

*H-France Forum*

Volume 18 (2023), Issue 5, #3

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 Mame-Fatou Niang, Carnegie Mellon University

It's not every day that you read a text that reshapes its field in extraordinary ways while opening exciting perspectives to adjacent fields of study; not every day that you read a document that you know, page after page, will be central for generations to come. *Scripts of Blackness* is a rigorous, interactive, beautifully-written and generous text that takes from pasts (largely understudied or unknown) to speak of and dialogue with our presents, in order to open windows to multiple futures.

Over the course of 376 pages, Noémie Ndiaye's first monograph surgically exposes "scripts of blackness," the "metaphorical strains" in early modern Western drama, ballet and opera molded by images of Afro-diasporic people, which, in turn, would shape, popularize and cement these representations. Covering three countries (England, France and Spain), the book unlocks the making of a racial matrix, the conception of race and blackness as organizational categories of power. The transnational nature of the study is undoubtedly Ndiaye's biggest contribution to Critical Race Studies. By unearthing forgotten or little-studied texts, translating and thus enabling access to a large catalogue in French, Spanish and English, and by constantly placing these three traditions in conversation, Ndiaye lays out the fundamentally trans-European nature of the racial matrix. In early modern Europe, the performance of blackness is the result of echoes, calls and responses between nations, a circular set of cosmetic, acoustic and kinetic theatrical practices mimicking blackness. This transnational *co-naissance* has been a fundamental element long hidden by language barriers and the often country-by-country approach to race studies in Europe.

*Scripts of Blackness* analyzes the relationships between early modern European theater and societal expectations in Spain, France and England, as well as the inscription on stage of Afro-diasporic people at the time. Ndiaye's text goes beyond a mere enumeration of aesthetic devices, showing how theatrical activities reflect profound shifts between these white societies and their growing black minorities. The ways that early modern theater participated in codifying and conceptualizing race is a fundamental insight of the book: the performance and definition of blackness are neither purely aesthetic, nor generated in a historical vacuum. From the sixteenth century onwards, they develop in intimate articulation with social, economic and ideological demands of the early modern era.

As a specialist of blackness in twenty-first-century France, I am especially and immensely indebted to Noémie Ndiaye for her intervention. In colorblind France, race is still contested as a valid category of analysis. Defenders of the universalist tradition denounce its use as a fashionable American import threatening the stability of France, a ghost defeated by republican

values and now resuscitated by agitators looking to “break the Republic in two.”[1] *Scripts of Blackness* debunks these pillars of pseudo-universalism by demonstrating that discourses mobilizing race are not a twenty-first-century phenomenon and that race, itself, is not a recent importation. Ideas about race floating around French society coalesced into an ideological construct as early as the sixteenth century when France began participating in coding blackness, contributing to conceptual formations about race that were crystallizing across metropolitan Europe and through intercolonial exchanges. Noémie Ndiaye shows in great detail that premodern stages not only drew on these codes but were active in producing racial ideologies. Early modern stages came up with an array of techniques to mimic blackness. As Ndiaye underlines, these artifices were “aesthetic codes...with real-life consequences” (p. 141). If white actors removed these masks to resume with their lives off stage, racialized people could not. By unearthing this past, the book is a timely arbitration, a valuable asset in the effort to indigenize race and racecraft as fundamental elements of France.

Chapter one discusses black-up as a popular dramaturgic practice, and the shift from its medieval diabolical undertones to renaissance Afro-diasporic black-up. Ndiaye aptly uses a tree metaphor to represent a “secularization in which various traditions slowly branch out from one core episteme of religious allegory inherited from the Middle Ages” (p. 135). From Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589) to *Othello* (1604), French and English stages often summon the medieval figure of the blackfaced Devil to represent Afro-diasporic characters. In Spain, cosmetization of blackness gradually shies away from the spiritual to metaphorize Afrodescendants as objects ready for consumption, thus solidifying the ideological foundation of a slavery-based economy. From demonizing to commodifying, the evolution of these cosmetic scripts of blackness reveal their “historically accrued semiotic leverage” (p. 37) to encode the new status of Afro-Spanish populations. In this spectrum, black-up paints Afro-descendants as evil, dangerous animals or objects of consumption that need to be controlled or excluded for the good of society.

One of my favorite parts of this chapter is Ndiaye’s note on how exceptionalism maintained a seemingly fair racial meritocracy in Spain. While constructing and degrading blackness, society needed morally absolving narratives. The stage listened and offered stories of exceptional Afro-Spaniards as moral “built-in pressure outlets” (p. 81).

Chapter two analyzes the intersection of gender and racial formation, and the construction of blacked-up female characters in early modern drama. Moving away from traditional discourses on erasure and absence, Ndiaye dives into a rich corpus to focus on what she calls the “simulacrum of presence” (p. 84). This chapter remarkably shows the ways in which the anxieties of contagion brought about by black women’s wombs do not always lead to the plain erasure of those deemed “irrepresentable” (p. 82), but often translate into a wealth of devices used (by white characters) to represent black womanhood. In France, women of African descent are seemingly absent on early modern stages, as the Petrarchan style mostly focused on relationships between enslaved Afro-diasporic men and white women. According to Ndiaye, this erasure is only superficial, as a dive into the French corpus reveals the deep shame brought about by the sexual exploitation of Afro-diasporic women inscribed in colonial life. Across the Channel, Ndiaye proposes “succuban scripts of blackness” (p. 102) to describe a buoyant culture of feminine black-up in line with Jacobean England’s obsession with witches. In Spain, the author reads the prevalence of the mulata as “a theatrical experiment in colorism that backfired”

(p. 120). Indeed, intended at first to illuminate advantages gained through a proximity to whiteness, the theatrical mulata further showcases the difficulty in departing from blackness. Although the chapter highlights differences in female black-up in these three countries, it also ties them to their common source: the anxieties and shame linked to the organization of colonial societies around race mixing and sexual exploitation. The chapter ends with a direct address to current and future generations of scholars and intersectional feminists. As more archives come to light, Ndiaye issues a vibrant call to shy away from paradigms of erasure and to adopt *un regard de biais*, in order to unearth the “geometrical exclusions, fetishist inversions [and] glaring contradictions” (p. 136) encoded in what is present(ed).

Chapter three dives into blackspeak, the phonic constructions of blackness through the use of black-accented European vernacular and imaginary African languages. This acoustic exploration is not limited to black languages in early modern stages; Ndiaye also interestingly forays into sounds and accents attributed to Roma and Jews. From Iberian “habla de negro” to the French *moresche* to black-accented English, Ndiaye analyzes the racial construction of sound as an element that simultaneously paints Afro-diasporic people as profoundly foreign and erases them from theatrical traditions. As the author explains, visual and acoustic regimes of blackness were able to function separately on stage, but their conjunction also served specific purposes. On Iberian stages where black-up conjured commodifying scripts, its articulation with the infantilizing echoes of blackspeak supported and rationalized the reification of Afrodescendant characters.

Chapter four examines dance as a regime of racial crafting that also reflected Black resistance to subjugation. A study of French, Spanish and English traditions shows both different approaches to staged black dance and the emergence of a “trans-European kinetic idiom of blackness” (p. 188). As the result of circulation across early-modern European borders, these black dances also illustrated the ambivalent power relations between white societies and their population of African descent, as evidenced in Ndiaye’s bold recording and *remplissage* of Hernando de Rivera, the Afro-Spanish dancer who ruled over Seville’s dance scene from 1609 to 1639.

*Scripts of Blackness* offers solid foundations for Critical Race Studies from the premodern era to our times. The book comes with carefully crafted notes, a rich selection of early modern plays featuring black characters, and bold methodological propositions such as the recourse to biomythography to make up for the failings of European archives in their recording of Blackness. The generosity of Ndiaye’s comparative approach recalls Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s propositions in *De langue à Langue* [2] in which Diagne defines translation as an ethic of exchange, dialogue and cultural mediation. Translation, he writes, is the hospitality offered in one language to ideas, feelings and thoughts previously encoded in another language. It is also a fertile site of opportunities opened by the linguistic encounters and their frictions. Ndiaye’s book is such a place of encounters, mirroring and discoveries.

As a scholar of race in twenty-first-century France, I am most interested in Ndiaye’s archeology of European and French racecraft. *Scripts of Blackness* methodically maps out, dusts up and unearths foundations of racial formation that belie current claims of racial virginhood. From a French Republican perspective, race does not exist. Principles handed down from the Enlightenment and the 1789 Revolution guarantee liberty, equality, and fraternity between

citizens irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. Contemporary France clings to this core principle and sees itself as a color-blind country, light-years away from the racial tsunami engulfing the United States or Great Britain.

The displacement of race as a foreign issue is apparent in language. The ever-so-verbose French language lacks terms to describe the legacy of France's relationship to race and its imperialist past. While English provides a substantial contingent of words, using them only fuels suspicions that it is not just the words, but also discrimination and racism *à l'américaine* themselves, that are being imported. Our beautiful language, which both underpins and reflects French national identity, does not have a word for *Blackness*, because the concept itself is not compatible with the Republican mindset. Herein lies one major peculiarity when it comes to race in France, one that underpins and continually feeds systemic racism in the country: Race is nowhere, and yet it is everywhere. The French are taught to not "see" race, even to abhor pronouncing the word, yet race is a haunting figure, the instant marker of belonging or exclusion from Frenchness. One clear example of that is contemporary responses to the use of blackface both on stage and in popular culture.

On March 10, 2019, a carnival in the northern French port of Dunkirk opened in a cloud of controversy over the use of blackface by more than 10,000 revelers. The weeks-long *Nuit des Noirs* saw locals dress up and parade through the streets in costumes, with some choosing to wear black make-up and clothing to resemble African tribal figures and "cannibals." Invoking "l'esprit de Charlie Hebdo," freedom of expression, and the right to caricature, the city's mayor, left-winger Patrice Vergriete, defended the event that had come under fire by antiracist voices. For Vergriete, *la Nuit des Noirs* stood for the Republic: *Liberté* for the weeks of freedom; *Egalité* for the shared appearance under the black-up; *Fraternité* for the sense of community the event fostered. In *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, French journalists sided with the mayor by raising the point that blackface had no history or racial undertones in France, while repeatedly bringing to the fore its racist American history.

This ignorance and cultivated innocence underline the urgent need to indigenize approaches to ethnicity, race and blackness in France. This need appeared even more urgent in April 2019 with the race row around *The Painted History of the National Assembly*, a series of frescoes commissioned by the government in 1991 from French painter Hervé di Rosa. The mural showed two black heads with unnaturally black skin, protruding red lips and beady eyes. It had adorned the walls of the French National Assembly for three decades, commemorating the first time France abolished slavery in 1794. The painting and the artist were fiercely defended by a large arc of public figures, media and politicians arguing for their innocence. Many commentators saw the blackface trope as an American importation, an attempt to impose a foreign agenda on the Republic. From Safy Nebou's 2010 casting of a blacked up Depardieu to play Alexandre Dumas, to Luc Bondy's choice of Philippe Torreton to play Othello, French stages remain deaf to criticisms raised by the casting of white actors wigged-up and blackened-up to play black characters. Furthermore, directors often defend these choices by drawing on French exception(alism), the non-existence of race and the superiority of artistic choices. Such was the argument used in 2015 by Le Théâtre de l'Odéon to shoot down criticism of Torreton's casting. According to their press release, the quality of the cast should keep public attention on the real

stakes of the work—a tragedy brought on by jealousy—and away from the problems raised by the white cast.

Noémie Ndiaye’s scripts are a set of scopic, acoustic and kinetic vibrations that forcibly bring out what I call a ghost racism: the refusal to consider race, when race functions precisely as an instantaneous element of unquestionable and natural belonging to the national group for white people, and an indelible mark of foreignness, probationary acceptance, or impossible inclusion in the case of non-whites in contemporary France. French racelessness effectively functions as an ideology ensuring that racism, racial thinking and their effects are rendered invisible for the non-racialized, while racialized subjects navigate the everyday according to their manifestations.

*Scripts of Blackness* is an extraordinary gift for scholars of race in contemporary France. It shines a light on the national and trans-European forges that produced the iron masks currently constraining Afro-French. The book is an exceptional tool for us and for generations to come, in our effort to indigenize and define blackness in French.

I am counting down the days until *Scripts of Blackness* is translated and available in French, and in Spanish, and in Italian, and...

*Jerejef* Ndiaye diatta.

## NOTES

[1] “Cela revient à casser la République en deux.” Quote attributed to Emmanuel Macron in Françoise Fressoz et Cédric Pietralunga, “Après le déconfinement, l’Elysée craint un vent de révolte” *Le Monde* 10 juin 2020.

[2] Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *De langue à langue*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2022.

Mame-Fatou Niang  
Carnegie Mellon University  
[mniang@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:mniang@andrew.cmu.edu)

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