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## What can Renaissance Studies Teach us about Inclusivity?

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## What can Renaissance Studies Teach us about Inclusivity?

### Abstract

In this article I describe my pedagogical approach to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish texts. I contend that by studying the cultural output of a remote historical period, modern students can examine mechanisms of exclusion without feeling compelled to defend their own identity or group. Racial dynamics are significantly different in the early modern period, when structural inequalities targeted religious minorities—the ‘*conversos*’ who were descendants of Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. Since students do not personally identify with either the hegemonic identity of the noble Spanish male nor with the *converso*, they are able to examine racial and gender inequities in a less emotionally charged milieu. Furthermore, the grafting of racial difference onto religious minority that occurs in this era invites examination of the socially constructed nature of race as an identity category. After examining the racial and gender inequities of the early modern era, students are able to discuss the dynamics of systems of exclusion that have persisted into the modern age and, I hope, feel better able to identify and examine modern forms of racial and gender discrimination. Moreover, by examining a historically distant time period, students recognize the historical contingency of ideas regarding what is ‘natural’ and of identity categories themselves.

### Keywords

Racism, Spain, literature, pedagogy, Early Modern

As institutions, CSB/SJU aim to foster intercultural knowledge and cultural self-awareness in our students, skills that are acquired through repeated practice in stepping outside one’s cultural conventions in order to critically examine them. As a scholar of early modern Spain, I believe that we can foster intercultural competence through the

exploration of the artifacts of a historically distant culture, learning in the process not just about the past, but also about ourselves. Through the study of Renaissance texts, students can develop the analytical skills needed to understand different perspectives and exhibit the type of cross-cultural thinking necessary to thrive in an increasingly globalized and multicultural world. Moreover, by examining racialized dynamics in a historically distant setting, no student is put in the position of experiencing ‘white guilt,’ or conversely feeling compelled to defend or explain their culture, since these texts are far removed from modern identity categories and the unmarked identity in these texts—the ‘Old Christian’ nobility—is anachronous to modern life. By studying mechanics of exclusion that parallel modern forms of racism, sexism, and other -isms, yet which depend on different markers of identity, students can develop a clear sense of race and other categories as socially constructed and historically contingent, opening up new ways of relating to the present.

Early modern Spain was a place of marked social tension that expressed itself through a form of identity politics delineated along ethno-religious lines. In 1492, as Columbus embarked on a journey that would set in motion the age of imperialism, the Catholic Kings (Ferdinand and Isabella), whose marriage united the kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula into the political entity now known as Spain, issued an edict ordering all religious minorities, such as Jews and Muslims, to convert to Catholicism or leave their lands.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the monarchs hoped to unify the formerly disparate Christian kingdoms of what was to become Spain on the basis of a shared religious ideology, bolstered by the turn to Castilian as a national language.<sup>2</sup> A special papal dispensation had allowed the couple to establish an Inquisition under their direct control which would enforce religious orthodoxy throughout their domains, and legislative acts discriminated against recent converts by instituting ‘blood purity laws’ that excluded the descendants of converts (*conversos*) from universities, emigration to the colonies in the ‘Indies,’ and choice jobs. This, in turn, reinforced existing distinctions of social class since titles of blood purity could be purchased. Hence, rather than target minorities based on skin color, early modern Spanish structural

inequalities discriminated against ethnic minorities based on perceived religious difference since the coercive means used to enforce religious unity created a suspicion that new converts continued to follow their former religion in secret. The distinction between ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Christians created two new categories of social difference that became targets of prejudice and Inquisitorial persecution: the ‘crypto-Jew’ who, despite conversion to Christianity, followed Jewish dietary laws and religious practices, and the *morisco* whose ancestors had practiced Islam, and who, like the formerly Jewish *converso*, was suspected of harboring an allegiance to the old religion. Consequently, while all inhabitants of Spain were Catholic following the edict of expulsion, distinctions were made between hegemonic and subordinate identities based on ethno-religious background that racialized former religious difference. The *morisco* in particular threatened Spain’s new-found sovereignty due to fears that deviant insiders could ally themselves with the Ottoman Empire to plot an invasion of Christian Europe.<sup>3</sup> This problem of how to distinguish between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Christians led to discursive attempts to establish visible, racialized markers of religious difference in order to identify potential false converts who might threaten religiopolitical unity.

The literary record attests to the lengths to which Spanish cultural production went to reify cultural identity through perceptible markers. Just as modern divisions of racial difference that seek to establish a clear delineation among races break down upon close inspection, the effort to distinguish between ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Christians on the basis of visible characteristics lays bare for the modern reader the artificiality of social constructions of identity. For example, in a literature class on Golden Age Spain, students read (among many other works) a pair of sonnets written by the acerbic satirist Francisco Quevedo to his great poetic rival Luis de Góngora: “Soneto a Luis de Góngora” [“Sonnet to Luis Góngora”] and “Érase un hombre a un nariz pegado” [“There was a man so attached to his nose”]. Having been introduced to the historical context and the biographies of these two canonical authors, students know that both were noble courtiers, that poetic wit was one of the most highly prized markers of Renaissance high culture, and

that Quevedo in particular was a fervent anti-Semite. In these two poems, Quevedo launches a poetic attack on his archrival in which he implicitly accuses Góngora of being a converso. In the first, Quevedo states that he need only spread lard on his literary works to keep Góngora away from them—invoking Jewish dietary laws—and accuses him of insincere religious beliefs and ignorance since he knows no Greek but only Hebrew, a “thing which your nose alone cannot deny” (Quevedo).<sup>4</sup> In the second sonnet, Quevedo expands in lurid detail on the size of Góngora’s nose as a marker of suspect identity, tying it to the traditionally Jewish professions of executioner and scribe; he declares that Góngora has not one nose, but “twelve tribes of noses” that would be criminal even on the face of Annas, the high priest of Judea and member of the Sanhedrin often blamed in the medieval anti-Semitic tradition for betraying Jesus. The synecdoche of the nose as marker of identity is patent in these poems and typical of the blatant racism and anti-Semitism of early modern culture and literature. The nose serves as a visible marker that supposedly reveals invisible religious dissidence. Students can clearly recognize these texts as ascribing a minority identity to the interlocutor in order to demean him.

In other works, the figure of the crypto-Muslim, rather than the crypto-Jew, threatens religious integrity. While the crypto-Jew may be identified through facial features and other cultural markers such as occupation, the crypto-Muslim in Spanish literature, whether the descendants of ‘moors’ or Muslims from the north of Africa, or Moorish slaves captured in battle, were identified with dark complexion as well as black magic.<sup>5</sup> However, just as in anti-Semitic texts, the visible markers of Moorishness in Spanish literature reveal an underlying cultural affiliation that threatens to undermine hegemonic identity. In Cervantes’ short story, “El celoso extremeño” [“The Jealous Extremaduran”] a jealous husband encloses his much younger wife in a house attended only by female servants, guarded by a eunuch who is enclosed between inner and outer gates to transmit mail or messages, but without the key to open either door. This “old black eunuch” is quickly identified as a stereotypical portrayal of early modern ‘blackness’ in that he is so desperate to be a musician that he would do anything

asked of him, fulfilling stereotypes of Moorish slaves as unintelligent and devoted to frivolities such as music and dancing (153-158). Under the surface, however, a more complex narrative lurks. Luis is not just an aficionado of music, but of a certain type of music; he wishes to hear “ballads about Moors . . . [such as] those about the Moor Abindarráez and his lady Jarifa and those sung about the history of the great Sufi Tumen Beyo” (159-160). These references to Abindarráez and Jarifa, courtly lovers and protagonists of a ballad set during Muslim rule of Iberia, and to Tumen Beyo, a contemporary powerful Muslim ruler, disclose Luis’ unhappiness with his imprisonment and longing for tales of heroes with whom he can relate culturally and that evoke Muslim sovereignty, revealing in turn Cervantes’ empathy for the marginalized and respect for individual liberty. Yet, even in the context of this sympathetic portrayal, Cervantes’ tale depicts Luis through a set of cultural stereotypes about Moorishness that clearly relegate him to a subordinate social position.

As Cervantes’ example demonstrates, many works of the period questioned prevailing norms; yet, the desire for individual liberty and justice they express is circumscribed, leading to productive classroom conversations about the limits of human vision. Beyond this, the flagrant bias of these works can prove a useful teaching tool precisely because it is so easily recognized. After reading these works, I first ask students to examine the markers of minority identity. When considering crypto-Judaism, I introduce examples from Inquisitional trials of food practices as a marker of non-normative identity, such as the aversion to eating pork cited in Quevedo’s poem as a marker of deviance or restraint from cooking on the Sabbath. We discuss the exclusionary history predating the expulsion of the Jews that proscribed occupational choices, associating religious minorities with certain professions such as scribe, notary, or executioner for Jews, or agricultural work for *moriscos*, or the slave status of Muslims captured in warfare. Likewise, we note differences in authorial point of view: Quevedo, a member of the courtly aristocracy, shows only contempt for religious ‘deviants,’ while Cervantes, who may have been a descendant of *conversos*, shows much more compassion for the disenfranchised (Márquez Villanueva 51-

74). Students come to recognize that the discursive effort to separate inhabitants of early modern Spain into visibly recognizable identity categories ultimately failed. While literary texts would have us believe that religious deviance could be ‘read’ through exterior signs, social reality indicates otherwise. During the seven centuries of Muslim rule in Iberia, relative tolerance of religious difference led to intermarriage between religious groups, making it highly unlikely that either *moriscos* or Jewish converts were significantly different in appearance from ‘Old Christians’ as fictional works would have us believe. Moreover, the existence of the Inquisition demonstrates the difficulty of assessing religious identity; the role of the tribunal was to identify those who did not conform to normative beliefs, yet this determination often proved contentious even after a lengthy trial. Likewise, given the intense discrimination they face, many *conversos* ‘passed’ as ‘Old Christians’ by counterfeiting or buying titles of blood purity. The ability of so many to go undetected calls into question the visibility of ethno-religious difference.

More importantly, the literature of a historically distant culture is an ideal site for modern students to unpack racialized language since they do not identify with the hegemonic identity categories at stake, such as the nobility or ‘Old Christian.’ Even when students do identify with the hegemonic identity under critique—for example, when male-identified students discuss gender issues in a misogynist culture—students in the hegemonic identity do not feel threatened since the culture is so distant from modern categories. Conversely, minority students that may feel pressured to defend or define their own group in conversations about modern racism do not identify with antiquated categories such as ‘Moors.’ Thus, no one is put in the position of needing to defend their identity, and likewise, when we move toward the present, this allows students to distance themselves from modern forms of exclusion and present themselves as allies. Furthermore, the grafting of racial difference onto religious minority that occurs in this era invites examination of the socially constructed nature of modern racial categories.

By making racism distant and therefore non-threatening, we can then move toward the present day. In initial discussions, students tend to be dismissive of historically distant cultures as ‘uncivilized’ or ‘barbaric,’ and take for granted that we, in the modern world, are more civilized and advanced. Many are confident that we have solved the problems of misogyny, racism, and other forms of exclusion. Throughout the course, I bring students into contact with examples that challenge their presumptions of the ‘backwardness’ of pre-modern culture such as readings from respected female authors, or discussions of Queen Isabella, who ruled in her own right and was more politically powerful than her husband, or Santa Teresa of Ávila, one of the most important figures of her time. However, the discussion cannot end in the past. After thinking through the texts and their problematic assumptions about religious identity, we turn to the markers of modern identity. We might discuss such modern issues as forms that ask citizens to identify themselves with a single racial identity, or cultural constructions of U.S. racial identity that differentiate between black and white with no middle ground: for example, defining Barack Obama as the first ‘black’ president despite his biracial ancestry, or, conversely, questioning whether he is ‘black enough.’ I find that, having examined the problematic nature of identity categories in the past, students are more willing to critically examine the underlying assumptions in modern culture about identity and to come to the realization that past patterns of exclusion linger into the present. Moreover, by acknowledging that any attempt to reduce human diversity to binary categories inevitably breaks down, students are better able to recognize race as a social construct and particularly as a historically contingent one. While a small advancement, with repetition and reiteration over time and through a number of identity categories, students become more willing to critically examine their own beliefs.

Additionally, by studying historically distant cultural output, students can recognize patterns of exclusion in cultural constructions of identity. Texts from the Renaissance, produced at a time when very few could read or write and when books were luxury goods available



only to the elite, clearly reflect the concerns of the nobility, from which women and marginalized groups are almost entirely absent. With this realization, students can apply an analytical lens to modern society looking at who is represented in our own cultural artifacts; for example, they might reflect on the recent ‘Oscars so white’ controversy. Or, as a final assignment, I might ask them to write an essay from the perspective of a historian four hundred years in the future examining artifacts such as Hollywood movies in order to understand the twenty-first century. In this way, students gain historical perspective on the constructedness of identity categories and a multiperspectival outlook on culture and society.

After examining the racial and gender inequities of the early modern era, students are able to discuss the elements of systems of exclusion that have persisted into the modern era and are better able to identify and examine modern forms of racial and gender discrimination. Moreover, by examining a historically distant time period, students recognize the historical contingency of ideas regarding what is ‘natural’ and of identity categories themselves, and gain a sense of the ambiguity of cultural difference—for example, recognizing that a culture that treats women as property and naturally subordinate to man can accept and even venerate a female monarch—that creates a more critically engaged mindset. In this way, students practice stepping outside of their own worldview, building intercultural awareness and the capacity for critical self-analysis. This in turn builds inclusivity through a more expansive view of human diversity.

## Notes

1. For more information on the history of religious conflict in early modern Spain, see Anderson 61-120; Elliot 212-248; Kamen 33-39.
2. See Anderson 17-30; Elliot 15-44.
3. See Harvey 45-78; Phillips and Phillips 208-209.
4. All translations are my own.
5. See, for example, the figure of the Moorish necromancer in María de Zayas' novella *La inocencia castigada* (84).

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