Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677 (review)

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Imtiaz Habib’s book boldly reconfigures the archive of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English history by uncovering an actual black population, previously considered tiny and insignificant, in a period “well before English black populations became known through the transatlantic slave trade” (1). Excavating documents from varied sources such as “legal, taxation, medical, and civic archives” (3), as well as records from parish churches within London and without and from royal and aristocratic households records, Habib follows richly detailed semantic clues about the presence of blacks within the English population: “hidden in the vast archives of parish churches within London and without, all through the Tudor and Stuart reigns, are voluminous cryptic citations of ‘nigro,’ ‘ neger,’ ‘neygar,’ ‘blackamoor,’ ‘moor,’ ‘barbaree’” (2). While acknowledging the slipperiness of such racial etymologies and linguistic mutations at the outset, Habib brings to life, albeit in short glimpses, imprints of black persons in various roles. These include, among numerous others, “Domingo” “a ginny negar” who seemed to have some prestige in the eyes of his owner, dwelling in “the abbye place… the manor house of East Smithfield” of the “right worshipful Sr. William Winter knight” (and financier of some of the Guinea voyages), and who received a “black cloth” at his burial (74); Elizabeth, “a negro child born white, the mother a negro,” baptized in the church of St. Botolph (96); Sir Walter Raleigh’s 11-year old Guyanian boy, “Charles,” baptized in 1597 at “St. Luke’s church in Kensington” (2); the black maidservants who were a part of the retinue accompanying Katherine of Aragon (36); and “John Blancke/Blak,” a “black trumpeter” “documented in the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII,” who according to Habib is “almost certainly” represented on the “Great tournament Roll of Henry VIII,” among the few visual images of blacks included in the book (39–40).

Black Lives in the English Archives is an important study at the “resurgent moment of race in Renaissance Studies,” making a crucial contribution to our knowledge of previously unrecognized, cross-racial encounters and racial discourse in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England (1). In making visible the “varied impress of black working lives” in the period, Habib interrogates the historical archives in terms reminiscent of Ann Stoler’s observation that “we should view archives not as sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production.” (“Colonial Archives and the Art of Governance,” Archival Science 2 [2002], 87). Archives are inevitably incomplete and partial, as Habib pointedly explains: “The usual topics of seventeenth-century English history, namely the financial and political problems of the reigns of the first Stuarts, the English Revolution, the Puritan government, and the Restoration, do not relate transparently to the black citations in the seventeenth century” (121). In this context, it
is not too surprising that black people are also untraceable in the work of major social historians including A.L. Beier, Lawrence Stone, and Joan Thirsk, all of whom display a remarkably sophisticated cross-disciplinarity (7), but within the perimeters of the accepted paradigms. Other studies of marginalized elements of England’s population—immigrants, foreigners, aliens, and vagrants—also exclude reference to any black elements among people on the margins (7). Within the prevailing critical and historiographical terrain, Habib takes on a two-fold challenge: he attempts to recover the presence of a black population in early modern England, “in considerable plurality, range of locations, and periodic continuity, that together demonstrate black people to be a known, even if denied ethnic group” (14); and he recuperates a sense of this black “community” as “individuals distinguished from white society by their blackness” by incorporating and expanding on the work of earlier scholars such as James Walvin, Peter Fryer, and F.O. Shyllon, among others (11).

Organized into five chapters and an introduction, Habib’s study has a broad historical sweep: he begins in the 1500s during England’s relations and interactions with Portugal and Spain, both slave-holding kingdoms, through conflict and rivalries with Catholic Spain; he then continues, covering the period after the 1540s which witnessed English privateering, piracy, and some forays into the slave trade by figures like Francis Drake and John Hawkins, who may have opened the way for more English cross-racial encounters. In his last two chapters he examines “records of black people in the English provinces, and East Indians and other people of color in London and the countryside” (17). Although most historians seem to suggest that the English slaving enterprise only picked up steam in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Habib’s recovery of a larger black presence than generally recognized complicates our understanding of the English involvement in trafficking and the Atlantic slave trade, as he explains: “the English trafficking in Africans between 1550 and 1650 was an activity in denial of itself as it were, and not only not the subject of clear or deliberate recordation, but also of documentary suppression” (69). Habib offers a thorough and painstaking documentation of archival records: while recognizing the limits of the archive, he provides some statistical analyses of these records. His chronological index of 448 records of black people (1500–1677) provides scholars at all levels with a valuable resource of records that seem to offer only “traces” of the lives of a black population, both personal diaries or accounts as well as public ratifications of identity such as government records and baptism and burial entries, among others. Collectively, these records tell a compelling story of black people who lived and died in early modern England: they included musicians, soldiers, prostitutes, and servants and slaves working for aristocrats, merchants, foreigners, and others.

To turn to the book’s methodology, while Habib’s overall claims are persuasive and generally well-argued, he sometimes makes broad hypotheses that remain mere conjecture. For instance, he accepts a speculative citation in another text that John Hawkins had a “Negro page named Samuel” because there is some
evidence that “the taking of Africans in the English voyages was a frequently casual, illicit activity” (70–71). On occasions like this, he would be better served to err on the side of exclusion and rigor. Overall, Habib takes his cue from the kinds of empirical studies mentioned at the outset, but also seems to want to set himself apart from the earlier approaches of postcolonial, race, feminist, and other “modes of representation” studies, which, according to him, in their post-structuralist orientations, “occluded the materiality and consequent historical import of the black presence” in the early modern period (8). Yet these earlier engagements with race seem to serve as straw men, since Habib himself presents us with a mediated empiricism. For example, he frequently points to the limits of the archive via post-structuralist perspectives on textuality, and to the difficulties of extracting “a sense of a living community from such records” (11).

In conclusion, Habib’s study has very useful and provocative implications for a history of race relations in early modern England, especially in a period when the systematic European practice of the enslavement of black people was still taking shape in the European (and English) imagination. It makes us re-think the terms of an emerging cosmopolitanism that marks many scholarly studies of an inchoate globalization, especially in London, even as such studies rarely provide a picture of ethnic and racial diversity in early modern England. A substantial part of the author’s search for blacks takes place on the geographical and spatial grid of early modern London and its suburbs, where black lives are refracted through a profusion of the names of London locations: churches, palaces, streets, and merchant households, giving a range of examples of complex social, cultural, and institutional relations in the period. In sum, Habib’s study shows that when early modern English people saw images of black people in paintings, or saw them on stage, or read or heard of them in travel narratives, though they would have seemed alien, they would not have been as unfamiliar as we may have come to believe.