

# *Reflections*

## Are We Global Yet?

### Africa and the Future of Early Modern Studies

Wendy Laura Belcher

Wendy Laura Belcher is Professor of African literature with a joint appointment in the Princeton University Department of Comparative Literature and the Department for African American Studies.

#### Abstract

For the past twenty years, early modern scholars have called for more scholarly attention to people and places outside of Europe. An impressive increase in literary research on non-European texts has resulted, and I describe positive aspects of this trend, using the MLA International Bibliography database. However, research on African-language literatures has declined since 2003 or has continued to flatline at nothing. A radical antiracist solution is needed, for no field can succeed with Africa as a lacuna. I call on all early modern scholars, regardless of their language knowledge, to cite at least one early modern African-language text in their next publication. I describe five such in this article, a tiny sample of the thousands of written texts that Black Africans across the continent composed in African languages before 1830. Asking early modern scholars to embrace the uncomfortable practice of “token citation” will enable these texts to circulate in the realm of knowledge and further efforts to diversify and broaden the field.

A little over fifteen years ago, Felicity A. Nussbaum published her ground-breaking edited volume *The Global Eighteenth Century*.<sup>1</sup> In its essays, scholars ventured beyond the usual bounds of eighteenth-century studies to detail European encounters with and reception of Indigenous African, Asian, American, and Pacific cultures. In the introduction, Nussbaum called for more such scholarship focusing on the deep

1 Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). I am grateful to Lisa Freeman for her invitation to present at the Newberry Library in Chicago in October 2018; this article was developed from the lecture I gave there. I am also grateful to Gregory Grazevich, Associate Director of Bibliographic Information Services and Editor, MLA International Bibliography (MLAIB), for assistance with searching the MLAIB database and to Kishonna Gray for the invention of the “Gray test” mentioned in this article.

connections among far-flung nations and the circulation of a variety of representations across national and linguistic borders. As she rightly communicated, the eighteenth century itself had always been global and twenty-first-century scholars needed to catch up. This book was heralded as a watershed in eighteenth-century studies<sup>2</sup> by crystalizing a turn in the previous five years of attending more to race and empire in the long eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

So, the question is: What happened after this turn and Nussbaum's clarion call for more global work? Are we global yet? Or, to put it more precisely—has the field of early modern studies become more attentive to the people and places outside of Europe and has it done so in productive ways? Further, have we attended to Africa specifically? And what does attention to Africa offer to eighteenth-century studies as a whole and for its future? In what follows, I argue that we have seen an impressive increase in literary scholarship on non-European texts, but that research on African-language literatures has remained abysmal. As a part of broadening early modern studies, I describe five vital early modern African texts and propose the uncomfortable practice of their “token citation” to seed the field with possibilities for a more inclusive future.

While acknowledging the following terms' limited and problematic nature, I use (to avoid lengthy phrases for period and place) “early modern” and “the eighteenth century” as interchangeable for the period from the late 1600s through the early 1800s CE (that is, as describing a

2 Nussbaum's previous books had also been heralded as turning points: *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989); *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (1995); Nussbaum and Laura Brown, eds., *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature* (1987); and Helen Deutsch and Nussbaum, eds., *Defects: Engendering the Modern Body* (2000). Her subsequent books have also made an impact on the field: see this essay's bibliography.

3 See Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (1999); Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (2000); Mita Choudhury, *Interculturalism and Resistance in the London Theater, 1660–1800: Identity, Performance, Empire* (2000); and Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (2000). See this essay's bibliography for further examples. This work built on earlier work of the 1990s by Ellis Markman, Peter Hulme, Glyndwr Williams, Vincent Carretta, and Linda Colley, all of whom had essays in *The Global Eighteenth-Century*. The research on African Atlantic authors writing in European languages was particularly vital: Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr, *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); and Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould, eds., *Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

set of years not asynchronous temporalities); “global” for the whole world and its relationships;<sup>4</sup> “we” for all living scholars of this period, regardless of nationality; “Africa” for all the complexities of the whole continent (and not just sub-Saharan Africa); and “Africans” as shorthand for all the Indigenous Black peoples of the continent and the genius of their thousands of languages and cultures.

*Early Modern Studies Is More Global*

The first answer to the question of whether we are global yet is yes, absolutely: early modern studies has become more global.

A search of literary scholarship recorded by the MLA International Bibliography (MLAIB), via EBSCOhost Databases, reveals immense increases in African, Asian, American, and Pacific subject matter. For instance, if we compare the number of scholarly texts published on eighteenth-century Asian literature in the fifteen years before Nussbaum’s book, and the fifteen years after her book, we find that the number has doubled.<sup>5</sup> For Africa (including North Africa), the number has also doubled.<sup>6</sup> For the Pacific or Oceania, the number has tripled.<sup>7</sup> Work on the Americas, always high, has increased as well (although just by half).<sup>8</sup> Focusing more narrowly in my own field of Ethiopian studies, the number has tripled.<sup>9</sup> Shifting focus from literary scholarship to

4 Geraldine Heng has argued that appending the term “global” to periods and projects functions too often like the word “diversity,” as an alibi for not attending to specific “early globalities” and “the interanimating worlds” of the past. Heng, “Early Globalities, and Its Questions, Objectives, and Methods: An Inquiry into the State of Theory and Critique,” *Exemplaria* 26, nos. 2–3 (2014): 234–53, <https://doi.org/10.1179/1041257314Z.00000000052>. Likewise, Ania Loomba argues that “global” too often works to “shore up [the] Eurocentric.” Loomba, “Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 3 (2009): 501–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27760273>.

5 All searches (unless stated otherwise) were performed on MLAIB, accessed 7/9/2019; time period limit: 1700–1799 (that is, “early modern”); publication date limits: 1987–2002 (before) and 2003–2018 (after). Scholarly texts on early modern Asian literature in MLAIB increased from 2,743 to 5,098. If we include “West Asia,” that is, the Middle East, we find a similar increase, from 3,087 to 6,551.

6 Scholarly texts on early modern Africa in MLAIB increased from 279 to 552. A slightly different search for Africa showed an increase from 138 to 221.

7 Scholarly texts on the early modern Pacific in MLAIB increased from 20 to 71.

8 Scholarly texts on the early modern Americas excluding the US and Canada in MLAIB increased from 935 to 1,433. Scholarly texts on the early modern Americas including the US and Canada increased from 4,968 to 7,191.

9 Scholarly texts on early modern “Ethiopia OR Eritrea” in MLAIB increased from 3 to 10.

historical scholarship, if we search the Historical Abstracts (HA), also via EBSCOhost Databases, we see that the study of non-European eighteenth-century subject matter has also increased, although not so dramatically.<sup>10</sup>

Further, the nature of that research is more sophisticated. It has moved beyond a “here’s Waldo” approach (merely pointing to representations of African, Asian, American, and Pacific people and places in European texts) and moved toward making vital arguments about non-Europeans’ *own* representations and contributions. Six examples will suffice to demonstrate this trend.

First, post-2003, scholars published more articles that discuss non-European theorists and thinkers. Take the article that sanguinely discussed Denis Diderot and Edmund Burke alongside Frantz Fanon and Ranajit Guha.<sup>11</sup> The author of this article felt no need to defend such a pairing, as would have been true in the twentieth century.

Second, post-2003, scholars published more articles about how non-European peoples and cultures shaped early modern Europe. In the past, scholars were consumed with the essential process of describing the horrors of European colonial expansion and accounting for its decimation of peoples and cultures.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, however, this meant that the reality of European penetrability often went unremarked, even though Europeans were radically changed by the deliberate actions of those they colonized. That is, before 2003, most scholars assumed that the direction of cultural transmission was always *toward* the outposts, never *from* it to the metropole of empire. That has changed. Take the article about an eighteenth-century British illustrator who had travelled in Asia for eight years and then modelled his illustrations of the British

10 Searches of EBSCO’s Historical Abstracts (HA), accessed on 7/9/2019; time period limit: 1700–1799; publication date limits: 1987–2002 and 2003–18. Scholarly texts on early modern African history in HA increased from 1,871 to 2,286. Scholarly texts on early modern Asian history in HA increased from 11,305 to 15,745.

11 Sunil Agnani, “Colonial Ressentiment, Enlightenment Thought, and the Impasses of Decolonization,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 56, no. 4 (2016): 799–821, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2016.0038>.

12 Some of the material in this paragraph and the next appeared in altered form in Belcher, “Consuming Subjects: Theorizing New Models of Agency for Literary Criticism in African Studies,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 46, no. 2 (2009): 213–32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25659714>. For an expanded proof of this argument, see Belcher, *Abyssinia’s Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

coast after the Asian coast he had previously drawn.<sup>13</sup> The author of this article shows how a British subject returned changed, taken over by what he had seen in Asia, and could no longer perceive the Britain of his youth as he once had.

Third, post-2003, scholars published more articles about how non-European peoples were not powerless in their interactions with Europeans. In the past, early modern studies rarely saw articles in which non-Europeans structured what it meant to be European. Scholars might depict Europeans as changing themselves in response to their encounters with non-Europeans, but scholars tended not to depict non-Europeans as having agency—specifically as having power over the thoughts and actions of Europeans. Now scholars do. For instance, take the research regarding an eighteenth-century French traveller's tale about the coronation of a West African king, a tale that circulated throughout France, England, and the Netherlands, and reflected the fierce European rivalry for the favour of a key African player in the Atlantic trade in enslaved people.<sup>14</sup> This is a good example of research that shows how encounters shaped colonizers not just those they colonized.

Fourth, post-2003, scholars published more articles about non-European subjects as important intellectuals respected by early modern Europeans. That is, scholars are showing that non-Europeans not only shaped the world but were also recognized by early modern Europeans as doing so. Take the article on how an eighteenth-century German traveller named Chamisso came to view a Pacific Islander, Kadu, as a reliable scientific authority and how Kadu's expertise shaped Chamisso's life and thought.<sup>15</sup> In the past, we did not tend to see articles that argued, as this one did, that a European and a non-European could be "equal actors in a globally and locally entangled network of knowledge in the long eighteenth century."<sup>16</sup>

Fifth, post-2003, scholars published more articles that represented early modern European discourse as simultaneously orientalizing and liberatory.

13 Elizabeth Mjelde, "William Daniell's 'Periplus': Littoral Travel and Aesthetic Representation in Scotland and Asia," *Études écossaises*, no. 19 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudeseccossaises.1347>.

14 Catherine A. Molineux, *The Making of Kings: African Sovereignty in the British Atlantic World*, forthcoming; "Visual Ethnography: The Travelogue Illustration as a Site of Encounter" (lecture, The Newberry, Chicago, IL, 28 April 2012).

15 Chunjie Zhang, "The Islander Kadu and Adelbert Von Chamisso: Relations in Oceania," *The Eighteenth Century* 58, no. 1 (2017): 79–98, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2017.0004>.

16 Zhang, 81.

Take the article about the swift spread outside of Spain of the archetype of Don Quixote, and how this meme challenges Eurocentric models of world literature, while at the same time furthering Spanish colonialism in the Philippines.<sup>17</sup> In the past, we did not see as many articles that forged nuanced answers to the question of discourses' complexity and complicity under empire.

The field has also seen another encouraging trend, perhaps the most important: more research on non-European-language early modern texts. This linguistic broadening is the true transformation in the field, when we no longer look at texts just in English and French or occasionally in German, Spanish, and Italian, but at texts in Middle Eastern, Asian, African, and American languages. For instance, again comparing the fifteen years before Nussbaum's book and the fifteen years after, we see that research on Arabic language eighteenth-century texts has tripled, which is a splendid development.<sup>18</sup> Research on Chinese language eighteenth-century texts has quintupled.<sup>19</sup> And research on Urdu, Hindi, Malay, and Bengali language eighteenth-century texts has increased three-fold, four-fold, six-fold, and ten-fold respectively.<sup>20</sup> Given that these are all among the top fifteen most spoken languages in the world, this increase is heartening.

All three of these trends—toward more and more sophisticated research in eighteenth-century studies on Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific, as well as the expansion to non-European languages—compel a “yes!” answer to the question of whether early modern studies is yet global. Further, this better attention to people, places, and texts from outside of Europe has not been merely an exercise in good citizenship or “diversifying” the field, but has had a tremendous scholarly impact on the field: deepening early modern studies through new theories and

17 Aaron R. Hanlon, “Quixotism as Global Heuristic: Atlantic and Pacific Diasporas,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 46 (2017): 49–62, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2017.0006>.

18 Scholarly texts on early modern “Arabic language literature” in MLAIB increased from 145 to 450.

19 Scholarly texts on early modern “Chinese language literature” in MLAIB increased from 20 to 104.

20 Scholarly texts on early modern “Urdu language literature” in MLAIB increased from 21 to 60. Scholarly texts on early modern “Hindi language literature” in MLAIB increased from 6 to 24. For early modern “Malay language” (there is no “Malay language literature” subject term) from 3 to 17. Scholarly texts on early modern “Bengali language literature” in MLAIB increased from 3 to 30.

theoreticians; expanding its understanding of the mutuality of early globalities; and grounding the field in a much broader intellectual history.

*Early Modern Studies Is Not Yet Global*

Maybe it will seem contradictory to say that the second answer to the question is no, early modern studies is not yet global. Europe is still the sun around which much of the field's research revolves. We are still provincializing Europe, to misuse Dipesh Chakrabarty's famous phrase, rather than doing work that eschews Europe. The examples of scholarship I gave above all have Europe as a pole. Don't get me wrong—in no way should we stop studying Europe. Certainly, I do not intend to stop studying Europe.

But, just like we needed to *have had* the “here's Waldo” stage of global early modern studies, and then do more; we need to *have had* the “comparative” stage of global early modern studies and now do more. The problem of literary comparison has been addressed at length elsewhere, most notably in the edited volume *Comparison*, in which one scholar asks whether “the project of comparison can escape the arrogance of centrism,”<sup>21</sup> and other scholars underscore how often Africa is used as the negative end of comparison.<sup>22</sup>

Without rehearsing the rich arguments about the strait jacket of comparison, I will merely add that broad comparative projects often fail to address Africa at all. A search of the MLAIB finds that the number of pieces published in the last thirty years on the subject of “globalization” is in the thousands, and yet only 5 per cent of them address Africa or African countries.<sup>23</sup> When it comes to eighteenth-century studies, the exclusion is total: not one of the pieces on globalization addresses Africa or African countries. Not one. That is, many scholars discuss the

21 R. Radhakrishnan, “Why Compare?,” *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 23.

22 Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, “Transnationalizing Comparison: The Uses and Abuses of Cross-Cultural Analogy,” in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, 120–46.

23 Over thirty years, from 1987 to 2018, MLAIB records 6,288 scholarly texts on the *subject* of “globalization” (not merely with the word appearing anywhere in the text) in the early modern period. Of those, 986 also dealt with early modern Europe or European countries (16 per cent), while only 328 dealt with early modern Africa or African countries (5 per cent). Using the same search string, HA showed a similar problem: from 1987 to 2018, 4,218 scholarly texts on the *subject* of “globalization” were published; of those, 1,297 (31 per cent) also dealt with Europe or European countries, while only 361 (9 per cent) dealt with Africa or African nations.

“globe” and manage never to mention Africa, a fifth of the world’s land mass and population. This is precisely why academics’ use of the term “global” has been so widely castigated. As Gayatri Spivak lamented in 2003, for comparative literature Africa “does not exist at all.”<sup>24</sup> This is more than unfortunate. No arena of study can be successful that has Africa as a lacuna.

Further, most comparative work on Africa rarely compares African literatures with other African literatures, or with Asian literatures, even though south-south networks are deep and broad in the early modern period. As Frederick Cooper put it brilliantly in his article on the lack of attention to Africa in globalization studies, these internal and external networks include the following:

religious pilgrimages to Mecca and networks of training which Muslim clerics followed all over the Sahara desert, from the eighth century and intensely from the eighteenth; regional systems of shrines in central Africa; ... trans-Saharan commercial, religious, and scholarly networks connecting with Hausa and Mandingo systems within West Africa; a trading system extending from Mozambique Island through the Red Sea, southern Arabia, and the Persian Gulf to Gujarat; ... the network of merchants and professionals across coastal West Africa, with links to Brazil, ... the Caribbean, and the West African interior, shaping racially and culturally mixed coastal communities.<sup>25</sup>

Rarely do these African networks shape scholarship on the early modern period. One exception is scholars in the vibrant field of Indian Ocean studies, who have achieved real advances in attending to relations among those outside of Europe in the early modern period.<sup>26</sup>

The second reason I say early modern studies is not yet global is that research on so-called “minor” languages of the early modern period is slim and citation of them is slimmer. This is not for any lack of warning—

24 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 19.

25 Frederick Cooper, “What Is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian’s Perspective,” *African Affairs* 100, no. 399 (2001): 210, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3518765>.

26 Clarissa Vierke, “Poetic Links across the Ocean: On Poetic Translation as Mimetic Practice at the Swahili Coast,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 321–35, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-4132941>; Sajjad Rizvi, “Faith Deployed for a New Shi‘i Polity in India: The Theology of Sayyid Dildar ‘Ali Nasirabadi,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24, no. 3 (2014): 363–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186314000303>.



Mauritian scholar and former American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) president Françoise Lionnet fired across the bow of literary studies in 2013, arguing that the MLA needed to “rise to the challenge of *language* diversity” and rise above “readers’ lack of linguistic or cultural competence and their inability to recognize exogamous influences.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, literary scholarship has remained focused predominantly on literatures in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Russian. In an article also using MLAIB as a source, three scholars show that scholarship on “minor” European language literatures has been declining every decade since the 1970s.<sup>28</sup>

This lamentable trend is doubly true for African-language literatures. Depressingly, research on them has declined since 2003 or remained flatlined at zero<sup>29</sup>—even though many of these languages are not remotely “minor.” Over a dozen African languages have between 10 million and 100 million native speakers each and have attested early modern writing, including West African languages (Fula, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo); East African languages (Swahili, Gəʼəz, Amharic, and Somali); southern African languages (Zulu and Xhosa); North African languages (like Tamaziyt); and Malagasy. Given the expanding population in Africa, none of these languages with tens of millions of speakers is disappearing any time soon; most have vibrant print cultures today.

27 Françoise Lionnet, “Languages, Literatures, Pedagogies: The MLA, Africa, and Diaspora Studies,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 50, no. 2 (2013): 219–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/complitstudies.50.2.0219>.

28 César Domínguez, Giovanna Di Rosario, and Matteo Ciastellardi, “On Writing a Comparative Literary History: Delocalizing Minor Literatures in European Languages in the Age of ‘Big Data,’” *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Culture* 53, no. 2 (2018): 278–307, <https://doi.org/10.1515/arcadia-2018-0028>.

29 Scholarly texts recorded in the MLAIB on more than 300 African languages (see Figure 1 for the whole list) in any century declined from 1,712 to 1,612. Scholarly texts on these African languages and limited to the period of the 1700s in MLAIB declined from 13 to 7. More narrowly, a few increased, but most decreased. For instance, scholarly texts on “Berber” increased from 1 to 3 and on “Igbo” from 3 to 11 (although this is largely an effect of Equiano studies, rather than actual study of African languages). But scholarly texts on “Swahili” declined from 8 to 5; on “Amharic” from 3 to 1; on “Hausa” from 5 to 0; on “Yoruba” from 2 to 0. Only one held even: on “Geez” (Gəʼəz or Ethiopic) from 2 to 2, while study of “Ethiopian literature” as a whole increased from 3 to 8. Most remained flatlined, however, with Zulu, Shona, and Somali in the 1700s having had nothing written on them for thirty years. As a control, I did searches for some “minor” European languages—all were in better shape, even if their study had declined; for example, scholarly texts on “Estonian” in the 1700s increased from 2 to 22 and “Slovenian” in the 1700s declined from 30 to 19 (still higher than any African language).

## Search string for African languages as they appear in MLAIB

DE "Abron" OR DE "Acholi" OR DE "Adamawa-Ubangi languages" OR DE "Adangme" OR DE "Adhola" OR DE "Afrikaans" OR DE "Akan" OR DE "Akoose" OR DE "Akpafu" OR DE "Alur" OR DE "Anaang" OR DE "Anaguta" OR DE "Anlo Ewe" OR DE "Anuak" OR DE "Anufo" OR DE "Anyi" OR DE "Ari (Ethiopians)" OR DE "Arusa" OR DE "Asante" OR DE "Attic" OR DE "Atuot" OR DE "Avatime" OR DE "Awori" OR DE "Awutu" OR DE "Babanki" OR DE "Babunda" OR DE "Bache" OR DE "Badanga" OR DE "Bafut" OR DE "Bahungana" OR DE "Baka (Cameroonians)" OR DE "Bakwiri" OR DE "Bali Nyonga" OR DE "Bambara" OR DE "Bamileke" OR DE "Bamoun" OR DE "Bandi" OR DE "Bangime language" OR DE "Bangongo" OR DE "Bantu" OR DE "Barabaig" OR DE "Bariba" OR DE "Basaa" OR DE "Basari (Senegalese and Guineans)" OR DE "Baule" OR DE "Bayaka (Congolesse (Democratic Republic))" OR DE "Beba" OR DE "Bebelibe" OR DE "Bedik (Africans)" OR DE "Beja" OR DE "Bekwarra" OR DE "Bemba" OR DE "Bena (Tanzanians)" OR DE "Bench (Africans)" OR DE "BenueCongo languages" OR DE "Berta language" OR DE "Berti language" OR DE "Beti" OR DE "Betsileo" OR DE "Beurs" OR DE "Biaka" OR DE "Biase" OR DE "Bira (Africans)" OR DE "Bisio (Africans)" OR DE "Bissa" OR DE "Bofi" OR DE "Boma" OR DE "Borana" OR DE "Boso (Mande)" OR DE "Bubi (Equatorial Guineans)" OR DE "Bukusu" OR DE "Buli" OR DE "Bulu" OR DE "Bungu" OR DE "Bura (Nigerians)" OR DE "Bwa" OR DE "Central Khoisan languages" OR DE "Central Sudanic languages" OR DE "Chaga" OR DE "Chamus" OR DE "Chari-Nile languages" OR DE "Chewa" OR DE "Chimbu (Africans)" OR DE "Chokwe" OR DE "Chopi" OR DE "Coptic" OR DE "Daba (Africans)" OR DE "Dagaaba" OR DE "Dagbamba" OR DE "Damara" OR DE "Dan (Africans)" OR DE "Datooga" OR DE "Defaka language" OR DE "Digo" OR DE "Ding" OR DE "Dinka" OR DE "Diola" OR DE "Dogon language" OR DE "Doowaayo" OR DE "Duala (Cameroonians)" OR DE "Dyerma" OR DE "Eastern Sudanic languages" OR DE "Ebira" OR DE "Edo (Africans)" OR DE "Efe (Congolesse (Democratic Republic))" OR DE "Efik" OR DE "Egba" OR DE "Ekperi" OR DE "Elmolo" OR DE "Endo" OR DE "Enya" OR DE "Esan" OR DE "Ewe" OR DE "Ewondo" OR DE "Fangs (Africans)" OR DE "Fante" OR DE "Fingo" OR DE "Fipa" OR DE "Fon" OR DE "Frafra" OR DE "Fulani" OR DE "Fur language" OR DE "Ga" OR DE "Gabra" OR DE "Gamk" OR DE "Gamo" OR DE "Gananwa" OR DE "Ganda" OR DE "Gbaya" OR DE "Gen-Gbe" OR DE "Gikuyu" OR DE "Giryama" OR DE "Gizig" OR DE "Gogo (Africans)" OR DE "Gola (Liberians)" OR DE "Gosha" OR DE "Guan (Africans)" OR DE "Guere" OR DE "Gur languages" OR DE "Gurage" OR DE "Guro" OR DE "Gusii" OR DE "Hamer" OR DE "Harari" OR DE "Hatsa language" OR DE "Hausa" OR DE "Haya" OR DE "Heiban language" OR DE "Hemba" OR DE "Herero" OR DE "Himba" OR DE "Hone (Africans)" OR DE "Hutu" OR DE "Ibibio" OR DE "Idoma" OR DE "Igbo" OR DE "Igede" OR DE "Igo" OR DE "Ijebu (Africans)" OR DE "Ijeha" OR DE "Ijo language" OR DE "Ikwerre" OR DE "Ila" OR DE "Iraqw" OR DE "Isoko" OR DE "Iteso" OR DE "Irbie" OR DE "Jie (Africans)" OR DE "Jlao Kry" OR DE "Ju/'hoan" OR DE "Jula" OR DE "Kababish" OR DE "Kabaya" OR DE "Kadugli-Krongo languages" OR DE "Kaguru" OR DE "Kalabari" OR DE "Kam (Africans)" OR DE "Kamba" OR DE "Kamwe" OR DE "Kanuri language" OR DE "Karanga (Shona)" OR DE "Karimjong" OR DE "Kasena" OR DE "Kavango" OR DE "Khoekhoe" OR DE "Khoisan languages" OR DE "Kikuyu" OR DE "Kipsigis" OR DE "Kisi" OR DE "Koalib language" OR DE "Kom" OR DE "Koma Ndera" OR DE "Koman languages" OR DE "Kona (Africans)" OR DE "Kongo" OR DE "Konkomba" OR DE "Kono (Sierra Leoneans)" OR DE "Konyaka" OR DE "Kordofanian languages" OR DE "Kpelle" OR DE "Kru languages" OR DE "Kuba (Congolesse (Democratic Republic))" OR DE "Kunama language" OR DE "Kung" OR DE "Kuranko" OR DE "Kuria (Africans)" OR DE "Kwa languages" OR DE "Kwanyama" OR DE "Kwaya" OR DE "Lafofa language" OR DE "Lala-Bisa" OR DE "Lamso" OR DE "Lango (Ugandans)" OR DE "Lega" OR DE "Limba" OR DE "Limbum" OR DE "Lobedu" OR DE "Lobi" OR DE "Lokaa" OR DE "Lokoli" OR DE "Lotilla" OR DE "Luba" OR DE "Luba-Kasai" OR DE "Lugbarra" OR DE "Lunda" OR DE "Luo" OR DE "Luvala" OR DE "Luyia" OR DE "Lyela" OR DE "Maban languages" OR DE "Mafa" OR DE "Makonde" OR DE "Malinka" OR DE "Mambila" OR DE "Mamprusi" OR DE "Mande languages" OR DE "Mandjak" OR DE "Mangbetu" OR DE "Maninka" OR DE "Manyika" OR DE "Margi" OR DE "Masaba" OR DE "Masai" OR DE "Masalit" OR DE "Masana" OR DE "Matengo" OR DE "Mbala" OR DE "Mbundu" OR DE "Me'en" OR DE "Meje" OR DE "Mende" OR DE "Meru (Kenyans)" OR DE "Mijikenda" OR DE "Minyanka" OR DE "Miri (Africans)" OR DE "Mofu" OR DE "Moghamo" OR DE "Mongo" OR DE "Moore" OR DE "Moro language" OR DE "Moros (Sudanese)" OR DE "Mukogodo" OR DE "Mulwi" OR DE "Murle" OR DE "Mursi" OR DE "Musey" OR DE "Mwera" OR DE "Nchumburung" OR DE "Ndebele" OR DE "Ndembu" OR DE "Ndendeule" OR DE "Ngwato" OR DE "Niger-Congo languages" OR DE "Nilo-Saharan languages" OR DE "Nizaa" OR DE "Nkem" OR DE "Nkoya" OR DE "Northern Khoisan languages" OR DE "Northern-Western Mande languages" OR DE "Nsenga" OR DE "Ntcham" OR DE "Nuer" OR DE "Nunu" OR DE "Saharan languages" OR DE "Sandawe language" OR DE "Songhai language" OR DE "Southern African Khoisan languages" OR DE "Southern Sotho" OR DE "Southern-Eastern Mande languages" OR DE "Swahili" OR DE "Tasawaq Songhai dialect" OR DE "Tebu language" OR DE "Tima language" OR DE "Tira language" OR DE "West Atlantic languages" OR DE "West Atlantic-Congo languages" OR DE "Zaghawa language" OR DE "Amharic" OR DE "Berber" OR DE "Chichewa" OR DE "Fula" OR DE "Kalenjin" OR DE "Kinyarwanda" OR DE "Kirundi" OR DE "Kiswahili" OR DE "Kiungu" OR DE "Luhya" OR DE "Malagasy" OR DE "More" OR DE "Northern Sotho" OR DE "Nyanja" OR DE "Oromo" OR DE "Pedi" OR DE "Sangho" OR DE "Sesotho" OR DE "Setswana" OR DE "Shona" OR DE "Somali" OR DE "Sotho" OR DE "Swati" OR DE "Tigrigna" OR DE "Tigrinya" OR DE "Tshiluba" OR DE "Tshivenda" OR DE "Tsonga" OR DE "Tswana" OR DE "Umbundu" OR DE "Venda" OR DE "Wolof" OR DE "Xhosa" OR DE "Yoruba" OR DE "Zulu"

Figure 1. The search string for African languages in literary scholarship recorded by the MLA International Bibliography (MLAIB).

Despite the richness of these early modern literary cultures, the MLA African literature forums, set up by scholars of African literature, reflect the general assumption of the field itself that no written early African literature exists, being divided into “Pre-1990” and “Post-1990.” That is, the field pairs a forum on thirty *years* of literature with a forum on thirty *centuries* of literature. In terms of numbers of scholars, this division is not wrong—the pre-1990 forum is not very populated, with the few scholars in it focusing almost entirely on the 1950s and 1960s—but, in terms of texts, it represents a failure of the field of African literary studies. Further, few scholars focus on Afrophone literatures, which “remain a neglected component not only of comparative literature, postcolonial studies, and world literature, but also of African literary studies at large.”<sup>30</sup>

I am not offering this critique at some remove. The fact of early African-language written literature came as a shock to me when I began to study the issue about twenty years ago, even though I, a white American woman, had grown up in Ethiopia and Ghana and should have known better. To overcome my own biases, I decided to assume that all African languages have always been written. Assuming such is the only way to overcome a predisposition not to see Africa as the home of writing. (As an aside, I think the primary reason we believe this myth is because libraries, not writing, were rare in Africa. Centuries of the slave trade and colonialism extracted the local wealth required for the mechanisms of preservation—archives. That is why “relying entirely on the availability of written documents to trace the beginnings of a writing tradition”<sup>31</sup> in African languages will get you nowhere fast.) For me, this assumption about presence not absence has yielded many findings. I continue to find more and more written texts in more and more African languages. Others have assumed it fruitfully as well: Mariana Candido’s research on Angolan slave ports is a terrific example of the ground-breaking scholarship that can happen when a scholar assumes there are early African primary sources and does not stop until she finds them.<sup>32</sup>

30 Sara Marzagora, “Literatures in African Languages,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (2015): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2014.978842>, which is the introduction to a special issue on the topic. See also the special issues on the topic in the *Journal of Literary Studies* (2011) and L’Encyclopédie des littératures en langues africaines (ELLAF), a digital library of literature in fifteen African languages so far, at <http://ellaf.huma-num.fr>.

31 Ousseina Alidou, “The Emergence of Written Hausa Literature,” in *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, ed. F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 329–56.

32 Mariana Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

*Early Modern Studies Needs to Cite African-Language Written Literature*

Therefore, my third answer to the question of whether early modern studies is yet global is “more Africa, please!”

Indeed, I demand that all early modern scholars, regardless of their language knowledge, cite at least one early modern African-language written text in their next publication. A scholarly paragraph about one of these texts would be splendid, but a sentence or even a footnote would be great. If twenty early modern scholars cited one of these texts in their next publication, we would take an important step toward broadening the future of early modern studies. I will address possible objections to such “token citation” later; for now, let me explain how you could actually do this.

One way to cite early modern African-language texts is time-consuming; actually reading and studying them. Excellent work has been done translating and anthologizing early writing by Africans in African languages. To name a few here, consider Jan Knappert’s *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*; Albert S. Gérard’s *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic*; B. W. Andrzejewski, Stanislaw Piłaszewicz, and Witold Tyloch’s *Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys*; Karin Barber and Stephan F. Miescher’s *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*; Abena Busia’s extraordinary four-volume *Women Writing Africa* from the Feminist Press; and any number of works from Markus Weiner Publishers, including John F. P. Hopkins and Nehemia Levtzion’s *Land of Enchanters: Egyptian Short Stories from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*.

The easier way, but still radically helpful, is to cite one of the five African-language texts which I will now introduce, all of which have English translations. While thousands of unique, early modern African-language written texts exist, almost none have English translations. (And yes, this essay is against the move by some comparatists to quarantine works in translation—they are not a disease but a gateway, however limited, to what the theorist of translation Lawrence Venuti calls the “utopia”<sup>33</sup> of connection.)

Let me repeat this point, so it is clear—these five are *not* the only extant early African-language written texts. There are thousands. I have selected these five from among those thousands as a tiny sample of what

33 Lawrence Venuti, “Translation, Community, Utopia,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000), 468–88.

Black Africans across the continent have written in African languages before 1830. This sample—drastically limited by what is available in English—is importantly specific (texts from specific districts and authors), evading the trap of representing “Africa” as if it were a whole.<sup>34</sup>

In case it is unclear how easy citing these texts can be, here are two invented examples using the first text below. (Yes, the first text I recommend is a co-translation that I did; but I chose to translate it precisely because, out of thousands of possible texts, I thought it could do the most to persuade people of the value of early African literature.) One possibility might be having a sentence like this in your next article: “Female religious leadership in the eighteenth century is not, of course, a solely English phenomenon, as demonstrated by the African-language biography of 1672 about the Ethiopian Orthodox abbess Walatta Petros (Gälawdewos).” Or, perhaps, “Queer identities in a range of European and non-European eighteenth-century texts is a burgeoning area of scholarship; for instance, see work on the Ethiopian Orthodox abbess Walatta Petros (Gälawdewos).”

Adding seventy words, as each of these examples would do (including the citation), will not always be possible. Yet I urge you to consider it. By doing so, you will prove that these texts exist and provide a paper trail for another scholar. Most of what I know about early African literature I found out by following up on a footnote. The aim of my edict is to ensure that these texts circulate in the realm of collective knowledge.

*Gəḍəz: The Life of Walatta-Petros*

The first early modern African-language written text I recommend for citation is the *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*. An Ethiopian monk named Gälawdewos (fl. 1670s) wrote it in the African language of Gəḍəz (classical Ethiopic) in 1672. The translation of it into English came out in 2015, and the student edition came out in late 2018.<sup>35</sup> This extraordinary book

34 These represent only a few of the texts I have started to address in my Early African Literature project, about which see <https://wendybelcher.com/african-literature/early-african-literature-anthology>.

35 Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, trans. and ed. Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Gälawdewos, *The Life of Walatta-Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman (Concise Edition)*, trans. and ed. Belcher and Kleiner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

is about an Ethiopian woman—a female religious leader and monastic founder with hundreds of followers, both men and women. She was an early anticolonial resister, refusing to convert to Catholicism when the Jesuits came to Ethiopia in the 1600s. She also had a life-long female partner, and the text contains an anecdote about nuns being lustful with each other. The text is a masterpiece of Gəʿəz literature, which has thousands of original creations written from the 1300s into the 1900s (this biography is only one of over a hundred early book-length biographies that Ethiopians wrote in Gəʿəz). This book includes fascinating human-animal encounters, beautiful embodied poems, and a radical theology. The translation does not assume the reader has any knowledge of Ethiopia or Gəʿəz and provides a robust contextual framework to help readers cite it or teach it: thousands of substantive and philological notes and a massive glossary of people, places, rituals, and things. Instructors are teaching it to great effect in medieval courses, early modern history and literature courses, and gender and sexuality studies courses.

If you want to do more than token citation, check out the excellent work on early modern Gəʿəz literature done by a range of Ethiopian scholars, most of all the prolific MacArthur Fellowship winner Getatchew Haile.<sup>36</sup> You may also consult the massive encyclopedic and cataloging projects for Gəʿəz.<sup>37</sup> Good scholarship has also been done on other

36 Getatchew Haile, “Highlighting Ethiopian Traditional Literature,” in *Silence Is Not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*, ed. Tadesse Adera and Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1995), 39–59; Haile, “Religious Controversies and the Growth of Ethiopic Literature in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Oriens Christianus* 65 (1981): 102–36; Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie, “Monks and Monarchs: Christological Controversy of the Ethiopian Church and Its Impact on the State (1632–1878)” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2011); Solomon Beyene Gebreyes, ed., *The Chronicle of Emperor Gälawdewos (1540–1559): A Source on Ethiopia’s Mediaeval Historical Geography* (Louvain: Peeters, 2019); Tadesse Tamrat, “Hagiographies and the Reconstruction of Medieval Ethiopian History,” *Rural Africana*, no. 11 (1970): 12–20; Tesfaye Gebre Mariam, “A Structural Analysis of Gädlä Täklä Haymnot,” *African Languages and Cultures* 10, no. 2 (1997): 181–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09544169708717820>; Samuel Wolde-Yohannes, “Il Fondo Umanistico Dei Modelli E Degli Ideali Dei Gadl. Ricerca Linguistico-Filosofica Su Alcuni Testi Del Xv Secolo Etiopico,” *Aethiopica* 1 (1998): 280, <https://doi.org/10.15460/aethiopica.1.1>.

37 William F. Macomber and Getatchew Haile, eds., *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa, and for the Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, Collegeville*, 10 vols. (Collegeville: Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, St. John’s Abbey and University, 1975–93); Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 5 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003–2015); and Alessandro Bausi, ed., “Beta Maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea”

written languages of Ethiopia, including Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo, although with little surviving written literature until the late 1800s.<sup>38</sup>

*Tamaziyt: Ocean of Tears*

The second early modern African-language written text to cite is *Ocean of Tears* (*Baḥr ad-Dumūʿ*), a book written in what many call Berber, but which speakers prefer to call Tamaziyt, an Indigenous African language common in North Africa. The author Muḥammad Ibn ʿAlī Awzal (ca. 1680–1749), who lived in what is now Morocco, wrote the book in 1714.<sup>39</sup> A fascinating figure in his own right, he fled the town where he grew up after accidentally killing a man, became a religious scholar, returned to his town (where the family of the man he killed forgave him), and lived his life there as a teacher and author. He is the most important author of the Sous Tamaziyt literary tradition, which constitutes the several thousand Indigenous Moroccan scholars writing between the tenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of their work recorded legends and epics; others record encounters with Europeans, such as the Tamaziyt poem about the French invasion of Algeria in 1830.<sup>40</sup>

*Ocean of Tears* is Awzal's most important text, a masterpiece of Tamaziyt literature. The language is said to be so exquisite that it is impossible to read without weeping at its beauty. It has a chapter on the wonders of creation, including rain, birth, and parental love. It also has chapters on repentance, death, the hereafter, God, the Prophet, and

(Hamburg: Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies at the University of Hamburg, 2016–), <https://doi.org/10.25592/BetaMasaheft>.

- 38 Maria Bulakh and Denis Nosnitsin, "An Old Amharic Poem from Northern Ethiopia: One More Text on Condemning Glory," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82, no. 2 (2019): 315–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X1900034X>; Amsalu Aklilu, "Aččər Yäʿityop Ya Šənä Šəhuf Tarik (a Short History of Ethiopian Literature)" (thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1984); Lyda Favali, "Loggo Särda," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia: He-N: Vol. 3*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 594–95; Wolbert Smidt, "Haggi Hab Səllus Gärä Krəstos," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia: D-Ha: Vol. 2*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 10–11; Tesfaye Tolessa, "Early History of Written Oromo Language up to 1900," *Science, Technology and Arts Research Journal* 1, no. 2 (2012): 76–80, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/star/article/view/98787>.
- 39 Muḥammad Ibn ʿAlī Awzal, "Baḥr Ad-Dumūʿ," trans. Nico Van den Boogert, in *The Berber Literary Tradition of the Sous: With an Edition and Translation of "The Ocean of Tears" by Muḥammad Awzal*, ed. Nico Van den Boogert (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1997), 303–91.
- 40 Hans Stumme, *Dichtkunst und Gedichte der Schlub* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1895), as cited in Van den Boogert, *Berber Literary Tradition*, 65–74.

the Devil. The chapter on sin conceives of the body in interesting ways: cataloguing sin according to which part of the body commits it, one sin for each of the eyes, ears, hands, stomach, legs, tongue, and genitals, and another seven sins of the heart alone.

Scholars can read the book in English or French translation.<sup>41</sup> The research in both is outstanding, and the translations are very erudite, although the awkwardness of the English is occasionally painful for native speakers. Nevertheless, the translation provides a full understanding of its themes and concerns, making it citable.

If you want to do more than token citation, check out the excellent work on early modern Tamaziɣt literature by a range of North African scholars, including Salem Chaker, Lamara Bougchiche, Mohand Akli Haddadou, and Abdellah Bounfour,<sup>42</sup> as well as the prolific Paulette Galand-Pernet, Daniela Merolla, and Maarten Kossmann; you may also consult the extensive *Encyclopédie Berbère*.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Hausa and Fula: Sufi Women*

The third early modern African-language written text to cite is any of the poems by Nana Asma'ū bint Shehu Usman dan Fodiyo (ca. 1793–1864), a fascinating and influential woman who was a scholar, teacher, and poet of West African Sufi Islam.<sup>44</sup> She was not a minor figure in her land, but a revered woman whose authorial name is still mentioned along with male authors.<sup>45</sup> She wrote in the Indigenous languages of

41 Van den Boogert, *Berber Literary Tradition*, 303–91; and Bruno Hugo Stricker, *L'Océan des pleurs: Poème Berbère de Muhammad Al-Awzali* (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

42 Abdellah Bounfour, "Littérature Berbère Traditionnelle (Traditional Berber Literature)," in *Encyclopédie Berbère*, ed. Gabriel Camps and Salem Chaker (Saint-Remy-de-Provence: Éditions Edisud, 2008), 4429–35; Mohand Akli Haddadou, *Introduction à la Littérature Berbère: Suivi d'une Introduction à la Littérature Kablye* (Algiers: Haut Commissariat à l'Amazighité, 2009); Lamara Bougchiche, *Langues et littératures Berbères des origines à nos jours: bibliographie internationale* (Paris: Ibis Press, 1997).

43 Gabriel Camps et al., "Écriture (Literature)," in *Encyclopédie Berbère*, 2564–85; and Abdellah Bounfour, "Littérature Berbère Traditionnelle (Traditional Berber Literature)," *Encyclopédie Berbère*, 4429–35.

44 Nana Asma'ū, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'ū: Daughter of Usman'dan Fodiyo (1793–1864)*, ed. Jean Boyd and Beverly Blow Mack (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997).

45 Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'ū, 1793–1865, Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013); and Beverly Blow Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'ū, Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).



Fula (her first language) and Hausa as well as Arabic. As many African intellectuals have for centuries, she used Arabic script, or *ajami*, to write these languages, much as many African languages now use the Latin script. Hundreds of thousands of manuscripts in *ajami* are extant in West African archives, and yet the history of these books, their libraries, and the manuscript culture of early African Muslims have only begun to be studied in the Euro-American academy with any depth.<sup>46</sup> For such archives to inform the collective understanding of literature scholars globally, we need to recognize the crucial abilities of multilingual scholars, those who are able to read Arabic script, to understand the African language of the text deeply, and to communicate their findings for publication in widely read language. And we must enable more Indigenous scholars to publish their research.

Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack have identified and translated several dozen works of Nana Asma'u's, including elegies for her learned uncle and brother as well as her learned sister, niece, and beloved female friend. They argue that her poems evidence an author negotiating the oral genres and forms of an Indigenous language with the demands of the vehicle of Arabic, and using imagery and metaphors directly related to her day-to-day life.

Much of her life and work were directed toward "the education and uplifting of women," especially through her classes for women.<sup>47</sup> In Nana Asma'u's poem *Sufi Women*, she addresses women directly and provides a record of women's names and accomplishments. In her poem honouring her sister Aisha, she praises her for "defending the unjustly treated" and declares, "She was a guardian of orphans and widows, / a pillar of the community, ensuring harmony."<sup>48</sup> Her poems show women being "active in supporting one another, and creating warm, supportive relationships among themselves."<sup>49</sup> As Chukwuma Azuonye has argued,

46 Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of Ajami and the Muridiyya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Graziano Krätli and Ghislaine Lydon, *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

47 Marie-Eve Humery, "Fula and the Ajami Writing System in the Haalpulaar Society of Fuuta Toore (Senegal and Mauritania): A Specific 'Restricted Literacy,'" in *The Arabic Script in Africa: Studies in the Use of a Writing System*, ed. Meikel Mumin and Kees Versteegh (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 173–98.

48 Nana Asma'u, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 226.

49 Mack and Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad*, 227.

she represented not a break from tradition (a “feminist” standing up to the patriarchy), but rather a continuation of her extended family’s generations-long tradition of championing women.<sup>50</sup> In discussions of early modern women authors, her name must be included. That she writes in a long tradition of Islamic women’s piety is no argument against citing her work as an African text (the “foreign” religion of Islam has been as long a part of Africa as the “foreign” religion of Christianity has been in Europe).

If you want to do more than token citation, check out the excellent work on early modern *ajami* literature done by a range of African scholars, including the indefatigable Fallou Ngom, as well as Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Shamil Jeppie, Ibrahima Diallo, and Ousmane Kane.<sup>51</sup> Consult Ousseina Alidou and others on early written Hausa literature specifically.<sup>52</sup>

*Swahili: Song of Liyongo*

The fourth early modern African-language written text to cite is *Takhimisa ya Liyongo*, a long praise poem written in Swahili by Sayyid Abdallah bin Nassir (ca. 1730–1820) in 1750.<sup>53</sup> Swahili is rich in praise poems, a dominant genre across West and East Africa; as well as in epic written poems, such as *Utendi wa Tambuka* (1728), about the ancient wars between the descendants of Mohammed and Byzantine Christians; and

50 Chukwuma Azuonye, “Feminist or Simply Feminine? Reflections on the Works of Nana Asmā’u, a Nineteenth-Century West African Woman Poet, Intellectual, and Social Activist,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 6, no. 2 (2006): 54–77, <https://doi.org/10.2979/MER.2006-6.2.54>.

51 Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World*; Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, eds., *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa Press in association with CODESRIA, 2008); Ibrahima Diallo, “Literacy and Education in West Africa: From *Ajami* to Francophonie,” *Africa Review* 8, no. 1 (2016): 60–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09744053.2015.1090663>; and Ousmane Kane, *Non-Europhone Intellectuals* (African Books Collective, 2012).

52 Ousseina Alidou, “The Emergence of Written Hausa Literature,” in *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, ed. F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 329–56; Bernard Caron, “La Littérature Haoussa,” in *Panorama des littératures Africaines: Etats des lieux et perspectives*, ed. Ursula Baumgardt and Abdallah Bounfour (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), 93–107; Abdulkadir Dangambo, “Hausa Wā’azii Verse from Ca. 1800 to Ca. 1970: A Critical Study of Form, Content, Language, and Style” (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 1980).

53 Abdallah Sayyid, “Takhmis Ya Liyonga,” in *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse: A Literary History and Anthology*, ed. Jan Knappert (London: Heinemann Educational, 1979), 92–95.

didactic poems, such as *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona* (1858), a mother's instructions to her daughter.<sup>54</sup>

*Takhimisa ya Liyongo* is about the great early modern poet-warrior-trickster of legend named Fumo Liyongo, who likely lived in the 1200s.<sup>55</sup> This epic figure lived large—dancing, drinking, fighting; he was eventually killed by his own son. Liyongo was the firstborn of his kingly father, and enormously popular, so the second son, wishing to eliminate him as a threat, imprisoned him. Liyongo escaped, but his son, for the reward, killed him with a copper nail, the only object capable of taking his life. In the poem that Nassir wrote about Liyongo, based on earlier folk-tales, both the protagonist and the antagonist practice deception, which Joseph Mbele has argued is the poem's sophisticated critique of heroism itself, and any supposed gap between heroes and villains.<sup>56</sup>

Of all African-language literatures, that in Swahili has received the most published attention, with no little focus on its early written literature, going back as far as the 1600s, so I mention it only briefly here. If you want to do more than token citation, see the excellent work by a range of East African scholars, among them M.M. Mulokozi, Mohamed H. Abdulaziz, Euphrase Kezilahabi, Ibrahim Noor Shariff, Alamin Mazrui, and Joseph Mbele.<sup>57</sup>

### *Nsibidi: Men and Women*

The fifth early modern African-language written text to cite is any of the stories translated from Nsibidi. Nsibidi is a written system, an ideographic script, elaborated by the Efik people of Nigeria in the 1770s for their secret society, but with symbols in it found on pottery dating to a thousand

54 John Willoughby Tarleton Allen, *Tendi: Six Examples of a Swahili Classical Verse Form* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1971).

55 Ibrahim Noor Shariff, "The Liyongo Conundrum: Reexamining the Historicity of Swahili's National Poet-Hero," *Research in African Literatures* 22, no. 2 (1991): 153–67, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3819830>.

56 Joseph L. Mbele, "The Significance of Deception in the Liongo Epic," *Kiswahili* 60 (1997): 7–14.

57 Mohamed H. Abdulaziz, *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979); Euphrase Kezilahabi, "The Development of Swahili Poetry: 18th–20th Century," *Kiswahili* 42, no. 2-1 (1972); Mbele, "The Identity of the Hero in the Liongo Epic," *Research in African Literatures* 17, no. 4 (1986); Mugyabuso M Mulokozi, "Protest and Resistance in Swahili Poetry 1600-1885," *Kiswahili* 49, no. 1 (1982): 25–54; Shariff, "The Liyongo Conundrum: Reexamining the Historicity of Swahili's National Poet-Hero"; and Alamin M. Mazrui, *Swahili beyond the Boundaries: Literature, Language, and Identity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

years earlier.<sup>58</sup> Although sometimes dismissed as merely representational, Nsibidi is far richer than that, a type of what one scholar has called “a vast, deep-time, curated supply of symbols.”<sup>59</sup> Only members who have been trained to read Nsibidi can understand its texts, which are used to narrate events, such as court cases and love affairs.<sup>60</sup> Enslaved people in the Americas used this language to communicate,<sup>61</sup> so it is particularly vital that Americanists be aware of it.

Nsibidi is a secret language protected by its peoples and therefore access to its stories is rightly limited. No historical, political, or legal texts have been translated from it; rather, those seen as frivolous, and therefore not in need of protection from prying eyes, have been. To start with a brief example, Figure 2 (on p. 437, top) shows a story made up of three “words” and seven signs.

The first sign, which looks like the capital letter I, represents a young man’s fighting stick; the second sign, a curved line, concave to the left, represents a woman; the third sign represents a pillow; and the fourth sign represents a man, concave to the right. The first “word,” then, (indicated with the number 5 below it) depicts a husband and wife lying with a pillow between them and a young man nearby. The next two signs

58 Christopher Slogar, “Early Ceramics from Calabar, Nigeria: Towards a History of Nsibidi,” *African Arts* 40, no. 1 (2007): 18–29, <https://doi.org/10.1162/afar.2007.40.1.18>.

59 Roderick J. McIntosh, “From Traditional African Art to the Archaeology of Form in the Middle Niger,” in *Dall’archeologia All’arte Tradizionale Africana: De l’archeologie a l’art Traditionnel Africain (from Archaeology to Traditional African Art)*, ed. Gigi Pezzoli (Milan: Centro Studi Archeologia Africana, 1992), 148.

60 J.K. Macgregor, “Some Notes on Nsibidi,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 39 (1909): 209–19; Elphinstone Dayrell, “Further Notes on ‘Nsibidi Signs with Their Meanings from the Ikom District, Southern Nigeria,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 41 (1911): 521–40; Dayrell, “67. Some ‘Nsibidi’ Signs,” *Man* 10 (1910): 113–14.

61 Tolagbe M. Ogunleye, “Aroko, Mmomomme Twe, Nsibidi, Ogede, and Tusona: Africanisms in Florida’s Self-Emancipated Africans’ Resistance to Enslavement and War Stratagems,” *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 3 (2006): 396–414, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40035017>; Antonio T. Bly, “‘By her unveil’d each horrid crime appears’: Authorship, Text, and Subtext in Phillis Wheatley’s Variants Poems,” *Textual Cultures* 9, no. 1 (2014): 112–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26500716>; Ivor Miller and Mathew Ojong, “Ékpè ‘Leopard’ Society in Africa and the Americas: Influence and Values of an Ancient Tradition,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 266–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2012.676200>; Ivor L. Miller, “The Relationship between Early Forms of Literacy in Old Calabar and Inherited Manuscripts of the Cuban Abakuá Society,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 35, no. 2 (2016): 162–96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44797205>.

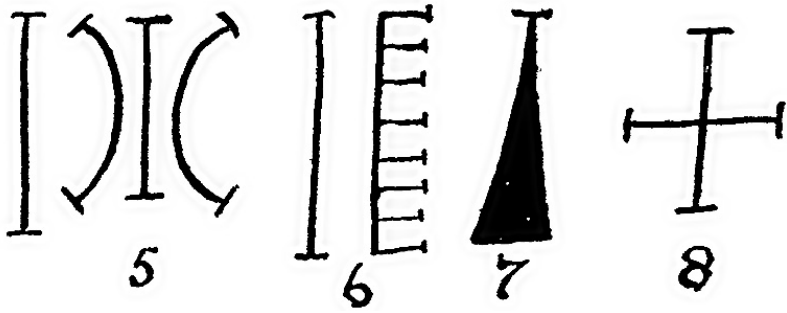


Figure 2. From Elphinstone Dayrell, “67. Some ‘Nsibidi’ Signs,” *Man* 10 (1910), plate H.

(indicated with the number 6 below it) represent the stick again and a secret society. The last sign is a sword. One translation is that the husband has quarreled with his wife because she has fallen in love with another man, who belongs to a particular secret society. The husband will use a sword to fight the young man with whom his wife fell in love.

A more complicated story appears in Figure 3, below.

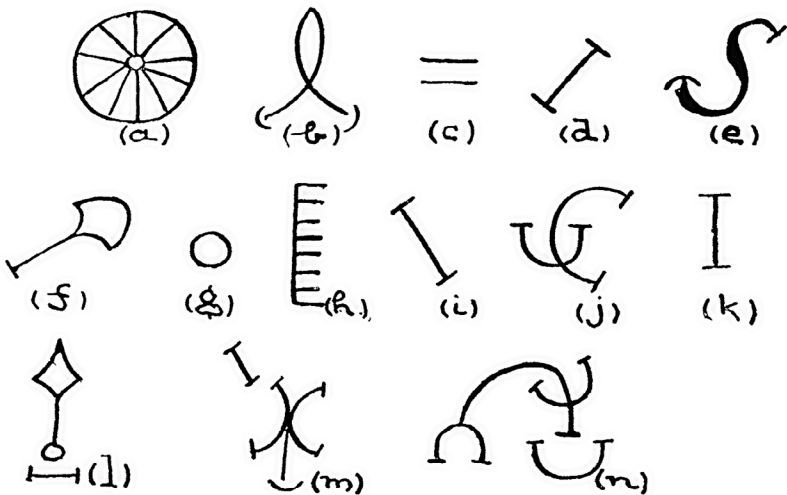


Figure 3. From Elphinstone Dayrell, “67. Some ‘Nsibidi’ Signs,” *Man* 10 (1910), plate H.

The translation is problematic; it seems the Victorian British translator was not able to bring himself to translate accurately the sexual misadventures. It appears to report on a love affair with a betrayal, preceded by an exchange of gifts, including (e) a chewing stick, (f) a bottle of alcohol, (g) a glass, and (j) money (a bag containing rods). Whatever its meaning, the story evidences the sophistication of African rhetorics, especially around indirection, and that Indigenous writing systems did exist in Africa.

If you want to do more than token citation, see the excellent work on Nsibidi done by African scholars, including Basil Amaeshi, Ekpo Eyo, Olu Kalu, and Maik Nwosu,<sup>62</sup> and the interpretive work of the modern Nigerian artists Victor Ekpuk and Chike C. Aniakor. If you are interested in teaching about it and other African writing systems, consult the online exhibit *Inscribing Meaning* by the Fowler Museum and the National Museum of African Art.<sup>63</sup>

### *Anticipating Objections*

Some people will want to dismiss these five examples of written African texts. For them, they will not be “African” enough, not “literary” enough, not “early” enough, not “enough” enough.

So let me remind such readers that most literatures are not enough in the same ways. The history of writing in most regions is not local, for instance. European texts were written in the foreign language of Latin (unless written by Italians, for whom it was native) into the 1800s. Likewise, many African texts were written in the foreign language of Arabic, with few written vernaculars. Yet no one says that European texts are not European because they were written in Latin. Just so, no one should say that African texts are not African because they were written in Arabic. Nor should anyone say that because a text

62 Basil Amaeshi, “Sources for West African Studies: Some Non-Alphabetic Writings of West Africa,” *Libri* 27, no. 1 (1977): 1–8; Olu Kalu, “Writing in Pre-Colonial Africa: A Case-Study of Nsibidi,” in *African Cultural Development*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (1978; Nsukka: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980), 76–85; Ekpo Eyo, “Archaeological Excavations in Calabar in Cross River Valley,” *South Eastern Nigeria, West African Research Association Newsletter* (1998): 11–12; Maik Nwosu, “In the Name of the Sign: The Nsibidi Script as the Language and Literature of the Crossroads,” *Semiotica*, no. 182 (2010): 285–303, <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.2010.061>.

63 Christine Mullen Kreamer, Mary Nooter Roberts, Elizabeth Harney, and Allyson Purpura, *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* (Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art and the Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2007), <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/index1.html>.

was written in North Africa or East Africa, that they are not African. Their bracketing arises from the racist assumption that Africa is a place without writing and history, and that therefore anywhere with writing and history cannot be Africa.

The history of writing in most regions is not “early” either. Almost no vernaculars were written until quite late in human history. Most European languages were not written until the 1500s CE. By contrast, Egyptian languages had written texts by 2,600 BCE, two thousand years before the Greeks arrived to “civilize” Egypt. Tamaziyt language inscriptions appear across North Africa and West Africa by the 1000s BCE. Sudan and Ethiopia had written languages by the 100s BCE. By contrast, even the major European languages appeared much later: the first English, Spanish, and Portuguese written texts are from the 700s, 1200s, and 1500s CE respectively.

Neither is the history of writing in most languages “literary” in the traditional academic sense. Of the world’s thousands of living and dead languages, perhaps only twelve were used to write novels before the twentieth century (Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, Arabic, English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian). Epic, folk-tale, and poetry were written in many more languages, but these genres were more likely to be oral literature until the nineteenth century—whether in Europe, Asia, or Africa.

Neither is the history of writing in most languages copious. Eighteenth-century Africans wrote more than enough—hundreds of works of genius in African languages and others. Yet, however many African texts the scholar names, it is never enough for those determined to claim Euro-American superiority. If the scholar says there is one early African novel, they ask why there aren’t two. If the scholar says there are ten, they ask why there aren’t twenty. The threshold is always receding.

A more serious critique of the citation practice I am recommending is that it is “mere tokenism,” a glib attempt to be inclusive without fully recognizing or engaging the bodies of work ostensibly included (or the ethics of translating Indigenous language texts into colonizers’ languages). Yet, “token citation” is the very definition of a heuristic technique—being both imperfect and yet useful—and is a practical way of making a vital strike at the Eurocentric foci of US scholarship while destabilizing the canon and helping literary studies support decolonization. Yes, real inclusion—and recentering of scholarly focus—requires more than such gestures. But absent radical transformation,

doing nothing is not the solution. As the famous Amharic proverb goes, ቀስ በቀስ እንቁላል በእግሩ ይሄዳል (slowly, slowly, the egg goes by its legs; that is, incremental change is the basis for large change).

As one example of its practicality, token citation can keep alive for future scholars that which is not valued in the present. Take the scholarship on Olaudah Equiano, a luminary of the eighteenth century who had faded almost entirely from cultural awareness in the nineteenth century but for the work of a handful of African American scholars. A single descriptive sentence in 1913 in a brief article by no less a figure than W.E.B. Du Bois reintroduced Equiano after a century of general neglect and enabled Equiano's star to rise again.<sup>64</sup> (Yet another case of African American scholars, through the critical language and theoretical approaches they developed, bringing to light the overlooked contributions of African writers.) In the same way, token citing of early modern African-language written texts would be an important seeding of the field.

Such practical methods, while they do not in and of themselves solve the problems of a field's systemic exclusions, can help to make more long-term changes possible. Many scholars are currently aiming to transform their fields through more inclusive and deliberate citational practices that counter longstanding biases. Research shows that, to date, women tend to be cited with less frequency than men, and Black, Indigenous, and Latinx scholars are cited less than their white peers, even when their work is directly relevant or objectively superior.<sup>65</sup> Ann duCille's blistering critique still stands of how fields ignore the Black women scholars who first brought attention to "the stunning quality of black women's ... contributions to American civilization."<sup>66</sup>

64 I make this argument based on tracking "Equiano" on Google N-Gram.

65 Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Richard Delgado, "The Imperial Scholar: Reflections on a Review of Civil Rights Literature," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 132, no. 3 (1984): 561–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3311882>; Llorena Rivera Leon, Jacques Mairesse, and Robin Cowan, "An Econometric Investigation of the Productivity Gender Gap in Mexican Research, and a Simulation Study of the Effects on Scientific Performance of Policy Scenarios to Promote Gender Equality," MERIT Working Papers 2016-072, United Nations University-Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (MERIT), 2016, <https://www.merit.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/abstract/?id=6327>.

66 Ann duCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies," *Signs* 19, no. 3 (1994): 591–629, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174771>.



To help improve citational practices, the scholar Kishonna Gray, who invented the effective hashtag #citeherwork in 2015, worked with me to create a test like the Wallace-Bechdel Test for film (in which, to pass, a film must include two women speaking to each other about something other than men). Likewise, we proposed the #GrayTest, which could only be passed as follows: “a journal article must not only cite the scholarship of at least two [authors who identify as] women and two nonwhite [Black, Latinx, or Indigenous] authors but also must mention it meaningfully in the body of the text.”<sup>67</sup> Note that this is a baseline test for establishing a bare minimum for responsible citation; it is not an aspirational test for best practices.

An author who cites one of the five African-authored texts above can help ensure their article passes the Gray Test. If citing them makes you nervous—fearful that in your ignorance of African literature you will cite incorrectly or offensively—send your sentence to me; I will be happy to review it for you.

Now, if you would rather do something less tactical and more strategic for the study of early African-language literature—by all means do so! For instance, work to ensure that your institution teaches any African language that interests its students. In the past, cost prevented institutions from offering multiple African languages; none could afford to hold classes for twenty different languages when only two students would take each class. Yet, added up, thousands and thousands of students across the United States and Europe are interested in learning each of dozens of specific African languages. Distance learning and virtual classrooms make grouping those thousands together cost-effective and can even create jobs for instructors on the continent. Or, work to hire scholars to teach African literatures at your institution. The Scholars at Risk network is always looking for US universities to host African scholars, even temporarily. Or, apply for the Fulbright to learn more from scholars in Africa.

### *Early Modern Studies Action Items*

So, where does all this leave us? First, we have three answers to the question of whether early modern studies is global yet: yes, no, and more is needed. Second, I have tried to suggest that focusing on the way that

67 Wendy Laura Belcher, *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 184.

Africa is represented in European language texts is not enough: early modern studies needs to focus on how Africans represent *themselves* in their own texts. Third, I have suggested one way to improve the future of early modern studies—by encouraging readers to cite early African-language literature, not only to improve their own citational practice, but crucially to seed the field with the necessary references that will enable future scholarship to attend more fully to the disproportionately neglected archives of early African literatures and counteract the limiting Eurocentrism of early modern studies.

It is my sincere hope that one hundred years from now, someone will cite this article as an example of how farcically limited early scholarship on written African literature was, and will chastise me for standing on the edge of its vastness and seeing so little. Yes, token citation may invite sanction. Especially if you are white, it may feel safer to say nothing than to do something so clearly insufficient in the face of such severe inequities. But a difficult truth of our time is that you can be cowardly correct (adhering to familiar ways of exercising your expertise and protecting yourself while doing nothing to improve the conditions of academic knowledge work), or you can bravely risk your status to do something, however contingent or small.



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