

# Rewriting the *Grand Siècle*: Blackface in Early Modern France and the Historiography of Race

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## Abstract

This essay critiques the French cultural aversion to racial thinking which has resulted in the absence of race as a theme and analytic in French historiographic practices, especially in relation to the *ancien régime*. This essay argues that focusing on 17th century theater and performance culture, especially on baroque ballets and their oblique representations of Blackness and slavery through blackface, reveals a long national history of racism against Black people. This essay is a call to rewrite as an age of race-making a period often construed as a cultural and literary golden age that still plays a central role in definitions of French heritage and identity today.

## KEYWORDS

*ancien régime*, blackface, early modern, France, historiography, performance, race

*Le mal vient de plus loin.*  
[This pain goes further back.]

Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, 1677

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In March 2019, a scandal rocked Paris-Sorbonne University: an upcoming performance of Aeschylus's *The Suppliants* was advertised on the University's website with photographs from a rehearsal featuring white actresses playing the Libyan Danaids in blackface. Students and anti-racist organizations (including *le Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires*) immediately protested: they got the performance canceled, which elicited outrage and outcry—well echoed in the French press, less so in the Anglophone press—from academic, cultural, and

governmental institutions denouncing censorship, dogmatic attacks on creative freedom, and the misguided importation of American cultural sensibilities and performance history into French society. Ultimately, the production was performed two months later, with actresses sporting golden masks rather than blackface, in the presence of the minister of culture, the minister of higher education, numerous diplomats, congressmen, and the French academic establishment, all committed to dismiss criticisms rooted in racial awareness and minoritarian experience derogatively dubbed “*communautaristes*” claims.

Most striking in this episode was the complete absence of reference to the long history of blackface in France, which started in the Renaissance under the name “*barbouillage*” and flourished thereafter.<sup>1</sup> This episode revealed the specific form of cultural amnesia that characterizes France's relation to its long tradition of racial representations, and the urgency of reclaiming collectively a history that has shaped French cultural identity, albeit through denial. In this article, I argue that a focus on the theatre and performance culture of 17th century France reveals an early investment in racism against sub-Saharan Africans and Afro-descendants, which has so far eluded historical discourse. Indeed, even in the rare instances when historical discourse does not fall prey to the French aversion to thinking about race, it erroneously begins its account in the 18th century, unwittingly falsifying the timeline of French racial thinking and maneuvers. From the Cardinal of Richelieu's decision in 1626 to form the *Compagnie de Saint-Christophe* in charge of developing French Caribbean trade to Colbert's foundation of the *Compagnie des Indes Occidentales* in 1664, and to Louis XIV's promulgation of the infamous *Code Noir* in 1685, France continuously fashioned itself as a colonial slave-trading power throughout the 17th century. That self-fashioning required the country to renegotiate its relation to Africans, Blackness, slavery, and race: performance culture was a crucial site for such cultural negotiations to take place. The *querelle des Suppliantes* demonstrated, if nothing else, the urgency of rewriting the *Grand Siècle* to reckon with France's long engagement with race through performance culture.

## 2 | WILLFUL (COLOR) BLINDNESS

French aversion to thinking about race is deeply rooted in the national mythology of republican universalism: color blindness was embedded in Enlightenment ideals, enshrined in Ernest Renan's 1882 landmark definition of the Nation as based upon the will of the people to dispose of themselves and live together, and brought to its apex after World War II, when a reckoning with the activities of the Vichy régime led to a fear that the mere fact of talking about race—albeit in a critical framework—might reify the fictive categories invoked (Fassin, 2009, pp. 7–16). Most tellingly, in Summer 2018, the National Assembly unanimously passed a resolution to remove the word “race” from the French Constitution, with the unspoken hope that silencing the discourse of race would undo the practices of racism. Wishful thinking, fear, and shame are thus at the core of French averseness to race studies and have long hindered the development of scholarship on Blackness, among other racialized identities. Marcel Koufinkana symptomatically concludes his pioneering work in the late 1990s on the condition of enslaved Black people in the *ancien régime* with the bitter realization that “*on a honte ou on se gêne d'en parler, et pour preuve, nos tentatives d'entrer en contact avec quelques familles à Nantes, Bordeaux, ou La Rochelle dont les arrière-grands-parents furent des négriers, négociants, ou propriétaires d'esclaves n'ont pas abouti. La raison évoquée est tout simplement: "c'est une histoire honteuse"* [“this subject is still a taboo. People are ashamed or do not want to talk about it. . . my attempts to reach out to some families in Nantes, Bordeaux, or La Rochelle, whose great-grandparents either transported, traded, or owned slaves have all failed. The reason invoked is simple: ‘that's a shameful history’; Koufinkana, 2008, p. 141].<sup>2</sup>

If Koufinkana's work has long remained isolated, it is because, as Myriam Cottias points out, historians are not exempt from the averseness to racial inquiry embedded in French cultural conditioning. As early as 1976, Arlette Jouanna pointed toward this cultural conditioning as the main reason for the absence of French scholarship on race in her ground-breaking dissertation on the genealogy of racial discourse in nobiliary contexts in 16th century France.<sup>3</sup> Doris Garraway felicitously calls “historical abjection” the erasure of racial questions from historiographic discourse that ensues from such conditioning (Garraway, 2005, p. 3): that “general silencing of French colonialism”

in historical discourse started “with Revolutionary France itself” for Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Trouillot, 2015, p. 100), whose magisterial *Silencing the Past* I quote at length:

The silencing of the Haitian Revolution fits the relegation to an historical backburner of the three themes to which it was linked: racism, slavery, and colonialism. In spite of their importance to the formation of what we now call the West, in spite of sudden outbursts of interest as in the United States in the early 1970s, none of these themes has ever become a central concern to the historiographic tradition in a Western country. In fact, each of them, in turn, experiences repeated periods of silence of unequal duration and intensity in Spain, France, Britain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the United States. . . Historical silences do not simply reproduce the overt political positions of the historians involved. What we are observing here is archival power at its strongest, the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research, and therefore, of mention (Trouillot, 2015, pp. 98–99).

Change happens slowly, yet often precipitates during virulent debates. Thus, in the wake of the controversial 2005 French law mandating that school curricula teach “the positive role of colonization in the world,” debates have raged among historians: “*Le ‘Nous historiens’ s’en est trouvé effrité et des visions antagoniques sur le positionnement de l’historien dans son rapport à la société sont apparues*” [“the ‘We historians’ split up, and antagonistic positions regarding historians’ relation to society have appeared”]; Cottias, 2007, p. 87]. Moreover, over the last 20 years, within the Hexagon, sociologists (including Pap Ndiaye, Didier Fassin, and Eric Fassin) and political scientists (including Françoise Vergès, Fred Constant, Maboula Soumahoro, and Mame-Fatou Niang) have sought to break taboos and think through race in contemporary France, often in collaboration with non-universalist anti-racist organizations such as the previously mentioned CRAN or the *Parti des Indigènes de la République* (Constant, 2000; Niang, 2019; Soumahoro, 2008; Vergès 2008). Sociologists, however, tend to focus on the present. As Pierre Henri Boule puts it, “*A quelques exceptions près, les chercheurs en sciences sociales se concentrent sur les phénomènes contemporains; ils sont moins intéressés par leurs origines*” [“but for a few exceptions, social scientists focus on contemporary phenomena and are less interested in the origins of those phenomena”]; Boule, 2007, p. 61]. When they engage with the origins of present racial dynamics, sociologists start their investigation late in the 18th century. For instance, Pap Ndiaye sees 18th century Afro-French people as “*la première population noire de France*” [“the first Black population in France”]; Ndiaye, 2009, p. 132]; Michèle Duchet writes that “*le préjugé de couleur*” [“color prejudice”] was invented in the 18th century (Duchet, 1969, p. 121); and Collette Guillaumin (2002) starts *L’Idéologie raciste* in the 18th century. One of the main reasons why historically minded sociologists—who truly are on the front line of race studies in France today—unwittingly contribute to the general oblivion of *ancien régime* racial culture, is that they rely upon the work of historians who focus on the Enlightenment.

As Trouillot reminds us, the historiographic block is not always ideological: as in many cases, it is often “rather epistemological, and by inference, methodological in its broadest sense” (Trouillot, 2015, p. 74). Indeed, while race is a system of power falsely and strategically packaged as a system of knowledge mobilizing the dominant epistemic fields at any given point in time, scholars often privilege specific epistemic fields in their own investigations. Taking parts of the system for its totality, race historians often tend to think synecdochically and ignore periods in which the system of race drew on different epistemic fields. Thus, 18th century specialists often see the invention of race as coterminous with the invention of scientific racism. For Ivan Hannaford, for instance, “it is unhistorical to perceive the concept of race before the appearance of physiological anthropology proper” (Hannaford, 1996, p. 147): prior to Bacon, “attempts to establish anatomical, physiological, geographical, and astrological relationships between man and man, and man and beast, did not produce a fully developed idea of race, since there was no proper anthropology, natural history, or biology to support it” (Hannaford, 1996, p.183). That phenomenon is not specific to French historiography: in English literary studies, premodern race scholars have, for the last 30 years, repeatedly debunked accusations of anachronism founded upon this synecdochic fallacy.

In the field of French studies, however, that fallacy is intensified by strong archival imbalances: simply put, the 18th century generated racial archives that are incommensurable with those found in prior time periods. The 1716 Edict that allowed colonials to bring enslaved people to France for the purpose of receiving a Catholic education or learning a trade launched policies of administrative control. Those policies culminated with the creation of the *Police des Noirs* in 1777, which generated the kind of hard data upon which historical inquiry thrives. From then on, when enslaved people entered French ports, they had to be declared, and information entered the historical record in that moment. Thus, historians of slavery such as Sue Peabody, Erick Noël, Pierre Pluchon, Madeleine Dobie, and Myriam Cottias, tend to start their investigation post-1685, in time to work with the *Code Noir* and with the hard data generated by the Edicts (Dobie, 2010; Noël, 2006; Peabody, 2003; Pluchon, 2004). Meanwhile, historians of race, such as Pierre Henri Boule, Marcel Koufinkana, Léon Poliakov (Poliakov, 1986), and Elsa Dorlin, tend to briefly touch upon the 16th and 17th centuries, sensing a point of origin there, only to jump to the 1680s, the *Code Noir*, and François Bernier's infamous article—also yielding to the pull of 18th century data.<sup>4</sup> Finally, historians and historically minded literary race scholars who explicitly focus on the 16th and 17th centuries either fail to integrate Blackness into their study (Jouanna gestures—boldly for 1975—toward Jews and Native Americans in her genealogy of the concept of race in the Renaissance, but she does not discuss Africans), or focus exclusively on colonial materials, as Doris Garraway and Guillaume Aubert do (Aubert, 2004).

Ultimately, what is missing from the landscape of *ancien régime* race scholarship is a study of racial thinking as it applied to Blackness in 16th and 17th centuries metropolitan France. In the remainder of this article, I propose to start filling this gap, with a keen awareness that this process requires a willingness to linger on *soft* cultural data, and a hope that this willingness may yield a usable history for our present moment. Indeed, studying representations of Blackness in early modern metropolitan performance culture can help unsettle the comfortable belief that racism in France has traditionally been the exclusive property of the uneducated and operates—both in the past and the present—in contexts combining ignorance and poverty, at a remove from the enlightened circles that constitute the social and intellectual elite of the nation. That is not to deny the correlations that exist in contemporary French society between intolerance to diversity and age, level of education, and perceived degradation of one's own financial well-being—all of which are well documented (Vie Publique, 2020, web). That is only to say that exclusive emphasis on such correlations obfuscates the deployment of racial thinking and racism in other milieux. In early modern France, just like in contemporary France, racial thinking and racism toward Afro-diasporic people was very much produced, consumed, and circulated by the powerful and the educated.

### 3 | “MADE IN FRANCE”: BLACKNESS IN EARLY MODERN PERFORMANCE CULTURE

In the late 1620s, the French State, in the person of Richelieu, embraced the colonial project and made no secret of it.<sup>5</sup> Interest in French Atlantic expansion was growing, and this evolution called for a paradigmatic shift in the representation of Black people on stage.<sup>6</sup> As the theatrical scene moved to Paris, in part under the impulse of Richelieu himself, the proximity between the stage and the siege of power increased, and the concentration of talented theatre professionals in the capital benefitted the development of court theatre. Afro-diasporic characters in blackface became a staple of court ballets in the 1620s. Court ballets, I argue, responded to the court's stance on French expansion in the Atlantic. They functioned as a laboratory where blackface (which had been in vogue in Norman theatre since the early years of the 17th century) could be rethought: where its semiotics and its politics with relation to Black people and the French body politic could be reconfigured.<sup>7</sup> That laboratory saw the development of an erotic hermeneutics of blackface that coded the subjugation, enslavement, and the alleged inferiority of sub-Saharan Africans in the French Atlantic in a celebratory mode, conveniently bypassing the question of coercion inherent in slavery. Such bypassing reconciled incompatible desires and ideals in a country that fiercely professed its theoretical attachment to the Freedom principle—the medieval tradition according to which no one could be enslaved on French soil.<sup>8</sup>

I will illustrate the ideological efficacy of the erotic hermeneutics of blackface with the case study of a ballet, *The Happy Shipwreck* [*Le ballet du naufrage heureux*], performed for the king in 1626, at the very same time when Richelieu started taking measures to revitalize the French navy. The plot that unfolds in Claude de l'Estoille's *libretto* is simple: a merchant first explains to the aristocratic ladies in the audience that his ship got wrecked.

*Du couroux du vent et des eaux  
Les richesses de mes vaisseaux  
N'ont pu iamais estre sauvées;  
Mais un plus grand bien m'est rendu  
Et ie croy vous ayant trouvées  
Que i'ay plus gagné que perdu.  
Mon pilote et mes matelots  
Et ceux qu'ils menoiert sur les flots  
Viendront bien tost vous rendre hommage.*

*The riches of my ships  
Could not be saved  
From the wrath of the wind and the sea.  
Yet I am receiving more precious ware in exchange now,  
And I believe that, having found you,  
I have gained more than I have lost.  
My pilot, my sailors,  
And all our passengers will shortly  
Come and pay homage to you.*

(L'Estoille, 1626, p. 3)

Breaking the fourth wall in order to woo the ladies in the audience was a generic requirement in court ballets; in this piece, it serves as narrative thread. In keeping with the merchant's promise, a series of characters performed by male aristocrats enter, dance, woo the Ladies, and exit, according to a serial logic of display. The passengers include "un preneur de tobac" ["a tobacco user"]—a commodity whose presence squarely locates the ballet in a transatlantic colonial space—, some "bourgeois," and a "un mondain" ["a worldly man"]. Then, some of the fantastic inhabitants of the shore where all those people got shipwrecked decide to woo the Ladies too: we now see "des fantosmes" ["ghosts"], "un furieux" ["a madman"], "un porteur de parasol" ["an umbrella carrier"], "des Pandoriens couverts de miroirs" ["Pandorians covered with mirrors"], "des hommes à trois visages" ["men with three faces"], "des hommes vestus des quatre éléments" ["men dressed with the four elements"], "des petits monstres" ["little monsters"], and finally, "les Mores" ["Moors"]. We know that those *Mores* stock characters were performed in *barbouillage* based on illustrations published for other ballets, such as the *Grand bal de la douairière de Billebahaut*, performed the very same year as *The Happy Shipwreck*. As Claude-François Ménéstrier wrote in 1682, in court ballets, "les Mores ont les cheveux courts et crespus, le visage et les mains noires, ils sont teste nue, à moins qu'on ne leur donnât un tourtil greslé de perles en forme de diadème; ils doivent porter des pendants d'oreilles" ["Moors have their hair short and frizzy, their face and hands black, and they go bare-headed, unless they wear a gold diadem with pearls; they must have earrings"; Ménéstrier, 1682, pp. 251–252]. The position of the black-skinned *Mores* in this serial logic is ambiguous: they could belong to the list of monstrous creatures living on the shore where the ship got wrecked, in line with medieval images of Africa, but they could also be part of the ship's cargo whose owner trades in the Atlantic, especially given the presence on board of an "umbrella carrier," a character typically represented as Black in early modern iconographic traditions.

In line with the Petrarchan motifs that permeate Renaissance court cultures, all of these ballet characters are “burning” with love for the ladies in the audience. Indeed, the libretto unfurls an obsessive poetics of burning: The Ladies in the audience seem to set everyone on fire. This poetics explains the position of the *Mores* at the end of the series on display: they are the culmination of this chain, for they bear the material mark of burning on their face. In a symbolic system where to love is to burn, characters in blackface covered with soot are the ultimate lovers:

*Beautez à qui rien n'est pareil,  
Vos yeux plus beaux que le soleil  
Plus que luy nous ont fait d'outrages,  
Cet astre a bien moins de rigueurs,  
Il n'a noircy que nos visages,  
Et vous avez bruslé nos coeurs.*

*Unparalleled beauties,  
Your eyes, more beauteous than the sun,  
Have also wronged us more.  
That star is more clement than you:  
It has only blackened our faces,  
While you have burnt our hearts.*

(L'Estoille, 1626, pp. 9–10)

Not content with symbolically mobilizing the ancient understanding of Ethiopian skin as burnt skin, Claude de l'Estoille revitalizes or performs it by having those *Mores* burn on stage. Indeed, immediately after the *Mores'* declaration, an Alchemist enters, clearly a charlatan:

*le fais distiller nuict et jour  
Des eaux pour faire des pommades  
Qui peuvent guérir nuict et jour  
Tous ceux qui n'en sont point malades.*

*I distill night and day  
Waters to make unguents  
That can cure by night or day  
Anyone they do not make sick.*

(L'Estoille, 1626, p.10)

Given the absence of any fourth wall in ballets, it is likely that the ladies in the audience had expressed some rejection of the *Mores'* wooing through bodily or verbal language: the Alchemist, moved by the *Mores'* plight, decides to help the Black men by re-casting them.

*le veux fondre dans mes fourneaux  
Ces pauvres amans misérables  
Et rendray ces Mores plus beaux,  
Qu'ils ne semblent dés-agréables.  
le veux que charmant tous les yeux  
Ils soient vainqueurs de leurs Maistresses*

*Et bien qu'ils ne soient pas des Dieux,  
Ils posséderont ces Déesses.*

*I want to melt in my furnaces  
Those miserable lovers,  
And I will make those Mores look more handsome  
Than they look ugly now.  
I want for them to charm all eyes  
And vanquish their mistresses:  
Though they be no gods,  
They shall possess those goddesses.*

(L'Estoille, 1626, p. 11)

The *libretto's* allusion to the Mores' "ugliness" suggest that the specific cosmetic conventions used to perform those characters, even though they differed from conventions that would develop in later centuries, conveyed a clear sense of racialized deformity. Desperate to please the white ladies seated in the audience, the *Mores* submit to the charlatan's proposed cure for Blackness. The Alchemist melts them in his furnace, and the *Mores* rejoice in the process, thinking of the pleasures that will ensue from their absorption into whiteness. The process proves lethal, illustrating the solidity of the Pan-European early modern proverb on the vanity of "seeking to wash an Ethiop white." The *Mores'* death is announced by a coal bearer who enters—his own face likely smeared with coal—exposes the *Mores'* hearts, and delivers the ballet's final lines:

*En portant ce Charbon, ie tremble à tous moments,  
Et soudain tout plaisir loing de moy se recule;  
Car ce Charbon n'est fait que des cœurs des Amans  
Que l'Amour a bruslez comme encore me brusle.*

*As I carry this coal, I keep trembling,  
And suddenly, all pleasures run away from me,  
For this coal is made of the lovers' hearts  
That love burnt the way it burns me now.*

(L'Estoille, 1626, p. 12)

This erotic hermeneutics of blackface exemplarily articulated in *The Happy Shipwreck* features in at least thirty extant *libretti* written between 1620 and 1650<sup>9</sup>—and there must have been more.

The ideological dimension of the erotic hermeneutics of blackface hinges on the power structure tying the *Mores* to the white ladies in the audience: the absolute submission of those Black characters to their "maistresses" [mistresses] is key. Emblematically, in *Le Grand ballet des effets de la nature* [*Nature's Effects*], 1632, a "neigre" ["Negro"] tells his *maîtresse*:

*Si cette couleur que je porte  
Est aussi sombre qu'un cercueil;  
C'est que mon corps porte le deuil  
De ce que sa franchise est morte.*

*If the color that I am wearing  
Is as dark as a coffin*

*It is because my body is mourning  
The death of its freedom.*

(“Effets,” 1968, p.206)

In this context the polysemy of the term “*maîtresse*” conjures up slavery. While the *Mores* use the rhetoric of courtly love to woo their potential mistresses, they also literally offer themselves as slaves to the French aristocrats in the audience. In *La boutade des Maures esclaves d'Amour délivrés par Bacchus* (1609), the *Mores* conclude: “*Nous sommes trop heureux et nous aimons nos chaînes / quand nous avons l'honneur de les porter pour vous*” [“We are overjoyed and we love our shackles / when we have the honor to wear them for you”; Boutade, 1609, p. 1]. The erotic hermeneutics of blackface thus constituted an interactive ideological device that interpellated ballet spectators as proto-colonial and pro-slavery agents. In no single ballet do we find an overt representation of enslaved people, but in virtually every single ballet displaying *Mores* in *barbouillage*, we find this complete and willing erotic submission of the sub-Saharan African man—prince, ambassador, or commoner—to the white female aristocrat, and this erotic relation displaces the unrepresentable relation of slavery. The framing of the master-slave relation in erotic terms allows ballet performances to celebrate French fantasies of becoming an enslaving colonial power without explicitly doing so. That representational strategy bypasses the problematic notion of coercion inherent in slavery by means of what Stuart Hall calls fetishism: “Fetishism takes us to the field where fantasy intervenes in representation; to the level where what is shown or seen, in representation, can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown. Fetishism involves the substitution of an object for some powerful but forbidden force” (Hall, 1997, p. 266).

Sylvie Chalaye insightfully suggested 20 years ago that French “*mauvaise conscience*” [“bad conscience”] accounted for the absence of realistic representations of Africans in early modern performances: “*Il faut croire que ces Noirs dont trafique la Compagnie de Guinée sont devenus suffisamment dérangeants pour que l'univers du divertissement et des spectacles les évite. C'est pourquoi on relève, à l'évidence, une réticence à montrer sur scène des rôles d'authentiques Africains. Le More reste délibérément, dans l'ordre de la représentation, une image inventée dont on sait finalement qu'elle ne correspond pas à la réalité*” [“it seems that the Blacks traded by *La Compagnie de Guinée* had become troubling enough for the world of entertainment and spectacle to avoid them. This is why we can observe an obvious reluctance to put on stage parts of authentic Africans. The Moor deliberately remains, in the realm of representation, a made-up image, which people knew did not match reality”; Chalaye, 1998, p. 65]. It should be clear by now that, unlike Chalaye, I find that representations of Africans in court ballets and, by extension, in commercial drama produced between 1620 and 1670 *did* obliquely address issues of Blackness, race, and slavery as it developed in the colonies—and it is that very obliqueness which is meaningful and symptomatic. As colonial expansion promised to become a reality, French fantasies of exploiting Afro-diasporic people in the Atlantic egregiously contradicted the national myth of the Freedom Principle, which Renaissance jurists had defended, and which was perceived as integral to French cultural identity. Blackfaced ballet *Mores* crystallize this contradiction and sidestep it gracefully.

Court ballets had a limited audience but that audience belonged to circles of power able to influence national and colonial policies: Louis XIII, the King who saw *The Happy Shipwreck* among so many other blackface ballets would eventually legalize slave trade in the French colonies—far from the metropole's eyes—in 1642. This should lead us to nuance Foucault's argument that, although racism and anti-Semitism existed long before the rise of biopower in the mid-18th century (Foucault, 2012, p. 60, p. 168), only in the 19th century did “race wars” become part of the basic mechanisms or technology of State power (Foucault, 2012, p. 171). A focus on the soft data of French theatre and performance history shows that racist representations were part of the mental universe of the very circles close or integral to the State that would engineer measures participating in the rise of biopower as early as the first half of the 17th century.



## 4 | CONCLUSION: UN-SILENCING THE PAST

Unearthing the ideological mechanisms of *barbouillage* in early modern French performance culture means rewriting as an age of race-making a period often construed as a cultural and literary golden age that still plays a central role in definitions of French heritage and identity today. That episode of French cultural history, once reclaimed, puts to rest the seasonal controversies about the use of blackface in events such as the annual carnival of Dunkerque, and it forces us to reflect upon the investments that have long conditioned historiographic and pedagogical silences. Ignoring *ancien régime* blackface, keeping it at a safe distance from 21st century curricula, and discounting critiques leveraged at 21st century blackface as historically inaccurate importations of American culture is a *modus operandi* rooted, at the subconscious and collective level, in a refusal to face uncomfortable facts about the long French history of racism against Afro-diasporic people. The erotic hermeneutic configuration of *barbouillage* in early modern French ballets did not originate anywhere else. French aspirations to compete with colonial empires—Iberian, Dutch, and, to a lesser extent, English—that could not function without color-based slavery troubled what early modern France knew about itself as a champion of the Freedom Principle. Similarly, the notion of the *Grand Siècle* as an age of race-making troubles what we think we know about France as an all-time anti-racist champion of rationalism, universalism, and color-blindness. But, unlike in the early modern period, obliqueness is no longer a viable option today: as France's demographics are becoming increasingly diverse, sidestepping race-related ideological contradictions in a graceful and fetishistic manner simply will not do anymore.<sup>10</sup> There is every reason to rejoice over that forced reckoning. 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.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The term first appears, to the best of my knowledge in Michel de L'Hospital's letter to Cardinal du Bellay (c.1560), where he calls attending a theatrical performance: “*Le plus étonnant, ce fut le personnage de Lucifer, avec ses cornes sur le front, son visage barbouillé de noir charbon, sa queue déroulant ses longs anneaux.*” [“the most striking element was the character of Lucifer, with horns on his forehead, his face all smeared with charcoal, and his coiled tail”] (Lebègue, 1953, p. 104). The term appears in 17th century play texts to refer to characters whose skin has been cosmetically darkened, such as a so-called “Gypsy” woman in Adrien de Montluc's (1654) *La Comédie des Proverbes*, for instance.
- <sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations from French into English are my own.
- <sup>3</sup> “*L'existence d'une telle lacune jusqu'à une date récente a de quoi surprendre. L'idée de race serait-elle trop contraire au dogme de l'égalité naturelle de hommes, en honneur en France depuis la fin du 18e siècle, pour avoir pu susciter une étude objective? ... le refus de comprendre va parfois jusqu'à l'aveuglement pur et simple.*” [“The existence of such a lacuna until very recently is surprising. Would the idea of race be too contrary to the dogma of natural equality between men, which has been revered in France since the 18th century, to have inspired objective scholarship? . . . The refusal to understand sometimes amount to willful blindness.”; Jouanna, 1976, pp. 8–9].
- <sup>4</sup> For example, in her brilliant investigation of the mutual genesis of racial and sexual discourse in the early modern Francophone world, *La matrice de la race* (2009), Elsa Dorlin devotes the first half of the book to exploring the cultural definition of women's bodies as “unhealthy” in the 16th and 17th centuries. The racial part of her argument, however, which highlights how a focus on white women's bodies was used to practice eugenics in the colonies and shape the Nation's body there first, focuses on post-1750 materials. Dorlin thus covers the totality of the *ancien régime*, yet barely touches upon the 16th and 17th centuries when it comes to conceptions of Blackness.
- <sup>5</sup> In 1626, Richelieu launched a long-term multi-fronted program to revitalize the French navy, take control of the seas, and bring Bourbon France onto the international stage. He granted charters and trade monopolies to commercial companies targeting specific overseas areas including West Africa, the Antilles, French North America, and the whole region between the North bank of the Amazon and the Orinoco. Richelieu was the most important associate of the St Christophe Company: he contributed almost a quarter to the company's total capital stock.

- <sup>6</sup> In literary studies, Michèle Longino has seminally explored the role of the Orient in fashioning early modern French colonial identity and practices of Othering (Longino, 2002), while scholars such as Sarah Melzer have explored France's engagement with its own history of colonization as it made claims to the New World (Melzer, 2012). Missing from this account of early modern French coloniality, however, is an account of France's engagement with the enslaved sub-Saharan people that its colonial project needed, and without whom French coloniality cannot adequately be conceived.
- <sup>7</sup> On the politics of blackface in Norman, baroque, and neoclassical theatre, see my forthcoming monograph. *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> The Freedom Principle originated in a 1315 ordinance in which Louis X gave serfs the possibility to buy their own freedom, and automatically freed enslaved people who would set foot in France, playing up the homophony between the name of the country and the idea of "enfranchisement." The Freedom Principle features in the work of major early modern jurists such as Jean Bodin (Bodin, 1577) and Antoine Loysel (Loysel, 1607), and it was reasserted in 1571, when a court of law in Bordeaux forbade a Norman merchant from selling enslaved Black people there because "La France, mère de liberté, ne permet aucuns esclaves" ["France, the Mother of Liberty, does not allow for slaves"].
- <sup>9</sup> The erotic hermeneutics of *barbouillage* can be traced to performances that precede the 1620s, such as *Pour des Masques assez hideux et sauvages* (1601), or *La boutade des Maures esclaves d'Amour délivrés par Bacchus* (1609), but it is only in the 1620s that hermeneutics became a staple of court ballets. It can also be found in later pieces, such as *Proverbs [Ballet des Proverbs]*, which was performed at the Duke of Nancy's court in 1665.
- <sup>10</sup> As Myriam Cottias puts it, "L'histoire objective ou subjective dominante a ainsi toujours fait silence sur une histoire de l'esclavage, et plus largement, une histoire coloniale qui revient en force actuellement pour interroger et secouer l'universalisme républicain car de nombreux acteurs de la société française en sont porteurs" ["objective history, or rather, dominant subjective history, has always silenced the history of slavery, and more generally, of colonial history, which is now back with a vengeance to interrogate and shake up republican universalism, because many agents of French society carry that history" (Cottias, 2007, p. 93).

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