

H-France Forum

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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 Domna C. Stanton, Graduate Center, CUNY

This ambitious, innovative, deeply researched book centers on an effectively erased aspect of early-modern scripts of race: the theater culture (plays, court ballets, dances, street performances) of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, England, and France. Analyzing three modes of representation—“black-up,” cosmetic blackness, which features religion (chapter one) and gender/sexuality (chapter two); “blackspeak” (chapter three), centered on acoustics, specifically the rendering of risible accents and gibberish; and “black moves” (chapter four), dance—Ndiaye analyzes how white authors and actors performed “scripts of blackness,” and in so doing brought race into being. This book demonstrates the breadth and depth of the Spanish, English and French (SEF) preoccupation with racecraft, and thus powerfully undermines the claim that those European nations were not conscious of Afro-diasporics in their midst, who were largely denied an embodied presence on stage. The implications of black-up are hard to evaluate: there do not seem to be any textual signs of anxieties or embarrassment, shame or serious moral questions, as some have argued, about this erasure of Black people by white performers in the pre-eighteenth-century corpus that Ndiaye has constituted; there are no oblique symptoms of a “political unconscious” that gestures, for instance, toward the emerging slave trade in SEF in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[1] Still, the incontrovertible textual evidence that *Scripts of Blackness* provides forces readers to question and to revise long-held conceptions about the political cultures of three dominant European nations.

In an immensely useful Appendix, Ndiaye lists the works (including the “Anonymous”) she unearthed of early modern plays featuring black characters, organized chronologically according to national origin. The differences among the three lists are revealing: in Spain, the earliest enslaving nation of the three, 36 works were published in the sixteenth century, three times as many (c. 107) in the seventeenth; England was a close second, performing respectively for each century, 35 and 102 published works; France, which engaged in slavery later than the other two nations, produced 2 works in the sixteenth and 61 in the seventeenth century. Is there a meaningful relation between early and intensive entry into the slave trade and the number of performance texts produced? And what does the number of anonymous works published in each nation signify? Ndiaye lists 5 for Spain, 14 for England, and 27 for France, the largest number for the smallest corpus and latest to enter the slave trade. Could this mean that French authors had concerns about participating in an Afro-diasporic performance script? But anonymity could have more to do with a nation’s publishing norms and the inconsistency of the state system of *Privilège* to publish than with authors’ trepidations. Readers may have conjectural responses to such questions, but Ndiaye’s readers now possess an indispensable bibliography for pursuing their own work on early-modern racecraft.

Each of the four chapters of *Scripts of Blackness* has a similar structure: an introduction that stages the main issues of a fundamental script—black-up, blackspeak, and black moves—followed by analysis of textual examples from the three nations, which are sequenced differently each time: EFS (chapter one); FES (chapter two), SEF (chapter three) and SFE (chapter four). Fortunately, this project does not feature the traditional comparative study of influences of one nation’s work on another’s. Instead, Ndiaye frames her project as transnational and looks instead for parallels, commonalities, connections, and circulations. Although most readers, myself included, feel competent in only one of those languages/literatures, given the academy’s abiding disciplinarity, I would still say that the most satisfying nation-based commentary in *Scripts of Blackness* is on Spain, with England second, and perhaps because it is my field, France third. To be sure, there has been less work on French racecraft in the U.S., though I believe it is emerging now at conferences, and in journals and books. Ndiaye’s irritation with the French, inscribed in two encounters with racism (pp. 1-2), leads her to criticize France’s scholars for casting race studies as yet another Americanism forced on them (beyond gender studies, Black Lives Matter and sexual harassment and violence).

Ndiaye’s impressive research, the rich conceptual framework she lays out on racecraft and her textual commentary do not mean that the choices she makes and their consequences in *Scripts of Blackness* cannot be questioned. Chief among these defining choices is Ndiaye’s central focus on white actors/performers ventriloquizing blackness. The exceptions, which include the Mulatta (chapter two) and Afro-diasporic dancers (chapter four), are in fact the principal living, historical subjects cited, along with important but unnamed bi-racial figures (e.g., Afro-Spanish; Afro-European) whom Ndiaye acclaims as “authentic.” Inevitably, this means that everyone else is “inauthentic,” to wit, white people performing scripts for other white people to confirm their superior whiteness. And yet, could there be staged depictions of blackness where, as Homi Bhabha has shown, mimicry fails, and slippages reveal a paradoxical script? Or, then, as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* argues, since norms (or scripts) need to be repeated constantly to be upheld, there are inescapably “repetitions with a difference” that create space for an-other script.[2]

In *Scripts of Blackness* who can be defined as black remains a problematic question. For example, Ndiaye emphasizes that differences between black and Maure are ambiguous in England c1590, and far more uncertain in France (pp.12-13, 181), because of the nation’s mercantilist treaties (or *capitulations*) with the Ottomans, and the equally powerful ideological/religious goal of defeating the conquering Muslims, closing in on Christian Europe from the East. Ndiaye references a Black Islamic presence at several points (e.g., p. 53), and her lexicographical work rightly shows that the color line is muddled (p. 99); Plate 4 figures a *Mauresse*, reputed to be Louis XIV’s own illegitimate daughter, with traits of blackface.[3] So saying, I want to highlight the presence of enslaved Black people in Mediterranean Europe, where Louis XIV’s galley ships trafficked, yet another ignored and erased script of early-modern racecraft. Going forward, those galley slaves can become visible within the European-wide perspective that Ndiaye frequently claims, and that Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss’s *The Sun King at Sea*, also published in 2022, illuminates.[4] Indeed, galley slaves which numbered 2000 in 1670, were far more visible to the hexagonal French, in ports or in widely disseminated public art than enslaved Africans in the Americas were.

More important, however, is the disappearance *in Scripts of Blackness* of the wider colonialist world, the future Caribbean, Latin America, notably Mexico, the U.S. and Canada, which recent work on early-modern race examines: the exception here is five substantial pages on French colonialism and slavery in their Caribbean islands (pp. 88-92). Otherwise, readers have no evidence-based sense of the presence of enslaved Black people in the featured European colonialist nations nor the approximate number of hyphenated humans (e.g., Afro-English), who represent key but invisible actors in early-modern race studies. To invoke enslaved Black people toiling inhumanly in the colonies, while white performers animalized, demonized, and mocked them on European stages dramatizes a salient disjuncture: but are there any signs of SEF self-awareness of this contradiction and attempts to conceal it? Ndiaye's project raises a further question about colonial knowledge: were there imported performances of blackness in the colonies? Would enslaved people have been allowed to participate in any way in such performances, or even to see themselves, as servants in the slave master's house, mimicked in black-up?

In the process of writing *The Brief History* (chapter one) and *Herstory of Baroque Black-Up* (chapter two), Ndiaye's history seems fragmentary at best on key political, religious, economic and cultural issues, and their shifts in SEF over two centuries. Understanding her choice to feature published theater pieces, historical contextualization would make the remarkable evidence she has uncovered for so many aspects of racecraft constitutive of a multi-layered conjuncture. Her consequential choice is to favor texts over contexts—paradigm over syntagm—but the number of titles rapidly cited in her text leaves little space for close analysis. As a result, the few thick exceptions, her readings of Shakespeare's *Othello* (pp. 38-41, 55-63), Abraham Cousturier's *La tragédie française d'un more cruel* (pp. 45-52) and Lope de Vega's *Servir a senor discreto* (pp. 125-30), are highpoints that reveal Ndiaye's analytical deftness and interpretative originality.

I end with an intentional lacuna that derives from Ndiaye's challenge to the idea(l) of agency in "white feminist critique" (p. 213) and its strategies of subversion and resistance. To be sure, in the aftermath of structuralism, whose structures seem to provide no agential opening, feminists and minoritarian others seemed determined to demonstrate that the most oppressive script can still bend toward agency and its liberatory effects. Instead, Ndiaye seems to agree with Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 where resistance is always recuperated by power;^[5] thus she looks for "stable beneficiaries" and "a stable set of class interests," which signals to this reader a tendency toward structuralist immobility that is contrary to the fluid practices of resistance (pp. 22, 27). Following Sedgwick, Ndiaye questions the reparative turn in race studies; she resists "the resistance idea of blackspeak" (p. 145); she criticizes in particular the centrality in Spanish scholarship of resistance and self-emancipation (pp. 24, 216). Moreover, she seems to dismiss diversity in spectator responses, because they are neither predictable, nor uniform—in other words, they cannot be systematized (p. 21)—rather than champion diversity for its counter discourse, however improvisatory or transient. In the book's conclusion Ndiaye states that blackspeak enables ideological ambivalence to enact contradictory impulses that can be sympathetic to Afro-diasporic characters, but that stagecraft keeps them in their place. She seems to discount the possibilities that contradiction may put into play for a moment, a day, or a lifetime, questions from a white audience that interrogate its hegemony.

By contrast, in the chapter on black moves, Ndiaye argues that despite white justificatory techniques to position Black people at the lowest social rung, dances “were used and transformed by Afro-Spaniards to [claim or reclaim] mobility, and ownership over their own bodies, or very materially [to earn] money to buy their own freedom” (p. 192). Here contradiction does not efface agency; here confraternities of living Afro-diasporic dancers emerge as communities that renegotiate their conditions in a slave society (pp. 197, 200), and so doing, exercise their collective agency (p. 205). [6] However, Ndiaye’s three-page *Post/script* warns yet again against the Circean attractions of agency: in the end, she rejects the idea of “performance culture” as revealing cases that undermine hegemonic forces: “In the majority of cases I have encountered... the conditions for resistance are not met” (p. 235).

In the end, I recognize that even if she were inclined to do so, Ndiaye could not fill the lacunae I have described, or risk producing an unpublishably long manuscript. And that would be our serious loss. Still, critique can serve as a reminder to sender and addressee to remain vigilant about the problematics of choice, to work to see our own blind spots, and so doing, to promote dialogic exchanges within an engaged community of scholars.

NOTES

[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.

[2] Homi Bhabha. “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *October* 28: Spring 1984, 125-33. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. NY. Routledge, 2006. Reprint.

[3] See e.g., Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) “MOOR [masc. and fem.] Black man or black woman, born in a region of AFRICA, named Mauritania.”

[4] Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss, *The Sun King at Sea; Maritime Art and Galley Slavery in Louis XIV’s France*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2022.

[5] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

[6] In chapter four, Ndiaye even claims that the *ballet de cour* provided French aristocrats a means to resist the monarchy. However, this ignores the elite’s avid desire to perform before the king (he commissioned the ballets and danced until 1670) to gain petty but meaningful distinctions in court rituals, and both political and financial favors. Moreover, Louis hired professional dancers from the start of his reign; by 1670, they had displaced aristocrats.

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