Editor's Introduction

Race-ing the dragon: the Middle Ages, race and trippin' into the future

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I can trace my interest in chivalry and the Middle Ages to a dream I had when I was 5 years old. In a cartoon world with verdant green grass and a brilliant pink sky, I, dressed in glittering armor, chased down a giant green dragon. We ran past a gray stone castle reminiscent of those in *Mario Brothers* and *He-Man*. The brilliant colors are what I recall most about the dream, and why, I believe, the dream has remained firmly lodged in my memory. What I know now did not occur to me then: that color of a different sort meant that I should not have had that dream. Or, at the very least, that I should have dismissed the childhood dream as nothing more than exactly that. Little black boys from Philadelphia are not supposed to concern themselves with knights and ladies.

Years later, when I was in graduate school, a visiting prospective student looked me up and down and asked, 'You're a medievalist?' I knew what this fellow person of color meant. I had apparently turned my back on African-American literature and culture. I was doing myself, my culture and people of color everywhere a grave disservice by working exclusively on dead white men. After all, how could the literature of the English Middle Ages encompass anything else? My presence evoked the same reactions as might E.F. Kitchen's photo of Aaron Palomides of Buckminster on the cover of this volume: I was out of time and out of place. My body meant that I was in the wrong attire chasing the wrong

foe. I was clearly confused, in the same way some might consider Aaron Lloyd, a Minnesota software engineer who becomes Aaron Palomides during Society for Creative Anachronism events, confused (Kitchen, 2010, 63, 92).

Blackness in revered figures in the English and European Middle Ages takes several forms, and it usually resists positive connotations. Black knights – that is, knights in black – appear throughout the world of romance. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Roman de Perceval*, Perceval defeats a pathetic black knight, also known as the Knight of the Tomb, who lives in a tomb and, to defend his lady love, battles every knight who happens by (Chrétien de Troyes, 1990). As late as the sixteenth century, in an Elizabethan prose romance titled *Tom a Lincoln, the Red Rose Knight*, the Black Knight is the son of Tom, the protagonist also known as the Red Rose Knight, and his wife Anglitora. When Anglitora cheats on Tom and murders him, Tom's spirit comes to the Black Knight. The Black Knight avenges his father by murdering his mother (Johnson, 1705; Spence, 1913, 356–358). This iteration of the Black Knight is also a paragon of loss. *Ywain and Gawain* features a foe who is called forth by enchantment when water is cast upon a stone. The knight is not black *per se*, but his approach is signaled by stormy weather that 'wex than wonder-blak' (Braswell, 1995, 369). The second time the same enchantment is activated – though this time the first knight has been replaced by our hero Ywain – the weather is described as 'wikked' (1293). Even when the black knight is not an antagonist, the association between blackness and evil stands. In Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, the blackness of the 'Black Knight' conveys the profundity of his loss and mourning (Chaucer, 1987). The blackness of one of the three magi, also known as kings or wise men, who come to worship the infant Christ in his manger is conventional and is among the most positive images of blackness in Middle English texts. Its positivity has inspired confusion and doubt: Paul H.D. Kaplan points out that in a mid-eighth century Irish Latin account of the magi, Balthasar is described as dark ['fuscus'] in such a way that blackness perhaps inheres only in his features – that is, his hair and beard – while tenth- and eleventh-century texts seem more certain about Balthasar's black skin (Kaplan, 1985, 26–29). If we accept that blackness inheres in his skin, the holy magus might inspire as much discomfort as perhaps the image of Aaron Palomides does. It is hard to square chivalric righteousness with blackness.

Indeed, in the *Three Kings of Cologne*, the Middle English translation of the Latin narrative by John of Hildesheim that celebrates the three magi, the discomfort with black goodness is palpable (John of Hildesheim, [1886] 2002). While the black king is righteous and holy, his people, also black, are heretical and wicked. Part of that wickedness shows up in their own use of color, antithetical to that of the text's Latin Roman Christian readers; the Nestorians have a penchant for painting Jesus, Mary and all the saints black and all the devils and demons white. If white Christian readers were not uncomfortable with the singular holy black man, they were certainly likely to be disturbed by a nation of black people associating *whites* with evil. While European Christians may be able to hold at arm's length the association

of blackness with goodness, the suggestion that whiteness signals evil would surely hit close to home. Even though the black king's difference from his black subjects troubles the notion that if white is good, black must be bad or vice versa, the text ultimately returns to and relies on the oppositional logic of race. The black king is little more than a one-off, an exception to the rule, a token.

It should come as no surprise that the logic of race, with regard to whiteness and blackness, is already deeply ingrained in Latin Christian culture by the late Middle Ages. Ania Loomba has shown that an association between blackness and lechery can be traced as far back as second-century CE Roman culture, in which blacks were associated with heat (via 'fornactor' or 'one who stokes a furnace' ['fornax']) and unrestrained sexual passion (via 'fornicator' from 'fornicatio' [sex], itself from 'fornix,' meaning a vault or arch, and also a vaulted space where prostitutes plied their trade') (Loomba, 2002, 49–51). Blackness continued to be associated with heat via the continuing influence of Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian 'climate theory' that attributes dark skin to blood burnt by the excessive heat of torrid climates (Ziegler, 2005, 511–535). In all cases – whether attributed to excessive heat, burnt blood or associated with unrestrained sexual passion – blackness denotes abnormality. Geraldine Heng correctly identifies medieval literary examples of '*the normativity of whiteness*, and of *the white racial body*, as the guarantor of normalcy, aesthetic and moral virtue, European Christian identity, and full membership in the human community' (Heng, 2003, 231–232). To be black is, in the European Middle Ages, to be other.

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To be black is also to be other *to* the European Middle Ages, and this fact has had major implications for the construction of modernity and the place of race in it. It is but a short hop from imagining blackness as other in the Middle Ages to imagining it as absent in the period altogether. If blackness is not present in the European Middle Ages, then the evidence of black people's abiding presence in modernity – when black people write, appear in the television and radio media or, at the very least, board trains with the rest of us – means that they must be exclusively modern. Indeed, one of the most important studies on blackness in modern American literature, by one of modern American literature's most acclaimed black writers, incidentally registers precisely this. Toni Morrison writes in her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* of a 'dark, abiding, and signing Africanist presence' that animates canonical American literature (Morrison, 1993, 5). Though she argues that blackness carries the weight of meaning in modern American literature – that 'blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable – all of the self-contradictory features of the self' while 'whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless,' she makes no claims that the abiding and signing presence of blackness precedes the American context (Morrison, 1993, 59). On the contrary, the erasure of a black presence from the European medieval past

is part of the dynamic Morrison otherwise traces – a dynamic in which blackness quietly, silently provides the framework on which whiteness is built. Whiteness disingenuously takes the credit for producing meaning when it would in fact be incapable of producing meaning without blackness, against which it sets itself off. An increasing number of us ‘postcolonial medievalists’ have turned to the groundbreaking work of Johannes Fabian in which he argues that the subject of anthropological study is primitivized when he is denied coevalness with the anthropologist who studies him (Fabian, 1983, 31). The ‘denial of coevalness’ must be tweaked to apply to the situation at hand: rather than explicitly denying black people the right to share the present – though that racial dynamic surely does occur at times – the study of the European Middle Ages has denied blacks the right to a shared medieval past that would, in turn, authorize them to share the present that emerges from it. In other words, denying blacks medieval coevalness allows Euro-centric cultures to relegate modern blacks to a *strictly* modern status in which their history appears to be without the authorizing length and depth available to whites. The denial of medieval coevalness encourages students to ask, ‘Where were the black people in the Middle Ages?’ in a tone that suggests they are not entirely certain whether black people existed at all.

It was no doubt a similar incredulity that led the prospective graduate student to question the commensurability of my identities as a medievalist and a person of color. Such questions would have been psychologically damaging to me, for sure, had I not soon become acquainted with the work of medievalists who sought to confront head on the matter of race’s relevance to medieval studies. The 2001 special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* (JMEMS) titled ‘Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages,’ edited by Thomas Hahn, became a bible of sorts for me as I prepared for preliminary exams. The issue’s brave forays into uncharted territory register a preoccupation with the question of *whether* the concept of race is worth exploring in the Middle Ages. Hahn imagines the critics of his issue’s efforts: ‘“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’ (Hahn, 2001, 26). Or, to put it more succinctly, the concept of race in the Middle Ages is anachronistic and therefore useless. William Chester Jordan’s response essay at the end of the collection, while it calls for further work on the matter of medieval race and commends contributors for ‘playing’ with the concept of race in ‘sophisticated ways,’ offers resounding doubts about the utility of race for fear that readers will not ‘sufficiently shed their modern notions of race’ (Jordan, 2001, 169). Jordan prefers ‘ethnic identity,’ a choice not at all out of step with a collection that features Robert Bartlett’s savvy inquiry into the fittingness of race versus ethnicity for medieval material. What rings most loudly and clearly is that the question of whether race is relevant to the Middle Ages is very much on the table in 2001 for Hahn, though his efforts are in the vein of proving that the answer is ‘yes,’ as for Jordan, whose answer is ‘yes’ but with caveats strong enough that it approaches ‘no.’

At the turn of the twenty-first century, medievalist scholars struggled with whether race matters to the Middle Ages. Asserting that we have made significant progress in the past 14 years, I have organized the current collection from the perspective that the question of race's relevance is solved: yes, the Middle Ages have been thoroughly raced. The question at hand is, exactly *how* are they raced? Not whether, but *how* is medieval race-thinking different from modern racism? How does it contribute to the formation of modern racism? What can we decipher of the intellectual, cultural, psychological and even emotional dynamics that give rise to race-thinking in the Middle Ages? In short, how does medieval race work from the inside out? These are hard questions, and they are far from fully resolved with regard to modern race, let alone with regard to its five-, six-, and seven-hundred-year-old predecessors. But it is my hope that a greater understanding of the medieval situation will be of some service to students of modernity as well as those of us who prefer to look backward from our admittedly modern perches.

Tom Hahn's *JMEMS* issue made it okay for me to investigate race in the Middle Ages. It made it okay to argue that race in the Middle Ages is a complicated issue worthy of sustained study. It made it okay to assert my identity as a medievalist and an African-American man without either identity making invalid the other. The abiding and signing presence of 'Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages' is felt throughout the essays in the current volume.

I have arranged the essays in this issue to reflect some of the concerns germane to the study of race and ethnicity today among medievalists, early modernists and postcolonial critics, as well as theorists of race more broadly. The issue begins with the 'sedimentation' of medieval racial theories in modern race, moves on to the study of whiteness and finally addresses the postcolonial deployment of the Middle Ages in matters of race. As to 'sedimentation,' Geraldine Heng has identified a 'politics of temporality' that recognizes 'the coevalness of present and past, in the sedimented pluralities of the present' (Heng, 2011, 424). In this issue, Robert S. Sturges and Randy P. Schiff explore layered history from opposite directions: Sturges from twentieth-century psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon's compelling and contradictory position that the past is at once inescapable and must be escaped and Schiff from the position that consignment of one's competitor to a primitive past – he argues that medieval Europeans understood Rome as having done precisely this to Carthage – is an old racializing move rooted deeply in medieval Christian Europe's foundation mythology. Both approaches register the centrality of desire – sexual, commercial, cultural: for love and recognition, domination and freedom in Sturges's analysis of the thirteenth-century French comic romance *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and for commercial, cultural and historical domination, as well as a power-consolidating arrest of ethnic instability in Schiff's analysis of Chaucer's treatments of Dido and Carthage. The pieces suggest that whether or not the past must be escaped, it does seem inescapable. These scholars proceed from the position that it may be

more profitable to concern ourselves with an analytically conscious habitation of the past that enfolds within itself the potential, at least, for escape from the past's ideological power.

Whiteness studies informs Asa Mittman's, Jamie Friedman's and Dennis Austin Britton's essays. In 2002, historian Peter Kolchin exclaimed, '[s]uddenly whiteness studies are everywhere' (Kolchin, 2002, 154). These studies, '[s]tarting from the now widely shared premise that race is an ideological or social construct rather than a biological fact,' take whiteness as a category within race that is just as much a construction as the latter (Kolchin, 2002, 155). Often, studies have addressed how certain, especially lower, economic classes in America came to take on the mantle of whiteness or how whiteness has functioned differently at different times in American history (Roediger, 1991; Ignatiev, 1995; Jacobson, 1998). Whiteness studies has 'at least partially shifted attention ... to how [Americans] have looked at whites, and to whiteness as a central component of Americans' racial ideology' (Kolchin, 2002, 155). The study of race in the Middle Ages, like studies of race in other periods, has until recently largely focused on the deployment of blackness in literature and history and the dynamics it registers, creates and reifies. Mittman's, Friedman's and Britton's essays represent the sophistication with which the study of premodern literature has made the turn toward whiteness. As Mittman explores whether the term 'monstrous races' – the Cyclopes, Epiphagi and Blemmyes that so often appear in ancient, medieval and early modern texts and world maps concerned with travel to parts not well known – is a useful moniker, especially as regards its use of 'race,' he also explores the perhaps unintended and certainly unexpected consequences of the term's untroubled use. Its surprising implication for whiteness is troubling indeed. Jamie Friedman explores just how troubled the notion of whiteness is in the thirteenth-century crusades romance the *King of Tars*, 'illuminating the traces of a fantasized white racial stability,' disrupting the 'logic of the normativity of whiteness' and imagining a reading practice that undermines the 'repressive racial logics of containment' that tend to posit whiteness as an *a priori* condition and anything else as an aberration. Britton rounds out the exploration of whiteness by working in a different chronology; while Mittman takes up antiquity and the Middle Ages and Friedman takes up medieval racial plasticity and its implications for modernity, Britton examines whiteness via Shakespeare and Fletcher's adaptation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Britton argues, responds to medieval romance's program 'to establish the indivisibility of white skin, desirability, and aristocratic class' by deploying images of Africanness to assert a connection between race, class and desirability. Rather than pointing out that whiteness consolidates power, as it has been shown elsewhere to do – take for example, treatments of the *King of Tars* that inform Friedman's essay – Britton demonstrates that Africanness interrogates and even undermines whiteness's power. Taken together, these essays represent the subtlety of the approach to whiteness that is engendered by pre- and early modern texts – those that fashion

whiteness and that direct its path toward reification before it gets there. These texts and their analyses show us that before whiteness became the monolith it has become – ‘mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable,’ to use Morrison’s words (Morrison, 1993, 59) – like blackness it bore subtlety, fragility and vulnerability as marks of its construction.

Complementary to the sedimentation of medieval racial theories in modernity is modernity’s explicit utilization of the Middle Ages in matters of race. Michelle R. Warren’s essay rounds out the collection by reflecting on the deployment of the Middle Ages in postcolonial literature. A close look at claims of access to and command of Chaucer’s texts in the postcolonial Caribbean, Warren argues, exposes and allows the scholar to explore circuits of power in modernity. Situating Chaucer within the complicated world of (post)colonial education in English, Warren explores the rhetoric of misquotation and appropriation in a landscape where the conviction of one’s claim to mastery of the canon could be said to mean everything. The ‘doubleness upon doubleness’ evinced by quotation and misappropriation, Warren shows us, ‘opens the margin of hope against every power play that demands order, whether proper citation or modernity.’ This issue of *postmedieval* destabilizes modernity’s claims to its distinction and independence from the Middle Ages; it destabilizes whiteness’s claim to normativity; it, too, forces open ‘the margin of hope against every power play that demands order,’ especially racial hierarchy, especially modernity.

To open that ‘margin of hope’ is what ‘Making Race Matter in the Middle Ages’ aims to do: to approach race in the Middle Ages not as possible but as certain is to resist the temporal hierarchy that posits the medieval as ineffably other, and to resist the related racial hierarchy that posits some groups of people – marked out by religion, culture, phenotype, geography – as primitive, behind the times, ‘medieval,’ while others living concurrently are considered modern.¹ Sara Ahmed’s response essay, ‘Race as Sedimented History,’ underscores the weight of race. Race weighs so heavy that it forms a foundational layer, consisting of history as past and history as an active participant in the present. Race blocks passages; it slows and attempts to arrest the flow of people, ideas, culture. They flow on anyway, but weighted, slowed. To open a ‘margin of hope’ is to deal with the sediment and to assist the flow.

Acknowledgments

‘Making Race Matter’ would not have been possible without the efforts of a great many people who have helped me chart a course through the flood: Each contributor showed off their brilliance, in all its myriad forms, from essay proposal through to final draft; the anonymous reviewers’ attention to detail improved not only each individual essay but also the organization, and flow, of

- 1 The medievalizing denial of coevalness thrust upon some peoples, especially those in the Middle East, has been treated memorably by Davis (2000). Such medievalizing narratives remain all too common, one such example appearing as recently as 7 September 2014 (Carr, 2014). Carr, a prominent media and cultural critic, is known for having risen above drug addiction. Despite Carr’s troubling medievalizing narrative, he is in part the inspiration for my title’s reference to ‘chasing the dragon,’ an idiom for pursuing an ever greater cocaine high – and an idiom that I find fitting here due to race’s insidious, self-perpetuating, addictive and therefore drug-like qualities. To imagine a world beyond racialization – much as Carr imagined and lived a new life as a successful media and cultural critic after overcoming

his addiction, and as I seek to do in this issue – is also to ‘chase the dragon,’ to seek an alternative high that comes from imagining and living into the possibility of a different and improved future. Carr’s untimely death at age 58 occurred on 12 February 2015 during the final preparation of this special issue.

the entire special issue; Siobhain Bly Calkin, Dorothy Kim and Ayanna Thompson, scholars who have made great contributions to the study of race in pre- and early modernity themselves, consulted on the project and offered suggestions that ranged from word choice through the arrangement of essays; they drew my attention to organic themes that connect the essays and that had escaped me. The essays and my own editorship have benefited in the extreme from the lead co-editorship of *postmedieval* by the indefatigable duo Eileen A. Joy and Myra Seaman, as well as the constant inspiration on offer from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. The study of race would not be where it is today without the dedication of Sara Ahmed; the study of race in the Middle Ages as well as my own scholarship and sense of being would not be what they are without the work of Tom Hahn. The greatest thanks, however, must be reserved for Lesley S. Curtis, the Haitian Studies scholar who has made my life complete and who has always supported my work in medieval race with the counterbalance of her insights into race in the nineteenth- through twenty-first-century Caribbean postcolony. The overlap between our work has been a source of joy, as has sharing all the other intimate aspects of life. If an even greater measure of thanks can be offered, it must go to London Olivia Grace Curtis-Whitaker, my muse, my joy and my light, who has spent much of her first 6 months in this world watching me read, edit and write for this volume. When she looks up at me from the bouncer next to my desk with eyes that, to me, seem to hold within them all the beautiful depths of the cosmos, I am reminded why I work to open a ‘margin of hope.’ For me, she has already done exactly that.

About the Author

Cord J. Whitaker works on the development of racial ideology and its intimate relationship with medieval rhetorical theory. He is completing a book entitled *Black Metaphors: Race, Religion, and Rhetoric in the Literature of the Late Middle Ages*. He is the recipient of fellowships and grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is Assistant Professor of English at Wellesley College (E-mail: cord.whitaker@wellesley.edu).

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