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Ella Shohat¹The Specter Of The Blackamoor: Figuring Africa And The Orient²*O Espectro de Backamoor: Entendendo a África e o Oriente*

Abstract

To speak of the Blackamoor figure is to speak of several intertwined imaginaries, especially along the East/West and North/South double geographical axis. A hybrid of the African Black and the Muslim Moor, the Blackamoor figure condenses representations often conceptualized in isolation within the compartmentalized cartographies of the various Area Studies. Scrutiny of the Blackamoor, in this sense, helps shed light on forgotten discursive continuities as well as on historical connectivities across continents and oceans; in this case, those operating along the winding Mediterranean shores of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Manufactured in European workshops, the Blackamoor can on one level be analyzed as part of an ornamental art that reflects various aesthetic tendencies while also reflecting the taste of its producers and consumers. On another level, the Blackamoor can be examined critically, as a stereotypical imaging of the racialized and gendered Black body. Here, however, I will pose a different set of questions: Can the putatively reassuring and domesticated Blackamoor also be viewed as a visual manifestation of an ongoing European anxiety about its "others?" Might this image of Blackamoor docility testify indirectly to a doubly repressed fear toward the neighboring continents of Africa and Asia? Could the apparent civility of the ornamental Blackamoor mask anxieties about racial mixing, cultural syncretism, and intellectual influence?

Palavras-chave

Eurocentrism. Racialization. Orientalism. Exotica. Mimesis. Syncretism

Resumo

Falar da figura de Blackamoor é falar de vários imaginários entrelaçados, especialmente ao longo do duplo eixo geográfico Leste / Oeste e Norte / Sul. Híbrida do negro africano e do mouro muçulmano, a figura de Blackamoor condensa representações frequentemente conceituadas isoladamente nas cartografias compartimentadas dos vários estudos de área. O escrutínio dos Blackamoor, nesse sentido, ajuda a lançar luz sobre continuidades discursivas esquecidas, bem como sobre conectividades históricas entre continentes e oceanos; neste caso, aqueles que operam ao longo das costas sinuosas do Mediterrâneo da Europa, África e Ásia. Fabricados em oficinas européias, o Blackamoor pode, em um nível, ser analisado como parte de uma arte ornamental que reflete várias tendências estéticas e também reflete o gosto de seus produtores e consumidores. Em outro nível, o Blackamoor pode ser examinado criticamente, como uma imagem estereotipada do corpo negro racializado e de gênero. Aqui, no entanto, colocarei um conjunto diferente de perguntas: o Blackamoor, aparentemente tranquilizador e domesticado, também pode ser visto como uma manifestação visual de uma contínua ansiedade européia em relação aos seus "outros?" medo em relação aos continentes vizinhos da África e da Ásia? Poderia a aparente civilidade dos Blackamoor ornamentais mascarar as ansiedades sobre mistura racial, sincretismo cultural e influência intelectual?

Palavras-chave

Eurocentrismo. Racialização. Orientalismo. Exotica. Mimesis. Sincretismo

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To speak of the Blackamoor figure is to speak of several intertwined imaginaries, especially along the East/West and North/South double geographical axis. A hybrid of the African Black and the Muslim Moor, the Blackamoor figure condenses representations often conceptualized in isolation within the compartmentalized cartographies of the various Area Studies. Scrutiny of the Blackamoor, in this sense, helps shed light on forgotten discursive continuities as well as on historical connectivities across continents and oceans; in this case, those operating along the winding Mediterranean shores of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Manufactured in European workshops, the Blackamoor can on one level be analyzed as part of an ornamental art that reflects various aesthetic tendencies while also reflecting the taste of its producers and consumers. On another level, the Blackamoor can be examined critically, as a stereotypical imaging of the racialized and gendered Black body. Here, however, I will pose a different set of questions: Can the putatively reassuring and domesticated Blackamoor also be viewed as a visual manifestation of an ongoing European anxiety about its "others?" Might this image of Blackamoor docility testify indirectly to a doubly repressed fear toward the neighboring continents of Africa and Asia? Could the apparent civility of the ornamental Blackamoor mask anxieties about racial mixing, cultural syncretism, and intellectual influence?

Exotica As Historical Erasure

As a cross between the iconographies of "the Black" and "the Moor," this phantasmatic figure acts as a recurrent reminder of the geographical proximity between the shores of Europe and Africa to the South, and Asia to the East, thus evoking the Western trope of "the-barbarians-at-the-gate," whether the gate be that of Vienna, or the straits of Gibraltar, or the Dardanelles. (Centuries after the Inquisition and the Expulsion of the Moors, the new immigrant barbarians from the South clamor at the gates of Fortress Europe.) As polished icons in domestic metropolitan spaces, Blackamoor statues have a fraught relation to Europe's own self-definition, especially in the wake of colonialism and its "civilizing mission." Conceived together within a shared Eurocentric vision, Africa and Asia were often housed under the same academic umbrella within post-Enlightenment Orientalist scholarship—evidenced, for example, in the very institutionalization of the University of London's "School of Oriental and African Studies." The worlds associated with Africa and Asia, meanwhile, had been sharing a long history grounded in trade exchange and cultural traffic. Until the 1869 digging of the Suez Canal—which connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and to the Indian Ocean, and facilitated the navigation of the maritime route to the "The Jewel in the Crown"—the continents of Africa and Asia had formed part of a geographical continuum.

Associated with the grandeur of the Suez Canal-opening era, Giuseppe

Verdi's *Aïda* was first performed at the newly built Khedivial Opera House in Cairo in 1871 as a celebration of progress and the new imperial world order. Inspired by archeological discoveries, *Aïda*'s scenario, written by the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette, told a story of ancient Egyptians who capture and enslave an Ethiopian princess, *Aïda*.¹ In this instance of the modern staging of the archaic, the Romantic investment in civilizational origins was merged with the triumphant march of science through twinned and parallel forms of digging—the past-oriented diggings of archeology and the future-oriented diggings practiced by engineering. Conducted by colonial powers, the forward-looking canal project in fact resurrected prior endeavors traced back all the way to antiquity. An historically earlier digging of another “Suez canal,” connecting the Nile to the Bitter Lakes and these to the Red Sea, occurred already in seventh century BC on the orders of Pharaoh Necho II and was later completed by Darius I of Persia.² Egyptologists often saw themselves as rescuing ancient civilization from the neglect of contemporary Egyptians, deemed unaware of the value of antiquity's treasures on which they happened to “sit,” thus providing imperial authorities with an alibi to possess the relics of ancient civilizations.

The commissioning of the Italian composer Verdi was also not without its echoes of regional antecedents. In 1574, the idea of digging a canal through the Suez was discussed by the Council of Ten by the Republic of Venice, but the canal never materialized due to projected high costs.³ Venice, as we know, enjoyed commercial links with the East dating back at least to Marco Polo's voyage. Polo's importation of the Chinese noodle transformed Italian cuisine, just as Columbus's “discovery of America” and its tomato, pepper, and corn added new dishes and flavors. The port of Venice, we may recall, was linked to the East and its riches, impacting Venetian cuisine (the Levant's nougat sweet) and decorative taste (the Orient's silk tapestry and embroidery), reflected in the artifacts adapted to regional Italian aesthetics surrounding the Blackamoor statues. Indeed, Shakespeare's plays staged this Eastern and African presence in Venice in *The Merchant of Venice* and in *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. *Aïda* could be regarded as a crescendo in the Italian celebration of the imperial division of the Afro-Asia continent. Yet, Verdi's sturm-und-drang spectacle of ancient Africa masked a contemporary Egyptian tragedy: the deaths of Egyptian laborers sacrificed on the altar of the feats of modern engineering. The dramatic contrast between the heroism of civilizational achievements and its repressed barbarism is similarly embedded in the Blackamoor figure. As an icon of stoic pacificity, the Blackamoor figure is intriguing for its repression of a violent history of kidnapping, forced labor, and enslavement, all “disappeared” from view in the face of the images of happy servitude gracing the halls of European mansions.

Alongside the artificial parting of the continents, Asia and Africa continued to be regarded as “outside of history”—as unself-conscious primordial civilizations to be explored and excavated, with the findings to be displayed in Western museums and expositions. Thus, to think of the Blackamoor after the emergence

1- Edward Said, “The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*,” *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993).

2- Encyclopedia Britannica
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/407681/Necho-II>;
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/151591/Darius-I/1715/Darius-as-an-administrator>

3- http://www.napoleon.org/en/special_dossier/suez/html-content/chrono/index.html



of colonialism inevitably leads us to think about the ways in which Blackness and Moorishness came into consciousness with and through each other as the exotic reverse-image of Western Reason. The Eurocentric vision of the Orient and sub-Saharan Africa engendered the Black and the Moor as two otherized and yet entangled figures of race (Blackness) and religion (Islam). Even apart from the Blackamoor, Orientalist paintings of Ottoman and Maghrebian locales, for example, often included visibly Black figures as chromatic variations in a colorful harem spectacle. Numerous on-location paintings and staged photographs set in Algiers, Fez, or Istanbul, “revealed” an inaccessible world inhabited by reclining Odalisques, featuring various “exotic” looks. In this sense, the Blackamoor extends the gendered racialization—and the engendering—not only of sub-Saharan Africa but also of the Orient. The Blackamoor thus has to be seen as a specific figure within the larger spectrum of colonial exotica and, at times, erotica. The ornamental domesticity of the Blackamoor reflects a Eurocentric imaginary that binaristically posits “the West” as imperious “mind” and theoretical refinement, and “the non-West” as servile “body” and unrefined raw material.

The servitude of the Blackamoor both in narrative content (depicted as carrying trays, or holding other functional objects such as boxes, clocks, and lamps) and in artistic form (decorative domestic ornament) fixes its presence in courtly spaces as a foreign body redeemed only through the implied submissiveness of a servile posture. In many ways, the comforting fiction of the happily serving Blackamoor silently testifies to the West’s denial of Africa and Asia’s contribution to Europe’s own cultural and scientific achievements. Yet during long historical periods Europe was largely a borrower of science and technology: the alphabet, algebra, and astronomy all came from outside Europe, including Dogon astronomy, Chinese gunpowder, compass, and printing press. Prior to and subsequent to the Columbus conquest era, Iberian Muslim and Jewish thinkers led advances in navigation and cartography. Even

the caravels used by Henry the navigator were modeled after lateen-sailed Arab dhows.⁴ Indeed, for some historians the first item of technology exported from Europe was a clock, in 1338.⁵ Within this *longue durée* of syncretism, the trope of the submissive Blackamoor constitutes a visual vehicle for rewriting history Eurocentrically as though all ideas and innovations originated alone and unaided in the West.⁶ The proximity between the shores of Europe and Africa to the south and Asia to the east in many ways has continued to haunt the European definition of self, and the West’s metanarrative of modernity. At the same time, however, even apart from colonial discourse and the Orientalist imaginary, the regions were historically hardly isolatable. In addition to the tri-continental Mediterranean syncretism, Asia and Africa witnessed cultural, religious, commercial, and militarily cross-regional movements and interactions, whether via continental continuities, such as North Africa and sub-Sahara, or via maritime links between, for example, East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Thus Asia and Africa were not only subjected to related Eurocentric discourses but they were also historical

4- John Merson, *Road to Xanadu: East and West in the Making of the Modern World* (London: Weidefeld and Nicolson, 1989).

5- Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy 1000-1700* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1976).

6- On the critique of Eurocentric epistemology, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (London: Routledge, 1994).

participants in the *longue durée* of cultural syncretism that itself impacted Europe. The figure of the Blackamoor, in other words, appeared in a context of global movement of goods, ideas, and peoples, which accelerates with colonial modernity.

Although cultural intercourse and racial mixing date back to antiquity, with modernity that history was rewritten through the grid of Eurocentric normativities. History was recast to conform to Eurocentric perspective, in the name of an eternal “West” unique since its moment of conception. Whole continents, in contrast, were turned into everlasting “slave continents.” In historical and discursive terms, the advent of colonialism inspired a retroactive rewriting of Asian and African histories and their relation to classical Greco-Roman civilization. In *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal distinguishes between the “ancient model,” which simply assumed classical Greek civilization’s deep indebtedness to both African (Egyptian and Ethiopian) and Semitic (Hebraic and Phoenician) civilizations—and the “Aryan model” that developed in the wake of slavery and colonialism.⁷ The Aryan model had to perform ingenious acrobatics to “purify” classical Greece—and by implication modern Europe—of all African and Asian “contaminations.” It had to explain away, for example, the innumerable Greek homages to Afro-Asiatic cultures, Homer’s description of the “blameless Ethiopians,” Biblical Moses’ marriage to a daughter of Kush, and the frequent references to the “kalos kagathos” (handsome and good) Africans in classical literature.⁸ Ancient Greece, supposedly the fount of universal civilization, was not then a proto-Europe; Greece, and for that matter the southern Mediterranean as a whole, was itself African, Semitic, and Asian, looking both east and west.

The exotic Blackamoor is embedded in a “Eurotropic discourse”⁹ that has systematically degraded Africa and Asia as deficient according to Europe’s own arbitrary criteria (the presence of monumental architecture, literate culture) and hierarchies (melody over percussion, brick over thatch, clothing over body decoration). Yet even by these dubious standards, pre-colonial Africa was clearly a continent of rich and diverse cultures—the scene of high material achievements (witness the ruins of Zimbabwe), widespread commercial exchange, complex religious beliefs and social systems, and diverse forms of writing (pictograms, ideograms, object scripts such as Alele and Ngombo). Scholars have also established the complexity of Dogon astronomical knowledge: the *sigui* ritual, introduced by the mythical ancestor of the Dogons, Dyongu Seru, has been found to analogize and reflect the orbiting cycle of the star Sirius B.¹⁰ And the Moorish Spaniard Leo Africanus, writing in the early sixteenth century, described the “magnificent and well-furnished court” of the King of Timbuktu, and “the great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men ... bountifully maintained at the King’s cost and charges.”¹¹ The idea that Europe has somehow produced knowledge and culture *sui-generis* is therefore a myth, since such cultural interchanges always constituted inter-civilizational joint ventures.

There had been considerable contact between Africa and Europe over the centuries, and the state of development of the two continents, prior to 1492, was

7- Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1987).

8- Frank M. Snowden, Jr. documents contacts between the Africans of Kush and the Egyptians, Syrians, Greeks, and Romans from the third millennium BC onwards, in *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

9- On the concept of Eurotropic discourse, see Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Post-colonial Atlantic* (NY: New York University Press, 2012).

10- Rouch filmed the ritual in 1967 in the film *La Caverne de Bongo* (1969). V.Y. Mudimbe sums up some of the debates about the Dogon in *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

11- Leo Africanus, *History and Description of Africa*, quoted in David Killingray, *A Plague of Europeans: Westerners in Africa Since the 15th Century* (NY: Penguin Books, 1974), 12-13.



12- John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 43-71.

13- Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (London: Zed Press, 1983), 4.

14- On the African influence on modern dance, see Brenda Dixon, "The Afrocentric Paradigm," *Design for Arts in Education* 92 (Jan/Feb 1991), 15-22. Ruth St. Denis's oriental mélange, I would argue, must be seen within the context of the coming-to-America of Arab belly dancers via the diverse expositions, which staged the orient in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century. Documented on film (*Fatima*, 1897) belly dance inspired the "hoochie-coochie" craze, blending the Orientalism of "exotic" dances into the American burlesque. See Ella Shohat, "Gender and the Culture of Empire," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 131:1-2 (Spring 1991), 45-84, and in *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

relatively equal. Africa had a varied and productive economy, with strong metallurgical and textile industries. Africans developed ironworking and blast furnace technology even before 600 B.C., prefiguring techniques used in Europe only in the nineteenth century.¹² The textile exports of the Eastern Kongo, in the early seventeenth century, were as large as those of European textile-manufacturing centers such as Leiden. Indeed, in the early years of the Atlantic trade, Europe had little to sell Africa that Africa did not already produce. The "inferiority" of Africa and the African was thus an ideological invention. It demanded, Cedric Robinson puts it, the eradication within Western historical consciousness of "the significance of Nubia for Egypt's formation, of Egypt in the development of Greek civilization, of Africa for imperial Rome, and more pointedly of Islam's influence on Europe's economic, political and intellectual history."¹³ The point here is not that Africa should be complimented for "satisfying" competitive Eurocentric criteria for "civilization." Rather, it is to call attention to the constructed nature of the supposedly unbridgeable gap between Europe and Africa.

Given this Eurocentric rewriting of history, the servility of the Blackamoor in both content and in form comes to allegorize a blinkered vision of "the West" as the center of ideas and "the rest" as passive vessels. The denial of cultural syncretism and racial/ethnic mixing, from antiquity to modernity, must be seen within the broader context of the rise of colonialism, and the emergence of a Eurocentric epistemology that insisted on the essentialist hierarchical division of civilizations. Although an ethnocentric narrative constructs an artificial wall of separation between European and non-European cultures, in fact Europe itself is a synthesis of many cultures, Western and non-Western. The notion of a "pure" Europe originating in classical Greece, suggested earlier, is premised on crucial exclusions from the African and Asiatic influences that shaped classical Greece itself, to the osmotic Sephardi-Judaic-Islamic culture that played such a crucial role during the so-called "Dark Ages" (an ethnocentric label for a period of Oriental ascendancy), the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. The movement of aesthetic ideas has always been (at least) two-way, whence the Moorish influence on the poetry of courtly love, the African influence on modernist painting, the impact of Asian forms (Kabuki, Noh Drama, Balinese theatre, ideographic writing) on Western theatre and film, and the influence of Asian and African dance forms on such choreographers as Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, and George Ballanchine.¹⁴ As a figure of exotica and servitude, the Blackamoor cements this unspoken long history of Africa and Asia in Europe, whether through ideas, materials, objects, or people. Even as a phatasmatic figure, the Blackamoor implicitly evokes the presence of Africans and Asians in Europe, reminding us that a homogenous pure West is a geographical fiction that flattens the cultural and racial diversity even of Europe itself.

Eurocentric thought is premised on denying its debt to other cultural-geographies. The display of the Blackamoor is a product of this segregationist logic that ignores the question of cultural syncretism, especially within the space

of the Mediterranean. Like most cultural geographies, the Mediterranean world is complex: the porous cultural borders between the civilizations of ancient Greece and Egypt, and generally between the North and South shores of the Mediterranean, allowed for tension, dialogue, borrowing, and, ultimately, mutual transformation, exchanges that intensified with modernity. Asians and Africans were a presence in Europe already in antiquity, at a time when Blackness was not yet racialized within the negative dialectic of colonial enslavements.¹⁵ Yet, the otherization of the Blackamoor has the effect of suggesting that both Blacks and Moors did not “really” have a history in Europe. Coupled with this axiom is the implicit notion of “pure White blood” and “pure European culture.” Post-Enlightenment nineteenth century anthropological discourses, attuned only to ethno-cultural genealogies and to the mapping of fixed and essentialist notions of identity, impacted and petrified, as it were, the configuring of European versus Black/Moorish cultural belonging. Rather than think of the Blackamoor as simply “an other in Europe” we could recast the figure as the testimony to the continuous inter-mingling of cultures and civilizations. Travel, commerce, learning, translation, conquest, along with rape, sex, and marriage, all resulted in new unions and the amalgamation of populations and cultures. The East-versus-West or North-versus-South dichotomies, in sum, are misleading when we take on board a millennial history of social *mélange*. A more historicized view of the Blackamoor would locate the figure within a dynamic, dialogical, and fluid conception of cultural history.

Despite such racial/ethnic hybridity, cultural syncretism, and the multi-directional flow of ideas, Eurocentric epistemology has been premised on the denial of this history. The simultaneous otherization of “the Black” and “the Orient” underscores this ongoing anxiety about acknowledging the amalgamation of the north and south, or the west and east, of the Mediterranean basin from antiquity to the present.¹⁶ In many ways the servile Blackamoor is a figure of disavowal; its hybrid exoticism is undergirded by a narcissistic vision that charts a unidirectional map of the flow of ideas.¹⁷ Under the tutelage of the West, dark bodies had everything to learn from Europe but Europe had nothing to learn from Afro-Asia. Blackamoor paintings and statues are hypervisible against the backdrop of the European aristocratic mansion, but they render invisible what the cradle of the Renaissance owes intellectually to Africans and Asians. Their presumed “outsideness” quarantines Europe from the eastern and southern Mediterranean shores, whether in antiquity or in the modern era. Nonetheless, the examples of fusion and hybridity are legion. In Spain, in the wake of the *limpieza de sangre*, the Moors and Sephardi-Jews who were forced to convert—known as the *conversos* and *moriscos*—remained and lived throughout Iberia, assuming their new official identities while also carrying on elements of their culture even if only in secrecy. *Conversos* and *moriscos* and their descendents assimilated but simultaneously left a legacy that transformed Iberian culture itself. Like the captive Moors who stayed in Europe, *conversos* and *moriscos* became an integral part of Europe, although

15- On the modern projection of race on antiquity, especially within the Mediterranean cultural geography, see Ella Shohat, “Disorienting Cleopatra: A Modern Trope of Identity” in *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

16- See, for example, Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

17- For a broader argument on the multi-directional flow of ideas, see: Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).



18- The Arabic Kufic script, which was based on straight and angular strokes, was imitated by European art during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Within non-Arabic context it is known as "pseudo-Kufic," or "Kufesque," usually seen in depictions of Holy Land figures, such as the Virgin Mary. On this case of Islamic influence on Christian art, see Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300–1600*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

19- On the Arab/Moorish/Muslim impact on Sicily, see: Aziz Ahmad, *A History of Islamic Sicily* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975); Jessica Basso, ed. (translated from the Italian by Brian Ezkenazi), *Arabs and Normans in Sicily and the South of Italy* (New York: Riverside Book Company, 2007); and Leonard Chiarelli, *A History of Muslim Sicily* (Santa Venera, Malta: Midsea Books, 2011).

not necessarily in the form of a recognized—or what could be called—"Sephardi/Moorish Europe." Slaves and servants from Africa and the Americas, who travelled or were imported to Europe, meanwhile, also co-mingled with the European population. Built in the fifteenth century, the Florentine Villa La Pietra itself must be then viewed within this non-segregationist perspective, highlighting an era when neighboring parts of southern Europe, were still under Moorish domination and cultural legacy.

The Moors who conquered the Iberian Peninsula in 711, we may recall, in 827 also occupied the Sicilian town of Mazara (itself a settlement originally established by the Phoenicians), and later founded the Muslim Emirate of Sicily, which lasted till 1072. At the same time, various Muslim forces (Arabs/Berbers/Saracens) were making ongoing efforts to dominate the southern shores of Italy, for example establishing an Arab stronghold in Taranto (840- 880) and founding the Emirate of Bari (847-871). As with Iberia and Malta, Muslim Arabs/Moors had a long-lasting effect on the history, culture, and language of Sicily and southern Italy, even after their defeat by the Normans. In 1180, William II commissioned the construction of the Cuba palace drawing on the expertise of Palermo's Arabs who designed and decorated it partly according to Fatimid aesthetics. Palermo's 12th century Cappella Palatina displays a wooden ceiling adorned with Kufic-style Arabic inscriptions executed by Fatimid craftsmen,¹⁸ while also exhibiting corbel decorative device of the symmetric Muqarnas, which was deployed in traditional Iranian and Islamic architecture, for instance in Baghdad's Abbasid palace and in Granada's Alhambra. The exterior of San Giovanni degli Eremiti church in Palermo also possesses the geometric structure associated with the Fatimid culture.¹⁹ Despite the religious and cultural Latinization carried out by the Roman Church, including its later concomitant expulsion of Sicilian Muslims in the 1240s, the traces of Moorish Sicily are visible even today, whether in the remnants of fortresses, gardens, and cemeteries, or in the various designs of ceramic work, architectural style, inscriptions in Arabic and Hebrew letters, and Church decorative aesthetics.²⁰ Yet, this multi-layered movement of people and the complex multi-directional flow of ideas are barely acknowledged, while Europe's own cultural syncretism is reassuringly elided. As an icon of an exotic elsewhere, the Blackamoor itself comes to partake in the repressed memory of fusion on European soil, whether in the form of inter-cultural dialogue or violent domination.

Corporeal Tropes

As with the U.S. "Sambo" and "Coon" images, the Blackamoor hides the injuries of racialized colonialism under the guise of frozen images of submission. At the same time, however, the very demeaning presence of the Blackamoor paradoxically affords us a remembrance vessel through which to unmask the hidden

stories of cultural co-mingling, and to chart the Mediterranean's palimpsestic hybridity. Rather than segregate the cultural geographies of Europe, Africa and Asia, then, they must be seen as intersecting and interwoven with one another. The display of the Blackamoor as the ultimate signifier of essentialist otherness, in this sense, testifies to the denial of the cultural continuum of geographies and of the racial mixing of people. As a hybrid figure, the Blackamoor condenses tropes about both Africa and the Orient, in an exotic amalgam of multiple stereotypes—the African, the Oriental, the Black, the Moor, the Berber, the Arab, the Turk, the Muslim, and so forth. Within colonialist discourse, metaphors, tropes, and allegorical motifs have played a constitutive role in “figuring” European superiority. They have also played a crucial if contradictory role in constructing Eurocentric hierarchies. Although tropes can constitute a repressive defense mechanism against literal meaning, they also constitute an arena of contestation; each is open to perpetuation, rejection, or subversion. The trope of light/darkness, for example, underlines the Enlightenment ideal of rational clarity. It envisions non-European worlds as less luminous, whence the notion of Africa as the “Dark Continent” and of Asians as “Twilight People.” Earlier religious Manicheisms of good and evil became transmuted into the philosophical binarism of rationality and light versus irrationality and darkness. Sight and vision are attributed to Europe, while those outside the continent are otherized as living in “obscurity,” blind to rational and moral knowledge. Color, complexion, and even climatic hierarchies emerge, privileging light and day over darkness and night, light skin over dark skin, as well as temperate over tropical climes.²¹ The idea of race, as we know, can be seen as less a reality than a trope; a trope of difference.²² While the color of the Blackamoor figure associates it with the “Dark Continent, its clothing evokes the “Twilight people.”

A figure of simultaneous Blackness and Moorishness, the Blackamoor offers an exemplum of the continuities between various Eurocentric representations, which include the racialization and Orientalization of various others. The Blackamoor can be seen as a fluid *mélange* of paradoxes; its Blackness is embedded in Orientalism, just as its Moorishness is embedded in the racialization of Africa. The fanciful hybridity of the Black and Moorish elements accentuate the intersecting tropes of blackness and Orientalness. Here, the Black body as an ornamental object is inseparable from the Orientalist imagination of Africa. (Images of the Orient themselves often included Blacks, partly because Arab / Moorish / Ottoman spaces were mixed with Sub-Saharan Africans, some of whom were servants or slaves.) The Blackamoor, then, combines two typological fantasies—the African Black, associated with savage wilderness, and the Oriental, associated with decadent palaces, blending two geographical imaginaries, especially of the African jungle and the Oriental harem. As an extension of nature, the Blackamoor's dark body denotes its “primitive origins,” its raw materiality sensuously engrained into shiny marble, its figure distilled in a permanent gesture of offering cultivated goods. As such, the tropological figure of both Africa and the Orient “resides” in

20- Although some Mediterranean Cathedrals were influenced by Islamic architecture, other times they were converted from Moorish Mosques and Synagogues. Within the “tres culturas” of Toledo, for example, Santa María la Blanca Church, built sometime in the late twelfth century and early thirteenth century as the Ibn Shushan Synagogue, believed to be the oldest synagogue building still standing on European soil. Constructed under the reign of King Alfonso VIII, and designed by Muslim architects for Jewish community rituals, it embodies the convivencia spirit. The hybrid palimpsest of Iberia's *sinagoga-turned-iglesia* or *Mezquita-turned-iglesia* came to underline both harmonious co-existence and its exact opposite. The architectural design incorporates diverse Moorish styles, including the Almohad and the Nasrids of Granada; it displays harmonious geometric design, horseshoe arches, interior white walls, vegetal decorations. The five rows of columns crowned with arches especially recall the Mosque of Córdoba of the Moorish “Golden Age” architecture. This characteristically Moorish-style synagogue stands as a testimony to a Judeo-Arab and to a Judeo-Islamic culture in Europe. When Ibn Shushan Synagogue was converted into a church in the 1405 riots, some of its visual aspects were also impacted. For example, some design transformations had the effect of blocking the original source of light, resulting in the darkness typical of cathedrals, in sharp contrast to the brightness of Mosques and Synagogues.

21- Somewhat contradictorily, it is not the clear-skied Mediterranean but the cold cloudy North that forms the locus of rationality and morality, while the jungle and wilderness are projected as the tangled sites of violent impulse and anarchic lust. And all these binarisms—reflecting the id versus the super-ego on the scale of civilizations—are mapped onto others: sane/in-sane; pure/impure; reasonable/hysterical, healthy/sick.



22- See also Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1988).

mansions under the symbolic European dominion over the lands of the "captive" Blackamoor.

The notion of "the Blackamoor" is a fluid, shifting signifier of various types of hybridity. While the idea of "the Moor" was not always a code word for "Black," and vice-versa, the Blackamoor became a specific concept whose adjective, "Black," distinguished it from the notion of "just Moor." The Blackamoor trope embodies a presumed civilizational "upgrade" for the sub-Saharan "dark continent" which now passes into the Oriental "twilight" zone through an image of opulence usually linked to Moorish Iberia and North Africa as well as to the Ottomans. In this sense, the domesticated Blackamoor figure epitomizes its own "stages" of the civilizing process. Despite its striking exotica, the Blackamoor is evidently not a fully nude figure, and thus only partly embedded in wilderness in contrast to the paradigmatic image of "the Black savage" (etymologically, the wilds, the forest). The historically evocative tension between the stereotypical representation of the naked Black body and that of the over-dressed Moor is resolved, as it were, in the Blackamoor's synthesis of the two traditional imageries. The visual grafting of flora and fauna on Blackamoors, ground their image in the trope of nature and naturalness. In the case of female Blackamoors, their ornate flower-patterned "textiles" tend to cover up their lower body, while their amber necklaces somewhat obscure their breasts. And similarly, the turbans of Blackamoor males dressed up in butler uniforms nonetheless flaunt luxuriant elements of cautious cultivation.

Blackamoor aesthetics, both in provenance and belonging, are rooted simultaneously in Orientalist art and in colonialist imagery of Africa, in ways that underscore the inherent paradoxes of Eurocentric discourse. If the Black corporeal nudity in Western representation signifies African inferiority, the opposite image of the overdressed Arab/Muslim body signifies a different kind of inferiority. In the case of Africa (as well as part of Asia and the Americas) the anthropological documentation of dressing up naked Africans encapsulated not merely "the civilizing mission" but also the West's dominion over the Black "Native" body. Orientalist painting and photography, meanwhile, tended to uncover the Arab body, for example in the numerous voyeuristic representations of the hamam's female nudity and the harem's Sapphic sensuality. These images implicitly celebrated the West's power to unveil inaccessible Arab bodies and penetrate taboo Muslim spaces such as the harem, whose name derives from the Arabic "haram," or "forbidden." In contrast to the Renaissance's celebratory representation of the nude human (White) body within the expanding syntax of liberated awakening, the representation of Black nudity signified a lacuna, an absence of civilization; just as the fully covered Muslim body was also, in its way, an index of cultural backwardness. Whether in relation to Africa's exposed bodies or to the Orient's veiled bodies, the West, in both instances, retains its positional superiority.

The Blackamoor figure combines the "natural savagery" of the Sub-Saharan African with the luxuriant excess of the Orient. Depending on the specific variation of the figure, the Blackamoor can variously manifest elements of "nature" or

of “cultivation.” In terms of footwear, for example, some go barefoot while others wear shoes, or boots, indicating a different emphasis in the interpretation of the Blackamoor. While many of the Blackamoor male figures sport Oriental turban, only some wear pointy Moroccan slippers. Some statues stand on marble dressed in Western clothes yet decorated with feathers on their head. Some of the Blackamoors flaunt luxurious attire and jewelry—gold earrings or amber necklaces—reverberating with the opulence of the mansions’ rooms that display precious metals and stones as well as silk fabrics and gold brocades. Textiles, including in Villa La Pietra, have been manufactured in Italy, but the history of trading between Italy and the east—China, India, and Iran—is partly reflected in the traces of Oriental design despite its “translation” into regional Italian motifs. The silk brocades bear the mark of Ottoman influences, as well as of the silk route, from China and India, all the way to the Mediterranean. And with imperial expansion, some textiles were directly shipped from China. Villas such as La Pietra, are enriched by intricate Turkish kilims and Persian carpets. Diverse Buddha statues also decorate the mansion, apparently obtained from China in the 1930s. Typical of European villas, La Pietra also possesses china blue Porcelain dishes and vases, which testify to another submerged history, for example, the development of cobalt blue decorations in ninth century Persia that were further developed in China with its Porcelain technology. Although in the early Renaissance various European workshops attempted to imitate Chinese ceramics, only in late sixteenth Century Florence did the Medici’s craftsmen succeed in producing porcelain.²³ In La Pietra, the design of some of the vases, dishes, fabrics, and furniture belong to the Chinoiserie style: European patterns that reflect the influence of Chinese aesthetics but which also project a fancifully ornate imaginary China. Orientalism, in other words, is interwoven in the Renaissance, including in Italian visual art. Against this broader backdrop, the Orientalist envisioning of the Blackamoor in Tuscany is hardly an anomaly.

The Blackamoor represents a figure in civilizational transition. Partly savage and partly cultivated, the African sculpture in a European home is in the process of assimilation. It is a figure that simultaneously shoulders the animalization trope but at the same time is subjected to the civilizational process. On one level, it betrays a Western sense of superiority, but on another, it reveals a latent envy of the wealth and cultural achievements of Afro-Asia. (As we may recall, in 1492 the continental route to the riches of the East was dominated by “enemy” Arabs/Moors/Muslims; hence Columbus’s Atlantic voyage to the west was about reaching the east, resulting in present-day West and East Indies.) As an ornamental art, the Blackamoor also symbolizes the power to possess non-useful pieces. It offers a testimony to the power of acquisition; to purchase, import, collect, and display objects gathered from diverse corners of the globe. Mansions like La Pietra offer the simulacra of travel into different outlandish locales, reflecting the power to travel in an era prior to the emergence of post-WWII middle class mass tourism. The fictional Blackamoor in La Pietra nonetheless exists on a continuum

23- <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/372403/Medici-porcelain>

with the collection of actual Asian objects, such as Buddhas from Indonesia and Nepal. Here the mansion embodies two different kinds of exotica: on the one hand, authentic artifacts that “traveled” to Europe from the East, which are fetishized within the Eurocentric imaginary, and, on the other, Blackamoor statues, which are also a figment of the Eurocentric imaginary, produced locally in Florence’s workshops. Yet both the actual and the fictional objects form part of an expanded decorative desire for lavishness premised on the domestication of otherized peoples and cultures. Rather than a museum of Asian and African artifacts, the villa could be regarded as a visual archive for its owners’ ways of seeing.

The Blackamoor has often formed a decorative element on a continuum within the aesthetics of ornamental exotica. Colonial “discoveries” revealed new worlds of peoples, and of flora and fauna, which inspired the new sciences of biology, botany, and zoology, as well as of ethnology and geography. They also impacted the establishment of new modes of voyeuristic spectacle enshrined in ethnological and natural history museums as well as in world expositions dedicated precisely to displaying these multiple findings. The newly explored far-off terrains were echoed in exoticizing decoration and ornamentation. In La Pietra, exotic birds, parrots, are inscribed in the eighteenth century frescos, as well as in the armchairs’ brocades upholstery, adorned with parrots and peacocks. Whether actual transplanted flora and fauna or only their simulacral appearance, the “anomalous” objects functioned as modes of material and cultural capital, testifying to the symbolic mastery of “other” geographies. Exotic plants were also processed into newly desired items, as was the case with the cacao tree, native to the Americas, which was transformed into “chocolate, leading to “the chocolate craze” that began in the seventeenth century. Inspired by indigenous concoctions, for example at the court of Montezuma, and facilitated by the expansion of enslavement, the chocolate came to be associated with self-indulgence, and de-linked from the landscape, cultural knowledge, and the forced labor that produced it. At the same time, its color came to be associated with Black corporality, evident in the name of the Chocolate-coated marshmallow confections, variously called in Flanders, “Negerinnentetten” (“Negress’ tits”), in German “Negerkuss” (“Negro’s Kiss”), and in Swiss German “Mohrenkopf” (“Moor’s head.”)²⁴ In such instances the Moor/the Black is cannibalized, devoured as a delectable sweet. Here, as with the trope of “the Blackamoor,” “the Black” and “the Moor” are mutually substitutable as triggers of “dark” sensual awakenings. Similarly, the statues of the mansions speak volumes about the racial and sexual unconscious permeating the all-consuming colonial imaginary.

While signifying European “discoveries” of the time, the exotic décor also exhibited the power and capital to collect treasured materials and objects not readily available in the metropole. An ornamental figure, the Blackamoor is overlaid with luxurious items such as precious metals and stones, many of which were brought to Europe thanks to colonialism and slavery, including from the Americas. The practice of collecting Blackamoors emerges precisely in this context of the

24- While in Switzerland the chocolate covered marshmallows are still consumed under the label of the “Moor’s Head,” in Germany this name was apparently changed to “Schokoküsse” (“Chocolate Kiss”) in the 1980s.

Currently, the chocolate bar Mnakao, which is produced in Madagascar but is marketed to the European market, “garnishes” its wraps with several images of Black heads. Depending on the proportion between chocolate and milk, the images of Black complexion range from a light-skinned mulata to a dark-skinned Black man, visually literalizing the color of the chocolate bar.

display of exotica, and has to be seen on a continuum with the accumulation of artifacts as the symbol of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie's power to own and possess. In museums, these outlandish objects could be organized and catalogued, engendering a new world order and modern apparati of the gaze. And while numerous artifacts—masks, feathers, bones—were “authentic,” they entered into scientific paradigm of imagined civilizational superiority/inferiority. The image of the Blackamoor itself is partly animalized and vegetalized, on a chain with exotic creatures. In instances where the Blackamoor statue is placed on rocks, rather than merely on a well-polished marble stand, the visual association with nature is explicit. In this sense, the manufacturing of the Blackamoors constitutes an extension of scientific racism.

The colonialist animalization and vegetalization tropes persisted well into the twentieth century expositions and popular culture. In the French film *Zou Zou* (1934), for example, the African-American Josephine Baker performs as a caged bird singing longingly for Haiti. In *Princess Tam Tam* (1935) the Bedouin protagonist, also played by Baker, is first introduced within a shot composition that literally frames her head between the cactus stems, as a “natural” element of the Saharan vegetation. In many ways, Baker's character, Alouina, could be seen as an updated embodiment of the now colonized Blackamoor—a hybrid of the jungle African and the desert Arab. In this Pygmalion narrative, the protagonist's nickname, “princess tam tam,” is an oxymoron, since a princess could not possibly be associated with the presumed primitive sounds of drums, just as the Roman mythological goddess, Venus, could not be associated with African beauty, as encapsulated in the ironic epithet “the Hottentots Venus.” The casting of an African-American actress to play the Arab/Bedouin, especially given Baker's syncretic dance movements, highlights the history of Orientalist projection of Blackness. The Black/Arab instinctual desire to wiggle in the face of French aristocratic codes is too strong to be repressed, and can only be understood by another exotic character in the film, the mystical Indian Maharaja, who echoes Kipling's essentialism of “the East is East and the West and is West and never the twain shall meet.” Such representations explicitly sets up the Black / Oriental double-topographical axis. As part of aristocratic fetish of “the exotic,” the Blackamoor forms a domesticated bon sauvage, remodeled as an “Oriental” of black pigmentation. The iconic turban and feather, for example, emblematically fuse the Orient and Africa. The hybrid Blackamoor figure, in other words, associates the Moor with nature when seen through a “Black prism,” while associating the Black with urbanity when seen through a “Moorish prism.” Janus-faced, the Blackamoor manufactured in Europe is thus simultaneously an Orientalized Black and a Blackized Moor.

Like certain Orientalist paintings that resurrected “the Orient” in the ateliers of Paris or the studios of London, without the painters actually traveling to the Orient, the Blackamoor becomes a site of an imagined creature of Afro-Asian exotica/erotica. In its physical presence, the Blackamoor offers the fantasy of vicarious travel to Africa and the Orient, even in the absence of actual traveling.



25- The obelisks placed next to the Santa Maria Novella cathedral in Florence, in contrast, were sculpted locally.

It has the same ideological function of displaying “strange” animals, plants, artifacts, as well as Black, Red, Brown, and Yellow people in expositions. It operates on a continuum with transplanting archeological objects, like the Egyptian Luxor obelisk in Place de la Concorde Paris and the Ethiopian Obelisk of Axum in Rome, witness to the entitlement to “decorate” Europe’s public spaces with ancient relics removed from their source regions.²⁵ Just as the importation of exotic objects and peoples facilitated the visualization of that which was not readily available in the metropole, the (re)production of the Blackamoor, in a kind of virtual experience, afforded the visual pleasure of gazing at Black servitude. Europeans who did not have servants or the means to travel could delight in the fictional status of owning a submissive colored servant. When placed in households devoid of material or cultural capital, the Blackamoor could represent a fantasy of vicarious class ascendancy, in which the more subordinated social classes could mimic the affluence of those who owned not merely such statues as standard accessories, but also actual servants (whose role would most likely be to dust off the statues.) The Blackamoor in such cases gave expression to the fetish of a desired status for those who did not have slaves or servants in an era when colonialism and slavery was injecting Europe with unprecedented wealth.

The Blackamoor figure suggests an unthinking body, often depicted as holding a tray abundant with fruits—a paradigmatic image of both nature and servitude. In this sense, even the male Blackamoor is gendered as feminine, offering the entitled masters of the universe their delicious treats. In other instances, the Blackamoor represents more than merely a stereotypical image of servility, when its body is entirely incorporated into furniture pieces. When the Blackamoor figure is grafted onto a functional design of a chair, a table, or a lamp, it forms a double figure of servitude: it supplies the room with an ambient ornamental decoration, while its very body, in petrified form, provides support for the lamp or the seat that serve as vessels of comfort. The Blackamoor’s body is here dialectically inscribed into the racialized grammar of civilizational ranking that elevates those who are served over those who serve. The imperial spoils enriching Europe made invisible the laboring bodies in the colonies, bracketed as irrelevant to Europe. Yet, these bodies made possible the mining and shipping of raw materials that transformed the ornamental corpus of villas and aggrandized public spaces. The “discovery” of “anomalous” artifacts also endowed the art of collection with an infinite supply transferred from Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In contrast, the Blackamoor figure was invented on Europe’s soil. However, the actual and the fictional artifacts function within the same discursive processes of elision and negation: in the first instance, the elision of the complex Asian and African cultures that produced the imported artifacts; and in the second, the reduction of Asia and Africa to an unthinking exotic body that denies Asians and Africans subjectivity and intellectual agency.

Masked Anxieties And The Paradoxes Of Mimesis

As a trope of Blackness and Moorishness, the specter of the Blackamoor haunts the Eurocentric imaginary. A tamed dark body amidst European domestic space, the Blackamoor figure masks key anxieties about the West's relation to the "rest:" 1) the phobic denial of racial mixing especially with regards to Black-African bodies; 2) the narcissistic anxiety of influence with regards to Eastern and African participation in Europe's scientific and cultural formation; and 3) the lurking fear of another Southern/Eastern/Muslim invasion. In its domesticity, the Blackamoor conceals an angst about multiple "external others" whose menacing identities and designations may overlap: Blacks, Moors, Berbers, Muslims, Ishmaelites, Saracens, Persians, Mohammedans, Ottomans, Kabyls, Turks, Semites, Arabs, Jews, Asians, Africans, Orientals, and so forth. The objectification of the historical Black/Moor as a figure of ornamental servitude, in this sense, is more than merely "just" a negative stereotype; rather, it unmasks a "political unconscious" of triumphant West over the East, or of North over the South, a discourse whose antecedents could be traced back to the ancient Greek/Persian wars, but more significantly to the various Crusades and the centuries-long conflict with the Arabs/Moors/Ottomans/Muslims. The fear of the Moor, like the phobia toward the Black body, is thus central to "figuring" the trope of the Blackamoor.

Virtually all nations see themselves as qualitatively different from and in partial opposition to other nations; they historically define themselves "with" and "against" and "through" their neighbors and victims and enemies.²⁶ France, for example, has historically defined itself against the Muslim world ever since the Battle of Poitiers in 732, with Charles Martel and the Crusades, while Spain, similarly, from El Cid to the fall of Granada in 1492, constituted its nation-state identity in contradistinction to the invading Moors. The Inquisition and the Edicts of Expulsion, the forced conversions of both Sephardi-Jews and Muslims, and the *Limpieza de Sangre*—the form of state-terror fully installed in 1492—resulted in the what could be defined as a veritable panic about the Moor. Coming to be associated with horror, the Moor was usually evoked within the historical epic genre as the defeated Muslim enemy. Triumphant after the fall of Granada, the Catholic-Spanish unification and purification program continued until the remaining Muslims were (presumably) completely expelled between 1609 and 1614. Thus, for "the Moor" in "the Blackamoor" to be displaced into the actantial-slot of "the exotic," suggests a kind of latter-day reconquest of the haunting Moor, now "fixed" by the attribution of a presumably "inferior" black color. We must recall here that "the Black" in "the Blackamoor" is the adjective that qualifies the noun, "the Moor," making the Moor the focal subject of its artistic objectification.

The dominant historical narrative about Islam continues to be entrenched in the values and assumptions of the Reconquista. The "Moros y Cristianos" set of festival rituals, celebrated till the present in many towns and cities across

26- See Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Flagging Patriotism: Crises of Narcissism and Anti-Americanism* (New York: Routledge, 2007)



27- In some instances of contemporary popular culture, the Black/Moorish history of Sicily is evoked, as in the 1993 film *True Romance*, scripted by Quentin Tarantino. One character, Clifford (Dennis Hopper), deliberately insults a Mafia leader, Vincenzo (Christopher Walken), by provocatively asserting the facts of Sicilian history that: "Sicilians were spawned by niggers" and "Sicilians have Black blood pumpin' through their hearts," since "hundreds and hundreds of years ago...the Moors conquered Sicily. And the Moors are niggers ... they changed the whole country. They did so much fuckin' with Sicilian women ... that they changed the whole bloodline forever. That's why blonde hair and blue eyes became black hair and dark skin. You know, it's absolutely amazing to me to think that to this day, hundreds of years later...that Sicilians still carry that nigger gene ... Your ancestors are niggers...and your great-great-great-great grandmother fucked a nigger ... and she had a half-nigger kid" The mafia leader first responds with a bemused laughter at his nemesis's farfetched history, but soon enough he pulls the trigger and shoots the messenger in the head.

28- In Egyptian cinema, the Christian-Arab filmmaker Youssef Chahine, meanwhile, offered a different perspective on the crusaders by largely focusing on the historical figure of Saladin in the epic production entitled *El Naser Salah el Dine* (1963).

29- Denis de Rougemont, *L'Amour et l'Occident* (1939) (Librairie Plon, 1972).

Iberia—and in Latin America as well—suggest that the specter of the Moor persist to haunt the Iberian/Latin unconscious. After all, Cervantes's magnum opus *Don Quixote* is embedded in the battles against the Moors. Not only did the author himself fight and get captured by Algerian corsairs, the reflexive novel begins with the account of the book's origins in the Toledo marketplace where worn Arabic notebooks are sold. After acquiring one manuscript, the author looks around for a Moor to translate it, testifying that it was not difficult to find a translator, including for Hebrew. The author "reports" that the Moorish translator revealed that the Arabic manuscript chronicled the "*History of Don Quixote de la Mancha*," composed by "an Arab historian" Cide Hamete Benengeli. And so, the picaresque tale of *Don Quixote* and Sancho Panza in the Spanish novel par excellence, and for some the first European novel, is thoroughly imbued with Iberia's Arabness. *Don Quixote* intervenes militarily in Master Pedro's puppet show, we recall, in order to protect the Christian damsel from the insidious Moors.

Medieval battles between the "Moros y Cristianos" are still reenacted throughout the Catholic world, in Europe's Mediterranean region. Sicilian folk culture of the Marionettes and Puppet Theatre stages legendary episodes of the clashes between evil Saracens or Moors and heroic Christians, such as Orlando (Roland), one of Charlemagne's knights, and the Norman knights of King Roger of Sicily.²⁷ At times, contemporary festivals of "Moors and Christians" highly racialize the simulated duels. In towns such as El Campello and Alcoi, Spaniards parading in Moorish costumes wear Afro-wigs and black gloves, and paint their faces jet black in a local version of the blackface that literalizes the racial trope of "the Blackamoor." The foundational narrative of defending innocent Christians against the infiltrating Muslims continues to be reproduced even in contemporary media. Christian sacrifice and triumph have been celebrated on the screen with epic productions such as Hollywood's *The Crusades* (1935), *El Cid* (1961), and *The Castilians* (1963), as well as the Italian television mini-series, *Crociati* (*The Crusaders*, 2001).²⁸

The palimpsestic and dynamic Muslim history and culture of Sicily and Iberia tend to be repressed, as though the Reconquista and the diverse triumphs over the Moors had eliminated all traces of a centuries long Arab/Moorish presence. Yet, Muslim and Sephardi remainders are still everywhere—in agriculture, language, ritual, architecture, music, and literature. To an extent the intra-national tensions between north and south Iberia as well as between north and south Italy could be viewed as a long-term sign of the continual wrestling with the legacy of the Arabs and/or Moors. Only over the past two decades does one notice an effort to confront this long suppressed Muslim/Sephardi history, with increased acknowledgment of the traces of Arab culture in Sicilian and Iberian cultures as well as in the southern shores of Europe generally. Literary critics, for example, going all the way back to Denis de Rougemont's *L'Amour et l'Occident*, meanwhile, had demonstrated the strong links between l'amour courtois and Arab poetry specifically, and between Arabic and Western literature generally.²⁹ Against

this backdrop, the molding of the ornamental (or to coin a phrase “orientamental”) Blackamoor enacts not only a denial of African/Moor/Arab/Muslim intellectual agency and its impact on European culture, but also a celebration of the Muslim’s defeat. In this sense, the feminization, as it were, of the Blackamoor figure (one male statue flaunts red lips) must be seen as in contradistinction to the traditional hyper-masculinization of the Moor and the Black African. The tamed Blackamoor then could be exoticized precisely because it is no longer associated with the angst over the invading Moor/Muslim.

In the wake of colonialism, the Blackamoor’s happy servility, furthermore, answers another specter—that of the rebellious Black. It reassures Europeans of a pacific, docile Black – totally unlike the rebellious maroons—whether in Africa or in the Americas. (Some of these West African rebels were Muslims, for example in Bahia, Brazil, where the Reconquista ideology persisted.)³⁰ In the context of colonialism, the historically racialized fluidity of “the Moor” gets to be fixed within the morbid colonial dialectic around Whiteness and Blackness, with the end result of the darkening the Moor’s pigmentation. (As we know, Moors were very varied in complexion.) And although “the Blackamoor” is a shifting signifier, condensing the morphed identities of Blacks, Moors, Berbers, Arabs, Africans, it largely evokes, while sanitizing, the-too-close-for-comfort Muslim world. Despite the absence of religion in its definition, the Blackamoor is implicitly a Muslim figure, just as Islamic aesthetics is submerged in Middle Ages and Renaissance art. The exoticization of the Blackamoor thus must be understood in a context of the religiously haunting icon of the Moor and the racially haunting image of the Black.

In La Pietra, one Blackamoor figure, which forms part of a lamp design, wears boots and holds a sword and a shield, gazing up toward “the sky.”³¹ Despite the military emblems, however, he epitomizes a tamed figure; his sword after all is not raised against Christians, but instead constitutes a decorative item. In contrast to the daunting Muslim Moor, this specific Blackamoor wears a Western uniform, with a feather on his head. The image of the docile Blackamoor is paradoxically embedded in its opposite—the petrifying Blacks and Moors. Although the Moors of North Africa had been defeated, other Muslims, such as the Ottomans, continued to threaten to penetrate the European continent. Traditionally, Orientalist representations staged passionate scenes of terror and ferociousness—the negative mirror image of the “positive” exotic Orient—whether set in the past or the present, whether factual or mythological. In the canvas history of the clashing monotheisms, carnage tended to spotlight Muslim’s shedding of Christian blood, as in Delacroix’s “Massacres at Chios; Greek Families Awaiting Death or Slavery” (1824), triggered by the 1821 Greek/Turkish war events that devastated the island.³² Within this context, the captive-like Blackamoor in the palatial halls of a Florentine villa comes to signify a disciplined Moor governed by codes of its “exilic” habitus. The Blackamoor “dressed” in a Western uniform, moreover, denotes his service to his European masters, evocative of Roland Barthes’s analysis of the uniformed Black youth saluting the French flag on the Paris Match cover.³³ Here

30- See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Tropical Orientalism: Brazil’s Race Debates and the Sephardi-Moorish Atlantic,” in Paul Amar, ed., *The Middle East and Brazil: Perspectives on the New Global South* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 119-161.

31- This Blackamoor statue is located in the main Conference room in Villa La Pietra.

32- The historical Greek/Turk conflict has even been invoked in recent North American cinema, in the romantic comedy *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002). Brought over to a Chicago suburb from Greece, the elderly and senile grandmother keeps escaping from the family house because she fears an invasion by the Turks. She fightss with an imagined Turk, angrily saying: “Listen up, ugly Turk. You’re not kidnapping me!” Although her family tries to update her that “the Greeks and the Turks are friends now,” for grandmother the war is not over. She continues to sleep with a knife under her pillow.

33- Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), translated from the French by Jonathan Cape (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).



34- Estevanico (c. 1500–1539), also known as Esteban the Moor, was a Moroccan Berber enslaved at a young age by the Portuguese and later sold to a Spanish nobleman. Estevanico participated in the colonization of the Americas alongside the explorer Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in “New Spain,” i.e. present-day U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico, where he was killed in the conflict with Indigenous Americans, the Zunis.

we may recall the fact that people of color from the colonized world—for example the famed *tirailleurs* Senegalais—often served in imperial armies, sometimes reaching high military positions, evident already during the Spanish conquest of the Americas (the case of the Moor Estevanico).³⁴ The Blackamoor in military uniform relates an assimilationist tale that also reveals some tensions between the iconographies of “the uniform” and of “the feather.” Despite the “civilizing process” (the uniform), the trace of “the primitive” (the feather) remains, suggesting the soldier’s forever-foreignness. As Europe’s Mediterranean “other(s),” the domesticated Blackamoor form(s) a disciplinary trope of doubly symbolic domination, both of the invading Moors and of the rebellious Blacks.

Given the anxieties both about the Moors and the Blacks, the history of cultural syncretism, as suggested earlier, has also been subjected to disavowal. Instead, the Blackamoor translates into artistic practice the hierarchical vision of mind-over-body. Hardly a representation of an “authentic type” within the colonial archive of ethnic “specimens,” the Blackamoor figure absorbs tropes of Blackness and Moorishness into visual culture. However, this adaptation nonetheless makes the Blackamoor an authentic figure, not of “the real” Africa, but rather of the West’s imaginary idea of authentic Blacks and Moors. It reflects, furthermore, Western protocols of visual representation that conjoin the notion of mimetic verism with Renaissance Perspective. The Blackamoor constitutes in this sense an aesthetic paradox. Its visibility is enshrined in mimesis and the three-dimensional Renaissance perspective, transferred in this instance to the cultural geographies of Africa and Asia. However, this mimetic aesthetic ignores the anti-mimetic or non-mimetic aesthetics more typical of these cultures. The West African mask, for example, is known for the multi-perspectivalism that inspired the modernist avant-garde and Cubism in particular. The calligraphy-based Arabesques that adorn Muslim spaces, meanwhile, are premised on non-figurative abstractions. Artistic modernism, moreover, has traditionally been defined in contradistinction to realism as the dominant norm in representation. Yet, within most cultural geographies realism was rarely the dominant aesthetic mode. Modernist reflexivity as a reaction against realism, in other words, could scarcely wield the same power of scandal and provocation. Modernism, in this sense, can be seen as a rather provincial, local rebellion. Vast regions of the world, and long periods of artistic history, have shown little allegiance to or even interest in realism. In India, a two-thousand year tradition of narrative circles back to the classical Sanskrit drama and epic, which tell the myths of Hindu culture through an aesthetic based less on coherent character and linear plot than on the subtle modulations of mood and feeling (*rasa*).³⁵ Ironically, the realistic aesthetic of the Blackamoor stands in dramatic contrast to the historically cultural practices of much of Africa and Asia.

The Judeo-Muslim—Biblical and Quranic—prohibitions against “graven images” also played into this penchant for an aesthetic of the abstract. The production of the visual was displaced onto other mediated forms. The surfaces of mosques and public buildings, for example, were covered with Arabic writing

35- On a critique of the meta-narrative of Art History, from the Renaissance through Realism to Modernism and Postmodernism, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics,” in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 27–49.

shaped in forms that would enhance the architectural design of a building. Calligraphy turned letters into a sensual medium, composing myriad geometric or vegetal forms created out of words or elaborately shaped sentences evocative of such forms, designed to highlight the greatness, the eternity, and the glory of God. Calligraphy gradually became the most important Islamic art, deployed even in non-religious contexts to adorn coins, cloth, and pottery. The Judaic and Islamic censure of “graven images,” and the preference for abstract geometric designs known as arabesques, cast theological suspicion on directly figurative representation, and thus on the ontology of the mimetic arts. While Roman Catholicism shared the Judeo-Muslim prohibition of substituting an image of God for God, it also accommodated the desire for a visual and visible representation of God. Brilliant paintings and frescos representing sacred scenes, including of individual saints and even some pictorial adumbrations of the Deity, adorn churches. Within the Judeo-Islamic ethos, a visible carnal divinity, such as that painted in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel featuring a bearded male God in the process of creating Adam, would be simply unimaginable. This tendency also applied to the traditional engagement in non-mimetic representations. The idea of mimetic art would seem almost inherently alien to the monotheistic tradition and to Judeo-Muslim aesthetic regimes. Within this perspective, Judeo-Muslim culture, partial to the abstract, would be essentially antithetical to the diverse techniques and movement of reproducing the real—the Renaissance perspective in the arts, the nineteenth century rise of realism and naturalism as literary “dominants,” and the ever-more-refined technologies of verism, specifically the still and cinematographic cameras with their built-in Renaissance perspective.

The tension between the three-dimensional realism of the Blackamoor statue, and the aesthetic history of the cultural geography of actual Blacks/Moors is hardly unusual in the context of the Orientalist representations of Asia and Africa. Jean Léone Gérôme’s “The Snake Charmer” (1870), for example, deployed the mimesis of the Renaissance perspective in the art to represent an “authentic” outlandish eroticized Orient, a *mélange* of Egyptian, Turkish, and Indian elements. In the foreground, a naked boy wrapped in a snake, and in the distant background, the arches typical of Muslim architectural design, decorated with the Arabesque forms and Arabic calligraphy. The realistic technique stands in sharp contrast to the abstract aesthetic of the Muslim world depicted in the painting. The attempt at authenticity, furthermore, highlights the painting’s sacrilege, a virtually surreal portrayal of serpent and nudity together in a space visually reminiscent of a mosque, and adorned by the name of God. In Gérôme’s painting, furthermore, the abstract arabesque, in all its complex philosophical meanings, is reduced to a decorative element of the exotica/erotica image, while also being aesthetically subordinate to the methods of the realistic technique and mimetic procedures. A structurally similar paradox informs the Blackamoor image, which adheres to mimetic realism while embodying a virtually surreal fantasy of an imagined Blackamoor person. Although depicted according to the Renaissance perspective,



the Blackamoor elides Black and Moorish cultural geographies, which did not commonly deploy mimesis as a normative aesthetic mode. As with Gérôme's painting, this cementing of the Blackamoor in mimetic art elides the historical penchant toward non-mimetic aesthetic practices in Asia and Africa. The Blackamoor figure, thus, encapsulates the presence of mimesis while simultaneously "disappearing" the non-mimetic conventions of the very source cultures of the actually existing historical Blacks/Moors.

Enshrined in the illusion of three-dimensionality and the ideology of "the real," the Blackamoor figure embodies the ideal of verism. As such, it contributes to the usually uncontested metanarrative of the unidirectional flow of aesthetic ideas between the West and the non-West. In this case, the methods of producing the persepctivalism of mimesis are regarded as originating solely in Europe's Renaissance perspective in the arts, which culminated in nineteenth Century Realism. Organizing artistic representation according to the viewer's single point of view, the Renaissance's technique of perspective, as we know, engendered a visual revolution that transformed Western art. However, the theory of perspective itself was conceived during the Middle Ages by Arab scientists during the Abbasid Caliphate, especially by the tenth/eleventh century Baghdadi polymath Ibn al-Haytham (or Alhazen), considered by some as "the father of modern optics" and the "first true scientist" in the sense of developing a scientific method of inquiry.³⁶ Based on geometrical abstraction, Ibn al-Haytham's visual theory was detailed in his *Kitab al-Manazir* (Book of Optics), which was translated into Latin around the end of the twelfth century, and impacted scientists such as Roger Bacon, Leonardo da Vinci, Nicolaus Copernicus, and Galileo Galilei. The Book of Optics also impacted the course of Western art, which, as Hans Belting's *Florence and Baghdad* demonstrates, transformed Ibn al-Haytham's theory of perspective into artistic pictorial theory. In a sense, Renaissance art "translated" Arab mathematics' theory of perspective into aesthetics of "the real," inspiring artwork that centered on the viewer's gaze as its focal element. In a civilizational joint venture, mathematics in "the East" was reconceived as a representational artistic method in "the West," an instance of civilizational fusion that forms part of a broader history of ideas, delineated for example in George Saliba's *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance*.³⁷

Although the theory of perspective, as suggested earlier, was not significantly adopted by the non-mimetic Islamic art, it did form part of a vital scientific question, which was later developed in Renaissance centers of visual arts such as Florence. Against this backdrop, Blackamoor statues and paintings exemplify Renaissance perspective in the arts, while also testifying to an Arab/Muslim cultural geography that conceived it for the sciences even if historically hardly practicing it in the visual arts. Thus, the Blackamoors presence at the heart of "the cradle of the Renaissance" exposes the denial of Europe's debt to Africa and Asia. My point here, however, is not simply to retrieve a lost credit but rather to argue for a complex narrative concerning the circulation of ideas and knowledge. As an

36- For example, André Authier argues that tables of angles of incidence and refraction were drawn from the well-known Arab mathematician and physicist Alhazen, considered to be the "father of modern optics and ophthalmology" in his "The Dual Nature of Light in Early Days of X-ray Crystallography" (Oxford University Press, Scholarship online, August, 2013), 23. The Iraqi scientist Jim Al-Khalili has popularized this argument in his "The First True Scientist," January 4th, 2009, BBC News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7810846.stm>

37- George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007). See also Nader El-Bizri, "A Philosophical Perspective on Alhazen's Optics," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15, (2005), 189–218.

aesthetic form, the Blackamoor figure participates in a unidirectional narrative of the Renaissance that regards persepctivalism as simply a Western invention. And in this sense the Blackamoor is a figure of disavowal with regards to the history of ideas. Thus, while a Euro-diffusionist narrative makes Europe a perpetual fountain of artistic innovation, one could instead highlight a multidirectional flow of aesthetic ideas, with criss-crossing ripples and eddies of influence. The Eurocentric narrative that “emplots” artistic history, like history in general, in a linear trajectory leading from the Bible and the Odyssey to literary realism and artistic modernism, raises the question whether such foundational texts, like their cultural geography, can be defined simply as Western. For example, telling the history of the novel as emerging solely from “Europe”—regarded as completely separate from the cultural spaces of North Africa and West Asia—and then “spreading” to Africa and Asia, constitutes a problematic diffusionist narrative. Within another perspective, the emergence of the novel—defined as fiction in prose—could be narrated as coming into existence within the syncretic worlds of the Mediterranean. The novel, as Margaret Ann Doody demonstrates, did not begin in the Renaissance but rather forms part of a continuous history of about two thousand years of contact between Southern Europe, Western Asia, and Northern Africa. Papyrus fragments of prose suggest that novel reading was popular among Egyptians in the second century A.D., while the title of Heliodorus’ *Aithiopika*, the longest of the surviving Greek novels, means “Ethiopian Story.”³⁸ A Renaissance Italian writer like Boccaccio, as Robert Stam suggests, found it normal to draw on the Eastern repertoire of the Fables of Bidpai and Sindbad, while writers like Cervantes and Fielding were quite aware of and influenced by such texts.³⁹ Impressed by the Arab-style design of the Cuba palace in Sicily, Boccaccio used it as the setting of one of the Decameron novellas.

The highpoints of Western history—Greece, Rome, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Modernism—can, in other words, be said to have been moments of cultural fusion, moments when Europe became traversed by currents from elsewhere. Western art has at least partly been indebted to and transformed by non-Western art. All the celebrated crossroads of European achievements are sites of cultural syncretism. The “West,” then, is itself a collective heritage, an omnivorous mélange of cultures; it did not simply absorb non-European influences, but rather it was constituted by them.⁴⁰ A more dialogical view of the relationship between the so-called “East” and “West,” or “North” and “South,” would highlight sites of syncretism, such as the uncovering of the traces of Arabic literature and visual art within Iberian and Italian cultures, and through them, within the European Renaissance, and on to the present. The cultural dialogue between the “West” and the “rest” is not of recent date, nor is it unidirectional, whereby “the rest” simply follow “the West.” The ornamental servility of the exotic Blackamoor figure, in sum, allegorizes a broader narrative that posits non-Westerners as mimicking the advances made by the West. It is imbricated in the mind-versus-body binarism, and in its concomitant hierarchical racialization of knowledge. The phantasmatic

38- Margaret Ann Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 18.

39- Robert Stam, *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and The Art of Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

40- See: Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 360. The debt of the European avant-garde to the arts of Africa, Asia, and indigenous America, furthermore, has been extensively documented. Leger, Cendrars, and Milhaud, for example, based their staging of “La Creation du Monde” on African cosmology. And Bataille wrote about pre-Columbian art and the avant-garde, generally, cultivating the mystique of vodon and of African art. I have tried to offer a reading of the complex relationship between mimetic and non-mimetic aesthetic in “The Sacred Word, Profane Image: Theologies of Adaptation,” in Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).



Blackamoor silences Moorish and Black, or African and Asian thought that enriched the cultural formation of what has been called “the West.” The historical Black/Moor, however, remains a ghostly entity denuded of subjectivity and intellectual agency, whose role in shaping the corpus of European ideas has too often been disavowed.



DOSSIÊ

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