Impure and Vile: Limpieza de Sangre and Racial Formation in Early Modern Spain
Olivia Ward

Exclusion and discrimination were part of everyday life for marginalized groups in Europe during the medieval and early modern periods. For Jews, this exclusion mostly materialized in the form of religious persecution, a burden that could be eliminated with conversion. However, in early modern Spain, conversos (converts to Christianity), who were many generations removed from their Jewish or Moorish ancestors and who often intermarried with Old Christians and other conversos, lived in a climate where social mobility was determined by one’s ability to prove that they were untainted by Jewish lineage. This task was nearly impossible to accomplish. Limpieza de sangre, or purity of blood, created a “theoretical underpinning,” which contended that reproduction of culture was fixed in the reproduction of the blood.\(^1\) The smallest amount of Jewish blood made one predisposed to immorality and “vileness.” This represented a marked difference from the religious anti-Jewish persecution of the medieval era.

I argue that the limpieza de sangre statutes and anti-conversos literature utilized religious language and racialism as tools for racialization in early modern Spain. This process of racialization allowed for the discrimination of conversos both civically and ecclesiastically. By using words like “blood” and “lineage” in reference to conversos, they suggested a fundamentally embodied and essentialized explanation for cultural and moral attributes.\(^2\) This argument is two-pronged, which incorporates a heavy historiographic element that is necessary due to the nature of race and religious persecution studies. In order to substantiate this thesis, I focus on the evolution of the word raza, or race, from its association with animal breeding to later discourses on the nature of Jewishness and blood. Next, I examine limpieza de sangre statutes and commentaries on conversos lineage, starting with Toledo in 1449 and ending in the early seventeenth century. Lastly, I narrow my focus specifically on commentary that fixated on Jewish breast milk and the relationship between the “Jewish” race and “blackness.” I aim to examine racial concepts historically, historiographically, and theoretically in a pre-modern context without implicating modern science as fundamentally necessary to racial processes. It is not, however, the aim of this paper to suggest

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2 Although limpieza de sangre statutes and anti-conversos material applied to descendants of both Jews and Moor (Muslims), I have chosen to narrow the scope of this paper to only focus on Jews.
that racism is a linear process that progresses in time from early modern Iberia to modern period, with each passing year showing greater signs of racism. The concept of race and racism are not constants. To suggest so would be teleological and hinge on racial logic.\(^3\)

**Defining Racism**

In order to better understand *limpieza de sangre*, it is necessary to define key terms. Racism is a contested topic and its definition is widely challenged by historians and sociologists. Benjamin Isaac defines racism as:

An attitude towards individuals and groups of people, which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of people collective traits, physical, mental, and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors.\(^4\) I would add that, as George Fredrickson has suggested, racism expresses itself in “practices, institutions, and structures.\(^5\)

This definition is helpful because it removes the precise temporal standards that some scholars attribute to racism.

More significant to this discussion are the terms racial formation and proto-racism. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, authors of *Racial Formation in the United States*, define racial formation—or racialization-- as “a process...in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.”\(^6\) Many historians who examine non-modern concepts of race attempt to fit these concepts into a modern understanding of race. In most pre-modern contexts, racial formation is a more appropriate term because it highlights the significance of a process rather than a static concept.

In this context, the term “racialism,” sometimes called proto-racism, is also appropriate.\(^7\) Benjamin Isaac defines proto-racism as racism in a full sense.

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\(^3\) I.e. that race is in fact biological; that scientific anti-semitism is a result of innovations in science; and that innovations in science naturally lead to the Holocaust.


\(^7\) Note that sometimes proto-racism is referred to as racialism. For our purposes, these words mean essentially the same thing.
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but in an early form, which precedes Darwinism.8 Proto-racism is still a theory based on biological differences that are sociocultural-imagined realities. Racism generally suggests a more organized and widely accepted form of racial discrimination, such as slavery. By understanding purity of blood laws as proto-racism, we reduce the risk of oversimplification or decontextualization.9

Historical Perspectives

Not unlike other forms of discrimination, proto-racism and racism have become some of the trendiest topics in history and sociology. This obsession with race stems from a desire to understand how and why societies utilize it. This exploration will proceed based on the presumption that race and racism are worthy of historical analysis. Some historians have questioned how pivotal the study of racism is to our understanding of societies, especially in comparison to other forms of persecutions.10 As historians, studying racial development is important, not because of a moral imperative or because race is more significant than other forms of persecution, but because race and racism are significant and necessary to understand the societies we study.11

This study seeks to address issues of discrimination that blur the line between anti-religious and racial. An explanation of race theory and historiography more broadly and within the study of medieval/early modern Iberia are necessary to ground the significance of this paper’s aims. This historiography will only focus on the most seminal and relevant theories surrounding race and racial formation. To do so, we must start with Foucault.

9 I have chosen not to utilize “antisemitism” in this essay because, although it may be fitting, readers will undoubtedly associate it with 19th and 20th century racism against Jews that does not provide us with a constructive discourse of Jewish persecution. In Racism: A Short History, Fredrickson suggests that anti-Judaism becomes antisemitism when Christians decide that it is preferable to get rid of Jews (i.e., expulsion) rather than convert them. He further argues that anti-semitism becomes racial when Jews are seen as “intrinsically and organically evil rather than merely having false beliefs and wrong dispositions.”
11 Although one could argue that the study of race and racism are morally justified and that this moral justification necessitates the study of race and its implications in history.
Foucault argues that racism is “[t]he fundamental mechanism of power that exercises itself in modern states.” According to Foucault, one of the primary purposes of race is to create a justification to enslave and kill. Although it is difficult to disagree with the majority of Foucault’s argument, his analysis clearly places race in the modern state. Racism is obviously a significant ideology in the modern era but to place it definitively outside the reach of non-modernist is not constructive. To do so, Foucault would have to prove that racism or proto-racism never existed before “modernity,” a task he never fully undertakes. This removes the possibility to fully utilize his theories in early modern Iberia, but does not allow us to dismiss his theories altogether.

Although Foucault never addresses pre-modern roots of racism, he suggests that racism does not exist within a vacuum. George Mariscal paraphrases Foucault arguing, “race is a field of practices and discourses that provides a conceptual repertoire from which specific groups draw in order to consolidate privilege and further their political projects.” This “conceptual repertoire” suggests that racism in the New World could not have come from a clear epistemological break from past ideologies. Instead, racial attitudes are utilized through conceptual repertoires that actors habitually use.

We can utilize the theories of Pierre Bourdieu to understand these conceptual repertoires through the notion of habitus. Habitus is the way society is “deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinate ways, which then guide them.” In other words, habitus are norms that are created unconsciously through social processes, which are transferable from one context to another. Consequently, race as a social construct must have developed in some way from social processes of difference and discrimination in pre-modernity. Foucault never directly makes this argument but the connection is clear.

13 Stoler, 85.
14 Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity?”, 237. Nirenberg argues that Foucault’s argument for the modern origins of racism are based on a “falsely organic view of the Middle Ages.”
15 Foucault never defines modernity but because he focuses on the modern state, we can assume that nothing before the 17th century would fit into this category.
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Owing much to Marxist ideologies, early American race and Atlantic slavery historians have only understood race in the context of colonialism and slavery. In their minds, race cannot be separated from slavery. As Herbert Aptheker phrased it, racism is a “...distinctly modern phenomenon and comes into being as capitalism develops and moves toward the subjugation and colonization of the darker peoples of the world.”\[^{19}\] Although a compelling argument for Africans in the New World, I am not convinced that slavery predates racism in all contexts. A specific example is Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States*, which argues that “a modern conception of race does not occur until the rise of Europe and the arrival of Europeans in Americas,” and that discrimination against Jews and Muslims was “always and everywhere religiously interpreted.”\[^{20}\] The first argument results from a lack of knowledge of European History and underestimates the significance of social changes within a European context. Their second argument misses the significance of racialized representations that utilize religious language.\[^{21}\] Despite their problems, their definition of *racial formation* is helpful in examining the role of race in blood purity laws because it suggests a process.\[^{22}\]

One would be making an egregious mistake to assume that contact with the New World did not have an irreversible impact on the way Europeans understood the world. However, the problem with Marxist and American-centered analyses is that they fail to account for the diversity of racism and development of race even within a modern context.\[^{23}\] They also do not account for racism that exists separate from enslavement or racial ideology directed at non-peoples of color. This creates an obvious problem for those who want to focus on race and racism directed at Jews. It also creates an epistemological problem for slavery and racism in the Iberian Peninsula.

Within scholarly debates about race there is much doubt placed on racism in early modern Spain. Can racism develop before modernity and outside

\[^{22}\] As a reminder, Omi and Winant define racial formation on page 55-56 as “a process...in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.”
the New World? Historians James Sweet and George Mariscal have addressed this question. Sweet argues that the slavery-racism question is significant because its answer focuses the origins of race away from American economics and towards European culture. Furthermore, he argues that racism and capitalism were not inseparably bound. Most importantly, he asserts that the racial ideas that characterized American slavery were established by the fifteenth century. This argument is significant because it challenges the problematic aspects of Marxist/American race. Thus, even when “inferior Others” adopted Christianity, they could not avoid inferiority. Although Sweet is directly referring to Africans and skin color, his evidence demonstrates that white Christian Iberians viewed race less dynamically than others have suggested and that society was racially stratified.

Moving away from slavery and African based arguments, Mariscal addresses the question of race in Spain more broadly. He argues that “anti-Semitic and racist discourse in the medieval period are ignored and we lose access to a large chunk of raw material....” He points out that scholars cannot fully separate religion from discussions on race in the early modern period. Instead, one mentalité on the Other can lead to another and they can co-exist, such as religion and race. This directly contrasts a more modern understanding of race as fundamentally separate from religious discrimination. Based on this argument, Foucault’s “conceptual repertoire,” and Bourdieu’s habitus, historians need to reexamine the hard divide between early modern discrimination against Jews and modern anti-Semitism without suggesting that one inevitably leads to the other.

While the topic of Jews is popular among historians of the Iberian Peninsula, few historians have taken up the challenge of blood purity laws and

25 Ibid., 143.
26 Ibid., 144.
27 Sweet does not suggest that this biological inferiority does not have as much legitimacy to racism as 18th and 19th century pseudoscientific claims.
28 Sweet, 144. “A people’s inferior culture implied a biologically inferior people.” David Nirenberg has pointed out the logical fallacy in rejecting the term “race” in reference to the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods because of their cultural emphasis that utilizes biology. He points out that all forms of racism conflate biology and culture. “Race and the Middle Ages: The Case of Spain and its Jews,” 74.
29 Mariscal, 10.
30 Ibid., 11.
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their inevitable questions about the nature of race and religion in the early modern period. Amérzco Castro dismissed their significance by arguing that they were rooted in “the most honored families in Israel; for there had been no admixture of impure blood in the paternal or maternal antecedents and their collateral relatives.”31 Historians have since challenged this argument, suggesting that Castro lacked an understanding of Jewish culture.32 In opposition, many of those who have taken an interest in limpieza de sangre laws associate their religio-racial tendencies to the 20th century organized pseudoscientific racism of the Holocaust.33 Connecting these laws to the Holocaust is anachronistic, overreaching, and blatantly ignores hundreds of years of historical and social developments.

Moving away from victim blaming and Holocaust parallels, some scholars have suggested that these laws represent something else entirely. Antonio Domínguez Ortiz argues that the requirement for Old Christian blood was a way for a small group of nobles and warriors to retain their individuality.34 But why specifically use blood and genealogy to achieve this goal? This question is never answered. Another explanation, made by Gregory Kaplan, contends that the laws are a result of the fear that conversos were crypto-Jews, not because their blood made them racially impure.35 This answer is troubling because it ignores the fact that limpieza laws directly correlated behavior with blood, heredity, and lineage.

34 Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Los judeoconversos en España y América (Madrid: Istmo, 1971), 81. “un medio, para una minoría noble y guerrera, de conservar su individualidad.” NOTE translation may be rough.
David Nirenberg has written many articles and presented various arguments about blood purity. In *Communities of Violence*, he asserts that blood purity laws involved sexual relations because they were racial in nature. In a separate article, he addresses the sexual and genealogical nature of purity of blood. Later he argued that using “racism” to describe *limpieza de sangre* and other forms of anti-Jewish persecution is not useful to a discourse on Jews. This is troubling because he refers to them as racial in multiple publications. Instead, he proposes that scholars, both medieval and modern, examine the differences and similarities between different forms of anti-Jewish discrimination. Nirenberg is clearly pushing against scholars who use the word “race” too liberally or chose to ignore categories of exclusion. He suggests that pre-modernists should not fear using the word “racism” and its antecedents but they should be cautious. Despite inconsistencies, Nirenberg teaches an important lesson about context. Purity of blood laws should be examined for what they are and what they represent, rather than how similar or dissimilar they are to extreme forms of anti-Semitic racism.

**Historical Context**

Scholars generally recognize the medieval Iberian world as a place of cultural plurality. Spain was a unique place where, for the most part, Jews and Muslims enjoyed a fluidity of religious and cultural acceptance. Scholars, such as Américo Castro, referred to these cultural interactions as *convivencia*, or coexistence. One should note that Jews and Muslims were always subject to varying degrees of persecution because of their religion. Despite how tolerant Christian Iberia was, it was preferable that Jews and Muslims convert to Christianity.

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38 Nirenberg, “Race and the Middle Ages: The Case of Spain and its Jews,” 74-86.
39 For examples of those who ignore difference or oversimplify their meaning see Américo Castro and Netanyahu.
41 Scholars have refuted Castro’s overwhelmingly positive view of coexistence in Spain. For a more detailed explanation and exploration of *convivencia*, see Thomas Glick, “Convivencia: and Introduction,” *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, ed. Vivian B. Mann, Thomas F. Glick, Jerri Lynn Denise Dodds (New York: George Braziller, 1992.)
42 Readers should note that the desire to convert Muslims and Jews was sometimes complicated by economic and social needs. For example, one may not want a slave to
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In the late fifteenth century, Spaniards witnessed the mass degradation of *convivencia* and diversity. Due to the religious diversity of Spain and the large influx of converts (*conversos, morranos, cristianos nuevos*), Old Christians understood the faith and allegiance to Christianity to be fragile. At any moment, one could turn away from Christ. This is evident as early as 633 when the Canon LXII of the IV Council of Toledo restricted contact between *conversos* and practicing Jews:

> Since good people are often corrupted by contact with those who are bad, it stands to reason that those who are inclined to be bad are more likely to be corrupted by such contact. Therefore, from this point onward there will be no contact between Jews converted to Christianity and those who are still practicing Judaism...  

In their minds, Jewishness corrupts and pollutes absolutely, like a disease. If one wishes to remain pure and uncorrupted, (s)he must physically remove Jewish behaviors from Christian spaces. This is significant because the Council understood the cause of *conversos* pollution to be Judaism and Judaizing, not Jewish blood or lineage.

Although *Las Siete Partidas* banned compulsory conversion, in 1391 mobs of Christians attacked Jews, killing some and forcing others to convert.  

Nirenberg notes that in 1391 these conversions were seen as a miracle but by the 1450s they began to be considered disastrous.  

Policies developed by the Church and rulers of Spanish kingdoms

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44 “Neither force nor compulsion in any form may be used to induce a Jew to become a Christian; rather, Christians must convert Jews to the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ by means of good deeds, the words of Scripture, and gentle persuasion, for Our Lord God neither desires nor loves forced service.” Dwayne E. Carpenter, *Alfonso X and the Jews: An Edition of and Commentary on Siete Partidas* 7.24 “De los judíos” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 33; Nirenberg, “Enmity and Assimilation,” 137.

45 Nirenberg, “Enmity and Assimilation,” 137.
intended to deal with Jews and Muslims represented a “shift in religious rhetoric,” which became increasingly less forgiving and tolerant in the late fifteenth centuries.46

As a result of a rise in anti-Jewish sentiment, mass conversions of thousands of Jews to Christianity caused by pogroms, forced segregation, and later expulsions, *conversos* destabilized traditional markers of religious identity. Additionally, these New Christians had gained privileges and responsibilities as Christians that were inaccessible to Jews.47 But by 1420s, the number of *conversos* in public service had begun to create animosity among Old Christians, especially against *conversos* who served at the court of King Juan II of Castile.48 With so many converts, it became impossible to determine who was a “true” Christian and who was a convert. Thus, unique doctrines began to appear in the Iberian Peninsula that suggested a link between the genealogy and cultural attributes of Jews in order to make known what was no longer visible: their past. This link could only be traced through blood lineage, or *limpieza de sangre*. It should be noted that these laws were not micro cases. Instead, they were present throughout Spain and over multiple centuries, which attests to their significance. Table 1.1 outlines some of the well-known purity of blood statutes in Spain.49

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48 Kaplan, 24.
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Table 1.1 Institutions adopting limpieza de sangre (purity of blood) statutes, 1482–1547

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1482</td>
<td>The Colegio Mayor of San Bartolomé, University of Salamanca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1483</td>
<td>The Holy Inquisition (episcopal inquisitors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1483</td>
<td>The Military Order of Alcántara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1483</td>
<td>The Military Order of Calatrava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1486</td>
<td>The Jeronimite Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1488</td>
<td>The Colegio Mayor of Santa Cruz, University of Valladolid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1511</td>
<td>The Cathedral Chapter of Badajoz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1515</td>
<td>The Cathedral Chapter of Seville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1519</td>
<td>The Colegio Mayor of San Ildefonso, University of Alcalá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1525</td>
<td>The Franciscan Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1527</td>
<td>The Military Order of Santiago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1530</td>
<td>The Cathedral Chapter of Córdoba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1531*</td>
<td>The Dominican Order (*onwards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1537</td>
<td>The University of Seville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1547</td>
<td>The Cathedral Chapter of Toledo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Raza and the Jews

The history and evolution of the word “raza” or “raça,” or race in Castilian, is a necessary starting point in our discussion of racial formation in early modern Spain. Américo Castro attacked the use of the word raza as an equivalent for race or racialism in early modern Spain because, he contends, race never existed in medieval or early modern Spain. He suggests that terms like raza or caste never had a racial meaning in this context, nor were they inherently negative. However, it should be noted that Américo Castro admitted that caste and raza implied “stable, essential, and inescapable forms of group identity...reproduced across time.” This interpretation of raza is reductive and deemphasizes the dynamic use of the word. In early modern Iberia, the word raza evolved from an association with animals and reproduction towards a connection between culture and nature through reproduction.

Gianfranco Contini drew the etymology of raza from the Latin haraz/haras, which means “the breeding of horses or a stallion’s pen.” This is most evident in Manuel Dies’ manual on horses, c. 1430, in which raza is used in reference to horse breeding:

50 Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity?” 246.
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So that is it advised that he who wishes to have good race [raza] and caste [caste] of horses that above all he seek out the horse or stallion that he be good and beautiful and of good coat, and the mare that she be large and well-formed and of good coat.\textsuperscript{52}

Thus, \textit{raza} may have been understood as a hereditary factor but was not originally used in association with Jews or \textit{conversos}. It is this understanding of the word that led Américo Castro to argue vehemently against using it to mean “race.” However, the hereditary nature of the word later expanded beyond animalistic features.

By the mid-fifteenth century, contemporaries had begun to associate \textit{raza} with defect. In a dictionary, Antonion Nebrijia defined “panni raritas,” as “race of the cloth” or “a defect in the material.”\textsuperscript{53} Francisco Imperial, who Nirenberg argues significantly impacted Castilian lyrical poetry, addressed a poem to the king in which he used \textit{raza} as the equivalent to “flaw.” The lines are as follows: “It shall be a clear example to your successors to see the blow of the mace, to see the roseate knife that will cut wherever it finds a flaw (‘raza’).\textsuperscript{54} This is significant because the word raza was used to imply hereditary and a defective nature.

Although the above uses of \textit{raza} do not fully and clearly connect concepts of heredity, defect, and Jews, other examples prove that this connection was clear in the minds of contemporaries. In a commentary in 1438, Alfonso Martinez de Toledo, a famously anti-\textit{conversos} Archpriest, uses \textit{raza} in a similar way that one would use “race” today. He states that the vices of the “vile” race are inherited regardless of social context:

\begin{quote}
Nature ensures this; thus, every day in the places where you live, you will see that the noble man is of a noble race [raza] and still shows his origins, and the unfortunate man is of a vile race [raza] and lineage; no matter how great he is or how much he
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} Mauel Dies, “Libres de la menescalía,” c. 1424-1436. As quoted by Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity?” 249.
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has, he will only show the wretchedness of his descent… and this is why when such men or women have power they do not use it as they should.  

This reveals that raza was understood as inherited, unchangeable, and independent of human will. Instead being used purely negatively, this usage suggests that the word in some cases referred directly to birth and lineage. Thus, the words “noble” or “vile” are used to modify the word raza, like one would the word “race.” In addition, Martinez’s language and the lack of explanation of heredity imply that this knowledge was commonly understood, perhaps because of its previous horse-related usage.

The evolution of raza and its amalgamation of defect, heredity, and Jews are best represented through descriptions of raza in the sixteenth and early seventeen centuries. In these contexts, unlike the modern word “race,” raza was inherently negative and synonymous with defect, heredity, and conversos (Jews and Moors). Thus, an Old Christian did not have a race. Bartolomé Jiménez Patón explained in his Speech in favor of the holy and praiseworthy statute of the blood cleaning, “there exists Old Christians, without raza, stain, lineage, and without evidence, reputation or rumor of these.” In Sebastian de Covarrubias’s Spanish dictionary, he defined race as something that one possess because of lineage: “the caste of purebred horses, which are marked by a brand so that they can be recognized…. Race in [human] lineages is meant negatively, as in having some race of Moor or Jew.” This definition is best juxtaposed against Gianfranco Contini’s definition of raza mentioned earlier, clearly marking a mentality change.

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55 Alfonso Martinez de Toledo, *Coracho, o reprobacion del amor mundane* (Barcelona: Zeus 1971) [1448], 59. Translated by Torres


58 Sebastian de Covarrubias, “raza,” *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (Madrid: Por L. Sanchez, impressor del rey n.s, 1611) as translated by Torres, “Purity of Blood,” 19, n. 28.
The usage of the word *raza* transformed and evolved in correlation to anti-*conversos* material and *limpieza de sangre* statutes. Therefore, we can safely link *raza*, or race, to racial formation and racialism because this evolution clearly places Jewish and Moorish lineage as an embodied defect passed through heredity. This vocabulary suggests that determining one’s character was becoming more overtly biological. As Max S. Hering Torres has pointed out, “*raza*” and purity of blood laws implied a “stained and tainted lineage.”

**Limpieza de Sangre**

The first popular *limpieza de sangre* statute and negative theory of Jewish genealogy began in Toledo in 1449. Many Toledans claimed that *conversos* were motivated only by ambitious desires and the “carnal lust for nuns and virgins, and that *conversos*…kill and stain their [Old Christian’s] clean blood [*sange limpia*].” These anxieties resulted from the King’s acceptance of *conversos* to high positions of power and a theory that Jewish blood predisposed one to vileness and corruption. As a result of the rebellion against King John II of Castile, Pero Sarmiento issued the first blood purity statute, which stated:

We, Pedro Sarmiento, head *repostero* of our lord the king … city of Toledo, proclaim and declare that, in as much as it is well known through civil and canon law that *conversos* of Jewish lineage, being suspect in the faith of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, frequently belittle it by Judaizing, they shall not be allowed to hold office or benefices public or private through which they might cause harm, aggravation, or bad treatment to

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60 Some suggest that the first purity of blood statute was in 1416, where descendants of Jews were barred from entering the College of San Bartolomé at the Universidad de Salamanca. Netanyahu, *The Origins of the Inquisition*, 272-275. Nirenberg points out that there were several attempts to bar *conversos* access to brokerage licenses. Nirenberg, “Was there race before Modernity?”, 252-253.

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good old Christians, nor shall they be able to act as witnesses against them …. 62

One cannot understate the significance of this law. As Netanyuhu pointed out, this statute was “the first public expression of the anti-Marrano [conversos] sentiment which … was rife in Spain but hitherto had been formally suppressed.”63 It places the discussion of conversos lineage and behavior outside of the realm of literature and into the space of popular support. Most importantly, the law clearly links negative cultural characteristics to “Jewish lineage.” Although the law aimed at Judaizing conversos, the focus was not on their lack of religiosity but on their “Jewish lineage” and “Jewish” cultural attributes, such as corruption, carnal lust for Christian virgins, and the desire to kill Christians. By marrying these concepts, the Toledans were arguing that Jewishness was embodied through blood and, thus, stained the pure Christian blood.

Though the Toledo statute was repealed after the rebellion, only to be reinstated in 1547, many public and ecclesiastical institutes followed Toledo’s lead and incited anti-conversos sentiment. Scholars have found blood purity laws in religious orders, majors schools, The House of Trade (la Casa de la Contratación) and the Office of the Holy Inquisition.64 The statute issued by the cathedral of Córdoba blamed all its misfortunes on the conversos by stating, “the many injuries and infamies that this Church and city have incurred during past times due to the fact that there have been patrons of this Church who have descended from conversos and Jews.”65 Unlike the Canon LXII of the IV Council of Toledo, this statute suggests that conversos polluted Christian institutions and brought misfortune, rather than Jews polluting conversos. This distinction is significant. The cathedral of Córdoba suggested that the mere presence of the decedents of conversos and Jews could lead to an institution’s ruin.

Similarly, the cathedral of Toledo issued a statute of blood purity in 1547. While debating whether or not to implement such a policy, the archbishop Juan Martinez de Siliceo stated that “from that day onward, applied to all the Benefice-holders of the Holy Church, and Dignitaries

64 Torres, 17.
65 Quoted in Sicroff, Los estatutos de limpieza de sangre, 120, note 113.
like Evangelical Canons, Chaplains and acolytes who were Old Christians without race of Jew, Moor, or heretics shall remain.”\textsuperscript{66} As we saw before with the word raza, Siliceo made a conceptual link between defective race and the Jews. In essence, Old Christians may remain in the office of the church because they lack Jewish blood and lineage, or race. The church undeniably organized human behavior into biological categories.

While early limpieza de sangre and other anti-conversos policies did not specify how many generations a person with Jewish lineage would be barred, in due time Old Christians contended that the smallest amount of Jewish blood polluted the entirety of a person. In 1604, the biographer of Charles V, Fray Prudencio de Sandoval wrote: “It is not enough for the Jew to be three parts aristocrat or Old Christians for one family-line [of Jewish ancestry] alone defiles and corrupts him.”\textsuperscript{67} Another source states, "The Holy Office has discovered in our times that up to a distance of twenty-one degrees they [i.e. conversos] have been known to Judaize."\textsuperscript{68} These sources suggest that Christians who descended from Jews would always be suspected of “Jewish-like” characteristics and were predisposed to immorality, despite social context or religiosity. It was their blood that corrupted, not their choices.

**Suckled by Jewish Vileness**

The obsession by Christians with consumption of conversos and Jewish breast milk renders the biological elements of raza and limpieza de sangre even more transparent. Old Christians argued that wet-nursing by conversos could transmit “Jewishness” from breast milk to Old Christian children, like a biological infection.

Peter Schollier has argued that food is the centerpiece of both self-identity and collective identity.\textsuperscript{69} Food draws the lines between who is inside a group and who is outside. Those who eat food that is “unusual” are seen as untrustworthy and even disgusting. As one source explained, the impurity of conversos was potent and thus, Old Christian children should never "be suckled by Jewish vileness [of wet-nurses] because that milk, being of infected persons,

\textsuperscript{66} Quoted by Torres, 19.
\textsuperscript{67} Fray Prudencio de Sandoval, *Historia de la vida y hechos del emperator Carlos V*, vol. 82, *Biblioteca de autores españoles* (Madrid: Editiones Atlas, 1956), 319. As Quoted by Friedman, 17.
\textsuperscript{68} Francisco de Torrejoncillo, *Centinela contra judios, puesta en la torres de la Iglesia de Dios* (ed. Pamplona, 1691), p. 62. Translated by Yerushalmi, 16.
\textsuperscript{69} Peter Scholliers, *Food, Drink and Identity*, 8.
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can only engender perverse inclinations."\textsuperscript{70} Here there is an obvious link between moral and religious behaviors, which suggests that not only was a \textit{conversos} impure, but that they could infect and make Old Christians impure through bodily fluids. Thus, in this context, drinking breast milk from a wet nurse of Jewish lineage placed one outside the realm of Christian collective identity. In essence, it made one biologically Jewish and could explain other varieties of strange behaviors.

Those in positions of power were also concerned with a parent’s decision on wet nursing. In 1480, a servant maid gave testimony to the Inquisition that her former employer Brianda Bessant, a \textit{conversos}, allowed a Jew to wet-nurse her child. According to the maidservant, she confronted Bessant by saying, “Why are you giving your daughter the milk of this Jewish bitch?”\textsuperscript{71} Later, the maidservant makes it clear that Jewish breast milk could transmit Jewish blood and qualities to an Old Christian child or further pollute a \textit{conversos}. The connection between breast milk and blood could be related to a medical opinion, which stated that a mother’s milk was derived from her menstrual blood.\textsuperscript{72} A wet nurse affected the character and morality of a child, both intentionally and unintentionally, just like a birth mother.

In one instance, it was asserted that Jewish Breast milk could push an Old Christian to convert to Judaism. Juan de Pineda warned against a situation in which:

A Moorish woman, or one of Jewish blood, might nurse the child of Old Christians, because although their original blood might be known to the credit of their ancestors, the children, without any fault of their own, might be reminded of their [\textit{conversos}] origins…I have heard it said about a person of good intellect they would beg him to convert to Judaism.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{70} Vicente de Costa Mattos, \textit{Breve discurso contra a heretica perfidia do judaismo} (Lisbon, 1623) fol. 31v. Quoted by Jerome Freidman, “Jewish Conversion, the Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation,” Examples such as this are legion.


\textsuperscript{72} For examples of the connection between blood and milk, see Christiane Klapsche, “Blood-parents and milk-parents in Florence, 1300-1530,” \textit{Women, family and ritual in Renaissance Italy}, trans. Lydia G. Cocnrane (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1987), 132-164.

\textsuperscript{73} Juan de Pineda, \textit{Dialogos familiares de la agricultura Cristiana}, iii, Biblioteca de Autores Espanoles, clvii, 103b.
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Like other contemporaries, Pineda understood a wet nurse to transmit heredity (origins) through their milk. Through this milk, his origins (conversos impurity) could beg him to “convert to Judaism.”

A child who is rendered pure at birth must be kept away from those mothers of Jewish lineage, lest the child be stained with impure blood. As Francisco de Torrejoncillo contended, a child with illustrious lineage was found to be ruined by Jewish milk: “They burned alive a Judaizer Don Lope de Vera who was verified to be of illustrious blood [pure, Old Christian heritage], but it was found that the nurse who had suckled him was of infected blood [era de sangre infecta].”

Blackness and Jews

In order to stress the biological nature of Jewish immorality, Old Christians began to relate Jewishness to the blackness of an African’s skin. The Benedictine priest and bishop of Pamplona, Prudencio Sandoval in Historia de la vida y hechos del emperador Carlos V suggested a resemblance between the blood purity of conversos (Jews) and black skinned Africans. Referring to a previously mentioned Statute in the Cathedral of Toledo, he wrote:

There was issued in this year of 1547 in the Holy Church of Toledo, by order of its Archbishop Don Joan Martinez Siliceo, the holy and wise statute, [whereby] no one who has the race [raza] of convert [conversos] may hold a benefice in it...because where there is someone of such wicked race, even though there rarely are, these people are so malign that it only takes one to disturb many people. I do not condemn the Christian piety which embraces all...But who can deny that the ill will of their ancient ingratitude and ignorance remains and persists in the descendants of Jews, as does the inseparable accident of their blackness in the Negroes.”

Like other sources, Sandoval attempts to reconcile theology with what he understood to be an undeniable inferiority of the descendants of Jews.

Although conversos are not distinct from gentiles in Divine law, like the blackness of an African, they cannot escape their “accidental” raza. Sandoval

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74 Francisco de Torrejoncillo, Centinela contra judios, puesta en la torres de la Iglesia de Dios (ed. Pamplona, 1691), p. 62. Translated by Yerushalmi, 16.
75 Fray Prudencio de Sandoval, Historia de la vida y hechos del emperador Carlos V. vol. 82, Biblioteca de autores españoles. (Madrid: Editiones Atlas, 1956) 319.
76 This “accident” can be understood in Aristotelian terms.
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explains that when Blacks “mate with white” for a thousand generations “the children are always born with dark color.” Similarly, even a “single raza infects and damages” a descendent of a Jew and they are “extremely dangerous to their community.” 77 Both black Africans and Jews are infected with heredity impurity and immorality. This attempt to liken Jewish lineage to blackness suggests an effort to essentialize and categorize group behaviors as embodied and beyond human will.

By the later half of the seventeenth century, Spanish Christian anxieties over raza were exacerbated further when Old Christians began to question if Jews could be black. In 1691, Francois-Maximilian Mission wrote against the belief about Jewish Blackness. Instead, he points out that some Jews appear less black than others:

Tis also a vulgar error that the Jews are all black; for this is only true of the Portuguese, who, marrying always among one another, beget Children like themselves, and consequently the Swarthiness of their complexion is entail’d upon their whole Race, even in the Northern Regions. But the Jews who are originally of Germany, those, for example, I have seen at Prague, are not blacker than the rest of their countrymen. 78

Mission’s need to explain the error in believing that all Jews are black suggests that some, if not many, held this belief to be true. Nonetheless, Mission does not argue that all Jews are without Black raza, instead he contends that non-Sephardic Jews are “not blacker” than other Germans. This raises many questions that are beyond the scope of this paper about the nature of “blackness.” For example, his association with the Portuguese and blackness, although interesting, is better explained elsewhere.

Conclusion

Although I have answered many questions about racial formation in early modern Spain, some questions have been beyond the scope of this paper. Most

77 “For if the latter should unite themselves a thousand times with white women, the children are born with the dark color of the father. Similarly, it is not enough for the Jew to be three parts aristocrat or Old Christian for one family-line [raza] alone defiles and corrupts him.”

importantly, “why race?” To best answer this question, I turn to Robert Bernasconi, who stated, “it is possible for the Spanish or English to exploit Jews, Native Americans, and Africans, as Jews, Native Americans, and Africans, without having the concept of race, let alone being able to appeal to a rigorous system of racial classification...However, the introduction of that concept lent an air of apparent legitimacy to these practices.” In our context, racialization allowed Old Christians to discriminate against their old enemies, the Jews, without having to answer important theological questions about the nature of salvation.

Some scholars argue that limpieza de sangre laws were insignificant because they were never fully adopted by the state or the church. However, in some parts of Spain, their influence was undeniable by historians. The Inquisition court of Toledo, for example, devoted four times as much space to determining genealogy in its records than to accusations of Judaizing. Additionally, the shear breadth and longevity of these laws proves their tenacity in Spanish Culture. Moreover, the sources suggest that the obsession with purity of blood permeated throughout Spanish society.

Eventually, limpieza de sangre statutes move beyond the Iberian Peninsula and across the Atlantic Ocean. Upon reaching the New World, Spanish Christians, determined to convert the natives, found limpieza de sangre statutes to be useful forms of exclusion. In New Spain, impure blood was synonymous with race and inferiority, similarly to Spain. Upon returning to Spain, Old Christians were forced to prove their purity and the purity of their children, lest they be infected with raza. In a different project, I would be interested in exploring a comparison between these laws in Old Spain and the New World.

Limpieza de sangre statutes and anti-conversos literature blur the line between religious and racial discrimination. This feature makes them such an interesting and frustrating topic of study. Medievalists and modernists attempt to exclude early modern Spain from our discussion on race and racialization. By stressing pseudoscience and a clear divide between religious and racial discrimination.

80 Kamen, 323.
82 Kaplan, 81.
83 For more information on limpieza de sangre in New Spain see María Elena Martínez, Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).
persecution, they risk overlooking and reducing *conversos* discrimination to nothing more than anti-Jewish sentiment. However, as I have shown, this reductive narrative misses the racializing nature of *limpieza de sangre* laws. By using words like “blood” and “lineage” to refer to *conversos*, the statutes suggest a fundamentally embodied and essentialized explanation for cultural and moral attributes. Old Christians later began to organize social structures and institutions around the exclusion of such a “vile raza.”

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