Introduction to literature compass special cluster: Critical race and the Middle Ages

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Abstract

This introduction is an antidote to the much earlier issues on medieval race and ethnicity with vastly different stakes and research methodologies. My introduction here centers Margo Hendricks’ work and call for a premodern critical race studies that “acknowledges its genealogies” and “celebrates that lineage.” One of the ways to do this is to explain how premodern race studies continues to highlight certain premodern race genealogies over others.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This introduction to the special cluster on Critical Race and the Middle Ages begins as the opening project of my tenure as the pre-1800 co-editor of Literature Compass. There has never been a premodern editor of Literature Compass who is a person of color, let alone a woman of color. As my own work focuses on race and the Middle Ages, it was agreed by both the co-editor, Ruth Connolly (University of Newcastle), and executive editor of Literature Compass, Stuart Christie, (Hong Kong Baptist University) that we would begin with an inaugural special cluster on Critical Race and the Middle Ages. This is the first special issue on race or volume on race in the premodern past that also includes a 60% (including myself as the writer of this introduction) demographic of scholars who identify as medievalists of color. In this introduction, and in fact, in the articles of all these scholars in this special cluster, we have fulfilled the tenets required to pass the Bechdel test for citation and the Gray Test that addresses racial and gender inclusion (Belcher, 2019, p. 184). Named for Kishonna Gray who created the hashtag #CiteHerWork, the hashtag and these various tests ask academic writers and journalists to consider the gender and race statistics of their citations (see Gray, 2015). It is thus a version of what Sarah Ahmed discusses in her piece “Making Feminist Points” (2013) about short-circuiting white and male citational practices and the replication of fields. Thus, I am specifically aware of what it means for a premodern issue of a major humanities journal to systematically pass these tests. I address this here to state clearly that I strive for the work at Literature Compass to address some of the most important intellectual and literary turns now that are deeply about politics, the state of the world, and how premodern critical literary studies is deeply imbricated in these discussions. I foreground these stakes and issues precisely as a contrast to the Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies introduction to a special issue on Race and Ethnicity in 2001.

This introduction also centers the critical methodological praxis laid out in Margo Hendrick’s recent talk at Race Before Race 2: Race and Periodization at the Folger Library in Washington, D. C. In her talk, “Coloring the Past,
Rewriting our Futures: RaceB4Race. " Hendricks (2019) separates what she calls "premodern race studies" (PRS) from "premodern critical race studies" (PCRS). She explains:

PRS is the practice of approaching race studies as if "you've just discovered the land." Practitioners ignore the preexisting inhabitants of the land or, if PRS scholars deign to acknowledge the land is inhabited, it's viewed as uncultivated and must be done so properly.

In this body of work, all evidence (or nearly all) of the work done to nurture and make productive the land is ignored or briefly alluded to. In other words, the ancestry is erased. No articulation of the complex genealogy that produced premodern critical race studies exists, which in turn, drew these academic "settlers" … to premodern race …. As Patrick Wolfe cogently reminds us, white "settler colonialism destroys to replace." It is not an invasion, so much as it is a structural event, driven by "the logic of elimination" (Wolfe, 2006 p. 388). Much of the theoretical and analytical critiques that form anti-settler colonialism is framed around indigeneity, which admittedly complicates the centrality of the notion of anti-blackness being the center of "race" in the premodern period and what it means for premodern critical race studies ….

I want to suggest, I want to, declare, "white settler colonialist" thinking is integral to premodern race studies. Why? Because "whiteness" is centralized in PRS as the privileged narrative creep. PRS relegates its critical race studies' ancestry to a citational entry, buried in a lengthy footnote, surrounded by scholarly whiteness. This creeping whiteness mediates the narrative by insisting on the sanctity of white-centric ideologies, genres, and, of course, the privilege of engagement: who gets cited, who doesn't. Using this creep, anyone can wear the mantle of premodern race studies. What this individual fails to see in such practices is the ways PRS intersects with the ideologies of white supremacy, and PRS's insistence on what Lehua Yim describes as the "arrogance of assumption" embedded in the inclusive "we" (Hendricks 2019).

As Hendricks has explained, with particular thought to work in early modern studies, premodern race studies (PRS) become another zone of white settler academic "Columbusing" (see León, 2018). Premodern race studies also actively erase the critical race genealogies that have worked often in toxic academic ecosystems yet still have created and nurtured such work. Hendricks (2019) explains premodern critical race studies (PCRS) in the same talk in this way:

So what does P CRS look like? I have no idea, except to say it's not PRS in its current iteration. I do want to suggest, as part of the larger critical race theory practice and practices, P CRS actively pursues not only the study of race in the premodern,... but the way that outcome, the way those studies can effect a transformation of the academy and its relationship to our world. P CRS is about being a public humanist. It's about being an activist. ... What truly distinguishes P CRS from PRS, of course, is the bi- directional gaze, the one that looks inward even as it looks outward. As bell hooks observed, "spaces of agency exist ... wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The gaze has been and is a site of resistance for colonized ... people globally" (Hooks, 2003, p. 95).

I want to argue that P CRS entails, or requires, both an oppositional and an insider definitional gaze. That like the term "indigenous," P CRS is strategic and political. It recognizes the analytical gaze's capacity to define the premodern as a multiethnic system of competing sovereignties. P CRS will resist PRS's tendency to make the study of race something akin to eco-tourism (a passive-aggressive form of white settler colonialism). P CRS is an intellectual, political, and public interrogation of capitalism's
capacious erasure of the sovereignty of indigenous peoples, whether in the Americas, the Pacific Islands, Asia, or the African continent.

PCRS also recognizes and acknowledges its genealogies. It celebrates that lineage--citation--and uses it "to dismantle the master's house" since the master's tools are ineffective.

In this way, this introduction is an antidote to the much earlier issue on medieval race and ethnicity with vastly different stakes and research methodologies. My introduction will center Margo Hendricks' work and call for a premodern critical race studies that "acknowledges its genealogies" and "celebrates that lineage." One of the ways to do this is to explain how premodern race studies continues to highlight certain premodern race genealogies over others. Thus, I am deliberately addressing the JMEMS special issue, rather than Cord Whitaker's, 2015a postmedieval special issue, because the JMEMS one is still the elephant in the premodern china shop in discussions of premodern race. Though Whitaker's special issue made clear that race mattered in the Middle Ages as a volume of premodern critical race studies, medieval studies continues to refer back to the JMEMS issue from 2001 rather than allow the postmedieval issue to update and move forward this discussion.

With the exception of two to three articles in the JMEMS special issue itself, the rest of the special issue muddies and actually diverts what is necessary to really engage in a sustained, productive, and critically well-researched discussion of premodern critical race. Most of the pieces refuse to engage with the work of critical race and ethnic studies for the last 60 years in the humanities and social sciences. Thus, most of the special issue is mired in a strange dance of "can we say race or not" equivocation that focuses on definitions of medieval race that have no anchor in any recent scholarship on the topic. Thus, this special JMEMS volume is premodern race studies par excellence with a bit of "we are going to deny premodern race" thrown in there for good measure.

In addition, the issue is rife with moments of academic racism. Thomas Hahn (2001) opens the 2001 JMEMS special issue with the spectacle of Michael Awkward's non-medievalist presence as obvious diversity token—a point that he admits to in a footnote but then forgives the tokenism because it is good way for medievalists to discuss the issue of race (pp. 1–4). Thus, racialized tokenization is perfectly legitimate in order for the black male scholar to do labor for white medievalists. He then moves to discuss the visual spectacle and tokenization of Black Balthasar in the medieval visual record. He makes clear his comparison as a form of transhistorical racializing tokenization: "The analogy I'm proposing here pairs Michael Awkward, as a darkskinned man of learning whose appearance at a medieval studies conference seems spectacularly exotic, with the role of Balthasar in these late medieval and early modern Epiphanies" (Hahn, 2001, p. 3). Thus, in his introduction, Hahn makes Michael Awkward into an exotic object of study; his tokenized blackness at an excruciatingly white academic space (The International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University) becomes an act of academic racism.

As Yolanda Flores Niemann explains in "The Making of a Token: A Case Study of Stereotype Threat, Stigma, Racism, and Tokenism in Academe," "This sense of extreme visibility is consistent with the experience of tokenism" (1999, p. 117; see also, e.g., Pollak & Niemann, 1998). As she further explains, "One of the effects of tokenism is what is known as the pressure of a double-edged sword: 'simultaneously, a perverse visibility and a convenient invisibility' " (Niemann, 1999, p. 119). This appears also to be the case with Michael Awkward's presence at the Medieval Congress. As Hahn describes Awkward's racialized hypervisibility, Awkward's scholarship and his discussion of critical race studies are invisible in this collection. With the exception of one or two essay writers who have referenced the work of critical race studies and postcolonial studies, none of the other pieces address Awkward's scholarly work—the very reason why he was at the Medieval Congress—or the fields in which his work resides (the exceptions being Cohen, 2001; Kinoshita, 2001; Verkerk, 2001).

Hahn (2001) lays out his agenda for the issue in his introduction: "This essay and my attempt to engage others in this special issue of JMEMS, 'Concepts of Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages,' grow out of the desire to avoid the potential for academic tokenism, out of a determination to insure that Awkward's appearance at the Kalamazoo Medieval Congress, whatever its value as spectacle, leads to further engagement with medieval race" (p. 4). But Hahn
never addresses the medieval scholarship that theoretically and historically engages with race and the medieval past, the work that would be legible to Awkward's own intellectual fields. In fact, one of the forms of epistemic racialized violence that happens in this introduction, which is clearly pitched to white medievalist readers, is that Hahn decides to use the "n-word" in full without comment (p. 21). For a white, male scholar to do so, flies in the face of ongoing discussions of the racialized violence of saying and publishing such terminology (see Flanagin, 2015; Mitchell, 2018).

In addition, how do you make sure that medieval studies further engages with medieval race if you do not make clear the definition of the term. In Hahn's introduction, he never defines "medieval race" but rather focuses on visuality and specifically epidural color difference as a way to discuss medieval race as "they clearly functioned as ascribed markers of identity; insofar as they depart from contemporary understandings or patterns, they should not be judged to fall short of Race, whether defined as Platonic Idea or a contrivance of social science, but should serve as aids in unpacking and revising how this category comes into being, and how the difference it signifies varies according to cultural circumstances" (Hahn, 2001, p. 6). His oculocentric fixation on medieval race as epidural and visual is picked up by others in the collection. Though he cites Henry Louise Gates, Jr.'s 1985 Critical Inquiry special issue on "Race, Writing, and Difference," he does not explain where his definition stands in relation to the issue's topic. As this is a major point of discussion in a number of the articles, it feels as if he does not want to come down one way or the other, though at least in a footnote admits that he has not worked with the theoretically engaged work on race (Hahn, 2001, p. 28, note 10). Hahn closes his essay to explain that he worked and organized this issue specifically for white medieval studies' benefit as a field and reveals that he too has succumbed to the medieval studies trajectory that has ignored 60 years of social science and humanities scholarship. He concludes that: "A robust engagement that takes 'medieval race'—as constituted by religion, geopolitics, physiognomy, color—as at once parallel and discontinuous with more recent racial discourses will insure that the Middle Ages does not become (remain?) an excluded Other" (Hahn, 2001, p. 26). He imagines that his definition of medieval race—one that is "biopolitical and sociocultural"—is not in fact the critical discussion of contemporary critical race theory (see Omi & Winant, 2014 and Heng, 2018).

2 | CRITICAL RACE AND THE MIDDLE AGES

In the critical scholarship on race and the Middle Ages, there are two genealogies that split medieval studies in how they address premodern critical race studies. The first is the genealogy of primarily medieval historians and is an example of premodern race studies that is about white supremacist methodologies and premodern race denialism—Robert Bartlett, David Nirenberg, William Chester Jordan, Patrick Geary, and so forth—who have focused on the term ethnicity rather than race but who have neither cited nor been involved in addressing the critical scholarship on race and ethnicity for the last 60 years in the social sciences, including the field of history. The second is the genealogy of medieval literature and other fields (outside of history) that have engaged in the critical race scholarship of the last 60 years in the social sciences. This is the critical genealogy of premodern critical race studies. This genealogy includes the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Steven Kruger, Geraldine Heng, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Paul Friedman, Cord Whitaker, Paul Kaplan, Henry Louise Gates Jr., Hortense Spillers, Ibrahim Kendi, Cedric J. Robinson, Erik Wade, Sierra Lomuto, Lynn Ramey, and myself (see, e.g., Cohen, 2001; Friedman, 1981; Kruger, 1992; Kruger, 1993; Kruger, 1997a; Kruger, 1997b; Akbari, 2000; Heng, 2000; Heng, 1998; Spillers, 1987; Ramey, 2014; Whitaker, 2015a; Kaplan, 2010; Bindman & Gates, 2010; Kendi, 2016; Robinson, 1983; Wade, 2019; Lomuto, 2019; Kim, 2015). Most of these are literature scholars and critical race studies scholars. Because the first genealogy relies on pre-WWII definitions of the terms race and ethnicity and thus perpetuates a white supremacist pre-Civil Rights methodological frame on the topic, this issue as well as what I expect future work in premodern critical race studies (PCRS) will be based on the second genealogy from the work of literary scholars and critical race scholars who have remained updated and engaged on current critical discussions in the humanities and social sciences.
This deliberate erasure of five decades of race as "biopolitical and sociocultural" in humanities and social science scholarship is compounded by the interdisciplinary missteps of the medieval historian's genealogy on race that seems to work through the critical discussion and or field methodologies of other areas without an eye to either the methodological practices of the field nor the recent critical conversations. Thus, we can see this play out in Robert Bartlett's work on medieval art history and David Nirenberg's discussion of race.

Bartlett's most recent article (2009), "Illustrating Ethnicity in the Middle Ages," opens with him explaining ethnic stereotyping, though in fact, what he describes is racialization or racialized stereotyping specific to North America:

We are all familiar with the construction of ethnicity through vivid visual stereotyping. Anyone who has seen a vintage Hollywood film knows how "Chinamen," "Arabs" or "Mexicans" can be summoned up by a hat, a moustache or a hint of swarthy skin. This paper takes a preliminary look at this issue for the pre-cinematic, indeed pre-print, era of the Middle Ages, asking whether and how ethnic difference was represented pictorially in medieval illustration. (p. 132)

The article then becomes a show-and-tell that bases its argument on the entire archive of European medieval manuscript illumination. Methodologically, this article purports to be one firmly in the realm of art history, yet it does not adhere to medieval art historical practices in scholarship on manuscript production that examines whole manuscripts; considers their location, geography, potential workshop/limners, and its patrons; and also wrestles with the question of agency and power in usual medieval art history in a collaborative enterprise. In this disciplinary realm, the question of standardization of images due to workshop/limners or specific choices because of other push and pull factors is an ongoing discussion. So the question of whether something is "ethnicized" in Bartlett's view or racialized is entirely dependent on iconographic tradition, location, production factors, and often in comparison with manuscript illumination coming from the same milieu or across a specific genre (i.e., how is St. Margaret depicted in 13th-century English manuscript painting). Bartlett's article adheres not at all to any of these medieval art historical disciplinary practices nor does he explain any of his erstwhile terminology that marks ethnicity or race: exotic, exoticizing, not exoticizing, otherness, and so forth. Nor does he explain the iconographic grounds on which he decides what is "exoticizing" "not exoticizing" "other" "ethnic" "racial." This lack of clarity is particularly acute in his discussion of Wonders of the East and Marco Polo manuscripts (Bartlett, 2009).

His article is a hodge-podge of random, analyzed images with not enough specific contextual, material, manuscript discussion about the visual record and the manuscript's production to make logical arguments about the visualization of difference in a specific location, context, tradition, and genre. Instead, these wide-ranging often one-off discussions of a manuscript image here or there become a way to make a generalized argument about the visualization of European "ethnicity" writ large that depends on Bartlett's idea of general European whiteness and realistic whiteness depicted in medieval manuscripts as the default norm. It also depends on Bartlett's idea of "ethnicity" grounded in a general pre-WWII, social science definition of ethnicity. Premodern medieval European manuscript painting tradition has a varied history of technically "real" depictions of figures depending on location, time period, contexts of book production, illuminators, and the technologies of painting perspective. To my knowledge, I do not believe any art historian has cited this piece, clearly because of these obvious problems in methodology. This article has been well received by historians who do not seem to find issue with the methodological problems in its art history analysis (see Panayi, 2010).

Even when medieval historians have more thoughtful ambiguity about the terms of ethnicity and race, they also place their foundations on these pre-Civil Rights and often pre-WWII definitions. When medieval historians move to also utilize the work of other social science fields, they replicate this continued latching onto the pre-Civil Rights discussion in other social science disciplines. Likewise, they conflate the critical scholarship on "race" and what is identifiable as "racism" for the same thing. This conflation is also about a complete disregard for the scholarship and politics that came after 1960s Civil Rights. By disappearing 60 years of political organizing as well as scholarly discussion of the term race—particularly strange considering much of the scholarly discussion in critical race studies often
starts in legal theory and journals—what is left is an inchoate discussion that disappears critical race scholarship and also uses argumentation that are textbook tropes of postracialism (see Cho, 2009).

In the case of David Nirenberg's ambivalence to the terminology of race, this also shows that race is constantly seen in a certain kind of black-and-white binary in theoretical present while imagined without key groups and geographies in the past. Nirenberg opens by discussing what he sees as the controversial use of race: "Today the situation has so reversed itself that no scholar of any stripe or period can strip the word ‘race’ of its scare quotes without inviting polemic" (2009, p. 232). His pronouncement is a perfect example of postracialism. Sumi Cho (2009) describes this phenomenon: “Under post-racialism, race does not matter, and should not be taken into account or even noticed. Thus, one who points out racial inequities risks being characterized as an obsessed-with-race racist who is unfairly and divisively ‘playing the race card’—one who occupies he same moral category as someone who consciously perpetrates racial inequities" (p. 1595).

Nirenberg examines the historiography of the term "race" but primarily concentrates on pre-WWII up to about 1950. He cites people using the work of Franz Boas in anthropology and so considers the discussion in another social science discipline. But this unreflective discussion of Boas and race is fraught since Boas has been a point of contention among anthropologists that precisely point to his settler colonial whiteness and racism in his ethnographic work (Nirenberg, 2009, pp. 232–233). You can see these criticisms laid out in the recent work of Audra Simpson, "Why White People Love Franz Boas; or, The Grammar of Indigenous Dispossession" (2018). Anthropology has had to reckon with the violent settler colonial legacy and racialized erasure of indigenous people and groups because of Boas's work (Todd, 2018). As Simpson (2018) explains:

“Rather than liberating Indigenous people from colonialism The Mind of Primitive Man erases indigeneity. It establishes a dualistic binary regarding the value of culture and bodily differences and their presumed vitality and value as well as their suitability for state and settler absorption. Its political use, then, remains in keeping a particular political order intact. Crucial to uncovering the political supposition of absorption that serves in this book as an unquestioned virtue is Boas’s presumption of the sturdiness of precise differences between peoples, differences defined through notions of decline and flourishing as well as demographic and statistical notions of bodily and cultural integrity. Such integrity becomes a form of evidence in Boas’s book, creating a line of argumentation that leads one to think about who will live and who will die within a new political state: who will be worthy of salvation, sympathy, and ultimately, incorporation—enfranchisement and equality. (p. 167)

This is the Boas who desecrated indigenous burial sites for his "research." This is the Boas who is undoubtedly one of the chief white academics that Linda Tuhiwai Smith thinks about when she writes in her opening introduction of Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012): “The word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1). Her opening paragraph is literally a litany of the methodologies of anthropology and ethnography in relation to indigenous peoples from its inception as an American academic field into the present. It can also be seen as the itemized crimes of Franz Boas and American Anthropology.

Nirenberg also seems to suggest that scholarship should only use terminology that was used exactly as it was in the historical period of discussion: “When, for example, scholars make use of the word race in their analyses of nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States history, as they so often do, they are deploying what they know to be a ‘myth’ incapable of definition” (Nirenberg, 2009, p. 234). This is a foolhardy and intellectually strange methodological approach since this would preclude the entirety of those working on the premodern past to eschew terminology like “Middle Ages,” “gender,” “class,” let alone other terms in the social sciences and sciences that have theories that change and develop even as these fields can identify the contours of them in the past. These include “oncology” and “engineering.” In essence, Nirenberg argues that the premodern past was “innocent of race” in that he suggests this is a reason not to use the term because “there is today a remarkable consensus that the earlier vocabularies of difference are innocent of race” (p. 234). This is a form of premodern white innocence. Nirenberg also grounds his discussion on Bartlett’s definition which is, as I have discussed, completely devoid of any critical race theory research and
mired in a pre-Civil Rights past which also means a continued misunderstanding that current and quite long histories of critical race studies post-Civil Rights have made clear that race is “biopolitical and sociocultural.” Finally, Nirenberg is not interested in even how other social sciences have reassessed the medieval archive as a place in which “racial formation” can be legibly seen in relation to medieval European Jews (see Thomas, 2010).

Nirenberg’s arguments when focusing specifically on Iberia and examples particularly in discussions of terminology in the medieval archive, like “raza, casta, and linaje,” are undoubtedly erudite in their discussion of the medieval Iberian archive (2009, p. 252). However, if he is taking the arguments and terminology of pre-Civil Rights “race” as the location of a discussion on whether to discuss racialization, structural racism, and how race can and may operate in the premodern Iberian past within certain contexts, geographies, and factors, this article’s utility is then in the discussion of the archive and its materials, it is not in the discussion of critical premodern race. I do, however, look forward to further work in Iberian studies that attends to the last several decades of critical race theory work happening in critical race studies, Chicana Studies, Caribbean Studies, and Latin American Studies.

It is clear then that moving forward in premodern critical race studies (PCRS) work in medieval studies will rely heavily on Geraldine Heng’s groundbreaking book, *The Invention of Race in the Middle Ages*. Heng has written the most up-to-date discussion on the term race for the premodern archive that considers both the critical and theoretical conversations in the social sciences and the humanities in the last several decades as well as the material archive of the premodern past. Her definition is the clearest articulation of the term race in relation to racialization and structural racism:

“Race” is one of the primary names we have—a name we retail for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes—that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Race-making thus operate as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for different treatment. My understanding, thus, is that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content. (p. 3)

One of the main issues that the two genealogies of race particularly focus on is the issue of race in relation to the body. The historian genealogy that bases its definition and methodologies on outdated, pre-WWII definitions grounded in 19th-century eugenicist pseudoscience seem unable to distinguish between race as fixed body and race as embodied. It is this flashpoint in the discussion of premodern race that I will turn to in order to rethink the state of the field in relation to critical race and the Middle Ages.

### 3 | RACE AS BODY VERSUS EMBODIED RACE

Because of the fixity of the eugenicist pre-WWII and pre-civil rights definition of race that make the body static and essential, a large area of medieval studies has ignored the work that has been discussed around embodied race. Thus, the material turn has not been part of the premodern discussion on race in these arenas. It has been succinctly outlined by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen first in his *JMEMS* article from 2001 and then in his entry on “Race” in the 2013 *Handbook of Middle English Studies*. He explains that “Medieval race may certainly involve skin color, as it does with Colbrond, yet race cannot be reduced to any of its multiple signs. Religion, descent, custom, law, language, monstrosity, geographical origin, and species are essential to the construction of medieval race. Although inextricably corporeal, race is also performative, a phenomenon of the body in motion” (Cohen, 2013, p. 111). He makes it explicitly clear that we cannot discuss race without discussing it as embodied:
Distinctions among the world’s peoples were typically believed to be congenital, the material and permanent impress of geography, climate, and phenomena that today we would label cultural. ... Despite its seemingly chimerical nature, however, race is bluntly corporeal: an identity system that anchors difference to the body, frequently through physical signs like the shape of one’s nose, contours of lips, texture of hair, variations in dermal pigmentation, embodied otherness. ... Race is embodied performance. Medieval ethnographers “discovered” race most frequently in the vivacious realm of what might be called corporeal practice, where it exerts a constant power to differentiate and reveal. Race is evinced in such highly visible actions as the choice, preparation and consumption of food; patterns of speech and use of language; law; customs and ritual; and practice of sexuality. (Cohen, 2013, p. 112)

Cohen points to the deep and ongoing discussion of race as “biopolitical and sociocultural” in this 2013 article. He also points to the work of a number of medievalists (usually in literature) who have deftly addressed premodern critical race in relation to the contemporary work of critical race studies:

... Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Geraldine Heng, Sharon Kinoshita, Stephen Kruger, and Lisa Lampert (among many others) grant race its instability, its contextual determination, its power of mutability. They employ race critically, not as a throwback to the racist ethnographies and philological nationalisms of the not too distant past. This use is inspired by the cautious deployment of the term in anthropology and critical race studies, where race is described as a shifting, ultimately non-reifiable category that nonetheless passes itself off as possessing an essence and a historical durability. Critical race theorists reject the supposed self-evident truth of biological, physiological, and other ontological models of racial classification; insist upon race’s liquidity, dynamism, and historical contingency; and interest themselves in the mechanisms through which race is made real, especially law, narrative and the visual arts. (Cohen, 2013, p.115)

This is in line not only with the work of critical race studies but also with the more recent discussions of the material turn in critical theory. In “How Real is Race?” Michael Hames-Garcia explains the materiality of race by pointing to how structural racism and white supremacy impacts the body as well as discusses how biology is never not cultural (2008, p. 321). Hames-Garcia’s point is that a body’s biology is not fixed and essential but rather is always in flux and changeable. This is especially applicable to the elasticity of the medieval body. He also points to how structural racism and white supremacy can affect and often mark the body. One recent example of this would be to consider the maternal and infant mortality rate in relation to black women in the United States. In a demographic analysis, the statistics show that there is a racial disparity between black and white women who give birth (Flanders-Stepans, 2000). Initially researchers concluded that there was some sort of biological or environmental issue that caused that marked disparity. But in fact, current discussions make clear that systematic racism and the compounded harm of intersectionality—dealing with the multi-axis viewpoint of being a woman and black—have marked black women’s bodies who have delivered children as a population (Crenshaw, 1991). As the recent public discussion of Serena Williams’ near fatal postdelivery demise made clear, structural racism and white supremacy mark black women’s bodies, often irrevocably and mortally (Roeder, 2019). Race is thus an embodied category that can affect racialized bodies.

4 | PREMODERN CRITICAL MEDIEVAL RACE STUDIES

It is with this background that I now situate the articles of this special cluster on Critical Race and the Middle Ages. This special cluster has a historical/temporal trajectory in that it begins with Nicole Lopez Jantzen’s article,
"Between Empires: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages," that examines race with the premodern critical race studies' critical genealogy in order to examine the transition between Late Antiquity into the early Middle Ages. She argues that "racial concepts were important to the early Middle Ages, and this period provides a bridge between classical and medieval forms of racial categorization." Coral Lumbley's "The 'Dark Welsh': Color, Race, and Alterity in the Matter of Medieval Wales" walks through an examination of how different groups in the British Isles view the Welsh and through various contexts, situations, and power dynamics racialize the Welsh in various ways. She examines how the racialized gaze looks from Early Medieval English and Anglo-Norman material and also what the Welsh themselves do in their own literary production. Joseph Derosier's "The Forest and the Heath: Defining the Human in Medieval Romance" examines the Old French Perlesvaus as a racialized biopolitical fantasy. He examines how the pressure of the Crusades and antisemitism shape the romance and how it addresses premodern critical race. Nahir Otaño Gracia's article "Towards a Decentered Global North Atlantic: Blackness in Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd" remaps a new area in premodern critical race studies: Medieval North Atlantic Studies. This includes the "British Isles, Iceland, Scandinavia, the English Channel, and the Low Countries" but also encompasses a discussion of the Global North Atlantic that examines the interconnections of Africa, Europe, and the North Atlantic. She discusses in Old Norse literature how certain texts clearly use racializations in tandem with early globalities. Shyama Rajendran’s article "The Vernacular: Dismantling Structures of Racio-Linguistic Supremacy" boldly explains that "medieval literary studies must critically reexamine the deployment of the term 'vernacular' in its usage concerning late Middle English writing." She sketches how vernacular language discussions "are intrinsic to the making of race." Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh’s "The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure" is a critical and political form of autoethnography in which she explains how medieval scholarship has used the term "Saracen" as a form of supporting past and contemporary racialized Islamophobia. She advocates for using "Muslim over Saracen" because then "we make explicit the racism and Islamophobia in the primary material." Anna Klosowska’s article, "Muhammad ibn al-Zain's Basin (Baptistère de Saint Louis), " is an object study through several centuries from medieval to 1900 and through linked French areas "from the Eastern Mediterranean ... to Cyprus and Armenia ... Sicily, Naples, and the South of Italy" that allows Klosowska to traverse a discussion of premodern critical race in relation to Francophone discussions of critical race that are predicated on ideas of "republican universalism" and how that has effected a longer durée discussion of critical race studies including how the French have addressed their part in transatlantic chattel slavery. Helen Young's "Thomas Percy's Racialization of the European Middle Ages" reexamines Thomas Percy’s foundational work in establishing medieval English literature through the lens of race. She argues that "Percy's medievalist works were shaped profoundly by his conception of race as an immutable and inherited category." Adam Miyashiro’s piece, "Our Deeper Past: Race, Settler Colonialism, and Medieval Heritage Politics," finishes the special issue with a discussion of white supremacy’s current weaponization of the medieval past as a form of "white heritage politics," a reevaluation of premodern critical orientalism and race, and finishes with a discussion of the work of decolonial studies and Patrick Wolfe’s work "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" and how it separates race from indigeneity. This discussion loops us back to this introduction and Margo Hendrick’s invocation of Patrick Wolfe's work precisely for us to sit with how race and indigeneity must be discussed separately and also discussed with each other in discomfort.

5 | RACE, RELIGION, ABBA MOSES, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN EUROPEAN MONASTICISM

Finally, I would like to end with one specific example from the medieval archive, to examine how in our current time and moment, we can identify the contours, structures, technologies, strategies of premodern critical race, racism, racialization, and resistance. It is a political, ethical, and scholarly choice to use the frames of contemporary phenomena, structures, and technologies to explain this past. This is a form of thinking through the premodern medieval archive through the work of critical race theory and thus a way to think about a method of premodern critical race
studies. It also is an example of what Toni Morrison described as how to read the literary past beyond the “white gaze” (Carroll, 2019). Though in this example, I am asking scholars to read and listen to the medieval archive with a racialized gaze and a racialized ear.

My example is from the accounts of Abba Moses from the beginnings of medieval Christian spirituality in the deserts of Egypt in the fourth to fifth century C. E. (late antiquity/early Middle ages) with the work of Coptic Christianity that created the foundation for medieval Christian solitary life and monasticism. These desert fathers and mothers are recorded in the Latin Vitae Patrum, as well as the Greek manuscript and textual tradition of the Apophthegmata Patrum.¹⁰

Benedicta Ward, in her introduction to her translation of the Vitae Patrum, explains that “Moses the Black, who came from a different part of Africa, was one of the most revered of the hermits” (p. xv). Ward's discussion of Moses describes him as the perfect racialized subject—“he was a warm and loving man and the affection in which he was held was expressed at times by teasing him about the colour of his skin; he returned these comments with no resentment but with good humour: ‘Black outside’, he would say, ‘but white inside’” (Ward, 2003, p. xv). Ward also relates the outlines of Moses's story in her discussion of him in the translation of the Apophthegmata Patrum (the alphabetic version). What Ward describes as “good humour” is an incident in the Vitae Patrum's section De humilitate “on Humility”:

(LIBELLUS DECIMUS QUINTUS. De humilitate.):


[29. They said of Moses that when he was ordained, they put the pall on his shoulders. The archbishop said to him, 'Look at that, here you are clothed in white and ready for your ordination, Moses.' He answered, 'White outside, Lord Bishop, or white inside, do you think?' The archbishop, wishing to test him, said to the clergy, 'When Moses comes to the altar, turn him away but follow him and listen to what he says.' They began to drive him from the church, saying, 'Get out, Ethiopian.' As he went out, he said to himself, 'You thing of dust and ashes, they have done you a good turn. You are not a man, how dare you remain in the company of men?'] (Ward, 2003, p. 157)

Ward has read this passage as a straightforward example of humility in which the monastic community “teased” Moses. The passage is quite clear that this is not “teasing” but overt racial harassment and testing based on his embodied racialized Ethiopian blackness. The incident reveals that Moses, above any other ascetic monk, must be tested to see if he is worthy of his converted and elevated Christian status—he must always prove his biopolitical Christian humanness.

David Brakke reassesses this passage in relation to postcolonial theory and argues for an interpretation of “resistant mockery” (2006, p. 179). Brakke explains: “Moses’s reply belongs to the ‘black body, but white soul’ topos that was widespread in literature of the period, but its artful performance of subordination … suggests manipulation and concealment … Mimicry, as Bhabha deploys it, not only presents an ambivalent other to the colonizer, but also opens a space for resistance through mockery to the colonized” (p. 179).

I would like to add another layer to this interpretation. For anyone conversant in the century-long work of critical race studies and W. E. B. Du Bois book The Souls of Black Folk (1903), this passage is a poignant, painful, and evocative example of double consciousness: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on
in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” Du Bois named, theorized, and explained the techne of double consciousness in 1903, but that “peculiar sensation” the feeling of twoness was not invented in 1903 when Du Bois publishes his book. It’s a phenomenon he is describing in his contemporary moment, but also in a much longer American and European past, and for Du Bois, he identifies that past as the work of multiple centuries—“the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife ... to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (Du Bois, 1903). As the passage’s end explains, Abba Moses’s response here is from a private moment, one under the surveillance of his white confraternity; it is different from his earlier utterance of postcolonial performative resistance.

This is not the first and only time that the Abba Moses in the Vitae Patrum must address the violent structural racism of his religious fraternity. In the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, another incident is recorded but with a different kind of response:

LIBELLUS DECIMUS SEXTUS. De patientia.


[7. At a meeting of monks in Scetis, the hermits wanted to test Moses. So they poured scorn on him, saying, “Who is this black man who is here with us?” Moses heard them, but said nothing. When the meeting had dispersed, the monks who had insulted him asked him, “Weren’t you upset inside?” He replied, “I was upset, and I said nothing.”] (Ward, 2003, p. 173)

Benedicta Ward translates “Aethiops” as “black man.” Her decision to do so also opens up some questions we must ask about the role of the translator and her white translating gaze. Though Brakke discusses the Roman racialization of “Aethiops” (Brakke, pgs.163-164). It also asks us to question when did Latin philology make the turn to racialize “Aethiops” into a black man and what that means in relation to both the premodern archive and also the racist history of Latin philology. This passage has been read by numerous scholarly critics as just another example of his extreme humility. However, Brakke (2006, p. 157, 180), the one scholar whose work has pointed out that Abba Moses’s multiple racist tests were forms of prejudice based on his Ethiopian skin, explains that Abba Moses’s reply is from Psalm 76. If one reads the rest of Psalm 76, one realizes that this answer is a form of exegetical clapback. The answer “I was grieved, but I kept silence” is the end of Line 5 of Psalm 76. The psalm’s later lines reveal the particularly nuanced way in which Abba Moses has responded to these constant racialized tests/ incidents of harassment.

The opening of Psalm 76 states:

I cried to the Lord with my voice; to God with my voice, and he gave ear to me. In the day of my trouble I sought God, with my hands lifted up to him in the night, and I was not deceived. My soul refused to be comforted: I remembered God, and was delighted, and was exercised, and my spirit swooned away. My eyes prevented the watches: I was troubled, and I spoke not .... (Psalm 76:2–5, DRBO)

Meanwhile, the end of Psalm 76 states:

The waters saw thee, O God, the water saw thee: and they were troubled. Great was the noise of the waters; the clouds sent out a sound. For thy arrows pass: The voice of thy thunder in a wheel. Thy
lightnings enlightened the world; the earth shook and trembled. Thy way is in the sea, and thy paths in many waters: and thy footsteps shall not be know. Thou has conducted thy people like sheep, by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Psalm 76:17–21, DRBO)

Abba Moses's response, if one actually reads between the lines and understands the rest of the psalm's verses, places him as the psalm's subject of working for God's enlightenment through his meditative silence. The noise discussed in the passage are the other monks' racist verbal attacks. And finally, the last line makes clear, it is Moses and Aaron—a fairly obvious reference to his name—whose hands direct the spiritual life of this noisy, racist flock. In the context of a monastic and eremitic Christian religious culture who would have read, reread, commented, re-commented, sung, and recited the Psalms as a form of regular and often daily devotional prayer, there is no way his other monks or religious brothers and sisters, let alone any monastic, and religious reader worth his/ her/ their salt in the Middle Ages would not have understood the context of Abba Moses's response.

This incident also can be framed through the work of recent critical race and sound studies. In particular, Jenny Stoever's formulation in her book *The Sonic Color Line* that considers how the "sonic color line is both a hermeneutics of race and a marker of its im/material presence" (2016, pp. 10–11). She reframes her analysis through Du Bois's later work, *Dusk of Dawn*, from 1940, where he imagines the color line as "a suffocating plate glass enclosure" (p. 9). Stoever explains that Dubois moves from "veil to vacuum as his preeminent metaphor for race" and thus "accounts for the multisensory experience and auditory affect of race..." (p. 9). In essence, Du Bois's work in this book thinks of race as a "wall of sound" in which black bodies inside this vacuum "are screaming in the vacuum, unheard" (p. 10). I believe this approach further refines Abba Moses's response vis-à-vis the soundscape of race and the positionality, in Moses's view, of God within this schematic. God is with him in the first half of the psalm in that plate glass enclosure, listening to his pain. And God has now positioned Abba Moses, by the end of the psalm, and flipped the positionality of race and sound so that the white brethren are now the ones whose noise must be managed.

I also describe this as a clapback rather than just verbal resistance because it follows the contours of this recent digital rhetorical form. A form of African American rhetoric that may have begun in the hip-hop culture of 2003 and Ja Rule's song "Clap Back" a diss track directed at Eminem and 50 Cent (see Gilyard & Banks, 2018, pp. 93–6). The term moved from being a reference to a "diss" to something more rhetorically specific as it moved into the platforms of digital communication. As a Buzzfeed 2015 article and the philological work of the Merriam-Webster dictionary explains:

Not to be confused w/ a garden-variety diss, a clapback is deemed by most as a targeted, often vicious acute comeback intended to place someone in much-needed check .... The goal of the clapback is to Shut. It. Down. (Edwards & Madison, 2015)

For all the different Greek, Syriac, and Latin versions of this episode, Abba Mose's response to racist verbal aggression is this exegetical clapback. As a Black digital rhetorical form directly utilized against whiteness and white hegemony and "white nonsense" whose goal is to shut it down, but within the surveillance culture of a public media space (i.e., often on Twitter), discussing this as a form of exegetical clapback makes sense because of all the contexts, variables, and specific shape and praxis that the clapback takes. And in the three different examples of responses we have seen from Abba Moses in relation to systematic and regular racist harassment, he utilizes numerous different strategies in addressing, resisting, and surviving this hegemonic white Christian space as a Black man.

But finally, I would like to end my article to address a larger question about the ethics of working on race in the premodern past. Walter Johnson, the historian the author of *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Johnson, 2017), wrote the following in his article, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice" (2018):
Let me return to the relationship between the history of slavery and contemporary notions of justice. Tragically, the history of slavery is increasingly being written without enslaved people. By this, I mean that a field formerly defined by the dissident, bottom-up methodology of African American Studies and social history is increasingly dominated by work that does not ask questions about the experiences, ideas, or history of the enslaved (even while it teaches us many new things about slaveholders and their business partners). Let me be clear: it is not only nonsensical but also unethical to continue asking whether slavery was capitalist without asking what that meant to enslaved people.

As we move forward in our premodern fields to discuss premodern critical race studies, I want to return to the points Johnson has made but frame it for this critical discussion of race in the premodern past. The story of premodern critical race cannot and should not be written without Black, indigenous, and people of color, without asking question about the experiences, ideas, or history of the racially-marked people of the premodern past. “It is not only nonsensical but also unethical to continue” to discuss race without asking what that meant to the racialized bodies of this premodern past (Echoing Johnson). Race is not a theoretical abstraction; race is not an intellectual debate. Race has a body count. Race is political. Race matters now and race matters in the premodern past. The brief moments in which we hear Abba Moses’s voice in the vast archive of the early desert fathers and mothers should show us that race affects bodies in the premodern past. Race impacted Abba Moses’s religious life. For a longer durée and wider view, race impacted the formation of Western Christian monastic and eremitic spirituality, a central node of the Middle Ages, and we need to attend to its long-term effects in our medieval histories. The ethics of working on critical race in the premodern past means that the work of the long history of critical race scholarship, done mostly by Black, indigenous, people of color, and the racialized lives of the premodern must be centered and central in this new area of scholarship. What I see going forward is that medieval race will be a politics and an ethical praxis of restorative justice in which we will always ask the question for the contemporary now and the premodern past, whose lives and whose scholarship matter?

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ENDNOTES

1 The closest previous issue was Cord Whitaker’s special issue for postmedieval, “Making Race Matter in the Middle Ages” (2015b), with 37.5% scholars of color including Whitaker’s introduction.

2 My thanks to Margo Hendricks for generously sharing her talk so that I could cite it here more specifically. A description of the symposium can be found here: https://acmrs.asu.edu/public-events/symposia/race-and-periodization [retrieved September 17, 2019].

3 The exceptions would be Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2001), who directly footnotes the work of critical race studies, Sharon Kinoshita (2001), who cites the work of postcolonial studies and orientalism, and Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk (2001), who cites Toni Morrison, the critical race work done in Classics, and the work of the series The Image of the Black in Western Art (2010). However, in the case of Verkerk, she uses the n-word in a footnote.

4 I elaborate on this split genealogy in a forthcoming American Historical Review article, “The Politics of Premodern Race.”

5 You can see Omi and Winant (2014, 3rd ed.) for an explanation of the historiography of race and ethnicity in the last 125 years. I unpack this more explicitly in my forthcoming AHR article as well as the forthcoming Routledge Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages entry on “Race.”

6 Though Bartlett cites some excellent work from medieval art historians, he appears to not have understood their methodologies particularly when the art historians examine specific manuscript productions in specific locations. The history of realistic manuscript painting in Western European manuscripts has had ongoing discussions and is often discussed in relation to periodicity and the early modern painting traditions. This is most specifically seen in discussions of the Burgundian manuscript tradition and the realistic trompe-l’oeil borders (see Kren & McKendrick, 2003). For Bartlett as a scholar of the Norman Empire, the Norman manuscripts discussed in relation to realistic manuscript illumination is Frederick II of Sicily’s 13th-century De Arte Venandi Cum Avibus (see Wood & Fyfe, 1943).
Even Nirenberg’s citation of Michael Banton’s work really is about citing discussions of how race was defined and formed in the 18th and 19th centuries (see Banton, 1998.)

I discuss this more extensively in my forthcoming AHR article and my entry for Routledge Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages. I am pointing to the work of Gloria Wekker in White Innocence (2016).

Flanders-Stepans (2000) hypothesized prenatal and postnatal care and the high rate of unplanned pregnancies among Black women as factors.

Both have been translated by Benedicta Ward: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetic Collection (1984) is based on the Greek, while The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks is based on the Latin Vulgate translation in the Patrologia Latina but was organized topically from Heribert Rosweyde’s 17th-century compilation (1615). This was made into a Latin edition by J.-P. Migne, in 1878 which has become the standard edition used in Ward’s translation (Vitae Patrum sive Historiae eremiticae libri decem). The textual tradition of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers that eventually becomes the Vitae Patrum (which also eventually is one of the cornerstones of the Acta Sanctorum) is vast and multistranded. It includes the Greek Apophthegmata Patrum that also included an alphabetical version (that was organized by alphabet of monk/anchorite) as well as an extended version in the Verba Seniorum. The organization by topic has been seen as the “systematic collection” while the alphabetical organization is connected to the 1677 J. B. Coteller edition and collection called the Apophthegmata Patrum. The complex manuscript, edition, and textual history is explained by D. Burton-Christie (1993, pp. 85–8).

Retrieved from http://pld.chadwyck.co.uk/.

Citations from Psalm 76 are accessed through the translation of the Latin Vulgate Bible, the Douay-Rheims Bible online: http://www.drbo.org/chapter/21076.htm.

Text from The Souls of Black Folk are reproduced from American Studies at the University of Virginia’s hypertext project: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DUBOIS/cover.html.

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