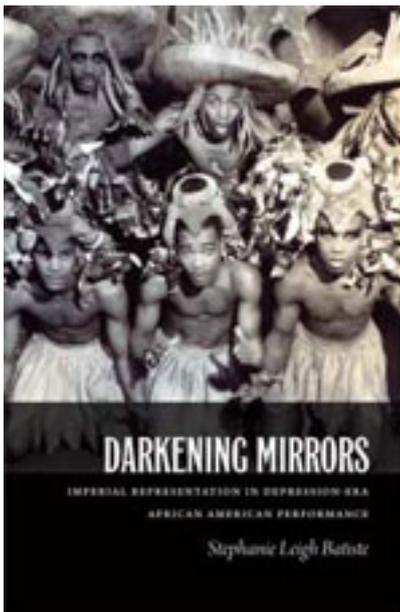


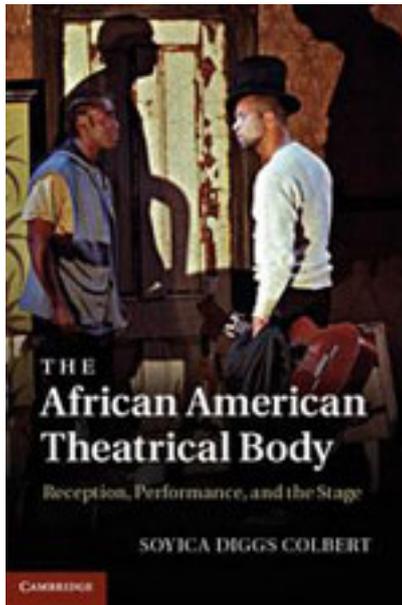
***The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage* by Soyica Diggs Colbert and *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance* by Stephanie Leigh Batiste**

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Colbert, Soyica Diggs. *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage*. London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 344 pages; illustrations; \$98.08 cloth.

Batiste, Stephanie Leigh. 2011. *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 352 pages; illustrations. \$75.92 cloth, \$21.95 paper.





The black body in performance is a complex signifier, layered with repeated historical traumas that refract and distort shifting relations of power. Soyica Diggs Colbert's *The African American Theatrical Body* and Stephanie Leigh Batiste's *Darkening Mirrors* investigate the ways in which black artists and intellectuals including W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Katherine Dunham, Lena Horne, and August Wilson have intervened in the construction of representations of racial subjectivity. Colbert enacts a comparative analysis of canonical works of African American literature and theatre, citing techniques of repetition and embodiment in processes of coping with psychological trauma. By contrast, Batiste's study considers the ways that black artists in the fields of dance, film, and theatre explored exoticism, imperialism, and race throughout the Black Atlantic in the 1930s and 1940s. Divergent in their themes and approaches, both texts nonetheless offer valuable contributions to an expanding corpus of historical and conceptual research on black performance and cultural studies in the Americas.

Colbert's *The African American Theatrical Body* draws upon concatenations of psychoanalytic theory and critical race studies by scholars such as Hortense Spillers and David Eng to develop a conceptual framework centering on literary and theatrical tropes of movement and stasis, repetition, and (re)production, which relate black subjectivity to formative sites of trauma and loss. Analyzing the dualities of lack/fullness and self/other within psychic landscapes of racial violence, Colbert contends that theatrical performance can create spaces for the conversion of racial melancholia into recuperative mourning and reparation. Expanding the field of black performance to encompass the embodied practices of the black church, slave auctions, blackface minstrelsy, and lynching, Colbert asks how canonical works of African American theatre have addressed the pejorative contours of hypervisibility, "a constitutive element of blackness that overdetermines black people's physical bodies and undermines their psychological, intellectual, and emotional lives" (7).

The African American Theatrical Body explores black corporeality as an accumulation of repeated traumas endured by African Americans in the wake of slavery's Middle Passage. Framing the Middle Passage as a "site of communal rupture," Colbert asks how theatre can "create a common affect [that] might translate into reparative practices through ritualized reproductions onstage" (207-208). What Colbert terms "the theatre of repair" is both collaborative and confrontational, enacting the transubstantiation of black bodies from objects to human subjects, which James Baldwin likens to acts of "communion" (195). These reparative rituals are conditioned on loss: many of the plays that Colbert analyzes enact violence, frequently in the form of violence against women. In Du Bois's *The Star of Ethiopia*, for example, the female symbol of black nationalism is lynched in order to foster the grounds for black liberation, an act Colbert compares to Frederick Douglass's account of the screams of his Aunt Hester as a necessary auditory condition for his self-development. Other female sacrifices include Emmaline in Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* and the female protagonist of Langston Hughes's *Tambourines to Glory*. Men also participate in violent acts of self-degradation, from the protagonist of Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* to Herald Loomis in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. These violations prove vital to the rupture of Alys Eve Weinbaum's "race/reproduction bind," whereby maternity is linked to the production of nationhood (206). Colbert's text concludes with a contemporary act of liberatory bloodletting: the self-sacrifice of Oya in Tarell Alvin McCraney's play *In the Red and Brown Water*. Like the echoes of May Joseph's "scream of Sycorax," raced and gendered disavowals haunt the borders of collective identity for African Americans as a community constituted through loss. Cast off, these ghosts linger as reminders of unresolved suffering. By theorizing human sacrifices as "black movements," Colbert frames theatrical (re)productions as ritualistic evocations and "political practices [that] reshape temporalities in order to reorganize the social and cultural fields that facilitate the social and physical deaths of black people" (265).

While Stephanie Leigh Batiste also invokes the Middle Passage in *Darkening Mirrors*, her study positions the slave trade in relation to a fraught history of black travel and migration. Batiste ventures beyond U.S. national borders to chronicle the racial, social, and sexual politics attending the transnational encounters of African American artist-ethnographers and their "native" interlocutors in the 1930s and 1940s. In dialogue with postcolonial theory and studies of transnational black exchanges in the Americas (including Penny Von Eschen, Michelle Stephens, Frank Guridy, and Micol Seigel), *Darkening Mirrors* merges historiography with conceptual inquiries central to theatre and performance studies. In a series of exquisitely rendered performance genealogies, Batiste documents an array of spectacular displays and critical interpretations of orientalism, imperialism, exoticism, primitivism, and modernism produced and consumed by African diasporic artists and audiences. Batiste focuses on black filmmakers, dancers, ethnographers, and theatre artists including Oscar Micheaux, Rex Ingram, Bill Robinson, Katherine Dunham, and Lena Horne, querying the positionalities of these individuals as

“stepping stones, emissaries, or craftsmen of an imperial culture on the move” (148). At once products and producers of imperial power relations, black artists and intellectuals worked tactically to construct subjectivities and aesthetics ambivalently positioned within a (post)colonial, transnational *mise-en-abyme*.

The artists in *Darkening Mirrors* employ African American traditions of masking to speak through and against dominant cultural forms (109). For example, Batiste demonstrates the ways in which Micheaux’s films deconstructed the ‘Western’ genre to depict a utopian “West” free of white racism, as well as a meditation on the “westerliness” of U.S. imperial expansion. Batiste’s comparison of 1930s theatrical productions treating the Haitian revolution demonstrates black artists’ engagements with tropes of black primitivism and black empire as personified by staged representations of Brutus Jones, Henri Christophe, and Marcus Garvey. Turning to intersections between blackness and the Philippines, Batiste explores the aesthetics, *mise-en-scène*, and acting in Gentry Warden’s *Swing Mikado* as spectacular representations of U.S. imperialism in the Asian Pacific, enfolding anti-Asian xenophobia, U.S.-British colonial relationships, and U.S. black othering through actors’ presentation of ambiguously raced “South Sea Islanders.” In her final case study, the film *Stormy Weather*, Batiste charts a shift from international exoticism to domestic national inclusion. *Stormy Weather*’s stars, including Lena Horne and Bill Robinson, refuse to embody the “other” of white modernism, replacing alterity with self-depictions as creators of a distinct black modernity/modernism. Despite these artists’ success in securing recognition, their disavowal of diasporic connections in favor of national incorporation newly highlights the paradoxical relations of (dis)empowerment that structure black subjectivities in the United States.

While Colbert’s study focuses on psychoanalytic concepts in U.S. black drama and literature, Batiste charts histories of performance and film across the Black Atlantic. These differences notwithstanding, both authors offer commentaries on the ways in which racialized tropes and imagery have circulated in a variety of black performance contexts. Moving beyond the resistance/oppression binary, both texts broaden our understanding of the methods by which African-descended artists have utilized diverse media and taken up conflicting representations of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality to craft a range of iterations, inversions, and transformations, confronting challenges of pervasive racial and social inequity within and beyond the United States in the twentieth century and to the present.

Suggested Reading

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Katherine Zien is a doctoral candidate in Northwestern University's Interdisciplinary PhD Program in Theatre and Drama. Her pedagogy and research focus on theatre and performance in the Americas, addressing the ways that performance events have traveled transnationally during the 19th and 20th centuries and in the process conscripted raced, classed, and gendered performing and spectating bodies within networks linking material

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representations to political and cultural ideologies and influences. Zien's research has been published in *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, *The Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *E-misférica*, and *Contemporary Theatre Review*. As a Fulbright scholar in Panama (2009-2010), Zien completed research on her dissertation, "Claiming the Canal: Performances of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Panama, 1904-1999," and co-produced a performance residency, "Agua/Tierra: Una propuesta para escuchar" (Groundwater: A Listening Project). Please see her website for more information: www.katherinezien.net. She can be contacted at kazien@gmail.com.