Performing Empire: Theater and Colonialism in Caroline Link's *Nirgendwo in Afrika*

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I. Introduction

In Caroline Link's film *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (2001), a Jewish family fleeing the Holocaust finds refuge in the British colony of Kenya. Having been persecuted in Germany and driven into exile, the Redlich family finds itself in a position of relative power and influence in Africa. Despite being Jewish, they are nevertheless viewed in the colonies as white. Although they have little experience with agriculture or with the local climate, they repeatedly find themselves placed in charge of plantations and tasked with overseeing the African labor force. They are cast in Kenya in the role of low-level colonial administrators. The film serves as a dramatization, in a way that is compressed and accelerated, of the process through which one is inducted into a colonial hierarchy. The film stands out for the specific way that it situates this dynamic of colonial and racial identity with respect to theater.

My contention is that the Redlichs' (and the film's) primary way of relating themselves to this colonial project and of adapting to their new life in Kenya is—unexpectedly—through theater and roleplay. Repeatedly, throughout the film, members of the Redlich family call upon one another—and the indigenous people around them—to engage in *theater*.[1] In a disturbing scene, Walter Redlich demands that his wife Jettel remove her blouse and act out the part of an African woman in the fields. In insisting that Jettel play the part of an African woman and in assuming for himself the role of a (British) *bwana*, the Swahili term for overseer, Walter alludes to (and parodies) a history of racial and sexual violence. He reenacts it in the form of a masquerade.[2]

These scenes of roleplay have a dual role in Link's film: On the one hand, theater serves the Redlichs as a means of acclimating themselves to new positions of colonial power and training themselves in the exercise of that power. It provides a zone of experimentation in which they can not only play with stereotypical images of blackness but in which they "try on" various roles within the colonial system. On the other hand, the Redlichs also make use of theater *per se* to distinguish themselves from (and assert their superiority over) the indigenous peoples around them. Through theatrical play, they demonstrate an understanding of their own identity as flexible, expansive, and mobile in a

[1] I specifically use the term theater here, because the film emphasizes in each instance that these scenes are self-consciously performed before an audience and not simply for the camera.

[2] On the complicated ways in which theatrical performances of blackness have been received in Germany, see Wipplinger, Thurman, Layne, and Sieg. On the place of Africa in German film, see Gutberlet. More broadly on how white subject formation has been linked to the subjugation of marginalized peoples, see Morrison (11, 42-43) and Yancy.

way that the indigenous Kenyan population, in their view, is not. Walter's and Jettel's experimentations with roleplaying take place in broad daylight, in full view of their African workforce. Through these scenes of roleplay, they assert their own ability to adapt and learn from other forms of experience, even as they insist that their indigenous workforce remains trapped in an idyllic past.

The Redlichs' young daughter Regina imagines the indigenous population's deficiency in precisely this way: Later on in the film, she quite literally sets out to instruct children from the local village in how to perform theater. She engages them in a performance of Hansel and Gretel. Although she attempts to incorporate elements of African folklore into the play, she nevertheless dominates the performance. Regina serves as the play's director, set designer, and dramaturge, assigning the other children their roles, arranging their costumes, and setting the script. She not only presumes that her indigenous audience is in need of this instruction but, I argue, that access to theatrical performance is precisely the thing that they most have need of. Her own prowess in arranging and managing theatrical representation, even though she is still a child, is taken for granted.

The strong emphasis that the film places on scenes of theatrical performance is, in my view, director Caroline Link's most important formal innovation in adapting the source material for the film—an autobiographical novel from Stefanie Zweig. This shift in explicitly highlighting scenes of roleplay, however, in such a metatheatrical way, raises a range of difficulties that I want to focus on. In what follows, I demonstrate that the Redlichs' attitude towards the local population—their unexamined belief that indigenous people are incapable of theater—is equally present in comments by the filmmakers themselves. In interviews, Link and her production team describe the indigenous population, despite the fact her team had specifically sought out non-actors, as struggling to understand the nature of theatrical representation.

According to the filmmakers, it is not merely that the film's indigenous extras were unfamiliar with performing for a camera and that they needed to be instructed in the specific conventions of Western theater, such as remaining in character, staying in costume, and not breaking the fourth wall. The problem, the filmmakers insist, was much more fundamental: The film's indigenous extras failed to understand the ontological distinction between fiction and reality. This misunderstanding, the filmmakers insist, frequently caused problems over the course of shooting the film. Link herself claims, in an interview that I cite at length in what follows, that the film's indigenous extras repeatedly became confused as to whether the scene they were performing in was "real."

This presumption about the inability of the local population to *understand* theater and theatrical representation is present both on the diegetic level of the film and on the level of its production. In depicting the local population as unable to understand theatrical representation and thus unable to fully participate in the film's production as equal and active participants, the filmmakers ultimately seek to justify their own right to depict Africa and its people in any way they choose. Producing the film in Africa, in front of (and often at the expense of) the indigenous population—much as the Redlichs practice their roleplaying in the fields in front of their indigenous workforce—, the filmmakers specifically deny that population the opportunity to represent *itself*. The filmmakers, in this way, conveniently represent Kenya's indigenous population as offering no resistance to Western description (McClintock 121). They are denied full creative agency even in their own self-representation (Kopp 123). This is all the more striking, because the film literally

re-stages scenes from Kenya's colonial past. In this reenactment of colonial history, the country's indigenous population is called upon to appear onscreen but not to contribute their experiences and perspectives.

The film was a critical and commercial success, winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 2003. Apart from a superb polemic written against the film by Kristin Kopp in the immediate wake of its release, however, it has received little sustained critical attention from scholars.[3] The film illustrates the persistent way that Western art and filmmaking have failed to take into account indigenous perspectives and have sought to justify that failure through an implicit but nevertheless emphatic insistence on the superiority of Western media and modes of representation (and indigenous peoples' ignorance of them). The film participates, in this way, in the ongoing dismissal of indigenous forms of theater and art-making and, in so doing, reinforces colonialist hierarchies and regimes of power (Kelly 8, Ngugi 36-38) . If colonialism has come to an end, at least in its most explicit political form, the film offers a further example of how colonialist paradigms of representation have persisted in contemporary filmmaking, through implicit assumptions about who can participate.

II. German-Jewish Refugees in Kenya

The irony of the Redlichs' situation in Africa is not entirely lost on them: The Redlich family, having only just fled the Holocaust, finds itself implicated in Kenya in a colonial regime's suppression of its indigenous population. The Redlich family struggles to come to terms with its complicity within the British colonial project. Walter, the father of the family, insists on setting himself apart from the British. As he claims in the film: His family is not there to make a profit. They are only there, as refugees, to survive and to make a living.[4] *Redlich* is indeed the German word for "honest" or "upstanding," which serves here to underline the family's middle-class, bourgeois values.

The film makes clear the extent to which structures of racism are, importantly, not universal but specific.[5] Initiating oneself into a colonial hierarchy requires a knowledge of its local structures, learning its terminology, deciphering its codes of conduct, and becoming proficient in applying those codes in a host of everyday situations. This is something that the Redlich family must still learn. By the end of the film, Walter will adeptly play racial groups within the Kenyan colonial system against each other. When, for example, a skilled Indian craftsman asks him for a higher wage, Walter coolly notes that there are dozens of African laborers, standing in line, who will work for less (Figure 1). The scene is presumably meant to demonstrate Walter’s growing confidence and self-

[3] I return to Kopp's essay in detail in what follows. There are some other important exceptions: See especially Natalie Eppelsheimer's dissertation, which is focused on the work of Stefanie Zweig and includes a discussion of Link's film. Despite this relative lack of critical interest, the film continues to be widely viewed: A survey of textbooks for teaching film in the German second language (DAF) classroom finds Link's film to be a staple on American college campuses. See, for example, Reimer/Zachau and Arendt.
[4] The film repeatedly attempts to distance the Redlich family from (British) colonialism. In this respect, Caroline Link’s film fits into a tradition of German fantasizing, described by Suzanne Zantop in her study *Colonial Fantasies*, about how Germany might have run the colonies, had it been in a position to exercise greater influence.
[5] On the local specificity of whiteness, see Frankenberg's "Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness."

Figure 1: Still from "Nirgendwo in Afrika"

assertiveness at this point in the film. The feeling comes, however, at the expense of his African workforce.

What is so striking about reading Zweig's fictionalized account of her childhood, on which the film is based, is the way that the novel dwells on the complexity of these racial dynamics, which the film tends to gloss over or strip away. Reading Zweig's novel, one is struck by the extent to which impoverished, "white" German-Jewish refugees represented a source of embarrassment for the British establishment. Their arrival risked disrupting the social and class structure in Nairobi. German-Jewish refugees did not fit neatly into the colonial divide between whites and blacks in Kenya: They were highly educated and yet unable to speak English; privileged and yet economically impoverished. Their very presence risked calling into question a colonial hierarchy that relied for its efficacy on being regarded as self-evident.[6]

When the Redlichs are granted privileges in the film due to their whiteness—being housed in luxury hotels, dressed in British army uniforms, and served lavish buffet dinners––, the explicitly racial justification for this treatment, stated so clearly in the novel, is left implicit or simply ignored in the film. German-Jewish refugees were, according to Zweig, were denied work that was considered beneath them, even when they were desperate to make a living. It was, for example, not considered fitting for white refugees to serve as wait-staff ("Nirgendwo," 26). The owner of a prominent hotel in Nairobi refused to house whites, even if they were impoverished, in the quarters meant for African servants, insisting that they instead stay in the luxury quarters (62). When German-Jewish refugees were declared enemy aliens and interned at the start of the war, the British authorities, Zweig writes, believed clothing German refugees in African prison uniforms risked racial

[6] For more background on the historical situation of German-Jewish refugees in Kenya, including a range of primary sources, see Eppelsheimer's new book *Roads Less Traveled*.

confusion (58). They were thus given surplus British army uniforms and ill-fitting khakis instead.[7]

The novel is explicit about the privileges that the Redlichs are granted as members of the white settler population, but it also dwells on the uneasiness with which they are integrated into the colonial establishment. Zweig's novel, for all its shortcomings, helps to make these complicated racial dynamics clear, in a way that is illuminating for thinking about the film: The Redlichs' whiteness poses an ongoing problem, both for the colonial regime and for the Redlich family themselves. Their whiteness is not something that can be taken for granted. It is precarious. It is something that must be *asserted*.

Walter in particular wrestles with his complicity in a colonial regime, while working to protect his standing within it. Upon his arrival in Kenya, he refers to himself proudly, in a letter written to his family in German, with the English word *Manager*. For Walter, it is only natural that he serve as a manager: “Ist hier jeder, selbst ich” (26). By “*jeder*”, of course, he refers only to the white inhabitants of Kenya. The term *Manager* is vague, designed to render his position innocuous. He describes with it, moreover, not the practical process of managing an indigenous workforce, but merely the term that "properly" applies to him as a white colonist and thereby installs him in a particular social station.

Mere moments after complaining about how the family will be consigned to poverty in Africa, Walter notes in a letter to Jettel that they (“*man*“) will have no end of servants. He announces, again using the English word, that he has hired a “*Boy*”:

> Wie Du siehst, habe ich schon einen eigenen Boy. Er ist groß, natürlich schwarz (bitte mache Regina klar, daß nicht alle Menschen weiß sind) und heißt Owuor. [...] Boys sind hier die Diener, aber es heißt gar nichts, wenn man einen Boy hat. Auf einer Farm hat man so viel Personal, wie man will. Du kannst also Deine Sorgen um ein Dienstmädchen sofort einstellen. Es leben hier sehr viele Menschen. Ich beneide sie, weil sie nicht wissen, was in der Welt geschieht und weil sie ihr Auskommen haben (11-12).

In using the British expression—“boy”—to refer to the family's adult servant Owuor, Walter expresses to his family in Germany just how effectively he has accustomed himself to colonial administration. Where these servants came from—or how they came to be dispossessed of their land—is not a question that Walter contemplates.[8] He casually uses the impersonal German pronoun *man* here to refer to white settlers: "One" can have as many servants as "one" wants.

In another letter, Walter congratulates himself on his rapid progress with Swahili:

> Um mit den Menschen auf der Farm zu reden, muß man Suaheli lernen. Da hat es der liebe Gott es mal ausgesprochen gut mit uns gemeint. Suaheli ist eine sehr einfache Sprache. Ich konnte kein Wort, als ich nach Rongei kam, und jetzt bin ich schon soweit, daß ich mich leidlich mit Owuor verständigen kann. Er findet es wunderbar, wenn ich auf Gegenstände zeige und er mir dann die Dinge beim Namen nennen darf. Mich nennt er *Bwana*. So redet

[7] On working class whiteness more generally, and the way that racism has been used to tamp down white workers' demands, see Roediger.

[8] For more on the segregation of land ownership in the "White Highlands" of Kenya and the successful British colonial policy of driving indigenous people into wage labor, see the extensive historical scholarship, including Karari, Nixon (223-225), and Anderson.

> man hier die weißen Männer an. Du wirst *Memsahib* sein (der Begriff wird nur für weiße Frauen gebraucht) und Regina das *Toto*. Das heißt Kind. (16 – my italics)

Having stressed the importance of learning Swahili, Walter teaches Jettel a few words: the terms for white overseer, white woman, and child, as if these were the most essential terms for her to learn. Jettel's first words of Swahili (*bwana*, *memsahib*, *toto*)—as well as her first words of English ("Boy," "Manager," etc.)—are intended to help her assert her status over the local population.

Walter does not even seem to realize that Swahili is not Owuor's native language but a lingua franca among indigenous people in east Africa. Walter's understanding of the language, which he has just pronounced "simple," is incomplete in other ways. "Memsahib," for example, is not a Swahili term at all, but rather a term adapted from the British colonial empire in India. It is a combination of the English word "ma'am" (mem-) and "sahib," which is Arabic for "sir" or "master."[9] Finally, Walter misinterprets the term "bwana," which in Swahili is not just a term for white overseers, as he claims, but one that can be applied to either white or indigenous men; the term could be translated simply as "sir." In short, what Walter has begun to learn is not the local language, as he thinks, but the language of colonial administration. His earliest attempts at learning the language are utterly implicated in his effort to place himself in a colonial context, to justify his (self-evident) position as a manager, and to establish himself on the farm as an overseer.

Walter insists, nevertheless, that he *envies* his household servants, "weil sie nicht wissen, was in der Welt geschieht und weil sie ihr Auskommen haben" (12). He envies them for their innocence, their ignorance of world affairs, and for their indifference to the distinction between Jews and other Europeans (26). Their worldview, he insists, is child-like. Walter's claimed admiration is ultimately a means of justifying the population's subjugation. In this way, he insists that Kenya's indigenous population is atemporal: outside (and before) history. As Anne McClintock has pointed out, this insistence that primitive peoples do not fully inhabit time has been used to justify their exclusion from narratives of world history (30).[10]

The family's indigenous servants are idealized in other ways as well. They are repeatedly described as not only *willing* to work for the household, but as allegedly feeling *fulfilled* by it. Zweig claims that Kimani, an African overseer who had managed the farm before the Redlich family's arrival, had *longed* for a bwana, even though Kimani had effectively been operating the farm for months in the absence of a white supervisor. Zweig writes:

> Kimani hatte sich schon lange einen Bwana auf der Farm gewünscht [...]. *Was nutzten ihm Ansehen und Anerkennung, wenn das Land, für das er sorgte, nicht gut genug für einen weißen Mann war?* Das neue Haus [the new home built for the newly arrived Redlichs] nährte seinen Stolz. War abends die Arbeit beendet und legte sich Kälte auf die Haut, blieben die Steine noch warm genug, um den Rücken an ihnen zu reiben. (82 – my italics)

[9] "Memsahib." *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memsahib.

[10] The childlike naiveté of the indigenous population is further emphasized in Zweig's novel, as Natalie Eppelsheimer has noted, through the direct translation of idioms from Swahili into German, which subsequently seem strange and mystical in translation (69-71).

Zweig insists that Kimani finds having a white overseer perversely to be a source of pride: Having a white family on the plantation serves both as a status symbol and a necessary prerequisite for indigenous peoples' feelings of self-worth. What use is overseeing a plantation, if it was not valued by a white owner and if one was not constantly being observed and approved of by a white overseer? Kimani, in Zweig's telling, goes so far as to lean against the stone walls of the house for warmth, literalizing the way that he benefits from the aura of having a white supervisor.[11]

III. Theater and Race

Zweig's novel helps to clarify the varied ways in which the members of the Redlich family accommodate themselves to the colonialist system in which they have taken refuge: They must learn to comport themselves in a manner befitting a colonial elite, take on household servants, and adopt a variety of linguistic expressions for Kenya's racial and class hierarchy. But it also makes clear their precarious position in British colonial society. Link's film adaptation, in my view, dramatizes the Redlich family's efforts to integrate itself: If in the novel this assertion of whiteness is managed through questions of language–– one continually finds the family at work developing a vocabulary for presenting itself and making sense of its situation—, it is accomplished in the film through scenes of theater and roleplay. Roleplay provides them with an opportunity to try out and experiment with colonial roles.

In a particularly crucial scene, mentioned earlier, Walter demands Jettel walk ahead of him on the path "wie eine Afrikanerin." He crudely offers her the reward of a roast chicken in return for her compliance, as he might do with one of the family's servants. Jettel complies, removing her blouse and bunching it up above her head. The dramatic and formal structure of this scene, arranged by Walter, is striking: *You* play the part of my African servant, *I* will play the part of your English master. Theater serves, in the scene, as a form of interpellation: One is *called* upon to perform a specific role within the colonial imaginary.[12]

In pretending to carry a jug of water, Jettel imitates a form of indigenous labor that she had explicitly refused to perform earlier in the film. At the beginning of the scene, a group of indigenous women carrying water and firewood had walked past the camera. Jettel now imitates them. The theatricality of the scene is emphasized by the fact that a group of black children, on the edge of the screen, are heard to laugh at Jettel's performance and her transgression of racial norms. By insisting that Jettel walk ahead of him, Walter asserts his control over her through his domination of the visual field. Uncomfortably, the camera adopts his perspective, thus placing viewers in the awkward position of being identified with his desire (Fig. 2).

[11] See also Eppelsheimer's reading of this scene (85).
[12] On the concept of interpellation, especially in a racial context, see Yancy.

Figure 2: Still from "Nirgendwo in Afrika"

At first, the scene appears to be a form of erotic foreplay. Jettel even smiles in anticipation. Walter, however, seems to be at once attracted by her compliance and repulsed by her seeming enthusiasm for the role. Frustrated, he handles her roughly, unleashes a stream of accusations, and storms off, leaving Jettel behind in the field. Her enthusiasm for the role, which he has only just called upon her to perform, serves for Walter as evidence of her promiscuity and confirms his suspicions of infidelity. Jettel, for her part, is quite literally made small by the experience: The closing shot of the scene shows Jettel at a distance, still half-naked, with her arms folded protectively across her chest. Frustrated by what he perceives to be his loss of status and his loss of control over the family following their move to Kenya, Walter attempts here to make use of their colonial context to reassert his status as patriarch: He implicitly compares a husband's (proper) power over his wife and household with the colonial administrator's sexual as well as economic power over the local population. Walter reimagines himself here in the role of a colonial official, with his command over the bodies of indigenous women.

In playing upon black women's supposed acquiescence and sexual availability, the scene is reminiscent of the minstrel stage.[13] Although theatrical performance since Aristotle has usually been thought to foster empathy—making it possible to "imagine oneself in someone else's shoes"—, scholarship on blackface and minstrel theater has emphasized the extent to which performances of blackface have historically served to exhibit a series of stereotypes. They serve too as a means of reinforcing notions of whiteness: To perform blackness for comic effect is to emphasize that one is in fact white.[14] This resonates with a tradition of Jewish-American singers and performers making use of

[13] See Sander Gilman's account of stereotypes surrounding African women's sexuality. See also Sidonie Smith's explication of the way that white European women in Africa, such as Isak Dinesen and especially Beryl Markham, felt the need to set themselves apart from indigenous women. On the cross-dressing that forms a central part of accounts of European women in colonial contexts, see Mayer.

[14] Eric Lott, in his study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, has emphasized the complicated dynamic involving attraction and ironic distancing in blackface performance. See also Priscilla Layne's study of postwar German appropriations of blackness as a form of rebellion.

blackface to demonstratively assert their (sometimes tenuous) hold on whiteness and sense of belonging in Hollywood film.[15]

Ralph Ellison has aptly described the symbolic work involved in minstrel theater:

> Despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of fiction [i.e., blackface performers] are counterfeits. They are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role ("Twentieth-Century Fiction," 84).

Ellison deftly turns the rhetoric of primitivism upside down. For Ellison it is white society, not the black community, that feels the need to work itself up into a frenzy, much like the stereotypical "primitive tribesman." (This frenzy is undoubtedly necessary to overcome a bad conscience, Ellison implies, to drown out or to forget the harm they know they are causing.) In the film, we witness the Redlich family rehearsing and preparing itself emotionally for its role in colonial administration. The scene serves as a case study for the way that theater can be utilized for the propagation of colonialist hierarchy.[16]

Ann Laura Stoler's *Race and the Education of Desire* (1995) and McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1993) have emphasized, moreover, the degree to which sexual norms in the metropole and sexual norms in the colony were not separate but rather mutually constitutive in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was in contrast to the "libidinal energies of the savage, the primitive, the colonized" (Stoler 6) that colonial authorities in the nineteenth century sought to define and police bourgeois sexuality.[17] In this scene, though, we witness the extent to which colonialist fantasy could also be deployed to attempt to reanimate desire within the bourgeois family. Colonized subjects can both be condemned for their (supposedly dissolute) sexual practices and yet also serve to inspire desire within their colonizers. The performance of the "primitive" is seen, even in being condemned, as an opportunity to reenergize European sexual mores—in short, as a fetish. As the film scholar Anna Everett has noted, race is frequently deployed in mainstream film as a means to explore illicit behavior and to justify the performance (on the part of its white cast) of prohibited acts. These risqué acts, enacted within a "primitive" colonialist context and against the backdrop of racial difference, are supposed to titillate (Everett, 2). In this way, as Anne McClintock has noted, Africa becomes a "porno-tropics for the European imagination," onto which Europe has "projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (McClintock, 22).

The scene's importance for the film is underscored through its repetition in a later scene between Regina, now a teenager, and her Kenyan friend Jogona. When Jogona teases her and asks her to remove her blouse, Regina at first protests that white women are held to a different standard. When she is finally persuaded to remove her white school uniform, the film intends this scene to signify her abandonment of colonial standards of racial

[15] Such as in the example of the performance of Al Jolson in the famous 1927 film, *The Jazz Singer*. See Bernstein (86) and Rogin.

[16] The fact that this scene of roleplaying, willingly engaged in by Walter and Jettel, does not achieve their romantic reconciliation but instead results in failure, does not change its importance for the film or make it any less revealing about the characters' (subconscious) understanding of their colonial context.

[17] The film repeatedly raises the question of the viability of monogamy, not least when it is revealed late in the film that the family's servant, Owuor, is himself a polygamist who lives apart from his wife and children.

purity.[18] At the same time, however, the scene heightens the film's association of blackness with both childishness and sexuality. Blackness represents a freer, more naive, and more promiscuous form of existence—a form of existence that is available to Regina, as it was to her mother Jettel, through imitation.

The fact that these two children are sitting beneath a tree, eating pieces of fruit, hints at an even deeper iconography to the scene: In a reversal of the fall from Paradise, it is Jogona who proffers the forbidden apple, offering Regina a return *into* paradise and access to a plenitude of sexual pleasure. Toni Morrison has written extensively on the uses of "Africanism" (7-11, 42-43) in American literature. She points to the ways that America's enslaved population "offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and its elusiveness" (36). This allowed "artists—and the society that bred them—" to transfer "internal conflicts to a 'blank darkness,' to conveniently and violently silenced black bodies" (37). Even if Morrison is writing in another context, her work is nevertheless helpful in describing the way that black characters primarily serve in Link's film as caricatures, as shallow representations of an idyllic, carefree existence, rather than as genuine interlocutors or fully fleshed out human beings in their own right.

IV. Indigenous People and Theatricality

As I mentioned at the outset, the film's director and production team were similarly preoccupied with questions of theatricality. The filmmakers insist that their indigenous extras seemed unable to understand the distinction between play and reality, insofar as they supposedly lack the sophistication and necessary sense of perspective to *perform* a role. They must simply *be*. In the filmmaker's commentary to the American release of the DVD, Link claims that most of the Kenyan extras had no experience with film and little understanding of the project.[19] According to a producer of the film, Peter Herrmann, it needed to be explained to the extras that they had to remain in character and wear “authentic” costumes while in the camera frame. The production team, for this reason, repeatedly asked the local population to discard “inauthentic” symbols of modernization and westernization: wristwatches, Nike T-shirts, and so on. At one and the same time, the film crew insists that these extras *are* authentically African—untrained extras from the countryside—and that they must *play* Africans from an older time.

There is a contradiction here: The advance team had specifically sought out an isolated and "rustic" locale in rural Kenya and recruited untrained extras from the local community, and they actively avoided using trained African actors. Kopp has noted that during the casting of the film Link insisted on having an "authentic" Kenyan actor for the role of Owuor, as opposed to a Black German or European actor (119-120). As the assistant director Nikolai Semjevski put it in an essay on the film, Link wanted "auf gar keinen Fall einen Darsteller mit westlichen Attitüden, sie wollte das afrikanische Original" (94). Semjevski claimed that he had supposedly acquainted himself with the physiognomy of

[18] As Kopp points out, in an earlier scene in which Jettel bathes the infant Regina, Jettel insists to her that she not play with the local children because of the risk of exposure to infection and filth. An abandonment of hygiene, in Jettel's view, would threaten their status as white Europeans (126).

[19] On the role of film in African culture, see Brian Larkin's detailed account of the place of cinema in Nigerian culture.

the various tribes in Kenya in order to find a non-actor who would look the part.[20] One could ponder the meaning of "Attitüden" here: the affectation, posturing, and gesture that would supposedly mar a Black German's performance.

As Kopp has pointed out, none of this exceedingly scrupulous demand for authenticity extended to the German-Jewish parts in the film (120-121). None of the primary cast members were Jewish, and the actor hired to play the lead character Walter Redlich—Merab Ninidze, who is Georgian by birth—had to have his lines dubbed over by a German actor because of his strong accent. In this sense, Walter's scene with Jettel in the fields is a double masquerade: Merab Nimidze plays a German-Jewish man imitating a British colonialist (a "bwana"), and the actress Juliane Kohler plays his Jewish wife imitating a black Kenyan servant.[21] If casting for the film's white characters was understood to be flexible, with accomplished actors capable of adequately portraying nearly any part, the black African characters were supposed to be "authentic," not acted. They were to play themselves.

This claim of authenticity applies especially to scenes of ritual. Kopp has pointed to the way that cultural rituals were shot for the film (122-124). In one scene, Regina and Owuor crouch in the brush, watching a group of older men perform a rain ceremony (Figure 3). The voyeurism of the scene implies that we as spectators, viewing the ritual from Regina's perspective, are witnessing the "authentic ritual"—not a work of theater, but a ritual as if it might be captured for a documentary. The film promises the audience behind-the-scenes access to the rituals as they are "really" performed. It references an older genre of ethnographic film.

Figure 3: Still from "Nirgendwo in Afrika"

This insistence that the film's indigenous extras are not performing, that they are not acting for the camera, serves to deny them a role in their own (conscious) self-

[20] On the brutal history of physiognomy and its relation to discourses of race and colonialism, see especially Gilman.

[21] On the question of "authentic" casting, see also Sieg (5-6, 11).

representation. For Kopp, it represents a "desire to deny indigenous people the *agency* usually granted to entertaining performers" (123 – my italics). As Eppelsheimer notes, the filmed rituals, despite the filmmakers' claims that they were strictly authentic, were altered in decisive ways: They were filmed at night, instead of during the day when the ceremony would usually have been held, presumably in order to make it more romantic. Costumes were monitored for "authenticity." Cows were slaughtered instead of bulls. And when an initiation ceremony was staged for the film, the Kenyan extras were perfectly well aware that they were performing for the camera (117-120).

In the filmmaker's commentary, a particular scene from the film prompts an active discussion between Link, the actress Juliane Köhler, the producer Peter Herrmann, and the ethnographer Benedict Mirow.[22]

Figure 4: Still from "Nirgendwo in Afrika"

Jettel comes upon an elderly woman who, near death, has been left on the outskirts of the village (Figure 4). In the night, the villagers explain, it is local tradition to let the woman be carried away by hyenas. Upon hearing this, Jettel tries to intervene, demanding that the villagers carry the woman back inside. Watching the scene prompts an anecdote from the film's production team: Link claims that the team had to persuade the elderly woman to continue with the scene, after she became uncomfortable depicting her own death. The scene, as Link puts it, had become uncanny for her: Link specifically uses the term "unheimlich" to describe the woman's experience.

This anecdote leads to a further discussion on the director's commentary about how well the indigenous extras understood what was taking place during filming. Link raises the suspicion that appearing in dramatic scenes must have been terrifying for the extras who, as she claims, did not fully understand the difference between theater and reality.

[22] The film production had hired an ethnographer, Mirow, both to help ensure the authenticity of the rituals being filmed and to ease communication with the indigenous extras. One may perhaps question Mirow's credentials on this score. He is certainly not an academic anthropologist, and his resume mainly consists of a list of other film productions.

Ironically, this turn in the conversation comes when Köhler explains that many Western viewers had asked her if the elderly woman had really died, as they were so persuaded by her performance. The Western moviegoer, it seems, found the scene equally uncanny and was equally unable to tell reality from fiction.

Link, undeterred, describes this as a question that had preoccupied her during the making of the film. If Link expresses sympathy for the film's indigenous extras and for the terror they must presumably be experiencing, her attitude is nevertheless patronizing:

> LINK: Das habe ich mich schon oft gefragt, was Spielen... Wenn sie dann so gut spielen, wenn das dann fast realistisch wird, was das für diese Menschen bedeutet, weil sie auch wie gesagt keine Filme kennen, kein Kino kennen. Wie sehr wird das dann auch in dem Moment *Wirklichkeit*? Wenn wir uns so reinschaffen, oder wenn du [presumably referring to Juliane Köhler] dich auf der Bühne in eine Figur reinfühlst und reinspielst, dann ist das ja *manchmal fast wie Realität*. Und diese alte Frau, die noch nie in ihrem Leben Theater gespielt hat oder einen Film gesehen hat, soll dann immer diesen Tod darstellen, der ihr sicher Angst macht (my italics).

In response, the crew ethnographer Benedict Mirow notes that Silas Kerati, the teenage boy who played Regina's childhood friend Jogona, had expressed similar reservations after the crew asked him to perform the initiation ritual of another tribe. According to Mirow, Kerati seemed unable to distinguish between the performance of a theatrical scene and the performance of a ritual:

> MIROW: Das war ja auch bei dem Silas [Kerati], bei dem Fest, was später kommt, wo er tanzt. Er ist eigentlich bei dem anderen Stamm, und er hat dann aber bei dem Initiationstanz dieses fremden Stammes mitgetanzt. Und es war ein Riesenproblem für ihn, weil er wollte natürlich nicht jetzt in diesen fremden Stamm initiiert werden. [We hear Peter Herrmann's laughter in the background.] Dann war es ihm irgendwie klar... bis wir ihm klar gemacht haben: Okay, du lässt alle anderen Rituale weg, du machst nur diese Tanzbewegungen und so. Es war wirklich... Das war wirklich nicht ganz einfach für ihn.
>
> LINK: "Ist doch nur ein Film" ist dann ein schlechtes Argument.

The crew is forced, according to Mirrow, to negotiate around Kerati's naiveté, working out a compromise whereby he agrees to perform some of the dance steps without performing the initiation ceremony itself.

This immediately triggers a new discussion, initiated by the producer Peter Hermann (who, according to Mirow in an essay on the film, also studied ethnography (121)), about whether—in terms reminiscent of the (now widely discredited) Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—the concept of theatrical performance was even expressible in Swahili:

> HERRMANN: Ist es dann überhaupt in Swahili so richtig erklärbar, in der Sprache, nur "Spielen," nur "So tun als ob"?
>
> KÖHLER [interjecting]: Na gut, Spielen werden die ja kennen. Die haben als Kinder ja auch wahrscheinlich Rollenspiele gespielt...
>
> MIROW [ignoring her]: Ja, dieses *kama ukweli*, "wie in echt," "wie wirklich" aber eben nur dieses *kama*, "fast wie wirklich." Und das hat schon funktioniert, das haben sie ganz

> gut gecheckt. Und das ist auch, was ich lange vorher mit denen geübt habe, denen immer klar zu machen: *Ihr zeigt nur was, ihr sollt... ihr spielt eben nur.* Diesen Schritt auch irgendwann zu kapieren, habe ich denen mit dem Mini-TV irgendwann gezeigt, abgefilmt und gezeigt, so sieht das dann aus und so. Irgendwann haben sie das dann so kapiert... Es ging ja sehr schnell. Sie haben das sehr schnell kapiert.
>
> LINK: Aber es war wichtig, dass du lange... doch einige Wochen vorher mit denen geprobt hast und da warst und immer wieder diese Fragen beantworten konntest auch.

Note that Köhler immediately interjects that indigenous people are of course familiar with child's play, but she is unable to redirect the course of the conversation, which turns—oddly—on the importance of having an ethnographer on set like Mirow who can explain the concept of theater to the natives. Mirow himself intones that, through his knowledge of local customs and the local language—which hardly seems to be exhaustive—, he was able to explain (at least partially) the concept of performance to the natives and to instruct them in it. (Mirow, in fact, contradicts himself, claiming that it was something they had practiced extensively, only to acknowledge moments later that the extras had understood him almost immediately.) And regardless, the point is lost on Link, who nevertheless insists that it required weeks of practice to explain it to them.

Strikingly, Kenya's colonial authorities had similarly denied the existence of an indigenous theater tradition. The Kenyan playwright, intellectual, and activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has described being faced with colonial authorities who argued that theater was "something totally alien" to the indigenous community (36). Even after independence, the Kenyan National Theater remained, according to Ngũgĩ, a strictly colonialist institution, dedicated to productions of West End musicals, Shakespeare plays, and the occasional work of George Bernard Shaw. Plays were performed exclusively in English and, to the extent that local people were depicted at all, Ngũgĩ argued, it was for the purpose of demeaning and humiliating them (38). Control of the theater, for Ngũgĩ, constituted an important part of colonial rule. As Ngũgĩ points out, however, there has always been a rich tradition of artistic expression and theatrical performance in Kenya, connected to traditions of oral storytelling (10), on the one hand, and rituals and ceremonies that depicted the gods and reenacted mythical scenes (36-37), on the other. The colonialist suppression of an authentically Kenyan tradition of theater, for Ngũgĩ, served to reenforce the notion that indigenous people were morally and intellectually inferior.

By contrast, Ngũgĩ argues, the Kenyan tradition of indigenous theater was a genuinely popular art form. Conducted in the vernacular, indigenous performances took place outdoors, rather than within the institutional confines of a theater. They lacked a strict distinction between performers and audience, tending instead to incorporate the entire community. And in a reversal, despite typical claims that indigenous people are superstitious and primitive, Ngũgĩ argues that it was *colonial Western theater* that insisted on mystification: Western theater produces "a gallery of active stars and an undifferentiated mass of grateful admirers" (57). Refusing to allow the audience a glimpse behind the curtain, the Western stage treats theatrical effects like magic tricks.

Such a professionalized theater, Ngũgĩ insists, "is part of the general bourgeois system which practices education as a process of *weakening* people, of making them feel they cannot do this or that" (56 – my italics). Much like Ralph Ellison, Ngũgĩ reverses the rhetoric of "primitivism" and superstition. It is in fact *Western* audiences who are guilty of

superstition, mystification, and commitment to the worship of actors and stars. Indigenous Kenyan theater, by contrast, Ngũgĩ insists, tended towards demystification. Lacking a curtain, and conducting their rehearsals in the open, the theater troupe held nothing back from the audience. It was a theater that did not insist on the production of theatrical illusion, indeed for which theatrical illusion was a dangerous obfuscation (56-57).

Leaving aside the question of whether theater is truly capable of being the instrument of anticolonialist struggle that Ngũgĩ believed it to be—and there are reasons to be skeptical—,[23] it should nevertheless be clear that Link's film simply ignores a longstanding effort in Kenya to foster an indigenous tradition of African theater, not only within the diegetic world of the film, but also with the film's production. Link's belief that indigenous people are ignorant of theater (and incapable of theatricality) is even more remarkable given that, from the outset, as I noted earlier, she seems to have specifically insisted on finding untrained African actors and extras in order to ensure the "authenticity" of the production. According to her assistant director on the project, Nikolai Semjevski, as I cited earlier, Link insisted on finding "das afrikanische Original" (94)—African extras who would not so much *play* the part as simply *live out* their naive existence before the camera, free of the "westlichen Attitüden" that would otherwise contaminate their performance. Despite the emphasis mentioned earlier on finding an untrained actor to play Owuor, if necessary "im Gebüsch," however, the crew eventually turned to Sidede Onyulo, an educated and accomplished Kenyan actor who had not only performed for the Kenyan National Theater and spoke a variety of languages fluently, but who had also traveled extensively and performed in Europe.[24]

Homi Bhabha has drawn attention to the way that colonialism, on the one hand, insists that colonialized peoples imitate their colonizers, that they learn to speak, dress and comport themselves like them. On the other hand, colonizers also never tire of pointing out the shortcomings of the colonialized people's performance. The colonialized subject's adoption of Western manners and customs is only ever partial. Colonized subjects become "almost the same, *but not quite*" ("Mimicry" 127) or, as Bhabha puts it even more bluntly, "*almost the same, but not white*" (130). The colonized subject is continually called upon to act *as if* they were white, Bhabha points out, and yet their performance is forever judged to be inadequate, if for no other reason than to justify the continued imposition of colonial rule.[25] Bhabha's description can be readily applied here to the specific case of theater and film: The film's extras, in *Nirgendwo in Afrika*, are simultaneously understood to be too naive to understand theatrical performance and, in Bhabha's terms, physically incapable of playing anyone but themselves, due to their skin color.

[23] On this point, see Peter Hallward (113-114).
[24] Onyulo died not long after making the film, in 2008.
[25] Bhabha has pointed to the way that this form of mimicry, which is both demanded for by colonialist thought and yet is structurally doomed to failure, has the potential to create a slippage and an instability in colonial ideology. If for Bhabha, however, mimicry "in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" ("Mimicry" 129), McClintock is much more skeptical about such a view of mimicry as inherently subversive (McClintock 63). Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan similarly challenge Bhabha's identification of mimicry with subversion.

V. Fairy Tales

This attitude towards Kenyans and theater is reflected *within* the world of the film in the striking sequence in which Regina instructs the indigenous children gathered around her in how to perform theater. I take the scene to be a microcosm of the film as a whole: Regina first reads aloud the tale of Hansel and Gretel from a collection of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, showing the children an illustration and freely translating from the book into Swahili. She then leads the children in a performance of the fairy tale complete with costumes and an audience, blending together elements of both German and Kenyan folklore.

The performance is meant to demonstrate the effortless way in which Regina is able to move between cultures as well as her mastery of the language and culture of the children she is interacting with. Regina, even while inhabiting a local idiom, is willing to acknowledge her place as an outsider: In the performance of the fairy tale that she stages, Regina takes on the part of a white witch who is ultimately banished by African spirits. This scene of banishment provides the only hint of a narrative of African liberation in the film. There are, strangely, otherwise no references to the impending end of British colonial rule in Kenya. Even in this instance, it seems carefully contained: Kenya's liberation is enacted by children—by childish and immature African subjects. Liberation is depicted as a fantasy, too hopelessly unrealistic to ever be meaningfully enacted.[26]

There are other ways in which the scene challenges colonialist representation: The play features a reversal of the classic colonialist trope of a fear of cannibalism. The fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel narrates the children's desperate escape from a woman who plans to eat them. Here, in a colonial context, it is *not* the indigenous natives, but the white witch, who is capable of performing such acts of cannibalism. And it is not the colonizers, but the colonized, who are at risk of being eaten.

Despite these implicit acknowledgments of the scene's colonial context, however, it remains bound by colonialist paradigms of representation. In a seemingly innocent scene, Regina's presentation of the book, around which the indigenous children gather, enacts a classic trope of colonialist literature (Figure 5). In his classic essay "Signs Taken for Wonders," Homi Bhabha has pointed to the paradigmatic nature of this scene: the genre that he refers to as "episodes of the book" (164). In such scenes, which are omnipresent in colonialist literature, the printed book is treated as a kind of emblem of Western literary culture’s superiority. The written word serves as a miraculous object, expected to create universal astonishment in those who contemplate it. Over and over again, the arrival of colonists is depicted also as the arrival of the printed word. Traditional, oral forms of knowledge transmission are understood to pale in comparison, as indigenous people react with surprise and amazement to the presentation of printed books. Curiously, as Bhabha notes, the scene tends to be presented over and over again in colonialist literature, always as if for the first time. It is continually being reenacted, as if Westerners never tire of seeing it again.

[26] Eppelsheimer points out that Caroline Link's account of Regina reading fairy tales to Kenyan children is based on Stefanie Zweig's account in her earlier, similarly autobiographical novels *Ein Mund voll Erde* and *Vivian* of attempting to translate stories (both German and ancient Greek) into terms the local children could understand (Eppelsheimer 104).

Figure 5: Still from "Nirgendwo in Afrika"

Regina's presentation of the book to the other children indeed takes on the quality of a missionary scene. Though not a work of scripture, Regina's edition of the Grimm brother's fairy tales is nevertheless populated by angels. Her edition features—strangely, given that it is not a part of the original fairy tale—a large-scale representation of a Christian angel, which Regina proudly shows to the other children (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Still from "Nirgendwo in Afrika"

The book occupies a curious intersection between the canonical and the sacred. It is a work of German folk culture, a classic of the German humanist tradition, and yet it takes on here an almost sacred meaning. This control over the text—the *script*—establishes Regina's authority as a storyteller. It authorizes her to direct the other children. In the performance that follows, Regina's theatrical and dramaturgical prowess is emphasized throughout. In

prompting the theater performance, and in coaxing the other children to take part, Regina stands in for the film's director, Caroline Link, offering a kind of allegory for the film as a whole.

Although the scene is interesting in many ways, one is struck by the fact that the medium of representation is nevertheless still provided by a white character. Regina reserves the authorial, dramaturgical, and—as it were—directorial role for herself. She sets the terms for their performance. The scene carries with it the sense that Kenya needs Western help in achieving its own (theatrical) self-representation and, even more significantly, that instruction in theatrical performance would notably advance Kenya's progress toward civilization. If Regina interweaves elements of indigenous culture into the play, one does not get the sense that she has allowed the other children a sense of creative control and agency. She incorporates their motifs, but she does not relinquish control of the script. This limits the performance's potential for cultural transformation. In this respect, the play serves as a microcosm for the film as a whole: It captures the film's limitations, in a nutshell.

Katrin Sieg has emphasized the importance of "a collaborative method of artistic production that aims at power sharing," otherwise "the mode of cultural production remains monologic and its means [remain] in the hands of white men" (21-22).[27] By denying the indigenous population the capacity to engage in theatrical representation and seeing them as continually in need of instruction, the film casts them as offering no resistance to Western description and as presenting no competition for Western forms of representation.

VI. Conclusion

Kristin Kopp has stressed the way that Link’s film uses Africa as a setting in which to renegotiate postwar German identity. By transferring the site of this renegotiation to Africa, Kopp argues, Link’s film evades some of the most troubling questions raised by German responsibility for the Holocaust and attempts to stage a scene of German-Jewish reconciliation. Troublingly, as Kopp notes, the film implies that German-Jewish reconciliation is made possible only through a confrontation with an even greater form of racial difference: that between black and white (107).

In my article, I have stressed that theater serves as a crucial element of the family's efforts to renegotiate their identity. It is this more flexible and more mobile concept of their own identity, establishing through theater and roleplay, that enables the Redlich family to come to terms with the trauma of the Holocaust. While theater is viewed as an essential part of the Redlichs' maturation as individuals, however, it is specifically denied in the film as a mode of self-formation and development for Kenya’s indigenous population. With their purported inability to understand the difference between fiction and reality, the film's indigenous extras are, in the eyes of the filmmakers, guilty of a kind of superstition:[28] They are unable to "perform" a ritual without simultaneously enacting it. They are unable to act

[27] In this case, of course, it is apparent that having a white woman as director does not dramatically change the power dynamics.

[28] I take "superstition" here not as an actual phenomenon, but as a rhetorical claim that can be deployed in a variety of contexts to discredit indigenous actors. As we have seen, scholars of color such as Ellison and Ngũgĩ have often sought to reverse it.

out a role, on stage, without simultaneously believing it to be real.[29] Thus, they are incapable of using fiction to reflect on that reality from a new and different perspective. They are portrayed as lacking, in short, an ironic distance from their performance. The film presents us with a striking and perhaps peculiarly German understanding of *Bildung*—that, through theater, one can attain cultural maturity and that, without theater, one remains trapped in an idyllic but ultimately primitive form of existence.

Theater, like film, to put it somewhat differently, has long been haunted by the idea of the "naive spectator": the viewer (or actor) who mistakes the illusion that takes place on the stage for reality. As Kenneth Calhoon has put it, drawing on the film theorist Christian Metz:

> According to Metz, no cinema- or theatregoer ever mistakes the fiction for reality. Nonetheless, the spectacle on the screen or stage *is constructed as if*, seated in our midst, were a fully credulous viewer – one who fails to recognize the illusion for what it is. (147 – my italics)

The figure of the "naive spectator" serves as a kind of constitutive illusion. The theater play is arranged "as if" it were real. It is staged so successfully that *someone*—someone else, that is—could believe that it is reality, even if we do not. The naive spectator serves simultaneously as both an ideal case and a laughingstock for the theater—a figure to which the theater both appeals and from which it distances itself, at one and the same time. This imagined figure of the naive beholder serves a peculiar function, as both a surrogate for and a cautionary example to the audience: The play is staged so persuasively, one wants to say, that *one* could believe it to be true, even if *I* do not. As Calhoon puts it, "Because *they* believed, *we* no longer have to" (148—my italics).[30]

One can think here also of the naive actor, who genuinely inhabits their role and who believes what is happening to them on the stage to be real. The naive (or, in this case, *native*) actor serves simultaneously as both an ideal of what acting can should be and yet also somehow as the *opposite* of acting. It is theater at its best and yet no longer theater—a kind of asymptote for theatrical performance, an edge which it must continually seek to approach and yet it may never reach, lest it cease to be theater.

The risk lies in literalizing this figure of the "naive spectator" and, what is more, racializing it. The "naive spectator" ceases to be an abstract rhetorical figure and becomes instead a specific class of people, who will henceforth be excluded from participation in the making of films (and the staging of plays).[31] A structural feature of colonialist literature has been precisely the presumption of such a naive, or in this case "primitive," spectator, to which the work both appeals and from which it seeks to distance itself. This presumption concerning indigenous peoples' naïveté about the theater (and, as Homi Bhabha points out in "Signs Taken for Wonders," about media and the written word more generally) becomes a strategy for justifying control over the means of representation and, indeed, determining what counts as a legitimate form of art or of knowledge (Kelly 8).

[29] At the same time, if the film's extras are guilty of mistaking theater for reality, the filmmakers accuse them––in a contradictory way—of not taking the theater's illusion *seriously enough*: Not being able to stay in character, not being a part of Western star culture, and not being able to play a role other than themselves.
[30] On Metz's reading of the naive spectator, see also Tom Gunning.
[31] I follow Calhoon here in pointing to the way that the "naive observer" applies, albeit in slightly different ways, to both film and the theater stage.

What is needed is a critique, of which this paper is just the beginning, of the way that implicit assumptions underlying theatrical convention—the "invisible wall," the theatrical illusion, the naive spectator—can take on a racialized meaning. It is necessary to analyze the way that Western theater, in both its presentation of racial clichés and stereotypes as well as the formal ways in which it frames the ontological difference between fiction and reality or actor and audience, can fall victim to colonialist paradigms of representation. Otherwise one risks reinscribing colonialism on a formal level, even as one purports to see theater as a means of overcoming it.

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