



Centring Blackness: Towards a New Public History of the Spanish Empire

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Jesús Sanjurjo

University of Cambridge, UK

History ‘is, at last, impossible’.¹ No single narrative, study, research, or reconstruction of events can capture the complexity of human existence. No single narrative can tell us the story of everything and everyone that has ever existed. Nor it can describe with a genuine level of honesty the emotional universe of individuals that once were. History is the discipline of approximation, a partial description, a bounded analysis of the past.² When individuals build histories, they tell us a lot about themselves, their values, and their aspirations. Creating a specific type of history is a political choice. Historiographies are political vehicles. As David Harlan put it ‘a sense of the past is a way of being in the present. At its best it is a way of arguing with ourselves’.³

If impossible, what is the goal of history? Or to be more precise, what is the role of public historians in creating new histories of Europe? Olivette Otelle told us in her powerful recent book, *African Europeans*, that learning the history of Afro-descendants in Europe has the transformative capacity of dismantling ‘racial oppression in the present’.⁴ History then is a transformative tool, a vehicle for thinking about the past to change the present. More recently, the historiography of the Global South has demonstrated a growing concern with the histories of those who have been silenced, ignored, or disregarded in terms of the grand narratives.⁵ Creating the histories

Corresponding author:

Jesús Sanjurjo, University of Cambridge, UK.

Email: js2713@cam.ac.uk

¹ H. Glassie, ‘The Practice and Purpose of History’, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (1994), 961–8.

² Ibid.

³ D. Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago, IL 2009), 209.

⁴ O. Otelle, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (London 2021), 20.

⁵ M. Barcia, ‘Into the Future: A Historiographical Overview of Atlantic History in the Twenty First Century’, *Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2021), 181–99.

‘of the nobodies’, as Eduardo Galiano called them, allows us to build more accurate, more inclusive, more exciting and complex, democratic, and better descriptions of the past. It is an extraordinary task, but it is also, as Josep Fradera asserted, an important responsibility – ‘the responsibility of explaining (to our compatriots) what they may not want to know’.⁶

Centring Blackness in European history means inserting the social, intellectual, political, and cultural contribution of Black people in our analysis of the past, going beyond merely acknowledging their presence, and engaging with their individual and collective stories. In this short essay, I will reflect on how these ideas have impacted my work and how telling the history of Spanish anti-slavery activists and of Black soldiers in colonial Cuba allows us to build a better and more exciting European history.

Studying the lives of Black people and communities in the Spanish empire is essential in building comprehensive and truthful narratives. The role of Spain in defining the slave trade and slavery in the Atlantic World, the expansion of the plantation economy in its Caribbean territories and its impact on the creation of modern Spain, and the role of Black people in the revolutionary efforts for emancipation and independence are simply unavoidable issues when studying Spanish history. For too long, traditional narratives and educational curricula in Spain had ignored these discussions and silenced the voices of Black individuals and communities, impoverishing our understanding of the Atlantic World.⁷ My current research project aims to investigate the intersection of Blackness, radical politics, slavery, and self-emancipation in the Caribbean during the Age of Revolutions. It proposes that General Lorenzo’s uprising of 1836 in Santiago de Cuba is a fundamental episode in the history of revolutions in the Atlantic World and explores the motivations, fears, and aspirations of the Black soldiers who participated in this failed rebellion. Ultimately, this project aims to contribute to ongoing debates about colonial slavery, the role of Black people (and Black soldiers in particular) in imagining post-emancipation societies, and the relationship between liberal and modern thinking and the legacies of slavery.

In the 1830s, Spain was a very different country from the one that had resisted the Napoleonic invasion. The independence of most of the American territories, the civil war, the spectre of the Haitian Revolution, and the long exiles of some of its key liberal intellectuals, had created a highly volatile political climate in which many pledged to preserve what was left of a shrinking empire at any cost and some dreamed of a radical revolution. Among the latter was General Lorenzo, the Provincial Governor of Santiago de Cuba, a major slave-trading hub at the time. When the news of the formation of a liberal government in Madrid reached his city, he ordered its people to rise up in arms to protect the revolution. Among them, a group of Black people, free and formerly enslaved, swore allegiance to Lorenzo and his radical program.

⁶ J. M. Fradera, ‘Imperios en la bruma’, *El País*, 26 March 2018, available at: https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/03/20/opinion/1521573674_801987.html (accessed 7 September 2022).

⁷ J. M. López García, *La esclavitud a finales del Antiguo Régimen. Madrid, 1701–1837. De Moros de Presa a Negros de Nación* (Madrid 2020), 11–17.

This research will unravel the profound ideological and political impact that Lorenzo's attempted revolution in Cuba – the largest slave economy in the Caribbean – had across the Atlantic World. It will also reclaim the central role that Black militiamen played in this episode and will place the liberal uprising of 1836 among other prominent, better-known episodes, such as the Haitian Revolution, Bolívar's campaign to liberate New Granada, Jamaica's Baptists War and Virginia's Slave Revolt of Nat Turner.

I argue that this liberal uprising provides an exceptional window onto the study of race relations and radical politics in, not only Spanish Cuba, but also the wider Atlantic World during the Age of Revolution more generally. The study of such an extraordinary event will allow us to better understand the role of Black soldiers in revolutionary episodes, challenging traditional definitions of 'popular movements' that excluded this group, providing a renewed transnational and comparative history. The project intends to explore the impact of Lorenzo's revolutionary uprising throughout the Caribbean and the Atlantic world, and to consider its trans-imperial implications across a number of debates which were ongoing urgently even before 1836: about the future of slavery and the potential of Black people (and Black soldiers in particular) to maintain post-emancipation societies, and about the relationship between liberal and modern thinking and the legacies of slavery – including the possibilities for citizenship and belonging across the colour line.

The history of anti-slavery activism and the abolition of slavery has been a traditional platform for Black histories to emerge naturally in European public histories. Although a lot more can still be done; in the UK, for example, key abolitionist leaders like Olaudah Equiano have become well-known historical characters, studied in schools, and their lives celebrated by institutions, cities and towns up and down the country.⁸ The history of abolitionism in Spain, however, has been poorly studied and memorialized, and those who fought for their freedom in the Spanish American colonies or for ending slavery in parliament have remained widely unnoticed.

With the publication in 2021 of my book, *In the Blood of Our Brothers: Abolitionism and the End of the Slave Trade in Spain's Atlantic Empire, 1800–1870*, I aimed to mitigate, even if partially, this historiographical gap. The foundational works in the field, such as those by Arthur Corwin and David Murray, focused on British influence on the development of anti-slave trade legislation.⁹ More recently, however, works by Josep Fradera, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, Martín Rodrigo, José Antonio Piqueras, Manuel Barcia and Emily Berquist, among others, have provided more innovative approaches to the construction and circulation of abolitionist ideas in the Spanish Empire during the nineteenth century.¹⁰

⁸ Historic England, 'Legacies of Slavery and Abolition in Listed Places', available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/the-slave-trade-and-abolition/legacies-of-slavery-and-abolition-in-listed-places/> (accessed 7 September 2022).

⁹ A. F. Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817–1886* (Austin, TX 1967); D. R. Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹⁰ E. Berquist, 'Early Anti-Slavery Sentiment in the Spanish Atlantic World, 1765–1817', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2010), 181–2; J. M. Fradera, 'Moments in a Postponed Abolition', in Josep M. Fradera and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, eds, *Slavery and Antislavery in Spain's Atlantic Empire* (Oxford 2013); Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla and Lizbeth Chaviano Pérez, eds, *Negros y esclavos: Barcelona y la esclavitud*

Spain officially abolished the slave trade in 1820, but its effective eradication took place only around fifty years later. An intricate system of slave traders, planters, financial backers, and public institutions introduced more than 700,000 African men, women, and children into Cuba, the most important remaining colony of a challenged empire, between 1800 and 1870. The slave trade in the Spanish imperial territories was profitable until its very last day, and its abolition and much later eradication can be comprehensibly explained only as the consequence of a complex and fragmented process. Since the early abolitionist discourses advanced by Isidoro de Antillón, José María Blanco-White, Miguel Guridi, and Argüelles in the 1800s and 1810s, to the anti-slavery poetry of Concepción Arenal in the second half of the 1860s, discourses against the slave trade and slavery adopted multiple forms and were advocated by Liberal and Absolutist, progressive and conservative, egalitarian and racist actors.

In the Blood of Our Brothers examines the processes of production, circulation, and reception of abolitionist ideas in Spain's Atlantic empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century and their development through to the decade of the 1860s. It charts British ideological, political, and diplomatic influence on the construction of anti-slave trade discourses and policies in Spain and stresses the multiplicity of abolitionist and anti-abolitionist ideas between 1802 and 1867. It appraises the emergence and development of public and political expressions of abolitionism and anti-abolitionism, studying the ideological backgrounds, political pressures, and motivations that operated during this process. The monograph aims to provide a more consistent and comprehensive theory of the history of the abolition and eradication of the slave trade in Spain's Atlantic empire. It shows that the ultimate eradication of the slave trade responded to international political negotiations that excluded the Spanish authorities and ignored Spanish political actors. However, the contribution of Spanish anti-slave trade activists was crucial to debilitating the public legitimacy of the traffic and challenged the dominant rhetoric affirming the necessity of its continuation. Their writings, speeches, campaigns and political initiatives eventually succeeded in consolidating the idea that the slave trade was 'horrendous, atrocious and inhumane', as Argüelles described it in 1810.¹¹ In the long term, they contributed to building the public consensus that the slave trade was unsuitable and condemned to disappear. This shift was informed by its relationship with liberalism, which has a particular meaning in the Spanish metropolitan and colonial contexts, and wider political and ideological debates in the Atlantic World. Both dimensions – the domestic and the transatlantic – co-existed and informed each other.

As Henry Glassie accurately put it, 'history tangles the past with the present in webs of facts ... but from one single account, most is missing. Women are missing, poor men, dark people, common labor, painful routines, little joys ...' and, therefore is not surprising that when we aspire to create more inclusive, pluralistic and democratic societies,

atlántica (siglos XVI–XIX) (Barcelona 2017), 17–46; C. Schmidt-Nowara. *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1833–1874* (Pittsburgh, PA 1999); J. A. Piqueras, *Negreros: Españoles en el tráfico y en los capitales esclavistas* (Madrid 2021); M. Barcia, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825* (Baton Rouge, LA 2012).

¹¹ Diario de las Sesiones de Cortes, 2 April 1811, 812.

communities demand studies of the past that tell ‘their story’.¹² In the case of European Black history, this has been accelerated by the activism and struggle of Black community leaders, academics, educators and politicians, but in the case of Spain, where Black people represent around 2.4 per cent of its current population, the historiography has failed to transform at the same speed. Saying that ‘Black history *is* Spanish history’ would still sound incendiary in some Spanish cultural circles. All the same, in July 2018, the Spanish newspaper *ABC* published an interview with the writer Borja Cardelús, in which he claimed that ‘Spain did not accept nor tolerate slavery in its American territories’.¹³ When a group of academics reacting to this piece, asked the newspaper to publish a response, the editor accused us of fanaticism and defended what he described as ‘the author’s opinion’ on the matter. The existence of the slave trade and slavery in the Spanish empire should not be a question for debate, nor should a respectable newspaper disseminate such toxic and ignorant views. To build historical narratives that include, reflect, and acknowledge Black people in Spanish history is a crucial and exciting task for the historians of the present and the future.

Author Biography

Jesús Sanjurjo is a Fellow of the Leverhulme and Isaac Newton Trusts in the Faculty of History and Corpus Christi College of the University of Cambridge. He has published various articles, in English and Spanish, on the history of the slave trade, slavery, and radical politics in the Atlantic World. He is the author of *In the Blood of Our Brothers: Abolitionism and the End of the Slave Trade in Spain’s Atlantic Empire, 1800–1870* (2021).

¹² Glassie, ‘The Practice and Purpose of History’, 961.

¹³ M. P. Villatoro, ‘El Imperio español se desangró para proteger a los nativos mientras el inglés esclavizaba a los africanos’, *ABC*, 26 July 2018, available at: https://www.abc.es/historia/abci-edward-colston-triste-verdad-tras-falso-heroe-ingles-hizo-rico-holocausto-africano-201807260227_noticia.html (accessed 7 September 2018).