



# Black Thought in European History

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ehq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ehq)**Chloe L. Ireton**

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While the call to centre Blackness in European history is an admirable one, we – as historians – must go beyond tracing the presence of Black Africans and their descendants in European history and think more carefully about the methodological implications for accounting for the diverse intellectual legacies of the African Diaspora in Europe and its empires. In particular, as historians, we have the responsibility to explore how enslaved and free Black Africans in the early European empires reckoned with the brutality and violence of the Atlantic world that they were forced to inhabit, and the different ways that they engaged with and shaped the intellectual life of diverse European and colonial societies. This involves, in the first instance, engaging in important methodological discussions about how we practise history and accounting for the theoretical implications of generations (and centuries) of epistemic erasures of diverse intellectual histories of Black thought in colonial societies.

In other words, our work in centring Blackness in European history must go beyond tracing the presence of Black Africans and their descendants, and instead move towards investigating their intellectual, political, social, and cultural histories and legacies. An example of the critical need to move beyond a cataloguing of Black presence towards a deeper understanding of intellectual legacies can be seen in the intellectual history of slavery and freedom, two concepts and legal categories that regulated the lives of all Black men and women in early-modern European history, especially in the Iberian empires. These categories were central to the lives of every Black African and person of African descent residing in Europe in the era of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. In contemporary scholarship, however, intellectual histories of ideas about slavery rarely include how Black Africans thought about and reckoned with the discourses that structured their own enslavement, or how they sought to shape the meanings of freedom. Instead, intellectual histories of slavery tend to focus solely on ideas that emerged within legislative or theological spheres in Western European thought, while disregarding how enslaved Africans may have engaged with, shaped or redefined such discourses. In other words, there is an epistemic erasure from intellectual histories of

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slavery of enslaved people's engagements with (or ideas about) the religious or legal discourses that structured the legality of their own enslavement in jurisdictions of European polities and empires.

Methodological challenges account for part of the reason why the rich history of ideas about how Black Africans conceptualized these two strands of political thought – freedom and slavery – in the early-modern Atlantic world has been invisible in European history. With a few notable exceptions of lettered Black Africans in the early Iberian world who penned and published texts, or political leaders in particular regions of West Africa and West-Central Africa who exchanged diplomatic correspondence with Iberian monarchs, the vast majority of the history of Black thought in early modern Europe is etched into the historical record through archival fragments within documents produced by institutions of colonial administration and justice or ecclesiastical and religious courts that tended to be hostile towards Black people. These fragments, when analyzed collectively, highlight a rich world of Black thought about slavery and freedom in the early Atlantic world that shaped contemporaneous discourses and decision-making in European empires. It is through the strategies deployed by Black individuals to deliberate in their final wills and testaments, in applications for royal justice, in litigations for their freedom from enslavement, and their defence strategies in criminal courts, where historians can begin to account for the diverse history of Black thought. For this, we need to rethink our methodological approaches to the history of ideas.

Litigation for freedom from enslavement in royal courts and petitions for royal justice in the early Spanish empire are important sites for Black Africans' intellectual histories, as petitions for freedom from enslavement reveal how enslaved and free Black Africans reckoned with the brutality of the Atlantic world that they were forced to inhabit, while also highlighting their important intellectual legacies in limiting the justifications for enslavement and defining the privileges of freedom. Take for example, a petition for freedom from enslavement submitted to the Spanish crown in 1536.<sup>1</sup>

'I Domingo, of Black colour, say that I am free': so, commenced the royal petition in which Domingo described himself as a free Black man from the land of Gelofe (Jolof Empire in the Senegambia valley), the son of an honourable man, and a Christian who had willingly left his land of birth with Portuguese traders in order to become more learned in the Christian faith and the language of the Christians. Domingo argued that his subsequent enslavement by a Spanish conquistador on the island of Tenerife was illegitimate due to his status as a free-born Christian in Gelofe. He had endured six grueling years of enslavement as a forced labourer on fleets that crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean and, latterly, as a domestic slave in the city of Seville. In response to Domingo's petition for freedom, the Spanish crown issued a royal decree declaring Domingo a free man.<sup>2</sup> The royal decree stated unequivocally that Domingo 'of Black colour' was – and always had been – free and should be treated as such across the kingdoms of Castile, the Indies, and Tierra Firme. The crown reasoned that Domingo's

<sup>1</sup> Archivo General de las Indias (hereafter AGI), Indiferente., 1205, no. 21, fol. 1<sup>r-v</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> AGI, Indiferente, 422, l. 17, fols. 114<sup>r</sup>–115<sup>r</sup>; AGI Indiferente, 1205, no. 21; AGI, Justicia, 712, no. 1; AGI, Contratación, 5536, l. 5, fol. 156<sup>r(1)</sup>.

freedom was guaranteed because he ‘came with them [the Portuguese] to be a Christian, as he is’, suggesting that the Crown accepted Domingo’s case for the illegitimacy of his enslavement because of his status as a free Christian in Gelofe. Domingo subsequently travelled to the Spanish Americas as a free man and presented the royal decree that guaranteed his freedom at the House of Trade in Seville when he requested a royal licence that would permit him to undertake the Atlantic crossing.<sup>3</sup>

Domingo’s 1536 royal petition for freedom highlights the existence of a discussion between rulers and ruled about the legitimacy of the enslavement of Black Africans in the early decades of the sixteenth century, especially in relation to Black African Christians, and reveals an important intellectual history of freedom and slavery spearheaded by Black Africans and their descendants in the early Atlantic world. Enslaved Black individuals who litigated for their freedom from enslavement in royal courts sought to place limits on the legitimacy of slavery, and their discourses also permeated the crown’s concerns, deliberations, and decisions in adjudicating justice. This case also highlights the importance of a thriving intellectual history that existed across Upper Guinea and West-Central Africa regarding whether and how slavery was justified. These intellectual histories responded to local histories and shifting political environments and allegiances. African Diasporic people in Europe and the Americas often drew on these intellectual legacies and their knowledge of Iberian laws when navigating slavery and the law in their daily lives. In addition, historians need to pay more serious attention to the diverse forms of knowledge and communication that existed between European and African societies in the early modern period. The Spanish royal court that responded to Domingo Gelofe and other enslaved Black Africans who litigated for their freedom had intimate knowledge and understanding of litigants’ regions of origin and how slavery was justified in these sites.

Seventy years later in the same city of Seville, two other documents point to a rich history of ideas about slavery and freedom spearheaded by Black Africans. Two late-sixteenth-century litigation-for-freedom suits brought to courts in Seville show how enslaved Black Africans sought to place limits on the conditions that legitimized the enslavement of Black Africans, while also seeking to broaden the rights and privileges of freedom in the early Spanish empire. Archival fragments from the Inquisition of Seville reveal how two enslaved Black men litigated for their freedom from slavery after being remanded as property by the Inquisition of Seville.<sup>4</sup> These enslaved litigants argued for their freedom by positioning themselves as exemplary Christians, while showing their know-how in Castilian law and legal precedents. They each argued that they should be free because the ‘old Castilian laws’ of slavery prohibited heretics from slave ownership. Since their respective owners had been found guilty of heresy and apostasy by the Inquisition of Seville, they each argued that such laws meant that they should

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Pleito fiscal de Juan, esclavo negro de Ana Hernández, reconciliada por el Santo Oficio, sobre petición de libertad a propósito de su venta como parte de los bienes confiscados de la dicha rea, 1596, Archivo Histórico Nacional (hereafter, AHN) Madrid, Inquisición, 4673, Exp. 6. Pleito fiscal de Juan Rodríguez, negro, esclavo que fue de María Rodríguez, relajada por el Santo Oficio de Sevilla y su de esta villa de declararle por esclavo cautivo de la Cámara y Fisco Real, 1594, AHN Madrid, Inquisición, 4672, Exp. 8.

be set free. For example, enslaved Juan made a claim for his freedom in 1594, explaining to the court that in the present he was a '*bozal*' and a Black *vecino* of Cádiz, and that he was free 'as I am' and 'in accordance with the laws of these kingdoms'.<sup>5</sup> The case centred on the validity of laws enacted prior to the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Castile. A representative for the Inquisition of Seville argued that Juan's case for freedom had no standing because the litigant was drawing on 'old laws' that 'were of the past' and which 'in the present times' were not practised and had since been repealed, arguing that the 'old laws' that 'Juan negro' wanted to take advantage of for his liberty did not pertain and were irrelevant because they were designed for when Moors and Jews were allowed to live among Christians, which – he underscored – was no longer the case. The royal judge presiding over the case sided with Juan and declared him free. These two enslaved Black Africans drew on legal precedent and 'old laws' to argue that their continued enslavement was illegitimate, and in both cases were set free by a royal judge.

These cases demonstrate that Black individuals participated in broader discourses about the conditions that legitimized slavery, often trying to narrow the justifications for enslavement, in this instance by engaging with historic precedent in Castilian law. In doing so, they positioned their Christianity and the illegality of non-Christians owning Christian slaves as a key reason for the illegitimacy of their enslavement. The royal judges in the Inquisitorial courts sided with the arguments of the two Black enslaved individuals, which highlights that the discourse was not limited to Black populations. Instead, such discourses also permeated the crown's concerns, deliberations and decisions in adjudicating justice across various royal courts.

These brief examples of freedom litigation suits raise important methodological questions about historians' responsibilities to trace the rich and diverse histories of ideas in the Atlantic world and account for the fact that the vast majority of enslaved Africans did not leave written traces, but rather etched their ideas and strategies into the historical record through their labour as litigants for their freedom in varied courts. These fragmentary pieces of evidence highlight how a narrow focus in intellectual history on the ideas of lettered elites over other forms of intellectual exchanges historiographically marginalizes certain groups from participating in – and forging – intellectual traditions, thereby rendering them outside of history and devoid of ideas or an intellectual tradition. In our work on centring Blackness in European history, I suggest that we begin to explore these important intellectual legacies by broadening our methodological approaches in order to account for diverse forms of knowledge, histories of ideas and intellectual exchanges that are the legacy of Black people and their ancestors who were violently displaced into European polities and empires in the early-modern period.

### Author Biography

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<sup>5</sup> Pleito fiscal de Juan, esclavo negro de Ana Hernández, reconciliada por el Santo Oficio, sobre petición de libertad a propósito de su venta como parte de los bienes confiscados de la dicha rea, 1596, AHN Madrid, INQUISICIÓN, 4673, Exp.6.

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Southern Atlantic world. She is currently at work on *Slavery & Freedom in Black Thought in the Early Modern Spanish Atlantic*, a monograph that explores how free and enslaved Black men and women in the early Atlantic world conceptualized two strands of political thought – freedom and slavery. She is the author of various articles including ‘Black Africans’ Freedom Litigation Suits to Define Just War and Just Slavery in the Early Spanish Empire’, which appeared in the *Renaissance Quarterly* and was awarded the Renaissance Society of America William Nelson Prize for best article published in the *Renaissance Quarterly* in 2020.