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Review

**Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan,
editors,**

***Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial
Difference in the Renaissance Empires***

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Reviewer:

Joseph Ballan

joseph.ballan@gmail.com

Looking for the genesis of Nazi and other twentieth century anti-semitisms, Hannah Arendt was surely right to turn to the biological racial theories that proliferated in the 19th

century, but in our search for historical precedents for the peculiar sort of racism that appears to be resurfacing with a vengeance in our own day, we may have a great deal to learn from studying the racism of imperialist and religious discourses of the Renaissance period, the period in which “race” first becomes recognizable as the object of what we today call racist discourses.

Rereading the Black Legend makes an important contribution to the opening of this field for research, helpfully framing discussion by limiting it to one especially revealing, complicated segment of a much larger picture: the so-called “black legend,” that is, the portrayal of Spain and the Spaniards as intolerant, fanatical, and barbaric, particularly vis-à-vis the populations they encountered in the New World.

The complexity of the situation begins to emerge, the editors contend, when one compares the imperialism of western Europe with that of other contemporary empires that were, notably, not on the cusp of the development of capitalism. Their goal being dynastic expansion, rather than the expansion of markets, one looks in vain for European-style colonialism, along with the racist discourses accompanying it, in their own brutal conquests. Leslie Pierce’s article on the Ottoman creation of an “imperial ethnicity” (27) through the conversion of Christian slaves to Islam and Ruby Lal’s essay on concepts of the sanctity of the familial sphere, through an analysis of the Mughal emperor Akbar’s *haram*, provide points of comparison in relation to the Spanish, Dutch, and English empires.

One of the volume’s real gems, an essay by David Nirenberg, opens the group of several on Spain by challenging a cluster of standard views of racism’s modernity, for instance that the anti-semitism of 15th century Spain was not a racism because the lines it drew were cultural and/or religious, not according to skin color or putative biology. Nirenberg traces the history of the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), according to which even a drop of Jewish or Muslim *blood* would render a person’s Christianity suspect. He concludes with probing reflections on nominalism about “race,” and on the historiography of race as a strategic

comparative endeavor. In her contribution, Barbara Fuchs also contests a scholarly truism, this one regarding the nature of the relationship between Orientalism and colonial domination (namely that the former reinforces or actualizes the latter in a relatively straightforward way). She demonstrates that the propagation of the Black Legend proceeded, in part, by orientalizing Spain, that is to say, by conflating it with Moorishness and with Islam.

Irene Silverblatt traces the development of inquisitorial conspiracy theories in colonial Peru that tied together a variety of perceived threats (New Christians, Indians, Africans, witches), betraying Spain's colonial anxieties. She also discusses Richard Hakluyt's argument for the superiority of the British approach to colonizing the New World on the basis of the superiority of the free market and free trade. Gonzalo Lamana pursues the theme of the construction of internal imperial borders as revealed by a variety of Spanish literary reinscriptions of the famous encounter between an Incan emperor and a Spanish clergyman on the plaza of Cajamarca in 1532. One of the most famous Spanish critiques of Spanish colonial behaviour—that given by Bartolome de Las Casas—is among the texts that Lamana deftly analyzes here. He shows that these internal critiques stopped short of questioning the overarching imperial project, which they took Christianity to underwrite.

SilverMoon and Michael Ennis document examples from Nahua intellectual culture (such as a new political structure, the *altepetl*) that give the lie to the notion of the “degraded Indian” which, the authors note, “was central to the critique of the Spanish” colonial system (151). An essay by Yolanda Fabiola Orquera provides a valuable analysis of the concrete ways in which power functioned in the Spanish colonies, not only the power exerted on the “native” populations from above, so to speak, but also of the role of what Orquera calls, à la Bourdieu, the “capital of experience” (168) on which indigenous people drew in forging new forms of cultural and political power. The section on Spain is bookended by another reflection on specifically Castilian racism which, like Nirenberg's piece, (re-)raises the question of “race” as a modern,

historiographical, interpretive category. Kathryn Burns seeks to “unfix” the term, showing the complex histories of terms like “mestizo” and “mulatto” as used both by those to whom these labels were applied as well as by those who were constructing the labels in the 16th century.

The Spanish were not alone in being criticized by other Europeans for their colonial behavior (which criticism was often underwritten by a racial subtext). Turning our attention to the Dutch context, Carmen Nocentelli reads Jan Huygen van Linschoten’s account of his travels through Portuguese India, giving attention to the intertwined operations of orientalizing and feminizing the Portuguese. Their empire’s decline could, with the support of such literary strategies, be read as racial degeneracy or degeneration (like the Spanish, the blood of the Portuguese was thought to have been tainted by relations with Africans). Nocentelli’s analysis of Linschoten’s portrayal of the Portuguese adaptation of the palanquim (or litter) is especially illustrative of what was anxiously perceived as a dangerous “hybridity” characteristic of the “contact zone” between Portuguese and Indians, the palanquim being “associated with weakness and effeminacy” (209-10). Patricia Gravatt gives a perhaps overly sanguine reading of Theodore de Bry’s *America* engravings, contending that de Bry was above all else a “Protestant philosopher” (225) seeking to represent the common humanness of Spanish and indigenous populations.

Edmund Valentine Campos opens a group of essays on England by calling attention to the function of metallurgy as a trope in the English construction of the Spanish enemy. Echoing Fuchs’s essay, Linda Bradley Salamon’s interpretation of Roger Hascham’s *Report of Germany*, a diagnosis of, among other things, the Ottoman threat to the Habsburg empire, suggests that Hascham’s portrayal of the Turks makes the body into a “battleground between Christian and heathen” (273), but in slightly unexpected ways: these confrontations became “displaced onto the confrontation between Spaniard and American indigene” (287). Jeffrey Knapp considers a number of instances in Elizabethan literature in which concepts of national or racial purity are

seriously undermined, but he concludes that the “remarkably deconstructive approach to race and nation” he detects in, for instance, Spenser’s tract, “A View of the Present State of Ireland,” nevertheless actually serves to “underwrite [British] imperialism” (304).

The far-reaching implications of the research undertaken in this book become especially apparent in its introduction and afterword. The latter, penned by Walter Mignolo, gives a provocative answer to the question it raises, namely, “what does the Black Legend have to do with race [but also, I would add, with religion]?” Mignolo’s bold thesis—which the individual essays support, but which would require a more detailed comparative historical epistemology to confirm in all its breadth of scope—is that nineteenth century “secular science and philosophy” merely translated and adapted the “racial system put in place by theology in the sixteenth century” (312). While we commonly think of the racism and colonialism of this period as a relation between (European) empire and (non-European) colony, we acknowledge that theological disputes were waged primarily between European Christians. The Black Legend represents a point of overlap between theological and colonial discourses, in which the subjugation of non-Europeans peoples was enabled and sometimes justified by theological differences. Would the return of the tone, if not the precise content, of these discourses be a feature of the so-called “return of the religious” today, as Mignolo and other authors in this volume suggest? As Talal Asad and others have taught us, “secularization” is never as straightforward a process as the standard narratives about it suggest, which may explain why constellations of racism, imperialism, and capitalism—witness the re-emergence of the language of “crusade” and of the forces of light and darkness in the pre-Iraq war rhetoric of George W. Bush (148) and Christian portrayals of Islam as the new *barbarie contraria* (Las Casas’ fifth type of barbarism, a catch-all that included all those opposed to true Christianity, Protestants no less than Turks; 14-15)—persist in subtle and not-so-subtle ways as features of the contemporary landscape.