

# Performing the Racial Scale: From Colonial Saint-Domingue to Contemporary Hollywood

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## Abstract

*This piece explores the notion of the racial scale in two performance contexts: first, in the theatres of the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth-century, and second, in twenty-first-century Hollywood. The racial scale as conceived by the colonials in Saint-Domingue was a means of establishing and upholding a social hierarchy that was built on the dominance of white European master over the black African slave, but which had also to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of free people of colour. One free woman of colour named Minette challenged the whiteness of the colonial stage by appearing in solo roles in a number of productions in Port-au-Prince throughout the 1780s. Her ability to move up the racial scale onstage is significant, though ultimately limited. Moving into the modern era, contemporary casting practices in Hollywood are examined in relation to a modern perception of the racial scale, often known as colourism. The controversy caused by the casting of Zoe Saldana as Nina Simone in a recent biopic reveals the complex politics of casting even 'black' actors in 'black' roles as perceptions of different shades of colour persist across different social groups.*

## Introduction

The identification, creation or application of a scale is one of the key ways in which humans attempt to make sense of the world around them. The notion of scale necessarily encompasses the notion of difference, and, as such, can be used as a means to bring about fairness, discrimination or, occasionally, neither. At the heart of my current research project on Theatre and Citizenship in colonial Saint-Domingue (the western part of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in the Greater Antilles, now Haiti), there sits the scale that is arguably the most discriminatory in the history of mankind: the 'racial scale.' The question of the racial scale will be examined here from two complementary perspectives: theatre performance practices in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue and twenty-first century Hollywood cinema. It will be seen that two centuries after the abolition of the slave trade, the question of an implicit

racial scale has yet to disappear. Its manifestations in the world of theatre and cinema shed light both on broader attitudes towards race and on questions relating to the theatrical illusion more generally.

In the period under consideration, Saint-Domingue was a French colony; following a bloody but ultimately successful revolution, Saint-Domingue eventually shook off French rule and became the first black republic in 1804 and named itself Haiti. In Saint-Domingue and other Caribbean colonies during this period there existed a notion, commonly accepted among the colonizing peoples and their associates, of a racial scale that ranged, crudely, from 'pure' white European at one extreme to 'pure' black African at the other. Between the two sat numerous shades of colour resulting from different ancestral combinations across several generations. Of course one of the problems for proponents of this kind of scale was that an individual's physiognomy – and in particular his or her skin colour – did not always in practice neatly reflect his or her ancestry. This racial scale was a means of establishing and upholding a social hierarchy that was built on the dominance of white European master over the black African slave, but which had also to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of free (and freed) people of colour, most of whom were of mixed racial ancestry. To say that it was an instrument of oppression is an understatement.

One of the great commentators on life in eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue was Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry (1750-1819), a white créole<sup>i</sup> born in the neighbouring French colony of Martinique, in the Lesser Antilles, who worked as a lawyer in Saint-Domingue for a number of years and who went on to represent what he considered to be the interests of Saint-Domingue at the French Parliament in Paris during the Revolution. Moreau de Saint-Méry is the author of a number of works, including the would-be encyclopaedic *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (1797-98) in which he drew up one of the most nuanced iterations of the racial scale in existence. Specifically, he identified thirteen distinct categories of skin colour among the population of Saint-Domingue; he also drew up detailed tables of the different combinations that would produce each of the thirteen types. By way of an example, Moreau de Saint-Méry's third type is the 'mulatto' (his first two types are 'pure' black and 'pure' white), which, we are informed, can be produced via twelve different combinations and is subdivided into two skin tones: red-copper and yellow-bronze.<sup>ii</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry's *quasi*-scientific system comprised a set of core racial combinations which, expanded and developed over seven hypothetical generations,

resulted in a dizzying 128-point scale. Of course, his scale was never adopted in all its nuances, but notarial and other contemporary documents confirm that a scale allowing for racial combinations across two or three generations was in common usage as individuals were frequently identified, for instance, as being one quarter or one eighth African.

One of the purposes of Moreau de Saint-Méry's scale was to support the colonizers' wish that an individual's racial ancestry be physically legible on his or her body. This way other individuals (the white colonials by default) would know if someone were black, white or in-between, and if they were in-between if they were more black than white or more white than black just by looking at them. Moreau de Saint-Méry's goal was to provide both a scale of observation and a scale of measurement that would overlap entirely. The wish for legibility was of course borne of an anxiety in the face of the unwelcome fact that it was in fact impossible to discern an individual's racial ancestry simply by looking closely at his or her physical appearance – an anxiety that was fuelled in the mid-eighteenth century by the increasing social mobility (albeit still restricted) of the free people of colour, many of whom lived alongside and among the white population. Other responses to this same anxiety included the rolling out of sumptuary laws, notably that of 1779 which forbade free people of colour from wearing clothing typically associated with the white population.

At the same time that the core principles, if not the minutiae, of this pseudo-scientific and supposedly immutable scale were embedded in the colonial mind, there existed an oft-repeated fear of degeneration among the white population in the Caribbean colonies. If an individual's actual racial ancestry was immutable, members of Moreau de Saint-Méry's first category (pure white) were nonetheless considered particularly susceptible to falling down other racially-inflected scales that also held pure white to be at the top and pure black at the bottom. It was commonly thought that white people of purely European ancestry could become morally and even physically one or two shades darker owing to the pernicious effects of living in the tropics, being exposed to the heat of the sun and to the company of non-white people.

Similarly (if conversely) some free people of colour were, particularly in the middle of the eighteenth century before new repressive measures were brought in, able to climb several rungs up the social and, by implication, racial ladder thanks to their wealth and ensuing influence in society. Contemporary documents confirm that their perceived 'civilization' was often understood as a form of 'whitening' – a fact that is

reflected, for instance, in the use of certain forms of address in legal documents. If the terms 'Sieur', 'Madame' and 'Demoiselle' were customarily reserved for white people in the colonial context, some free people of colour came to be addressed in this way – a fact that challenges Moreau de Saint-Méry's implicit attempts at matching not only skin colour to racial ancestry, but also racial ancestry to social position.<sup>iii</sup> Of course, once the free people of colour had moved up the social scale towards the ultimate status of white European, they too were subject to the possibility of degeneration and to the fear that they might at any time slip back into their supposedly 'natural' category. Two broad and conflicting models for the racial scale were thus at work simultaneously: one based on ancestry that was logically immutable; the other, based primarily on ancestry but allowing for some degree of movement among the white population (for whom the only way was down) and the free people of colour (who aspired to go up).

Before turning to the question of how the racial scale impacted upon the theatre in colonial Saint-Domingue, it is perhaps useful to acknowledge some of the challenges that this study poses. Our sources for the study of eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue are woefully incomplete and deplorably biased. The influence of the colonial slave society weighs heavily on our writers, many of whom do not see fit even to question the abuses that are so apparent to us today. Those who do question them do not go far enough. The challenge for the researcher is to try both to understand contemporary society in Saint-Domingue without condoning it, and to uncover – or at least empathize with – the experiences of those who were voiceless or whose voices are barely audible. Terminology too can be tricky. It is difficult to write about a racist society without engaging with its racist terminology or, in some cases, with terminology that was put to racist purposes and which has as a consequence taken on a racist hue. Yet most anti-racism groups agree that in order to combat the undeniable existence of racism, we must acknowledge the existence of a constructed concept of race even as we deny its scientific foundation.<sup>iv</sup> Nor can we relegate the notion of race or racism to the past for, as will be seen in the later discussion of contemporary theatre (broadly conceived), the question lives on today.

#### Race and the Theatre in Colonial Saint-Domingue

Saint-Domingue enjoyed the most extensive theatrical offerings in the whole of the colonial Caribbean. Several towns boasted theatrical centres at various times in the late eighteenth century, but the two main theatrical centres were in the towns of Port-au-Prince and Cap-Français (now called Cap-Haïtien), where plays and operas were

performed up to three times per week in the heyday of the late 1770s and throughout the 1780s. The theatrical repertoire overlapped considerably with that of metropolitan France and over ninety per cent of the works performed were French. The genre of choice was *opéra comique*, followed by other comic forms. Tragedies were rarer, but not unheard of, particularly those of Voltaire. Alongside these French offerings, we know of the existence of a small number of local works, some of which were clearly intended to imitate those of metropolitan France, while others included some créole or local elements.<sup>v</sup>

Extant documents relating to the theatre in Saint-Domingue and elsewhere in the French Caribbean colonies reveal the racist dynamics that underpinned the institution. One of the most revealing sources in this regard is a set of manuscript documents dated 1780 and relating to the proposed founding of a new theatre in Saint-Pierre, on the island of Martinique. The authors of the proposal insist upon the 'civilizing' effects of the theatre, contending that it can benefit both the white and free coloured populations (who made up its audience), rescuing the one from much-feared degeneration and raising the other above its 'original barbarity.'<sup>vi</sup> In other words, the theatre could uphold the racial scale by keeping the whites white and offer a modest degree of movement within that scale by whitening the disproportionately small number of free people of colour present in the auditorium. Lest the free people of colour became *too* white and to protect the white population from contamination by association, the auditorium was segregated according to racial ancestry. In Port-au-Prince, where they represented approximately fifteen per cent of the theatre's audience capacity, the free people of colour were required to sit in fifteen second-tier boxes (seven on either side of the auditorium and one at the back). In Cap-Français, commonly known as Le Cap, the free people of colour represented a little more than five per cent of the audience capacity and sat in the upper boxes at the back of the auditorium. Free black women (but not men), who were admitted to the theatre in Le Cap towards the end of the period under consideration, sat in separate boxes from spectators of mixed racial origins.

While the inclusion of people of colour in the theatre audience was systematic, although restricted, during the late 1770s and 1780s, the appearance of performers of colour onstage remained exceptional. Throughout the period, the small number of black roles in the repertoire were customarily performed by white actors in blackface. Indeed, we have no evidence of any actors of colour until the 1780s. The most famous of these was a young woman from Port-au-Prince called 'Minette' who

performed as a soloist in a number of operatic works. There is no doubt that Minette's exceptional talent as a singer helped her to overcome – at least in part – racial prejudice and forge a career for herself in a world dominated by white performers. But it is probably no coincidence that she had only one grandparent of African origin and was probably – though not certainly – relatively pale-skinned.<sup>vii</sup> In addition to Minette's younger sister, Lise, who also became a professional actor-singer, we know of one unnamed black créole actor who performed in 1788.<sup>viii</sup> A French visitor to the island, Alfred de Laujon, noted a mix of colours, which he described as 'blanc', 'noir' and 'jaune', singing in the chorus at the theatre in Port-au-Prince in the 1780s.<sup>ix</sup>

Minette's first appearance in the public theatre was described by none other than Moreau de Saint-Méry, who commented on how she was able to overcome the colonial prejudice that otherwise worked against her:

On 13 February 1781, M. Saint-Martin, then director [of the theatre in Port-au-Prince] agreed to put prejudice head to head with pleasure by letting, for the first time, a young person, a fourteen-year-old créole from Port-au-Prince debut in the role of Isabelle in the opera *Isabelle and Gertrude*. Her talent and her enthusiasm, which are rightly applauded on a daily basis, sustained her beginnings in this career, despite the prevailing colonial prejudices, which anyone who is sensitive and fair is delighted to have seen her overcome. (Moreau de Saint-Méry, 1958, p. 989)

As a performer of colour, Minette was in effect cross-cast when performing such roles – a phenomenon that challenged both colonial prejudice and theatrical verisimilitude. There is some evidence that Minette, unlike her sister Lise, who we know performed at least one black character during her career, sought to maintain her newfound status (or perhaps to climb further up the racial scale) by performing only white characters in French works. This is suggested by a text that was attributed to Minette in the local newspaper advertising an upcoming production:

It is not one of these ephemeral productions that have for a while been bastardizing and even degrading the lyric stage, and which are merely local and are frequently concerned only with the daily events that take place in private society. It's an opera that has met with the approval of those with

good taste, and people who appreciate what is beautiful will always take pleasure in seeing it again.<sup>x</sup>

Minette's presence in the press announcements highlights the mutability of the racial scale in other ways too. In relation to her first appearance in the theatre, she was referred to as 'une jeune personne' (a young person) and then as 'la jeune personne' (the young person); as she gained in notoriety, she came to be referred to by the respectful term of Demoiselle Minette (see above for the significance of the title Demoiselle). In the context of a later legal dispute, however, Minette was simply referred to as 'la nommée Minette' (the so-called Minette), the accepted form of address for an unexceptional free woman of colour. For Minette, then, her success in the theatre allowed for some social mobility but this did not necessarily shield her from daily prejudice in other areas of her life.

#### Colourism or the Racial Scale Today

Would that one could end the story of the racial scale in the Caribbean and in the theatre more generally with the slave revolts of 1791 and conclude that this and all other manifestations of racial prejudice ended with the founding of Haiti in 1804. But this of course this would grossly untrue. It is impossible here to trace the story of the racial scale across theatre history from 1789, 1791 or 1804 onwards but it is instructive to pick up the threads in the twenty-first century and to consider one of the more recent controversies that has arisen in the field of theatre's more modern cousin, film. The absence of actors of colour from the list of nominees for the Oscars in 2015 and 2016 is well-documented and rightly caused a stir and renewed the debate about on-going racial prejudice and discrimination in the industry. While these issues have yet to be resolved, it is to be noted that the situation improved somewhat in 2017 with the success of Mahershala Ali (best supporting actor) and Viola Davis (best supporting actress), who won Academy Awards for their roles in *Moonlight* and *Fences*, respectively. Our particular concern here is not with conceptions of race in the theatre but with conceptions of a racial scale and the nuances of racial distinctions. While the racial scale is seldom referred to as such, Alice Walker's term 'colorism' is a close modern equivalent. For Walker, colo[u]rism is defined as 'prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color' (Walker, 1983, p. 290). What is particularly interesting about colourism is that it is no longer a racial scale used by white colonial oppressors against black people (or even one used by would-be white populations against black people), but often, also and as will be seen below, an intra-racial phenomenon.

The news that Zoe Saldana, replacing Mary J. Blige, was to play Nina Simone in Cynthia Mort's biopic, *Nina* (2016) was met with consternation in many quarters and particularly within the self-identified African American community. Among others, Nina Simone's daughter, Lisa Simone Kelly, queried the casting decision, commenting that 'appearance-wise' Saldana was 'not the best choice.'<sup>xi</sup> Born to a Dominican father and a Puerto Rican mother, Saldana, who identifies as a black actor, is noticeably lighter-skinned than Nina Simone. In other words, she was *too* light-skinned. Or, to put it another way, *not* dark-skinned *enough*. This is both a question of scale and one of verisimilitude. Questions of verisimilitude, of course, strike at the heart of the notion of theatre and its related genres: is what the audience or viewer sees imitation or representation? How lifelike does the imitation or representation have to be? To an extent, the answer depends on the genre in question. In the context of live theatre performance, more latitude is usually granted as part of the contractual willing suspension of disbelief. In a documentary-style film, however, the expectation is that the actor will look like or, crucially, be made to look like the person they are playing, particularly when that person's appearance is well-known as is the case of Nina Simone.

It is of course not unusual for actors to adjust their appearance in order to play a role. In this instance, however, the adjustments were highly political. For Zoe Saldana to look sufficiently like Nina Simone she had to wear a prosthetic nose and skin-darkening make-up. As Lisa Simone Kelly explained, these were not neutral decisions in the context of Nina Simone's life: 'My mother was raised at a time when she was told her nose was *too* wide, her skin was *too* dark' (my emphasis -- we note further references here to a scale of darkness and skin colour and other racial elements). For Saldana to wear a prosthetic nose to play Nina Simone was, in this context, different from Meryl Streep wearing a prosthetic nose to play Margaret Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*. The question of skin-darkening make-up is perhaps more problematic still. As we saw above, the use of blackface in the theatre in Saint-Domingue and at other times in theatre history (the minstrel shows are an obvious example that bridges Saint-Domingue and the late twentieth century) was inextricably bound up with the complex and insidious power relations that were at play in colonial and slave societies that depended for their very existence on fictions of a racial hierarchy. Saldana's case is an interesting one for she is a self-identified black actor who was, in the eyes of many other actors, especially actors of colour, in effect blacking up. But where does blacking up begin and wearing tinted make-up



end? That too would appear to be a question of scale.<sup>xii</sup> Whatever the answers to these vexed questions, it is clear that while prosthetics and make-up solved the practical, theatrical problem of verisimilitude in Saldana's case, they only served to highlight the ongoing issue of colourism in Hollywood and elsewhere.

If colourism remains endemic, the particular problem of casting the role of Nina Simone could have been avoided by choosing a darker-skinned actor. Lisa Simone Kelly commented that she would have preferred Kimberly Elise or Viola Davis to have portrayed her mother, and reported that Nina Simone's own choice would have been Whoopi Goldberg. Viola Davis has herself commented on the insidious application of the racial scale – or colourism – particularly in relation to female actors of varying shades, noting as a general point (and, it should be noted, without reference to the Saldana controversy):

When you see a chocolate-complexioned actress on TV in a complex and sexualized role, clap for that woman and whoever cast her because dark-brown women have to contend with the colorism hurdle just to land quality roles.<sup>xiii</sup>

She went on to use one of the most evocative images of the more modern application of the racial scale, commenting: 'If you are darker than a paper bag, then you are not sexy, you are not a woman, you shouldn't be in the realm of anything men should desire.' It is beyond the purview of the present article to explore the question of the objectification of women that Davis also raises here, but her reference to the notorious paper bag test of the early twentieth century, whereby admittance to parties, fraternities, churches and other institutions and events was reliant on an individual's skin being deemed lighter than the colour of a brown paper bag, is telling. Equally telling is the fact that Robert L. Johnson, the African-American distributor of *Nina* had compared the criticism of casting Saldana as Simone to the same test:

That's where some of this comes from, when you hear people saying that a light-skinned woman can't play a dark-skinned woman when they're both clearly of African descent. To say that if I'm gonna cast a movie, I've gotta hold a brown paper bag up to the actresses and say, 'Oh sorry, you can't play her.' Who's to decide when you're black enough?<sup>xiv</sup>

Johnson rejects the notion of a racial scale, of colourism, of different shades of black or brown, insisting instead on the more elementary notion of African heritage or blackness. His description of actors of varying skin colour both being 'clearly of African descent' is the crucial one for the present discussion as it appears, perhaps unwittingly, to suggest that the visual appearance of an actor does remain important when casting 'black' roles. If Saldana is clearly of African descent despite being noticeably lighter-skinned than Nina Simone, at what point might an actor with an African ancestor be deemed *not* to be clearly of African descent? The obvious answer for the majority of the viewing public is when that person is as fair-skinned as people who identify as (or who are identified by others as) white.

### Some Conclusions

It is clear from this brief account that the problem of the racial scale, or colourism, persists in the theatre and film industries today. The 2017 Academy Awards at which *Moonlight*, featuring an all-black cast and a story about a gay black man, won best picture (albeit after a monumental mishap) give cause for hope but certainly not complacency. Even as opportunities and recognition for black and minority ethnic actors may slowly be expanding, this question of Walker's on-going discrimination within racial groups must not be overlooked. *Nina* was controversial for a number of reasons, notably because it was an unauthorized biopic and because it manufactured a love story between Simone and her personal assistant, Clifton Henderson (who was in fact homosexual – a case of straightface, perhaps). The casting of Saldana in the title role was also particularly problematic in the context of a film that many people thought failed to do justice to Nina Simone's role in the civil rights movement or to portray adequately her experience of discrimination and prejudice over the course of her life. The director of the film, Cynthia Mort, was identified by most critics as 'white.' The ethical issues that arise in relation to this film are many and various and the casting of its principal actor is only part of that story, just as the question of the racial scale in the theatre is only part of the story of broader questions relating to race and society.

The specificity of the theatre or cinema's role in these questions is, however, worth considering. The central problem of verisimilitude has already been discussed; what, then, is the theatre or cinema's role in society? To what extent does the fact that these genres are so powerfully visual impact upon how we (literally) view racial difference? And do the dramatic arts ultimately reflect society's prejudices (as they surely do in most instances) or can they be used to challenge those prejudices in

ways that are thought-provoking and ultimately even constructive? Minette was not an active pioneer for actors of colour in 1780s Saint-Domingue, but her appearance onstage before a colonial and racist audience was nonetheless significant as it marked a small step on the long – and as yet incomplete – journey towards the breaking down of the racist racial scale. As we look to the future of casting practices (which are of course only a small part of the broader story of inclusion and diversity in the entertainment industry), two possible avenues are colour-blind casting (as embraced by the new artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, Michelle Terry, in August 2017), whose success as a leveller has so far been mixed, and colour-conscious casting, which is used to enhance the production in question and has the advantage of acknowledging difference.

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<sup>i</sup> In the eighteenth century, the term *créole* applied to all people born locally, whether of European, African or mixed ancestry. In practice, when used alone, the term usually alluded to individuals of European or part-European descent, *créole* slaves being referred to as *nègres créoles*.

<sup>ii</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry also attributes certain personal as well as physical characteristics to each type e.g. laziness, resilience, loyalty and so on.

<sup>iii</sup> One obvious example of social position not matching skin colour or racial category is found in the case of the 'petits blancs' or white underclass, who were socially inferior to the wealthy free people of colour (and whose discontent contributed in no small way to the Saint-Dominguan revolution).

<sup>iv</sup> In 2013, under President François Hollande, France's National Assembly voted to remove the terms *race* and *racial* from France's penal codes, arguing that the concept of race has no scientific foundation. However, this proved controversial among anti-racist groups and plans to remove the word *race* from the French constitution (where it appears only once) were abandoned.

<sup>v</sup> One such is the anonymous three-act comedy *Les Veuves créoles* (The Créole Widows, 1768), which is the first known play to have been written in Martinique and which was performed in Saint-Domingue on at least two occasions. During my fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Durham, I prepared a critical edition of *Les Veuves créoles*, which was published by the Modern Humanities Research Association in 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> *Mémoire Concernant l'Etablissement d'un Spectacle à St-Pierre de la Martinique* (1780) ANOM COL C8b 15 No43bis.

<sup>vii</sup> Her father was a white European and her mother was of mixed African and European origins. For further details on Minette's ancestry, see Camier, 2005.

<sup>viii</sup> *Supplément aux Affiches américaines (Feuille du Cap)*, 8 March 1788, p. 749.

<sup>ix</sup> Laujon, 1834, vol. 1, pp. 166-67. Set alongside other available evidence, his account would appear to exaggerate the extent of the inclusion of non-white performers.

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<sup>x</sup> *Supplément aux Affiches américaines* 18 October 1783, p. 594. It has also been suggested that she may have sought to avoid performing in local works because they featured and thereby degraded more black characters.

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/movies/should-zoe-saldana-play-nina-simone-some-say-no.html>. Consulted 18 March 2017. All references to the views of Lisa Simone Kelly are taken from this article.

<sup>xii</sup> For the purposes of the present study I have limited myself to questions relating to 'black' and 'white', to people of African or European or mixed African and European ancestry. However, similar questions of course arise in relation to the portrayal of, for instance, Asian characters on the Western stage and screen. The use of 'yellowface' in a recent production of Howard Barker's *In the Depths of Love* at The Print Room in Notting Hill, for instance, provoked a demonstration outside the performance venue. See <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/notting-hill-theatre-faces-yellowface-protest-for-casting-white-actors-in-chinese-roles-a3444051.html>. Consulted 18 March 2017.

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://thegrapevine.theroot.com/viola-davis-on-colorism-in-hollywood-if-you-are-darke-1790886679>. Consulted 18 March 2017. All references to the views of Viola Davis are taken from this article.

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/17/nina-simone-blackface-criticism-zoe-saldana-biopic-slavery>. Consulted 18 March 2017.