



Returning to Accra: Between Nina Simone, Ama Ata Aidoo, Fassbinder, and the Cockettes

Moving across New York and San Francisco, Paris and Munich, Accra and Lagos, artist and scholar Malik Gaines's *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* offers a lively and affirmative account of stage, dress, film and television, and music performance. Saadi Nikro reviews Gaines's recently published book, discussing its many intersections of race, theatricality, subjectivity, and sexuality.

Review / Saadi Nikro September 27, 2018

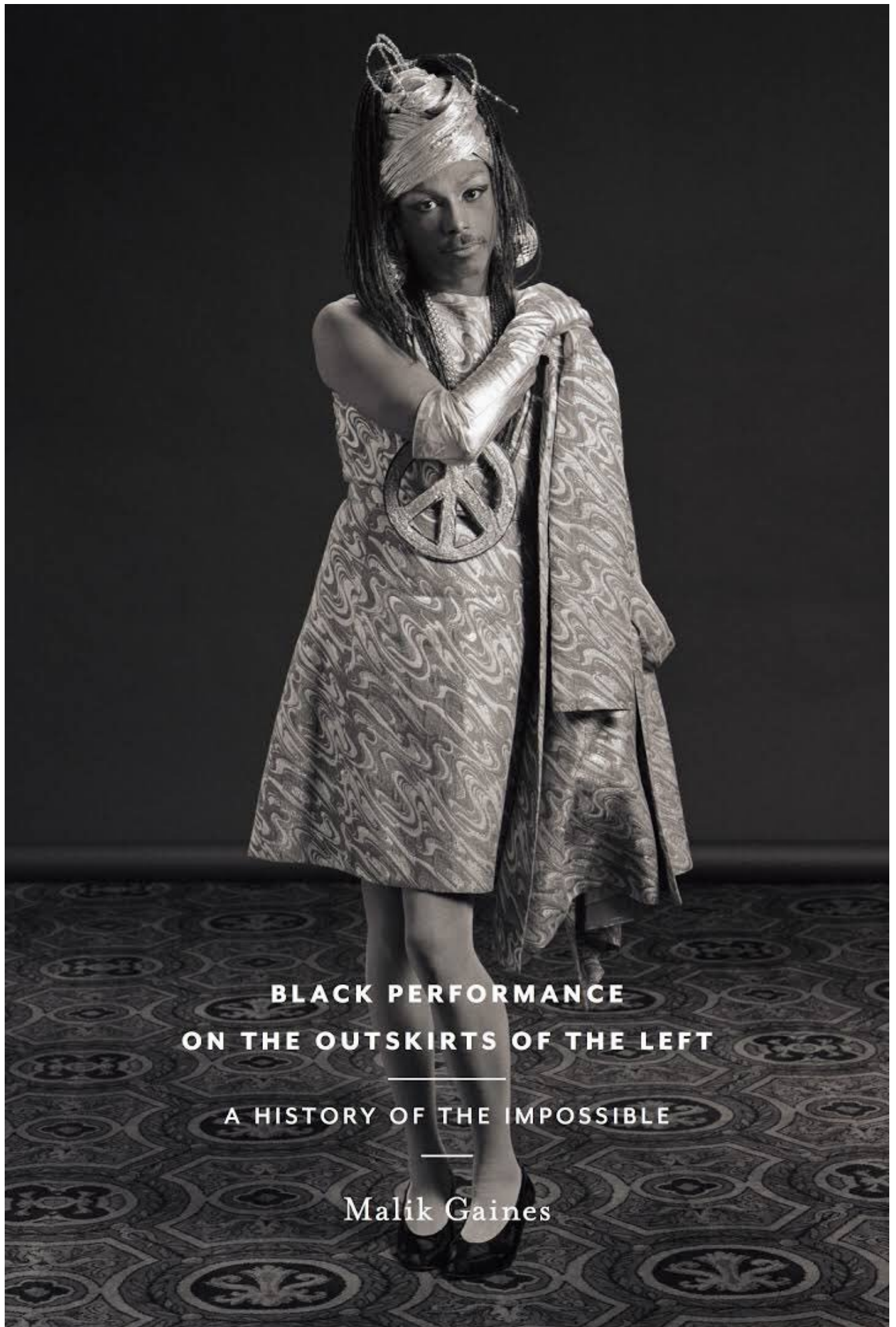
Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible*. (New York: New York University Press, 2017)

Didier Eribon, *Returning to Reims*. Translated by Michael Lucey. (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2013)

While reading American performing artist and scholar Malik Gaines's *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left*, I was also reading French intellectual Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*. The latter predates the former by almost a decade. A colleague who has some awareness of my background recommended Eribon's memoir, which traces the tension between his working-class origins in the French town of Reims, his homosexuality, and his coming to own his modest background. Having long before come out of his "sexual closet," Eribon's book is in the main a record of his efforts to come out of his "class closet."

While both books display a keen awareness of political culture and left activism, they are very different in style and thematic preoccupation. Having a broader range than Eribon's more personal and local concerns, Gaines presents a critical study of stage, dress, film and television, and music performance, in respect to intersections of race, blackness, and sexuality, to transgender and transsexuality. Much of his subject matter derives from the 1960s, as he moves across and between New York and San Francisco, Paris and Munich, Accra and Lagos.

unnamed.jpg



**BLACK PERFORMANCE
ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE LEFT**

A HISTORY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Malik Gaines



[1]Front cover, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left A: History of the Impossible*, By Malik Gaines, New York Uni Press, New York, 2017
New York University Press, New York, 2017

I briefly mention Eribon's book to put into relief what constitutes the primary conceptual contribution made by Gaines. The intersectional scope of *Black Performance* offers a critical departure from the Hegelian temperament embedded in the pores of *Returning to Reims*. Despite moving away from privileging sexuality as the driving force of his efforts to "belong to himself," Eribon maintains a lens of double consciousness. Writing about his tactics to hide his class background as he learned to inhabit academic and intellectual circles in Paris, Eribon explains his "class closet" in the following manner: "I mean by this that I took on the constraints imposed by a different kind of dissimulation; I took on a different kind of dissociative personality or double consciousness" (27). Consequently, resentment and angst tend to inform both the subject matter and stylistic temperament of Eribon's memoir.

This is not to say that resentment and angst have no productive role for the production of political subjectivities, intellectual cultures, performance and radical theatre. The point is, rather, that the existential temperament and paradigm of double consciousness remains steeped in the terms of reference and balance of power that privileges a polyphonic, rather than heterophonic, relationality. Against the reconcilable duality of master and slave, Gaines mines the work of his performers to articulate what he calls "quadruple consciousness" (22).

[e-flux Lectures: Malik Gaines, "A History of Impossible Progress" \[2\]](#)

Video of e-flux Lectures: Malik Gaines, "A History of Impossible Progress"
2017 מליק גיינס מרצה אודות ספרו במסגרת הרצאות e-flux, פברואר 2017

In studies of race and blackness the notion of double consciousness emerged from the early twentieth-century work of W.E.B. Du Bois, especially his [The Souls of Black Folk](#) [3], a critical study of slavery in the United States, first published in 1910.¹ This important, remarkably creative study laid the basis for a critique of how racial subjugation involves something like an internal mirror, or "veil," influencing (or policing) self-regard—similar to what Franz Fanon referred to as "Manichean," and what Lacan, with very different concerns to du Bois and Fanon, was to call the Imaginary, or ideal-ego. Against the underlying assumption of a reconcilable balance between ego and ideal, self and other, black and white, Gaines promotes a "provisional black subject." As an alternative to "the wholeness of black identity," he argues for a sense of "the fragmentation of black subjectivity" (35).

[The Souls of Black Folk \(FULL Audiobook\) - part 1 \[4\]](#)

Video of The Souls of Black Folk (FULL Audiobook) - part 1
וא"ב דו בויוז, נשמתם של השחורים (1910), ספר קולי (אודיו), חלק א'.



Accordingly, the opening chapter of *Black Performance* adapts notions of subjectivity as multi-sited, provisional, intersectional, ambivalent and proactive. Titled "Nina Simone's Quadruple Consciousness," Gaines discusses a number of the jazz singer's performances in terms of "the political dimension of Simone's theatricality" (23). Simone's performances, he argues, produce an ambivalence and precariousness of colour, sexuality, race and gender, class and nation. "Neither singular authority nor dialectical progress can be oriented around the shifting terms of quadruple consciousness," he writes. Transforming "the negativity of alienation into a productive force," Gaines goes on to explain, the "shifting terms of quadruple consciousness...produce multiple positions, provisionally destabilizing the concrete terms around which race and gender have been putatively oriented" (22).

After this initial burst of conceptual clarification (illustrated by sprightly attention to the marvellous radicality of Simone's performances), Gaines does not spend much time on the theoretical argument. This makes for a more relaxed and enjoyable read of his book. In succeeding chapters, he provides lively discussions of stage and film work, all anchored in the 1960s.

[Nina Simone: To Be Young, Gifted & Black](#) [5]

Video of Nina Simone: To Be Young, Gifted & Black
נינה סימון, להיות צעיר, מוכשר ושחור
Release by the Estate of Nina Simon

In the second chapter, Gaines focusses on theatre and black liberation in Ghana's Pan African movements. He develops compelling readings of Efua Sutherland's play *Edufa* (1962) and Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964). Moving in and out of text, context, and the proactive motivations informing them, Gaines is careful enough to pick out nuances by which both playwrights entertained cross sections of feminist, decolonial, nationalist, and racial themes. Besides visiting Ghana himself, Gaines's research is broad and sensitive, noting, for example, that matrilineal traditions of Ghana's Akan communities influence Sutherland's creative work. At the same time, he canvasses "transnational entanglements" between New York and Accra—such as Rockefeller Foundation funding for the arts and culture in Ghana (75). This I found to be a particular strength of Gaines's book: put simply, he critically practices the cross-sectional theory he champions.

[The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo Documentary](#) [6]

Video of 'Edufa'; the play performed live on #theTrend
#Kenya NTV ,theTrend של אפואה סת'רלנד בהופעה חיה ב- theTrend

Performed live on [#theTrend](#) [7], [NTV Kenya](#) [8]

In chapter 3, he moves from Accra to the fringe scenes of theatre and film in Munich, concentrating



on the astonishingly prolific work of the short-lived Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Discussing, in the main, one of Fassbinder's major actors and collaborators, Günther Kaufmann, he addresses a number of the filmmaker's theatrical projects and earlier films, such as *Whity* (1971). In keeping with his study as a whole, Gaines is mostly interested in the cross-sections of sexuality, race, class, and nationalism that Fassbinder's work puts in critical relief. Within this oeuvre, "Kaufmann's racialized body is an agent of radical ambivalence, a critical position that meets authority with unresolved multiplicity" (97).

In contrast to Fassbinder, Kaufmann has not received much critical attention in studies of film and television in Germany. The son of an American soldier and a German woman, he had a long acting career, up until his death in May 2012. That colour and racism were absorbing issues for him is obvious from the stark title of his autobiography, *Der Weiße Neger von Hasenberg!* (the White Negro from Hasenberg!), published in 2005. The book has not been translated into English, and although Gaines, it seems, is acquainted with the German language, he does not mention the book. Indeed, while giving attention to the somewhat neglected figure of Kaufmann in studies of race, I felt that Gaines could have provided more context in this chapter. For example, considering that his international reputation was in some respects out of kilt with his more subdued reception in Germany, I wonder what local reviewers in the 1970s made of Fassbinder's early work, and what was made of Kaufmann's racialized, sexualized figure.

[Whity](#) [9]

Video of Whity

קדימון לסרט "ווייטי", ריינר ורנר פסבינדר, 1971, 95 דקות

However, in his following chapter, "The Cockettes, Sylvester, and Performance as Life," Gaines returns to the context-rich impulses of his study. Focussing more on the work and life of Sylvester as he moved to San Francisco and eventually joined the Cockettes, context for Gaines's more affirmative approach is always dynamic and engaging, not simply a backdrop explaining subjective motivations. This is another strength of the book—while reflecting on circumstance, occasion, and context, Gaines manages to write about how subjects proactively engaged and worked on their circumstances. As he says in conclusion, "blackness endures, not only as a mode of subjection, but as a deeply energetic position from which to communicate" (202).

[The Cockettes \(trailer\)](#) [10]

Video of The Cockettes (trailer)

קדימון לסרט "Cockettes The", ביל וובר, דיוויד ויסמן, 2002, 100 דקות

Besides including a number of photographs, the book greatly benefits from the musical and theatrical work of Gaines himself. A member of the radical troupe My Barbarian since the early 2000s, Gaines brings a personal experience of performance to his considerations. His creative experience of sound and voice informs the liveliness and affirmative spirit of his discussions.



His own trajectory informs his discussion of contemporary music performance in his *Afterword*, which serves to highlight connections between the 1960s and the present. Here, he focuses first on a music and voice performance choreographed by the Nigerian, Berlin artist Emeka Ogboh, for the 56th Venice Biennial, in 2015.

[Biennale ARTE 2015 \(The 56th Venice Biennale 2015\) - The Song of the Germans - Emeka Ogboh](#) [11]

Video of Biennale ARTE 2015 - The Song of the Germans - Emeka Ogboh
2015 ARTE Biennale , אמקה אוגבו, השיר של הגרמנים

This particular sound/song installation, performing the German national anthem, works as a compelling demonstration of what I distinguished above between polyphony and heterophony, the former associated with an ultimately reconcilable dualism, the latter with a multiplicity whose dispositioning of power and desire better captures the critical impress of Gaines's notion of "quadruple consciousness." Under the subtitle "Babel," Gaines writes (181): "One voice began, and others joined, until a chorus surrounded the listener with overlapping languages, performing the same heavy tune, the 'Song of the Germans' ('Lied der Deutschen') in Douala, Igbo, Lingála, Bamun, Kilongo, Yoruba, Sango, More, Twi, and Ewondo."

Ogboh's soundscape is a telling choice on Gaines's part, considering the German genealogy of Hegel's dialectical relational paradigm. Along with, and against this influential pedigree, Gaines tracks contiguous genealogies of "performative contradictions" and "multiplicitous expressions" (193) to thwart pre-scripted repertoires of mutual oppositions.

- [1.](#) W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994)

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