



GOLDBERG, K. MEIRA (2019). *SONIDOS NEGROS: ON THE BLACKNESS OF FLAMENCO*. NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



In *Sonidos Negros: On the Blackness of Flamenco*, K. Meira Goldberg engages flamenco's embodied traces in both the individual body (the bodies of specific performers) and the encoded body (the body at its intersection with social, political, economic, and aesthetic conventions). She opens the book with her main research question: "How is the politics of Blackness figured in the flamenco dancing body?" (p. 1). This inquiry gestures to three of her key intellectual investments at the nexus of race and performance: embodiment; choreography; and the politics of Blackness. To center the body is to consider how flamenco's rhythmic, melodic, and aesthetic details are imprinted on and enacted through the dancing body as an archive of signs, symbols, and intensities. In elevating the unspoken—gestures and movements—privileging the body intervenes politically on behalf of and alongside subjects whose voices have been historically silenced or marginalized. Resisting "a tendency in current flamenco scholarship to foreground flamenco's complicated mestizaje through the attempted erasure of Roma people" as an ethnic group, Goldberg is committed to the flamenco dancing body's subjectivity—and by extension, to Gitanos' ability for self-definition (p. 16). Holding the "image [of the Gitano stereotype] and the [Gitano] people separately and in dialogic relation," Goldberg leans on critical race theorists—Toni Morrison, Fred Moten, and Jayna Brown, among others—who theorize Blackness in relation to the liberating possibilities of W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness." *Sonidos Negros* inhabits this space of resistance and freedom.

The book constitutes a deep engagement with choreography, defined by Susan Foster in her influential article "Choreographies of Gender" (1998) as "the tradition of codes and conventions through which

meaning is constructed in dance” (p. 5). As a dance scholar, Goldberg asks the following questions in her analysis. How are the bodies of the subjects moving? What do their motions signify? What choreographies do they enact? Flamenco emerges as a genre in the mid-nineteenth century; yet many aspects of its choreographic logic precede its inauguration and animate its development over time. Goldberg traces its codes in the span “between 1492—the year in which Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula coincided with Christopher Columbus’s landing on Hispaniola—and 1933—when Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca published his ‘Theory and Play of the *Duende*’” (p. 2). Her massive undertaking in comparative literary analysis and practice-based analyses of scripts in gesture and sound render meticulous (re)readings and (re) constructions of a fragmented and disparate panorama consisting of a wide range of sources: fictional and nonfictional written accounts; visual artifacts like drawings, paintings, and film; and music as sound and notation. Goldberg proposes readings of these multifarious dance references, breathing new life into archives of the dancing body. To reanimate flamenco’s repertoire, she relies on her fifty years devoted to flamenco’s study and practice. Provided her depth of scholarly and embodied knowledge of flamenco, Goldberg achieves a masterful recounting of the interrelationality of codes and conventions that have, across centuries and diverse socio-cultural contexts, influenced flamenco.

Choreography acts as the social and historical analytic framework for the study of race as it is performed in and through flamenco. Indeed, Goldberg mobilizes flamenco as a paradigm of Blackness, which constitutes a meaningful intervention in studies of race, Blackness, performance, and flamenco. Reading “in flamenco’s *mestizaje*, its hybridity, a fragmentary portrait of the formation of race in what Paul Gilroy calls *The Black Atlantic*” (p. 3), she asks, “What does flamenco dance tell us about the construction of race in the Atlantic world?” (p. 1). This inquiry embeds her study in recent emphasis in Iberian Studies scholarship on Spain’s role in transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and their legacies. Due to this intervention in Spain’s cultural memory project, *Sonidos Negros* has often been placed in dialogue with Miguel Ángel Rosales’s documentary *Gurumbé: canciones de tu memoria negra* (2016) which exposes and preserves the legacy of Afro-Andalusians in flamenco. Although Black diaspora culture is fundamentally entangled with flamenco through its African and Afro-American lineages, *Sonidos Negros* does not primarily

address flamenco's Africanist cultural legacy. Instead, the book theorizes Blackness in Spain along Christian theological lines as the "catastrophic dogma that non-Christians should be enslaved" in early modern Spain: Blackness as "immutable bloodline" and "an equivocal state of moral peril from which a soul might still emerge (or be forcibly wrested)" (pp. 4-5). Paralleling its gradual loss of global hegemony over the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Spain resisted European and U.S. cultural imperialism by "asserting [its] unique national identity, as personified by its last remaining Other (Moorish, Jewish, and Afro-descended Spaniards having long since 'disappeared'): the Gitano" (p. 13). The ensuing "minstrelized Gitano" figure "carried a hybrid of Spanish and American representations of Blackness directly into flamenco" (p. 2). Goldberg traces choreographies of Blackness thus conceptualized—proposing a framework that represents a critical inroad in current efforts to theorize race via Spanish-centered frameworks.

Rather than illustrating what Blackness is, the book's six chapters illustrate how Blackness moves through performances of racism and race. Here I focus on two chapters, "Chapter 4. Nonsense of the Body" and "Chapter 5. Tilting across the Racial Divide: Jacinto Padilla, 'El Negro Meri,' and the Flamenco Clown," for how they dialogue with the traditions of theorizing race and performance that Goldberg invokes. Chapter 4 examines several blackface representations of men: "Mungo" from Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Padlock* (1768), "Harlequin Friday" from Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Robinson Crusoe, or Harlequin Friday* (1781), and "Jim Crow" from Thomas Dartmouth Rice's repertoire in the 1830s. Goldberg finds in these racist performances instances of choreographic correspondences with Spanish dance. She traces the ideologies of racialization underpinning these representations to flamenco, which renders the performance of Blackness performative—that is, a reiterative and citational practice by which a regulatory system's discourse produces the effects that it names. Blackness emerges a fictive, culturally constructed category of identity rather than an essence. And yet, as E. Patrick Johnson indicates in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), conceptualizing Blackness as performance has its limits: "blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the 'living

of blackness' becomes a material way of knowing" (p. 8). In Chapter 5, Goldberg depicts Blackness in this dynamic relation with performance. She uplifts "'celebrated mulato'" Jacinto Padilla's acrobatic jumps as a repertoire of intervention upon and resistance to white supremacy as a regulatory system essentializing people through blackface: Padilla's "virtuosity defied the blackface trope of the broken and muted body" (Goldberg, p. 128). Goldberg posits his dance within a Black Atlantic tradition of zapateado, footwork, and acrobatic jumping which she articulates, throughout the book, as choreographies of "transgressive yet potentially transcendent Blackness" in Spain. Moreover, in her close reading of Padilla's performance in the Lumière brothers' "Danse espagnole de la Feria" film from the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle, his dance expresses an embodied subjectivity. Conceiving of the acrobatic jump as a "shaking off [of] racist theatrical tropes with sly irony and physical mastery," Goldberg asks, "What doubled messages was [Padilla] telegraphing from the interstices of [the] representational battlefield [between two white colonial powers, Spain and France]?" (p. 148).

Throughout *Sonidos Negros*, Goldberg moves between and with archives and repertoires of performances of Blackness—always heeding the interstices. The impetus to elevate choreographies of Blackness as resistance reflects her ethical commitment to signaling the material conditions of inequality that race inscribes into flamenco, Spain, and the world. Goldberg's reconstruction of the language of the body as a central text in flamenco history endows the book with an aliveness, a multi-sensorial experience for her readers. While the book's diligent documentation is one of its greatest contributions to scholarly inquiry, it does produce a density which at times interferes with the transmission of the book's meaningful set of arguments. Ultimately, the book reads like the highly nuanced project that it is. *Sonidos Negros* registers flamenco as an archive of embodied meaning, memory, and feeling of Blackness.

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