

The logo for 'Critical Race Conversations' features the word 'CRITICAL' in large, bold, black capital letters. Below it, the word 'RACE' is in a smaller, bold, red font. At the bottom, 'CONVERSATIONS' is in a smaller, bold, black font. The entire text is set against a white background with a thin black border. Below the text is a solid red rectangular bar.

CRITICAL RACE CONVERSATIONS

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Reading, Writing, and Teaching Black Life and Anti-Black Violence in the Early
Modern World

DESCRIPTION: Dialogue with Jessica Marie Johnson, Cécile Fromont, and Amanda
Herbert

March 18, 2021

AMANDA HERBERT: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Critical Race Conversations, a series hosted by the Folger Institute with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. We are delighted that you're here today. I'm Amanda Herbert, Associate Director for Fellowships at the Folger Institute. We're delighted to gather so many friends, old and new, to these conversations. I'd like to take a moment to introduce the series and our speakers for today's event. This series of free online sessions features scholars who are offering new insights into the prehistory of modern racialized thinking and racism. Our speakers are acknowledging deeper and more complex roots to enduring social challenges, and conducting more inclusive investigations of our contested pasts, all with the goal of creating a more just and inclusive academy and society.

HERBERT: The Folger Institute is providing the platform and the framework, but as is our practice, we turn to scholars across disciplines and career stages to lead discussions from their own experience and expertise. We recognize that we should allow others who are more knowledgeable about the field of critical race studies to create the conversations. We have much to learn. In these Critical Race Conversations, we're actively experimenting with new technologies and new ways to foster dialogue and present content, just like people are around the world. For this session, our speakers welcome live tweeting with the #FolgerCRC and comments posted in the YouTube live chat.

HERBERT: You may also pose questions via Twitter or the live chat, and we'll relay as many of these as is possible. I remind you that the session will be recorded and posted on the Folger's YouTube channel as soon as it is processed with closed captioning enabled and a verified transcript, which will be uploaded next week. Please contact the Folger Institute with any questions or concerns. Today's session on "Reading, Writing, and Teaching Black Life and Anti-Black Violence in the Early

Modern World” is organized by Jessica Marie Johnson of Johns Hopkins University, who is joined by Cécile Fromont of Yale University.

HERBERT: It’s important for us to mention that this presentation will contain some representations of violence. Our presenters have elected to forego long introductions in favor of more time for discussion, but you can learn more about all of their many accomplishments by following the links in the chat. Welcome all, and we look forward to this conversation.

CÉCILE FROMONT: Thank you, Amanda. [LAUGH] It’s a great pleasure to be here, and I want to thank Jessica for inviting me into this conversation. We will begin by each sharing about 10 minutes some thoughts about our practice as historians and art historians to get us oriented in our conversation. So, I will begin, and let me share my screen to begin with an image. So, Jessica has kindly asked me to reflect with her about the ways in which, as scholars, we are trying to go beyond the invisibility or disavowals.

FROMONT: Right? That have made Africa and Africans less than prominent in the historiography and the collective imaginary of the early modern world and as well with their invisibility, the invisibility of the role that they have taken in shaping that early modern world. I want to share with you two examples of how my research is addressing this invisibility and one example of teaching.

FROMONT: So, at the very core of the issue that we have as scholars and as students also of the early modern world, trying to bring to the forefront Africa and Africans is the issue of the archive. And this is why I wanted to open these remarks with a mention of this object that I found just a couple months ago at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. And I’m not traveling [LAUGH] around in COVID. I live in Paris this year.

FROMONT: And I was looking at something that at least I thought was completely unrelated, and I opened one of the manuscripts, and as I opened it, there was this Congo style, probably some in 17th century that was bound in this volume, and it was there hiding in plain sight. And that’s one of the kinds of invisibility of these objects made by Africans, and these are incredibly rare and precious.

FROMONT: They are, to my knowledge, none of them in any museums are represented in France. For example, that would be the first one. And these objects are the ways through which as an art historian, I am able to access the material tresses of cross-cultural exchange that have Africans and Europeans in the early modern period. And within that exchange, these objects allow me to access the African side of that story that has not been recorded otherwise.

FROMONT: And so these kinds of discoveries, right, this kind of expansion of the archive is absolutely essential, but most importantly, what I’m doing with my work is thinking about new approaches, thinking about ways to go with what we do have

and think about how we can use it as a source for African history and African epistemology.

FROMONT: So, an example of what I'm trying to do in my forthcoming book that may or maybe not [LAUGH] be titled *Images on a Mission in Congo and Angola*, I'm looking at a set of images that actually... European images made by Europeans for Europeans. In this case, made by Capuchin friars about their missions. But I'm looking at them and questioning the extent to which it is possible that in this case as well as in other cases in the early modern world, Europeans were really able to maintain kind of steadfast epistemological isolation from the context within which they exist.

FROMONT: And so instead of looking at these images as only European, I'm focusing on the figure of that pair. That African man in conversation with the European men. And finding in the conversation the place where the authorship of the image actually lies. And what we have here in this conversation is the African man and the European that are together experiencing that paradigmatic early modern moment of discovering the multiplicity of point of view and discovering one worldview might not be at the center.

FROMONT: And they are here both weaving that discovery that our historiography has tended to assign to Europeans. Right? Weaving that discovery there in the arduous process of creating cross cultural meaning together. And to, you know, bring this point home, maybe I bring in comparison the image of Stradano many of you will be very familiar with of the discovery of American, where you have the European that is bringing the instrument of European knowledge and conquest to the new, to him, continent, and facing a guileless America.

FROMONT: And the African encounter is emphatically not what is depicted in the American one. You have there the pair that is bringing together their worldview to create knowledge together. Another example from my research is really focusing on visual imagery of culture. Really push us beyond that issue of invisibility and disavowal. In particular one made by the shape and the context of the archives.

FROMONT: So, in this case, it's in another project I'm looking at inquisition records that are trying a set of men and also women, but mostly men, who were making and selling amulets. And in this inquisition archive, you have records of the trials, which means that the words and testimonies of the men who were accused were recorded, but through many different layers of a translation sometimes recording by a really listless European scribe, and then the structure of the interrogation itself.

FROMONT: And so you're faced with this voice that is very distant, and then you have moments of a presence in the paper with this shaky cross here, which is the moment that we know the African men actually signed this paper. But if you look at this archive in another way, and you focus on here, the little packet, the actual

amulets that the African men made first that he masterminded, but with the help of the European student to do the penmanship.

FROMONT: Then you can turn that story of violence and suppression and tell instead a full tale of mutual attempt at mobilizing and exercising power. And by mutual I include, of course, fraught relationships, and combative relationships. So that here we have the papers and the object that are made by an African man to manipulate power in the European realm. And then you have that power that is, again, attempted to be controlled by the archive of the inquisition by including the object within its own binding.

FROMONT: Finally, I wanted to say a word about how does that function in the classroom? And for that I'm bringing you a few words about my Art. Race. Violence. seminar that I ran in the fall of 2020, which was obviously online. But as a way to open up the conversation with the graduate students in our art history department, but we had many sessions that were around invited guest speakers and open to the very broad public.

FROMONT: And some of you may have joined us at some point. And I use for this kind of icon of the class this very provocative image that is from the 15th century in a Mesoamerican codex that is showing a African man hung in the aftermath of the rebellion. And it's an image that I use as a provocation because it is historically grounded in a context, but it's interesting in and of itself, but also it has long echoes into the imagery of antiblack violence that we know of.

FROMONT: So, in this class we thought about that particular relationship. The ways in which the early modern world casts a shadow on our modern and contemporary times. And so, to do that, we talked about sugar, we talked about skin, we talked about flesh, we talked about silver, we talked about museums, we talked about the sea. And by doing that, by juxtaposing the early modern, weave their echoes in our own times.

FROMONT: What I was suggesting we could do is that if you can hold in your mind the history, for example, the history of the emergence of the idea of the fetish in the 17th century on the coast of Africa. If you can hold that history in your mind as you approach Sanford Biggers interventions in his BAM series, here For Michael from 2015, if you can hold these two together, then you can achieve a clarity and a level of insight about our own time that would otherwise be simply elusive to you.

FROMONT: So, that's what I have. Thank you very much.

JESSICA MARIE JOHNSON: [CLEARS THROAT] Thank you so much Cécile. Thank you to Folgers, the Folger Research Library for bringing us here and giving us a chance to have this conversation. This is already so much rich material I don't know how to follow it up [LAUGH] but I will try to offer a little bit of perspective from

maybe a little bit of a later period and how that, you know, intersects issues and the questions that are on the table.

JOHNSON: I will share my screen as well. Yes, this is the PowerPoint. Oh, hang on a second. There we go. Da-da-da... So, I'm gonna talk a little bit about some of the constituent elements that make up my book *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*. Because one of the things that I thought was really important when I was doing the research and in, you know, pulling the narrative for the text together, is making sure above all that the conversation about African women and women of African descent who end up in gulf coast Louisiana is not a conversation that is just about the continental Americas, and isn't just about kind of one way, unidirectional flow from the African continent to the new world.

JOHNSON: One of the key mythological and research moves that I try to make in my work broadly. And this text in my teaching, writing, and in my practice as a whole is to think about okay, how does this conversation begin in the African continent? As a African diaspora scholar, this is incredibly important. Conversations about diaspora, whether in its theoretical formulations or in the more intricate study of the slave trade or various dispersals if you're looking at other kinds of diasporas. One of the, you know, key elements is absolutely dispersal. Expulsion from a homeland arriving in a host land.

JOHNSON: But I don't think that it's useful in all of our work to then paint the continent as this place that, you know, is only expelling individuals in which people are forced to leave the continent is a massive, massive space of many polities, a whole range of histories, and we only get to learn a kind of small segment of it.

JOHNSON: At least based on the documents that we have for this era. So, what I wanted to always do, and structure my work, my teaching, my research around how this question might look if we turn the African diaspora in the opposite direction, and what ways can a study of west Africa in this same moment, what does that offer us as a counterpoint or as another kind of narrative of belonging to diaspora.

JOHNSON: And so for this table of contents is as a way to kind of think about, you know, how to structure the first half of the book up to chapter three is situated in Senegambia. And I'll talk a little bit about what that looks like as far as what the source is in just a second, because it looks like the ways at a region that is the region that is the principal embarkation point for so much of the French slave trade. Transatlantic slave trade to the gulf coast.

JOHNSON: And the second half of the book is the book that looks from a more archipelagic framework. But looks at what are the ways that an African diaspora society is growing, creating, merging. I love Dr. Fromont's framing of spaces of correlation. These are spaces of correlation that are getting created all around the Atlantic world in this early modern era. And to understand that we have to do this kind of intricate and deep dive.

JOHNSON: So, the other thing that I just want to make sure I mention before getting into some of the sources is that for me, I don't think there's a way of sort of encountering the sources in this archive without really considering the ways that our reading of it; our reading of the documents and our reading of the text is always actually informed by some theoretical framework. Even objectivity is a theoretical framework. And we should've actually be more honest and coherent about that.

JOHNSON: But recognizing ourselves as scholars engaging with the archive, how do we understand and identify what theoretical frameworks we're bringing to the documents? What ideas and assumptions and narratives about the world that we're bringing to them? And what else do we need to learn beyond those frameworks? So, for me, engaging in these texts, engaging in archival material, the archives as a project, is a very much about engaging in a black feminist praxis, engaging in a praxis of black feminist work that is looking at the period of slavery is really invested in and trying to grapple with what it means, what blackness means and the period of bondage.

JOHNSON: What gender and sexuality mean in the period of bondage. So, I have this quote here as a guide. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh-of female flesh "ungendered"-offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations." So, Hortense Spillers' work is so critical to not just this project, but in general to how I read the archive and how I read these different documents. Her call to imagine other grammars, which is a call that so many scholars have taken up and also built and innovated on.

JOHNSON: Marisa Fuentes, Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, so many scholars have engaged in these frameworks. And they offer us a way really of reading, and a way of writing and teaching that I think is really critical. I just want to make sure that we're taking our theoretical framework as seriously as our method. So, just as a kind of geographic framing, New Orleans is all the way over here in the upper left-hand corner. And when I'm talking about, you know, the kind of geographic spread of my work, and this is a image that I would show to my students, I'm talking about a particular Atlantic world.

JOHNSON: Other scholars of New Orleans have done this; Rashauna Johnson is a perfect example. Larry Powell, Nick Clark... in which we're kind of trying to think about what are the ways that the gulf coast is situated in this kind of broader context, but also what are the ways that we can kind of get away from the Atlantic world as a unitary device that encompasses everything? Because that encompassing tends to be very 18th century focused, and it tends to be very anglophone.

JOHNSON: If not anglophone, anglophone and francophone. When in fact, which I hope we'll get into even more in the conversation, there is both a longer and earlier

Atlantic world that is emerging in this moment. It goes later than emancipation and either the British or the French empire. And it is multilingual in ways that we, I think, are still really trying to kind of digest in our histories. And so when we're thinking of this early modern era and how to think with it, the complexity of it actually should be something that's rather humbling, not something that we think we can kind of grasp and hold with both hands.

JOHNSON: So, in trying to engage in this work, here is kind of a representation of, like, two directions that I go in the archives. One, of course, are text documents. You know, like, and these can be really useful and fascinating for students, particularly ones in which we find women like Marie Baude, who is one of the women that I follow in *Wicked Flesh*, and her voyage from Saint-Louis across the Atlantic on a slave ship and ends up in New Orleans. And she's the wife of a French gunsmith.

JOHNSON: And so there's a longer story there that is charted out in court documents. Court testimonial, essentially. And these types of documents are really critical. You know, we have letters from colonial governors writing back and forth from all across the empire, not just New Orleans and Saint-Louis and Gorée, but Martinique, from Guadeloupe, from Saint-Domingue. They're relating their understandings of the slave trade, of African society.

JOHNSON: They're relating their assumptions about African women and women of African descent. Many of these assumptions being salacious, licentious, that are captured in that title *Wicked Flesh*, and are not gonna be unfamiliar to those of us who are doing any work in histories of black women in particular, or in histories of gender and sexuality in this earlier era. And they are material that also tell us something about the geopolitics. It tells a lot about, you know, French interactions with African society, with Wolof emissaries, with agents, with Africans who they employ on ships. Africans who are employed in trading vessels going up and down the Senegal rivers.

JOHNSON: So, these are rich texts that can offer us a lot of ways to think about, you know, what is black life in this period, and also what are the contours of the violence? Sometimes the violence looks obvious to us. It's maiming, it's whipping, it's branding, it's being torn from families. But there's also other ways that Africans themselves, and women in particular, are noting their grievances with colonial officials. The attempted refusal of French officials to bequeath inheritances or to allow inheritances between European men who die and their African wives.

JOHNSON: The intimate violence that happens at the comptoirs on both sides of the Atlantic as European men take advantage, not just of free African women and their relationship and their vulnerabilities there, but also women who are enslaved. African women who are enslaved at the comptoirs. And so you have many layers of ways of engaging on the violence, and it's all, you know, it's right there which we'll talk about a little bit more about, you know, like, in the kind of hiding in plain sight [LAUGH] ness of this history.

JOHNSON: But on the other side of this slide is also visual material. And this is not material that I engage with as an art historian, because I am not. I learned very much from those who are art historians who are visual and material culture scholars. And this also goes to, like, reading widely and thinking about what we don't know. What are the limits of our capacity and of our expertise? And being in community with scholars who are creating this work. And so images like maps that give some texture to the space and the geography, of inhabitation, and occupation of the comptoirs.

JOHNSON: I'm actually gonna jump ahead to this one as we're talking about maps. And maps also offer kind of sense of what is the imperial imaginary way now? So, this is a map of Gorée that I like to use from 1723, and in the map itself you can see in the top right side that, you know, this mapmaker has set out, like, you know, very clear boundaries between the inhabitants. The free Africans who are, you know, considered stakeholders in Gorée and property owners, and people for whom the company... French employees and the company directors have to, you know, employ there.

JOHNSON: Their dependents, their sons, their daughters, their slaves as part of labor for French trading designs. And then you also have, you know, a different village, quote unquote, a village for those who were the Bambara, those who were understood enslaved soldiers. African soldiers. You had a different village for those who were understood to be laborers, Gourmettes Christian, understood to be laborers but also were Christianized.

JOHNSON: And so that mapmaker has this kind of, you know, idea that is also tells us something about how the French are imagining what kind of optimal layout and optimal segregation of these comptoirs might be. And also important to think about, you know, how might that actually have worked in practice. And so in grappling with, like, these maps that are these fantasies of French empire, I also try and juxtapose them with other images that are circulating, you know, in a related time period.

JOHNSON: So, this one I'm making it as a travel narrative. This is the 1780s, and this is supposed to be, as far as we know, and I believe George Burks makes this claim, this is the earliest image that we have of a Signare of Saint-Louis. So, the Signares is the honorific for free African women who were also property owners, slave owners, traders. Women of status at the comptoirs. And so this image number two with the headwrap and the white dress, this is her.

JOHNSON: So, this gives us some way of thinking about okay, how are French artists [LAUGH], imperial artists, what are the images of black women that are circulating? Of African women that are circulating in this time period. And we have, you know, it is important to think of this as the first representation of the Signare at

least that we have uncovered so far, but then we also have, you know, not just the Signare here, we also have her enslaved entourage. Right?

JOHNSON: And so there's a lot happening in images like these, and how can we begin to think about what these encounters look like from a French perspective, but also what is actually happening on the ground? Like, what does this tell us about the kinds of societies, the kinds of self-conscious, independent, autonomous work that is happening, economies that are happening, sociality that is happening in this world. And not view, you know, the west African context as either, you know, paint it with one broad brush, or paint it as though what, you know, the west African context has to offer this history is a kind of blank slate for which we understand, you know, how African society develops, African diaspora society develops on the other side of the Atlantic.

JOHNSON: And then this is another one that is also in the book and that I used to kind of think about, you know, what would, like, the living space of these comptoirs look like, feel like? You know, what is the combination of elements? The different kind of architecture? The different kind of labor or laborers. The expressive culture as people are wearing various things. And I'll end with a final image. David Boilat who was the child of Matisse who became a priest was Senegalese and wrote one of an often cited and one of a critically more important text about Senegal, about the history of Senegal and Senegalese.

JOHNSON: One of the images that he has is a woman that is listed as la Reine du Wolof but is understood to be Ndaté Yalla who is one of the leaders of Waalo I believe. And so, a woman of status and leadership with the Wolof society. And so one of the things I try to impress on, particularly if I'm using this with students, is to think about, okay, what are the constituent elements of status that are trying to be remarked on here by a Senegalese man in this context?

JOHNSON: Who is of this society and who is trying to lay out a kind of visual repertoire of elements to think through in this context. So, we have the headwrap, we have the pipe and the smoking of tobacco, which tells us something either about the commercial networks across the Atlantic or homegrown commercial ventures. We have gold jewelry, bracelets, pearls, all very, very critical markers of status. Markers of affectation.

JOHNSON: Symbols of the coast. More jewelry. We have the textiles, which is a critical trade item for much of the era of trade between Europe and the continent. And then we have a key piece that, you know, students don't always catch, which is that, you know, this is a woman who is luxuriating. You know, she is, you know, in her finery. She is wearing her jewelry. She's smoking a pipe. Taking a break.

JOHNSON: And, you know, just resting by the river, which is a thing of leisure, which is a marker and a visual representation of status, because if you can do that, that means somebody else is doing your work for you. So, these are the kinds of

things that I have found really useful in sort of trying to get students to think about, you know, how can we, like, interrogate Africa in this moment? And the last thing I'll share is a site that I created, wow, going on a decade now. The archive actually runs back a decade.

JOHNSON: It's called the New Orleans Course Archive, and they created it in cahoots with the courses that I teach on New Orleans, on Louisiana, and the moments and courses where I'm teaching something related to Louisiana and Louisiana history. And what it is is a collection. Some of it is my material. You'll see my callsign here, jmjafx, but also material that I ask students to contribute around, you know, what are they finding online out in the world on this history?

JOHNSON: And usually, it begins somewhere along the lines of, like, Mardi Gras and jazz. [LAUGH] But often, like, as they're reading and as they're thinking through the text and learning more and more about, like, New Orleans and Atlantic world and all these connections to the Caribbean, across the Atlantic to France, they begin to expand their visual archive and their textural archive themselves. And so I found sites and projects where students can do that kind of cocreation. Incredibly useful for helping them be researchers themselves and engage the work, you know, on their own in their own kind of independent capacity.

JOHNSON: So, yeah, so this is, you know, some of the work that I've been up to. And, you know, I think that this would be, you know, a good time to kind of think about, like, okay, the connection between our work and also some of the aims. For example, like, if we're thinking about Africa in the early modern world, you know, what does it mean to make the African continent a part of our conceptions of the early modern? So, I will pitch it to you actually, Cécile.

FROMONT: [LAUGH] Oh, thank you, Jessica. That's so rich, and there's so much in there. And, you know, I think you're absolutely right that it's an important step to look at the broad picture and ask ourselves as we develop the archive we kind of hone in on a methodology that our archive demands from us as interpreters to think about, well, what does it mean? And I think some of the really broad intervention that it is making are still so basic in some ways that are, you know, both surprising and shocking and kind of invigorating. Right?

FROMONT: And one of them is that it allows us to think about Africa in history, and, you know, there is so much that is in the kind of collective imaginary of the continent that is very contemporary or that begins with the era of colonialism, which for the African continent, really begins in the later part of the 19th century. And there is kind of this wall there in our ability to have a deep historical imagination of Africa or one that doesn't go straight to ancient Egypt, right?

FROMONT: To think about the depth and the texture of time passing, and in particular, for, you know, broad regions of the continent, in dynamic relationship with Europe or other continents also. And one of the reasons why it's, you know, it's

all the more pressing in a way is when we think about in art history, the so-called global turn. Right? In which, you know, broad connections are being made, and you have global history of this and global history of that.

FROMONT: And these global histories often, or more often than not bypass Africa. So, global history history of that commodity in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. And this is true for the early modern periods. Very much so. And Africa doesn't really figure there. Or it figures through mentions of the slave trade or mentions of kind of participation in furnishing of primary materials, but when we think about history of textiles, like global history of cotton or that does not deal with Africa as the main market for... the main mother of a lot of the interactions that came to be.

FROMONT: It's really jarring, but it comes from, you know, the historiography and it comes from kind of the reflexes of research and of systems that are being put in place. And, you know, that brings us back in a way to our discussion of the archive, right? Like, why do we need to make our own archives? And in a way how do we go to those repositories, right? That were made and, you know, in a way continue to sustain a certain worldview that we're writing sometimes against, but at least suspiciously from right?

FROMONT: So, what has been your experience in approaching that? In both in terms of the conceptual archive, but also in the, you know, going there with your backpack and, you know, [LAUGH] trying...

JOHNSON: And actually visiting. [LAUGH]

JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, [LAUGH] you know, it's so important what you say about Africa in history, about, you know, what are the ways that, you know, the continent is part of these conversations about global histories.

JOHNSON: You know, and I just want to really quickly shout out, you know, Herman Bennett's amazing book, and thinking about these early ways of understanding sovereignty and relations, and not just thinking in terms of Europe and Africa in terms of conquests, you know? Particularly when it does not quite parallel the interactions that are happening in an earlier moment. And, you know, and engaging in the archives is a critical piece of this. So, you know, for my research, what I learned early on is that, you know, like the actual brick and mortar archives, like the physical archives, are still very much structured by the colonial moments.

JOHNSON: You know, and as you said, the 19th century colonial moments. So, when I'm doing research on this period and I'm looking for the text or the maps, the census records, the état civil, I am not going to find them in this early 18th century moment, at least in Senegal. I will find them in the overseas archives in France. In Aix-en-Provence. When I am looking for certain time periods even for Saint-Louis or Gorée, because of the imperial, you know, back and forth, some of those records are

actually in the National Archives in the UK because of the time period that the British held Saint-Louis.

JOHNSON: Some of the really rich records and really rich material is outside of my language range in Portuguese and in Dutch and in Arabic. And those documents are in those archives as well. And so we have this issue, right? You know, so, like, there's, like, bringing this history into circulation and into the conversation so that we can talk about somebody like one of the women I talk about Maribo, who I placed on the screen, in the same conversation that we talk about enslaved women across the Atlantic, and the same conversation that we talk about what is happening in Congo, Angola and Congo Angola.

JOHNSON: Like, how do we take those names and make them mainstream names? Household names. Names that we can't forget that we can't talk about this history and this historical moment without mentioning them. But we also have the issue of, like, just doing that research to excavate that. It's so difficult. It is expensive, it requires traveling to multiple places. It requires, you know, multiple language facilities, so for those who are graduate students who are doing this work, they need to learn multiple languages. That takes time out of their... important time, but it does take time out of their program.

JOHNSON: So, there's so much about the actual archives. And then on top of that, because that is not enough. [LAUGH] Is going into the archives themselves and trying to find these histories. You know? I've had the experience where I go into the archive, and I ask you know, like, oh, you know, this was also younger me where I did not know better, but my asking, like, oh, where can I find out more about, you know, slavery in Senegal? Where can I find out more about free people of color in Louisiana?

JOHNSON: And then pointed to a single finding aid, or a single, you know, folio box. Right? And then finding out later that actually, you know, enslaved Africans, free African women, free women of African descent are all over all of the documents. So, there's not organization of the archive in which you can step into the shelves and pull down a box or pull down 10 boxes and find here is the story of Maribol. Here is the story of the free African women slave owners of Saint-Louis or Gorée, or Elmina or Ouidah or elsewhere.

JOHNSON: Instead, you do have to do the kind of deep, intense digging through every page of the letters, the colonial governors and the company directors are writing back and forth to France. Every page of the état civil. But then you go there, and you open those pages and those folios and there are enslaved Africans on every page. The état civil is rich with women who are baptizing themselves or getting baptized and baptizing others. Who are women of the comptoirs. These are not European women.

JOHNSON: And so there's a strange, like, dissonance between there's not necessarily an organization at an archive or a finding aid that says here. Here is your research. Which is again, extra work that then has to be done by those scholars who are interested in these histories, but then also once you actually get into the imperial spaces of the archive, you find this history everywhere. Literally as your first slide said, it's literally hiding in plain sight.

JOHNSON: So, it's strange. I know you've had maybe similar experiences of going into the archive and encountering archivists who are also very well meaning, and archivists are amazing. We love librarians, we love archivists. And also, you know, like, you know, trying to navigate this kind of history in plain sight-ness as well. So, I didn't know if you wanted to speak to that.

FROMONT: Yeah. No. Absolutely. And I think that's actually one of the things that, you know, I'm striving to pass onto my students, and in particular the graduate students, but really also the undergraduate scholars who are interested in pursuing these kinds of topics that it is difficult because, you know, we don't have a catalog resume or this or that, but it is exciting because you get to do research on your own terms.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

FROMONT: You know, these are the documents from, you know, the beginning to the end you're able to have, you know, kind of an autonomous look at it. And that's very exciting. It's also daunting. And it's also difficult. And I think our role as, you know, a graduate advisor is to really communicate on behalf of our students what they're doing, the difficulty, and the painstaking attention that they have to give to their research, but it's writing a dissertation in our topic does not only mean going to consult a particular set of documents and then commenting on it.

FROMONT: It is about creating your own set of document. Creating that archive, and then creating the methodology that you can apply to that new set of documents that's asking new questions. That is demanding new kinds of skills, and then you can bring in an interpretation. And so these very many layers is what make our field so rich and so, I think, in a way, exemplary perhaps for other parts of our disciplines. But it's also something that I think we have to be very intentional about communicating on behalf of those who want to comment and be part of the conversation.

FROMONT: And, you know, that's great, you know, freshness I think and in teaching, for example, you know, it's great to see how much of the preconceptions that we tend to write against actually do not exist in the minds of a lot of our students. And, you know, and it's kind of an interesting conversation, and I'm really hopeful and really excited about it because, you know, it can really take on, you know, a great set of different dimensions.

FROMONT: And as I mentioned, you know, I think my kind of teaching slogan is to look at the early modern period because it tells us so much about our own times. And it's not say like the early modern period isn't worth studying for itself, it's just that it's on top of being interesting in and of itself, it is so essential to understanding who we are and what we're doing. And a question I had for you also as, you know, working in similar topics, a different geography than I do, you know, how do you find this echoing in your own classrooms?

JOHNSON: Yeah, you know, you know, it's so true, and I love how you said that is that our students, you know, when we write against these preconceptions and misconceptions, and our students, you know, sometimes come to us and they, you know, they don't have them. Or they have other ones that we don't imagine [LAUGH]. But I have absolutely had that experience of amazing students of undergraduate and graduate level who, you know, students these days, they learn so much and there's so much more to engage with, you know, online, increasingly now 'cause of Covid.

JOHNSON: Now there's so much material just on this YouTube archive and this Google archive. But they have been exposed to so many kinds of questions and ways of thinking that I think that we in some ways are catching up to in our pedagogy. And so, you know, when I think about, like, what role this history has, the history of the early modern world, the kind of shadow that it casts, you know, on the present, you know, I am struck by, you know, what are the ways that, you know, this is a time period in which we are learning about the structure and the formation of the prison.

JOHNSON: This is the time period where we're learning about the meaning of genocide. The meaning of bondage. This is the time period where we're learning about the meaning of freedom. You know, like what is that thing that is going to be an idea, an event, an experience, a worldview that is now separated from the sacred. Separated from the sovereign. Right? You know, this moment, at least in the 18th century that certainly, but I think is beginning to emerge much earlier where we can ask different questions about what it means to be a subject or a citizen, and what does it mean to have all of that happening also in a context of bondage.

JOHNSON: And also in a context of the slave trade, and chattel slavery, and colonization regimes that are enacting genocide or forced labor regimes on indigenous communities in so many different places. And so it tells us something about, you know, what is the structure of society supposed to be? We... and black feminists thought, you know, I'm thinking also of Dr. Yomaira Figueroa's work and Worlds/Otherwise. You know, there is such an important and visionary and futuristic realm of thinking about beyond this dispossession.

JOHNSON: Beyond the legacies of 1441, 1445, 1492, 1619. What is that world going to look like? I think that there's ways that, you know, understanding this early modern era both tells us how we got here, how this particular formation of blackness, of nation, of borders, of environmental dispossession gets, you know,

seen as commonplace, but there's also, particularly in the work that I'm interested in, the archive I'm interested in, the kind of labors against it.

JOHNSON: That at all times and all places, 18th century, 17th century, 16th century, people are imagining something different. And that different world that is sometimes just blinked at and sometimes glimpsed in moments... Haitian revolution, SONA rebellion, the refusal of black women to have their labor taken up, their refusal of sexual violence, the manumission act, like, these are glimpses at other kinds of organizations of society, and other ways of organizing our humanity and our relationships to each other.

JOHNSON: But we don't get to understand that, and we don't see that as possibility if we don't take seriously this moment. Like, if we only took, you know, this world that we're in right now, and, you know, I definitely want to express, like, so much solidarity and love for Asian and Asian-American colleagues, family, friends who are really going through it right now. Like, we took this world now as it is as the only world that we can live in, and the only, you know, present and future possible, it's devastating.

JOHNSON: But if we look to the past as a way to chart out other kinds of futures and other world possibilities, then we actually can open up so much more. And as hard as this archive is with its slavery and its torture and its despair and its slave ships and all of it, there're also amazing kinds of meanings that get created. Like, your work is so informative to me in thinking about the Congo iconography and the way Catholicism has taken up but also completely reformed, reshaped, and done it in this independent, autonomous self-conscious way.

JOHNSON: By, you know, by those who, you know, a textbook might say, you know, are not having a contribution at this moment, but in fact are literally shaping the moment that I come into in the 18th century. So, I don't know. If you have thoughts. [LAUGH] [OVERLAP]

FROMONT: No, yes, I mean, I think what you're pointing to, that has been important at least in my thinking is the ways in which, or the extent to which some of the concepts, so practices that we may think of as wholly European, or whole instruments of subjugation, of colonization were in fact spaces of tremendous battle in terms of the definition and the ways in which they were inhabited.

FROMONT: So, I'm, you know, thinking about Catholicism, that, you know, we can tend to think of it as imposed to African populations in the continent, but certainly in the Americas. And that's something that I'm interested in looking at along with a set of colleagues. It's also a space for African spirituality on the African continent and in the Americas.

FROMONT: When we think of power, we think power being yielded by the machinery of colonialism, by the machinery of the slave trade, but in fact, and that's

something I can see when I'm looking at the inquisition archive, it is a space that is completely embattled, and that African ritual actually able to manipulate, and to claim for themselves, sometimes using the very instruments of the Europeans in a way that is really threatening and destabilizing for the state and the church of Portugal and elsewhere.

FROMONT: So, when we think, you know, more broadly about this concept, and about these big instruments of rule, of empire, and we get to the texture of them, by not excluding [INAUDIBLE] other parts, because they come from Africans, because they come from elsewhere than the places where they've been recorded. The people for whom they've been recorded in attempt at making them maybe smoother than they ever were. Then you get to something that is so, you know, so much closer to what could really have happened. Right?

FROMONT: A story that is messy, that is fraught, and that is just, you know, human in the way that we know it. Right? Certainly, any record in the archive, even though sometimes they are messy, and they have, like, misspellings and mis everything, nothing is as simple as it is in the document, and that kind of imagination also that we need to bring in to compliment what is written and to compliment it with the visual culture, the material culture, but with also the understanding of the relationship and the ways that events unfolded.

FROMONT: And I think in this way, right? That studying these documents and studying this history may be a methodology of its own. Right? Like, studying African and African diaspora in the early modern period, it's its own epistemology. Right? The demands and approach, and it demands a frame of mind that is recasting everything that we know once we've looked at it. And in this way, it has, you know, really great potential.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes.

FROMONT: I'm posing in deep thought. [LAUGH]

JOHNSON: [LAUGH] We should open it up for some questions. So, we have folks who are tweeting, and I think throwing questions on YouTube, so I hope people will feel free to ask us anything 'cause I could talk to you forever, Cécile. I could talk to you for all the time.

FROMONT: Same here.

JOHNSON: Okay. [LAUGH] All right, so we have a question. One of the strongest and most exciting aspects to critical race studies is its interdisciplinarity, which we've talked about in this presentation. So, how do we, all of us, support and nurture that kind of collaboration between, among, and around fields? So...

FROMONT: Yeah, I mean, I can start. Because I think in a way art history in and of itself tends to be more multidisciplinary in its own kind of single discipline. But what I would say is that, you know, the kind of work Jessica is doing and I'm doing also is proving is that this kind of research is about a problem, and it can be a visual question, it can be a human question, and from that problem the archive gets built, the problematics gets built, and then the methodologies that you need to bring in to answer these questions come into play.

FROMONT: So that, you know, I really think that the work that I'm seeing is very organic. Right? And, you know, promiscuous maybe in terms of methodologies, but in a very positive ways in that, you know, it's not shy and boring what it means. It's not shy in saying, you know, I need to go there to get the answer to this questions, and to kind of bring together the different viewpoints. And that is what's creating really creative types of studies.

FROMONT: But created the only way we can get to what we're trying to do.

JOHNSON: Yeah, I love that. I love the idea of framing our work and our methods around problems and not so much around discipline. I love the idea of our promiscuity, of course. Because I completely agree. I think that, you know, what would it look like if we structured our work and our methods, our grad program, epistemologies, around themes instead of continents or instead of chronologies.

JOHNSON: Like, what kind of work would be called to learn? What kind of work would we be called to do when we're encountering documents? What kind of documents? What kind of new kind of text would we have to take up? You know? And I same like you, I feel like I see this also happening in some really amazing and organic ways. Certainly in the study of and the history of slavery and African diaspora because I don't think there's a way that you can do that work responsibly and not move somewhere interdisciplinary.

JOHNSON: The black lives just do not confine themselves to discipline any kind of way. But I'm amazed by work that's coming out of black ecologies. I'm amazed by work that's coming out of archipelagic studies. Archipelagic American studies. And thinking about this in historical, you know, time and place are really kind of taking up these concerns and these questions and really trying to take that seriously. So, I absolutely think that those are strategies.

JOHNSON: I think also, like, just to kind of come back to, you know, the teaching piece, we also have to, you know, we have to foster that in our students, too. Like, what are the ways that we as those on graduate committees, advising dissertations, writing job letters... how are we also making sure to encourage that, to train that way, to point that out? I mean, it's so much a part of the work that we do as scholars who are mentors and who are advisors, but also as scholars who are trying to, like, you know, open space in the academy for new ways of thinking.

JOHNSON: And so I think that there's also that piece there, the kind of labor that we're called to do in our roles of actually, you know, being able to open doors and create great spaces and resources for those who are coming after us in particular.

FROMONT: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. I kind of always joke with my students saying that, you know, don't take no for an answer, find your own methods, but also there's this amazing thing called paleography; they will actually teach you how to read the documents. Like, if only I had known. If only I had known. [LAUGH]

JOHNSON: I know. I hope people know that. Like, there are ways to do this work. Like, we will make it as easy as possible. Please come work in this field. [LAUGH] We need more people. We have another question. What might a globe...

FROMONT: Do I need to read it for you?

JOHNSON: Oh, sure. Yes.

FROMONT: Okay. A question that actually relates very well to what you were saying that is asking what might a global history centered on Africa in the ways the two of you... two of us... have shown? One, perhaps also inspired by African futurism and Afro-futurism, what might such a history look like?

JOHNSON: Ooh, I love the idea of a history inspired by African futurism and Afro-futurism. You know, some of the really exciting framings in that work is... I'll put it like this; how do we think about counterfactual? I mean, like, what does the world look like if we do not presume European superiority and might... what does the world look like if we do not presume African subjection? What does the world look like if, you know, if and when the slave trades are not the primary economic driver?

JOHNSON: Which is something that is not necessarily the case in Senegambia. The slave trade is a gamechanger, but it's not necessarily the economic driver. And, you know, what do we do with that if you take those three assumptions out? You know, How then are we looking at the documents? You know, how do our histories change? Where do we see African women in society? Where are they socializing?

JOHNSON: Like, what do their communities look like? What do their kinship structures look like? Who are they in love with? Where are they finding joy and pleasure? You know, we know a lot about the violence. We don't do as well when sort of navigating aesthetics of living within the violence and beyond the violence. And so, you know, taking those as not for granted is so critical. And also not taking that as though, you know, these African societies are egalitarian.

JOHNSON: Right? You know because there is always, you know, messiness. And there is grappling with inclusion and exclusion. There's grappling with hierarchy. There's grappling with dynamics of violence and exclusion. And, you know, where do we see those? And how do we take those not as pathology, but as the nit and

gritty of making society? And so, for me, it's like, what does this history look like? What do the documents look like when we approach it from that context?

JOHNSON: And that can be really, really important to early modern era when so many of our histories are sort of structured as though those counterfactuals are actual fact, when in fact, those actually are more fantasy, and more historiographic construction than they are the actual reality of African society on the continent. But I don't know, what do you think, Cécile? [LAUGH]

FROMONT: I don't know, yes. I'm nodding. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yes, absolutely. No, and it's really striking how, you know, how much you can get that is enlightening when you are making sure to take what the objects are telling you, and with, you know, around them the societies that are creating these objects are telling you on their own terms, and not as you were saying, predefined structures that would fit, you know, another type of historiography and kind of complete it.

FROMONT: Try taking them at their own center, and also looking at the ways in which they are informing what used to think they are the center from the other direction. And one of the ways, for example, that are really interesting to do that is to think about collecting on the African continent. Thinking about what kind of objects from elsewhere, rulers or the elites of different places on the African continent were interested in collecting and displaying.

FROMONT: And how kind of that tells us history, right? Of the travel of things from far away to a center that is defined by, you know, a certain worldview that is organizing the world so that, you know, global may look very different depending on, you know, where you are, and, you know, this kind of... [LAUGH] I'm not gonna be able to say that... kaleidoscopic ways of, you know, looking at, you know, what we think of as globals.

FROMONT: Or I guess what I'm meaning by global is world making. Right? What does a world making look from? The Congo in 17th century, or from Gorée in 18th century.

JOHNSON: I love that because, you know, it reminds me that, you know, one of the disciplines we haven't quite drawn into this conversation, well, I know is very present in your work, and I talk about it as well is archeology, you know, and the ways that, you know, the kind of, you know, physical excavation of spaces can be so rich and so informative.

JOHNSON: And I know as historians we are doing, I think, more I think of work like Ibrahima Thiaw and excavating at Gorée or Shannon Lee Dawdy's work in Louisiana, like that the actual physical materials that we're able to even find right now tell us something about, you know, what kinds of worlds people are building themselves in the midst of so much global circulation of material.

FROMONT: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: Excuse me. So, which brings us to another question. I love Dr. Johnson's framing when she said that we should be telling stories where Africa's not always being thought of in terms of expulsion.

JOHNSON: Right? So, do we have any go-to sources? Textiles, maps which can help us flip more traditional histories of the Atlantic world in this way? I would definitely put archeology in that category, but Cécile, your work is, like, you range in a whole... even further into, like, visual material culture archive. Maybe you could say a little bit more about some of your go-to sources.

FROMONT: Yeah, no, I think... where to start? Right? I think part of the answer is, you know, to take a more kind a more sober look at a lot of the family objects and really, you know, ask us deeper questions about each and origins, and the kind of involvement of different parts of the world in the formulations of these objects. And, you know, one of the striking objects that I'm looking at in my current research is this silver scepter that was made in the west of France in the late 18th century, and that is made in the shape of emblem of status from coastal Congo.

FROMONT: That usually probably would have been made in wood. But then there is this artisan, this metalworker in France that reframes it and makes it in silver to be sent back as gift on the Atlantic coast. So, with these kinds of objects, you know, there's a classic interpretation of thinking of, you know, the ancient area. The silver that's, you know, probably coming from south America, and then that's coming to France, and there is sort of American [INAUDIBLE], but then, you know, there are different ways also of bringing into question the conversation at the level of design and aesthetic.

FROMONT: Right? When you have a artist in France that is imitating an African object, you know, how does that recast the way that we understand those networks? And this of course was an object that was taking part of the slave trade, but that's also telling us that, you know, it's not an exchange of kind of anonymous trinkles that comes from Europe and that are exchange at great profit for enslavement and women. There is actually an attention on the part of the slave trader because their interest is involved in it to find and understand the aesthetic preferences of their interlocutors on the African coast.

FROMONT: Right? So, what we could easily see as, you know, Congo that could be interchangeable, well, in fact, is not. There are parts of objects that are really sophisticated, not only in their form, but in their conception, and in the networks of understanding that comes behind their conceptions. And the same goes with cotton cloth that is made for the slave trade, and the information that circulates to make it to the taste of the different African regions.

JOHNSON: I love that. I mean, I can also see that happen in a class. Like taking a single item, artifact, text, and just really working it all the way around for all of its possibilities, and asking students to think with that and think, okay, where might this aspect of it go? Where is the silver from? Where is the design from? What was it used for? And it just feels so full bodied in a way that our histories really need to be and to impact.

JOHNSON: When I think of this question, I mean, I think in a lot of ways of... textiles and maps, already mentioned, of course. Material objects already mentioned. Archeology already mentioned. But I also want to think seriously with, and in some ways return to black feminist work around systems of belief and spirits.

FROMONT: Mm-hmm.

JOHNSON: And take seriously that people of African descent, continent, diaspora, US, Europe, everywhere have very serious ideas about the secular and the supernatural. And I think that in some ways, like, at least in the US Academy of, you know, positive is science and imperialist is... we're sort of training that into stepping back from the encounters with spirit or encounters with systems of belief foresee those as in that kind of weird binary between tradition and modern. Early modern. Now we're moving away from the Catholic church from the papacy, all of this. But I think we need to take seriously where we encounter those moments in the archive, and think about, you know, whether it's in text, whether we're thinking with music, whether we're thinking with sound.

JOHNSON: Sound study has so much to offer us in thinking of the early modern era. I can see an example of this for, like, the Louisiana to Senegambia thread is the banjo and the evolution of instrumentation. African inspired instrumentation across the 18th century into the 19th century even. But I think that, you know, it would be interesting to think about, okay, in the same way you have an object, and you turn it all around on itself and try and really, you know, dig your way into all the aspects that it might offer us today, what would it look like to take the concept of spirit?

JOHNSON: The concept of systems of belief and see where in an archive that we already have we might be able to identify it, and we might be able to find it. And what would it mean to then take that seriously? You know, and take those understandings of the world, and a world in which the sacred and the secular actually not separate. Not two sides of a coin, but actually wrapped up together. How would that change how we talk about the past? How would it change how we talk about people of African descent in the past as well?

JOHNSON: So, it looks like we are... oh, go ahead.

FROMONT: Yeah. Yeah, no, I just wanted to add... and yeah, no, absolutely. And so, you know, this is so inspiring. But I also it made me think of embodied knowledge. Right? And not so much, you know, in the kind of experiential aspect of it, but also

kind of trusting what we have in us. Right? And in particular, as, you know, black women of the Americas, there is so much that we hold in our, you know, in our bodies that we can bring to the documents also.

FROMONT: You know, as instinct, but also as kind of deciphering processes to, you know, hone in to some of the aspect that, you know, perhaps were meant to be overlooked even. Right? That there is something that we have in our bones there.

JOHNSON: Yes. Yes. I love that. That is like a perfect place to bring this conversation [LAUGH] to a close. What a wonderful way to stop.

HERBERT: That was so inspiring and energizing and brilliant, both of you. Thank you. Thank you for that incredible conversation. Okay. Now I have to give my official thanks for that. I'm blown away by both of you. That was incredible. A special thanks in addition to the thanks for our speakers goes to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for their support of this series, and I'd like to extend my gratitude to our audience for the lively Twitter and chat feeds to which they've contributed.

HERBERT: We take seriously question that interrupt received wisdom, exceed easy answers, and open the scope of our understanding. We at the Folger Shakespeare Library ask for your continuing support of our work with so many audiences from K-12 educators and their students who are served by the Folger Education Division, to the award winning productions of the Folger Theater, to fellowships and advanced programming for graduate students and faculty run the Folger Institute.

HERBERT: If you are in a position to contribute, we are very grateful. Our institution was founded on philanthropy, and your philanthropy will help us to continue to support groundbreaking research and more inclusive audiences, just as we did today. We hope that you'll be able to join us on April 22nd for a discussion on "This Is Not Who We Are," with Ian Smith of Lafayette College, and Michael Whitmore, Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Further details on this and upcoming critical race conversations may be found on the Folger Institute's webpage.

HERBERT: And now I'd like to pitch things back to our presenters to give them the last word.

JOHNSON: I just want to say thank you so much. It is an astounding pleasure to encounter your work and to read and to learn from you, but to be able to talk to you as well in person-ish [LAUGH] about these topics is such a joy and is such a pleasure. Thank you so much for this.

FROMONT: Thank you, Jessica. And thank you for your scholarship. Thank you for your voice. Thank you for your energy, and thank you for inspiring us. This has

been such a treat, and I'm wiser after this conversation and more enthusiastic than ever to continue. Thank you.

JOHNSON: Thanks. Thanks, everybody watching. [LAUGH]

FROMONT: Thanks, everybody.