

## Seminar 31: Rethinking the Early Modern Literary Caribbean

Seminar Leader: Steve Mentz, St. John's University  
[mentzs@stjohns.edu](mailto:mentzs@stjohns.edu)

### Abstracts:

Ariane M. Balizet

#### **Unfair Play in Shakespeare's *The Tempest***

In the final scene of Shakespeare's 1611 *The Tempest*, Prospero reveals to Alonso "a wonder": his son Ferdinand, safe and happy, playing a game of chess with Miranda. In the brief exchange that follows, Miranda accuses Ferdinand of cheating—"Sweet lord, you play me false"—and he playfully denies the charge. Miranda's interruption of their game, like her father's interruption of the masque in an earlier scene, highlights the discordant tone of the play's concluding promise of resolution through marriage. Her accusation of cheating, furthermore, arrives inconveniently just as Prospero moves to "discover" the pair with a dramatic flourish. These gestures towards unfulfilled ludic endeavors reveal, I argue, the impulse to perform the intersection of racial and gender identities as a game of pure skill. Drawing upon decolonial feminist and afro-indigenous critical approaches, I read *The Tempest's* island as an Antillean field of unfair play.

“Reckoning with Loss: Dispossession and the Lost *Conquest of the West Indies*”

Andrew Bozio

Skidmore College

In 1601, Philip Henslowe paid John Day, William Haughton, and Wentworth Smith a total of £6.15s for their work on a play called *The Conquest of the West Indies*. Often cited alongside *The New World's Tragedy* (1595) and *The Tragedy of the Plantation of Virginia* (1623) as evidence of early modern drama's engagement with the Americas, the play nevertheless remains undertheorized, owing to the fact that it is no longer extant. In this essay, I follow critical consensus in approaching the lost *Conquest* as a dramatization of Thomas Nicholls's translation of Francisco López de Gómara's *La conquista de México*. Reading references to the play in Henslowe's diary alongside Nicholls's translation and an undated university play called *Montezuma* (which dramatizes the same events, albeit on the basis of a different source), I speculate as to how the lost *Conquest* may have staged the dispossession of the Mexica at the hands of Cortés and encouraged the English to engage in what José Muñoz has theorized as a disidentification with the Spanish. In doing so, I aim to revise a familiar narrative by demonstrating how the English, initially horrified by accounts of Spanish cruelty in the Americas, found within such exploits a model for their own colonial ventures—one rooted in a racialized logic of dispossession and accumulation.

Valerie Forman  
Abstract

### “There and Not There”: Conflicting Knowledges in the Early Modern English Caribbean

In my study of recent years, I've been trying to understand how the development of sugar plantations and the enslavement of mostly African people on which it depended provides the foundation for a future of racial capitalism and imperialism. My focus has been not only on new economic practices necessary to accumulation on an enormous scale but also forms of knowledge, in particular, ways of understanding property, freedom, representation, labor, political subjectivity, and the relations among them. Though I've been exploring the way that colonial plantation development hugely impacts political economy and social relations on both the European and American side of the Atlantic, the perspective I've focused on is largely European/British. While I think it's important to understand these shifts in Western thinking and the influence of the complexity of the Caribbean on them and our contemporary world, I think this genealogical account needs to include, perhaps even foreground, African knowledges and in particular what knowledges Africans carried with them to, and produced in, the Caribbean in the seventeenth century. Reading between and around the lines, I hope to bring what might only be traces or echoes into the foreground to think about the tensions among different knowledges and the impact of nonwestern epistemologies in this period. I've also been increasingly coming to realize (admittedly belatedly) that understanding racial capitalism as it was developing then and as it functions today, needs also to foreground the (attempted) genocide of Indigenous people and the (ongoing) dispossession of their land. The first part of my title, comes from Kevin Bruyneel's *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States*, in which he calls attention to the simultaneous absence and presence of indigenous people in the history of race as produced and reproduced by settler memory.\* In this paper I hope to think about settler colonialism (stolen land) and plantation slavery (forced/enslaved labor) together--as indigenous land was transformed into plantations developed, expanded and sustained through the labor of enslaved Africans. A possible starting point for this part of the project is to think more carefully and critically about the ephemeral “interruptions” of indigenous presence in works that appear to focus exclusively on the enslavement of Africans. I imagine this paper will be both speculative, based on the bias of archives, and very much a work in progress, based on the limitations of my current understanding of knowledges indigenous to both Africa and the Americas. My shifts in thinking about this project are much informed by my experiences working alongside activists, advocates and community members fighting for both abolition of immigration detention and freedom of movement across borders. My hope is that this project will ultimately open up additional ways to think about and engage in intersectional politics and abolitionist practices today.

\*I highly recommend his first chapter on Bacon's Rebellion: The Settler Memory of Bacon's Rebellion.”

John Kuhn  
Abstract

### **Dryden's Hammock: Indigenous Artistic Labor and English Theater History**

In the 1660s, English audiences were dazzled by the display of indigenous artwork in London's theaters, in the form of feather costumes, prop hammocks, and miscellaneous "Indian rarities." This essay attends to these indigenous-made properties and costumes, which appeared in two late seventeenth-century English plays: *The Indian Queen* and its sequel *The Indian Emperour*. In doing so, I contribute to a substantial body of scholarship that has focused on English theater and its relationship to indigenous groups in the Americas. Much of this scholarship has understood this relationship as predominately one in which indigenous peoples were passive objects of European-controlled representations. These accounts have shown us important things about the ways in which representations of American indigenous groups in Europe functioned as part of European dreams of racial superiority and imperial dominance. But somewhat ironically, these scholarly accounts, though nominally sympathetic to indigenous groups, run the risk of underestimating their artistic influence on the English theater. In other words, English playwrights may have mounted productions that fantasized about colonial growth and imperial mastery, but a *material* account of these productions shows the extent to which these same playwrights opened themselves up to and were dependent upon complex indigenous technical and aesthetic traditions like feather- and textile-work. In this essay, I demonstrate this by focusing on stage properties made by indigenous artisans or inspired by their designs and unpack the histories of labor and artistic knowledge embedded in these objects, arguing that they reveal a transcultural history of English stagecraft in which indigenous artisans function as partial co-creators of these Restoration spectacles.

## Locating the Caribbean in William Davenant's 'New World' Drama

Maria Shmygol (University of Leeds)

[m.shmygol@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:m.shmygol@leeds.ac.uk)

This paper pursues an imaginative connection between William Davenant's 'New World' drama and England's colonialist ambitions in the Caribbean during the Interregnum by focusing on the operatic-dramatic entertainments *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* (1658) and *The History of Sir Francis Drake* (1659). Although both of these entertainments are set in Peru, they were written and staged during the final years of Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, following the failure of Cromwell's 'Western Design' in the Caribbean. I will demonstrate how Davenant reimagines material from an heroic Elizabethan past in order to speak to mid-seventeenth century colonialist ambitions and domestic politics. I suggest that these entertainments revive the figure of the Elizabethan 'adventurer' as a means of legitimating (and potentially also critiquing) England's colonialist ventures by emphasizing different forms of inheritance and national legacies. These plays – in their subject matter, revival of historical figures, and use of vivid painted scenery that helped to open a view into the 'New World' – contributed to the visual and literary culture of imperialist ambition in the Interregnum.

Olga L. Valbuena  
Wake Forest University

*The Merchant of Venice* contains two unique references to Mexico and a Spanish colonial galleon, the *San Andrés* (renamed *The Andrew*). Together, these details fix the play's composition between the 1596 siege of Cádiz, in which Essex took the ship, and the 1597 Islands Voyage in which the converted galleon carried Essex's troops in a largely unsuccessful mission against Spain's treasure fleet in the Azores. *Merchant's Andrew* thus corresponds to Essex's only accomplishment in the Islands Venture, his catch of 55,000 pounds of cochineal, the coveted red dye and "merchandise" that Antonio and his colleagues on the Rialto would have imported from Mexico via Spain. Second only to silver in value as an export commodity, by the 1580s cochineal came to dominate Venetian and, indeed, global markets in the manufacture of fine textiles and expensive garments among the highest ranks of the secular and clerical orders. *Merchant's* preoccupation with knowing another's interiority by the outward shows of skin and clothing is captured in the play's manifold *suits*, the central albeit most unstable signifier or "nodal point" of the play.

In this paper, I examine the contingency enfolded in *Merchant's* "suits," a word or "element" whose repetition and multiple senses casts doubt on the authenticity of all suits in the play. In a reversal of the customary north-to-south, European-to-native ontological lens, I examine the 'caste' of *Merchant's* suits by the light of Nahua (Aztec) thought, which posits a direct correspondence between color-substance and *being*—entirely different from the application and understanding of color in non-Nahua (European) contexts. For the Nahua, such dyes are never 'mere implorators of unholy suits' but instead encode meanings that have recently become known through the analysis of pigments and their strategic manifestation in the *Florentine Codex*. Applying an ontology of color presumed lost with the invasion of Mexico, I evoke the presentative logic of the Nahua color use against European *representation* to expose the ironic chasm between "outward shows" of piety that "be least themselves" and the ambiguity of inner motives concealed in all suits, whether worn, pled, or pursued in marriage or in the law court in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Cast up on the Caribbean Shore:

Reading Early Modern Voyages through the New Materialism and Marxism

Daniel Vitkus (University of California, San Diego)

#### ABSTRACT

During the first century following the arrival of Columbus in the Bahamas, the expansion of the Western empires brought settlers to the Caribbean (and beyond) to establish new colonial outposts, plantations, and mines as elites back in Europe sought to gain profit and reduce their debts. This expansion was marked, however, by the failure of numerous imperial voyages, leading in many cases-- not to the establishment of stable, profitable settlements--but to death, disappearance, suffering, captivity, or enslavement. This history of failure is frequently represented in the imperial archive in terms of heroic endurance, sacrifice, or tragedy. But the texts that bear witness to the experience of the castaway and the captive also expose the dark side of empire, and sometimes they reveal and suggest improvisational strategies of resistance to colonial injustice. The paper will focus on the representation of failure and survival in the castaway narrative of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. In reading this text through the lens of current new materialist and Marxist perspectives, the paper will demonstrate the limitations of a new materialist, object-oriented reading, and argue instead for the political efficacy of an interpretive framework that is dialectical, acknowledging human entanglement with (and dependence on) weather, wind, tide, sails, masts, plants, animals, sand, etc. while placing human agency at the center of our interventions. The paper suggests that this reckoning with human responsibility and/in capitalism is necessary if we are to confront and resist the deep causes of ecocide.