

BOOK FORUM

Race in the Islamicate Middle East: Reflections after Heng

Justin Stearns 

New York University, Abu Dhabi, UAE
Email: jks8@nyu.edu

“The past we imagine is always partly, sometimes wholly, filled with ourselves.”¹

When we go looking for the present in the past we always find it, a reflection of our own desire that speaks to the time and place we began our search. This problem is well known to historians of premodern science, the term itself in its singular representing a stumbling block to understanding how scholars, practitioners, and their societies classified and pursued knowledge of the natural world. In order to avoid the teleology of shearing all knowledge and practice from whatever does not lead to the science of the twentieth century, such historians turn science into natural philosophy or employ it in the plural, sciences, as discrete bodies of knowledge lacking a unifying method, some mathematical, some drawing on empirical observation, some rooted in the occult.² This attention to terminology plays a small if initial role in how these historians hope to describe past attempts to understand and intervene in the natural world. Without such attention to the words we use, they argue, we risk misreading the past out of a desire to find there our present moment and our present understandings. To be sure, there are continuities across time, but these must be held in balance with the contingencies of past contexts. With race, we face a similar challenge with another term that gained its current significance in the nineteenth century, but which can plausibly be translated from concepts found in languages around the Mediterranean from antiquity until the present

¹ The Postclassisms Collective, *Postclassisms* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 16.

² I draw here on ideas I have laid out more extensively in “Writing the History of the Natural Sciences in the Premodern Muslim World: Historiography, Religion, and the Importance of the Early Modern Period,” *History Compass* 9 (2011): 923–51; see also my *Revealed Sciences: The Natural Sciences in Islam in Seventeenth Century Morocco* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

day.³ This is the history that Geraldine Heng addresses in *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, a work that I will approach obliquely here through the consideration of an adjacent field, that of the history of race and ethnicity in the Islamicate world.

The past decade has sharpened our understanding of collective identities in the world that became Islamicate following the expansion of Arabian tribes in the seventh century. Peter Webb's argument that Arab identity emerged in the garrison towns in Iraq and Egypt following the conquest, an effort to connect distinct genealogical groups linked by their common language and new faith, has provoked debate and provided a powerfully suggestive example of ethnogenesis concerning the very category that previously defined the early Umayyad empire (661–750).⁴ The contingency of one's own ethnic or racial identity—I will return to my conflation of the terms in the following—is further driven home by reading an older article by Cemal Kafadar on how Ottoman Turks fashioned themselves as Roman against the classicist Anthony Kaldellis's argument for the ethnic identity of Romanness in the Byzantine Empire.⁵ Race-making was widespread and multidirectional in the premodern Islamicate world, with a final powerful example being found in Ramzi Rouighi's discussion of how Arabic historical writing invented the inhabitants of Northwest Africa, a process culminating in the work of Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). All of these examples reflect the strong pull of genealogical thinking and the tension between it and environmental determinism present since antiquity.⁶

The Islamicate world inherited from Hellenism both the science of physiognomy (*firāsa*) and a more general belief that a pleasing appearance reflects positive character traits.⁷ As discussed by Kristina Richardson, those possessing blue eyes, but also disabilities were to be avoided—one prominent holder of such views being the jurist al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820), founder of the eponymous Sunni school of jurisprudence.⁸ To some extent, it is hard not to link such a focus on the shape

³ A handy survey of classical materials is found in Rebecca F. Kennedy, C. Sydnor Roy, and Max L. Goldman (eds. and trans.), *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2013).

⁴ Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); on ethnogenesis, see the entry by Helmut Reimitz, "Ethnogenesis," in *Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* (<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah12081>). A thoughtful review and critique of Webb's book can be found in Robert G. Hoyland, "Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East," *al-'Usūr al-Wuṣṭā* 25 (2017): 113–40.

⁵ Cemal Kafadar, "A Rome of One's Own: Reflections on Cultural Geography and Identity in the Lands of Rum," *Muqarnas* 24 (2007): 7–25; Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁶ For the early period of the Islamicate world, see here also the work of Sarah Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Elizabeth Urban, *Conquered Populations in Early Islam: Non-Arabs, Slaves and the Sons of Slave Mothers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

⁷ Robert Hoyland, "Physiognomy in Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (2005): 361–402.

⁸ Kristina L. Richardson, "Blue and Green Eyes in the Islamicate Middle Ages," *Annales Islamologiques* 48 (2014): 13–29, and Kristina L. Richardson, *Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). For a comprehensive survey of Islamicate views of

and form of the body to the pervasive discourse of anti-Blackness that runs through Islamicate literatures from the frame tale of *1001 Nights* to descriptions of the habitual characteristics of slaves being rooted in their skin color and geographic origin.⁹ Yet, with such famed examples as al-Jāhiz's ninth-century collection of accounts that praise Blackness and include Black Arab protagonists on the one hand, and, as Rachel Schine has most recently shown, with popular epic cycles such as *Sirat 'Antar* and their Arab African heroes on the other, the discourse was never straightforward or without internal tension.¹⁰ The Hamitic myth with its genealogical logic linking geographic location and skin color to the right to enslave was as prevalent in the Abrahamic Mediterranean and its hinterlands as Aristotle's argument that some people were meant to be slaves by nature; but both logics were to some extent refuted by the promise of belonging to one of the Abrahamic communities regardless of background.¹¹ As with other discourses of alterity and inferiority—the status of non-Muslims under Islamic law being one prominent one—discourses around race and ethnicity acquired force only with the agency of those individuals who engaged them.

We see the premodern past through the veil of the European colonialism of the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, a period in which the intellectual and social landscape of much of the Islamicate world was reframed and new genealogies were projected into the past. Contemporary racial and ethnic categories in the Middle East and Africa did not, however, come into being with the European presence, but were grafted onto, extended, or shifted from previously existent forms of collective identity. This can be seen in the French use of Ibn Khaldun's (d. 1406) Berberization of North African history in their administrative policies toward Arab and Berber inhabitants, as discussed by Ramzi Roughi, and in Bruce Hall's masterful study of race in West Africa in French officials' attempts to play on local Tuareg-Black identities in Mali as they solidified colonial control over the Niger Bend.¹² A similar stress on the salience and long-standing importance of local forms of identity-making is found in Jonathan Glassman's nuanced discussion of racial tensions in postcolonial Zanzibar.¹³ These studies emphasize

European Christians, see Daniel König, *Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West: Tracing the Emergence of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ For a particularly vivid depiction of racialization occurring in a description of slaves, see the excerpt of the Nestorian Christian Ibn Buṭlān's (d. 436/1075) *On Buying Slaves* included in Bernard Lewis, *Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2:243–51.

¹⁰ See Al-Jāhiz, "The Boasts of the Blacks Over the Whites" (*Fakhr al-Sūdān 'alā-l-Bīḍān*), trans. Tarif Khalidi. *Islamic Quarterly* 25 (1981): 3–51. For it being unclear whether al-Jahiz himself possessed African ancestry, see Thomas Hefter, *The Reader in al-Jāhiz* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 127–29. On the epic of 'Antar, see Rachel Schine, "Epic Worlds: The Racial Worlds of the Arabic *Sīras*," forthcoming.

¹¹ See David Goldenberg, "The Development of the Idea of Race: Classical Paradigms and Medieval Elaborations," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 5 (1999): 561–70; Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54.1 (1997): 103–42.

¹² Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹³ Jonathan Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), and Jonathan Glassman, "Ethnicity and Race in African

a point already made by the aforementioned scholarship on premodern race-crafting, namely that ethnic and racial groups existed outside of Europe and before the rise of Western capitalism. A further example is provided by Chouki El Hamel in his study of the Moroccan ruler Moulay Ismail's (d. 1727) rounding up of all Black Moroccans in the late seventeenth century to create a slave army for himself, a policy that provoked fierce debate among Islamic scholars and revealed the stark implications of racial identification in the bureaucratic efforts of the seventeenth-century Moroccan state almost a century after a scholar from Timbuktu, Ahmad Baba (d. 1627), had chastised Moroccan efforts to enslave sub-Saharan Africans based on their skin color.¹⁴ What Jeffrey Fynn-Paul has called slaving zones, be they in East Africa, West Africa, or the Caucasus, were deeply connected not only to the need to seek slaves beyond one's religious group, but also to processes of racialization going back as far as late antiquity.¹⁵ The intersection of race and slavery, though necessarily involving a discussion of the ways in which slavery differed across time and space, emphasizes how racialization is inevitably a political project proceeding from specific power dynamics with often radical implications for those involved.

The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages is a sprawling and ambitious work that moves from one moment of racialization to another, drawing on broad readings of secondary literature in literature and history, and offering its readers extended contemplation of largely (but not only) English and French literary sources from the High Middle Ages. Its scope and length give the impression of aiming for comprehensiveness, of creating an archive of European race-making in the medieval period. It is frustrating, therefore, that such an ambitious work remains largely unconvincing, especially when read from within the scholarship on the Islamic world or the history of science. The main reasons for this are two: first, it projects a unified conception of Europe and Europeans into the Middle Ages without ever seriously attempting to define what it means by the terms, and second, it repeatedly conflates the medieval and the modern by characterizing medieval states and societies with such terms as *capitalism* and *colonialism*, which are evocative but confuse as much as they explain. Racialization becomes an essence of a poorly defined geographic area that is read back through time in a teleological narrative that is meant to anticipate and thus explain the horrendous effects of colonial racecraft in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁶ Along the way, one race, the European, or as Heng puts it, *homo europaeus*, uniting whiteness

Thought," *A Companion to African History*, eds. William H. Worger, Charles Ambler, and Nwando Achebe (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), 199–223.

¹⁴ Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); on Ahmad Bābā, see Ahmad Bābā al-Timbukti, *Mi'raj al-Su'ud: Ahmad Bābā's Replies on Slavery*, eds. and trans. John Hunwick and Fatima Harrak (Rabat: Institute of African Studies, 2000), and Timothy Cleaveland, "Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti and His Islamic Critique of Racial Slavery in the Maghrib," *The Journal of North African Studies* 20.1 (2015): 42–64.

¹⁵ See Jeffrey Fynn-Paul, "Introduction: Slaving Zones in Global History: The Evolution of a Concept," in *Slaving Zones: Cultural Identities, Ideologies, and Institutions in the Evolution of Global Slavery*, eds. Damian Pargas and Jeffrey Fynn-Paul (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1–22.

¹⁶ Karen Fields and Barbara Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso Books, 2014).

and Catholic Christianity, remains at the heart of the story, the normative subject. When we reach the end, we have the impression of understanding the origins of our present better, but it is doubtful how much better we understand the role race has played in the past or what we have gained by using the word *race* to gloss multiple forms of premodern collective identity making.

Heng's book is best understood as a polemic, and as such shares with the genre the characteristics of hyperbole, conflation, and strategic imprecision in the service of making a broader intervention. In the book's introduction, Heng lays out the book's origins within the disciplinary landscape of European medieval studies and the opposition she faced from white European gatekeepers in her previous work. *The Invention of Race* is explicitly a challenge to the legacy of empire—be it in Heng's childhood in Singapore or her career as a woman of color in a conservative academic discipline largely populated by white men as well as being one that holds deep attraction for contemporary ethno-nationalist groups in both Europe and the United States. It is also an argument for taking the contemporary academic and social focus on the importance of race as an essential lens for understanding inequality and discrimination, and applying this focus backward into the Middle Ages in order to heighten our awareness of the violence certain social groups suffered before the modern period. For Heng, not using the category of race—focusing instead on difference, otherness, or ethnicity—contributes to the persistence of current configurations of power within and beyond the academy. Highlighting the productive nature of race when looking at the Middle Ages additionally strips the early modern and modern periods from their claims of birthing the category of race and draws renewed attention to what she sees as older genealogies. Revealing these, she argues, has the potential of reshaping the discipline of medieval studies as a whole and of providing a new understanding of the West. The very conflations and essentializations that I have noted previously are thus central to Heng's argument: they are deliberate, not accidental. The distance between past and present is paper-thin.

The urgency of Heng's intervention into her field of study and the broader reckoning of European medieval studies with its current disciplinary politics bears strong parallels with the recent debates among classicists about their own discipline's part in establishing a certain racialist vision of Western civilization.¹⁷ Both classics and medieval studies have historically been related to the imagining of a Europe sustained by a specific type of genealogical thinking related to the formation of these disciplines in their modern form in the nineteenth century that identified European civilization with whiteness. The questionable teleologies built into this genealogy have in recent decades been decisively critiqued in many, many ways—including by, notably, scholars of late antiquity who showed how the Muslim world was an equal heir to classical antiquity, allowing us to reframe the West as including the Muslim world.¹⁸ In centering race, Heng's

¹⁷ I have benefitted here from the nuanced and thoughtful previously cited collaborative volume *Postclassicism*.

¹⁸ For a representative example, see Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammed: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

intervention aims to reveal her own discipline's complicity in hiding its racialist assumptions, but in linking race-making with a transhistorical Europe, the book reaffirms older genealogies as much as it creates new ones. This is unfortunate in the context of a broader turn to the study of the Global Middle Ages, a turn that has as its aim not to detract attention from the horrendous violence that characterized the expansion of European colonial power from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, but to address the Eurocentric bias in establishing genealogies of both the premodern and modern.¹⁹ In contrast, *The Invention of Race* reaffirms the centrality of Europe to world history, and its intervention will likely be most strongly felt within English language scholarship focusing on the history and literatures of England and France—while scholars writing on the Christian or Muslim Mediterranean and beyond will find it less useful to their own historiographic interventions.

Heng closes her book with a discussion of the Roma and how since the High Middle Ages they have suffered from being racialized across Europe in negative ways. The twist in her argument, however, and the one that she ends on, is that they also engaged in racecraft themselves and found in ethnogenesis a source of resilience in the face of persecution. It makes sense in a volume so focused on the racializing violence of the gaze of *homo europaeus* that considering racialization as having positive benefits could seem to be an innovative shift, an opening of a window onto new possibilities. Yet in light of recent scholarship on race and ethnicity in the Islamicate world, it is stale and unproductive. Although there is little agreement on how to parse the difference between the terms *race* and *ethnicity*, one useful way to place the two in relation to each other would be to argue that ethnic identities in the premodern period often involved racializing processes. Examples of this were offered previously: with the expansion of tribes from Arabia, the Arabs created themselves or at the very least gave an old name deeply productive new significance in the creation of a collective identity. In Anatolia, central Asian Turkish tribes adopted a Roman ethnicity, one that the Byzantines had successfully donned before them. These same Arabs, some of whom considered themselves Black, began a project of Berberization in Northwest Africa, forwarding a powerful though not hegemonic discourse of anti-Blackness against Africans south of the Sahara. Religion, a major factor in racialization in Heng's analysis, played a role in all of this, although the racialization of Jews was less coherent or pervasive, and I am aware of few examples—one being in sixteenth-century Fes—where the stigma of Jewishness was argued to have been passed on genealogically, despite conversion, to their descendants, an argument that faced stiff opposition from religious scholars.²⁰ The weakness in Heng's analysis, therefore, is not only rooted in its bias toward northwest Europe or its unconscious adoption of the very positionality it sets out to critique (a point made with particular poign-

¹⁹ For a useful overview of some of the challenges and opportunities posed by globalizing the Middle Ages, see Alan Strathern, "Global Early Modernity and the Problem of What Came Before," *Past and Present: The Global Middle Ages* 238, suppl. 13 (2018): 317–44.

²⁰ On this episode, see Mercedes García-Arenal, "Les *bildiyyin* de Fes: un groupe de neo-musulmans d'origine juive," *Studia Islamica* 66 (1987): 113–43.

ance by Sarah Pearce), but also means that it should not be taken as paradigm setting for scholarship outside of Europe.²¹ This point bears stressing precisely because historians of the Islamicate world have looked in recent decades to their Europeanist colleagues for inspiration when it comes to new and nuanced ways of writing social and intellectual history. This is not such a moment.

There is no firm place to stand. No incidence of racecraft is ever as successful as it would have us believe, although many have had remarkably powerful and often violent effects in specific contexts. Discourses of anti-Jewishness and anti-Blackness have been remarkably persistent in both Christendom and Islamdom. Yet it is precisely this persistence that needs not to be naturalized, but its contingency interrogated. What work has gone into keeping these discourses relevant, and why have they held greater explanatory value in some places and times rather than others? When thinking about race we are better off following the advice of David Nirenberg, one of the scholars that Heng draws on but whose thinking on race has also been decried by some who have held up Heng's work as paradigm shifting.²² Nirenberg's thinking about genealogy, anti-Jewishness, and race in fifteenth-century Iberia demonstrates the types of the contingent nuance in shifting ways of thinking about race that so often get lost in Heng's book, and it also lays out starkly what is lost when we blithely use the term *race* in all its modern biological fullness to describe premodern demarcations of cultural and genealogical difference.²³ It is worth pausing here: The debate about whether to use the word *race* to refer to collective identities in medieval Europe is a Europeanist debate, and although I clearly have sympathies regarding what is the more productive approach, working within the Islamicate world I am more concerned with future scholarship on an area that never experienced the Middle Ages.²⁴ From this perspective, the debate over whether race is the best way to refer to efforts to create premodern identities is of less immediacy than precision in contextualizing past efforts at racecraft (the term's evocatory power outstripping here my worry at its potential misleading presentism). In such efforts, we must remember that there is and has never been one Europe, nor one Islamicate world, and the multidirectional racializations that have taken place within them shifted (and continue to do so), even as they were distinguished by distinct power relationships and strategic purposes. Our narrations of the past will doubtlessly continue to reflect our own desires for our present, but preserving both the past's contingency and complexity as well as the agency of its actors in

²¹ Sarah Pearce's engagement with Heng is much more extensive than my own. See Sarah Pearce, "The Inquisitor and the Moserret: The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages and the New English Colonialism in Jewish Historiography," *Medieval Encounters* 26 (2020): 145–90.

²² Dorothy Kim, "Introduction oo *Literature Compass* Special Cluster: Critical Race and the Middle Ages," *Literature Compass* 16 (2019): 1–16.

²³ See David Nirenberg, "Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of 'Jewish' Blood in Late Medieval Spain," in *The Origins of Racism in the West*, eds. Miriam Eliav-Feldon, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 232–64. This is the very chapter that so frustrated Kim in her introduction to her edited special issue *Critical Race and the Middle Ages*.

²⁴ Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab. Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018).

adapting available discourses to demarcate collective identities to which they or others belong are common enough challenges for the historian and are sure to continue to be productive ones.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Ato Quayson for the opportunity to contribute to this roundtable and to the seminar in medieval studies on the subject of race organized by Suzanne Akbari and Cord Whitaker at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton during the 2019–20 year that I spent there as a Patricia Crone fellow in Historical Studies. I was first introduced to Heng's work during this seminar and learned an enormous amount from the seminars' participants, not least from the generosity and openness of its organizers. I am aware that my own reading of the text departs significantly from that of some of the other participants, and so the ritual caveat that none of those thanked here are in any way responsible for the thoughts expressed is not solely a rhetorical gesture. My own thoughts on race in the Middle East are indebted to a course I cotaught in fall 2020 and 2021 at NYUAD entitled "Race and Ethnicity in the Middle East and Africa." I am deeply grateful to my colleague Erin Pettigrew, from whom I have learned much through preparing and teaching this course. Finally, I am indebted to Erin Pettigrew and Rachel Schine for reading an early draft of this paper and offering comments, and to Toral Gajarawala for her thoughts on a later draft. Their suggestions, many of which I have not been able to address adequately, made it a better piece.

Author biography. Justin Stearns received his PhD in Near Eastern studies from Princeton University in 2007. He taught in the Religion Department at Middlebury College from 2005 to 2010, when he joined New York University Abu Dhabi, where he is part of the Arab Crossroads Studies Program. His research interests focus on the intersection of law, the natural sciences, and theology in the premodern Muslim Middle East. His first book was *Infectious Ideas: Contagion in Pre-Modern Islamic and Christian Thought in the Western Mediterranean* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011) and his most recent is *Revealed Sciences: The Natural Sciences in Islam in Early Modern Morocco*, (Cambridge University Press, 2021). The first volume of his edition and translation of al-Yusi's (d. 1102/1691) *Discourses* appeared with the Library of Arabic Literature in 2020. (Email: jks8@nyu.edu)

Cite this article: Stearns, Justin. 2022. "Race in the Islamicate Middle East: Reflections after Heng." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, 114–121. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2021.36>