

Chapter One

PROGRESS: RACIAL BELONGING, MEDIEVAL MASCULINITIES, AND THE ETHNIC MINORITY *BILDUNGSROMAN*

THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES how the genre of the ethnic minority *Bildungsroman*, or story of intellectual growth, was crafted in the nineteenth-century United States in conjunction with traditions of travel narrative and contemporaneous forms of medievalism (especially historical romance). If the phrase “medieval romance” usually conjures visions of chivalric knights in armor and fair damsels in distress, what space could people of color create for themselves within such expectations? This book’s explorations of medievalism by people of color starts by tracing how medieval romance and conversion narratives offered a vital scaffolding for accounts of intellectual development. African American abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818–1895), Chinese American journalist and public speaker Wong Chin Foo (1847–1898), and Arab American author Ameen Rihani (1876–1940) repurposed the masculine *Bildungsroman* to reject medievalizing white fantasies of the past and to critique gendered Western imperial ideologies of progress and expansion. In their writings, they challenged stereotypes portraying Africans as “savage” and Asians as stagnant “Orientals.” Conversations among African American and Asian American thinkers generated nuanced forms of racial belonging in lieu of white Eurocentric models.

As discussed in the introduction to this book, my analysis of early ethnic minority writing explores what José Esteban Muñoz calls strategies of disidentification.¹ The authors discussed in this chapter who find themselves positioned in the “minority” (in respect to white Christian masculinity) devise varied methods for disidentifying with European medieval pasts, and they seek to transform gendered notions of racial belonging through references to a Western Middle Ages that is not typically coded as properly “belonging” to them. Such gendered and politicized acts of disidentifying with the European medieval past—or openly refusing to engage with such a past—shape these authors’ arguments for new forms of cultural and national belonging.

Frederick Douglass: Disenchanting Medieval Pasts

In the final chapter of *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845), internationally renowned African American orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818–1895), originally named Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, has achieved freedom and chooses a new surname (retaining his first name “Frederick,” which he has held from birth). His white benefactor Nathan Johnson, who

1 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; see also this book’s introduction.

has just been reading Sir Walter Scott's historical romance *The Lady of the Lake*, suggests "Douglass" (derived from a character in Scott's narrative), a name which Frederick adopts.² In this episode, Douglass takes ownership of a name derived from a historical romance alluding to Arthurian legends—but it is only one moment in an extended life story where Douglass claims and repurposes medievalizing frameworks.

Douglass first published his story of intellectual growth and journey to political freedom in his *Narrative* (1845), and he revised his own life story in different iterations over time, including *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, revised 1892).³ In my discussion of Douglass's work, I focus on the first iteration of his *Narrative* and how his use of medievalizing discourse adapts over his lifetime in conjunction with his international travels and shifting political investments.

Douglass opens his *Narrative* with his birth into slavery in Maryland, noting his biracial "parentage." His mother, Harriet Bailey, was "colored" and "of a darker complexion" than both of her parents, while his father, who remains unnamed, "was a white man."⁴ Even if it is "whispered that my master was my father," the law held that Frederick would be enslaved following his mother's legal "condition."⁵ The text relates horrors of slavery including the cruelty of family separation and effects of dehumanizing violence. In the process, the *Narrative* dismantles medievalizing discourses that idealize white supremacy in the American South.

A formative moment in the author's intellectual life is his entry into literacy. His new white slaveholder in Baltimore, Mrs. Sophia Auld, "very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C." and he "learn[s] to spell words of three to four letters" before his current "master," Mr. Hugh Auld, expresses his disapproval of her teaching him how to read.⁶ Mrs. Auld is initially presented as a gracious lady worthy of admiration: "My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her ... a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings"; she was "by trade a weaver" and "a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery."⁷ Initially "unlike any other white woman" he had encountered before, she "seemed to be disturbed" by displays of "crouching servility" and "[h]er face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music."⁸ Through such imagery, the text constructs a vision of white innocence prior to the corrupting experience of power that slavery as an institution would bring.

This image of a "heavenly" fair woman instilling a youthful eagerness to read connects to long history of alphabetic literacy and Marian devotion in medieval European literature. One of the foundational literary works in English tradition deploying such motifs is Geoffrey Chaucer's *ABC*, translated from a French source, which offers

2 Douglass, *Narrative*, chap. 11, 112.

3 Douglass, *Bondage and Freedom*; Douglass, *Life and Times*.

4 Douglass, *Narrative*, chap. 1, 2.

5 *Ibid.*, chap. 1, 2–3.

6 *Ibid.*, chap. 4, 33.

7 *Ibid.*, chap. 6, 32.

8 *Ibid.*

a sequence of prayers to the Virgin with each stanza starting with a sequential letter of the alphabet; Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale," presented by "Madame Egline" in *The Canterbury Tales* as if it were a prayer to the Virgin, upholds violent Christian supremacy through a story of a "litel clergeoun" (schoolboy) of "Cristen blood" who exhibits eagerness to read as well as intense Marian devotion.⁹ The *Narrative* transforms a medievalizing discourse that conflates the slaveholding "mistress" and the courtly maiden. In the context of later African American medievalism, Charles E. Wilson observes how nineteenth-century American idealizations of white womanhood and *noblesse oblige* are constructed through such medievalizing notions.¹⁰

The *Narrative* furthermore activates contemporaneous imagery aligning idealized white Christian domesticity with industrious household activities, including instruction of children and proper management of textile goods and related labor.¹¹ As a "weaver" with the "finest feelings" and a "face made of heavenly smiles" associated with the virtues of reading, Mrs. Auld is multiply inscribed by the *Narrative's* fusion of medieval courtly and Marian discourses of idealized womanhood: a weaver and lady who adopts the role of the Virgin Mary in medieval imagery and acts as a mother, saint, and mediator.¹² When Mr. Auld "at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further," characterizing it as "unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read,"¹³ the slaveholder's opposition "inspire[d] me with a desire and determination to learn."¹⁴ Enabled by the kind assistance of Mrs. Auld acting as his benevolent intercessor, the author finds in alphabetic literacy "the pathway from slavery to freedom."¹⁵

The *Narrative* does not sustain its idealized Marian imagery for very long, as the medievalizing discourse of white womanhood is soon revealed to enable a cruel system of violence, and the text enacts a structural critique of slavery's toxic effects on white people as well as illustrating the harms of the institution against black women and men who are enslaved. For Mrs. Auld, the "fatal poison of irresponsible power" that she accesses through the institution of slavery in the domestic sphere transforms her into a strange inversion of a lady in a medieval courtly blazon: "under the influence of slavery" her "cheerful eye ... became red with rage,"¹⁶ and "that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord" and "that angelic face gave place to that of a demon."¹⁷ Douglass's disenchanting portrayal of the "poison of irresponsible power" as embodied by Mrs. Auld suggests Toni Morrison's observation that nineteenth-century

9 Brogan and Colón, "Abecedarius (abecedarian)"; Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, "Prioress's Tale," lines 503 and 497.

10 Wilson, "Medievalism, Race, and Social Order," 76.

11 Smith, "Domesticity and Race," 345.

12 Manuel Cuenca, "Angel in Plantation," 98.

13 Douglass, *Narrative*, chap. 6, 33.

14 *Ibid.*, chap. 6, 34.

15 *Ibid.*, chap. 6, 33.

16 *Ibid.*, chap. 6, 32.

17 *Ibid.*, chap. 6, 32–33.

American literature can reveal “it is the white racial ideology that is savage” in upholding slavery, and it is not just “racist institutions or their laws, but the very concept of whiteness” as a violent power structure that comprises “an inhuman idea.”¹⁸

Douglass describes the verbal and physical abuse that a neighboring white woman, Mrs. Hamilton, enacts against Mary, an enslaved black woman in her household, as particularly abhorrent: “The head, neck and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces” and her head is “covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress.”¹⁹ By dwelling on the notable brutality of violence directed upon an enslaved black woman, Douglass anticipates what later Black feminist theorists Moya Bailey and Trudy would identify as misogynoir, a term they use to describe the harms that contemporary Black women experience due to the combined forces of anti-Black racism and misogyny.²⁰ By associating Marian discourse and courtly imagery not with idealized white womanhood nor maternal pity but instead with the corrupting influence of slavery upon white slaveholders,²¹ as well as the dehumanizing horrors of antiblack and misogynist violence that the institution enables, Douglass in his own time offers a disenchanting inversion of gendered medievalizing imagery.

Douglass’s Appendix to the *Narrative* ironically names the hypocrisy of systemic oppressions including racism and misogyny upheld in the name of “Christianity” by claiming it all as a distortion of “Christianity proper.”²² Douglass states: “What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* [emphasis in the original text] of this land ... I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ,” and “I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”²³ Due to the deep associations between slavery and violent white supremacy, it is not surprising that the Christian and European medieval past was anything but idealized for African Americans with experience of plantation life. African American educator Edward L. Blackshear (1862–1919), born into slavery in Alabama, aligns the Southern plantation and the medieval European past: “The plantation,” with “cultivated acres,” “forest lands,” and “hunting grounds,” offers an idealized “theatre” of “home-life and ... beautiful and lavish hospitality,” but enslaved black laborers “were like the feudatories of Middle Age Chivalry,” with the legal and social conditions of slavery producing a “master class by the constant, daily, personal exercise of domination over the enslaved class” analogous to “the feudal system of Europe.”²⁴ As Matthew X. Vernon notes, Blackshear exposes how “the Middle Ages can be deployed as a seductive illusion that disguises historical fact.”²⁵

18 Morrison, “Unspeakable Things,” 178.

19 Douglass, *Narrative*, chap. 6, 35.

20 Bailey and Trudy, “On Misogynoir.”

21 On Marian imagery and racialized motherhood more broadly, see Tapia, *American Pietàs*.

22 Douglass, *Narrative*, Appendix, 118.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Blackshear, “Negro in American History”; quoted in Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 75.

25 Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 76.

Douglass's formative account of entry into literacy in the *Narrative*—crucial to the author's intellectual growth—marks a key moment in his structural analysis of how the “master class” asserts dominance, with knowledge and power as intertwining racialized and gendered systems of control.

Whenever he is left in the house unsupervised, Frederick practices how to write: “after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.”²⁶ Literacy is a mechanism for advancement and growth. Frederick notes that he has changed names many times throughout his travels out of practical necessity, but it is now an appropriate time for him to assume a new (and final) name.²⁷ The concluding chapter marks this pivot in identity, and the selection of a final new name is expressly framed in terms of reading itself as well as a racialized power play between men:

I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but told him he must not take from me the name of “Frederick.” I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity. Mr. Johnson had just been reading the “Lady of the Lake,” and at once suggested that my name be “Douglass.” From that time until now I have been called “Frederick Douglass;” and as I am more widely known by that name than by either of the others, I shall continue to use it as my own.²⁸

The *Narrative's* account of the name selection marks the act of becoming a “changed man” through an intellectual journey, and it also conveys the paradox of retaining a core original identity while marking a transformation in status. In 1846, Douglass notes that “Frederick Douglass, the freeman, is a very different person from Frederick Bailey (my former name), the slave,” and “I feel myself almost a new man—freedom has given me new life.”²⁹ Douglass's reference to a “new life” and becoming a “new man” signal an implicit allusion to the *Vita Nova* of medieval poet Dante Alighieri, whose courtly love poetry and retroactive gloss on his own younger self states “ond'io mi cangio in figura d'altrui” [I am changed into something new—another man].³⁰ Douglass's drive toward racial equality and freedom suggests a faith in “the inexorable movement from chaos to order and from violence to peace,” akin to what Vernon in a related context refers to as a “progression of Dante's pilgrim from the Inferno to Paradise.”³¹

The *Narrative's* account of the selection of a new name is portrayed as a negotiation process between two men, or a nuanced navigation of what is, and is not, white property.³² Mr. Johnson is granted the “privilege” of choosing a name (a “privilege” only Frederick can bestow), and Frederick sets the limiting terms. The name “Douglass” (after a

26 Douglass, *Narrative*, chap. 7, 44.

27 *Ibid.*, chap. 11, 111–12.

28 *Ibid.*, chap. 11, 112.

29 Douglass, “Letter to William Lloyd Garrison, Jan 27, 1846,” 133.

30 Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nova*, trans. Frisardi, 7.12 [XIV.12], lines 12–13, page 18. On African American poet Henrietta Cordelia Ray's appropriation of Dante's sonnets, see Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 70–73 and 95–96. On Douglass and Dante, see Looney, *Freedom Readers*, 58–61.

31 Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 73.

32 On Cheryl I. Harris and white property, see the introduction to this book.



Figure 1: Writing desk of Frederick Douglass in his Gothic Revival residence at Cedar Hill in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, DC. His library, preserved much as it was upon his death, includes editions of the works of Sir Walter Scott, historical romances, and slave narratives. Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. December 2019. Photo by the author.

Scottish character in Scott's poem) might seem incidental as it's not clear how *The Lady of the Lake* relates to Frederick's life, but the importance of this literary name proved meaningful to Douglass in later years. In his library at Cedar Hill, the Late Gothic Revival style home in Washington, DC, where Douglass spent the final years of his life, the book collection that remains largely preserved as it was upon his death contains multiple editions of *The Complete Works of Sir Walter Scott*, among other works of nineteenth-century medievalism and historical romances.³³ In Douglass's later transatlantic travels on the lecture circuit as an abolitionist and civil rights advocate, the name "Douglass" would gain great significance—and the relationship of this name to a politicized interpretation of the medieval past would become more apparent.³⁴

I will discuss the meanings of "Douglass" soon, but one African American contemporary who provides a useful literary contrast to Douglass is Albery Allson Whitman (1851–1901), born into slavery in Kentucky and later an accomplished poet.³⁵ Whitman engages directly with nineteenth-century poetic medievalism and the historical romances of Scott. While attending Wilberforce University, at the time owned by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, Whitman composed a versified historical romance *Not a Man, and Yet a Man* (1877) about a mixed-race hero Rodney (of African and European descent) who is born enslaved and becomes a Union officer during the Civil War, and his journey from bondage to freedom recalls narrative tropes of heroic romances such as *Ivanhoe* and also Douglass's own *Narrative* of becoming a "changed man."³⁶ The narrative reaches its climax when Rodney encounters his injured former "master" Aylor on the battlefield who asks for (and is granted) forgiveness for his wrongdoings.

Whitman's epic poem, produced in "that spirit of 'self-development'" associated with Wilberforce,³⁷ abounds with medievalizing imagery. In the final scene, Rodney with his "old heroic heart" raises with "sable hands" his "country's banner, soiled and battle-torn" streaming in the sun's "deep golden light" and the flag "rival[s] Heaven in her blazon bright."³⁸ The Union's victory marks "the day when Southern chivalry / Beheld black manhood clothed in liberty."³⁹ The poem concludes with a vision of national reconciliation (of North and South, black and white) emphasizing the righteous cause of black soldiers or "our sable comrades" fighting under "America's escutcheon [shield or coat of arms] bright" who fought against the social ill or "seething gangrene [of] Slavery" with the patriotism of "knightly Norman[s]" and Crusaders.⁴⁰ Claiming African American

33 US National Parks Service, "Collections," *Frederick Douglass National Historic Site*.

34 Pettinger, *Douglass and Scotland*. On Douglass and Macbeth, see Briggs, "Exorcism of Macbeth."

35 Wilson, *Dusk of Dawn*, "Introduction," 1–18.

36 Whitman, *Yet a Man*. On Douglass's writings on "black male military valor" and contemporaneous racialized discourses of national progress and citizenship, see James, *Freedom Bought with Blood*, 12–13 et passim.

37 Whitman, *Yet a Man*, 7.

38 *Ibid.*, 201.

39 *Ibid.*, 202.

40 *Ibid.*, 206.

heroism in chivalric terms recognizable to contemporary white peers, Whitman leverages the transformative power of medievalism.

Whitman's poetry reclaims some of the heroism traditionally associated with European chivalry (Norman knights and Crusaders) for a mixed-race hero and for African American soldiers, but Douglass's own imaginings of the medieval European past critique pervasive myths of "Anglo-Saxon" racial purity and their implications for global white supremacy in anglophone societies. Douglass and writers within the African American intellectual milieu of the AME Church used the coinage "Anglo-African" to dislodge myths of white "Anglo-Saxon" racial purity defined as direct ancestry from Britain and Northern Europe. In the "Apology" to *The Anglo-African Magazine* (1858–1862), a publication providing a venue for black thought, the editors characterized the unrealized intellectual and political might of African Americans as a "*noir fainéant* [or] black sluggard" that would eventually agitate to "[s]hake the pillars of the commonweal!";⁴¹ this term *noir fainéant* alludes to an epithet for the disguised King Richard I in Scott's *Ivanhoe* referring to the king as one who springs Britain into action once he reveals himself.⁴² The glories of medieval Britain jut up against the editors' rebuke of white Americans who idealize "unbroken lineal descent" from early medieval Britain, and the editors emphasize how "Anglo-Saxon" itself implies hybridity: "[t]he inhabitants of Africa, like the Anglo-Saxons, are a mixed people."⁴³ Vernon notes that the coinage "Anglo-African" asserts a "double emphasis on origins ... while it also [holds] out the possibility for a novel reading of identity" that not only debunks myths of racial purity but also intertwines black and white anglophones in a narrative of collective advancement.⁴⁴

In the years immediately after the first publication of his *Narrative*, Douglass further developed his own analogies between the modern US and medieval Europe, comparing medieval conflicts in the English/Scottish border zones of Britain to the recent war between the US and Mexico (1846–1848). In an 1848 article in the *North Star* (abolitionist newspaper that Douglass founded in Rochester, NY), Douglass references the mythos of medieval Britain to critique US imperialism and ideologies of westward expansion: "Mexico seems a doomed victim to Anglo Saxon cupidity and love of dominion."⁴⁵ In this case, "Anglo Saxon cupidity" names the ongoing harms of white American settler colonialism and imperialism along the US/Mexico border zone. During his time in Scotland, Douglass expressed his support for ongoing struggles for Scottish independence and the Scottishness of the name "Douglass" accrues layered meanings.⁴⁶ Invoking the "free hills of old Scotland," Douglass refers to an "ancient 'black Douglass'" who might stand

41 Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 61.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 61–62.

44 Ibid., 62.

45 Ibid., 75.

46 Douglass writes from "Scotland, [where] almost every hill, river, mountain and lake ... has been made classic by the heroic deeds of her noble sons" and streams "poured into song" and many a hill "associated with some fierce and bloody conflict between liberty and slavery" ("Letter to Francis Jackson").



Figure 2: Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, featuring grand Gothic arches and stained glass. Frederick Douglass attended this church throughout his residence in the city and his funeral was held here in 1895. Washington, DC. December 2019.

Photo by the author.

up to any foe who seeks to “make a slave” of him,⁴⁷ and Douglass’s own fight for freedom is aligned with historical struggles for independence in different border zones in Britain. This expressed analogy between Scottish independence struggles and the current US/Mexico border conflict reflects what Vernon calls a “crucial ... understanding [of] hemispheric solidarities caused by American expressions of force” and its “evocation of mythical self-exceptions” that “Anglo-Saxon” alignments support.⁴⁸

Douglass’s use of geopolitical analogies to express solidarity with liberation struggles globally contextualizes his famous lecture on “Our Composite Nationality” (1869), delivered a few years after the Civil War ended, positing a new form of multiracial American collectivity. In this speech, Douglass expresses principles of universal “human rights” or “rights of humanity” that are “eternal, universal and indestructible,” including equal citizenship laws, the right to vote, and unrestricted mobility defined as the “right of locomotion” and “right of migration.”⁴⁹ In response to what Edlie L. Wong has characterized as an increasing late nineteenth-century “exclusionary discourse of Christian civilization” that “refashioned Native American and Chinese racial differences” through a rhetoric of “heathenism” that presented these communities of color as “morally unfit for citizenship,”⁵⁰ Douglass makes clear that the nation must live up to the “principle of perfect civil equality to the people of all races and of all creeds.”⁵¹

Douglass observes that “a new race is making its appearance within our borders” (i.e., Chinese),⁵² and that the Chinese in America should have the right to be “naturalized [and] invested with all the rights of American citizenship” and not be subject to exclusionary immigration laws.⁵³ Moreover, people “from Asia, Africa, or the Isles of the Sea” can find a home in the nation,⁵⁴ and Douglass “want[s] a home here not only for the negro, mulatto, and the Latin races,”⁵⁵ but also for the “Indian and Celt, negro and Saxon, Latin and Teuton, Mongolian and Caucasian, Jew and gentile”—all of whom claim belonging in a composite nationality, a microcosm of the globe, enhanced by immigration and heterogeneity.⁵⁶ By invoking “a liberal and brotherly welcome to all likely to come to the United States,”⁵⁷ Douglass revises contemporaneous claims to “Anglo-Saxon” purity and “Anglo-African” identities by stating the equality of the “negro and Saxon” among many other configurations of racial and ethnic groups, and he makes clear his

47 Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 46.

48 *Ibid.*, 75. See also Abrams, “Douglass and Mexican War.”

49 Douglass, “Composite Nationality,” 294. On his support of women’s suffrage, see Douglass, “Radical Woman Suffrage Man.”

50 Wong, *Racial Reconstruction*, 98.

51 Douglass, “Composite Nationality,” 295.

52 *Ibid.*, 286.

53 *Ibid.*, 293.

54 *Ibid.*, 302.

55 *Ibid.*, 294.

56 *Ibid.*, 303.

57 *Ibid.*, 295.

own investments in expressing solidarity with communities of color against white supremacy.

Throughout the *Narrative* and his career, Douglass repurposes medievalizing discourse for three important ends: exposing the brutality and harms of white supremacy in the US; using racialized analogies across Britain and America to dismantle notions of “Anglo-Saxon” purity; and envisioning a progressive “composite” model of collective identity. Douglass’s antiracist polemic expresses support for the rights of aspiring Chinese Americans and solidarity with communities of color and minority groups including Jews and immigrants of Asian and Latin ancestry. Douglass and other African Americans set the stage for Chinese Americans who would soon, from their own vantage points, join the struggle to dismantle medievalizing claims to white supremacy and to oppose racial exclusion.

Wong Chin Foo and Chinese American Medievalisms

Early Chinese Americans didn’t share with African Americans a collective experience of slavery, but the legal institutions and barriers that Chinese Americans faced during the second half of the nineteenth century through the era of Chinese Exclusion (1882–1943) were a set of policies severely restricting immigration and denying citizenship on the basis of race, as well as broader perceptions of Chinese immigration as a threat to white labor and stereotypes of Chinese as “heathens” and “perpetual aliens” who could never assimilate into white anglophone society. Edlie L. Wong’s careful work of literary and cultural analysis *Racial Reconstruction* (2015) reveals how polemics of Black inclusion in the later nineteenth century coincided with, or even depended upon, discourses of Chinese exclusion. Early Chinese Americans (and Chinese unsuccessfully seeking to obtain US citizenship) found themselves confronting harms of the era’s medievalizing discourses of “heathenism” and they developed strategies for arguing against racial exclusion and critiquing white missionary ideologies of assimilation.

In contrast to Douglass who distinguishes between a peaceful “Christianity proper” and a white supremacist perversion of religious ethics, Wong Chin Foo (1847–1898), likely one of the first people to use the term “Chinese American” in reference to a sociopolitical identity, unapologetically rejects the alignment of white supremacy and Christian progress. Composed after he was naturalized as a citizen in 1874 in Michigan (which took place before the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), he penned a scathing essay “Why Am I a Heathen?” (1887).⁵⁸ Wong notes he was “[b]orn and raised a heathen,” and although he had in early life “seriously contemplated becoming the bearer of heavenly tidings to my ‘benighted’ heathen people” upon exposure to Christian missionaries,⁵⁹ he found no form of Christianity satisfying and he critiques the sinophobia of white Christians. He imagines entering heaven to meet Denis Kearney, Irish American instigator of violent anti-Chinese labor riots in California and the American West, and see him “forget his heavenly songs, and howl once more: ‘The Chinese

58 Wong, “Why Am I a Heathen?”

59 Ibid., 169.

must go!' and organize a heavenly crusade to have me and others immediately cast out to the other place."⁶⁰ Wong exposes the bigotry of white self-proclaimed Christians and rebukes their greed and imperialism abroad, sarcastically concluding by saying he "earnestly invite[s] the Christians of America to come to Confucius."⁶¹ Thwarting the developmental trajectory of a spiritual journey or assimilation narrative, Wong maintains an ethical "heathen" status.

In the summer of 1887 one of Wong's most ostentatious performances of chivalric masculinity took place: he challenged Kearney to a duel. Wong's challenge to his opponent was this: "I would give him his choice of chopsticks, Irish potatoes or Krupp guns."⁶² Kearney's disdainful retort to Wong deployed medievalizing and sinophobic discourses: "I'm not to be deterred ... by the low blackguard vaporings of Chin Foo ... or any other representative of Asia's almond-eyed lepers."⁶³ Wong's offer to have Kearney choose among "Irish potatoes" or "Krupp guns" as weapon options not only implicates Kearney's own immigrant status and socioeconomic status; Wong also references Kearney's career of enabling armed violence through racist appeals to aggrieved white masculinity. In his speech on "composite nationality," Douglass had noted the hypocrisy of Irish American racism against the Chinese, deploying his own discourse of chivalric brotherhood to make his point: "Already have our Celtic brothers" (i.e., Irish Americans), started to "[form] associations ... in avowed hostility to the Chinese," eager to "execute the behests of popular prejudice against the weak and defenseless."⁶⁴ As Tania Nicole Jabour demonstrates, Wong's performances of chivalric masculinity in 1887 and onwards displayed to the public both the rhetorical and physical violence of anti-Chinese rhetoric itself.⁶⁵

Douglass's thinking about racial mixture (given his own "parentage") and contemporaneous African American efforts to claim an "Anglo-African" or "composite" identity can be set in contrast with Wong's public medievalism. One of Wong's most overt literary strategies for resisting white norms was to embrace historical and mythological Chinese traditions and to use medieval genres to create spaces for Asian heroism in lieu of European models. *Wu Chih Tien, The Celestial Empress* (1889), Wong's serial novel and alleged English "translation" of a Chinese romance, is set during the time of China's only female ruler Wu Zetian (武則天) who lived in the Tang Dynasty, a historical period contemporaneous with the Western Middle Ages. The novel alludes to classics of Chinese literature such as the fourteenth-century *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義), repurposing a familiar set of narrative and visual conventions from European historical novels and challenging readers to accept Asian protagonists.⁶⁶ Wong's

⁶⁰ Ibid., 171.

⁶¹ Ibid., 179.

⁶² "Denis Kearney," *Chicago Tribune*; Seligman, *First Chinese American*, 116.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Douglass, "Composite Nationality," 291.

⁶⁵ Jabour, "Spectacular Subjects," 127–73.

⁶⁶ I discuss this work further in the introduction to this book.

embrace of non-European historical influences marks a divergence from African American strategies of reclaiming historical romances set in medieval Britain.

Wong was not the only early Chinese American thinker to create space for national belonging through first-person writing and literary historical narratives. Yan Phou Lee (1861–1938), one of the first Chinese students to earn a degree in the US (at Yale, aided by the Chinese Educational Mission), published a memoir *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887) with his surname “last” just like white Americans.⁶⁷ Although he submitted paperwork around 1887, an amendment to the exclusion law prevented him from ever claiming citizenship. Lee’s “Why I am Not a Heathen: A Rejoinder to Wong Chin Foo” (1887) distinguishes between “religion” (or as Douglass calls it, “Christianity proper”) and “ethics” as practiced in real life, and Lee emphasizes the benevolence of white Christians who supported his integration into American society.⁶⁸

Lee’s childhood memoir offers a narrative of education, assimilation, and progress palatable to white audiences while subtly critiquing Western adventure stories.⁶⁹ In a chapter describing his education in China, Lee notes the appeal of Chinese legends and narratives that are “historical or romantic” relating stories “of war, of love, of magic and enchantment” that are “really beautiful ... and as interesting as an English novel,”⁷⁰ including the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which Lee calls a “historical novel” with such “delineation of characters and elegance of diction” that he finds “few books in English its equal.”⁷¹ Yung Wing (1828–1912), another key figure in the Chinese Educational Mission, became a citizen of the US only to have his citizenship revoked years after the Chinese Exclusion Act. Yung’s *My Life in China and America* (1909) fondly recalls reading Sir Walter Scott and English authors at the Monson Academy in Massachusetts.⁷² In contrast to the unapologetically “heathen” Wong, assimilationists such as Lee and Yung posit Chinese historical romance traditions as structural equivalents to the medieval-themed “English novel.”

Yung interweaves conventions of travel narrative and missionary accounts of progress to craft what Asian American literary historian Patricia P. Chu calls a “Chinese sequel to the slave narrative.”⁷³ Just as Douglass and other formerly enslaved male narrators “spoke as global citizens for the concerns of enslaved Africans everywhere,” so does Yung address “liberal white readers as both a global citizen” and as an “elite American-educated Chinese” who also seeks to “improve the fates of less fortunate Chinese.”⁷⁴ In this global social context it is “unsurprising that Yung shared with Douglass ... the

67 Lee, *Boy in China*.

68 Lee, “Not a Heathen.”

69 Cheung, “Early Chinese American Autobiography,” 50–51.

70 Lee, *Boy in China*, 81.

71 *Ibid.*, 82.

72 Yung, *China and America*, 31.

73 Chu, *Where I Have Never Been*, 40; also 145–49 and 165–76.

74 *Ibid.*, 165.

imperative to demonstrate cultural mastery and Western masculinity.⁷⁵ The historical construction of a European “global subject” has its earliest antecedents, as Chu suggests, in the thirteenth-century *Travels of Marco Polo* and famous medieval adventurers.⁷⁶ Medieval literary historians Geraldine Heng and Shirin A. Khanmohamadi have shown how medieval European forms of ethnographic writing (narratives about “self” and “other”) establish modes of elite masculine self-fashioning through travel; both secular romance narratives and writings by medieval missionaries participate in a historical process of constructing the masculine Western European writer as the “omniscient” narrator and “universal” subject of discourse.⁷⁷

As a counterpart to Wong’s resistant “heathen” identity and rejection of medieval European models in favor of Chinese traditions, Yung’s construction of a masculine subject aligns Chinese historical romances with literary traditions established by the European Middle Ages. Due to his affinity for Eurocentric masculinity, Yung has been characterized as a white supremacist and assimilationist, with Asian American literary critic Frank Chin describing Yung’s work as “mission-schoolboy-makes-good Gunga Din licking up white fantasy.”⁷⁸ Yung’s invocations of medieval narrative traditions (Chinese and European) are not expressly antiracist, but his rhetorical positionings and desire to assimilate as a person whose citizenship had been revoked can be useful for theorizing what would later be called “honorary whiteness.”⁷⁹

Wong’s public performance of chivalry bespeaks an ambivalent relationship to white Eurocentric models of masculinity and exposes his own implication in systemic anti-blackness. A circular published on behalf of the Chinese Equal Rights League in Chicago as the “First Voice of the Americanized Chinese in the United States to the Public” (1897), and signed by Wong as the League’s president,⁸⁰ invokes a restoration of full rights of citizenship for “Americanized and American-born Chinese of the United States” and the “glories and responsibilities” of the “home and country in which we live” and “cherish in our hearts” but “cannot legally call ... our own.”⁸¹ In making this appeal, Wong invokes “Americanized Chinese” feelings of injustice in beholding “our colored brethren, even from the wilds of African jungles” who “sit and eat at the National family table, while we, the descendants of the oldest race on earth, are not even allowed to pick up the crumbs.”⁸²

Wong’s statement on behalf of the League indulges in its own forms of ethnocentrism (the claim that the Chinese are the “oldest race” on earth with all the associations of civilization and cultural superiority that the term implies), and the text problemati-

75 Ibid., 166.

76 Ibid., 147.

77 Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 239–306; Khanmohamadi, *Light of Another’s Word*.

78 Chin, “Ye Asian American Writers,” 11.

79 López, *White by Law*; Sen, *Not Quite Not White*; Valdez Young, “Honorary Whiteness.”

80 “A Chinese League,” *The San Francisco Call*, May 27, 1897, 6.

81 Ibid. See also Chinese Equal Rights League, *Appeal for Equality of Manhood*, 2–3.

82 Ibid.

cally invokes tropes of primitive blackness for rhetorical effect. By using such tropes of antiblackness within a document ascribed to a Chinese American community, and seeking to address a white audience in particular, the document anticipates what would later be called the “model minority” myth that positions Asian Americans as responsible subjects worthy of full rights of citizenship in an implicit or overt contrast to allegedly undeserving African Americans.⁸³

However problematic Wong’s document on behalf of the League reads in retrospect, it importantly allows for early Chinese Americans to claim African Americans as “our colored brethren,” casting legally enfranchised African Americans and disenfranchised Chinese Americans as fellow people of color. As literary historian Edlie L. Wong observes, “Wong [Chin Foo], like Douglass ... before him,” names “Reconstruction’s failed vision of racial egalitarianism” while also challenging “the Orientalizing discourse of heathenism” that upholds the binary of “black inclusion / Chinese exclusion.”⁸⁴ The statement on behalf of the League reveals how the power structures upholding white supremacy can set communities of color against one another as if in a competition for resources (e.g., seeking a limited number of seats at the table or fighting for “crumbs”), as if white supremacy itself were not the real problem. Even with its flaws, the League’s appeal at least exposes to white audiences the very arbitrariness of racial exclusions enacted by unequal citizenship laws.

The “national family table” metaphor used in the Chinese Equal Rights League’s appeal at the end of the nineteenth century anticipates discourses of national belonging adopted by African American writers in the decades to come. In the iconic poem “I, Too” (1926) by Langston Hughes, the speaker states that he is “the darker brother” excluded from the national table and yet “I, too, am America” and will “be at the table / When company comes” in the near future.⁸⁵ A reconfigured “table” through the Arthurian knights of the Round Table informs Benjamin Brawley’s sonnets published in 1922 to “Chaucer” and “My Hero” (Colonel Robert Gould Shaw of the African American Civil War regiment),⁸⁶ and a poem (ca. 1907) composed in heroic couplets by Hallie E. Queen addressed to James Weldon Johnson invokes the latter as a “gallant knight” and invites him to partake in “choicest viands, rich and mete for all.”⁸⁷ These later African American writers experiment with medievalizing metaphors in a vision of “arriving at a court in which all are equal.”⁸⁸

Early African American and Chinese American thinkers divergently employ medieval motifs and medievalizing discourses to participate in public discussions of racism, citizenship, and collective national belongings. Douglass offers an ethnic model of a

⁸³ Chou and Feagin, *Model Minority*, 23 and 175 et passim.

⁸⁴ Wong, *Racial Reconstruction*, 118.

⁸⁵ Rampersad and Roessel, eds., *Poems of Langston Hughes*, 46.

⁸⁶ Vernon, *Black Middle Ages*, 93.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 95. On medievalism and Harlem Renaissance writers, see Whitaker, “B(I)ack in the Middle Ages”; Whitaker, *Harlem Middle Ages*.

masculine *Bildungsroman* that later Chinese American authors would engage, and both Douglass's "composite nationality" discourse and Wong's "national family table" metaphor create more racially expansive visions of belonging and new forms of solidarity across communities of color.

Ameen Rihani: Medievalism and Auto-Orientalism

I have put early African American and early Chinese American authors in conversation to explore how they adopt, or reject, white Eurocentric medievalizing models of masculinity. I end by discussing Arab American writer Ameen Rihani (1876–1940), who was not only the author of the first Arab American poetry collection in English, *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905), but also wrote in Arabic and English and was an accomplished English translator of medieval Arabic poetry.⁸⁹ Born in Lebanon to a Maronite Christian family and naturalized as a US citizen in 1901, his spiritual and philosophical novel *The Book of Khalid* (1911) claims dual status not only as a foundational Arab American immigration narrative but also a fusion of medieval Arabic traditions and medieval Western inter-texts (including hagiography and chivalric romance).

Literary critics such as Wail S. Hassan have noted how Rihani's work disrupts contemporaneous forms of Orientalism, a dominant "colonialist hierarchy of values that defines the East as primitive, childish, superstitious and the West as advanced, mature, rational."⁹⁰ This "inaugural text of Arab American fiction" by a first-person narrator "fuse[s] Arabic and Western literature thematically, linguistically, formally, and structurally,"⁹¹ and Rihani was fully capable of "[writing] against the grain of Orientalism."⁹² The book broadly evokes the structures of an ethnic immigrant *Bildungsroman* with its protagonist, Khalid, who is born in Lebanon, moves to New York, and navigates influences of "Eastern" spirituality and "Western" materialism. Nonetheless, as literary historian Layla Al Maleh observes, the narrative is not only loosely based on Rihani's life recounting an "intellectual development" but also "a philosophical dissertation and a work of ... mystical imagination, and satirical and political understatement"⁹³ with "myriad allusions to stories from such diverse sources [as] the Qur'an to *Arabian Nights*."⁹⁴ The book is consequently "the offspring of more than one culture and one literary genre, a unique hybrid."⁹⁵

The book jacket advertisement for the original 1911 edition of *The Book of Khalid* presents it as "a frank, free and striking criticism of the Occident by the Orient," i.e., "the Immigrant" conjured as a "dark-eyed, swarthy gentleman who presides over a

⁸⁹ Al Maleh, "Literary Parentage," 313.

⁹⁰ Hassan, "Orientalism and Cultural Translation," 378.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 400.

⁹³ Al Maleh, "Literary Parentage," 315.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 337.

pushcart” who now “break[s] forth into excellent English [to] give a clear, spirited, carefully considered and telling criticism of America, Americans, our manners, habits [and] institutions.”⁹⁶ This trope of an “Oriental” figure disarmingly critiquing the “Occident” and “our” habits evokes longstanding tropes of “othering,” as medieval literary historian John M. Ganim notes in his work on orientalism and medievalism and the uncanny Asian or “Oriental” origins underlying founding myths of white European identity.⁹⁷ One vivid instance of this from European medieval travel writing is the English knight-narrator of the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* whose journeys throughout the Middle East and Asia include encounters with a French-speaking Sultan who offers a forceful critique of the moral failings of European Christians, a “dis-orienting” process that Khanmohamadi describes as being “othered” and “worlded” through travel across the globe.⁹⁸

The distinctly cross-cultural and mystical medieval “aura” of Rihani’s book is established in its opening, with its vivid trope of the miraculous “found book.” “The Editor” states that in the “Khedivial Library of Cairo, among the Papyri of the Scribe of Amen-Ra and the beautifully illuminated copies of the Korân,” was found the “modern Arabic Manuscript which forms the subject of this Book” now entitled in English *The Book of Khalid*.⁹⁹ An “amanuensis” is hired to make a copy, and its “weaving” is composed of “material ... of such a mixture that here and there the raw silk of Syria is often spun with the cotton and wool of America.”¹⁰⁰ This richly textured opening synthesizes material associated with Asia (silk) and America (cotton, wool), and the Khedivial Library itself was known for its fusions of neo-Islamic architecture and collection of illuminated medieval Qur’an manuscripts.¹⁰¹

In *The Book of Khalid*, two young boys, Khalid and Shakib, arrive in New York’s “Little Syria” in Lower Manhattan after embarking on the “Via Dolorosa,” or arduous journey from Beirut to Europe to New York, characterized as “the suffering and misery which emigrants must undergo, before they reach that Western Paradise of the Oriental imagination.”¹⁰² They initially make a living by selling trinkets they claim are from the Holy Land, “a common occupation for impoverished Lebanese immigrants at that time.”¹⁰³ The irony of selling fake Holy Land souvenirs upon arriving from the real Levant is not lost on literary critics, who find an affinity with Chaucer’s knowingly corrupt pilgrim the Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales* who sells fake holy objects for profit. As Suheil B. Bushrui states: “Like Chaucer’s Pardoner, Khalid is sufficiently clear-sighted to feel disgust for his own deceptive practices in convincing a credulous public to buy spurious

96 Rihani, *Book of Khalid*, ed. Fine, “Introduction,” 9.

97 Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism*; see also Akbari, *Idols in the East*.

98 Khanmohamadi, *Light of Another’s Word*, 113–44, at 140.

99 Rihani, *Book of Khalid*, 17.

100 *Ibid.*

101 *Ibid.*, 472–73.

102 *Ibid.*, 36.

103 Hassan, “Orientalism and Cultural Translation,” 393.

relics and ‘sacred’ wares.”¹⁰⁴ The author reconfigures an immigrant journey along the lines of the “Via Dolorosa” of Christ in the Holy Land, and the capitalist replication of the “Holy Land” for Western consumption upon arrival enacts a satire of human foibles and a disorienting inversion of space and place.

Khalid is more free-spirited and bohemian, while Shakib is more pragmatic—and by the time they both return to Lebanon they find themselves transformed by their experiences. Khalid imparts his philosophical knowledge and calls for religious transcendence. Rihani’s appropriations of the medieval past don’t fully conform to “Western” (Eurocentric) or “Eastern” (in this case Muslim) conventions. In one scene reflecting contemporary forms of regionalized Arab nationalism, Khalid sees “antique colour prints” from a bazaar in Damascus with “heroes of Arabia” including Saladin and states: “We need another Saladin” in the present day, “a Saladin of the Idea” who will “wage a crusade” not against any religion (“Christianity [nor] Mohammedanism,” i.e., Islam),¹⁰⁵ but instead against the political sovereignty of the Ottomans, who controlled much of the Mashriq (eastern part of the Arab world) in Rihani’s day. Rihani transforms Saladin from an exemplary medieval Muslim leader standing against Christian European crusaders to a figure for Arab resistance to Turks, abstracting “Saladin of the Idea” into a figure for local sociopolitical struggles for self-determination.

Rihani’s enigmatic *Bildungsroman* not only avoids monolithic constructions of “Western” and “Oriental” cultural identities but also experiments with racial positionings that sidestep white hegemony. Swati Rana has explored the sociopolitical notion of “brownness” as a literary construction that creates “mixed identifications” in the writings of Rihani and twentieth-century minority immigrant American authors, and *The Book of Khalid* opens up space for complex forms of American racial and national subjectivity that elude narrowly defined norms of white Christian identity.¹⁰⁶ When Khalid meets “a certain American lady, a Mrs. Goodfree, or Gotfry,” who is of the Bahá’í faith and evades clear racial categorization, the narrator describes her as “an Oriental gem in an American setting,” or a “strange Southern beauty in an exotic frame,” or a woman of Mexican or “of Andalusian, and consequently of Arabian, origin” due to her brownish “complexion, neither white nor olive, but partak[ing] of both,” and she happens to be dressed in both black and white, “like myself.”¹⁰⁷ Such a multifaceted and racially ambiguous description of an American whose non-Black cultural identity cannot be reduced to whiteness suggests the author’s own mobile “Oriental,” “Arabian,” “swarthy,” or “brown” positionings across time and space, an unfixed form of racial belonging that might potentially “partake” in whiteness only under certain circumstances.

The Book of Khalid ultimately does not idealize Lebanon or America, and the text demonstrates the protagonist’s detachment from both of his “homelands.” Disillusioned by his experiences with a monastic community upon his return to Lebanon, Khalid’s

104 Bushrui, “First Arab Novel in English,” 31.

105 Rihani, *Book of Khalid*, 220–21.

106 Rana, “Brownness,” 19–44.

107 Rihani, *Book of Khalid*, 207–8.

concluding exile into the desert (where he mysteriously vanishes at the end of the text) evokes Saint Anthony's temptation in the desert and "read[ing] in the *sinksar* (hagiography) the Life of the Saint of the day" in a monastic community recalls medieval Christian monks in Egypt or North Africa.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, the book's pervasive references to "Oriental" cultural contexts evoke the Arabic genre of *rihla*, or an intellectual narrative of travel and search for knowledge, so often associated with medieval Muslim authors, that recounts movement across expansive spaces.¹⁰⁹ Christian and Muslim analogies circulate throughout *The Book of Khalid*, as "Al-Gazzali," the medieval philosopher whom Muslims "so much prize and quote," is likened to "St. Augustine of the Christians,"¹¹⁰ the North African and Father of the Latin Church who converted after reading Saint Anthony's life in the desert.¹¹¹ A broad synthesis of "Oriental" (Arab and Islamic) influences, Rahini's text reframes through its Mediterranean settings some of the foundational Asian and African contexts of "Western" Christianity. By traversing America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, this "Oriental" narrator suggests how ideas and cultures circulate to construct any given intellectual or textual tradition, and the travels of peoples throughout medieval Afro-Eurasia are profoundly implicated in the very foundations of Western religious and literary traditions.

Building Solidarity Movements

This chapter has focused on three Americans of divergent ethnic and religious backgrounds: African American (Frederick Douglass), Chinese American (Wong Chin Foo), and Arab American (Ameen Rihani), writing respectively from Christian, "heathen," and a philosophical hybrid of Islamic and "Western" Christian perspectives. I have shown how motifs of medieval romance shape their divergent narratives of national belonging. Each author creates new venues for representation beyond Eurocentric models of masculinity, repurposing medieval influences to claim full citizenship, resist narrow forms of assimilation, and hybridize cultural and intellectual influences. These authors critique gendered white ideologies of progress and imperialism and offer transformative visions of social reform.

Medievalism offers a new appreciation of how "founding figures" of ethnic minority traditions transform dominant notions of race and masculinity by conspicuously disidentifying with a medieval European past, and by claiming a shared national identity that evades monolithic notions of "Anglo-Saxon" purity. This analysis moreover reveals early flows of Afro-Asian influence in public discourse and literary expression. Douglass, Wong, and their contemporaries enact antiracist dialogues across African American and Chinese American political frameworks. Rihani shares Wong's investments in dismantling Eurocentric forms of medievalism and critiquing nineteenth-century Orientalism,

108 Ibid., 166.

109 Touati, *Islam and Travel*, 2 et passim.

110 Rihani, *Book of Khalid*, 232–33.

111 Wilhite, "Augustine the African."

and his richly intertextual and syncretic thinking makes visible racial belongings beyond whiteness or blackness *per se*, as well as showcasing some of the pervasive North African influences within the very foundations of “Western” Christianity. It is this question of cross-racial solidarity, in response to converging histories of oppression, that I address in the next chapter.