

## GENEALOGY, RACIAL THINKING, AND THE IBERIAN SPECIFICITY

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The call for contributions for the roundtable “Race in the Iberian Middle Ages: A Critical Roundtable” underscored two points that seem vital to situate the relevance of race in this context. These two points emphasize the specificity of the Iberian context and question “whether all modes of constructing difference (ethnic, religious, linguistic, etc.) are constitutive of race.” From my perspective, at the intersection of these two lays an approach to the study of race that may offer meaningful insights not just for Iberomedievalists but also for scholars and students interested in other spaces and temporalities. These remarks depart from anecdotal information based on my own experience engaging with the study of race as a graduate student to situate the issue of the Iberian specificity before proposing that the study of genealogy may be instrumental in understanding how ideas about race in this context were intertwined with historical, theological, and scientific knowledge in ways that differ from the centrality of skin color in modern racial thinking.

The positionality and internal development of the field of medieval Iberian studies are two significant factors in questioning the specificity of race in the Iberian Middle Ages. Perceived as its most prominent characteristic, the longstanding context of proximity and interactions between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Peninsula constitutes a significant factor in considerations about an Iberian specificity by those of us working in the area and those looking at it from the outside. The perception of this circumstance as an anomaly in the

European context has resulted in a certain insularity of the study of the medieval Iberian Peninsula. Furthermore, the fragmentation and polarization of academic life after the establishment of Francisco Franco's dictatorship shaped the approach to the Iberian Middle Ages by generations of scholars whose questioning of medieval identities have examined concepts as "*raza/raça*" or "*casta*" from distinctive perspectives that may not translate perfectly to their use in other areas of Anglophone academia. A brief personal anecdote may help illustrate this point.

In September 2017, I presented my PhD preliminary examination at a US institution. Less than a month before, the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville shocked medievalists for using medieval-inspired paraphernalia for open bigotry purposes. During my examination, a committee member whose expertise is not medieval Iberia asked me why I didn't discuss race on a paper about human groups identified as different in Fernández de Heredia's version of the *Libro de Marco Polo*. I answered that religion was the more relevant factor for grouping people as different in the region. When they pointed to a reference to skin color in one of my quotes, I added that references to skin color were not necessarily equivalent to having an established idea of race. I tend to think that many specialists in medieval Iberia would have agreed with me at that point.

In the months and years that followed the infamous rally, we have witnessed a proliferation of studies on medieval race. Many of them approach the study of race in the Iberian Peninsula and elsewhere from methodologies and research questions that complicate the role of religion in the creation of medieval difference. The unique character of religion and conversion will likely remain central to inquiries about race in the Iberian context. What may be up to debate is the teleological conception of race as a development of religious difference that viewed ideas about "*pureza de sangre*" as a point of origin for modern racial thinking. In this context, I

wonder if Chad Leahy’s pieces asking us, “Dear Fellow Iberianists: Where Are We?” in February and March of 2018 are still relevant to reconsider how Iberianists communicate the specificity of our field of study to a larger audience.

As a multilingual space with frequent direct interactions across religious communities—whether intellectual, commercial or through intermarriage—Iberia is a potentially insightful place to consider race in terms that are not limited to physiognomic traits. While research on “*pureza de sangre*” has undertaken this line of inquiry, a broader approach to the significance of genealogy would be instrumental to consider *whether all modes of constructing difference (ethnic, religious, linguistic, etc.) are constitutive of race*. Medieval genealogy has multiple dimensions besides the already established research on the libels of purity of blood. They include considerations about the formation of noble lineages, etymology, or the chains of transmission of the *aḥādīth*. The different levels of detachment from the body in these examples may illustrate how genealogical thinking was used across languages and cultures to establish order, exclusion, or belonging. Addressing how genealogy was used to create difference before *pureza de sangre* may illuminate the flexibility and variety of ways used to racialize in the Iberian Middle Ages, even if the term *raça* did not yet exist or was not used for humans or any living form—as Ana Gómez-Bravo has eloquently demonstrated.

The Fourteenth-century Castilian romance *Libro del cavallero Zifar* illustrates how genealogy and race intersect at spheres of knowledge that show the impact of thinking about race beyond the body. The Curse of Ham has one of the longest and best-established traditions related to the medieval race. It was broadly used to identify African people as descendants of Ham and “cursed” if not explicitly discriminated against by the sins of their alleged ancestor. In the *Libro del cavallero Zifar*, the Curse of Ham is mentioned when addressing the ancestry of Zifar—an

idealized Christian knight from India who carries his own curse inherited from an ancestor. While the romance puts Zifar in close contact with the course Ham and—in another passage—with black-skinned Indians, Zifar is not directly racialized by belonging to those groups, nor does the reader have any information about his physiognomy. The use of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim referents situates the work within the specificity of its Iberian context, while the linguistic, geographic, and theological underpinnings aim to universalize the impact of its views on the symbolic and transformable relationship between genealogy and the body.

The *Libro del cavallero Zifar* exemplifies how the specificity of some general trends in medieval Iberia provides an opportunity to think about the creation of formulas to racialize difference that challenges some of our established ideas about the role of external bodily features and the lineal progress of “race” as a category construct by a singular and uniform group to discriminate against others. Nevertheless, we must be aware of the risk of detaching genealogical thinking from the specificity of where context where they were produced. Detached from individual stories such as Zifar’s and personal quest, what remains of genealogy is a lineal transmission that imposes a strict, causal, and traceable order. This abstracted genealogy was behind the racialization of black skin through the story of the Curse of Ham and the racialization of religious difference through the notion of purity of blood. Thus the potential ethical implications of creating a genealogy of race that reproduces the methods historically used to racialize. This tension may be inherent to any historical inquiry about race. However, I wonder if some of the disconnection I felt when I was inquired about medieval race in 2017 was not the result of a certain tokenization of the “difference” of medieval Iberia as part the larger narrative about the origins of racial thinking that viewed *pureza de sangre* as a necessary step to explain how religious discrimination made its way into modern racism.

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