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Blackness Out of Time: Anachronism and Race in Early Modern France

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In contemporary feminist practice, black female bodies (and perhaps black feminism itself) are treated outside of our unfolding present moment. [...] Black women's bodies are not the subjects of the present moment; they are, in fact, always constructed as out of time. [...] Black women's bodies are always already anachronisms.

Jennifer C. Nash[1]

When I received the generous invitation to participate in this issue, I was incredibly honored as a junior scholar, but an immediate sense of unease came over me. The word “anachronism” has lurked in the background of my scholarly existence since graduate school. Anachronism is the boogeyman in the closet, an accusation that, as a researcher of the *dix-septième*, you never want directed at you from a senior scholar. “This work is anachronistic” can feel a lot like “in error,” “dismissible,” “not sufficiently historically rigorous.” To begin this essay, I intentionally focus on the affective impacts and discursive uses of the terms “anachronism” and “anachronistic” within the field of French and early modern studies to highlight the resonance between perceptions of anachronism and perceptions of belonging as felt by a junior scholar whose work touches one of the subfields often said to be “anachronistic,” namely early modern race.

Studying race in the early modern period has been, and still often is, treated as an unthinkable “presence” that elicits many different reactions from colleagues and mentors—surprise, critique, suspicion, welcome, dismissal.[2] For French studies, the uneasy presence of early modern race, I think, partly stems from a defensive desire to not investigate the deep, long, old roots of contemporary racism; to separate “French” approaches from “American” approaches to literary and historical studies; to protect contemporary discussions of race and racism from becoming too broad or not sufficiently focused on the problems that must be solved in the present; to pin down exact definitions and etymologies for the word “race” at different moments in French history before acknowledging race as an analytical lens; and finally, to follow the unspoken imperative to “historicize.” The necessary scholarly care in investigating the history of the word “race” in French and in using analytical lenses beyond the

initial scope in which they were defined have shaped my own sense of how I would like to approach the question of early modern race. In that work I am grateful to be able to learn from long traditions; early modern race and premodern critical race studies (PCRS) have been clearly defined fields of scholarship for decades thanks to the groundbreaking work of Kim F. Hall and Margo Hendricks, among many others.[3]

However, long before PCRS and early modern race studies were recognized as delineated “subfields” within academe, scholars of race have been keenly aware of their positions vis-à-vis historicization and time. Brittney Cooper, for example, has traced the deep historical awareness and philosophy in the work of nineteenth-century black women thinkers.[4] Despite these scholarly traditions and the enduring work to analyze race not as a static thing but as a malleable notion whose contours could be traced with historical precision, this is the echoing ring of “anachronism” that I heard as a graduate student beginning to work on race: the “anachronism” of early modern race was not compatible with the rigor of proper historical inquiry. Race did not belong in the early modern period, and, perhaps, I did not belong in early modern studies.

As I tried to consider where this discordant experience of time and belonging came from, I was inspired to consider the history of anachronism itself. By analyzing the series of early modern objects that structure this article, I seek to flesh out how anachronism, first defined in French in the late seventeenth century as an error in calculation, developed alongside notions of cultural belonging and race. Taking blackness as one expression of race—that is to say, as a non-exhaustive but fundamental case study—I explore how blackness was placed out of time by white thinkers and makers even as such thinkers and makers were developing new historiographical methods for thinking about chronology and anachronism.

The first part of this article will therefore bridge my contemporary experience of the field and historical objects through an analysis of how an eighteenth-century clock at the Musée du Nouveau Monde exemplifies the historical co-construction of time, race, and belonging. I then move back to the seventeenth century to show how belonging was an essential component across different attempts to theorize anachronism: the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694), Pierre Le Lorrain de Vallemont's *Les Éléments de l'histoire* (1696), and Léonard Gaultier's frontispiece to the *Parnasse des plus excellens poètes de ce temps* (1607). Since anachronism depended on evolving notions of belonging, I highlight, in the 1696 issues of the *Mercure galant*, how it was as much a subject of scholarly debate then as it is now. Finally, I read a pair of ekphrastic poems about a cameo featuring the head of a Moor by Madeleine de Scudéry

and Élie de Bétoulaud to connect anachronism, belonging, and the paradox embedded in studying early modern race: race is present even when (and where) it is read as not belonging. A critical consideration of anachronism cannot ignore what (and whose) notions of belonging anachronism was built upon. The sense that, for some, early modern race does not “belong” in early modern studies today is a historical product whose manufacture is visible in time, and particularly in seventeenth-century conceptions of time and anachronism.

1.

I remember an experience I had several years ago. I was still a Ph.D. student, working as a research assistant for a wonderful professor who sent me to France to photograph documents for her book project. It was my first time at the Musée du Nouveau Monde in La Rochelle. A statue of Toussaint Louverture greeted me in the courtyard. The past arrested in bronze for the present, a welcome face after weeks of white stares looking up at me from the account books and letters of *marchands négriers*. Inside, on display: a clock, *Pendule dite “au matelot,”* dated to the late eighteenth century.

According to the label, this clock features a “matelot à la peau noire accoudé sur une balle de coton *attendant* l’embauche pour le chargement de voiliers en partance pour l’Europe” (emphasis mine). The fashion for these *pendule au bon sauvage*, *pendule au bon nègre*, or *pendule au nègre* dates to the end of the eighteenth (**fig. 1**) and early nineteenth century,[5] and speaks to the interconnectedness of constructions of race, time, and calculations of time.[6] What does it mean for a black man to be represented as perpetually, positionally, *beside* time, *accounted for* in the representation of time? What does it mean for him to be perpetually waiting, “attendant”—on a clock?

Below the man, in gold, timeless *putti* weigh, transport, and load up the merchandise. Between the *putti* and the waiting worker sits the clock face. The time of the man’s labor, the timeless *putti*’s labor, and the time-telling of the object’s user are all connected to the explicit and implicit transactions represented by the clock. The economic transactions of maritime commerce are explicit in the bag of money and the stack of coins sitting on top of the cotton bale. The economic transactions of cotton trade are explicit in the gold of the gilt bronze used to represent a load of plant fiber. The economic transactions and exploitation of the human life, labor, and time; of enslaved peoples; of *forçats* condemned to work on French galleys, are all explicit in the choice of owning and displaying the statue of a black man next to a bale of

cotton sold for profit (but not his) on an object with an ostentatious, functional purpose: the daily accounting of and for time.



Fig. 1. Pendule dite “au matelot.”
Musée du Nouveau Monde, La Rochelle, France.
17 June 2022. Author’s personal photo.

As with the charge of “anachronism,” when I saw this clock for the first time, I felt viscerally disjointed. A distortion of the blackness I see in myself—and that some see on my body—on display, there on a time piece that has transcended time to survive centuries of viewers’ gazes, decontextualized from specific identifying characteristics and situated embodiment. Indeed, this clock is just one example of a genre of luxury European decorative objects that depict black bodies, what Adrienne L. Childs has theorized as “ornamental blackness,” that is, “a style of luxury object or representational scheme in which the figure of

the Black African, ‘Moor,’ or person of African descent is treated as a decorative motif.”[7] We might consider the *Pendule dite “au matelot”* alongside, for example, Jean-Baptiste-André Furet’s *Mantel Clock with Musical Movement*, or *La négresse* (ca. 1784) in which the bust of a smiling black woman wearing a turban serves as a literal display of time as her eyes open to show the hour and minute.[8] The ornamental blackness on the Musée du Nouveau Monde’s clock exemplifies an eighteenth-century desire to create temporal and racial logics simultaneously in an age canonically noted for its scientific and philosophical innovations. After the institutionalization of the transatlantic slave trade with, for example, the creation of the Compagnie du Sénégal in 1673, after François Bernier’s landmark “Nouvelle Division de la Terre par les différentes Espèces ou races d’homme” in the *Journal des savants* in 1684, after Louis XIV’s Code noir in 1685, the eighteenth century saw the rapid rise of France’s colonial empire—and the rapid development of theories of racialization by white thinkers, both men and women, that both justified and critiqued the institution of slavery that empire required.[9] My encounter with the *Pendule* allows me to articulate this clock as a visual representation of an anachronism in which narratives of time and chronology are disjointed from—but coexistent with—narratives of belonging.

In his theorization of anachronism, Jacques Rancière has argued that modern historiography’s perception of anachronism as a “sin” is based upon “behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and beliefs” that do not fit perceived senses of time:

Behind the accusations of anachronism or archaism, the core of the problem is untimeliness. [...] Chronological accuracy does not matter much. Time is only a word to designate a set of conditions of possibility. [...] To say that you cannot adopt this behavior or that thought during this or that epoch comes down to saying that you must stay in your place within the distribution of forms of life as they shape your daily life. Anachronism ultimately means “impropriety”; it is a sin against time as location, against the social distribution of positions, occupations, identities, and capacities.[10]

In the *Pendule*, I see a symbolic instance of Rancière’s anachronism in the side-by-side display of a way of keeping time and ornamental blackness. The keeping of time—chronological accuracy—is one function of a clock. Creating conditions of possibility is both the function and foundation of ornamental blackness. Locating a black man on a clock, attendant on an imagined boat of merchandise in the narration of the object’s history, attendant on the (almost) perpetual time keeping of the clock mechanism, fixes ornamental blackness in time as a social distribution of positions, occupations, identities, and capacities. That is, the *pendule* is not anachronistic because it betrays chronological accuracy, but because it reveals the difficulties of anachronism:

how do we distribute what we imagine to be possible relative to social positions, occupations, identities, and capacities in time? The *Pendule* is the result of a long ideological process to make blackness hover, waiting on time, present and active but denied agency in canonical logics of accounting for periods of time, value, and knowledge systems. While I do not pretend to an exhaustive treatment of this question here, my experience with the *Pendule dite "au matelot"* prompts me to investigate several narratives shaping the word *anachronisme*, from its definition in the seventeenth century, to debates on time and cultural belonging, to one object's paradoxical location in time specifically through its ambiguous dislocation from time.

2.

Anachronisme appears in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694), registering a certain use of the word by the end of the seventeenth century. There, it is defined as an "[e]rreur contre la cronologie, faute dans la supputation des temps." [11] Anachronism exists only in relation to other concepts, and, specifically, in relation to normative understandings of chronology and the calculation ("supputation") of time. It is first an "erreur," that is a "fausse opinion," [12] then a "faute," that is, a "manquement contre le devoir, contre la loy," [13] a "manquement contre les regles de quelque Art," [14] and an "imperfection en quelque ouvrage." [15] In "faute" and "erreur" then, *anachronisme* registers an opinion on chronology that is deemed false, an imperfect calculation, a deviation from rules or obligations. As an example of *anachronisme*, the dictionary provides the following: "Il y a un grand anachronisme dans ce Poëme. Cet Auteur est sujet à faire des anachronismes."

While *anachronisme* is therefore first illustrated as a literary phenomenon, it becomes inscribed into debates on historiography and the relative relationship between facts. In 1696, the *Dictionnaire's* sense of *anachronisme* seems to be repeated in Pierre Le Lorrain de Vallemont's historiographical treatise, *Les Éléments de l'histoire*, in which he defines "Anacronisme" as:

une faute ou erreur qu'un Auteur fait *dans le calcul*, ou suputation [sic] des tems. Ainsi Virgile a commis un anacronisme dans son Enéide, faisant vivre en même tems Enée & Didon. Cependant, il y a près de 300. Ans entre l'un & l'autre. Car on met Enée vers l'an du monde 2829. & Didon vers l'an 3112. [16]

Anachronisme, then, occurs when an author reports a character living at a time when historians or scientists have deemed they were not alive, with the now infamous example of Virgil. While the 1694 *Dictionnaire* defines *anachronisme* as an "erreur contre la chronologie," Pierre de Vallemont gives "une faute ou erreur [...] fait dans le calcul." The *décalage* between the "chronologie" in the 1694 definition and the "calcul" of the 1696 theory is not

without importance, as de Vallemont defines “la Chronologie” as “la doctrine des tems, & des Epoques,” where an “Epoque” is “un point fixe, ou bien un tems certain & remarquable dans l’histoire; dont on se sert dans la Chronologie pour commencer à compter les années, & qui est ordinairement fondé sur quelque événement singulier.”[17] Calculation is not without a method that introduces uncertainties, differences of opinion, and is subject to amendment:

Il faut avertir ici ceux qui n’ont pas étudié les matières de Chronologie, que l’an de la naissance du Sauveur du monde ne précède pas immédiatement l’an de l’Ere Chrétienne, comme le P. Petau Jésuite, & la plupart des Chronologistes l’ont crû : car le tems qui perfectionne les arts & les sciences, a ajouté de Nouvelles lumieres à la Chronologie : & il est aujourd’huy constant que l’Ere Vulgaire, telle que Denis le Petit l’a donnée, & qu’on l’a suivie depuis lui jusqu’à présent, est trop courte de quatre ans.[18]

Following de Vallemont’s theorization, chronology, and therefore anachronism, is—and should be—subject to revision as our understanding evolves. Anachronism is not an absolute fact, but a departure from an established normative calculation that a given society and culture have taken as fact. Therefore, anachronism, for the seventeenth century, is not simply an error in fact, but an error—or a difference—in facts *as they relate to each other*.

By way of illustration, let us consider the 1607 frontispiece that inscribes Virgil—that most anachronistic poet—into the contemporary moment (**fig. 2**). This edition of *Le Parnasse des plus excellens poètes de ce temps*, printed by Mathieu Guillemot, features an engraving attributed to Léonard Gaultier.[19] On either side of the centered title stand two figures: on the left, Homer, on the right, Virgil. Both figures are looking towards the center and are pictured in motion, standing in naturalistic poses, crowned with laurel wreaths. Above their heads, in a bucolic scene, sits Apollo surrounded by Muses, some with distinctly early modern, not classical, instruments. Neither Virgil nor Homer was alive in 1607, but they are figuratively immortalized as belonging to a conceptual understanding of this epoch, *ce temps*. From anachronism as a theory of calculating chronological belonging and periodization, we have here an intentional play with time and evidence to shape perceptions of cultural belonging. If Rancière theorized the long historiographical debate on anachronism as a debate about belonging, about what is or is not thinkable as a presence in our conception of certain historical periods,[20] what I would like to underscore here is that this debate on cultural belonging and the writing of history, on multiple coexisting theorizations of time in the early modern period, is visible in treatises on chronology and in creations of literary anthologies at the very moment that “anachronism” is being defined.

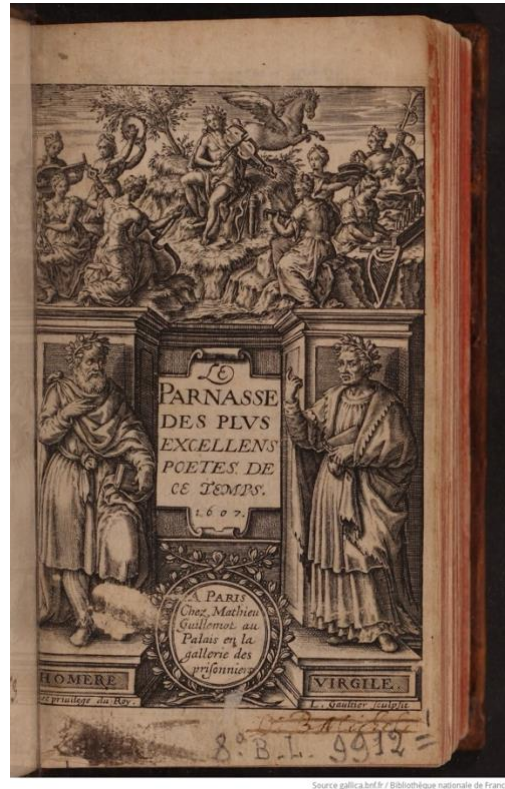


Fig. 2. Frontispiece of *Le Parnasse des plus excellens poètes de ce temps*, ed. Despinelle, t. 1 (Paris: Mathieu Guillemot, 1607). Source: gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Since anachronism hinged on interpreting calculations and fluctuating understandings of *temps*, *époque*, and cultural belonging, the relationships between facts became open subjects of debate. In October 1696 the *Mercure galant* published a letter from l'Abbé Harcoüet, “Sur les Fleurs de Lis,” a response to M. de Cypièrre, with whom he had been corresponding on the origins of the *fleur de lys*’s appearance on flags. M. de Cypièrre had, in a previous letter, doubted the abbot’s sources; in response, the abbot declares:

Si Hunibale, Tritheme, & Sigebert vous paroissent remplis d’anachronismes sur cette matiere, il faut pourtant avouer que les monumens publics doivent garantir leurs Ecrits, & qu’en cette rencontre on peut prendre leur party, puisque des choses inanimées le soutiennent si évidemment depuis tant de siècles, & les sauvent du reproche de la supposition.[21]

In the letter to which our author is responding, M. de Cypièrre does, in fact, use the word “anacronisme” to characterize Hunibale and Trithème.[22] In so doing, he questions the trustworthiness of Harcoüet’s sources based on their authorship, their naming practices, and their chronology:

Vous m’apportez à la verité un certain Hunibale ou Hunibaud. [...] Mais soit que cet Auteur dise ou ne dise pas que Francus II eut des Fleurs de lis dans ses

Enseignes, vous sçavez, Monsieur, que c'est un Auteur *supposé*, reconnu tel par Cluvier [...] & d'autres Sçavans, qui y ont trouvé plusieurs marques de supposition, comme de nommer des Villes d'un nom, qu'elles n'eurent que dans la suite ; de parler de certaines choses qui ne sont arrivées qu'après luy ; & plusieurs autres anacronismes.[23]

M. de Cypièrre and Harcoüet are engaged in a scholarly debate on historiographical methods for understanding the past: on what do we base our understanding of the truth of the past? What constitutes reliable evidence? Anachronism underscores coexisting theories of time and dating of events. What stands out to me is that while the *Dictionnaire*, the *Mercure galant*, and the *Elemens de l'histoire* all give anachronism a more or less negative connotation—it is an error in relative facts, something to be avoided, a critique to be made against sources—they are all also fundamentally concerned with what belongs and what does not, and how they can calculate, measure, or determine belonging. All of our authors evoke anachronism while trying to establish their place in their time: What is French as a language in 1694? How should history be written? How do we place a key feature of French symbolism in place and time? Virgil, Homer, and the *fleur de lys* belong culturally to what these artists and authors would like to consider *their* world, *this* time.

3.

If anachronism debates competing questions of belonging, then what does it mean to be properly *chronistic* in the early seventeenth century? To follow the norms for calculating time? To belong? Where does an *erreur dans la supputation des temps* belong in conceptions of time that produce the “black clock” with which I opened this piece? Inherent in racist understandings of black Africans as “primitive,” “behind” the progress of Europeans, or as testifying to a different “age,” is a preexisting construction of time as an object, as if it could be placed up next to something (or someone treated as *something*) as a means of measurement. Indeed, this is one way to understand the positioning of our *matelot* next to the clock face, always being beside the measure of time. I posit no teleological origin story of the relationship between race and time,[24] but let us turn to two ekphrastic poems from the late seventeenth century which ambiguously contextualize ornamental blackness relative to time and suggest that blackness and race were created *next to*, not *in* time. If that is the case, blackness, and perhaps race more broadly, was conceived outside of the very category on which anachronism depends.

Dated to 1690-1701, two poems, one by Élie de Bétoulaud (1640?-1709),[25] one by Madeleine de Scudéry (1607-1710),[26] describe a piece of onyx destined to be sent to King Louis XIV. Bétoulaud's poem is entitled, “Le More à Mademoiselle de Scudéry, En luy envoyant pour le Roy une Onyce antique

où la teste d'un More est gravée en relief sur un fonds blanc." Scudéry's title is briefer: "Mademoiselle de Scudéry au Roy, En luy envoyant le petit More." Bétoulaud's poem is written in the first person and takes on the voice of a well-traveled Moor who is happy to arrive in France and admire Louis XIV:

SAPHO, j'ay voyagé sur la terre & sur l'onde,
Et j'ay connu par tout que sous ses lauriers verds,
LOUIS redonneroit le calme à l'Univers. (ll. 2-4)

Louis XIV is portrayed as triggering an eternal epoch of peace and victory through a kind of speech act:

*A peine a-t-il parlé, qu'au plus haut de sa gloire,
On a veu sur son char la Paix & la Victoire ;
Toutes deux à l'envi couronnant ses souhaits,
Par des neuds éternels s'unissent à jamais.* (ll. 5-8, emphasis mine)

Within this contemporary eternal golden age, enslavement is a happy condition:

Trop heureux, si j'estois quelque jour en ces lieux
L'esclave d'un Héros aussi grand que les Dieux ! (ll. 11-12)

Thus, this poem transfigures an object (the sculpted piece of onyx) into a person from "du fonds de l'Orient, des confins du Monde," into a subject bound by the political context of the late seventeenth century (which is itself cast in classical terms). The subjected object's blackness situates him in multiple contexts of enslavement, but his *ornamental blackness*, his value as a represented object for royal display, is explained by his durable economic and political value:

Le soleil merveilleux à varier les hommes
Nous fit un teint d'ébène au pays où nous sommes,
Mais la noirceur du corps ne passe point au cœur,
Et n'y peut effacer l'image d'un Vainqueur [...] (ll. 21-24)

"Ébène" is both a color and a reference to the valuable trade in ebony wood; his black hue makes him an object trafficked around from place to place, from person to person. This blackness holds economic value. However, he holds political value because his heart is *not* black. This contingent political value hinges on his acknowledgement of Louis XIV's inherent, eternal, and global authority:

Digne pas ses hauts faits dans la paix, dans la guerre,
D'estre l'unique Roy des peuples de la Terre ! (ll. 29-30)

The spatial and temporal dynamics of Bétoulaud's poem place blackness within an eternal subjection to a white gaze, always a manipulable object beside and under the powerful monarch. The ventriloquized Moor is never granted a precisely situated personhood, but Louis XIV marks the beginning of a new era, founds a new epoch in de Vallemont's conception of chronology. Bétoulaud's poem thus distributes time and space such that the white monarch is both *in* time and the measure by which to tell time; the black object holds contingent economic and political value but is given no time and no place other than perpetual enslavement.

Scudéry's poem is slightly more specific than Bétoulaud's in situating the political context of the onyx in time, as she hints at the Nine Years' War and opposition to Louis XIV's imperial designs: "le plus grand de vos [Louis XIV] hauts faits, / Seroit de nous donner une troisième paix" (ll. 7-8), and "les fiers Alliez à vos pieds abbatus, / [...] Leur fausse ambition causoit leur résistance" (ll. 11-12). This political specificity, however, still leads to an eternal glory as Louis XIV "[p]army tous ces Héros vous seriez toujours Mars. / C'est une vérité que personne n'ignore" (ll. 18-19). Within this game of political alliances and recognition, Scudéry's poem serves as an occasion for her to be recognized in turn, as she speaks herself in the first person. In so doing, she anthropomorphizes the sculpted object, as if it had asked her to be given to the king:

Je n'ay pu refuser à cet aimable More
Le bonheur de passer du moins devant vos yeux,
Avec tout le respect qu'il pourroit rendre aux Dieux [...]. (ll. 2-4)

In this desire for recognition, she, like Bétoulaud, establishes a starting point for a new future in which Louis XIV forever embodies the glory of the classical past: "Parmy tous ces Héros vous seriez toujours Mars" (l. 18). In this new imperial era, Scudéry also reprises Bétoulaud's play on the Moor's potentially enslaved status, his happy pacification under Louis XIV, but she hints at potential rebellion:

Il n'est pas jusqu'au petit More,
Qui, pour se faire un sort & glorieux & doux,
Ne borne ses souhaits à l'honneur d'estre à vous :
Et s'il obtient ce qu'il desire,
Il ne quitteroit pas ses fers pour un Empire. (ll. 20-24)

On the one hand, then, these two poems dislocate ornamental blackness from specific markers of time passing, as if their mere presence before the reader-spectator is evidence of their eternal existence under a white gaze: that of Louis XIV, Madeleine de Scudéry, Élie de Bétoulaud, the implied white reader,

and even the white “fonds blanc” that encapsulates the Moor’s head on the piece of onyx. On the other hand, the authors also use the political contexts specific to the seventeenth century and Louis XIV’s reign—the attempts to expand the French empire, the enslavement and trafficking of black Africans under the Code noir, the enslavement and trafficking of “Turcs” as galley slaves, the trade in ebony wood, Louis XIV’s own speech—to anchor the epoch of peace and prosperity the King’s power is meant to install. Ornamental blackness becomes an eternal currency, signaling its beholder’s power.

Making blackness into a currency for the beholder has a paradoxical temporal effect. Ornamental blackness bestows upon the beholder a place in time, a context of recognition of power, position, and epoch. It also places the black ornament in a space out of time in which it can forever be circulated, exchanged, bought, and sold, without its white beholders recognizing the ornament’s belonging to a particular moment. Even as notions of temporal and cultural (non)belonging are being constructed through the theorization of anachronism, this strategic contextualization of blackness in and out of time echoes the placement of the *matelot*, eternally waiting on his spectator to tell the time.

4.

The paradoxical temporal effect of ornamental blackness is still visible in discussions of blackness, race, and early modern French studies. In bringing together some of my twenty-first century experiences of anachronism, seventeenth-century representations of race and time, and seventeenth-century theorizations of anachronism, I seek neither to excoriate nor defend “anachronism.” Instead, I am pointing out the shared mechanism of *calculation* and *perceptions of belonging* that underlie these discursive and figurative acts. In closing, I want to point to how the construction of blackness (and race more broadly) as an object out of time with regards to anachronism echoes Jennifer C. Nash’s analysis of processes of institutionalization. Reflecting on the status of another analytical lens, intersectionality, she contends that feminist time sees intersectionality as an analytic that leads “toward the inevitable future” or relegates intersectionality to “an already-transcended past.” This temporal paradox has resulted in a racial logic in which “black female bodies are either historical subjects whose critiques have already been heard, or harbingers of a future where intersectionality belongs to us all. In either case, black women’s bodies are not the subjects of the present moment; they are, in fact, always constructed as out of time.”[27] Seventeenth-century ornamental blackness and contemporary black women’s bodies are not one and the same; the *mechanism* of considering neither as “subjects of the present moment,” of *ce temps*, rings in parallel. Thinking through ornamental

blackness, I hope, demonstrates that in order to conceptualize seventeenth-century anachronism, contemporary debates on “anachronism,” and seventeenth-century France more broadly, we need to also think through deliberate constructions of early modern time in which white French thinkers and makers objectified blackness into a timeless time piece. As we start to interrogate terms like anachronism, it also allows us to acknowledge the temporal bind that ornamental blackness operates on black bodies. The question, then, is whether to let them remain stuck in historical suspension, “always already,” as Nash writes in the passage cited in my epigraph, “an anachronism.”

NOTES

[1] Jennifer C. Nash, “Institutionalizing the Margins,” *Social Text* 32/1 (2014): 45-65, p. 61.

[2] On anachronism and “unthinkable presence,” see Jacques Rancière, “Anachronism and the Conflict of the Times,” *Diacritics* 48/2 (2020): 110-124.

[3] Here I use “early modern race [studies]” in the broadest sense. As examples of such early work on race in the early modern, see Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). See also Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994). On the genealogy of PCRS, see Margo Hendricks, “Coloring the Past, Consideration on our Future: RaceB4Race,” *New Literary History* 52/3-4 (Summer-Autumn 2021): 365-384.

[4] Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

[5] The Conseil des Musées website, which creates a network for the museums of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region in France, describes the Musée du Nouveau Monde’s *Pendule dite “au matelot”* as a “pendule ‘au nègre.’” “Le matelot – MNM.1989.1.1.” See <https://www.alienor.org/collections/oeuvre/29915--pendule-le-matelot> (accessed 15 April 2026). See also Danielle Bégot, “L’image du Noir dans l’iconographie française de la traite et de l’esclavage, de la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle au milieu du XIX^e siècle. Enjeux et discours,” in *Les Traites et les esclavages. Perspectives historiques et contemporaines*, ed. Myriam Cottias, Élisabeth Cunin, and António de Almeida Mendes (Paris: Éditions Karthala et Cirsec, 2010), pp. 309-324.

[6] On the construction of race, slavery, and calculation, see Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[7] Adrienne L. Childs, *Ornamental Blackness: The Black Figure in European Decorative Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025), p. 1. See also Adrienne L. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain," in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. Michael E. Yonan and Alden Cavanaugh (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 159-177.

[8] Clare Vincent, Jan Hendrik Leopold and Elizabeth Sullivan, *European Clocks and Watches in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Highlights of the Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), pp. 218-221.

[9] See, for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Andrew S. Curran, eds., *Who's Black and Why? A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2022). I intentionally note "white thinkers" in this sentence to underscore that theories of racialization by black thinkers and responses to enslavement by black thinkers were *not* what has been recognized by the (overwhelmingly white) canon.

[10] Rancière, "Anachronism and the Conflict of the Times," pp. 117-118.

[11] "Anachronisme. s. m.," *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1st ed. (Paris: Vve J.-B. Coignard, 1694), <https://artfl.atilf.fr/dictionnaires/ACADEMIE/index.htm>

[12] "Erreur. s. f. (1)," *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*.

[13] "Faute. s. f. (1)," *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*.

[14] "Faute. s. f. (2)," *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*.

[15] "Faute. s. f. (3)," *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*.

[16] Pierre Le Lorrain de Vallemont, *Les Éléments de l'histoire, ou Ce qu'il faut savoir, de géographie, de blazon, de l'histoire universelle [...]* (Paris: J. Anisson, 1696), pp. 11-12, emphasis mine.

[17] Vallemont, *Les Éléments de l'histoire*, pp. 4-5. Vallemont's explanation expands on the *Dictionnaire's* definition of "chronologie" as "Doctrine des temps."

[18] Vallemont, *Les Éléments de l'histoire*, p. 8.

[19] *Le Parnasse des plus excellens poètes de ce temps*, t. I (Paris: Mathieu Guillemot, 1607).

[20] Jacques Rancière, "Le concept d'anachronisme et la vérité de l'historien," *L'Inactuel* 6 (Automne 1996): 53-68.

[21] Harcoüet (abbé), "Sur les Fleurs de lis," *Mercure galant*, October 1696, p. 18.

[22] "Réponse de Mr de Cypièrre à Mr l'Abbé Harcoüet, touchant les Fleurs de Lis," *Mercure galant*, April 1696, pp. 133-156.

[23] "Réponse de Mr de Cypièrre," pp. 136-138.

[24] For a fuller discussion of the importance of this question, see *New Literary History* 52/3-4 (Summer/Autumn 2021), particularly Urvashi Chakravarty and Ayanna Thompson, "Race and Periodization: Introduction," pp. v-xvi.

[25] Élie de Bétoulaud, "Le More a mademoiselle de Scudery, en luy envoyant pour le Roy une onyce antique où la teste d'un More est gravée en relief sur un fonds blanc," [s.l.n.d.], quoted in *Mercure galant*, December 1697, pp. 176-179, and in Dominique Bouhours, *Recueil de vers choisis* (Paris: Jean Barbou, 1745), pp. 321-322.

[26] Madeleine de Scudéry, "Mademoiselle de Scudery au Roy, en luy envoyant le petit More," [s.l.n.d.], quoted in *Mercure galant*, December 1697, pp. 179-181, and in Dominique Bouhours, *Recueil de vers choisis*, pp. 323-324.

[27] Nash, "Institutionalizing," p. 47, p. 46, and p. 61.