



BOOK REVIEW

## Noémie Ndiaye. *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race*

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The argument of Noémie Ndiaye's authoritative work, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race*, is that as early modern colonial endeavor increased the points of contact with Afro-diasporic people—in both global and local contexts—European performance culture sought a remedial fantasy for the violence of their global engagement. Race is produced to inoculate a public fully participant in an enterprise of extreme violence from the admission of their own implication in the project. Even more important to that project is the projection of a racial imaginary that obscures the actual human subjects who pay for their global aspirations. This European public is imagined as “white” because it is through this performative racecraft that European whiteness is produced—against a spectrum of blackened colonial subjects, particularly those of an African diaspora. As Ndiaye makes clear, the urgency of this production becomes more acute as the numbers of Afro-diasporic people increase—through theft or migration—within the countries that make up this study: Spain, France, and England. It is the *proximity* of a people (religious, cultural, social, and/or physical) that makes colonial endeavor more difficult, more complicated, and more violent—as the necessity to prove superiority over another people, requisite to colonial logic, becomes harder to achieve. It is here that the racial imaginary of white European performance culture intervenes.

Over four chapters, Ndiaye examines “black-up,” “blackspeak,” and “black moves” as modes of performance that conceptualize blackness to both create and calcify interracial power relations. The demonization of blackness is explored in chapter 1 with the translation of the figure of the medieval devil of English cycle plays and other religious theatrical performances to blacked-up actors on the early modern stage. Since “[d]evils reveal communal values by default” (37), underscoring what communal practices are *not* ratified, the early modern staging of blacked-up characters litigated whether Afro-diasporic people could be absorbed into societies that understood particular values—particularly Christian affiliation—as cultural adhesive. But most Afro-diasporic people in Europe were, in fact, Christian. In England, for example, there is evidence of considerable numbers of non-white Europeans who had resided in the country over generations—and who were regarded as Christian (Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* [2008]). Ndiaye reads Shakespeare's *Othello* as a play that makes the harms of these diabolical scripts visible—and one that explores the effects of the consummate social insider suddenly pushed to the margins of his community. But, of course, embedded in this script is the threat of expulsion. In chapter 2, Ndiaye shows how Afro-diasporic women are subject to their own diabolical script. What she terms the “succuban script of blackness” (32) imagines Afro-diasporic women as demonic succubae who coerce Christian men into sexual

encounters. Ndiaye traces these hermeneutics through English plays like *The Tempest* (1611), *The White Devil* (1612), and *The Enchanted Island* (1667). These plays are part of a recuperative fantasy evident across European countries engaged in the traffic of human beings: the fantasy attempts to absolve white Christian men of the sexual assault of Afro-diasporic women that is taking place in the European colonial world. In France, a different strategy of absolution excludes Afro-diasporic women in favor of men depicted in the Petrarchan tradition of slaves to love. These Afro-diasporic men burn for white female mistresses. From comedies such as *L'inconnu* (1675) to ballets such as *Ballet du naufrage heureux* (1626) and *Grand bal des effets de la nature* (1632), Afro-diasporic men are implicated in their own enslavement, while Afro-diasporic women are made literally invisible and simultaneously rendered undesirable against the white women to whom these men voluntarily submit.

In the negotiation that converted people to property, speech and movement are crucial instruments for the exclusion of Afro-diasporic peoples from the human category. From blackspeak to broken English, in chapter 3 Ndiaye examines the depicted speech patterns of Afro-diasporic characters and how their inability to *talk* verifies their outside status and aligns them with other alienated colonial subjects. The two versions of blackspeak that Ndiaye tracks, “Africanese gibberish and black-accented European vernacular” (141), render its human subjects in animalistic terms, unable to master the human trait of language. Like Shakespeare’s Caliban, to “gabble,” or speak in a language that the colonizer cannot understand, is to be condemned as a “thing most brutish” (*The Tempest*, I.ii.28-9). But it is also to be associated with other colonial subjects who are deemed unintelligible. This association is evident in city comedies like Richard Brome’s *The English Moor* (1637) which “record” the language of the Afro-diasporic peoples around the playwrights of London—and depict them within a stage tradition of incomprehensible (and comedic) Irish accents. That the incapacity for language is an index of their inhumanity is made clear when the blacked-up character of *Intrigo* is fitted with clothes that only throw into relief his animalistic qualities: he is a “hog,” a “baboon,” and an ape. This underscores how ill-fitting the cultural accoutrements of European society are to him. Similarly, Ndiaye shows in chapter 4 how dance, as status-based cultural performance, rendered the inability to integrate Afro-diasporic people evident in their animalistic impersonation of European forms. The transnational dance tradition of the *moresque*—adopted in some form in Spain, Italy, and England—offers insight into the depiction of Afro-Europeans across Europe. Moresque required elaborate movement of hands and feet, and various postures produced for comedic effect. As Ndiaye points out, the movements of the dance frequently had the dancers on the ground. The way that the “black” body is objectified in this tradition is underscored by the fact that some performances dressed dancers as apes. This animalistic performance, Ndiaye argues, pervaded across early modern black dance and pageant performance in Europe. While in some dance performances, such as Simón Aguado’s *Los negros* (1602), Afro-Spanish dancers might have been employed, the Afro-Europeans depicted in dances in France and Spain were overwhelmingly white performers in black-up. This emphasizes the system of control that these dances enacted, but it also calls attention to the white racial imaginary from which they emerged.

Blackness, as a racial category, is produced in order to be excluded—and is therefore produced in the absence of Afro-diasporic performers. Ndiaye resists the term “blackface” because it invokes a performance later developed in the United States that combines sight, sound, and movement in a single mode of degradation. Instead, the book is arranged around these three categories of performed blackness: cosmetic; acoustic; kinetic. The distinction between the early modern European performance practice and the racist cultural tradition that evolved in the US throws the important intervention of premodern critical race studies into relief: PCRS traces the precedent for later forms of control and oppression, but it also demonstrates how different sites of performance respond to different agendas. The brilliance of *Scripts of Blackness* lies in the specific attention paid to the national and cultural anxieties which each mode of performance answers, and to how race is regenerated at each particular site.