

## Staging *habla de negros*: radical performances of the African diaspora in early modern Spain

by Nicholas R. Jones, University Park, PA, Penn State University Press, 2019, 221 pp., \$89.95 (hardback), ISBN13 978-0271083469

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Staging *habla de negros*: radical performances of the African diaspora in early modern Spain**, by Nicholas R. Jones, University Park, PA, Penn State University Press, 2019, 221 pp., \$89.95 (hardback), ISBN13 978-0271083469

*Staging Habla de Negros: Radical Performances of the African Diaspora in Early Modern Spain* is Nicholas R. Jones's first monograph, a bold intervention that contributes significantly to the ongoing expansion of early modern race studies beyond the Anglosphere. In his exploration of representations of blackness in the *siglo de oro*, Jones accomplishes the methodological tour de force of bringing the scholarly traditions of Black studies and African Diaspora studies into conversation with race scholarship in early modern Hispanic studies (best illustrated by the work of Baltasar Fra-Moliner, Aurelia Martín-Casares and John Beusterien). By doing so, Jones is bringing to the field of Iberian early modern race studies some powerful methodological insights that have been in use in the field's English counterpart often referenced by Jones himself. That intervention is set to enable interdisciplinary dialogue and facilitate the sorely needed inclusion of Iberia in all conversations about race and blackness in early modern Europe.

While the title and largest part of Jones's book focus on linguistic and phonetic instantiations of blackness in early modern Iberian poetry and drama (mostly from the sixteenth century), Jones's argument has a much wider scope. Not only does he reject the critical consensus that "*habla de negros* language is 'racist buffoonery' or 'racist stereotype'" (xiii), he also argues more generally that a number of representations of black people authored by early modern white writers are not racist but, rather, "render legible the voices and experiences of black Africans in ways that demand our attention" (5). For Jones, *habla de negros* "embodies a dialectical and performative masked truth that has the potential to disavow antiblack racism and stereotyping" (19). In other words, embarking on a self-avowed revisionist project, Jones does "not believe that the Renaissance Iberian composers, musicians, and playwrights [studied in his book] caricatured or denigrated Africanized speech forms conclusively" (68). Jones bases his engaging demonstration on a corpus of specific literary cases in which black characters "position themselves as agents who subversively contest the oppressive lot in which they exist" (20) – cases which Jones emphatically reads as the norm and not as exceptions (6).

In the first chapter – the longest chapter in the book – Jones explores *habla de negros* as the aural activation of the performative practice of blackface and, he notes, within that configuration whose nexus is located in the mouth of the *negro bozal*, the recurrence of "tropes of feasting on and performing 'African'-derived dances, music, and sounds" (29). Going over a wide archive of primary sources, Jones examines material practices of cosmetic blackface in early modern Spain, and he connects them insightfully to other racialized practices of blackening such as print or makeup, which use the same basic materials. Cued by Francisco de Quevedo, Jones also connects *habla de negros* to *bailes de negros*, which "enhance its performativity" (49). The chapter culminates with a close reading of Simón Aguado's *entremés Los negros* (1602) innovatively anchored in food studies. Jones reads the black characters' obsession with food illustrated by this *entremés* as a sign of black culture's resistance to erasure and oppression, for feasting is associated with "hospitality, grace, bonding, and celebration" (77) and thus constitutes a privileged site to retrieve early modern black joy and communal agency. This section was, to me, the most powerful and thought-provoking moment of the

book, as it provides a robust alternative reading of a motif that I understand as the theatrical transfer of the white desire to consume blackness in all its forms onto black characters themselves.

In the second chapter, Jones argues that, in his *pliego suelto* poem “Gelofe, Mandinga”, Rodrigo de Reinosa works as a “cultural mediator” (116) who practices for a speculatively black audience and readership what is known in African-American literature as “signifying” – a technique glossed by Jones as “an indirect method of communication whereby the speaker builds meaning intended for a restricted audience, using signals that only the intended audience will be able to recognize and decode” (90). Jones reaches the intriguing conclusion that the “signifying” duel of insults (replete with allusion to food and feasting) in which the black characters Comba and Jorge engage “ultimately teaches us, as present day readers, that blacks are subjects who assert their subject positions and subvert their lowly lots” (110). I would have been more convinced by this interpretation of “Gelofe, Mandinda”, however, if the chapter had explained more substantially how a white writer such as Reinosa could accrue the cultural knowledge necessary to become fluent in a linguistic practice precisely designed to keep white people at bay.


In the third chapter, Jones seeks to reclaim the often erased agency of black female characters by reading Lope de Rueda’s Eulalla (in *Eufemia*) and Guiomar (in *Los engañados*) “across the gaze of the normative spectator” (120) respectively as a “black diva” unconcerned with the white gaze, who fashions her own body and aesthetics in empowering ways, and as a “black feminist” claiming noble matrilineal genealogy and literate subjectivity. Both women are given “agentive voices via their contestatory *habla de negros* speech acts” (157). The reading of Eulalla as a “black blonde” constituted, for me, one the most exhilarating moments of the book, yet the demonstration would have been stronger if the close reading had reckoned in more depth with the striking lines delivered by Eulalla’s white lover, Polo, who, by confiding in asides to the audience his intention to sell her as a slave, shows that the black blonde’s claim to self-determination often falls on deaf ears in early modern Spanish society. In a short afterword, Jones finally construes *habla de negros* as an early modern forerunner to nineteenth- and twentieth-century *poesía negra* from Cuba and Puerto Rico, and he uses the acoustics of the language spoken when African spirits descend among the living during rituals of trance possession in the Afro-Atlantic religions of Santería and Palo Mayombe today to imagine how early modern *habla de negros* sounded.

Jones’s project is, fundamentally, a reparative project powered by a strong drive and commitment to retrieve and reclaim black agency, subjectivity, intellect, beauty and joy in early modern Iberia. As he eloquently puts it, “I, the necromancer, aim to awaken the memory of early modern Spanish black lives via placing Hispanism in dialogue with Black studies” (55). I share that reparative drive, and I admire the project. Yet I was troubled by the numerous instances in the book when such desirable retrieval of black agency is predicated upon the assumption of whiteness’s transparency. Indeed, in Jones’s book, Rodrigo de Reinosa’s whiteness is no obstacle to his “signifying”, Eulalla’s white lover’s deafening comments are barely audible and artificial performances of sonic and choreographic blackness by white performers are often uncritically likened to authentic black cultural practices. I agree with Jones that retrieving black agency in early modern Iberia is not a project that hinges on fetishization (15), and I enthusiastically support attempts at decentering whiteness in early modern race studies – but I also think that we ignore the opaque whiteness of most producers, performers and consumers of literary and theatrical *habla de negros* – that is to say, we ignore their positionality in the early modern racial struggle – at our own peril.

One immense merit of Jones’s book is to emphasize the depth and complexity of literary and theatrical representations of blackness in the *siglo de oro* by bringing to the fore many

cases in which black characters stand up for themselves or manifest their pride, literacy and resourcefulness. The most efficient and enduring aesthetic systems of racialization are precisely those that include room for complexity, layering and contradictions: it is in that space that racialized characters get humanized and their overall racist characterization thereby artificially acquires some truth effect. *Habla de negros* and the performative nexus in which it participates form one such system – if not *the* paradigmatic system, for that matter. Thanks to Jones’s bold, lively and unapologetic monograph, many future early modern race scholars will likely reckon with that complex system – and our field will be the richer for it.

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