

Edited by  
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EARLY  
MODERN  
BLACK  
DIASPORA  
STUDIES

*A Critical  
Anthology*



# Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies

Cassander L. Smith · Nicholas R. Jones  
Miles P. Grier  
Editors

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*A Critical Anthology*

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and colonial domination, thus setting the stage for centuries of French imperialism. Her work has appeared in *Biblio 17* and *Cahiers d'Histoire de l'Amérique Coloniale*.



## Introduction: The Contours of a Field

*Cassander L. Smith, Nicholas R. Jones and Miles P. Grier*

*Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies: A Critical Anthology* stages a conversation between two fields—Black Studies and Early Modern Studies—that too often have viewed each other with suspicion. Scholars of early modern Europe have traditionally insisted that the social category of race is inappropriate to the field, as they believe it results from the legal, social, and scientific developments of other places and later periods.<sup>1</sup> For its part, much activist Black Studies scholarship concentrates on present-day sociopolitical concerns, sometimes at the expense of the deeper historical research that might re-orient current activist projects and analyses.<sup>2</sup> The orientations of these fields leave a gap that *EMBDS* seeks to fill. How can reconceptualizing the time and geography of racial blackness—as well as the methods for assessing the impact of black Africans on early modernity—transform both fields?

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Through this anthology, we seek to stimulate productive and provocative conversations between two seemingly disparate fields, through an interrogation of the regional and temporal boundaries that typically restrict scholarly inquiry. *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies* endeavors to enlist the strategies, methodologies, and insights of Black Studies in the service of Early Modern Studies and vice versa. This cross-pollination revises current understandings about racial discourse and the contributions of black Africans in early modernity across the Atlantic world.

The essays that comprise *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies* offer new critical approaches to representations of black Africans and the conceptualization of blackness in early modern literary works, historical documents, material and visual cultures, and performance. Contributors address these phenomena in Africa, Europe, and the Americas from the disciplinary perspectives of literary studies, history, anthropology, and performance studies, among others. All contributors have been prompted by the primary charge of Black Studies: to place black lives at the center of inquiry and to provide answers to how black people affected and were affected by various social, political, and cultural institutions.

We aim to shift paradigms in the constitutive fields of early Atlantic studies by asking scholars to re-conceptualize the relationship between black Africans and the early Atlantic world. In the past, studies of black Africans and race in the early modern era examined the ways in which Western cultures utilized black Africans and racial ideologies on symbolic and material levels to construct cultural and political institutions.<sup>3</sup> *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies* advances the conversation with approaches that not only recognize the incidental influence of black Africans in the construction of Western culture but that also examine the extent to which black Africans were integral in shaping that culture and in some cases building their own.

This volume features essays that ask how the conversation shifts when we approach developments in early Atlantic culture from the perspective of black Africans. What would it mean to have an entire subset/discipline devoted to discussing the many ways in which black lives mattered in the early Renaissance—not just as part of the story about what Europeans were doing but as *the* story itself? In what ways could archive, method, geography, and temporality expand to center black subjects in this way? And how might such an undertaking inform the study and practice of black political struggle in the present? Ultimately, we contemplate the contours of a field of Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK STUDIES

*EMBDS* endeavors to change the frame of reference for Early Modern Studies to one more Afrocentric in nature, a move that inherently disrupts current Eurocentric epistemologies that are rooted in material experience, the sensory. How does what we know about the early modern period change if we view that epoch from the perspective of black Africans and with a different epistemological sensibility, one that allows us to acknowledge and accept, as one example, the realms of the spiritual and the paranormal as archives of knowledge? What new insights emerge, as another example, when we privilege orality alongside the written word or consider the histories of ancient Africa when demarcating time periods, like *medieval*, *early modern* and *modern*? In short, what would a field of study look like that accounts for the agentive energies of black Africans who were, to borrow Maulana Karenga's definition for *agency*, "thinking, acting, producing, creating, building, speaking and problem-solving in their own unique way" in the early modern world?<sup>4</sup>

Not incidentally, epistemology and Afrocentricity have been key thematic markers of Black Studies scholarship for decades. That scholarship most often addresses black experiences within modern-day contexts and does so for many of the same reasons that Early Modern Studies have been slow to examine the agentive experiences of black Africans in earlier periods—a perceived lack of archival data and relevance. This is not to say that Black Studies scholars do not concern themselves with the histories of black Africans, including those who lived in the early modern period. In fact, a central, though at times contested, thrust of Black Studies is Afrocentrism, which is a philosophical orientation to the discipline that situates the black experience within the history of African imperial civilizations, such as Egypt (or Kemet), Kush (modern-day North Sudan), and Ghana.<sup>5</sup> The point rather is that Black Studies, activist in nature, has evoked the past mostly as a means to interrogate the present and advocate on behalf of black lives today. This aim of Black Studies is a product of the discipline's beginnings in the 1960s black freedom movements.<sup>6</sup>

Since its earliest iterations as a formal discipline, Black Studies has questioned whether current epistemological structures can accommodate the life experiences of people of African descent. How can western knowledge help us arrive at insights about black Africans? And how can we employ established institutions to enrich the lives of black Africans

throughout the African diaspora? On an institutional level, can one pursue an Afrocentric academic agenda in already-established departments of English, History, Sociology, and so forth? These questions were central in the early formation of Black Studies and resulted in competing intellectual frameworks whereby some advocated for what Perry Hall calls a separatist approach and Nathaniel Norment, Jr. terms radical.<sup>7</sup> A separatist or radical perspective insisted that the best way to pursue a Black Studies agenda was to supplant current epistemologies with knowledge systems arising out of the philosophies and histories of African cultures. This perspective sought to extricate the study of black African experiences from the ethnic and racial biases of Western structures. Others advocated for a more integrationist model, in Hall's words, or a moderate framework, as Norment articulates it, that acknowledged the efficacy of current critical paradigms and sought to incorporate the study of black African experiences into already existing intellectual traditions. This move emphasized the value of black Africans in dominant, Euro-American culture.

Today, the field is defined more by what Hall calls a "transformationist" approach, which acknowledges Black Studies' efforts to break from Eurocentric epistemologies but insists on locating black experiences within, in Hall's words, "an inclusive human universe."<sup>8</sup> *EMBDS* adopts this approach. That is to say, we recognize the black experience as an Afrocentric phenomenon—rooted in cultural, philosophical, historical systems coming out of ancient Africa—but we also interrogate the ways in which black Africans' diasporic encounters with and in Eurocentric spaces of the early modern era informed and transformed experiences of both Africans and Europeans. Put another way, in this project, we integrate black Africans as thinking, human, agentive presences in discussions about Early Modern Studies—within critical paradigms that already exist. We also interrupt those epistemological borders by questioning, restructuring, and, when necessary, abandoning intellectual canons. Blackness is not alterity. Rather it is a particular synthesis of experiences and ways of *thinking, acting, producing, creating, building, speaking, and problem-solving*, that can tell us something about (early modern) humanity in general.

## BLACK AFRICANS IN EARLY MODERN STUDIES

*Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies* is both indebted to and expands upon a rich legacy of scholars whose critical study of blackness and race in Early Modern Studies has laid a firm foundation for our present volume.

Since the 1960s, our scholarly predecessors have examined the ways in which Western European intellectual thought and literary production have utilized black Africans and anti-black racial ideologies on the symbolic and material levels to construct its own cultural and political institutions. For instance, Lemuel Johnson's *The Devil, The Gargoyle, and The Buffoon: The Negro as Metaphor in Western Literature* (1971) and Marta Cobb's essay "An Inquiry into Race Concepts through Spanish Literature" (1972) have provided rich bibliographical information, as well as a critical lexicon and framework for exploring the study of black Africans in medieval and early modern Iberia. Focusing on Spanish-language texts, Miriam DeCosta-Willis's anthology *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: Critical Studies* (1977) stands alone as the first critical study that both chronologically and systematically examines the roles of black Africans in medieval and early modern Spanish literatures. Following DeCosta-Willis comes A.C. de C.M. Saunders's *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441-1555* (1982), which utilizes the concept of "race relations" to re-imagine the way in which bondage, cultural exchange, freedom, and racial miscegenation operated in Renaissance Portugal. Interested in close readings of literary texts, Baltasar Fra-Moliner's *La imagen de los negros en el teatro del Siglo de Oro* (1995), stands as a comprehensive study that closely examines the representations and presences of blacks in Golden Age Spanish theater. John Beusterien's 2006 monograph *An Eye on Race: Perspectives from Theater in Imperial Spain* employs the category of subaltern studies in order to address the ways in which imperial Spanish theatergoers and readers alike "see" the racial codification and racial difference of black Africans, Jews, and Muslims on early Spanish stages. Jerome Branche's *Racism and Colonialism in Luso-Hispanic Literature* (2006) presents an even more audacious, yet valid, critical approach to literary representations of blacks by incorporating Critical Race Studies and Postcolonial Studies.

In more recent years, the text that relates most closely to *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies* is T.F. Earle and Kate Lowe's *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, a collection of essays that interrogates the effect of slavery and developing racial ideologies on the cultural and political institutions in Europe. Several of the essays in particular examine the life experiences of black Africans living in Renaissance England and Spain, and like *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, our volume treats a diversity of linguistic blackness, if you will, representing not only English but also French and Spanish. While Earle and Lowe's anthology largely

emphasizes the ways in which European politics and social systems circumscribed black lives within various European spaces, we build on their work by exploring the opposite dynamic. We interrogate the extent to which black lives drove cultural and political developments and in spaces throughout a wider Atlantic world. This particular analytic has empowered us as editors of *EMBDS* to enter into, on the one hand, and to bridge, on the other hand, a constructive dialogue with the variety of critics who have paved the way in establishing a critical language, methodology, and vocabulary for examining blackness and race relations in early modern Europe. What is more, *EMBDS* makes visible a developing field of study that prioritizes black lives in the early modern era. In doing so, our chief preoccupation is to not only render visible the inherent agency and savvy subject position of African-descended people in Europe and the Americas, but to also connect the so-called early in Black Studies with its “current” or “present” study of black lives in the twenty-first century.

The anthology’s approach and methodology differ significantly from these aforementioned texts in that the volume complicates race relations in the early African Diaspora between blacks and whites. Moving beyond the static model of white over black often emphasized in this scholarship,<sup>9</sup> *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies* offer access to the assertive voices and subversive acts of black life, by placing them at the center of analysis and critical inquiry. *EMBDS* is also in dialogue with other works such as: Kathryn Joy McKnight and Leo J. Garofalo’s *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550–1812* (2009), and James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra’s co-edited volume *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade* (2013). Ultimately, what distinguishes this volume from the aforementioned books is its ability to uncover the power of blackness as a cultural, ideological, and structural category that affirms black life and identity, while problematizing ideations of black subordination that are informed by the category of Whiteness, and vice versa. To that end, *EMBDS* undertakes this new approach by turning essentialist and racist assumptions on their heads.

### THE CRITICAL BORDERS

The methodological contours of our approach have been set by many predecessors. In their own ways, Edward Said and Toni Morrison helped establish that European (and Euro-American) imperial self-image could not have come into being without Orientalist or Africanist foils. In the

wake of their work, Kim F. Hall argued that scholars could use “knowledge taught in African-American communities” to access the ways that the “Africanist presence is embedded in [early modern English] language.”<sup>10</sup> Beyond establishing a discursive presence, more recent scholarship has aimed to reconstruct lived experiences of diasporic Africans and—even when such recovery is impossible—to show that African persons always shaped modernity, including the structures called forth to police black folks.<sup>11</sup> With these methodologies and shifts of focus have come another bracing challenge to business as usual—namely the historical periods by which we organize not only most professional associations but also our job advertisements. Saidiya Hartman has been most eloquent and persistent in articulating this critique, suggesting once that Emancipation proved a “nonevent” for freed people who have been living in a remarkably durable “time of slavery.”<sup>12</sup>

In the 2016 film *Moonlight*, father figure Juan tells a shy and withdrawn protagonist named Little that “it’s black people everywhere, you remember that, okay? Ain’t no place in the world...ain’t got no black people.” Juan voices this volume’s challenge to the geography of Early Modern Studies. While pioneering monographs such as those of Anthony Barthelemy, Eldred Jones, and Kim F. Hall established that black Africans were important figures in the literary, material, and performance cultures of early modern Europe, much of the cultural history of the Early Atlantic world has been unable to locate diasporic black persons as shaping agents in the creation of those cultures.<sup>13</sup> The scholarship of many—including Imtiaz Habib, John Thornton, Michael Gomez, and this volume’s editor Cassander L. Smith—has created the possibility for expanding the geography not only of black *presence* but also of black *effectivity*.<sup>14</sup> For, as Smith observes in her monograph, it may not always be possible to recuperate diasporic Africans’ lives from archival traces. Nevertheless, their presence created gaps, elisions, and discursive problems that contributed to the physical and imaginative worlds produced. Here, we do not intend to suggest that every moment of black existence in diaspora has been aimed toward resisting the structures of white supremacy or demonstrating agency.<sup>15</sup> Rather, we simply aim to remind scholars that the idea of a people entirely submerged in and beholden to writing culture and market economies is untenable.<sup>16</sup>

This challenge fuels the contributions in our first section on space and field—finding not only black folk “here and there,” but also (and always) black people *shaping* the various economies in which they

participated—even the language, laws, and institutions most designed to subjugate them.<sup>17</sup> This affective and affecting presence is not some unique sign of a special capacity for endurance or bravery. It is, simply, a fact that subaltern populations who are not in control of the official history or the means of recovering it nevertheless helped shape the past.<sup>18</sup>

The essays in the second section of *EMBDS* propose methods for reading archives both familiar and previously unexplored. While histories of early modern racialization tend to build on etymology, humoral theory, geography, and legal history, the essays in this section ask scholars to consider choreography, ventriloquism, stage performance, and testimony.<sup>19</sup> Crucially, the authors push against the notion that these cultural activities merely reflect ideological formations completed in some other social arena. Instead, they argue that these cultural activities constitute social engagements of their own and can therefore generate, inflect, articulate, or propagate race as a narrative and a structuring category.

The essays in the third section, entitled “Period Tensions,” question the relationship between early modernity and later historical moments. The authors here pursue comparative analysis and unorthodox conversations. In gross terms, a certain kind of early modernist would dismiss Black Studies approaches as anachronistic work, shaped by well-intentioned advocacy goals. Similarly, a scholar-activist in Black Studies might consider early modernist inquiry to be an antiquarian exercise of limited usefulness in contemporary political strategy. The editors would like to move beyond such impasses, primarily by encouraging scholars who consider one of those fields home to read literature, archival sources, and scholarship of the other period. Rising to that opportunity, the authors in this section consider the extent to which the constellation “Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies” demands a reconsideration of the means by which scholars tell time.

The fourth section of *EMBDS* is a round table discussion among four scholars, two more senior in terms of professional rank and experience and two more junior. All of the scholars have employed approaches in line with Black Studies and/or Early Modern Studies. Dennis Britton submitted a lecture first delivered at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, while John Beusterien responded to the following prompt: *What is the value in thinking about a sub-discipline or field of Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies, and what might be some of the challenges in doing this kind of work? How might we overcome those challenges?* The two junior scholars were asked to respond to the

thoughts of their senior colleagues. The resulting colloquy synthesizes some of the key issues inherent in conceptualizing a field of Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies.

The field of Black Studies strives to produce scholarship that is accountable to black communities. It is both theory and practice. We are constantly mindful of the ways in which the essays in this volume potentially serve constituents within the black diaspora, and we draw inspiration from the concept of Sankofa, the idea of not just looking back but revisiting the past to give meaning to the present and guide the future. In other words, the project of this volume is social justice work. We aim to illuminate those historical structures surrounding modern-day black Africans. The project is a return of sorts but not to a black African natal origin. Instead we emphasize key stops along the historical path of the African diaspora to explain how humanity got here, an approach that fosters better global awareness. We call for a change in how we think about and see black Africans in materials we study but also in academic disciplines, publishing houses, conferences, and so forth. This volume challenges the prevailing politics of knowledge, including not only what can be known about the past but also who can be said to know it and what methods can be used to access that knowledge. The work is inherently political and we embrace that.

## NOTES

1. For examples, see Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction*, edited by J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–177; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction" in "'Race,' Writing, and Difference," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn, 1985); Ruth Hill, *Hierarchy, Commerce, and Fraud in Bourbon Spanish America: A Postal Inspector's Expose* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005); Michael Banton, "The Idiom of Race: A Critique of Presentism," in *Theories of Race and Racism A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2000): 51–63.
2. Using literary studies as one example, when scholars pursue the origins of African American literature, they typically find them in eighteenth-century North America. See, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Valerie Smith, William L. Andrews, Kimberly Benston, Brent Hayes Edwards,



- Frances Smith Foster, Deborah E. McDowell, Robert G. O’Meally, Hortense Spillers, and Cheryl A. Wall, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 3rd ed. (W.W. Norton, 2014).
3. For examples of such scholarship, see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
  4. Maulana Karenga, “Introduction” in his *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2002), 4.
  5. Since 1980, Molefi Kete Asante has been the leading proponent of this theory of Afrocentrism. Among the numerous books and articles he has produced articulating and nuancing the theory, see his *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980) (Chicago: African-American Images, 2003).
  6. We should acknowledge here that people were studying black perspectives before the 1960s as Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel point out in their introduction to *The Black Studies Reader*. However, the decade of the 1960s matters because it is when we first see a push for the creation of Black Studies departments at U.S. institutions, beginning in 1968 with what was called then San Francisco State College.
  7. Hall offers a concise summary of the intellectual developments of Black Studies thought from the 1960s to today. See his essay “African-American Studies: Discourses and Paradigms,” in *African-American Studies*, edited by Jeanette R. Davidson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 15–34. See also Norment’s introduction to his critical reader *The African-American Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001) and Robert L. Harris, Jr., “The Intellectual and Institutional Development of Africana Studies,” in *The Black Studies Reader*, edited by Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15–20. Harris traces the development of Black, or Africana, Studies across four stages of development, beginning in the 1890s.
  8. Hall, “African-American Studies: Discourses and Paradigms,” 29.
  9. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).
  10. Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 14.
  11. Cassander L. Smith, *Black Africans in the British Imagination: English Narratives of the Early Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2016); April Lee Hatfield, “A ‘Very Wary People in Their Bargaining’ or ‘Very