

Early Theatre

A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama



Carol Mejia LaPerle, ed. *Race and Affect in Early Modern English Literature*. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Press, 2022

Dennis Austin Britton

Volume 26, Number 1, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108226ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.26.1.5499>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

McMaster University Library Press / Becker Associates

ISSN

1206-9078 (print)

2293-7609 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Britton, D. (2023). Review of [Carol Mejia LaPerle, ed. *Race and Affect in Early Modern English Literature*. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Press, 2022]. *Early Theatre*, 26(1), 145–148.
<https://doi.org/10.12745/et.26.1.5499>

Carol Mejia LaPerle, ed. *Race and Affect in Early Modern English Literature*. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Press, 2022. Pp 221. Hardback \$29.95. ISBN: 9780866986922. Paperback \$19.95. ISBN: 9780866986588. Open Access. <https://doi.org/10.54027/mxsc7700>.

Dennis Austin Britton
University of British Columbia

In the foreword to *Race and Affect in Early Modern English Literature*, edited by Carol Mejia LaPerle, Margo Hendricks places the volume within the history of Premodern Critical Race Studies. Hendricks then asks the question, ‘Can and will *Race and Affect in Early Modern English Literature* have an effect’ to which Hendricks responds, ‘The answer is yes’ (viii). I agree wholeheartedly. The essays in this volume advance understandings of race in early modern English literature in considerable ways through explorations of readers’ affective relationships to texts and how texts use affect to racialize white people, non-white people, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. This volume is also an important intervention in discussions of affect in early modern English literary studies, which have not often treated race as central to early modern affects, emotions, and feelings. In the introduction, LaPerle articulates the need for greater attention to how ‘affects depicted in early modern English literature are not only *available* to racializing regimes’ but also how they ‘mobilize the experience and attribution of race’ (xx). The richness of citations throughout the volume demonstrates that there have been robust conversations in critical race studies and criticism on more contemporary literatures about race and affect, conversations to which early modern scholars need to pay more attention. As LaPerle and others in the volume acknowledge, moreover, Black scholars have understood anti-Blackness as an affective orientation.

But what exactly is affect? All studies of affect tackle this vexed question — is it a matter of the mind, body, subpersonal, suprapersonal, non-linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, or more? And, what is the relationship between the early modern passions, affects, feelings, and emotions? LaPerle addresses the slipperiness of what affect is in the introduction but highlights the importance of work by scholars such as Lauren Berlant, Sianne Ngai, Kyla Schuller, and José Esteban Muñoz, who variously attend to the sociality of affect and its role in the disciplining of racialized bodies. The essays in the volume are most interested in exploring how affects produce racial divisions, kinships, and hierarchies, as well as how affects instigate various forms of racial violence.

The essays in the volume are organized into three sections. Section 1, 'Racial Formations of Affective Communities', begins with Ambereen Dadabhoy's 'Imagining Islamicate Worlds: Race and Affect in the Contact Zone'. Dadabhoy importantly draws attention to the fact that some scholars, because of their embodied identities, are excluded from and positioned as enemies to the affective communities that texts attempt to create; reading early modern texts produces affects, and those affects are raced and not universal. Analyzing Philip Massinger's *The Renegado*, Dadabhoy then shows how whiteness emerges in its affective relationship to non-white Muslims. In 'Desire, Disgust, and the Perils of Strange Queenship in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*', Mira 'Assaf Kafantaris examines the relationship between affect and allegory, demonstrating how anxieties about the desirability of foreign queens and miscegenation are allegorized in Duessa, who must become the source of disgust. Kafantaris is especially attuned to the biopolitics of feeling and the formation of white Protestant identity, as well as how *The Faerie Queene* works to impede the white Protestant reader's ability to sympathize with Duessa's suffering. Meghan E. Hall, in 'New World Encounters and the Racial Limits of Friendship in Early Quaker Life Writing', focuses on fear, love, and friendship. Reading Alice Curwen's *A Relation of the Labour Travail and Suffering of that Faithful Servant of the Lord Alice Curwen* within a larger context of Quaker reactions to and participation in the enslavement of Africans and the displacement of Indigenous peoples, Hall shows how Curwen's writings produce shared affects between the white author and white readers, and how fear tests the limits of Quaker belief in the spiritual equality of all people. Drew Daniel begins his essay, 'Early Modern Affect Theory, Racialized Aversion, and the Strange Case of *Foetor Judaicus*', with an affective response to affect theory — some people are just sick of it, in part because of affect theory's unwieldiness. After providing a helpful overview of what affect encompasses, Daniel shows how the supposed bad smell of Jews, *foetor judaicus*, indeed links the physiological and the emotional, as smell — imagined and experienced by white Christian readers — creates the disgust that proves Jews to be racially different.

Section 2, 'Racialized Affects of Sex and Gender', begins with Sara Coodin's 'Conversion Interrupted: Shame and the Demarcation of Jewish Women's Difference in *The Merchant of Venice*', which draws attention to the significance of Jessica's self-loathing and shame. Coodin argues that it is not enough for Jessica to be white or to convert to Christianity; she must also hate her Jewishness and feel and perform shame, a social rather than private emotion constituted by the acceptance of outside cultural expectations and judgments. In 'Navigating a Kiss in the Racialized Geopolitical Landscape of Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid*

of the West', Kirsten N. Mendoza, drawing from the work of Sara Ahmed, thinks through how affect orients people toward or away from others. In Heywood's play, this manifests itself in the insistence that the whiteness of the protagonist, Bess, makes her universally desirable. In doing so, the play invests whiteness with an extraordinary power to triumph over a Black, Muslim man and secure England's racial and economic future. Mario DiGangi's 'Branded with Baseness: Bastardy and Race in *King Lear*' examines how *Lear*'s meditations on lineage, gender, and sexuality shape the racial constitution of bastardy, and how Edmond's feelings about being a bastard motivate his attempt to disrupt racialized systems of kinship and inheritance. The bastard's villainy, DiGangi's shows, is understood as heritable, marked on the body, and constituted by the blackness of a sexually promiscuous mother.

In the first essay in Section 3, 'Feelings and Forms of Anti-Blackness', Averyl Dietering reads pictorial representations of black bodies in printed texts through the lens of Afro-pessimism. Dietering's 'Black Ink, White Feelings: Early Modern Print Technology and Anti-Black Racism' argues that images of black bodies show that representational practices and the materiality of print — ink and paper — made print a racializing technology, and that prints of fearsome and disgusting black bodies helped shore up the connection between blackness and non-humanity. Matthieu Chapman also engages Afro-pessimism in "'Away, You Ethiop!': A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Denial of Black Affect — A Song to Underscore the Burning of Police Stations'. Chapman's affective response to being surprised and saddened that this line was uncritically spoken in a rehearsal for a university production that Chapman was directing is the starting point for a series of reflections on how this line demonstrates the unremarkable equation between blackness and disgust in Shakespeare's day and our own, and how black suffering fails to inspire anti-racist affects. Cora Fox's chapter, 'Othello's Unfortunate Happiness', not only shows that Shakespeare's play colours Othello's joy, but also that positive emotions such as joy and happiness are inseparable from politics of racial belonging and exclusion. Fox reads Othello as part of what Sara Ahmed calls the 'unhappiness archive', objects that exist in tension with the dominant culture's ideas of happiness. The generic mandates of both romance and tragedy overdetermine Othello's emotions and render a Black man's joy as a stressor to the happiness of the white Venetians. The section and volume closes with LaPerle's 'The Racialized Affects of Ill-will in the Dark Lady Sonnets'. LaPerle turns to Ahmed's theorization of willfulness as a social problem, and demonstrates that the speaker's disgust toward the dark lady is not inspired by her sexuality but by her refusal to submit to his will; the commodification and racialization of the

Black woman's body and her ill-will — her 'unkindness' — solidifies the racial kinship between the speaker and the rival lover/friend.

Given the volume's attention to affect within texts and between texts and readers, it seems appropriate to share my own affective responses to the chapters. The essays are indeed 'moving', provoking new thought, wonder, and pleasure upon contact with stunning insights, feelings of intellectual and political kinship, and some anger and despair because of the intractability of white supremacy and anti-Blackness — this was especially true when I, the Black reader that I am, read Chapman's essay. Race and affects of various kinds indeed prove inseparable from reading and critical engagement. Except for Fox's attention to happiness, Hall's consideration of Quaker love and friendship, and Dadabhoy's commitment to criticism as a kind of love for oneself and one's community, the collection mostly focuses on what are usually characterized as negative affects, fear, hate, disgust, and shame — as they circulate through polymorphous forms of desire, be they sexual, economic, political, or religious. The volume's primary focus on negative affects is important and necessary, and indeed more work needs to be done on them. At the same time, scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have argued that more work needs to be done on 'positive' affects, attention to the fact that 'Whites ... derive satisfaction and even pleasure in domination, while the subaltern derive the same emotions from resistance'.¹ Neither white supremacy nor anti-racist activism sustain themselves solely through what makes people feel bad; they are also nourished by what makes people feel good. Bonilla-Silva also suggests that scholars need to grapple with the perhaps uncomfortable fact that the 'same emotions' inspire racist and anti-racist activity. This volume does long-needed affective and intellectual work, even as it provokes attention to the need to continue to expand our understanding of the messiness and plenitude of racializing affects.

Notes

-
- 1 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 'Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions', *American Sociological Review* 84.1 (2019), 1–25, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418816958>.