


RESPONSE: RACE IN THE IBERIAN MIDDLE AGES: A CRITICAL ROUNDTABLE

Pamela A. Patton 
Princeton University

It was a privilege to be asked to comment on such a diverse and thoughtful series of presentations. So as to cede as much of the session time as possible to the panelists, I have highlighted here some of the most vivid ways in which their remarks brought out the roundtable's main themes, followed by a few questions that might help us explore them further.

The call for this roundtable invited critical assessments of how race and racialization might be considered in relation to medieval Iberian studies and its pedagogy, and the papers it elicited seemed to me to fall into two categories. Three speakers addressed explicitly how evolving scholarly views of medieval race and race-thinking can be applied in scholarship and the classroom, while three presented very short case studies that illustrate how such approaches might look.

In the first group, **Ana Gomez-Bravo** emphasized how important it is to recognize the protean significance of “race” and “racism” as concepts, as well as how the different connotations of these terms in Spanish and English have mediated historical analysis in Hispanophone and Anglophone spheres, respectively. Her call for a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach that gathers specialists in varied languages and fields to forge a fuller understanding of racial concepts is a laudable one. **Luis Miguel Dos Santos** asked how the specificity of an Iberian context, where scholarly focus on religious difference has often taken precedence, might change the questions one might ask about race there. He proposes considering medieval treatments of

genealogy and lineage as reflective of how medieval Iberian Christians articulated racial concepts within a specifically Iberian frame. And **Rebecca De Souza** described how she brings the study of race into the classroom, citing recent scholarship that helps her students to think through the racial constructs embedded in many Christian-authored texts and describing the limitations of commonly used paradigms such as the “Global Middle Ages” and the “neomedieval.”

The three papers share several important themes. Among them are: 1) the importance of understanding that scholarly treatment of race in Iberia continues to evolve, sometimes in ways arguably unique to the Iberian Peninsula; 2) the importance of setting terms clearly, with a close attention to linguistic choices and their repercussions; and 3) the rewards and risks of investigating how race-thinking in the Middle Ages might relate to that in the modern world.

These themes were echoed in the short case studies presented by the other three speakers. **Ali Alsmadi** explored the construction of male Muslims as hypersexualized and dangerous in Christian-composed texts, generating what he calls “an imaginary regime of ‘truths’;” in this, he invites us to see Christian efforts to exclude and segregate Muslims as a racism that begs comparison with colonial and modern ways of thinking. **Juan Escourido** presented the historical projects of Alfonso X of Castile as a crucible for a specifically Iberian view of world history that would be better equipped to accommodate the Peninsula’s diverse religio-racial makeup than were traditional western European models that severed Europe decisively from Africa and Asia. Finally, **Anita Savo** traced the *topos* of the wise Black horse tender in *El Conde Lucanor* to the Arabo-Islamic genre of Black Excellence literature, which controverted traditionally negative Christian readings of dark skin to celebrate Black wisdom and eloquence.

All the presentations spoke to the promise, as well as the challenges, of choosing to study and teach about race and racialization in the Iberian Middle Ages. They also prompted several questions that I set out here as an avenue toward further consideration of their ideas.

First, a question about research. With exceptions like Anita Savo's, most of the presentations have addressed race primarily from the perspective of medieval Iberian Christians, and primarily of Castilians. This is logical, of course, as the field in which most of our speakers specialize, but it also inspires two questions: 1) How do you think that your individual method and conclusions might apply to Iberian cultures beyond your immediate research area and home discipline? 2) And how might work in your field intersect with that on conceptions of race among Iberian Muslims and Jews, say the recent scholarship by Mohamad Ballan on the Nasrids, or Adam Cohen on the Sarajevo Haggadah? Would a comparative approach be useful, and what might we learn?

Second, a question about pedagogy. In light of recent efforts by some state governments, such as those in Texas and Florida, to intervene in the content of university curricula, has your teaching been affected by political or social pressures to avoid teaching about race in your courses? If it has, or if you anticipate that it might, what responses or strategies have you considered?

I'd like to thank all the speakers for their thought-provoking papers. I look forward very much to learning where your ideas will take this topic next.