

Archival Possibilities: New Considerations of Black African and Afro-descendant Communities in Iberia

Berruezo-Sánchez, Diana, Manuel Olmedo Gobante, and Cornesha Tweede, editors. *Iberia negra. Textos para otra historia de la diáspora africana*. Routledge, 2024.

Borst, Julia and Danae Gallo González, editors. *Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy*. De Gruyter, 2024.

Tsuchiya, Akiko and Aurélie Vialette, editors. *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain*. SUNY Press, 2025.

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Three recent edited volumes collectively challenge the historical erasure of Black African and Afro-descendant communities in Iberia. By critiquing archival practices and proposing new frameworks of memory, these works redefine the field of Iberian Studies. This review examines their contributions, beginning with *Iberia negra*, moving to *Personas africanas*, and concluding with *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain*. In these three edited volumes, authors from a variety of disciplines come together to recontextualize the histories of Black African and Afro-descendant peoples in the Iberian Peninsula, with the shared goal of showing—as articulated in Julia Borst and Danae Gallo González’s introduction to *Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy*—“que España sí es (y siempre fue) país de negrxs” (12). These works put together historical, literary, cultural, and artistic sources to bring this argument to the fore, contributing to the rapidly growing field of Black studies in the Iberian context. As they shift focus to an understudied part of Iberian history and culture, the volumes simultaneously critique the limitations of archival spaces, which have contributed largely to this lack of critical understanding of the Black African and Afro-descendant experiences in the Iberian Peninsula. The books’ shared critique of the archive also presents an opportunity to establish a new kind of archive, one which considers possibilities and potentialities. When read together, the three texts open a wider conversation within Iberian Studies about the representation, history, and understanding of Black African and Afro-descendant communities.

Iberia negra: textos para otra historia de la diáspora africana, edited by Diana Berruezo-Sánchez, Manuel Olmedo Gobante, and Cornesha Tweede, takes up this critical history particularly through the context of what has been termed Spain’s “Golden Age,” or the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In working within this period of early modern Spain, the volume converses with previous publications in a variety of fields, including historical, literary, cultural, and religious studies. In particular, the volume follows discourses in early modern

Iberian studies opened by Baltasar Fra Molinero (*La imagen de los negros en el teatro del Siglo de Oro*, 1995), John Beusterien (*An Eye on Race: Perspectives on Theater in Imperial Spain*, 2006), and Nicholas R. Jones (*Staging Habla de negros: Radical Performances of the African Diaspora in Early Modern Spain*, 2019). This collection provides a variety of primary sources from across the Iberian Peninsula in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in order to increase awareness of the Black African diaspora and Afro-descendant communities in this time period. The editors' goal was not only to contribute critical analyses of these texts, but also to create a compilation of edited historical and literary sources for others to study, whether in their own research or as teaching aids in the classroom. The texts are split into three sections, *Libertad*, *Orgullo*, and *Resistencia*, named after the themes that tie together the primary sources.

In the first section, "Libertad," authors focus on mostly legal documents which discuss the efforts made to ensure freedom from slavery, or the actions taken during this freedom that exemplify the ways in which Black African and Afro-descendant peoples discussed their own liberty. While many of the documents are of a legal nature, and particularly from the Inquisitorial archives, the authors select examples of first-person narratives wherever possible (including from the *discurso de vida* of Inquisition trials, or from marital letters), allowing modern readers a direct account of how Black Iberian subjects spoke about their own identities, their lives, and their relationships. The book's second section, "Orgullo," is comprised of poems, musical compositions, and a fencing manual which point to how Black Iberians expressed pride in their Black identity, especially as they worked to gain education and recognition in predominantly white spaces. With works from the poet Juan Latino, songs by Vicente Lusitano, and selections on Black fencers from the guide by Luis Pacheco de Narváez, these selections carry on the thread from the first section of direct accounts of Black experience in early modern Iberia. The final section, "Resistencia," includes examples of how Black Iberians expressed

opposition to their societal positions under enslavement, mostly through literary representations in the theatre of the early modern period. Through the course of the volume, the various contributors participate in a practice of “re-edition,” which Ann Christensen and Laura B. Turchi first outlined as a way to “build from un-editing projects to move outward, claiming editor’s prerogatives to pointedly invite students to connect their observations and experiences with race and racism in their own and the world of Shakespeare” (512). In the introduction to *Iberia negra*, the editors provide their definition of re-edition as “un análisis crítico y comprometido que muestre la relevancia actual de las voces del pasado” (8). While *Iberia negra*’s scope remains on the early modern period, the practice of re-edition and critical engagement with primary sources is applied to other periods and contexts in both *Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy* and *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain*.

Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy, like *Iberia negra*, embarks on an effort to recontextualize both archival material and literary examples which have been understudied in the past. The collection compiles this material while also critiquing the concept of the archive itself, exploring alternative formulations of “archive” that acknowledge the inherent contradictions of this space as “sin duda, un espacio donde actúan estructuras de poder y de dominación, pero también en el que se conservan saberes alternativos e incluso subversivos, albergando así momentos de empoderamiento” (Borst and Gallo González 13). The editors also point to the “huellas” left in archival material as points from which the volume’s authors expand, centering their analyses on these moments of subversion that were (deliberately or not) ignored in prior studies (Borst and Gallo González 14). The focus on these ‘huellas’ also relies on examples of “autohistoricization,” which Odome Angone defines in the preface as “una recopilación política de datos de cara al futuro para conjurar una vulnerabilidad relacionada con el

sentimiento de no pertenencia, lo cual implica una autonarración desde un protagonismo activo [...] se trata pues de una estrategia disruptiva a favor de la propia visibilización, una autoenunciación” (3). To accomplish this “autohistoricization,” the volume is divided into five sections.

The first section works to establish “una historiografía afro de España,” utilizing archival and historical sources, much like the authors in *Iberia negra*, to critique the foundational white myth of Spanish historiography that ignores Black presence, as Gonzalo Baptista shows in his first chapter of this section. While these chapters focus primarily on this hidden history, the second section focuses on “estereotipación y resistencias creativas” in literature, theatre, and film. The chapters in the second section span from the so-called Golden age period (Góngora) to contemporary sources, exploring how these creative media treat the subject of Black Africans and Afro-descendants in Spain. The third section of the book focuses on the “voces de la migración africana en España,” delving into how Black African and Afro-descendant communities in Spain conceive of their own identities and relations to Spanish culture. This section flows directly into the fourth, which discusses “la nueva generación ‘afro-española’, el auge del activismo y resistencia afro en la literatura.” The third and fourth sections of the book move chronologically through literary and artistic production by Black African and Afro-descendant communities in Spain, from discussions of works published under Francoism or during the Transition to democracy, to studies of migration to Spain in the 21st century and ending with the fourth part’s analysis of Black activist writings of the last twenty years. This focus on activism sets up the fifth and final section’s proposal to advance “hacia una cultura decolonial y empoderadora,” directly engaging with the practice of ‘re-edition’ and pedagogical practice that Christensen and Turchi discuss. The collection concludes with a roundtable with Deborah Ekoka and Jeffrey Abé Pans that discusses Afro-Spanish activism in the present moment, offering a consideration of both the history and the future of Afro-

Spanish identity, activism, and cultural production.

The explicit critiques of the archive forwarded by the authors in *Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy* call for a recontextualization of the archival space like the one proposed by Benita Sampedro Vizcaya, which “surpasses its institutional, physical and material definition, focusing instead on its possibilities as a basis for knowledge production, identity formation and the projection of community imaginaries not only in the past and present but also, notably, in the future” (342). The new possibilities of the archive are processed through the use of re-edition and of autohistoricization in the volume. These interventions into understandings of the archive are amplified by the authors in the collective book *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain*, which also includes critical analyses of other memory sites, like monuments and museums.

While the other two volumes discuss the Black African and Afro-descendant experience in Spain in a broad historical perspective, *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain* explicitly focuses on slavery to “create an archive of cultural memory sites of slavery and its aftermath, and [...] to investigate what is hidden behind these cultural forms and symbols—what untold stories they might hold about those of African descent in Spain, whose history and stories have long been suppressed” (Tsuchiya and Vialette 5). Notably, the editors are explicit in their goal to use the book to create an archive in itself, which contributes not only to Iberian studies but also to broader studies of transatlantic slavery. The introduction to the project is most directly influenced by the works of Saidiya Hartmann (whose words serve as the epigraph to the volume), Joan Scott, and especially Ana Lucia Araujo’s work *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (2012). These theorists of memory studies highlight the ways in which slavery is not truly “past” until those in the present can engage with its repercussions on our lives today. The archive brought together by the collected chapters of the book begins the process of this engagement, through scholarly articles, interviews, and creative pieces that explore the

myriad ways people in Spain today are addressing the topic.

The first section of the book focuses on the archive, connecting its critical analysis to that of both *Iberia negra* and *Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy*. The chapters in this section trace material from archives in Spain as well as its former colonial territories, like Equatorial Guinea, the Philippines, and Cuba, in order to elucidate aspects of the transatlantic slave trade and the post-emancipation period that were concealed within this historical record. The authors also work to center Black experience in materials that often focus more on the records of slave profiteers than on people experiencing slavery or postsavery themselves. The second section, “Confronting the Legacies of Slavery in Cultural Memory Sites,” includes articles and interviews discussing the recent efforts in Spain to confront its monuments to slavery and colonialism. These include case studies of toppled statues in Barcelona, Madrid, and Cádiz; an in-depth consideration of the Museo Atlántico in Lanzarote as a memorial to slavery; and an interview concerning the lack of official political memory projects concerning colonialism and slavery. Focusing not only on statues as monuments, these chapters reconsider the place of the museum in these critical memory sites. The third and final section of the book addresses the legacies of slavery in literature, music, and visual culture from the 19th century to the present. Included here is a critical analysis of the literary representations of a notable slave trader (Pedro Blanco) and a consideration of the treatment of enslaved Black presence (María de la Luz) both in 19th century art and 21st century literature. This section also features interviews with several cultural practitioners about how their work engages with Black subjectivity and Afro-diasporic communities, and the collection concludes with a creative essay on the relationship between Flamenco and Black experience.

All three collective volumes contribute to a rapidly growing field of studies focusing on Black African and Afro-descendant communities within Iberia,

challenging the historical erasure of these communities and their contributions to Spanish history and culture. More than a mere effort to identify these historical subjects and place them within the Iberian milieu, the works turn a critical eye to institutions of memory—like archives, museums, and monuments—which have erased the presence of Black African and Afro-descendant people in service of a white, Eurocentric national mythmaking that “sitúa a las personas denominadas blancas como origen de los eventos dignos de memoria y relega a las personas racializadas negativamente a posiciones tanto de inferioridad como de invisibilidad dentro de nuestra historia” (Baptista 36). By working against these invisibilizing forces in the archive and in academia, the works amplify and diversify understandings of Black African and Afro-descendant communities’ participation in Iberian identity-formation. Through their critical engagements with archival material, in particular, they perform “a reading of history (and literary and discursive historiography) not from a single, fixed, geographical and conceptual cartography—be it linguistic, ethnic or otherwise—but according to multiple maps, simultaneously unfolded” (Sampedro Vizcaya 341). These maps are not merely geographical or historical, but also cultural and literary, as evidenced by the varied sources investigated by the authors in all three collections, which include paintings, plays, statues, dances, and more. In the critical analysis of the archival material, as Borst and Gallo González describe, the articles “son al mismo tiempo también archivos que, al desvelar saberes ‘otros’ e incluso subversivos de la ‘España negra’, resignifican archivos y se convierten, además, como señalara Arjun Appadurai, en ‘aspiraciones’” (14). These aspirations also support Sampedro Vizcaya’s idea of an archive of possibilities; the three collections themselves represent an archive of present thinking about Black African and Afro-descendant peoples in Spain while also providing readers an opportunity to consider these perspectives and apply them to future understandings of these communities.

Furthermore, these projects are not only focused on presenting a critical

look at the archive, but also creating spaces for Black scholars to present their own interventions in the predominantly white spaces of academia—as the editors of *Iberia negra* note: “se quiere incorporar a más investigadores negros y afrodescendientes. Las voces negras del presente deben formar parte del discurso académico y aportar sus conocimientos” (Berruezo-Sánchez, Olmedo Gobante and Tweede 11). This goal is shared across the three collections. *Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy* centers the contributions of Black and Afro-descendant scholars, artists, and activists, ensuring these underrepresented voices in academic texts are heard. Similarly, *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain* includes interviews with cultural practitioners and artists alongside the academic articles to show “the broad range of important work that is being done ‘on the ground’ by the cultural practitioners themselves, who ‘carry our own history with us,’ as James Baldwin affirmed” (Tsuchiya and Vialette, 8-9). These interviews, with interlocutors Tania Safura Adam and Yinka Esi Graves, cover topics from public memory in Spain to artistic practices, to the need for alternative modes of education outside the traditional classroom. The interviews, along with the scholarly and creative essays in the volume, record the current perspectives of those involved in these crucial projects and interventions, leaving primary sources with which future investigations may engage.

In compiling these sources together, the three collective volumes perform new interventions into Iberian studies. *Iberia negra*'s focus on the early modern period presents an important collection of primary sources that complicate traditional views of –and traditional scholarly approaches to– Spain's “Golden Age.” The re-edition of these texts, along with the critical examinations prefacing them, creates a new anthology for researchers and instructors to work with in future studies of this period. The critical articles and discussions in *Personas africanas y afrodescendientes en España ayer y hoy* continue the re-edition of archival material while also bringing in a practice of

autohistoricization that involves first person accounts from activists and cultural practitioners in Spain today. The collection's critique serves as an impetus for the creation of a new kind of archive, one that is more interested in possibilities than in discursive control. This continues through *Cultural Legacies of Slavery in Modern Spain*, which also appraises other sites of memory formation, like monuments and museums. Read together, the three books establish their own archive, both through the primary sources they engage with and through the interviews, creative writings, and roundtable conversations they present.

The new form of archive established by these three texts is also a living one. The histories of Black African and Afro-descendant communities in Iberia are ongoing, and more work will be needed in future years to account for shifting realities and discourses. As the field of Global Hispanophone studies grows, its commitment to diversity (not only in thought but also in the identities of scholars and subjects) is required to understand the full picture of the past, present, and future. While new voices and perspectives enter into archival spaces, the erasures and elisions of the archives can finally be brought into the light. These three collections mark opening steps in that direction, and they leave fertile ground for further investigation by other researchers.

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