

Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Blackness in the Transnational and
Transhistorical Context*

Article 5

November 2022

The Legacy and Representation of Blacks in Spain

Dr. Nicholas Jones
nicholas.jones@yale.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/dsp>

Recommended Citation

Jones, D. (2022). The Legacy and Representation of Blacks in Spain. *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology*, 2 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/dsp/vol2/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

THE LEGACY AND REPRESENTATION OF BLACKS IN SPAIN

NICHOLAS JONES

Yale University

This essay is a meditation on the current reception of Black Spain in historiography and literary studies. It tackles some of the lurking assumptions I have identified over the years in Iberian studies scholarship and addresses the legacy and representation of Black Africans in Spain. I frame the issue at hand by addressing historian Alessandro Stella's question in *Histoire d'esclaves dans la péninsule ibérique*: "When, how, and why did the question of Blackness—or even passing—disappear from cultural memory in the Iberian case?"

This question overlaps with historian Tamar Herzog's contention that studies of the Black diaspora need to include disciplinary tools beyond simply understanding the historical record because scholars must understand the question of *why* the existence of a vital and vigorous Black diaspora culture has been ignored. Herzog maintains that much of the historical study of Afro-Iberians has been done, but the studies of the reasons for historiographic neglect are still in need of further exploration.

My immediate answer to Herzog's charge troubles the inheritance of the notion that, at least according to the critic Américo Castro (1885–1972) in *The Spaniards*, few Black slaves

were brought to Spain from Africa.¹ To some extent, the belief that Black African slavery and racism did not exist in Spain and were, instead, a North American or Caribbean problem, still persists today. Among a small number of colleagues in North American academic circles, there is also the contention that “white slaves” existed in Spain too, thereby perpetuating the idea that “slavery is slavery” and the institution treated “everyone” horribly. This fallacious sentiment is the product of covert racism and identity politics, and of a Eurocentric narrative that has ignored—willingly or not—the presence and role of Black Africans in the pre-modern and early modern archives in the Western world. It encourages the latent quantification and qualification of suffering, as if white people’s oppression and suffering is worth more than its weight in gold and historical credence.² The problem with sentiments advocated by Iberian scholars like Castro is that such ideas dismiss the significance of race in Spanish history, which, for me, erases the influence of sub-Saharan Blackness on pre-modern and early modern Spanish society.

One of the reasons Iberian scholars dismiss the significance of race in Spanish history stems from Castro’s monumental book, *España en su historia* (1948), which posited that Spanishness is a hybrid, a culture that was produced over the course of centuries by the intermixing of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish populations and traditions. Castro coined the term *convivencia*—describing intercultural harmony or coexistence in medieval Iberia—to highlight a fluid, multicultural, and religiously tolerant society in which Christians, Jews, and Muslims cohabitated. It is the legacy of this term’s cachet and seduction that has unilaterally insisted that the concepts of Spain and Spanishness are ethnically mixed, multicultural, and thus hybrid(ized). The Castrista school of thought has obfuscated Blackness by privileging multiculturalism, or cultural and ethnic mixtures, in which sub-Saharan Blackness has no place. The legacy of Castro’s scholarship, I argue, cannot be disconnected from Stella and Herzog’s valid question of the disappearance and memory of what happened to early modern Iberia’s Black populations.

My subject position as a Black scholar born in the United States, who has lived in Spain and identifies both as a Hispanist and an Africana studies scholar, shapes the way I treat the representation of Black lives in early modern Spanish texts, which range from archival

¹ Américo Castro, *The Spaniards: An Introduction to Their History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 20. See also David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 178-180.

² David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 178, n.26.

documents and literature to visual culture. In my celebration of the Black experience in the African diaspora, I unapologetically own my stance and role in the recovery of Iberian Blackness. Blackness is unbounded by the confines of temporality. Although anti-Black racism and ideologies have systematically worked to mute and suppress the visibility of African-descended people across the globe, I opt instead to illuminate the agency and resistance of Black people within early modern Iberian studies. When I construct an answer to the inquiry about the “disappearance” of Black folk in early modern Iberia—where they are invisible in public spaces or not talked about in popular culture—my stance is critically optimistic because I focus on resurrecting Iberian Blackness as a cultural, linguistic, literary, and lived mode of existence.

Using the concept necromancy has provided me with a pathway toward capturing and depicting Iberian Blackness in all its richness and fullness. Scholar John Beusterien has instantiated a new frame of reference for Iberianists and Black studies scholars to embrace: necrocapitalism, or the business of death, in which social norms remain in place outside the confines of law and allow forms of subjugation to occur, such as torture and other forms of destruction. As a counterpoint to this position, I utilize the term *necromancy* in my research on Blackness in early modern Spain. I employ the lens of African cultural survivals—the manifestation and representation of sub-Saharan African folk practices, language and speech, religious and spiritual practices, as well as dance and music—to return on the one hand and to animate on the other hand an inherent agential voice to the persons who were bureaucratically filtered, silenced, and regularized in slave owners’ inventories and wills, as well as in dossiers from the Inquisition. If, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *necromancy* embodies “the art of predicting the future by supposed communication with the dead; (more generally) divination, sorcery, witchcraft, enchantment,” then I, as the necromancer, aim to awaken the memory of early modern Iberian Black lives by placing Hispanism in dialogue with Black studies. My answer to Herzog’s question—what will awaken the memory of Blacks in early modern Spain?—challenges scholars and the students whom they teach to awaken their memory of Blackness in early modern Spain by *not* positioning Africa and Europe in opposition, respectively the victim and perpetrator in global economies of death.

The debts that Spain has incurred surpass economic, or rather monetary, reparations.³ In the absence of economic reparations, Randall Robinson proposes a “Black renaissance,” a dynamic return to knowledge, memory, and creativity as a formula to halt the production of victims generated by the aftereffects of slavery and colonialism. Borrowing from Robinson’s proposal, I, too, urge my readers to confront the varying dimensions of debt as the virulent conjunction of economic processes through centuries of forced and unpaid labor and as the imposed erasure of memory and culture.

The numerous colonized and subjugated Black and brown people have returned and are returning to collect (Spanish) debts, and they have their receipts. It is for this precise reason that I do not adhere to the notion of the “disappearance” of Black people in Spain in our present time. The de-Africanization of Spain in the necropolitical erasure that Beusterien evokes via Herzog and Stella cannot sustain itself, for it cannot control the proliferation and expansion of African diasporic cultural and linguistic survivals that have entered Spain with the country’s Black generations.

For example, let us consider the contemporary dispersal of African diasporic religions in Barcelona, Madrid, and the Canary Islands, where *espiritismo* and the Afro-Cuban religious system of orisha worship known as La Regla de Osha (The Rite of Osha; also known as Santería) and Ifá are soaring. Stores attending to the needs of these religious-spiritual communities (called *botánicas* or *esotéricas*) can be found across Madrid’s city center. In the world of flamenco, dance historian K. Meira Goldberg links and locates Blackness to the embodiment of song and dance in nineteenth-century and present-day flamenco in Spain. Film director Miguel Ángel Rosales, in his outstanding 2016 documentary *Gurumbé: canciones de tu memoria negra* (also known as *Gurumbé: Afro-Andalusian Memories*), exemplifies the way in which Spain can acknowledge its sub-Saharan African past.

In the Spanish Academy, historians Aurelia Martín Casares and Alberto del Campo Tejedor represent a cohort of scholars who have fought tirelessly to both expose and preserve the legacy of Blackness in Spain. Taking ownership of their presence, visibility, and voice, we have a generation of African-descended actor-scholars based in Madrid called “The Black View: actores, actrices y artistas negros en España.” This collective is important because it has

³ It is also worth pointing out the Spanish government’s rejection of Spanish citizenship for the Morisco diaspora, unlike the Sephardic diaspora. The Moriscos were the descendants of converted Muslims to Catholicism.

inaugurated a space where Black people in the performing arts industry in Spain can be empowered, heard, and represented. These examples I have listed give credence to the variety of ways in which people of African descent have demonstrated an investment in both resuscitating the legacy of Spain's Black African past and maintaining it so it does not disappear.⁴

⁴ *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology* is grateful to the African American Intellectual History Society for permission to reprint Prof. Jones's essay here, which originally appeared as Nicholas R. Jones, "The Legacy and Representation of Blacks in Spain", *Black Perspectives*, June 1, 2018. <https://www.aaihs.org/the-legacy-and-representation-of-blacks-in-spain/>

Works Cited

- Castro, Américo. *The Spaniards: An Introduction to Their History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Nirenberg, David. *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014
- Jones, Nicholas R. “The Legacy and Representation of Blacks in Spain.” *Black Perspectives* (June 1, 2018). <https://www.aaihs.org/the-legacy-and-representation-of-blacks-in-spain/>