blackness, always moving between extremes, should encompass the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora and at the same time unite them into a community.[12] She considers it necessary to study Blackness as a social category that intersects with others – an intersectional view of the relations between Blackness and gender, sexuality, and class, which guarantees access to a multitude of experiences, perspectives, and attitudes. Each of these experiences, complementing or cancelling out the others, equally defines a pluripotent and heterogeneous Blackness in the process of constant conceptualisation. Attending to its flickerings can be considered a contemporary strategy for redefining 'race' – a construct that in previous centuries was the (pseudo)scientific foundation of racist ideology, and which today, completely discredited as a biological system of human classification, remains an important social determinant that requires critical analyses and contexts, as well as reliable observation of the conditions in which it is produced and reproduced.

Blackness understood in this way exists in close relation to Whiteness, a concept that is just as complex, though not usually subject to as much thought. Whiteness is not just about belonging to a light-pigmented population. According to critical Whiteness studies, it is a naturalised racial identity with its own history, culture, and epistemology, considered the norm by which all other ethnic groups are defined. Whiteness, as an ideology based on beliefs, values, behaviours, and customs, provides access to power and systemic privilege. 'White privilege is the fact that if you are White, your race will almost certainly positively affect the course of your life in one way or another. And you probably won't even notice it,' writes Reni Eddo-Lodge in her essay *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2018, p. 115). The journalist argues that there is no point in talking to White people about racism until they learn to recognise and acknowledge the systemic benefits of being White. Emma Dabiri in her essay *What White People Can do Next*[13] postulates that anti-racist activism should be based not on solidarity, i.e. empty declarations made on social media, but on joint action toward an equal society, bringing benefits to both Black and White people.

Critical studies of Whiteness and interracial relations, however, primarily cover areas where Black communities are numerous and highly visible – the United States with a history of slavery and Western European countries with a colonial past. Most of the anti-racist strategies and solutions proposed by researchers do not therefore directly correspond to the Polish reality. In the world-system,[14] Poland, geographically and symbolically situated between the East and the West, plays its specific semi-peripheral role. 'A semi-peripheral identity is suspended, torn between two ordering principles: the dominant narrative from the centre and potential voices of resistance or submission from the periphery,' diagnoses Andrzej W. Nowak in his text *The*

Mysterious Disappearance of the Second World. On the Difficult Fate of the Semi-Periphery (2016, p. 90). Maria Janion also analyses Poland's ambivalent identity in *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna* (*Uncanny Slavdom*):

> The processes of the aggressive colonisation of Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries and Sienkiewicz's opposing dream of colonising others have created a sometimes-paradoxical Polish postcolonial mentality. It manifests itself in a sense of helplessness and defeat, inferiority and peripherality of the country and its stories. This fairly common feeling of inferiority towards the 'West' is opposed within the same paradigm by messianic pride in the form of a narrative about our exceptional suffering and merits, about our greatness and superiority over the 'immoral' West, about our mission in the East. (2006, p. 12)

In recent years, researchers and historians have begun to restore the memory of Poland's involvement in various colonial projects — primarily the aristocracy's colonisation of the East in the 16th and 17th centuries and the fantasies of Polish society about overseas colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries. 'Polish historiography is reluctant to expose Poland's place in the context of the colonial regime,' notes Dorota Sajewska in her article *Perspectives of Peripheral History and Theory of Culture* (2020), which reports on Poland's specific semi-peripheral struggles with modern form. It is commonly claimed that Poland never participated in the colonial expansions conducted by Western European states, but only fell victim to them. In fact, in the years 1569–1648, the Polish nobility colonised Ukraine and exploited the labour of Ruthenian peasants under the feudal system. In *Fantomowe ciało króla* (The Phantom Body of the King), Jan Sowa analyses

the noble policy of this period as a local equivalent of global colonial actions, a ‘peripheral integration with the economic and cultural centre of the capitalist world’ (2011, p. 183). Sarmatian mythology played a huge role in constructing the noble identity at that time – the belief that the Sarmatians were a group ethnically and nationally different from the peasants and the bourgeoisie, descended from foreign, ancient tribes that invaded and colonised the lands inhabited by the Slavs between the 4th and 6th centuries, and therefore predestined to rule Poland and the eastern lands of Europe and to collect serfdom from their inhabitants, whom from the 17th century the Sarmatians called ‘czerń’ (‘Blackness’) (see Sajewska, 2020; Pobłocki, 2011).

Racialisation discourses, present in numerous texts from the period, have inspired some historians to trace similarities between the living conditions of Ruthenian serfs and Black slaves in America. This research perspective was adopted by anthropologist Kacper Pobłocki in *Chamstwo* (2022) and publicist Przemysław Wielgosz in *Gra w rasy* (2021). The latter juxtaposes the development of slavery in the North Atlantic basin with the racialisation of the peasantry and working class in Polish lands, analysing racism as the basis and bond of international capitalist exploitation. Comparing the Polish history of serfdom to American slavery is a popular, although controversial, rhetorical device in discussions about the folk history of Poland, and one of the strategies for seeking analogies between global and local histories. The tools of postcolonial discourse sometimes require adaptation to semi-peripheral conditions, but they are necessary to place Poland on the map of global dependencies and influences.

The ‘dream of colonising others’ (which was dictated in the 19th century by the desire to acquire new territories for the then non-existent Poland, and in

the interwar period by the desire to expand the newly regained independent state), resulted in Polish research expeditions, plans to settle Poles in Africa and South America, and political interference, which Sajewska interprets as a kind of mimicry of Western imperialism. The cultural studies scholar uses this concept coined by the leading philosopher of postcolonialism Homi K. Bhabha to draw attention to the hybridity of culture typical of the semi-periphery and manifested in the colonised society's partial adaptation and imitation of the mechanisms of the repressive authorities in order to defend itself and achieve self-determination. The colonial ambitions of the Second Polish Republic, detached from reality and persistently fuelled by the Maritime and Colonial League and the editorial staff of the magazine *Morze* (Sea), never came true, and Poland did not catch up with the Western powers – it remained distant, but dependent on the global centre.

Contemporary Polish society can hardly be called multicultural or multiethnic – this was determined by both the country's history and its current migration policy. The African diaspora in Poland, although constantly growing, is still small, and its presence in the public space can be considered negligible, similarly to the presence of other non-White communities. Critical studies of Whiteness do not cope well in environments with a homogeneous ethnic structure, which leads to fundamental questions: does a semi-peripheral variety of Whiteness exist? What is Whiteness like in an ethnically undifferentiated country? What is Polish racism specifically and how does it differ from the racism of the global centre?

The answers have not yet been established, and research on Polish Whiteness is still in its infancy.[15] This is evidenced by the deficit of a native anti-racist language. There is a lack of a Polish equivalent of the term 'People of Colour', affirming belonging to non-White communities, or a

consensus on the correct way to refer to Black people (‘Black’ coexists in Polish with ‘black-skinned,’ ‘dark-skinned,’ ‘African-American’ [used regardless of actual origin], and the only-recently recognised as pejorative ‘Negro’), as well as people identifying as multiracial (the terms ‘mixed race’ and ‘mulatto’ are usually frowned upon, but it would be hard to find better ones). Linguistic incompetence seems to be one of the manifestations of racism characteristic of the semi-periphery. Others include naturalising Whiteness through exoticising and symbolically excluding people of colour from the national community, spreading stereotypes and prejudices that cannot be confronted with reality due to the small representation of minorities, imitating the discourses of the centre without taking into account their local specificity or ignoring the discourses of the centre, justifying them with their groundlessness in the local context, taking advantage of Whiteness in the case of travel and emigration, or propagating xenophobia, closing borders and fear of the absent Other, typical of the ethnic nationalism that is gaining popularity. The humanitarian crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border, especially when compared with the reaction of society to the outbreak of war in Ukraine, has proven that Whiteness can be an important condition for Polish hospitality. The different situations on the two Polish borders seem painfully symptomatic of the local entanglement in Whiteness, as do the slogans that regularly appear at Independence Marches: ‘Poland will be White or depopulated,’ ‘White Europe of brotherly nations,’ ‘It’s okay to stay White’ (see Mikołajewska, 2017).

‘The semi-peripheries themselves reinforce racist division, treating it as a form of advancement, but paradoxically this strategy means that not only are the residents of the semi-peripheries ethnicised and racialised, but they are also accused of racism themselves,’ writes Nowak (2016, p. 102), trying to characterise semi-peripheral racism. Similar explorations in the text

Perspectives of Peripheral History and Theory of Culture gives Dorota Sajewska (2020) concluding:

> This ambivalent position of Poland, questioning the easy division into the centre and the periphery, can be perceived both negatively – as a place where xenophobic attitudes, behaviours and phobias are shaped in detail, and positively – as a decentralised confrontation with Western culture. This ambivalence also conceals the possibility of political intervention: recovering from history what could have happened and a critical stance towards what really happened.

The need to explore this possibility of political intervention and the complex relations between Polishness, Whiteness, and Blackness eventually led me back to the theatre. I believe that theatre, as a vibrant cultural institution, has the power to reflect the social and political moods of the 'here and now,' to diagnose the state of public awareness of the topics it addresses, and the potential to practice dominant discourses and concepts by illuminating important cultural phenomena and finding performative expression for them. It can therefore use its resources to represent members of the society in which it functions and to respond to their current problems. The tension between Blackness and Whiteness is currently one of these problems, and analysing Polish performances that address the topic of 'race' has the potential to provide insight into the local processes and contexts of its design.

Wiktor Bagiński

In Polish theatre, the representatives of Blackness are currently most often actors and performers, both full-time and hired for individual projects on the subject of 'race.' They form a small but diverse group, characteristic of the Black community in Poland – the colour of their skin unites them more than their roots or social class, declared identity or common political activity. Those who identify as Afro-Poles have relatively rarely had the opportunity to explore their own Afro-Polishness in their work on performances; their Blackness on stage usually refers the audience to the global centre. For director Wiktor Bagiński,[16] the experience of Blackness specific to Polish coordinates and its semi-peripheral identity resistant to universalisation have been the main subject of theatrical exploration, especially at the beginning of his creative path. In performances based on original scripts, once written together with playwright Paweł Sablik, Bagiński explored various forms of racist violence and his own entanglement in stereotypes concerning Black people. He collaborated twice with the Zimbabwean–Polish performance artist Sibonisiwe Ndlovu-Sucharska, gaining access to her perspective and struggles with Afro-Polishness. In his reflections on the situation of Black Poles, he also drew abundantly on the work of prominent Black philosophers, most notably Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, and the writer James Baldwin. After George Floyd's death, he published a dense essay in *Dwutygodnik*, *The Birth of the Negro* (2020), in which he wrote:

> While the history of colonisation and racial segregation is not my story, the skin archive also receives this document. I did not want these stories in my body, but they were already there before I knew it. I learned that I had to listen to my body to see its story.

In numerous interviews given on the occasion of the premiere, he willingly spoke about private experiences and events from his life, somehow mythologising them and leading critics to biographical interpretations of his own performances. It is difficult to avoid them in the face of the artist's consistent self-creation on and off the stage. Bagiński was often asked about Blackness in the theatre and Blackness in Poland, so he spoke on behalf of Black Poles: he demanded a more diverse representation and more voices in the discussion about Blackness, diagnosed the condition of the Afro-Polish community and urged White Poles to recognise racism in their beliefs, behaviours and language. When asked by his colleagues about the monothematic nature of the performances he was preparing, he replied: 'And when was the last time you staged a text by a non-White author? It is always if not Słowacki, then Mickiewicz, if not Ibsen, then Chekhov' (Bagiński, 2019). He has often lamented the fact that there is no other Black director in Poland who could argue with his vision. Thanks to his position and performances, the topic of Blackness in Poland, supported through reading texts by non-White authors, could be taken up and developed by people who are directly affected by it – here and now, not only there and then.

Wiktor Bagiński's work and character also began to function in a different context, when in early 2023 his former collaborators, Bartek Prosuł, Krystyna Lama-Szydłowska, Aleksandra Pajączkowska and Paweł Sablik, published a statement (2023) revealing the director's violent practices, including manipulation, fits of rage, groundless accusations of racism and sudden termination of contracts with female directors. In response, the director wrote on Facebook: 'Since October, I have been a victim of harassment by former collaborators. This harassment has been ongoing since October and its source is racism' (Bagiński, 2023). And further: 'I do

not refer to the accusations made by the above-mentioned persons [Paweł S., Bartek P., Krystyna S., Karolina S. and Aleksandra P.] because all the allegations are lies. This is a fiction prepared by a group of racists whose goal is to remove me from Polish public life' (2023). The statement was signed by 'Ahmad Ali,' because at about the same time Bagiński announced that he had converted to Islam and changed his name. In March 2024, the post about the name change had already been deleted, and the director is once again listed on his social media as 'Wiktor Bagiński.' On the website of the German Theater Freiburg, where his adaptation of Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*[17] premiered in June 2023, 'Ahmad Ali' is added in brackets next to the director's name, and I will use this official name in the text. The director is currently abroad. His last performance in Poland was made at the end of 2022. The conflict between Bagiński and his former collaborators remains unresolved.

Black Skin, White Masks

The walls and stairs to the mezzanine of the cavernous Modelatornia of the Opole theatre are covered in white tiles. Cables, speakers, and tripods are piled up in the corners. On the wooden parquet floor, on the left, there is a piano, in the centre an ornate chair, and on the right – a golden bathtub. Near the scenographic objects, there are posed figures in rococo costumes and 18th-century wigs: a pianist in a tailcoat is frozen at the instrument, on the throne a lady in a flared blue dress and a footman in a patterned frock coat watching over her, next to the bathtub a young woman and an older man taking an elegant stroll. In front of the tableau vivant stand Sibonisiwe (Bonnie) Ndlovu-Sucharska and Wiktor Bagiński in jeans and sweaters. The performers introduce themselves and greet the audience at a meeting of anonymous racists. Bagiński announces that a show about the fate of Black

slaves at Polish courts in the 17th and 18th centuries was created as part of the meetings. Bonnie announces a scene about the genesis of European racism, in which she will be responsible for the Enlightenment philosophers' leisure. The director adds that the White participants of the meeting play Black historical figures on their own initiative. The hosts step off the stage, the courtiers come to life, the stage lights go down, and spotlights pick out the pianist, the countess, and the footman from the darkness.

Sitting at the piano, Aleksander Dynis, the Black servant of the 17th-century Kraków bishop (Karol Kossakowski) becomes the narrator of the prepared show, placing the existing scene in time and space – it is February 1752 in Biała Podlaska. The pianist recounts the passage of a convoy of twelve Black slaves through the streets of the city, which aroused great interest and excitement among the inhabitants. The lady on the throne then puts theatrical binoculars to her eyes and looks out at the procession somewhere in the audience, then hands them over to the footman, who waits obligingly at her feet. From the conversation between Prince Hieronim Florian Radziwiłł (Michał Świtała) and the Austrian actress Sophie Schröder (Joanna Osyda), who is a guest at his court, and who are strolling nearby, it emerges that the woman in the blue dress is Magdalena Radziwiłłowa née Czapska (Karolina Kuklińska) with her Black servant, Pierre (Kornel Sadowski). Under the influence of the gaze of the strollers, the couple freezes for a moment in the painting African Page Passing a Basket, which Radziwiłł had given his wife a year earlier. This is not the only expression of the host's fascination with Black bodies – the prince boasts to the actress about buying Pierre in Paris for twelve hundred ducats, and then orders the servant to bring his favourite exhibit from the home cabinet of curiosities, namely the head of the Black man in a jar of formalin. Sitting down on a chair, he pulls a blackface mask with white skin peeking out from a glass container and

kisses her lips almost lasciviously. He then takes Sophie by the arm and leads her to the theatre for a performance of 'Negro ballets,'[18] leaving Magdalena alone with her favourite servant.

The reconstruction of episodes and customs from the life of the Polish nobility on the Opole stage is dense and slightly distorted from the very beginning – despite the narrator's chronicle-like accuracy, events from the 17th and 18th centuries coexist on stage, as well as characters whose paths could not have crossed in reality, and documented facts are mixed with the creators' imagination. This technique is used by the director and playwright to quickly remind the audience of a little-known practice by the Polish magnates – acquiring Black slaves for their courts as proof of their status and wealth. As Dynis tells, the Black newcomers, bought for huge sums, led a life in Poland at that time different from the slaves in the Atlantic trade triangle, because instead of working on plantations, they served as court mascots and local attractions. In this way, the director indicates at the very beginning Poland's semi-peripheral position in the global system of supply and demand for slave labour, only to reveal it in full in a game of stark contrasts a moment later.

History is successfully condensed by consistently piling up theatricality. Here, the contemporary participants in their meeting of anonymous racists take on the roles of historical figures, while the noblemen they play fill their time with theatrical performances. Playing with convention within the world of the performance reveals its infinite performativity and unmasks Whiteness as a set of traditions and habits rooted in material and cultural status. The box-like structure of the performance and the melange of stage identities and realities create space for shifts in the representation of Blackness and the search for new meanings through courtly images. By casting White

actors and actresses in the roles of Black servants, Wiktor Bagiński makes Blackness one of the constructs, possible to be invoked on stage through the power of performativity. In his performance, 'race' is not essential – it can be played, just like any other identity on stage. The director sees the essence of the experiences of Black slaves in Polish courts in performance; their work consists primarily in presenting an exotic appearance and performing the role assigned to them in the noblemen's theatre of everyday life.

After her husband and the actress leave, Magdalena states that the hour of her daily concert has come and asks Pierre to bring her a microphone. The servant tries to resist, because he is afraid that he will not be able to endure another vocal display by his mistress. In response, the noblewoman affectionately pats his head and promises him a bath in milk and honey in exchange for the microphone. Pierre agrees to the offer, although his disgusted face shows that he is doing it only at Magdalena's request, not for his own pleasure. He hands him the microphone, and Magdalena Radziwiłł abruptly sits him down at her feet and, with her hand in his hair, performs the song to the accompaniment of the piano, while the page reluctantly repeats some phrases of the piece:

> If I didn't have you, Heart, as a page, I could not longer live.
> I've met, I can sing to, an angel, as if I'd
> gone to heaven.
>
> You're not my son, because you're a Negro.
> – I am a Negro.
> You're not my brother, because you bring tea.
> – I bring tea.
> You won't be wild anymore, you newcomer from Africa, you won't

be wild anymore, oh no.

Sadness and fear are far from you, you have plenty of bird’s milk,
no one
hurts you, no one beats you, oh, how
good life is in Podlachia.

At the end of the piece, Pierre prepares for a bath, undresses down to his underpants and steps into a golden bathtub in a cap. Magdalena sits down next to him and pours milk from a jug over him, noting that Piotruś is living in the lap of luxury with her. And it is hard for Piotruś to disagree, although he is clearly dissatisfied with his mistress’s caresses. Perhaps because, although he does not do backbreaking work, he has been completely objectified and racialised as a salon pet to be occasionally pampered. Magdalena’s treatments quickly take on an erotic tone – the magnate looks at the page lasciviously and sighs, runs a sponge close to his crotch, and finally vigorously pats his exposed buttocks. Her fascination turns Pierre not only into an infantilised mascot, but also into a helpless sexual object, completely at the mercy of his owner.

Suddenly, the bath is interrupted by screams; Magdalena leaves, and the light dims. Behind the smoked glass on the mezzanine at the back of the stage, the shadows of a woman tied to a stake and a man in a tall wig whipping her are now visible. Pianist Aleksander Dynis approaches the page in the bathtub and explains the image to him: it is John Locke, an outstanding Enlightenment philosopher who believed that having Black slaves does not conflict with the idea of freedom that was constitutive of the era. When the light on the mezzanine brightens, Locke (Katarzyna Osipuk)

recites a fragment of his writings devoted to slavery and the principle of private property, and the eyes of the audience – both those in the audience and those on stage – are shown the bound, half-naked Black body of Sibonisiwe Ndlovu-Sucharska. The performance of violence involving the Black performer seems to be intended for Pierre as a pang of conscience and a lesson in racial solidarity. Dynis continues his insistent lecture, forcing the page to look at the theatre of cruelty that, under different circumstances, might have met him too.

In the blink of an eye, Bonnie disappears, and Locke's place is taken by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Leszek Malec), a romantic philosopher and famous author of the dialectic of master and slave, insensitive to the contemporary suffering of real slaves under the yoke of real masters. The irritated thinker also takes his anger out on the now invisible Black slave, and from offstage we hear her broken screams. Pierre interrupts Dynis's lesson because, as he says, he is aware of the suffering of his brothers in other parts of the world, though it does not befall him. Suddenly, he begins to sound like a typical Polish patriot denying historical facts that are not very honourable for the fatherland – he states that there have never been such words as racism, imperialism or colonialism here, which exempts him from responsibility for these phenomena in the West. These are arguments that return in contemporary debates on Polish racism, but after a few suggestive scenes in the play, it is already clear that they are not true. Racism in Poland not only exists, but also has its own history – it simply manifests itself differently than in the global centre.

Bonnie Sucharska steps down from the mezzanine in a White, bloody petticoat and announces another instalment of the play within a play: the outstanding Viennese actress Sophie Schröder will play Queen Maria

Kazimiera in a ‘beautiful love story about her feelings for a negro servant’ who served King Jan III Sobieski at Vienna. The page Pierre will play Joseph the Dutchman in love. The Black servant, summoned to the stage, recites a love monologue like a 19th-century actor from the era of stage stars. Having learned of the death of his beloved Queen Maria Kazimiera, Joseph plans to fight for her honour in the upcoming battle. When he leaves, his place in the spotlight is taken by the queen, who has just received a letter from Sobieski announcing that the Dutchman has fallen in battle. Schröder begins to shed theatrical tears, but before he fully devotes himself to mourning, Pierre returns to the stage as the queen’s beloved. A wonderful and completely counterfactual union of lovers takes place. An overjoyed Maria Kazimiera and Józef Holender fall to their knees and embrace tenderly. The Black footman asks the queen to marry him, and she accepts. However, the fantastic wedding will never take place, because Michał Świtała, a participant in the meeting of anonymous racists, who has been impersonating Radziwiłł until now, interrupts the reconstruction.

The meeting of anonymous racists

‘Wait a minute, what’s going on here? What are you playing here? What is this? It’s not true, it doesn’t fit with the historical record! I will never allow it!’ Michał thunders, wagging his finger in the semi-darkness. The other participants of the meeting start arguing with him, leaving their previous roles, and the director of the play takes advantage of the confusion to set up chairs on the stage. Wanting to explain the situation, he finally asks for the lights to be turned on and takes his place in a semi-circle with the actors. He opens the discussion by asking Michał why he ended the performance. Michał states that he cannot play the owner of the Black slaves, since the actors who are playing them are White, because such an assumption

contradicts the truth of the stage and history. The participants of the meeting raise their voices of protest again, defending the conventionality of the performance, announced at the beginning by the director.

When Michał suggests that the actors playing the Black characters wear black makeup, they react with outrage: most of them are aware that blackface is a racist practice. Leszek, who, in addition to Hegel, was supposed to play Father Jan Chlewicki, explains why White performers cannot be portrayed as Black people and draws attention to the prevalence of this phenomenon in contemporary Poland, especially in schools and theatres. It quickly turns out that, contrary to initial declarations, the opinions of the rest of the cast are not as radical. Karolina, who previously played Magdalena Radziwiłł, admits that as a child she painted herself black to perform Makumba by the pop group Big Cyc in a school competition and sees nothing wrong with that, because her make-up was not combined with stereotypical gestures and behaviours of Black people. Bagiński sarcastically congratulates her on winning and tells how, at a kindergarten song review, the teacher forbade him from singing Enrique Iglesias' song, insisting on a hit by Boney M., which in her opinion was more appropriate for the boy's skin colour. However, the director decides to absolve Karolina of her past mistakes, stating that the responsibility for her blackface lies with the teachers, who were unable to see the problematic nature of the racist costume.

The debate initiated in this way could be considered spontaneous – the actors regret that they will not be able to finish the show, they perform under their own names, their lines sound natural and sometimes overlap in the tumult of voices, and the arguments seem unstructured, a free exchange of ideas not covered by a script at all. In fact, the performance was not

interrupted, but only stripped of several layers of theatricality. The discussion is meticulously led by the director present on stage, who moderates the meeting, gives the floor, asks questions and summarises the answers. He has complete control over the theatrical situation as the key creator of *Black Skin, White Masks* and the representative of Blackness among White actors. Thanks to this devised structure of the performance, Wiktor and Bonnie will have the opportunity to discuss the source materials of the show with the actors, talk about their private experiences and reflect with the rest of the cast on the representation of Black people in Polish theatre. Some of their actions and statements resemble the strategies of auto-theatre: they speak on their own behalf as experts on Polish Blackness, called up for the needs of the performance, and their experiences paint an image of a group that is undervalued in the public space on a daily basis.

In this precisely directed panel, actor Michał Świtała is cast as the devil's advocate; his extremely conservative stance provokes the others to nuance their own beliefs and share their experiences and knowledge gained during rehearsals. As a result, Michał becomes a medium for the most banal and ignorant commentary from public and online disputes about political correctness – an embodiment of the normative White culture that Black creators in Poland must navigate.

Bagiński returns to the question of what moments of the show led the actor to interrupt the performance, and Michał becomes incensed that in 1683, the wedding of Queen Maria Kazimiera to a Black butler would not have been possible. Leszek then points out that the first Polish–African wedding had taken place fifty years earlier on the Krakow market square. During the debate, as during the reenactment, little-known facts are juxtaposed against the historical mainstream, forcing the participants to revise common beliefs

and ideas about Poland's connections with Blackness. To give them a performative dimension, the director asks the actors playing the roles of the newlyweds to perform a previously prepared song. Katarzyna Osipuk, in a wedding dress and with a clearly outlined pregnant belly, approaches the piano with Karol. The actor starts playing and they both sing a love ballad with the following refrain:

> This fair girl loves a Negro
> Because love is not black
> Because love is not white
> For love, I would give everything I have

After the song, some of the performers leave the stage to change, and the director, in exchange for an unfinished show, proposes a conversation about nano-racism. Michał demands an explanation of the term, and the director explains that nano-racism is a soft form of stigmatisation related to skin colour. Bonnie then mentions the constant feeling of threat caused by unfriendly glances on the street. Kornel points out that this type of racism can also manifest itself in jokes and rhymes, such as Murzynek Bambo. Michał immediately defends the popular text, so the other cast members point out the racist clichés contained in Tuwim's seemingly innocent poem. When the older actor insists that the rhyme has a positive connotation, Bonnie explodes in anger and talks indignantly about her friends' Black children who tried to scratch their skin off because their peers at school told them they were dirty and afraid to take a bath.

Katarzyna then reminds her of their joint visit to the bar and the licentious comments made by men to Bonnie about her exotic appearance. However,

the attention does not focus on the Black performer for long, because Wiktor asks Katarzyna to share her own experience of nano-racism, which she had previously mentioned in their private conversation before the performance. At this point, the host begins to reveal his directorial over-knowledge and skilfully manipulates the situation on stage – he subtly forces the actors to confess things they supposedly said outside of rehearsals. This technique creates the impression that the meeting was organised to clear up misunderstandings that occurred between the actors during the two months of preparations for the premiere and it intensifies the sense of genuine tension between the participants. Most of them have already taken off their baroque costumes and nothing now shields them from the audience and the inquisitive director, ready to hold his White collaborators accountable for their racist transgressions.

At Bagiński's request, Katarzyna tells how her ex-boyfriend from Senegal used to point out cultural appropriation to the actress, which he believed she was committing, by making a gesture of retort (a snap with an accompanying sarcastic mm-hmm) during a conversation, which belongs to the Black community of South Carolina in the United States, i.e. to his 'race.' The cast immediately takes the side of their colleague, considering her behaviour to be universal, but the director defends the Senegalese. He recalls his White ex-girlfriends who made similar signs in his presence and calls them 'insensitive morons.' At that moment, Michał bursts out laughing with satisfaction, and the other actors and actresses are momentarily silent in shock. Katarzyna turns Wiktor's chair towards her and suggests that he tell her straight to her face that she is an insensitive moron. The director seems embarrassed; he is unable to look at the actress, he casually says, 'Sorry, Kasia,' and when the actress leaves, he tries to turn the situation into a joke and move on to the next item on the programme.

The cast members are somewhat bewildered by the director's behaviour, but they allow him to continue the meeting. It is impossible to unequivocally assess Wiktor's on-stage behaviour, remembering that it was planned by Bagiński – the sexist comment did not come out of his mouth by accident, and the reactions of the actors and actresses were certainly subject to the director's control. Bagiński made a conscious decision that the character he played, seemingly very close to the director and representing the Black community in Poland and on stage, would not arouse sympathy or full trust among the cast and the audience. The director's impertinence makes it difficult to trust him as an arbiter of the debate and uncritically accept his vision of the world. Perhaps Bagiński undermines the authority of the persona he has created, deliberately not meeting the viewers' default expectations of a representative of a minority. He does not present himself as a humble, polite and patient agent of Black Polishness towards White colleagues, nor does he seek the sympathy of those around him. In this way, he seems to encourage the audience to reflect on the conditions that an Afro-Pole must meet in order for his experiences to be considered worthy of consideration and compassion. It is a pity, however, that he has started playing with the prejudices of White viewers by means of a sexist comment.

After the altercation, the director asks the actors to start the previously prepared reconstructions related to the identity of ruin – a term he coined for the purposes of discussions about Black Polishness, describing the uprooting and disintegration of Afro-Poles deprived of political agency and their own culture. The crew moves to the sides, leaving three chairs in the middle. They are occupied by Wiktor, Leszek and Karol. The actors begin to harass the director: they surround him and hurl racist insults and vulgarities at him. When Wiktor tries to stand up, they first hold him in place and yank

him, and then pin him to the ground. Suddenly, Bonnie, who has taken control of the meeting for a moment, intervenes in the scene and asks them to start the reconstruction again, this time ‘with kissing the cross,’ referring to the offstage conversations with the person in charge of the recollection. The actors and director, out of breath, return to their chairs and repeat the scene, and when the attackers overpower the victim, Karol orders Wiktor to kiss the cross hanging around his neck.

The director, out of breath, returns to his seat. Bonnie asks him what the identity of ruin means to him in light of the scene he has just played. Bagiński then tells us in a breaking voice about the racist violence he regularly experiences as a Black Pole: racial profiling, insults, teasing, spitting, beatings. When he was twelve, he recalls, ‘death to the nigger’ was written under his window and a swastika was drawn, and the police did not initiate an investigation. The director confesses that the wrongs done to him have made him hate White people, at one time even his closest family members. Once again, he reveals himself to the actors and the audience as a far from exemplary representative of a minority, filled with anger and resentment, and therefore an irrational and biased commentator on reality. However, the suffering that Wiktor has just recreated in the reconstruction protects his confession from being easily discredited.

In the etude entrusted to the actors, there was a highly affective reproduction of one of the acts of violence against the director. The veristic brutality of the reconstructed event seems to blur the boundaries between theatrical fiction and extra-theatrical reality. At his own request, the director gives himself into the hands of White actors playing the attackers. He is insulted and attacked in front of the participants of the meeting and the audience. The impression of the reality of the attack is intensified by the

sweat, shortness of breath and trembling voice of Wiktor, as despite the theatrical mediation, his body reacted to the simulated violence. Such a procedure can make the audience aware of the enormity of the pain experienced by Afro-Poles and justify their negative emotions towards Whites, but it can also unnecessarily reproduce violence culturally and historically linked to the Black body, as happened in the scene of Bonnie's whipping. The director's provocative behaviour before the etude leaves one with the impression that the attack scene is also an attempt to reveal the racism dormant in the participants of the meeting. The reenactment clearly unsettles and disorients the actors watching it. They smile nervously, look away, or grimace, clearly unwilling to participate in the reproduction of racist violence.

Fortunately, Bonnie momentarily relieves the tension by testifying that not everyone has had the same experiences as Wiktor. She recalls a lesson about Africa that she attended as a teenager, and the respect and curiosity she aroused among the students when she spoke about Zimbabwean society. She says that the birth of her son stopped her from returning to her homeland and her beloved parents. When she begins to explain the complicated procedures leading to attaining Polish citizenship, Wiktor suggests another reconstruction, this time with Bonnie. Karol plays her husband, and Joanna and Kornel play the officials conducting the standard check on foreigners.

The bureaucrats are haughty and suspicious. They have difficulty pronouncing the Zimbabwean woman's full name. First, they ask Bonnie and her husband for documents, then for interviews in private. The couple turn their backs on each other, Joanna asks Bonnie questions, and the men's conversation becomes inaudible. The official asks the future Polish citizen what her husband drinks in the morning and what colour his toothbrush is,

whether they plan to have children, and how often they have sex. Bonnie does not answer intimate questions, and the official informs her colleague that the husband himself does not know what colour his toothbrush is. Joanna asks the performer if she has thought about returning to her homeland, since it is warmer there than in Poland. When the officials receive almost no answers, they say goodbye to the couple and end the reconstruction. The short study, both oppressive and humorous, provides an insight into the everyday lives of foreigners applying for Polish citizenship: constant state surveillance, hostile questions, and complicated procedures. However, Wiktor argues that the concept of the identity of ruin presented in Bonnie's scene should not be limited to the experiences of Black Poles. He then asks Karolina to speak.

The actress agrees to share her own experience that fits the director's intent and begins her story, nervously clenching her hands between her thighs. When she was a freshman, seven years earlier, a friend introduced her to a boy in a Krakow club. Karolina liked the boy. They danced and drank a lot, first at a party, then at a mutual friend's apartment. Eventually, the drunk actress felt like sleeping, so the boy took care of her, took her to the bedroom and undressed her for sleep. Then he lay down next to her and started touching her body, despite her resistance, and then raped her. Karolina recounts these events, choosing her words with difficulty and gesturing frantically. After a while, she adds that she doesn't want to think that every Black man is a rapist, but she can't help it that Wiktor reminds her of that boy, because they have the same skin colour.

The director asks the actress to tell her story again, this time in the condition she was in during the rape. When Michał asks if Karolina is supposed to be drunk, Wiktor clarifies that the actress should take off her

clothes. When Karolina asks why she has to do this, he replies that it is for the purposes of therapy. Concerned, Karol wonders what the limits of this reenactment are and whether someone is supposed to rape the actress, to which the director replies that the rules from the previous etudes apply and that he himself will play the rapist. The actresses protest and emphasise that the decision to participate in the reenactment must be Karolina's, but she silences them, claiming that she can follow Wiktor's orders because she has already worked through her trauma. When she starts to undress, all the participants of the meeting except Wiktor turn away or look down. The actress remains in her underwear, but the director asks if she was wearing it then. Karolina reluctantly admits that she didn't, takes off her panties and covers her crotch with her hands. She starts repeating the words she said a moment ago, with tears in her eyes and a breaking voice, wiping her face with her hand every now and then. In her emotions, it's hard for her to remember exactly what she said, but eventually she finishes the story and asks if she can get dressed, and the director agrees. Unfortunately, the recording doesn't show what Wiktor does during the monologue as a rapist; he's probably just watching the actor. While Karolina is getting dressed, Bonnie asks for a statement on the identity of ruin from Katarzyna, and she begins to dance.

Fanon's Masks

Karolina's scene is not summed up in any way. Kasia performs a choreography based on jerking to the rhythm of reflective electronic music, and the stage lights give way to white spots cast on the dance floor by spotlights. In the semi-darkness, the rest of the actors assemble a huge model of blackface on the proscenium, resembling the mask that Radziwiłł kissed at the beginning of the performance. Suddenly, they also start

dancing, almost invisible, until they finally find each other, lie down in front of the installation and intertwine into a ball of bodies. The last sequence of the performance was probably supposed to translate the emotional states associated with the identity of ruin into the non-verbal language of theatre, to express the inexpressible and radically break off the debate that had been going on for several dozen minutes. Does a meeting of anonymous racists really bring about catharsis? The final impression suggests that the participants of the meeting did experience that, but most of the tensions built up during the performance were not released at all.

The first part of the performance is a condensed anecdote from the life of Polish nobility, in which Blackness and Whiteness are exposed as constructs with an enormous performative charge. In less than twenty minutes, Bagiński revises Poland's position in the global system of dependencies and the history of slavery, examines a semi-peripheral version of racism, and undermines mimetic representations of Blackness, prompting reflection on the possibilities and principles of presenting 'race' in Polish theatre. The show of anonymous racists is interrupted because restoring the memory of Black slaves in magnate courts and Polish connections with Blackness turns out to be too iconoclastic for one of the White participants. Because of his doubts, the announced Polish–African weddings and reconciliations do not take place. Those remembered and invented episodes could have laid the foundations of a new, multicultural community, but they do not materialise on stage. Instead, the director initiates a discussion to clarify contentious issues and resolve conflicts in the cast.

The seemingly casual and non-judgmental conversation between Wiktor and Bonnie and the actors quickly turns out to be a game precisely conducted by the director, consisting of exposing the racist beliefs of the White

participants in the meeting and confronting them with the painful experiences of the Black performers. The symbolic division into Black victims and White perpetrators is reinforced by reconstructions based on strong affects, which destabilise the presented world, momentarily blurring the boundaries of the spectacle, the show within the spectacle, and reality. The antagonistic relations between the White and Black participants of the meeting are nuanced when the director, who until then had been the Black arbiter of the debate on racism, reveals his own antipathies towards and intimate experiences of the actors, deepening the conflicts that have arisen in the group and gradually losing their trust. Thus built, the tension culminates when Wiktor asks the White actress to recount the rape committed by a Black man and takes on the role of the perpetrator.

Contrary to the director's belief, the reproduction of sexual violence then does not serve to help the actor therapeutically. It is instead Wiktor's performative confrontation with a cruel racist stereotype and the exposure of Karolina's prejudices rooted in traumatic experience. It is unclear whether her story is true, but it is made credible by the assumptions of the discussion panel – the actors' private names, spontaneity and freedom of expression, and the autobiographical nature of the reconstruction. The audience is not supplied with the tools to interpret the rape scene. They see a Black director who conventionally torments a White actor. Even if we consider the meeting of anonymous racists to be completely fictional, and Wiktor's behaviour to be conscious self-creation, his power and relations with the actors go beyond the world created in the performance. It was Bagiński, as the creator of *Black Skin, White Masks*, who decided to make the painful reproduction of rape the climax of the performance, in order to extract from the characters their most shameful and complicated racist beliefs. While recounting violence against Black people, it also resorts to violence against women –

fictional in the reenactment at the meeting of anonymous racists and symbolic in the production of the play.

The misogyny inherent in some of Bagiński's behaviours and decisions, as well as his stage porte-parole, seems to be a trap set for the director by the author of the text that was the starting point for the performance in Opole. The title of the performance was taken from the essay *Black Skin, White Masks* published in 1952 by Frantz Fanon, an outstanding psychiatrist, anti-colonial activist, and philosopher who, in his work, examines colonialism as the cause of the collective mental illness of its victims and politicises the symptoms it has developed, giving them a cultural dimension. His work is widely considered innovative, groundbreaking, and still painfully relevant, but cultural studies scholars who conduct feminist revisions of his argument show that the author consistently places men at the centre of his analyses. Furthermore, by examining the position of Blackness as the Other, he actually makes women the Other (see Yukum, 2022). In Fanon's work, women, both Black and White, are above all objects or subjects of desire, completely subordinated to the rules set by psychoanalytically understood sexuality and race relations. There is no denying that gender and 'race' strongly influence each other, as can be found in Angela Y. Davis's *Women, Race & Class* (2022). In her historical essay, the Black Feminist devotes considerable attention to accusations of rape made by White women against Black men as a tool of power, a manifestation of White supremacy and gendered racism, but her thorough and nuanced critique of this phenomenon never leads her to misogyny or the objectification of women. A reading of Fanon can remain valuable, but it should be provided with appropriate commentary and supplemented with the voices of Black women whom the psychiatrist omitted from his work. Wiktor Bagiński uses *Black Skin, White Masks* as a starting point for discussion, to outline its philosophical and

ideological context, but he clearly did not undertake a critical reading of the text, imposing on himself the limitations and blindnesses of an author of eighty years ago. Perhaps that is why Bonnie's role turns out to be marginal compared to Wiktor's – the performer perceives violence in the reenactments and sometimes comments on the events on stage, but her perspective loses significance in the face of the dominating spectacle, the growing conflict between the director and the cast.

The climactic scene of the play may seem like a symbolic revenge on the racist characters embodied by Karolina. The contractual rape of the White actor by the Black director would be, in this approach, a mirror image of Pierre's bath, during which Magdalena Radziwiłłowa objectifies the Black butler as an erotic toy. In both scenes, Blackness is closely linked to sexual violence; in one, it is completely deprived of agency, while in the other, it regains agency through an act of cruelty. The character of the director exposes the racism of the actors entrusted to him, so that the real director can expose his staged porte-parole's hatred of Whites. In *White Skin, Black Masks*, Bagiński ponders not only the realities of life of Black Poles in a White society that has still not learned the lesson of its own racism, but also whether violence can be responded to with violence. Are White Poles ready to face the hatred of Blacks born of years of systemic discrimination? What emotions do they feel when a representative of Blackness does not arouse sympathy, is not guided by humility and is not ashamed of his resentment? Are they ready to listen to him?

By posing these questions, Wiktor Bagiński examines the mechanisms and unwritten rules of representing Blackness – he not only produces them, but also considers how they can be produced.

Against Representation and Other Traps

The reenactment of the rape of a Black man on a White woman crowned both *Black Skin, White Masks* and the later Heart[19] – in the Warsaw performance, the account of the act of sexual violence against the mother of Bagiński's porte-parole was carried out using deeply psychological acting and explicit language, and the absent father/attacker was played on video by the director himself. It can be assumed that Bagiński confronts in this way the cultural scripts triggered by his 'race' and that he is entitled to do so as a Black director – his identity, clearly thematised in both performances, sanctions the implementation of a racist stereotype, which in the performance of a White director could be considered unfair and harmful. Is it truly different in the case of Bagiński's performances? What representation of Blackness emerges from his works and the director's self-creation that complements them?

The images of Black masculinity evoked by Bagiński – clearly negative, entangled in violence and resentment – may be considered bold. The director strives for ambivalent and uncomfortable representations, disregarding the fact that native Polish culture still lacks a positive and accustoming attitude to otherness. This does not mean that they should be avoided. A Black director should not be obliged to represent other Black people only in accordance with the expectations of the audience and with the greatest social benefit of the images created on stage in mind, even if he is the only Black theatre director in Poland. Or maybe he should not be obliged to represent anything at all?

The belief that Wiktor Bagiński speaks in his performances on behalf of the Black community, reinforced by the director's strong self-creation on stage

and in the media, is a trap, most likely consciously set for the audience by the artist. Bagiński knows that he is expected to speak out on the issue of Blackness and seemingly meets this expectation, but a careful analysis of *Black Skin, White Masks* shows that the director essentially represents himself only. In doing so, he seems to conclude that one, isolated (auto)biography of a Black man cannot testify to all the others. Therefore, it is difficult to consider the stage image of Wiktor Bagiński, embodying this (auto)biography in his performance, as fundamentally harmful – after all, it refers only to the character of the director, not to Black men in general. The identity of ruin, and thus semi-peripheral Blackness, explored in the performances is based on loneliness, not only of the creator's porte-parole on stage, but also of himself in the theatre environment; a loneliness that prevents any representation of the collective. It is not the representation, or rather the anti-representation of Blackness in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that requires criticism, but the means used by the director to play it out on stage.

In order to confront the racist stereotype and root it in biographical particularity, Bagiński reproduces violence against women. In the Opole performance, a White woman is presented as a potential victim of a Black rapist, and the director realises this potentiality using a theatrical machine that emotes efficiently. The actor plays her ordeal as if reliving it, without any formal mediation or guardrails. The experience of rape is reinforced by off-stage reality: the audience is fed the impression that Karolina is recounting her actual memory. The brutal reproduction of violence on stage, combined with the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and truth, can lead to (re)traumatisation – both of the actress playing in the performance and of the viewers watching it. Theatre has the resources for non-violent, non-oppressive talk about violence, but Bagiński does not use these. In his performance, anti-racist discourse is symbolically contrasted with the

#MeToo movement, and equally important phenomena unnecessarily come into conflict, instead of complementing each other. Translating violence against Black people into violence against women is a trap, even if the goal is to undermine the White status quo and create multidimensional representations or anti-representations of Blackness. Both *Black Skin, White Masks* and the later *The Heart* lack an intersectional perspective that would protect the performances from harmful practices and open them up to women's experiences and their possible representations in theatre. It is hard to ignore this lack, despite the unquestionable value of Bagiński's performances.

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Footnotes

1. *The Blacks*, directed by Zygmunt Hübner premiered at the Teatr Ateneum in Warsaw on 2 December 1961.
2. The Polish word ‘murzyn’ (largely equivalent to the English ‘negro’) and its derivatives are currently considered racist — their pejorative connotations were confirmed by the Polish Language Council in 2020 under the influence of a petition submitted by the Black is Polish collective. In this article, I use the English word ‘negro’ only as a historical quotation, citing the statements of other people, most often from the time when a different language norm was in force.
3. There is no consensus among researchers on the issue of writing ‘Blackness’ and ‘Whiteness’ in upper- or lowercase letters, e.g. Audre Lorde in her texts considers capital letters to be affirming Black identity (this spelling has been preserved in Polish translations), and Emma Dabiri advocates lower case letters so that Black communities are not made an exception and not isolated. Polish publications are dominated by lowercase spellings, and uppercase letters are used by Christian Kobluk, Monika Bobako, and the Black is Polish activist collective, among others. It is worth noting, however, that the various decisions regarding spellings usually do not have racist overtones, and most often result from different interpretations of these two concepts. In this article, I have used ‘White’ and ‘Black’ to refer to cultural and ethnic identity and ‘white’ and ‘black’ to refer to colour, analogously to the capitalisation of such words as ‘East/east’ and ‘West/west.’
4. The master’s thesis was written under the supervision of Dr Weronika Szczawińska and was defended at the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw in March 2024.
5. *Dziady*, directed by Radosław Rychcik at Teatr Nowy in Poznań, premiere on 22 March 2014; recording for TVP Kultura, directed by Józef Kowalewski, broadcast on 31 October 2014.
6. *W pustyni i w puszczy. Z Sienkiewicza i innych* (In Desert and Wilderness. From Sienkiewicz and from Others), directed by Bartosz Frąckowiak, Teatr Dramatyczny in Wałbrzych, premiere June 11, 2011; undated theatre recording by Black Cat Studio Pro.
7. *The Blacks*, directed by Iga Gańczarczyk, Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz, premiere 17 January 2015; undated recording of the show.
8. *Black Skin, White Masks*, directed by Wiktor Bagiński at the Teatr im. Jana Kochanowskiego in Opole, premiere 8 November 2019; undated recording of the performance.
9. *The Heart* (*Serce*), directed by Wiktor Bagiński, TR Warszawa, premiere 5 March 2021.
10. Cf. ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’
11. Cf. ‘Blackness is and can be a network of strategies for self-determination and radical imagining of new social relations.’

12. See Wright, 2004.
13. See Dabiri, 2021.
14. A term coined by the American sociologist and historian Immanuel Wallerstein, meaning a spatial entity that develops over time, encompassing various political and cultural units, and characterised by internal dynamics of economic and social dependencies. See Wallerstein, 2007.
15. Active studies on Polish Whiteness are currently being conducted by culture expert Monika Bobako, see Bobako, 2020.
16. Oliwia Bosomtwe writes about Wiktor Bagiński in the context of the experience of Polish Blackness in her book *Jak biały człowiek. Opowieść o Polakach i innych* (Like a White Man. A Story of Poles and Others), 2024.
17. *Der Steppenwolf*, directed by Wiktor Bagiński (Ahmad Ali), Theater Freiburg, premiere June 23, 2023.
18. All quotes from this performance are based on a transcription of the recording.
19. It is worth noting that the topic of rape and its reproduction was also the axis of the play *Othello*, presented by Wiktor Bagiński at the 9th Forum of Young Directors in Kraków, even before *Black Skins…* and *The Heart*, See Kwaśniewska, 2020.

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