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BOOK FORUM

The Invention of Race and the Status of Blackness

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It is at this point a longstanding tradition that scholarly works investigating
Black and African presences in premodernity, works that challenge accepted
notions about the origins of and participants in Western civilization, meet with
significant resistance in the marketplace of ideas. The scholarship in question
has focused on a wide range of subjects—from the roots of Greco-Roman
knowledge and culture to the presence of Africans in those established centers
of classical antiquity to the role of Africans in the Old World's exploration of the
New. Yet, resistance arises at every turn. The case is no different for Geraldine
Heng's 2018 *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*—except that this time
the focus is the European Middle Ages. The book deftly introduces and defines
"race-making" to describe the very active process by which elements of what I
have called "race-thinking" are coalesced in the Middle Ages as race proceeds
toward the ideological status it achieves in modernity. Of the now six full-length
monographs—including my own—that take as their primary inquiry the nature,
development, and salience of race in the European Middle Ages, *Invention* is the
most ambitious and proceeds from the "thoroughly interdisciplinary vantage
required of a concept as ideologically powerful and multifaceted as race, one
whose study defies disciplinary divisions between literature, history, biology,
sociology, and anthropology, among other fields."[1] Praise has been swift. So has
backlash. This article will consider the latter in order to understand the motiv-
ations and implications of criticisms against studies that similarly innovate
within their fields.

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[1] Cord J. Whitaker, "Cord Whitaker Reviews *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*," *Critical
Inquiry* (July 1, 2020) (https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/cord_whitaker_reviews_the_invention_of_
race_in_the_european_middle_ages/). For Heng's introduction of "race-making," see Geraldine Heng,
The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018), 3. For
"race-thinking" and some of the fundamental differences between medieval race-thinking and modern
race, see Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking*
(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 75–76 and 97–122.

Martin Bernal's 1987 *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* was followed by subsequent volumes in 1991 and 2006 and called for a sea-change in our understandings of the Western civilization that traces its roots to Greco-Roman antiquity. The response to *Black Athena* demonstrates a strategy by which scholars have resisted, even while also giving some credence to, scholarship that changes their fields by examining blackness's presence where it has not previously been considered. The book revises the foundations of Greco-Roman civilization to rest on African (especially Egyptian and Phoenician) influences. Its impact and backlash were significant, swift, and spectacular. *Black Athena*'s impact extended into documentary film and secondary school curricula in a way few academic studies do. In fact, in 1992, anthropologist Peter S. Allen, while reviewing a 1991 film on *Black Athena* and its controversy that was produced for the UK's Channel 4, cogently takes issue with Bernal's use of linguistics to assert that Egyptian beliefs and practices heavily influenced the development of Greek religion. The relationship, Allen suggests, between the borrowing of deific names and of religious ideas is not an easy one. In fact, he argues, they need not go together at all.[2] Allen's detailed, if compressed, argument suggests that, by asserting a linguistic relationship between Egyptian deities' names and those of the Greeks, Bernal is barking up a completely unnecessary and ultimately wrong tree. At the same time, Allen recognizes the role of racism in the Western intellectual tradition when he describes Bernal's position that scholars have "reconstructed the past in the image of the colonial present," including its pervasive and "virulent racism and anti-Semitism," and concludes that "Western scholars *have* played down the influence on the ancient Greeks of cultures from Asia and Africa, probably for the reasons Bernal states."[3] Nevertheless, Allen admonishes: "It is unfortunate that Bernal uses the terms *racism* and anti-Semitism to describe the main biases of the Western scholarly canon."[4] In a 1991 article, historian of Rome Jane F. Gardner registers similar sentiments: "Both terms [Black and African] are already so abused in racial politics that scholarly precision is unlikely to have much impact on public controversy."[5] Gardner seems to suggest that "abuse" is the indignity of being implicated in racial politics. Taken together, Allen's and Gardner's responses suggest that, although the book's premise is wrongheaded, the bigger problem is that Greco-Roman history has been dragged into the history of race at all.

Allen demonstrates another strategy when he pushes the conclusions of *Black Athena*'s readers to cartoonish extremes. Allen deems Black studies scholar Leonard Jeffries "self-serving, to say the least" and derides his "showing pictures of various pharaohs to his class and referring to them as 'brothers.'" Allen oversimplifies Jeffries's proposition by stating that its "logical conclusion would be that the Greeks of the Bronze Age were Black Egyptians, something even Jeffries's followers would find hard to maintain... ."[6] To call Jeffries's position

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[2] Peter S. Allen, "Black Athena" [review], *American Anthropologist* 94.4 (1992): 1024–1026, esp. 1025.
[3] Allen, "Black Athena." 1024–1026, emphasis original.
[4] Allen, "Black Athena." 1025, emphasis original.
[5] Jane F. Gardner, "The Debate on 'Black Athena,'" *The Classical Review* 41.1 (1991): 166–167, esp. 167.
[6] Allen, "Black Athena," 1024.

"self-serving" suggests the complete intellectual solidarity of Black Americans in opposition to normative White Americans, such that the blackness of important historical figures is beneficial *only* to modern Black Americans. In order to dismiss Jeffries entirely, Allen pushes Jeffries's position, with Bernal's hypothesis, as far to its extreme as he possibly can. Contrary to what Allen suggests, Jeffries's and Bernal's positions would logically result in the notion that the Greeks of the Bronze Age were mixed with supposedly Black Egyptians, not that they categorically *were* Black Egyptians.

The approach of Frank. M. Snowden, a Black classicist who made his career at a historically Black university, puts in relief Allen's and Gardner's method by standing in counterpoint. Although Gardner justifies her approach by recognizing Snowden's "cogent and sensible restatement of the evidence," Snowden's objectives in response to *Black Athena* are in fact quite different than hers.[7] Snowden argues that the term that should be sought in classical sources to denote people we would today describe as phenotypically sub-Saharan African is "Ethiopian." He goes to lengths to show that Greeks and Romans were well aware of gradations of color and hair texture between their own and Ethiopians' and had words to describe those "designated in the modern world as Negroes."[8] When he ends his article by stating that there is "no justification for equating 'black,' as used by Herodotus or any other Greek author, with peoples designated in classical text as Ethiopians (i.e., Negroes) ..." it is not to suggest that classical antiquity should be held apart from racial politics.[9] Rather, Snowden's emphasis on the gradations of blackness in the classical world reveal that in modernity whiteness collapses nuance, far more than thinkers in classical antiquity did, and has made itself into a monolith. For Snowden, there was no escaping racial politics, nor would he have had *Black Athena* try to do so either.

In addition to trying to hold apart premodernity from racism and pushing premodern critical race scholars' conclusions to absurd extremes, resistant scholars have also accused antiracist premodernists of lacking scholarly objectivity. In 1996, classicists Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers published an edited volume in response to *Black Athena* containing contributions from some sixteen scholars, in addition to the editors. Taking aim at Bernal's training as an historian of China, the editors accuse him of being "willing to speculate and make imaginative leaps" and refer to him as an "armchair archaeologist par excellence."[10] His work, they argue, is biased by an "outsider's stance of moral superiority," he is in league with "certain Afrocentrist historians," and he lacks subject matter expertise.[11] There are surely good evidences used and worthwhile arguments made in the volume; it includes, for instance, an expansion of Snowden's argument. But, if scholarly objectivity is of primary value, Lefkowitz's

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[7] Gardner, "The Debate on 'Black Athena,'" 167.

[8] Frank M. Snowden Jr., "Bernal's 'Blacks,' Herodotus, and Other Classical Evidence," *Arethusa* 22 (1989): 83–95, esp. 85.

[9] Snowden, "Bernal's 'Blacks,' Herodotus, and Other Classical Evidence," 93.

[10] Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, eds., *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), x.

[11] Lefkowitz and Rogers, *Black Athena Revisited*, x–xi.

and Rogers's volume lacks it at least as spectacularly as they claim Bernal's book does.

That the work of many of Bernal's critics is vexed by the very inexactitudes of which they accuse his scholarship can be attributed to a difference of agenda and historical positioning. Classicists who identify as White have been able to approach historical evidence from the assumptive position that they have, by rights, access to it: that Western cultures—that is, their own—have descended from Greco-Roman civilization. Black scholars and those who study blackness have, on the other hand, had to contend with the fact that:

> In much of contemporary Europe, the perception remains that Africans—the most visible targets of new immigration policies, the most likely to face discrimination in employment and housing—have no history of which to speak, and to many it therefore seems self-evident they have no history within premodern Europe.[12]

The perception that Black people have no history—or at least no history from before chattel slavery in the Americas—is common in the Western world. It has prompted otherwise well-educated professionals to ask me, incredulously, "Where *were* the black people in the Middle Ages?"[13] Scholarship on the history of slavery indicates that the misperception of Black people's novelty and ahistoricity is born of a strategic and integral element in the process of enslavement. "Natal alienation," as Orlando Patterson has termed it, is the symbolic and cultural denial to the enslaved of "all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations" and "all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants." As a "genealogical isolate" who is "desocialized and depersonalized … as a nonbeing," the enslaved person is devoid of history.[14] The Afrocentrist approach so reviled by *Black Athena*'s reviewers must be taken in the context of the divergent approaches to history that appear when the identity category most central to critics' lens is Black versus when it is White.

This article is not ultimately about Bernal's work. Heng's *Invention* appeared thirty-one years later. Much has changed, not least of which is the ability for a book that considers the seminal roles of blackness to appear in medieval studies. Although *Invention* is not Afrocentric, its investment in medieval globality involves the significant presence of Black people—the Middle Ages' "Ethiopians," to hark back to Snowden's work. Heng registers claims such as Jean Devisse's that after the fall of the Roman Empire western Europe "no longer had any contact with blacks" and that the Crusades represented the

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[12] Maghan Keita, "Race: What the Bookstore Hid," in Celia Chazelle, et al., eds., *Why the Middle Ages Matter: Medieval Light on Modern Injustice* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 130–140, esp. 130.

[13] I discuss "the denial of medieval coevalness" to Black people in Cord J. Whitaker, "Race-ing the Dragon: The Middle Ages, Race, and Trippin' into the Future," *postmedieval* 6 (2015): 3–11, esp. 5–6.

[14] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5, 38.

revitalization of such contact.[15] Heng also registers counterclaims from scholars such as Paul Edwards, who writes that "Evidence of continuing contact between the British Isles and Africa, and of the presence of Africans in the British Isles, is to be found in the records of the Scandinavian settlements in Dublin and Orkney."[16] The Black presence in medieval northern Europe, and England in particular, is corroborated by the work of bioarchaeologist Rebecca Redfern. Responding to colleagues and visiting researchers "anecdotally observing the presence of people with Black ancestry and dual heritage in the Medieval cemetery populations from London," Redfern and Hefner seek to substantiate the presence of "individuals of non-White European ancestry" in Black Death cemeteries in Britain.[17] Of the forty-one sets of remains that the researchers studied, 29 percent "were people with non-White European ancestry." That is, 29 percent had Black African or Asian ancestry. The study concludes that sources "may actually be underrepresenting population diversity in the city" of London.[18] *Invention*'s engagement with blackness in premodern Europe, though increasingly corroborated, nonetheless runs counter to the narrative of Black absence in premodern Europe that has been underwritten by the natal alienation of Black peoples.

Expectations born of Blacks' natal alienation and Whites' perceived ownership of the Middle Ages has already been on display in scholarly reaction to *Invention.* The most discussed, and by far the longest, review to have appeared is S. J. Pearce's "The Inquisitor and the Moseret: *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* and the New English Colonialism in Jewish Historiography." Published in 2020, the article claims to show how *Invention* fails to negate, and even trades in, "imposed structures of colonial and white supremacist historiography" and is but "one more work of history written through the eyes of the legal, ecclesiastical, and textual hegemonies of a Christian Middle Ages and its modern academic heirs."[19] The reviewer goes to great pains to limn the contours of her own subject position as a Jewish medievalist who teaches elements of premodern race as they appear in the Hebrew poetry of medieval Spain, especially that of Judah Halevi. Pearce uses it to demonstrate, via Halevi's "ideas about a racialized

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[15] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 184–86; Jean Devisse, *The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the Early Christian Era to the "Age of Discovery,"* trans. William G. Ryan, vol. 2, part 1 (New York: William Morrow, 1979, 57, quoted in Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 184.

[16] Paul Edwards, "The Early African Presence in the British Isles," in *Essays on the History of Blacks in Britain: From Roman Times to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, eds. Jagdish S. Gundara and Ian Duffield (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992), 9–29, esp. 10–11, cited and quoted in Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 191. On Black slaves being sold into Ireland in the ninth century, see also M. Ray, "A Black Slave on the Run in Thirteenth-Century England," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007): 111–19.

[17] Rebecca Redfern and Joseph T. Hefner, "'Officially Absent but Actually Present': Bioarchaeological Evidence for Population Diversity in London during the Black Death, AD 1348–50," in *Bioarchaeology of Marginalized People*, eds. Madeleine L. Mant and Alyson Jaagumägi Holland (London: Elsevier, 2019), 69–114, esp. 69–71.

[18] Redfern and Hefner, "'Officially Absent but Actually Present,'"106.

[19] S. J. Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret: *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* and the New English Colonialism in Jewish Historiography," *Medieval Encounters* 26 (2020): 145–90, esp. 150–51.

Jewish people," that "people who lived during the Middle Ages are, in many fundamental ways, more similar to people living now than they are dissimilar."[20] Pearce cites a commitment to "critical compassion" that drives her and her students "to use critical tools to come to a better personal understanding of the experience of [her medieval subjects]" in order to claim her place in the same "community" of scholars as Heng, one whose members strive to "ensur[e] that [the Middle Ages'] reverberations in the postmedieval world are not given over to evil."[21] These claims of solidarity, however, obscure a fundamental difference between the reviewer's and the book's comportments toward blackness in premodernity.

If Pearce is indeed in that same community of scholars, then her review article is subject to the same standards as Heng's work. Pearce's analysis exhibits the pitfalls of which it accuses *Invention.* As an example of the book's engagement with "ecclesiastical and textual hegemonies," Pearce points to the use of the phrase "the fullness of time" as a colonizing move that casts Jewish conversion to Christianity within a "christological chronotrope." "In the fullness of time," Pearce points out, is borrowed from the book of Galatians to describe the "inevitability of Jesus's intervention in history." Whether the usage is intentional or sloppy, Pearce asserts, it "contextualize[s] the history of Jewish conversion to Christianity within a Christian messianic and eschatological telos."[22] This would be a colonizing move indeed and a big problem in a book such as this if this careless adoption of "explicitly polemical anti-Jewish language" were done, as Pearce claims it is, in Heng's own voice.[23] It is not. When read in context—and Pearce offers little context in her discussion of the excerpt—it is clear that Heng is ventriloquizing medieval Christian culture's "progressivist logic of conversionary momentum" in order to understand the "thirteenth century's preoccupation with conversion."[24] In particular, it is the period's fear of apostasy among converts to Christianity that leads medieval European clerics and laity to ask of the convert, "Which of the subject's two religious identities linked by a temporal conjuncture is the real identity? Is the subject currently passing?"[25] To think that Heng is herself genuinely saying that conversion will occur "in the fullness of time" is to believe that Heng is herself asking "Is the subject currently passing?" or that "a culminating identity acceptable to all"—that is, medieval Christianity —is acceptable, indeed desirable, to Heng herself. *Invention*, however, marks these questions and the idea that conversion might occur "in the fullness of time" as a thought experiment in using Karl F. Morrison's treatment of conversion as a process to consider the "inscrutability and interiority" of conversion, the very elements that facilitated Christians' fears of apostasy in medieval Europe.[26] That it is but a thought experiment ventriloquizing a medieval

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[20] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 146–47.
[21] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 148, 181.
[22] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 159.
[23] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 158.
[24] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 78–79.
[25] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 79.
[26] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 79.

Christian worldview is evidenced also by the conditionality of the closing statement. Were the Jewish subject to really convert "in the fullness of time," then "religious race as a project of improvement *would* thus be capped ... by the successful entry of the convert into a new racial-religious formation."[27] Pearce's review has engaged with *Invention* in a colonizing fashion. In seeking mastery over the scholarly text, it has foisted upon it assumptions about the hegemony of the text's and its author's positions such that the review ignores important context that gives the passage its meaning. Such assumptions run counter to the review genre's requirement for scholarly objectivity and distance.

What's more, and perhaps harder to forgive or excuse, is that the review also asserts its own brand of hegemony when it borrows a term developed in *Invention* without ever crediting the book. "Race-making" is a formation central to *Invention* and appears as part of its definition of *race*, which Pearce describes as a "useful working definition."[28] Pearce, however, begins using the term "race-making" on the review's fifth page and does so eight times in the article, not counting quotations of Heng, without ever explicitly crediting Heng with the nomenclature. Pearce includes the entire definition in a footnote, but never acknowledges "race-making" as anything other than a common word and concept.[29]

In Pearce's review, it seems that an impulse similar to the one that led Allen to make errors by pushing Afrocentrist scholars' assertions to cartoonish extremes and then claiming that those were erroneous, manifests in even more serious errors. Pearce, for instance, accuses Heng and other medievalists who work on England of "mistak[ing] England for a place that is a universal cradle for Jewish lives and afterlives in medieval European societies."[30] She suggests that *Invention* holds up England's Jewish community as archetypal and quickly dispenses with the considerable space Heng makes for nuance: "Heng is arguing ... that although it does not map fully onto other communities of European Jews in the Middle Ages, England is an archetype for Jewish life."[31] Apparently dispensing with Heng's caveats, Pearce treats the book as if it offers no understanding of nuanced differences between England's and other European Jewish communities at all.[32] This, despite Heng's lengthy treatment of the *particularities* of the English Jewish community, especially with regard to its wealth, position within systems of feudal and movable wealth economies, their much discussed relationship to the English Crown, and the *very* particular English chirograph chest system that kept track of their assets and debts owed them.[33] These are significant features of the very chapter on which Pearce focuses her criticism, yet she suggests that Heng

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[27] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages,* 79.

[28] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages,* 3; Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 152.

[29] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 152, fn 20.

[30] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 158.

[31] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 156.

[32] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 4.

[33] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 58-72.

makes no significant space for the reader to realize just how different the Jewish experience may have been in England. Ignoring *Invention*'s treatment of the particularities of that experience and then accusing the book of lacking nuance is similar to Allen's treatment of Jeffries's and Bernal's work.

The strategy of representing the most extreme versions of a study's positions and then criticizing those renditions is accompanied by a propensity toward making the very mistakes of which one accuses the study in question. While Pearce's review suggests that *Invention* "was perhaps not edited as carefully as it might have been," the review's own editorial errors are as obvious as attributing a well-known monograph to the wrong author. Historian Kathleen Biddick, author of such works as *The Shock of Medievalism*, did not write *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, as Pearce's footnote and bibliography say she did.[34] It was written instead by English literature scholar Kathleen Davis. It appears that when a scholar is threatened by the perception that another scholar has invaded her field and questioned some of its most fundamental assumptions, the situation may lead to some egregious errors.

Aside from the racial bias that exists against scholars of color in predominantly White fields, it is scholars' engagements with blackness, the incursion of blackness into fields and narratives where it has not been accepted before, and claims that it is in fact foundational within such discursive spaces that some scholars may find most threatening. After all, Martin Bernal was not Black. Nor is Geraldine Heng. The feeling of threat, that one's field and years of hard study are being besieged and undermined, could go a long way toward explaining why otherwise even-handed scholars committed to objectivity and empiricist scholarly methods have resorted to insults (e.g., "armchair archaeologist") and snide comments about editorial inaccuracy (before demonstrating, apparently unwittingly, editorial inaccuracy). One of Pearce's most erring moments occurs when Heng frames her treatment of blackness in two modes: "hermeneutic blackness" and "physiognomic blackness." The former is discursive, Christian culture's imagined blackness of devils and demons with the leveling notion that the souls of all humans are stained black with sin. This was able to take root even if, as Devisse argues, "there were simply no black people" in western Europe between the fall of the Roman Empire and the twelfth century because it renders blackness a sign or, as I have argued, a metaphor.[35] The latter, "physiognomic blackness," refers to the blackness of material Black people. It was no barrier to admitting Black people into the Church and Christian identity, and their earthly skin was held apart from the blackness of theological discourse.[36] The chapter goes on to explore how hermeneutic and physiognomic blackness converge, diverge, and intertwine through the late Middle Ages using art historical, theological, and literary evidence. Pearce does not linger over chapter 4, but her brief description of the difference between hermeneutic and physiognomic "race" seems to misunderstand the concepts entirely. She defines "'hermeneutic'

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[34] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 159, fn 36, 183.

[35] See Whitaker, *Black Metaphors.*

[36] Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 185.

race and 'physiognomic' or 'epidermal' race" as "the difference between an individual being considered black or white in a social context rather than actually having a skin color that could be defined as white rather than pinkish or black rather than brownish."[37] The definition seems to refer to the fact that Black and White are often misnomers for the color of an individual human's actual skin. They are. But this is not the opposition to which Heng's terms refer. What's more, for Heng, both "hermeneutic blackness" and "physiognomic blackness" fall under the rubric of "epidermal race." Both are about skin color; the difference is whether the skin is imagined to be dressing discursive representations or real, material people at the time. The anxiety to preserve medieval studies' racial innocence, which I propose may facilitate the error, perhaps gives itself away when Pearce silently replaces Heng's "blackness" with "race" in both formulations. All this discussion of race introduces the influence of blackness to the study of the Middle Ages. It is blackness that participants in resistant strains of scholarship strive to exclude or excise.

Perhaps their reasons lay in the special condition, the unsettling power of blackness, that its association with natal alienation has helped facilitate. In reading Fanon and articulating the "problem of blackness" vis-à-vis the "Heideggerian distinction between being (thing) and *Dasein*—the being to whom understandings of being are given," Fred Moten writes of blackness as the condition of:

> The ones who are attained or accumulated unto death even as they are always escaping the Hegelian positioning of the bondsman, are perhaps best understood as the extra-ontological, extra-political constant—a destructive, healing agent; a stolen, transplanted organ always eliciting rejection; a salve whose soothing lies in the abrasive penetration of the merely typical; an ensemble always operating in excess of that ancient juridical formulation of the thing (*Ding*), to which Kant subscribes, as that to which nothing can be imputed, the impure, degraded, manufactured (in)human who moves only in response to inclination, whose reflexes lose the name of action. At the same time, this dangerous supplement, as the fact out of which everything else emerges, is constitutive.[38]

The "destructive" agent, the "organ" that elicits rejection, the "abrasive penetration." These are to be had in the threat of the collapse of disciplinary boundaries, in the suggestion that a powerful ideology thought to be the hallmark of modernity is not, in the nightmare vision that the instability of our ever-changing present shakes the foundations once thought firm and fixed of the medieval or ancient pasts. The "impure, degraded, manufactured (in)human" wears blackness—hermeneutic and physiognomic at once—as he tears away a veil that would hide his presence. He reveals that the periods, histories, and narratives that have dictated the terms of his presence have been predicated on

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[37] Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moseret," 153.
[38] Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50.2 (2008): 177–218, esp. 186–87.

his absence. An absence that was but a lie obscuring that he has been present all along.

Such a fundamental threat must be unsettling. It can help to explain why reviewers have exaggerated claims only to refute the exaggerated versions that they created. It explains why to bring up race is interpreted as to bring up "abuse" or why softer language than "racism and anti-Semitism" is advised. It helps to explain why a scholar with a different comportment toward blackness, as a Black man, can criticize the same work without resorting to the same anxious claims and within the framework set out by the scholarship under discussion. It helps explain why the reviewer claims a book exercises colonizing hegemony over its material and then exhibits a very similar colonizing mastery over a major concept from that book. Or how the reviewer can claim the book offers no nuanced treatment of a subject only to gloss right over a significant section that offers precisely such a treatment. Rather than the measured and reserved judgments that the reviewers have usually offered—that most scholars usually offer—these are jittery missteps, anxious reactions, in the face of the recognition that blackness is constitutive, even in the study of the European Middle Ages. With the appearance of more works like *Invention*, it is a "fine and human hope" that such anxieties will fade.[39]

Author biography. Cord J. Whitaker is an expert in the literature of the Middle Ages and the history of race. A graduate of Yale and Duke Universities, Whitaker is Associate Professor of English and Chair of the Presidential Commission on Ethnicity, Race, and Equity at Wellesley College. He is also Senior Antiracism Consultant at Sagely. In October 2019, he published a new book, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), and he is at work on another, to be titled *The Harlem Middle Ages: Color, Time, and Harlem Renaissance Medievalism.* (Email: cord.whitaker@wellesley.edu)

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[39] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess: A Romance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 23.