

# Review of: "Blacks in the Middle Ages – What About Racism in the Past? Literary and Art-Historical Reflections"

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**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

This manuscript has a worthy goal and could potentially make an important contribution to understandings of global racialization. Given the work on anti-Blackness and Islam, racial capitalism, etc., I think it is certainly worthwhile to examine the historical periods that existed prior to 1458 and 1492 to examine discourses around African individuals and groups in a place like Europe. Where the author can improve this manuscript is to better situate the reader with regard to the specifics of the societies under analysis, and to give a bit more context to some of the claims they make.

For example, on page 2, the author states that "The placement of Blacks in Africa and their negative evaluation goes back, as we all know, to the Old Testament". I'm not sure if the author is referencing the Curse of Ham here, but it is worth noting that there are other examples, such as the Ethiopian Prophecy in the Book of Psalms, that references Africa in a (arguably) positive way. To reference the Old Testament as a source that denigrates Africa requires some more explanation and unpacking.

Also on page 2, the author argues that there do not exist Black voices in the Middle Ages, but that the narratives of white Europeans occasionally mention people of African descent. This particular claim could be strengthened if the author provided either a list of Medieval sources that did account for people of African descent or a list of scholarly publications that speak to this tendency.

On page 4, the author says that "most Christian Europeans had either very little or no experiences with non-white people". While I imagine this may have been the case in some part of Europe, the people of Spain, Portugal, Italy, and the Balkans (among others) would certainly have had regular contact with people from North Africa, parts of West Africa, and the Arab world at this time. Islam and Judaism is central to the history of these locations and many (if not most) of the Muslims and some of the Jews present in the places would certainly not have been racialized in the same way as European Christians were. The author should address the importance of these different (non-Christian and frequently non-European) populations and how this relates to their overall argument.

The main thing I think the author can do to strengthen their argument is to attend to the historical specificities of the different locations they are referencing. They are clearly discussing a moment in European history prior to contact with the Americas, however, there are a number of other historical contingencies that may have affected how African populations were represented in the literature and art of the time. For one, the author should make sure they give the date of each work discussed (there is no year given for Blandin de Cornoalho, for instance). In addition to this, and perhaps more

important, the author should discuss each respective country's relationship to Islam and the different Islamic caliphates that existed in and around Europe at the time. Given the work that has been done around the Arab world's contributions to Iberian ideas of anti-Blackness, it is vital that the author demonstrates how Muslim populations were themselves racialized (if at all) within Europe. The author refers to Black people and Blackness throughout the manuscript, but there should be some unpacking of *who*, specifically, would have been referred to as Black during this time--not just in the works under analysis, but, generally, in the literature of the time. In a similar vein, on page 13, the author discusses the Queen of Sheba, stating that "She wears a heavy necklace, and there is nothing about her that would describe her in any negative light". I think it would be helpful to explain a bit about what, exactly, a negative evaluation of someone might look like in this context. What were tropes employed in this kind of literature that would have revealed feelings of negativity. A similar point could be made on page 7, where the author says that Gahmuret takes little pleasure in kissing the burgave's wife "obviously because she is black". While the lack of pleasure in kissing the woman could certainly be because of the color of her skin, I'm not sure we can take this for granted. Again, some more background about literary traditions and norms of the time would be useful to better contextualize this particular case.

Some minor points:

I don't think the discussion of Critical Race Theory in our present moment is necessary.

Taking a look at the endnotes from the first section of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* may be useful to get an idea of how people have written about and studied racialization in an intra-European context.