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**Título:**

**Reseña de** ***Trajectories of Empire: Transhispanic Reflections on the African Diaspora*. Vanderbilt UP, 2022, editado por Jerome C. Branche, ed.**

**Review of *Trajectories of Empire: Transhispanic Reflections on the African Diaspora*. Vanderbilt UP, 2022, edited by Jerome C. Branche.**

*Trajectories of Empire: Transhispanic Reflections on the African Diaspora*, edited by Jerome Branche, provides a better understanding of the presence of Africans in the Iberian Peninsula and the Ibero-American empire. This research book complements works done by other scholars on the sites of African diaspora in Europe and the Americas such as Yolanda Aixelà-Cabré, Elisa Rizo, Carmen Fracchia, Fassil Demissie, William Phillips, S.K. Bryant et al., Joaneath Spicer et al., Natalie Zemon Davis, Kate Lowe, Alastair Corston de Custance Maxwell Saunders, Kathryn Joy McKnight, Leo J. Garofalo, Niyi Afolabi and George Reid among others.[[1]](#footnote-1) Most of the manuscripts published on the historical trajectory of Afro-Iberians either focuses on the Iberian Peninsula or Ibero-America, but *Trajectories of Empire* combines both worlds to highlight their interconnectedness in term of imperial project and Iberian colonialism.

In the introduction of the book, Jerome Branches emphasizes that the basic objective is “…to explore salient issues in imperial domination, accommodation, race/ing, and resistance, in relation to these experiences, that have largely escaped the attention of traditional, discipline-bound scholarship” (i). Beyond exploring the experiences and challenges faced by Afrodescendant in the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas, there is a subtle insistence on the interdisciplinary nature of the book. The chapters in this volume are written from a methodological framework that transcends disciplinary boundaries. There is an intentional act byBranche to give the readers a greater appreciation of black experiences through an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses the intersection of cultural studies, traditional literary analysis, history, visual culture and anthropology among others. I take this opportunity to reiterate that research on blackness should not be limited or trapped within the confines of any particular discipline. The history, life and experiences of Africans and African diaspora communities are better understood through a critical inquiry that is multidimensional and transcends disciplinary boundaries. The relevance of interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinary and/or multidisciplinary in Black/Africana studies research is also echoed by the scholar Reiland Rabaka who noted that Africana studies is *“… a transdisciplinary human science-That is, an area of critical inquiry that transgresses, transverses, and ultimately transcends the arbitrary and artificial academic and disciplinary borders and boundaries …”* (Rabaka 13, *Italic from the author*).

The book is divided in three parts that cover, in general, the beginnings of the settlement of captive Africans in the Iberian Peninsula, the African presence in colonial and postcolonial Latin America. Part one is entitled “The Iberian Scenario” and divided in three chapters. In the first chapter, Elizabeth Wright traces the arrival of enslaved Africans from West Africa to Portugal in the spring of 1444. She based her research on the accounts of Gomes Eanes de Zunara, a chronicler who narrated the painful story and experiences of 235 captive slaves. Zunara’s chronicle is based on firsthand observations in Lagos, Portugal and the now-lost textual witness by Afonso de Cerveira. Miguel Valero in Chapter two analyzes the social and cultural roles of Afro-Iberian confraternities. These confraternities made up of freed Africans prove the reality of African presence in late medieval Iberia. This model of African brotherhood would be established in the Americas. Contrary to the confraternities in the Iberian Peninsula, the ones in the Americas included enslaved Blacks who benefited from their services. In Chapter three, Manuel Olmedo Gobante examines the participation of Afro-Iberians in early modern Iberia martial arts. The author uses the story of Alba-Medrano family to show how swordplay became an opportunity for upward mobility for Africans. Martial art not only offered a way for Africans to improve their financial well-being, but enabled them to fight discrimination and stereotyping. Jerome Branche in Chapter four examines the story of Chicaba, a nine-year old girl captured in Ewe and enslaved in Spain. Her conversion into Catholicism and ascension into Venerable Mother are not only remarkable, but reveal the mechanism of whitening used by her confessor and biographer, Father Carlos Miguel de Paniagua, to legitimate her piety.

Part two entitled “Continuing Expansionism and the Circum-Atlantic” is divided in four chapters. By means of archive, portraiture, literature and reproductive experience, the writers examine the experiences of Africans in colonial Latin America. While Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, in Chapter five, explores the archives and questions the insertion of the Black enslaved subjects (especially the face) in visual representation, Baltasar Fra-Molinero’s Chapter six uses the 1599 painting by Andrés Sánchez Gallque to present the autonomy a political agency of three afrodescendant leaders in Ecuador. The painting, known as *Los mulatos de Esmeraldas*, offers a counternarrative to the image of Blacks as perpetual slave and subservient to the imperial rule of the Spanish Crown. More than a form of resistance, Fra-Molinero argues that the portrait of these (colonized) Black leaders can also be read as a form of afrofuturism. In Chapter seven, Lúcia Helena Costigan presents the disillusion and frustration of two formerly colonized Brazilian writers who were victim of discrimination and marginalization in Portugal. Costigan uses the case of Gregório de Matos (white) and Domingos Caldas Barbosa (mulato) to demonstrate the linguistic, political and social ostracism as well as racial discrimination suffered in the metropole by diasporic colonial subjects because of their Brazilian origin (Matos) and dark complexion (Caldas). In Chapter eight, Cassia Roth explores the reproductive experience and the physical pain of enslaved black women in the Americas and particularly in Brazil. Although miscarriage, stillbirth and infant mortality rates were common in the nineteenth century for women of all ethnic-racial background, they were particularly elevated among the enslaved population due to racialized medicine, false beliefs about black women body and biological differences between whites and blacks.

Part three entitled “Afro-Latin America” is divided in three chapters and addresses black marginality in twenty-first century Latin America. In Chapter nine, Alberto Abreu examines racial dynamics and tension in Cuba. The pervasive phenomenon of “el miedo al negro” (the fear of Blacks) rooted in colonial era is still prevalent in contemporary Cuban society albeit discreet. The construction of the nation as a “racial melting pot” and/or racial democracy has put Cuban racial problems in the back burner and jeopardized the attempt of deconstructing the subaltern place that blackness has held in Cuban consciousness. The legacy of slavery and plantation mentality is also visible in Chapter ten where Eliseo Jacob uses the images of the “senzalas” and “quilombos” as a metaphor to chastise the justice system, the correctional institution and the mass incarceration of Black and poor mestizo population in Brazil. Brazilian Hip Hop artists became the voice through which state violence and anti-Black racism are condemned; political and cultural resistance are celebrated. The book closes with Chapter eleven in which Maria Andrea dos Santos Soares describes the artistic event known as “African Heritage: Urban Interventions along the Pathway to the Port.” This event organized by Zózimo Bulbul is a journey through Black heritage, memory and resistance. It is worth noting the paradox of the appropriation of African based cultures by the Brazilian state. While Black cultures are celebrated by the state as part of the national foundation, Afro-Brazilian are still suffering daily from institutional racism and exclusion. The folklorization of Black cultures has become a commercial enterprise that profit more the White-dominated tourist industry and government institutions than Black communities.

It is worth mentioning that the present volume does not engage the rich African presence in the Iberian Peninsula from 711-1492. The exclusion of the history, experiences and legacy of the moors in Spain might be due to the fact that the book focuses on Spain and Portugal as empire and their Iberian maritime expansionism in Ibero-America. This expansionism postdates the presence of moors in what used to be called Al-Andalus. Even though the book discusses the experience of important Afrodescendant figures in the Iberian Peninsula and Ibero-America, it does not cover other prominent Black leaders of the Atlantic world such as Benkos Biohó in Colombia, Gaspar Yanga in Mexico and King Bayano in Panama for example. Other Black experiences in Central and (Spanish) South America are not covered in the manuscript. These limitations are understandable because of the impossibilities to address in a single monograph all the issues pertaining to Black diaspora.

*Trajectories of Empire* is an effective reading of the journey and settlement of Africans in the Iberian Peninsula from the fifteencentury as well as their living conditions in Cuba and Brazil. From enslaved and freed individual to swordsman, leaders and venerable, afrodescendant experiences are not monolithic nor homogeneous but diverse and multidimensional. By using case studies in their research papers, the authors personalize human experiences at a microlevel and show how different aspects of an afrodescendant's life are related to and also different from each other. This method is also a way of relativizing general assumptions that might not correspond to individual context. The present volume is an invitation for further inquiry into the historical trajectory of African Diaspora in the Iberian worlds.

Rabaka, R. 2010. *Forms of Fanonism*. Lexington Books.

1. Yolanda Aixelà-Cabré and Elisa Rizo. *Afro-Iberia (1850-1975)* (2023), Carmen Fracchia. “*Black but Human”: Slavery and Visual Art in Habsburg Spain, 1480-1700* (2019); Fassil Demissie. *African Diaspora in Brazil History, Culture and Politics* (2014), William Phillips. *Slavery in Medieval and early Modern Iberia* (2014). S.K. Bryant, R.S. O’Toole, and B. Vinson III. *Africans to Spanish America: expanding the Diaspora* (2012), Joaneath Spicer, Ben Vinson III, Natalie Zemon Davis and Kate Lowe. *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe* (2012); Alastair Corston de Custance Maxwell Saunders. *Social History of Black Slaves and Freedom in Portugal, 1441-1555* (2010); Kathryn Joy McKnight and Leo J. Garofalo. *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World*, *1550-1812* (2009), Niyi Afolabi. *Afro-Brazilians: Cultural Production in a racial Democracy* (2009) and George Reid. Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000, (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)