Kenshur Prize Commentary on *The Sun King at Sea*

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Good afternoon!
I want to start by thanking Jesse for this occasion to engage with *The Sun King at Sea,* a brilliant and urgently important book. Like my co-panelists, I am spending much time this fall grappling with the demands of a new administrative position (for me, like Johannes, as department chair; while Rebecca, possibly even busier, as dean). So, I am sure I am speaking for all of us, when I say that this is a particular welcome break from the steady stream of administrative meetings and emails, a return – and a reminder about – what we came here to do in the first place.

In the past, when I have spoken at events for the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies, I have always started by excusing myself of being somewhat of an interloper, as a *dix-septiémiste*, working on the political and philosophical culture of absolutist France of the late seventeenth century. Today, however, I am delighted that the winner of the Kenshur Prize for best book in eighteenth-century studies published in 2022 makes that caveat redundant. The book we are here to celebrate is itself mainly and first of all *dix-septiémiste* – or let's say for the occasion: safely situated at the beginning of a very long and capacious eighteenth century – while discrediting some of the most widely shared opinions about what the French still calls "le grand siècle." That's why it is still a most worthy winner of an eighteenth-century award: reshaping our image of the preceding decades, it also gives us a different eighteenth century.

This book is a beautiful object, lavishly illustrated, in a way that (paradoxically) does justice to the horrifying story told. It is also engagingly written, with a crispness that from the outset gave me the sense of holding in my hands one of those rare books that changes much more than the narrow field of its immediate intervention. It not only brings new evidence to the table, constituting new archives (in plural!) in the process, both through the breathtaking depth of the research and the crucial constellations of different interpretive skills, but it also invites us to see the whole age differently. For me, this recognition was a *collective* experience. I first read parts of the book this summer, in an online reading group of fellow US *dix-septiémistes*, where we were exploring new work on race and racialization in seventeenth-century France. *The Sun King at Sea* was one of two books that truly stood out to us as game changers, alongside Noémie Ndiaye's *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (Penn, 2022). Since then, I have had the chance to make the same collective experience over again, when we read parts of *The Sun King at Sea* in my graduate seminar titled "Expressions of Absolutism" this week. (I am happy, but not surprised, to see quite a few of the students from my seminar present here today).

What do I mean when I say "game changer"? First of all, *The Sun King at Sea* does exactly that: unearths Louis XIV imperial ambitions "at sea", adding a crucial maritime and Mediterranean dimension to the study of art, culture and politics in early modern France. But as the book draws our attention to already from its cover, the traces of this understudied maritime dimension is present at the heart of the decorative program in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, indeed representations of galley slavery is hiding in plain sight in the self-celebration of the Sun King, reminding us of what we should have known all along but had chosen not to see, not to know: that servitude was "a visible condition, mode of representation, and symbol of sovereignty during Louis XIV's reign" in ways that this volume invites us to reassess.

However, although the book delivers forcefully on this promise, this is the one point where I wonder whether the book could have dug deeper still by adhering less to the anachronistic notion of *propaganda*, pursuing rather what Orest Ranum so fruitfully analyzed as the pursuit of *gloire* (in *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France*, 1980). More specifically, and again following Ranum's intuitions, approaching the reinterpretation of the dynamic of servitude and sovereignty as propaganda means a priori limiting the discussion to a transactional and instrumental perspective which is not necessarily able to catch the nuances of dynastic self-representation under Louis XIV (more about this in my *Dream of Absolutism*, Chicago, 2021). Therefore, to me, there is here important work left to be done, returning to the self-celebration of the Sun King (which was more than manipulative propaganda), in light of the dire on-the-ground real-life networks of meaning from which the royal self-representation is not so removed as we may have thought.

I will end my brief remarks by trying to make a little more concrete what I just said through the formulation of the two main take-aways from the book for my own research on absolutist culture. First, the book brings into sharp focus the way in which the role of Louis XIV as an enslaver has been erased by the historiography of his reign. It is simply not true that there were no enslaved people on French soil during the Sun King's reign. Indeed, as Martin and Weiss show, in 1680, the gazette *Mercure Galant* broadcasted as a news anecdote among many others of an entirely different tenor the mind-boggling account of how Louis XIV had bought "fifty-four Moors, true Africans… [who] should serve on the Canal of Versailles" in the real-life representation of the splendor of the "Sun King at Sea" through the enactment of galley slavery at Versailles (*Mercure Galant*, Sept. 1680, p. 296; discussed by Martin & Weiss, p. 92). This is only one of many examples brought forth by Martin and Weiss of a reality that was flaunted back then but which had to be erased for Versailles more comfortably to become the *lieu de mémoire* that it is now. Second, the book imposes the urgent necessity to rethink the concept of allegory, which is in fact at the heart of the decorative program at Versailles. The Versailles chapter, in particular, reminds us about the profound ambiguity of allegory, torn between its abstract meaning and a much closer reality than what we, *what I*, would have believed, with the presence of actual enslaved people on the grounds of Versailles, undergirding and enacting the decorative program itself.

But these two points are of course only a few of the many reasons why the book we are celebrating here today will remain a central reference for many different fields for years to come. Please join me in congratulating Meredith Martin and Gillian Weiss on an urgently important and transformative book.