In the early twelfth century a Jew named Moses converted to Christianity under the patronage of King Alfonso I of Aragon and was christened Petrus Alfonsi. Though no records pertaining to Moses’s background or position in the Jewish community remain, the fact of his conversion is well known: shortly after converting, he penned *Dialogi contra iudaeos*, a fictional dialog between his new Christian self, Petrus, and his pre-conversion Jewish self, Moses. Here, Alfonsi formalized his status as a recently converted Jew navigating the expanding religious, political, and cultural terrain of Christendom. This text stands at the core of my current book project, in which I explore the religious and cultural factors that informed textual constructions of the convert, the disputant, and the Jew during the high middle ages. The *Dialogi* offers an ideal point of entry for my analysis. Alfonsi converted and composed this work at a time when Jewish converts to Christianity increasingly influenced public discourse around the legal and theological role of Jews and Judaism in the Christian world.

This text is remarkable for the fact that Alfonsi split his narrative voice, animating the Moses character who argued with the Christian Petrus but nevertheless remained obstinate in his Jewishness. As such, it raises questions about the mechanics of writing about conversion and writing to remake ‘one’s self.’ Alfonsi emphasized his position as a Jew poised between Muslim and Christian intellectual spheres, struggling to find the faith that best cohered with philosophical reasoning. The *Dialogi* thus provides an important resource for addressing questions of medieval self-representation, interfaith relations, and the political and social significance allotted to converts during the middle ages.

This project emerges from research for my first book, *Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community, and Messianism*, where I explored a public disputation in which a convert used his knowledge of rabbinic literature to debate with Nahmanides, a leading rabbi of his time. I came to wonder how the image and figure of the convert were shaped in medieval discourse. I undertake this project as several recently published works have embarked on fresh readings of the liminal status of converts in the middle ages who negotiated an often hostile course through Christian society. My work will contribute to this emerging scholarship and it will pursue two additional lines of analysis. The first concerns the literary structure of the work. Alfonsi utilized his connection with Judaism to establish a mien of authority. Telling his readers that he had been an important scholar in the Jewish community, Alfonsi positioned himself as the bearer of exotic and previously forbidden Jewish knowledge. The *Dialogi* became a crucial text for that offered important information about why Jews continued to reject Jesus as the Messiah and a model for arguments that might help encourage others to follow Alfonsi’s example.

Second, this project will contribute to scholarship on polemics and the medieval Christian mission to Jews. Theological exchange between the two faiths took the form of detailed polemical tracts in which the disputants struggled over the proper interpretation of scripture. Medieval polemical and disputation literature exploits the drama of dialog to construct a convincing literary Jew who holds fast to an untenable truth. Alfonsi enhances the plausibility of his Jewish character by presenting both disputants as versions of himself. I am interested in the rhetorical devices and prooftexts employed in the exchanges between the Christian and Jewish characters in the text. Does Alfonsi reproduce stereotypical arguments about Judaism, or does he allow his Moses to use arguments that Jews would recognize as Jewish? And, in those cases when the text
A Jew in the Margins: Petrus Alfonsi and the Figure of the Medieval Convert
Nina Caputo
Department of History
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was abridged or excerpted by other authors, to what degree was the integrity of the Jewish character reproduced?

Because this project is concerned with the Dialogi at the micro level as well as the history of its reception and interpretation, three strata of research are necessary. The first is a comparative survey of the manuscript tradition of the Dialogi. There are roughly 80 extant manuscript copies of this text, whether complete, excerpted, or paraphrased, dating from the 12th to the 16th centuries. Most important for this study are excerpted and paraphrased copies. A survey of these partial texts to determine whether scribes modified Alfonsi’s representation of Moses’s voice will provide a clue as to what readers sought in the Dialogi.

At the next level of research, this project situates Petrus Alfonsi’s Dialogi contra iudaeos and its reception in the changing terrain of conversion between the 12th and 16th centuries. It is necessary to situate this text in the corpus of works detailing the process of conversion both within Christianity and to Christianity.

The final layer explores polemical literature as an exegetical tool. Alfonsi’s work found particular favor among the monks of the Victorine order, which is also an important setting for Jewish-Christian discussion and collaboration around questions of biblical interpretation. Victorine or Cistercian biblical commentaries and sermons or epistles dealing with conversion are of particular interest. Comparing Latin and Hebrew polemical and exegetical works will highlight Jew resistance to Christian arguments.

A Rothman Faculty Fellowship would enable me to travel to Paris and England to continue my research for this book. Previous research trips afforded me the opportunity to study and photograph 12th and 13th century manuscripts of the complete text of the Dialogi. This summer I plan to review fragments or partial copies of the Dialogi in Paris, London, and Cambridge to help answer some of my questions about how the text was received by medieval readers. In particular, I hope it will help explain what attracted scribes’ attention in this text and how they ‘packaged’ excerpted portions as freestanding works. This research is crucial for the book as a whole, but it will also enable me to draft a proposal for NEH and the ACLS fellowships for the 2020-21 academic year.
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Professional Experience
August 2009- present
Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Florida
August 2003- July 2009
Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Florida
August 1999-May 2003
Assistant Professor, Department of History, Florida International University

Education
December 1999
Ph.D., History, University of California, Berkeley
October 1996-June 1998
Visiting Researcher The Remarque Institute, New York University
1992
Master of Arts, Jewish History, University of California, Los Angeles
1991-1992
Visiting Research Fellow, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel
1989
Bachelor of Arts, History, University of California, Los Angeles,
1987-1988
Junior Year Abroad, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

Selected Publications
- Books
Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: Community, History, and Messianism, (Notre Dame University Press, 2007)

- Books and journals, coedited
Postmedieval: A Journal on Medieval Cultural Studies special issue on “The Middle Ages and the Holocaust,” co-edited with Hannah Johnson (University of Pittsburgh), vol. 5, no. 3 (September, 2014)

- Articles and chapters


“Holocaust and the Middle Ages: Medieval Anti-Judaism and the Crucible of Modern Thought” Introduction to Postmedieval: A Journal on Medieval Cultural Studies special issue on “The Middle Ages and
the Holocaust,” with Hannah Johnson, vol. 5, no. 3 (September, 2014)


- Works in Progress


A Jew on the Margin: Petrus Alfonsi and the Figure of the Medieval Convert (a book-length study of the rhetoric, style, and legacy of Petrus Alfonsi’s Dialogi contra iudaeos)

- Recent Book Reviews


Selected Fellowships, Awards, and Grants

2017-2020  UF Term Professorship, University of Florida

2017-18  Colonel Allen R. and Mrs. Margaret G. Crow Term Professorship, CLAS, University of Florida

2017  John K. Mahon Undergraduate Teaching Award, Department of History, University of Florida

2013-14  Dorset Fellow, Oxford Center for Hebrew and Judaic Studies Fellowship, Oxford University

2013  Franklin Research Grant, American Philosophical Society

2012  Faculty Enhancement Opportunity Grant, University of Florida

2010, 2007  Humanities Scholarship Enhancement Grant, University of Florida

2008  Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation Humanities Grant, co-PI with Andrea Sterk

2008  Project Grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, with Andrea Sterk, for a series of workshops entitles Faithful Narratives: The Challenge of Religion in History

2004  Humanities Scholarship Advancement Grant, University of Florida

2001-2002  Mellon Foundation Fellowship, Penn Humanities Forum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Recent Invited Lectures and Symposia

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“The Trouble with Conversion: Petrus Alfonsi’s *dialog contra judaeos* and the Anxiety around Jewish Converts” Florida State University, Department of Religion, Religion in Antiquity Workshop, 29 October, 2018

“The Trouble with Medieval Conversion: Reading Petrus Alfonsi in the Light of Legal, Polemical, and Autobiographical Sources” Medieval Studies Colloquium Series at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 6 October, 2018

“Teaching with Graphic Novels,” The Coffee&Vis Series at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 20 March, 2018

“Graphic Differences: Adapting a Jewish-Christian Disputation to Comic Form” Triangle Medieval Studies Seminar, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 19 March, 2018

“Graphic Differences: Interpreting a Medieval Theological Debate through Comics” The Tobias Lecture, Center for Jewish Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison. 26 February, 2018

“Debating Truth: Adapting the Barcelona Disputation to Comics Mode” Keynote lecture, Conference on Comics and Graphic Novels, Image/TexT, University of Florida, 7 April 2017


**Recent Service to the Profession**

2017-2016  |  *American Historical Association Career Diversity for Historians Institutes*, member


|  “On the Word of a Jew: Oaths, Testimonies, and the Nature of Trust” co-organizer and co-director with Mitchell Hart (University of Florida)

2013-  |  *Marginalia Review of Books* Subject Editor, Medieval and Early Modern Jewish History

2009-  |  *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, Editorial Board, member

**Selected Service at the University of Florida**

Early Modern Europe Search Committee, *Department of History*, Chair, 2018-19

Graduate Committee, *Department of History*, 2013-present, member; 2010-2012 chair

Sabbatical Committee, CLAS member, Fall 2018

Associate Chair, Department of History, August 2014-August 2018

Early Modern Iberian World Search Committee, member, 2017-18

Department Chair Search Committee, *Department of History*, member, 2017-18

Combined Quest Working Group, *University of Florida*, member, Spring 2017

 Faculty Council, CLAS, member, 2014-2018

Personnel and Policy Committee, *Department of History*, member, 2014-2018,

Good Life (Humanities Gen Ed) Working Group, CLAS, co-chair, Fall 2016

Graduate Coordinator, *Department of History*, 2010-2012

Associate Dean Search Committee, CLAS, member,
Nina Caputo  
Department of History  
Rothman Faculty Fellowship Budget  

Airfare – JFK to ORY, 15 May, return from London 15 July, $1050.00  
Lodging in Paris 15 May-30 June = $3987.19 (€ 3480.00)  

Amount requested: $3000.00