

Tracing the Roots of Discrimination

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María Elena Martínez's book, which traces the purity of blood concept from 15th century Spain to the New World, has won two major awards from the American Historical Association. Photo credit Pamela J. Johnson.

(PhysOrg.com) -- María Elena Martínez's book, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 2008), the first in-depth study of the purity of blood concept and repercussions, has won two major awards.

Martínez, associate professor of history and American studies and ethnicity in USC College, received the American Historical Association's James A. Rawley Prize in Atlantic History, and the AHA's Conference on Latin American History's Mexican History Prize.

Both prizes will be awarded to Martínez during AHA's annual meeting Jan. 8 in San Diego. The yearly Rawley Prize recognizes outstanding writing that explores the integration of the Atlantic World — the five

continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean — before the 20th century. The CLAH Prize is awarded annually for distinguished scholarship (in any language) on a significant aspect of Mexican history.

“I didn’t write this book to receive prizes; I wrote it because like most scholars I was fascinated with the topic and thought it would be a contribution,” Martínez said. “But it’s very nice to receive this kind of recognition from peers.”

The two prizes complement one another. The Mexican history prize is chosen by historians of Latin America who can judge the contribution’s uniqueness within an established body of historical literature. Conversely, the Rawley Prize is awarded to work contributing to scholarship in various fields.

“By writing this book, I was hoping to raise broader questions,” Martínez said. “The book is not just about *limpieza de sangre* in Spain and Mexico, but it raises questions about why certain aspects of the modern world took the forms that they did. It is also fundamentally about how religion — religious ideologies, religious identities, religious [discrimination](#) — can function like race.”

The Origins

Limpieza de sangre is Spanish for purity of blood, a concept developed in 15th-century Spain, referring to a person without Jewish, Muslim or heretical ancestry. Purity of blood became an obsessive concern in Spain when persecuted Jews and Muslims began converting to Christianity in large numbers. Converts were dubbed New Christians and those claiming to have *limpieza de sangre* called themselves Old Christians.

The ruling class, members of the church, and many lay people distrusted the New Christians and accused them of being false converts who

secretly practiced their old religions. During the time of the Spanish Inquisition, *limpieza de sangre* was incorporated into the statutes of many Spanish secular and religious institutions. By the middle of the 16th century, proof of blood purity was necessary for gaining access to certain professions, public offices, university colleges, military and religious orders, convents, guilds, and so forth.

“In order to protect their faith and make sure that it wouldn’t be corrupted by alleged internal enemies, the Old Christians resorted to these genealogical examinations for a couple of generations,” Martínez said. “But the couple of generations became an indefinite period, making the New Christians and their descendants into a particular type of convert: one that never became fully Christian.

“The idea of *limpieza de sangre* became a powerful tool of exclusion and one of the central fictions, ideological and genealogical, of early modern Spain.”

During the Spanish colonization of the Americas, beginning with Christopher Columbus in 1492, Spaniards brought with them the concept of *limpieza de sangre*.

“I was intrigued by how the idea of purity, which was used to identify Jewish, Muslim and heretical blood, how that was used in the colonial context, in the Americas where most of the population was indigenous or of African ancestry and obliged to convert to Christianity,” Martínez said. “That was one of the key questions that the literature available didn’t answer.”

Digging through Documents

Martínez began examining *limpieza de sangre* documents to determine when the language began to change and the idea of impurity extended to people of indigenous and African ancestry. These documents —

genealogical dossiers submitted to cathedral chapters, inquisitorial tribunals, religious orders and other institutions as well as town council records, writings by theologians and jurists, marriage licenses, indigenous nobility petitions, royal legislation, civil law cases — were dispersed in libraries and museums throughout Mexico, Spain and the United States.

The documents, some of which were hundreds of pages, were written in old Spanish script, which made the process of analyzing them laborious and time consuming. Martínez also studied images depicting lineage, namely the 18th-century Mexican casta (caste) paintings, which were strongly influenced by notions of blood purity.

“This was a concept not limited to one institution or one social group, but it had salience in many domains of Spanish colonial culture and social life,” she said. “This made the project much more interesting, but also more daunting. It meant I had to analyze a whole array of different sources and they were endless.”

Researching and writing the book took about a decade.

“I could have spent a lifetime studying documents that made reference to *limpieza de sangre* and still not be finished,” Martínez said. “It was exciting because it confirmed that it was a central organizing principle with profound social and cultural repercussions.”

Women, Indigenous and Africans

The concept of *limpieza de sangre* became a strong component of the Spanish culture of familial honor and all that it implied in terms of patriarchal control over women.

“Because of its link to biological reproduction, the notion of *limpieza de*

sangre had clear implications for women — especially those classified as pure — and for sexual and marriage patterns,” Martínez said. “It reinforced endogamy and the importance of legitimate birth among certain social groups, and increased male anxieties about controlling female sexuality and women’s bodies more generally.”

In the New World, the concept had profound repercussions for the populations that were subjected to Spanish rule. Spaniards did not officially label the indigenous people as impure in blood. Unlike Jews and Muslims, their community had not historically rejected Christianity, Spaniards reasoned. And because they had ostensibly accepted Spanish rule and Christianity, they were considered free Christian vassals of the Crown of Castile.

Further, Spain had used the concept throughout the colonial period to explain its political domination over indigenous people in the Americas. The Spaniards claimed it was their responsibility to save their souls by bringing them into the church’s fold.

“If the Spanish Crown had said these people are impure because they have rejected the Christian faith and will never become true converts, then how could Spain justify its presence in the Americas?” she asked.

The rules were very different for the population of African descent, which in Mexico City in the early- to mid-17th century was the largest of any city in the Americas.

“Spain’s titles to the Indies, as Spain called its American territories, did not depend on Christianizing those of African descent, though the crown did issue laws requiring that all be baptized and taught the Catholic faith,” Martínez said.

In the early modern period, Spanish monarchs did not prohibit the

enslavement of people of African descent as they did with the indigenous population. They made no pronouncements declaring that Africans were pure of blood.

Blood Purity Laws Amended

In the mid-18th century, the Supreme Council of the Inquisition amended its purity of blood statute to explicitly include people of African ancestry in the category of impure blood. Indigenous people were not included in the category.

“So the idea that people with indigenous ancestry — some with both Spanish and native ancestors — were pure was actually confirmed from an official standpoint,” she said.

In reality, both indigenous and black populations were discriminated against and considered inferior by the Spanish Christians. But there were fundamental distinctions drawn between the groups concerning *limpieza de sangre* and their status as Christians.

“I argue in the book that this is going to have incredible implications for the way that racial ideology develops in the colonial period in Mexico and also in the post-independence period,” Martínez said.

The concept of *limpieza de sangre* and its legacies shaped, for example, modern Mexican nationalism.

It shaped Mexican nationalism’s racial imaginaries, in particular its ideas about *mestizaje* or mixture. The concept formed Mexico’s patterns of social exclusion and inclusion, and social and biological reproductive fantasies, Martínez said.

“In Mexico, just as it did in Spain, purity of blood produced its own

ideological and genealogical fictions.”

Provided by USC College

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