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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/siecles/9017>

ISSN: 2275-2129

### Publisher

Centre d'Histoire "Espaces et Cultures"

### Electronic reference

Fabiana Senkpiel, "The Act of Un-masking in *Black Off* (2016–) by Ntando Cele", *Siècles* [Online], 51 | 2021, Online since 04 January 2022, connection on 18 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/siecles/9017>

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This text was automatically generated on 18 January 2022.



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# The Act of Un-masking in *Black Off* (2016–) by Ntando Cele

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## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In her performance *Black Off*, the dark-skinned South African performer, actress, singer and theater maker Ntando Cele addresses forms of racial discrimination in connection with questions of cultural identity and belonging on the basis of her experience as South African woman in Europe.<sup>1</sup> In the first part of the piece she does this masked as Bianca White, a white-skinned woman with dyed platinum-blond hair, wearing a kimono, blue contact lenses, and white gloves. In the second part of the piece, Cele negotiates the above issues embodied as Vera Black, a struggling black punk singer.
- <sup>2</sup> This case study deals in particular with the act of un-masking in *Black Off*, which is negotiated in two ways. On the one hand there is a metaphorical level of un-masking, as Cele deals with specific issues and uses artistic approaches to reveal stereotypes, prejudices, and expectations of white people faced with black people as well as to reveal the hidden racism in everyday life. On the other hand, it is about the concrete aesthetic strategies that Cele uses to un-mask the figures Bianca White and Vera Black. The act of un-masking offers Cele performative potential to negotiate the issue of Black counter-representations.

## ***Black Off* (2016-) by Ntando Cele**

- <sup>3</sup> Ntando Cele came to Europe from South Africa in 2009 on a student scholarship. She graduated from the Durban University of Technology with a Bachelor's degree in Theater and earned her Master of Arts in Theater at DasArts, AHK Amsterdam. Today, Cele lives in Bern, Switzerland. Since 2005 she has been developing performance and

theater projects in which she mixes physical theater, video installations, and stand-up comedy.<sup>2</sup> Cele's artistic works have already been shown in Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, South Africa, and Brazil, where they have met with great approval.<sup>3</sup> In her artistic projects, Cele negotiates the issues of black and white identity from different perspectives, along with issues of explicit and implicit racism in everyday life, prejudices and stereotypes. In her native country of South Africa, Cele stood out as a female performance artist. In Europe, her skin color significantly shapes the ethnically determined, discriminatory experiences she has faced as a stranger in a foreign country, as she has herself explained, although she also says that she feels integrated and part of the community in Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> In an interview, Cele explained the development of her attitude towards a black female artist negotiating the subject of identity. She was initially skeptical, but is now convinced: She did not want to be one of the mainstream female black artists who had adopted this subject for themselves over the past few years. She wanted to find an exciting way to take on the subject of identity.

5

- 4 The journalist Sarah Thiele has characterized Cele's art as follows:

She is all too familiar with the problematic narratives and binaries that prevail in the European and Swiss imaginary of 'Africa,' having been based in Bern, Switzerland for several years. Her work faces these contradictions squarely and demands self-reflection.<sup>6</sup>

- 5 The journalist Xymna Engel writes that Cele is an energetic performer and singer who is captivating and enthralling. Engel also writes that her work is well received by European theater audiences, though in her homeland some have argued that Cele's art is "too white."<sup>7</sup>
- 6 In the winter of 2016, Ntando Cele combined her three performances *Face Off*, *Black Notice* and *Complicated Art for Dummies* under the title *Black Off*. These artistic works have been described as follows:

[...] In ihrem ersten Solostück FACE OFF stellte sie sich die Frage, was eine schwarze Frau in Europa von einer in Südafrika unterscheidet. Was sind die Vorurteile und Stereotypen, die sie mitbringt und die ihr entgegengebracht werden? BLACK NOTICE behandelt das Thema subtiler und gleichzeitig härter: Bianca White, Ntando Celes weisses Alter Ego, versucht, mit Therapie und Meditation die Welt weiss und leicht verständlich zu machen. COMPLICATED ART FOR DUMMIES ist eine Powerpoint-Präsentation von Bianca White, die es schwarzen Künstlern erleichtern soll, in den europäischen Kunstmarkt zu finden. Bis dann Vera Black, eine schwarze Punkerin, auftritt und zornig die schaurige Harmonie zerstört... [...].<sup>8</sup>

- 7 Additional information about the creation and production context of *Black Off*, can help clarify the historical and social contexts in which it is embedded. The following remarks refer to the performance *Black Off* that took place on February 8, 2018, in the context of the Festival *CROSSROADS - International Perspectives on Culture, Art and Society*, which the author attended.<sup>9</sup> This event was financially supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, a federal institution promoting Swiss arts and culture with a focus on diversity and projects that are of national interest. *CROSSROADS* took place in collaboration with the Theater Kaserne in Basel, the Antigal Festival in Geneva and the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel. In other words, as the journalist Geneva Moser has pointed out, it was a state-financed, large-scale meeting of established international artists. Moser also wrote that the event could be situated in the context of a slowly, just beginning

process of coming to terms with Switzerland's not yet fully explained role as both an actor of and profiteer from colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

## Metaphorical Un-masking

- 8 This section will focus on the metaphorical level of un-masking by explaining some of the artistic strategies of *Black Off* that expose cultural identity and belonging as well as latent racism. Bianca White (fig. 1) involves the audience in the first part of *Black Off* through direct questions and short interviews, although it is not clear whether these are spontaneous and authentic or planned and arranged. The audience may also be invited on stage.

### Forms of Racial Discrimination?

- 9 Addressing the Basel audience in 2018, Bianca White asked if there were any black people in their circle of friends and what they were called/designated: Black? Dark-skinned? Of African origin? Person/people of color? At this moment, the light projectors were pointed at the audience, who had earlier been sheltered in darkness and were now blinded. A shiver of unease became almost palpable. *Partout*: silence. No one dared to say anything; everyone was busy thinking.
- 10 In addition, Cele, through her white *alter ego* Bianca White, recounts experiences that constantly underlined her "otherness," such as the repeated questions: "Can I touch your hair? How do you pronounce your name? When will you return?" Quoting Cele, Engel writes:

[...] Im Gegensatz zu Cele kann sie [Bianca White] auf der Bühne sagen, was immer sie will, zum Beispiel: Schwarze verkaufen Gras, Weiße haben schlechten Sex und eine Vorliebe für 'complicated art shit'. Wenn sie als Ntando über ihre Hautfarbe spräche, werde sie schnell als Opfer wahrgenommen, sagt sie. 'Bianca hat Privilegien, sie erlaubt es mir zu zeigen, wie ich wahrgenommen werde.' Umso weißer sie wird, umso stärker wird die Message der Schwarzen.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 1 : Ntando Cele as Bianca White, *Black off*, Detail.



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## Questions of Cultural Identity and Belonging

- 11 There is another artistic strategy for engaging with the audience in *Black Off*, one that is variable and site-specific. In the Basel performance, Cele turned to the audience and emphasized how happy she was to be performing in Zurich that day! This confusion of place was repeated a few times in passing. To understand the scope of this well-known artistic trick, one must know that there has long been competition between the Swiss cities of Zurich and Basel. This is common knowledge locally. More precisely, there is a strong sense of identification among Basel and Zurich residents towards their respective cities. Cele was deliberately challenging this sense of cultural identity, identification, and belonging to one's own city. Cele wanted to see the audience's reaction, if they even reacted at all, if anyone dared to disagree and correct. At the same time, this artistic strategy was intended to reflect on the ignorance of many Europeans with regard to African countries and to turn this on its head – for Europeans tend to have an undifferentiated, uniform image of Africa. As Thiele wrote:

[...] they provide a sketch for the generic imaginary of Africa that dominates in Europe. An imaginary of 'Africa' is in itself highly problematic, homogenizing a continent that is societally, geographically, and linguistically too diverse to fall under one umbrella term as it often does.<sup>12</sup>

- 12 Cele also provides a sketch for a generic imaginary of Europe that is provocative in turn, and constitutes another conceptually momentous aspect of her performance that challenges conventional boundaries and binary categories.<sup>13</sup> This part of the performance *Black Off* deals with a metaphorical level of un-masking, because Cele deconstructs stereotypes in the everyday life of the audience, she also questions cultural identity and belonging as well as latent racism.

## Aesthetic Strategies and Un-Masking

- 13 What aesthetic strategies does Cele use in her artistic practice to translate her specific topics into a theatrical performance?

### Mask, Masquerade, Un-masking

- 14 Masks have been an integral part of theater practice since Antiquity.<sup>14</sup> Typically, masks used in the theater in Ancient Greece helped to express the feelings of the wearer; the covering of the face was representative of the role being embodied. Accordingly, masks were referred to as "persona," though no strict distinction between a civilian person and embodied person was discernible. In modern times, the actor's face took on the function of the "mask" object; it is used like a mask, and the role is played with the whole body.<sup>15</sup> As the theater scholar Friedemann Kreuder has written, the mask also implies the costume, attitude, and posture.<sup>16</sup> In contemporary theater, mask-like make-up is common, while clothing and other forms of adorning, shaping or covering the body can also be seen as a form of masking, or a "masquerade."<sup>17</sup> Cele agrees with this as a description of the characters Bianca White and Vera Black.<sup>18</sup> As Kreuder writes, masks enable an aesthetic oscillation between truth and illusion, which is inherent in the mask as a dialectic of showing and covering that allows a mimetic interplay of identity, difference and appropriation to shine through.<sup>19</sup> Thus "[...] deutet die Maske

sinnbildlich die Funktion von Theater an".<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, issues of self-realization and self-empowerment here through the technique of doubling through an image, also play a role, or, as Kreuder suggests:

[...] Der Akteur mit der Maske illustriert allerdings nicht nur die Möglichkeit des Rollenspiels im Theater, sondern auch den anthropologischen Befund, dass der Mensch mittels Maskengebrauch zu sich selbst auf Abstand zu gehen vermag: Die Maske steht dann schlicht für das Bewusstsein des Trägers, anders zu sein, als er dem Betrachter erscheint. Der Mensch kann sich seine eigene Maske aufsetzen, seine eigene Rolle konstruieren. Er verwirklicht sich gerade in dieser Möglichkeit der Verdoppelung durch ein Bild von sich, darin äußert sich sein Personsein [...].<sup>21</sup>

- 15 The act of un-masking, which involves masking and its opposite as well as the dialectic of showing and covering, begins accordingly when Cele first masquerades as Bianca White, covering her face with white make-up, applying the platinum blonde wig, dressing her body in the kimono and imitating poses and attitudes of white people in front of black people. The unmasking in this masquerade takes place when in *Black Off* Bianca White sits in front of the mirror, removes her white make-up, and takes off her wig. The unmasking temporarily reveals the presence of the artist behind the figure. The artist then disappears behind the scene and returns, masked again, this time as Vera Black. For this reason, a hyphen is inserted in the word un-masking in this article to emphasize that this process takes place several times. These points will be described below in more detail.

## Whiteface?

- 16 Cele's white-painted face as Bianca White, that is, her artistic realization of whiteface, is considered in this article as a mask. The co-presence of face and mask, here through make-up, is emphasized in a special way: from a cultural studies perspective, art historian Hans Belting speaks of a medial or somatic unity between the invisible and the visible, between the masked and the appearing body.<sup>22</sup>
- 17 By making up her black face with white paint and consequently masking it, Ntando Cele reverses blackface. This already gives an idea of the explosive nature of Cele's performance, because she here reverses the racist practice of blackface. Blackface has a very complex history and is often considered to have been primarily practiced in the United States and United Kingdom, although it was and is also present in the wider European context and in other Anglophone contexts such as South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>23</sup> In *Black Off*, Cele reverses this practice and questions it through her performative negotiation. Cele explained in a 2014 interview that her *alter ego* Bianca White was born out of the frustration of her experience of blackface in the Netherlands as well as the observation not only that there was no equivalent for blackface, but that it was not possible to laugh at the mirrored situation.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, theater historian and dramaturgist Marvin McAllister has investigated the issue of "whiting up" in African-American performances, and distinguishes between two modes of performance: "whiteface minstrelsy" and "stage Europeans." He writes:

I define whiteface minstrelsy as extra-theatrical, social performance in which people of African descent appropriate white-identified gestures, vocabulary, dialects, dress, or social entitlements. Attuned to class as much as race, whiteface minstrels often satirize, parody, and interrogate privileged or authoritative representations of whiteness. Stage Europeans can be defined as black actors appropriating white dramatic characters crafted initially by white dramatists and,

later, by black playwrights. Rooted in conventional theatrical practice, this component emphasizes physical and vocal manifestations of whiteness, often relying on visual effects such as white face paint and blonde wigs.<sup>25</sup>

McAllister further states:

With each whitening up act, black artists engage in a subtle intercultural negotiation between three distinct identity streams: the black performer's sense of his or her own professional and cultural positions, which may be fluid or somewhat fixed; contemporaneous audience perceptions of whiteness and blackness, which can be historically grounded, stereotypic, mythic, and even archetypal; and finally, forward projecting reconsiderations or reconstructions of what whiteness and blackness, as well as other identity markers such as class and gender, can potentially signify for artist and audience.<sup>26</sup>

- 18 McAllister concludes that “whiting up” is a site of interracial play, and “[...] has proven to be a fertile ground where black artists, and more recently white artists, can formulate a collective understanding of themselves and others.”<sup>27</sup>
- 19 Through her whiteface in *Black Off*, Cele seeks to mimic the behavior and prejudices of white people in front of black people, based on her own experiences as a South African in Europe. However, on closer inspection, her form of whiteface is not so clear. As one can see in a summary video of *Black off*, Bianca White claims to be one quarter Zulu, one fifth Khoikhoi and a third generation Burameichi and says she feels “almost black, here in Liechtenstein.”<sup>28</sup> The same goes for the moments when Bianca White talks about experiences as a black woman in Europe, which is certainly part of her game with this incongruity. What kind of whiteface is it, when the artist with the white made-up face explicitly says that she is of African origin and almost feels black? What is behind the intentional white appearance and, in the fiction of the performance, the underlining of an obvious, real, black-ethnic background? What is the aim of showing these contradictions and ruptures in/through the figure of Bianca White, which also causes irritation in the audience? This strategy could be aimed at: “[...] das Unsichtbare sichtbar zu machen und sowohl zur kritischen Reflexion binärer Wahrnehmungskategorien zu bewegen als auch zur Umkehrung der Perspektive bzw., um so zu einer anderen Lesart einzuladen [...]”.<sup>29</sup>
- 20 By revealing her presence behind Bianca White, Cele also gives her whiteface the depth and explosiveness it needs to function credibly in the context of the performance. One could refer here to the categories of *ästhetische Differenzierung* vs. *ästhetische Ent-Differenzierung* (aesthetic differentiation vs. aesthetic de-differentiation) as introduced by theater scholar Hanna Voss in relation to the practice of blackfacing in contemporary German theater, thus arguing for an aesthetic-political perspective on the phenomenon. For Voss, aesthetic differentiation in the theatrical context means ethnic discrimination on the basis of appearance and is thus problematic, while aesthetic de-differentiation highlights the potential to stimulate a critical discourse on questions of self-attribution and attribution from others, and thus on identity, through differentiating practices of blackfacing, for example, also in the sense of a possibility to negotiate identity through performativity.<sup>30</sup>
- 21 By inverting the practice of blackface, Cele succeeds in (re)producing a stereotypical representation of the foreign and the alien through a visual form of appropriation and simultaneous modification, which, however, shakes up rather than consolidates the existing visual worlds.<sup>31</sup>

## Cele's Authorship

- 22 While the mask in western theater has long made the invisible visible as emotional states, the theatrical means for this, such as make-up and costumes, has remained invisible.<sup>32</sup> In Cele's performance, this is reversed, even deconstructed. In the middle of *Black Off*, Bianca White sits in front of a mirror and removes her wig and the white paint from her face (fig. 2). This act of un-masking is amplified and projected onto a screen on the wall.<sup>33</sup>

Figure 2 : Ntando Cele, *Black off*, Detail.



© Janosch Abel.

- 23 At this point, Bianca White/Cele initiates a role change, gradually discarding the figure of Bianca White. Cele's face and her real skin color slowly shine through, becoming visible. By unmasking, when Cele is no longer Bianca White, but not yet Vera Black, her presence as an artist becomes evident for a moment. Cele claims her authorship: she is the one who creates and leads the character(s). One could say that there are two forms of the artist's presence that are an integral part of the performance. On the one hand there is the implicit, continuous presence behind the figure of Bianca White, which, as mentioned above, also reveals itself in the spoken text – such as at the moment when she introduces herself as Bianca White and nevertheless mentions her black roots. This is Cele's genuine way of practicing whiteface. On the other hand, there is the explicit presence of the artist that emerges at the moment of unmasking and taking off the disguise. With her play between transparency and opacity, Cele's body achieves an iconic presence that allows it to show something that it is not or is not yet.

## Face-work

- 24 During Bianca White's stand-up comedy and her interactions with the audience in the first part of *Black Off*, Cele uses an aesthetic strategy consisting of moments of stillness



and a mixture of poses and grimaces.<sup>34</sup> Bianca White stands in the middle of the stage and looks wordlessly into the audience. The form of presentation just mentioned, which could be described as “zwischen Bild und Performance” (between image and performance) with reference to theater scholar Gabriele Brandstetter, has a “seltsam und komisch” (strange and comical) effect, and adds a sense of irritation and resistance to an interpretation of the situation. Brandstetter also points out that a situation of “acting” and “non-acting” could provoke a feeling of *déjà-vu* in the audience, but generally turns out to be a “Maskerade einer Körper-Bild-Figuration” (a masquerade of a body-image figuration) because it does not refer to any poses that are already familiar.<sup>35</sup>

- 25 After unmasking in the middle of the performance, Cele then examines her own face in front of the mirror, which is a means of self-knowledge *par excellence*. Then Cele starts to work with her face, creating frightening and pathetic mask-like grimaces. Overlapping with this, older video footage is shown with Cele’s face on the screen: sometimes made up in red, looking as if Cele is wearing off red paint; sometimes wound by a string that is unwound by Cele. <sup>36</sup> The processes shown in the video excerpts involve reverse temporality, as the actions are “rolled” backwards.

## Black Counter-Representations

- 26 The act of removing the mask provides the performative tool for *Black Off* to negotiate black counter-representations in artistic terms. Constitutive for these counter-representations are also the topics of gaze-regime(s) and double consciousness, which are dealt with below.
- 27 After un-masking Bianca White into Cele in the middle of *Black Off*, a break took place. The change of roles and perspectives becomes clear in the second part of the performance: Bianca White’s stand-up comedy was only an echo and now, at last, it became clear that Cele was not just reverse blackfacing, as Engel rightly states.<sup>37</sup> Cele then returned to the stage transformed into the punk singer Vera Black. Cele then performed as the self-confident, self-empowered and strongly sexualized black activist with fishnet tights, braided hair, and a loud voice (fig. 3). The artistic development of this character’s identity is still in progress, as Cele says.<sup>38</sup> Vera Black sings fighting punk songs with texts featuring political identity statements by Frantz Fanon (1925-1961).<sup>39</sup>

Figure 3 : Ntando Cele as Vera Black, *Black off*, Detail.

© Janosch Abel.

## Gaze-regimes

- 28 In the description of Vera Black, referring indirectly to the questions of the gaze regimes that Fanon brings into the room,<sup>40</sup> Moser aptly asks: “[...] Auch weil ich, weil wir sie so sehen wollen – sexy und unabhängig und für alle People of Color sprechend? Weil der weiße Blick sie so konstruiert?”<sup>41</sup>
- 29 The topic of the gaze-regimes is of crucial importance for both parts of the performance *Black Off*: Who is actually looking at whom? On the one hand, the performance is about the gaze of others on Cele as a South African woman in Europe, artistically negotiated on stage through the eyes of Bianca White; thus, it is also about the gaze of Cele on the people she has met. But on the other hand, it is also about the expectant gaze of the mostly white audience on the figure Vera Black, which is above thematized through the eyes of the journalist Moser, and also about Cele’s gaze on the figure and the audience. Finally, the scholar’s gaze also plays a role when it comes to the construction of an artist’s image and the meaning of her artistic achievement.
- 30 In *Black Off*, Cele refers to the problem of discrimination based on the color of one’s skin, which Fanon himself had experienced. Moreover, by un-masking the white color on Bianca White’s and her own face, by un-masking and by playing with the audience’s expectations of the character of Vera Black, Cele, representing many black people, liberated the white masks Fanon wrote of, which Black people would have to wear in order to receive the appreciative glances of whites.<sup>42</sup>
- 31 These changes of gaze and perspective underlie the counter-representations that Cele creates in the performance. In this way, Cele also questions the different roles that each individual plays both in life and in society.

## Double Consciousness

- 32 Against this background, Cele creates black counter-representations, thereby reflecting W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness: "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. One ever feels his twoness, [...]"<sup>43</sup>
- 33 The performance offers a novel example of black counter-representations that is grounded in Cele's diaspora experience. *Black Off* can be placed in the context of contemporary cultural production that operates with postcolonial themes and approaches, and has an epistemological value in relation to black identities.<sup>44</sup>
- 34 Cele's performance also make it possible to open up a debate about the way artists from non-western artistic traditions represent selfhood and how they deal with it. A new kind of black self-representation shimmers through in *Black Off*. It is a self-representation that is provocative and self-aware, and shows identity both as a multi-layered, complex social construct, and also as a very real, material concern. It is about coming to terms with one's own experiences, about staging one's own experiences as a form of self-representation that shows the splitting of the self, a perspective on oneself, with one's own experiences seen from the outside. *Black Off* can be placed in the broader context of visual self-representations that black people and the diaspora have produced in response to the proliferation of ethnic stereotypes in mainstream culture.
- 35 In light of the above, this article ends with a quotation from Cele herself concerning her previous work *Face Off*, which is an integral part of *Black Off*:

*Face Off* represents a preoccupation with my own skin. I am a South African whose life experience has been formed and dominated by race. Coming to Europe has made me confront these issues outside of racially prescribed South African society. At times, it is uncomfortable and feels claustrophobic. As a stranger in a strange land, I wonder whether these feelings are caused by how others perceive me, or whether I project these feelings onto others. In *Face Off*, I hope to ask questions about the roles we play, the roles we are put into and masks we choose to wear.<sup>45</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Ntando Cele, "Black off," accessed March 19, 2020 at <https://vimeo.com/224043567>.
2. Cf. Sue Williamson, *South African Art Now* (New York: Collins Design/Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 123, 142; Stephanie M. Selvick, "Love in a Time of Trauma: Imagining Queer Female Sexualities in Post-Apartheid South Africa," PhD diss., University of Miami, Open Access Dissertations, 1036, 2013, accessed at December 06, 2021, [https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa\\_dissertations/1036](https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations/1036), 2021; Stephanie M. Selvick, "Positive Bleeding: Violence and Desire in Works by Mlu Zondi, Zanele Muholi, and Makhosazana Xaba," *Safundi. The Journal of South African and American Studies* 16, no. 4, 2015, 443-465.

3. Rolf Stein, “Künstlerin Ntando Cele über Rassismus: ‘Lasst uns darüber lachen!’” *Kreiszeitung.de*, April 24, 2018. Accessed at September 09, 2021, <https://www.kreiszeitung.de/kultur/gesprach-kuenstlerin-ntando-cele-ueber-rassismus-lasst-darueber-lachen-9811276.html>.
4. Xymna Engel, “Ihr Wille ist ihre Schaufel,” *Der Bund*, November 3, 2016, accessed March 18, 2020 at <https://www.derbund.ch/kultur/berner-woche/ihr-wille-ist-ihre-schaufel/story/23990424>.
5. Ntando Cele, “Season 3: Ntando Cele ON Whiteness as Theory”, interview by Kadiatou Diallo, *Artists on Africa: An Experimental Podcast About Africa, From Africa – From an Artist’s Perspective*, video, 44:59 min., see especially from 09:00 to 13:00, posted May 14, 2018. Accessed March 30, 2020 at <http://www.artistsonafrica.net/podcasts/ntando-cele-on-whiteness-as-theory/>.
6. Sarah Thiele, “What Does ‘African’ Art Mean for the Swiss Public? A Review of the ECAS7 Arts and Cultural Program,” *Critical Interventions* 12, no. 3, 2018, 361.
7. Engel, “Ihr Wille ist ihre Schaufel.”
8. “In her first solo piece, *Face off*, Cele asked herself what distinguishes a black woman in Europe from one in South Africa. What are the prejudices and stereotypes that she brings with her and is confronted with? *Black Notice* deals with the subject more subtly and at the same time more harshly: Bianca White, Ntando Cele’s white *alter ego*, tries to make the world white and easy to understand through therapy and meditation. *Complicated Art for Dummies* was a PowerPoint presentation by Bianca White intended to help black artists find their way into the European art market. Until Vera Black, a black punk, appears and destroys the eerie harmony with anger...,” English translation by author. Between 2016 and 2019, Cele was funded by “Prairie. Migros Kulturprozent,” a Swiss foundation with a program focused on the performing arts, cf. “Prairie. Ntando Cele/Manaka Empowerment Productions”, *MIGROS Kulturprozent*, accessed March 18, 2020 at <https://www.migros-kulturprozent.ch/schwerpunkte/kultur/prairie/ntando-cele-manaka-empowerment-productions>.
9. Bewegungsmelder. “CROSSROADS – Internationale Perspektiven auf Kultur, Kunst und Gesellschaft. Pro Helvetia & DEZA.” Accessed at March 18, 2020, at <https://bewegungsmelder.ch/events/event/crossroads-internationale-perspektiven-auf-kultur-kunst-und-gesellschaft/>.
10. Geneva Moser, “Decolonize me! Also the real thing/Black Off – Arbeiten von Boris Nikitin, Zuleikha Chaudhari und Ntando Cele zum Auftakt des Crossroad Festivals in Basel,” *Nachtkritik*, February 8, 2018, accessed March 18, 2020 at [https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=14975:also-the-real-thing-black-off-arbeiten-von-boris-nikitin-zuleikha-chaudhari-und-ntando-cele-zum-auftakt-des-crossroad-festivals-in-basel&catid=599:kaserne-basel&Itemid=100190](https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14975:also-the-real-thing-black-off-arbeiten-von-boris-nikitin-zuleikha-chaudhari-und-ntando-cele-zum-auftakt-des-crossroad-festivals-in-basel&catid=599:kaserne-basel&Itemid=100190).
11. “Unlike Cele, she [Bianca White] can say whatever she wants on stage, for example: black people sell grass, white people have bad sex and a preference for complicated art shit. When she talks about her skin color as Ntando, she’s quickly perceived as a victim, she says. ‘Bianca has privileges, she allows me to show how I’m perceived.’ The whiter she becomes, the stronger the black message becomes,” English translation of the original German text by author, cf. Engel, “Ihr Wille.”
12. Thiele, “‘African’ Art,” 356.

13. Ziauddin Sardar, "Foreword to the 2008 Edition," in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks. Introduction by Paul Gilroy* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 208, 210.
14. Cf. Hans Belting, "Gesicht und Maske im Theater," in *Maske, Maskerade und die Kunst der Verstellung. Vom Barock bis zur Moderne*, ed. Christiane Kruse, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), 15-31; Richard Weihe, "Maske. Gesicht und Maskierung in Theater und Kult," in *Das Gesicht. Bilder, Medien, Formate*, ed. Sigrid Weigel, Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden, Exhibition Catalogue *Das Gesicht. Eine Spurensuche*, Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden, August 19, 2017-February 25, 2018, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017), 70-75.
15. Belting, "Gesicht und Maske im Theater," 15.
16. Friedemann Kreuder, "Maske/Maskerade," in *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, eds. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Doris Kolesch, and Matthias Warstat (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2004), 204.
17. Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006), 34.
18. Cele, Interview, 32:57.
19. Kreuder, "Maske/Maskerade," 203-204.
20. "[...] the mask symbolically suggests the function of theater," English translation by author, cf. Kreuder, "Maske/Maskerade," 203-204.
21. "[...] The actor with the mask, however, illustrates not only the possibility of role-playing in the theater, but also the anthropological finding that man is able to distance himself from himself through the use of masks: the mask then simply stands for the wearer's awareness of being different from how he appears to the observer. Man can put on his own mask, construct his own role. It is precisely in this possibility of doubling himself through an image of himself that he realizes his personhood," English translation by author, cf. Kreuder, "Maske/Maskerade," 203.
22. Belting, "*Bild-Anthropologie*," 34.
23. Cf. Coen Heijes, *Shakespeare, Blackface and Race: Different Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Michael Pickering, *Blackface minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998); Jürgen Bauer, "Die Blackfacing-Debatte II: Worüber wir reden, wenn wir über 'Blackface' reden. Blackface ist nicht gleich Blackface," *nachtkritik* 22.02.2012, accessed September 16, 2020 at [https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?view=article&id=6619%3Adie-blackfacing-debatte-ii-worueber-wir-reden-wenn-wir-ueber-qblackfaceq-reden&option=com\\_content&Itemid=84](https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?view=article&id=6619%3Adie-blackfacing-debatte-ii-worueber-wir-reden-wenn-wir-ueber-qblackfaceq-reden&option=com_content&Itemid=84); Ulf Schmidt, "Die Blackfacing-Debatte oder: Das Politische im Ästhetischen." *nachtkritik* 21.02.2012, accessed January 27, 2021 at [https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?view=article&id=6615%3Adie-blackfacing-debatte-oder-das-politische-im-aesthetischen&option=com\\_content&Itemid=84](https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?view=article&id=6615%3Adie-blackfacing-debatte-oder-das-politische-im-aesthetischen&option=com_content&Itemid=84).
24. Cele, Interview, 12:55 to 14:30. See for a classic treatment of the whiteface performance tradition: Marvin Edward McAllister, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
25. McAllister, *Whiting Up*, 1.

26. *Ibid.*, 6.
27. *Ibid.*, 264.
28. Cele, “Black Off,” 00:00:10 to 00:00:29.
29. “To make the invisible visible and to encourage critical reflection on binary categories of perception, as well as to reverse the perspective or, in this way, to invite a different way of reading,” English translation by author, cf. Koku G. Nonoa, “Christoph Schlingensiefels Operndorf jenseits des Postkolonialismus?” in *Postkolonialismus und (Inter-)Medialität. Perspektiven der Grenzüberschreitung im Spannungsfeld von Literatur Musik, Fotografie, Theater und Film*, ed. Laura Beck and Julian Osthues (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag (Interkulturalität. Studien zu Sprache, Literatur, Gesellschaft, vol. 7), 2016), 160.
30. Hanna Voss, “Die ‘Blackfacing-Debatte’: Ästhetische Differenzierung vs. ästhetische Entdifferenzierung,” in *Reflexion von ethnischer Identität(szuweisung) im deutschen Gegenwartstheater*, by ibidem. (Marburg: Tectum Verlag (Kleine Mainzer Schriften zur Theaterwissenschaft, vol. 26, 2014), 85-131.
31. On the visual (reality) construction of migration between visibility and invisibility in an interdisciplinary perspective cf. Christoph Rass, and Melanie Ulz (eds.), *Migration ein Bild geben. Visuelle Aushandlungen von Diversität* (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag (Migrationsgesellschaften, 2018).
32. Kreuder, “Maske/Maskerade,” 204.
33. Dominik Wolfinger, “Performance aus tiefster Seele,” *Kulturkritik*, August 26, 2012, accessed March 18, 2020 at <http://www.kulturkritik.ch/2012/ntando-cele-face-off/>.
34. Cf. Cele, Interview, 13:30 to 14:00.
35. Gabriele Brandstetter, “Attitüden und Posen. Figuration als Bild und als Performance,” in *Figuration - Defiguration. Beiträge zur transkulturellen Forschung*, ed. Atsuko Onuki, and Thomas Pekar (Munich: iudicium, 2006), 169.
36. Engel, “Ihr Wille,” Cele, Interview, 08:18 to 08:43.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Cf. Cele, Interview, 20:00 to 24:00.
39. Moser, “Decolonize me!”
40. Gilroy, in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; cf. Jens Kastner, “Klassifizierende Blicke, manichäische Welt. Frantz Fanon: ‘Schwarze Haut, weiße Masken’ und ‘Die Verdammten dieser Erde’,” in *Schlüsselwerke der Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Julia Reuter, and Alexandra Karentzos (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012), 85-86.
41. “[...] Also because I, because we want to see her that way – sexy and independent and speaking for all People of Color? Because the white gaze constructs her that way? English translation by author, cf. Moser, “Decolonize me!”. Cf. also Homi K. Bhabha, “Foreword to the 1986 Edition,” in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 220-221.
42. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Kastner, “Klassifizierende Blicke,” 86.
43. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (London: Routledge, 2016), 2; see also Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Terri Hume Oliver (eds.), *W. E. B. Du Bois. The Souls of Black Folk. Authoritative text, contexts, criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

44. Patrick E. Johnson, “Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures,” in Soyni D. Madison and Judith Hamera (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, (Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications: 2006), 446-463; Nadine George-Graves, “Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities,” Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (eds.), *Black Performance Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 33-44.

45. Ntando Cele, “Face off,” in *Ntando Cele Blog Archive*, February 29, 2012 accessed March 18, 2020 at <http://ntandocl.blogspot.com/2012/02/face-off.html>.

## ABSTRACTS

**Summary:** In her performance *Black Off* (2016-), the South African performer Ntando Cele, masked as both “Bianca White” – a white-skinned woman with dyed platinum-blond hair, blue contact lenses and white gloves – and “Vera Black” – a black punk singer – addresses forms of racial discrimination and cultural identity based on her own experience as a South African in Europe. Two levels of un-masking are essential in *Black Off*. On the one hand it is metaphorical, because Cele deconstructs stereotypes and expectations and exposes the hidden racism in everyday life. On the other hand, it is literally about the un-masking of Bianca White and Vera Black as an aesthetic strategy, which involves an interplay between difference and appropriation. The act of un-masking offers performative potential to negotiate the issue of Black counter-representations.

**Résumé :** L’artiste sud-africaine Ntando Cele, masquée en Bianca White – une femme à la peau blanche, avec des cheveux teints en blond platine, des lentilles de contact bleues et des gants blancs - et aussi comme Vera Black – une chanteuse punk noire – aborde les formes de la discrimination raciale et d’identité culturelle dans sa performance *Black Off* (2016-), en se fondant sur sa propre expérience en tant que Sud-Africaine en Europe. Deux niveaux de dé-masquage sont essentiels dans *Black Off*: D’une part, le dé-masquage est métaphorique, car Ntando Cele déconstruit stéréotypes et attentes et expose le racisme caché dans la vie quotidienne. D’autre part, il s’agit littéralement du dé-masquage de Bianca White et Vera Black comme stratégie esthétique qui implique différence et appropriation. L’acte de démasquage offre un potentiel performatif pour négocier la question des contre-représentations des Noirs.

## INDEX

**Geographical index:** Europe, Afrique du Sud

**Keywords:** performance, contemporary theater, Un-masking, racial discrimination, cultural identity, whiteface, Cele Ntando, Europe, South Africa, 21st century

**Mots-clés:** Performance, théâtre contemporain, dé-masquage, discrimination raciale, identité culturelle, whiteface, Cele Ntando (\*1980)

**Chronological index:** XXIe siècle

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