

PROLOGUE

The Scramble for Blackness

Idle Reader: I only wanted to offer it to you plain and bare, unadorned by a prologue. For I can tell you that although it cost me some effort to compose, none seemed greater than creating the preface you are now reading. I picked up my pen many times to write it, and many times I put it down again because I did not know what to write; and once, when I was baffled, with the paper in front of me, my pen behind my ear, my elbow propped on the writing table, and my chest resting in my hand, pondering what I would say, a friend of mine, a man who is witty and wise, unexpectedly came in and seeing me so perplexed asked the reason, and I hid nothing from him and said I was thinking about the prologue I had to write. *Vale*.

—Miguel de Cervantes, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*

The maddening, self-induced quibble of *how* and *where* to begin yet another written scholarly enterprise on Miguel de Cervantes catalyzes, feeds, and soothes my writer's block. The signposts "Idle Reader" and "*Vale*" that frame the epigraph from the prologue of part 1 of *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605) call into question the ramifications of a reader's good will, disposition, and training—or lack thereof. As a literary critic, I forge a coarticulation between Cervantes and blackness, highlighting a Cervantine unsettling of *idleness* that indexes the backlash of what idle behavior, minds, and practices bypass, erase, and fail to absorb, comprehend, and sense during the consumptive process of reading.¹ This most certainly applies to the exercise and practice of scholarly criticism conducted by a public of readers

(and authors) studying the so-called presences and representations of blackness. The closing “*Vale*” reports Cervantes’s feisty demand for respect: a catty farewell, or warning, that forecasts what’s in store for lazy readers. Not just a “farewell” in its own right, this closing iteration of Cervantes’s authorial *Vale* implicates readers and critics alike. Following Cervantes, my intervention in this book urges its audience—or at least those who’re hip to and receptive of such a task—to create an inverted sense of its idleness, to see different methodological shifts and theoretical outcomes at the threshold of Cervantes studies and critical black studies.

Cervantine Blackness embodies my unapologetic, unflinching, and unhinged black authorship that channels black culture, black expression, and black livingness in the oeuvre of Cervantes. In doing so, I do not take blackness as a uniform, self-coherent concept. It is capacious, complex, unsettled, spatial, and rich, while its utility is historical and rhetorical. To be clear, this book does not seek to prove, recover, nor reiterate the overused category of black agency. As a concept, my coinage of the term “Cervantine Blackness” charts new methodological and theoretical terrain and possibilities that problematize the way in which agency has stifled and truncated the analysis and examination of black Africans and their descendants in early modern studies, most notably in Spanish cultural and literary production. Instead, I urge herein, my dear, idle reader, that we must trouble the blind faith we lend to agency—and its coterminous analogues “presence” and “resistance”—as the primary heuristic for examining the lives of diasporic black people in early modernity.

This book will perturb some of its readership. As this prologue walks you through the architectural contours and polemical convictions of *Cervantine Blackness*, it is not my intention nor wish to dupe you, my dear reader, by departing from some of the chief claims made in my first book *Staging Habla de Negros: Radical Performances of the African Diaspora in Early Modern Spain*. A clarification for those readers whom this book will stir, quake, and move: I’ve matured, I’ve moved on, and I’ve evolved from theorizing about agency and terms analogous to it. This book reflects growth and rising competence.²

Cervantine Blackness disturbs and fucks up the insistent, paternalistic, knee-jerk reaction to redeem black people’s agency by way of abject, dehumanized, and subordinated blackness. I’ll polemically put it out there: *it’s not all about agency*. The caché that agency—specifically as early modern literary scholars have instrumentalized it to study “presences” of enslaved and free black Africans, their ancestors, and their descendants—has garnered in

recent years has caught considerable traction, ranging from a host of new publications and workshops to an inundation of panels at conferences far and wide. (It's even glaringly bereft and unethically remiss that *still*, at a 2022 MLA panel hosted in Washington, DC, titled "The Problem of Race in Cervantes," *visibly* black and brown scholars were absent from such an important discussion in the field of early modern Spanish studies.) Do optics matter? Does the examination of black agency qua critical race studies guarantee a field's longevity and relevance in the arguable wane in institutional interest, hiring practices, and study of topics related to the so-called Spanish Golden Age? If we are now, suddenly, doing "antiracist" and "decolonial" work in early modern studies writ large, what are the epistemological and phenomenological reasons behind such missteps?

The corrective to these missteps doesn't remedy itself by outing people or naming names. This is counterproductive and unnecessary. To name names distracts us from the ongoing interior work needed to correct, curb, and undo injustices of all sorts rampant in academic and nonacademic spaces. Contesting liberalism and the liberal individual's history, theorist Dorinne Kondo points out that "challenging the individual, the anthropology of the twentieth century critiques the personal as a category that is itself an artifact of language and culture, problematizing the subject/world division. The subject is inextricable from the structural."³ To name names indulges, reifies, and participates in the highly problematic nature of self-individualized liberalism. This is not my point. *Cervantine Blackness* is not a classical, liberal book. While, in the backdrop of its conception and theoretical interventions, this book embraces Dylan Rodríguez's critique, "The Pitfalls of White Liberal Panic," *Cervantine Blackness* does not take interest in the business of exoneration. Instead of naming names, the work herein criticizes, within and beyond the bounds of agency, systems and schools of thought codified in early modern studies.

Another point of contention that may aggravate an already perturbed readership is the notion that Cervantes studies—as well as early modernists working outside of black studies—isn't the culprit or problem. This idle readership would proffer that it is black studies interlocutors who ought to rethink *their* presupposition about the history of blackness, the place of Spain in that history, and so on. The point I'm making in *Cervantine Blackness* is converse. The goal is to engage the structural and systemic ways in which Cervantine studies refuses to dialogue with non-Eurocentric modes of scholarly inquiry to talk about Cervantes, sub-Saharan Africa and its transoceanic diaspora, and the black people who populate his literary imagination. As far as I am concerned, tasking specialists of Cervantes and their students to

decenter Eurocentrism and to take seriously the critical category of blackness—and not the other way around—derives from the ethical, ideological, and moral premises from which I am grounded and take seriously.

In what follows I argue that the payoff from the concerns raised and the topics treated in this book will resonate with a wide-ranging readership, one who will learn from the case of Cervantes and his predecessors and contemporaries. While *Cervantine Blackness* innovates and theorizes a new kind of early modern studies, I gently remind you, my dear reader, that this book isn't a pedagogical nor teacherly text. Time and time again black people are demanded to coddle, enlighten, and teach generic nonblack interlocutors about systematic oppression and its hydra-headed microaggressions. This problematic expectation also encumbers women as well as people from queer and trans communities. *Cervantine Blackness* is not this kind of project.⁴

Methodologically, *Cervantine Blackness* performs a close reading of Cervantes's writings and the implications of those works in the wake of his worldwide legacy. While Equatorial Guinean thinker and writer Francisco Zamora Lobo—*in his* *Cómo ser negro y no morir en Aravaca* (1994) and the poem "Estefanía," from the collection *Memoria de laberintos* (1999)—would categorize Miguel de Cervantes as an "antiracist," this book does not exalt Cervantes as such.⁵ Nor does it marshal the now trendified and performative practice of applying concepts willy-nilly—at times just empty slogans and underdeveloped progressive ideals—to literally *everything*: antiracist, decolonial, global, and so on. The grievance I have with these terms is that each sloganizes culture, history, and ideology. They collapse the historicity and singularity of each movement for wholesome trendy gains and relevance. Each isn't transferrable. In my view these three terminological positionalities lack nuance and precision through flattening and misrepresenting unique historical, philosophical, and theoretical formations for different communities, lands, nations, polities, and sovereigns.⁶ To think with Kara Keeling's astute insights made in *Queer Times, Black Futures*, each has taken shape as a part of the organization of capital into forms of "globalization" and "financialization" that various fields and subfields maneuvering under the rubric of early modern studies have facilitated. These three terms—"antiracist," "decolonial," and "global"—commensurate different forms of capital, representing financial derivatives that are themselves "computations of relative values, embodying social relations of competition, not just trust, power, promises and obligations."⁷ This widespread Amazonification of concepts must cease and desist. Or, at a minimum, we must apply them with better critical nuance and conceptual precision.

Placing Cervantes in conversation with our current times and highlighting the relevance of his corpus to contemporary society, *Cervantine Blackness* dialogues directly with *What Would Cervantes Do? Navigating Post-truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*, coauthored by William Egginton and David Castillo. *Cervantine Blackness* also complements Ana Laguna's *Cervantes, the Golden Age, and the Battle for Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century Spain*. While discussions of race relations, racial justice, and racialized discourses remain absent in both volumes, the pages you either hold in this book or scroll through on a screen enhance the erudite and timely contributions of Egginton, Castillo, and Laguna. Through my concept of "Cervantine Blackness," this project delves into the current understanding of Miguel de Cervantes's works by filling a void in Cervantine criticism that has remained woefully silent about the author's compelling literary construction and cultural codification of black Africans, sub-Saharan Africa, and the African diaspora.

To not fall into the trap of hypocrisy, I'm very cognizant of and intentional in my eschewing of dubbing *Cervantine Blackness* as the "first" book of its kind that analyzes blackness in Cervantes's writings. To do so and to make such a claim means participating in the politics of Columbusing and settler-colonialist beliefs that I critique throughout this prologue—mostly fiercely in the next section, titled "Against Agency: The Scramble for Blackness." I tread carefully here in how I have envisioned the gaps this project seeks to fill. *Cervantine Blackness* does not recover any essentialisms nor essentialized meanings about racialized blackness. This book expresses no interest in recovering Miguel de Cervantes as an exemplary savior of black people and black suffering. My intervention here not only provides a critical response to the recent international explosion of content and interest in the so-called black African in early modern Spain—and, arguably, other disciplines that fall under the umbrella of early modern studies—but also problematizes the carnivorous exploration of and exploitation constituted in *the study of* black bodies, black characters, black content, and black histories in early modern Spanish cultural and literary criticism to date.

Against Agency: The Scramble for Blackness

Cervantine Blackness explores a set of problems as demarcated by, or perhaps framed by, this prologue's title: "The Scramble for Blackness." This effort functions as both an intellectual concern and a cultural critique. A trendy uptick and expeditious interest in the study of blackness and black people

have overrun early modern Spanish literary studies. I identify this peaked awareness, concern, and curiosity with a series of events: the 2019 publication of *Staging Habla de Negros*, the beginning of the pandemic lockdowns in the spring of 2020, and a spate of police killings in the United States, whose victims included Breonna Taylor (March 13, 2020), George Floyd (May 25, 2020), and Tony McCade (May 27, 2020) that launched a volume of protests unprecedented in US history. As philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò cogently explains in *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)*, “The protests were not only large, but combative. Across the country, luxury mall and retail stores were sacked and pillaged. In Minneapolis, police fled the Third Precinct for their lives as rebels smashed windshields with projectiles and set the building on fire.” Táíwò adds, “The protests were global in scope. This global solidarity undoubtedly owes itself to the steadfast international organizing work of Black Lives Matter chapters, the umbrella Movement for Black Lives, and a number of other organizations around the world working in partnership and solidarity with them. These problems are among the many legacies of our immediate past that shape our lives today.”⁸

At this juncture Táíwò’s *Elite Capture* jogs our memory of and understanding about how Black Lives Matter movements worldwide have mobilized what I call a savior-mode zeitgeist in recent and forthcoming scholarly publications in early modern Spanish studies that focus on the study of blacks and their racialized blackness. What undergirds this scramble for blackness in early modern literary criticism manifests in Táíwò’s ideation of elite culture at “every scale” in the ivory tower.⁹ Put simply: to center blackness through the prisms of agency, joy, resistance, and subversion, scholars working in the field of early modern Spanish studies—and its adjacent established and emergent fields and subfields across geographies and languages—have perpetrated elite capture. These singularly progressive and enlightened acts, disguised as noble intellectual efforts and pursuits, concretize a scramble for blackness that aims to conquer and extract the glitzy agency, joy, and presence of black people and their thematic blackness across continental Africa and the vast African diaspora. If we were to follow and track recent publication trends and their recent and forthcoming metrics, such publication output might leave us with the impression that scholars with little training in critical black studies and its foundational genealogies, histories, methods, or theories seek to produce “new” work that fails to honor—or even mention—earlier scholarship created by black scholars across class, gender, and sexuality.¹⁰



Fig. 1. Caricature of Cecil John Rhodes, 1892. Edward Linley Sambourne, "The Rhodes Colossus," *Punch*, December 10, 1892.

I analogize the scramble for blackness to the colonization, division, extraction, occupation, and invasion of the African continent by seven Western European powers between 1880 and 1914, most notably known as the "Scramble for Africa," sponsored by Otto von Bismark's Berlin Conference of 1884.¹¹ As illustrated in and politicized by figure 1, the scramble to further discover and extract black Africans' agency—or to propel the insistence that blacks instrumentalized their agency to resist and subvert antiblack racism, discrimination, and enslavement—as if one has struck theoretical gold has its limits and can lead us to a dead-end analysis. We cannot easily disentangle black agency from the fanciful abstraction that blackness becomes for many scholars. I connect and identify the problem of agency to T. J. Tallie's important reminder for us, in "On Black Autonomy and Responding to Abstract, Genteel Contempt," that some white scholars "see us [black people] only as extensions of their noble projects. They see objects of study. They see informants. They see things to be spoken over or for or abstracted."¹² The stakes of analogizing colonial processes of extraction with the scholarly pursuits of overemphasizing black agency demonstrate how perceivably benign, well-intentioned celebrations of that black agency

collude with a literary criticism and an intellectual history that attend to the longer historical arcs of racial capitalism.

Another way to read my frustration manifests in an astute Twitter post by geographer Katherine McKittrick: “Theorizing should not be a scramble to make (and therefore own) a concept. beginning a project with a sexy new concept risks undermining theoretical activity because the sexy concept ends up controlling and undermining our analytical creativity and limiting how and who we read. (theorizing is about writing, sharing, reading, fighting about ideas—concepts help us do this, but how concepts are entangled with other ideas and stories and conversations is really beautiful and exciting).”¹³ *Cervantine Blackness* isn’t a scramble for new trendy theoretical gains and ends, replete with the extractive logic of racial capitalism. In accord with McKittrick’s perceptive charges, this book encourages us as critics and readers of Africans and African diasporic communities and their histories to not fall into the repeated myopic and seductive clutches of merely scrambling for messiah-like terms. The bandwagonism must end.

As early as 2003 and as recent as 2021, social historians have debated the elisions and implications foreclosed within the capital and jargon of enslaved persons’ agency. In his essay “On Agency,” Walter Johnson explicates my point as follows: “The term ‘agency’ smuggles a notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice, right into the middle of a conversation about slavery against which that supposedly natural (at least for white men) condition was originally defined.” Johnson adds, “And out of this misleading entanglement of the categories of ‘humanity’ and (liberal) ‘agency’ has emerged a strange syllogism in which the bare fact (as opposed to the self-conscious assertion) of enslaved ‘humanity’ has come to be seen as ‘resistance’ to slavery.”¹⁴ Urging us to think about Africa as having its own trajectory and sovereignties rather than bestowing agency on Africans, Herman Bennett argues that we must assume Africa and Africans’ existence from the very start. To illuminate my position even further, in dialogue with Bennett’s powerful push back against John Thornton’s insinuation of liberal causality and ill-defined African agency, he prods, “What are the implications of assigning Africans agency when Western humanism assumes as much with regard to philosophical Man? Does not the very act of bestowing agency foreclose its unquestionable universalism? Asked differently, does the gesture of granting agency not risk giving legitimacy to the very political-conceptual practice that exercised its existence among Africans in the first place?”¹⁵

Raising similar concerns, Marisa J. Fuentes cogently inverts the meaning of resistance, as it's linked to agency, in her indispensable work *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. Fuentes rebukes "our search for subversive agency as the dominant way to understand enslaved humanity."¹⁶ In its phenomenological dialectics—not necessarily one attributed to the master-slave dialectic from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's "Lordship and Bondage" treatise from *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)—I propose we scholars of early modern studies aspire to conceive anew agency and its coterminous analogues by suspending them—holding them in tension, if you will—with the diametrically binarized tenets of black pessimism and black optimism. Wielding no connection to the categorically facetious racialized grouping and status of *tente en el aire* (upended or suspended in the air), which is visually depicted in the colonial Mexican *sistema de castas* (society or system of castes), my recommendation is to *suspend*—or perhaps puppeteer—the antinomies and complexities of black personhood through a critical engagement with talking about blackness in all of its capaciousness through what I like to call "the and *and* the with." Affirmation and negation must be comingled.

So how do we rethink black agency in the works of Cervantes and his contemporaries? The black feminist academic pornographer Mireille Miller-Young offers some counsel. She explodes the concept of agency "by moving away from reading of its equivalence with resistive (sexual [and racial]) freedom." She proposes, "We might instead read agency as a facet of complex personhood within larger embedded relations of subordination. Agency then might be seen as a dialectical capacity for pleasure and pain, exploration, and denial, or for progressive change as well as everyday survival."¹⁷

Taking a methodological cue from Kevin Quashie's theorization of "black aliveness" provides an additional framework for us to consider. In *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being* Quashie reminds us that "antiblackness and white supremacy, as they live in and are enacted by any person in implicit or explicit or structural registers, both are sins against the human."¹⁸ Thinking closely with Quashie, I too depart "from black pessimism" and want to use *Cervantine Blackness* in this intellectual and justice-oriented tradition by reflecting on new possibilities of theorizing the capacious category of early modern Iberian blackness within Cervantine criticism. Channeling my *Cervantine Blackness* paradigm through Quashie's "black aliveness" concept, this project embraces a critical imperative that implores its audience to "imagine a black world." I am a black thinker and writer who invokes and sees in Cervantes's texts a world where blackness exists in the tussle of being, in reverie, in terribleness,

in exception, and in ordinariness.¹⁹ To decentralize the primacy of agency's overuse, I propose, instead, we think in terms of the "phenomenology of blackness"—that is, when and where blackness is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what location, both figurative and literal.²⁰

Meditation as Methodology I: On Form, Genre, and Style

My first book, *Staging Habla de Negros: Radical Performances of the African Diaspora in Early Modern Spain*, constitutes the well-behaved, obedient, traditional intellectual project. In a quixotic sense, its genealogy—or paternity test—started as a dissertation. In due course, depending somewhat on perfect Aristotelian *imitatio*, I reworked *Staging Habla de Negros* into a monograph that contains thematically structured chapters, a separate introduction, and a conclusion dubbed an "Afterword." Written with a clear, authorial voice, that book's two-pronged argument ebbs and flows in its own logical way. Much like other literary studies monographs, strange paternities and questionable genealogies influenced and informed how I examine—and perhaps still do to this day—primary sources and use secondary and theoretical materials to frame my discussion of literature. My inquisitorial-like confession draws from theorist Therí Alyce Pickens's sage counsel that the "picayune parameters" of a book project do not always require this formulation.²¹

Writing *Cervantine Blackness* has been profoundly cathartic and liberating. It is a theoretical work that belongs to black literary criticism. I identify this book, essayistic in form, as a manifesto or a provocation whose form, genre, and style is purposeful. It follows in the practice and tradition of black theorists such as Audre Lorde, Christina Sharpe, James Baldwin, Kevin Quashie, Marquis Bey, Saidiya Hartman, Toni Morrison, and W. E. B. Du Bois, among countless others. By no means am I a Baldwin, a Morrison, or a Sharpe! However, I am a student of theirs, and the way in which I've written this book—and *think* in this book—reflects their aesthetics, forms, styles, and traditions. The way in which I've crafted this project is not out of the ordinary. To date, a handful of extraordinary scholarly works that do not follow the neatly packaged—hegemonic, if you will—form, genre, and style of a so-called academic book do in fact exist and have excelled beyond measure. I list for you, my dear reader, several that come to mind: Herman Bennett's *African Kings and Black Slaves*; Marquis Bey's *Black Trans Feminism and Cistem Failure*; Tina M. Camp's *Listening to Images*; Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward*

Lives; Sharon Patricia Holland's *An Other: A Black Feminist Consideration of Animal Life*; Dorinne Kondo's *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*; Keguro Macharia's *Frottage*; Biko Mandela's *Black Life Matter*; Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*; Jennifer Morgan's *Reckoning with Slavery*; Kevin Quashie's *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being*; Alexander G. Weheliye's *Feenin' R&B Music and the Materiality of BlackFem Voices and Technology*; and Therí Alyce Pickens's *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*. Again, there are many black and nonwhite thinkers who blur, mix, and remix conventional academic writing style with their vernaculars and stylistic constructions.²²

While my use of alliteration in this book, for example, may dizzy some readers and may be uncharacteristic of book listings in early modern Iberian studies, *Cervantine Blackness* embraces the ways in which both critical black studies and critical theory have played with form, genre, and style. I'd like to remind those who aren't aware (or whose cognitive dissonance conveniently leads them astray): theory, too, is a *construction*, and it's not always *deconstructive*. In my justification of the stylistic choices carried out in this book, I reiterate that critical black studies creates and mobilizes theory in ways that function as method and vice versa. Critical black studies—and black feminist thought in particular—engages a methodological movement that interrogates the epistemology of knowledge production. As a black writing subject who has authored *Cervantine Blackness*, I hold onto the theory-method double bind as an apparatus for explicating the payoff and utility of my stylistic formulations.

For me this genealogy begins with literary theorist Barbara Christian, who precisely captures my motivations. Christian's pioneering essay "The Race for Theory," published in 1987, at the height of arguments about canons, exclusions, and theory, asserts unflinchingly, "My folk . . . have always been a race for theory."²³ For Christian theory does not exist distinct from the artistic production of black (women) writers; instead, theory constitutes and is constituted in the creative deployment of abstraction and eroticism in black arts. In Christian's conceptualization, black literary criticism—like black literature itself—is phenomenological and epistemological, an invitation to encounter being and becoming: "For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*." Following in the footsteps of black women theorists, this project treats new possibilities for writing and thinking in early modern studies that affirm and cohere the formulations, wisdom, and work of Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, and Hortense J. Spillers.²⁴

Meditation as Methodology II: Wax, Serpents, Images

Cervantine Blackness unfolds as a set of four meditations. The first, titled “Cervantine Blackness,” unlocks the book’s genesis by analyzing defaced statues in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. The second meditation, “Granular Blackness and *Don Quixote*,” concerns itself with the limits of agency and representation, asking if the literary imagination of blackness in *Don Quixote* is irreconcilable. To address this question, I suggest that blackness in parts 1 and 2 of *Don Quixote* is granular, hence the coinage of my term “granular blackness.” Such granularity allows us to sift through the ways in which Cervantes conditions, codifies, and structures blackness as alchemical, ephemeral, and phenomenological. The third meditation, “Rethinking Luis,” historicizes and unpacks the sociocultural range of blackness exhibited by the old, black eunuch Luis from the story *El celoso extremeño* (1613). To achieve this, I distill and make meaning out of the intersecting phenomena that BDSM and pornography, music, queerness, and sound harness my study of blackness as a fecund space to think through the material consequences of Cervantes’s construction of Luis. The final and fourth meditation, “Cervantes Unhinged,” redirects our critical gaze from Cervantes to the celebrated Spanish writer María de Zayas y Sotomayor, who wrote during the late seventeenth century. In doing so I query how Cervantes’s construction of racialized blackness changes or evolves in the works of high-born Spanish women like Zayas? This fourth rumination sheds light on Zayas’s racially gendered construction of race relations, interracial intimacy, and the racialized embodiment of material culture at the turn of the eighteenth century. *Cervantine Blackness* ends with the epilogue “To Cervantes with Love,” which comes full circle, speaking back to and troubling authorship, readership, and the grammar of black futures and freedom in Cervantine thought.

These meditations refer to, revise, augment, and sometimes may contradict one another. My preference for “meditations” over the conventional “chapter” nomenclature serves as an essayistic exercise that gets us to think about how we think when we think about blackness and Cervantes. Other synonyms we can apply to this formulation are “manifesto,” “pansé,” or “provocation.” As such, my meditations throughout this project resuscitate what Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset would deem a “circumstance” or “the mute things which are all around us,” with which we must reckon.²⁵ Concerning method and methodology, this section illumines how *Cervantine Blackness* employs its meditations to theorize on the meditation. To achieve

this I delink meditation from contemplation and devotion.²⁶ While it's not my object of study to dissect and reassemble the sinew of long-standing and ongoing debates about the genre of devotional meditation from Saint Augustine to Saint Ignatius Loyola or René Descartes to Saint Teresa of Ávila, I am compelled, however, to push beyond the bounds of devotional *meditatio* by pursuing the epistemological and phenomenological underpinnings of meditation as a means to assess and reimagine how this book's meditations understand blackness's movement in Cervantes's literary imagination. Early modern Iberian studies has escaped this kind of thinking. In my view the field has insufficiently adopted, explored, and theorized about the machinations of epistemology (about the way we know) and phenomenology (about the structure of experience) regarding racialized blackness, race relations, and racial justice. Perhaps, in a sense, like Descartes's wax example from "Meditation Two" and the phenomenological (experiential, sensorial, situated) concerns and conclusions we learn from it, each meditation in *Cervantine Blackness* aims to remold and reimagine Cervantes's literary world of blackness as a black one that radiates a textuality for feeling and orienting.

Images and visual culture play important roles in this book. I use images to create an experience with the pages you may thumb through in a physical book or scroll up and down on a screen. Purposeful in their selection, these visuals frame and invite further theorization about the potential of what this book's meditations do, heighten, or incense in phenomenological terms for its audience. The most powerful of these images is one that graces this book's cover: Franciszek Starowieyski's *Teatr Dramatyczny, Sala Prób, Cervantes, Teatr Cudów* (Dramatic Theater, Marvelous Playbill, Cervantes, Theater of Miracles) from 1968 (see fig. 2).

What resonates most is the serpent and the two ouroboros figures that encircle an eye and the word "Cervantes" and another with a nail spike, or thumbtack, encircled by the accompanying Polish phrase "Teatr Cudów" (Theater of Miracles). The artist replaces the more recognizable ouroboros symbol of the serpent or dragon eating its own tail for humanoid hands that lock and bear Latin and Polish inscriptions. The left-sided ouroboros inverts a Latin phrase from Virgil's tenth eclogue "*Amor vincit omnia*" (Love conquers all) and depicts a second one that reads, "*Ubi tu Gaius, ubi ego Gaia*" (Where you are, there I am). The right-sided ouroboros states, "*Fides ad mortem*" (Faith unto death). Moving from the left ouroboros to the right ouroboros, four Polish phrases accompany these sentences in Latin. Here I offer English translations of the Polish script:



Fig. 2. Franciszek Starowieyski, *Teatr Dramatyczny, Sala Prób, Cervantes, Teatr Cudów*, 1968. Color offset lithograph, 83.1 × 58 cm. Yale University Art Gallery. Gift of George Hopper Fitch, B.A. 1932. 1973.60.10.

- I. “*Baba z wozu koniom lżej*” (When the woman is off the cart, it’s easier on the horses).

In Polish referring to a woman as *baba* is generally pejorative, though perhaps in the context of the image *baba* could be an antiquated or colloquial usage. What is more, symbolically, one may use this phrase to express happiness or pleasure from getting rid of something or someone.

2. “*Donna Elvira jest piękną Hiszpanką, ma wdzięk*” (Donna Elvira is a beautiful Spanish woman with charm).
3. “*Temperament & własne mieszkanko*” (Temperament and one’s own little flat).
4. “*Stary mąż chrapie wciąż / O wyjdź na balkon dziewico, niczważaj na wieczoru chłód*” (The old husband is constantly snoring / Oh, go out to the balcony, maiden, don’t care about the evening).²⁷

For all intents and purposes of this project, I’m especially drawn to the black serpent that stands out in Starowieyski’s lithograph. Methodologically, my visual reading of this image reveals a potent linguistic register and symbol lodged between my pairing of “Cervantine” and “serpentine.” To theorize

further into this book's meditations, through my construction and unification of the Cervantine-serpentine homologue, I hope to tap into the ripe potential for linking aesthetics, art, and visual iconography into a broader understanding of *what* a meditation can perform and produce in this body of criticism.

With serpents outside of the West framed and positioned alongside and in continuum with West and Central African cosmologies, philosophies, and religious rites—as well as those that evolved and flourished in the Americas and the United States—I conjoin and conjure symbolic meaning into them. In Yorùbá *òrìṣà* (spelled *orixá* in the Portuguese contexts and *orisha* or *oricha* in Spanish contexts) iconography and religion, these serpents or snakes (called *ejo*, or *erè* or *òjòlá* for “python”) would be recognized as divine, powerful, and sacred. The python, for example, held by one of the *òrìṣà* Olókun's wives, is said to represent another serpent god called Òṣùmàrè (the spirit of the sacred rainbow), who attends to and works closely with Yemoja and Šàngó. The python is also sacred to Erinlè and Qbàtálá. For the Fon of the Dahomey, Dã/Dan Ayido Hwedo is the rainbow serpent that represents the union of the archetypal masculine (Lisa) and feminine (Mawu) principles and powers that maintain a balanced world. This divine python is revered famously in the port of Ouidah in Benin. In Roberto Strongman's magnificent work *Queering Black Atlantic Religions*, we learn of serpentine embraces—and their metaphors—through the African diasporic Haitian Vodou *lwa* Dambala (the sacred earthly serpent) and Aida Wedo (the rainbow or serpent in the sky).²⁸ On both sides of the Atlantic, in the Kongo and its diasporic proliferation in Brazil, Cuba, and the US South, serpents of differing sizes and species embody divine guardianship, kinship, magic, and spiritual potency. For instance, in Cuba, since the onset of the colonial period but most notably during the long nineteenth century, priests of the Afro-Cuban, Central African–derived cosmologies and rites of Palo Mayombe (known as Tata Nkisi Malongo and Yayi Nkisi Malongo) have referred to serpents as *majá*, *mboma*, and *ñoca*.

Placed in conversation with Western constructions of serpents, in terms of the ouroboros and the serpentine content illustrated in Starowieyski's lithograph, I turn to serpent metaphors and iconography throughout *Cervantine Blackness* to tap into the ripe potential for linking aesthetics, art, and visual imagery into a broader understanding of *what* a meditation can do, perform, and produce in this book. Such a critical move calls attention to the cycles of destruction and recreation in the evolution of critical thought on Miguel de Cervantes.

Meditation as Methodology III: Black Worldmaking, Critical Fabulations

This book's meditations operate as an organizing compass that reflects my own vulnerable contemplation of conjoining Cervantes and blackness. To be honest with you, *Cervantine Blackness* embodies my scholarly vulnerability; it represents intellectual risks and political investments that at times scare me and take me out of my comfort zone. Blackness has always signaled vulnerability and risk—especially in the current state of the planet and the crises that afflict it. As such, to be vulnerable with Cervantes means to break through the frames, rubrics, and normative conventions that are imposed on us. My vulnerability remains predicated on what follows in the dissemination and reception of this book, like the release of Descartes's *Meditations*: the mark of controversy and polemics.

Cervantine Blackness is deliberately irreverent, rambunctious, and wayward. Taking methodological cues from Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, this project concerns itself with breaking open archival documentation—literary and otherwise—from Cervantes's and his contemporaries' worlds so that they might yield a richer picture of pre-Enlightenment Iberian black social life.²⁹ Through vulnerability and risks, I prefer to think of *Cervantine Blackness* as a fugitive text, marked by the errantry with which it identifies and that it catalogs. In this spirit, following Hartman, I read against the grain and press at the limits of the historical and literary archives associated with Cervantes and those in his writerly orbit. Waywardness in this book speculates about what might have been. As a method, the wild ideas reverberating in this book reimagine blackness through Cervantes's spirit of irony conveyed in writings—yet also his *pulcritud*, or neatly nuanced details—that simultaneously flicker before our eyes.

My privileging of the wayward in *Cervantine Blackness* thus allows me to consider how Cervantes narrated blackness not merely as a racial category of racialized colorism but, more interesting, in light of the cultural, ideological, linguistic, performative, spatial, and textual contours of such a critical fabulation and formulation. As I argue in meditation 2 on blackness in *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Cervantes gives us granular yet glasslike prisms beaming and refracting with content and (im)possibility to think about blackness. Concerning critical fabulation and speculation, the theoretical interventions of Saidiya Hartman, Donna Haraway, and Tavia Nyong'o activate my inclination to create new meaning out of the black lives and black diasporic worlds Cervantes assembles and imagines in his works.

Once activated, such critical fabulations empower me to fill in the blanks with interdisciplinary approaches and against-the-grain close readings desperately needed in early modern literary criticism. Drawing on my understanding of Cervantine scholarship and my own theorization of blackness in the early modern Iberian world, I suggest we make anew and shift our critiques in and of the author's narrative rendering of blackness. Narrative is *always* an act of selection, framing, editing, adjusting, and silencing, and Cervantes's writing of blackness—autobiographical, literary, historiographic, or otherwise—is not exempt from this recursive process. Ultimately, *Cervantine Blackness* positions Cervantes as a thinker who channels both the shortcomings and value of black Africans' aesthetic, cultural, historical, and political maneuverings in the Spain of his time. The book encapsulates a cultural, linguistic, and literary double bind that can no longer be ignored by scholars nor merely dismissed as insignificant or marginal.

I choose to nominalize Cervantes by adding the suffix “ine” to attend to the word as both description and category. My staged grammatical intervention in this book's title enables me to trouble the adjectival pronouncement and institutional(ized) recognition of its adjectival, genealogical, and institutional consolidation and footing (e.g., Instituto Cervantes, Casa Cervantes, and so on), most notably in relation to grammatically theorizing about blackness and vice versa. As a grammar and critical nomenclature for unpacking Cervantes's literary construction of sub-Saharan Africans and their diasporic worldmaking, my conceptualization of “Cervantine Blackness” provides a productive way for reading outside of the crevices and ridges of calcified narratives about black agency that have begun to stunt the field's evolution and foresight. I can then create, imagine, and pinpoint the formation of blackness that entails knowing and representing the cultural and literary history of the West, Europe's encounters with Africans, and the evolving account of racial becoming.

Additionally *Cervantine Blackness* understands “blackness” as geographic and spatial. This turn in my framing of blackness is heavily influenced by black geographers such as Katherine McKittrick, J. T. Roane, and Clyde Woods.³⁰ Likewise, the collection *The Black Geographic: Praxis, Resistance, Futurity*, edited by Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, has enriched my framing of early modern Iberian blackness within and outside of Cervantes studies. In its geographic and spatial capacities, I think of and sit with blackness as liquid, as nonlinear, a process. Drawing inspiration from new scholarship published in the Open Access journal *Liquid Blackness: Journal of Aesthetics and Black Studies*, I maintain in *Cervantine Blackness* that blackness

in Cervantes operates as an ongoing process that manifests in black geographies and spaces. Like the Cervantine-serpentine homologue I introduced earlier, as well as my ideation behind the cover image, the serpentine reference metaphorizes the ways in which blackness undulates, traverses, and penetrates spaces, structures, and terrains that are integral to imagining how Cervantes and other writers from his time link blackness to broader themes of geology, land, and topography. The black geographies in Iberian early modernity have taken place in alleys, battlefields, brothels, castles, cathedrals, churches, convents, courtyards, docks, gardens, guilds, haylofts, hospitals, intersections of streets, jails, monasteries, palaces, plazas, ships, tile factories, universities, vineyards, and so on. In relation to Cervantes and his contemporaries, see table 1 to help pin down where black people show up.

I substantiate the claim that blackness is a process, liquid in its constitution, by exposing this book's many audiences to Cervantes's ability to portray sub-Saharan African blackness as active, fluid, and ongoing processes. With this in mind, we cannot disentangle blackness from geography and space. (And this is precisely why I maintain that clenching onto romanticized notions of agency, joy, presence, and recovery fall flat and stall in the

Table 1 Schematic of black characters

	Reference	Title	Geography/space
1	The black academician and manicongo figures	<i>Don Quijote de la Mancha</i> , part 1 (1605)	Providence of Ciudad Real, Castilla-La Mancha; castle or gravesite
2	Juan Latino	<i>Don Quijote de la Mancha</i> , part 1 (1605)	Granada; court, palace, or university setting
3	The unnamed housekeeper and her boyfriend	<i>Coloquio de los perros</i> (1613)	Sevilla; domestic space
4	The old eunuch Luis	<i>Celoso extremeño</i> (1613)	Sevilla; hayloft apartment
5	The enslaved girl Guiomar	<i>Celoso extremeño</i> (1613)	Sevilla; domestic space
6	Princess Micomicona (racially impersonated by Dorotea)	<i>Don Quijote de la Mancha</i> , part 1 (1605)	Castilla-La Mancha; continental Africa, fictionalized as "Guinea" and "Ethiopia"
7	Sancho Panza's reference to enslaving blacks	<i>Don Quijote de la Mancha</i> , part 1 (1605)	Castilla-La Mancha; fictionalization of colonial territories
8	Don Quixote's reference to black soldiers	<i>Don Quijote de la Mancha</i> , part 2 (1615)	Castilla-La Mancha; fictionalization of colonial territories
9	Guinea (West Africa) personified	<i>El rufián dichoso</i> (1615)	Span of continents and years

longevity and sustainability of their sophistication and theoretical potential.) As we see in this project, Cervantes's expansive literary archive catalogs and indexes blackness insofar as he channels and locates alternative forms of record keeping, measuring, and assigning value and nonproprietary modes of gathering. Energized by the pathbreaking interventions exemplified by the editors of the *Liquid Blackness* journal, my coinage and deployment of the term "Cervantine Blackness" gives a "variety of idiosyncratic, errant, and unruly indices to adopt improvisatory methods, which often prompt a measure of critical vulnerability: a willingness to be guided by objects of study and to learn from their rich complexity how to unspool" Cervantes's archive.³¹

Like a serpent, I crisscross and uncoil Cervantes's archive of blackness by way of meticulous and tedious detective work, an archaeological excavation of interwoven literary communities, histories, and influences of Iberian elites with whom Miguel de Cervantes interacted and brushed shoulders. Popping up unexpectedly in each meditation of this book, my Cervantine-serpentine method, interdisciplinary in its analysis, sheds light on the salient role Iberian elites had on Cervantes and his contemporaries. This was a society that Cervantes critiqued, satirized, and scorned—many of whom, in serpentine-like ways—made their wealth and solidified their fame and power by the trafficking in and selling of sub-Saharan Africans. At the opening of Cervantes's *El celoso extremeño* (1613), for instance, the narrator comments on the leisurely and slaker-like idleness of Seville's privileged class. Calculation, plotting, and strategy dictated their moves. Serving as counterpoints to some of the Cervantes's works presented in table 1, I list my findings from various archives in Seville, Spain:

1. Gaspar de Arguijo (1532–94) and his son, Juan (1567–1622), were influential and powerful merchants and *regidores* who made their fortunes from the African slave trade in the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Honduras, and the Americas. A famed poet during Cervantes's time, Juan de Arguijo ran an intellectual literary circle out of his home. It is believed that Cervantes possibly attended these meetings. He mentions Juan de Arguijo in *Viaje del Parnaso* (II, vv. 352–57).
2. Francisco de Aldana (1537–78) was lauded by Cervantes as "El Divino" in the pastoral novel *La Galatea* (1585). In "Poema XXIV" Aldana affirms and boasts the potency of his enslaved Mandinga wet nurse's breast milk.
3. Miguel Cid (1550–1615) stipulated in his will in 1634 that he owned enslaved persons in his household, estimated at 15,000 *ducados*,

in addition to silverware and other pieces of furniture. Cervantes briefly mentions Cid in *Viaje del Parnaso* (II, vv. 46–48).

4. Felipe Godínez (1582–1659), dramaturge and author of *San Mateo en Etiopía* and *San Sebastián y la reina Esther*, left an indelible imprint on Cervantes, who recognizes his skill in *Viaje del Parnaso* (II, vv. 31–34).

In closing, *Cervantes Blackness* has allowed, compelled, and energized me to ground and recenter myself through cultural and literary criticism. Inspired by Biko Mandela Gray’s method of “sitting-with,” such a feeling in *Cervantine Blackness* has aspired to make the methodological commitment of sitting with—caring for, gathering, and tracking—Cervantes’s and his contemporaries’ engagement with blackness that may rock us to our core.³² As I vibe with Langston Hughes, I invite you to wonder with me as I wander.