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Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 358 pp. Color plates, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. $64.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781512822632.

Review Essay by Katherine Dauge-Roth, Bowdoin College, and Rose A. Pruiksma, University of New Hampshire

Noémie Ndiaye's *Scripts of Blackness* compellingly makes the case for the central role of early modern performances—whether taking place in theaters, in the street, in private homes, or at court—in the production of blackness as a racialized category in early modern Europe. Excavating the theatrical archives of Spain, France, and England, Ndiaye's deeply researched and beautifully crafted study convincingly demonstrates how three key performance techniques—the use of stage make-up and prostheses, or "black-up," altered speech, "blackspeak," and movement, "black dance"—generated varied "scripts of blackness" to fulfill the particular ideological needs of the societies that produced them at specific moments in their colonial history. Through incisive close reading and wide-ranging erudition, Ndiaye carefully follows the pathways of these various "scripts" as they travel across Europe, revealing that "racializing discourses of blackness, while distinct, were intertwined and . . . mutually constitutive: the production of blackness as a racial category was a transnational European endeavor" (p. 10). Indeed, "all early modern European nations with strong colonial aspirations deployed, worked with, and worked through performative blackness" (p. 15). In fact, so potent was performative blackness for the affirmation of power that even European kingdoms that had few imperial ambitions found in it a useful tool, as historian Alexander Bevilacqua's current work on racial impersonation in court spectacles in the Hapsburg empire reveals.[1] Given the pan-European nature of this race-making project, its critical interrogation and decoding must, Ndiaye convincingly argues and models throughout her path-breaking book, be equally transnational and comparative if we are to begin to confront the interlinked paradigms that actively produce race in what she elegantly describes as "the racial matrix" (pp. 4–8).

Ndiaye's ambitious transnational work critically reveals that one specific nation—France—and its cultural scholars have been especially resistant to studying race-making. Ndiaye invokes the French cultural icon of seventeenth-century drama, Molière, and his no less canonical *comédie-ballet*, the *Malade imaginaire* (1673), to point out that "most would be surprised to hear that the play includes black dances or performative blackness in any form, owing to the pathological averseness to racial inquiry and reckoning embedded in French national mythology and appended pedagogical practices" (p. 212). So diligently has the French canon been whitewashed that even those who regularly teach this *comédie-ballet* have little awareness of the exoticizing portrayal of blackness that Molière uses in the second interlude between acts II and III, where a group of six "Egyptiens" [Romani] men and women, dressed as "Mores," dance and sing with jumping apes. Here Ndiaye powerfully indicts not only the insistent French erasure of race from public discourse, but also seventeenth-century French studies. As *dix-septièmistes* ourselves—one a scholar of literature and history of the body, the other a musicologist and dance historian

specialized in court ballet—we would like to reflect on Ndiaye's vital analysis as both a guide and a call to action, while giving particular attention to how the characteristics of court ballet raise further questions about the scripting of race in the French context.

While Iberian and English studies have, for decades now, embraced critical race theory as essential for our understanding of the seventeenth century, French studies, until recently, has not. Though scholars have focused significant attention on representations of blackness and the slave trade in the eighteenth century, little work has examined this earlier period.[2] Seventeenth-century literary scholars and historians have looked carefully at French representations of other racialized groups but have rarely addressed the portrayal of Afro-descendant persons.[3] This has slowly begun to change, with important scholarship on the early French Atlantic world leading the way.[4] Musicologists and dance historians too have only recently begun to grapple with racialized representations in early modern dance and music, evidence that has been in plain sight or marginalized due to hierarchies of musical value privileging canonical works.[5] This erasure is especially apparent within the study of French court and theatrical dance, where the archive includes so many visible and even, arguably, audible and kinetic traces of performative blackness, but where even publications of color plate images of ballet costumes have presented the images without engaging in any discussion of the representations beyond the merely descriptive and logistical.

The still persistent lack of sustained scholarly consideration of Afro-descendant persons and their representations in seventeenth-century France is all the more problematic given that, for the French of that period, Afro-descendant persons were part of everyday conversations and consciousness. As Sue Peabody's seminal *"There Are No Slaves in France"* (1996) highlighted and Erick Noël's meticulous archival work, presented in his monumental three-volume *Dictionnaire des gens de couleur* (2011–2017), documents, Afro-diasporic persons not only populated the French Atlantic though forced migration and enslavement but made their lives in towns across France in the seventeenth century.[6] As French involvement in the Atlantic slave trade quickly gained momentum, anatomists, naturalists, travelers, and theologians engaged deeply in theorizing blackness and its origins. Already in 1612, doctor Jean Riolan dissected an unidentified Black man in the anatomy theater of the Paris Faculté de médecine to pinpoint the locus of his skin color. 1640 saw the first public conference on blackness, held in the heart of Paris at Théophraste Renaudot's Bureau d'adresse et de rencontre. Theologians, too, urgently debated the origins of human diversity, spurred in France by theologian Isaac La Peyrère's 1655 work, *Prae-Adamitae*, which scandalously proposed polygenesis, or multiple separate creations, to explain it. French readers ravenously consumed travelers' and missionaries' accounts of encounters with diverse nations across the globe, Afro-diasporic persons among them, as religious orders and the French crown actively collaborated to promote their vast imperial project. All the while, ever-present and ubiquitous in everyday life, the mass-media of the time that was theater, ballet, opera, and public spectacle did its work of forming the collective European imaginary. Bringing to light for analysis a new or largely understudied corpus from this earlier period, Ndiaye convincingly draws our attention to the ways in which performance did not simply reflect and represent normative ideas about race but participated actively and decisively in perpetuating, reshaping, and inventing new ideas about blackness and Afro-descendant persons.

In her book's final chapter on dance, Ndiaye deftly reveals the presence of actual Black dancers in Spain and the ways those performers used their art to make "documented bids for control over black dances' cultural sites of production" and attain social and geographic mobility through their earnings (p. 191). Since enslavement can be conceptualized "as an issue of mobility," the use of kinetic performative blackness by Black artists to ensure freedom of movement is all the more salient (p. 197). In the context of French court spectacle, however, these potentially self-liberating power dynamics, so apparent in the Spanish context when the dancers are Afro-diasporic performers, do not map well onto the bodies of French noble and professional dancers. Drawing on Mark Franko's influential readings of burlesque dance as a medium for noble dissent through which disenfranchised aristocrats made claims of autonomy against the absolutism of the king, Ndiaye posits that nobles performing "black moves" as "Mores" in black-up repurposed "the racial discourse of black dances to articulate a critique of their current condition" (p. 211).[7] This framework, however, flattens the complex ways that power dynamics were manifest in Louis XIII's court ballets. The best-documented and most often analyzed of these ballets were lavish productions organized at the king's command, and planned, to the smallest detail, by the ballet's *ordonnateur*. They included roles for select noble performers, hand-picked based on multiple factors, ranging from rank, closeness to the king, and ability to dance, and these roles were assigned rather than selected by the dancers, except, of course, the king, who chose his own roles. These privileged nobles danced alongside many unnamed professionals.

Thus, the elaborate *Grand bal de la Douairière de Billebahaut* (1626) that Ndiaye examines through text and image included at least twelve dancing nobles, along with Louis XIII himself and his brother and heir, Gaston d'Orléans. Sieur Delfin, a low-ranking Corsican gentleman who had been placed in Gaston d'Orléans's household, performed the role of the elaborately crowned, scepter-wielding Cacique, mounted on an elephant,[8] while Gaston, heir to the French throne, danced as an *Africain* with four other nobles all in black-up, dressed in ornate costumes and feathered helms, cast as the Cacique's subjects (Ndiaye's Plate 5).[9] After the "Récit de l'Afrique" sang her solo *air*, this "squadron of *Bazanez*" danced before the Cacique's elephant. Along with the five noble, sword-bearing *Africains*, three musicians, wearing shackles and red and white striped livery, appear to have provided some musical accompaniment with Middle Eastern *nakers* (small kettle drums) and a whistle held to the lips of one. Ndiaye considers the Cacique, via his costume's tusk-like beard, the heavy elephant, and his feathered cloak, as performing the animalizing script of blackness. But what clues do we have as to the danced kinesis of these scenes? Surviving still images and texts for this ballet provide little to distinguish the *Africains* on stage as moving in ways that were either animalistic, unruly, or coded as "black," unlike what can be found in descriptions of some other ballets. Was their dancing before the elephant coded as "black dance" due to the sound provided by the shackled musicians? What was communicated from choreographer to dancer in the learning and practicing of "black moves"? How might we understand the political goals noble dancers may have had in relationship to the labor of the unnamed professionals who performed alongside them, typically in subordinate roles, and who often executed the most virtuosic dancing of a ballet? How did professional dancers view their performative work and the athletic, technical demands of unruly dance, and pass on this bodily knowledge to others? Ndiaye's insight that unruly dance became coded as black dance resonates well with her examples of the *moresche/moresque* and the *canarie*. At the same time, how do we reconcile the relationship between accounts of the virtuosity, rigorous physical training, and control that unruly, grotesque, and comic dance required and what Ndiaye identifies as "the animalizing script"? In court ballets, the most

demanding roles, often the most racially marked, were danced by professionals, or exceptionally skilled nobles. What was each group's stake in physically becoming part of this essentializing machine?

The sonic and choreographic coding of race in court ballet could also be quite fluid. The Middle Eastern *nakers* present with the *Africains*, who are also referred to as *Bazanez*—often translated as tawny—but who were described in the *Mercure françois* report on the *Grand bal* as "vestus en Negres," are only a small sample of this sort of *flou*. In the sonic realm, these slippages can be found in the ways certain groupings of instruments—guitars, castanets, tambourines, and, on occasion, *nakers/gnacares*—and certain dance types—the *sarabande* and the *chaconne*, and sometimes, the closely related *passecaille*—were coded almost interchangeably as variously Spanish, sub-Saharan African, Arab/North African, or even Native American. For instance, Georges de Scudéry's *Almahide, ou l'esclave reine* (1660-63) set in Andalusia, with its vivid description of a danced *sarabande* performed with castanets by a Moorish woman, presents a highly sexualized, ambiguously racialized dance of great expressive power. The troupe of Spanish musicians and dancers who performed in the 1667 *Ballet des Muses* danced a *sarabande* accompanied by guitars, castanets, and *gnaceres* and Lully and Quinault's *Cadmus* (1673) included a *chaconne* sung and danced by *Africains*. The fact that neither the *sarabande* nor the *chaconne* had any actual connection with dancing from either North or sub-Saharan Africa did not prevent them from registering as black dance in some contexts and Spanish in others.

These slippages are not confined to the acoustic and kinetic realms but extend to the cosmetic and sartorial. This is particularly true in the case of French court ballet, where a dazzling array of characters, often racialized, sometimes seemingly hybrid in their identities or even interchangeable, swoop in and out of the wings. We cannot help but wonder about the racecraft at play around France's other Others whom Ndiaye's already far-reaching book could not possibly spotlight, but who make furtive entries from time to time in its pages. What of Ottoman, Native American, North African, Middle Eastern, Asian, Romani, and Jewish characters? What similarities and differences might we see between characterizations of sub-Saharan Africans and those of these other groups? What connections did early modern spectators and performers see among them? How were essentializing tactics applied to each of them, and how did the characterization of one group influence that of another? In what ways were spectators conditioned to recognize and read the codes that signaled their identities? And what of Others who play other Others, in black-up or other shades? In a performance world where someone labeling costume sketches might mistake the portrayal of an African king for a Native American ruler, where a costume design for Louis XIV dancing the role of an *Amériquain* in black-up differs from that of an *Afriquain* more for its feathers than skin tone, where the term *Indiens* in a ballet *livret* could refer to Native Americans just as easily as it could to natives of India, just how clear-cut were these distinctions for early modern spectators? How did designers and performers negotiate the wide-ranging and unstable referents of the term *basané*, used to signify the skin colors of diverse nations scattered across the globe, from sub-Saharan Africans, to Native Americans, to European Spaniards (pp. 48–50)? How should we understand, as Ndiaye puts it, "the relational nature of racial formations, the connectedness of paradigms and sub-paradigms within the racial matrix" in the early modern period, and in the world of theater, court ballet, and opera? (p. 213).

At the close of her 2020 article, "Rewriting the Grand Siècle," Ndiaye concludes unequivocally, "But unpacking the long trajectory of racial formations starting in the ancien régime is not the exclusive task of French agents who have roots in former colonies. Rather, un-silencing the past befalls all of the heirs to the Grand Siècle. It befalls anyone who, in the practice of everyday life, speaks "*la langue de Molière*"—and who knows it."[10] What histories, debts, care, and consciousness, then, must *dix-septièmistes* on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere eager to accept Ndiaye's invitation acknowledge and adopt so that their contributions may advance the crucial field of pre-modern critical race studies without reproducing the very Eurocentric, white-dominant paradigms that they seek to expose and unravel? How do *dix-septièmistes*, in a field still predominantly populated by white scholars, take up Ndiaye's call without unwittingly assuming a neo-colonialist position? While the desire to contribute to advancing thinking about the manifestations, mechanisms, and history of race-making in seventeenth-century France is undoubtedly sincere on the part of most white scholars, and while we likely agree that the immense labor of bringing these representations and tactics to light can and should not fall on the shoulders of scholars of color alone, how can white scholars avoid a sort of plundering of the rich terrain that Ndiaye has opened up and made available, a kind of Indiana Jonesesque raiding of the "lost" archive, through potentially unwelcome incursions that could easily be interpreted as self-serving? What are best practices and next steps toward continuing to expose and examine the multi-layered "scripts of blackness" that still fuel everyday racism, race-based violence, and structural inequities in France and the United States, our university systems, and the Academy today?

What is certain is that there is urgent work to be done and none of us can do it alone. For too long, we have fallen into the trap of interpreting, in Ndiaye's words, "the absence of evidence as evidence of absence," and not looked further (p.13). The abundance of previously ignored or unknown sources that Ndiaye illuminates throughout her innovative analysis and shares in her book's appendix testify to just how blind we have been. Among the many extraordinary contributions that Ndiaye makes through *Scripts of Blackness*, for scholars of seventeenth-century France this is perhaps the most transformative: she calls us urgently to take off our blinders and take up the task of making visible, to radically rethink our approaches and questions, expand our corpus, learn to read differently, and pay attention to the interludes.

NOTES

[1] Alexander Bevilaqua's current book project, *Europe Triumphant: Nobility and Race in the First Global Era*, examines race-making through performance at European princely courts, an excerpt of which is forthcoming in *Past and Present*.

[2] The vast scholarship focused on blackness and enslavement in eighteenth-century France includes Pierre H. Boulle, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), Elsa Dorlin, *La matrice de la race. Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la Nation française* (Paris: La Découverte [2006] 2009), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Andrew S. Curran, *Who's Black and Why? A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), Anne Lafont, *L'art et la*

race. L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2019), Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), and Sue Peabody, *"There Are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[3] Representative work examining French portrayals of Asians, Indians, Native Americans, Ottomans, and Persians in the seventeenth century includes Faith E. Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de la Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), Michael Harrigan, *Veiled Encounters: Representing the Orient in Seventeenth-Century French Travel Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), Michèle Longino, *Orientalism in French Classical Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and *French Travel Writing in the Ottoman Empire: Marseilles to Constantinople, 1650–1700* (New York: Routledge, 2015), Sara E. Melzer, *Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern French Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), Susan Mokhberi, *The Persian Mirror: French Reflections of the Safavid Empire in Early Modern France* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), Micah True, *Masters and Students: Jesuit Mission Ethnography in Seventeenth-Century New France* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), and Ellen R. Welch, *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), as well as numerous volumes and scholarly editions of French travel narratives such as those produced by Frank Lestringant and Marie-Christine Pioffet.

[4] Representative work by literary scholars focused on the early French Atlantic includes Doris L. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005; reprint 2008), Michael Harrigan, *Frontiers of Servitude: Slavery in Narratives of the Early French Atlantic* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2018), Christina Kullberg, *Lire l'*Histoire générale des Antilles *de J.-B. Du Tertre* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), and Ashley M. Williard, *Engendering Islands: Sexuality, Reproduction and Violence in the Early French Caribbean* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2021). Though focused on the eighteenth century, see also Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020) and Julia Prest's *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). Prest's website, "Theatre in Saint-Domingue, 1764-1791. Plays, Ballets, and Operas," features an invaluable database of all *spectacles* documented in local newspapers for that era, offering a model of archival accessibility: https://www.theatreinsaintdomingue.org. Domna C. Stanton's forthcoming *The Nation and Its Others: France and Frenchness in the Reign of Louis XIV* considers slavery in its final chapter. Toby Wikstöm's dissertation, "Law, Conquest and Slavery on the French Stage, 1598–1685," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2010 and his forthcoming book, *Staging and Erasing the Global in Early Modern France*, examine at length the early seventeenth-century plays *Les Portugais infortunés* and *Le More cruel*, also analyzed by Ndiaye (45–55). Several pieces by historian Guillaume Aubert, including "'The Blood of France': Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 61.3 (2004), 439–78, represent invaluable contributions. Historian Mélanie Lamotte's forthcoming *Making Race: Policy, Sex, and Social Order in the French Atlantic and Indian Oceans, 1608-1756* expands geographies to

examine the effectiveness and failure of French policies regarding Afro-descendant persons in both colonial arenas. Recent French publications on the history of race include Claude-Olivier Doron, *L'Homme altéré. Races et dégénerescence (XVIIe-XIX siècles)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2016) and Jean-Frédéric Schaub and Silvia Sebastiani's impressive *Race et histoire dans les sociétés occidentales (XVe–XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2021), the first major transnational history of race-thinking in early modern Europe.

[5] Olivia A. Bloechl, "Race, Empire, and Early Music," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, edited by Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 77–107 and the open access publication edited by Emily Wilbourne and Suzanne G. Cusick, *Acoustemologies in Contact: Sounding Subjects and Modes of Listening in Early Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021) https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0226 are two of the most recent. See also Olivia A. Bloechl, *Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[6] Peabody, *"There Are No Slaves in France"* and Erick Noël, *Dictionnaire des gens de couleur dans la France moderne*, 3 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 2011–2017).

[7] Mark Franko, *Dance as Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 63–107.

[8] Michel LeVassor, *Histoire du règne de Louis XIII. Roi de France et Navarre*, vol. (Amsterdam: Pierre Brunel, 1703), 454–455, also cited in Kate van Orden, "Hearing Franco-Ottoman Relations circa 1600: The chansons turquesques of Charles Tessier, 1604," in *Seachanges: Music in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds, 1550–1800*, edited by van Orden (Harvard University Press / Villa I Tatti, 2021), 33–68, at 37.

[9] The other nobles dancing as *Africains* were Alexandre de Vendôme (Louis XIII's and Gaston's half-brother), the Duke of Longueville, the Duke of Elbeuf, and the Commander de Souvray, son of Louis XIII's childhood tutor and a close companion.

[10] Noémie Ndiaye, "Rewriting the Grand Siècle: Blackface in Early Modern France and the Historiography of Race," *Literature Compass* 18.10 (2021), e12603, 1–11, at 9. https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12603.

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