On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England

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Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other. It is not simply—humanistically—a matter of being able to accept the other, but of being in his place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. . . . The word foreshadowed the exile, the possibility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country, thus heralding the art of living of a modern era, the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed.

—Julia Kristeva, “Toccata and Fugue for the Foreigner”

Because she writes in universalizing terms, feminist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has been dismissed as an essentializing throwback to her Parisian predecessors, the existentialists led by Jean-Paul Sartre, with their Big Pronouncements on la condition humaine.¹ In Strangers to Ourselves (Étrangers à Nous-Mêmes)—the title of which even cites Albert Camus—Kristeva conducts a poetical investigation into the place of the other, arguing that a painful self-estrangement suffuses all human subjectivity.² Because in this formulation a foundational otherness is everywhere, the counterargument goes, it is nowhere. I must admit to never having understood the logic of this kind of dismissal, frequent in scholarly circles (e.g., “If queerness is everywhere, it is nowhere”): many things are omnipresent—oxygen, altruism, violence—and they do not vanish once confronted with that fact. But the anxiety which provokes such a dismissal of Kristeva’s thesis is understandable, for any universalism would seem to exclude the determinative power of the local, the contingent, the historical, all of which are central to contemporary critical work on ethnicity and race.

In this essay I would like to place in conversation the grand gestures
of psychoanalysis and the temporally circumscribed discourses of medieval and postcolonial studies, especially as they relate to the construction of race in late medieval France and England. These three modes of analysis find a natural point of overlap in exploring the cultural work of the Saracens, whose dark skin and diabolical physiognomy were the Western Middle Ages’ most familiar, most exorbitant embodiment of racial alterity. Most scholarship on Saracens has been content to explain their widespread presence by reference to their function in crusading propaganda, where their monstrous presence serves as both a call to arms and an uncomplicated antithesis to Christian identity. When a medieval text declares that in the Holy Land Saracens circumcise Christian boys and “spill the blood of circumcision right into the baptismal fonts and compel them to urinate over them,” it is clear that these demonized others perform their blasphemous acts to mobilize the text’s auditors against them. Such historicizing explanation works admirably well in demonstrating the contextual determination of race, linking the promulgation of a spectacularly embodied otherness to a contemporary program of martial displacement. More difficult, however, is accounting for why outside of empty nostalgia or mere convention Saracens continued to inhabit the fantasies of times and places no longer passionately invested in the destruction of Islam. My aim in this essay is therefore threefold: to trace briefly the genealogy of a racialized bodily otherness marked by skin color in its relation to physiology and character; to argue that medieval constructions of race included the knowledge that a “biological” truth of the body is produced (and sustained) through repetitive acts of representation, so that this truth could be deterritorialized, disrupted, at the moment of its embodiment; and to suggest that psychoanalysis because of its universalizing tendencies provides a useful means for breaking the power of universals, allowing the particularities of the other to become visible at last. In the end, I would like to consider what Kristeva could possibly mean by the resonant phrase which ends my epigraph: what, exactly, is the “cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed”?

Saracens and the matter of race

Saracen, a term with a long history in the Christian vocabulary for the negative representation of difference, was disseminated with a special vigor throughout the Latin West in support of the crusades. The collective Latin noun Saraceni and its vernacular derivatives were promulgated to contain within reductive flesh the diversity of the non-Christian world, especially—
but not exclusively—Islam. In those areas it called its Holy Land and its East, as well as in Iberia, Western Christianity had a long experience of heterogeneous cultures. Some were clearly allied by kinship, affinity, geography, political expedience, religion; others existed in bitter competition amongst themselves and with their neighbors; all were as ethnically various and politically mutable over time as the inhabitants of those lands which the Latin Christians had left behind. But just as *Christianitas* seldomly acknowledged its own internal differences, promulgating instead a transnational, transtemporal myth of essential unity and sameness, this non-Christian world was likewise represented as lacking interior variation. Peter the Venerable, for example, might have hesitated in the title of his *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim Saracenorum*, indicating a widespread uncertainty about whether Islam was a *secta* (body of belief independent of Christianity) or *haeresis* (heresy), but he knew that all Saracens shared its errors (hence the unannounced collective plural *Saracenorum*), and tautologically that sharing rendered them Saracens. Cultural specificities were lost as the inhabitants of Iberia and the East were unified beneath the sign *Saracen*, a racialized figure of ultimate difference who condensed everything inimical to the fragile Christian selfsame.

That the body of the medieval other could be a *racialized* body perhaps needs some elaboration. Robert Bartlett has influentially argued that race in the Middle Ages was closer to what we would today call ethnicity. While observing that the language in which race was expressed (“*gens, natio*, ‘blood,’ ‘stock,’ etc.”) would seem to be biological, Bartlett nonetheless asserts that “its medieval reality was almost entirely cultural.” Bartlett defines medieval race as a compound of language, law, power, and blood. Because only the last of these determinants is rooted in the body, Bartlett stresses, race was a plastic category of identity. Modern technologies of racial discrimination and containment (special badges and clothing, ghettoization) emerged only after an emphasis on descent and uniformity became prevalent in the late Middle Ages. Even then, however, the biological determination of race proceeded from a preoccupation with blood in its relation to lineage and inheritance rather than from a cultural interest in skin color and physiology, making medieval racism different in kind from contemporary versions.

Dermal and physiological difference, the most familiar markers of embodied race, play no role in Bartlett’s formulation because he overlooks race’s humoral-climatological (that is, medical and scientific) construction; race for Bartlett ultimately has little to do with bodies. Another scholar,
faced with what seems to be just such a “modern” linking of bodily difference and skin color to racial typing, likewise hesitates to invoke the possibility of a premodern bodily discrimination of race. In a footnote to her magisterial work on the scientific construction of sexual difference in the Middle Ages, Joan Cadden puzzles over a reference by Albertus Magnus connecting the color of black women’s skin to their supposed sexual aptness. Since so little scholarship exists on the medieval language of skin color, she writes, it is difficult to evaluate black skin as a possible racial signifier. Yet skin color is never a mere fact, but is, from the moment a difference in pigmentation is imputed, already caught in the imbricated discriminations that make race inextricable from religion, location, class, language, bodily appearance and comportment, anatomy, physiology, and other medical/scientific discourses of somatic functioning. John Block Friedman long ago stressed that race (even if monstrous race) could be read only by reference to geography, theology, and bodily morphology. Recent work by Steven Kruger maps medieval race as a phenomenon encompassing the imbricated mutability of gender, sexuality, and religion. Suzanne Conklin Akbari has stressed the climatological construction of what eventually becomes European whiteness. Geraldine Heng has underscored the shared work of juridical and textual constructions of racial alterity in ameliorating trauma and precipitating national cohesion. These medievalists stress that race is a phenomenon of multiple category overlap rather than a distinctly reifiable or measurable “thing” (that is, race has no independent ontology), and that race is therefore always written on and produced through the body (race is nonetheless biological). These conclusions, it is worth noting, are wholly consonant with recent work in contemporary critical race theory.

The erasure of embodied race in both Cadden and Bartlett is traceable to the fact that these critics focus their attention silently and almost exclusively on the Christian body, which then functions in their analysis in just the way the medieval corpus Christianum presented itself: as a universal body unmarked by such differentiations. Strictly speaking, the Christian body did not have a race (just as, ideally, it did not have a gender or a sexuality), because the body of the other always carried that burden on its behalf. In writing embodied race out of the Middle Ages, a medieval logic is being reenacted. Anatomical appearance, the medical composition of the body, and skin color were in fact essential to the construction of difference throughout much of this period, especially in Christian representation of the Jews who lived in their midst (gens judaica) and of Iberian and eastern Muslims (Saraceni). Geraldine Heng has argued that a multifarious, rec-
ognizably modern racial discrimination is fully evident by the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), a juridical intervention obsessed with disciplining bodies and making difference immediately visible upon them. In Heng’s analysis, the thirteenth century encouraged the proliferation of virulent new racisms, practiced especially against Muslims and Jews. These discourses of racial difference were dependent upon “the intense and searching examination” of “religion, color, and bodily difference.” Heng emphasizes the epistemic novelty of such thirteenth-century differentiations, but in constructing a racialized alterity via reference to character, color, and bodily appearance, Christian writers were also citing a tradition far predating encounters with Islam.

Greece and Rome both had direct, extended experience of Africa, especially through Egypt and the trading cities of the Mediterranean littoral, but also through contact with diverse peoples from throughout the continent. Through African bodies classical writers fantasized connections among geographical origin, cultural essence, and a biology of race (by which I mean a scientific discourse in which variations in skin color and physiology—the medicalized body—were placed in a determinative relationship to personal and group identity). In speaking of Ethiopians, geographers, historians, mythographers, philosophers, and medical theorists were referring generally to dark-skinned people in all of Africa, whose coloration, it was thought, resulted from a sun so intense that it had long ago overheated and transformed the white skin of their ancestors. Greek myth described the Ethiopians as pious and therefore favored by the gods; Greek medical writing (the so-called Hippocratic corpus) insisted that, like the plants and animals in their countries, the Ethiopians were also “drier, hotter, and stronger.” In an influential formulation, the Roman naturalist Pliny wrote that the “Ethiopians are burnt by the heat of the heavenly body near them, and are born with a scorched appearance, with curly beard and hair . . . their juice is called away into the upper portions of the body by the nature of heat.” Dark skin is a permanent and collective biological fact, an ancient climatological reconfiguring of the body which enables human survival in an inclement environment. This somatic adaptation makes perfect medical sense. Hot environments trigger a compensatory distribution of the humors, and the outward sign of this particular configuration of the body’s materiality is a swarthy complexion—where dark skin is simply the signifier of a solar-induced aridity and a resultant outward movement of the blood. A geographical accident, blackness marks race but does not thereby entail racism. Ethiopians might differ in corporeality and therefore in character.
from Romans and Greeks (and Germans and Celts), but difference did not
necessarily indicate inferiority. 

Despite the importance of figures like Augustine of Hippo, medi-
val Christianity eventually lost its early geographic connections to Africa.
Christian writers nonetheless remained familiar with classical discourse on
the Ethiopians and incorporated this writing into new fantasies about
generic bodily difference. The climactic determination of the body received
its most influential medieval treatment in Isidore of Seville’s Etymologiae,
which essentially repeats Pliny’s assertions about somatic adaptation and
solar proximity. Albertus Magnus drew upon then amplified classical
precedent to argue that the heat of Africa was written everywhere across the
Ethiopian body: “The earthly members which are inside them, as bones,
become very white as is apparent in their teeth. Their flesh is suffused with
blood as if they are glowing coals, as is apparent in their tongues and throats
when their mouths are open. And they have prominent mouths, thick lips,
reddened eyes, veins and eye lids.” Since skin color was a bodily signifier of
the distribution of passions within the individuals and groups it character-
ized, Christian texts could link corporeal difference to a foundational differ-
ence in character among unbelievers. Like Isidore before him, Bartholo-
maeus Anglicus found in the black body a spiritual deficiency derived from
a somatic one, because “the sonne abideth long over the Affers, men of
Africa, and brennen and wasten humours and maken ham shor t of body,
blacke of face, with crispy here. And for here spirites passe ouate pores
that ben open, so they be more cowardes of herte.” In contrast, cold
for Bartholomaeus is the “modir of whitnesse,” and the white skin of north-
erners is the outward marker of their inner valiance. Mandeville divided
Ethiopia into an eastern portion where the people were black, and a southern
portion where they were blacker. As a result of the climate, he wrote, all
Ethiopians ate little, were easily intoxicated, and often suffered diarrhea.
Not surprisingly, Ethiopia in Mandeville’s Travels is also a place of bodily
deformity. Christian allegoresis aligned black skin with the devil, with
Ethiopians consequently appearing as diabolical figures in the writings of
Jerome and in some of the earliest saints’ lives. In his Moralia in Job, Gre-
gory the Great (ca. 540–604) interpreted Ethiopia as a symbol of the fallen
world, its blackness a figure for sin. Paulinus of Nola declared that
Ethiopians were burnt by sin rather than sun, while a popular school text
glossed “Ethiopians” simply as “sinners,” and stated that “Ethiopians are
black men presenting a terrifying appearance to those beholding
them.” For Benoît de Sainte-Maure (ca. 1150), “in regions where the days

are hot and burning . . . [the people] have no law, religion, or reason, justice or discretion; not knowing the difference between right and wrong, they are more felonious than dogs.” Benoît immediately inscribes climatological and physiological difference as visible somatic difference, describing these “hot” peoples as black, horned, and hairy, with large ears and noses. Jacques de Vitry likewise linked torrid climate to the determination of negative racial character: “In the East, especially in hot regions, bestial and wanton people . . . easily embark on the path that leads to death.”

As Benoît and Jacques make clear, Africa, the intemperate South, provided the palimpsest for the racialized representation of Islam, and especially of the Muslim East. In the Saracen, an imagined shared alterity was written across a collective body, and this somatic difference, grounded in contemporary scientific discourse (astrology, humoral theory, and climatology) was a racial difference encompassing religion, skin color, anatomy, sexuality. Benoît's conjoining of monstrous corporeality with a similarly monstrous lack of reason to describe in crusading idiom the “felonious dogs” of the hot regions of the earth demonstrates how easily the classical vocabulary of race was transferred and amplified. Although Christians had in their historical store some affirmative possibilities for the representation of the black body (one of the three Magi who visited Christ at his nativity was frequently depicted with dark skin, as were St. Maurice and Prester John), the Saracen was ordinarily a figure abject and intolerable. Although Christians were aware of the wide differences in dermal pigmentation among Muslims, fantasies of the Saracen body generally imagined flesh as dark as the classical Ethiopian. To skin color were immediately conjoined other marks of corporeal otherness. The Borgia mappamundi depicts a dog-headed “rex Sarracenus Ethipicus” [Saracen Ethiopian king] in Africa, who with his similarly disfigured subjects is naked “propter solis calorem” [because of the heat of the sun]. Crusade propaganda figured Islam as an unassimilable body exorbitantly marked by racial difference and threatening the corporate integrity of Latin Christendom. The Saracen was visualized in the act of eviscerating, impaling, or forcefully circumcising Christian bodies, even though the Christians themselves were fully committed to just such a program of corporeal violence. In his Contra paganos, Alan de Lille declared Islam an “abominable sect, one suitable for fleshly indulgences” whose founder was, in a word, “monstrous.” Like Muhammad, Islam itself was said to be luxuriosus and bellicosus.

Like monsters, racist representations inevitably conjoin desire and disgust. The Saracens were no exception. The extended visualizations of
“lusty, black-skinned people” in the Chanson de Roland, for example, brought “the darkness of Africa” queerly close to Christianity, a temptation within a threat. The poem describes both Margariz, whose beautiful body attracts the lingering eyes of Saracen ladies and Christian men, and Abisme, a Saracen “neirs cume peiz ki est demise” [black as molten pitch] whose skin color and character are inseparable (he enjoys perfidy, murder, and heresy). Another Saracen leader, Marganice, rules over Africa (Ethiopia, Carthage, Alfrere, Garmalie), where he holds “the black race [la neire gent] under his command; / their noses are big and their ears broad” (1917–18; cf. 1933–34: “[they] are blacker than ink / and have nothing white but their teeth”). During battle scenes groups of warriors are described according to the physical difference which sets apart their race: the Milceni, with their large heads and piglike bristles on their spines (3221–23); the Canaanites, who are simply ugly (3238); the fiery desert dwellers of Occian, whose skin is so hard they do not wear armor (3246–51), and who bray and whinny in battle (3526); giants from Malprose (3253); the Argoille, who bark like dogs (3527). In the Roman de la Rose, Guillaume de Lorris embodied Dangier as a Saracen with red eyes, a blunted nose, and black, bristly skin. In Aliscans, a chanson de geste describing the exploits of Guillaume d’Orange, a pagan king named Agrapars embodies racialized Saracen alterity well: his hair is curly and unkempt, his nose hooked, his body deformed and corpulent, his nails leonine, his eyes like fiery coals. Agrapars’s teeth are canine and he attacks in battle by clawing and biting. His adversary taunts him by declaring, “You are low born and wild! / You look to me to be a monkey’s child!” [Moult es pute racine; / Très bien resembles de ligneage de singe].

That the otherness of the Saracen is racially marked seems obvious enough, but it is also worth noting that this alterity is strongly gendered as well. Most Saracens were imaged as male, even if the Saracen’s masculinity often deviated from Christian norms. Although historically women on both sides participated in the crusades, the textual world constructed by crusader texts (histories as well as romances) is a relentlessly homosocial one. Nonetheless, Islamic women were not completely ignored by the Christian representation machine. Laws were frequently enacted to stop sexual unions between Christian men and Jewish and Muslim women; such miscegenation was associated with bestiality and sodomy, and was likewise punishable by death. While the desire to touch the body of the other was prohibited in life, however, textually this caress was enacted repeatedly. Saracen women, rich in both material wealth and talents, provide beautiful wives for heroes like Bevis of Hampton (who marries Josian) and Guillaume d’Orange...
(whose wife Orable was previously married to the African Tiébaut). Such women convert eagerly to Christianity, and their embrace of their new religion is more a declaration of what they always already were (white—that is, Christian—before the fact) than a true conversion from one state to another. Although the *chansons* depict some male conversions to Christianity (Otuel, Fierabras), for the most part the masculine Saracen body is obdurately other: typically a Saracen chooses death over a newly Christian life. In a striking example of the inextricable bodily link between Saracen race and Saracen masculinity, when the King of Tars becomes a Christian at the urging of his Christian bride, his skin is transformed at baptism from black to white. Nor were all Saracen women depicted in positive (that is, assimilationist) terms. Just as the male Muslim body might be depicted as softly effeminate, Muslim women could be demonized or masculinized, like the scythe-wielding giantess Amiete in *Fierabras*, the cannibalistic hunchback Guinehart of *Aliscans*, or the diabolical sultaness in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*. De Weever finds in the vituperative figure of the black female Saracen a hybridization of misogyny and racism through a triple confluence of representations: the wild woman, personified vice, and “death itself, *la mort*, feminized through grammatical gender.”

Michael Uebel has argued that because Islam was an alien presence at the heart of those lands from which the West traced its religious history, the Saracen “like the monstrous race of Cynocephali (dog-headed men) with whom they were often identified . . . symbolized the blurring of ideal boundaries, such as those separating rational man from animal.” The Saracen is a monster, an abjected and fantasmatic body produced through category violation in order to demarcate the limits of the Christian possible. As such, there were no real Saracens in the Middle Ages. And yet Saracens could uncannily take on a life of their own. In at least one text they seem to have attained a certain amount of self-consciousness about their status as distorting representational project. In an episode from the fourteenth-century history of France known as the *Grandes Chroniques*, the Saracen army of Cordova employs a tactical mimesis to defeat the seemingly indefatigable cavalry of Charlemagne:

At the point that our first contingent was about to join battle with the first contingent of the Saracens, a great crowd of their foot-soldiers placed themselves in front of the horses of our fighters; each one had a horned mask, black and frightening, on his head, that made him look like a devil [et avoit chascuns en sa teste une
barboire cornue, noire et horrible, resemblant à deable. In his hands, each held two drums together, making a terrible noise, so loud and frightening that the horses of our soldiers were terrified, and fled madly to the rear, in spite of the efforts of their riders.  

The scene is magnificently illustrated in a manuscript now at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (MS fr. 2813), where uncertain French knights swathed in fleurs-de-lis retreat from black-skinned enemies with excessively racialized visages: huge noses, ears, and mouths; inhuman grins; demonic eyes; bestial horns. Without reference to the surrounding text, a medieval observer of the minutely rendered scene might not guess that the Saracens are wearing masks, for their caricatured corporeality is wholly consonant with other textual and pictorial representations of Muslims as a monstrous, racial other. The Saracens of Cordova participate in the same program of abjecting representation as the verbal descriptions of Agrapars and Margan-ice, but by inhabiting such stereotypes through an act of will, they expose the constructedness of this promulgated otherness.

The strategic mimicry of the Cordovan Saracens stands out all the more clearly for the unhesitating reductiveness of the episode which precedes it in the Grandes Chroniques. Before Charlemagne’s assault on Cordova, Roland battles the Saracen giant Fernaguz, “descended from Goliath” [uns geanz du lignage Golie], a monster whose gross body is meant to encode everything dangerously exorbitant about the Muslim world (VII, 240; 108). The encounter between the two foes is both an explication of proper chivalric comportment (when Roland sees that the giant is weary, he allows him to take a nap, even placing a stone under his head to allow him to rest more comfortably) and, more importantly, of the imperviousness of Christian identity. Martial combat quickly gives way to an extended catechism in which the giant asks naive, Nicodemus-like questions about Roland’s faith (“Who is this Christ in whom you believe?” “Explain to me how three things can be one.” “Why must one believe in the resurrection?”). His adversary replies with patient explication of ecclesiastical doctrine. At the point at which the giant seems too reasonable, when it seems through his questions and interest that the difference which Fernaguz enfl eshes is coming too near the Christian singularity for which Roland stands, a familiar ritual of disidentification is staged:

“I shall fight you,” said the giant; “if what you say is true, may I be vanquished.” . . . Then Fernaguz leaped forward and seized...
Roland with his fists, bent him to the ground, and easily pinned him. When Roland saw that there was no way at all for him to escape, he piously began to call upon the Son of the Virgin for help, and he helped his champion leap up and pin the giant beneath him. Roland caught his sword and pressed it into the navel of the giant, who began to shout in a loud voice, calling upon his god: “Mahomet! Mahomet! Help me gods, I’m dying” [Mahomet! Mahomet! Mes diex secor moi, car je muir]. Roland then left the field, hale and hearty, to the army of Christians.

(VIII, 249; 114)

When pagan and Christian subjectivities seem close enough almost to touch, violence erupts to redraw the faltering self/other boundary, this time in blood. A pure realm of Christian signification where even nonsense (Fil de la Virge, “Son of the Virgin”) makes perfect sense, where prayer is an efficacious speech-act, is contrasted to a Saracen language in which those same prayers in the mouth of the other are revealed as nonsignifying—as if “Mahomet” could ever serve as a designation for god. Fernaguz dies when he is literally and figuratively stuck in place, pinned down within a signifying system that codes his dark body as monstrous, excessive, absolutely other. Fernaguz destabilizes Christian certainty by beginning to seem too similar. This ambivalence is quickly vanquished by having Roland kill the monster and perform the ritual of “I am not that.” The black skin and devilish features which the Cordovan Saracens adopt elicit a similar identity panic in their foes, a momentary “ungrounding” of bodies, “making them strange,” silently acknowledging the artificiality of the devil-Saracen construct. The diabolical masks of the Grandes Chroniques are in this way the equivalent of the blackface employed in an early episode from Aliscans, during which a Saracen prince who does not adequately embody his alterity is smeared with charcoal in order to align his fair flesh with the dominant representation of Islamic racial otherness. In both narratives, the artificiality of the identity “Saracen” is tacitly admitted, even if quickly disavowed. That race can be performed, that dominant representations and the bodies grouped beneath them do not necessarily coincide, is dangerous knowledge which can topple whole epistemological systems. And so in the Grandes Chroniques de France, Charlemagne destroys his Cordovan foe utterly:

the announcement was made throughout the army that everyone should cover his horse’s head with cloth or sheets, so that they
might not see the masks, and to stop up their ears, so that they could not hear the shouts of the Saracens, or the sounds of their drums. (IX, 25; 115)

Veiled eyes, earplugs, and a violence which is consequently both blind and deaf seem to be the only reply that the Christians can give to this message offered by the very other it has itself constructed.

**Joie in the other**

The performance of bodily difference by the masked Saracens of Cordova underscores the complexity of racialized medieval representations, which hybridize knowledge and its violent denial. Jacqueline de Weever sees the Christian representational project as fundamentally a masking of the other, and quotes the anthropologist A. David Napier to good effect: “the presence of masks in situations relating to transition is so commonly the rule that exceptions to it are hard to find.”54 Napier identifies some of these possible “transitions” as rites of passage, exorcisms, and the incipient altering of rules and laws. How is it, then, that the masked Saracens intimate the constructedness of racial stereotypes and yet fail to bring about any cultural change? Why do racialized representations remain tenacious even after they are literally unmasked, vigorously enduring in times and places far removed from their originary moment? How did Saracens exert a power of fascination so long after the specific religious and colonialist ambitions through which they had been actively promulgated lost their urgency? Fantasies of racial difference are always constructed through a structure of enjoyment which, even if historical in its genesis, may—once absorbed into the deep structure of identity—function immune to subsequent transformations of cultural context. Unless the collective jouissance which saturates racializing images and narratives is somehow disentangled, altered, emptied of its mesmerizing power, then the fantasies which this enjoyment supports remain impervious to historical change. It is not enough simply to reveal the artificiality of race (or any other identity) in a specific case: the fantasy which structures enjoyment and produces race (or any other identity) must likewise be ungrounded in order for change to enter the world. This may all sound too Lacanian, too abstract, or too postmodern, but late medieval England performed a version of this psychoanalytic insight through *The Sultan of Babylon*, a popular romance obsessed with Saracen enjoyment.

Fantasies of Saracen bodily difference have always been inextricable
from fantasies of the pleasures of Saracen bodies. The superabundant wealth, plentiful luxuries, and hedonism of the Saracens were medieval commonplaces. Norman Daniel, for example, observed that even though the prohibition of alcohol was “one of the best known facts of Islamic life and faith” (probably because it seemed so extraordinary to medieval observers), wine nonetheless flowed copiously at the lavish banquets in which Christian writers imagined Saracens indulged. In a typical scene from a chanson de geste, Guillaume d’Orange discovers in an enemy tower a cornucopia of wealth and pleasures: armor, weapons, women, bread, meat, spiced wine (both piment and claré). The imagined excesses of Saracen enjoyment were insistently connected to the supposed exorbitance of their sexuality. Here the importance of astrological theory on the determination of race can be seen: because they supposedly originated in the distant south, where the planet Venus was thought to be ascendant, Saracens were said to be predisposed toward licentiousness. Jacques de Vitry, who had been both a crusader and a bishop of Acre, asserted that those considered most religious among the Saracens were those who had impregnated the most women. Anti-Islamic polemic and literary texts alike agreed that the Saracens permitted polygamy, adultery, concubinage, and sodomy. Indeed, Hutcheson and Blackmore aptly label erotic excess the “unique mode” for the conveyance of Muslim cultural and racial alterity. John Boswell documented the obsessively imagined sexual indulgence of the Saracens, stressing a Christian preoccupation with their sodomy (Guibert of Nogent declared that Saracens not only had many wives, but enjoyed themselves with other men as well) and polymorphous perversity (Jacques de Vitry identified Muhammad as a proselytizer for indiscriminate sex with men, women, and animals). This “paradise of supreme enjoyment” centered upon a “boundless jouissance” is strikingly similar to Mladen Dolar’s psychoanalytic vision of the cultural work performed by later occidental fantasies of the luxurious Orient. What motivates such fantasies, Dolar argues, is that they provide a “subject supposed to enjoy,” a figure who consumes and hoards the enjoyment that “we” as Westerners have renounced in order to be Westerners. Orientalist dreams of distant, copious indulgence provide a necessary support for the West’s sacrificial systems of nationhood and identity in that they maintain the fantasy that a potentially recoverable full enjoyment is in fact located somewhere, even if it is not possessed by “us.”

Nowhere does the enjoyment of the Saracen other exert more textual fascination and receive a more complex treatment than in The Sultan of Babylon (ca. 1400). In this unparalleled narrative, the textual location of
joie (the Middle English word which best corresponds to “enjoyment”) at first seems to reinforce Christian unity at the expense of a dehumanized foe, but the narrative ultimately inhabits the subject position of that foe to unground the fantasies sustaining his alterity. Like the masked Cordovans with their dismaying mimicry, the Saracens of this romance expose the contingency of race, but the obliteration of these racialized bodies does not yield the same satisfaction—the same obscene enjoyment—as the destruction of their brethren in the Grandes Chroniques. The Sultan of Babylon does not reveal what Saracens are “really” like, nor does it argue that race is as artificial (and therefore as easily discardable) as a mask, but instead demonstrates that only when a fantasy of otherness is inhabited from the inside will it begin to lose its obstinate grip.

The Sultan of Babylon (Cairo/Africa) is Laban, enemy of all things Christian, including theocratic empires. The Saracens whom he leads against Rome are typical of the demonized Muslims encountered in crusading polemic and chansons de geste. Monstrous in their sexual and aggressive excess, they slay ten thousand Christian maidens at a time, leading the Sultan to declare bluntly, “I wole distroie over all / The sede over alle Cristiante” (Sultan, 234–35). Embodying an alien, racialized physicality, these Saracens are typically described only in terms of their skin color (“soom bloo, some yolowe, some blake as More” [1005]). Unintelligible in their customs, language, and vice, they worship senseless idols, torture prisoners, ride strange beasts, murder innocents. During the prolonged battle scenes which form the narrative heart of this as well as most other Charlemagne texts, the majority of Saracen bodies exist to menace Christian integrity and as a consequence to be spectacularly destroyed.

The giant Estragote, a footsoldier in the Sultan’s army, embodies in excess these familiar alterities. Like most Saracen names, and like the culture for which they stand, Estragote is untranslatable, in comprehensible.65 His hybrid body is barely human with its dark skin, boar’s head, and monstrous strength:

And Estragot with him he mette  
With bores hede, blake and donne.  
For as a bore an hede hadde  
And grete mace stronge as stele. (Sultan, 346–49)

Like all giants, Estragote is a “grete gloton” (427), a body that ingests the certainties upon which secure identities are built and makes them unintelli-
gible by transforming them into inassimilable difference. When in typically extravagant terms the Sultan decrees that all Roman citizens shall be utterly destroyed (“Beest ner man, childe nere wife, / Brenne, slo, and distroye alle!” [417–18]), Estragote immediately strides to the gates of the city and shatters their protective iron with a single blow from his mace. Just as the giant enters helpless Rome, the citizens drop the portcullis and slice him in half, through the “herete, lyver, and galle” (434). The visualization of Estragote’s opened body, its viscera impossibly visible, is followed by a lingering narrative stare at the dying Saracen’s body. The scene hybridizes anxiety at the monster’s excess with a deflationary amusement at the spectacle which it has engineered:

He lai cryande at the grounde
Like a develle of helle;
Through the cité wente the sowne,
So loude than gan he yelle.
Gladd were all the Romaynes,
That he was take in the trappe,
And sorye were al the Sarsyns

. . . . . . . . . .
Thai lefte him lijonge there.
Mahounde toke his soule to him
And brought it to his blis. (435–48)

Estragote’s ironic “blis” is to be transported to hell by Mahounde (Muhammad), where the suffering engendered at the breaking open of his body will continue into eternity. The reader’s “blis,” meanwhile, is the delectation of conjoined visual excess, a body in pain, and linguistic cleverness.

The somatic rebuke to the giant’s identity is staged as laughable (at least for the Christians), and in order to work depends upon a perverse enjoyment being located in the smashing of the Saracen’s flesh. So far nothing unusual: battles against Muslims, written from a Christian viewpoint, always invest their enjoyment in this way, so that readers are never permitted to identify with or humanize the enemy.66 Indeed, long series of ritualized dismemberments are the structuring principle of martial combat for most Charlemagne texts. In the Chanson de Roland, for example, Roland’s evisceration of the pagan Margariz may lack the dark humor propelling the death of Estragote, but the text invests its sadistic pleasure within a similar poetics of disidentification written as bodily disaggregation:
[Roland] smashes [Margariz’s] helmet with its gleaming carbuncles,
He hacks [trenchet] through the body and scalp,
He hacked through his eyes and face,
Through the shiny hauberk and close-meshed mail
Through his entire body right down to his crotch,
And right through his saddle, wrought of gold;
The sword has come to rest in the horse itself.
He slices through its spine, he never sought out a joint,
He throws him dead in the meadow on the thick grass. (1326–34)

The violent, slow-motion destruction of this Saracen takes on a special force when it is remembered that Margariz’s body was originally presented as a site for ocular enjoyment because of its great beauty (955); even at its fantastically prolonged dismemberment, Margariz’s flesh perversely yields the same visual pleasures. The spectacle of the Saracen’s broken form is so much the center of narrative consumption for crusader romances that in Richard Coer de Lion the English king is depicted as an enthusiastic cannibal of such bodies in pieces, recommending that all Englishmen ingest Saracen flesh to stay vigorous. Richard’s gastronomy merely renders a long-established site of textual enjoyment more visible by writing it in corporeal terms.67

If The Sultan of Babylon located its joy only in such straightforward scenes of Christian triumph and violent bodily rebuke, there would be little to differentiate it from the Chanson de Roland, written three hundred years earlier, with its much-remarked reductive sloganeering (“Paien unt tort e chrestiens unt dreit” [The pagans are wrong and the Christians are right!] [1015]).68 The Chanson de Roland envisions a nearly womanless world. The pagan queen Bramimonde and Roland’s would-be wife Aude never advance the action, seeming to exist only to convert (and vanish) or die (and vanish). Charlemagne’s victory in The Sultan of Babylon, on the other hand, would not be possible without the active participation of both Laban’s children, his son Firembras and his daughter Floripas. When the imprisoned Twelve Peers are on the verge of starvation, Floripas provides them with a magic girdle that makes them feel as satisfied as if they had just attended a feast. Ingestion, the body of the other, and enjoyment are complexly conjoined throughout the romance. Thus the girdle is lost when Roland discards a Saracen body wearing it; revenge is taken upon the pagans as they are massacred at a feast; a long battle scene involves a skirmish over a Saracen food delivery; the prison which Floripas maintains for Roland and company is as well stocked with maidens as victuals (“Thai were ful mery in
that dungeon” [1661]). Likewise, having at last captured Rome, the victorious Saracens celebrate as follows:

Thai brente frankensense
That smoked up so stronge
The fume in her presence,
It lasted alle alonge.
Thai blewe horns of bras;
Thai dronke beestes bloode.
Milk and honey ther was,
That was roial and goode.
Serpentes in oyle were fryed
To serve the Sowdan with-alle. (679–88)

All the familiar stereotypes about foreigners, medieval and modern, find their place here: they make too much noise, they smell bad, they eat repulsive foods, their delight in excess is disgusting. Delicacies like serpents fried in oil and “beestes bloode” (later specified as the blood “of tigre, antilope and of camylyon” [1008]) are matter which does not constitute human aliment and which therefore allies the Saracens with the anthropological unclean.69 This culinary alterity suggests that, like Estragote’s name, Saracen culture is untranslatable, nonsensical, asignifying.

In his recent work on the psychoanalytic dynamics of ethnic violence, Slavoj Žižek has argued that in order to answer the question, “What are we aiming at, what do we endeavor to annihilate, when we exterminate Jews or beat up foreigners in our cities?” we must first rephrase the query as “What does our ‘intolerance’ towards foreigners feed on?”70 The language of ingestion underwriting Žižek’s reformulation indicates the oral fixations that characterize discourses of otherness. Žižek insists that even though constructed through “a series of features” experienced as intolerable, the other is never simply reducible to a finite list of attributes: there is always “’something in them more than themselves’ that makes them ‘not quite human.’”71 Ethnic and racial violence, Žižek argues, is an attempt to snatch or destroy (“strike a blow against”) what might be called the “unbearable surplus-enjoyment” of the other. Powerful fantasies structure the relationship between subjects and their own “lost” enjoyment, which (against all evidence to the contrary) they see as being possessed by this other. Persecution, racism, and genocide are therefore never simply reducible to rational political, religious, or economic causes. Indeed, in a work which might be called the psycho-
analytic supplement to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), Alain Grosrichard has argued that an economy of enjoyment undergirds all Western fantasies of the East. *Structure du sérail* (1979, trans. *The Sultan’s Court: European Fantasies of the East*) demonstrates that the West as a political system relies on a fantasy of a distant and despotic subject supposed to enjoy in order to conceal its own despotism, its own tyranny over its subjects.\(^7^2\)

Enjoyment in the other saturates the *Sultan of Babylon*, a text which invokes almost every medieval fantasy about the exorbitance of Islam. The Sultan Laban hoards a wealth beyond measure, and a key scene involves his daughter commanding that the royal treasury be hurled over the city walls to confound her own father’s army. Saracen maidens willingly offer their bodies to Christian men. Abundant food, drink, sex, and magic characterize Saracen culture. This Christian fantasy of enjoyment in the other no doubt propels the long narrative gaze upon the Sultan’s feast of fried snakes and animal blood, but it does not adequately capture the full force of how the passage works, since it is one of the few times in the narrative when no “blow is struck” against the Saracens’ jouissance. Once the celebratory meal is described, the text simply states that a communal cry erupts from the reveling pagans: “‘Antrarian, antrarian!’ thai lowde cryed / That signyfied ‘Joye generalle’” (689–90). These two lines are extraordinary. A nonsense word (*Antrarian*) is introduced and glossed as if it were *Sarrazinois*—that is, as if the Saracens possessed a unifying, signifying language.\(^7^3\) Unlike the meaningless difference embedded in names like *Estragote* (a concatenation of sounds that signals its difference by its very nonsense), linguistic alterity is here both admitted and analogized through enjoyment: *antrarian* means “joye generalle” (communal joy). Placed immediately after the repulsively strange repast, the gloss undercuts the simple logic of “you are what you eat” through its insistence upon verbal equivalence and cultural translatability.

The glossing of alterity in *The Sultan of Babylon* occurs for the most part in passages having no analogue in the romance’s sources. The “wilde beestes bloode” that the Saracens drink is made comprehensible when we are told that their warriors imbibe it to excite their courage in battle. After the Saracen Mersadage of Barbary is cut off in the midst of his threats by a Christian hurling a dart through his heart, Laban orders his dead minion carried back to the royal tent:

> And beryed him by right of Sarsenye  
> With brennynge fire and riche oynemente
And songe the Dirige [Office of the Dead] of Alkaron [the Qur’an],
That Bibill is of her laye [faith]
And wayled his deth everychon
Sefen nyghtis and sefen dayes. (2269–74)

This extended visualization of Saracen funeral rites combines with a gloss on their culture as a “people of the book,” thus acknowledging difference in the other but relativizing rather than rebuking. The Qur’an had been translated into Latin by Robert of Ketton in 1143, and was uniformly condemned by Christian commentators as the writings of a madman, impossibly confused and lacking logical structure, but the author of The Sultan takes pains to demonstrate that its rituals make culturally specific sense. Indeed, the author takes every opportunity to display an erudition of foreign customs, filling his interpolations with learned “facts” and nonjudgmental descriptions not found in his source materials. Religious rites repeat and become comfortably familiar. Particularizing names and linguistic diversity are bestowed upon what in the romance’s sources is an undifferentiated Saracen horde.

The text’s enjoyment in the other finds its ultimate expression not in the monstrous excesses of the Saracen body, but in the domestic and collective structures of belonging which the Christians resolutely do not allow their enemies to maintain. Early in the romance the Sultan declares that

Sire Ferumbras, my sone so dere,
Ye muste me comforte in this case:
My joye is all in the nowe here
And in my doghter Dame Floripas. (93–96)

Laban’s “joye” is his family, specifically his son and daughter, both of whom he will ultimately lose to religious conversion. The only Christian counterpart to the Saracen “joye generelle” of communal feasting and Laban’s “joye” in his children is Charlemagne’s ever-active sword, “Joye” ([850] “Joyeuse” in most other Charlemagne texts). This contrast between Saracen joy in integrative social structures (family, race, and religion) and Christian joy in violence directed against such identity systems is stressed in the odd scene when, after the giant Estrapote and his avenging wife Barrok have been slain, Charlemagne’s men find the monstrous couple’s children. Discovered during the plunder of the city of Mantrible, these baby giants are
seven months old and fourteen feet tall. They immediately give Charlemagne “grete joye” (3024). He orders both to be christened, naming one Roland and the other Oliver—significantly, the names of two of the Twelve Peers whom the French king has recently lost to the Sultan because of their prickliness and his own paternal inflexibility. Charlemagne envisions raising the children himself, perhaps as more docile versions of the knights they nominally replace. Unfortunately, however,

Thay myght not leve; her dam was dede;
Thay coude not kepe hem forth.
Thay wolde neyther ete butter ner brede,
Ner no men was to hem worthe.
Here dammes mylke they lakked there;
They deyden for defaute of here dam. (3031–36)

The triple repetition of the reason for their death makes clear the impossibility of the children’s assimilation into Christian otherness: they die because Charlemagne’s men can never provide a home, never provide a protective structure of “joye” anything like a family; they starve because, once Charlemagne smashes out their mother’s brains (2949–52), they are deprived of breast milk (in medieval medical discourse, synonymous with the spilled maternal blood). As long as Charlemagne’s “joye” is a sword, a weapon aimed against Saracen domesticity and collectivity, Christian fraternal identity is doomed to inhabit a circumscribed, diminishing world.

What does this complex trigonometry of enjoyment in The Sultan of Babylon accomplish? Certainly not an understanding of Islam, since the text’s Saracens are as imaginary as those in the Chanson de Roland, and its facts about Muslim culture are mainly invented. Antrarian, strictly speaking, is as nonsensical as Estragote. Yet glossing alterity in The Sultan of Babylon amounts to temporarily inhabiting a Saracen subjectivity (where Saracen is a cultural shorthand for the position of the other), allowing the text to deterritorialize Christian chivalric identity and expose the love of violence upon which its code of masculinity is founded. The text locates its joy in Saracen belonging and envisions an integration into Christianity which is death: Laban, abandoned by his son and daughter who do not urge his conversion (as in the analogues), spits in the baptismal font and is beheaded. To return to psychoanalytic terms, the romance performs the process of “going through the fantasy,” of nullifying from the inside the myth of a Saracen who is racially, culturally, ontologically other. Dolar argues that Lacan’s dic-
tum “One doesn’t interpret the fantasy, one has to ‘go through’ [traverser] the fantasy” can be enacted textually, depriving the fantasy of its “natural and self-evident air” and revealing its contingency, its groundlessness.76 Devoid of identity-sustaining force, the fantasy becomes no longer sustainable, no longer enjoyable, precipitating something close to the harrowing but potentially productive state which Lacan called subjective destitution. The Sultan of Babylon performs just such an estrangement, leaving the centuries-old “truth” of Saracen racial alterity no longer self-evident. By intervening in a matrix of historical and literary representations, rendering visible the cathexes of enjoyment through which it is maintained, The Sultan of Babylon traverses the fantasy and renders it insupportable. Western eyes are faced not just with the constructedness of Saracen alterity, but with its inherently fantasmatic nature—and therefore with their own passionate complicity in its enduring vitality.

Going through the fantasy, exposing its partiality and disrupting its consistency, fractures enjoyment and propels the subject into that painful realm where, as Julia Kristeva argues, “Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking the impetus of my culture.”77 This universalizing possibility of egress from the pseudouniversals of culture is exactly the opposite of solipsism—it is, in fact, the only way to smash solipsism and see with another’s eyes. Inhabiting the otherness abjected from the self acknowledges, first, that the self is not personal, but social, not singular, but plural (Kristeva’s “split identity, kaleidoscope of identities”); and that only by estranging (making a foreigner of) the self can “real” others assume their proper place in all their particularities outside of fantastic co-construction. This painful process, this smashing of the self and smashing of fantasy and smashing more than anything of language—of literature—is in the end the “cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed.”

Coda: Saracen Chaucer and literary enjoyment

Perhaps The Sultan of Babylon is so textually preoccupied with Saracen bodies because England had recently returned to thoughts of both Africa and Islam. In 1390 a contingent of English nobles participated in a crusade to Tunis, laying siege to al-Mahdiya. Froissart recorded public prayers and processions for the departing crusaders, and even if the expedition ultimately made few military gains, it nonetheless “returned crusading against Islam to
the agenda of practical politics” for some time to come. Yet “Saracen” was also a mobile category which could be made to encompass almost any non-Latin Christian. Jews, for example, were always in danger of being conflated with Muslims under the violent, collective power of the term: the Song of Roland records that Charlemagne, like historical crusaders, demolishes synagogues along with mosques (3662), while “every large crusade from the first to the fourth is associated with pogroms.” Through the agency of romance (e.g., King Horn) and historical texts (Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae), Saracens had long ago invaded English history to mark a nonspecific, instantly rejectable otherness. Saracen could therefore be deployed to encode a wide range of anxieties loosely tied to race and nation, anxieties which were as frequently domestic as international. Even if an obsession with enjoyment in the other derives in part from England’s mercantile, religious, and martial encounters with alterity abroad, The Sultan of Babylon also encodes in the Saracen a propinquity of differences at home. Claire Sponsler has observed that late medieval London’s 50,000 citizens were derived from diverse regions of the country as well as France, Spain, Italy, the Low Countries, and Greece, rendering the city especially susceptible to outbreaks of xenophobic violence. In response to this potential volatility, John Lydgate composed two mummings in 1429 that featured Oriental merchants and Jewish elders bearing gifts to the citizens of the city, thereby reinventing “native and foreign relations within the charged space of polyglot, ethnically diverse, socially divisive, and economically competitive London.” Like Lydgate’s “festive interventions,” The Sultan of Babylon encourages English citizens to hesitate before projecting fantasies of absolute difference and stolen enjoyment on the alieni who lived among them, catalyzing that cosmopolitanism which Kristeva aligned only with modernity.

Because race, language, and the formation of a national literature are inextricably bound, the Saracens of The Sultan of Babylon should also be read as embodying some of the linguistic struggle surrounding contemporary constructions of English identity. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, England was preoccupied with the racial purity of its vernacular. French was being systematically demolished as the premier literary language; a nationalistic alliterative revival was arising north of London; Parliament enacted legislation against the colonization of English by Celtic loanwords and proper names. The Sultan of Babylon was probably written around 1400, the year that Geoffrey Chaucer died, and perhaps just as other writers were beginning the official process of his canonization. Chaucer had
intervened into a “fractured vernacularity” to establish English as the uni-
fying language of literature. The Sultan of Babylon intervenes into 
Chaucer’s intervention, colonizing Chaucer from within. Although its exact 
source does not survive, the romance was clearly based upon a text like 
British Library, MS Egerton 3028, an Anglo-Norman narrative which 
redacts and abridges two related French works, Destruction de Rome and 
Fierabras. Unlike these texts, however, the Middle English romance cites 
Chaucer unmistakably, repeatedly—and anonymously. This silent citation-
ality establishes Chaucer as a literary authority, as a voice which must be 
heard within other voices for them to be literary. Whereas the audience for 
most Charlemagne stories is assumed to be loosely conversant with its array 
of characters and themes, rather than with specific texts, The Sultan of Baby-
lon performs The Canterbury Tales and perhaps Troilus and Criseyde to con-
struct an ideal community of readers with a knowledge of English as a lit-
erary language, of what proper English poetry sounds like (it sounds like 
Chaucer).

Chaucer’s authoritative literariness is performed throughout the 
romance, and almost never has a parallel in the Anglo-Norman analogues. More than simple borrowing, these citations always proceed in a Chaucer-
ian spirit, reworking their source material to unexpected and sometimes 
amusingly ironic effect. Here, for example, is how The Sultan of Babylon 
stages the reader’s introduction to the Saracen world:

Hit bifelle bytwyxt March and Maye, 
Whan kynde corage begynneth to pryke, 
Whan frith and felde wexen gaye, 
And every wight desirith his like, 
Whan lovers slepen with opyn yye 
As nyghtngalis on grene tre 
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 
This worthy Sowdon in this seson 
Shope him to grene woode to goon, 
To chase the bore or the veneson, 
The wolfe, the bere and the bason. (41–52)

The passage employs Chaucer’s favorite words, the ones he overused to the 
point at which their meanings became unstable (pryke, worthy). Chaucerian 
images are poached, along with their familiar wording (“Whan lovers slepen 
with opyn yye”). But the author also signals that he comprehends what
outside of specific words, phrases, and images constitute the English literariness of *The General Prologue*. Whereas Chaucer invoked conventional seasonal images in order to reinvent spring as the time when a young man’s fancy is moved to pilgrimage, *The Sultan of Babylon* reinvents Chaucer’s reinvention to render spring the season when a wicked Saracen sultan’s thoughts turn first to hunting and then to making war. Both authors deter­ritorialize the natural as pilgrimage, hunting, and warmongering are shockingly (and amusingly) aligned with the rising of sap, the awakening of sexual desire, and the environmental construction of the human body. The complexities of enjoyment in the other, made structurally foundational within a language itself exorbitantly invoking (and enjoying) Chaucer’s deployment of English as the language of literary enjoyment, racializes this originary moment even as it deconstructs it. English vernacular literature becomes possible through a metastasis of enjoyment in the other. English Chaucer, *The Sultan of Babylon* insists, is only made possible through Saracen Chaucer.

**Notes**

My sincere thanks to Glenn Burger, Michael Cornett, Steven Kruger, Thomas Hahn, Gail Kern Paster, and the members of the Medieval Doctoral Conference of Harvard University for discussion of this essay.


3 I use *Saracen* here instead of *Muslim* in order to mark the category from the start as produced through the passionate investment of occidental fantasies and desires, rather than as a historical marker of a simply misrecognized identity.

4 The lines are from the spurious late-eleventh- or early-twelfth-century “Letter of Alexius Comnenus to Count Robert of Flanders Imploring His Aid,” a text which goes on to declare that noble women are being routinely raped, then their daughters likewise abused while the mothers are forced to sing “lewd songs.” Men and boys, meanwhile, are being sodomized, sometimes to death. John Boswell provides a fine translation of the letter as well as an analysis of its rhetoric in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 279–80, 367–69.
“Saracen” was typically used to mean “Muslim,” but was sometimes generalized to include both pagans and non-Western Christians (especially Arab Christians). As Amin Maalouf has pointed out, some of the famous resisters of the Christian occupation were Arabs (Ibn ‘Ammar, Ibn Munqidh), some Turks (Zangi, Nur al-Din, Qalawun), Armenians (al-Afdal), and Kurds (Saladin and al-Kamil). Their armies incorporated whatever warriors were willing, including many from the steppes. A majority of these peoples spoke Arabic and had in fact been “Arabized,” but many did not (as the frequent use of interpreters attests). It should also be kept in mind that even though the Christians often represented their enemies as a united force, in fact most alliances between the Muslim groups were tentative at best, as principalities, independent cities, and so forth carried out their political ambitions; the Muslims were also involved in an internal conflict about the practice of their religion, the Sunnis (aligned with the caliph of Baghdad) against the Shi’is (associated with the Fatimid caliphate of Cairo). The Christians often played competing groups off each other through selective alliance. On these points as well as the Muslim construction of an all-encompassing identity term (“Frangi”) for the Christians, see Amin Maalouf’s polemical but useful study *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, trans. Jon Rothschild (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), esp. 44, 72–74, 87, 261–62.

Although Edward Said posits a medieval origin for orientalism far more straightforward than the one I argue for here, he has written that the West has never relinquished its fantasy that the East is timeless and immutable. See *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994).


Bartlett argues that “colour racism in the USA” and “Nazi anti-Semitism,” with their insistence on the biological markers of race (visible or invisible), are “relatively insignificant” forms of racism in the Middle Ages (ibid., 197).

Cadden is referring specifically to the words of Albertus Magnus on the sexuality of black women in his *Quaestiones de animalibus*, bk. XV, where he argues that “black women are hotter and most swarthy, who are sweetest for mounting, as the pimps say.” See *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 163–64 and n. 165. Albertus is certainly not unique in theorizing the sexuality of black women; cf., for example, Abelard: “the flesh of a black woman is all the softer to touch though it is less attractive to look at, and for this reason the pleasure they give is greater” (Letter 4, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice [New York: Penguin, 1974], 140).

Jacqueline de Weever sees in these lines a possible “experience concealed” (*Sheba’s Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic*).
but a relationship between black skin and an exaggerated sexuality were commonplaces of medieval racial fantasies.

It should be asked how sexuality in any time period can be thought of without immediate reference to the myriad cultural categories through which it is coconstructed, including race. Postcolonial theorist Anne McClintock has made this point repeatedly; see, for example, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race, and Nationalism,” in Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives, ed. McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 89–112.

Friedman provides a thorough discussion of these linkages throughout The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).


Critical race studies is a field too vast to reduce to a footnote here, but a good starting point is the collection edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Race, Writing, and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), especially Gates’s “Introduction: Writing, ‘Race,’ and the Difference It Makes” (1–20); and Anthony Appiah’s “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race” (21–37). I have also found the work of Colette Guillaumin helpful: Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology

18 As the pogroms attending the First Crusade made clear, Judaism and Islam were often conflated. Kruger points out that Jewish and Muslim bodies were depicted as substantially different from those of Christians, not just because males had been circumcised, but also for “innate” gender reversals (Jewish and Muslim men were depicted as effeminate [Thomas de Cantimpré infamously argued that Jewish men menstruate], women as too masculine). See “Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?” esp. 22–26 and note; as well as Christine Chism, “The Siege of Jerusalem: Liquidating Assets,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28 (1998): 32–21; Heng, “Romance of England,” 142–43; and R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 30–31.

19 Heng’s far-reaching methodology underscores the imbrications of race, religion, gender, class, and nation. She points out that Lateran IV issued seventy canons, a “massive codification of rules” on subjects including heresy, confession, the sacraments, and even the dress “for racial and religious minorities living throughout Christendom” (“The Romance of England,” 137). On black skin and the racializing discourses of the late Middle Ages, see Heng, esp. 163 nn. 7–8. On Lateran IV and the sexual anxieties behind making race visible, see Kruger, “Conversion and Medieval Sexual, Religious, and Racial Categories,” 167–68.


21 In his *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), Frank M. Snowden Jr. points out that any black or dark-skinned person was ordinarily called an Ethiopian, no matter where in Africa he or she had originated (*Aethiops* and *niger* were synonyms). Black-skinned people lived not just in southern Africa, but in the north, including Carthage, frequently making their way into Greece and Italy as travelers, warriors, and domestic help throughout the classical period. Snowden emphasizes that the Ethiopian has too often been dismissed as a purely mythic designation, and documents at length the extensive experience of the classical world with nonwhite peoples.

22 On climate and the Ethiopians, see Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity*, 172–78, quotation at 172. Homer describes divine visits to the “blameless” Ethiopians, while Diodorus asserts that they were the “first to be taught to honor the gods”; Seneca, Statius, Pausanius, and Heliodorus echo the sentiment (*Blacks in Antiquity*, 144–48).


24 Marian J. Tooley emphasized that the relationship between climate and complexion was thought to be inverse, so that hot climates produced cool temperaments; according to this formulation, Muslims were therefore by nature sensuous, subtle, and cruel. See “Bodin and the Mediaeval Theory of Climate,” *Speculum* 28 (1953): 64–83, esp. 72–76. For more on climate and race, see in addition to the works previously cited Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture*

25 Snowden makes this point in Blacks in Antiquity, 176, as well as more generally in Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). For a strong argument against reading the history of race back from the systems which eventually dominated its construction, such as slavery, see Emily C. Bartels, “Othello and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered,” _William and Mary Quarterly_ 54 (1997): 45–64, esp. 47–48.


27 Albertus Magnus, _De natura locorum_ 2.3, trans. Sister Jean Paul Tilmann, in _An Appraisal of the Geographical Works of Albertus Magnus_ (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 101. Albert insists that astrology also plays a part in the determination of bodily difference, since different planets and stars dominate in different zones of the earth (47). In giving a complete “racial” account of the black body, Albert is demonstrating his knowledge of Greek and Roman authors, who frequently commented upon the “thick” lips, “thick” or “wooly” hair, and “flat” nose of the Ethiopians (Snowden, Blacks in Antiquity, 5–7), though seldom in language as vivid as his own.


29 One reason that Mandeville maintains an interest in Ethiopia is to prevent conventionally racialized representations from leaking into his portrayal of the Saracens, whom he casts in a flattering light in order to underscore the failings of contemporary Christianity. On the relativism of the Mandeville-author, see Mary Campbell, _The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600_ (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

30 Gregory, _Moralium libri, sive Expositio in librum B. Job_, bk. 18, chap. 52 (“Aliquando vero Aethiopiae specialiter gentilitas designati solet, infidelitatis prius nigra peccatis”), _PL_ 76 (Paris, 1849), col. 88.

31 On Christian moralization of black skin, see Friedman, _Monstrous Races_, 64–66, quotation at 65. A contrary tradition is based on exegesis of a line in the _Song of Songs_


34 On the reduction of the three zones of the world (in which Asia—the East—had functioned as the happy mean between the too frigid North and the too warm South) into two (balanced West versus extreme, overheated East), see Akbari, “From Due East to True North,” 19–34. Akbari points out that in the Christian version of the Ethiopia myth, Noah’s son Ham populates Africa (Ethiopia, Libya, Egypt) because his immoderate behavior proved that he was too hot (Jerome glosses his name “Ham, id est calidus”). Hrabanus Maurus, Isidore, and Hugh of St-Victor all place Ham’s progeny in Africa (22–23). Isidore was most specific: Ham had four sons, three of whom founded African kingdoms, and one of whom (“Canaan”) generated the Afri, Phoenicians, and Canaanites (*Etymologiae* 9.2.10–12; Akbari, 33 n. 29).

35 The Latin may in fact be read as indicating that the Ethiopian Saracens are both dog-headed (cynocephalic) and naked because of the sun. On the Borgia world map, see Vicomte de Santarém, *Essai sur l’histoire de la cosmographie et de la cartographie pendant le Moyen-Age*, 3 vols., ed. Martim de Albuquerque (Lisbon: Administração do Porto de Lisboa, 1989), 294. I am grateful to Michael Uebel for pointing out this source to me, as well as for many discussions on Saracens, cynocephali, and category violation. As James H. Sweet has observed, Arabs and Berbers likewise had a long tradition of demonizing dark skin (“The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 [1997]: 143–66). Ibn Khaldun (14th cent.), for example, wrote that blacks “possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals” (cited in David Brion Davis, “Constructing Race: A Reflection,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 [1997]: 16).


37 Heng has persuasively argued that romance, the superlative genre of medieval vernacular literature, formed in reaction to the unthinkable events at Ma’arra an-Numan, where crusading Christians cannibalized the corpses of their Muslim enemy. See “Cannibalism, the First Crusade, and the Genesis of Medieval Romance.”

38 Cited and translated by Uebel, “Unthinking the Monster,” 274.

39 The infamous description of Islam by Matthew Paris in his Cronica majora, quoted in Daniel, Heroes and Saracens, 15, 64.

40 Quotation from Gregory S. Hutcheson and Josiah Blackmore’s introduction to Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, ed. Blackmore and Hutcheson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 1. Among the many strengths of this volume is its refusal to think sexuality separately from race, so that the sexual otherness of Muslim Iberia in Christian accounts is shown to be inextricable from racial, cultural, and religious alterity.


44 Kruger gives examples of intercourse with Jewish women being likened to intercourse with animals, as well as references to men burned for such sexual relations. See “Conversion and Medieval Sexual, Religious, and Racial Categories,” 169 and n.; see also 178 n. 32 for references to Christian injunctions against sexual intercourse with Muslims and Jews. That intermarriage was a fact of the crusader kingdoms is emphasized by Dana C. Munro, The Kingdom of the Crusaders (New York: D. Appleton Century, 1935), 119–22.

45 The dilemma posed by the fact that while black is coded negative, Saracen women must nonetheless be desirable brides for Christian knights is the central focus of Jacqueline de Weever’s Sheba’s Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic. De Weever makes a strong case for not desiring the whitened Saracen in the way that the heroes of their texts do; a persistent critical problem, she argues, has been the admiration critics unreflectively shower on these women who are, from another point of view, unfaithful murderers, adulterers, and opportunists.
46 See Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, 65. Friedman also relates the story of the half white, half black progeny of a Christian-Muslim marriage who is likewise whitened by baptism.


48 De Weever, *Sheba's Daughters*, 54. On the racism inherent in demonizing portraits of black women, see 100: "When skin color is linked to ideas of inferiority, to notions of savagery, to relegations to the category of the marginal and uncivilized, to the charge of cannibalism, racism is born."

49 Uebel, "Unthinking the Monster," 268.


51 On the giant as an exorbitant marker of racialized otherness, see my *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 180.


53 See *Aliscans*, ll. 3214–16, for the episode. De Weever provides several examples of Christians donning blackface to pass as Saracens (*Sheba's Daughters*, 15–16).


55 Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens*, 50. Daniel memorably calls such celebrants "wine-swilling Saracens" (51), and in this impossible figure I would locate the ambivalent heart of Christian fantasy.

56 "La Prise d'Orange": *chanson de geste de la fin du XIIe siècle*, ed. Claude Régnier, 5th ed. (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1977), ll. 1083–89. Earlier in the poem, Guillaume complains of boredom, wishing for a thousand beautiful girls for his and his companions' pleasure (85–91). The Christians and the Saracens here have the same desires, but the Saracens are the ones who possess that desire's means to fulfillment.


58 This taxonomy of Saracen pleasures and its explication can be found in Uebel, “Unthinking the Monster,” 274.

59 See their introduction to *Queer Iberia*, 1.
60 See Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 280–81.


62 Dolar’s account of Grosrichard’s argument is a complicated one, and propounds that “[i]t is through the supposition of enjoyment in the Other that the subject may get his or her share of enjoyment . . . through the subject’s renunciation [of enjoyment, which] . . . can give consistency to the phantasmatic enjoyment of the Other” (ibid., xxiii). That is, by believing that the Eastern other enjoys, by believing in the *subject supposed to enjoy*, I can renounce my own enjoyment (a perversely enjoyable act) and surrender myself to the despotic regime (the West) as a law-abiding subject. This fantasy “can procure enjoyment only by keeping it at a distance . . . keeping the subject and his or her enjoyment in an ambiguous in-between state” (screened “against the impossible Real” [xxii]).

63 Enjoyment in the other, it should be noted, helps to explain why Charlemagne texts continue to be created, translated, and consumed in England, even at the turn of the fourteenth century (when three of the four romances in the so-called Middle English “Firumbras” group originated— *Sultan* [ca. 1400], *Asbnole Firumbras* [ca. 1380], *Fillingham Firumbras* [1375–1400]). I have consulted the two available editions: *The Sowdone of Babylone*, ed. Emil Hausknecht, EETS e.s. 38 (London, 1881); and *The Sultan of Babylon*, in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Insitute Publications, 1990), 1–103. Quotations are from Lupack’s edition of the poem by line numbers.

64 Strictly speaking, of course, the line is nonsensical in that it compares Saracens who are Moors to themselves, but more generally the simile is typical of the text’s intertwining of excess and racial otherness in paradoxically deflationary ways.

65 Smyser argued that the romance’s most immediate source was an Anglo-Norman romance combining the French *Fierabras* and the prefatory *Destruction de Rome*; see H. M. Smyser, “The Sowdan of Babylon and Its Author,” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 13 (1931): 185–218, at 201–2. In the *Fierabras*, Charlemagne battles a giant named Effraons and his wife Amiote— Estragote and Barrok supplant these giants in *The Sultan* and its source (a version of the romance Smyser calls “HD” [see 191])—never engaging Charlemagne, and indicating that the passions of both the Anglo-Norman and English romancers were invested in narrative spaces other than those inhabited by the putative central figure of their texts. See also *Fierabras: Chanson de geste*, ed. A. Kroeber and G. Servois (Paris, 1860).

66 Smyser identifies such corporal affronts as a “favorite joke” of the author of *The Sultan*: Ferumbras decapitates the traitorous porter of Rome with a falling portcullis; both Laban and Marsedag of Barbary are cut short from their insults against the Christians by a well-thrown dart (“The Sowdan of Babylon and Its Author,” 212, 216).

“Cannibalism and Cultural Encounters in Richard Coeur de Lion,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999): 499–528, which argues that the romance employs cannibalism to demarcate the English from the French, an “other who is too close for comfort” (520).

68 But even the *Song of Roland* is more ethically complex than such identity formulas might suggest; the deadliest threat to Christian integrity is not the Saracens, after all, but Roland’s treacherous stepfather, Ganelon.


71 Ibid., 18. This “radical strangeness” in the other is the embodiment of what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, “the object-cause [or ‘invisible driving force’] of desire” (18).


73 The language which the Saracens speak is never identified in this text, but *Sarrazinois* is a common French designation elsewhere. It should be noted that, unlike many other authors, a consciousness of Saracen linguistic diversity is not alien to the writer of *The Sultan*. When a Babylonian ship captain arrives to announce to Laban that tribute meant for the emperor has been seized by Romans, he speaks through an interpreter (66–67).


75 Smyser observes that religious ceremonies are staged repeatedly in order to make their rites familiar, and that “lists of Saracen tribal names crop out in a half dozen places” where the sources and analogues describe “unparticularized pagan hordes” (“The Sowdon of Babylon and Its Author,” 209).

76 I am quoting from Dolar’s description of Grosrichard’s achievement, but the words fit the medieval romance uncannily well; see “Subject Supposed to Enjoy,” in *The Sultan’s Court*, xii.


78 Christopher Tyerman explicates the episode’s importance in *England and the Crusades, 1095–1588* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 276–80, quotation at 280. Henry Bolingbroke himself was to have brought troops to Africa, indicating how high a profile the undertaking enjoyed.


81 Ibid., 230.

82 Kathleen Biddick has described the “fractured state of vernacularity” in England in

83 Smyser, “The Sowdon of Babylon and Its Author,” 82.

84 Behind my use of “citationality” here is Judith Butler’s argument that discourses gain authority by “citing the conventions of authority.” See Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13.

85 Most noticeably in a passage of 111 lines connecting the two French sources and occurring in neither (Smyser, “The Sowdon of Babylon and Its Author,” 83). An exception is lines 1541–62, which describe how Roland and Oliver spot Floripas while trapped in prison, perhaps recalling Palamon and Arcite in The Knight’s Tale, and contained in both the Middle English and the Anglo-Norman redactions.