Cervantes and the Matter of Black Lives

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A few weeks ago, on June 19, a group of demonstrators protesting against the killing of George Floyd vandalized various statues in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, including one of Cervantes.

As was to be expected, the reaction on social media and in the Spanish press was fulminating. Just in the newspaper *ABC* alone there have been dozens of articles in recent days dedicated to the subject. Relevant — and notably conservative — cultural institutions have also taken positions on the subject, including the [Royal Academy of History](https://www.rah.es/ataques-contra-estatuas-de-personajes-historicos/), the Cervantes Institute, and the [Hispanic Institute](https://twitter.com/HispanicCouncil/status/1274300053922942976?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1274300053922942976%7Ctwgr%5E&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.20minutos.es%2Fnoticia%2F4298755%2F0%2Factivistas-escriben-bastardo-estatua), with the latter kicking off a pro-Hispanic publicity campaign with the hashtag #RespectHispanicHeritage, demanding respect for the legacy of Spain in the United States. The Spanish government, too, entered the debate with various public complaints, such as the one from the [Spanish Embassy](https://twitter.com/SpainInTheUSA/status/1274437473968500736), or the one from the [Minister of Culture, José Manuel Rodríguez Uribes](https://twitter.com/jmrdezuribes/status/1274340766358347776), who protested on Twitter that the attack seemed, to him, “incomprehensible” and caused him “pain. A lot of pain.” That tweet caught the attention of the American ambassador, [Christopher Landau](https://twitter.com/USAmbMex/status/1274817750729441287), who screamed to high heaven that this perceived injustice must have been committed with the tacit permission of local authorities (the ones from California who, as is well known, go around wearing berets, with their fists raised high in the air).

We would like to offer a brief reflection upon some of the arguments that have been made up to this point in the debate and that, to our minds, have failed across the board.

On one hand, a number of these reactions tend to lose sight with frightening ease of the fact that the worldwide protests against racial injustice — of which the felling and tagging of monuments are one part — have little to do with a deliberate meditation upon Spain’s imperial past, and even less with a particular interpretation of it, born of “[intellectual indigence](https://www.huffingtonpost.es/entry/un-espectro-recorre-estados-unidos_es_5ef4cb39c5b615e5cd3a8bf1)” regarding Cervantes as an epigone of slavery. The cries of pain and anger heard in every corner of large and small cities all across the United States are a response to historical circumstances that are moving in a different direction, something that Julio Vélez-Sainz (whom we admire greatly) recognizes. From our perspective, continuing to look at this from the perspective of Spanish history, or even from the interpretive traditions around Cervantes — rather than from the specific history of the human experiences that are seeking an avenue of expression through these protests —reflects a kind of cultural myopia that must be fought. In other words: Cervantes isn’t what matters here.

But it’s not just that. It is enough to say that the laments over the defamation of Cervantes and, by extension, of the glories of the imperial past, often follow the same lines as those drawn out by Elvira Roca Barea and her ilk in the last few years. In that context the demonstrators appear as mere avatars of an anti-Spanish plague that is denounced in [Roca Barea’s book] *Imperiophobia*, with Cervantes portrayed a graphic symptom of the Black Legend, a victim of those who refuse to recognize the “[great events of Spanish history](https://www.abc.es/historia/abci-gestas-historia-espana-manual-para-combatir-leyenda-negra-y-quienes-pintan-estatuas-202006232304_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fctxt.es%2F).” To some, such as [David Alandete](https://www.abc.es/cultura/abci-fray-junipero-odio-hispano-arrecia-estados-unidos-202006210138_noticia.html), “the hatred of Spain is ramping up in the United States.” And to [Juan Manel Cao](https://www.diariolasamericas.com/eeuu/juan-manuel-cao-derribar-nuestros-simbolos-es-un-modo-discriminarnos-n4201532), “tearing down our symbols is a form of discrimination against us.”

The exceptionalist and nationalist spirit from which these and similar discourses emerge comes through in the debate about the Cervantes statue. Some writers set it out very easily and don’t even try to hide it. They use abhorrent tropes that belong to the oldest forms of racism, writing with vituperative, personal rhetoric that seeks to dehumanize the protestors, sometimes through grotesque language making them out to be animals, describing them, for example, as “[donkey-like, trotting along on four feet, spreading like a universal pandemic](https://www.abc.es/espana/comunidad-valenciana/abci-jose-luis-torro-colon-y-cervantes-agredidos-partida-doble-202006270729_noticia.html).” In somewhat more measured, though no less problematic, terms, the protestors appear as “[stupid mobs](https://www.abc.es/opinion/abci-ignacio-camacho-expiacion-202006222359_noticia.html),” “ignorant,” [bad readers of Cervantes](https://www.abc.es/cultura/cultural/abci-contra-cervantes-202006251842_noticia.html), “[the Taliban](https://www.abc.es/opinion/abci-abc-talibanes-estados-unidos-202006202245_noticia.html),” anti-Hispanic, anti-Christian, [goofball iconoclasts](https://www.abc.es/opinion/abci-isabel-san-sebastian-mentecatos-iconoclastas-202006212350_noticia.html), illiterates, imbeciles, brutes, “[a horde of barbarians](https://www.abc.es/espana/castilla-leon/abci-guillermo-garabito-barbaros-202006211101_noticia.html),” and “bastards.” (This last example comes from the distinguished Cervantes scholar Juan [Manuel Lucía Megías](https://www.abc.es/opinion/abci-jose-manuel-lucia-megias-cervantes-bastardo-202006232258_noticia.html), and is a sentiment he shares with [Jesús García Calero](https://www.abc.es/cultura/abci-bastard-insulta-quien-escrito-sobre-cervantes-202006222130_noticia.html).)

All of this underlines an absolutely abominable message: that at the heart of it, the protestors are at fault, that villains here aren’t the systematic terror perpetrated against Black American populations or even the police officers who so happily asphyxiated George Floyd with a knee to the throat. In this version of the narrative the protestors come to be the true antagonists.

This shines a cold, hard light on the real priorities of those who object to the attack on the Cervantes statue. Some writers are much more committed to the defense of Cervantes and Spain than to the destruction of the systems of oppression for the sake of which Cervantes was sacrificed. In the end, they are telling the protestors that Cervantes matters much more than Black lives.

On the other hand, the debate tends to fail equally by not going far enough in considering the Cervantine implications of rethinking social movements today. Many authors have pointed out the tremendous irony that Cervantes himself was a slave and that his large literary corpus is dedicated to defending the liberty and the equality of marginalized people. The proto-feminist moves made with Marcela or La Gitanilla and the complaints of Ricote the Morisco are examples that must be mentioned along with the recurring themes of free will, personal agency, the freedom to create one’s own self, the condemnation of blood and lineage as determining forces in life, and more- and less-veiled critiques of power structures. (We might think, for example, about the famous scrutiny of Don Quixote’s library (chapter VI) or the violent acts he perpetrated against arbiters of justice, such as the freeing of the galley slaves (chapter XXII) or the attack on the soldiers (chapter XLV), and this all without even mentioning that Cervantes himself spent a good number of years in captivity in Algiers; and because of that he personally knew the value of freedom.)

We don’t completely disagree with this reading, but where we do find the landscape lacking is in the nuances that might be conceded to the question of the sub-Saharan experience in the context of the Spanish Empire. Although this fact is mentioned very infrequently, there is no shortage of Black people in Cervantes’ work. As Nicholas R. Jones has shown in his monograph, [Staging Habla de Negros](https://bobcat.library.nyu.edu/permalink/f/ci13eu/nyu_aleph007363106), this presence of Black subjects and of the matter and the experience of the Black African Diaspora requires us to reconsider in what sense Black lives matter within the Cervantine corpus.

When Sancho drools over the idea of becoming a slaver (chapter XXIX), we are confronted by an explicit recognition of the massive presence of a trade in enslaved Black people as a fundamental part of the cultural experience of the Golden Age of Spain and Portugal. When, in *The Jealous Extremaduran*, the eunuch Luis — a lover of music wanting to entertain himself in the monotony of the interstice where he finds himself, between two locked doors — facilitates the entrance of Loaysa into the Carrizales home, we as readers are witnesses to a story that puts a Black subject at the center of the narrative. When, in *The Colloquy of the Dogs*, Cipón and Berganza offer up a discourse on the Black subjects in their vicinity, Cervantes obligates us once again to *see* Black people and to *hear* them. And when we do we recognize the system that often keeps them in positions that are contrary to Cervantes’ usual one in favor of human liberty. Cervantes confronts us with the matter of Black lives. For Cervantes, Black lives matter.

To conclude, we urge our Cervantine colleagues and other intellectuals to put things back in their place. Instead of crying out in agony over the injustices committed against Cervantes, what would happen if, for just a moment we left the guy who lost his arm at Lepanto alone? Made to choose between the defense of a statue or of George Floyd’s body, where do we choose to stand? And what does the answer to that question tell us about our own values and priorities?

At the same time, what would happen if we insisted upon putting the voices of Black Africans and African-descended people in their rightful place at the center of the narrative, where they so clearly mattered to Cervantes? The Cervantine oeuvre itself obligates us to recognize the mattering of Black and African-descended lives. Of course we can, and we should, see in Cervantes an ally in the fight for and defense of marginalized voices. But when we do that, we must not forget about the voices of his Black characters or the voices of those who, today, clamor for justice with a can of spray paint in hand.

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