

Race and transnational theater

Noémie Ndiaye

The development of racial thinking and the invention of white supremacy in early modernity were transnational phenomena, which means that they can only be fully understood through transnational approaches. Because early modern Europe was in the early phases of creating and maintaining national identities and colonial powers, studying the interaction between the literatures, performances, cultures, and texts produced in different parts of Europe reveals a more complete story than studying them in isolation. So, when it comes to understanding the development of racial thinking and the propagation of white supremacy, it is not a luxury to take a transnational approach. It is vital because racial thinking grew not out of one specific canon, but from the interaction of many cultures through time and space.

For example, did you know that *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's very own *Titus Andronicus*, a play that is critical to the study of race in early modern literature, was a product of a transnational network of texts? There is an anonymous French play that was published in 1613 called *La Tragédie française du More cruel*, *The French Tragedy of The Cruel War*, in which the protagonist, an enslaved black Muslim man, avenges himself from the wrongs that his white Spanish enslaver inflicted upon him on the island of Mallorca. It's an incredible play. I'm currently translating it into English for publication. That play was based on an Italian novella that dramatized Spanish events. And when you

look closely at the plot, it is clear that the French play is the twin of an English play based upon the same Italian source text, namely Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. This example tells us that historical events, conceptual frameworks, narratives, and aesthetic forms circulated across Europe, circulated across Spain, Italy, France, England, and beyond. That circulation created the conditions in which cultural and political thoughts spread throughout Europe's many nations and languages. In turn, that osmosis of cultural knowledge allowed for the rise of early modern white supremacy.

Transnational approaches to theater allow for the study of cultural idiosyncrasies and transmissions that are often unseen or ignored when studied in the traditional silos of national canons. For example, when studying "moresche" songs and their performances outside of Naples, I discovered evidence of a vocal technique of racial impersonation that would not have been identified had I studied those songs in their traditional boundaries.

"Moresche" songs were secular popular songs written in the Neapolitan dialect. In Naples, they flourished in the mid 16th century. They dramatized comic scenes of courtship within the early modern Afro-Neapolitan community. You get some very profane, borderline salacious dialogues between the stock characters of Giorgio and Catalina, who sing with a thick mock-African accent. Those songs contain words lifted from the Kanuri language that was spoken in the empire of Bornu (now Northeastern Nigeria). That region was involved in the Trans-Saharan slave trade, and so it provided early modern Naples with a large segment of its enslaved population. "Moresche" songs were a creolized version of the oral techniques used in Iberian performance culture to represent West African characters, a creole technique produced in the outpost of the Spanish empire that was early modern Naples.

The most famous “moresche” songs to have reached us were those composed by Flemish-born composer Orlando di Lasso for the German wedding of Wilhelm V. The description of that wedding and its entertainments is available: it was published in 1582 by the Italian composer and poet Massimo Troiano. And what is most interesting to me about that historical episode is the fact that di Lasso thought that Afro-Neapolitan “moresche” songs would entertain a German-speaking audience, even though the songs’ humor could only be appreciated by people familiar with the standard Neapolitan dialect. According to Troiano, these wedding guests knew too little Italian to even understand what the *commedia dell’arte* skits that were part of the wedding entertainments meant! But di Lasso knew what he was doing.

Troiano mentions in his description of the wedding performances that these “moresche” songs were performed, I quote, by “six wind instruments that accompanied six select and sonorous voices,” unquote. Troiano doesn’t comment on the quality of any other performers’ voices in the rest of these fairly long wedding descriptions. And so I came to speculate on the existence of a technique of black timbral impersonation, which is what musicologist Nina Eidsheim calls “acousmatic Blackness.” You can think of it as the “Amy Winehouse effect.” My idea is that timbral impersonation, which is not something that race scholars working in any early modern linguistic traditions have noticed, is what constituted the appeal of “moresche” for an audience unfamiliar with the Neapolitan soundscape.

Once documented in Troiano’s text, the response from the German audiences makes this instance of racial impersonation perceptible. This is an example of a moment when reading a performance through a transnational lens can reveal an important dimension of that very performance that would have gone unseen in its original, nationally bounded context.