

John Beusterien. *An Eye on Race. Perspectives from Theater in Imperial Spain*.
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The strength of ideology derives from the way it becomes “common sense,” through tales told and confirmed by observation of reality, endorsed by institutions of power, and performed by the people in them as well. Because those who constitute the margins and the center of power are not very different from each other, it is important to maintain the distinction between them if the system is to be perpetuated. The otherness that lies beneath the skin, invisible, needs circumstances or stories to bring it to light, whereas otherness manifested in the color of the skin needs no such account for the difference to be evident. The literary or dramatic stereotypes of Jewish characters—distinguished by blood—or Black characters—distinguished by skin—are manifestations of ideological structures produced by the culture. While the reader does not necessarily applaud these structures, he or she will profit from an understanding of the point of view from which they are written and performed, which is what John Beusterien has set about to do in *An Eye on Race*, an informative and provocative consideration of the impact of racism on those who invent and perpetuate it. Beusterien’s controlling central metaphor, the eye, is a good choice to consider how reputation and race are social constructs, dependent entirely on one’s standing in the eyes of others, for whom one continuously performs one’s story.

Current subaltern studies posit that race and ethnicity are culturally rehearsed and performed. Physical characteristics are “merely external, representational graphics without meaning or signifiers that signify nothing more than themselves.” Identity consists of “the performance into imaginary being of something which has no existence outside of the repetition of the traits. It is their comparison with similar traits and their contrasting with dissimilar ones that generates the false sense that an identity precedes and generates the differences. The belief that physical traits refer to or express an ethnic interiority, an identity or substance of genetic being that provides the external traits with meaning, is one of the last remaining uncriticized ideologies.”¹

Indeed, the inventions and ideologies of race developed early and held fast throughout medieval Europe. In the eyes of medieval Europeans, the cultural practices of the followers of certain religious traditions were transferred to biological markers of difference. Because one’s religion might or might not be immediately evident, because one might be able to conveniently assimilate or mimic the dominant religious practices, this “invisibility” is the source of anxiety, and the only way to make this invisibility visible is to bring to the surface the essence of the difference: the blood. Based on prevailing constructions of medical theories, the learned and the interested constructed elaborate physical signs of distinction that illustrated the narration of the sins of the

1 Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, “English Without Shadows. Literature on a World Scale,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 851-55, at 855 n.1.

Jews, particularly their peculiar smell and their circumcision, but also male menstruation, a symptom of blood superstition prevalent among both Jews and Christians. (This phenomenon, possibly related to the affliction of hemorrhoids, had the effect of bending the gender of Jews, adding an additional negative element of effeminacy, with the concomitant implications of lack of control and instability.)

Throughout Europe, the fundamental difference between Christians and Jews resided in the primary question of purity of Christian blood, or *limpieza de sangre*. The importance of blood is central to the construction of Christian identity, as manifested in the transubstantiation of the blood of Christ during mass, a miracle that recalls the sacrifice of the paschal lamb at Passover to save the first-born Jews. The guilt of the Jews in connection with the death of Christ became the proto-narrative, the blood libel: they spilled Christ's blood because of their own tainted blood. And the chief identifying mark of distinction of the Jews revolves around their own attitude towards it, in circumcision and menstruation.

In contrast, Whites did not construct such elaborate cultural and socio-religious narratives to distinguish themselves from Blacks, simply because their difference, their otherness, is easily visible and needs no explanation or presupposition to be appreciated. Nonetheless, for Beusterien, racism toward Blacks—American racism—could not have developed as it did without the context of its precedent, Continental racism towards the Jew, and it is texts that can create the very reality that they appear to describe. Works of literature, in this case theatre, can promote beliefs and assumptions regarding Others: here Jews and Blacks. Beusterien argues that one type of racism was necessary to create the cultural preconditions for the other. The discursive construction, or narrativized vision, of the Jew creates a pattern of representation of the Black, whose difference is visually so conspicuous as to obviate the need for a narrative, and is thus a denarrativized vision. What concerns Beusterien is how the White constructs the Black presence or persona (and concomitant matters of class, sexual permissiveness, repression and power) and uses this fabricated presence in the theatre; the representation of these constructs in theatre allows us to appreciate the particular and peculiar formulations of the Black in the eye of White Spain. Beusterien discusses various plays where the implications of racial purity are evident to those in tune with the ethos of the day, when honor and racial purity were one and the same. Many scholars have seen a connection between the Golden Age twin obsessions, honor and *limpieza de sangre*. However, as Américo Castro had long ago remarked in *De la edad conflictiva*, purity of blood is not a particularly compelling plot for dramatization, whereas honor conflicts are intrinsically dramatic. Beusterien explores this relationship or concern for honor and *limpieza de sangre* in plays dealing with Jews and Blacks. His extensively researched and documented study offers thoughtful and probing analyses of these concepts through varying critical lenses, from Lacanian to subaltern studies.

In Chapter 1, "The White's Eye," Beusterien defines the White's eye as a logical combination of narrativized and denarrativized vision, speculating that this is the basis of understanding modernity, and that the examination of these "ocular processes" and

visions in modernity are best carried out through theater. He discusses Quevedo's views (in *La hora de todos*) on the economic aspects of race as they relate to modernity, especially how the blood-based racism of anti-Semitism combines with the anti-African racist discourse central to the slave trade. Chapter 2, "Blood Displays: Seeing the Jew," deals with how the invisibility of religious difference becomes externalized through a narrative based on the show of blood (blood display). Beusterien presents a Lacanian analysis of Calderón's *El medico de su honra* to explicate the Continental model of racism, as well as several Lope plays (*El niño inocente de La Guardia*, *Auto sacramental de la circuncisión y sangría de Cristo*) dealing with the themes of blood libel and circumcision. In Chapter 3, "Skin Displays: Seeing the Black," Beusterien discusses and analyzes a series of plays with Black characters (among others, *Juan Latino*, *El negro valiente en Flandes*, and several Black saint plays) through the lens of the "White's eye" that sees the display of black skin as a sign of inferiority, but one that is the essential engine for the imperial/colonial economic enterprise.

In Chapter 4, Beusterien brings the discussion of the White's eye to a head by exploring how Cervantes contests the previously studied models of race and celebrates a subaltern aesthetic as he discards both racial paradigms in one of his most popular *entremeses*, "El retablo de las maravillas." Beusterien maintains that in the "Retablo," Cervantes parodies and mimics the dominating discourses of racism in imperial Spain. Some ideas are more compelling and convincing than others. Beusterien's discussion of skin color as a significant component of the Spanish honor code will undoubtedly raise the hackles of some, who might react with resistance to claims that the "Retablo" is not simply about Continental racism, about *limpieza de sangre*, but also about American racism, about skin color: "In the character of the Governor, who sees the performance because of the fear of exposing his *negra honrilla*, Cervantes makes his play about the Spanish eye on race in the sense that honor simultaneously connects honor to the explicitly stated fear of a past religious stain but also to the unstated presence of a *negra*" (156). Suggesting a literal interpretation of the line from *Lazarillo*—"la negra que llaman la honra"—Beusterien suggests that the transformation of the adjective "negra" into a noun makes the word "more explicitly racial," while at the same time recognizing "a tradition of puns and associations between the figurative idea and the literal dramatic character of the *negra*" (156). Beusterien refers the skeptical reader to Cervantes' prologue to the *entremeses*, in which he enumerates Cervantes' references to the plays of Lope de Rueda and the latter's performances as a *negra* whose attempts to whiten herself mock the Spanish obsession with honor and appearances. Beusterien points out the obsession with skin color visible in the *Retablo's* female characters and concludes that Cervantes' response to "contemporary drama's visualization of skin color" results in a "challenge to dramatic convention and vision" (156).

Not all readers will be convinced that Cervantes' use of the phrase *negra honrilla* is an invocation of the stock comic character of the *Negra*, also associated with dance: "Cervantes associates this adjective *negra* with the discourse of Afro-Hispanic difference, most especially the role of denarrativized vision in drama" (142). More specifically,

Beusterien claims that "Cervantes intentionally invokes the noun *negra*" (143) through the dance of the *chacona* performed by the nephew and in so doing "he criticizes White drama and its appropriation of Africanness in his burlesque of the character of the nephew dancing the *chacona*." (164). Through the inclusion of the dance, the *negra* is "present, but not present" suggesting that Whiteness is "revealed and foreclosed in this European musical context" (165). Compelling points for Beusterien's case, for this reader, include the fact that the African-inspired dance is performed with an invisible Jewish woman, thus providing both denarrativized and narrativized forms of racism at the same time while "upend[ing] race and gender hierarchies" (165), such as Juana Macha and Juan Castrado.

Despite the skepticism with which some readers will react to Beusterien's argument of the connection between the adjective "*negra*" and the broader historical context of Afro-Hispanic difference, his discussion is illuminating. He posits that "the *negra* in the *comedia* is a stock type characterized as a base sexualized object. Her skin color is sexual fantasy" (146). Yet, evidently, she is represented onstage as "anti-female," often played by a male. Her dangerous darkness contrasts with the exotic whiteness of the Jewish female, and each represents colonial desire and religious desire, respectively. (For this reader, a sign of a perhaps over-eager application of this is Beusterien's assumption that the character Jacinta ("*una esclava herrada*") in *El médico* is a Black slave and not Moorish.)

That said, Beusterien's *An Eye on Race* provokes readers to take another look at these texts, some well known and others more obscure. His meticulously documented review of traditional notions, placed side by side with his own provocative new interpretations, is certainly a notable contribution to Hispanic and Cervantine studies.

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