

# Review of: "Blacks in the Middle Ages – What About Racism in the Past? Literary and Art-Historical Reflections"

Inés Monteiro<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

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The work is interesting, but I think it should be completed by dealing with various issues in order to offer a more complete view of the subject.

The author selects a series of literary works where he perceives the existence of a positive notion about blacks. I consider this statement to be quite questionable, considering that he selects very limited works, and that the examples he provides are not indicative of a positive attitude towards blacks.

The author selects some literary works, but it is important to take stock of the epic songs at that time. A very significant work in this regard is Bancourt's doctoral thesis (Although it is difficult to obtain, it has served as a reference for multiple works, among them, Monteiro offers a lot of information about this work and the vision that is thrown of blacks in the same).

It is also surprising that he has not consulted the most comprehensive and important book on black representation, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, which is very helpful in understanding the perception of ethnic otherness in the past.

I find the positive view of blacks questionable in much of the literary works of the 12th to 14th centuries.

The fact that a black woman can be considered beautiful in a romance or that a black city is described as civilized does not imply respect or appreciation of the black community. It is rather the reflection of a historical reality in which there were very important cities, mainly Muslim, where there were rulers and prominent figures of the black race. This did not imply that there was not a great rejection towards black Muslims, infidels, who were also demonized for that black appearance. Positive black characters mentioned in epic songs and chivalrous plays often end up converting to Christianity at the end of the play, leading to the miraculous whitening of their skin. The very Belacane that the author mentions is willing to receive baptism: it seems difficult to maintain that it is a positive vision of a black woman, when not respecting her religious diversity and her difference; the only thing that is recognized in that story is her feminine attractiveness, as part of the multiple love experiences of the Christian hero. The fact that your son is animalized (in medieval culture, animalization is a mechanism of demonization) also seems to me a rather negative reading about black ethnicity. Of course, it has a humorous character, but humor is also an instrument of exclusion within medieval symbolism.

The author indicates that we do not have a black voice in medieval times that gives us first-person testimony about the problem of race at that time. It seems to me that his affirmation is paradoxically Eurocentric, and that it would be

necessary to see how many of the Arabic authors who have left a rich scientific and philosophical production in medieval times were blacks.

It is mentioned that the slave trade of blacks did not exist until the 16th and 17th centuries, however, the first notable contact with blacks in the medieval West was precisely through their presence as slaves within the armies of Muslim Spain from 9th century on. The first realistic representation of black in Western art can be found in medieval Romanesque art, as Monteiro has studied, references to this are attached below. So, there was a trade in black slaves in medieval times, and the *chanson de geste* attest to a profound rejection of blacks, due to their ethnic as well as religious differences (see references below). It would be convenient to specify what Western society is talking about in medieval times, to affirm that there was no contact with blacks, which is highly debatable.

The concept of racism for the medieval period is perhaps a little far away from the mentality of that time, where a complete rejection of what is different is observed, both from the point of view of doctrine and from the physical aspect.

A very important element in this sense were the "Estatutos de limpieza de sangre" produced in Spain, I think the author should address that issue. There components arise that we could begin to relate to modern racism, but the discrimination of blacks in previous stages is contaminated by the ideology of the crusades and Christian ethnocentrism.

Regarding the figure of Alfonso X as tolerant in the union of the three cultures, and a favorable character towards blacks, it is inaccurate. The most recent historiography has called into question the widespread idea of Alfonso X's tolerance, generally related to his scientific work and the schools of wise men he created, with Jews and Muslims. That did not prevent his warlike and ideological attitude towards the Muslims from being truly belligerent, as discussed in the work of García Fitz (see below). Also flatly inaccurate is the fact that King Alfonso X would never have tolerated any negative portrayal of Arabs and blacks. There are many studies on the pejorative way in which Jews and Muslims are portrayed in the *Cantigas*, with blacks and ethnic different features, who are appearing as child murderers and evil conspirators. See some references below. I also want to warn the author about the use he makes of "European" as opposed to "Black", understanding that Europeans are not equivalent to white. It must be remembered that al-Andalus was a very refined civilization, which developed in the Western and European area, and within Al-Andalus the political hierarchies were often black and Berber. The author mentions the presence of the black king of Epiphany as a positive vision of blacks. This representation was a very useful instrument to evangelize and Christianize the eastern lands, and it should not be understood as a tolerant vision towards blacks, since its positive character is conditioned to convert to Christianity with a pre-colonial spirit. For the representation of black at that time, in a German and European context, it is important, for example, to analyze the presence of black heads in coats of arms and European heraldry. See Monteiro where this

evolution is monitored until recent times.

It also seems a bit excessive to me to deduce the absence of racism in an entire era or society from an ennobling portrait of a black man. In the same way that at the beginning of his study the author indicates that in our current culture there are still racist manifestations and attitudes, despite the fact that it is not the global attitude of the general population, we cannot generalize a case for the analysis of the past. In the medieval context, the situation is directly reversed, there may be partial indications of tolerance towards blacks, but the general attitude is one of deep intolerance. On the other hand, in general terms, it is somewhat inappropriate for an academic article to carry out value judgments and opinions about what is good or bad, which are more valid in today's world than in medieval times. The fact that the author understands the approach towards the black figure in medieval Europe as positive, I think, also implies applying parameters of contemporary mentality to a past world, which had a truly different mental structure. As the author himself indicates on different occasions, the notion of race in medieval times is more complex because the religious concept interferes with it. Finally, I find valuable the argument about the need to know the roots of racism and delve into the past to understand the present. I fully share this statement and the need to value it, given the educational policies he mentions in the United States, where the most conservative sectors want to hide racism in the past. But I think that, considering all the elements I mentioned, the author has to rethink and reconsider his general conclusions, since I think they are partial and not accurate to the information we have about the past. I hope this report has been useful and I apologize for any errors in English that may exist.

-General works on blacks in medieval art and thought and racism:

DEVISSE, Jean *L'Image du Noir dans l'Art Occidental. Des premiers siècles*

*Chrétiens aux "Grandes Découvertes,"* vol. 1, part 2 (Paris-Freiburg: Bibliothèque des

Arts, 1979), 72–82; new English edition, David BINDMAN and Henry L. GATES Jr., eds., *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol.2: From the Early Christian Era to the "Age of Discovery," part 1: From the Demonic Threat to the Incarnation of Sainthood

(Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 75–84.

MONTEIRA, I. « Visual Traits of Otherness: figurative resources used in the depiction of Muslims in Mediterranean Romanesque sculpture », in *Artistic and Cultural Dialogues in the Late Medieval Mediterranean* M. Marcos Cobaleda (ed). 2021, Palgrave MacMillan, chapter 4, pp. 81-97., 202

- "Seeking the origins of Christian representation of Islam", *Islamophobia Studies Yearbook*, Academic Press, Wien 2016

SACHS, Ignacy. "L'image du noir dans l'art européen", *Annales Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 24<sup>e</sup> Année, 4, Julio-Agosto 1969, pp. 883-893.

DIJK, Teun A van, *Elite discourse and racism*, Sage

- On black slaves in medieval Europe and Blacks in Christian medieval art:

MONTEIRA, Inés. *El enemigo imaginado. La escultura románica hispana y la lucha contra el Islam* Méridiennes CNRS, 2012, p. 479.

MONTEIRA, Inés, "Of Archers and Lions: The Capital of the Islamic Rider in the Cloister of Girona Cathedral", *Medieval Encounters* 25-5 (2019), pp. 457-498.

- On blacks in the chanson de Geste:

Paul Bancourt, *Les Musulmans dans les Chansons de Geste du Cycle du Roi*(Marseille : Université de Provence, 1982),

- On black heads in heraldry:

MONTEIRA, Inés, "Destierro físico, destierro espiritual. Símbolos de triunfo sobre el "infiel" en los espacios secundarios del templo románico". In *Relegados al margen. Marginalidad y espacios marginales en la cultura medieval* CSIC, Madrid, 2009.

-On blacks, Muslims, and Jews in Alfonso X's Cantigas:

García Fitz. Francisco "El Islam Visto Por Alfonso X",  
[https://www.academia.edu/36111426/EL\\_ISLAM\\_VISTO\\_POR\\_ALFONSO\\_X](https://www.academia.edu/36111426/EL_ISLAM_VISTO_POR_ALFONSO_X)

GARCÍA ARENAL, Mercedes. "Los moros en las cantigas de Alfonso X El Sabio", *Al-Qantara*, Vol. VI, 1985, pp. 133-151.

KLEIN, Peter K. "La imagen de los moros y los judíos en las *Cantigas* de Alfonso X el Sabio", en *Simposio Internacional. El legado de al-Andalus. El arte andalusí en los reinos de León y Castilla durante la Edad Media*. Fundación Patrimonio

Historico de Castilla y León. Coord. y ed. M. Valdés Fernández. Valladolid, 2007, pp. 339-364.

RODRÍGUEZ BARRAL Paulino “La dialéctica texto-imagen. A propósito de la representación del judío en las “Cantigas de Santa María” de Alfonso X”, Anuario De Estudios Medievales (AEM)37/1, 2007, pp. 213-243

PATTON, Pamela “An Ethiopian-Headed Serpent in the Cantigas de Santa María: Sin, Sex, and Color in Late Medieval Castile”, Gesta, nº 55, 2016, pp. 213-238.