To begin, I quote a couple lines from Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History:*

“There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.”

The intimate relationship between civilization and barbarism etched here belonged to a broader thread in Benjamin’s thinking, through which history represented a telescoping of facts, fiction, ideas and memories reconstructed within the present moment of political and social struggle. For Benjamin, history was another element of the cultural bundle that victors of war and hegemonies had to contest and reform in order to maintain their constituencies.¹

In Benjamin, there exists space to treat history and its practice not simply as a faithful recording of historical veracity, but also as a political tool, constituted in its and our presents. We see in Carlo Ginzburg’s essay, “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist” the

¹ Also in Thesis VII: “And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.” Hannah Arendt (Ed.) *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Press, 1968) 256-257
tendency to treat the historical document as something to be manipulated and adjusted solely for the purpose of a truth. In his hands, the Inquisitors became anthropologists, describing the life and practices of peasants who fell under their investigation.

This process of revision is a productive example both of creating the microhistory as well as illustrating the layers of political consciousness embedded in history. To explore the significance of such layers, I’ll use three examples in Spanish religious histories whose real and revised knowledge helped produce a continual struggle of human difference through the process of racialization: first, a popular uprising in Toledo, against the converso classes in 1449. Second, the change in Taino descriptions of their God from Ramón Pané to Bartolomé de las Casas, as reflecting increased knowledge and new set of religious politics in America. Finally, Bernardino de Sahagun’s re-writing of Book XII in his Florentine Codex, whose edited form emphasized the role Christianity played in his account of Cortés’ invasion.

I. Imaginations, Politics and Jewish Subjects


6 The first version of the twelfth book may be found in Angel Garibay’s edition of the Historia de las cosas de Nueva España (Porrúa, 1980ish), the second version is found in S. L. Cline Conquest of New Spain: 1585 Revision (English and Spanish Edition) (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1989)
Recently, David Nirenberg made an argument for the historical power of the imagination through a history of anti-Jewish practices throughout the creation of Western tradition. His analysis is summarized in the following sentence:

“The ‘reality’ of these Jewish rivals was entirely the product of a discursive struggle against ‘Judaizing’ projected onto the flesh of Judaism’s living representatives.”

The relationship between “reality” and “discursive struggle” reflects the broader problem of any historian dealing with the particulars of struggle and resistance from the periphery against the center of a historiographical tradition. Colonial history and postcolonial studies have shown the numerous readings possible when the historian takes as her focus not only the archive, but also the questions asked of it. Nirenberg’s text is particularly useful because it deploys such a method through not just the modern period, but through Classical Antiquity, tying all of these historical traditions into the reproduction of the imagined Jew.

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8 Walter Mignolo’s Introduction in The Darker Side of the Renaissance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) and the Introduction to the first volume of Subaltern Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) by Ranajit Guha both reflect this struggle in different contexts. Central to these struggles is less an emphasis on the colonial tradition through which it was made manifest and more through the continual deployment of power in historiographical analysis and focus. In relation to gender, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in G. Nelson (Ed.) Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-316 and Joan Scott “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” The American Historical Review 91:5 (1986): 1053-1075.
9 This process has been thought about more broadly in the context of postcolonial theory and its relation to previously ignored subject areas. See Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, The Postcolonial Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), R. S. Sugirtharajah The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Eds. Laura Nasrallah & Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender and Ethnicity in Early Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
For this tradition, a term like “Judaizing” had a history far older than its invocation in 1449. In the mid-thirteenth century a specific problem in the reign of Alfonso el Sabio was his portrayal by opponents as a weak king controlled by the Jewish ministers and advisers. The individuals, who worked in the scriptoriums, translating and working with many of the Arabic scientific, legal, and artistic materials, were often depicted and named as Jews, whose experience in varying linguistic tradition proved useful. Alfonso’s obsession with knowledge, and the politics of legal governance were susceptible to comparisons with Jewish tendencies. This was so much the case that part of his son’s rebellion was justified in terms of his father acting as a barely Christian tyrant, with implications of Jewish corruption.

It was this revision of Jewish practice as intimately linked to conspiracies of politics and economy that played a role in the pogroms that ravaged Castile in 1391. Born from a spirit of populist rebellion against perceived Jewish influence, the aftermath of these pogroms was so bad that many Jews sought conversion and protection under sections of the Siete Partidas intended to encourage the baptism of non-Christian subjects.

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13 For the 1391 rebellions, see Philippe Wolff, “The 1391 Pogrom in Spain: Social Crisis or Not?” Past & Present 50 (1971): 4-18. Samuel Parsons Scott has provided an admirably accessible,
In practice, the conversion of Jews after 1391 created a new chapter in anti-Jewish practices within the Castilian territories. In the 1430s, “Old” Christians began to rely on genealogies to demonstrate their purity and distinction from the *conversos*. By 1449, an alcalde mayor named Pero Sarmiento led a group of rebels against the king’s minister, who they suspected of being a *converso*. Using his political position, Sarmiento wrote out a document called the *Sentencia-Estatuto de Toledo*, which banned *conversos* from political positions.

“We pronounce and declare as it is notorious[ly known], by the right of canonical as well as civil [law] that the *conversos* of Jewish lineage, for being suspect in the faith of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as they frequently throw up his light by Judaizing, that they cannot hold offices, nor benefices public or private where they can gravely injure or badly treat Clean, Old Christians, nor can they be used for testimony against them as a result of this reason… …descendants of Jewish lineage both appeared as evidence in the past and evidently appear to be people of suspicion in the Catholic faith, guarding the rites and ceremonies of the Old Law.”

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14 See Emilio Mitre Fernández *Los judíos de Castilla en tiempo de Enrique III: El pogrom de 1391* (Valladolid: Secretariado de Publicaciones, Universidad de Valladolid, 1994)
This statement was part of the first generation of limpieza de sangre (Cleanliness of blood) statutes, used to limit converso advancement. It is also within the same time period we see the rise of raça and raza in Castilian poetry and horse-breeding manuals, where it was used to describe defects in both horses and humans. We see, for example, in the poetry of Alfonso de Baeno that the term raça is translated as defecto or defect. It is from this connection that some scholars have suggested rather than ratio in Latin, the origins for raza come from the Arabic haraz meaning horse.

This is part of the history in which imagined stereotypes of Jewish practice and segregation turned into a new political tool. Many of the demands issued in statutes like the Sentencia-Estatuto focused on the converso by requiring genealogies in order to prove the applicant for public office or notary had no Jewish blood. We may never know whether or not the king’s minister was a converso, or whether the conversos of Toledo in 1449 were actively Judaizing. However, these specific historical truths are irrelevant in the history of racialization. Here, we see the connection between conversos and Jewish ancestry had taken biological and perhaps even economic turns for the removal of suspect classes from social advancement. Such a connection, much like the broader history of

18 Numerous examples of this translation are found in Brian Dutton and Joaquin Gonzalez Cuenca (eds.) Cancionero de Juan Alfonso de Baena (Madrid: Visor Libros, 1993) for example, song 250, verse 50 and song 100, verse 2.

19 I must confess I’m relying here on other scholar’s interpretations of Gianfranco Contini’s “Tombeau de Leo Spitzer” in Varianti e altra linguistica una raccolta di saggi, (1938-1968) (Turin: Einaudi, 1970) 651-660, as I currently have no Italian. That being said, it is cited in this context both by David Nirenberg, “Was there race before modernity?” p. 248 and Margaret R. Greer, Walter Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan (eds.) Rereading the Black Legend: Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008).

20 In terms of the biological, we see strategies in which Jews are compared to the multi-bodied animals. In terms of the economic, we see within the logic of Sarmiento’s argument an analysis of “risk” and “uncertainty” in regards to how likely the conversos are to Judaize compared to Old
anti-Jewish tendencies in and out of the West would not be easily refuted by the clarification of facts.

II. American and Christian Gods

Racialization in imagined histories would open a radically new chapter with the arrival of Columbus in Palos de la Frontera with seven Taíno survivors and stories of America. Scholars like Lewis Hanke and Benjamin Keen have thought beyond the Black Legend of Hispanic colonization as dictated by Protestant rivals and allowed the asking of a new question: What political-religious tools would be useful in re-imagining the Americas as a natural extension of Hispanic aspirations to Christian dominion?

This was a different question from the ones inspired by interactions with the Jews and Muslims, who had heard the Word of Christ and rejected it. This difference influenced the ways through which Hispanic jurists thought about the distinctions between Africans and Native Americans. By the end of the 17th century it was possible to confer “limpio” status upon varying groups of Native populations that had “accepted” Christian thought and practice in the early 16th century. However, in 1497, Ramón Pané and other friars

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22 It is worth noting the problem of translating spiritual politics into the messy matter of human organization and empirical knowledge was hardly specific to Spain and the Americas. See Brett Whalen’s Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) and David Livingstone’s Adam’s Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

23 Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 2009, 118-119.
encountering Indigenous populations for the first time often found themselves looking for evidence in Taino myths that these people knew of a Christian God:

“They believe that he is in heaven and is immortal and that no one can see him, and that he has a mother. But He has no beginning, and they call him Yucahu Bagua Maórocti, and they call his mother Atabey, Yermao, Guacar, Apito, and Zuimaco.”

Pané’s original account is lost. It was recorded in a text titled History of the Admiral Don Christopher Columbus by his Son Don Fernando and only survives in a poor Italian translation published in 1571. As such, the account of Pané is full of errors of translation and transcription. Yet, the work of Pané is referenced in a 1566 publication of Bartolomé de las Casas, Apologetic History of the Indies. While he explicitly records Pané’s findings in earlier chapters of the text, we see in this section something slightly more than repetition:

“Theyir religion seems primarily to have abided in the idea or respect of a god, and there they held their worship, although some errors intruded because they lacked doctrine and grace, and the devil and his ministers put obstacles before them and worked persuasions upon them. The people of this Island of Hispaniola had a certain faith in knowledge of a one and true God, who was immortal and invisible, for none can see him, who had no beginning whose dwelling place and residence is heaven and they called him Yócahu Vagua Maórocoti.”

26 Appendix C in Pané, Account of the Antiquities, 1999, 55.
On one level, Las Casas’ account reveals the amount of ethnographic work he did in his remarkable life. Later sections go into more detail about the languages of the island, and referred to Ramón Pané as someone who “found out what he could, insofar as he understood the languages.” On another, this re-reading and correcting of Pané’s account also reflected a new set of politics that had evolved to explain the differences between the Tainos or Nahuas and the Spaniards: those of demons in America. Scholars like Fernando Cervantes have written extensively about the rise of demonology as explaining the fall of Native populations for Hispanic jurists.27 More recently, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra explored how descriptions of the Fall in St. Augustine’s writing contributed to discussions about the natural “stains” or “damage” of Native American bodies.28 The relationship between demonology in the Atlantic world, confirmed by the reports of greed and abuse from encomenderos and disgraced hidalgos in America confirmed the challenge of converting in America where demons appeared everywhere.29

III. Cortés and God: From Nahua to Spanish Perspectives

By 1521, theories of Christian rule meant little when individual groups of Spaniards were capable of challenging governance. The invasion and subsequent destruction of the

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27 Fernando Cervantes The Devil in the New World: Diabolism in New Spain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997)
29 The deep connection between proselytizing and the encomienda is explored in several cedulas between Isabella and Ferdinand and governor of the Indies Nicolas de Ovando. See documents 6 and 10 in Richard Knetzke Colección de documentos para la historia de la formación social de Hispanoamérica, 1493-1810 vol. 1 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1953). The sermon of Antonio de Montesinos in 1511 is also useful for seeing the perpetuation of these abuses and the Christian terms in which they are diagnosed. A brief translation of the important sections of which are here, hosted by Digital History, last accessed August 20th, 2015.
Aztecs’ empire by Hernan Cortés would fundamentally change the needs and energies of Hispanic efforts. By the middle fifteenth century, Francisco Toral, first provincial for the area, gave the order to Sahagun for a full compilation of Native histories. Sahagun was tasked with first, gathering as much extensive knowledge about the Nahua past pre-conquest as possible and second, developing an attentive history of Cortés’ invasion. These goals were conceptualized as a way of learning about the spiritual disease in American populations, so they could apply the cure of baptism. The project took thirty years of close work with second generation Nahuas and Spaniards, interviews with people who remembered their histories before the Spanish, and corroboration of the account in Book Twelve with the historical documents left by Cortés among others. It was completed in 1579 with the title *General Historia de las Cosas de Nueva España*, aka *Florentine Codex*.

By 1585, however, Sahagun completed a revision of Book XII. According to the Prologue for this book, Sahagun accounted for this revision by citing a need to correct the previous text, which was full of errors and mistakes. Errors notwithstanding, these revisions were conveniently timed to an internal religious struggle between the Franciscans of Spain and those of America, struggling to conceptualize the necessary conditions for Revelation. If Sahagun wanted funding and publication of his thirty year project by his employer, he would have to revamp the vision of its account.

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30 An account of this struggle is found in John Leddy Phelan *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970)
As such, the 1585 version reflects a series of parallel amendments. Throughout the 1579 version, there is one mention of a church: St. Lucia, used to orient the reader in regards to where the Spanish army re-grouped in one scene. In the 1585 revision, however, we see passages like the following:

“And of those who had [embarked] on the discovery of this continent, there were no heretics, nor Muslims, nor Turks, nor Jews, nor Gentiles; they were Catholic Christians, obedient to the Holy Roman Church, Spaniards and people most clean in the things of the Catholic Faith that there were in this time: and for being Christian Catholics, they were obligated by the vow of their Christian baptism to do all that assists the service of Our Lord God and to the good treatment of her neighbors (even infidels) and if this they did as Catholic Christians, our Lord God would not have allowed the great disaster that came, and thus they were to point from the loss of some [of the Spaniards], through our Lord God and his great mercy that they [who were lost] had not carried out his plan of converting these people.”

In another area, a whole chapter is added in which Sahagun summarizes the conquest through the eyes of the Spaniards. These edits and revisions all contributed to one specific goal: making the Spanish actions seem tolerable through a renewal of their commitment to Christianity. Despite this important history of revision, when Cline published her translation in 1989, she noted that scholars had overlooked the 1585 by citing its obvious tampering in relation to the Christian politics of Spain. They preferred to work as closely with the Nahuatl as possible, if not directly.

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Such a project is important, but so is a history of how Sahagun framed Book XII for the end of the sixteenth century. Many of these discursive struggles—primarily argued by Spaniards in terms of Christian orientation—produced images of noble savages, innocent children, and demonic barbarians predicated on the histories that were circulated not only in the Hispanic context, but also by tourists like Hans Staaden, whose account of being kidnapped on the coast of Brazil was an extremely popular imagining of the peoples beyond European coasts. These tools—legal, religious, and fictive—all contributed to a series of narratives and orderings of the world predicated on the prowess and ability of specific Catholic and Protestant European nations and individuals to transform these subjects.

IV. Conclusion

In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty chides scholars working with Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* for working with a very nuanced, particular notion of “community” while leaving “imagined” as a largely static concept. With a little effort, we can see how the imagination worked in tandem with knowledge to produce the sort of memories appropriate for the inheritance of victors.

The examples used here to illustrate the productivity of thinking through revisions and imagined structures are part of a broader narrative fundamentally reliant on imaginative ways of using political tools: the process of racialization as it moved from the end of the


Medieval to the Early Modern Period. They also highlight a potential limitation of the archive. As we learned from Foucault, history is for cutting us from our fantasies of an origin of our ideas; history is effective to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being (88). The search for origins fails because “it lies at a place of inevitable loss, the point where the truth of things corresponded to a truthful discourse, the site of a fleeting articulation that discourse has obscured and finally lost.” Foucault’s sense that both genealogy and history introduce discontinuity relied on a fundamental assumption about the relationship between origins and the truth. Yet, if figures of truth, and figments of imagination can have similar lifespans in the domain of ideas, then perhaps we need to ask different questions about such a search.

For it was from these figments and figures that sixteenth century politicians and friars drew to re-orient the world after landing in America. Nicolas de Ovando, for example, brought the specific experiences of his Holy Order, the knights of Alcantara when he proposed a revival of the encomienda system on Hispaniola.\(^\text{35}\) Sometimes, these memories found new meanings in their contexts; in 1611, there were still definitions of raza that referred only to the defect of being a Moor or Jew. By the end of the seventeenth century, experiences with pardos and free black slaves would immeasurably transform notions of raza and limpieza de sangre.\(^\text{36}\)

\(^{35}\) Comparative studies between thirteenth and sixteenth century forms of the encomienda are scarce. See Robert Chamberlain’s . “Castilian Backgrounds of the Repartimiento-Encomienda”, \textit{Contributions to American Anthropology and History} 5:25 (1939)

\(^{36}\) María Elena Martínez, \textit{Genealogical Fictions} and Ann Twinam \textit{Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) both trace specific aftermaths of this history
Such a practice, of course, must also encompass the ways in which gender accompanied these tools by naturalizing the circumstances under which women became biologically and socially responsible for cultural reproduction. This becomes crucial when one evaluates the ways in which gender for American peoples in the North and South was never as determinative. Scholars ought to continually revisit the issue not simply by asking what may have been historically true, but what political work recurring imagined ideas did for the cultural hegemonies maintained by European states nationally and globally in the past, present and future.

37 In several of the books, Sahagun emphasizes this point through a philological argument, citing the roots of *matrimonio* versus *patrimonio*.