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Deprovincializing the Middle Ages

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In 1978, Edward Said defined Orientalism as, among other things, a style of thought based on “an ontological and epistemological distinction” between East and West, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” Though focusing primarily on the strategic use of knowledge as power in the age of European expansionism, he repeatedly gestures towards what he implies is Orientalism’s very long history, stretching from Aeschylus to Silvestre de Sacy. For Said, the proto-Orientalism of the Middle Ages is concretized in the representation of Mohammed as a disseminator of false revelation, “the epitome of lechery, debauchery, sodomy [and] treacheries.” And when in Canto 28 of the *Inferno* Dante places Mohammed in the eighth circle of Hell, Said suggests, it exemplifies the structural continuities of an unchanging western discourse of demonization and domination, “an instance of the schematic, almost cosmological inevitability with which Islam and its designated representatives are creatures of Western geographical, historical, and above all, moral apprehension.”¹

In the wake of *Orientalism*, many critics generally sympathetic to Said’s project called into question the rigidity of his binary construct. While noting Said’s effectiveness isolating and discrediting an array of stereotypes—“the eternal and unchanging East, the sexually insatiable Arab, the ‘feminine’ exotic, the teeming marketplace, corrupt despotism, mystical religiosity”—James Clifford summed up his critical method as “associative, sometimes brilliant, sometimes forced, and in the end numbingly repetitive,” resulting in a “tendency to *dichotomize* the human continuum into we-they contrasts and to *essentialize* the resultant ‘other’—to speak of the oriental mind, for example, to even generalize about ‘Islam’ or ‘the Arabs.’”² Dennis Porter argued for the specificity of the literary instance and the possibility of a counter-hegemonic, alternative canon.³ Lisa Lowe, Jenny Sharpe, Inderpal Grewal, Anne McClintock and others pointed out

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 1–3, 62, 68–69.

2. James Clifford, “On Orientalism,” in *Predicaments of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 255–76 (at 258). In a more hostile critique, Aijaz Ahmad attacks what he reads as Said’s unrepentant humanism.

3. Dennis Porter, “Orientalism and Its Problems” in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen and Diane Loxley (eds.), *The Politics of Theory. Proceedings of the Essex Sociology of Literature Conference, University of Essex* (Colchester, 1983), 179–93. His examples are Marco Polo’s *Travels* and T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, though the version of the essay that appears in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 150–61, drops the Polo example.

4. *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

5. On Said's place in the development of Colonial Discourse Studies see, for example, Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 1998), 43–51, and Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), ch. 26.

6. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993), xii.

7. Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, October 22, 2001, 11–13.

the centrality of gender in the workings of Colonial Discourse.⁴ In part, the field of postcolonial studies could be seen as an effort to nuance our understanding of Orientalism as a history and a discursive structure underpinning the colonial and postcolonial moments.⁵ In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said himself expanded both the geographical, historical, and discursive scope of his earlier argument in ways that made it "not just a sequel to *Orientalism* but an attempt to do something else."⁶ And in an article published in the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001, Said challenged Samuel Huntington's (in)famous thesis of the Clash of Civilizations as an ideology that

wants to make 'civilizations' and 'identities' into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and counter-currents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that 'the clash of civilizations' argues is the reality.⁷

But what of the Middle Ages? Later on in the same article, Said answers the question "What is so threatening?" about the Muslim presence in Europe and the United States by evoking a specifically medieval historical trauma:

Buried in the collective culture are memories of the first great Arab-Islamic conquests, which began in the seventh century and which, as the celebrated Belgian historian Henri Pirenne wrote in his landmark book *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1939), shattered once and for all the ancient unity of the Mediterranean, destroyed the Christian-Roman synthesis and gave rise to a new civilization dominated by northern powers (Germany and Carolingian France) whose mission, he seemed to be saying, is to resume defense of the "West" against its historical-cultural enemies. What Pirenne left out, alas, is that in the creation of this new line of defense the West drew on the humanism, science, philosophy, sociology and historiography of Islam, which had already interposed itself between Charlemagne's world and clas-

sical antiquity.⁸ Islam is inside from the start, as even Dante, great enemy of Mohammed, had to concede when he placed the Prophet at the very heart of his *Inferno*.

On the one hand, one is struck by Said's self-revisionism: Dante's representation of Mohammed is no longer a synecdoche for medieval Europe's demonization of Islam but an acknowledgment, however unwilling, of the degree of the latter's influence on the former, bearing out Said's anti-Huntingtonian affirmation that "there are closer ties between apparently warring civilizations than most of us would like to believe." On the other, his citation of Pirenne, as we shall see, largely reproduces his reading of 1978. In the remainder of this essay, I examine the place of the medieval in current discourses of postcolonial theory and globalization, arguing that the tendency to "other" the Middle Ages prematurely shuts down important avenues in our understanding of the history of "the West." Part I reviews Said's 1978 representation of medieval Europe and subsequent reactions to it. Part II looks at the constitutive role nineteenth-century nationalism and orientalism played in the foundation of medieval study and its critical consequences. Part III explores what it might mean to de-link our thinking on the European Middle Ages from this nineteenth-century legacy. Finally, Part IV turns to the question, not simply of the value of postcolonial theory for medieval studies, but of the importance of medieval studies to contemporary discussions of postcolonialism and globalization.

I. Orientalism and the Middle Ages

At the heart of *Orientalism* is a curious tension between history and structure. On the one hand, the book purports to offer a genealogy of Orientalism from its emergence in classical antiquity to its ascendancy in the age of colonial expansion. Yet in many of Said's formulations, "Europe" and "the Orient" function as essentialized cultures that seem to preexist the discourse that purportedly constructs them. "The Orient was almost a *European* invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences," the object of a "European imaginative geography" that begins with Aeschylus.⁹ Though in *theory* Said acknowledges "Europe" or "the West" to

8. The bibliography on the transmission of Arabic thought to the Latin West is a long one. Peter O'Brien usefully collates the assessments of the Arabic contribution to medieval European thought found in standard histories in "Islamic Civilisation's Role in the Waning of the European Middle Ages," *The Medieval History Journal* 2:2 (1999), 387-404.

9. Said, *Orientalism*, 1, 57 (emphasis added).

10. Said, *Orientalism*, 58

11. Kathleen Davis, "Time Behind the Veil: The Media, the Middle Ages, and Orientalism Now" in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 105–22 (at 111–13).

be as much a construct as "the Orient" or "the East," in *practice* he treats it, if not as an "inert fact of nature," then as an entity with a history so long as to be virtually timeless:

Consider how the Orient, and in particular the Near Orient, became known in the West as its great complementary opposite since antiquity. There were the Bible and the rise of Christianity; there were travelers like Marco Polo who charted the trade routes and patterned a regulated system of commercial exchange . . .; there were fabulists like Mandeville; there were the redoubtable conquering Eastern movements, principally Islam, of course; there were the militant pilgrims, chiefly the Crusaders. Altogether *an internally structured archive is built up* from the literature that belongs to these experiences. Out of this comes a restricted number of typical encapsulations: the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, the polemical confrontation. *These are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced, and they shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West.*¹⁰

This quick jump from the Bible to Marco Polo and Mandeville is of course meant to illustrate Said's point on the tenacity of Orientalism as an unchanging discourse of fixed style and meaning. At the same time, as Kathleen Davis points out, this collapse of temporal, geographical, cultural, and discursive difference effectively "empt[ies] out the Middle Ages as a category with its own history," transforming it into a "an inert, purely textual space . . . untainted by any experiential intercourse with the East" in a manner symptomatic of the widespread modern "othering" of the medieval. The problem, Davis continues, is that "Said's dichotomy . . . instates a core 'reality' that privileges and solidifies the very discourses he criticizes. If we grant with Said that medieval Europe's system of representing Islam is purely antiempirical, based not on any experience with Islam but only on a fully closed, self-generating tradition, then we privilege Europe as an absolutely self-constituting object."¹¹

The one event that both disrupts and crystallizes this history of continuity is the rise of Islam:

The European encounter with the Orient, and specifically with Islam, strengthened this system of representing the Orient and, as has been suggested by Henri Pirenne, turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilization from the Middle Ages on was founded. The decline of the Roman Empire as a result of the barbarian invasions had the paradoxical effect of incorporating barbarian ways into Roman and Mediterranean culture, Romania; whereas, Pirenne argues, the consequences of the Islamic invasions beginning in the seventh century was to move the center of European culture away from the Mediterranean, which was then an Arab province, and towards the North.... Europe was shut in on itself: the Orient, when it was not merely a place in which one traded, was culturally, intellectually, spiritually *outside* Europe and European civilization, which, in Pirenne's words, became 'one great Christian community, coterminous with the *ecclesia*. . . . The Occident was now living its own life.' (71)

12. Gregory B. Stone, "The Age of Others," *Medieval Encounters* 2:2 (1996), 155–63.

In this passage we easily recognize the picture evoked in the 2001 *Nation* article quoted earlier. Yet curiously, while in *Orientalism* the works of political figures like Balfour or Cromer, intellectuals like Lane or Renan, and men of letters like Lamartine or Flaubert all come in for careful critical scrutiny, Pirenne's characterization of the Middle Ages is taken not as symptomatic of his time and discursive space but as a transparent account of Muslim-Christian relations from the seventh century forward. It is as if Said's trenchant critique of Orientalism is bought at the price of what we might call "Medievalism"—itself a widespread phenomenon. As Gregory Stone has written:

In contemporary public discourse the adjective "medieval" functions—when it does not just mean "barbaric" pure and simple—as a synonym for "intolerant," "self-centered," "narrow-minded," "dogmatic," "doctrinaire," "mentally inflexible," "fascist," "cruel." Medieval Europeans were those people who, out of an ignorance of alternative ways and possibilities caused by a paucity of encounters with others, thought they were always right.¹²

The result is the "emptying out of the Middle Ages as a category with its own history" that Kathleen Davis identifies as part of "a strategy with a

13. Davis, "Time Behind the Veil," 112.

14. Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, trans. Russell Moore (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), 74–75. On the ruptures of the European sixteenth century, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

15. Porter, "Orientalism and Its Problems," 184–85.

16. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 54; orig. *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955). Césaire here explicitly cites the crusader Jean de Joinville, biographer of the saint-king Louis IX of France.

17. Thus when King Offa of Mercia (a contemporary of Charlemagne) struck a gold coin in the year 774, he modeled it after an 'Abbasid dinar: his name, in Latin letters, was accompanied by a legend in Arabic, and the date was stamped on the coin was that of the Hegira," 157. Robert S. Lopez, "Mohammed and Charlemagne: A Revision," *Speculum* 18:1 (1943), 14–38 (at 30). The 'Abbasids were the dynasty of Caliphs who ruled the Muslim world from Baghdad between 750 and 1258.

long modern and imperial genealogy: it paradoxically claims the Middle Ages as both the origin of a progressive history and as an inert, sealed off space *before* the movement of history."¹³

In contrast to Said's emphasis on Orientalism's "sheer knitted-together strength" and "redoubtable durability," other critics underscore its historical specificity as a modern, colonial discourse. For Egyptian theorist Samir Amin, for example, the assertion of an intrinsic European superiority of the kind underlying Orientalism becomes imaginable only with the global expansion of European commercial capitalism in the long sixteenth century. Thus when Dante places Mohammed in Hell, it is not, as Said would have it, a moment of "Eurocentrism" but simply an example of the "banal provincialism" to be found wherever one culture encounters a group it perceives as its cultural Other; what we (mis)take for medieval instances of Orientalism are expressions of ignorance and fear in a time "before European hegemony."¹⁴ Dennis Porter elaborates: "In the era before European ascendancy the assumption of European superiority is not automatic even where the form of literary representation involved is that of European subject to Eastern object, of observer to observed. In the late thirteenth century, it was the European who was in awe of Eastern power and Eastern armies and not vice versa."¹⁵ And to Said's vision of a Christian Europe "shut in on itself," one can counterpose Aimé Césaire's assertion that the thirteenth-century knight "who fought Islam but respected it, had a better chance of *knowing* it than do our contemporaries (even if they have a smattering of ethnographic literature), who despise it."¹⁶

Acknowledging the historical complexity of the Middle Ages—examining its political, economic, and cultural practices as well as its ideological pronouncements—unsettles the picture of its monolithic and monologic orientalism. As early as 1943, Robert Lopez challenged Pirenne's thesis of the dire consequence of the rise of Islam, emphasizing instead continuities of contract and trade, and the degree to which Islamic (like Byzantine) forms functioned as a prestige culture susceptible of admiration and imitation.¹⁷ Other scholars self-consciously play against the Orientalist grain. In his analysis of queenship in the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem, for example, Bernard Hamilton writes that the Muslim world "was clearly shocked by

the degree of social freedom which western women enjoyed.” However, he immediately disrupts this familiar orientalist binarism—an enlightened West versus a backwards East—by adding that Arab sources “reacted to women with political power much as misogynist dons did to the first generation of women undergraduates, by affecting not to notice them.”¹⁸

II. Deprovincializing the Middle Ages

Like the “Orient” and often linked to it, the Middle Ages was one of the nineteenth century’s abiding obsessions.¹⁹ Already in 1829, after noting “*Au siècle de Louis XIV on était helléniste, maintenant on est orientaliste*,” Victor Hugo goes on to compare the seduction of the Orient to that exerted by the Middle Ages: “*Là, en effet, tout est grand, riche, fécond, comme dans le Moyen Age, cette autre mer de poésie.*”²⁰ The historical and structural parallels between them make it no surprise, then, that Medievalism and Orientalism were conscripted to similar roles in the construction of Modernity. Catherine Brown succinctly makes this point by taking a paragraph from Said and substituting “Medievalism” for “Orientalism,” “Middle Ages” for “Orient,” and “the present” for “Europe.”

For decades the Medievalists had spoken about the Middle Ages, they had translated texts, they had explained civilizations, religions, dynasties, cultures, mentalities—as academic objects screened off from the present by virtue of their inimitable foreignness. The Medievalist was an expert . . . whose job in society was to interpret the Middle Ages for his compatriots. The relationship between Medievalist and Middle Ages was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely understandable civilization or cultural monument, the Medievalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object.²¹

One preoccupation of the emerging field of “postcolonial” medievalism has been precisely to excavate the nineteenth-century roots of our discipline, revealing the mutual imbrication of medieval studies, colonialism and nationalism. Kathleen Biddick, for example, has shown how the “cleavage in the Victorian intelligentsia around the response to Governor Eyre’s handling of the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica in 1865”—for

18. Bernard Hamilton, “Women in the Crusader States: the Queens of Jerusalem, 1100–1190” in *Medieval Women*, ed. D. Baker (Oxford, 1978), 143; repr. *Crusaders, Cathars and the Holy Places*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

19. Said refers to the “virtual epidemic of Orientalism affecting every major poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period” (*Orientalism*, 51). Among the medievalizing examples he cites are Walter Scott’s crusades novel, *The Talisman*, and Disraeli’s *Tancred* (*Orientalism*, 99). In the visual arts, Eugène Delacroix’s “Entry of the Crusaders into Constantinople” (1840) evokes the Westerners’ sack of the Eastern Christian capital in 1204. On the role of the crusades in the nineteenth-century imaginary, see Elizabeth Sillery, “Images of the Crusades in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*, ed. Jonathan Riley-Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 365–85.

20. Preface to “Les Orientales,” Victor Hugo, *Odes et ballades—Les Orientales* (Paris: Garnier-Flammariion, 1968), 322, emphasis added. “In the century of Louis XIV one was a Hellenist, now one is an Orientalist . . . There, in effect, everything is large, rich, fertile, like in the Middle Ages, that other sea of poetry.”

21. Catherine Brown, “In the Middle,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30:3 (2000), 549. The passage she is modifying comes from Said, *Orientalism*, 222.

22. Goldwin Smith, the Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, was a member of the liberal Jamaica Committee, which wanted Eyre to be tried for his actions. Attacked for his position, he resigned his professorship in 1866 and was replaced by William Stubbs, who presided over the professionalization of medieval history as the study of the long-dead past. Goldwin, for his part, crossed to the United States, where he took up a post (1868) at Cornell University. Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 5–9. On the Eyre case, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 11. In 1997, one could still write, “the study of Chaucer, to a surprising extent, still works within the foundational, nationalist parameters established by Victorian England.” This is part of David Wallace’s critique of the Anglocentrism of medieval English studies in his *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), xiii.

23. See Sharon Kinoshita, “Pagans are Wrong and Christians are Right’: Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31:1 (2001), 79–111 (at 80–81).

24. Compare the editor’s introduction to *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, in which Jeffrey Jerome Cohen specifies that one of the volume’s explicit goals is to demonstrate “the violences and internal colonizations upon which Englishness was founded.” Thus the volume’s “disproportionately large” focus on England is presented as “a deliberate choice, accomplished because England has such a tight grip on the critical imaginary of North American medievalists (and postcolonial theorists).” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Midcolonial,” *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, 8.

Paul Gilroy a key moment in the construction of “England and Englishness”—decisively shaped the institutional history of medieval studies on both sides of the Atlantic.²² In France, the canonization of the *Song of Roland* as the French national epic took shape in the 1870s, in the aftermath of France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and the intensification of colonial rule in Algeria.²³

How could or should this revelation of the nineteenth-century roots of medieval studies affect our critical practice? One strain of postcolonial medievalism has focused on exposing premodern genealogies of the ideologies informing Western Europe’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial expansionism, discerning the proto-Orientalism and racial binaries in epic and romance representations of pagans and “Saracens,” or in the nascent discourses of nationalism in late medieval England.²⁴ Such analyses fit comfortably within Said’s vision of Orientalism’s long history, and—for reasons I don’t have time to develop here—tend to cluster in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁵ At its most extreme, this emphasis on continuity results in the total collapse of historical difference: “In [the tenth- or eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon] *Wonders of the East*, India is identical to the India depicted by Forster, a place of mystery and imagination that does not make any sense.”²⁶ Conversely, other medievalists have focused on drawing out the *differences* between the medieval and the modern—largely in an attempt to undo nineteenth-century categories that, for all our efforts at deconstruction and historicization, continue to haunt our critical readings. Robert Bartlett, for example, has argued that the high Middle Ages lacked a biological notion of race.²⁷ Where we might expect racial designations, medieval texts tend to take religion as a primary marker of difference.²⁸ This is not to say that medieval people did not notice somatic variation—simply that the will to equate skin color or other “racial” features with significant difference was far from automatic. In the mid-tenth century, the Persian traveler Naser-e Khosraw depicts the inhabitants of Andalusia (Muslim Iberia) as having “white skin and red hair. Most of them have cat-eyes like Slavs.”²⁹ Three centuries later, the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck (in current-day Belgium), seeking out the Great Khan at the behest of Louis IX of France, describes two

Mongols he meets as “dark like Spaniards” but then renders Batu, khan of the Golden Horde, as “similar in size to Sir John of Beaumont (may his soul rest in peace).”³⁰

The absence of a biological discourse of race in the high middle ages is of course the logical corollary of recent demonstrations that race is a phenomenon of modernity, a social construction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A closely related issue concerns the linking of race and national or proto-national identities. As medievalists have shown, many of the “barbarian” tribes whose names we take as ethnic markers were in fact “the product, not of blood, but of history.”³¹ Patrick Geary makes this point emphatically in his recent book, *The Myth of Nations*. In wake of the resurgent ethnic nationalisms and neo-racism of the 1990s, he condemns the “pseudo-history” that assumes the peoples of Europe to be “distinct, stable and objectively identifiable social and cultural units, and that they are distinguished by language, religion, custom, and national character, which are unambiguous and immutable.” In opposition to the alarm sounded by right-wing politicians at the spectacle of “thousands of rioting Albanian refugees” in Brindisi or “Romanian gypsies begging in the streets” of Berlin, he notes that “in the history of Europe, such mass movements have been the rule rather than the exception. The present populations of Europe, with their many languages, traditions, and cultural and political identities, are the result of these waves of migrations.” To nationalist distortions of the medieval past as the foundational moment of ethnogenesis, Geary counterposes a textured history showing “ethnic” groups like the Huns to have been tribal confederations based more on political affiliation than blood or kinship.³² “Names of peoples may seem familiar after a thousand years, but the social, cultural, and political realities covered by these names were radically different from what they are today. For this reason we need a new understanding of the peoples of Europe, especially in that formative period of European identity that was the first millennium.” Historians, he poignantly concludes, “have a duty to speak out, even if they are certain to be ignored.”³³

Despite these careful and historically specific reconstructions, however, categories like race and nation continue to exert a hold over our

25. This has to do with what some medievalists have seen as a kind of epistemic rupture within the Middle Ages themselves, with the early thirteenth century ushering in a proto-Foucauldian mentality of discipline, punishment, taxonomies, and standardization. See Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2–3 and 135–38. This late medieval regime is what R. I. Moore has termed a “persecuting society” in *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

26. Andrea Rossi-Reder, “Wonders of the Beast: India in Classical and Medieval Literature,” in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 42 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 53–66 (at 66).

27. In the Middle Ages, peoples were distinguished not by biological essence but by language, law, “dress, domestic rituals, dietary habits, hair-styles and a host of other habitual practices.” The key feature of this cultural concept of difference is that, unlike race, such attributes could be changed “not only from one generation to the next, but even within an individual lifetime.” See Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), chapters 8–9, esp. 197–98.

28. John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

29. Andalusia itself he describes as “a large and mountainous province where it snows and freezes . . . It is ‘under’ the Mediterranean.” *Nasir-e Khosraw’s Book of Travels (Safarnama)*, trans. W. M. Thackston, Jr., *Persian Heritage Series* 36 (New York: Persian Heritage Foundation [see; In an Antique Land, 360—copied.], 1986), 43.

30. Christopher Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 127, 143. Lest anyone doubt the way medieval studies is inflected by modern political concerns, see Dawson's preface (originally published in 1955), where he describes William of Rubruck as traveling through Constantinople and the Crimea "rather than entering the Mongol world through the *Iron Curtain* of Eastern Europe and Russia" (xxii, emphasis added). Likewise, in the Penguin edition of Marco Polo's *Travels*, first published in 1958, translator Ronald Latham refers to the "iron curtain" that the "meteoric rise of Islam . . . interposed . . . between West and East" (8).

31. Marjorie Chibnall in *The Normans, The Peoples of Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 3.

32. As Chibnall writes about the Normans: "the *gens Normannorum* of the chroniclers . . . were of exceptionally mixed blood," their identity determined by "allegiance to a leader, not ethnic unity" (*The Normans*, 3–4). David Morgan makes a similar point about the Mongols in *The Mongols, The Peoples of Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 89–90. Morgan gives the example of the Persian-speaking "Hazara" of central Afghanistan, whose name—far from being an ethnic designation—derives from the Persian word for "a thousand," reflecting the decimal organization characteristic of Central Asian armies like that of the Mongols.

33. Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. 7, 9, 10, 11, 13. In England, the study of the middle ages is also inseparable from the long genealogy of the ideology of "Anglo-Saxonism." See Allen Frantzen, *Desire For Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); and Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English*

thought, as is evident in the persistent way they pervade our analyses—the way that race is frequently reinscribed in readings of medieval discourses of religious difference. A recent analysis characterizes the *Song of Roland* as

one of the most violent and widely diffused pieces of anti-Muslim literature in the years surrounding the First Crusade. Here the religious alterity of the Saracen *Abisme*, who "fears not God, the Son of Saint Mary," is writ large on his countenance: "Black is that man as molten pitch that seethes." Roland himself gazes upon other such "misbegotten men," who appear "more black than ink is on the pen, / With no part white but their teeth." Samir Marzouki has gone so far as to argue that for the *Roland* author skin color was "*un indice moral ainsi qu'un indice social*" [a moral as well as a social indicator], in which the Saracen, "*hâlé par le soleil, était considéré comme laid et par conséquent immoral*" [tanned by the sun was considered ugly and therefore immoral].³⁴

In the portrait of *Abisme* (French for "abyss"), we encounter a disturbing equation between skin color and a Saracen disdain for "the Son of Saint Mary"—a somatization of perceived religious and cultural difference.³⁵ Yet to take this as representative of the *Roland's* view of Islam is highly misleading, ignoring its wide array of physical and cultural types, from the bristle-backed Mycenes, to the seductively handsome Margariz of Seville, to the Saracen king's son, Jurfaleu the Blond, and his nephew, who bears the distinctively Germanic name Aëlroth.³⁶ The notion that in medieval epic, Saracens are systematically, or even predominantly, racialized as black is, in other words, a distortion produced by selective quotation that risks hardening into the self-fulfilling prophecy of a sheer knitted-together discourse.³⁷ In medieval French epic, for example, the stock figure of the Saracen princess is indistinguishable from any beautiful woman of high station. This absence of racializing markers has sometimes been read as an ethnocentric erasure of racial and cultural difference.³⁸ But impulse to correlate religious faith with somatic features, I have argued elsewhere, reveals more about modern presuppositions than about lived medieval realities, as Naser-e Khosraw's evocation of white-skinned, red-haired Spanish Muslims shows.³⁹

Any cursory look at the Middle Ages also disturbs (or should disturb) the modern reflex of taking the nation-state as a default category of analysis. This is apparent politically—in the way the medieval Crown of Aragon, for example, assembled a dynastic confederation spanning non-contiguous territories belonging to several modern nations—but also culturally, as in the way the nascent vernaculars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were not yet carriers of national identity.⁴⁰ Versions of Old French, for example, were spoken north of the Loire, in Anglo-Norman England, in the kingdom of Sicily, and as a literal *lingua franca* across the Mediterranean, but not in southern France, the land of *langue d’oc* (Occitanian). In the mid-thirteenth century, French was “at once a national and a supranational language” of “prestige and dominance.” Thus Brunetto Latini composed his *Livres dou Tresor* in French “*por çou que la parleure est plus delitable et plus commune a tous langages*”—“because that language is more delightful and more widespread than all others.”⁴¹ Likewise, when Rustichello of Pisa and Marco Polo met in a Genoese prison, the former transcribed the tale of the latter’s travels in French rather than in Italian. As Rustichello’s career as a romance writer exemplifies, the choice of a vernacular was often strongly linked to genre: Richard the Lionheart, king of England but also duke of Aquitaine, composed lyric poetry in both Old French and Occitanian, while the Alfonso X of Castile composed his *Cantigas de Santa Maria* in Galician. And, in a multilingual *tour de force*, the early thirteenth century troubadour Raimon de Vaqueiras composed a “descort” with successive stanzas in Old French, Provençal, Catalan, Portuguese and Italian.⁴²

As many of the examples given above indicate, medieval Iberia is in fact a privileged site from which to disrupt reductive notions of the “European” Middle Ages. “There is little ‘orientalism’ in medieval Spain’s posturing toward the Moors; neither is there an overriding compulsion towards abjection, but rather a pragmatic give-and-take that lines itself up only exceptionally along the battlelines of crusade.”⁴³ In the *Cantar de Mio Cid*—retrospectively constructed as the Spanish national epic—the protagonist’s most troublesome enemies are in fact his sons-in-law, the counts of Carrión, his most dependable ally the noble Moor Abengalbón,

History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1982).

34. Bruce Holsinger, “The Color of Salvation: Desire, Death, and the Second Crusade in Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*” in *The Tongue of the Father: Gender and Ideology in Twelfth-Century Latin*, ed. David Townsend and Andrew Taylor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 156–86 (at 170).

35. In point of fact, both Jesus and Mary are of course revered figures in Islamic tradition.

36. Kinoshita, “Pagans are Wrong,” 82–83.

37. For William Chester Jordan, the risks involved “in regarding medieval attitudes toward people of different ‘races’ as ‘racist’” outweigh the benefits. See “Why ‘Race’?”, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31:1 (2001), 165, 168.

38. Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba’s Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York: Garland, 1998), esp. chap. 1.

39. Sharon Kinoshita, “The Romance of MiscegeNation: Negotiating Identities in *La Fille du comte de Pontieu*,” in *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval Through Modern*, ed. Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 111–31 (at 118–19).

40. On linguistic complexity in the Middle Ages, see Geary, *Myth of Nations*, 37–39: “Only the horrors of the twentieth century have created the illusion that language and ethnicity could or should be mappable.”

41. Kevin Brownlee, "The Conflicted Genealogy of Cultural Authority: Italian Responses to French Cultural Dominance in *Il Tesoretto*, *Il Fiore*, and *La Commedia*" in *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity through Early Modern Europe*, ed. Valeria Finucci and Kevin Brownlee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 262–86 (at 266). For Brownlee, Dante's *Commedia* represents a "profoundly aggressive" claim on behalf of the new Italian literary vernacular, one that "strategically ignores the fact of French cultural primacy in the vernacular" (286).

42. See H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (New York: October House, 1967), especially chapter 3, "Language and Nationality." On the emergence of the *Lingua Franca* as a "contact vernacular," particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean, see Henry and Renee Kahane, "*Lingua Franca: The Story of a Term*," *Romance Philology* 30:1 (1976), 25–41.

43. Gregory S. Hutcheson, "The Sodomitic Moor: Queerness in the Narrative of *Reconquista*" in *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, *Medieval Cultures* 27 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 99–122 (at 104).

44. "De parte de orient vino vn coronado / El obispo don ierom[e] so nombre es I[am]ado," "from the east came a mitered one; his name is Bishop Jerome." *Cantar de Mio Cid*, ed. Francisco A. Marcos Marín (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1997), ll. 1288–89.

45. "Coming out of Exile" in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, 49, n.16, Kathleen Biddick fleetingly alludes to "the important . . . questions at issue in recent work on religious and ethnic groups and economic history in medieval Iberia, which have rich implications for recent work on postcolonial translingual practices" (she refers to the work of Thomas E. Burman, Olivia Remie Constable, Mark D. Meyerson, and David Ni-

and the text's most "oriental" figure the French bishop Jerome, "de parte de orient," whom the Cid appoints to the newly conquered see of Valencia.⁴⁴ Despite this, Iberia is at best addressed only in passing in some central works of the emerging field of postcolonial medievalism.⁴⁵ The dictum that "Europe ends at the Pyrenees" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the Iberian peninsula is not "European" because "Europe" is defined as culture much smaller than the continent bearing this name.

Nor is it only medieval Iberia that provides such examples. To return to our point of departure: Dante—so central to Said's conception of the European Middle Ages—is susceptible to other readings as well. As Reed Way Dasenbrock writes:

[I]f there is a history of "Orientalism," there is also a history of "counter-Orientalism," of discourse which seeks to break down the structure of opposition between self and other which Orientalism helps to construct. Said's work itself makes no sense without the possibility of this "counter-discourse" which breaks down the rigid oppositions he criticizes and seeks to modify. I would argue that Dante's placement of Saladin in the first circle [of the *Inferno*] should be seen less as a foundational gesture of Orientalism than a foundational gesture of a "Counter-Orientalism." The Other is not denied human attributes: the Other is praised here for helping to create the very culture which Said imagines Dante opposing to that Other.

Dasenbrock concedes that "Said is in large measure right to discern in the Western tradition of representing Islam a discursive system in which Islam is presented as a demonized 'Other.'" But he locates that work of demonization in the literary (and nationalizing) epics of Tasso, Camoens, and Spenser—three *sixteenth-century* poems "for which Said's critique has genuine relevance."⁴⁶

III. Discrepant Medievalisms

In a talk entitled "On Globalism, Again" presented at the 2002 conference "Postcolonial Studies and Beyond," Ali Behdad—analyzing the theoretical belatedness of academic discourse of globalism—notes that, despite the "scale and speed of the current global flow . . . the flow itself is rather

old, as is the discourse of novelty itself.” Where Enrique Dussel and Homi Bhabha “locate the advent of ‘global culture’ in 1492 with Columbus’s so-called discovery of America,” Behdad invokes Janet Abu-Lughod’s “surprisingly forgotten text” *Before European Hegemony* as the source of “compelling historical evidence for the existence of a complex and sophisticated world system in the thirteenth century.”⁴⁷ He calls for “a new set of historical inquiries” that would, among other things, produce a genealogy of the historical formation of globalism.⁴⁸

The world system mapped by Abu-Lughod may already be discerned in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in the “Mediterranean Society” reconstructed by historian S. D. Goitein from the accidental archive of the Cairo Geniza.⁴⁹ A huge cache of letters, marriage contracts, bills of divorce, legal deeds, court records, business accounts, wills, inventories, horoscopes, and children’s writing exercises (written mostly in Judeo-Arabic) “discovered” by western scholars in the late nineteenth century, these *geniza* records offer a glimpse of a multicultural and multiconfessional world in which Jewish merchants based in Fatimid Egypt maintained networks of trading partners and correspondents stretching from Almería in the west to the Malabar coast of India in the east. Goitein’s work has served as an important source of inspiration for the postcolonial novelist Amitav Ghosh, who, in his ethnography-cum-memoir *In An Antique Land*, contrasts the fluidity of medieval categories of difference with the straight lines and unforgiving rules of History with a capital “H.”⁵⁰ It is also central to the project of poet-scholar-translator Ammiel Alcalay in his *After Jews and Arabs*, who writes: “One of the most striking aspects of the *geniza* world is the extent to which people, goods, and ideas continued to travel freely over a vast and incredibly diverse geographical area, despite political conflicts, wars, civil wars, invasions, unstable or tyrannical rulers, natural disasters, epidemics, and any and all other possible obstacles, whether human or divine.”⁵¹

Historians chronicling these multiethnic, multiconfessional societies often make a point of reminding us that they did not last; such moments of coexistence, they imply, are insignificant anomalies in a larger sea of genocidal intolerance. One historian of Norman Sicily, after noting

renberg), only to say she is not going to address them. In his important study “Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique,” *Speculum* 77 (2002), 1195–1227, Bruce W. Holsinger includes several bibliographical items relating to Iberia in a footnote, but does not address Iberia’s role in Postcolonial Medievalism.

46. Reed Way Dasenbrock, “Saladin, Confucius, and the Status of the Other in Dante and Pound,” *Dante e Pound: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi «Dante e Poind», Ravenna, 8–10 Settembre 1995*, ed. Maria Luisa Ardizzone (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1998), 63–76 (at 74). On the counter-discourse of tolerance, see Cary J. Nederman, *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration, c. 1100–c. 1550* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

47. *Before European Hegemony* offers a synoptic view of the period from 1250 to 1350, when Ghent and Bruges, Genoa and Venice, and the fair towns of Champagne constituted an “archipelago of towns” linked to a “world system”—enabled by the *pax mongolica*—stretching from Europe and the Mediterranean through Central Asia to China and the Indies. Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

48. Ali Behdad, “On Globalism, Again,” *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 25–28, April 2002. I thank Ali Behdad for sending me the text of his talk.

49. The Geniza was a tower, once common in medieval synagogues, used to store unwanted documents until they could be properly buried, since no writing bearing God’s name could be destroyed. See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 5 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–88), I, 1–16.

50. In a *tour de force* of Subaltern Studies, Ghosh is able (with a little poetic license) to reconstruct to a remarkable extent the lives of a twelfth-century Indian slave named Bomma, as well as his master, the Arabic-speaking Jewish trader Abraham ben Yiju. Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale* (New York: Random House, 1992). Ghosh, in turn, is an important figure for James Clifford in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1–2, 4–6, 276. Kathleen Biddick criticizes what she interprets as Ghosh's overly sentimental representation of medieval slavery. See her "Translating the Foreskin" in *Queering the Middle Ages*, 193–212 (at 198–204).

51. For Alcalay, Goitein's sensitivity to "the range of human and cultural interaction between Jews and Arabs in the Levant makes it a fertile, resilient, and antithetical point of reference in the face of the unchecked assumptions and 'logical minimalizations' that everywhere circumscribe the present scene." Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 130, 132.

52. Donald Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 112–13.

53. Joan-Pau Rubiès, "Marco Polo's India and the Latin Christian Tradition," in *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India Through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 35–83 (at 36).

that the "mixture of religions and cultures found in the twelfth-century southern kingdom has excited the interest and admiration of the modern imagination," hastens to add: "The multicultural dimension of the southern kingdom was . . . only a transitory phenomenon, and it is unlikely that there was ever any genuine interest in fostering intercultural relations or protecting minority cultures."⁵² This seems to me a rather odd instance of the Intentional Fallacy, as if multiculturalism "counts" only where it is self-consciously theorized. Such assessments, moreover, capitulate too quickly to a teleological view of the inexorability of History: but for our historical myopia and "chronocentrism," there is, after all, no reason to dismiss the long twelfth century as less significant or complex than the nineteenth.

What these examples reveal, I think, is the capital importance of attention to *context*, whether chronological, geographical, social, cultural, or even generic. Joan-Pau Rubiès notes how much the modern perception of medieval representations of the other draws on a pictorial tradition localizable in space and time to late medieval northern France—to the exclusion of a nuanced reading of the texts these images accompany:

[W]e must seek to distance ourselves from the commonplace that the Orient was represented in the Middle Ages as a land of marvels populated by a collection of monstrous races, and its corollary that this 'medieval view of the other', influenced by classical authors like Pliny and Solinus and built around medieval re-workings of Greek themes such as the Alexander romance, reflects something fundamental about the medieval mentality.

In fact, "rather than determining a simplistic and all-encompassing duality, crusade and mission generated novel experiences and eventually gave form to discourses which were original, in some ways even revolutionary."⁵³ Indeed, for all the reductionism of Said's vision of the Middle Ages, his favorite quotation—the line he so poignantly and repeatedly cites—comes from the twelfth-century philosopher Hugh of St. Victor: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land."⁵⁴ This emphasis on cosmopolitanism and exile is not surprising in the man who will go on to entitle

his memoir *Out of Place* and who will refer to Cairo—the place he spent the majority of youth—as “a city I always liked yet in which I never felt I belonged.”⁵⁵ Yet during the years of Said’s childhood, traces of Goitein’s Geniza world certainly lingered in the eastern Mediterranean—as, for example, in the story of Leila Ahmed’s beloved Nanny, a French-speaking Croatian who, when widowed in the 1910s, made her way to Istanbul, “the capital of what was still the Ottoman Empire, a familiar landmark in people’s consciousness, as it had been for generations,” before eventually coming to Cairo.⁵⁶ In the polyglot and multiconfessional Mediterranean of Ahmed’s childhood, we recognize something of the Geniza world of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (anachronistically?) resisting the epistemologically comforting cookie cutter of modern national, religious, and ethnic difference.

Conclusions

What I hope to have demonstrated through these examples is that to lose sight of the specificity of the Middle Ages is to lose sight of the specificity of Modernity as well. Delinking the study of medieval texts from the nineteenth-century obsession with nationalism and colonial expansion makes visible aspects of the premodern which in turn unsettle the unreflective construction of modernity over and against an inert medieval Other. Interestingly, this is something that novelists seem, in advance of critics and theorists, to have understood: historical fiction set in the Middle Ages has become a place to explore the complexities of Muslim-Jewish-“European” relations.⁵⁷ These heterogeneous and contestatory Middle Ages—before European hegemony, before nation-states and before national vernaculars—challenge us to put into practice our avowed critical desire to see beyond the binary, to encounter an “Other” whose alterity may reside precisely in its different conception of difference. Such historical work gives texture to our understanding of what *Orientalism* has taught us: that “Europe” and “the West” are not geographical entities given in advance, but ideological constructs with their own deeply complicated histories of conquest, colonization, and acculturation.

54. Said, *Orientalism*, 259. On Said’s use of this quotation, see Clifford, “On Orientalism,” 264, and Kathleen Biddick, “Coming Out of Exile: Dante on the Orient Express,” in *Postcolonial Middle Ages*, 35–52 (at 37–38).

55. Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1999), 43.

56. Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman’s Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999; repr. Penguin, 2000),

57. See, for example, Amin Maalouf, *Léon l’Africain* (Paris: J. C. Lattès, 1986), translated as *Leo Africanus*, trans. Peter Sluglett (London: New Amsterdam Press, 1992), and Tariq Ali’s historical quartet: *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (London: Verso, 1993) on the fall of Granada in 1492; *The Book of Saladin* (London: Verso, 1998), which a jacket blurb by Edward Said describes as “a narrative for our time, haunted by distant events and characters who are closer to us than we dreamed”; *The Stone Woman* (London: Verso, 2000); and *A Sultan in Palermo* (New York: Verso, 2005). Episodes from the history of the crusades serve as the occasion for epistemological speculations in Maria Corti, *L’Ora di tutti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962) in English as *Otranto*, trans. Jessie Bright (New York: Italica Press, 1993); José Saramago, *Historia do Cerco de Lisboa : Romance* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1989), in English as *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1996). See also Evan S. Connell, *Deus lo Volt! Chronicle of the Crusades* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), A. B. Yehoshua, *Journey to the End of the Millennium: A Novel of the Middle Ages*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (New York: Doubleday, 1999).