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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.

Response by Noémie Ndiaye, The University of Chicago

I am grateful to the six reviewers who graciously gave their time and critical attention to *Scripts of Blackness*: Katherine Dauge-Roth, Hélène Merlin-Kajman, Mame-Fatou Niang, Marie-Anne Paveau, Rose A. Pruiksma, and Domna C. Stanton. They all approached my work with curiosity, rigor, depth, and generosity through the lens of their own expertise, collectively providing a beautiful account of what the book does, what it does not do, what moves it, and how it moved them. Reading their review essays was humbling. In what follows, I seek to answer the most interesting questions that they raised.

I would like to start by responding to Domna Stanton's observation that "the wider colonialist world" tends to disappear in *Scripts of Blackness*. Certainly, the early Francophone world, its politics, and the lived reality of Blackness in it were on my mind, as they form the book's interpretive horizon for understanding metropolitan French cultural artefacts. But Stanton is correct in noting that I do not attend to theatrical performances of blackness in the colonies or to the circulation of scripts of blackness between metropolises and colonies—and she is not the first scholar to ask me why.<sup>[1]</sup> Besides the issue of length, the main reason why I decided to focus on metropolitan performance culture in this monograph is that I knew that many of my fellow twenty-first-century French readers would only accept the notion that race existed in premodern France, and that Blackness in particular was a linchpin for the development of the racial matrix, when faced with the presence of racial discourse in metropolitan (preferably neoclassical) cultural productions. "What happens in the islands stays in the islands": from 1642 to 1715, France lived with the cognitive dissonance necessary to allow slavery in its colonies while forbidding it on metropolitan soil. That cognitive dissonance, that old and convenient blinder trick that has enabled the mental construction of the Francophone world as distinct from France "proper" despite political fictions of assimilation, is alive and well (as shown, for instance, by the different environmental policies applied by today's French government in overseas territories versus the metropole). Thus, I focused on early modern metropolitan cultural productions because I wanted to preemptively neutralize that mode of reading and prove beyond a doubt to *any* reader that the racialization of Blackness started in early modern France "proper." That was my way of contributing to what Mame-Fatou Niang eloquently calls the urgent "effort to indigenize race and racecraft as fundamental elements of France."

Another accurate observation made by Domna Stanton and Hélène Merlin-Kajman concerns my resistance to resistance readings of early modern theatre's participation in race-making. Isn't it possible for drama (especially *good* drama), given the contingencies of performance, to land outside of established racial patterns? Can't it sometimes produce something unexpected? Isn't that what makes drama interesting? I anticipated those objections in the book's Introduction and

Post/script, where I describe my own critical affect as “reparanoid” (p. 23). Simply put: I, too, long for an account of early modern performance aesthetics that could exceed heinous anti-Blackness, but I am also wary of accounts that obfuscate said anti-Blackness—and I sit with that tension. Especially in the case of early modern French studies, where the paranoid work of bringing to light, exposing, and mapping the structural anti-Blackness of performance culture had not been done at all when I started writing this book (by contrast with English and Hispanic studies), what was urgent was not to find alternative, unexpected, unstable, and thus potentially liberating figurations of Blackness. I forged analytical tools so that others might, in turn, tailor them to their own needs, refine them, and use them to find something else in the archives, something that only they could see. As Katherine Dauge-Roth and Rose Pruiksma neatly put it, “none of us can do this urgent work alone.” The development of premodern critical race studies in English and Spanish studies over the last thirty years suggests that this field’s growth depends on its critical pendulum’s continuous swing between paranoid and reparative approaches. Yet it is the paranoid affect that typically initiates the pendulum’s first push, and if *Scripts of Blackness* makes such a push to early modern French studies, I am more than satisfied. That said, I want to mention that I appreciated H el ene Merlin-Kajman’s willingness to recount her own reparative experience of reading *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*: performing felt to her like “becoming the Other,” allowing her to perceive everything we have in common rather than what separates us. That account is valuable to me because it echoes what I have heard many theatre-makers of color (directors, actors, dramaturgs) say over the last few years, when they discuss their own relation to early modern drama. While, as a scholar, I refuse to project the reparative affect wholesale onto the past, I understand why theatre-makers often do, as they look for the contemporary value of classical drama. What can these early modern plays do for us today, and how can artists put them to work without ignoring the inexpungible racism that they originally contained? Important conversations about the value and uses of premodern critical race studies for contemporary Francophone and Francophile artists are yet to come.

I was heartened by Marie-Anne Paveau and Mame-Fatou Niang’s exhortation to translate *Scripts of Blackness* into French (among other languages) so it might reach the trans-European, African, and global audiences it was written for. The book’s recent winning of an award from the Medieval and Renaissance Drama Society and my current preparations for a French translation leave me hopeful that this *Forum*, among other forms of critical engagement, will help the book get some attention from French presses.[2] As a US-based comparatist working in an English Department and whose mother tongue is French, I was trained to appreciate the art of translation. Translation is how I move in the world, and it is a hermeneutic method close to my heart. Thus I would like to say how much I loved Mame-Fatou Niang’s astute translation of some of my English phrases and key concepts, such as “*le regard de biais*” necessary to unearth the *oblique* aesthetics of early modern misogynoir (chapter 2), “*le remplissage*” which, as a historiographic technique helps me record what archives partly obfuscate (chapter 4), and more. Such examples beautifully illustrate Bachir Diagne’s definition of translation as cultural hospitality that Niang cites. While I have at this point little interest in auto-translation, I intend to facilitate the translation of continental early modern race plays into English, which I see as vital work. Just as English should not be the only language providing race analysis today (as Paveau importantly notes), Anglophone race scholars should not limit themselves to the small fraction of European early modern dramatic archives to which they currently have access. We need a stronger, multidirectional ecosystem of translation.

Katherine Dauge-Roth and Rose Pruiksma “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 connections did early modern spectators and performers see among them?” In a separate review published last February in *Journal 18*, Ellen R. Welch raised a similar point.[3] Those attentive and thoughtful reviewers all saw the question that has been brewing inside of me for a while, so much so that it is now the focus of my second monograph (in progress), tentatively entitled *Early Modernity in Black and Brown*. That new project stems from what I had to temporarily push to the side in *Scripts of Blackness*: puzzling moments of convergence between the racialization of Africans and of other non-white people in early modern performance. For instance, in the 1626 court ballet *Le grand bal de la douairière de Billebahaut*, right after the *entrée* danced by the African king and his squad, “La caballe du cacique s’en retourne sur ses pas. Cependant, il faut noter que le grand CAM, bien qu’il soit de l’Asie... suit la piste des Afriquains.” What does it mean for this libretto to give a blackfaced African king an Indigenous American title (“*cacique*”), to associate his squad with Jewish mysticism (“*caballe*”), and to connect him to the Khan of the Mongol empire (“*le grand CAM*”)? What are the wider cultural implications of the Black figure’s racial magnetism in this scene? Answering those questions requires focusing on the historical and representational juxtapositions, frictions, and solidarities between Black people and Romani, Jewish, Muslim, Indigenous, and Asian people in early modernity. My second book will study how Blackness, which entered the racial matrix at the beginning of the sixteenth century, came to *anchor* that entire matrix by the end of the seventeenth century. It had then become a conceptual category that could be put to work, organizing a vast grammar of intercultural power relations that could strategically re-position *anybody* in the racial matrix. A preview of this second project in progress is available in my article “Black Roma: Afro-Romani Connections in Early Modern Drama (and Beyond)” published recently in *Renaissance Quarterly*. [4]

I would like to close by making three suggestions in response to Dauge-Roth and Pruiksma’s question: “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?” That is a hard question and the right question. Many thanks for asking it. Thinking through it requires a willingness for white scholars to listen and to relinquish defensive or universalist postures. I saw that willingness in Marie-Anne Paveau’s essay, and I commend the exemplary openness of her critical posture, as she reckons with systemic considerations—that is, with her own positionality as a French white woman and the epistemological limitations that this position structurally entails on the subject of race—as well as with her individual agency, through her willingness to listen, to learn, to think together, and to move forward. Adopting such a critical posture is the precondition for white *dix-septièmistes* to start working through the difficulty that Dauge-Roth and Pruiksma identify. First suggestion: one way for white scholars to participate ethically in French premodern critical race studies is for them to remember that citational practices are political and that scholars of color—especially women, and especially *Black* women—are disproportionately under-cited by the readers they inspired. If we made your work possible in any way, *cite us, cite us, cite us*—and not just in a footnote. Second suggestion: in English premodern critical race studies, the subfield of critical whiteness studies is currently booming. That approach does not focus on people of color in aesthetic and cultural archives; rather, it exposes the strategies that were deployed to fashion the fiction of racial whiteness into existence in early modernity. White supremacists are currently showing beyond a doubt how dangerous

unexamined whiteness is to all of us; early modern critical whiteness scholars' mission is to make visible, to examine, and to deconstruct racial whiteness at the very moment of its inception.

In my opinion, it would behoove white scholars (or rather, scholars racialized as white) to start doing this important work in early modern French studies now. Third suggestion: white *dix-septièmistes* allies have a responsibility to diversify the pipeline, by inspiring, recruiting, training, platforming, and actively supporting *dix-septièmistes* (and *seizièmistes*) of color from the undergraduate level up through the doctorate. Ask yourself: how does the specific configuration of your institution, of your teaching load, and of your professional network allow you to diversify the pipeline? And then go do it. Because if we truly want the field of early modern French studies to end its long tradition of whitewashing, embrace premodern critical race studies, and step into a vibrant, exciting new phase, we need all hands on deck.

## NOTES

[1] Readers interested in colonial cultural artefacts might want to read Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Duke University Press 2005) and Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* (Palgrave Macmillan 2023), among other works.

[2] 2023 David Bevington Award for Best Book in Early Drama Studies. See: <http://themrds.org/award/2023-bevington-award-best-new-book>

[3] Ellen R. Welch, “Scripts of Blackness: A Review,” *Journal18* (February 2023), <https://www.journal18.org/6700>

[4] “Black Roma: Afro-Romani Connections in Early Modern Drama (and Beyond).” *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 4, 2022, pp. 1266–1302, doi:10.1017/rqx.2022.332.

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