
Quantum *Quixote*: Embodying Empathy in the Borderlands

AMY R. WILLIAMSEN

AS I LOOKED FORWARD to the Cervantes Society symposium in Texas, I looked back over my thirty-three year relationship with Cervantes, bearing in mind the question posed by the conference organizers: why does Cervantes still inspire us today?¹ Or, phrased more narrowly, what significance does *Don Quixote* hold in/for the quantum age? As I reflected upon what it means to read Cervantes in the 21st century, I realized with stunning clarity that since my first serendipitous encounter with Cervantes in a Missouri classroom with a seemingly fearless Howard Mancing (who did indeed wear a bowl on his head to teach a certain episode), I have seen Cervantes everywhere.

1 These remarks were first presented in November 2010, a few months before the devastating events on the morning of January 8, 2011. The multiple shots fired that morning in Tucson may not have been heard around the world, but they were heard by my thirteen-year-old son who was hiking perilously close to the area. Adults nearby attempted to reassure him that the percussive blasts echoing through the foothills were merely firecrackers—until rescue helicopters and wailing sirens filled the air. As he attempted to make sense of what had happened, he kept repeating, “Mom, I should have known better.” At the MLA in Los Angeles, I was touched by the support of friends, colleagues and strangers who, reading the badge that identified me as a Tucson resident, tried to comfort me, often repeating “Things will change now.” Upon reflection, I was forced to recognize that we should *all* know better. These things do not improve of their own accord. It requires the active commitment of concerned individuals to bring about the fundamental changes our society so desperately needs. Sometimes, we can deal with problems by reframing them in ways that enable progress; however, some realities cannot be improved by “reframing”—their horror cannot be mitigated. We must come to terms with them and our own powerlessness to make them right again. Yet, we must not remain passive. In this spirit, I would like to dedicate these pages to the brave women and men who risked their own lives to disarm the shooter *and to all* our children—May they never have to call upon such courage.

Not the quixotic icons captured by Doré and Picasso, but my vision of a benevolent man with a wicked sense of humor and irony, whose body and soul show the tolls of life, and who has frequent cameo appearances in both my dreams and nightmares.

Undoubtedly, emerging technologies influence our relationships with early modern texts. Kindles, Nooks and iPads multiply at vertiginous rates; yet, the powerful sensory experience of turning over a new page cannot be replicated—the tactile sensation of finger against paper, the earthy smell of vintage binding are lost to those who only interface with texts electronically. Lost as well are the insights of generations past who have scribbled in the margins. Who knows how much my entire understanding of *Persiles y Sigismunda* was shaped by the hasty fountain ink notation regarding the elder Antonio's initial encounter with the "barbarian" Ricla that produced their first son: "What a first date!" This four word exclamation unquestionably highlighted my perception of potentially subversive elements in this supposedly straightforward Christian allegory.

Nonetheless, these same technologies offer alternative ways of enriching textual experiences.² They can provide immediate access to crucial contexts. Cervantes's literary legacy—truly more than the sum of its parts—is instantly available, thanks to the Herculean efforts of Eduardo Urbina's "Proyecto Cervantes" and others. A wealth of cultural contexts—music, art, the latest critical studies—are only seconds away. We can easily integrate other fields of inquiry. We can heed Lisa Vollendorf's entreaty to re-examine Cervantes's canonical texts in the light of what we have learned by reading the works of women writers, by studying the material reality of women's lives in Cervantes's time—we can establish links to literary analyses and historical data to provide this background with the click of a small plastic tool commonly called a mouse.

2 The first three months of 2011 also vividly revealed how emerging technologies can change lives and transform political realities. The role that social media played in the revolution in Tunisia and the ongoing struggles for freedom in the Middle East will undoubtedly be the subject of future studies.

What, in turn, can Cervantes offer contemporary “Kindlers” in our quantum age? Defined in popular terms, a quantum “is the minimum amount of any physical entity involved in an interaction”; discoveries regarding quantum energy have forced scientists to contend with “non-local” events—for they must consider how seemingly unrelated physical entities—separated by time and space—influence the behavior of one another.³ Hence, it proves quite appropriate, in a quantum framework, to consider how a physical object, penned over four centuries ago, may inform human behavior in today’s world.

Here I would like to offer some preliminary reflections on what I, given my own current socio-political realities, consider to be one of Cervantes’s most crucial contributions captured in *Don Quixote*—the call to embrace empathy. Surprisingly, more and more scientific endeavors include metaphysical contemplations. As I noted in my first attempt to explore the productive connections between science and literature, *Co(s)mic Chaos: Exploring LOS TRABAJOS DE PERSILES Y SIGISMUNDA*, the pioneers behind chaos theory mused in the conclusion of their ground-breaking article in *Scientific American*: “In this light, chaos provides for a mechanism that allows for free will within a world governed by deterministic laws” (Crutchfield et al, 57). Now, almost two decades later, websites, books, and articles on quantum physics include frequent discussions of the need for empathy grounded in “quantum entanglement.”

In an age every bit as troubled as our own, Cervantes skillfully manipulated the responses of his readers. In a brilliant, concise monograph, *Distance and Control in DON QUIXOTE*, Ruth El Saffar clearly outlines how the author controls the reader’s relationships with the characters—when the distance increases, the characters become objectified and are increasingly subjected to ridicule.

Notably, Cervantes carefully orchestrates readers’ engagement with the characters, employing discourse to, in essence, “bestialize” individuals at key moments. Some instances, as the blanketing of Sancho, are brutal in their directness. “Como perro en Carnestolendas,” like

3 For an interesting update on quantum matters, see Vedral.



Fig. 1: Commemorative stamp, 25 centimos. Issued in Spain, 1905; cancelled in 2005.

a dog blanketed during Carnival festivities, he is tossed up and down while Don Quixote remains paralyzed on the sidelines (1.17:224; see figure 1). A few chapters later, Sancho is reduced to his animal-like bodily functions when he defecates from fear during the adventure of the “batanes” (1.20:251-52). In part two, as master and squire return from their ill-fated adventure with the “barco encantado,” the narrator, in an oft-cited passage, quips “Volvieron a sus bestias, y a ser bestias, don Quijote y Sancho Panza” (2.29:251). Even village leaders strive to distinguish themselves by braying like donkeys.

In part, what distinguishes *Don Quixote* from the debased world of the picaresque (or the crudeness of Avellaneda’s apocryphal second part) is that Cervantes then reframes these very same characters in ways that underscore their humanity. For example, consider the merciless description of Maritornes in animalistic terms with her hair “que alguna manera tiraba a crines,” her breath that smelled of “ensalada fiambre y trasnochada” (1.16:243) and whose assignation is designated with the same term used for Rocinante’s sexual exploits a few chapters before—“refocilarse” (1.16:241). Mere pages later, Cervantes highlights her humanity when she is the only inhabitant of the inn who shows compassion for Sancho’s suffering (1.17:255).

Critics may be considered as “hard” or “soft,” depending on their emotional identification with or critical distancing from Alonso Quijano’s plight; nonetheless, it seems Cervantes leads readers from one position to the other, in an ongoing emotional oscillation. The text consistently plays with the presentation of “outsiders”—prostitutes, actors, gypsies, *moriscos*, and even criminals. At times, the work underscores their humanity; then, just as compellingly, it reduces them to their basest nature. When Don Quixote, the knight errant seeking to redress wrongs, is confronted with the *galeotes*, chained together like animals (see figure 2), he addresses each of them with kindness and concern. Though replete with humor and irony, the ensuing conversations reveal the *galeotes*’ individual existences as fathers, sons, hus-



Fig. 2: *Los galeotes*. Illustration by Gustave Doré from *L'Ingénieux hidalgo Don Quichotte de la Manche* (Paris: Librairie de L. Hachette et Cie., 1863). Courtesy of the Eduardo Urbina Cervantes Collection, Texas A&M University Libraries.

bands—human beings trying to eek out meager existences, subjected to the whims of arbitrary judges and justice. After Don Quixote frees them, he suffers their brutal ingratitude at the hands of Ginés de Pasamonte and others.

Why oscillate between these extremes? It is clear that, in his delusions, Don Quixote does not judge “con la prudencia necesaria” and, as a result, is often “taken in” by the ruses of the unscrupulous from every social class. In this sense, Cervantes seems to warn us against naively accepting appearances (or stated intentions) at face value. Equally important, however, is his call for us to embrace empathy in the sense captured by Mikhail Bakhtin’s neologism “vzhivanie,” literally “inhabiting the other.”⁴ In his development of this concept, Bakhtin stresses the importance of “active empathy” and “creative understanding.” As Russell Valentino explains, this requires one “to enter actively into another individuality, another perspective on the world without losing sight even momentarily of one’s own unique perspective” (3). Bakhtin cautions against falling prey to simplistic identification that leads to “infection with another’s suffering” (25); instead, he privileges what Gavin Flood calls the historically embedded “dialogic interaction of self and other” (163).

Some recent studies by Rosa Rossi and others have attempted to trace the origins of Cervantes’s deep understanding of the plight of the marginalized. Whether it results from personal experience or natural inclination, this empathy is a palpable presence throughout his work. Interestingly, empathy is now quickly becoming a “hot” topic as current advances in cognitive science illuminate the functions of mirror neurons. Marco Iacoboni, one of the pioneers in the field, explains that “mirror neurons [...] actually make us feel the suffering or the pain of the other person” (4-5).⁵ Yet, Lynne Cameron notes that “even automatic mirror neuron activated empathy is mediated by the subject’s

4 Though most often rendered as “live entering” or “living through,” the English phrase “inhabiting the other” better reflects the original sense of adopting the other’s position without becoming the other. I would like to thank Grace Fielder for her assistance in grappling with the linguistic challenge posed by Bakhtin’s creative use of such neologisms.

5 Howard Mancing and his talented group have delved into the rich field of cognitive science, while Catherine Connor, Robert Johnston and others have begun to explore the

prior activity experience, since that has influenced the development of the brain” (8).

Centuries ago, Cervantes seems to have sensed the emotional power behind these scientific “discoveries.” He provides readers myriad opportunities to empathize with others, tangibly embodying their suffering—whether it be Don Quixote’s dismay at the sad state of his stockings, Sancho’s lament for his ass, or Ricote’s passionate love of a country lost. Amidst laughter, there lies an awareness of the depth of human suffering. Amidst tears, moments of joy shine through as testaments to the indomitable human spirit. Perhaps this facet of Cervantes’s genius explains why *Don Quixote* has been called the Bible of Humanity; why, in conflicts world wide, this one work has been credited by the victims of violence and unthinkable horror with helping them maintain their sanity against all odds.

Personal testimonies abound. The holocaust survivor whose tale is documented in the BBC Video, *The Further Adventures of Don Quixote*, explains that he chose to work in the *Museo iconográfico del Quijote* because this book—his only possession—became a beacon of hope during those terrifying times. María Antona Garcés, the esteemed literary critic once held captive by Colombian *guerillas*, writes:

More than anyone or anything else, Cervantes has been the great teacher, the healer who has helped me to reattach “el roto hilo de mi historia” as I read, and wrote about, his fictions. Laughing with these fictions, reinterpreting them time and time again, often from different perspectives, pondering the profound questions that arise from Cervantes’ texts, I have been pressured to sound the complexities of literary and psychic constructions, both in Cervantes and in myself. (Garcés xi)

Cervantes helps us reconnect with ourselves and with each other. He teaches us that if we as individuals grow too distant from one another, we lose sight of each other’s humanity.

implications of mirror neurons for the understanding of Golden Age literature, especially the *comedia*.

Furthermore, Cervantes's text explores the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, and even gender. Here I do not wish to enter into the ongoing debate on whether or not Cervantes might be a feminist or a proto-feminist. Instead, I would like to consider the impact that his outstanding women characters have had on subsequent generations. Marcela, who utters the phrase "Nací libre" and Transila (appropriately known as "de la voz") who actively voices her desire, have inspired readers throughout history. (It seems very fitting that one of the first dissertations ever published by a female Hispanist in the United States is Edith Cameron's "Woman in *Don Quixote*.") Cervantes rendered visible/audible/speakable facets of women's lives that had been veiled for too long. In his literary universe, women are not mere static types or stock figures, their identities are shaped by dynamic intersections of gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, and religion. They may be clever like Dorotea, simple like Maritornes, cruel like Altisidora; they may be gut-wrenchingly ugly or breathtakingly beautiful (one of the countless "bellezas sin par"). Or, they may appear as a cloaked cipher like Zoraida whose textual presence serves to question assumptions about race, ethnicity, and religion.

Even more transgressive, women in Cervantes's texts may openly act upon their own sexual desires. In *Persiles y Sigismunda*, Rosamunda and Cenotia both shamelessly pursue the young, chaste Antonio. Both women are textually marked as marginal because of their "advanced" age—admittedly, they would qualify for residency in today's *Cougar Town*—and their deviant professions (courtesan and witch). Rosamunda even argues for the advisability of pre-marital sex for women: "la experiencia en todas las cosas es la mejor maestra de las artes y asi, mejor te fuera entrar experimentada en la compañía de tu esposo, que rústica e inculta" (I.I4:II7).

In many ways, Cervantes's fictional creations anticipate contemporary insights into gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity. In her compelling memoir, powerfully entitled *Infidel*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Muslim Somali refugee who became a Dutch Senator, asserts that women will not enjoy full human agency until female sexuality is freed from the constraints of patriarchal discourses framed in terms of reli-

gion; that is, until morality is not defined in terms of female chastity. She links the mutilation of girls to culturally perpetuated models that equate women with wild beasts whose sexuality needs to be controlled.

Similarly, time and time again, Cervantes invites us to consider how dehumanizing distance enables the atrocities that we as societies perpetuate—whether these take the form of legislation targeting “illegal” immigrants, torture of supposed terrorists, or violent genocide of entire cultures. In his monumental work, *Transnational Cervantes*, William Childers persuasively argues that “La Mancha” can best be understood as a borderland shaped by cultures in contact. Accordingly, a study of Cervantes’s careful manipulation of the language that reduces human beings to animals may serve as a valuable lens for analyzing racist discourse in our quantum age.

Given current political developments in Arizona, I thought it might prove illuminating to consider the discourse and the images today’s media use to portray undocumented workers. I was astounded. In an article from 1999 entitled, “‘Like an animal I was treated’: Anti-Immigrant Metaphor in US Public Discourse,” Otto Santa Ana compellingly demonstrates how the metaphor “immigrants are animals” predominates in our media. From the building of fences to keep the “wanderers” out, to “round-ups” to “corral” them,⁶ these individual are treated like chattel.⁷ Even more damaging, during the year 2010 they were portrayed in the US Senate as contaminants, “toxic sludge that is killing thousands of plants and animals, ruining entire ecosystems, and destroying the livelihoods” and the very “way of life for *real* Americans” (Bershad). The preoccupation with “limpieza de sangre” that Cervantes so skillfully undermines in his portrayal of “cristianos viejos” and “cristianos nuevos” flourishes under a new guise.⁸

6 For representative visual images, see <http://ouramericangeneration.org/blog/the-every-day-life-of-the-border>. In some cases, detained immigrants are chained as modern day *galeotes*. See <http://www.azcentral.com/community/phoenix/articles/2009/02/04/20090204abrkinmatesmarcho204-ON.html> and http://www.azcentral.com/php-bin/commphotos/show.php?colid=9798&slide_nbr=1&fAZ=1&http_referer=http://www.azcentral.com/community/phoenix/articles/2009/02/04/20090204abrkinmatesmarcho204-ON.html#1

7 Santa Ana analyzes how terms usually reserved for describing livestock are systematically applied to immigrants; women “give birth to babies” whereas pregnant immigrants “cross the border to drop their babies” (202).

8 For more on “limpieza de sangre” and its legacy, see Martínez.



Fig. 3: Road sign on Interstate 5, Northbound, California. Photo courtesy of Salvador Cerón.

A few visuals will suffice as illustration. The road sign, usually depicting crossing wildlife, here portrays humans (see figure 3); more troubling, however, is that the English requests “Caution” while the Spanish warns “Prohibido.” In other instances, immigrants are rendered as snakes or as floating refuse.⁹ Equally powerful images that underscore the humanity of those crossing the border in hope of better lives (see figures 4 and 5)—the beloved keepsakes and treasured books abandoned in flight from officials—do not receive equal press, they remain in the counterculture margins.¹⁰ Lest we think this dynamic is limited to the American Southwest, consider an example from Europe. A disturbing photo vividly displays the bodies of two young Roma women, dead on the sand, treated by Italian beachgoers with as little regard as road-kill along a highway.¹¹

Now more than ever, it seems imperative that we heed Cervantes’s call to empathy. We must actively resist discourse that objectifies human beings as “other”; for, this is the first step in constructing the psychological and sociological conditions for abuse, one effectively em-

9 See <http://thunderations.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/illegal-immigrants-water.jpg>.

10 My heartfelt thanks to Claudia Aburto—talented scholar, author, poet, and artist—for sharing these prints from her recent exhibit.

11 See <http://observers.france24.com/content/20080723-holidaymakers-drowned-roma-girls-naples>. For a discussion of such issues, see Catalano.



Fig. 4: *Sacred Relics*. Photo courtesy of Claudia Aburto.



Fig. 5: *Mi vida eres tú*. Photo courtesy of Claudia Aburto.

ployed by militaries worldwide. As Edith Cameron points out, research suggests that “empathy must be inhibited for people to engage in violence” (9). Studies of discourse during times of war and upheaval reveal how insidiously rhetoric can legitimize the unthinkable (e.g., soldiers involved in the Mei Lei massacre thought of their opponents as “gooks”; the junta labeled individuals as “subversive” to justify their elimination during Argentina’s “guerra sucia”; to name but a few recent examples). The discourse of our nation today regarding immigration is chillingly similar. Although the aftermath of the Tucson shootings drew national attention to the lack of civility in public discourse,¹² leading to the creation of the National Institute for Civil Discourse—co-chaired by Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush—and the establishment of the Fund for Civility, Respect and Understanding, there has not yet been substantive change in the tenor of political discussion regarding border issues.

Regrettably, many corporations, who exploit undocumented workers, also reduce human beings to objects—individuals become mere entries on a balance sheet. In fact, recent studies suggest that when analyzed according to standard psychological criteria, some global corporations, motivated primarily by greed, function as do the psychopaths described by psychologist Robert Hare, “completely lacking in conscience and in feelings for others, they selfishly take what they want and do as they please” (xi).

In today’s technologically advanced society, we must be wary at every turn, especially in what passes for “entertainment.” For example, the simulation game “Border Wars: A Day on the Line,” which is linked to the National Geographic television series “Border Wars,” rewards players only if they assume that all immigrants are “armed and dangerous.”¹³ The system trains us to see the “other” as our enemy. In response to such insidious and divisive practices, we must force ourselves to come to terms with the human suffering we inflict. If we can

12 For a discussion of related issues, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/15/guns-in-politics-giffords-palin_n_808016.html#s223332&title=Voters_Invited_To

13 I would like to thank Jamie Wilson for sharing her insights into “Border Wars.”

remind political officials, corporate executives, and even university administrators of the human costs of their revenue saving “initiatives,” we have a chance to stave off some of the most damaging decisions.

How can we fight against the injustices of our own time? Robert Encila’s program notes for a recent community production of *Man of La Mancha*, Dale Wasserman’s dramatic rendition of Cervantes’s quest, prove suggestive:

The heart can surprise and inspire intentional acts of magnificence. Don Quixote, a dissenter of the highest order, sees life not as it is, but how it ought to be. [...] It’s maudlin, perhaps, but to “Dream the impossible” might be a fitting mission statement for a nation fraught with cynicism and divided by vicious politics [...] Our public education wobbles on life support, but we never lack for zeal to sustain military and religious preeminence [...] but there’s good news! [...] mad people are about, embracing the disenfranchised and rescuing our future from imprudent leaders. (2; see figure 6)

Faced with an insane, unthinkable reality, perhaps insanity is a viable response.

In my own experience, “strategic insanity” has functioned as an effective defense mechanism. Decades ago, I lived in a rundown apartment complex, literally on the wrong side of the tracks, just on the edge of the University of Southern California where I was completing my doctorate. I was walking back from a class on Cervantes, an author I have admired with an enduring passion since I was a clueless undergraduate. As dusk fell, I suddenly felt something sharp against my back and heard a deep voice telling me in lurid, graphic detail what the unseen assailant behind me planned to do with the knife he held against me. Even though the voice forbade me from turning around, I could tell the man was much taller than I was; by the arm I could see, he was much stronger; and because I have never been athletic, I knew he would be much faster as well. Fighting back or fleeing were not options. My mind raced: What could I possibly do to frighten him



Fig. 6: Production still from *Man of La Mancha* (Studio Connections). Courtesy of Robert Encilas, Director.

away? This was Los Angeles; we had long ago learned that cries for help went unheeded. Suddenly, scenes from *Don Quixote* came clearly into focus: no one knows what to do with a crazy person. So, all I had to do was convince him I was crazy, making enough noise in the process to attract attention. I instantly began to skip, badly singing “We’re off to see the Wizard” as loudly as I could. I steeled my resolve, skipping and singing for what seemed like ages, ignoring the stream of threats. People from the shacks next door to my building opened their doors and windows; as my complex came into view, the manager, drawn by what she termed that “godawful racket,” looked out and called the police. But most important of all, the pressure on my back eased as the fading voice behind me murmured incredulously “Bitch, you are crazier than I am.” He was never caught, but I was never cut.¹⁴

¹⁴ I was stunned when a journalist, after hearing an earlier version of this presentation, asked me “What happened to the black man?” I have no recollection of the attacker’s ethnicity and never mention it in the description of the event. This exchange underscored for me how our own mental schema influence interpretation.

As current dire economic times have combined with frightening changes in Arizona, I have often felt that I am, with others, literally fighting for the survival of the humanities. I think back on that episode in Los Angeles, and realize that the study of Cervantes prepared me for real life in ways that traditional hard sciences with their mathematical precision and engineering with its fixed principles could not. Especially in the quantum age, humanistic inquiry represents a necessary complement to sciences in that it provides other ways of looking at the world, of dealing with issues that are neither black nor white. Indeed, Cervantes's texts, both canonical and non-canonical, in all their chaotic complexity, teach us the most lasting lesson of all: that human experience, in all its untamed glory, unites us. Empathy engenders compassion; in turn, this empowers us to transcend the socially constructed barriers that would otherwise divide us. Thus, we need not fall prey to the divisiveness of distancing discourse; rather, we can follow the "wisdom of the humanities," a wisdom "grounded in human rights and human values" (Rudenstine).

amy.williamsen@uncg.edu

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, GREENSBORO

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