

## The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race before the Modern World

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The motives for gathering the present cluster of essays stem, in part, from the session “Race in the Middle Ages” that took place during the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo in 1996. The event, sponsored by the Teachers for a Democratic Society, featured Michael Awkward, then Professor of English and Director of the Institute for African-American Studies at the University of Michigan, and included a brief response by me.<sup>1</sup> Professor Awkward, an Americanist with little professional interest in medieval studies, had nonetheless agreed to address this session on race, presenting the lecture “Going Public: Ruminations on the Black Public Sphere.” This session, in prospect and panic, and in retrospect and reflection, urgently raised the question for me as a medievalist, What’s race got to do with it? What, if anything, does medieval studies have to do with racial discourses?

Awkward’s appearance at Kalamazoo, unusual from several perspectives, had a double effect, for in providing an immediate, even urgent, perhaps arbitrary forum for discussion, it also pointed up the prevailing lack of interest in race among medievalists. What would he do, what was he doing—the nonmedievalist, the “expert” on race—at a conference that, among those who care, is a byword for dedicated, extensive (and to some degree exclusive) study of all things medieval? Within the identity politics that obtains throughout American society, the position he occupied as a person of color defined his relation to his subject and endowed him with existential and political warrants that few at that particular conference might claim. My own status as a white, middle-aged, middle-class, male medievalist correspondingly shaped my role as an official respondent. It also determined my response to race and race studies as “a black thing,” a subject on which any impressions I might offer might easily seem intrusive or inau-

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thentic, at least to those who, intellectually or experientially, claimed a more “serious” engagement with race. Particularly in circumstances so foreign to his usual academic interests, Awkward seemed to many of those present an “organic” intellectual, speaking on behalf of a community whose concerns were defined by a unified racial identity.<sup>2</sup> Though his topic, the place of feminist polemic among black intellectuals, female and male, underscored the absence of seamless common interests in the African American public sphere, its distance from the usual business of the seven hundred-plus sessions at Kalamazoo made the academic union of race and medieval studies appear exceptionally inorganic. The invitation to Awkward signaled that medievalists wished to address issues of race. It left open, however, the form that such address might take: Were medievalists to engage with race in contemporary society, as teachers and citizens? Were they to see Awkward’s presentation as somehow extending the Black Public Sphere to medieval studies, opening (or forcing) access by medievalists to on-going intellectual controversies? Or was Awkward to present transhistorical motives and models, arising from his own scholarly work in modern literature, that medievalists might adopt or adapt in their own work on seemingly remote texts and events?

As a catalyst for the discussion of race, it was clear at the Kalamazoo session that Awkward’s *appearance* made all the difference. Awkward’s visible presence as a lone black man in an overwhelmingly white milieu, his announced interest in racial discourse, and his status as an outsider/nonmedievalist did more to make difference an issue among these historically engaged scholars than any of the evidence or argument he offered in his talk. As a spectacular anomaly, Awkward’s intervention was symbolic and performative, rather than a systematic and integral feature of the academic inquiry routinely sponsored by a medieval studies conference. What remained unclear was whether this was a sensational, “one-off” event, a singular chance to envision or discuss race in a professional context, or a symptomatic feature of broad change concerning methods and focus in medieval studies.<sup>3</sup>

This impression of Michael Awkward’s spectacular outsiderhood at Kalamazoo—and the attendant questions of whether “race” was integral or foreign to medieval studies—evoked for me a parallel with late medieval, early modern racial discourses (though this did not form part of my public response at the time). Beginning in the fifteenth century, European painters, especially in Germany and the Netherlands, regularly represented Balthasar, one of the magi, as a black African.<sup>4</sup> In many of these Epiphanies, Balthasar

habitually appears not as a supernumerary or an afterthought on the periphery, but as a spectacular figure, splendidly clothed with flamboyant headgear. Ordinarily he stands apart from Mary and the infant Jesus, who are venerated by a white-skinned elderly king, plainly dressed. This grand isolation only calls further attention to his exotic difference.<sup>5</sup> Though in some renditions Balthasar has an attendant or two, for the most part he stands as the only person of color in a tableau of white faces.<sup>6</sup> In these Epiphanies (as also in individualized portraits, by Dürer, Mostaert, and others), artists present the details of African appearance—hair, physiognomy—with an accuracy so exceptional that it has sometimes suggested to modern audiences the potential of an unchanging racial identity.<sup>7</sup> Yet the clothing that distinguishes the African king is entirely fictional, a version of the conventionalized exotic, confected from a melange of Western styles and exaggerated fads.<sup>8</sup>

The analogy I'm proposing here pairs Michael Awkward, as a dark-skinned 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. The possible connections here may seem less far-fetched if I tease out some of the implications of the visual iconography associated with the Journey of the Magi. The increasingly visible and realistic appearance of black Africans, in scores of paintings from the middle of the fourteenth century and afterwards, seems irrefutable evidence of a keener awareness among European artists (and their audiences) with respect to geopolitical diversity and racial difference; moreover, the uniformly elegant appearance and lavish dress of the African king might well appear a gesture of openness or even of acceptance of the Other in the West. Yet the singular, iterated presence of the black magus represents not an accommodation of the Other, but an accommodation of the Same by the Other: the inclusion of the African king bears witness to the coming out of the infant God and accordingly declares the world-historical significance of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> European culture in this way asserts its universalizing dynamic, appropriating otherness as a means of expanding its own horizons. The African magus, summoned from afar, brings his wisdom as an adornment to the claims of absolute dominion represented by the Adoration/Epiphany. His elaborate dress is the emblem of his exotic sovereignty, which in the event can say nothing distinctive to a culture complete in itself, except visually to signal its fullness in time and space.

At the Kalamazoo session on race, Michael Awkward seemed to me a similarly spectacular and anomalous presence. Among two or three thou-

sand medievalists, he was one of perhaps a score or fewer of blacks. Though his distinguished academic and professional achievements assured him a cordial reception, he clearly spoke a different language: Could he say anything that would actually be heard? What are the possibilities for dialogue between those engaged with race as a historical and theoretical framework for analysis and those who do medieval studies? My own assessment was that, at that Kalamazoo session and more generally, many medievalists regarded race studies as an exotic intrusion into a discipline with well-established (not to say closed) fields and methods of inquiry. On the other side, many scholars engaged in the study of race clearly view the Middle Ages as “prehistoric,” a cultural domain where race does not operate, or does not signify as a trope of difference, at least not in ways that pertain to the more urgent histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Dissolving this impasse—between a living, engaged awareness of race and a professional investment in a historically remote culture—will require medievalists to recognize race studies as something other than a fashionable, politically driven niche subject whose single-minded, universalizing models import inappropriate or irrelevant interests to the study of the past. It also demands that modernists follow through on the perception that race, as a trope of difference, is always historically constructed and activated, and that the dynamics of medieval racial discourses may therefore fundamentally modify how work is done in the field.<sup>10</sup> In my own mind, the meaning or lasting effect of Awkward’s presentation at Kalamazoo remains unclear: his paper, cogent and lively as it was, may have caught much of his audience unawares or unprepared, and the event’s impact may have taken force more through the empirical and experiential spectacle of difference than through any sustained professional dialogue. 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.

If, by the high Middle Ages, artists possessed the skills to represent race as a coherently recognizable, reproducible category of identity, how did it mean? What particularities attach to individual representations, beyond obvious general effects, such as the universalizing of Western Christendom? What difference did it make, and how did this vary across discrete audiences, according to the sponsorship, conventions, and motives of particular artists

and traditions, or in similar and divergent subjects? For example, though the veneration of Saints Christopher and Maurice dates back to early Christian times, both (but especially Maurice, in German renditions) became palpably black or African through a series of cultural transformations.<sup>11</sup> Like Balthasar the magus, however, Maurice remains a stand-alone African, a single black face within a tableau of European, white countenances; his token presence is an appropriation of the Other that affirms the universality of the Same. This cultural dynamic drives innovation in other subjects as well: in one rendition of the Last Judgment, Hans Memling includes a single, unmistakably African figure both among the saved and among the damned, demonstrating through this evenhandedness that dark skin is not inherently charged with negative meaning.<sup>12</sup> Memling in effect preserves the trope whereby the racial exception proves the universal rule, even as he reverses its conventional terms: these black men do not stand as splendid anomalies (the lone African king) demonstrating the dominion of Christianity, but as unique generic tokens that, in the final scene of universal history, confirm the totality of its inclusiveness. While depictions such as Memling's demonstrate remarkable verisimilitude, their complex implication within Western cultures ensures that they can scarcely be "objective," let alone neutral, and so opens the question of whether any specific, historical representations of blackness may stand outside racial meaning or discourse.

Ancient painters and sculptors possessed a capacity for the lifelike representation of black Africans rivaling that of the Middle Ages. In his book *Before Color Prejudice*, Frank M. Snowden Jr. argues for the segregation of race and cultural difference within ancient culture; physical features and skin pigmentation in this argument convey peculiar and typical features of ethnicity, without any implicit suggestions of inferiority or superiority.<sup>13</sup> Genetics and environment produce "types" that are recognizable in nature, and representation is purely descriptive; as such, it is therefore simply accurate or inaccurate. Race thus produces distinction without difference, and cultural identities—the production of sameness and otherness—come about through neutral, unmotivated activities. In Snowden's account, race (or its nonexistence) paradoxically amounts to the "same difference"; positing the absence of hierarchical or value-laden discriminations implies that color exists outside history itself. Installing the ancient world as a domain *before* prejudice amounts to imagining it as *before* history, so that it stands as a kind of innocent Golden Age that recognized multicultural identities as entities without contested, or even relational, status.

Far from being (more or less) true to nature, the ancient represen-

tations of Africans that Snowden has made available articulate the nature of racialization as a practice and provide further (nonmedieval) instances of how color signifies outside the modern era. For difference to signify—in terms of black and white, African and northern Mediterranean—spectators and readers required access to established registers and semantic fields surrounding brown and black, white, ruddy, olive, or gray pigmentation.<sup>14</sup> One recurrent form in which color difference was articulated was a double-faced vessel (dating from the fifth century B.C.E.) adorned with female faces, one black and recognizably African in physical appearance, the other white and Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> These household items, in building the two faces into a single artifact, convey the structural interdependence of color and appearance, since each signifies only as a property of the other. At the same time, such conventionalized and domestic items accessorize racial difference, conferring upon it an entirely ornamental status. This same association with adornment and marginality marks other typical representations (for example, statues of musicians and dancers), whose distinctive African traits clearly serve an exotic function, exhibiting imported pleasures and acquired tastes.<sup>16</sup>

I wish, then, to argue that represented color difference is never “innocent,” neutral, or without cross-cultural evaluative meaning. While skin pigment (and physiognomy) in the ancient world did not at all signify racial difference in the same way as in nineteenth-century America, or within eighteenth-century European-African relations, it nonetheless signaled conscious and conventionalized distinctions based upon appearance, territorial and geopolitical diversity, and power relations. Perhaps in Greece and Rome these distinctions lacked the explicitness and coherence to become “the ultimate trope of difference,” as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has defined race within the modern world.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, 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.

So far as I know, no medievalist has made an argument for the “pre-historic” character of racial difference between 500 and 1500. Nonetheless, scholars have largely left the issue of race aside, in this way pushing such difference outside history. On occasion, the Middle Ages has been presented as a staging area, where some early symptoms or traces of later conflicts and

categories of difference—that is, Real History—may be glimpsed. Despite this lack of notice, race does operate distinctively in various medieval contexts, and I wish to argue for its existence—in the first instance, apart from color and physiognomy—through a brief glimpse at several texts and milieus.<sup>18</sup> The earliest accounts of the Norman Conquest of England make striking use of race as a trope of difference. For these historians, *Anglia* as an abstract Latin noun is clearly a territory rather than a unified nation. In the decades after 1066, the language of royal charters switches from English to Latin, and the subjects addressed by the king are not simply “the English,” but French, Normans, and Danish as well.<sup>19</sup> Writing two generations after the Conquest, both William of Malmesbury and Orderic Vitalis call attention to the mixed character of their own ancestry: Orderic, for example, whose father was Norman and mother English, wrote as an adult that he had been exiled among a foreign race when he was ten. He continues to refer to himself as English-born (*Angligena*), and regards these two peoples whose blood he shares as quite distinct in customs and nature. He often pauses in his *History* to characterize the Normans as a race (*gens*) whose members exhibit identifying, common traits, wherever they might happen to live.<sup>20</sup> Within England, the laws required that in every suspicious death there be a presentation of *Englischeria*—proof by testimony of Englishness—in order to avoid the fine associated with the murder of a Norman; as a mode of legally mandated racial profiling, this system recalls the assignment of badges or stars to Jews in the twelfth, thirteenth, and twentieth centuries. Sustaining race as the ultimate trope of difference among ethnically similar western European populations seems to have lost both cause and effect within England over the course of three generations or so, and Richard fitz Nigel (probably the illegitimate son of an Anglo-Norman bishop and English mother), in *The Dialogue of the Exchequer* (1177), notes that intermarriage has in effect leveled racial differences.<sup>21</sup>

Marjorie Chibnall, not a historian given to trendy generalizations, has designated Anglo-Norman England as preeminently a “multi-racial society.”<sup>22</sup> The incoherent, diverse, antagonistic populations that jostled each other on English soil provided a powerful incentive—for political leaders, lawyers, intellectuals—to imagine a larger community, and consequently race and nation circulate as precociously viable terms in the British Isles. The wide-spread consciousness of difference in twelfth-century Britain at one level simply reflects the welter of languages, kin groups, and ancestries on the ground; it is no less a material reality, however, that the *writing* of race and difference becomes a strategy calculated not merely to describe but

to control the centrifugal forces represented by these diverse blocs. Some avatar of race may have been a formative element in English identity from the time of Bede and *Beowulf*; nonetheless, it is a pair of Welsh writers a generation or so apart who effectively invent a powerful myth and a critical framework for racial discourse.<sup>23</sup> These men, who must at the least have been quadrilingual to negotiate their overlapping worlds, entangle Britons and Saxons, English and Normans, Welsh and Irish in a network of contested and conjoined identities. Gerald of Wales's suite of books on Wales and Ireland (to which he returned repeatedly for additions and revisions) represents a remarkably sophisticated ethnographic achievement: they focus on climate, topography, and environment, and offer detailed accounts of origins, social organization, customs, language use, military practice, and local and national character.<sup>24</sup> Gerald (1146–1223) notes that his critiques have no generic precedent, and he seems to have regarded them as a form of area studies, appealing at once to intellectual curiosity and pragmatic advantage. Gerald's descriptive technique and his comparative method equip his readers with the conceptual tools to distinguish race as a feature of biological, political, and territorial categories (kin, tribe, people, nation). Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1135), which has been called the most influential book written during the European Middle Ages, displaces English and Norman antagonisms onto the ancient clash of Britons and Germanic invaders, and in the process it renders racial antagonism a crucial component of any larger vision of national history.<sup>25</sup> The frameworks, the terms, the very peoples devised by Gerald and Geoffrey define specific and distinctive medieval engagements with race; at the same time, they become the rudiments of later racial discourses, whether in royal and republican conflicts over English national history in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or in the emergence of a modern discourse of race in the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> In this respect both the lineage of the nation-state and the building blocks of racial identities take shape in the Middle Ages, though it remains imperative to work out how they function within their own particular contexts—to study the difference of difference—rather than to cast them as the quaint or faint precursors of “real” racial relations.

The disconnect between dominant medieval racial discourses—dynamic, effective, even pernicious systems of identity in their own terms—and the common assumption that *color* constitutes the default category of difference no doubt explains on the one hand the lack of interest in, or palpable resistance to, race studies on the part of professional medievalists, and, on



the other, the general absence of attention to the Middle Ages among those engaged with racial identities as mechanisms or tropes of difference. Yet in this peculiar feature—the insignificance of color as a crucial marker—these structures of identity and difference in the Middle Ages directly correspond to some historical and contemporary practices of race. Recent attempts to account for the harrowing conflicts in Rwanda, for example, have frequently drawn upon discourses of race to explain differences among peoples who appear, especially from Western perspectives, homogeneous in color, territorial origins, and shared histories. Postcolonial analyses that preceded renewed conflicts (1985–90) identified “race”—here defined as a history of cultural differences, the manipulations of colonial and postcolonial rule, and campaigns of political and ideological intervention—as more important in motivating “fratricidal” violence than material inequalities.<sup>27</sup> Especially in the years leading up to the killings in 1994, racial discrimination between the minority Tutsi groupings (Hamites) and the majority Hutus (Bantus) depended on the revival and institutionalization of long-standing antagonisms among peoples not estranged by obvious divergence in physiognomy or color.<sup>28</sup> The latest reassessments, though they recognize the complexities of caste, ethnicity, outside impositions, and economic disparity, generally retain race as an appropriate category of analysis for cultural conflict where color does not function as the fundamental marker of difference.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, those who have tried to describe or understand the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1990s have often invoked, or questioned, the role of race in shaping and fueling conflict. Though color seems never to have been a prime term of abuse among Croats, Bosnians, Serbs, Gypsies (Romany), and Jews, these diverse groups clearly thought of themselves as enmeshed in racial conflicts, and race remains an essential tool in exploring the warfare and the identity politics that lay behind the hostilities.<sup>30</sup> If the elusiveness of race—as a component of organic identity, as an analytic descriptor, as a trope of difference, or as a phantasm of representation—equips the term to describe the complexity of modern social relations, it seems counterproductive to cite these same capacities (its versatility, its ambiguity) as reasons to exclude race from the analysis of medieval documents and events.<sup>31</sup>

The intensification of racial conflicts and ethnic cleansing in the late twentieth century has been directly linked to the rise of the nation state, and such a model has remarkable resonances with the situations described or experienced by William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, the devisers of the Common Law, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Gerald of

Wales. The point of such potential connections, however, should not be a simple-minded claim that the Middle Ages did it first (tempted though we may be by bumper sticker history), but a fuller understanding of how the Middle Ages did it differently. Moreover, analysis must work bilaterally, so that the textures of medieval discourses and the hard edges of medieval practices help illuminate the function of race within modern and contemporary conditions. In pursuing such analogies and contrasts, one inevitably fronts the question, What evidence is there that medieval people—artists, intellectuals, social or political groupings—constructed notions of race through color? To what degree, and in what circumstances, do black and white operate as indices of contrasting and continuous African-European identities before the invention of America? I've already suggested that color may not be the primary category of racial identity or distinction in medieval thought or social organization, and it may therefore seem perverse to give it a central place in a historical investigation of the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, because color stands at the heart of much contemporary discourse on race, it makes sense to note its place and to sort out its use and meaning in a variety of medieval contexts. In the remainder of this essay, therefore, I would like to focus specifically upon the power of color to signify difference and to consider the ways in which such difference participates in medieval categories of race.

Throughout the ancient world and the Middle Ages, the black-white binary persistently conveys deep-seated symbolic meaning, in both written and visual contexts. Snowden has argued that the ethnic or geopolitical exemplar of the black-white dyad—Ethiopian-Scythian, African-European, southern-northern—implies no sense of hierarchy or inferiority but instead functions centrally as a trope of inclusiveness, encompassing the unity of mankind.<sup>32</sup> Color without prejudice ostensibly functions in two utterly disjunct spheres, one narrowly referential and neutrally descriptive, the other a purely symbolic or textual construct. It seems hard to accept that the ancient cultural registers that Snowden cites—habitual associations of blackness with evil and death, for example—did not leak through and suffuse the cultural identities of black peoples. Proverbial and stereotypical formulations—such as “to wash the Ethiopie white” or “Can the Ethiopie change his skin?” which were commonplaces in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian cultures—simultaneously depend upon and disavow linkage to the real world to achieve their figurative meaning.<sup>33</sup> While blackness in ancient times may not have been charged with the same racial meanings or intensity as

polemics surrounding, say, American slavery, it seems nonetheless inevitable that such powerful markers of difference through color inflected the description of peoples in ways that participate in what we now consider discourses of race.<sup>34</sup>

Climactic explanations of color—dark pigment produced by exposure to the sun in a hot and dry environment—occur in virtually every medieval encyclopedia from Isidore to Bartholomew the Englishman and Pierre d'Ailly (whose text Columbus annotated).<sup>35</sup> In the later Middle Ages maps—both those targeted for mariners as well as the majority addressed to general audiences—frequently incorporated legends drawn from encyclopedias on their face, or on the page surrounding the map, identifying peoples by region, habits, or appearance (including color). In such productions, intended for nonspecialist audiences, text and image converge dynamically to delineate difference and identity. Africa, Ethiopia, Pentapolis, the land of Prester John, and sometimes “India Parva” were on different charts populated with black peoples. Visual representations of Africans occur in the world map of Pietro Vesconte (ca. 1320, with heraldic head), the Catalan chart (ca. 1375, with black Prester John), a chart by Mecia de Viladestes (1413, with Prester John and other blacks), the Borgia *mappamundi* (before 1450, with dark-skinned magi and Ethiopians), a Genoese map (ca. 1457), a Portugese chart (ca. 1471), and the atlas of Diego Homem (ca. 1565, all with a black Prester John).<sup>36</sup> On these maps, black physiognomies visually mark territorial distance and exoticism, and by the fourteenth century this image had become so thoroughly familiar that it was incorporated iconically into coats of arms, both fabulous and genuine. Armorials—collections of heraldic symbols and family crests—illustrated the arms of Balthasar, the black magus, and of St. Christopher, using black Africoid features of the sort that appeared on the arms assigned to the bishop of Freising or allies of the king of Aragon.<sup>37</sup> “Universal” armorials, illustrating the widest range of noble insignia, included an array of black physiognomies. Though the arms ascribed to Prester John did not include an African countenance, those associated with the Great Khan, his supporters, and the allies of the emperor of Constantinople prominently featured blacks.<sup>38</sup> Strange and exotic warriors in chivalric romances sometimes acquired their own arms adorned with black faces, as did the opponents of Godfrey of Boulogne and Alexander the Great.<sup>39</sup> The profusion and coherence of these images suggests the conspicuous and unambiguous status of color as a marker of geopolitical, religious, and cultural difference.

The milieus in which these representations occur—encyclopedic,

geographic, heraldic, chivalric—are to some degree descriptive, and might be characterized as being neutral in that they imply comparison or parity, as in matters of climate or knightly rivalry. Yet the association of blackness and strangeness seems often to have carried viscerally negative associations and functioned to produce monstrous others. *Kyng Alisaunder* (Middle English, early fourteenth century) deploys climactic explanations to describe peoples in India who live beyond “an hylle . . . cleped Malleus”:

Thoo that woneth in the est partie,  
 The sonne and the hote skye  
 Al the day hem shyneth on,  
 That hij ben blak so pycches fom.  
 Thise naciouns ben outelyng,  
 And in her owen yemyng.

. . . . .  
 Another folk there is ferliche,  
 Also blak so any pycche.  
 An eighe hij habbeth and nomo,  
 And a foot on to goo. . . .

[Those that dwell in the east part, on them the sun and the hot sky shine all day long, so that they are as black as foam from pitch. These nations lie at the edge, and are in their own governance. . . . Another people in that place is marvelous, and also black as pitch. One eye they have and no more, and one foot to move on.]<sup>40</sup>

While the first group’s dark pigment results from the environment, the latter clearly hail from the monstrous races such as the one-footed Sciapods who have here become Cyclopes as well; their blackness seems simply to intensify their strangeness. Other peoples in *Kyng Alisaunder* appear black as “grounden pych” (6407) or “broune . . . and nothing white” (6569), suggesting that color in itself, and not blackness as a default, works to signify monstrous difference. This is strikingly the case with another nameless nation:

Another folk biside there wonne:  
 Ich wene it ben the fendes sones.  
 So yelough so wexe ben her visages;  
 In the werlde ne ben so vile pages.  
 Rughgh hii ben also hounde,

From the hevede to the grounde.  
 Visages after Martyn ape:  
 Folk it is wel yvel yshape.  
 Her mouthe from the on ere to the other,  
 Her nether lyppe is a ful fothere  
 For to the navel doune it hengeþ.

[Another people dwell nearby; I think they are the devil's children. As yellow as wax are their faces; there are not such vile people in the whole world. They are rough in appearance like hounds, from head to foot, with visages like a beastly ape: these are people who are really ugly. Their mouth goes from one ear to the other; the bottom lip is even larger, for it hangs down to the navel.]  
 (6448–58)

Romances like *The Sowdone of Babylone* show a similar indifference, presenting a host of “Sarsyns” including “some bloo, some yolowe, some blake as More.”<sup>41</sup>

As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen demonstrates in his essay on the *Sowdone*, the overlap (and the boundaries) between a racially inflected sense of blackness and a generalized evocation of color as difference requires detailed, richly informed analysis. Throw-away allusions that connect blackness with strange or evil figures—the devil's offspring in the “Pesme Aventure” episode of Chrétien's *Yvain*, or the “hideous, black and horrible” giant Fouke Fitz Warren fights in Ireland—remain commonplace in the high and late Middle Ages, but even the most jejune must have altered in meaning as European self-awareness intensified.<sup>42</sup> This is apparent in vernacular works as dissimilar as the *Song of Roland* (eleventh century) and the Middle English *Richard Coer de Lyon* (early fourteenth century). Though both works may seem to reproduce a crude black-white binary, in *Roland*, Sharon Kinoshita reveals, distinctive lineaments of race come into focus through the representation of gender and national differences, while *Richard*'s portrayal of color, including its blithe cannibalism of Saracen corpses, participates in and reinforces a surprising range of cultural formations.<sup>43</sup>

The stark pagan-Christian contrast highlighted in *Roland*, *Richard*, and *Sowden* draws upon an absolute contrast of black and white that goes back to apostolic times and that envisions conversion, in Jeremiah's terms, as a visible change of skin. The vivid representation of black conversion in a number of late medieval paintings may suggest a more discriminating

consciousness of racial difference, but the vernacular popularity of the trope as *literal* change attests to a prevailing stereotype of difference so invincible that it is susceptible only to miraculous metamorphosis.<sup>44</sup> In one set of legends of the Holy Cross, preserved in the encyclopedic *Cursor Mundi* (ca. 1325), King David finds three rods blessed by Moses; their miraculous power cures illness and converts monstrous blacks to flawless whites:

Four Sarzins wit the king can mete.  
Blac and bla als led thai war.

. . . . .

That sagh man never forwit that hore,  
Sua fraward scapen creature.  
O thair blac heu it was selcuth,  
And in thair breistes bar thair moth.

. . . . .

Thair muthes wide, thair eien brade,  
Unfreli was thair face made.  
In thair forhed stod thair sight.

. . . . .

“For lath ar we, and als lath  
Es wicked man saul and bodi bath.”

. . . . .

He [David] heild tham to thaim for to kys;  
Thai kneld and tham kyeyst; als tite  
Als milk thair hide becom sa quite  
And o fre blod thai had the heu,  
And al thair scapp was turned neu.

[The king met with four Saracens, who were black and blue as lead. . . . Never before that hour did anyone see so horribly shaped a creature. Their black hue was marvelous, and their mouths were in their breasts. . . . Their mouths were so broad, their eyes so large, that it made their faces repulsive. In their foreheads stood their eyes. . . . (They say,) “We are loathsome, but loathsome also are the soul and body both of a wicked man. . . .” David held (the rods) out to them to kiss; they kneeled and kissed them. Immediately their skin became as white as milk, and they took on the hue of high blood, and all their appearance was made new.]<sup>45</sup>

Having delivered their riches to King David (presented here as a Christian antitype), the “Saracens” go “home” to “Ethiopi.” An analogous mutation occurs in a popular romance, *The King of Tars*: after baptism has transformed his newborn from a formless lump to a healthy infant, a sultan agrees to convert:

His hide, that blac and lothely was,  
 Al white bicom, thurth Godes gras,  
 And clere withouten blame.  
 And when the soudan seye that sight,  
 Then leved he wele on God almight.  
 . . . . .  
 Unnethe hir lord sche knewe.  
 Than wist sche wele in hir thought  
 That on Mahoun leved he nought,  
 For changed was his hewe.

[His skin, that had been black and loathsome, became all white, through God’s grace, and was spotless without blemish. And when the sultan saw that sight, well he believed on almighty God. . . . (He returns to his chamber:) Scarcely did she (his wife) recognize her lord. Then she well knew in her mind that he did not believe at all in Mohammed, for his color was entirely changed.]<sup>46</sup>

Anecdotes like these project race as the spectacular counterpart of an essentialized identity: you are what you are seen to be. Gross conversion in turn denies the possibility of any mediation between black and white. In favoring surface over substance, such a fiercely emblematic representational system reflects the medium of popular narrative, with its need for obvious cues, shared responses, and a strong visual orientation. In this it draws upon established medieval conventions and emerging mentalities, perhaps including increasing attentiveness to color as a lynchpin of difference. At the same time, however, it closely parallels, and by its seeming strangeness illuminates, the function of color as an elemental component of racial identity in modern cultures.

Less spectacular representations of race subordinate color to discursive detail: modern novels, autobiographies, essays, studies, or even art films—from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to *Beloved* and *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*—embed racial identity within a detailed history, fictional or factual, internal

or external.<sup>47</sup> While no late medieval work addresses color difference with the specificity or nuance that Gerald of Wales develops concerning race and ethnography within Britain, in several narratives black and white relations play a featured role. *The Romance of Fouke Fitz Waryn* (fourteenth century) contains an episode in which one of the hero's associates impersonates a minstrel in order to rescue a captured retainer from King John of England:

He attired himself very richly, just like any earl or baron, and dyed his hair and his whole body as black as jet, so that the only thing which was white was his teeth. He hung round his neck a very fine tabor, then he mounted a fine palfrey and rode through the town of Shrewsbury right up to the castle gate, with many people staring at him. John came before the king and, kneeling down, greeted him in very courtly fashion. The king returned his greetings and asked him where he was from. "Lord," he said, "I am an Ethiopian minstrel; I was born in Ethiopia." The king replied, "Are all the people in your land your colour?" "Yes, lord, men and women."<sup>48</sup>

The episode depends upon consciousness of race as spectacular—the gaze of the people of Shrewsbury, the question of the king—but at the same time it assumes a familiarity on the part of the audience with race and color difference. While the black man is an outsider (a professional entertainer) he is a fully acculturated individual, and it is only his status as simultaneously authentic and exceptional that legitimates the switch in identities and makes the trick succeed, inside and outside the narrative.<sup>49</sup>

Wolfram's *Parzival* (early thirteenth century) begins and ends with profoundly complex and provocative interracial encounters. Parzival's father Gahmuret visits the land of Zazamanc, where the people are "black as night"; though at first color difference (which Wolfram repeatedly underscores) leaves him uncomfortable, he falls in love with Queen Belcane, whose complexion stands out like "black upon white samite," and who is herself a "judge of fair complexions, for she had seen many a fair-skinned heathen before."<sup>50</sup> Though "his black wife was dearer to him than his own life," like Gawain, Yvain, and other chivalric heroes, he leaves her to seek adventure. At the end of *Parzival*, Feirfiz, the half-black, half-white child of that union, half-brother of Parzival, and a hero in his own right, goes off to India to become the ancestor of Prester John. The internal density and complexity of these framing episodes, and their potential intertextual links with



the African-European, black-white elements in the Dido-Aeneas story, make the representation of race a compelling yet enigmatic feature of *Parzival*. Wolfram's romance characteristically combines an increasingly complex vernacular selfhood with expansive social and political ambitions.<sup>51</sup> Though blackness in *Parzival* is effectually *underdetermined*—that is, open to appropriation in unique or eccentric ways, as compared to its overdetermined status in the last several centuries—*Parzival* nonetheless shows how a sustained narrative may deploy race as a crucial mechanism of cultural meaning.

Wolfram's depiction of racial identities seems to have had little precedent or influence. An exception is the Middle Dutch metrical romance of *Moriaen* (fourteenth century).<sup>52</sup> While searching for Perceval, Gawain and Lancelot encounter a knight who "was all black . . . his head, his body, and his hands were all black, saving his teeth" (29). After testing his mettle through combat, they recognize a shared bedrock of chivalric values beyond epidermal or cultural variation. He seeks to recover his honor by finding his father Acglovael (Perceval's brother), who begot him in the land of the Moors. His story so moves Lancelot and Gawain that they turn "pale, and then red"; the black knight then removes his own helmet, baring his "head, which was black as pitch; that is the fashion of his land—Moors are black as burnt brands" (38). The knights join forces, and through a sequence of adventures find Perceval and Acglovael, and then rescue Arthur. *Moriaen* reveals himself to his father, who professes his eagerness to return to the land of the Moors and solemnize the union that will legitimate *Moriaen* and restore a proper heritage to his mother, who becomes queen of the Moors. Perceval, Lancelot, and Gawain journey to *Moriaen*'s homeland and witness the marriage, before returning to Arthur's court for Pentecost.

The narrator's internal comments on the plot suggest that he had access to other versions of the story, and the romance shows traces of influence from the prose *Lancelot* and the Dutch *Perchevael* that accompanies it in the surviving compilation.<sup>53</sup> The centrality of color difference, the suspended interracial marriage, and the status of *Moriaen* as Perceval's nephew, whose life story repeats that of Perceval's half-brother Feirfiz (who would in turn be half-brother to *Moriaen*'s Acglovael), all point to strong affinities with Wolfram's *Parzival*. Through these multiple sources and analogues, *Moriaen* grafts and recirculates stories of racial conflict and convergence for medieval audiences, installing an African presence within the matter of Britain.<sup>54</sup> Within *Moriaen*, many of the episodes involving the black knight are generic to chivalric romance, and one might argue that the ele-

ment of color is the superficial equivalent of introducing a “red” knight or a “green” knight. Yet racial identity here is suffused through a network of kin relations and mutual dependencies, and the crowning episode celebrates a public marriage that legitimates, and even glamorizes, intercultural, interracial relations, even as it marks the distance that separates European knight-hood from a foreign sphere of black sovereignty.

Sharon Kinoshita has shown how sexual exchange mediates racial relations in the *Song of Roland*, and both *Parzival* and *Moriaen* represent cultural encounters through black-white marriage and hybrid offspring.<sup>55</sup> *Mandeville's Travels* (ca. 1360) initiates a tradition of vernacular ethnography where femininity and personal beauty become touchstones of difference. Mandeville notes that in Chaldea “ben faire men and they gon full nobely arrayed,” but “the wommen ben right foule and evyll arrayed, and thei gon all bare fote and clothed in evyll garnementes. . . . thei han gret here and long, hanginge aboute here schuldres. And thei ben blake wommen, foule and hidouse; and treuly as foule as they ben als evele they ben.”<sup>56</sup> A German version of *Mandeville* illustrates “Der Mornlanndt” (the land of the Moors) with a dark-pigmented woman wearing an Arabic or “Saracen” headdress, underscoring the visual link of color and race.<sup>57</sup> As Linda Lomperis points out, difference in *Mandeville* is by no means always negatively charged, as the narrator demonstrates when he describes the “men of Nubye [who] ben Cristen but they ben blake as the Mowres for the gret hete of the sonne”:

that [blackness] thai hald a grete bewtee, and ay the blakker thai er the fairer tham think tham. And thai say that, and [if] thai schuld paynt ane aungell and a fende, thai wald paynt the aungell black and the fende qwhite. And if thaim think tham nocht black ynough when thai er borne, thai use certayne medecynes for to make tham black withall.<sup>58</sup>

*Mandeville's* portrayal of blackness turns the popular conversion topos on its head, since the reversal here consists not in a magical epidermal transmutation, but in a professed inversion of values: black remains black, but in the particular environment constructed by *Mandeville* it signifies beauty. The effect of the passage is not simply to trigger endless, untethered binaries, but on the contrary, to impress readers with the linkage of difference to specific material circumstances. This view of color and race as rooted in cultural experience is not unique or perhaps even eccentric in *Mandeville*:

Bishop Jacques de Vitry, in his *History of the East* (thirteenth century), says that “though we westerners think black Ethiopians base, whoever is blacker among them is judged to be more handsome in their opinion.”<sup>59</sup>

*Black* and *white* as terms of racial identity and difference seem often to find their most compelling expression in erotic or at least gendered formulas. In the Greek Alexander romance, Queen Candace of Meroë writes to Alexander and enjoins (echoing Belcane in *Parzival*), “Do not think the worse of us for the color of our skin. We are purer in soul than the whitest of your people.”<sup>60</sup> The link of blackness with both beauty and inferiority does not carry over into the Latin (or subsequent vernacular) translations of the Greek romance, and the one surviving copy with illustrations represents Candace’s pigment as identical to Alexander’s.<sup>61</sup> The Queen of Sheba, who attempts to match wits with King Solomon, appears variously as black or white in both exegetical and visual traditions.<sup>62</sup> Interpretations of the story often imply that the clash of cultures (monotheism versus idolatry) will be resolved by erotic submission on the Queen’s part, although warnings against the seductive dangers of her pagan excess sometimes predominate. Both views, however, seem to incorporate race as a feature of her mystique (for good or ill), while other popular traditions (Jewish and Islamic) portray her darkness (or hairiness) as the brand of her exotic sexuality.<sup>63</sup> Finally, the bride in the Song of Songs, who sings “I am black but beautiful” (1:5), is sometimes represented as dark-skinned in late medieval illustrations, whether alone or in the embrace of her lord.<sup>64</sup>

The Song of Songs has been for several millennia and in many traditions one of the most assiduously glossed texts, partly because of its beauty, but mainly because its open sensuality seems at odds with spiritual meaning. The widespread, excited engagement with the Song of Songs in twelfth-century Europe illustrates how attempts to explain the text simultaneously afford an opportunity to articulate distinctive, often novel cultural interests. A diverse array of writers found the erotic imagery of the Song an ideal medium for expressing the intimacy, mutuality, and intensity of divine love, the interiority of the self and its capacity to love and be loved, to assert desire and to submit passively to the godhead. The commentary tradition, for all its profusion and its surprising turns, does not in general take much interest in the bride’s color. Origen, Augustine, and other early readers addressed her blackness, but in limited, ad hoc terms, and most high medieval exegetes followed suit. In recent book-length studies that elucidate medieval interest in the Song, E. Ann Matter and Anne Astell have virtually no occasion to address color or race.<sup>65</sup> In the last section of this essay, I’d like

to examine the color commentaries of the twelfth century, including those by two of its foremost intellectuals, Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux.

Bernard produced a celebrated sequence of eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs, apparently delivered live to his fellow monks and then polished for publication. Although by no means a systematic commentary on the biblical text, they nonetheless provide one of the most elaborate and stimulating interpretations of the book ever written. Though the bride declares “I am black but beautiful” in verse five, Bernard does not begin any sustained consideration of color until the twenty-fifth sermon.<sup>66</sup> Yet his interpretation, when it comes, shows Bernard to be an extraordinarily ingenious and compelling reader of black as *structural* difference. In his first move, he separates “color” and “form,” surface and essence, so that black may arbitrarily convey pleasure and appeal, as in the case of black gems or black eyes. The beauty of blackness, however, is always grounded in whiteness as the default category of perfection, as when “black locks above a pale face enhance its beauty and charm.”<sup>67</sup> Bernard’s results depend upon figures of displacement and inversion, like metaphor, irony, and allegory, and upon a stable sense of surface/depth contrast: in this scheme “black-skinned beauty” is an oxymoron, where external, superficial, “false” appearance betokens inner, substantive, “true” reality. Such understandings apply solely to “true” Christians, whose blackness arises through the denigration of the world.

Bernard’s dazzling performance brings all its pressure to bear on the tiny conjunction *but* (“sed”): in converting it to *and*, Bernard insists on the equation “black *and* beautiful,” and so works to persuade his readers of the counterintuitive proposition that black and white are the same (53). Such a collapse of meaning requires that color be merely “outward appearance,” a blemish or “kind of blackness” that marks “those who seem discolored as by the sun’s heat through the lowliness of a penitential life, through zeal for charity” (54). Bernard’s boldest assertion is that Christ himself was “obviously black”; he has Christ declare, addressing all Christians, “I am black but beautiful, sons of Jerusalem” (56). Christ bears “the stigma of blackness” as a result of human sin, but also because of his humility and abjection, which furnish the model and incentive for all believers to acknowledge their blackness. Bernard’s construal of how black signifies difference corresponds to his handling of the bride’s sexuality: his sermons directly address the sensuality of the biblical account and the explicitly sensual excitement aroused by the bride’s body and her union with the bridegroom. He immediately displaces physical desire, however, through the

gender-bending strategies that Caroline Walker Bynum has explored so astutely: the fetishized breasts of the bride become the succoring paps of the abbot-as-mother, the teats that are longed for by all the monks under his or her authority.<sup>68</sup> The force and appeal of Bernard's reading lie in his reconfiguration of sexual desire as a supreme fiction, and in his capacity to free up this fantasy for spiritual use.

Blackness, though a less important trope for Bernard than Eros, likewise inhabits the abstracted domain of spiritual meaning through a similar sequence of reversals, overlays, and cancellations. The contours of Bernard's technique perhaps take shape more clearly in the insistent iterations of his successors. Thomas the Cistercian, for example, marshals a throng of antitheses demonstrating how the bride may be black but beautiful: "she is black in penance, beautiful in obedience; black in humility, beautiful in charity . . . black in the discharge of religious duties, beautiful in the sincerity of contemplation; black in the flesh, beautiful in spirit; black in active life, beautiful in contemplative."<sup>69</sup> Phillip of Harveng asserts that souls who desire eternal beauty "call themselves black and abject in a humble voice."<sup>70</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx declares that "Our lord himself wished to put a certain blackness on display, though he had underneath the blackness a vast beauty."<sup>71</sup> In another passage, Phillip has the soul repeatedly cry out, "I am black" [sum nigra, sum nigra], and Thomas baldly asserts "Ipse Christus niger fuit" [Christ himself was a black man].<sup>72</sup> This chorus of voices claiming a black identity points to the success of Bernard's figures of reversal, at least within a distinctive strain of cloistral spirituality; "blackness" allows the soul to acknowledge and internalize an aspect of self-loathing as a means of achieving wholeness. Within this therapeutic practice, the intensified use of "niger" strangely and distantly parallels contemporary African-American street talk, now commodified in commercial rap and film. In these contexts, the vernacular term "nigga" has undergone a structural inversion, disarming it as a term of abuse and enabling it to be claimed as an expression of solidarity. The glaring difference is that in the cloister there was no community of black speakers, no organic intellectuals, no politics of racial interaction or solidarity. Yet, if among medieval writers blackness functions solely in an allegorical framework, its capacity to articulate abjection in ways that seem new and powerful to the twelfth century signals some wider change in how color signifies.

Bernard's energetic troping aims to have the imaginative power of black skin participate in the sense of interiority that characteristically unfolds in the twelfth century.<sup>73</sup> The cultivation of self-consciousness often posited

a core identity that might be completely at odds with external appearances. In Bernard's sermons, the emphasis on interiority emerges perhaps most conspicuously in the demands that the texts make upon listeners and readers, asking them to tease out the contradictions and figural challenges he embeds in black and white. Such textualizing of skin pigment, while it no doubt reflects a heightened association of color and difference (especially when compared to earlier commentaries on the Song of Songs), ultimately dematerializes blackness. Allegorical readings, premised as they are on the dismissal or absorption of exteriority, segregate color from social, political, or economic circumstances, and in this way they stop short of "racializing" such difference.

Having postulated this highly "textualized" representation of race in Song of Songs commentaries, I would like to contrast it with the reading of the bride's blackness offered by one of Bernard's great antagonists, Peter Abelard.<sup>74</sup> Abelard never wrote a formal, systematic, or sustained commentary on the Song of Songs. The concentrated remarks in his second letter to Heloise (the fourth letter in the correspondence) seem to have been set off by Heloise's quibble about titles and precedence. Abelard had addressed his earlier letter "To Heloise, his dearly beloved sister in Christ, [from] Abelard her brother in Christ," thereby reversing female-male hierarchies and implicitly denying their history as lovers and wedded spouses. Though ostensibly Abelard, like Bernard, speaks as a teacher or figure of authority in these letters, offering spiritual advice and pragmatic counsel to Heloise as prioress, the informal genre of letter writing and the repeated recollection of physical and spiritual intimacy between the correspondents produce a distinctive personal tone and individualized voice. Abelard addresses this letter "To the bride of Christ, [from] Christ's servant," and the responses he improvises more resemble arguments and associations provoked by newly convergent cultural issues than they do an exegetical treatise.

Abelard justifies his titles for Heloise by accentuating the simultaneous humility and exaltation encompassed in her vows to Christ as a nun. The "coarse black clothing" of her habit signals abjection, but as the wife of the Lord (and not Abelard) she enjoys the highest possible position.<sup>75</sup> Heloise recalls the "bride in Canticles, an Ethiopian (such as the one Moses took as a wife), [who] rejoices in the glory of her special position and says, 'I am black but lovely, daughters of Jerusalem; therefore the king has loved me and brought me into his chamber. . . . Take no notice of my darkness, because the sun has discoloured me.'" Abelard immediately takes on the attraction/revulsion dyad embodied by the bride:

The Ethiopian woman is black in the outer part of her flesh and as regards exterior appearance looks less lovely than other women; yet she is not unlike them within, but in several respects she is whiter and lovelier, in her bones, for instance, or her teeth. . . . And so she is black without but lovely within; for she is blackened outside in the flesh because in this life she suffers bodily affliction. . . . As prosperity is marked by white, so adversity may properly be indicated by black, and she is white within in her bones because her soul is strong. (138–39)

Much of this resembles traditional and contemporary explication of the Song of Songs, assimilating blackness to the tribulations of the saints, the spiritual exile of life on earth, the contemplative life, the clash of external and internal realities. Abelard's interpretation stands apart through his insistence upon seeing the bride concretely, and upon imagining the matrix of eroticism, abjection, and blackness as voyeuristically experiential:

she keeps herself humble and abject in this life so that she may be exalted in the next. . . . the heavenly love of the bridegroom humbles her in this way, or torments her with tribulations lest prosperity lifts her up. He changes her colour, that is, he makes her different from other women. . . . And she did well to say that, because she is black, as we said, and lovely, she is chosen and taken into the king's bedchamber, that is, to that secret place of peace and contemplation, and into the bed, of which she says elsewhere, "Night after night on my bed I have sought my true love." Indeed the disfigurement of her blackness makes her choose what is hidden rather than open, what is secret and not known to all, and any such wife desires private, not public delights with her husband, and would rather be known in bed than seen at table. Moreover it often happens that the flesh of black women is all the softer to touch though it is less attractive to look at, and for this reason the pleasure they give is greater and more suitable for private than for public enjoyment, and their husbands take them into a bedroom to enjoy them rather than parade them before the world. (139–40)

Abelard here fetishizes blackness as a decisive ingredient of desire, he fantasizes about its role in asymmetrical power relations between women

and men, and he sexualizes knowledge as the outcome not of study or office but as intimate contact within a secret, private space. To so characterize these passages may seem to take them out of context, but their interpolation into a personal letter (as opposed to a sermon or academic tract) endows them with no formal framework or integrated interpretive meaning. In fact, the imaginative delight in coercing the union of public and private, outer and inner, taboo and erotic, pleasure and abjection corresponds uncannily to the peculiar scenes and themes that color the *Letters*: Heloise's use of the latest meditational techniques to intensify the remembered joy of love-making, Abelard's "chastening" inventory of sexual transgressions with and against Heloise (copulating furtively in a corner of the refectory at Argenteuil, battering her into sexual submission in her uncle's residence), his sensational exaltation of his own castration. All of these episodes traffic in the sublime and the abject, the desired-because-taboo and the unattainable-and-therefore-desired. What is forbidden or beyond the pale becomes for that very reason a spur to desire. A reverie on the sexuality of black women, compounding the exotic and the erotic, exclusion and possession, abjection and idealization, offers a compelling variation on these established themes in the *Letters*.<sup>76</sup> The cartographic and geopolitical traditions that describe distance and enforce physical separation, setting Europe against Ethiopia, put the black woman outside the bounds of the ordinary and make her all the more desirable.

Readers familiar with Abelard's *History of My Misfortunes*, or with his poetry, his philosophical dialogues, or even his theological arguments, may well regard him as sufficiently ingenious, even kinky, to have invented this erotic meditation on black skin. But to write the passage off as a personal, eccentric fetish evades the recognition that all fantasies, including those encompassing sexual longing and exotic difference, are culturally grounded: though Abelard seems here to articulate an image of desire that has no obvious precedents or analogues, its power or fundamental intelligibility depend upon pervasive understandings of Same and Other filtered through color difference. *Black* and *white* as terms of racial difference may have been less stable in the twelfth century than they have been in the bitterly contested discourses of the last centuries. Nonetheless, color is emphatically the ground on which Abelard traces out cultural difference in this instance. Our own sense of how to read Abelard must depend not only on his own practice and its contexts, but also upon the peculiar location in history that we occupy in the West, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with an intensifying consciousness of regional, national, and global



identities. Given the crucial role that racial relations, and in particular the assignment of identities based upon color, have come to play in the current world order, it seems to me not simply appropriate but imperative to recognize and unpack the peculiar features of race within a complex text such as Abelard's *Letter* to Heloise.

It may seem tendentious to hang the history of race or of African-European relations on a sexual fantasy. Yet fantasies—just because they depend so fully on vague associations and seem so unmotivated—provide a key to distinctive drives at the heart of cultures: their force and intelligibility rely upon pervasive, well-established connections that don't require, and frequently resist, conscious explanation. Abelard's representation of the black woman both draws upon and appeals to such connections; the coherence and explicitness of its components, and its place within one of the controlling interpretive frameworks of medieval scriptural exegesis, suggest that however far his riff is personal, it inevitably possesses highly developed public and political dimensions as well. Abelard's remarks triangulate structures of religious and sexual identity with geopolitical realities; they actualize racial discourse insofar as they participate in a series of cultural registers that extend far beyond the cloister, complicating interiority through its integration with external horizons and material borders. Abelard's casual allusion to Moses's Ethiopian wife (a "Cushite"; Numbers 12:1) anticipates the visualization of her blackness in manuscript illumination, just as his emphasis on the bride's skin also finds its visual counterpart.<sup>77</sup> Abelard's attentiveness to color as a fixed condition of identity rests upon assumptions about race that are similar to (and less crude than) those of Albert the Great, who offered a scientific judgment that "because black women are hotter and dark in the extreme, they are sweetest for copulation, as the lechers say."<sup>78</sup> This conviction of race's categorical and operative reality underwrites Abelard's use of it as a consequential trope of difference. In his interpretation, the "black outside" of religious habits functions as a symbol whose meaning depends on the referential, material reality of epidermal difference: unlike the Cistercian readings of the Song, which turn pigment into a paradoxical abstraction, Abelard demands that his readers think intensely about the texture, the color, and the feel of black skin.

I have assembled this welter of examples, drawn from several media produced in Europe across three centuries, in hopes of showing that medieval difference exists, that medieval racial discourses differ among themselves, and that medieval race differs from contemporary expectations and models.

The descriptors of identities medieval people used to make a difference between groups respond to race-oriented interrogations in ways that affirm the cross-cultural usefulness and stability of the category, at the same time that they prove the need for “race” to be continuously revised under pressure of new (or old) evidence. The difference the Middle Ages makes is therefore not simply a matter of antiquarian interest, objective inquiry, or predictable origins, but a process entangled in dynamic, powerful systems of meaning, operating at once in symbolic and social spheres. For living constituencies, forcing a history upon race, getting archival, threatens to strip it of its visceral, experiential purchase; for specialists, “race-ing” the Middle Ages smacks of “presentism,” empowering the preoccupations and concerns of the early twenty-first century to distort the self-contained truth of the past.<sup>79</sup> 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. Whatever the pitfalls of such a hybrid enterprise, it offers the promise of placing medieval studies at a rich and contested convergence point within modern intellectual and academic cultures, of making it a productive source for both models and minute particulars in the analysis of difference, and of creating a venue in which the shaping of identities and the motives of scholarship claim urgent notice.



## Notes

I would like to thank Michael Awkward for comments and reactions to my original presentation and for responses to the present project. Colleagues and friends at the University of Rochester—Jeffrey Tucker, Dana Symons, Juliet Sloger, Joyce Middleton, John Michael, and Bette London—have helped me rethink the arguments presented here through general conversation and specific comments on earlier drafts. Sarah Beckwith has supported the special issue from its beginnings, and she offered trenchant comments on the present essay, of which I have tried to take full advantage. I’m deeply grateful for the energetic engagement and serene patience of Michael Cornett, the Managing Editor of *JMEMS*.

- 1 The session was organized by Larry Scanlon of Rutgers University and was part of a series of panels on medieval multiculturalism. Michael Awkward has incorporated parts of his presentation at that panel into “Chocolate City,” in *Scenes of Instruction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 85–126. The present essay reproduces examples and argument from that response, as well as from a separate presentation, “The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race as Visual Identity,” delivered

- at the Rockefeller Conference on Race and Gender, Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender and Women's Studies, University of Rochester, 1996.
- 2 John Michael treats this term in the context of cultural and political criticism, and particularly in terms of issues of race, in "Publicity: Black Intellectuals as Inorganic Representatives," in *Anxious Intellectuals: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 23–43. Though medieval studies makes up no part of his concern, Michael's arguments and evidence provide stimulating parallels to the questions discussed here.
  - 3 In emphasizing the public, visual, nondiscursive features of Awkward's appearance at Kalamazoo, I recognize the danger of reducing his presentation to a kind of tokenism. Yet this seems to me a structurally inescapable feature of the event: the decision to invite a distinguished black scholar actively engaged in race studies more or less precluded asking any of the thousands of medievalists who regularly attend the Kalamazoo conference to speak. To miss this obvious index or "sign" of the differences that mark the practice of historical scholarship would have been a misprison in the event, and a lost opportunity in its aftermath. In assigning priority to its spectacular (as opposed to intellectual or academic) elements, I hope to use this signal encounter as a spur to further dialogue and engagement with medieval race studies.
  - 4 For a valuable historical survey, see Paul H. D. Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985), which includes one hundred black-and-white plates. Though the customary designation of this subject is "The Adoration," "Epiphany" seems more appropriate to the present treatment.
  - 5 Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat, *L'Image du Noir dans l'art occidental*, Part 2, *Des premiers siècles chrétiens aux "grandes découvertes,"* vol. 2, *Les Africains dans l'ordonnance chrétienne du monde (XIVe–XVIIe siècle)* (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1976), 161–86 ("L'Africain transposé"), includes a number of color plates that complement Kaplan's presentation. Hereafter in the notes this volume of the multivolume work is cited simply as *L'Image du Noir*.
  - 6 The evidence gathered by Devisse and Mollat possesses such substance and richness that it has to some degree made their images canonical, and it seems crucial (particularly in an inquiry about difference) to recognize the diversity and range of images produced in Europe. Joos van Cleve (d. 1540) painted a long sequence of Epiphanies, and these, as well as others by members of his studio, his relatives, and imitators, demonstrate both a consistency of iconography and a gamut of possible physical and cultural identities for Africans. See Max J. Friedländer, *Joos van Cleve, Jan Provost, Joachim Patenier*, 2 vols., *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. 9, parts 1–2 (Leyden: Sijthoff; Brussels: La Connaissance, 1972–73), pt. 1, plates 14, 17, 19, 20, 49, 50, 130. Friedländer's plates and catalogues in this series provide indispensable evidence for the permutations of race within a European milieu expressly defined by time and space. Moreover, still further racial meanings inherent in this subject become visible when other frameworks of analysis are applied. Ruth Mellinkoff, for example, reproduces a series of lesser-known Epiphanies featuring an African magus, arguing for an asymmetrical racial dynamic between blackness and Jewishness, with the virtual disappearance of Joseph in these paintings demonstrating anti-Judaic sentiment. See Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle*

- Ages*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), vol. 2, plates XI.19–26, and 1:224–25 for commentary.
- 7 Mostaert, *Portrait of a Moor* (early sixteenth century), in Friedländer, *Joos van Cleve, Jan Provost, Joachim Patenier*, pt. 2, plate 30; Pisanello, drawing of the head of a Moor (before 1450), in Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plate 121; and for Dürer's much-reproduced *Katharina* (early sixteenth century), see Devisse and Mollat, plate 263. Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), discusses later portraits in her chapter "An Object in the Midst of Other Objects: Race, Gender, Material Culture," 211–53. The breadth of Devisse and Mollat's enterprise implies both the stability of a single prototype—"le noir," "the black"—and the unchanging, self-evident identity of the African outside Africa.
  - 8 Florentine renderings of the black magus represent an exception to the usual convention of elaborate and elegant dress, perhaps because of the significant presence (and low status) of African bondsmen in the city. See Kaplan, *Black Magus*, 117–18.
  - 9 Beginning with the church fathers, Christian exegetes understood the Epiphany in terms of the Church's universal claims, and interpreted blacks as the limit case of human culture. Augustine, for example, declared that the truth of Christianity had been revealed "all the way, even to the Ethiopians, the remotest and blackest of peoples" (*PL* 36:909). See Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 204 and nn.; Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, 161–86, and throughout; and Kaplan, *Rise of the Black Magus*, 22 ff. and nn.
  - 10 This blanket statement rhetorically neglects recent historically and theoretically informed work on race in the Middle Ages; see for example the work by Steven F. Kruger, Geraldine Heng, and others cited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "On Saracen Enjoyment" below, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 137–38 nn. 10–16; and in particular the essays gathered by Cohen in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
  - 11 On St. Maurice, see Kaplan, *Rise of the Black Magus*, 10, 67–78.
  - 12 Memling, *Last Judgment* (about 1473), Danzig/Gdańsk, Muzeum Narodowe. See Hans Belting and Christiane Kruse, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes: Das erste Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1994), plates 204, 205 (in color, with fine detail); see also Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plates 240–43. For other Africans painted by Memling, see Devisse and Mollat, plates 140, 145, 158–64 and accompanying discussion.
  - 13 Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), esp. 63–87. This volume is a revision and expansion of Snowden's contribution to Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir dans l'art occidental*, vol. 1, *Des Pharaons à la chute de l'empire romain* (Paris: Bibliothèque des Arts, 1978). Snowden's publications are encyclopedically learned and indispensable for the study of race in the ancient world. Nonetheless, I disagree fundamentally with his central thesis concerning the absence of color prejudice (and effectively of race) and wish to use this divergence as a means of defining race before modern times.
  - 14 All of these terms, and more, survive in the Latin lexicon and occur in learned,

- popular, and poetic texts; the multiplicity, nuance, and structural integration of such descriptors tells against their being merely “informational.”
- 15 Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, figs. 12a, b, and c.
  - 16 For other double-faced, color-contrast vessels, see Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, figs. 13, 14, 16, 93; for African/Negroid representations on vessels, figs. 27–35, 57, 59, etc.; and Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice*, fig. 27a; for dancers, see *Blacks in Antiquity*, figs. 2, 102, 104; acrobats and jugglers, figs. 51, 101, 107; musician or singer, fig. 60; athletes, figs. 44, 49, 50, 52, 63, 106.
  - 17 See Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” introduction to the special issue “Race, Writing, and Difference,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 1–20, with quotation at 5.
  - 18 Geographers, encyclopedists, cartographers, and other intellectuals in the Middle Ages accepted a “racial” division of the world, traced from the three sons of Noah and reflected in the tripartite Continental division (reproduced in T/O maps) of Africa, Asia, and Europe. See Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963); and Benjamin Braude, “The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 103–42. In the high Middle Ages direct contact in metropolitan and institutional centers produced vivid, often stereotypical understandings of racial/national difference, as well as conventional, often rule-bound definitions of identities. See, for example, Pearl Kibre, *The Nations in the Mediaeval Universities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy, 1948).
  - 19 For a discussion of charter-making, history-writing, language, and national self-consciousness, see Thomas Hahn, “Early Middle English,” *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 61–91, with citations provided there. See also Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989); Marjorie Chibnall, *Anglo-Norman England, 1066–1166* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and Robert M. Stein, “Making History English: Cultural Identity and Historical Explanation in William of Malmesbury and Layamon’s *Brut*,” in *Text and Territory*, ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 97–115.
  - 20 Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), reviews Orderic’s life and provides citations from his *Ecclesiastical History*.
  - 21 On *murdrum* and the associated fines, see Chibnall, *Anglo-Norman England*, 167; on mixed populations, see *The Course of the Exchequer, by Richard, Son of Nigel*, ed. Charles Johnson (London: Nelson, 1950), 52–54 (double paginated, Latin and English).
  - 22 Chibnall, *Anglo-Norman England*, for example, at 208, 211.
  - 23 On early “racial” categories in Britain, see Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
  - 24 My comments here rely largely on Robert Bartlett’s ground-breaking study (on Gerald and on medieval ethnography), *Gerald of Wales, 1146–1223* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), which provides a full bibliography of Gerald’s writings. See also Bartlett’s

- essay below, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 39–56; and Monika Otter, "Quicksands: Gerald of Wales on Reading," *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century English Historical Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 129–55.
- 25 For a recent discussion with bibliography, see Otter, "Gaainable Tere: Foundations, Conquests, and Symbolic Appropriations of Space and Time," *Inventiones*, 59–92.
  - 26 On Geoffrey's racial thought and its later ramifications, see Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History* (Montreal: Harvest House; Hanover, N.H.: University of New England Press, 1982). For the currency and reappropriation of these terms of race in the early modern period, see Christopher Hill, "The Norman Yoke," in *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr*, ed. John Saville (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954), 11–66. Michael Banton, in *The Idea of Race* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), connects the "racialization of the West" specifically with the reinvigoration of the terms *Britons*, *Saxons*, and *Normans* by nineteenth-century British writers. Stephanie L. Barczewski, in *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), discusses in passing the continuity and distortion of the medieval categories of race.
  - 27 On the status of "race" as a category of social and political analysis and its importance for Rwandan conflict, see Leo Kuper, "Race Structure in the Social Consciousness," *Race and Social Difference: Selected Readings*, ed. Paul Baxter and Basil Sansom (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 77–97; and Kuper, "Theories of Revolution and Race Relations," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (1971): 87–107. On pre- and postcolonial components of racial difference in Rwanda, see Jean Sayinzoga, "Les réfugiés rwandais: quelques repères historique et réflexions sociopolitiques," *Genève-Afrique* 20 (1982): 49–72; and on war among black Africans as fratricide, Jean-Pierre Chrétien, "Les fratricides légitimes (Burundi et Rwanda)," *Esprit* 44 (1976): 822–34.
  - 28 Chrétien's reassessment of the situation in Rwanda on the eve of the genocide traces out the terms of the racial conflict: "La crise politique rwandaise," *Genève-Afrique* 30 (1992): 121–40.
  - 29 Peter Uvin, "Prejudice, Crisis, and Genocide in Rwanda," *African Studies Review* 40 (1997): 91–115; and see Gaetan Feltz's review of four books (in French) published since 1994: "La colonisation belge sur l'œil inquisiteur: des événements du Rwanda, du Burundi, et du Congo/Zaire," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 85 (1998): 43–63.
  - 30 Peter Hudis, "Bosnia in the Historic Mirror: A Commentary," *The Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 24 (1996): 335–47. For the backgrounds of racial identity and ethnic separatism dating back to the nineteenth century, see Srdjan Trifkovic, "The First Yugoslavia and Origins of Croatian Separatism," *East European Quarterly* 26 (1992): 345–70; and on racial antagonisms under Soviet rule, Yeshayahu Jelinek, "Nationalities and Minorities in the Independent State of Croatia," *Nationalities Papers* 8 (1980): 195–210.

- 31 Garth Myers, Thomas Klak, and Timothy Koehl argue that reports in the West of the warfare in Rwanda and in Bosnia-Herzegovina often emphasized conflicting racial institutions and practices; in this way, not only did representation in news and other media define “race” in Africa and the Balkans, but it did so through preexisting Western preconceptions. See “The Inscription of Difference: News Coverage of the Conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia,” *Political Geography* 15 (1996): 21–46. John Bale, “Capturing ‘The African’ Body? Visual Images and ‘Imaginative Sports,’” *Journal of Sport History* 25 (1998): 234–51, makes a similar argument, suggesting that the West’s photographic record of Africa established an iconography that contributed to the “racialization” of Tutsis and Hutus.
- 32 Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 1–5, 176–218; and Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice*, 63–108. Snowden argues that descriptive accounts of Africans remain ethnographically neutral, unaffected by the negative charge widely associated with blackness.
- 33 On the prevalence of this stereotype in the classical world, see Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 1–7, esp. 5, and 196–215 and nn. Both the Greek and Latin citations and Jeremiah’s rhetorical question, “Si mutare potest Aethiops pellem suam?” (Vulgate) imply whiteness as a positive norm and blackness as an irremediable deficiency or denigration. Though such a cliché seems harmless or superficial, it’s difficult to imagine its circulation “without prejudice.”
- 34 Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk’s essay in the present collection, “Black Servant, Black Demon: Color Ideology in the Ashburnham Pentateuch,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 57–77, offers a detailed and persuasive account of the relations of color and race in an early Christian context parallel to those discussed by Snowden.
- 35 See Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 1–15 and throughout; and more recently, James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 45–81. On medieval continuations, see J. B. Harley and David Woodward, *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, *The History of Cartography*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), which includes full discussion, many reproductions, and full bibliographical citations.
- 36 For Vesconte, see Devisse and Mollat, *L’Image du Noir*, plate 90; and P. D. A. Harvey, *Medieval Maps* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), plate 27; for the 1375 Catalan chart, Devisse and Mollat, plates 93–94; for Viladestes, Devisse and Mollat, plate 95; for the Borgia *mappamundi*, Harvey, plate 53; and Harley and Woodward, *Cartography*, plate 18.34 (detail); for the Genoese map, Devisse and Mollat, plates 129–31; and Harley and Woodward, 377 n. 61; for the Portuguese chart, Devisse and Mollat, plates 128, 132; and for the Homem atlas, Harley and Woodward, 18.36. Earlier world maps such as the Ebstorf, Hereford, and Aslake present African peoples, but without darkened complexions. For transcriptions of legends, some of which offer climactic descriptions of black Africans, see Konrad Miller, *Die ältesten Weltkarten*, vol. 3, *Die kleineren Weltkarten* (Stuttgart, 1895); and Marcel Destombes, *Mappemondes, A.D. 1200–1500: Catalogue préparé par la Commission des Cartes Anciennes de l’Union Géographique Internationale* (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1964). As

these sources and their plates make clear, the maps listed here are merely a sampling of many more that survive.

- 37 See Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plate 1, for Balthasar (before 1395), reproduced also in plate 5; plate 54 (ca. 1354) labels the arms of the black king "Melchior"; plate 1 also reproduces an armorial of a black St. Christopher (after 1390), and the arms of the bishop of Freising (1316), with a stylized, crowned black head. A further example of the bishop's arms may be found in plate 2. For the king of Aragon's arms, see plate 6 (before 1395). All examples are German and French.
- 38 For a "universal" armorial, see *ibid.*, plate 7. Some of the heads are hybrids (attaching for example, asses' ears), endowing the gallery with resemblances to encyclopedic and ethnographic illustrations of strange races. For Prester John, see plate 49. The Armorial of Konrad of Grünenberg (ca. 1480), one of the most elaborate of surviving examples, illustrates Prester John and his disciples as having African features (in terms of hair, nose, lips) but only slightly darker skin pigment than "white" figures. For the Great Khan and the emperor, see plates 50, 51 (ca. 1465).
- 39 For the arms of the kings of Ybernia, Possen, and Kanoppat, and the emperor of Argye, see *ibid.*, plates 52, 53, 60, 57. A manuscript of the French romance of Godfrey shows a leading Saracen knight holding a shield on which are imprinted three black African heads, while eight more decorate his horse trappings (Devisse and Mollat, plate 77, in color). The French prose Alexander romance in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 264 (which also contains the *Travels* of Marco Polo) shows one of the knights in the entourage of Alexander's opponent Amiral bearing a shield with three dark-faced, curly-haired heads, with four more such heads on the horse trappings (fol. 90v); in a subsequent scene (fol. 95v), Alexander defeats this opponent, whose shield and horse visually confirm his identity. In the same manuscript (fol. 107r), Alexander defeats the Duke of Marchyse, who is accompanied by a knight holding a shield with three black heads (while another fallen knight may bear similar arms). See M. R. James, *The Romance of Alexander: A ColloTYPE Facsimile of MS Bodley 264* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).
- 40 *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. G. V. Smithers, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), lines 4894–906, 4963–66, hereafter cited in the text by line numbers. I have slightly modernized the orthography. Smithers notes that the text differs from its known sources in the first two passages I quote.
- 41 *Sowdone of Babylone*, in Alan Lupack, ed., *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute, 1990), lines 1004–6.
- 42 See Cohen's essay, "On Saracen Enjoyment," including its extensive citations. For *Yvain*, see the translation by Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), l. 5258; for Fouke, *Two Medieval Outlaws*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 181. On self-awareness and its connection to racial consciousness, see Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), which sets the terms for this discussion. For "universalist" arguments about African cultural presence in world culture throughout the Middle Ages, see the essays collected in *Golden Age of the Moor*, ed. Ivan Van Sertima (New Brunswick N.J.: Transaction,



- 1992), originally published in the *Journal of African Civilizations* 11 (1991). The association of blackness and abjection emerges in the occasional depiction of Christ's tormentors as distinctively African: see Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plate 69 (from the duc de Berry's *Très Belles Heures*, ca. 1380); and Simon Bening, *Crowning with Thorns* (ca. 1525–50), in Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, vol. 2, plate VI.25.
- 43 See Sharon Kinoshita's essay below, "Unruly Speech: Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 79–111; and on *Richard Coer de Lyon*, see Geraldine Heng, "The Romance of England: *Richard Coer de Lyon*, Saracens, Jews, and the Politics of Race and Nation," in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Cohen, 135–71; and Heng, "Cannibalism, the First Crusade, and the Genesis of Medieval Romance," *differences* 10 (1998): 98–174.
- 44 Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 196–207, discusses early Christian interpretations, the black-to-white trope, and their relation to the classical tradition; see also the analysis and further commentary by Verkerk, "Black Servant, Black Demon," below. A Moravian gospel collection of 1368 shows Matthew preaching and baptizing blacks, including a crowned ruler; the *Très Riches Heures* of the duc de Berry (1416) shows David proclaiming God's word to blacks and the apostles preaching to a black congregation; the Bible of Evert van Soudenbalch portrays the Ethiopian reading Isaiah in his cart (ca. 1465); and the *Hours of Charles V* (ca. 1519) presents a vivid portrayal of Phillip baptizing the Ethiopian. See Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plates 16, 105, 106, 135, 244.
- 45 *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Richard Morris, Early English Text Society 59 (London, 1875), lines 8072–8122. For a twelfth-century version, see *History of the Rood Tree*, in *History of the Holy Rood Tree*, ed. A. S. Napier, Early English Text Society 103 (London, 1894), 2–17. Here and in subsequent quotations I have slightly modernized orthography.
- 46 *The King of Tars*, ed. Judith Perryman, Heidelberg Middle English Texts (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1980). Perryman presents the version that survives in the Auchinleck Manuscript. Doris Shores, *The King of Tars: A New Edition* (diss., New York University, 1969), prints the copy in the Vernon Manuscript (with variants from the Simeon Manuscript) in parallel columns with Auchinleck. Differences between the versions are slight ("His colour that lodlich and blak was / Hit bicom feir . . . and cler withoute blame" [838–40]).
- 47 I mention these only as well-known and representative examples in different genres. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (New York: Norton, 1997); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987); *Africana*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).
- 48 *Romance of Fouke Fitz Waryn*, in Burgess, *Two Medieval Outlaws*, 162–63.
- 49 The black outsider's role as performer (duplicated by the impersonation of blackness in this episode) recalls the ancient (and modern) ascription of roles of musician, dancer, and athlete. For a visual counterpart, see the *Moorish Dancer* [Morris?] by Erasmus Grasser (ca. 1480), Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plate 204.
- 50 I quote from *Parzival by Wolfram von Eschenbach*, trans. Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage (New York: Vintage, 1961), 10–11, 18–19, 30–31, 383–431. For

- Wolfram's text I have consulted *Parzival Buch I–VI*, ed. Albert Leitzmann (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1961). For general commentary, see Andreas Mielke, *Nigra sum et formosa: Afrikanerinnen in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Stuttgart: Helfant, 1992).
- 51 I hope to take up the question of race in *Parzival* in a separate essay.
- 52 I quote from *Morien* [*sic*], trans. Jesse L. Weston (London: Nutt, 1901), providing page numbers in the text. For an edition and further bibliography, see Bart Besamusca, “The Influence of the *Lancelot en Prose* on the Middle Dutch *Moriaen*,” *Arturus Rex: Koning Artur en de Nederlanden; la matière de Bretagne et les anciens Pays-Bas*, vol. 2, *Acta Conventus Lovaniensis 1987*, ed. Werner Verbeke, Jozef Janssens, and Maurits Smeyers (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1991), 352–60. In “Arthurian Literature in the Medieval Low Countries: An Introduction,” Geert H. M. Claassens and David F. Johnson place *Moriaen* within the manuscript and cultural context of the Dutch Vulgate cycle; see *King Arthur in the Medieval Low Countries*, ed. Claassens and Johnson, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia Series 1, Studia 28* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2000), 9–10. In the same volume (“Narration and Textual Grammar in the *Moriaen*,” 125–34), Norris J. Lacy underscores the difficulties surrounding the interpretation of the text.
- 53 See Besamusca, “Influence of the *Lancelot en Prose*,” for evidence and arguments.
- 54 Despite surprised reactions *within* the text to the spectacle of blackness (*Moriaen* was “much gazed upon” in Arthur’s court [143], though it is not clear if this is because of his wondrous history or his color), the narrator’s comments make plain that readers or listeners are to find the romance conventionally pleasing. Another instance of a black African associated with the Round Table occurs in Pisanello’s portrayal of a group of knights in the ducal palace at Mantua (Devisse and Mollat, *L’Image du Noir*, plate 121 and n. 172).
- 55 Kinoshita, “Unruly Speech,” below.
- 56 *Mandeville’s Travels*, ed. P. Hamelius, Early English Text Society 153 (London: Oxford University Press, 1919), 101–2.
- 57 New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, MS 37, fol. 88v.
- 58 *The Buke of John Maundeuill*, ed. George F. Warner for the Roxburghe Club (Westminster, 1889), 29, 24. Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The “Travels” of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 102, discusses this passage; Higgins’s treatment of *Mandeville* and its sources and analogues is on the whole richly learned and illuminating. See Linda Lomperis below, “Medieval Travel Writing and the Question of Race,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 147–64, for a stimulating discussion of *Mandeville*’s ethnographic relativity.
- 59 “Nos autem nigros Aethiopes turpes reputamus, inter ipsos autem qui nigrior est, pulchrior ab ipsis iudicatur”; *Jacobi de Vitriaco . . . libri duo* (Hanover, 1611), quoted in Malcolm Letts, *Mandeville’s Travels: Texts and Translations*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), 1:33; quoted also in Warner, *Buke of John Maundeuill*, n. 58; and discussed as well by Higgins, *Writing East*, n. 58.
- 60 *The Alexander Romance*, trans. Ken Dowden, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 721. The

romance originated in the Hellenistic world, but was recopied throughout the Middle Ages.

- 61 See André Xyngopoulos, *Les miniatures du Roman d'Alexandre le Grand dans le codex de l'Institut hellénique de Venise*, Bibliothèque de l'Institut hellénique d'Études Byzantines et Post-Byzantines de Venise, vol. 2 (Athens: n.p., 1965), fol. 143v (text in Greek and French). "Candace" is the generic name for the female ruler of Ethiopia (Meroë, Nubia, the Sudan); most translations of Acts 18:27 ff. make the Ethiopian eunuch (whose conversion is discussed above) an official of Candace, though the Jerusalem Bible, for example, translates "the kandake, or Queen, of Ethiopia."
- 62 For representations of the Queen of Sheba, see Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plates 26 (1405; color), 45 (1411), 43 (1430), and 113 (1440), all of which show her as black. A sculpture at Chartres Cathedral (ca. 1220) shows her with a black attendant; see Kaplan, *Black Magus*, 10.
- 63 Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba's Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York: Garland, 1998), outlines some of the traditions concerning the Queen. Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), discusses both biblical and popular traditions. Bernard of Clairvaux associates the black bride of the Song of Songs with "a shaggy-haired likeness to Esau" (Sermon 28.2), and makes a specific comparison with "the Queen of the South" (Sermon 22.4); *On the Song of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 89, 17. Jacqueline Kelen, *Les Reines noires: Didon, Salomé, la Reine de Saba* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987), despite its promising title, has nothing to offer on this subject.
- 64 For the bride as black, see Devisse and Mollat, *L'Image du Noir*, plates 42 (ca. 1320) and 136 (ca. 1465; color); see also Mielke, *Nigra sum et formosa*, passim.
- 65 Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 196–205, offers an account of Origen and other early commentators; and see further the comments of Verkerk, "Black Servant, Black Demon," 66 and nn. Denys Turner provides an introduction to medieval readings as well as an anthology (mainly twelfth to fourteenth centuries) in *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Studies 156 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995). Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), provide a crucial basis for the generalizations that follow here.
- 66 Bernard cites the verse in Sermon 3, after paraphrasing Jeremiah's verse on the Ethiopian's change of skin, but at this point only promises a fuller treatment; see *On the Song of Songs I*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 17.
- 67 Bernard, Sermon 25, *On the Song of Songs II*, ed. Walsh, 51; hereafter citations of this sermon are given in the text.
- 68 See, for example, Sermon 23.2, *ibid.*, 27. On the figure of gender reversal, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing," *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 110–69.

- 69 “[Sponsa] itaque sic praeparetur sponso, ut nigra sit per poenitentiam, sed formosa per obedientiam; nigra per humilitatem, formosa per charitatem; nigra tentationum pugna, sed formosa virtutum constantia; nigra ministerio, sed formosa desiderio; nigra exercitio religionis, formosa sinceritate contemplationis; nigra in carnalibus, formosa in spiritualibus; nigra in activis, formosa in contemplativis” (*PL* 206:73).
- 70 “Nam cum fortiter et singulariter aeternam pulchritudinem ejus amant, se nigras et abjectas humili voce clamant” (*PL* 203:432).
- 71 “Ipse dominus noster voluit ostendere quamdem nigredinem; sed habuit sub illa nigredine magnam pulchritudinem” (*PL* 195:343).
- 72 Phillip, *PL* 203:432; Thomas, *PL* 206:73. My contention here, that scholars should interpret blackness in these monastic texts in terms of the complex and reciprocal relations between high intellectual culture and changing social realities, parallels (in both method and substance) the arguments offered by Houston A. Baker Jr. in *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 73 The contours and limits of high medieval interiority have been widely discussed and debated; for a classic overview, see Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in *Jesus as Mother*, 82–109.
- 74 M. T. Clanchy’s *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) offers a richly detailed and reliable portrayal; see esp. 149–72 and 249–60.
- 75 I quote from the translation by Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 138; further citations are given in the text. For the Latin text, see J. T. Muckle, C.S.B., “The Personal Letters between Abelard and Heloise,” *Mediaeval Studies* 15 (1953): 47–94; and 17 (1955): 240–81; the comments on the bride occur at 83–85.
- 76 Abelard’s fantasy may owe something to literary traditions. Martial contrasts a girl whiter than a swan, who pursues him, with the woman he desires: “sed quamdam volo nocte nigriorem / formica pice graculo cicada” [I seek a woman blacker than the night, than an ant, pitch, a crow, a cicada]; *Epigrams*, ed. Walter C. A. Ker, vol. 1 (London: Heinemann, 1919), 1.115 (102–3). Martial circulated among medieval readers and was at times a curriculum author; see R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 126, 423. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 3–5, discusses this epigram, along with passages of love poetry from Propertius and Ovid that allude to black skin.
- 77 For a rendition of Moses’s wife as black, see Devisse and Mollat, *L’Image du Noir*, plate 41 (ca. 1450); for the bride as black, see plates 42 and 136.
- 78 Albert, *Quaestiones super “De animalibus,”* ed. Ephrem Filthaut, vol. 12 of *Opera Omnia*, ed. Bernhard Geyer (Münster: Aschendorff, 1955), 271: “quia nigrae sunt calidiores et maxime fuscae, quae sunt dulcissimae ad supponendum, ut dicunt leccatores.” See Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), who quotes this passage (163–64) and notes that the “language of skin colors in the Middle Ages has not been seriously studied, so it is difficult to evaluate the sense of this passage in relation to modern concepts of ‘race.’ Certainly more is involved here than relative lightness and darkness” (n. 165).
- 79 Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker discuss the issues surrounding the historical

study of race in their introduction to *Woman, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–14. On the power of race in historical and cultural analysis, see *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1992). Kathleen Biddick has discussed “presentism” (and “pastism”) in relation to medieval studies in *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 83–89.

